



# How We Broke the Murdoch Scandal

***Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger on his dogged reporter, a U.S. ally—and a gamble that finally paid off.***

by [Alan Rusbridger \(/authors/alan-rusbridger.html\)](/authors/alan-rusbridger.html) July 17, 2011



Dan Chung / Eyevine-Redux (portrait)

Alan Rusbridger, editor of The Guardian. Inset: Cover of The Guardian after the scandal.

Every so often—perhaps once every 18 months—the veteran *Guardian* writer Nick Davies comes into my office, shuts the door with a conspiratorial backward glance, and proceeds to tell me something hair-raising.

In June last year he wanted to inform me about [Julian Assange \(http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/06/13/wikileaks-probe-spoils-pentagon-papers-anniversary.html\)](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/06/13/wikileaks-probe-spoils-pentagon-papers-anniversary.html). He'd read that the (then little-known) snowy-haired hacker was on the run with a data stick full of millions of secret documents that the U.S. Defense and State departments had carelessly hemorrhaged. His plan was to track him down ... and then *The Guardian* would publish them all. Good idea?

Early in 2009 there had been a similar moment. He'd discovered that James Murdoch, the son and heir of the most powerful private news-media company on earth, had done a secret deal to pay more than \$1 million to cover up evidence of criminal behavior within the company.

Interested?

The answer to both questions was—of course. Followed by a small inner gulp at the sheer scale and implications of the stories. Followed by the sight of Nick, invariably dressed in jeans and a defiantly unfashionable brown leather jacket, disappearing back out through the door in search of trouble.

Everyone knows how WikiLeaks ended: a global swarm of revelations and headlines, with governments the world over transfixed by the daily drip-feed of disclosures, war logs, classified cables, and diplomatic indiscretions. And now everyone knows how the Murdoch story ended: with a kind of giant heave of revulsion at what his employees had been up to, and with a [multibillion-dollar merger \(http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/07/13/lord-david-puttnam-saves-bskyb-from-murdoch.html\)](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/07/13/lord-david-puttnam-saves-bskyb-from-murdoch.html) stopped in its tracks by the most overwhelming parliamentary vote anyone can remember. A profitable newspaper selling millions of copies a week had been killed off. The British press regulator was dead in the water.

Except the Murdoch story isn't finished. It reaches so deeply into so many aspects of British and American civic life—including policing, politics, media, and regulation—that the story will continue to play out over the months, even years, ahead. Everyone expects more arrests. There are numerous civil actions wending their way through the British courts. There will be two public inquiries—into the behavior of press and police. And who knows what trouble the News Corp. shareholders or American regulatory authorities might create the more they learn about the management of the British wing of the family business.

Rewind to July 2009 and think how different it could have been. Up to this point the official narrative was straightforward. *News of the World's* royal correspondent, Clive Goodman, had been caught “hacking” the palace phones. Or, rather, he had subcontracted the job to a private investigator, Glenn Mulcaire, who was expert at accessing voice messages and cracking any security (such as PIN numbers) that a victim might have put in place. The police had pounced. The two men went to jail, and News International told everyone—press, Parliament, police, and regulator—that Goodman was a lone rotten apple. The editor, Andy Coulson, resigned, protesting that he knew nothing about any of it. Game over.

*The Guardian's* story on July 9, 2009, blew all that apart. It showed that there had been another junior reporter at work transcribing voice messages left for the Professional Footballers' Association chief executive, Gordon Taylor, and sending them “to Neville”—a reference to *NotW's* long-standing chief reporter, Neville Thurlbeck. So that was two more *NotW* journalists in the know. Some executive must have instructed the junior reporter, which would make three. And a named executive (who might or might not have been directing the young reporter) had signed a bonus contract for Mulcaire if he landed the Taylor story. So that was three, maybe four, in addition to Goodman.

When he learned about this new case, James Murdoch reached for the checkbook—a decision he now blames on the advice he was given at the time. He did it again with another case involving the hacking of the phone of the showbiz publicist Max Clifford.

But the reactions of other agencies were equally telling. The police announced an inquiry—and then, within hours, issued a terse statement saying there was nothing “new” to investigate. Well, of course not. It was all sitting in the 11,000 pages of Mulcaire's notes, which they had seized back in 2005 but done so little about.

News International saw the police's announcement as vindication. The company put out a very bullish statement telling the world that *The Guardian* had deliberately misled the British public. In due course the Press Complaints Commission announced the findings of its own inquiry: there was no evidence to suggest that the “rotten apple” theory was anything other than the

truth. Not even News International was sticking to this line by then, but the watchdog had rolled over like a puppy.

A parliamentary committee did its best to get to the bottom of things. But News International's chief executive, the former *Sun* and *NotW* editor Rebekah Brooks, refused to grace the committee with her presence. One or two of the committee's members have since said that they felt too intimidated by the threat of what might be done to them by News International journalists if they insisted. So they didn't.

And the majority of the press weren't much better. By now—to general astonishment—Coulson had been hired as press spokesman by the man everyone assumed would be the next prime minister, David Cameron. The nearer Cameron edged to the door of No. 10 Downing Street, the less appetite there was to run anything negative about Coulson. I knew (if I didn't know already) how lonely our chosen track was going to be in November 2009 when an employment tribunal awarded a former *News of the World* journalist more than \$1 million in damages after finding that he had suffered from a culture of bullying under Coulson.

Big story? Not at all. Not a single paper other than *The Guardian* noted the fact in their news pages the next day. There seemed to be some *omertà* principle at work that meant that not a single other national newspaper thought this could possibly be worth an inch of newsprint.

Life was getting a bit lonely at *The Guardian*. Nick Davies had been alerted that Brooks had told colleagues that the story was going to end with “Alan Rusbridger on his knees, begging for mercy.” “They would have destroyed us,” Davies said on a *Guardian* podcast last week. “If they could have done, they would have shut down *The Guardian*.”

If the majority of Fleet Street was going to turn a blind eye, I thought I'd better try elsewhere to stop the story from dying on its feet, except in the incremental stories that Nick was still remorselessly producing for our own pages. I called Bill Keller at *The New York Times*. Within a few days, three *Times* reporters were sitting in a rather charmless *Guardian* meeting room as Davies did his best to coach them in the basics of the story that had taken him years to tease out of numerous reporters, lawyers, and police officers.

The *Times* reporters took their time—months of exceptional and painstaking work that established the truth of everything Nick had written—and broke new territory of their own. They coaxed one or two sources to go on the record. The story led to another halfhearted police inquiry that went nowhere. But the fact and solidity of the *Times* investigation gave courage to others. Broadcasters began dipping their toes in the story. One of the two victims began lawsuits. *Vanity Fair* weighed in. The *Financial Times* and *The Independent* chipped away in the background. A wider group of people began to believe that maybe, just maybe, there was something in this after all.

Meanwhile, Cameron—against all advice—had appointed Coulson to be his press spokesman at No. 10. There had been a moment just before the election when I had sent a warning to him of evidence that we couldn't publish for legal reasons but that I thought he should know.

It went like this: in 2005 Coulson's *NotW* had rehired as one of its investigators a man named Jonathan Rees, who was just out of prison having served a seven-year sentence for planting cocaine on an innocent woman. Rees was now in prison, awaiting trial for conspiracy to murder his former business partner, a man who had been found in a pub parking lot with an ax in his head. He was acquitted this past March.

It was inconceivable that *NotW* could not have known about his criminal background: *The Guardian* had published two long articles about Rees's previous links with *NotW* and corrupt police officers back in 2002.

*The Guardian* couldn't publish any of this before the general election because British media law bars newspapers from writing about people facing criminal charges. But it seemed to me that Cameron might like to know before he made any appointments to his government team (I told Gordon Brown, then prime minister, and Nick Clegg, now deputy prime minister, as well.)

Cameron said this week that his chief of staff never told him—not that it seemed to have bothered him very much at the time. He appeared rather dismissive of its significance and only a little rattled. Appointing Coulson was a terrible judgment call, and he must know it.

The tipping point came some time around the new year. The stream of civil legal actions became a torrent. The police became seriously engaged at last, appointing a new 45-strong team to do what had so glaringly not been done back in 2006. It has so far said that it has informed 170 out of nearly 4,000 targets. The regulator ripped up its old report as worthless. And then came the revelation by Nick Davies that *NoTW* had hacked into the phone calls of the missing teenager Milly Dowler, deleting her voice messages so that it could listen to new ones. That single action—which had given Milly's parents hope during the dark days before it was confirmed that she had been murdered—caused a surge of revulsion from which *NotW* found it hard to recover.

Rarely has a single story had such a volcanic effect. Suddenly you couldn't keep the politicians, journalists, police officers, and regulators off the TV screens. Police officers lined up to apologize for oversights and errors of judgment. M.P.s were suddenly saying very publicly things that, a fortnight earlier, they would only have whispered.

Someone christened it the "Murdoch Spring." There was a widespread acknowledgment that, for a generation or more, British public life had molded itself to accommodate the Murdochs. As the company grew larger, more successful (40 percent of the national press and a broadcaster with twice the income of the BBC), and more aggressive—and with, as we now know, a small team of criminal investigators employed to work over anyone in public life—it became an accepted belief that these were bad people to upset. You needed Murdoch to get elected in Britain—or so most politicians believed. And—always unspoken—Murdoch needed certain things, too. It wasn't necessarily corrupt. But it was certainly corrupting. And now—with one story and one unanimous vote in the House of Commons—that spell has been broken.

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