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Thursday, 7 July 2011 / 21 comments

# Simons: Murdoch's UK reputation is trashed

by Margaret Simons

*The News of the World* phone-hacking scandal is now developing into nothing short of a major corruption story reaching into the highest levels of British government and with News International at its heart.

With more revelations coming almost by the hour — the most recent being that Iraq War widows may have had their phones hacked — it seems clear that the reputation of the Murdoch machine can never recover, at least in the United Kingdom.

Rupert Murdoch has put out a [brief statement today](#) backing Rebekah Brooks' leadership and promising co-operation with the police. *The News of the World* editor has also [published a message to staff](#) but both are clearly inadequate measures for the depth of trouble that the organisation is now in.

Remember, earlier this year [James Murdoch was confidently proclaiming](#) that the reputation of the company was such that the *News of the World* scandal could be "put in a box".

"You talk about a reputation crisis — actually the business is doing really well. It shows what we were able to do is really put this problem in a box."

That is a comment that now looks almost criminally stupid. Hardly surprising that in the British Parliament yesterday, James Murdoch was being accused of a cover-up.

Nobody wants to touch the *News of the World*.

And yet. The whole issue of what it did wrong, and why it was wrong, is worth a moment's deeper thought, particularly if we want to prevent this kind of thing happening again.

This morning as I rang around newsrooms, one person said to me that he knew many reporters who, if the culture of the newsroom encouraged it, and if everyone else was doing it too, would not

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hesitate to hack phones or break the law.

“People don't think that clearly, or that well. And the culture of the newsroom can be a powerful thing.”

I agree.

Those of us who have worked in media organisations know that it is rare for ethical codes to be referred to or taken seriously, if they stand in the way of getting the story. It is also almost impossible, particularly in this country, to enforce the codes.

News Limited in Australia, for example, has a code of professional conduct. Yet ask young reporters within the empire whether they are aware of its existence, let alone what it says, and you will get some idea of the priority it has in the organisation.

And if they were aware of it, they would naturally wonder how it was that it was sometimes honoured in the breach, including by senior editors.

The message the company gives — whether wittingly or no — is that reporters should concentrate on getting stories, and not argue the toss over ethical considerations.

But the problem is not only newsroom culture. It is the nature of the profession. Journalism, including the best journalism, operates on the moral edge. Journalists operate in the world of the unauthorised disclosure. Often, when people leak to journalists, they are breaking the law.

We would all take a stolen document, if it was a story. And the world's best papers published the WikiLeaks cables.

In many Australian newsrooms, it is commonplace to find things such as reverse telephone directories, (which have been illegal in Australia) illegal police scanners and devices to record telephone conversations without informing the subject that they are being recorded.

It can look like a small step from this to being the one who actually steals the secret document, or bugs the phone call. But the legal and moral difference is immense.

And yet when we talk about preserving journalism, we are talking about the capacity — which has always existed in healthy democracies — for unauthorised disclosures.

Like all moral issues, there is nothing simple about this, and no easy answers.

What is the difference between a WikiLeaks and a phone hacking? Between taking a stolen document and stealing the document yourself?

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The answer has to be about the public interest — meaning information on which the public has a right to be informed, not merely what the public might be interested in. And it has to be about a degree of humility. At the point where a media organisation becomes part of a corruption problem, or actually impedes a police investigation, we know that something awful and shameful has occurred.

Actually defining where the lines should be drawn is difficult. We all know that what the *News of the World* has done is awful and repugnant.

Yet most of us support the publication of WikiLeaks.

Where is the line between the two?

Until journalists are prepared to give deep and serious thought to the appropriate limits of our action and power, we can expect more reporters to unthinkingly race on, chasing the story like greyhounds after a rabbit, until they find themselves beyond the point of moral return.



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## 21 Comments



**WILLIAM MAGNUSSON**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 1:28 pm | [Permalink](#)

wikileaks were dealing with public entities and govts and the NoW phone hackings were dealing with private individuals ???? brookes cooperating with police...from my understanding NoW were paying police for inside information... i dont mind journo's teetering on the edge to pursue a story on Govts but its a different matter when dealing with an innocent person not in public life as suc, like the parents of victims of crimes. from what i understand another former editor of NoW is also the UKs PM staffer, could get prickly when the inquiries start.



**SHARMAN**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 1:46 pm | [Permalink](#)

The whole point about the News of the World hacking is that the "journalists" were not following a real story. They were looking for celebrity gossip. They did not do it to get justice for anyone or to put pressure on oppressive regimes. They did it because it is an easy out. Doing real work is hard. Finding real stories is difficult. If you had to nominate the best story to come out in Oz in current affairs in the last 6 months, it would have to be the Four Corners report on live cattle exports. Most of the work done on that was done by an animal activist NOT a "journalist"!



**CAIRNS50**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 2:01 pm | [Permalink](#)

come on margaret you cant have it both ways

what murdoch has been doing in the uk and everywhere where his empire operates, which is all over the western world is wrong, end of story, you know that and so does any sensible person who can read and write

the bastard runs his empire using his lackeys like a mafia thug, trying to stand over anybody who gets in his way, wheter they be democratically elected governments or private individuals

his right place and that of his lackeys is in jail

hopefully now some of the gutless politicians who bow to him will have the courage to tell him the truth about himself and his organisation

any idea of sky news running the australian network in asia, should now be dead and buried and so should the idea that he can control most of australian print media

ps of course no one from murdoch knew about the melbourne storm salary rorts either did they?

just a small sample of his corrupted ways

ask the people in rugby league what they think about mr murdoch and his underlings , his son lachlan in particular ?



**CARLITOSM**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 2:07 pm | Permalink

Great article and questions Margaret, thanks!

Shaman: spot on.



**DRMICK**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 2:07 pm | Permalink

Spot on Cairns50

If you cant tell the difference Margaret, then you are part of the problem.

Its not what the reporter decides is "valid"; or what the ownwer of the paper demands. If you know something is wrong, and believe me hacking in to anyones message bank and deleting messages is WRONG, and you are too weak to raise an objection, (or too fearful for your job), then you are definitely part of the problem.



**GEORGE CRISP**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 2:13 pm | Permalink

" Remember, earlier this year James Murdoch was confidently proclaiming that the reputation of the company was such that the News of the World scandal could be "put in a box". "

Perhaps JM was right, only the box he was talking about was a News Ltd sized coffin.



**MOZ**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 2:20 pm | Permalink

This is so typical Margaret. You want to spend your time bagging people, asserting your superior morality and so on. Then you say things like the stuff above. WTF are you intending when you say that most of us who've worked in media know that ethics don't get in the way of a "good story"? You know perfectly well that they do. Or at least they do with the many people who are ethical. It's just that it suits you to say that because it's the lazy, slippery, know-it-all folk with almost invisible ethical credentials that have all the air time on media issues.

Let me mentioned some names: Beecher, Gawenda, Hywood, Hartigan, Scott, Matthews, Mayne, Simons, Day.....and then we get to the long list.....  
Unfortunately it's the sleaze that's on top. For now.



**MACADAMIA MAN**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 2:24 pm | Permalink

Two definitions:

1) "public interest" = The well-being of the general public (in contrast to the selfish interest of a person, group, or firm).

The commonweal.

Anything affecting the rights, health, or finances of the public at large.

Matters in which the whole of society has a stake and which warrant recognition, promotion, and protection by government and its agencies.

2) "public interest" = anything I think any substantial segment of the public is, has been, might be (or can be encouraged to be) interested in hearing about.

I know which one I endorse and that law courts around the world have consistently endorsed. It isn't the second one.

Journalists (and I am one) *and* those who employ them need to re-learn a fundamental truth of their profession: A story is not automatically defensible just because it is something an audience wants to hear or that we imagine it might want to hear.

That definition belongs to "gossip".

If we don't re-learn that lesson we truly deserve all the scorn and condemnation we already get.

Even News Ltd knows that to be true, but until the rest of us punish transgressions by the comprehensive and active withdrawal of our support for the (ir)responsible outlet, we are complicit in the breach.

Accessories before, during and after the fact you could say ...



**ZUT ALORS**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 2:43 pm | [Permalink](#)

Thanks for your honesty about the culture of newsrooms, Margaret.

And thanks to karma for delivering to News Ltd a serving of what it deserves.



**MICHAEL**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 2:46 pm | [Permalink](#)

What am I missing here? Everyone knows that journalists are corrupt, evil, unprincipled, baby eating, deceitful, cowardly, bloodless freaks. Why the surprised looks?



**KLEWSO**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 2:50 pm | [Permalink](#)

What makes some journalists think that, because they are "reporting it" they are outside normal mores and acceptable standards of behaviour - in much the same way some police seem to think, that "because they are enforcing it (the law)", they are outside it?



**KLEWSO**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 3:02 pm | [Permalink](#)

Maybe that line is between "the said and the done"?

And who judges "the public interest"? What if they're not prepared to abide by the same standards of disclosure come "their turn", as they apply and expect others to cop? Would rather use the resources of their organisation (used to expose others) to hide their own inappropriate behaviour.



**DRMICK**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 3:42 pm | [Permalink](#)

Zut and Klewso

Thats the killer; by questioning everything, by demeaning and undervaluing life itself, they attract a certain type of easily manipulated tyre kicking superficial wanker.

The type that slows to a stop in a line of traffic going past a prang to see if they can see a body or blood or whatever.

Having "created" a "market", they justify what they do as "in the public interest", they just dont tell you what pathetic part of the public they mean.

Unfair and Unbanced describes their reason for existence, and the rubbish that describes their chosen market



**DAVID**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 3:44 pm | [Permalink](#)

Interestingly today many tweeters on Twitter have been asking News Ltd Journalists here in Australia if they have been involved in or know of similar conduct as being dragged out of Murdochs UK employees.

Not one of course bothered answering. Sometimes silence expresses itself louder than words or could it be fear of retribution from their employer. Most jurnos on Twitter are easily identifiable which is the way they like it.

Of course they may all be as innocent as a new born babe...there goes another flying pig.



**LIZ45**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 3:50 pm | [Permalink](#)

Margaret, there's a big difference between what Wikileaks did/do and the revolting behaviour of the so-called journalists employed by Murdoch.

To hack into the phone of a young girl who's disappeared (ending up being found murdered) and removing some messages to make it look like she was still alive(and giving the parents/family hope) was totally disgusting. Full stop. the end! Disgusting!

But, they did it again- many times. To the phones of the families of two other young girls who were murdered; to the families of those killed in Afghanistan and Iraq; to the families of the London bombings who lost loved ones. The mind boggles.

As someone said before me, if you have to ask the questions, then you're part of the problem.

I believe that there should be the equivalent of a Royal Commission(so that red haired woman will be FORCED to give evidence - not refuse as she's done in the past) and criminal charges should be laid, including against Rupert Murdoch himself - as the ultimate person responsible. I find his pathetic attempts to on one hand say tut tut, but on the other allege his innocence is just showing contempt for all of us. He's a contemptible person, and his behaviour disgusts me but doesn't surprise me. Gutter journalism has been his methods of running his rags for decades!

People should take a look at Lateline last night. the interview between Tony Jones and John Prescott is

educational. He had his phone hacked 44 times, even though he was told several times that it wasn't - they lied, they're still lying. Get them in Court under oath and let's all listen to what the evidence is. Totally disgusting.

I hope all the families get together re a Class Action and sue the pants off Murdoch - or better still, the dollars off him! Heaps of dollars! Many, many millions!

The people in the US should take a look also. And as John Prescott said last night, 'you Aussies should take a look too' or words to that effect.



**FREDEX**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 4:17 pm | [Permalink](#)

Murdoch's reputation has been trash for at least 20 years.



**TOM**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 4:44 pm | [Permalink](#)

Prediction - Sales numbers of the News of the World will not decline by more than 5% and not for more than one month before they are back bigger and more popular. Is it an outrage? Yes. Is it beyond moral or ethical decency? Yes. Are we, the middle class disgusted and determined to boycott something for at least a week? Yep. Is the News of the World what the wider public wants? ab-so-bloody-lutely.

Sideshow, Lindsay Tanners 'dumbing down democracy' while being very depressing is very illuminating and explains step by step how this happened.

Popular journalism across the western world from newspapers through radio shock jocks to the infotainment presented as news on commercial television is in the toilet. Has been for a while and is showing no signs of getting any better any time soon.

The public gets what the public wants ..... and this is it.



**MICHAEL**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 5:07 pm | [Permalink](#)

Liz are you a nun?



**NICOLINO**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 5:14 pm | [Permalink](#)

Tom, You said it all. I was listening to some radio news today and one item referred to an upcoming tour of a Rock Group for God's sake. That's news!!?

As with politicians, we get the news we deserve or what passes for news.



**JOHN2066**

Posted Thursday, 7 July 2011 at 11:21 pm | [Permalink](#)

The redigested monkey apes of News Corp need to be treated as common criminals.

It seems the glorious death of Frank Devine was a harbinger of the death of this foul company.



**CAIRNS50**

Posted Friday, 8 July 2011 at 8:16 am | [Permalink](#)

so the evil bastard has closed his NEWS OF THE WORLD

what he should do now is do is close down the rest of his rags around the globe

this is nothing more than a stunt to try and take the heat off himself and all his lying underling sons lackeys etc

julia gilliard, tony abbott, and other leading australian politicians take note

the next time this bastard or one of his standover editors summon you or demand an interview with you

show them the door and tell them to get stuffed

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