



Chief Executive of News International, Rebekah Brooks, listens to speeches during the Conservative Party conference in Manchester, northern England, 2009. REUTERS/PHIL NOBLE

## INSIDE REBEKAH BROOKS' NEWS OF THE WORLD

Journalists who worked at the News of the World under Rebekah Brooks describe an industrialised operation of dubious information-gathering

BY GEORGINA PRODHAN AND  
KATE HOLTON  
LONDON, JULY 18

*"It was the kind of place you get out of and you never want to go back again."*

**T**HAT'S HOW ONE FORMER reporter describes the News of the World newsroom under editor Rebekah Brooks,

the ferociously ambitious titian-haired executive who ran Britain's top-selling Sunday tabloid from 2000 to 2003.

Journalists who worked there in that period describe an industrialised operation of dubious information-gathering, reporters under intense pressure attempting to land exclusive stories by whatever means necessary, and a culture of fear, cynicism, gallows humour and fierce internal

competition.

"We used to talk to career criminals all the time. They were our sources," says another former reporter from the paper who also worked for Murdoch's daily tabloid, the Sun. "It was a macho thing: 'My contact is scummier than your contact.' It was a case of: 'Mine's a murderer!' On the plus side, we always had a resident pet nutter around in case anything went wrong."

The 168-year-old paper published for the last time on July 10 after exposure of its widespread use of phone-hacking triggered a scandal that has engulfed Rupert Murdoch's UK newspaper group News International, its New York-based parent company News Corp, and Britain's political classes and police.

Brooks, one of two top Murdoch executives who resigned on Friday, was arrested on July 17 on suspicion of intercepting communications and corruption. She has maintained she neither sanctioned nor knew about the phone hacking. The Guardian newspaper reported the paper's targets went beyond celebrities to include murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler and the bereaved relatives of dead soldiers. Murdoch has apologised personally to the Dowler family.

Four former employees of Britain's best-selling Sunday tabloid have told Reuters that Brooks' denials are simply not credible. They say people on the paper's newsdesk, the hub that directs news coverage, were regularly grilled about the top stories by Brooks and later by her successor Andy Coulson, who resigned over the phone-hacking scandal in 2007 and went on to become Prime Minister David Cameron's spokesman.

"They went in and they were cross-examined for two hours every day. And it was all about the genesis of all the stories," the first ex-reporter, who worked at the paper for seven years, told Reuters.

The News of the World's reporting methods were first questioned when it published a story about an injury to Prince William's knee in 2005, prompting fears his aides' voicemail messages were being intercepted. The royal family complained to police. More than a year later the paper's royal editor Clive Goodman and private detective Glenn Mulcaire were jailed for six months for conspiracy to access phone messages.

Coulson, by then the newspaper's editor, resigned immediately, although like Brooks he has repeatedly denied any knowledge of phone-hacking. Until recently, the paper continued to maintain that the hacking was isolated to Goodman.

Former employees say that's hard to believe, not only because of the story approval process, but also because budgets were so tightly controlled that payments for such services would not have gone unnoticed.

"It's simply not conceivable that somebody who was editor wouldn't have known," says the journalist who spent seven years at the paper, covering general news.

Neither Brooks nor Coulson could



**WE'RE SORRY:** News Corp Chief Executive Rupert Murdoch speaks outside a hotel where he met the family of murdered teenager Milly Dowler in central London, July 15, 2011. **REUTERS/PAUL HACKETT**

be reached for comment, and News International declined comment for this story beyond saying: "There are numerous views from former employees and we are not going to counter each one."

Reuters is a competitor of Dow Jones Newswires, the financial news agency that News Corp acquired along with the Wall Street Journal in 2007.

### **SURVIVALISTS**

WHEN BROOKS BECAME EDITOR, at age 31, she had a brief to broaden the paper's appeal by intensifying the focus on celebrity and showbusiness news and publishing fewer of the harder stories the paper had been known for -- politicians caught taking illegal drugs or footballers caught with their pants down. More and more front pages were taken over by stories about C-list celebrities, such as contestants in the TV reality show "Big Brother", to the irritation of the old guard.

At the same time, the pressure to get exclusive stories was so intense that dubious practices were barely questioned. "They were 'dodgy business HQ'. I'm not sure if people even realised it was illegal. It was a don't-get-caught culture," said the reporter

of seven years' standing. New staff would be given the cold shoulder until they'd proved themselves to be "thoroughly disreputable" so their colleagues could trust them.

"It was no place for anyone to pipe up and say: 'This doesn't seem ethical to me.' That would have made you a laughing stock."

Journalists didn't explicitly ask for private investigators to get involved in their work, but help would be provided if a reporter got stuck on a promising story. "How it arrived on your desk was a bit of a mystery. You didn't know and you didn't ask," said the reporter. "Every week, somebody's mobile phone records, somebody's landline records, sometimes even somebody's medical records. It was common enough not to be notable."

A fifth former News International employee who worked with News Of the World journalists at this time said its reporters were under "unbelievable, phenomenal pressure", treated harshly by bosses who would shout abuse in their faces and keep a running total of their bylines. Journalists were driven by a terror of failing. If they didn't regularly get stories, they feared, they would be fired. That meant they competed ruthlessly with each other.

Because the News of the World was a Sunday paper, where a hot story on Tuesday could be useless five days later, pressure was much more intense than at the Sun, said the ex-journalist who worked at both titles.

"The News of the World was much more secretive than the Sun. At the Sun, you knew what was going on, what people were working on. In the News of the World you never knew what anyone was working on. They'd send you out to a job and wouldn't tell you what it was for. It'd be: 'You're going to meet a man. Don't ask his name and whatever you do don't get him excited. Just take his statement and leave,'" he said.

"You became a complete survivalist."

Reporters say they lived in constant fear of byline counts which weeded out those who had filed the fewest stories. "They were always seeking to get rid of people because it was a burn-out job. Their ideal situation was you work your nuts off for six months and they let you work there another six months," said the general news reporter.

"Every minute you spent there you felt that your employer hated you."

### DESTROYING LIVES

CHARLES BEGLEY, an ex-News of the World reporter, has spoken out about the bullying culture. He said he felt close to breaking-point when, three hours after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on New York's twin towers, he was ordered to appear at the paper's daily conference dressed in a Harry Potter outfit he had been given to help the tabloid capitalise on the craze for the books about the boy wizard.

"At that time, we were working on the assumption that up to 50,000 people had been killed," he said then, according to tapes published in 2002 by the Daily Telegraph of a conversation between him and assistant news editor Greg Miskiw. "I was required to parade myself around morning conference dressed as Harry Potter."

It was during this conversation that Miskiw made a comment that was to become notorious in Britain: "That is what we do -- we go out and destroy other people's lives."

Contacted for this story, Begley said he did not wish to comment further on his experiences but stood by statements he made at the time.

The reporter who worked on both the Sun and the News of the World recalls that at one stage, every journalist in the News of the World newsroom was ordered to apply to become a contestant on "Big Brother", in

the hope the paper could do an undercover report on it.

"Someone came round the office with all these application forms and we were all given a three-line whip to try to get on that bloody show. They were desperate to get someone on there and 'expose' it all. Everyone was moaning about it," he said.

The same journalist also described how four reporters were sent off as a punishment to spend a stint on a crack-ridden estate in Bristol and write a feature about it. They never went, he said.

Matt Driscoll, a sports reporter sacked in April 2007 while on long-term sick leave for stress-related depression, was later awarded 800,000 pounds (\$1.3 million) for unfair dismissal. The employment tribunal found that he had suffered from a culture of bullying led by then-editor Coulson.

"Nobody ever felt secure there and that's the way they liked it. On the edge, scared, insecure," said the general news reporter.

### SAVING MONEY

CONTRARY TO A POPULAR perception

*"THE NEWS OF THE WORLD WAS MUCH MORE SECRETIVE THAN THE SUN. AT THE SUN, YOU KNEW WHAT WAS GOING ON, WHAT PEOPLE WERE WORKING ON."*

that the tabloid threw large sums of money around to get stories, the news budget was extremely tightly controlled, the journalists said. One described how entire expense reports might be struck through with a red line without any reason given.

Readers who supplied a front-page story would typically be paid about 10,000 pounds, while story pitches negotiated by a publicist would command at least twice that. Smaller user-submitted stories would fetch a couple of hundred pounds. On Saturday afternoon, when it was too late for a reader to sell a story to another paper, their fee would often be reduced.

This is another reason it was hard to believe senior editors were not aware of phone hacking and other expensive illegal services provided by outsiders, the ex-reporters told

Reuters. Mulcaire, the private investigator later jailed for phone hacking, was paid more than 100,000 pounds a year by the News of the World.

"No newspaper editor would not know what a 102,000 pound budget was used for. They knew about every 50 quid," said the long-term freelancer.

Eavesdropping on voicemail or obtaining call logs was initially a money-saving measure, according to the former employees. Rather than committing a reporter to stake out a venue for as long as it took to catch out a couple having an affair, for example, voicemails could first be scrutinised to establish the time and place of a rendezvous, saving the reporter time and the paper money.

As its uses became apparent, it was employed more and more. The general news reporter said he was first shown how to listen in to people's cellphone voicemail by a colleague in the 1990s.

"It became the course of first resort rather than last," the long-term freelancer told Reuters.

### CYNICAL

BUT THE FOCUS ON celebrities and reality television stars was causing problems inside the paper.

"It was a ridiculously cynical approach to news," says Peter Burden, author of the 2008 book "News of the World? Fake Sheikhs & Royal Trappings". "They just thought: here are these endless people that Joe Public are interested in because of 'Big Brother', and they thought they could do what the hell they liked with them and they raided them rotten, them and their families."

Editors would then often use damaging stories as bargaining chips, trading them for future access to public figures or to build relationships with stars. Often, the paper would drop the story they had altogether and publish something more sympathetic.

"It would be things like: 'We know you were sleeping with your secretary but we'll keep it out of the paper if you give us the story about how you were given away as a child,'" said the long-term freelancer.

"They used to call stories 'levers,'" said the general news reporter. "They weren't necessarily interested any more in using the story you'd proved or got past the lawyers. They were interested in using the story as leverage in order to get a different story. Sometimes the kind of story that you would bargain as an alternative wasn't actually the

truth. It annoyed a lot of reporters.

"It was relationship-building for them. Basically, she (Brooks) was trading in your hard work to be friends with influential PRs. They used the stories to bank credit with influential people. It then made the whole raison d'être of the place something different."

### MACHO CULTURE

BROOKS DID LITTLE to change the paper's culture. Former employees say she could equal her male counterparts in swearing, and would join the men for a drink in the pub. She

could also be fearsome, intimidating even the aggressive Miskiwi.

"Part of that macho culture was that you would laugh at the risk and the dodgy illegality you might find yourself involved in," said the general news reporter.

It became practically a matter of honour not to use respectable journalistic methods, the reporters said.

"The whole idea of having friendly relations with someone and getting them on the record -- that was just weird. You had to get stuff on someone and then confront them," he said.

In Brooks's resignation statement on Friday, she said: "I feel a deep sense of responsibility for the people we have hurt ... I now need to concentrate on correcting the distortions and rebutting the allegations about my record as a journalist."

(Additional reporting by Olesya Dmitracova and Stephen Mangan in London and James Mackenzie in Rome; Editing by Simon Robinson and Sara Ledwith)



**ONLY THE START:** The last edition of News of the World newspaper goes on sale alongside other British Sunday newspapers in London July 9, 2011. **REUTERS/PAUL HACKETT**

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

**SIMON ROBINSON,**  
ENTERPRISE EDITOR  
+44(0)2075425458  
simon.robinson@thomsonreuters.com

**SARA LEDWITH,**  
TOP NEWS TEAM  
+44 20 7542 8585  
sara.ledwith@thomsonreuters.com

**GEORGINA PRODHAN**  
+4420 7542 7954  
georgina.prodhan@thomsonreuters.com