

Sun newspaper deputy editor charged, Trinity Mirror journalists arrested

UK phone-hacking scandal spreads

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The 18-month police investigation into phone-hacking in Britain took a dramatic turn with the arrests in London, last Thursday, of two current and two former journalists at Mirror Group Newspapers (MGN).

The four arrested were James Scott, editor of the *Sunday People*, and his deputy, Nick Buckley, along with Tina Weaver, the former editor of the *Sunday Mirror*, and her partner, Mark Thomas, a former deputy editor of the *Sunday Mirror*.

They were held on suspicion of conspiracy to intercept telephone communications contrary to the Criminal Law Act 1997 and asked to return to police stations on various dates in April.

On Friday, Richard Wallace, former editor of the *Daily Mirror* and Weaver's partner, was interviewed by police under caution.

The four arrests are the first police action against suspects not connected to titles at News International (NI), Rupert Murdoch's UK publishing arm. The MGN group comes under the umbrella of Trinity Mirror. In a statement, the Metropolitan Police said, "It is believed [the conspiracy] mainly concerned the *Sunday Mirror* newspaper and, at this stage, the primary focus is on the years 2003 and 2004.

Simon Fox, chief executive of Trinity Mirror, described the arrests as "disturbing". The police have said they will be contacting people believed to have been "victims of the suspected voicemail interceptions". This will almost certainly lead others to come forward, creating a further long list of victims claiming compensation. Solicitors Simon Burns predict the potential targets of hacking are "thought to number upwards of 4,000 individuals."

Alleged tabloid hacking victims have included the teenage murder victim Milly Dowler and the families and friends of British servicemen killed in Afghanistan.

This week, Geoff Webster, the deputy editor of Murdoch's *Sun*, was charged over alleged criminal offences relating to payments of £8,000 to two public officials during 2010 and 2011. He is due to appear in court on March 26.

Alison Levitt, QC, principal legal adviser to the director of public prosecutions, said the decisions arose from Operation Elveden investigations into alleged bribes paid to public officials. "We have concluded, following a careful review of the evidence, that Geoff Webster, who at the time of the alleged offending was deputy editor of the *Sun* newspaper, should be charged with two offences of conspiring to commit misconduct in public office, contrary to section 1(1) of the Criminal Law Act 1977," she said.

The chief executive of NI, Mike Darcey, told staff in an internal e-mail that Webster was a "long-standing and valued colleague". He said the company would be supporting him throughout the legal process. "We will not prejudice the outcome."

Webster was arrested last February, along with four other *Sun* employees, one of whom, chief reporter John Kay, has already been charged. The Crown Prosecution Service said it was making no further announcements on charging decisions in the remaining three cases. The Metropolitan Police have expanded their Operation Elveden investigation and are now investigating the passing of "confidential" information to journalists where no money is involved.

Webster is the fourth *Sun* journalist to be charged

since the Elveden investigation was launched following the decision by NI owner News Corporation to cooperate with the police and hand over 300 million internal e-mails. The scandal has already led to the closure of the *Sun*'s sister newspaper, the *News of the World*, after 168 years, prompting a major public inquiry, and forcing the resignation of Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson and his assistant, John Yates.

Operation Weeting was set up under the auspices of the Leveson Inquiry and devoted specifically to phone-hacking. It is responsible for the arrests of former News International chief executive Rebekah Brooks and Prime Minister David Cameron's ex-spin doctor, Andy Coulson. The pair were arrested last July for "perverting the course of justice," and their trial date has been set for early September.

Operation Elveden was launched a few months after officers were given documents suggesting News International journalists made illegal payments to police officers.

The police also set up three related operations: the Sasha inquiry into allegations of perverting the course of justice; Kilo, an inquiry into police leaks; and Tuleta, the investigation into computer-related offences. *Guardian* newspaper sources now say Scotland Yard detectives believe they can identify as many as 600 new incidents at the *News of the World* after obtaining the phone records of an insider being lined up as a crown witness. Operation Weeting is re-evaluating the timetable for concluding its investigation, which police now expect to continue into 2015.

More than 250 people have sued NI, including public figures Jude Law, Sienna Miller and Charlotte Church. The 600 new potential litigants include new victims, others who sued over hacking but signed agreements with NI allowing them to sue the company again, and those who signed agreements potentially barring them from suing again.

In another related development, the *Times* crime editor, Sean O'Neill, citing the Metropolitan Police, reported on Tuesday that "a police officer who leaked information about the phone hacking investigation to a newspaper has been allowed to avoid a disciplinary hearing by retiring." He continued, "Detective Constable Peter Cripps, 53, spent 19 months suspended on full pay after being arrested for allegedly passing the

names of people arrested by Operation Weeting to a reporter for the *Guardian* newspaper during summer 2011."

"Anti-corruption officers investigating the leaks are understood to have logged more than 500 telephone contacts between the officer and the reporter, Amelia Hill, over a few months when the hacking scandal was at its height".

More evidence of the Murdoch empire's criminality was exposed this week at the High Court when Siobhain McDonagh, the Labour MP for Mitcham and Morden and former private political secretary to Cabinet minister John Reid, accepted "very substantial damages" after *Sun* journalists accessed messages on her stolen mobile phone.

In the settlement read to the court, it was revealed that McDonagh had her phone stolen from her car in October 2010, and her texts could have been accessed for more than 18 months. "In June 2012, she was notified by police they had obtained evidence that the *Sun* had accessed her text messages from about October 2010 and therefore appeared to have accessed and/or acquired her mobile phone."

The statement said that NI has "not only admitted liability but also agreed to pay [the MP] very substantial damages".

Dinah Rose, QC, for the newspaper, said it accepted information on the phone "should not have been accessed and used and [that] there has been a serious misuse of her private information".

McDonagh is an elected representative of the Labour Party. But as with her colleagues in the same circumstances, she chose not to expose the criminal behaviour of Murdoch's media empire and to settle out of court.



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