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Panorama and the Fake Sheikh: trawling tabloid excesses

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The picture Mazher Mahmood's lawyers didn't want you to see. BBC Panorama.

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Well, there was a lot of mucking about, but **Panorama** has finally broadcast its exposé of Sun on Sunday journalist Mazher Mahmood, widely known as the “Fake Sheikh”. The programme had been scheduled for Monday November 10, but – just one and a half hours before it was due to go out – the BBC decided not to air.

Mahmood's lawyers had wanted to protect his anonymity – seeking to prevent any images of him post 2006 being broadcast, but this was rejected by the High Court and leave to appeal was refused by the Court of Appeal. It seemed that it was all systems go until Mahmood's legal team expressed **eleventh hour concerns** about the content of a section in the documentary involving one of Mahmood's high-profile stings.

But this was a delaying tactic and on Thursday the BBC went ahead and transmitted what turned out to be a damning indictment of the journalistic practices of the man responsible for, in his own words to the Leveson enquiry, more than 500 tabloid revelations leading to 260 criminal convictions.

There is some poetic justice, I suppose, in a man who has gained such success from pretending to be someone he is not, being revealed for who he really is. And let's not forget how Mahmood made his name.

In a vastly successful career, including 20 years at the News of the World where he rose to be investigations editor, Mahmood exposed the follies and greed of the rich, famous and, to be sure, the downright criminal. His investigations led to the imprisonment of actors for the purchase of cocaine, the exposure of corruption in Pakistani cricket and the tricking of then England manager Sven Goran Erikson into saying he would quit his England role if the team won the World Cup and was prepared to become the £5m-a-year manager of Aston Villa.

It was at the News of the World where the "fake sheikh" persona was cultivated. Mahmood would dress as an Arab noble and appeal to the vanities of his targets. In one of his most famous stories, Sophie Wessex was enticed to the Dorchester hotel by the prospect of handling the £20,000 a month PR account for a Saudi Prince. Once there, Prince Edward's wife described "President Blair" (this was 2001) the "frightening" tax rises and "pap budget" presided over by Gordon Brown. The News of the World gleefully reported all the details.

No expense was spared on creating the façade, as the Independent reported in 2005:

The sheikh routine is well rehearsed. The white jalabia is accompanied by a flowing robe and the agal, or headdress. Then there is a special black and gold robe, only worn by members of the 25,000-strong House of Saud. Expensive shoes and a Rolex watch complete the routine, along with a Ferrari or a helicopter. He also likes to puff away on a hubble-bubble pipe as he coaxes the story out of his victim.

It is these techniques that led to previous accusations that Mahmood is an agent provocateur who preys on the foibles of the otherwise innocent, tempting them to commit acts in any other circumstances they would not. In 2006, Roy Greenslade, who was once boss of Mahmood at The Sunday Times, wrote:

I want to put an end to his regular use of subterfuge, the most controversial weapon in journalism's armoury. I want him to mothball the fake sheikh's robes. And I want his paper, the News of the World, to take a long, hard look at its journalistic ethics and to reconsider its editorial agenda.

Mahmood told Panorama that he had spent his career investigating crime and wrongdoing and had used legitimate methods that brought individuals to justice. He said any criticism of him usually came from those with "an axe to grind".

Only way is ethics

Panorama certainly examined journalistic ethics – that and much more. John Sweeney’s 30-minute programme heard from many of Mahmood’s alleged victims and his former colleague, Steve Grayson, who candidly admitted to setting up model Emma Morgan as a cocaine dealer. Grayson told Sweeney: “He [Mahmood] is a drug dealer, we’re drug dealers, we have paid this guy to supply the drugs to give to her.”

More importantly, perhaps, the programme referred to the alleged relationship between Mahmood and the Metropolitan police. It was stated that he had links with corrupt police officers and a private detective firm called Southern Investigations. One document highlighted by Panorama said: “Source met Maz, a News of the World reporter ... on this occasion Maz was with a plainclothes officer ... The officer was selling a story to Maz.”

Perjury investigation

All this is complicated by the fact that Mahmood is now under investigation by the Met for perjury and suspended from the Sun on Sunday following the collapse of the Tulisa Contostavlos trial in July. X Factor star Tulisa, who also appeared on the Panorama programme, faced charges of intent to supply cocaine after being filmed by Mahmood who was posing as a Hollywood movie executive. Appearing as a prosecution witness the judge threw the case out saying that the trial could not go any further because, said Justice Alistair McCreath, there were “strong grounds to believe” that Mahmood had “lied” at a hearing before the trial started.

For former attorney-general Lord Goldsmith this means that convictions which occurred as a result of Mahmood’s evidence in previous cases now need examination. He told Panorama:

The fact that somebody who has been accused by a judge of apparently of not telling the truth may be instrumental in those convictions would certainly be a reason to look at those convictions again and to examine them to see whether they are safe.

John Alford, an actor jailed following a Mahmood sting in 1997, would certainly welcome any investigation at all. He appeared at the end of Panorama, on the verge of tears, to exclaim:

No one can give me the 18 years I’ve lost, no one can give me that back.

Mark Lewis, a media law, libel and privacy lawyer who filed the first phone-hacking civil case against News of the World is in no doubt about the severity of Mahmood’s alleged actions he said:

The damage that’s caused, the damage for people’s livelihoods, the amount of people sent to prison, it’s a far more serious thing than phone hacking ever was.

Of course, the phone hacking scandal hasn't gone away, either. On November 7 the former editor of the News of the World, Ian Edmondson was sentenced to 8 months in prison whilst Operation Elveden, the investigation by the Metropolitan Police into alleged payments to public officials for information by journalists, currently has three trials in the criminal courts.

On trial in in Kingston Crown Court are journalists and senior newspaper executives comprising the "Sun Six". These are still dark days for tabloid news journalism and there's more to come. With more potential victims of Mahmood's set to come forward in the wake of Panorama, it may be a long time before we see the light.



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