

From The Gdn online:

Rupert Murdoch's News Group has paid out more than £1m to settle legal cases that threatened to reveal evidence of his journalists' repeated involvement in the use of criminal methods to get stories.

The payments secured secrecy over out-of-court settlements in three cases that threatened to expose evidence of Murdoch journalists using private investigators who illegally hacked into the mobile phone messages of numerous public figures and to gain unlawful access to confidential personal data including tax records, social security files, bank statements and itemised phone bills. Cabinet ministers, MPs, actors and sports stars were all targets of the private investigators.

Today, the Guardian reveals details of the suppressed evidence which may open the door to hundreds more legal actions by victims of News Group, the Murdoch company that publishes the News of the World and the Sun, as well as provoking police inquiries into reporters who were involved and the senior executives responsible for them.

The evidence also poses difficult questions for:

= Conservative leader David Cameron's director of communications, Andy Coulson, who was deputy editor and then editor of the News of the World when, the suppressed evidence shows, journalists for whom he was responsible were engaging in hundreds of apparently illegal acts

= Murdoch executives who, albeit in good faith, have misled a parliamentary select committee, the Press Complaints Commission and the public

= The Metropolitan police, who did not alert all those whose phones were targeted, and the Crown Prosecution Service, which did not pursue all possible charges against News Group personnel; and

= the Press Complaints Commission, which claimed to have conducted an investigation but failed to uncover any evidence of illegal activity.

The suppressed legal cases are linked to the jailing in January 2007 of News of the World reporter Clive Goodman for hacking into the mobile phones of three royal staff, an offence under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act. At the time, News International said it knew of no other journalist who was involved in hacking phones and that Goodman had been acting without their knowledge.

However, one senior source at the Met. police told the Guardian that during the Goodman inquiry, officers had found evidence of News Group staff using private investigators who hacked into "thousands" of mobile phones. Another source with direct knowledge of the police findings put the figure at "two or three thousand" mobiles. They suggest that MPs from all three parties and cabinet ministers, including former deputy prime minister John Prescott and former culture secretary Tessa Jowell, were among the targets. News International has always maintained that it has no knowledge of phone hacking by anybody acting on its behalf.

A private investigator who had been working on contract for News Group, Glenn Mulcaire, was also jailed in January 2007. He admitted hacking into the phones of

five other targets, including Gordon Taylor, chief executive of the Professional Footballers Association. Among those phones Mulcaire hacked into were the Liberal Democrat MP Simon Hughes, celebrity PR Max Clifford, model Elle MacPherson and football agent Sky Andrew. News Group denied all knowledge of the hacking, but Taylor last year sued them on the basis that they must have known about it.

In documents initially submitted to the high court, News Group executives said the company had not been involved in any way in Mulcaire's hacking of Taylor's phone. They specifically denied keeping any recording or notes of intercepted messages and claimed they had not even been aware of the hacking. However, at the request of Taylor's lawyers, the court ordered the production of detailed evidence from Scotland Yard's inquiry in the Goodman case and also from a separate inquiry by the Information Commissioner into journalists who dishonestly obtain confidential personal records.

The Scotland Yard files included paperwork which revealed that, contrary to News Group's initial denial, Mulcaire had provided a recording of the messages on Taylor's phone to a News of the World journalist who had transcribed them and emailed them to a senior reporter; and that a News of the World executive had offered Mulcaire a substantial bonus payment for a story specifically related to the intercepted messages. Several famous figures from the world of football are among those messages which were intercepted. Andy Coulson was editing the paper at this time. He told the Guardian this week that he knew nothing about Taylor's legal action, which began after he resigned from the paper.

The paperwork from the Information Commission revealed the names of 31 journalists working for the News of the World and the Sun, together with the precise details of government agencies, banks, phone companies and others who were conned into handing over confidential information on politicians, actors, sports men and women, musicians and television presenters, all of whom are named in the paperwork. This is an offence under the Data Protection Act unless it is justified by public interest.

Senior editors are among the journalists who are implicated. This activity occurred before the mobile phone hacking, at a time when Andy Coulson was deputy, and the editor was Rebekah Wade, now due to become chief executive of News International. The extent of their personal knowledge, if any, is not clear: the News of the World has always insisted that it would not break the law and would use subterfuge only if essential in the public interest.

Faced with this evidence, News International changed their position, started offering huge cash payments to settle the case out of court, and finally paid out £700,000 in legal costs and damages on the condition that Taylor signed a gagging clause to prevent him speaking about the case. The payment is believed to have included more than £400,000 in damages, dwarfing the largest previous payment for breach of privacy in the UK, the £60,000 paid by the News of the World for filming Max Mosley naked with prostitutes. News Group then persuaded the court to seal the file on Taylor's case to prevent all public access, even though it contained prima facie evidence of criminal activity.

The Scotland Yard paperwork also provided evidence that the News of the World had been involved with Glenn Mulcaire in his hacking the mobile phones of at least two other figures from the world of football. They, too, filed complaints, which were

settled earlier this year when News International paid a total of more than £300,000 in damages and costs on condition that they, too, signed gagging clauses.

The Guardian's understanding is that the paperwork disclosed by Scotland Yard to Taylor is only a fraction of the total material they gathered on News Group's involvement with Glenn Mulcaire. And it is a matter of record that the Information Commission has refused to release paperwork which implicates national newspaper journalists in thousands of apparently illegal acts.

The secrecy around the cases continues. Gordon Taylor declined to make any comment. Clive Goodman, now out of prison, said: "I'm not going to talk. My comment is not even 'no comment'." A spokesman for News International suggested the case did not exist: "This particular case means nothing to anyone here, and I've talked to all the people who would be involved." However, the Information Commission confirms that they disclosed material for the case, and the Guardian has pieced together a detailed account of the evidence.