

Hacked Off

Submission to Public Office (Accountability) Bill Committee call for evidence

November 2025

Executive summary

1. In its long title, The Public Office (Accountability) Bill promises to “*require public authorities to promote and take steps to maintain ethical conduct within all parts of the authority*”. **Yet it fails to address one of the most persistent and deep-rooted sources of public authority impropriety: officials’ improper, corrupt and sometimes unlawful relations with the media.**
2. As a member of the Hillsborough Now Coalition, Hacked Off welcomes the Bill in principle and endorses the coalition’s submission. However, **the absence of action to tackle relations between public officials and the media is a critical omission which must be addressed.**
3. We recommend the Bill is amended in the following two ways:
 - 3.1. **To include a provision requiring the Government to establish an inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005, to deliver fully on its promise to secure candour and accountability in public life.** This inquiry should deal with evidence of unethical conduct in respect of relations between public authorities, officials and news publishers, and make recommendations for appropriate reforms to protect the public in the future.
 - 3.2. **The exemption for journalism under Section 11 of the Bill, ‘Offence of misleading the public’, should be removed to prevent a carve-out for public officials seeking to perpetrate dishonesty or mislead the public through media publications.**

Public officials & the media: basis for a public inquiry

4. This Bill’s purposes and objectives (as set out in the long title) promise accountability and candour from public officials, yet the Bill does not engage with the relationships through which some of the most prominent and severe cases of impropriety arise. In particular, it omits any reference to the well-established need for a public inquiry into relationships between public officials and the media. Evidence of profound, systemic and persistent impropriety between public officials and the media is evident in a series of events over the last few decades:
 - 4.1. The impropriety of South Yorkshire Police (SYP) and its relations with the media following the Battle of Orgreave.
 - 4.2. The improper relations between SYP & *The Sun* following Hillsborough; many of the families have subsequently called for a public inquiry into this aspect, as referred to in the Rt Reverend James Jones’ report.
 - 4.3. Relations between News UK (formerly News International) and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) in respect of the investigations into the murder of Daniel Morgan; Daniel’s brother Alastair has called for a public inquiry into this aspect, saying,

“There are still critically important unanswered questions about Daniel’s death, and corruption between the police and the media is at the heart of it. These organisations close ranks every time they are challenged, and we need a public inquiry to find the truth.”

- 4.4. Successive failures by the MPS to fully investigate allegations of widespread illegality at News UK throughout the 00s in relation to the phone hacking scandal, at the same time as News UK editors & senior MPS officers enjoyed close relationships.
- 4.5. The Information Commissioner's failure to investigate evidence of phone hacking committed on behalf of newspapers in the 2000s, following the ICO's Operation Motorman investigation.
- 4.6. The failure by Surrey Police to act on information relating to News UK's hacking of the voicemails of Milly Dowler in 2002.
- 4.7. Relations between News UK and the MPS in respect of information published surrounding the assault of Jenny Evans; she has called for a public inquiry, saying,

"That the police took the details of what I had lived through and passed them to a newspaper was a profound betrayal. It caused real pain. We need a public inquiry so that what happened to me — and to others — is properly understood and never repeated."

- 4.8. The reliance of the MPS on the evidence of Mazher Mahmood throughout the 1990s, 2000s and early 2010s; the close relationship between Mahmood, News UK and the MPS, which is alleged to have shielded Mahmood from exposure or even prosecution. Journalist & Mahmood expert Paddy French has said,

"The Metropolitan Police Force's attitude and relationship to Mahmood was deeply disturbing. There is an overwhelming case for a public inquiry into the relations between police officers of that force, Mr Mahmood, and News UK more broadly."

More detailed evidence of UK press and media contributing to public officials' impropriety is set out at length from page 5 below.

5. The Bill's long title specifically promises that the Bill will "*require public authorities to promote and take steps to maintain ethical conduct within all parts of the authority.*" That objective cannot be achieved without a review of relations between public officials and the media, which has been repeatedly recommended by various investigations, inquiries and experts for several decades.
6. The Bill as it stands otherwise fails to address public official impropriety in respect of relations with the media; dealing only with officials' direct and public statements. The only provision it contains which makes any meaningful attempt to grapple with improper public official and media relations is the clause 9 ethical code requirement. Yet, in many of the cases described above and from page 5 below, the conduct alleged is already unlawful or at least widely known to be unethical. The introduction of a code is likely to have absolutely no impact whatsoever on these covert and improper relations.
7. The Minister has argued that the media landscape has changed and things have moved on. As detailed below, this is false. More people read content published by newspapers today than ever before, and the power of the press is even more concentrated. But in any case, it is irrelevant to the question of relations between the press, the police and other public authorities; there is no reason or evidence to show that police/press relations have been materially altered by the rise of the internet or other changes in the news "landscape" (whatever that is taken to mean).

Journalism exemption from the Offence of Misleading the Public

8. Clause 11 creates the "Offence of Misleading the Public". Subclause (1) sets this out:

A public authority or public official commits an offence if, in their capacity as such an authority or official—

(a) they act with the intention of misleading the public or are reckless as to whether their act will do so, and

(b) they know, or ought to know, that their act is seriously improper.

However, subclause (4) states:

(4) Nothing in this section applies to an act done—

...

(b) for the purposes of journalism.

9. The purpose of this exemption in 11(4)(b) is unclear. The explanatory notes refer to the BBC, and imply that it is to protect BBC employees from the impact of the Bill. But the language of the Bill and the lack of definition of the “purposes of journalism”, seem to go much wider, potentially covering politicians’ and police officers’ articles in newspapers.
10. In any case, the threshold for committing the offence is so high as to render this exemption unnecessary for the purposes of freedom of expression. There are six tests which must all be satisfied to warrant prosecution. In particular, the individual must have,
 - a. “departed significantly” from the expectations of their role, *and*
 - b. “caused harm” to someone, *and*
 - c. been responsible for “significant or repeated” dishonesty, *and*
 - d. that dishonesty was related to matters of “significant concern” to the public, *and*
 - e. a reasonable person would consider their actions “seriously improper”, *and*
 - f. they know or ought to know their act was “seriously improper”.
11. This sets an extremely high threshold. There is no conceivable conduct which would satisfy these tests, and would yet be a legitimate journalistic activity.
12. Furthermore, there is a risk that police officers or politicians will use the platform of the media to spread lies and falsehoods, as is precisely what happened after Hillsborough. This is a loophole which should be addressed by removing this exemption.

Position of the Government

13. In her closing remarks during the Second Reading of the Bill, the Minister argued that reinstating Part 2 of the Leveson Inquiry - inquiring into unlawful conduct at newspapers and corrupt relationships between the press, the police and other public authorities - is “out of scope” for the Bill. But we propose a public inquiry, which specifically targets public officials’ relations in the media, is manifestly in scope. Indeed, given the short and long titles of the Bill, its absence is an oversight which must be rectified.
14. The British media – and national newspaper publishers especially - have operated hand in hand with public authorities to evade accountability for impropriety and misconduct. National newspapers have perpetrated falsehoods that presented victims of wrongdoing as the perpetrators, while press coverage of major scandals has laundered and legitimised the deceptions and dishonesty of public officials. Across almost every case of public misconduct and corruption, victims have made it clear that the actions of the press significantly compounded the harm and abuse they had experienced.

As the Right Reverend Jones' 2017 report for the House of Commons found in reference to *The Sun* newspaper, **press coverage which came about as a result of improper relations between public officials and the media became “a barrier to truth and justice” for the victims of the Hillsborough disaster.**¹

15. We also refute the Minister's claim that “the media landscape has drastically and dramatically moved on”. New media technologies and audience habits have changed considerably in recent years, with social media and digital platforms having a dominant role in how news and information is found and shared. However, the UK press and national newspaper publishers' extent of influence and power is unchanged.
16. Despite consistently declining *print* circulation since the 1980s, the *overall reach* of newspaper content has never been higher - newspapers and content published on their websites reaches a combined monthly UK audience of 46.2 million people.² The three largest newspaper publishers - DMG Media, News UK and Reach - together account for two-fifths of the combined online reach of the UK's top 50 news websites. National newspapers comprise nine of the top 15 ‘newsbrands’ in the UK news market, and are amongst some of the most-followed accounts on social media.³ Despite being effectively unregulated as members of IPSO - the complaints handler owned and controlled by the newspaper industry - national newspapers receive undue prominence from news aggregators which unaccountably label these titles as ‘trusted’ sources. In any case this has little relevance, if any, to the question of the ethics and legality of police and press relations.

About Hacked Off

17. Hacked Off campaigns for media freedom and press accountability, and was formed in response to the phone hacking scandal, which revealed industrial-scale criminality at News International (now News UK), Reach PLC and other national news publishers. The resulting Leveson Inquiry further exposed a widespread culture across the British newspaper industry of corruption, cover-ups and unethical behaviour involving the police and other public authorities. Following the Government's cancellation of the second part of the Leveson Inquiry (‘Leveson 2’) in 2018, the full extent of this corrupt culture – including unlawful interactions between the press, the police and other public authorities – remains unknown and uninvestigated.

¹ House of Commons & The Right Reverend James Jones KBE (2017) [A report to ensure the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated](#), pg. 22.

² PaMCO industry data 2024, reported by [Press Gazette](#).

³ Media Reform Coalition, [Who Owns The UK Media? 2025 Report](#).

Evidence of historic and ongoing impropriety in relations between public officials and the media

Deceptive press and BBC coverage of police violence at Orgreave

18. False and sensationalised media coverage played a pivotal role in falsely justifying police violence and mass arrests against striking miners at Orgreave in 1984. Photography from the scene that documented excessive use of force by the police was ignored or dismissed as “anti-police propaganda” in press coverage, which was frequently accompanied by favourable quotes from the Police Federation.⁴ The BBC also notoriously flipped the order of footage it broadcast from the clashes, appearing to show miners attacking police prior to a mounted response when in reality the police charged first. A 2015 review by the Independent Police Complaints Commission confirmed officially, despite the truth being apparent for decades, that the BBC had reversed the order of footage - a deception the BBC continues to deny and for which it has never apologised.⁵

Investigations into the murder of Daniel Morgan

Press & corrupt police interference in investigations

19. The Report of the Daniel Morgan Independent Panel detailed how journalists working for the *News Of The World* newspaper surveilled, intruded on and attempted to blag private information about the senior investigating officer (SIO) in charge of re-investigating the 1987 murder of Daniel Morgan. The Report found that “the circumstantial evidence suggests very strongly” that this was arranged, in part, by Sidney Fillery, the former police officer who had been first assigned to investigate Daniel’s murder in 1987.
20. The Independent Panel established that there was a “longstanding” relationship between News UK and a private detective firm at the centre of police investigations, Southern Investigations (Morgan’s former employer). These were linked to the MPS directly, through Fillery, who had been hired by Southern Investigations prior to Daniel’s murder to pass on information, and circumstantially, through the finding that a number of Fillery’s and Southern Investigation’s associates in the police force had been convicted of various offences which implied corruption and/or impropriety. Southern Investigations derived “a substantial portion” of its income from providing information to the press, including “the passing of sensitive and confidential information to the media for the private gain”. This was “derived from police sources”, i.e. serving police officers.⁶
21. The Independent Panel outlined in particular how News UK reporter Alex Marunchak and Fillery, “were exploring ways of discrediting the investigation” into the Daniel Morgan murder.⁷ Staff and photojournalists working for News UK subsequently placed the SIO and his wife (Jacqui Hames) under surveillance, using vehicles identified as leased to News UK to surveil and intrude on their private residence. During this period, the SIO also reported tampering with his private mail and receiving suspicious phone calls, indicative of the ‘blagging’ conducted by private detectives and journalists to acquire private information - as subsequently revealed by the Leveson Inquiry. The Independent Panel concluded that the evidence available to it “suggests very strongly that the intrusive activity” organised by News UK staff in concert with private detectives and former police officers was arranged to discredit and intimidate Police investigators “and thus disrupt” the investigations.⁸

⁴ Petley and Bailey, ‘[The Making of an Icon - and How the British Press Tried to Destroy It](#)’, Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom.

⁵ [IPCC review of matters relating to the policing of events at Orgreave coking plant in 1984](#), pg. 12.

⁶ [The Report of the Daniel Morgan Independent Panel](#), June 2021, Pg. 510

⁷ *ibid.*, pg. 509

⁸ *ibid.*, pg. 517

Daniel Morgan investigations: Improper relationships between the police and the press

22. The Report of the Daniel Morgan Independent Panel further explored the 'linkages' between the police and the press. It criticised the trend of senior police officials 'cultivating' relationships with media organisations that were known to be facing serious allegations of unlawfully acquiring information from serving and former police officers. The Independent Panel further criticised former senior police officials who had "compromised the integrity of the police" by downplaying reports of phone hacking while employed by *News Of The World*.⁹
23. Daniel Morgan's brother Alastair said,
- "There are still critically important unanswered questions about Daniel's death, and corruption between the police and the media is at the heart of it. These organisations close ranks every time they are challenged, and we need a public inquiry to find the truth."*

Hillsborough disaster & Cover-up

24. After the Hillsborough disaster disinformation was rapidly spread by representatives of South Yorkshire Police. In addition to remarks made in the immediate aftermath of the disaster by David Duckenfield, which falsely alleged hooliganism, police officers went on to brief a news agency that fans had not only caused the disaster, but had abused and stolen from the dead. This subsequently provided the basis for the infamous "The Truth" story in *The Sun*.
25. The impropriety of public officials who conspired with the press to present a false and misleading narrative at what happened at Hillsborough had devastating consequences. Bishop James Jones' report quotes:
- "I tried hard not to speak about Hillsborough but it was everywhere but I managed to develop what I would call a "guarded watchfulness". If I ever sensed that Hillsborough, Liverpool or football supporters were going to be discussed I would get myself out of the situation. For example, there were times I can remember when clients would start talking about Hillsborough, unaware that I was from Liverpool, and I would start to panic. I wanted to stand up for all the fans but felt vulnerable and weak, knowing I would break 22 down in tears. I wanted to be professional and good at my job, but felt constantly angry that judgements were being made by the media, press and the general public."*¹⁰
26. Bishop James Jones finds that the cover-up, a product of the impropriety of police officers & the media, slowed down the pursuit of justice. He said it "acted itself as a barrier to truth and justice, in that it affected people's willingness to engage with the families' campaign." He also quotes *Guardian* journalist David Conn, who echoed this sentiment: "The inaccurate media coverage, failure to check stories and perpetuation of prejudice against the victims did terrible damage to the families and survivors, and also contributed to the injustice and failure to hold it to account."
27. *The Sun's* political editor Trevor Kavanagh also claims that he was briefed by an advisor to Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister, with the same allegations. So too, involved in the sequence of events, is Irvine Patnick, the local MP (and member of the governing party), who repeated and amplified the police's (false) version of events.

⁹ *ibid.*, pg. 1096

¹⁰ Dorothy Griffiths, sister of Vincent Fitzsimmons, quoted in Rt Rv Jones Report, pgs. 21-22.

28. Over time, and through the limited investigations which have occurred, some of these networks and individuals implicated have been identified. However, the identities of many of those involved in the chain of communications which supported the cover-up remain a secret, while some of these exchanges are disputed. Of perhaps even greater concern is that there has been no full and detailed investigation, with appropriate powers, into these networks and associations themselves.
29. As a result, we still do not know the truth about precisely how this cover-up was perpetrated. It is possible that individuals involved continue to serve in public office; it is very likely that the improper networks and associations between police services, newspapers and other public authorities continue to operate.
30. Furthermore, a number of families reported their belief that private information was provided to the press by police officers:

“In the aftermath of the disaster I could not understand how the press got hold of my name. I thought that the only way this could have happened was either through the hospital admission records or from the police. I had no direct contact with the press. After the disaster I went to live with Arthur’s widow, Susan, spending most of my time with her on the Wirral. Little did I know that the press were also camped out at my place in Bootle. How did they get my address?”¹¹

31. A number of other families also reported their suspicions that police officers were supplying the press with personal information, several more of them quoted in Bishop James Jones’ report. This is a practice likely to persist to this day. Indeed, there is a pattern of individuals affected by major disasters reporting that the press has discovered their address or other personal details; often, it is alleged, via the police.
32. Groups representing the families affected by Hillsborough have repeatedly called for a public inquiry into the relations between the police, the press and politicians, and related matters.

Failures to investigate news publishers in respect of allegations of voicemail interception (“phone hacking”) and other illegality

1999: Operation Nigeria

33. Jonathan Rees, who ran the investigations firm which supplied unlawfully obtained information to News UK, Southern Investigations, was bugged in 1999 and subsequently arrested.
34. Evidence associated with that investigation ought to have alerted the police to the fact that News UK were paying for stolen information. Rees openly boasted about his network of corrupt police officers helping to supply information, and he was in receipt of £150k/year from News of the World alone. Yet the police took no action against News UK.

2003: Operation Glade

35. In 2003 and 2004, Metropolitan Police Service Operation Glade found evidence that illegally obtained information had been passed from police officers to private investigators, and had ultimately been sold to news publishers.
36. Several reporters in receipt of stolen information were interviewed, but the police declined to search them or investigate further. It is alleged that improper relations between police officers and the press

¹¹ Dave Golding, nephew of Arthur Horrocks, quoted in Rt Rv Jones Report, pg. 11.

may have informed this decision. The MPS Commissioner during this period (2000-2005) went on to write for News UK (News International, as it was).

2006: Operation Caryatid

37. In 2006, in the course of their investigations into voicemail interception (hacking) committed against the Royal household, the MPS seized the notebooks of investigator Glenn Mulcaire, which contained evidence of industrial-scale phone hacking committed on behalf of the press against thousands of private individuals.
38. Yet beyond *NOTW* reporter Clive Goodman (and Mulcaire), who was charged and convicted for the timeshacking of members of the Royal household, the police failed to investigate the evidence they now had of hacking on a much wider scale. For years, they did not even inform the victims.
39. This operation was initially overseen by the Assistant Commissioner. He was later employed by News UK for whom, in his column for *The Times*, he wrote that the 2006 operation had been so thorough as to have left “no stone unturned”. As confirmed by later revelations and, in particular, Operation Weeting in 2011, this was evidently not the case.
40. In 2009, when further allegations of phone hacking arose, the police refused to reopen the 2006 investigation. The Commissioner at the time was Sir Paul Stephenson, a close friend of News UK Executive Editor Neil Wallis. Stephenson employed Wallis on behalf of the MPS in a consultancy role, and Stephenson received a complimentary stay at a spa facility which employed Wallis. The pair had at least eight dinners together between 2006 and 2011.
41. Sir Paul directed Assistant Commissioner John Yates to look at the new allegations, “establish the facts”, and consider the basis for a review of the 2006 operation. Yates, also a close friend of News UK’s Neil Wallis, did not recommend a review and the scandal remained covered-up until further stories emerged in 2011.

2003: The Information Commissioner (ICO)

42. The ICO, another public authority, too faces allegations of impropriety in relation to the media. In 2003 the ICO launched Operation Motorman, which uncovered evidence that private investigators were receiving hundreds of requests for stolen information commissioned by national newspapers. However, the ICO failed to take any action against the media. The former ICO officer, the late Alec Owens, was extremely critical of the ICO’s failures, and attributed them to a “fear” of the press, which significantly damaged the interests of the victims.

2002: Surrey Police, Operation Baronet

43. Operation Baronet found that in 2002, police officers at Surrey Police became aware that Milly Dowler’s phone was hacked. No action against News UK appears to have been taken, and the public nor the Dowler family were made aware of what had happened until almost ten years later.
44. In respect of the phone hacking scandal, public authorities demonstrated a persistent refusal to take proportionate action against the press, in the face of overwhelming evidence of wrongdoing. While this was going on, senior public officials enjoyed close (and sometimes paid) relationships with the media. The victims have called for a public inquiry into the closeness of these public officials and News UK, calling the ongoing failure to launch one a “tacit endorsement” of corruption and impropriety.

Mazher Mahmood & the MPS

45. Mazher Mahmood was known as “the Fake Sheikh”. In 2016 he was convicted of perverting the course of justice after tampering with evidence in the trial of Tulisa Contostavlos; the case against her brought about by a Mahmood sting. He conducted dozens of sting operations on behalf of News UK throughout the 1990s, 2000s and early 2010s. During this period his stings provided evidence used to secure an estimated 94 convictions, despite allegations that his methods were unethical or even illegal. He formed close relationships with the MPS that, it is alleged, protected him from prosecution during this period.
46. As early as 1994, merely one year into his career at News UK, a story provided by Mahmood formed the basis of a prosecution against men charged with defrauding the Department of Social Services. At trial, Mahmood’s evidence in the case was directly contradicted by police and the case collapsed. Despite Mahmood’s evidenced unreliability, the MPS continued to rely on his evidence for further convictions.
47. In 2003 Mahmood’s collusion with the police reached a peak, as he reported an alleged plot to kidnap Victoria Beckham. In fact, this was a sting coordinated by Mahmood. It later emerged at trial that the entire case rested on an unreliable witness who had been paid by News UK. The trial itself descended into farce, as it became apparent that Mahmood’s witness, Florim Gashi, had planted the idea of kidnapping Beckham among the suspects, and that they had never taken the idea seriously. Despite this further evidence that Mahmood’s methods and conduct were unreliable, the MPS continued to rely on his evidence for convictions, and more people - many of whom claim innocence to this day - went on to be arrested or lose their livelihoods after being targeted by him.
48. In the course of exchanges between Mahmood and the MPS subsequent to the failed Victoria Beckham case, Mahmood told the police, “I’ve got bent police officers that are witnesses, that are informants.” Despite this alarming disclosure, the police declined to investigate News UK further.
49. More cases were affected by Mahmood’s untrustworthiness over subsequent years. Yet the MPS never stopped relying on his evidence, right up until the Contostavlos case in 2014. Paddy French, an authority on Mahmood and one author of *“Rogue: The Rise and Fall of Mazher “Fake Sheikh” Mahmood”*, said,

“The Metropolitan Police Force’s attitude and relationship to Mahmood was deeply disturbing. There is an overwhelming case for a public inquiry into the relations between police officers of that force, Mr Mahmood, and News UK more broadly.”

Further cases of impropriety between public officials and the press

Coverage of the assault of Jenny Evans

50. Ms Evans was the victim of a sexual assault committed by a well-known person. She reported the crime to the police and was interviewed by officers. Details of her assault then appeared in a national newspaper the following day. She subsequently discovered that police officers sold details of her ordeal to reporters. Ms Evans has said,

“That the police took the details of what I had lived through and passed them to a newspaper was a profound betrayal. It caused real pain. We need a public inquiry so that what happened to me — and to others — is properly understood and never repeated.”

Caroline Flack

51. There are allegations of impropriety in the relations between police officers and the press in connection with the pursuit and death of presenter Caroline Flack. Caroline's mother Christine, in particular, believes that information was privately exchanged between the police and the media.