

Britain: Murdoch's News of the World censured for bugging on an "industrial scale"

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A report by the Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee has exposed the contempt that the mass circulation Sunday newspaper, *News of the World* (*NoW*), part of Rupert Murdoch's media giant News International, has for basic democratic rights, parliament and the rule of law.

Its 167 pages, part of a wider inquiry into press standards, libel law reform, privacy and press regulation, found that the newspaper had lied about the extent to which its journalists had illegally hacked into the phones of the police, the military, royals, government ministers, celebrities and other well-known people in the top echelons of British society—in what was described by one MP as hacking on a “near industrial scale.”

The investigation had re-examined the issue of the *News of the World*'s phone hacking, the subject of a previous inquiry in July 2007. The first inquiry followed the conviction and jailing of Clive Goodman, the *News of the World*'s royal editor, and Glen Mulcaire, a private investigator employed by the paper, for phone-hacking. They had intercepted the voicemail messages of three members of staff at Buckingham Palace. Mulcaire was also convicted of intercepting the voicemail of five well-known people, including Gordon Taylor, chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association.

The *News of the World*, a Sunday newspaper that specialises in salacious gossip about celebrities and pursues a right-wing law-and-order agenda, had insisted at the first inquiry that a rigorous internal investigation had left it satisfied that Goodman was a rogue operator and that no one else knew about or authorised his activities.

These lies were blown apart when last July the *Guardian* revealed just how widespread the *News of the World*'s illegal activities really were, prompting a second parliamentary inquiry. *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies had written that Murdoch's News International, the UK subsidiary of News Corporation, had paid out more than £1

million in damages and costs to settle an invasion-of-privacy case brought by three people in professional football for hacking their voicemails. This had not come out in the trial because the settlements had been subject to gagging clauses. Furthermore, the newspaper group had asked the court to seal the case files. The *Guardian* also revealed that politicians as well as many celebrities had been targeted.

The select committee said it was quite clear that the newspaper had intercepted numerous people's voicemail. One police officer estimated that 6,000 people had been intercepted. But few of them—the list included people in government, the military, the police and anyone in the public eye—would have been of any interest to Goodman, the royal reporter.

The MPs refused to believe the paper's repeated assertions that Goodman was a rogue operator, that no one else knew what he was doing, in effect accusing the paper of lying to the committee. The presiding judge in his summing up at Goodman and Mulcaire's trial had referred to the latter's dealings with other members of News International's staff.

The committee condemned the *News of the World*'s witnesses' “collective amnesia,” “deliberate obfuscation” and “unwillingness to provide detailed information.” In its view, the payoffs were hush money. The *News of the World* had also paid out hush money to Goodman and Mulcaire who had sued for unfair dismissal, something its lawyer initially denied.

The MPs concluded that “We strongly condemn this behaviour which reinforces the widely held impression that the press generally regard themselves as unaccountable and that News International in particular has sought to conceal the truth about what really occurred”.

It did accept that there was no evidence that the paper's editor, Andy Coulson, had known about the hacking, but said that he was right to step down. Coulson has joined the Conservative Party as its communications officer.

Murdoch's media empire is out of control, operating like a colonial concession in nineteenth and early twentieth century

China, immune to local law. The report paints a devastating picture of the state of democratic and legal governance in the UK, when dealing with this representative of the financial oligarchy.

It notes that the police's failure to investigate, never mind prosecute, was "inadequate." Apart from the one case to do with Buckingham Palace, the police were shown to be utterly prostrate before *News of the World*. They claimed that all the journalists they spoke to declined to comment, while the paper's lawyers refused to provide the most basic information.

The police further justified their refusal to prosecute under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act that it was only illegal to hack into voicemails *before* the intended recipient did so, and therefore it would have been impossible to prove that the *News of the World* had done so, particularly in view of the time that had elapsed. Therefore, the only action a victim can take is to pursue a civil case for a breach of privacy.

The police's position was endorsed by the Crown Prosecution Service.

Tom Watson, a former minister and a member of the committee, said that "Scotland Yard are sitting on a whole bank of information and data about very senior people in public life who were hacked, that the public don't know about."

No one knows who they are. What were the journalists and investigators up to? The *News of the World* won't say and the police won't investigate.

The Press Complaints Commission, made up of key people from the industry, was toothless. Its rushed investigation following the *Guardian* revelations was "simplistic and surprising." It accepted the *News of the World*'s assertions at face value and "effectively exonerated" it of any wrongdoing.

The information commissioner, who did investigate one firm of private investigators, likewise did not take any further action to identify and inform all those whose privacy had been breached. News International's response was to question the credibility of the committee, made up of MPs from all parties and headed by a Conservative, John Whittingdale, accusing it of being in a political conspiracy with the *Guardian* and pursuing a "party political agenda".

Apart from the BBC, *Guardian/Observer*, *Financial Times* and the *Independent*, the media have been largely silent. The Liberal Democrats have called for a judicial inquiry.

The Labour government is directly responsible for the unprecedented powers accrued by Murdoch. It has been beholden to the media mogul ever since it came to power in 1997 and would never have criticised News International in the past.

If it does so timidly today, it is only because the *Guardian*'s investigatory work paints such a devastating picture and, politically, because Murdoch has now transferred his political loyalties to David Cameron and the Conservatives.

Thus, Ben Bradshaw, the culture secretary, said the report raised "extremely serious questions" for the Murdoch empire. "This report...says lawbreaking was condoned and that the company sought to conceal the truth. We welcome the report and are considering what further action may be needed to be taken."

Downing Street also issued a statement, saying: "The scale of this is absolutely breathtaking and an extreme cause for concern."

Even now, however, these are weasel words. The government will do nothing to curb the power of the Murdoch empire because it is the political tool of the financial oligarchy. To the extent that Murdoch has antagonised many within Britain's ruling circles, he will face verbal censure and demands that he conduct himself less brazenly. But there will be no attempt made to strengthen and enforce the rights of ordinary British citizens.

Labour's relations with Murdoch only exemplify its broader relations with the super-rich and big business. Like many others, News International pays virtually no tax in Britain as its media is utilised to attack workers who defend their rights, to whip up racism and xenophobia, and encourage vigilantism and "victims' justice."

More significant are the efforts of Britain's ruling elite to placate Murdoch in the run-up to the anticipated May General Election. Just last week, the BBC announced that it was cutting 25 percent of its website operations and closing several of its radio channels targeted at specialist audiences—a key demand of Murdoch that is also a constant theme of the Conservatives.



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