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Q&A: Phone-hacking scandal at News of the World

News International, publishers of the News of the World, has issued an apology to some of those who claim their mobile phones were hacked by the newspaper. The company said past interception of voicemail messages was a matter of "genuine regret".

What is behind the apology?

The increasingly complex fallout of a 2006 court case. The News of the World's (NoW) then royal editor Clive Goodman and a private investigator Glenn Mulcaire were jailed for hacking into the mobile phones of royal aides.

Since then, a series of inquiries and legal cases have been exploring just how widespread the practice was, with implications for the police, celebrities and politicians.

How did the NoW phone-hacking case first emerge?

The paper published a story about a knee injury to Prince William. The royal began to fear his aides' mobile phone voicemail messages were being intercepted.

What was the outcome?

In January 2007, Goodman and Mulcaire were jailed for four months and six months respectively.

What's the relevance now?

Quite simply, the allegations did not end there. More and more celebrities and public figures have alleged their phones have been hacked and some have launched legal actions against the paper or the police for allegedly failing to investigate.

Why does all this matter?

It is against the law to intercept voicemail messages on mobile phones. If NoW executives acted illegally by ordering Mulcaire to hack the phones then they could face charges. The ongoing allegations also have the potential to damage the police, politicians and Rupert Murdoch's business interests

How sorry is News International?

According to a statement issued by Rupert Murdoch's company on 8 April 2011 - they have apologised unreservedly to those whose cases meet "specific criteria". While saying they will continue to challenge unjustifiable cases, News International says it is instructing its solicitors to set up a compensation fund. BBC business editor Robert Peston says this is likely to cost the firm around £20 million.

So who alleges they were hacked?

Aside from members of the Royal Family's staff, the Goodman case revealed publicist Max Clifford, Professional Footballers' Association chief executive Gordon Taylor, Lib Dem MP Simon Hughes, model Elle Macpherson and sports agent Sky Andrew had all been victims.

Mr Taylor and Mr Clifford brought private cases against the NoW and received reported settlements of £700,000 and £1m respectively before key documents were revealed in court.

What evidence is there to support these claims?

A lot of the allegations come down to the Met's original investigation into Mulcaire. Detectives recovered files from Mulcaire's home which referred to a long list of public figures and celebrities. But John Yates, acting deputy commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, has told MPs that detectives could only identify a short list of possible victims of hacking by newspapers.

But since then, actress Sienna Miller, actor and comedian Steve Coogan, and former Sky Sports presenter Andy Gray have launched actions against the NoW after the Met confirmed that their personal details were in Mulcaire's possession.

In February 2011, a judge said Mulcaire would have to provide evidence in the cases brought by Mr Coogan and Mr Gray.

Others taking action include politician George Galloway, TV presenter Chris Tarrant, jockey Kieren Fallon, and interior designer Kelly Hoppen.

Former Deputy Prime Minister Lord Prescott, former Met assistant commissioner Brian Paddick, Labour MP Chris Bryant and journalist Brendan Montague are all seeking a judicial review into the police's handling of the case.

Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown is understood to have asked police if he was targeted, as has RMT union leader Bob Crow.

What happened then?

John Yates, acting deputy commissioner at the Met, was ordered to "establish the facts". He decided there would be no further investigation because where there had been evidence people had been subjected to any form of phone hacking, they had been informed.

But in January 2011, amid continuing pressure, the Met said it was reopening the investigation and launched Operation Weeting to look at "significant new information". Senior barrister Alison Levitt QC was brought in to re-examine everything gathered by the police.

The Met's move came after the NoW sacked Ian Edmondson, one of its assistant editors, after four e-mails relating to phone hacking were allegedly found on the newspaper's systems.

Three months earlier, the New York Times published an article claiming that hacking was widespread at the NoW.

One former reporter, Sean Hoare, also told the BBC that phone tapping was "endemic" in the industry. He also alleged that Andy Coulson, the former NoW editor who went on to become David Cameron's spokesman, personally requested him to do it. The paper denied the allegations.

What's happened since the new investigation began?

The most dramatic development has been the apology and admission of liability by News International in specific cases. That came a week after Ian Edmondson and the paper's chief reporter, Neville Thurlbeck, were both arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to intercept communications. They have been released on bail until September 2011.

At the same time, the legal history of the saga has got murkier.

The Met's John Yates has previously told MPs that there were only a small number of victims, based on what he said was legal advice that the police would have to prove that messages had been intercepted and also listened to before being heard by the recipient.

But Keir Starmer QC, the Director of Public Prosecutions, has now said that was not the advice given to detectives. He says advice from his prosecutors was at best provisional and "did not limit the scope and extent of the criminal investigation".

Where does all this leave News International?

All of these developments challenge the long-held position that Goodman was a lone "rogue reporter" who was the only member of staff who knew about hacking. The cross-party House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee has accused the NoW of "collective amnesia". It said it was "inconceivable" no-one at the tabloid had known.

But some public figures want a wider investigation. Some like media lawyer Mark Stephens says hacking was endemic among tabloids with almost every news organisation involved at some level or another. Former MP Paul Marsden has said he may take legal action against newspaper group Trinity Mirror over alleged phone hacking. The group said its journalists worked within the law. Mark Lewis, the solicitor representing some of the alleged victims, says he wants to see some form of official or judicial investigation into the original police investigation.

What exactly is the law on hacking?

It's illegal to gain access to another person's telephone under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA). There are also offences under the Computer Misuse Act 1990. The UK's security services can apply for warrants to hack phones.

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