

Wapping-gate exposes serious questions about the ethics of UK journalism and the collusion of media, politics and security forces

A broad debate is needed about ethics in journalism and how to enforce them without impeding on press freedom when it comes to matters of genuine public interest, writes [Bart Cammaerts](#).



There is a long standing tradition in this country (as in many others) that if you want to remove something from the public debate because it is too controversial or damaging and there is an urgent need to move on, you announce an all-encompassing independent inquiry preferably broad in scope which will self-evidently need ample time, resources and a more sober, rational, atmosphere to come to any kind of conclusions.

Wapping-gate is no different; at least three parallel processes have been put in motion to come to terms with all that happened – or rather did not happen. However, despite the efforts of several actors in this ever-evolving scandal to try and put a lid on it, they failed miserably. “The worst is still to come”, Rebekah Brooks told the flabbergasted journalists at News of the World after the decision to close down the Sunday newspaper. One wonders how much worse it can get?

The one chasing the scandals has become the scandal, but one of a much bigger proportion than any scandal it ever reported itself. For many political observers this was a scandal waiting to happen, surprising really that it took so long. Coincidentally, a few days before the decision to grant Murdoch 100% ownership of BSkyB was to be taken or rather announced, all hell broke loose.

In recent weeks, the real extent of the illegal hacking practices was finally publicly acknowledged, but above all the respective attempts to contain and conceal the industrial nature of phone-hacking in Wapping revealed the incestuous collusion between media owners/editors, politics and the police. While the practices relate to the need for more ethics in journalism, the extent of the collusions point to deeper problems at the heart of liberal representative democracy.

With all attention focused on News International and especially the dubious practices at News of the World, we tend to forget that the nature in which journalism is being practiced by some print media in this country might also be part of the problem. Many have argued that Wapping-gate should not be used as an excuse to introduce press regulations (as is already the case with broadcasting). One thing is for sure though, self-regulation has proven to be dysfunctional and contra-productive, which is not unsurprising when one sees that the chairman of the editors’ Code of Practice Committee of the Press Complaints Commission is non other than Paul Dacre, the editor in chief of the Daily Mail. “It’s like putting the mafia in charge of the local police station”, Max Mosley famously said about this double role, when he appeared before the culture, media and sport committee at the House of Commons in 2009.

One wonders why it is deemed to be such a bad idea to impose a number of basic ethical rules on the media concurrent with their social responsibilities in a media-saturated democratic society. In this debate one of the pivotal issues is privacy. In which circumstances and to which extent is it justifiable for the media to invade somebody’s privacy; celebrity or not, politician or citizen. The media’s and the public’s obsession with celebrities, extreme sensationalism, as well as the tendency in some of the UK media to expose, sometimes even destroy, ordinary people’s lives and exploit them in the name of moral outrage, has now taken things well beyond what is acceptable in a democracy. This calls above all for a thorough rethink of privacy laws, but also of the ways journalists behave to get a story and of how journalistic deontological codes are enforced.

It remains difficult to believe in this regard that other (red-top) journalists beyond News International did/do not engage in similar practices. In 2006 [a report](#) commissioned by Richard Thomas, the then Information Commissioner, revealed that [58 Daily Mail journalists bought 952 pieces of information](#) from a single private detective called Stephen Whittamore. *Daily Mirror* (45 journalists/681 transactions) and *News of the World* (23 journalists/228 transactions) featured in the top 5 as well, even the *Observer* (4 journalists/400 transactions) made it into the top 10. In total a whopping 350 journalists were found to be customers of Whittamore and there must be plenty of other PIs out there offering their services to journalists. Claims emerged from former journalists that [hacking was also rife at the Daily Mirror and Mirror on Sunday](#). As

such, a much broader debate is needed about ethics in journalism and ways to enforce them in a better way without necessarily impeding on press freedom when it comes to matters of genuine public interest rather than populist interest.

The second dimension of Wapping-gate, which is to some extent even worse, is that of the collusion which unravelled in the wake of the scandal between media organisations on the one hand, and politicians and security forces on the other. In a way this is inevitable given the mediated age we live in. Politicians need the media and so does the police, but the media also needs the police and politicians for stories and drama; there is also a duty to inform citizens which is mainly done through mainstream media. Besides this, the opportunities the mainstream media offer in terms of propaganda and persuasion have been well documented which also explains why especially politicians strive to receive positive exposure by the media. However, it is clear that this symbiotic relationship can also become toxic certainly when one actor was allowed to own such a large part of the UK newspaper and broadcasting industry giving him the leverage to lead the dance.

As a result of this we have seen desperate attempts by all parts of the establishment on all sides of the political spectrum to cozy-up to the Murdochs, scared of the feral and intimidating beast; the police putting a price on sensitive and private information, then attempting to cover-up the extent of these corrupt practices across the police force, and a political class too scared and fearful to act and do anything about it as Murdoch was deemed to be able to make and break a political career.

It seems as if the public outrage Wapping-gate caused broke an enthralling spell which culminated in the grilling of the two Murdochs in Parliament last Tuesday (causing a Schadenfreudegasm, as the [Daily Show's John Oliver put it](#)). Gone was the fear, the reverence and adulation, the vying for public support of the media mogul. Everybody seemed keen to distance themselves from the Murdoch empire. Maybe this is one of these cathartic moments that will enable us to collectively reflect on the nature of the relationships between media organisations, journalists, politics and the police, while at the same time also questioning the unethical behaviour of some journalists and editors in their search for the next scandal or juicy story. This requires a profound debate, which I hope will not only be had within the confinements of inquiries, but also beyond, within civil society, amongst journalists, academics, police and other citizens, with audiences and publics.