

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Phone hacking judge sums up as Coulson holds firm on stand

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Cool customer Andy Coulson. Anthony Devlin/PA

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It seems that after six long months, the phone hacking trial is nearing its conclusion. The trial judge, Justice John Saunders, has begun his summing up, and has instructed the jury to consider an amendment to count seven of the charges, relating to the allegation that Rebekah Brooks, her husband Charlie and News International security chief Mark Hanna removed and hid material to conceal evidence from police investigating hacking at the News of the World.

Now, the jury has been told, this charge has been changed from “conspiring to pervert course of justice” to “perverting the course of justice”.

But what has been of main interest over the last few weeks has been the defence and cross examination of Andy Coulson whose testimony has provided a valuable insight into the workings of national tabloid journalism.

Coulson, the prime minister’s former communications chief and one-time editor of the News of the World, is on trial for conspiracy to hack phones between 2000 and 2006 and conspiracy to commit misconduct in a public place.

Coulson’s cross-examination began with insight into the workings of the tabloid press in the last 15 years. On the first day alone, the jury heard about the importance of contacts, the influence of PR people, and the widespread use of private investigators – though as far as private investigators were

concerned, Coulson claimed he could not remember ever using one while he ran the Sun's Bizarre column.

As the week progressed, Coulson's barrister, Timothy Langdale QC, explored the finer points of editing a national newspaper. The jury was shown a floor plan of the News of the World offices, which included a "secret office" where high-profile stories were kept hidden lest they be leaked to competing titles. They heard that Coulson's role as editor meant he wouldn't have read the paper's every word, and that he was principally concerned with the front pages and bigger stories.

Staff at the News of the World were given briefings on the "dark arts" of journalism, which Coulson described as "investigative techniques." These included utilising surveillance, hidden cameras, recording devices and following people.

Asked about the phrase "turning a mobile", Coulson said:

"turning a mobile" or "spinning a mobile" – these are phrases that I heard during my time as an editor. To me it meant getting an address from a phone number or getting a phone number from an address, or vice versa. And I believed there were perfectly legal ways of doing that.

Coulson voiced regrets about how this process worked and how stories were investigated. He told the court that this was something he "should have applied my mind to"; "I should have looked at it more, interrogated it more," he added.

As for phone hacking, Coulson told the court that he was "aware of it in very vague terms, it was in the ether, people gossiped about it." But he denied that he was party to it – and claimed that in 2002, he did not know that intercepting voicemails broke the law. Not that that made it acceptable, of course: "It was intrusive and lazy journalism," he said, adding: "the people I worked with were never interested in phone hacking."

Asked by his barrister if he was ever party to phone hacking at the News of the World, he simply replied: "No."

Before the court rose for the Easter recess, Coulson told the court that he still didn't know phone hacking was an illegal act at the time of the David Blunkett affair in August 2004 – though he did listen to the former home secretary's private messages at that time. He told the court this was "the first and the only time voicemail messages were played to me".

Known unknowns

Day four of Coulson's spell in the witness box began with questions about former News of the World reporter Dan Evans, who claimed earlier in the trial that it was "obvious" he was employed by Coulson for his skills in phone hacking.

Referring to a meeting in 2004, Langdale asked whether “anything [was] said by Dan Evans about or concerning phone hacking?” Coulson replied: “Not that I can remember.” Coulson also denied that in 2005, as Evans claimed, he listened to a message left on actor Sienna Miller’s phone before the News of the World published a story about her relationship with Daniel Craig.

There was much that Coulson did not know about or could not remember. Asked by Langdale if he knew or suspected that reporter Clive Goodman (the News of the World’s royal editor, facing two counts of conspiring to make corrupt payments to public officials) had hired Glenn Mulcaire to intercept messages, Coulson replied: “absolutely not”.

Indeed, the court was told, it was not until the day of Goodman’s arrest in August 2006 that Coulson had heard of Mulcaire at all. Goodman’s claim that Coulson knew about Mulcaire was, Coulson said, “a lie”.

However, the court heard that when Goodman and Mulcaire were sentenced to prison on January 26 2007 for hacking royal voicemails, Coulson resigned as editor of the News of the World because “I felt it was the right thing to do as I was the boss”.

As the defence case rested, the court heard that on July 9 2007, Coulson was appointed director of communications for the Conservative party only to resign from his position in January 2011.

Explaining that resignation from Downing Street, Coulson said that given the “long history of press coverage... I couldn’t do the job I was employed to do”.

Dowler and Blunkett

The cross examination of Coulson by lead prosecutor, Anthony Edis QC, began on April 25. Edis took Coulson back to the Milly Dowler case and the News of the World story that the murdered schoolgirl was alive and looking for a job.

That story originally appeared on page 9 of the paper, but in later editions appeared on page 30 with quotes obtained from Dowler’s voicemail removed. Coulson rejected the accusation that there was a “process of hiding the true source”, and stated that the story’s initial prominent position was a “mistake”. Asked by Edis why verbatim quotations from voicemails were left out, Coulson stated that he couldn’t remember and didn’t know why.

Returning to David Blunkett’s hacked voicemails in 2004, Edis questioned Coulson’s decision not to ask reporter Neville Thurlbeck how he had obtained the information. Denying that he already knew from whence they came, Coulson conceded his error: “I asked no questions, I accept that, it was a failure on my part.”

Edis then managed to draw out of Coulson the admission that he was lying to Blunkett later when, on the record, the pair met to discuss whether or not the News of the World would publish the details of Blunkett’s love affair. At this meeting Coulson did not tell Blunkett that the private details had come from hacking. He had been, he admitted, “disingenuous”. Repeatedly, Edis asked: “so you lied to

him?” Eventually, the judge Justice Saunders intervened: “Were you telling a deliberate untruth? Yes or no?” After a moment’s hesitation, Coulson said: “Yes”.

Edis’s questioning frequently touched on the editorship of the News of the World and how much knowledge and control Coulson had. Referring to the routine payment of police officers and the hacking of leading politicians’ phones, it was put to the defendant that he didn’t want to know where the resulting stories had come from. To which Coulson replied: “I don’t think I did.”

Edis then asked Coulson: “Is the explanation that you couldn’t care less or that you were slapdash and careless?” to which Coulson replied: “I accept I was careless, but not that I couldn’t care less.”

As the cross examination ended, Edis focused on Coulson’s resignation as the government’s director of communications in 2011. The timing of his resignation was, Coulson said, to do with the increasing difficulty he had doing his job. Not according to Edis who stated: “You knew the truth was going to come out that you were involved in a conspiracy to hack phones.” Coulson denied this – and the court adjourned.

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