

The Leveson Inquiry

Witness Statement of Stephen Wright

A. Career history

1. I have spent my entire professional life in journalism. My first journalistic role was as a trainee reporter at the Bucks Free Press, a weekly newspaper based in High Wycombe, which I joined in 1987. The paper was part of the Westminster Press Group and I attended the group's well regarded training school where I undertook a six month National Council for the Training of Journalists course. I then completed the paper's two year indenture scheme, passing the NCTJ Proficiency Certificate six months early in December 1988.
2. In 1989, I moved abroad to work for a newspaper in Hong Kong, where I was senior reporter for two years, and then, as a news reporter, in local radio for a year. I returned to the UK in late 1992 where I worked as an assistant producer on a BBC TV programme and also did a small number of trial shifts at the Daily Mail. After impressing on particular assignments, I was taken on as a regular freelance news reporter at the Daily Mail in April 1993 and was offered a six-month contract that November. I joined the staff as a news reporter in 1994, before joining the Mail's Crime desk in January 1996.
3. After nearly 15 years on the Crime desk, where I rose to the position of Crime Editor, I was promoted in September 2010 to Associate News Editor where my responsibilities have widened to cover investigations, campaigns and exposés across a wide spectrum of subjects, not just involving the police.
4. Press awards I have received during my career include the BBC "What the Papers Say" Reporter of the Year in 2007; Specialist Writer of the Year in 2009 at the British Press Awards; and the joint winner of the Cudlipp Award (twice) for excellence in journalism. In addition, I have twice been shortlisted for Reporter of the Year at the British Press Awards, and twice for Specialist Writer of the Year. Along with a colleague, I am a past runner up in the prestigious Paul Foot Awards for outstanding investigative journalism. Equally important to me are the numerous letters of support I have received from people who have been affected by stories I have written, congratulating me on my work and the professional way I have dealt with them. These include high profile victims of crime.

B. Relations with the police

5. The development of professional relationships with the police has been an integral part of my job throughout my career.
6. As a trainee reporter in High Wycombe I, along with rival reporters from other newspapers, would attend the local police station on a regular basis where we would be told about incidents in which the police felt publicity would assist them in gathering information and solving crimes.
7. As a junior reporter at the Daily Mail, I was sent to cover major crime stories through which I would come into contact with the police. The most significant of these was when I was sent to Gloucester when bodies were discovered at the home of Fred and Rose West. Other reporters from the Mail would come and go, while I remained in Gloucester for six weeks as the extent of the crimes unfolded. As well as attending press conferences and police briefings, I spent the time speaking to people and developing professional contacts within the police and the social services in order to understand how they had missed vital signs which allowed vulnerable girls to become victims of the Wests. Similarly, I also looked into the backgrounds of the Wests and spoke to a number of family members. I spent three or four months researching the case and covered the entire trial of Rosemary West at Winchester Crown Court.
8. Once I was given the role on the Crime desk, as part of my job I would call New Scotland Yard daily to listen to a tape recording prepared for press on incidents the police considered to be of interest (Scotland Yard now emails these press reports to the media). I would also attend press conferences and talk to the Met's press officers (whose role is to provide statements on cases and field questions) on a regular basis. I had similar contact with the other police forces round the country whenever a major crime occurred in the different regions. For example, I covered the Soham murders, the Shipman case and the murder of Milly Dowler, all of which brought me into contact with different police forces.
9. When attending press conferences or talking to press officers, if you made a good impression and were considered to be an honest and trustworthy reporter, you tended to be granted an interview with the more senior officers dealing with a particular case. This would then provide the foundations on which to build a professional relationship with the police force involved. If you made a good impression with senior officers, I have found that you are

regarded as a journalist to be trusted and this filters down to lower ranks. People become more willing to confide in you when there is respect on both sides.

10. The Inquiry has asked me a number of questions about who in the police force I was in contact with and what was discussed. Given that a large part of the contact I have had with members of the various police forces, of all ranks, was based on a relationship of trust and confidence, it would be a breach of that trust if I were to mention any aspect of what was spoken about, even on an anonymous basis. I am concerned that people would be able to look back at the stories I have written down the years and speculate who the source/sources may or may not have been. In general, the relationships I built up with police officers tended to be those of senior and middling ranks as they were given discretion to talk to the media. Who would initiate contact would depend on the circumstances, however at all times what they decided to tell me was a matter for them.
11. In my view, it is extremely important that the police are allowed to talk to the media, both on and off the record. It is entirely appropriate and leads to a mutually beneficial exchange of information. The practice was endorsed, for example, in a draft media relations policy for the Metropolitan Police Service that was circulated to me as a member of the Crime Reporters Association (CRA) at the time Sir Ian Blair took over from Sir John (now Lord) Stevens in 2005. I have included a copy of this draft at Exhibit SW1 (I do not believe I was sent the final version).
12. As I understand it, the practice also follows guidance issued by the former Met Commissioner Sir John Stevens in the early 2000s which actively encouraged officers to build relationships with the media. I am also told that one of Sir John's predecessors, Sir Robert Mark, also issued similar guidelines in the 1970s.
13. There is significant public benefit to the press and police communicating in this way. First, the press can assist the police (and the public) by preventing the disclosure of false information and by helping to ensure that reporting is as accurate as possible. For example, I recall the events surrounding the London tube bombings in July 2005. Information was being leaked to the US media apparently from law enforcement sources in the States. I was contacted by sources (not necessarily within the police) who let it be known that not only was some of the information inaccurate but, had we decided to publish, it would be disruptive to the investigation that later led to the arrest of all those responsible for the failed attacks on 21 July. Providing the public with as much accurate information as possible helps create confidence in the system.

14. The media are also able to provide valuable help to the police in their investigations. They are able to provide important publicity to a case and encourage the public to provide information to the police which, in turn, helps them to identify suspects, track down the families of victims of crime, identify victims and potential witnesses. The press can also, through the use of proper, traditional journalistic methods, uncover information or leads that the police may have missed or can otherwise reignite a stuttering investigation. For example, in 2001 I conducted a five page interview with Rachel Nickell's partner in which he issued an emotional appeal for the police to catch her killer. It was a very poignant article, as I was the first journalist to meet Rachel's son, who had witnessed her murder. I later alerted a very senior police officer to the article which, I believe, may have helped restart the inquiry which eventually led to the conviction of a man already in Broadmoor for a brutal double killing of a young mother and her daughter. I feel I can also take some credit for persuading a respected senior figure within the Superintendents Association to make a powerful reference to the Stephen Lawrence case during a 1997 speech calling on the then Home Secretary Jack Straw to repeal the 800-year-old double jeopardy rule.
15. The importance of allowing informal relationships to develop should not be underestimated. They enable the police to let me know if they are concerned I might publish certain information that could potentially have an adverse impact on an ongoing inquiry or operation. I would on occasion, therefore, be told 'don't run anything' and I would conclude that significant developments were imminent. Trust works both ways. I would always respect that request as I would never wish to jeopardise operations by inadvertently putting sensitive information into the public domain. In fact, in one high profile case, a senior officer and senior prosecution lawyer called me to thank me for not running a story when I was told it might jeopardise an arrest. If communications were restricted to more formal channels, this important flexibility and goodwill would be lost.
16. It is for similar reasons that from time to time, and along with other members of the press, I was given an embargoed press briefing of a pre-planned operation usually involving raids on illegal immigration or passport rackets. You do also, very rarely, hear rumours that arrests are going to be made or that a major operation is underway, but in my experience the rumours are vague. Similar to the example in the previous paragraph, the purpose of these embargoed press briefings and less formal indications of potential arrests is to ensure that nothing is reported in the period leading up to the arrests which might affect their success (e.g. by tipping off the suspects).

C. Independence from the police

17. It is important to put what I have said above in context. It would be wrong to assume that information on crime stories necessarily comes from the police. That is far from the case and I use a wide variety of independent sources. Crime reporting is like piecing together a jigsaw. In my work I have had professional dealings with the Home Office, prison and probation personnel, victims of crime, campaign groups, police staff associations, politicians, lawyers and freelance journalists. Furthermore, many of my most important stories came after I had followed a particular case for a number of years and stayed in touch with the various people involved. For example, I spent 12 years investigating the Rachel Nickell case before the real killer was convicted, while I spent a total of 15 years chronicling developments in the Stephen Lawrence case.

18. Whilst I have a professional relationship with members of the police, I am fiercely independent and not afraid to criticise the police when I think it is justified. Indeed, one of the most important parts of my job as a crime reporter was to hold the police to account. For example, I take great pride in the role I played in spearheading the Daily Mail campaign, signified by the famous 'Murderers' front page in 1997, to bring the killers of Stephen Lawrence to justice. In the run-up to that landmark story, I advised my editor, Paul Dacre, and the former head of the Daily Mail's editorial legal team, Eddie Young, on the background of the case and the suspected killers. During the campaign, I reported details of the so-called 'video of hate' which damned four of the suspects; that the police watchdog had found conclusive evidence of errors by detectives that allowed Stephen's killers to escape justice; that no police officers would be disciplined for the failed investigation; that the investigation was influenced by institutional racism; the names of officers responsible and how the police watchdog was demanding reforms of the police disciplinary rules. Similarly, my critical reports of the Milly Dowler murder inquiry by Surrey Police, the shambolic probe in the Soham murders by Cambridgeshire Police and the Met's investigations in the Cayman Islands, the so-called 'Sunshine Squad', were considered to be 'fair game' by senior officers.

19. I am particularly proud of the way the Daily Mail exposed the disgraced Scotland Yard Commander Ali Dizaei. For more than a decade, I was responsible for a string of exposes on Dizaei, recently jailed for a second time for corruption. Had it not been for my reports, much of Dizaei's appalling conduct would never have been made public, nor would the weak leadership at Scotland Yard which allowed his career to prosper. In my opinion, these reports were hugely in the public interest.

20. This leads me on to a further reason why there must be scope for off-the-record contact with the police: this is a vital way in which people within the force can voice their concerns and expose corruption, malpractice and abuses of power.

C. Hospitality to/from the police

21. On occasion, I provide hospitality for my contacts and sources, including those in the police. This could range from a cup of coffee to very occasional official dinners for the Commissioner at the Daily Mail office. More often than not, this hospitality is reciprocated. I have also hosted tables at charity events including one to raise money for the New York Police Department after the 9/11 attacks. I was dispatched to New York to report on those atrocities, something which affected me deeply, and which made me very keen to participate in that fundraising event.
22. The CRA, which I was a member of for 15 years, also organises hospitality events both for its members and the police. The receptions put on by the Association were also often reciprocated by the police.
23. I have also accepted hospitality from the police. I would say three or four times over 15 years as a dedicated crime reporter I have attended, along with Daily Mail colleagues and journalists from other newspapers, lunches or dinners with the Commissioner and senior colleagues at New Scotland Yard. Also, on occasion, senior officers at the Met have bought me drinks and/or dinner. I have also attended media drinks evenings organised by forces other than the Met, but not very often.
24. The purpose of this hospitality is to develop professional relationships between journalists and the police. These relationships promote the exchange of information between the police and the media which, for the reasons described above, is of huge benefit to society and is very much in the public interest.
25. It is important to distinguish hospitality from inappropriate gifts and any sort of payments to police. I have never paid police or known any police officer to be paid by the Daily Mail. To do so would be wholly unacceptable. If a police officer or member of staff was seeking payment for information, I would report them immediately. I would regard it as an integrity test.

26. The Daily Mail operates a number of procedures in relation to payments for hospitality given to third parties, as described in the first witness statement of Paul Dacre, the Editor-in-Chief. These procedures have been updated since the implementation of the Bribery Act 2010. As such, hospitality expenses need to be documented, usually by means of a pro forma, and must be approved by department heads who must be satisfied that the expenses are legitimate.
27. As I have said, I do not pay any of my sources for information who are public officials and, whether I am dealing with a member of the police or anyone else paid out of the public purse, I rely on developing relationships where my sources trust me and are willing to confide in me. Given the importance of this trust, I am generally not required to disclose the identity of my sources when I get hospitality expenses signed off.
28. In light of my training received as a trainee journalist and the ongoing training I receive, I also fully understand and abide by my obligations under the PCC Code with regard to making payments or providing hospitality to witnesses. The fact that the PCC Code has always been at the forefront of my mind is illustrated by my experiences as a junior reporter. As I have explained, soon after joining the Daily Mail, I was sent to cover the Fred and Rosemary West murders in Gloucester. I was co-ordinating our coverage on the ground and am proud to say we were one of the few media outlets not paying prosecution witnesses, which could have led to the collapse of the trial.

D. Ethical and legal issues faced by a crime reporter

29. The role of a crime reporter is to pursue the aims that I have set out in parts B and C above. In summary, these include:
- 29.1 Ensuring that matters relating to criminal investigations and proceedings are reported as accurately as possible so as to encourage public confidence in the system;
- 29.2 Assisting the police with their inquiries by encouraging the public to come forward with information;
- 29.3 Undertaking independent investigations and research into crimes which may uncover further information for the police;

29.4 Working with the police in order to ensure that information is not published unnecessarily at a time when it could interfere with or jeopardise an investigation or arrest; and

29.5 Exposing corruption, malpractice and abuses of power by the police and ensuring that the forces are held to account.

30. At all times, I do my utmost to ensure that I am acting lawfully (including in accordance with the laws of defamation and contempt of court) and ethically.

E. Proposals for reform

31. The Inquiry has asked for my view of the recommendations contained in the HMIC's recent report "*Without Fear or Favour*" on the governance of relations between the media and the press. As a crime reporter, I was able to have entirely proper and professional relations with dozens of police officers. I was guided by my integrity and desire to break significant stories in the public interest; they, I believe, were guided by their own judgment and rules. In my experience, the relationships worked well. I believe that, in the current climate, clarification and new guidance on police/media relations is inevitable and must be respected; however it is important that any changes do not engender a climate of nervousness and fear in police dealings with the media.

F. Conclusion

32. An essential part of a crime reporter's job involves talking to the police – sometimes openly and sometimes in confidence. It is of benefit to all concerned and is very much in the public interest.

33. I would take great offence to any suggestion that I am somehow "in the pocket" of any member of the police, or indeed that anybody in the police is in my pocket. The relationship is one of mutual respect: I try to help them to perform their public duties but, conversely, they know that I will expose any breach of those duties that I uncover.

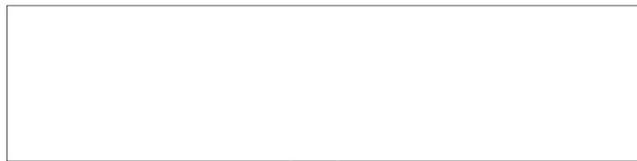
34. It is only through establishing such a relationship with the police that I have been able, through ethical means, hard work and lateral thinking, to publish the stories that I have; all of which I strongly believe to have been in the public interest and many of which would never have been made public had I not unearthed them. Some of these stories I have referred to above, but they also include:

- 34.1 The DNA breakthrough that eventually led to the Rachel Nickell's real killer being identified, thereby removing the stigma associated with the former prime suspect, Colin Stagg;
- 34.2 The scandal involving former Met Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair secretly recording conversations with the Attorney General and the head of the police watchdog;
- 34.3 That the police marksman who shot Jean Charles de Menezes had killed an armed robber days after returning to fire arms duty;
- 34.4 The Scotland Yard 'race war' during which it came to light that, Sharokouh Mireskandari, the lawyer representing the Assistant Commissioner, Tarique Ghaffur, in a race claim against the Met, was a convicted criminal with bogus qualifications. Mr Ghaffur quit in the aftermath of the Mail's revelations while Mireskandari's firm was closed down and he was suspended from the legal profession;
- 34.5 The corrupt relationship between Mireskandari and his close friend, Commander Ali Dizaei, who, the Mail revealed, was secretly advising him on how to undermine a prosecution being brought by Scotland Yard;
- 34.6 I also revealed that Scotland Yard detectives had concluded that the cricket coach Bob Woolmer was not murdered in Jamaica, but died naturally – a story followed up around the world;
- 34.7 My 2001 investigation into Scotland Yard's handling of the arrest of Neil and Christine Hamilton and into an earlier mishandled police investigation into the gang-rape of a young girl which led to the trial judge discharging the jury. The Daily Mail was sued by a Detective Chief Inspector over my front page article but he lost his libel action three and a half years later. This was a victory for press freedom which I hope the Inquiry will note: any new rules in this area must not provide a vehicle for allowing a force to keep embarrassing public interest stories out of the public domain; and
- 34.8 In September 2000, I obtained a copy of a briefing document given to police officers on duty at the Notting Hill Carnival, which had been particularly violent that year. Two people were murdered, women were raped, 19 people stabbed and there were dozens of muggings. The document showed that, contrary to

comments made by a senior officer, the Met had imposed a 'softly, softly' policing strategy.

35. The Inquiry should be extremely wary of proposing reforms in this area, particularly with regard to formalising the contact between the press and the police, as the strong likelihood is that this will inhibit the exchange of information on which much of this reporting relied.

Signed



Date

21 Feb 2012
.....