

Matthew Parris

(1) Who you are and a brief summary of your career history in politics and the media;

I am a columnist, writer and broadcaster. After leaving the Foreign Office at 25 I worked as a correspondence clerk in the office of the then Leader of the Opposition, Margaret Thatcher. In 1979 I was elected MP for West Derbyshire, resigning in 1986 to become Presenter of *Weekend World*, LWT's Sunday politics programme, leading this to an early grave in 1988, when I started working for *The Times*, producing daily political and parliamentary sketches, which continued until 2001; by then I was also writing commentary columns, serious and light, often but not always about politics, and these continue. I write a weekly column, usually quite "heavy" for the paper on Saturday, and on Thursday a weekly Diary column, more miscellaneous and often lighter. I also produce extra work ad hoc for the paper. For about 15 years I've been writing a regular, fortnightly column for the *Spectator*, of a sometimes serious and sometimes whimsical nature, about anything I choose. I also produce occasional journalism, political and otherwise, and reviews and travel articles, for a miscellany of newspapers and magazines. I do some television work, mostly as a political pundit interviewee or panellist, for a range of channels, but the lion's share of my broadcasting (apart from brief occasional punditry for about a dozen stations at home and abroad) is for BBC Radio 4, where I am now in my fourth year of presenting a biographical programme, *Great Lives*. My books on a range of subjects have included *Great Parliamentary Scandals* (through five editions), *The Great Unfrocks – 2000 years of Church Scandal*, *Parting Shots* (a collection of British Ambassadors' Valedictory Dispatches obtained by application at the archives at Kew and through Freedom of Information requests), *Scorn* (a collection of invective and verbal abuse) and an autobiography, *Chance Witness*.

It will perhaps be helpful to your Inquiry to make clear at once that, though I think of myself as a *Times* journalist, and of the paper as my own, I am not, properly speaking, in the employ of *The Times* or any other media organisation: I worked freelance without a contract with the paper until about 2006, and since then have worked on an annual contract stipulating an agreed output of columns, and ad hoc payments for additional work. Although, when a parliamentary sketchwriter, I was based at *The Times*'s room at Westminster, I have never worked in the main office of the newspaper itself, and only go there about once a week, for the Editor's weekly Politics meeting. I am largely ignorant of the organisational side of the paper, having become familiar only with those channels I need to work through: the Comment Desk, sub-editors, and the News Desk. The overwhelming majority of my work has been either dictated, faxed or (now) emailed to the paper, and most of my professional dealings with fellow-journalists have been by telephone or email.

(2) How you understand the system of corporate governance to work in practice at the publications for which you write ("your newspaper") with particular emphasis on systems to ensure lawful, professional and ethical conduct;

See above for an outline of my non-office-based working method. I have an only hazy understanding of the meaning of the term 'corporate governance' – but take it to mean 'management' or 'system of management'. I have never read my annual contracts with great care, but seem to recall that they make clear – as I would anyway expect – that my work should be conducted in a professionally ethical and proper way, and that I would not bring the company into disrepute. Contractual or otherwise, I would consider this a condition of any reputable job and would not need it spelling out. If I had had, or were ever to have, any doubts about what 'professional and

ethical' meant in practice in any aspect of my job, then it would be understood in a job like mine that I would seek guidance from my Comment Editor or the Editor himself. I've never doubted they would be ready to advise. To the best of my memory, this circumstance has never yet arisen. My kind of journalism hardly takes me near the edge of proper means of enquiry, and I have not worked alongside any journalist whose job did so. Under five successive *Times* editors I have never been in the least doubt that my paper rigorously eschewed improper conduct; my present Editor has made it clear more than once in my hearing – I cannot specify date or occasion as I see and hear him quite often – that our paper had had and would have nothing to do with unlawful means of news-gathering; and I recall that one of the reasons why *The Times* did not buy the stolen CD-ROM (finally obtained by the *Telegraph*) containing information about MPs' expenses was said by colleagues to be that it had been stolen.

(3) What your role is/was in ensuring that the corporate governance documents and all relevant policies are adhered to in practice. If you do not consider yourself to have been/be responsible for this, please tell us who you consider to hold that responsibility and why;

I am unfamiliar with these documents; have never had much doubt about what constituted impropriety in a job like mine; and regard myself as being responsible for my own behaviour, and the Comment Editor and the Editor as being responsible for satisfying themselves that my behaviour was proper. If any serious impropriety by any of my fellow-journalists on the paper were ever to come to my attention (none ever has) I would suppose it my responsibility to bring this to the attention of my superiors.

(4) Whether the documents and policies referred to above are adhered to in practice, to the best of your knowledge;

I am in no position to verify what is, nevertheless, my confident opinion that on *The Times*, any guidelines in place are respected.

(5) Whether these practices or policies have changed, either recently as a result of the phone hacking media interest or prior to that point, and if so, what the reasons for the change were;

I would not know. I have never heard it suggested. On my own paper it is my impression there would be no cause to change practices or policies, which were already appropriate.

(6) Where the responsibility for checking sources of information lies (including the method by which the information was obtained): from reporter to news editor/showbiz

editor/royal editor to editor, and how this is done in practice (with some representative examples to add clarity);

I do not know. I would assume that each of us is directly responsible to his immediate superior; and so on, up to the top.

(7) To what extent a reporter or journalist such as yourself is aware, and should be aware, of the sources of the information which make up the central stories featured in your newspaper each day (including the method by which the information was obtained);

I confidently suppose, but am in no position to verify, that on *The Times* our channels and sources of information are appropriate and proper. Mine are. The only doubt I have ever felt or expressed to colleagues (and it is of about twenty years' standing) has been about the way some newspapers' journalists appear to have been tipped off before high-profile arrests or other police operations. When I've expressed concern or curiosity I've been told – as though it were common knowledge, anciently established – that some journalists have unofficial lines of communication with individual officers in police stations. This has been described to me as industry practice rather than something any colleague on *The Times* was doing. I've received a similarly cynical response when I've raised the phenomenon with criminal barrister and solicitor friends, whom I might have expected to be more indignant on their clients' behalf. The same is true of friends in the police I've spoken to. I've found this professional insouciance on the part of journalists, lawyers and the police, unsettling.

(8) The extent to which you consider that ethics can and should play a role in the print media, and what you consider 'ethics' to mean in this context;

Of course they should. The word 'ethics' should be interpreted as it's commonly understood. Ethics require the striking of balances. The striking of a balance requires the weighting of competing goals. In differing fields of professional endeavour different weights may by common consent be attached to goals. On the battlefield, for instance, respect for human life will be weighted differently from in the civilian workplace. You would not expect a topless dancer to attach the same weight to decorum as a vicar's wife might, but still there is honour – and there are ethics – among topless dancers. A columnist like me gives less weight to the aim of not stirring up antipathies or causing offence or pain, than would a speaker on *Thought for the Day* – but still I'm conscious of having sometimes overstepped the mark and been unkind. In the gathering by journalists of useful information it should be the starting point of any inquiry that in order to extract information from people who do not wish to volunteer it, methods, sometimes of subterfuge, may be used that would be improper if used among friends. In assessing whether the mark has been overstepped, great consideration must be given to the public interest. The public interest in exposing and combatting crime or corruption in high places is easy to argue and must be considerable. But that does not mean there is no public interest at all in sniffing out hypocrisy or impropriety in "celebrities", or showing that heroes may sometimes have feet of clay. A society in which this occurs is healthier than one in which it is easy for such truths to be hidden or suppressed.

(9) The extent to which you, as a journalist, felt any financial and/or commercial pressure from the proprietors of your newspaper, the editor or anyone else, and whether any

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such pressure affected any of the decisions you made as a journalist (such evidence to be limited to matters covered by the Terms of Reference);

Never. But as a columnist I'm not on the front line of trying to pursue stories. You have not – but perhaps should have – included in your list of the sources of pressure, the question of career and standing, which for investigative journalists (I would hazard) is a more common motivation than any offer of money, or threat to take it away. Such journalists rightly hanker to break stories.

(10) The extent to which you, as a reporter, had a financial incentive to print exclusive stories (NB. It is not necessary to state your precise earnings);

Not really applicable to a columnist like me, except in the obvious sense that we all prefer to say things, or reveal truths, that are not already common knowledge, and are more likely to gain a living from doing so.

(11) Whether, to the best of your knowledge, your newspaper used, paid or had any connection with private investigators in order to source stories or information and/or paid or received payments in kind for such information from the police, public officials, mobile phone companies or others with access to the same: if so, please provide details of the numbers of occasions on which such investigators or other external providers of information were used and of the amounts paid to them (NB. You are not required to identify individuals, either within your newspaper or otherwise);

No

(12) What your role was in instructing, paying or having any other contact with such private investigators and/or other external providers of information;

None

(13) If such investigators or other external providers of information were used, what policy/protocol, if any, was used to facilitate the use of such investigators or other external providers of information (for example, in relation to how they were identified, how they were chosen, how they were paid, their remit, how they were told to check sources, what methods they

were told to or permitted to employ in order to obtain the information and so on);

Not applicable

(14) If there was such a policy/protocol, whether it was followed, and if not, what practice was followed in respect of all these matters;

Not applicable

(15) Whether there are any situations in which neither the existing protocol/policy nor the practice were followed and what precisely happened/failed to happen in those situations. What factors were in play in deciding to depart from the protocol or practice?

Not applicable

(16) The extent to which you are aware of protocols or policies operating at your newspaper in relation to expenses or remuneration paid to other external sources of information (whether actually commissioned by your newspaper or not). There is no need for you to cover 'official' sources, such as the Press Association;

I am not familiar with, but have always assumed the existence of, *The Times's* policies; and that they will have prohibited inappropriate payments; and that my colleagues will have had a good and agreed understanding of what 'inappropriate' means in such circumstances. I hope I'm right in supposing it would not, for example, include buying lunch for a talkative cabinet minister, which is about as close as I would ever be likely to get to spending my newspaper's money on acquiring information.

(17) The practice of your newspaper in relation to payment of expenses and/or remuneration paid to other external sources of information (whether actually commissioned by your newspaper or not). There is no need to cover 'official' sources such as the Press Association;

Speaking for myself, I would have to be specific about any expense incurred in the pursuit of my duties, and submit receipts.

(18) In respect of editorial decisions you have made or participated in to publish

stories, the factors you have taken into account in balancing the private interests of individuals (including the fact that information may have been obtained from paid sources in the circumstances outlined under paragraph 11 above) against the public interest in a free Press. You should provide a

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number of examples of these, and explain how you have interpreted and applied the foregoing public interest;

This has scarcely affected me as a columnist. The only example that comes to mind is the (collective) decision by British journalists not to publish a story about a serious emotional/psychological crisis involving one of a former PM's family, while in office. I abided by this voluntary censorship but thought it a mistake: a retrograde and improperly deferential decision by the news media. If a Prime Minister's family life is in crisis I do believe this to be a matter of legitimate public interest. But to the best of my knowledge the questions of financial inducements or subterfuge in the gathering of this news did not arise.

(19) Whether you or your newspaper ever engaged in or procured others to engage in 'computer hacking' in order to source stories, or for any reason.

I never have; and I've no reason to think my newspaper has, and would be confident it has not. My editor has remarked in my hearing that we do not, and I do not doubt his word.

(20) If you cannot answer these questions, or take the view that they could be more fully answered by someone else, you must nonetheless provide answers to the extent that you can, and to the extent that you cannot you must provide the Inquiry as soon as possible with names of those who would be able to assist us further.

The documents you should provide to the Inquiry Panel should relate to the following matters or issues:

- (a) Any policies or protocols referred to above;
- (b) Any details or documents relating to expenses paid to private investigators and/or other external sources of information;
- (c) Article/s you have written about the phone hacking scandal.

I cannot help you on (a) and (b); I would have no idea even of what to look for. On (c) I attach a Diary item and an Opinion column I've written. I think they are all I've published that touches hacking, but if there's anything else, it will have said the same thing, because my views have not changed and I've always disclosed them.

Some further thoughts, only tangentially covered in answers to the questions above, follow ...

I do understand the margins within which your enquiries must proceed; but no examination of phone-hacking should divorce it from the context of press subterfuge over the last century or more, of which hacking is only the most recent example, distinguished from its predecessors by the technology employed but not (I contend below) the principles at stake.

I am sending, with this document, copies of my books *Great Parliamentary Scandals* and *The Great Unfroked*. I would draw your members' attention to (in the former) the chapters dealing with the Lords Lambton and Jellicoe (see particularly p186, the scandal affecting the former MP Harvey Proctor (p266-267), that affecting David Mellor (p301-302), Norman Lamont (p315), Piers Merchant MP (p337-339), and the fall of Michael Brown MP – a story for which key information was (I understand although I did not print this) gathered by 'Mahmoud' of the *Daily Mail*, of whom more below.

In the latter book please glance at the chapter on '*The Knicker Vicar*' of North Yorkshire.

In none of these stories, I would submit, was the public interest strongly (though in most of them it was arguably) involved.

All these individuals just mentioned were, effectively, spied upon. The means of espionage included a cine camera hidden in a wardrobe, a male prostitute hired and wired for sound by a journalist, a bugged telephone in a private flat, covertly accessed hotel records and credit card statements, a stolen personal diary, reporters and photographers concealed in bushes, an impersonator tricking an individual into betraying confidences, and a camera behind a two-way mirror.

Most of these stories led to the ruin of the career of the person targeted. In not one of them, to the best of my recollection and research, was there any serious public indignation about the methods used by the press to obtain the story. In all of them the only question in which the public or the media seemed interested was whether the story was true. In every case, it essentially was.

I believe that, as a relatively new young MP in the early 1980s, I was also targeted by a would-be *agent provocateur*, but I spotted the likely stratagem and cheerfully ignored it. Had I been successfully entrapped, my feeling in retrospect would be that it would have served me right.

I draw your committee's attention to the contemporary journalist who still operates under the name of 'Mahmoud' (allegedly the *agent provocateur* in the Michael Brown case): the "fake sheikh" who by confidence trickery draws his victims (they have included Sarah Ferguson) into damaging personal indiscretions. "Mahmoud" has now won at least two important industry awards as an investigative reporter, most recently in the British Press Awards earlier this year. I have not heard it suggested by anyone that these awards were inappropriate.

You, Sir, and others on your committee, will have a keener grasp of modern jurisprudence than I can claim. I invite you to look at such examples of "traditional" press subterfuge, and apply to them two questions: (1) Are there any important differences of moral principle between classic means such as these of stealing truths from people, and the more recent electronic means of hacking into people's telephone messages? I can find my way to no other answer but No. (2) if, then, the abuse is, in its moral essentials, equivalent in all cases, is the phone hacking which has led to the establishment of your Inquiry, distinguished from other kinds of subterfuge simply by the likely seriousness of the invasion of their privacy?

Again, I cannot see that in principle it is. It might be in practice, of course, depending on the nature of the message overheard. But I question whether in principle the abstraction of a message left for another does as great a wrong to the addressee as might an ear to the door of his house; or as great a wrong to the message's addressee as to its author. Why are huge awards being made to individuals whose messages from others are said to have been heard by a journalist, but not to the individual authors whose messages these were? Is it simply that we don't know who the latter are? There seems to have been no public curiosity on the subject. If I leave a voice message for a friend confessing my love for her, and it is heard by an unauthorised person, I would argue that my privacy has been invaded more intimately than hers.

I do not know, in law, whether a message is the property of the author or the addressee, but as the addressee is helpless what messages are left for him and therefore not complicit in them, I wonder how intimately it is right to say he has in principle been intruded upon? How in principle does the hacking of a private phone message differ from the "stealing", by the use of a long-lens camera, of a paragraph of private briefing addressed to a minister and held up briefly in his hand in ignorance of the technology that could capture it? Were it a *billet doux* from his mistress, shouldn't its capture attract the same indignation as the capture of a private phone message? Yet such a note would be routinely published, today, without (I suggest) a peep of public protest.

I do not in the least approve of phone hacking. I could not condone it in any of the cases that have come to light. It should be stopped and the culprits punished. But I cannot but see message-hacking as simply the newest, but not in principle the most shocking, method by which some journalists have been spying on people.

That being so, I have tried in my own mind to account for the tremendous and sustained indignation that hacking, as opposed to other journalists' subterfuges, has aroused; and tentatively submit five possible reasons.

- (1) Its novelty – other forms of espionage being well known;
- (2) its association (in the opinion of his accusers) with the man who later became the Prime Minister's Press Secretary;
- (3) the celebrity status (and in one case the tragic circumstances) of some of its most prominent victims;
- (4) the fact that it has proved so difficult to drag evidence of all this into the light; so that the very struggle (as with the Watergate affair) has taken on an epic quality, and become a story; and
- (5) fashion: waves of media indignation do bear some of the hallmarks of contagion by repetition and amplification.

These may serve as explanations of the huge anger and attention that phone hacking has aroused, but they do not make it in principle so distinct from other forms of subterfuge, nor in practice so much more injurious, that we could see hacking (I believe) as anything other than a very small corner of an immense, and immensely difficult, field.

And a final thought. Emphasis seems to be given, in your questions to me, upon codes of practice, 'protocols' and 'policies'. But there is no substitute for the employment by a journalist of his own moral reasoning, supplemented by collective workplace understandings that are not always easy to codify. Once you start trying to list exhaustively rather than illustratively the things a person should not do, you encourage him to disregard his own moral intuition, and consult the list instead. It may prove difficult for the list to keep pace with new wrongs enabled by new technology. I would be surprised, in this case, if any proper journalist ever doubted that phone hacking would be inappropriate except in very rare and grave circumstances. The lack, in this case, was not of a code or protocol, but of respect for professional propriety. Everybody knew what professional propriety dictated.

I hope these thoughts are useful to your committee.