

Tim Toulmin

From: Mick Gorrill [Mick.Gorrill@pcc.gov.uk] ([redacted])
Sent: 17 August 2009 07:43
To: Tim Toulmin
Subject: Operation Motorman.

Dear Tim,

As you are aware, Operation Motorman uncovered an illegal trade in personal information between a private investigator, Steve Whittamore and some 305 journalists. In the ledgers and workbooks that were seized from Whittamore's home there are references to the journalists requesting the information, the details of the request and the resulting information forwarded to the journalist. For example, a journalist may have come across an individual's ex-directory telephone number or mobile telephone number and may have requested that the address for that number was obtained. Some requests were headed 'hospital blag' or 'credit check' 'vehicle reg' etc. Checks were made with the credit references agencies and through DVLA for registered keeper details. There were more intrusive checks being asked for and completed for example criminal record checks but the majority of the checks, it would appear, were an attempt to find the current address of people who individual journalists were interested in (many were people in the public eye or associated with such individuals).

The reason why we are reluctant to provide the select committee or any other interested parties with the information contained in the workbook is because most of the information in the ledger is personal information. For example, names, addresses, vehicle registrations, telephone numbers etc., of the individuals subject to the requests and of course the names of the journalists.

Whittamore and his accomplices appeared in court in April 2005 when the matter was dealt with. The lenient sentences handed down to them led to the two parliamentary reports, What Price Privacy and What Price Privacy Now which called for a more substantial penalty (imprisonment) for those found guilty of the section 55 offence (unlawful obtaining etc of personal information).

Since the Motorman investigation we have not had any investigations where we have uncovered evidence of journalists using private investigators or other third parties to unlawfully obtain personal information. We have received one complaint since Motorman where a member of the public complained that details of her medical record appeared in a national newspaper and that the journalist had unlawfully obtained it. It was clear that details of her medical record had appeared in the newspaper but we were unable to show that it had been unlawfully obtained.

We are of the view that the threat of imprisonment and other high profile convictions of private investigators unlawfully obtaining information (not on behalf of journalists) have had an effect on this practice which has significantly reduced across the board. The PCC's own work will also have made a contribution so far as journalists are concerned. From our records there has been a marked reduction in complaints about journalists unlawfully obtaining personal information via third parties. This does suggest that unless journalists are now using other improper methods to obtain personal information there has been an improvement in standards.

I hope this helps, please do not hesitate to contact me should you wish to discuss further.

Michael Gorrill
 Assistant Commissioner
 Head of Regulatory Action Division
 Information Commissioner's Office

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17/08/2009