Murdoch Empire phone hacking scandal exposes corruption at the heart of the system

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The News of the World, once flagship paper for the Murdoch Empire was shut down amid allegations of corruption and illegal phone hacking which goes right to the heart of the state, writes Simon Hardy

A small hand grenade has gone off at the centre of British politics. A complex web that connects the media industry, the police and the political establishment has unravelled over the last few days.

Right wing rag, the News of the World (NotW), stands accused of hiring private investigators to hack into voice mails and listen to messages. But this is not just a 'rogue journalist' who hacked a few Royals phones to find out who they were sleeping with. The list of victims is huge, those involved extensive, they have deep connections with the establishment in the form of senior police officers and politicians, including Prime Minister David Cameron.

It is a remarkable and timely expose of the powerful clique of individuals that dominate the British media industry and their connections to politicians and the unelected coercive apparatus of the state.

In the latest, most dramatic, turn of all, News International have announced Sunday’s edition of the NotW, will be the last ever ? it will shut down, now an apparently toxic asset, its brand irreversibly damaged by this scandal.

Many socialists will be forgiven for crying, ?good riddance, to bad rubbish? as we remember all the workers’ and progressive struggles this rag villified. The whole affair symbolises the deep crisis of capitalism today - even the mightiest of corporations, so proud of its ability to manipulate mass public opinion, now feels the anger of millions of people.

A media empire built on lies and hypocrisy

Allegations first came to light in 2006 when police investigated and arrested a Private detective, Glenn Mulcaire and the NotW’s Royal Correspondent Clive Goodman.

Goodman had reported stories of Harry and William’s exploits with verbatim quotes from voice mail messages on Harry’s phone. Both Mulcaire and Goodman were hung out to dry by News International, and the case was wound up.

But the story did not go away. In summer 2009 the Guardian published articles accusing the NotW of widespread use of phone hacking by journalists. It was becoming clear that this wasn?t just a few ?bad eggs?, but was a systemic, regular practice, which was sanctioned by the paper?s top brass.

It has since emerged that the number of names and phone numbers hacked could be as many as 4,000.
This was the list of numbers recovered by police from the notebooks of Mulcaire, but the police and Crown Prosecution Service disgracefully sat on the information.

The names are not just limited to the Royals - government ministers, army officers, civil servants, police officers and journalists have all been targeted.

Even more outrageous has been the revelation that the voice mail of Milly Dowler, missing in 2002 and found dead six months later was hacked by Mulcaire and journalists.

The parents of Jessica Wells and Holly Chapman killed by Ian Huntley had their phones hacked. The families of the 7 July London terrorist bombing victims were also hacked. Even the families of dead soldiers from Afghanistan had their phones tapped and have now been contacted by the police as part of the investigation because their numbers were found on the lists.

This all reveals the real conditions of modern journalism; its rotten morals and utter hypocrisy. On the one hand the newspapers pursue a pro war, pro militarist agenda that provides unwavering support for the war effort, praising the virtues of the 'brave heroes' of the British army. Then the grieving families, applauded in the tabloids for their 'sacrifice' are subjected to illegal phone hacking by journalists, an outrageous invasion of their privacy.

The newspapers accuse the anti war movement of being unpatriotic and not caring about the safety of 'our boys', but in fact it is they who manufacture consent for a barbaric war and champion sending working class men and women off to fight in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq.

These journalists cry crocodile tears over the results of a war they made themselves the chief propagandists for. They lambast 'criminals' and call for ever-more draconian sentencing, with no attempt to address the causes of crime, whilst breaking the law in the pursuit of a 'good story'.

Many of us will wonder what possible ?story? could they gain from hacking the phones of relatives of murder victims? But it doesn?t matter to people who have constructed their own perverse moral outlook on the world ? one where nothing stands in the way of being first to get the edge, the scoop, and be the first to break the story. Indeed, in the glitz and glamour of the Murdoch Empire, the rewards were no doubt worth the risks.

It shows the actual contempt that such people have for the victims of crime ? they launch their regular crusades to defend the moral order, but they are steeped in the kind of corrupt practices that are absolutely ingrained in the DNA of the capitalist system.

It is an obsession with personal tragedy and crime which dominates the media today, stories of usually no interest to wider society. Similarly, in the other 'subject' of choice, the world of the rich and famous, a footballer having an affair with a model is rationally of no interest to others, except as sheer gossip and part of an obsession with celebrity which is manufactured and sustained by the media industry as a distraction from the difficult issues of the real world.

If this backward culture has been undermined in the last days it can only be a good thing. Certainly, these revelations have thrown News International into a deep and profound crisis ? the editors of the News of the World, Rebekah Wade (now Brooks) who also worked at the Sun, and Andy Coulson, are heavily implicated in the phone tapping.

Brooks is now chief executive of News International and a close friend of Rupert Murdoch. She is part of the inner clique and a crucial lynchpin in the Murdoch Empire. He is standing by her - for now - but her
position is becoming more untenable as each day passes.

**Police ? corrupt to the core**

It is not, however, just News International that stands exposed. How did Mulcaire get all those phone numbers? A private investigator he was a resourceful character, but to secure so many private numbers of people, including so many private individuals, indicates some help from somewhere.

There have been telltale signs of corrupt relations between the NotW and the police over many years. Back in March 2003 Brooks appeared before a Commons Select Committee and admitted that NotW had paid police for information. And the police have dragged their feet over mountains of evidence.

After the initial investigation in 2006 they closed the case down, saying that there was no evidence of further tapping. ?Blame the Royal Correspondent ? only his desk was involved in it?.

The Met's acting Deputy Commissioner, John Yates explained to parliament that, despite the fact that thousands of names and numbers had been found in Mulcaire notebooks, that Goodman was the only one involved - just a single rogue journalist.

Even more revealing is that the Policeman in charge of the investigation, Andy Hayman, was subsequently given a job as a columnist for News International in 2010. He was quoted as claiming that there had only been a "handful of victims".

Many new witnesses in the phone hacking scandal have been called into Scotland Yard, arrested and placed under caution. The implication of course is that any journalists who know anything would be investigated as being complicit in the crime. The normal practice of granting protection to 'whistle blowers' didn't seem to apply here.

The hacking scandal goes back even to the trial of Tommy Sheridan. Sheridan started a war with the Murdoch Empire over allegations it made about his personal affairs. He won the libel case but subsequently new evidence emerged, including recorded videos of him admitting to friends the story was true.

Coulson was summoned before the courts and under oath denied being involved in any hacking of Sheridan's phone. Sheridan asked Coulson "did the News of the World pay corrupt police officers?" Coulson replied "not to my knowledge". The judge agreed that Coulson was not involved - but who can believe this now? Indeed, News International are now thought to have passed emails to the police that implicate Coulson in the phone hacking.

At the time of the case it emerged that the investigating officers were willing to drop it but orders came from 'higher up' to pursue the case to the end it raises questions about what role News International had in the imprisonment of Sheridan. Clearly, News International and the political establishment decided to 'get' Sheridan and see him in prison.

We should not be surprised at the complicity of the police with these right wing tabloids ? after all the relationship is mutually beneficial. Police get extra cash for information, and the tabloids run stories that exonerate police violence, legitimise systematic inequality and brutality and create a climate of crime-hysteria which further justifies police funding and operations.

**The Tories**
The scandal has also exposed in the most sublime way the connections between the anti working class Murdoch papers and the Tory party itself, especially its leadership and David Cameron. Indeed this is potentially the most serious faultline developing now as the story throws up more and more damaging revelations.

Towards the end of 2009 people began to talk about the highly influential friendship between David and Samantha Cameron and two other couples, Matthew Freud (a big name in PR) and Elizabeth Murdoch and Rebecca and Charles Brooks who all live near the Cameron's in Oxfordshire.

This exclusive clique has become known as the "Chipping Norton triangle", and it illustrates the cosy relationship that Cameron has to the world of Rupert Murdoch.

But it was not always this way. Murdoch initially disliked the Eton toff educated Cameron, but Rebekha Brooks played a crucial role in bridging the gap between them. This was helped by the appointment of ex-NotW editor Coulson, who became an essential part of the Tory team as Cameron's director of communications. Whereas Alastair Campbell helped Blair construct the slick media savvy image which defined his premiership, Coulson's role is to provide the crucial link to the Murdoch empire, the beating heart of the lower middle classes world view and the kind of anti working class rubbish that is printed in the Sun and the NotW.

Cameron defended Coulson in 2009 when the allegations surfaced again. He said he had complete faith in Coulson and that "he has behaved totally honourably."

The New York Times in September 2010 published an interview with a former NotW journalist, Sean Hoare who claimed that Coulson knew of the phone tappings and listened to several messages. Coulson was forced to resign shortly after as the police became involved again.

The timing for News International's business dealings could not be worse. On the eve of the proposed take over of BSkyB the phone hacking scandal added fuel to those who are opposed to the monopolistic take over of a major TV and news company by Murdoch.

Now Cameron has been forced to argue that the phone hacking scandal should have no bearing whatsoever on the proposed take over. But common sense is growing that this simply cannot be the case. An insider told the Independent, "We are looking for a way out on the takeover. But it isn't easy to find one. The timing is just awful." The government was forced to eventually back down and move the decision date to September "at the earliest".

It was two undercover reporters from the Telegraph who recorded Vince Cable boasting about "waging war on Mr Murdoch" which led to Cable being removed as the Minister responsible for overseeing the planned take over of BSkyB by News International. The Tory they put in charge was far more willing to approve the deal, a considerable boost to Murdoch's plans. It is yet another example of journalists in a surveillance society and an anything-goes news culture.

The rot at the heart of the establishment

This metaphorical hand grenade could still claim many political lives, not just consign to the dustbin the NotW. It can sink political careers as well as newspapers. At worst it would irreversibly damage Cameron's credibility in the eyes of many people across the country who might other wise be sympathetic to him.

News International is pursuing a containment strategy. Hanging people lower down in the ranks out to dry to save the powerful at the top of the pyramids. This is the Pinochet strategy ? the person in charge knew
nothing of what their subordinates were doing. It did not work with Pinochet and it will not work with Brooks. Eventually she will be sacrificed, pensioned off after a resignation when the heat becomes too unbearable. Murdoch will close a 'sad chapter' in the life of NI and move on with his operations.

There are plenty more right-wing journalistic hacks willing to sell their soul to be an editor or an executive for one of the biggest news agencies in the world, with all the power and influence that it brings. The problem is the lack of truly transparent investigation, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) has been woefully slack in its role and tagged along with what the police and News International said all along. When questioned on the BBC the head of the PCC failed to give a clear answer as to what they had done ? all she could point to was a review which had been set up.

Even more incredible is the decision of News international to investigate itself and to appoint - Rebekah Brooks to head up the internal investigation! Considering she is one of the prime suspects for overseeing the entire practice of phone tapping it is impossible to see how she can be impartial. Even the toothless PCC described this state of affairs as "extraordinary".

Finally, even the police have been forced to set up an internal investigation into how they bungled the operation from 2006-2010. Senior police, no doubt angry that their phone numbers also appear to have been found in Macluires notebooks, are asking questions about what happened. But we cannot rely on the police to investigate themselves. In all these cases independent public enquires must be established ? but the working class organisations like the NUJ who have special knowledge of the inside of the media industry must launch their own enquiry into the events.

**Bring down the Murdoch Empire**

This crisis represents an enormous opportunity to discredit the Murdoch Empire. It has already sunk the NotW, but as everyone knows this paper is just an appendage of the Sun.

These rags should be boycotted at every level of society - companies should follow Ford and Npower and pull their advertising, people should refuse to buy it, shops should refuse to stock it.

Ultimately it points to the close links between the right wing papers and the bosses? party. The Sun is part of the same media empire as the NotW. It spews the same anti working class, racist and sexist rubbish and should be boycotted in response to the cover up going on in News International.

Murdoch is a money grabbing media tycoon who supports reactionary right wing parties as part of his own political agenda. Fox News in the US offers not news but a constant barrage of right wing arguments, designed to support and reinforce the rule of the rich.

Murdoch himself pays little tax in the US, and paid no tax at all in the UK in the 1990s, running up a tax bill of £350 million. His papers are some of the most rabid defenders of the banking sector and were instrumental in shifting the entire public debate away from bank reform and onto the alleged over spending of the public sector. His papers have the audacity to blame working people and the poor on the budget deficit whilst the editors live luxurious life styles.

All the cynicism, corruption and hypocrisy of life under capitalism is being exposed. If we can build a mass campaign then we can root out all those involved in the scandal by forcing investigators to prosecute at the highest level. It can also permanently undermine the standing of the Murdoch press in Britain - it offers the opportunity to sink the government's right wing media agenda and tabloid ties beneath the waterline and fracture the coalition even further.