

# The News of the World Scandal

It is too early to make a final judgement on what is currently known as "*The News of the World* Phone Hacking Scandal," where journalists pursuing stories appear to have systematically hacked into mobile phones, stolen personal information and allegedly made payments to corrupt police officers.

It is too early because we do not know who authorized these actions and whether such illegalities occurred elsewhere within Rupert Murdoch's vast News Corporation media empire, which includes *The Times*, *The Sun*, *The Sunday Times* and Sky television. Yet if we cannot yet make a final judgement, we know enough to be angry. Some of our society's most fundamental standards have been trampled on and there has been a complete disregard for those most elementary British values, the rights to decency and privacy.

This scandal appears to be a further dramatic sign of the erosion of our Christian principles in British society. The Ten Commandments have for generations provided the foundations underlying our society, forming the rulebook for British national life. Even if you were unclear about what exactly it meant to keep the Sabbath, you knew that you weren't supposed to lie. Yet in this post-Christian age there are no longer any such moral foundations; in pursuit of profits and a good story anything goes.

The actions uncovered are wrong on many counts. In terms of the Ten Commandments, the eighth—'You shall not steal'—has clearly been broken: names, phone numbers, identities and perhaps reputations have been stolen. In a broad sense, the ninth—'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor'—has also been broken. Although often felt to be simply about lying, at its deepest level it forbids us hurting another individual through saying or writing something false. Yet there is something deeper still.

I think what people have found particularly shocking has been the arrogance with which journalists, over many years, appear to have ignored the most basic moral values. They seem to have felt they could do exactly what they wanted. In viewing themselves as godlike, above everyone else, they have adopted an attitude that borders on the blasphemous.

But is there anything more in this sorry affair than a statement of our moral bankruptcy? I think there are three other issues.

Firstly, there is a sense in which we as a society must share some of the guilt. A society gets the press that it deserves: papers such as *The News of the World* printed what they did because that's what the public wanted to read. In judging the press, we judge ourselves.

Secondly, while something must be done to control these abuses of the press, we need to be very careful. Human nature is such that in fleeing from one error we all too frequently fall into another. In this case, there is clearly a temptation for the government to impose new rules and regulations on the media, which will prohibit even the gentlest investigation into an individual's private life.

Although this may be attractive, it is also problematic. We do need a press that has the freedom to investigate and expose wrongdoing. Constraints on press investigations could permit all sorts of evil to flourish. (It is worth remembering that it was actually an investigation by the press itself—the *Guardian*—that brought these present abuses to light.) Whatever new legislation and penalties are proposed they should not become a smokescreen behind which the guilty can hide. There are people who would very much like a toothless press.

Thirdly, let me suggest that the church must take a little bit of the blame. At its best, the press performs a role not unlike that of the prophet in the Old Testament, denouncing

what is evil in society. Is it possible that we have become so self-absorbed, so focused on our own pleasures, so anxious to be well thought of by everybody, that we have forgotten our God-appointed task of speaking harsh truths to our generation? Is it possible that it is in part the silence of the church that has allowed the tabloids to speak? And, at the risk of making a glib pun, isn't it possible that if prophets are silent, profits will speak?