

The News Machine: Hacking, The Untold Story

James Hanning with Glenn Mulcaire

London: Gibson Square, £12.99, p/b

The Conservative Party had already lost the Rochester and Strood by-election in the hours before its former director of communications left prison early on the morning of 21 November. Whether the timing of Andy Coulson's release was coincidental or evidence that his former boss, Prime Minister David Cameron, was pulling all the strings he could to avoid a UKIP victory, we may never know.

But we do know that Coulson's earlier employer, News International (now News UK), made very little of his return to civvy street five months into his 18-month sentence for conspiracy to hack phones and of the Conservative defeat in what was previously a very safe Tory seat.

The linked worlds of criminality, the media, the state and politics are the subject of the latest book by *The Independent on Sunday* deputy editor James Hanning, viewed through the eyes of Glenn Mulcaire, the private investigator who worked extensively for Coulson among other News International senior executives. He was jailed for six months in 2007 for his role in phone hacking.

Along with *News Of The World* (NOTW) royal reporter Clive Goodman, Mulcaire pleaded guilty, allowing News International to claim they were two bad apples in a Wapping barrel brimming with decent practitioners of the journalism trade, including Coulson and another NOTW editor, Rebekah Brooks. Hanning tells us the admission by Mulcaire and Goodman also saved lots of embarrassment for some of the Royals, who might have been called as witnesses, and the Metropolitan Police.

It was only after Coulson went from Rupert Murdoch to the Conservative Party and then to Her Majesty's Government as Cameron's spin chief at No 10, that suspicions began to spread that Goodman and Mulcaire had merely taken the hit for Murdoch's empire. Nick Davies of *The Guardian* and a few MPs pointed to widespread abuses of privacy and illegality, a pattern of corruption confirmed by the Leveson Inquiry and

criminal trials, some of which – one involving Coulson – are still ongoing.

Mulcaire came before the courts again in 2013 once his 'bad apple' status was shown to be shared by many others in the Murdoch barrel. He was given a six-month suspended sentence.

But between his two trials he caught much of the critical flak from those belatedly emboldened to speak out against the practices of Murdoch journalism. One of those was former Home Secretary David Blunkett who wanted Mulcaire 'to rot in hell' but who has nonetheless continued to be a regular recipient of News International largesse.

Mulcaire, inhibited first by the terms of his settlement with News International at the time of his first conviction and then by the contempt constraints of subsequent trials, has found himself largely in the firing line, particularly after he was identified as the man who hacked the phone of murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler.

The author has done a smart and important thing in getting the vilified Mulcaire to tell at least some of his side of the story. Hanning has not done this in any way to exculpate Mulcaire: rather to help us understand what makes a devout, Roman Catholic father of five, former youth worker and professional footballer blag and hack his way into the private lives of his fellow citizens. Hanning's journalistic and humane instincts have also allowed us to see a much bigger picture of what was going on in the past twenty years than has emerged from the fine work of Nick Davies, MPs Tom Watson and Chris Bryant, Leveson and the hacking trials themselves.

We learn that Mulcaire's early career was as a 'tracer' for John Boyall who, among other things, carried out contract work for the intelligence services. When the *NOTW* and Boyall fell out, Mulcaire was the beneficiary and became ever more deeply involved with obtaining material by assorted means in support of the paper's campaigns under the editorship of Brooks. When Coulson became editor, the demands for ever more celebrity tittle-tattle grew, with Mulcaire's workload earning him six-figures a year.

Mulcaire seems to have believed – whether this is just deluded self-justification is hard to discern – that the status of a global media empire working closely with agencies of the state, including the Met, conferred legitimacy on his activities. Court verdicts have not supported his beliefs; but have also left lots of questions unanswered about the extent of the trade between the state and the Fourth Estate.

Hanning offers us lots of insights into cosiness at the top. When Rebekah Brooks decided she would like to ride a horse retired from the Metropolitan Police, Hanning discloses: ‘The horse was acquired from the police by Brooks *partly for David Cameron’s use*. It is a story which speaks volumes about both her and Cameron.’ (Author’s italics.) The details need not detain us save to say that a Hanning source confirms that the then head of the Met, Sir Ian Blair, arranged Brooks’ use of the horse and was told that Cameron would also be riding it. There are lots of similar stories of the masked meshing of the mutual interests of the rich and powerful.

Old Etonian Hanning, who brought the photograph of the Prime Minister’s Bullingdon Club mates briefly into the public domain with his biography of the Tory leader, has done a good job in teasing this material from Mulcaire and putting it into political context.¹ Further, as a widely experienced senior journalist with a commitment to what the trade can be at its best, he also offers important insights into the changing nature of the profession. He illustrates how Mulcaire’s journey from tracing villains to industrial-scale hacking of decent citizens gained momentum under the voracious Murdoch machine.

His latest book extends the understanding of those who wish to move beyond simplistic monochrome judgements about the popular press by those who prefer to read the unpopular ones. It is also a story of our times: the top people

¹ Hanning gave thoughtful evidence to Leveson which is well worth a look for those seeking to put its better publicised celebrity witnesses in perspective. See <<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122145147>> and <<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2012/07/Witness-statement-of-James-Hanning-undated.pdf>>.

go free and get richer while smaller fish go to jail and find it
ever harder to pay the bills.

Tom Easton