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Phone hacking: media reputations are at stake

With phone hacking, and social media, we must work together to uphold the highest ethical standards



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Metropolitan Police commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson recently said he would rather his men were tackling robbery than investigating phone hacking. Photograph: Iwan Neal/AFP/Getty Images

Imagine if, over the past two decades or so, a particularly persistent burglar had made it his business to target the properties of the rich and famous. Imagine that he went after celebrities – pop stars, actresses, footballers – and found that he was getting away with it. What's more, the police hadn't a clue what he was doing.

So he expanded his ambitions and went thieving from members of the royal family, the governor of the Bank of England, terrorist informers and even those who pass the laws he was breaking: members of parliament. Flushed with success, he targeted backbenchers, then ministers, and even – most brazen of all – the prime minister. And imagine he then found that, far from acting swiftly to capture, arrest and charge him, the Metropolitan police force (who knew something about his activities) initially stood idly by as his list of victims grew and grew.

What's the difference between this and the phone-hacking scandal that has engulfed some of Britain's leading media companies? The phone-hacking scandal isn't hypothetical.

We don't yet know for certain the full extent of it. Some of those alleging their phones were hacked may not be victims after all. But it seems certain that many of them were – that the same media companies targeted them.

This is one of the biggest scandals in public life for decades, and yet our response has been weak. The police have been slow to react, which may be linked to their close ties with those media companies. Sir Paul Stephenson, the commissioner of the Metropolitan police, recently said he would rather his men were investigating more serious crimes like robbery. But isn't the theft of private information still theft?

And if the Press Complaints Commission is fit for purpose, its recent conduct is *not* proof of that.

That is all the more regrettable for coming at a time when the proper conduct of the

media is under great pressure from advances in technology, and the distinction between what is in the public interest, and what is of interest to the public, is getting harder to make.

On the latter – what is of interest to the public – the case of Fred Goodwin is instructive. The Royal Bank of Scotland boss is alleged to have had an affair before the bank's collapse. Is it right that the public should know of his affair, given its liabilities for his errors? My answer is yes.

On the former – what is in the public interest – social media companies like Twitter and Facebook have changed the media landscape permanently, and for the better. Journalism is more open and collaborative than ever. Consumers of media are participating in a conversation, not listening to a lecture. But a consequence of this is the anarchic flow of information, and the difficulty of legislating effectively on it.

But laws mean nothing if they are not enforced. It is nonsensical to pass laws without genuine efforts to tackle the behaviour they prohibit. And so while with phone hacking the problem was not one of having the wrong laws in place but rather failing to apply those laws properly, so in the age of social media the idea of a privacy law is both impracticable and naive.

As a result of all this there have been times over the past year when I have opened red-top newspapers and despaired of their sensationalism. But if red-top values are the price we pay for an open society, I would rather that – with all the attendant controversy and prurience – over the closed minds bred by a less free press.

As the British-Russian son of a former KGB officer, I feel strongly that one of the best measures of a strong, healthy society is its view of free speech, and a free press is the greatest champion of free speech.

And that is why, incidentally, I would like to take steps with other newspaper proprietors over the coming months to see if we can collectively improve things.

Working with other owners, we can ensure that the regulations we have in place are more effective, that our laws catch up with the digital revolution, and that our journalists uphold the highest standards in ethical journalism. Nothing less than the reputation of Britain's media is at stake.

• Evgeny Lebedev will be speaking about free speech at an Independent Voices event in London on Tuesday 5 July

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