

The Practice of Journalism

Allegations that Milly Dowler's phone was hacked besmirch journalism. The full truth must be exposed

There is no doubt but that journalists are now in their version of the MPs' expenses scandal. If there is proven to be truth in the allegations that journalists on the *News of the World* hacked into the voicemail of the murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler, there will not be a journalist in the country who, after the warranted anger, will not feel shamed and depressed. There is a lot that is not yet known about this case but this much we do know: this is beyond reprehensible.

Before today, *The Times*, which, like the *News of the World*, is owned by News International, has taken the view that it ought not to comment on the issue of phone hacking. We have sought to report the story straight, in good faith, without taking any editorial view. A supportive line invites the accusation of speaking from the party script. A critical line is easily written off as a deliberate, insincere attempt to create distance from the story.

But anyone who has serious faith in the public purpose of journalism has to record his or her dissent from the behaviour that has now been alleged. Anyone who believes in the nobility of the trade of reporting the truth, the better to inform the readers, and anyone who believes in the contribution of vibrant comment to a raucous and well-informed democracy, has to be clear when a line has been crossed. Over and above the internal inquiry that will be conducted at News International, this matter now requires the most rigorous possible police inquiry, which must be carried out, in David Cameron's words, "without fear or favour". It is also welcome that the Speaker has allowed an emergency debate in Parliament today.

For it is clear that, at this stage, these are all only allegations. There is much that we still need to know. Were journalists at the *News of the World* involved or just their consultant Glenn Mulcaire? Was Milly Dowler's phone actually hacked or is it simply the case that Mulcaire had obtained her number? Did the *News of the World* and Mulcaire do the same in the case of the Soham victims and, if so, when? And given the reports of phone hacking by other national newspapers, how much of this was exception and how much, across the industry, the rule?

It must become clear, in time, whether allegations harden into facts and whether the criminal law has been broken. It will also become clear whether the investigation into Milly Dowler's death was in any way hampered, something Surrey Police say was not the case. But, even before the intervention of the law, journalism has a responsibility and an ethic. Its claim to public credibility rests on conducting its work in a way that is defensible to a reasonable person, known in the trade as a reader.

We will, no doubt, learn more, and none of it is likely to be edifying. Whatever else emerges, this is a watershed moment for British journalism. What happened needs to be investigated and, in the public interest and the interests of journalism itself, brought to light. It ought to go without saying that nothing of this nature can ever happen again. But then it ought to have gone without saying that nothing of this nature could ever have happened in the first place. This is why it is so important that the truth be known.

These questions, about journalistic integrity, will now occupy public attention for some time to come. But the anguish of the Dowler family is happening now. Much has been written and said about the pain that the Dowlers had to endure in court as their lifestyle was impugned in the (vain) defence of the man who killed their daughter. It was, surely, the least they deserved that, after the tragedy of losing a daughter and the strain of the witness box, the Dowler family might have been left as free of this awful case as they can ever be. Unfortunately they have been denied even that small mercy.