

News-Gathering Gone Too Far?



▲ Hacked Off.

When actor Hugh Grant was tipped that his voice-mail exchanges with woman-friend Jemina Khan may have been hacked by *News of the World*, he went to court. A judge ordered police to share what they knew so Grant could decide what to do next legally. Grant is among celebrities involved with the Hacked Off lobby group that is campaigning for a rigorous inquiry into eavesdropping by British newspapers.

Milly Dowler's voicemail for information and tips. The revelation, even all those years later, incensed the British public.

But the revelations about the newspaper's aggressive news-gathering went beyond tasteless invasions of privacy. The newspaper hackers, when they realized that Milly Dowler's voicemail box was full, secretly deleted messages from their remote site. This was during the months that police, desperate for clues, were checking Millie Dowler's incoming calls. In their quest for more headlines, the hackers wanted more messages. Indeed, there were calls, all hoaxes as it turned out, from weirdos pretending to be the kidnapper.

The phone-hacking scandal deepened with allegations that *News of the World* had also hacked into the phones of families of soldiers

After 13-year-old Milly Dowler was kidnapped on her way home from school in southern England, her parents made desperate and tearful pleas for her safe return. The disappearance and the parents' anguish made headlines throughout British media. Six months later Milly's body was found dumped in the woods. Years later a nightclub bouncer was convicted of the murder.

From the beginning, the horrific crime ranked high for newsworthiness. In 2011, nine years after the disappearance, it became clear exactly how aggressively one newspaper, *News of the World*, had pursued the story. It turned out that reporters at *News of the World* had hacked into

killed in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as members of the royal family, including Prince William. Politicians and celebrities were hacked. Actor Hugh Grant claimed phone messages with a woman friend were intercepted. Within months of the revelations, 7,000 people had contacted attorneys with claims that their phones had been hacked by *News of the World*.

For years the newspaper's titillating and shocking headlines screamed for reader attention. *News of the World*, at 2.4 million circulation, was among Britain's most profitable tabloids. But people were unaware of how the stories came to be. The presumption was that it all was good old-fashioned news-gathering, aggressive to be sure, but hardly to the extent of interfering with police investigations. Or violating privacy laws. Strict free press advocates argue that the media should have no limits in pursuing information.

The idea has roots with 17th century thinker John Milton who argued for uninhibited inquiry: "Let truth and falsehood grapple, whoever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter." Traditional libertarianism, strictly applied, trusts good things to come eventually if not immediately from the fullest array of information being available through mass media.

But what of decency? What of mucking up a police investigation? What of pressuring political leaders into favorable policy by suggesting that embarrassing information gathered by the newspaper would be kept out of print? It was all tawdry, to say the least.

Under intense pressure from Parliament, Rupert Murdoch acknowledged that his *News of the World* had gone too far. The admission surprised many people because Murdoch had made his fortune, estimated at \$7.6 billion, with no-holds-barred tabloid newspapers and television for decades. Others thought the admission was typical Murdoch, who has a history of elasticity to preserve his media empire. In fact, so threatened was the empire in Britain that Murdoch fired executives at the newspaper left and right, some of whom went to jail. Then, under continuing pressure, including the withdrawal of millions of dollars in advertising accounts, he shut down *News of the World*. All the while, Murdoch claimed he had no idea about the hacking,

You can't have a free press without the press being free. This means uninhibited inquiry.

POINT

COUNTER
POINT

Decency should trump news-gathering that invades privacy, interferes with criminal investigations, and has nothing to do with serving a public good.

Assignment 2

News Gathering Gone Too Far?

To what extent do you agree with the claim that "you can't have a free press without the press being free" or with the claim that "decency should trump news gathering that has nothing to do with serving a public good." Provide reasons and evidence to support your point of view.