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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

For the Mirror Group, buying Daily Express would be a blast into the past, not the future

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The Mirror's extraordinary but creditable mea culpa. Philip Toscano/PA Wire

In the week that four senior journalists from The Sun were cleared at the Old Bailey on all charges relating to paying public officials for information, Tuesday also saw Matthew Nicklin QC, the lawyer representing Trinity Mirror in the case of eight well-known public figures suing the company for damages over phone hacking, tell the High Court that the practice was “unlawful and wrong”. Phone hacking, said Nicklin, represented an “unwarranted and unacceptable intrusion into people’s private lives and it shouldn’t have happened”.

Well, that’s candid enough – and a timely reminder that illegal practices in the procurement of exclusive stories was not the sole domain of the Murdoch newspapers.

Indeed, while the trial judge Justice Mann listened to testimonies from the likes of Paul Gascoigne, Alan Yentob and Shane Richie, it became apparent that their claims were just the most high-profile to have come to light. The court was told of a further 100 other people who have come forward to register claims against Mirror Group.

Here the final judgement in assessing the scale of the damages (which is expected to take weeks, if not months) will have a direct bearing on what happens in these other cases. Given that Trinity Mirror has admitted printing more than 100 stories based on hacking the current plaintiffs' voicemails from 1999 to 2009, the story, as they say, might run and run. And run.

Mirror, Mirror ...

As the **Independent** reported, the level of phone hacking inside Mirror Group Newspapers (MGN) may have been greater in scale than at the News of the World or the Sun. It was alleged at a legal hearing in January this year that as many as 41 journalists working on the Mirror, Sunday Mirror and People newspapers used “internal office lines to make calls to mobile phones and illegally access private voicemails”.

But at least the Mirror Group has now publicly, though undoubtedly belatedly, admitted its culpability. An editorial printed on the February 13 in the Daily Mirror stated,

Trinity Mirror, owner of the Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror and Sunday People, today apologises publicly to all its victims of phone hacking ... Our newspapers have a long and proud history of holding those in power to account. As such, it is only right we are held to account ourselves.



Paul Foot: crusading journalist. Paul Kidd
CC BY-SA 3.0, CC BY

It's fair to say that Mirror newspapers do have a proud history of championing the causes of the under-represented and disenfranchised. The Daily Mirror is the paper, remember, of Paul Foot and John Pilger two campaigning journalists known for their integrity and campaigning zeal. If it were not for Foot, as the Telegraph recorded in his obituary, The Birmingham Six, the Guildford Four, the Cardiff Three and the Swansea Two would possibly still be incarcerated.

The Mirror has consistently supported lost and moribund causes, too - throughout the 1980's (in the notorious and difficult Maxwell years) the Mirror and the Sunday People were the only popular national papers that steadfastly supported the Labour party. Perhaps this the reason why the current Labour leadership's silence on Mirror matters has been so deafening.

More seriously, in the run up to the Iraq war in 2003 the Daily Mirror was regularly critical of Bush and Blair and even, unofficially, sponsored the “Stop the War” marches in Glasgow and Edinburgh.



For eight years it has supported the HOPE not hate campaign – and its special pull-out: “Britain





Refreshing from a red top. Author provided

against extremism” on the day of the European elections last year was, to my mind anyway, a welcome and positive corollary to the divisive rhetoric regularly peddled by its tabloid rivals, notably The Daily Mail and The Daily Express.

Campaigning: John Pilger in the Daily Mirror. Wikimedia, CC BY-SA

The Express in particular occupies a peculiar place in the media landscape. In 1978 the legendary Manchester poet John Cooper Clarke wrote that, though he'd never seen a nipple in the Daily Express, the paper was nonetheless: “boring mindless mean full of pornography, the kind

that's clean.”

No change, John. No change.

Indeed, the Express' unswerving commitment to immigration/Princess Diana/Madeleine McCann/health and weather stories as front-page lead stories virtually every day for the past century has led many to speculate about the health of its own journalists – faced as they are with the monotonous regularity of daily revisiting “exclusives” which evoke a singularly bleak vision of modern Britain. The famous masthead should not be a crusader but a groundhog.

Who will buy?

All of which makes a report in *The Times* last week suggesting that Mirror Group is in consultation with Richard Desmond about buying the Daily Express either a cause for celebration or mourning, depending on your point of view.

It's a fair guess that the staff at the Express would welcome the end of the Desmond era, characterised as it is by repeated cost cutting and rock-bottom morale. In October last year the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) gathered evidence on workload pressure and stress following cuts to journalist numbers. They found that employees had to work in “poor conditions, with mice rampant at the London office”.

All the pointers are toward a Desmond exit – in October he sold Channel 5 to US conglomerate, Viacom, for £450m and, according to *The Times*, he has given Mirror representatives access to the Express's confidential accounts – which aren't in bad shape. This is money website reports that the most recent accounts from Express Newspapers show that it made a pre-tax profit of £30.4m on revenues of £204.9m in 2013. Evidently, the cost-cutting has been effective.

But I wouldn't hold my breath for a Mirror takeover, not least because there would be competition issues arising if the Daily Star (also under Desmond's ownership) was included in the deal. And why would Mirror group want the hassle? As Roy Greenslade asserts, pre-tax profits of the



Express notwithstanding, both publishers are in a business where there are ever-declining print sales and decreasing revenue. The future is in digital platforms not print.



Wait – where's the Diana story? Peter Jordan/PA Archive

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