

THE  TIMES

This outrage over hacking is hugely overblown

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I know I'm out of sync with the public on this, but spying on people has been going on in journalism for decades

Happy the columnist whose moral instincts run passionately with the spirit of the hour. He will be read with delight. Happy, too, the columnist whose moral instincts run passionately against the spirit of the hour. He will be admired as a plucky controversialist.

Wretched, however, the columnist who doesn't dispute the rights and wrongs but thinks the entire debate overheated. He has nothing new to reveal and nothing to rebut; nor does he dissent from any of the arguments being shouted at or by the public. He just thinks people are getting things out of proportion. And who wants to read a thousand words of that?

I am that wretched columnist. The advice to calm down is — almost by definition — unlikely to meet wild applause. So I've just shut up. But it's becoming embarrassing to maintain this silence: people will think I've been suppressing my true opinion. Oh boy, have I been suppressing my true opinion. My true opinion is that this whole hacking thing has been ludicrously overblown. I understand how *The Times* too has caught the mood of media anger now sweeping Britain, but I do not quite share it.

What, really, are we talking about, once you've stripped away the electronic garb in which old vices appear in new guises? It's this. Parts of the British press have got into the bad habit of spying on people. The habit is at least a century old and — in the general if not the particular — perfectly well known by journalists and widely suspected by our readers. It didn't infect my own newspaper but it did another, and it had to stop. Investigations should be made. Charges should be laid. Heads will roll. New rules and more vigilant supervision will be brought in (presumably outlawing practices such as *The Daily Telegraph's* use of a stolen CD on MPs expenses?). But in the pagination of my private news judgment this is about page four of a national newspaper.

I know very well that is not how most of you, my readers see it. I'm out of sync.

The last time this happened to me so painfully was nearly 20 years ago, as a hurricane of public and media scorn for John Major and his "back to basics" ministers gathered force. I didn't think they were all that good. It's just that I didn't think they were all that bad, either; and thought Mr Major a better man than the opinion of the hour had pronounced; and that the stuff about MPs' and ministers' private lives was a bit silly. But tut-tut rarely makes as easy a column as *How Dare They?*

And now, thumbing through a book I wrote about parliamentary scandals, I've found the chapter on David Mellor, the Majorite minister caught in a steamy affair with an actress in 1992. Remember, do you, how he was caught? "Her telephone in the ... flat where she lived and where he frequently visited her had been bugged. Her landlord had co-operated in this with journalists . . ."

Bugging a phone is by several orders of seriousness a graver intrusion than accessing messages, but this was never the story: it was Mr Mellor, we thought, who was the proper target of our indignation.

Or go back to the fall of the minister Lord Lambton, after sex with the wife of Colin Levy, in 1973. "Levy and an accomplice hid ciné equipment and a microphone and offered the film show to the *News of the World* for £30,000. The pictures were not good enough so the newspaper installed its own equipment in the flat. The following day a *NoW* photographer hid in the wardrobe behind a two-way mirror and took pictures of the minister cavorting on the bed . . ." When the newspaper dropped the story, Levy sold the pictures to the *Sunday People*.

Or go forward to the fall of Harvey Proctor, a Tory MP, in 1986: "One of the *People's* informants was an 18-year-old rent boy ... Armed with the *People's* hidden tape recorder he had visited Proctor ... Wired for sound [he] assured the MP that he was over 21 . . ."

It would be tedious to remind you of journalists gaining access to the credit card statements of Norman Lamont, then the Chancellor. In vain did Mr Lamont complain that the scandal was not whether he had paid a bill (he had) but how the press had acquired his private records. Nor will I belabour you with the 1997 story of "The Knicker Vicar of North Yorkshire" ([reporters] glued a tiny video camera to the inside of a bookshelf in the master bedroom ... and somehow ... they took away with them verbatim extracts from Mrs Roberts's diary entries . . .").

I could cite dozens more. From all you would gain the impression that the methods — spying in various forms, often illicit — may occasionally have raised an eyebrow or a laugh, but seem to have been thought routine in Britain. Hacking into the phone messages of a missing girl was one grisly (and for the *News of the World* catastrophic) example of a species of espionage that has been commonplace.

Early in my own newspaper career I remarked to a senior colleague on another paper that it seemed odd that the press always knew when the police were about to arrest a celebrity. I was told, with the smiling condescension reserved for a greenhorn, that many police stations (and certainly not just the Met's) had "an arrangement".

Surely it must have occurred to most readers too that "police tip-offs" are systematic in

Britain? Surely you've noticed that private records fall into journalists' hands without the consent of their owners? When last week millions of the readers of the *Daily Mail* studied the photograph of the Essex bedroom of Ryan Cleary, the reclusive 19-year-old alleged computer hacker, didn't many wonder how the paper had got its hands on a private photograph he surely didn't want published? Why am I supposed to explode with indignation now that it's officially acknowledged that some newspapers can access private information, and the police are sometimes complicit, when for most of my adult life that's been obvious? Are we overreacting now — or were we underreacting then?

Maybe both are true. Maybe a calm resolution to clean up what's really a creeping abuse half-sanctified by custom, not a new, alien and monstrous horror, is what's called for.

The shock this week that should cause real rather than synthetic indignation is the death of a great national newspaper founded more than 160 years ago to bring the newly literate working class into the world of news and comment — and consistently sneered at by the educated elite: their proxy for hating their own proletariat. We've been alone in the West in keeping national papers before the eyes of a reading public composed of the masses. Many will never transfer to another paper. Their papers have subsidised ours. This could be the beginning of the end for all of us in print journalism.

For me the abiding image of the week has been our Peter Brookes's cartoon of an African famine victim thanking providence she didn't have a mobile phone to be hacked. And the abiding sentiment came in a tweet from the political scientist, Philip Cowley: "Is there a phrase for shock and disgust triggered by confirmation of a long-held belief?"

The PIN for my mobile phone voice messages, incidentally, is my birthday: 7849.

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