

Fresh arrests in UK's News International phone-hacking scandal

Dave Hyland

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Rupert Murdoch's hopes of distancing himself from the illegal phone-hacking scandal engulfing his media empire have again suffered a serious setback.

Last Thursday, the Metropolitan Police announced that it had uncovered a "further suspected conspiracy" inside News International's Wapping headquarters and arrested six people.

The three men and three women were all former journalists who worked mainly on the features or show-biz desks of the now-defunct *News of the World* (NOTW). Two presently work on the *Sun* newspaper while another is currently working on an IT project for Associated Newspapers.

All six were arrested on "suspicion of conspiracy to intercept telephone communications" between 2005 and 2006. They were interviewed at police stations in London and Cheshire, and their homes were searched. They are all closely associated with celebrity reporting. Rav Singh was once Britain's most high-profile show-biz writer. Many of his scoops came from his close relationship with Simon Cowell, who attended his NOTW leaving party at London's Electric Birdcage bar in 2008.

After the demise of the NOTW, Jules Stenson, the 20-year tabloid veteran, went into public relations with AOBPR, a company representing soap and reality television stars.

Polly Graham is another veteran showbiz reporter. Her "scoops" have included revelations that Kate Moss was attending the Priory clinic and Naomi Campbell was a member of Narcotics Anonymous. Graham was one of the *Daily Mirror's* "3am Girls" before moving to the NOTW as Singh's sidekick on the "Rav and Polly" column. She also had a film column called "Pollywood," and her punditry on celebrity stories ensured her regular appearances on breakfast television

sofas.

Rachel Richardson is editor of the *Sun's* weekly magazine *Fabulous*. She was show-biz editor and TV editor at the NOTW before becoming digital editor. After moving to *Fabulous*, she was named "New Editor of the Year" by the British Society of Magazine Editors.

Matt Nixon was sacked as head of features at the *Sun* in 2011 after being accused of sanctioning a payment to a prison official for information on the Soham murderer Ian Huntley while he was running the NOTW features desk. He vehemently denied the allegation and won a £100,000 settlement. He now works on a digital project.

Jane Atkinson is the former Manchester-based chief feature writer of the NOTW and was given a north of England role several months after it was closed down as News International geared up for the launch of a Sunday edition of the *Sun*.

A statement from the London Metropolitan Police said officers would be contacting people they believed had been victims of the suspected voicemail interceptions.

The arresting officers are attached to Operation Weeting, one of three lines of investigations into illegal activities at the Murdoch empire.

On July 13, 2011, after the revelation of his own close relations with leading figures in News International, Prime Minister David Cameron announced an inquiry headed by Lord Justice Leveson into the culture, practices and ethics of the press. Leveson's role was intended to control the fallout from Murdoch's long-standing relationship with the highest figures within the British state and the corruption among the London Metropolitan police force.

Once the ruling class has set investigations into

motion, it is not always possible to control them. The Metropolitan Police needs to try and salvage some credibility, given revelations of close relations between senior personnel and News International, alongside evidence of bribery and corruption. Evidence from Operation Weeting, which has so far arrested 32 people, was key to the charges brought last year against 15 people including senior News International executive Rebekah Brooks and former NOTW editor and David Cameron's ex-communication secretary Andy Coulson. Their trial is scheduled for later this year.

Weeting detectives focused their investigation on the operations of the NOTW's news desk and the contents of notebooks belonging to a private detective commissioned to target newsworthy individuals. However, the Metropolitan Police believes it has now identified a further strand of illegal hacking practices that reaches into another department of the Sunday tabloid.

News International recently announced it was going to close its in-house compensation scheme for hacking victims this April. It was meant to signal an end to the scandal and the damage caused to Murdoch's global business empire. That aim now looks overly optimistic.

The latest arrests expose the media baron's attempt to claim that it was simply "rogue reporters" that were responsible for criminal behaviour. They point to the fact that his entire News International organisation has been based on a culture of criminal activity and illegal phone hacking.

As well as suppressing the value of News International, it raises the likelihood there will be further contamination to the share value of its US parent company, News Corporation. Its board will not welcome this news, which will have implications for Murdoch and other family members involved in the company.

This is understood by News International's management. Chief executive Mike Darcey e-mailed staff to confirm the arrests, recognising the "huge burden" this latest development placed on journalists. Steven Heffer, a solicitor with Collyer Bristow who has acted for more than 100 victims of phone hacking, said, "I have been informed by one client, who sued NI and recovered damages last year that the police have discovered new evidence and documents which appears

to justify an entirely new claim being made."

Under the terms of News International's settlement with victims, a specific clause allowed further claims if new evidence emerged. Mr. Heffer added, "It seems likely there will not only be new individuals with new claims, but also existing clients with further claims arising from the additional evidence... which has come to light."

On hearing the news, Labour's shadow home affairs minister, Chris Bryant, who received £30,000 in damages from News International last year over his phone-hacking claim, described the illegal practices at the NOTW as a "many-headed Hydra". He added, "It was not just one rogue reporter. Not just one rogue newspaper. Not even one rogue department. I hope the police will consider charges against the body corporate and the directors of this thoroughly corrupt company."

Bryant predicted the arrests and the new line of inquiry by Scotland Yard would add to the momentum for Lord Justice Leveson's recommendations to be fully implemented. This is a reference to Leveson's main proposal to have statutory controls over the press in Britain. This is an issue that deeply divides the British bourgeoisie, with Labour's Ed Miliband striving for a compromise agreement between the three main political parties.

A wealthy layer of the middle class, mostly associated with the celebrity culture, is insisting on statutory legislation from the standpoint of protecting its own privacy—a move that will undoubtedly impinge more broadly on press freedoms.

This clashes with the interests of those media tycoons such as Murdoch, who oppose any legislation that interferes with their own manipulation of the news and political affairs.



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