

ROGUE



The Rise and Fall of Mazher 'Fake Sheikh' Mahmood

ROY GREENSLADE
WITH PADDY FRENCH

**NEWS OF THE
WORLD**

**THE
Sun**
ON SUNDAY


THE SUNDAY TIMES

"Mr Mahmood carries on with great style the long tradition of investigative journalism at the News of the World."

— Rupert Murdoch

"... [Mahmood] is certainly charismatic and highly intelligent but we submit he is dangerously deceitful, ruthless, exploitative and corrupt."

— Jeremy Dein, QC

"Ethics should be of paramount importance in all fields of journalism because in my view a large part of the work of investigative journalists is to expose moral wrongdoing and it is essential to uphold the integrity of the profession."

— Mazher Mahmood

"There are strong grounds for believing that Mr Mahmood told me lies when he gave evidence ... there are also strong grounds for believing that the underlying purpose of these lies was to conceal the fact that he had been manipulating the evidence."

— Judge Alistair McCreath

"Now that my honesty and integrity as a journalist is in question, I feel that there is no longer a place for me on the [Sunday Times]."

— Mazher Mahmood

Barrister "... isn't the true position ... that you had left the Sunday Times because you had committed an act of dishonesty?"

Mazher Mahmood: "Correct, absolutely."

— Leveson Inquiry

see also inside back cover

Roy Greenslade, a journalist from the age of 17, had a varied career in newspapers, as assistant editor of *The Sun*, managing editor (news) of the *Sunday Times*, and spent 28 years as media columnist and blogger for *The Guardian*. From 2003 to 2018, he was Professor of Journalism at City, University of London. He is a Life Member of the National Union of Journalists and has been on the board of the *British Journalism Review* since 1993.

Paddy French is an investigative reporter with more than 40 years' experience. An award-winning ITV Wales current affairs producer (1999-2008), he founded the Welsh magazine *Rebecca* (1973-1982) and currently edits the *Press Gang* website (paddyfrench.substack.com). Over the past decade, *Press Gang* has published ground-breaking exposés of Piers Morgan and Andrew Norfolk of *The Times* as well as Mazher Mahmood.

By the same authors

Roy Greenslade

Goodbye to the Working Class (1976)

Maxwell's Fall (1992)

Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits From Propaganda (2003)

The Peer, the Priests and the Press (2023)

Paddy French

(with Brian Cathcart) *Unmasked: Andrew Norfolk, The Times Newspaper
And Anti-Muslim Reporting — A Case To Answer* (2019)

ROGUE

The Rise and Fall of Mazher 'Fake Sheikh' Mahmood

ROY GREENSLADE
WITH PADDY FRENCH



BALLYARR

Published by
Ballyarr Books, Ramelton, Co Donegal, Ireland

First published in 2025

Copyright:
© Roy Greenslade and Paddy French, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-7391022-1-0

All rights reserved.
The authors assert copyright rights, as usual,
under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Photo credits
Cover: Mazher Mahmood, Metropolitan Police Service
Back cover: Rupert Murdoch, PA
Rebekah Brooks, News UK
Prince Harry, Bantam Books

Design
Terry C. Evans

For Noreen and Tricia

Contents

	Note: Two authors – one narrator	viii
	Preface	ix
<i>Chapter 1</i>	An Asian kid from Birmingham	1
<i>Chapter 2</i>	A brother betrayed	11
<i>Chapter 3</i>	Cover-up at the <i>Sunday Times</i>	17
<i>Chapter 4</i>	Mahmood's entrapment 'gang'	25
<i>Chapter 5</i>	The <i>News of the World's</i> 'approved cocaine dealer'	45
<i>Chapter 6</i>	Miscarriages of justice	61
<i>Chapter 7</i>	Bend it like Florim: the Beckham kidnap plot.....	77
<i>Chapter 8</i>	Why did no-one join the legal dots?.....	93
<i>Chapter 9</i>	Phone-hacking? Terrible – not me mate... ..	111
<i>Chapter 10</i>	Fake convictions	127
<i>Chapter 11</i>	Living the lie, telling lies and ditching a friend	135
<i>Chapter 12</i>	Crowning achievements?	151
<i>Chapter 13</i>	Sporting stings and a cricketing mystery	169
<i>Chapter 14</i>	One lie too many leads to prison	179
<i>Chapter 15</i>	Rogue editors at a rogue newspaper	193
<i>Chapter 16</i>	A serial perjurer	209
	Acknowledgements	217
	Appendix 1 — Timeline	218
	Appendix 2 — Convictions	221
	Appendix 3 — Failed Prosecutions	223
	Bibliography.....	225
	Index	228

Note: Two authors – one narrator

This book's joint authorship requires an explanation because it is written in the first person by Roy Greenslade. In the late 1980s, as managing editor (news) at the Sunday Times, he was Mazher Mahmood's boss. From 1992 until 2020, as The Guardian's media commentator, he took a close interest in Mahmood's journalistic career, writing often about him.

In 2011-12, Roy gave evidence to the Leveson inquiry into press ethics, some of which centred on Mahmood's departure from the Sunday Times. Paddy French also presented a statement to the inquiry that dealt specifically with Mahmood's false claim about his convictions "hit rate".

Over the following years, quite separately, Roy and Paddy continued to inquire into Mahmood's work. In Paddy's case, this was manifested in several lengthy online articles. Meanwhile, Roy wrote what was, in essence, a first draft of this book. But, unable to find a publisher, he put it to one side while writing another book.

In 2024 Roy sent his manuscript to Paddy. His response led to an agreement to publish an expanded version of the book themselves with Roy remaining as the narrator.

Preface

On 21 October 2016, the former *News of the World* investigations editor, Mazher Mahmood, was sentenced at the Old Bailey to prison for 15 months for conspiring to pervert the course of justice. His conviction was no aberration. He could, and should, have been found out many times before during a quarter century of shameless dishonesty.

In his vainglorious memoir, Mahmood wrote:

“My father was a magistrate in Birmingham for over twenty-five years, and I remember him telling me that he had never come across any Asian defendant who would put his hands up and plead guilty before him. They always wanted to fight and take their chances. I’ve had the same experience. In all my years, I have not come across a single Asian villain who has simply turned to me and said, ‘It’s a fair cop, guv’. Even when faced with overwhelming evidence, my Asian brethren try to either lie or talk their way out of it”.¹

The supreme irony of that statement will become apparent in the course of this book because Mahmood could have been writing about himself. It also epitomised his ambivalent feelings about his heritage, leading him, on occasion, to express contempt for people who shared his Pakistani background.² He either lied or talked his way out of trouble throughout a newspaper career in which he became both one of the most celebrated, and one of the most reviled, journalists in Britain. Over the course of twenty years, Mahmood, the man said to have “changed the face of British tabloid journalism”,³ worked as an investigative reporter for the *News of the World* until the truth about that newspaper finally emerged in public.

Once the phone-hacking scandal broke, the world learned at last what had previously been obvious to only a tiny minority: the *News of the World* was nothing short of a criminal enterprise. In a ferocious attack in the House of Commons, former prime minister Gordon Brown contended that the newspaper had been guilty of law-breaking on an industrial scale and accused Rupert Murdoch’s publishing company of having been part of a

1 Mazher Mahmood, *Confessions of a Fake Sheikh* (HarperCollins, 2008), p48. He also refers to ‘that fine Asian tradition of lying when caught’, p203 [hereafter, *Confessions*]

2 Christine Hart, ‘Fake wife blows lid on Fake Sheikh: “He lived in a fantasy world”’, *Byline Investigates*, 7 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/thy98rx6>

3 John Sweeney, *BBC Panorama*, 12 November 2014

“criminal-media nexus”.⁴ Brown renewed his attack in 2025 by making a criminal complaint to the Metropolitan police and the Crown Prosecution Service on the grounds that the company had obstructed the course of justice in the aftermath of the scandal.⁵ He cited “significant evidence” by police officers who claimed the company had attempted to cover up its journalists’ illegal activity by deleting emails. In so doing, “the Murdoch empire” had brought “what should be a free media into disrepute”.⁶

It had long become evident that a significant proportion of the paper’s reporters and senior editorial staff had indulged in illegal activity or hired outside agencies to do so. Several more either condoned it or professed to be unaware of it. Aside from the illicit accessing of mobile phone voicemail messages, its journalists were the recipients of information from private investigators which they knew had been obtained by unlawful means.

Some reporters viewed blagging, the obtaining of confidential information by impersonation or deception, as a routine activity. Some trampled over people’s rights. Some bugged. Some engaged in acts of surveillance that bordered on espionage. Some trespassed. These reporters, and their editors, saw nothing wrong in bribery. All of this, and worse, was passed off as “the dark arts”, a cynical euphemism for illegality which was embraced by many of its users with a large measure of misplaced pride.

As the *News of the World*’s most prolific story provider, Mahmood engaged in his own peculiar array of dark arts. He was a master of what one of his collaborators called “theatrical journalism”.⁷ He carried out many of his investigations while wearing a disguise and adopting a *nom de plume*: the Fake Sheik.⁸ Although the omission of the final ‘h’ in that title’s conventional English spelling can be dismissed as a quirk, it is an apt metaphor. Mahmood, in company with several of his editorial colleagues, was an indiscriminate rule-breaker.

He purported to be a public tribune acting on behalf of society to expose villainy while often employing methods that were contemptible. All too often he fooled people into committing crimes they would not have thought to carry out without his offering them disproportionate inducements to do so. To trap his victims, he relied on the routine practice

4 ‘Brown in ferocious Commons attack on News International’, *BBC News*, 14 July 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/3twdtpda>

5 ‘Gordon Brown makes criminal complaint against Rupert Murdoch’s media empire’, *The Guardian*, 26 April 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/ku7p9n28>

6 ‘I have now spoken to police officers who say they were misled by Murdoch’s empire. I won’t let this rest’, *The Guardian*, 26 April 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/f6hcr6v5>

7 Aylia Fox’s description, *The Fake Sheikh*, Amazon Prime, 26 September 2023, episode 1, directors Ceri Isfryn & Alexandra Lacey [hereafter Isfryn & Lacey]

8 I will, however, ignore Mahmood’s spelling by using ‘sheikh’ throughout

of subterfuge and the occasional use of *agents provocateurs*. Indeed, the *Daily Mail's* gossip columnist thought he should be nicknamed “the *Asian provocateur*”.⁹ With enthusiastic backing from his editors, and a supporting “gang” of accomplices – some with criminal records – he acted as if he was a branch of the police force, a journalistic vigilante gathering evidence of behalf of the Crown Prosecution Service. When criminality was not relevant, he held people up to ridicule. Yet, in many cases, especially those involving high-profile people, his guileless targets were guilty of no more than trivial indiscretions.

What emerges from a close analysis of his work – the stories, so to speak, behind his stories – is a clear pattern of duplicity and the routine deployment of falsehoods. These are compounded by his single-minded ruthlessness. From his first steps into journalism, marked by compromising his parents’ friends and his brother, up to his final “investigation”, there were countless examples of his mendacity. He lied several times in court. He lied to a judicial inquiry. He lied whenever called to account for his chicanery.

Mahmood worked in an office tainted by gross hypocrisy. It was a newspaper that spoke to its readers from the moral high ground, delivering lectures about drugs being bad, excessive alcohol being bad, and sexual promiscuity being bad. Yet, among the staff, there was drug-taking, drunkenness and, as one insider revealed, “everyone was screwing everyone”.¹⁰ A case in point: for six years, two of its editors had an adulterous relationship.¹¹

Mahmood liked to cast himself as a lone wolf, but he could not have operated as he did without his newspaper’s considerable financial support and its owner’s idiosyncratic management. For his story makes no sense without understanding the regime at the *News of the World*. It was published by a company headed by Rupert Murdoch who paid close attention to what went on inside every one of his papers. He was well aware of Mahmood’s work, writing to a member of the House of Lords to praise the reporter’s “great style” as an investigative journalist.¹²

Murdoch was all powerful within his multi-national empire, creating the climate in which his managers and editors operated. He set the objectives which, in terms of the *News of the World*, simply meant maximising profitability by maximising sales. To accomplish his wishes, he exerted relentless pressure on his editors. They were also aware of his contempt for

9 Ephraim Hardcastle, *Daily Mail*, 12 April 2001

10 Sarah Issitt, Witness statement, John James Shannon vs News Group Newspapers, High Court, (Claim No BL-2019-001790), 13 October 2021

11 ‘Rebekah Brooks and Andy Coulson had affair, phone-hacking trial hears’, *BBC News*, 31 October 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/ywt4e8kd>. Cf. <https://tinyurl.com/yc67peb9>

12 Letter from Rupert Murdoch to Baron Ahmed of Rotherham, 16 February 2000

political attempts to regulate editorial content through the imposition of ethical guidelines. The consequence was the adoption within the paper of a journalistic culture best summed up by the idiom: by any means necessary.

It is also important to grasp the *News of the World's* unique place in Fleet Street. Even prior to its acquisition by Murdoch it was a paper apart. From its inception, it traded on a cynical exploitation of human weakness disguised as moral concern. It built a vast audience through scouring the courts of Britain in order to publish details of sexual crimes, sexual misdemeanours, and sexual foibles. This voyeuristic entertainment assumed a nastier, more intrusive, edge under Murdoch's ownership, and the distinction between it and the rest of the national press became ever more clear... until it dragged other papers down to its level. The *News of the World* developed into a rogue newspaper that encouraged reprehensible rogue behaviour, with Mahmood as its leading exponent. As the US magazine *Rolling Stone* rightly put it, Mahmood "conned celebs for Rupert Murdoch".¹³

Mahmood divided opinion within Britain's media, not to mention the fields of politics, the law and the entertainment industry. Some journalists regarded the self-styled "King of the Sting" to be one of the greatest investigative reporters of all time.¹⁴ They believed him to have exposed wrongdoing that would have remained hidden without his pioneering techniques and personal bravery. To these admirers, usually spouting trade clichés, he was a character, an operator, a one-off. They pointed to the fact that he was garlanded with journalistic awards. At one point, he was listed by the men's magazine *GQ* as that year's 45th most powerful man in Britain on the grounds that "his scoops create waves throughout royalty, government and the media".¹⁵ On the other side, his detractors considered him to be a fabricator, a deceiver, and a traitor to the journalistic community he affected to serve. They argued that his activities had the effect of bringing popular investigative journalism – an honourable trade – into disrepute.

Although this is a story about one reporter, one newspaper and one media tycoon, it has far greater significance. It raises questions about the nature of British tabloid journalism, about the failure of media regulation, about policing, about the judiciary, and about a society in which the *News of the World* was Britain's highest circulation newspaper for almost all of its 168-year existence. Despite the unprecedented public scandal that ended its existence, it is sobering to realise that its final issue was bought by four-

13 'The "Fake Sheikh" who conned celebs for Rupert Murdoch', *Rolling Stone*, 25 September 2023

14 They included former *NOTW* editors and colleagues, such as Andy Coulson, Neil Wallis, Phil Hall and Aylia Fox

15 'The 100 most powerful men in Britain', *GQ*, October 2001; 'Biggest mover and sheikher in town: Our man Maz is more powerful than Prince Charles', *NOTW*, 7 October 2001

and-a-half million people.¹⁶

For critics of Mahmood, which included my co-author Paddy French and me, his spectacular downfall was a vindication of our prolonged campaign to highlight his misdeeds.¹⁷ When he was finally sent to jail, it was a moment of *schadenfreude* for those who regarded themselves as his victims. They felt his going to prison substantiated their impassioned, but disregarded, complaints of his trickery. This book is a forensic reckoning on their behalf.

16 'News of the World's last edition "sells 4.5m copies"', *The Guardian*, 11 July 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/y3uj78ys>

17 'Why I am out to nail Mazher Mahmood', *The Independent*, 16 April 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/mryz2wmc>; 'The life and times of a serial perjurer', *Press Gang*, 29 August 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/ktcyd32y>

Chapter 1

An Asian kid from Birmingham

*“The great thing about newspapers is that nobody
gives a damn about your age, or what your
background is, as long as you have got a story.”*
– Mazher Mahmood

Mazher Mahmood was born into journalism. That is no exaggeration. From his childhood, he was steeped in both the romance and reality of newspapers. It was not just the talk around the kitchen table. Making magazines was the Mahmood family’s cottage industry. Journalism wasn’t the only motivating factor in his life, however, because he was the child of Pakistani immigrants. In his earliest newspaper article, he outlined his background’s effect on him. Asian parents, he wrote, have high aspirations for their children. They expect them to benefit from their British education by obtaining the best available qualifications in order to secure good jobs. “This feeling is embedded in every Asian youngster”, he wrote. “In an alien and white world, they must aim higher and be better to get as far as their white [English] counterparts”.¹

Sixteen-year-old Mazher was not faking it.² Undoubtedly, this was his authentic opinion at that time. His ethnicity and birthplace would remain a significant part of his persona. Some thirty years on from that juvenile essay, he took pride in being “an Asian kid from Birmingham”.³ On those occasions when he spoke of his work, Mahmood acknowledged the crucial advantage of being Asian. “My colour”, he said, is “the only reason I’m still alive. Nobody would ever think I was a reporter”.⁴

Doing better, and better again, was something of a Mahmood family

1 ‘Pressure on Asians to try harder’, *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 19 Dec 1979

2 In this chapter, I have used Mahmood’s first name to avoid complications with his family members

3 *Confessions*, p.ix

4 ‘The dirty digger’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 June 2003

mantra, exemplified by Mazher's father, Sultan. The son of a lawyer in Lahore, he was working in the city's passport office in the late 1950s when thousands of Pakistanis were applying to emigrate to Britain in the hope of improving their prospects. Sultan, at twenty-two, was also eager to improve his life chances. In 1960, taking advantage of the free entry granted to Commonwealth citizens, he decided to join the exodus. He left behind his young wife, Shamim, and their baby son, Waseem, heading first to Bradford before plumping for Birmingham. Amid Britain's post-war boom, there were plenty of opportunities, but not for immigrants seeking white collar jobs. So Sultan, the former civil servant, worked first as a labourer and then, within a year, he became a bus conductor. When his wife and child arrived, the Mahmood family set up home in a small Victorian terraced house in Floyer Road, Small Heath.

The somewhat down-at-heel suburb of Small Heath had once been notorious for its links to a violent gang, the Peaky Blinders, later accorded fame via a hit TV series.⁵ Although the gangsters had long gone, the area was on its way to gaining another negative label as far as the indigenous white community were concerned: an Asian ghetto. Among the increasing number of immigrants, mainly from Pakistan and India, were two of Sultan's brothers. They moved into Floyer Road with their children, so Waseem and Mazher, who was born in March 1963, grew up with cousins as neighbours. According to Waseem, this tightly-knit Pakistani enclave, in which Lahore was reconstructed in Birmingham, tended to enhance survival rather than integration.⁶ The boys were addressed by their parents in Urdu, but they understood more than they spoke. They learned through English at Montgomery school in Sparkbrook, which was some distance from their house but selected by Sultan because of its academic excellence.

Their mother, in company with other Pakistani women in the area, worked at home, earning small sums by finishing coats for a clothing manufacturer. The sewing machine's whirr provided a constant backdrop to the family's evenings, a sound, said Waseem, "that represented both the struggle and resilience of immigrant life". Meanwhile, Sultan moved on from bus conductor to driver, suffering racist taunts in both roles, before finding some relief when he worked as a postman where "everyone was so friendly".⁷ Eventually, he landed a job with British Rail, where he was to spend the rest of his working life as overseer of freight train movements. It enabled him and his family to benefit from subsidised train travel. His original intention

5 'Murderous outrage at Small Heath: A man's skull fractured', *Birmingham Mail*, 24 March 1890

6 I am indebted to Waseem for sharing his family's history

7 'The Millenbrum Project', *Birmingham Post*, 1 November 2000

had been to go back to Pakistan but each planned milestone to return home passed and the Mahmoods stayed put. Away from the railway depot, Sultan spent all his time realising his ambition to be a journalist.

He later explained that the journalistic seed was planted the moment he landed on British soil. When he stepped off the plane, a friend who had come to meet him skipped “the usual greetings” by asking instead whether he had brought any newspapers with him. The friend, hungry for news from Pakistan, was jubilant when he took copies from his case. Sultan wrote: “He went through the newspapers line by line during the next week before passing them on to another friend as a cherished gift. In this way, the newspapers brought by me circulated through many Pakistani homes and their reading continued until someone else brought a gift of fresh newspapers”.⁸

Sultan’s first writings were for *Mashriq* (The East), an Urdu-language weekly. It was founded in 1961 by a Pakistani student at Birmingham University to serve Asian communities in several British cities.⁹ By mixing reports from Pakistan and India with British news and advertisements, it quickly found an audience. Sultan, wrongly cast by Mazher as *Mashriq*’s founder, became its prolific Midlands correspondent.¹⁰ In the process, he built a solid public profile through articles that were often cited as a source of immigrant opinion by the local press.¹¹ For *Mashriq*, he wrote in Urdu. But, having enjoyed a good education in Lahore, he was able to read and write English. Therefore, as his journalistic skills improved, he sought to work for British outlets.

Sultan’s story is one of continual improvement. In about 1968, he moved his family from Small Heath to the predominately white, more prosperous, middle class suburb of Selly Park. Waseem, then ten, and eight-year-old Mazher found themselves in a minority at Raddlebarn primary school where there were very, very few Pakistani pupils at the time. Although they did face some racial prejudice, they coped well enough. Sport helped them fit in. Both boys, encouraged by their father, loved playing cricket. They also prospered academically. Waseem went on to Moseley Grammar and two years’ later, Mazher went to an arguably more prestigious grammar, King Edward VI Five Ways.

Mazher was regarded as a capable cricketer, and there are two cricketing

8 Sultan Mahmood, *Urdu Journalism in Britain* (Lahore, 1978)

9 Founded by Mahmood Hashmi. See Sajid Mansoor Quaisrani, *Urdu Press in Britain* (Islamabad, 1990)

10 ‘Sultan Mahmood – founder of Britain’s first Urdu-language national newspaper’, *Press Gazette*, 5 May 2005 [he was not, as stated, the founder]

11 *Birmingham Daily Post*, 14 February 1968; *Birmingham Weekly Mercury*, 18 February 1968

anecdotes about him at this time, possibly alternative versions of the same incident. In the first, playing for his mosque team, he decided the umpire (an imam) was guilty of cheating. Showing disdain for authority and displaying his nascent leadership qualities, he led his side off the field. In the second, playing in the local park, he was given out by the umpire, disputed the decision, and when it wasn't reversed, he picked up the stumps and the ball, which he owned, and walked off home. In the first, he is hero; in the second, villain. Both may, of course, be apocryphal. Perhaps they are best viewed as a precursor to the later contrary perceptions of Mazher. One incident that did occur illustrates Mazher's desire for centre stage. He and Waseem were among the spectators at the 1971 Edgbaston test match at which the Pakistan batsman, Zaheer Abbas, scored a record 274 runs. It prompted eight-year-old Mazher to join other boys who ran on to the pitch and accompanied Abbas back to the pavilion.

Sultan was not the only driving force in the Mahmood household. Shamim, who took a job in the linen department at Selly Oak hospital, was active and vocal on behalf of her community. She joined the Pakistan Women's Association, which was a springboard to her membership of Birmingham's Community Relations Committee.¹² "We were thoroughly involved in the social life of the Asian community", said Waseem.¹³ Sultan began to write occasionally for the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, which helped him to forge local political connections and, as a Labour party supporter, he became friendly with the MP for Birmingham Small Heath, Denis Howell, who held various junior government posts. Through that connection, the family engaged with the wider political world. "I remember meeting Harold Wilson", recalled Waseem.¹⁴ It is possible that Howell played a role in Sultan becoming one of Britain's first Asian magistrates. He was appointed as a JP in 1977. The following year, walking along a street in Small Heath, Sultan suffered an unprovoked racist attack. Two white men, shouting that he was a "black bastard", punched him to the ground and kicked him repeatedly in the stomach. They stole his wallet and watch.¹⁵ He needed hospital treatment for his injuries.

Around that time, Shamim persuaded Sultan that Pakistani women would benefit from a journal dealing with their concerns. As a result, they launched a monthly magazine in Urdu, *Gharana* (Household). Producing the magazine was a labour of love and necessitated considerable organisation. Urdu-language typesetting was unavailable in Britain so the pages were

¹² *Birmingham Daily Post*, 26 March 1969

¹³ Roy Greenslade 'Private family chatter became a sensational story', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/3n9n7ufk>

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ 'Asian JP: I suffered a racial attack in street', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 4 Sept 1978

handwritten, shipped off to Lahore and returned in thousands of separate printed sheets. Waseem and Mazher helped to collate and staple the pages. They also assisted their father to deliver copies to grocery stores around Birmingham and, eventually, neighbouring cities. Then they would travel around to collect the returns and pick up the takings. The boys realised that journalism provided perks, such as copies of review books, tickets to the theatre, and entrance to various events. Media, they could see, came with benefits.

Their youthful introduction to magazine publishing was not the only factor that placed them apart from their school contemporaries. Their lives were markedly different in other ways too. For example, according to Waseem, “holidays in second generation immigrant homes were strange affairs” because cash-strapped parents like his were “making the most of the overtime that was available during the holidays”. He lamented the fact that “we never went anywhere or did anything interesting, as our neighbours’ children seemed to be doing. Holidays for me were a diet of daytime television and playing cricket ‘up the park’ with other Asian kids... who were in the same position”.¹⁶ As a teenager, Waseem was acutely conscious of the dichotomy felt by many refugees, telling a newspaper interviewer: “I feel I cannot fit in in Pakistan and somehow I am a misfit here as well”.¹⁷

Even if assimilation proved difficult for his sons, it appears that the workaholic, upwardly-mobile Sultan was determined to make his mark in his adopted home. Ahead of the 1979 general election he was responsible for organising a pioneering survey into party political sympathies among immigrants in eight cities.¹⁸ Waseem played a leading part in developing the questionnaire. As Sultan grew in confidence, he began to share his knowledge of Pakistani politics and his thoughts on Islamic affairs in articles for the *Birmingham Evening Mail*.¹⁹ From early 1980, he also wrote regular columns as the *Mail*’s “special correspondent on race relations and community affairs”.²⁰ His excellent series, billed as “The new Britons” and featuring sympathetic interviews, explored problems confronted by immigrants from the West Indies as well as south Asia.

Sultan’s reputation also reached his homeland, and in the mid-1980s he became correspondent for two leading Pakistani titles, the Lahore-based *Daily Nawaiwaqt* and the English-language daily, *The Nation*. As a result, he was sought by TV broadcasters in his home country to comment on

16 Waseem Mahmood, *Good Morning Afghanistan* (Eye Books, 2007), pp89-90

17 ‘I am never going to be fully accepted’, *Birmingham Mail*, 12 December 1979

18 ‘The coloured vote’, *Daily Express*, 9 April 1979

19 Examples: ‘Turning point looms for Pakistan’, *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 28 September 1979; ‘Why Khomeini blackmail act worries Islam’, *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 5 December 1979

20 Examples: *Birmingham Mail*, 11 February, 11 April, 12 May, 14 July, 21 August 1980

British politics. In one example, an interview screened on Pakistan's main TV channel and posted on YouTube, Sultan's self-assurance is clear.²¹ According to the respected Pakistani cricket writer, Qamar Ahmed, Sultan could be a little "full of himself" by "presenting himself as a top journalist" with influence in Pakistani political circles.²² They met annually at Edgbaston test matches and Qamar wrote of Sultan often boasting about Mazher's "investigative acumen" and the money he earned from it. Nothing odd in a father exhibiting pride in his son's achievements, of course, nor in blowing his own trumpet. He can be forgiven for a measure of exaggeration. The unmistakable point is that, through journalism, Sultan had become a man of substance, a fact his sons doubtless recognised.

The boys' paths diverged after leaving school. Waseem, having obtained good O-level results, studied for his A-levels at Sutton Coldfield College, and went on to what is now the University of Worcester to do drama. Mazher also took A-levels, in English, economics and sociology, which enabled him to take a humanities degree at Middlesex Polytechnic. Neither brother stuck for long at their third-level courses. Clearly, the amateurs were eager to be professionals, wanting to turn their schoolboy journalistic experience to good account. In fact, Waseem did not choose to be a newspaper journalist, preferring to work in another branch of media, in broadcasting. Before doing so, he spent six months in Bombay (now Mumbai) to explore opportunities in the Indian film industry.

While he was there, he did his younger brother a favour by engineering a job for him as UK correspondent for a Bollywood movie magazine called *Super*. Mazher, at barely seventeen years old, filed UK news and gossip about Anglo-Asian celebrities. What happened next was a pointer to Mazher's ruthlessness. It illustrated his single-minded ambition and also his disregard for the consequences of what he wrote, even when it compromised those closest to him, including his own family. At the start of a career pockmarked by controversies this was the first of them. It began in mundane fashion at his parents' house. One evening, they were entertaining friends to dinner who boasted of an illicit money-making scheme. It involved them creating, and selling, counterfeit copies of Indian and Pakistani films on video tape cassettes. Mazher's ears pricked up. His initial attempt to sell the story to Fleet Street came to nothing. It was considered to be "too ethnic". Instead, he approached the editor of *Super*, Rauf Ahmed, who was happy to publish it.

21 PTV interview, <https://tinyurl.com/3ky8hyrx> Posted by "perrykhan999", an alias sometimes used by Mazher

22 Qamar Ahmed, 'Fake Sheikh – the man behind the smokescreen', *Dawn*, 22 October 2011. Email to author Roy G, 2 October 2022

Mazher, convinced the story should get a wider audience, didn't give up. He contacted the *News of the World* and successfully enthused its reporter, Ray Chapman, with his video piracy revelation. Chapman, a veteran of the paper's investigations team,²³ then guided the teenage Mazher through his first undercover assignment. He later told how he was "wired up with a covert recording device" to visit Soho video shops in order to buy illegal tapes.²⁴

Chapman spent six weeks honing the story before it was published. It was illustrated with a photograph of a house said to be the home of a video pirate, thereby giving away the address of the Mahmoods' friends. Mazher's father was livid, "absolutely incandescent", Mazher told a colleague some years later.²⁵ Mazher also told Andrew Marr that his "parents were mad. They threatened to throw me out for exposing family friends, and it did take a long time to get back in with them".²⁶ Mazher's reward for his betrayal was just two weeks' casual work at the *News of the World*.

There is one further oddity about this tale. A year before Mazher took his "scoop" to the *NOTW*, a very similar "exclusive" – about Asian shops renting out illegal videos – had been published in the *Birmingham Evening Mail*.²⁷ It was bylined by none other than his father, Sultan Mahmood. Unlike Mazher, he had been careful to ensure no names were mentioned and no shops were identified. It seems unlikely that Mazher was unaware of it. At this distance, we cannot be sure, but what we do know is that, from this moment on, the Mahmood brothers went off in very different directions.

In 1982, Waseem applied for, and won, an assistant producer's position in the BBC's Asian programmes unit at its Pebble Mill studios in Birmingham.²⁸ At twenty-one, he was reputed to be the corporation's youngest hiring in such a role, and was to go on to enjoy considerable success in the job. While Waseem began to prosper, Mazher could not find a way to kick-start his career. He was twice rejected for trainee posts at the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, and came to believe it was due to his ethnicity. Instead, displaying the kind of initiative that would mark him out in future years, he decided to skip provincial journalism and chance his arm as a freelancer working for Fleet Street titles.

At barely twenty-one, he managed to do remarkably well by writing

23 Cyril Bainbridge & Roy Stockdill, *The News of the World Story* (Harper Collins, 1993), pp250-1, 257-9

24 *Confessions*, p4

25 Aylia Fox, episode 1, Isfryn & Lacey, op cit

26 Andrew Marr, *My Trade* (Macmillan, 2004), p47

27 'Corner shop racket in pirate films', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 4 October 1979

28 Waseem Mahmood, op cit, pp113-4

articles for *The People*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily Star*. In several cases, he discovered that his ethnicity opened doors. Two pieces for the *Mail's* Femail section were about women of Asian parents raised in Britain avoiding arranged marriages.²⁹ His heritage also proved a major plus for assignments at *The People* where he was interviewed by that paper's greatest asset, its investigations editor, Laurie Manifold.³⁰ For more than twenty-five years, Manifold's mastery of his job was recognised by a succession of admiring editors. None more so than *The People's* Bob Edwards who thought him "a remarkable figure... who would have made an inspired and incorruptible police chief".³¹ He oversaw a range of investigations, from exposés of sex workers to revelations of genuine public interest. These included wide-ranging corruption in the Metropolitan Police, match-fixing by football players, and cruelty inside vivisection laboratories.³² To land such stories, Manifold pioneered a range of investigative techniques and groomed his reporters in the art of subterfuge. He operated as "a sort of Fleet Street George Smiley, organising reporters in the ways and wiles of spies", wrote one of his many journalistic admirers.³³ In Mazher, Manifold had found his most diligent student, and Mazher always acknowledged him as his mentor.³⁴

Manifold was quick to recognise Mazher's potential value as an undercover reporter, viewing his ethnicity and his skin colour as key assets. Moreover, as he once told me, he admired the combination of Mazher's boyish charm and his keen intelligence.³⁵ He employed him on a casual basis and, right from the off, he knew Mazher was going to be his kind of reporter. What he was unable to forecast, as he readily admitted to me, was the way in which Mazher would later abuse the skills he taught him. Not that he should have been too surprised. One of the previous reporting stars he had trained, Trevor Kempson, became one of the *News of the World's* most amoral – and, therefore, most successful – undercover operators.³⁶ Until Mazher's arrival.

In Mazher's first assignment for Manifold his ethnicity was the key to his helping staff reporter David Wickham to reveal the use of marriages of convenience in order to enable illegal immigrants to remain in Britain. The

29 'Please don't make us marry these foreigners', *Daily Mail*, 14 May 1984; 'Passport to misery', *Daily Mail*, 15 May 1984

30 Roy Greenslade, 'Subterfuge, set-ups, stings and stunts: how red-tops go about their investigations', *Investigative Journalism*, 2nd edition, ed, Hugo de Burgh (Routledge, 2000), pp325

31 Robert Edwards, *Goodbye Fleet Street* (Jonathan Cape, 1988), p159

32 Roy Greenslade, 'People Power', *British Journalism Review* Vol 19/1, 2008, pp15-22

33 Norman Giller, 'The "Manifold" strengths of undercover reporting', 3 September 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/3h35e3vk>

34 *Confessions*, pp2-3

35 Interview with author Roy G, 2007

36 For Kempson's exploits, see Bainbridge & Stockdill, op cit, pp237-42

article stated: “Asian journalist Mazher Mahmood joined our investigating team to get the real story”.³⁷ His part involved him replying to adverts placed in Urdu-language publications. With that success under his belt, he was teamed with Roger Insall, a reporter renowned for his undercover work who would eventually specialise in exposing paedophiles on behalf of both *The People* and *News of the World*.³⁸ Although Mazher could not have realised it at the time, one of his assignments with Insall would have far-reaching consequences for him. They were tasked with reporting on a supposed “vice ring” operating out of a hotel near Birmingham’s National Exhibition Centre.³⁹ At the time, the NEC was hosting a motor show and Insall suggested to Mazher that if they were to attract the attention of prostitutes he should pose as a rich Arab interested in purchasing a Ferrari.⁴⁰ Mazher thought it was a great idea, “except I had a Brummie accent, so thought I’d better get an outfit”. He is said to have bought his Arabic costume from an Islamic bookshop for £9.99.⁴¹ The Fake Sheikh was born.

According to Mazher, Manifold was delighted by “that Arab caper”, telling him he could claim for buying the outfit on his expenses. Manifold told him: “It’ll come in useful again”.⁴² It is unlikely that he did re-use it while at *The People* because his work with Insall and Wickham centred on sex-based “scandals” which didn’t necessitate dressing up.⁴³ Few of the eighteen stories which carried his byline did not involve sex. One, about the esoteric “sport” of quail-fighting, would re-emerge fourteen years later in a slightly different form.⁴⁴

Manifold did not give Mazher a full-time job, employing him on an “if and when” basis. It allowed him to spread his wings. He partnered *Sunday Times* reporters on a couple of stories, wrote another *Mail* feature and two pieces for the *Daily Star*. Mazher had successfully bypassed the traditional route into Fleet Street. Not for him the humdrum work on a local weekly or regional daily, nor the rigours of shorthand classes and hours spent studying *McNae’s Essential Law for Journalists*. He never obtained a National Council for the “Training of Journalists” diploma. Instead, he learned by experience and, in so doing, he picked up a crucial, practical and ultimately cynical

37 “‘Quickie brides’ scandal”, *The People*, 6 May 1984

38 Graham Johnson, *Hack: Sex, Drugs and Scandal from Inside the Tabloid Jungle* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), pp22-3

39 ‘Sex for sale at the motor show’, *The People*, 28 October 1984

40 Rachael Gallagher, ‘Secrets of the fake sheik Mazher Mahmood’, *Press Gazette*, 9 May 2008 <https://tinyurl.com/yrtx8m9b>

41 Nick Greenslade, *The Thin White Line: The Inside Story of Cricket’s Greatest Scandal* (Pitch Publishing, 2020), p21. Nick and Roy G are not related

42 *Confessions*, p3

43 Examples: ‘Sex-for-sale rota’, *The People*, 28 October 1984; ‘The cheekiest vice girl in Britain’, *The People*, 27 January 1985; ‘Sexagram girls’, *The People*, 21 April 1985

44 ‘Inside the cruel world of quail-fighting’, *The People*, 10 March 1985

lesson about the trade. “The great thing about newspapers”, he said, is that “nobody gives a damn about your age, or what your background is, as long as you have got a story”.⁴⁵ He reiterated that point by writing: “There are few things more important to news editors than THE STORY”.⁴⁶

The story, we should note, not the truth. Mazher had correctly identified journalism’s rationale – the provision of “stories”. For popular papers in particular, “the story” is the whole point of the exercise. It’s news to amuse, not to use, an entertainment, sometimes to shock, sometimes to delight. Emotion trumps information. Years before Mazher joined the *News of the World*, one of its editors, Bernard Shrimpsley, made a similar point by bursting into song:

Something familiar,
Something peculiar,
Something for everyone:
A comedy tonight!
Something appealing,
Something appalling,
Something for everyone:
A comedy tonight!

Stephen Sondheim did not have Britain’s popular press in mind when composing that number.⁴⁷ But Shrimpsley, who always regarded his years at *The Sun* and *NOTW*, as “fun, fun, fun”, was spot on. From the start of his career, Mazher grasped that too. What he could not possibly have known was that he was on the path that would lead to him becoming a one-man story factory.

45 Marr, op cit, p47

46 *Confessions*, p4

47 From *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, by Stephen Sondheim, 1962

Chapter 2

A brother betrayed

*“Some ghosts become impossible to exorcise and
my brother’s betrayal was one of them.”*

— Waseem Mahmood

Mahmood has led people to believe that his big *Sunday Times* breakthrough came as the result of his reporting on race riots in his home city. “My career was catapulted by the Handsworth riots”, he wrote.¹ “I was head-hunted by news editors who knew I could speak to rioters in their own language”. He told of being hired by one of the newspaper’s junior executives, Robin Morgan, specifically to cover the riots, which broke out in September 1985. In fact, he was already close at hand because his byline had previously appeared on two *Sunday Times* articles.²

In fairness, given that he wrote his memoirs almost a quarter of a century after the riots, his memory may have been playing tricks. So, he may genuinely have believed the riots were his passport to a staff job. In fact, his contribution to the *Sunday Times*’s Handsworth coverage was marginal, given that he was one of a team of seven.³ Nor did it result in an immediate staff job.

But we must go back to his first byline for the paper because it offers an interesting insight into how Mahmood transferred his experiences on *The People*, and the methods he used there, to the *Sunday Times*. The story involved a fraudster who was selling bogus university degrees. Mahmood and a fellow freelance, Simon de Bruxelles, posed as prospective customers in order to expose the racket.⁴ De Bruxelles, who went on to work at *The Observer*, found Mahmood “very smart but also devious”, recalling how, when they were trying to obtain official information Mahmood “short-circuited the application process by slipping the archivist £20” (which, to

1 *Confessions*, p5

2 ‘Off-the-peg degree fraud’, *Sunday Times*, 2 September 1984; ‘Sikh tensions spread to Britain’, *Sunday Times*, 18 November 1984

3 ‘Why? Insight reports on the lessons of Handsworth’, *Sunday Times*, 15 September, 1985

4 ‘Off-the-peg degree fraud’, *Sunday Times*, 2 September 1984

the surprise of de Bruxelles, he accepted).⁵

As a freelance, Mahmood illustrated his versatility by working at each end of the Sunday newspaper spectrum. In February 1986, for *The People*, he interviewed women selling sex.⁶ Weeks later, he was bylined on the *Sunday Times* front page alongside John Witherow, its future editor, on a story claiming that Libyan pilots training in Britain were forming anti-American suicide squads.⁷ In April, he was bylined in both papers on the same day, an extraordinary tabloid-broadsheet double. He wrote about anti-Asian prejudice at nightclubs for *The People* and was one of the *Sunday Times* team who detailed the American bombing of Tripoli.⁸

Much of Mahmood's early work as a staff reporter was linked directly to race or to stories featuring someone of Asian background.⁹ He had no compunction about using his ethnicity to his story-getting advantage. He usually worked with other reporters, which was common in the newsroom. He soon found himself embroiled in a controversy while working on an Insight investigation into the trade in wild birds.¹⁰ He wrote a short piece, "posing as an Arab buyer", in which he accused a Department of the Environment wildlife inspector of negotiating to sell peregrine falcons and acting as a go-between for a convicted bird smuggler.¹¹ The woman complained bitterly that key statements she made to him had been omitted and that the article lacked balance. To settle the matter, the paper published her letter, which ran to more than 400 words and amounted to a complete refutation of Mahmood's story.¹² To carry such a lengthy letter of complaint was extremely unusual, and its publication amounted to an apology.

Mahmood survived this ignominious start to his *Sunday Times* career. In his first three months on staff, with rare exceptions, he was partnered with other reporters and his work was more than competent. In several of the stories for which he was solely responsible, and which relied on his Asian background, he used subterfuge.¹³ All had a public interest justification,

5 Email to author Roy G, 11 September 2022

6 'Scandal of the £250-a-day council house call girls', *The People*, 23 February 1986

7 'Gaddafi's hit-teams in Britain', *Sunday Times*, 30 March 1986

8 'Why top nightclubs barred Asians', *The People*, 20 April 1986; 'Operation Mad Dog', *Sunday Times*, 20 April 1986

9 Sikh tension spreads to Britain', *Sunday Times*, 18 November, 1984; 'Sikh arrests sop to Gandhi, say Asians', *Sunday Times*, 13 October 1985;

10 'Exposed: callous trade in rare birds', *Sunday Times*, 23 March 1986

11 'Official agreed to sell birds for smuggling', *Sunday Times*, 23 March 1986

12 "Birds trade: report denied", *Sunday Times*, 20 April 1986

13 'Immigrants seek brides to skirt law', *Sunday Times*, 29 June 1986; 'Scandal of Britons who buy young boys for £3 a night', *Sunday Times*, 3 August 1986; 'Alarm over mullahs who beat their pupils', *Sunday Times*, 10 August 1986; 'Illegal aliens buy their way into UK', *Sunday Times*, 7 September 1986; 'The godfather who believes he can beat the world's passport controls', *Sunday Times*, 7 September 1986; 'The boys who slave on carpets – for 25p a week', *Sunday Times*, 28 September 1986

and, along with several other similar examples, they cannot be faulted. As with the rest of the *Sunday Times*'s reporters, he was closely supervised by a news editor, Michael Williams, and, above him, a senior news executive, Tony Rennell, who was renowned for his close scrutiny of every article. Both men would have had the wildlife inspector's complaint in mind.

Mahmood's contributions to the paper from the end of 1986 through to spring 1988 fell into two kinds, either run-of-the-mill news stories or his own investigations. Most of the former, which were assigned by the newsdesk, meant him working with another member of staff. On the latter, which were his own ideas, he usually worked alone. Self-starting reporters, those who don't rely on being assigned story leads by "the desk", are highly valued. But his speciality, exposures of low-level scams by Asian immigrants, were anything but agenda-setting stories. The subjects also tended to be repetitive: dodgy doctors; drug dealers; fabricators of bogus passports or visas. But there were good ones too, such as Mahmood's infiltration of a Tamil gang trafficking in heroin, which deserved its page one slot.¹⁴

When I was appointed as managing editor (news) at the *Sunday Times* early in 1988 I reviewed all the news room staff's output and decided, with only odd exceptions, that Mahmood's stories were marginal. But the news editor had faith in him, as did my predecessor, and I did not make an issue of it. I didn't know it at the time, but he became aware of my lack of enthusiasm for his work, which he confirmed years later, although he was wrong to suggest that I didn't like him and also wrong to claim that I had "a series of run-ins" with him.¹⁵ There were certainly moments of concern, such as his story alleging that the Pakistan government was seeking the extradition of Usman Khalid, a former brigadier who was living in retirement in Britain.¹⁶ According to Mahmood's article, co-authored with a Pakistani-based journalist, the brigadier was suspected of involvement in the air crash the week before that had killed the country's president, General Zia-ul-Haq. After strenuous denials by both the Pakistani authorities and Khalid, we were obliged to carry an abject apology.¹⁷

In April 1988, unaware of its provenance and its implications, I was pleased by one story he brought in out of the blue. He revealed that BBC staff in London, Manchester and Birmingham were making money on the side by using the corporation's equipment to produce films and pop videos, and even programmes for Channel 4. In so doing, they were breaking their

14 'Inside Tamil Tigers' drug racket', *Sunday Times*, 30 August, 1987

15 Leveson: evidence, 25 January 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/yfth2ypt>

16 'Zia death inquiry spreads to UK', *Sunday Times*, 28 August 1988

17 'Brigadier Khalid', *Sunday Times*, 23 October 1988

contracts of employment.¹⁸ It was factual, replete with details, names and appropriate quotes, so I gave the article a good show. There seemed to be no loose ends. The BBC did not complain, neither did any of the people mentioned in the piece. As far as I was concerned, he had done a good job.

It was many years later before I discovered that the BBC moonlighting story was far from a good job as far as his brother, Waseem, was concerned. It wrecked his career. By the time it was published, Waseem had been with the BBC for seven years. He had lived up to his early promise by becoming a senior producer, winning awards along the way for his ground-breaking work for the Asian Unit at Birmingham's Pebble Mill. One of his programmes, *Asian Magazine*, was screened on Sunday mornings on BBC 1, securing a large audience among Hindi and Urdu speakers. It also won plaudits for its content.¹⁹ Waseem was destined for greater things at the corporation and about to go before a board to be appointed to a new role when his brother's story appeared. He was directing a live breakfast time show when the floor manager thrust a copy of the *Sunday Times* under his nose. He picked out the key words: BBC, moonlighting, scandal; and the names of colleagues, friends, mentors. On spotting Mazher's byline, what sprang into Waseem's mind was the line from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* when he saw his friend Brutus among his assassins: "Et tu Brute!"²⁰

Waseem, who was certainly not guilty of moonlighting himself, immediately realised how Mazher had obtained the story, and guessed what was likely to happen to him as a result. The article was attributed to an unnamed "BBC source" and his colleagues were bound to think he was that source, which, in an indirect sense, was the case. As he explained: "Private family chatter around the kitchen table had been regurgitated into a sensational story".²¹ The piece named, in passing, one of Waseem's closest fellow producers, and his protests that he knew nothing about the story were not believed. Many Pebble Mill staff shunned him, believing he had betrayed them. As for the BBC hierarchy, it decided that he was not, after all, worthy of a new position. Waseem lost his job and his reputation.

Of course, the real traitor was Mazher. Heedless of the likely impact on Waseem, the source of his story was blindingly obvious. As if that blow wasn't enough for Waseem, he was shocked by the reaction back at home. His mother sided with his younger brother. She claimed it was a good story and that Mazher "was only doing his job". On hearing that, Waseem wrote: "I

18 'Moonlighting at BBC is one of the "perks"', *Sunday Times*, 24 April 1988

19 'Safira is in a different world', *Birmingham Mail*, 30 July 1983; *Birmingham Weekly Mercury*, 23 Sept 1984; *Birmingham Mail*, 24 Jan 1985

20 Waseem Mahmood, *Beyond the Frame: A filmmaker's search for identity* (2025, forthcoming)

21 'Private family chatter became a sensational story', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/3n9n7ufk>

packed up my wife and children and left the family home, never to return”.²² A single story created a family rift that was never to be healed. Waseem and Mazher have not spoken since, except for uncomfortable exchanges at family events.

The aftermath of the affair was shattering for Waseem. He wrote: “Professionally, I found myself banished to that barren wilderness, which was ‘disgraced ex-BBC’, from which very few ever returned. Suddenly, all the awards and all the successes meant nothing and overnight I had become an unemployable pariah who had allegedly sold out his friends to the vultures of tabloid journalism”.²³ The *Sunday Times* was not, of course, a tabloid but it was an understandable exaggeration in the circumstances.

Waseem was unable to find a broadcasting job, not even at a local radio station. He wrote: “Friends who had been dangling lucrative contracts in front of me while I was still at the Beeb, now stopped taking my calls”. His wife, Farah, an Iranian who had once been a TV announcer in Pakistan, could not find similar work in Britain. To make ends meet, she served in a shop. Waseem, eager to re-enter the media world but unable to do so, ended up making Asian wedding videos.

Eventually, he got involved in the group that created TV Asia, a subscription service in Hindi for the British Asian community (later, Zee TV). Then, in 1998, his “infamy not yet having spread to Scandinavia”, Waseem obtained a job with an organisation based in Denmark.²⁴ He was to thrive as a consultant at the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, a Danish government initiative aimed at assisting the development of media in fledgling democracies. “In essence”, wrote Waseem, “we gave the voiceless a voice”.²⁵ The organisation, as its title suggests, first sought to introduce public service broadcasting to the post-communist Baltic states. It then did the same in Kosovo. Waseem’s greatest triumph for the centre was the key role he played in setting up a radio station in Afghanistan in 2002 following the overthrow of the Taliban. As the *New York Times* noted, Radio Kabul’s bold programming won a huge audience in Afghanistan by giving citizens a voice long held in check.²⁶ Waseem went on to work in Jordan, acting as a media adviser to its government and to other Arab regimes. As a result, he was awarded an OBE “for services to the reconstruction of media in post-war countries”.²⁷ He was also recognised within his own community for his

²² Waseem (2007), op cit, p152

²³ Ibid, p152

²⁴ Ibid, p153

²⁵ Ibid, p44; Mandrake, ‘Sheikh up’, *Daily Telegraph*, 15 April 2001

²⁶ ‘On the radio, Afghans call their nation to a new day’, *New York Times*, 4 September 2002

²⁷ ‘New Year’s Honours’, *The Times*, 31 December 2004

media work.²⁸

In his book about his Afghanistan venture, Waseem paid tribute to his father – who had died in April 2005, aged 67 – as “one of the most respected journalists of his generation”.²⁹ After Sultan’s death, Mazher also praised his father, for his journalism and for his “huge contribution” to his Birmingham community.³⁰ In the obituary, published by the newspaper industry’s trade magazine, one sentence stood out: “His [Sultan’s] body was laid to rest at his family shrine in Lahore last week by his son, Mazher”. And the other son? Waseem’s name was not mentioned. He was not even informed about the funeral in advance.³¹

Waseem’s bitterness did not dissipate. Time did not, indeed, could not, heal the hurt and humiliation he and his wife suffered. “Some ghosts”, he wrote, “become impossible to exorcise and my brother’s betrayal was one of them. It taunted me every single moment and I knew that it would continue to do so until my dying day. There were, and still are, times when the anger is overwhelming, and while I try hard to forgive, I find it nigh on impossible to forget what he did. The one question that haunts me to this day is ‘why?’”

I first wrote about the differences between the two brothers in 2006 after interviewing Waseem for a BBC World Service series on press freedom.³² Ten years’ later I compared them once again, recording that Waseem, unlike his brother, believed media “should be used as a positive influence to rebuild lives and not as a destructive power which had devastated so many lives, including my own”.³³

To sum up. On two occasions, Mazher Mahmood had treated private discussions around his parents’ dining table as source material to advance his own career. It was possible, if he had taken the trouble to be more subtle, that he could have written both stories – the one about video piracy and the one about BBC moonlighting – without compromising friends and family members. Instead, he was cavalier, careless of the potential repercussions. By any standards, the betrayal of his brother was an unconscionable act.

28 Award by the Kashmiri and Pakistani Professionals Association, ‘High achievers of Muslim life’, *Birmingham Mail*, 29 July 2005

29 Waseem (2007), op cit, p230

30 ‘Sultan Mahmood - Founder of Britain’s first Urdu-language national newspaper’, *Press Gazette*, 5 May 2005 <https://tinyurl.com/3z5dca6x>

31 Mazher pointed out that his father died within a week of being “thrilled” to hear of his son being praised by a barrister for his witness box performance in a libel trial, *Confessions*, p102

32 ‘Private family chatter became a sensational story’, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/3n9n7ufk>

33 Waseem, op cit, p153; ‘Waseem Mahmood, the fake sheikh’s modest brother’, *The Guardian*, 3 November 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/ywaem4jf>

Chapter 3

Cover-up at the *Sunday Times*

“Now that my honesty and integrity as a journalist is in question, I feel that there is no longer a place for me on the paper.”

— Mazher Mahmood

The row within the Mahmood family, including Waseem’s job loss, was entirely unknown to us at the *Sunday Times*. To my eyes, the BBC moonlighting article had been a solid and uncontroversial piece of work. A month later, I had reason to reconsider my opinion about him once again following a disturbing complaint about another of his stories.¹ Disturbing because it called into question, at best, Mahmood’s judgement and, at worst, his honesty. The story claimed that police were investigating the headmaster of a private boarding school over allegations of cruelty to his pupils. Children were said to have suffered “bruises and weals after being beaten” by him. One former teacher was quoted as saying the head “went to extremes in a bid to get better exam results”. The allegations were, according to Mahmood, “supported by colleagues and parents”. Five teachers had supposedly condemned the headmaster’s teaching methods. In what would later come to be a trademark of Mahmood’s reporting, he wrote of the *Sunday Times* having “compiled a dossier”. It hardly needs saying that no such document existed. But the news editor had no reason to suspect the accuracy of the story. There were identified complainants, some of whom were quoted directly. Mahmood seemed to have it all sewn up.

On the following Tuesday, however, the balloon went up. The newsdesk fielded a chorus of complaints. People named in the story said they had been misquoted, or that there had been serious omissions from what they had said to Mahmood. They were supported by people who were not mentioned. Now, it has to be said that newspaper executives are used to receiving

¹ ‘Head of top school accused of cruelty’, *Sunday Times*, 8 May, 1988

complaints from people who feature in stories. Claims of misquotation, and/or a lack of context, are common. For those unused to it, an appearance in newsprint can be disquieting. People are given to forgetting what they have said during interviews. But the volume of complaints, and the force with which they were delivered, was unusual. There wasn't much doubt that the headmaster was a strict disciplinarian and corporal punishment was not, at that time, banned in private schools. However, there was no getting around the falsehood at the heart of the story: the police stated unequivocally that they were not investigating the allegations against the headmaster. They had previously made inquiries, which had come to nothing.

In order to settle the matter, we agreed to publish three letters to the editor, an extremely rare event. Moreover, we agreed to Mahmood being named as the writer of the article, also rare.² The main letter, from the chairman of governors, said that the head's main accuser was a former teacher who was bitter at having been fired. The police had dismissed his complaints. The chairman wrote of teachers' views having been "selectively misrepresented". The second letter, from one of those named teachers, made a similar point, pointing out that he had attempted to discourage Mahmood from "pursuing allegations which were malicious". The third letter, signed by fifty-eight children, described the headmaster as "caring and courteous" with "a fantastic track record of achievement... a source of great inspiration to us all".

My previous misgivings about Mahmood were reinforced, and he would have been made aware of my anger, but it has to be said that he did not receive a written warning. He didn't work alone for two months until he badgered the news editor into funding a trip to Saudi Arabia to cover the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. More than 400 people had died during the hajj [hadj] the year before so he pitched the story as one about the introduction of extreme security measures. Unable to go as a journalist, he posed as a pilgrim. His report, which carried a byline photo of him suitably bearded, told how he was detained and questioned for five hours at Jeddah airport.³

He claimed his interrogation involved sleep deprivation, and he quoted one interrogator as saying: "You could be an American spy or an English reporter. We could send you to jail for a long time if we think you're here for any reason other than to perform hadj". He was then taken to a police station and "locked in a tiny cell" for 24 hours until being released as a bona fide pilgrim. "The faithful still flock to Mecca", he concluded, "but the journey has become a security nightmare". Whether, on reflection, any of

2 'Prep school praises head', *Sunday Times*, 15 May 1988

3 'Steep and stony path to Allah's holy city', *Sunday Times*, 31 July 1988

this was true is hard to know. The Saudi embassy did not complain.

Over the following six months, Mahmood worked mostly in tandem with other reporters and brought in no exclusives. In fact, looking across his entire output for the *Sunday Times* – from his first bylined story in September 1984 to his last in December 1988 – his byline appeared on 98 articles. Of those, however, only 38 were written by him alone. And it is the extraordinary repercussions of that final article which proved to be his downfall.

He was handed a fairly straightforward assignment, to report on demands by alcohol campaign groups for the government to introduce harsher penalties for police officers who had been convicted of drinking and driving. Certain forces tended to demote such officers rather than dismiss them. At the end of his article, in a list of case histories, he named a Plymouth detective chief inspector, stating that the man had been “demoted to constable after being in an accident last year”.⁴ That single sentence contained two mistakes. The officer had been demoted only to inspector; and the accident had happened two years before.⁵ It was obvious that Mahmood had misread the copy sent to him by a reputable Devon news agency.

When the inspector complained about the errors, a quick check showed he was correct and that Mahmood was wrong. But Mahmood stood his ground. He told the news editor, Michael Williams, it wasn’t his error; the news agency must have been at fault. Naturally, Williams contacted the agency, which re-sent its original copy, showing that the demotion had indeed been to inspector and also that the incident had happened two years before. Confronted by this evidence, Mahmood, to Williams’s disbelief, said the agency was lying. It had, he said, obviously amended the original version.

Until that moment, I had not taken a great deal of interest in the matter. These were factual errors, and we were prepared to carry a clarification and an apology to the police officer. Making such mistakes would increase the size of the black cloud looming over Mahmood’s head, but there was no question of his being fired or even given a written warning. After all, he had not tried to “improve” his story. Just the reverse. A demotion to inspector would have been more appropriate to the tenor of the article than one to constable.

Williams and I were baffled by Mahmood’s stubborn refusal to admit his mistake. But there was a simple way to check his claim that the agency had

4 ‘Drink-driving immunity – the police force “perk”’, *Sunday Times*, 11 December 1988

5 ‘Police chief in crash relieved of duties’, *Western Evening Herald*, 5 December 1986; ‘Drink-drive cop demoted’, *Daily Mirror*, 26 February 1987

lied. The original transmission from the agency would be on our publisher's central computer. Williams asked a computer operator to make the check and discovered that it said "constable" rather than "inspector". So Mahmood appeared to have been right... until the computer operator happened to say how odd it was Williams should want to know about that particular story because a reporter had visited the main-frame computer room to request access to it. Mahmood had done so despite the room being off-limits to journalists.

Our bafflement turned to anger. Had Mahmood really dared to tamper with the original agency copy? I decided not to rush to judgement. I wanted to be sure of exactly what had happened and authorised an investigation of our investigative reporter by our systems editor, the highly respected Bryan Silcock. It did not take him long to file a damning report about Mahmood's clandestine behaviour. He found that Mahmood had persuaded a systems operator to retrieve versions of the agency file and, when left unsupervised, was able to make changes to it. Silcock concluded that the agency's original filing was correct, but it had later been altered. Under questioning from Williams, Mahmood admitted entering the computer room but denied having doctored the file.

I did not have the power to fire a staff member, so I requested a meeting with the editor, Andrew Neil, and two other senior executives. I recommended that Mahmood be dismissed for his act of gross dishonesty. The others agreed. The meeting probably lasted no more than half an hour, but Mahmood got wind of what was happening and quickly wrote a resignation letter to the editor, with a copy to me. Dated 17 December 1988, it said:

Dear Andrew,

This is to formally notify you of my resignation from my post as newsroom reporter with the Sunday Times.

It has been a pleasure working for the paper for the last four years, and I deeply regret having to leave in these circumstances.

Because of the nature of my work, I am only able to operate with the absolute support and trust of my senior colleagues and lawyers, but now that my honesty and integrity as a journalist is in question, I feel that there is no longer a place for me on the paper.

I therefore ask you to accept my resignation.

Yours sincerely, Mazher Mahmood

He had resigned to avoid the embarrassment of being fired. His letter turned reality on its head. It was we who had lost “support and trust” in him. It was not a case of his honesty and integrity being “in question”. We had cast-iron proof of his duplicity. As a paper, we quickly put the sordid little episode behind us. It caused barely a ripple within the newsroom because Mahmood had made few, if any, friends among the rest of the staff. In the following issue, we published a correction and apology to the police officer.⁶ Running a busy news department left little time for conjecture over problems once they were solved. But Williams and I remained puzzled by Mahmood’s extraordinary attempt to pull the wool over our eyes. If he had admitted his error, he would have received no more than a sharp verbal reminder to be more careful in future. Surely, after his years at *The People* and on the *Sunday Times*, he had enough experience to know the form. Why had he lied and covered up?

Almost a quarter of a century would pass before Mahmood offered some form of explanation, and only then during intense questioning in public, and under oath. That is a story for later (see chapter 9). As far as matters stood in December 1988, I imagined it would be the last I would ever see or hear of Mazher Mahmood.

Almost nothing has been reported about what happened to Mahmood after leaving the *Sunday Times*. He merely passed it off in his book as “a three-year stint at TV-am, working as a producer on the David Frost programme”.⁷ That bland, and somewhat inaccurate, statement has been widely accepted ever since. He repeated it in his written evidence to the Leveson Inquiry in 2011.⁸ But the reality was somewhat different. I spoke to former TV-am executives, and other members of staff, who confirmed – whether they liked him or not – that he was not, formally, a producer. He was a reporter and then a researcher. In fairness, said one executive, the term “producer” is often used by junior broadcasting staff as a catch-all short-form description of their posts.

There were strongly divergent views about Mahmood’s record at the channel. Among the veterans I interviewed, he had a couple of admirers, but most were critics. Those divergent opinions reflected the later split among the wider journalistic community. How he came to be appointed to the TV-am newsroom reporting pool at some time in 1989 is something of a mystery. One source thought a friend at Reuters smoothed his path.⁹ “He

6 *Sunday Times*, 18 December 1988

7 *Confessions*, p5. Frost was one of the founders of TV-am, the ITV breakfast franchise which broadcast from 1983 to 1992

8 Evidence to Leveson inquiry, first witness statement, 14 October 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/26rtwbdn>

9 Anonymity requested

arrived without fanfare”, said programme planning editor, Jon Akass.¹⁰ At interview, Mahmood would surely not have mentioned the reason for his sudden departure from the *Sunday Times*. He had the advantage of it being very unlikely that his new bosses could have known about the incident: it was not public knowledge outside the paper; and, anyway, there was little cross-over gossip between newspapers and broadcasters.

It appears that he did not thrive as a general news reporter. “He didn’t fit in”, said Akass. His story ideas and his approach were not appreciated by his immediate bosses. After a time, both the director of news, Bill Ludford, and his deputy, Jeff Berliner, began to have “serious doubts” about his value to the channel. “He seemed too clever by half”, recalled Berliner, “and not TV-am material. He was coming up with weird, wonderful and utterly unworkable ideas”.¹¹ It was decided that he was “out of place in the general newsroom”. That recollection was supported by Akass, who remembered Mahmood as “always wanting to investigate this or investigate that”.¹² And Jerry Thomas, Series Editor, thought Mahmood “appeared from the get-go as a slightly shifty, slippery character”, but one who exhibited “a certain amount of rogueish charm”.¹³

These memories are countered by another non-newsroom executive who, speaking off the record and agreeing that Mahmood was always eager to launch investigations, saw his input in positive terms. He considered him to be “a really interesting figure, crackling with intelligence and buzzing with ideas... a magnet for stories”.¹⁴ This warmer opinion is shared by at least one other former staffer. The executive, although viewing Mahmood as “an amoral person”, in the sense that “he liked turning people over”, found it “fun working with him”. He thought him charming and good company. He was able to recall some of those “weird” investigations, which included exposing a prostitution business run by married women in Corby and, similarly, a call-girl ring set up by British women soldiers in Cyprus. He could not remember whether the stories were broadcast.

Mahmood tended to be both reporter and photographer at the time, putting his faith in the autofocus qualities of a Canon Sure Shot camera. The executive also noted Mahmood’s verbal trait in which he made his arguments in repetitive staccato phrases. Explaining why he thought someone should be “turned over”, he said: “public interest, gotta be done... public interest, gotta be done”. And in distancing himself from any error or misjudgement,

10 Zoom interview with author Roy G, 4 November 2022

11 Email to Roy G, 29 October 2022. Berliner was later Controller, News & Current Affairs, TV-am

12 Email to Roy G, 29 October 2022; Zoom interview, 4 November 2022

13 Phone call with Roy G, 1 November 2022

14 Ibid

he evidently said: “Terrible, mate. Terrible, mate. Not me. Not me”.

Mahmood’s discovery that television newsrooms demand far greater transparency and accountability than newspaper newsrooms, did not suit his go-it-alone style. But it had one advantage, allowing him to continue working on a freelance basis for newspapers. In one story, for *The People*, he told of Iraqis, “who could be agents of dictator Saddam Hussein”, being smuggled into Brighton by a Pakistani fixer.¹⁵ At least one of Mahmood’s extra-curricular stories emanated from within TV-am itself, involving a trainee, Anastasia Cooke. She confided to Mahmood that she was friendly with Prince Edward and had met the Queen. A story hinting at a romance between Cooke and the prince duly appeared as the lead item in Ross Benson’s gossip column in the *Daily Express*.¹⁶ The following day, TV-am issued a statement of denial by an embarrassed Cooke.¹⁷ Cooke, suspecting Mahmood to be the source, challenged him but he denied responsibility: “Not me, mate... not me, mate”. She evidently accepted his word.

In keeping with his penchant for getting into hot water, Mahmood’s tenure in the newsroom came to an end in murky circumstances. He proposed launching an investigation into a company which, it transpired, was suing him. His bosses, fearing he was trying to use TV-am for his own ends, washed their hands of him, and he was moved “out of harm’s way” to a role as a guest-booker and general factotum for David Frost’s Sunday programme. Part of his brief was to entertain interviewees, as he acknowledged in his book, telling how he “had often shared coffee and croissants” with Tory MP David Mellor in the green room prior to broadcasts.¹⁸

This kind of task, although he accomplished it with good grace and by exercising his sweet-talking skills, hardly fulfilled his journalistic ambitions. So he opened links with the *News of the World* by contributing two articles while working for Frost.¹⁹ How his heart must have leapt at the end of 1991 when he persuaded the paper that he was their kind of journalist.

15 ‘Mr Fxit smuggles Saddam men into Brighton’, *The People*, 7 July 1991

16 ‘Shy Edward courts TV-am girl Anastasia’, *Daily Express*, 6 November 1990. Mahmood got no mention

17 ‘No royal romance: telly girl’, *Irish Independent*, 7 November 1990; ‘Eddie’s giggling gal’, *Daily Mirror*, 7 November 1990

18 *Confessions*, p14. Within a year, he exposed Mellor’s affair (chapter 4)

19 ‘We expose Mr Video Nasty’, *NOTW*, 13 January 1991; ‘Vice girls come to a sari end’, *NOTW*, 20 October 1991

Chapter 4

Mahmood's entrapment 'gang'

*"I've got bent police officers that are witnesses,
that are informants."*
— Mazher Mahmood

Mazher Mahmood and the *News of the World* were made for each other. "A match made in heaven", according to Andrew Marr; "a perfect marriage", agreed Neil Wallis.¹ Mahmood was working at last for a newspaper suited to his kind of stories and to his methods. The rogue had joined a rogue newspaper. Within the popular press, however, roguery was admired on the grounds that exposing crime required journalists to be "quick-witted, resourceful and – let's not deny it – downright devious at times".² This justification for unethical, and eventually illegal, behaviour was a constant refrain by *NOTW* editors and reporters.

The uses of phone-hacking, blagging,³ and private detectives were wrongly cast as some sort of aberration. In fact, such unlawful information gathering (UIG, as it became known in the courts) was the culmination of a process of journalistic impropriety that can be dated to the *NOTW*'s coverage of the Profumo affair in 1963. It had all the ingredients the paper regarded as overwhelmingly newsworthy: espionage, treachery, politics, aristocracy and, most important of all, sex.

The editor, Stafford Somerfield, paid the woman at the centre of the scandal, Christine Keeler, to tell her story and attracted huge sales.⁴ He also built an investigations team which treated intrusion into privacy as a routine assignment. From this point on, a variety of reporting methods previously

1 Marr, op cit, p47; Wallis in Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 2

2 Nick Greenslade, op cit, p9

3 Obtaining private or confidential information by deception, usually through the use of impersonation

4 'Confessions of Christine, by the girl who is rocking the government', *NOTW*, 9 June 1963; Bainbridge & Stockdill, op cit, p194; Somerfield, op cit, p140

frowned upon, such as trespass, subterfuge, covert taping and filming, and blagging were adopted as “legitimate” techniques. Reporter Trevor Kempson, hired from *The People*, was among its earliest practitioners, and one of his greatest admirers was Mahmood.

There was no doubt about the *NOTW*’s popularity. Its scandalous reputation had won it record-breaking sales, achieving a circulation above eight million per issue for six years from 1950 onwards.⁵ Despite a subsequent decline, it was still Britain’s highest-selling newspaper, by a wide margin, when Rupert Murdoch acquired it in 1968. His first decision – to return to the Profumo scandal by paying £21,000 to serialise Christine Keeler’s book about her part in the affair – landed him in hot water with the political, religious and media establishments.⁶ Murdoch attracted considerable odium when he said in a TV interview: “People can sneer as much as they like, but I’ll take the 150,000 extra copies we’re going to sell”.⁷ A second interview with David Frost, in which he tried to justify the serialisation on public interest grounds, was the epitome of car-crash TV. Thereafter, *Private Eye* gave him a nickname that stuck for years afterwards: the Dirty Digger.

Murdoch’s stewardship of the *NOTW* continued to be controversial. He soon ousted Somerfield after several clashes, saying to him: “I didn’t come all the way from Australia not to interfere”.⁸ He then hired and fired a series of inadequate editors. His dithering can be gauged by the fact that over the course of his initial twenty-year ownership, he fired and hired ten editors. In the previous twenty years, there had been just three.

Along the way there were plenty of controversies, none more tragic than the story about schoolteacher Arnold Lewis. He had advertised in a contact magazine for couples (consenting adults, note) to join him for sexual hi-jinks. An *NOTW* reporter and photographer duly turned up at his caravan in a Welsh forest, witnessed what was happening and, in time-honoured fashion, made their excuses and left without taking part. Days later, the reporter called Lewis to tell him he was going to be “exposed” in the paper.⁹ On the Sunday morning the story was published, Lewis’s body was found in his car.¹⁰ He had killed himself by inhaling exhaust fumes. This tragedy would be echoed fourteen years later in a similar suicide due to a Mahmood story (see the Ben Stronge incident later in this chapter).

5 The sale in June 1950 of 8,443,917 is widely regarded as a world record

6 *The Observer*, 28 September 1969

7 Michael Leapman, *Barefaced Cheek: The Apotheosis of Rupert Murdoch* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), pp50-53

8 William Shawcross, *Rupert Murdoch* (Chatto & Windus, 1992), p44

9 ‘If you go down to the woods today, you’re sure of a big surprise’, *NOTW*, 15 October 1978

10 “Sex romp” teacher found dead’, *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 16 October 1978

Trevor Kempson's speciality was exposés of sexual dalliances in the shires but, in 1973, he found a higher profile target and broke a Profumo-style scandal. It involved a junior government minister, Lord (Tony) Lambton, whose liaisons with prostitutes were allegedly a threat to national security. Lambton was forced to resign as minister and MP. He had been undone by a prostitute, Norma Levy, and her husband who contacted the *NOTW* with the story. In order to obtain the necessary evidence, Kempson took great delight in recounting to colleagues how Lambton was filmed through a two-way mirror and taped by a microphone concealed in the nose of a teddy bear propped up on a chair in the bedroom.¹¹

Although Kempson died the year before Mahmood arrived at the *NOTW*, he would have heard about that story because it had assumed legendary status within the paper and across Fleet Street. It was also one of the cases that press reformers cited as an example of newspapers doing what they damn well liked without adequate public interest justification. In retrospect, the overlapping ironies of the situation at that time are truly flabbergasting. In the late 1980s, there was rising alarm in parliament at people's privacy being compromised for no good purpose and at the perceived weakness of the Press Council to prevent it. MPs noted how owners and editors treated the council with disdain. Murdoch, for example, dismissed it as "a pussy-footing arm of the establishment".¹²

Home Office minister David Mellor, anxious to curb what he regarded as editorial excesses, famously warned that "the popular press is drinking in the last chance saloon".¹³ To assuage Mellor and to counter calls for a privacy law, the owners and editors came up with a Press Council mark two, known as the Press Complaints Commission, and agreed to draw up an ethical code. It was chaired by none other than the *NOTW*'s editor, Patsy Chapman, and I was with her on the drafting committee.

Murdoch's choice of Chapman had been another of his poor decisions. Her considerable strengths as a production journalist, with a renowned talent for witty headline-writing, were largely irrelevant to the requirements of editing the *NOTW*. Managing a desk of sub-editors was quite unlike running a room of reporters, especially those who had little respect for authority. For Chapman, her first two years in charge must have been surreal. Outside the office, she was chairing weekly meetings aimed at drawing up a code to restrict reporters from using the trade's "dark arts". Inside, she was hosting daily news conferences to consider the merits of stories provided

11 'A vintage Fleet Street tale of sex, scoops and skulduggery...', *The Guardian*, 16 March 2015 <https://tinyurl.com/3pexkewa>

12 Cited in Tom O'Malley & Clive Soley, *Regulating the Press* (Pluto, 2000), p68

13 Channel 4 *Hard News*, 21 December 1989

by reporters who, as she was well aware, were given to joking that “ethics” was no more than a county to the east of London.¹⁴

It is doubtful if Chapman knew much about Mahmood when he arrived for his first day’s work in December 1991, and highly unlikely that she had been apprised of his *Sunday Times* history. The two newspapers within Murdoch’s Wapping fortress were located in neighbouring buildings but it was as if they existed in separate universes. There was almost no contact between the staffs. Mahmood must have been aware he might bump into former colleagues. Although I was no longer around, the news editor, Michael Williams, was still in place, as were several reporters who knew him. If anyone did spot him, nothing came of it. The man who appeared to have burned his bridges with the organisation three years before had found a way back.

Chapman was surely impressed by his early weeks. His first assignment involved him posing as an illegal Kurdish immigrant to expose people-smuggling from Belgium.¹⁵ It was the splash, turning to two pages inside, headlined: “I sail on human cargo ship of shame”. The article referred to “reporter Mazher Mahmood, a British citizen of Pakistani origin”. His byline was illustrated with a profile of his head in silhouette, which was to become his trademark.

He followed his “ship of shame” splash with three more in January. They were typical *NOTW* fare, exposures of prostitution, and the third of them involved his fake sheikh persona.¹⁶ It is possible, prior to his arrival, he had these stories up his sleeve. Given the level of internal competition, it was very rare for a single reporter to land four page one leads in seven weeks.¹⁷ Over the following couple of months, having launched his *NOTW* career with a bang, his offerings – fairly routine stuff about sex workers, an immigration racket, a seller of fake documents – made less noise.

Some six months in, however, came the first major example of the problem caused by Chapman’s conflicting roles. And it was Mahmood who was at the centre of events, secretly playing something of a dual role. Unbeknown to Chapman, he was embroiled in an investigation into the private life of David Mellor, by then minister of the department responsible for media affairs, and eager to introduce a privacy law. To that end, he was monitoring

14 This homophonic joke about Essex/ethics was a Fleet Street cliché

15 *Confessions*, p5; ‘P&O ship smuggles Kurds to Britain: Our man joins illegal cargo of immigrants’, *NOTW*, 15 December 1991

16 ‘Cops and Brothels: Ello, Ello, sex for sale ads in police journal’, *NOTW*, 5 January 1992; ‘Miss Whiplash back on the game!’, *NOTW*, 12 January 1992; ‘Royal jockey fixes girls for sex’, *NOTW*, 26 January 1991

17 According to his Wikipedia entry, royal editor Clive Goodman holds the record for the most consecutive *NOTW* splashes

the operation in its early months of the Press Complaints Commission, the regulator administering the code of ethics which Chapman had helped to draft.

When one of her executives informed her about Mahmood's activities, which included the installation of video cameras and bugs in a flat where Mellor was meeting his mistress, Chapman was appalled. According to Mahmood's own account, she called him – the first time they had spoken since his appointment – to demand he stand down. "Maz, get your cameras and bugs out of that flat straight away. We've got to be really careful with this guy. If this ever gets out we'd all be in serious trouble".¹⁸ Mahmood obeyed his editor's command, but not to the letter. Either by accident or design, he left a tape recorder concealed under a bookshelf, which picked up the unmistakable noises of Mellor having sex with an actress, Antonia de Sancha.

The genesis of Mahmood's investigation remains unclear. He was supposed to have learned about Mellor's relationship with de Sancha from her landlord via a photographer. The pair had expected to make £40,000 by selling the story to the *NOTW*. An even bigger mystery is what he did once he had the tip. At this stage of his career, he had yet to develop mastery of the bugging technology that he would later employ as a routine. So, how did he suddenly carry it out? The paper's news desk executive, Greg Miskiw, believed the bugs were installed by a private detective agency, Southern Investigations. Miskiw claimed that its covert intelligence team "bugged the shit out of the room".¹⁹ We cannot be sure of that. What we do know for certain is that by the time Mahmood complied (partially) with Chapman's demand to remove the bugs, he had enough taped material of de Sancha's phone conversations with her landlord about her relationship with Mellor to compile a story. When it was presented to Chapman, she rejected it. He was told by an executive: "Patsy won't run it. It's far too sensitive".

But the thwarted landlord and photographer (and, plausibly, Mahmood too) were not prepared to give up on their payday. They took their tale of Mellor's adultery to the *NOTW*'s rival, *The People*. They were able to produce the taped evidence collected by Mahmood. Whether he connived in that approach is uncertain. Once *The People* had confirmed the story with its own covert taping, its editor, Bill Hagerty, decided there was enough of a public interest justification to publish.²⁰ News that he was about to run with the story was leaked to the *NOTW*, and both papers ended up running

18 *Confessions*, p12

19 Greg Miskiw, *Master of the Dark Arts: I was Fleet Street's phone hacker* (Yellow Press, 2024), p163

20 Bill Hagerty, 'Showdown at the last chance saloon', *British Journalism Review*, Vol 3/3, 1992

similar stories on the same Sunday.²¹ Mahmood had got his way, doubtless feeling vindicated by the outcome. He was rewarded with a trip to Antigua to follow de Sancha who refused to answer his questions.²² Although Chapman had been correct in predicting that a political row would break out, it proved to be of no consequence because it helped to undermine Mellor's authority, a plus for her and for all the tabloids eager to intrude into people's privacy.

Immediately after the Mellor reverse, Mahmood came up with a sensational scoop about "the biggest social security scam ever carried out in this country".²³ (The resulting implications are explored in detail in chapter 8). Regarded at this early stage as a reporter with potential, he was just one of an editorial team engaged in the same seedy business. He was outshone in particular by his old friend and *People* colleague, Roger Insall, who was much more prolific. Several other members of staff, notably Gary Jones, were also very prominent story-providers. Sexual revelation was their main trade, and they were proficient purveyors of it. In the early 1990s, the words "vice", "pervert", and "scandal" sprang from almost every page. What made it so popular, and acceptable, was the professional sub-editing and flashes of wit, which leavened the otherwise censorious stance, especially about cases of adultery.

Headlines were replete with double entendres, rhymes and puns, such as "Two-timing violinist fiddles with his mistress", "Lawyer drops briefs at sex and drugs orgies", "Doctor used hanky panky to keep a girl called Pinky perky", and the convoluted, if amusing, "Pimp said his hobby was collecting stamps but philately will get him nowhere now that we have him licked". However, there were also examples of casual racism.²⁴ Everything was treated like a merry jape, including the paper's nickname, *News of the Screws*. The message: nothing should be taken seriously. Unless, of course, you happened to be the butt of the joke.

In what was to become a common occurrence, one of Mahmood's stings elicited a complaint. The story, which concerned a solicitor who made money from acting as a pimp, claimed that one woman he recommended had offered sex to a reporter (Mahmood) for a £105 fee.²⁵ She told her local paper that the allegation was untrue, saying the article was "very cunningly written and the smear is there by innuendo".²⁶ Mahmood responded, as he

21 'David Mellor and the Actress', *The People*, 19 July 1992; 'Minister of Fun and the Actress', *NOTW*, 19 July 1992

22 'Mellor girl dips her toe in the water', *NOTW*, 9 August, 1992

23 'The great pension book fiddle', *NOTW*, 30 August 1992

24 'Kinky Chinky serves vice girls with rice', *NOTW*, 25 July 1993. The article referred to the male restaurant owner as a "Chinaman"

25 'Legal eagle sells birds for sex', *NOTW*, 28 November 1993:17

26 'I'm not a prostitute, says angry Joy', *Thanet Times*, 7 Dec 1993:3

would do time after time down the years, by pointing out that he had a tape recording of the interview with the woman. He added: "Every word has been checked by our lawyer and it is accurate".

His stand-out exclusive in this period deserves special mention. He wrote about a couple running a care home who, allegedly, indulged in sex acts with a 13-year-old girl.²⁷ According to his book, he was forced to flee when the couple sent men armed with shotguns to seize his tape recordings.²⁸ The pair were arrested, admitted two charges of indecent assault, and were sentenced to five-year jail terms.²⁹ In this case, Mahmood's decision to use subterfuge passed the public interest test and he was inordinately proud of it. Over the course of his twenty-year career at the *NOTW* it was to remain one of his favourite stories, eventually being billed in 2011 as one of his "top 12 court victories".³⁰ He also revealed that the girl wrote him "a scrawled note" thanking him for rescuing her: "You are like Superman! You are my hero. You saved me from this evil man". He had it framed and placed on the wall of his office.³¹ He often referred to "the lovely letter" he received from the girl as vindication for his form of journalism.³² When she reached her 18th birthday, she and her mother broke their previous confidentiality by speaking to the paper and posing for pictures.³³

Mahmood's other memorable effort around the same time involved him acting as "husband" to three women in the space of two hours. The bogus marriages were part of an immigration swindle set up by a man of Pakistani background.³⁴ Mahmood's ethnicity proved to be a key element in his ability to corner the journalistic market in immigration scams. Whatever criticisms were levelled at Mahmood, lack of effort was not one of them. The weeks in which his name did not appear were often matched by those when it appeared twice in the same issue. It is also important to keep in mind that he generated virtually every story himself, rarely relying on news desk assignments. One exception was a page one splash about a philandering government minister, Tim Yeo, which he wrote jointly with Annette Witheridge.³⁵ It revealed that the MP's fling with a Conservative councillor had resulted in the birth of a child and led to his resignation two weeks later, the first casualty of Prime Minister John Major's so-called back-

27 'Shotgun terror as we rescue girl of 13 from sex pervert', *NOTW*, 21 February 1993:1

28 *Confessions*, p113; Marr, op cit, p47

29 'Five years for child sex pair nailed by News of the World', *NOTW*, 4 July 1993

30 'Crimebuster Maz', *NOTW*, 11 July 2011

31 *Confessions*, p113

32 Marr, op cit, p47

33 'They stole my daughter's childhood. Soon they'll be free to abuse again', *NOTW*, 26 November 1995

34 'Wedded Blitz! News of the World man jilts 3 girls in 2 hours to smash bogus wedding scam', *NOTW*, 8 November 1992:11

35 'Tory MP's love child: minister's secret affair', *NOTW*, 26 December 1993

to-basics campaign. Seventeen years later, Mahmood and Witheridge were jointly responsible for an agenda-setting royal scoop (see chapter 12).

At some stage in 1993, Mahmood began working with the man who would become his invaluable assistant for the following two decades: Conrad Brown.³⁶ He was the son of a veteran *NOTW* reporter, Gerry Brown, who had been one of the paper's team responsible for exposing Tory MP Jeffrey Archer's relationship with a sex worker.³⁷ Gerry, a Glaswegian with the vocabulary and mumbled delivery of an American movie gangster, was known in the paper by the nickname "Morse" due to his resemblance to actor John Thaw, who portrayed the TV detective, Inspector Morse. A pioneer of so-called "tabloid techno", he described it as "sort of halfway between papers and tabloid telly". His equipment included "a range of miniature tape recorders, radio microphones and micro video recorders".³⁸ He used these tools during his many undercover investigations into gun-running and drug-dealing.³⁹ When he died in 2004, Mahmood paid tribute to him as "one of my inspirations and the reason I joined the *News of the World*".⁴⁰

They worked together for twelve years, but Mahmood's partnership with his son, Conrad, lasted even longer. After leaving university, he started work for the *NOTW* on a freelance basis and soon surpassed his father to become the paper's recognised technological surveillance expert. He ensured that the covert video and audio devices were always the most up-to-date available. Able to deploy state-of-the-art technology, such as radio scanners and mobile phone trackers, he turned himself into a very effective operator, becoming, in effect, "second lieutenant in Mahmood's troop".⁴¹

Brown was a member of staff while many of the people Mahmood was allowed to recruit as part-time "assistants" were not. And they were, to use a *NOTW*-style cliché, a motley crew. At least six of them had criminal records.⁴² Several of them were big men whose size and demeanour were guaranteed to frighten. By far the most colourful was Mahmood's second cousin, Mahmood Qureshi, nicknamed "Jaws" because of his diamond-studded gold teeth. Mahmood described him as "huge... powerful-looking... intimidating... an unforgettable sight".⁴³ He kept himself fit by spending

36 Nick Greenslade, op cit, p24

37 'Tory boss Archer pays off vice girl', *NOTW*, 26 October 1986; Brown (1995):1-42

38 Gerry Brown, *Exposed!* (Virgin Books, 1995), p315

39 Gerry Brown obituary, *The Times*, 14 January 2004

40 'Farewell Mr Fearless: Our reporter Gerry Brown dies at 60, still chasing villains', *NOTW*, 18 January 2004

41 Nick Greenslade, op cit, p23

42 Mahmood Qureshi, Lenny McLean, Paul Samrai, Steve Grayson, Alan Smith, Florim Gashi

43 *Confessions*, p42

an hour a day in a gym and jogging three miles before breakfast.⁴⁴ Mazher's father and Qureshi's father were first cousins and the boys met on a couple of occasions in childhood. Years passed without any contact between them until Qureshi, who was raised in Bradford, got in touch with Mazher in 1996, supposedly after seeing his name in the *NOTW*. Despite not having met since the 1970s, they quickly cemented a close relationship.⁴⁵

Qureshi was often referred to as an undercover investigator, and sometimes as a researcher, by Mahmood. But he preferred to call himself a market trader. He had a sizeable criminal record from 1982 onwards, including car theft, burglary, assault and fraud, for which he received police cautions and a brief spell in a detention centre. He was sentenced to a year in jail in 1986 for more serious cases of fraud, assault and criminal damage. In subsequent years, for similar offences, there were suspended jail sentences and periods of probation. One court appearance in Leeds, involving five charges such as car theft and driving while disqualified and uninsured, took place in July 1999 while Qureshi was working for Mahmood. He was sentenced to a somewhat lenient 120-hour community service order for those offences.

According to Mahmood, by giving Qureshi a role as "my bodyguard", he changed his cousin's life.⁴⁶ Qureshi did not see it that way. During a libel trial in which he appeared as a witness on the *NOTW*'s behalf it was put to him that Mahmood had given him "a chance in life". Qureshi replied: "How did he give me a chance? He did not give me a chance. How?"⁴⁷ That denial didn't affect their relationship. His importance to Mahmood can be gauged by the numerous references to him in his book and the key role he played in several story set-ups. Sometimes, the lines between bodyguard, tipster, and participant (and, arguably, *agent provocateur*), became difficult to distinguish.

His first story for Mahmood was a case in point. It concerned a gang led by a Bradford hairdresser who provided illegal immigrants with forged passports and it raised questions about Qureshi's personal involvement.⁴⁸ In Mahmood's article, he referred to the gang employing "a local thug called Mehmood, known as Jaws because he has gold teeth studded with diamonds". Clearly, it was Qureshi, as Mahmood was forced to concede after evidence to the Leveson inquiry by my co-author, Paddy French.⁴⁹ Mahmood

44 Ibid, p175

45 Qureshi witness statement, Beckham kidnap case, 21 January 2003

46 *Confessions*, p42

47 'NoW researcher accused of lying', *The Guardian*, 7 April 2005 <https://tinyurl.com/5dp5985u>

48 'This man will get migrants into Britain by hooker by crook', *NOTW*, 29 September 1996

49 Mahmood's fourth witness statement to Leveson Inquiry, 18 July 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/2phy2u73>, Paddy's statement <http://tinyurl.com/2xpxz22m>

later explained that he had sought to protect his source by deflecting the gang's attention from Qureshi. But what was his cousin's status? At what point did he move from a thug with a criminal record to being a reporter? Joining gangs on Mahmood's behalf became something of an art form for him until he was injured in a motorway crash in 2007 and paralysed from the neck down.⁵⁰ His name will crop up on several occasions in the following chapters.

Mahmood had no qualms about working with characters who were less than squeaky clean, even admitting during a police interview that they included members of their own force. He said: "I've got bent police officers that are witnesses, that are informants".⁵¹ He consistently argued that since his work often involved exposing people engaged in criminal activity it made sense to use recruits who were less likely to arouse suspicion.⁵² Lenny McLean, for example, was a bare-knuckle boxer whose friendships included London's most notorious gangsters. He was reputed to have run a pub with Charlie Kray, eldest brother of the Kray twins. He had a string of convictions and had had spells in jail before he was imprisoned following the death of a man he ejected from a nightclub where he was doorman. After a murder charge was dropped, he was sentenced to 18 months in 1992 for causing the man grievous bodily harm.⁵³

Mahmood, slim and slight, just under 5 ft 8ins tall, was no bruiser himself and liked to surround himself with tough-looking individuals like Jaws and McLean. He told how he was once warned by police that a £10,000 contract had been taken out on his life by a south London gang of fraudsters.⁵⁴ (Oddly, he reported no such contract in the paper, although he did claim a £100,000 price was once placed on his head)⁵⁵. He was baffled days later when the gang leader called him to say the threat had been lifted. Years passed before Mahmood discovered, so he claimed, that McLean had visited a certain pub and "made it known I was his personal friend and that anyone messing with me would be taking him on".⁵⁶

McLean was not his only link to the Krays. To land one story, Mahmood employed Tony Lambrianou who was jailed with the Kray brothers for the 1967 murder of Jack "The Hat" McVitie. He paid Lambrianou "several

50 *Confessions*, p175

51 Operation Canopus Two, 17 October 2005 (see chapter 7); *Panorama*, 12 November 2014

52 Alin Turcu vs News Group Newspapers, judgment by Mr Justice Eady, 4 May 2005, para 21 <https://tinyurl.com/apv9k9jx>

53 'Humphreys killing charges dropped', *Salford Advertiser*, 12 March 1992; *Confessions*:146. McLean died, aged 49, in July 1998

54 *Confessions*, pp146-7

55 '£100,000 price on Maz's head', *NOTW*, 13 January 2002

56 Ibid. McLean doesn't mention Mahmood in his name-dropping autobiography

thousand pounds” to act as the go-between with credit card fraudsters.⁵⁷ In court, Mahmood said Lambrianou commanded “a great deal of respect within the criminal fraternity” and introduced him to the gang. “They were very wary of me” at first until “Tony convinced them I was to be trusted”.⁵⁸ Asked by counsel whether he was aware that Lambrianou, a man of “seriously bad character”, had served 15 years for murder, Mahmood replied that he had not offended since his release and was now regarded as “a respected author” who frequently appeared on television. When Ronnie Kray died the following month, Lambrianou “wept at the news”, saying his murderous gangster friend “was a gentleman” who would be “remembered in the East End as... a very generous man and a very kind man”.⁵⁹ Mahmood did not mention Lambrianou in his memoir.

By contrast, there were at least five references to another beefy character with a criminal record: Alan Smith. He took on various roles at Mahmood's side and eventually stood trial with him in 2016, was convicted, and given a suspended jail sentence (chapter 14). “Reliable Smithy”, as Mahmood regarded him, was one of his most intriguing team members.⁶⁰ He was the subject of Mahmood stories, also an informant on stories, and went on to serve as both Mahmood's driver and occasional play-actor. According to one account by Smith, they first met in about 1993.⁶¹ What is certain is that Smith was the subject of a Mahmood story in April 1995 when he exposed him as a counterfeiter in an overblown story about “a gang of master forgers”.⁶² It alleged that 25-year-old Lee Smith and his “bald sidekick”, Alan Smith, were responsible for minting £1 coins. (Lee may well have been Alan's son). Mahmood claimed to have passed on his evidence to the police who “launched a massive probe”. But, as was so often the case, no prosecution followed.

A year later, Smith turned up in a Mahmood tale about a drugs racket being run from inside a jail where he was said to have “served a four-year sentence”.⁶³ The story itself, involving Channings Wood prison in Devon, was almost certainly fictional, as is explored in chapter 11. And it omitted to mention the reason for Smith's incarceration. He had been convicted in

57 ‘Kray twins henchman acted as go-between’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 3 February 1995; ‘Girl jockey comes a cropper in credit card swindle’, *NOTW*, 6 September 1992. See chapter 8 (Jacqui Oliver)

58 ‘Ex-Kray twins man “trapped crooks”’, *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 3 February 1995

59 ‘They laughed and put a red-hot poker in my eye’, *Daily Mirror*, 18 March 1995; ‘“King of gangsters” Ronnie Kray dies’, *Lincolnshire Echo*, 17 March 1995

60 *Confessions*, pix, 149

61 Witness statement, 8 September 1997

62 ‘Moneybagged! We nab gang making a mint from fake £1 coins’, *NOTW*, 30 April 1995:5

63 ‘Cons go into jail order drugs business’, *NOTW*, 24 March 1996

1981 of conspiracy to commit arson.⁶⁴ At that trial, the court was told he was a garage owner who hired men to set fire to a rival's garage. He was also said to have committed previous offences.

In May 1997, Smith made another appearance in a Mahmood story which purported to show how nine men sentenced to do community service were taking part in “a ridiculous sham”.⁶⁵ They were spending their time drinking, smoking and sun-bathing. The main picture showed Smith apparently taking a nap in the back of a Rolls-Royce. It was captioned: “Snooze a naughty boy?” The article wrongly described Smith as “Alan Graham”, “an unemployed chauffeur” with a “gleaming Rolls”. In fact, Smith obliged Mahmood's photographer, Steve Grayson, by posing for a “nap”. According to the article, “Graham” had been sentenced to 100 hours' community service by Uxbridge magistrates for fraud. Years later, when confronted by the facts, Mahmood said he had used an alias for Smith to conceal that he was his informant for the story.⁶⁶

Smith also played a leading part in a story about the smuggling of people into Britain in the back of a van importing toilet rolls.⁶⁷ In his article, Mahmood told how “Scarface Dave... recruited one of our team to drive a van to Belgium [to] collect 12 illegals”. In the subsequent court case, it emerged that it was Smith who contacted the gang and was then drafted in as driver.⁶⁸ Three men were sent to prison for conspiring to facilitate the entry of illegal immigrants, but the regular driver appealed against his three-year sentence. At the hearing, where the man's sentence was reduced, Smith was described as an “undercover *News of the World* reporter”.⁶⁹

One of Smith's more bizarre appearances in a Mahmood story was as a participant in a sex orgy in which he was described as a used-car dealer with “a lengthy criminal record”.⁷⁰ Clearly, Mahmood was untroubled by Smith's law-breaking (and sexual) activities, but were his newspaper bosses similarly relaxed? He made no secret of employing Smith as his driver and minder. It suggests that *NOTW* editors and their legal department did not view their senior reporter, whose major role was to expose crime, working alongside a man who had committed several crimes, as a conflict of interest. Just as surprising was the fact that when Smith's previous convictions

64 'Men badly burned setting garage on fire, court hears', *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 19 February 1981; 'Bricklayer cleared of conspiracy', *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 2 April 1981

65 'This is a crook doing time: Scandal of villains who make a mockery of community service punishment', *NOTW*, 18 May 1997

66 'The sting in the singer's tale', *Press Gang*, 29 August 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/2pk8ucmh>

67 'Scarface Dave and the loo roll migrants', *NOTW*, August 1999; *Confessions*:80

68 'Groups hid in toilet roll vans', *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 26 September 2000

69 'Immigrants' driver has sentence cut', *Luton News and Bedfordshire Chronicle*, 2 May 2001

70 'Lawyer drops briefs at sex and drugs orgies', *NOTW*, 17 November 1996

were mentioned at Mahmood's 2016 trial, the judge thought they had no relevance beyond possibly explaining his "lack of resistance when asked to act dishonestly" by Mahmood.⁷¹

Another of Mahmood's associates with a criminal past was Paul Samrai, who also served time in prison. Like Mahmood, he was the son of Punjabi immigrants who grew up in the Midlands. He did well enough at school to go on and study law at university. Although he passed his bar exams, he never practised as barrister. Instead, he used his legal knowledge to run a business in Hong Kong which assisted wealthy Chinese residents to enter Britain by providing them with forged passports. In 1994, he pleaded guilty to conspiracy to use false documents and was sentenced to three years in jail.⁷² The judge referred to his running "a large-scale fraud and forgery of a sophisticated kind". On appeal, his sentence was reduced to two years and he spent 12 months in prison.⁷³ After his release he worked in his father's newsagents until he contacted Mahmood about a doctor seeking a hitman to kill a troublesome former mistress. It resulted in a story which led to the doctor being jailed for seven years.⁷⁴ It was also the start of a new career for Samrai. Even though Mahmood found him "a little too carefree and prone to exaggeration", supposedly characteristics that he considered typical of a Punjabi, he hired him to work in various undercover roles.⁷⁵ Samrai, having learned covert filming skills by observing Conrad Brown, felt confident enough to work for other newspapers and broadcasters, including the *Sunday Times* and Sky TV.⁷⁶ He split from Mahmood in 2006 following a sting on undocumented migrants (see following chapter).

During Mahmood's first five years on the *NOTW*, the staff photographer most often at his side was Steve Grayson. It is possible that neither Mahmood nor the paper were aware that, in 1976, Grayson received a 12-month suspended jail sentence, plus an £800 fine, for swindling his then employer while working as a printer.⁷⁷ It is unlikely that the *NOTW* vetted employees. So the company would not have known about the offence, nor that Grayson, having once run a construction business, went bankrupt after running up

71 Judge Gerald Gordon, Old Bailey, 21 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/3xjbzadz>

72 'Lawyers "ran £1m racket in false passports"', *The Independent*, 12 October 1994 <https://tinyurl.com/bdffyhwp>; 'Barrister jailed for forgery', *Birmingham Mail*, 9 November 1994; 'Rogues set up shamed soccer duo', *Daily Mirror*, 25 March 1998

73 'Sentence on lawyer who forged resident documents is cut by Appeal Court', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 16 May 1995

74 'Doctor in £5,000 plot to murder mistress: GP got knockout drugs and syringes to use on victim', *NOTW*, 1 February 1998; 'Doctor jailed over hitman bid', *The Herald*, 18 February 2001 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/5n97ec79>

75 *Confessions*, p39

76 'GP who told how to buy a kidney is suspended', *Sunday Times*, 16 October 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/42jzp4my>; 'Eastern European Gun Runners', *Sky News*, 7 August 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/h66msrvs>

77 Steve Grayson, *Don't Ask, Don't Get* (Kavanagh Tipping, 2008), pp121,161

debts of £60,000, which necessitated the sale of his flat. “I was desperate”, he admitted, “I would have done anything to make money”, including breaking the law, “but fortunately I never did”.⁷⁸ Instead, after a stint as a plumber, he became a paparazzi photographer and secured some freelance work at the *NOTW* in the late 1980s. Grayson soon won “a reputation for getting pictures others could not” and was given a staff job.⁷⁹ He proved to be a perfect partner for Mahmood and did “things”, he later reflected, “I am terribly ashamed of”.⁸⁰ Aside from taking photographs, he sometimes acted as the sheikh’s secretary and pretended to hire prostitutes for him.⁸¹ Grayson’s spectacular falling out with Mahmood is dealt with in chapter 11.

Grayson and Samrai were among several recruits who turned on Mahmood, although most remained loyal. They included another dodgy character, Akbar Ali Malik. He was praised by Mahmood for being “ever resourceful” and “quick thinking”.⁸² At some time in the mid-1990s he offered tips to Mahmood and they hit it off almost immediately. He soon joined the reporter’s acting troupe, usually as a member of the sheikh’s entourage and occasionally playing the sheikh himself. He took part in some of the highest profile and most contentious entrapments, such as those of the Earl of Hardwicke, actor John Alford, the Newcastle United directors, and jockey Kieren Fallon, all of which are detailed in later chapters.

Mahmood was surely aware of Malik’s shady career and, even if he was ignorant of it before 2000, he couldn’t have been in any doubt afterwards. In that year, the Law Society closed down Malik’s firm, Malik Law Associates. He responded by thumbing his nose at the Society to create Malik Associates in its place. In 2003, a complaint was made against Malik and his firm which dragged on for four years until, in 2007, Malik was suspended from practising law in England for six months by the Solicitors’ Disciplinary Tribunal on the grounds of serious misconduct.⁸³ In its findings, the tribunal found that Malik’s evidence had been “unconvincing and unreliable”. In 2006, while working for Mahmood and the *News of the World*, he was accused by another Murdoch paper, the *Sunday Times*, of offering suspect immigration advice.⁸⁴ The paper’s investigation was flawed and Malik, having sued for defamation, was awarded £20,000 in damages.⁸⁵

78 Ibid, p164

79 Ibid, p185

80 Ibid, p211

81 Ibid, p223

82 *Confessions*, pp7,272-3

83 Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal finding 9685-2007, 12 November 2007

84 ‘Migrants use gay marriage loophole’, *Sunday Times*, 19 February 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/529ntjs8> Online warning: “This article is subject to a legal complaint”

85 ‘Sunday Times pays damages to immigration lawyer’, *The Guardian*, 18 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/5222pka9>

Malik, who is thought to have introduced Mahmood to his second wife, was a guest at their wedding in Lahore in 2001.⁸⁶ Malik's strained relationship with legal regulators worsened in subsequent years. In April 2018, the Solicitors Regulation Authority shut down Malik's firm due to suspicions of dishonesty involving himself and another employee.⁸⁷ Bankruptcy followed.⁸⁸

Malik was not the only stand-in sheikh. Marwan, "a Palestinian plumber from east London who scrubs up nicely" was another.⁸⁹ Marwan was especially useful because, unlike Mahmood, he could speak Arabic, something of an essential requirement for a sheikh. Aside from Qureshi and McLean, another of Mahmood's sometime bodyguards was the flamboyant ex-soldier and bounty hunter John Miller whose dubious claim to fame was a farcical attempt to kidnap great train robber Ronnie Biggs from Brazil.⁹⁰ Years later, Miller posed as the leader of a gang of mercenaries to embroil a Conservative MP, Sir Teddy Taylor, into a plot to spring a British arms dealer from an Indian jail.⁹¹ With Miller acting in cahoots with Mahmood, his supposedly clandestine meeting with Taylor was pictured and their conversation was taped. No such plot existed and four months after Mahmood's story was published the *NOTW* was obliged to state that Taylor had not been involved.⁹² In addition, Miller was involved in the Newcastle United directors' sting (see chapter 13) and acted as a go-between for a story about actress Michelle Collins (see chapter 5). Although described by Mahmood as a burly, muscular former Scots Guard, Miller rejected boxing promoter Frank Warren's idea to arrange a bout between him and McLean. According to McLean, Miller turned it down because he was "too busy nicking fortunes out of the papers and touring universities telling them what a hero he was".⁹³

Mahmood also received help from private detectives, notably from a firm called Southern Investigations, run by Jonathan Rees and a former detective sergeant, Sid Fillery (see chapter 8). The company was embroiled in the unsolved murder of a former partner.⁹⁴ Rees, who was jailed in 1999 for attempting to pervert the course of justice by planting cocaine on an innocent woman, had a lengthy association with the *NOTW*, earning up to

86 'The Scurra', *Daily Mirror*, 11 April 2001. The item says the marriage took place in Rawalpindi. My source says it was Lahore

87 SRA intervention, Case No 348326; *Law Society Gazette*, 19 April 2018

88 Case No BR-2019-000992, 14 August 2019

89 *Confessions*, pp6,129

90 Miller's memoir, *Former Soldier Seeks Employment* (Macmillan, 1989), was written by Gerry Brown

91 'Top Tory MP in jailbreak plot', *NOTW*, 21 September 1997

92 Correction, *NOTW*, 18 January 1998

93 Lenny McLean, *The Guv'nor: The autobiography of Lenny McLean* (John Blake, 2003), p112

94 Alastair Morgan & Peter Jukes, *Untold: The Daniel Morgan murder exposed* (Blink, 2017)

&150,000 a year.⁹⁵ One of Southern's operatives, Melvyn Heraty, another ex-policeman, was sometimes employed as Mahmood's minder, notably in the sting on John Alford (see chapter 6).

Aside from his testosterone-fuelled retinue, Mahmood often called on females to partner him. One of his choices, staff reporter Aylia Fox, thought him "one of the best investigative journalists ever" while another, freelancer Christine Hart, spoke of him having "a movie star aura". Both women remarked on how his disguise boosted his ego. Fox said: "He loved playing the sheikh".⁹⁶ Hart agreed: "He lived and breathed His Highness".⁹⁷ A third woman, embarrassed by having worked for the *NOTW* and wishing to remain anonymous, said: "I got the impression that he loved inhabiting the fantasy world he had created, where he had unlimited money and flunkys at his beck and call".⁹⁸ She, in company with the other two, spoke of his ruthlessness. He was "constantly on a mission to prove himself", said Fox. "He would find a way to get the story by hook or by crook". Hart, a former private investigator who once played the sheikh's fictitious wife complained that "he used me", adding: "My job was to seduce... trying to get men to sleep with me".⁹⁹ A fourth woman, Sarah Issitt, who was a *NOTW* news desk administrator and accompanied Mahmood on a couple of undercover assignments, thought him "extremely driven... utterly convinced his targets deserved what they got" but "he lacked insight into his own behaviour and never expressed any empathy".¹⁰⁰

Their experience matched that of a woman known only as Zee who claimed to have spent five years as Mahmood's partner after meeting him online.¹⁰¹ She told TV documentary-makers she worked on several stories with him and that "he loved going undercover". She, like Hart, told of his touchiness if criticised. Some of his collaborators eventually disparaged his methods. In subsequent chapters, we will meet three more who turned on him: Kishan Athulathmudali, Steve Burton, and Florim Gashi, whose criminal record I detail in chapter 7.

The other important figure throughout Mahmood's years on the *NOTW* was Tom Crone, News International's legal manager. He emerged as one

95 'Murder trial collapse exposes News of the World links to police corruption', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/7kbvpy77>, *Press Gang*, 11 February 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/byrkzw4f>

96 Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 1

97 'Fake wife blows lid on Fake Sheikh', *Byline Investigates*, 7 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/mrxjhykj>

98 Confidential briefing to Roy G, 17 February 2025

99 'Reporter Christine Hart on playing the Fake Sheikh's wife', Alice Levine podcast, 13 February 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/5xm8mzw4>

100 Issitt (2021), op cit

101 Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 2

of the reporter's most consistent and articulate supporters. He stepped forward to defend Mahmood whenever he came under attack. Quick-witted, persuasive and popular with the *NOTW*'s editorial staff, he was wont to boast of his fierce commitment to press freedom. He was regarded as "a vital cog in the machine" at the *NOTW*, being referred to as "a unique lawyer" who was "incredibly streetwise" with "great journalistic instincts".¹⁰² Crone's central role to Mahmood's work, both pre and post-publication, cannot be over-emphasised.

He was among the guests, as was I, at a huge party and fireworks display on the banks of the Thames in October 1993 to celebrate the *NOTW*'s 150th anniversary. Soon after, the increasingly disenchanted editor, Patsy Chapman, stepped down, having suffered a nervous breakdown due to the pressure exerted by Murdoch.¹⁰³ If Mahmood's star had been in the ascendant under her, then it became more luminous after Piers Morgan took over at the beginning of 1994. Morgan, working to a brief from Rupert Murdoch, sought to "appeal to a wider, more affluent and middle class audience".¹⁰⁴ He reduced the volume of suburban sex stories, increased the celebrity content and introduced a modicum of more serious material. The latter involved the restoration of the long-forgotten fig leaf: a heavyweight spread which featured the paper's leading article, a column by Woodrow Wyatt, and articles by Conservative politicians. Mahmood's agenda, however, was untouched. His sex story quota remained as before, with a string of exposures of sex workers, gay vicars, and at least one "evil paedophile ring".¹⁰⁵ As a result, in October 1994, Morgan gave him the title of Chief Investigative Reporter. Oddly, in his name-dropping memoir, Morgan did not once mention Mahmood. Similarly, Mahmood did not refer to Morgan in his book. Every editor he worked under loved Mazher, wrote a senior *NOTW* executive, "with the exception of Piers Morgan".¹⁰⁶ The reasons for the mutual Mahmood-Morgan antipathy are not known.

Some staff who had been at the paper far longer than Mahmood were less than delighted by the elevation of a relative newcomer. They pointed out that his stories had not made the kind of waves guaranteed to attract public attention. They also noted that months after Mahmood's promotion it was the *NOTW*'s Gary Jones – "a fantastic journalist", according to his

¹⁰² Nick Greenslade, op cit, p21; 'News of the World legal manager Tom Crone to leave News International', *The Guardian*, 13 July 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/yn8bxa9s>

¹⁰³ Andrew Neil, *Full Disclosure* (Macmillan, 1996), p176

¹⁰⁴ Morgan (2005), op cit, p61

¹⁰⁵ Examples: 'The kinky vicar's dungeon of sin', *NOTW*, 6 March 1994; 'Doc prescribes himself a tart 3 times a week', *NOTW*, 24 July 1994; 'The court clerk, the aerobic champ and the schoolboy sex slaves', *NOTW*, 2 October 1994

¹⁰⁶ Miskiw (2024), op cit, p185

editor¹⁰⁷ – who was named reporter of the year in the 1995 *What the Papers Say* awards for a run of exclusive stories, including an agenda-setting royal splash.¹⁰⁸

Mahmood first dipped his toe into celebrity with revelations about Melvyn Bragg's private life and footballer Ryan Giggs's aunt.¹⁰⁹ In terms of the *NOTW*'s audience, these were minor figures and of little consequence. He was happier going undercover, even daring to pose "as an Arab terrorist" in order to smuggle a submachine gun and pistols into Britain on a Calais-Dover ferry.¹¹⁰ Whenever Mahmood came under fire, he and his editors would inevitably point to the risks he was willing to take to obtain some of his stories. Given the many examples of his economy with the truth, it is hard to be certain about the level of danger involved in each case. For a start, it was extremely rare for him to operate alone. He made much of having a bodyguard, or even bodyguards plural. Conrad Brown was a constant companion, joining him on a potentially perilous trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan to a Taliban hideout.¹¹¹ So, if he did put his body on the line, it is hard to assess the level of danger he faced. Yet there was a widespread belief, as one admiring TV documentary-maker told me, that Mahmood was very brave.

Six months after he joined the *NOTW* one of Mahmood's stories had a tragic conclusion with a melancholy echo of that Lewis incident fourteen years before (see above). It concerned a couple, Thomas and Roxanne Stronge, who were advertising sexy weekend breaks at their house in northern France, offering "quality food and sex". The article was illustrated with a risqué picture of Roxanne and a head-shot of Thomas, who was also called Ben at one point in the text.¹¹² There was no suggestion that the couple were doing anything illegal. They were simply hosting parties for consenting adults. Yet Mahmood went to some lengths to "expose" the couple's "sin hotel".

According to Grayson's account, written some sixteen years' later, Mahmood posed as a doctor and was accompanied by his girlfriend while Grayson took his wife. The two couples booked in separately and acted as if they didn't know each other. When the Stronges made sexual advances, the four managed to avoid any contact and, on a pretext, fled the house the next

107 Ibid, p72

108 'Di's cranky phone calls to married tycoon', *NOTW*, 14 August, 1994; 'A pretty despicable man', *Press Gang*, 27 October 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/32erpv32>

109 'The South Bonk Show: telly girl is Melvyn Bragg lover', *NOTW*, 9 April 1995; 'Ryan's aunt runs vice and drugs den', *NOTW*, 20 November 1994

110 'Nothing to declare... except 2 pistols and an Uzi machine gun', *NOTW*, 5 February 1995

111 'Behind the lines with the Taliban', *NOTW*, 23 September 2001

112 'Only food's not rude at Filthy Towers!', *NOTW*, 21 June 1992

morning. Back in London, Mahmood duly called the husband to admit that they were *NOTW* “investigators” and were planning to run an article about their wife-swapping enterprise. The husband broke down in tears and called the editor, Patsy Chapman, to tell her that should the story be published he would kill himself.¹¹³ Evidently, she responded by saying that nothing would ever be printed if she pulled stories in the face of such threats. So the article appeared the following Sunday. Some time after, wrote Grayson, “we heard that he’d hanged himself”. He was thirty-six years old.

Grayson claimed that Mahmood was unmoved by news of the death, which was recorded on the official French database.¹¹⁴ But there was no mention of how he took his life and nothing appeared in the *NOTW* or in any British newspaper. “When I talked to Mazher about it”, Grayson recalled, “he said the guy shouldn’t have been advertising what he was doing if he didn’t want to be found out. After all, that kind of story is what newspapers like the *News of the World* go after, and everyone knows it”.¹¹⁵

It was noticeable that Mahmood’s article did not mention a response by Stronge to his phone call. Instead, it quoted his wife as saying she and her husband were doing no harm, adding: “We’re not selling sex”. That, of course, was the point. There was no public interest justification for the story. As Grayson conceded, the couple were not committing a crime. Nobody visited them unless they wished to do so. Despite feeling “responsible” for “a terrible thing”, it did not change Grayson’s mind about working with Mahmood. At least, not for a while...

113 Grayson, op cit, p218

114 Benjamin Thomas Stronge, born Sligo, 9 June 1956; died Matringhem, Pas-de-Calais, 23 September 1992

115 Grayson, ibid

Chapter 5

The *News of the World*'s 'approved cocaine dealer'

Barrister: "*Does Mr Murdoch approve of this activity (buying cocaine)?*"

Mazher Mahmood: "*He obviously does, yes.*"

Mahmood sold dreams. He identified the hopes and aspirations of his targets and slyly offered them the opportunity to achieve them. Be it fame or money, he presented people with a chance to realise their ambitions. Ambitions they were sometimes unaware they had until he crafted them into a form that seemed, against the odds, to be within reach. As one of his victims put it, his proposition "was so unbelievable it was believable".¹ No matter how far-fetched they seemed, given the right circumstances, which he contrived to create, dreams could come true. Until, of course, they turned into nightmares, which was the miserable experience of all the people in this chapter.

In Mahmood's fifth year at the *News of the World* he exposed "the secret drug and vice shame" of two *Sun* "Page 3 girls", one of whom, Emma Morgan, immediately protested she had been entrapped.² She argued vehemently, as she has done ever since, she was persuaded to do something that – without an inducement – she would not normally have done. She was innocent of Mahmood's accusations, she said, and justifiably complained he had wrecked her career.³ Her case, which was overlooked at the time (including by me), can be seen in retrospect as hugely significant. It was a precursor to scores of similar operations in which Mahmood's *modus operandi* rarely changed. A combination of planning and play-acting, plus access to the

1 Jodie Kidd, Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 3

2 'Busted! Page 3 girls' drugs and vice scandal', *NOTW*, 14 January 1996

3 'Fake Sheikh sting "ended my career"', *BBC News*, 6 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/2s4ctvjv>

NOTW's considerable resources, was employed.

It also involved the key element which featured in almost every Mahmood sting: the provision of drugs, usually of the Class A variety, meaning cocaine. Many of Mahmood's entrapments revolved around inveigling his targets to obtain the drug for him. Often, this required Mahmood to provide the funds to enable the person to acquire it. On occasion, Mahmood, or one of his team acting on his orders, bought cocaine themselves.⁴ During a courtroom cross-examination by a barrister, Alun Jones QC, Mahmood was put under intense pressure to explain whether his buying of drugs was approved by his newspaper bosses and, ultimately, by the paper's owner, Rupert Murdoch.⁵ It was a fascinating and enlightening exchange played out in front of Judge Timothy Pontius at London's Blackfriars court.

AJ: How do you get authorisation for the spending of money on cocaine?

MM: Well, there's no set budget.

AJ: Do you have to get authorisation on any one occasion?

MM: No.

The Judge:⁶ Petty cash?

MM: I don't think so. I probably paid for it myself and claimed back. I'm not sure.

AJ: And you claim it back as expenses?

MM: Expenses, purchase cocaine.

AJ: So are there documents for that for accounting purposes for the purchase of cocaine which go into the accounting system?

MM: Presumably, yes.

AJ: And auditors see that, "For the purchase of cocaine", do they, of a public company?

MM: I assume so, yes.

AJ: Does Mr Murdoch approve of this activity?

MM: He obviously does, yes.

AJ: For you to go out and...

MM: To buy cocaine.

AJ: ...spend money to buy cocaine?

4 Among others, see the Hardwicke case (chapter 6) and Prince Harry story (chapter 12)

5 Alun Jones, Hardwicke trial, 16 September 1999; 'The sheik unveiled', *The Guardian*, 4 October 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/yc69c8ej>

6 Judge Timothy Pontius

MM: That's correct, sure.

AJ: That is approved policy of the Murdoch press?

MM: That's correct. Absolutely. If it results in convictions I don't see what we're doing wrong. We're exposing criminals.

But this final reply begged several questions: were his targets really criminals? Were their sins worthy of the elaborate and expensive scenarios he constructed in order to snare them? Was his purchase of cocaine justifiable either ethically or legally? None of his stings were carried out in haste. By taking his time, Mahmood assuaged his targets' suspicions, imbuing them with a misplaced sense of confidence. This was certainly the case with Emma Morgan, then aged 24 and eager to expand her modelling horizons. She had little reason to be suspicious when she was approached about the possibility of "starring" in a bikini calendar. It seemed like a natural step in her career. As if the bait of a lucrative contract wasn't dazzling enough for her, the second stage was a paid-for flight to Lanzarote to meet an Arabian prince (Mahmood).

On stepping off the plane, she was surprised to be greeted by a man whom she knew from previous visits to the island to be a regular on Lanzarote's party scene. He introduced himself as "Billy" and said he would be acting as her bodyguard. The *NOTW* photographer on the assignment, Steve Grayson, believed "Billy" was recruited by Mahmood as part of the sting.⁷ The prince told Morgan he was about to publish a magazine in the United Emirates and wanted her to attend the launch party. According to Morgan, when recalling the conversation many years later, the prince hinted that he liked party girls, saying that "he thought people who didn't do drugs, or people who weren't sexually aware, would be kind of boring, and he wouldn't want those sort of people at the party".⁸

Morgan, eager to oblige and an admitted recreational drug-taker on occasions, was then encouraged to accept cocaine from "Billy". In a revelatory video clip acquired by BBC's *Panorama* in 2014, Mahmood, Grayson and "Billy" are shown preparing the entrapment scene.⁹ At one point, Mahmood bends forward over a glass table to show how he expects Morgan to be filmed snorting cocaine, which she did after drinking champagne and smoking cannabis.

A model merely *consuming* drugs was not a good enough story. She

7 *Panorama*, BBC One, 12 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/3btywjje>; Billy's identity has never been revealed

8 Interview with Alice Watkins, undated, *Hacked Off* <https://tinyurl.com/4s3etav4>

9 *Panorama*, op cit

must be coaxed into *procuring* them. Mahmood whispered to her that he would like her to get him some cocaine, saying he didn't trust "Billy", but he did trust her. Morgan bowed to the pressure and agreed to do as he wished, obtaining two bags from "Billy". She did not see it as drug-dealing. She rationalised it by saying: "When somebody just offers you the world and then asks you to do them a little favour, you feel beholden to do that".¹⁰ In Mahmood's story, Morgan's one-off "little favour" was magnified. She was said, falsely, to "have connections with a highly-organised drug ring" in the Canary Islands.

However, Morgan could not deny a string of quotes in which she boasted of her drug use: "Coke keeps us going and helps keep our weight down... I've done a lot of gear with other models and friends in the acting business... It's all part of the lifestyle we lead... If you go to a club you have to pop Ecstasy to have a good time and be in with the rest". She was, of course, unaware she was being recorded. Although this can be seen as foolish in hindsight, in the context of her situation at the time, including the blandishments of a man she regarded as royalty, her guard was down as she sought to impress her would-be employer by showing she was his sort of "party girl".

Grayson said: "She should never have been done like that. Never. She wasn't a drug dealer". And in a statement to *Panorama*, "Billy" agreed: "I'd like to apologise to Emma for my part in stitching her up. The only real criminal was Mazher Mahmood. He gave me the money to buy the cocaine". The filmed clips, plus "Billy's" confession, amounted to powerful evidence that Morgan was the victim of a set-up, and that Mahmood had entrapped her.

As a result of Mahmood's "exclusive", *The Sun* – the *NOTW*'s newspaper stablemate – closed its modelling doors to Morgan. Without income, she was evicted from her London home and returned to Manchester to live with her parents. She lacked the knowledge, the contacts or the resources to take legal action. Eventually, she did manage to rebuild her life and pursued an acting career. She also took every opportunity to bring her complaint about Mahmood's entrapment to public attention. She offered sympathy to his later victims and occasionally turned up at events to publicise her case. She was determined to show that she was nothing like the person portrayed in the *News of the World*.

We need to dissect that sting more closely. Morgan did not buy the cocaine out of her own pocket. She was given money by Mahmood in order to purchase the drug from "Billy", who was being paid by Mahmood. Therefore, it was Mahmood rather than Morgan who was the procurer of the cocaine.

¹⁰ Watkins, *Hacked Off*, op cit

This fake sheikhdown was no laughing matter for the victimised Morgan. Her entrapment revealed the consistently sinister template of Mahmood's form of "investigative journalism" in which the story as presented in the paper (the fantasy) bore little resemblance to the story-behind-the-story (the reality).

In setting up Morgan, Mahmood had created the blueprint that he would use time after time over the following fifteen years. It marked the point at which it became clear to him that the revelation of crime by unknown people – such as bogus weddings, counterfeiting and drug-smuggling – was less rewarding than entrapping celebrities. Their fame magnified his own fame as the Fake Sheikh. People desperate to jump-start their careers were especially susceptible, as were those whose star had begun to fade. With the right amount of planning and cunning, he could manipulate them into committing a crime or, at the very least, incite them to indulge in hypocritical behaviour.

He had previously caught out many people without a public profile. Celebrities offered him a better chance of enhancing his status within the *NOTW* and in the wider popular newspaper community. All his targets, as with anyone fooled by confidence tricksters and held up to ridicule, were outraged at being deceived. But the advantage of celebrity stings, from Mahmood's and the *NOTW*'s point of view, was the certainty that their complaints would engender headlines in other newspapers and coverage on broadcast media, which would keep the story running. In Fleet Street jargon, it would have "legs". With much to lose, and usually able to draw on professional advice, celebrities often called on PRs or lawyers to argue their case. Not, it should be said, as successfully as their professional credentials might suggest.

As Mahmood's journalism began to attract increasingly hostile criticism, he was able to count on firm support from his editors. When Piers Morgan resigned in September 1995, on becoming editor of the *Daily Mirror*, he was replaced by his deputy, Phil Hall, who proved to be a stout defender of his work. Following a blurb about "our amazing Mazher" – one of many such boasts – Hall promoted him from Chief Investigative Reporter to Investigations Editor.¹¹ Mahmood was on his way to journalistic stardom, to becoming as famous as the people he fooled. For Andrew Marr he was akin to the fame-hungry, self-promoting Victorian journalist, George Augustus Sala. Mahmood's celebrity marked him out, thrilled Marr, as "our Sala", an

¹¹ 'Our Mazher's just amazing', *NOTW*, 9 March 1997; 'Our man brings baddies to book', *NOTW*, 27 July 1997; 'Our Maz puts child pervert behind bars', *NOTW*, 20 December 1998. He was promoted in April 1997

“emblem of British reporting”.¹²

Yet this supposed paragon of journalism traded on exploiting people’s fondness for the use of recreational drugs, an activity he knew to be common throughout the media and, most definitely, among many of his *NOTW* colleagues. Aware of its prevalence, he understood that possession itself was unlikely to be viewed as exceptional and also unlikely to engender police inquiries. Therefore, there had to be an element of criminality – dealing, supplying, trafficking – in order to satisfy the Press Complaints Commission’s “public interest” test, to provoke police action and, most importantly, to satisfy judges and juries. If the target was well-known, the tag of “drug dealer” would surely tarnish their reputation and discourage them from suing for libel. Should they be successfully prosecuted it would negate the chances of legal action against the paper.

Eleven years passed between the entrapment of Emma Morgan and that of fashion model Jodie Kidd, but Mahmood’s method did not vary. He managed to reach her by posing as a wealthy sheikh – is there a poor one? – in an approach to her brother Jack, a professional polo player. Mahmood told him he was planning to stage a polo and fashion event in Dubai and would like his sister to act as an adviser. Urged by her brother, Kidd dutifully turned up to meet the sheikh and his entourage at a Park Lane apartment. As usual, the place was wired. As usual, wine flowed through dinner. And, as usual, as time passed and she grew more relaxed, it was suggested to Kidd that the party would be improved if she could obtain some cocaine. Eager to do her best for her brother, and later protesting that she felt under “incredible pressure”, she made a phone call and bought three grams of cocaine. Days later, her foolishness was exposed in an *NOTW* article accusing her of being “a coke-snorting drug fixer”.¹³ The effect on Kidd’s career and life was dramatic. Marks & Spencer terminated her £250,000 contract as the face of its financial services campaign.¹⁴ Other work dried up. Worse still was the aftermath within her family. Some sixteen years after the incident she reported that her relationship with her brother had never recovered.¹⁵

Kidd, in recalling “a stupid moment” when she had been “groomed and manipulated”, spoke of the “years of tears and anger and pain” that followed “the biggest mistake of my life”. But what was the point of encouraging her to make that mistake? A model takes drugs? A model knows how to obtain drugs? This transgression ranks way down the scale on the checklist

12 Marr (2004), op cit, pp46,49

13 ‘It’s not the best cocaine.. but it’s the best we can do at 12.30am’, *NOTW*, 16 September 2007

14 ‘M&S drops Jodie Kidd over drugs sting’, *Campaign*, 24 September 2007 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/yc77h6r6>

15 Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 3

of high crimes and misdemeanours. Noticeably, the police took no action. She was not prosecuted despite the *NOTW*'s "dossier" being "available to the authorities". Perhaps Mahmood's valedictory message in the paper's final issue provides a clue. There, he boasted of having "shamed" Kidd.¹⁶ Hard to see how shaming served the public interest.

For Mahmood, she was a headline name, and her entrapment depended on his exploitation of her brother. Similarly, in order to entrap snooker champion John Higgins – another headline name – it was initially necessary to ensnare the player's manager, Pat Mooney. Money rather than drugs was the lure. Mahmood, posing as businessman Marcus d'Souza, told Mooney his company wanted to sponsor a series of European snooker events that he knew Higgins and Mooney were seeking to establish. At a meeting with Mooney in Edinburgh, d'Souza suggested he bring Higgins to the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, to discuss sponsorship details.

When they arrived at the Kiev hotel, they were told that d'Souza had gone to China and were introduced instead to two characters named "Jaroslav" and "Mikhail". At the meeting it became clear to Higgins that Mooney, a board member of the World Professional Snooker and Billiards Association (WPSBA), had previously reached some kind of match-fixing accord with the absent d'Souza. It centred on an offer of €300,000 (£261,000 at the time) for Higgins to lose frames in four matches. According to Mahmood's article, Higgins was agreeable to the deal.¹⁷ The pair's eleven-minute meeting with the mysterious Ukrainians was taped and filmed, a clip of which was posted on the *NOTW* website. It appeared to be damning. But no money changed hands and no document was signed. Even the article conceded that Higgins had never been involved in match fixing. That was revealing because, without any previous evidence of wrong-doing, why did Mahmood decide to carry out such an elaborate and costly sting?

On first reading, I suspected all was not as it appeared. Why would Higgins throw a couple of frames in exhibition matches for a bribe that, given his overall earnings, was small beer?¹⁸ I also noted that Higgins swiftly issued a denial, explaining that he had decided to "play along" out of fears for his safety because he suspected the two men he met were connected to the Russian mafia.¹⁹ More significantly, I also noted an online article posted by investigative journalist Nick Harris in which he described details

¹⁶ 'Great sheiks', *NOTW*, 10 July 2011

¹⁷ 'Snooker champ Higgins bribes scandal', *NOTW*, 2 May 2010

¹⁸ Roy Greenslade, 'How the News of the World's fake sheikh snookered John Higgins', *The Guardian*, 10 May 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/5n8y8vc8>

¹⁹ David Middleton, 'John Higgins: "My conscience is 100% clear" after bribery allegations', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2010

of Mahmood's set-up.²⁰ It involved the creation of a fake business, a fake website, and a fake email address. There were questions also about the editing of the video clip.

Within a day of Mahmood's story appearing, the WPSBA suspended Higgins and obliged Mooney to resign from the board. Then it called on David Douglas, a former Met Police chief superintendent, to carry out an investigation. He was able (allegedly) to view the entire footage shot by the *NOTW* and concluded that Mooney had kept Higgins in the dark about the nature of his discussions until he was ushered into the room in Kiev: "John was going in as a rabbit in the headlights".²¹ An independent tribunal chaired by Ian Mill QC agreed. Higgins was innocent of the claim that he had sought to fix matches. However, the tribunal found him guilty of "giving the impression" that he would breach betting rules, and of failing to report that the *NOTW* had approached him. Higgins was banned from snooker for six months and fined £75,000. Mooney received a life ban.²²

In short, the *NOTW*'s central allegation, which stated that "Higgins is captured here on camera shaking hands on a disgraceful deal to fix a string of high-profile matches after demanding a £300,000 kickback", was false. He did not fix anything; he did not agree to fix anything; he made no demands. He had been led astray by Mooney. Higgins, widely regarded as the nicest of nice chaps, was an innocent victim of a sting. Guilty, at worst, of naivete. He had been humiliated for no reason. But the *NOTW* could not bring itself to apologise. Instead, turning reality on its head, it called the result "a victory for *News of the World* investigative journalism" and a "testament to the extraordinary work of our investigations editor". It also argued, without a shred of proof, that "the brevity of Higgins's ban stunned many".²³ A senior News International executive even listed the tawdry, flawed investigation as one of the *NOTW*'s top five public interest stories.²⁴

Mahmood's audio and video recordings often failed to live up to their promise. On occasions when lawyers acting for his victims were able to scrutinise unedited tapes and video footage they discovered a disjunction

20 Nick Harris, 'Revealed: The tale behind the snooker sting that leaves Higgins in a fight for his life', 3 May 2010 tinyurl.com/wpyn69z

21 Nick Harris, 'Revealed: why John Higgins was cleared of match fixing (because the evidence, including a statement from Mazher Mahmood told the full story)', 21 September 2010 tinyurl.com/2nk2upvm

22 Nick Harris, 'In full: the John Higgins match fix ruling by Ian Mill QC', 8 September 2010 tinyurl.com/mryrx8ep; Roy Greenslade, 'News of the World's entrapment of John Higgins besmirches journalism', *The Guardian*, 9 September 2010 tinyurl.com/2s4dbt2y

23 'Hearn's backing for ban – John's been humiliated', *NOTW*, 12 September 2010; Roy Greenslade, 'Why Higgins was cleared after News of the World entrapment', *The Guardian*, 22 September 2010 tinyurl.com/4yca9ybp

24 Richard Casey, fifth witness statement, Leveson inquiry, 18 July 2012 tinyurl.com/3jrnwz94

between the newspaper's claims and the reality.

Supposedly conclusive evidence of wrong-doing was not what it seemed. That was also the case with allegations against the champion Irish jockey Kieren Fallon which rested on "bombshell taped conversations".²⁵ Mahmood's story claimed that Fallon had forecast that a certain horse he was riding at Lingfield Park would lose to a horse he named as the winner. The race was certainly controversial because Fallon's mount was way ahead for most of the time, yet lost narrowly at the finish to the very horse he had predicted would win. Suspicious betting patterns had already alerted the Jockey Club to a potential problem. It immediately suspended Fallon for 21 days and ordered an investigation on the grounds that Fallon might have acted "in a manner prejudicial to the integrity and good reputation of racing". Fallon's livelihood was in jeopardy.²⁶

Most racing journalists did not believe Fallon guilty of much more than foolishness. J.A. McGrath, the BBC's horse racing commentator, noted in the *Daily Telegraph* that the article produced "no evidence of race-fixing" while the *Daily Mirror* poured scorn on Mahmood's "botched hatchet job".²⁷ As was widely expected, the Jockey Club inquiry was eventually halted on advice from its legal team after it reviewed certain "additional material" to Mahmood's original "dossier". That material, meaning the tape-recordings, absolved Fallon of any guilt. But the club did not make a public announcement in order to criticise the *NOTW*. Instead, it preferred to issue a bland statement: "We no longer consider that there is sufficient evidence to merit a disciplinary hearing".²⁸

According to a report in the *Horse & Hound*, which had a relatively small readership, speculation was "rife" that the club's decision may have been influenced by the revelation that Fallon's solicitor, Christopher Stewart-Moore, was considering the publication of transcripts of the *NOTW* tapes.²⁹ The lawyer's public statement, in which he merely observed that Mahmood's allegations had been proved to have been completely unfounded, tended to damp down the speculation.³⁰

25 'The Fixer', *NOTW*, 7 March 2004; 'Fallongate: The tapes - for first time, full shocking evidence that exposes race shame jockey', *NOTW*, 14 March 2004

26 'Fallon's career in danger', *Irish Independent*, 8 March 2004; 'Fallon in for Jockey Club high jump', *NOTW*, 11 April 2004

27 'Fallon facing bets inquiry', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 March 2004 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/32e3fpnu>; 'Horse Whisperer: Fallon's Sheikh screwed up story', *Daily Mirror*, 13 March 2004

28 'Jockey Club says Fallon has no case to answer', *Irish Independent*, 15 December 2004

29 'Kieren Fallon disciplinary inquiry dropped', *Horse & Hound*, 15 December 2004 <https://tinyurl.com/mhm46wz>

30 'Jockey Club abandons inquiry into Fallon', *The Independent*, 15 December 2004 <https://tinyurl.com/32wnt4dv>

What he had discovered in private, however, was fascinating and should have been headline news. As Fallon revealed in his autobiography, the “disturbing” truth was that one tape – initially omitted from the *NOTW*’s “evidence” to the Jockey Club – contained Fallon’s strident refusal to fix a race and the fact he had never done so.³¹ A transcript of the tape eventually found its way into the *Sunday People*, but its relevance was, sadly, ignored. News International’s legal team certainly understood its significance and when Fallon sued the *NOTW* for libel, the paper rapidly settled, securing Fallon damages and costs said to total £300,000, plus an apology. He also sued the paper for libel over a second story, which falsely claimed he had attacked another jockey, winning more damages and another apology.³²

Further details of the sinister truth about the Fallon sting emerged in 2012 when Channel 4 screened a documentary about the *NOTW*.³³ Mahmood’s one-time assistant, Kishan Athulathmudali, turned on his former colleague to tell how the jockey had been entrapped. Fallon had flown to Marbella at Mahmood’s invitation on the understanding he was meeting a group of international gamblers who included Kishan and Mahmood’s cousin, “Jaws” Qureshi. Fallon persistently refused attempts by “the sheikh” to pay him money for his race tips, recalling that “he got very pushy, when I would not accept anything”. Fallon said of the experience that so nearly ended his racing career: “They destroy people’s lives. I was suicidal about it and you can’t put a price on that”.

In their different spheres, Morgan, Kidd, Higgins and Fallon had public profiles. They were chosen by Mahmood because they were likely to be known to *NOTW* readers. Many of his other targets were selected not because they were famous but because they were vulnerable and could therefore be coaxed, or coerced, into doing something that would result in a sensational story (such as the Victoria Beckham “kidnappers”, see chapter 7). Of all those who were manipulated into providing a shock-horror-probe headline none was more deplorably exploited than an 18-year-old Plymouth woman, Lindsey Stone.

In March 2005, days after the *NOTW* had been named as newspaper of the year, she featured in “an investigation that will rock Britain”. It was a front page exclusive: “Mum sells baby to *News of The World*: She says: Tot’s yours for cash... I don’t want her”.³⁴ Described as “an evil mother”, she was alleged to have tried selling her two-year-old daughter to the paper

31 Kieren Fallon, *Form: My autobiography* (Simon & Schuster, 2017), pp206-209

32 ‘I’ll sue Fallon, jockey vows after champ’s attack’, *NOTW*, February 2004; ‘Our jockey champ Fallon takes on the News and wins’, *Dublin Evening Herald*, 10 March 2006; ‘Jockey wins damages from News of the World’, *The Guardian*, 10 March 2006

33 ‘Undercover at the *News of the World*’, 2 August 2012

34 ‘Junkie mum sells baby to *News of the World*’, *NOTW*, 20 March 2005

to fund her drug habit. An inside article was headlined “She’s yours for £15,000: I never bothered with her really... I won’t miss her”. It was alleged that Stone and her “thug boyfriend” John Carwithen, the child’s step-father, made a deal to sell the girl to “our undercover reporter” with Stone even signing a “contract”: “I, Lindsey Stone of Plymouth hereby agree to sell baby Charleigh, who is my own daughter, for the sum of £15,000. I will not wish to see her again or have any legal rights over her. She will belong to (reporter’s name)”. Mahmood portrayed the couple in the worst possible light. Stone was alleged to be a heroin addict while “leering” Carwithen was said to be a convicted petty criminal and also an addict. After reading the story, almost no-one would have had a shred of sympathy for them.

One paragraph in the article, which probably passed most readers by, stood out for me: “We had been tipped off about the couple’s plot to sell Charleigh by a computer expert. He was stunned and disgusted when Stone contacted him, asking how she would go about selling a baby on the internet. Instead of posting her advert, he gave us her home number”. It just didn’t ring true to me. Did the “computer expert” exist? Had the woman really sought to post an online advert to sell a baby? I wasn’t the only sceptic. The police, after arresting the couple, soon had second thoughts. A press officer for Devon and Cornwall police, speaking off the record, told me it all “stank to high heaven”. A formal police statement referred ambiguously to its investigation being “very sensitive and quite complicated”.³⁵ Two days after publication, I spoke to a senior officer who told me: “I’m not happy about the whole story. The *News of the World* weren’t helpful when we asked them specific questions”. One of his phrases stood out: “They hid behind journalism”. What he meant was that Mahmood, by asserting that he must protect his confidential sources, refused to explain the story’s provenance.

By the time I discovered the truth some six months later, the police had long dismissed the story as lacking credibility. Stone and Carwithen were questioned after one night in custody and released without charge. The baby’s natural father, although angered by what the newspaper had accused Lindsey of having done, was quoted in the local newspaper as saying she was “a good mother”.³⁶ He knew nothing of her alleged drug habit. The baby was temporarily taken into care while he sought custody.³⁷ Meanwhile, police cast the whole episode in a different light by letting it be known that there was no evidence of any intention to sell the baby. Instead, it was a scam to trick a prospective purchaser into parting with money. “One theory we are actively investigating is that this was a conspiracy to rob the

35 ‘I want my kid: Dad’s plea after mum tries to sell toddler’, *The Sun*, 21 March 2005

36 ‘City mother at centre of “baby for sale” plot’, *Plymouth Evening Herald*, 21 March 2005

37 ‘Father in fight for “£15k girl”’, *The Sun*, 22 March 2005

reporter”, said Detective Inspector Alex Bunning. “That is one allegation we are looking at, but it is not the only allegation. We are keeping an open mind”.³⁸ Two arrests of young men were made on that basis while another two men were being sought.

Then, as suddenly as it arrived, the baby-for-sale story, which was supposed to rock Britain, vanished from the media. No charges were ever brought against the couple, or anyone else. That didn’t stop *NOTW* editor Andy Coulson citing it as a reason for his pride in his reporter’s work.³⁹ Some six months later I discovered what had really happened from the man who orchestrated the whole deplorable business, Florim Gashi. He told me Mahmood had been obsessed for two years about landing a story involving a mother prepared to sell her baby.⁴⁰ “We tried a couple of times with a gypsy woman in London, but she refused. Another woman I asked was really mad at me”. In order to fulfil Mahmood’s wishes, and to make money for himself, Gashi persevered. He was living in a house in Plymouth with Kurdish asylum-seekers from Iraq when he met Stone and Carwithen. “John was selling stolen goods, like TVs, cameras, DVDs and so on. I acted as a middle man to sell them on to the Kurds. I told Maz about him and Lindsey being drug addicts and about the little girl. He said, ‘Pretend I’m Perry, a rich man who wants to buy baby.’”

When Gashi mentioned it to Carwithen, the young man saw an angle. If this “Perry” had money, maybe he could con him into handing it over. So he coaxed Stone to go along with the idea of selling her daughter. By the time I met Gashi he was full of remorse for his activities on behalf of Mahmood.⁴¹ Gashi said he was sorry for what happened to the woman, blaming Carwithen for getting her involved. “She didn’t know what was happening. She was a good mother... and desperate for money. I got John to persuade the girl when she was at her lowest. I just did it for a story. It’s awful. I was awful”.

Gashi’s part in this unsavoury episode, for which he was paid £250,⁴² also proved life-changing for him. Having come to the attention of the police in Plymouth he was arrested and, as an illegal immigrant, he was deported to his home country, Kosovo. According to his account, he told the police the truth about the Stone-Carwithen sting perpetrated by Mahmood. How much of the truth? The police, embarrassed at having investigated a sham

38 ‘Hunt for men over “baby plot”’, *Western Daily Press*, 29 March 2005

39 ‘In the race to demonise Mazher Mahmood, don’t forget his “victims” were often rich people, driven by greed to do bad things’, *Press Gazette*, 5 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/59bn2raa>

40 Florim Gashi interview with author Roy G, recorded 6 September 2005, Dubrovnik, Croatia

41 Ibid

42 Exhibit MM17, Leveson inquiry, <https://tinyurl.com/mr2dtfdf6>

crime, have refused to elucidate ever since.

It is very doubtful if Mahmood gave the fate of poor Lindsey Stone a second thought after his story was published. Two weeks before he made her life a misery, he had attempted to wreck the life chances of a group of even poorer people by seeking to expose what he claimed to be an immigration racket. He posed as a building firm boss who told two priests at a Sikh temple in Walsall that he could offer work to undocumented migrants. Mahmood then turned up in a mini-bus to collect eight men who thought he was taking them to a construction site. Instead, he drove them into a police road-block, where they were arrested.⁴³ Two months later, Mahmood reported that, after questioning by immigration officials, all eight were released. He raged: "Today, we find police and the Home Office guilty of wasting the *News of the World's* time by losing a minibus-load of illegal immigrants we delivered to them".⁴⁴ He claimed that "our six-week investigation" had involved eight journalists and cost £10,000".

The following year, he decided to give "bungling Home Office officials a lesson in catching illegal immigrants" by repeating his outrageous stunt on a much larger scale. Assisted by Paul Samrai, he used the same ploy as in Walsall to fool "66 on-the-run foreigners" into boarding two coaches in the belief they were on their way to a building site. They were driven instead to Colnbrook immigration removal centre near Heathrow "with the message" to officials, according to Mahmood's article: "Try not to lose them this time".⁴⁵ One group were recruited in East Ham, east London, and the other from Southall in west London. Almost all of them were Sikhs from the Punjab. According to Samrai, born in Birmingham to Punjabi parents, this was, for him, a sting too far. Years later, he told a TV documentary: "These guys weren't hurting anybody, they weren't villains... I was involved in ruining people's lives. I should have said no... they were like lambs being led to the slaughter".⁴⁶ He thought "Mazher was no longer fighting for justice. I decided not to be involved any further. I got out". Seeing no public interest justification for the article, he said: "This wasn't journalism. This was theatre".⁴⁷ By contrast, for the *NOTW's* deputy editor, Neil Wallis, the stunt was "a brilliant piece of tabloid investigation".⁴⁸

What is clear from all these examples were the lavish resources allocated to

43 'Busted! This coach-load of illegal immigrants thought they were going to work... but their driver was Mazher Mahmood.. and he took them straight to police', *NOTW*, 6 March 2005

44 'What do cops do when we hand them van-load of illegal immigrants?', *NOTW*, 22 May 2005

45 'We catch 2 bus loads of illegal immigrants', *NOTW*, 28 May 2006

46 Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 2

47 'I worked with the infamous Fake Sheikh...', *Metro*, 26 September 2023 <https://tinyurl.com/57kbud6d>

48 Isfryn & Lacey, ibid

Mahmood. Although he was given to grumbling about financial constraints, he was able to draw on funds that, by the standards of the rest of the paper's editorial staff, let alone journalists across the rest of Fleet Street, were eye-wateringly generous. He was indulged. For one entrapment, he paid for first class airline tickets to fly the target, her boyfriend and their 15-month-old daughter to Spain. Then they were booked into an expensive suite at the Marbella Club hotel, while he and his team took a bungalow costing £1,500 a night. But a "sheikh" required even more ostentation to be convincing so, in a "flamboyant show of wealth", he wrote, "I arranged a fleet of stretch limos complete with a small army of minders to ferry us" to restaurant Antonio in Puerto Banus. There, they dined on lobster thermidor washed down with vintage champagne.⁴⁹ In this case, the woman in Mahmood's sights was an *EastEnders* actress, Michelle Collins, who was lured to Marbella in the belief that the sheikh was eager to cast her in a film he was financing. If she was at all suspicious, her worries were eased because Mahmood's minder, John Miller, knew Collins and acted as the go-between.

Mahmood did not explain the nature of the sting, such as his supposed *prima facie* evidence. He claimed instead that he decided not to go ahead with it because her partner had assaulted her. It is fair to speculate, going on Mahmood's past form, that he was planning to persuade her to supply cocaine. Whatever his intention, it meant he had to "write something completely different for the paper".⁵⁰ Different how? What was it about Collins he was planning to expose? His published story told of a violent row between the couple and it contained very detailed quotes which were overheard, according to his article, by "shocked British tourists in the room next door".⁵¹ This was untrue. As he admitted in his book, his assistant, Conrad Brown, taped the exchanges through the wall in an adjacent room. (Of course, given his team's usual *modus operandi*, it is possible they had also bugged Collins's room in advance). Both the article and the book alleged that her partner offered to sell Collins's secrets for £20,000, which the oh-so-principled reporter rebuffed.

After the story was published, Collins contacted the Press Complaints Commission and her lawyer sent a letter to the editor threatening possible action. Nothing came of either initiative. Some seventeen years later, Collins wrote a memoir in which she made no reference to the *NOTW* story. But she did mention that her former partner was once offered money by a newspaper to sell his story. She thought it "to his credit he never took it".⁵²

49 *Confessions*, p140

50 *Ibid*, p134

51 'EastEnders Michelle beaten by lover', *NOTW*, 28 December 1997

52 Michelle Collins, *This Is Me* (Michael O'Mara Books, 2014), p150

Hard therefore to give much credence to Mahmood's claim that it was the man who had wanted to kiss and tell.

Most of the cases discussed above engendered wider press and broadcasting coverage after publication in the *NOTW*. That had the effect of multiplying the embarrassment for the people involved. As badly as they suffered, however, they did not face a loss of their liberty, the fate of Mahmood's victims in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

Miscarriages of justice

*“Had we been allowed to take the extreme
provocation into account we would undoubtedly
have reached a different verdict.”*
— Trial jury

Although all of Mahmood’s victims in the previous chapter had their lives destroyed they escaped the humiliation of arrest, prosecution and conviction. For at least seven people, however, the outcome of their encounter with the Fake Sheikh was life-changing. In every case, it is possible to argue that they suffered from what amounted to miscarriages of justice. In each instance, they were subjected to the use of serpentine subterfuge in order to accuse them, falsely, of being drug-dealers. Exposing crime is in the public interest, but their offences were so obviously malevolently manufactured that their exposure lacked any justification.

By far the worst case – in terms of the length of the prison term he endured – involved Besnik Qema, an Albanian immigrant. Said by Mahmood to have “blagged his way into Britain by pretending to be a persecuted Kosovan”, he was accused of being “a drug-pushing pimp who moonlights as a people smuggler and arms dealer”.¹ Mahmood’s article claimed that Qema, described as a nightwatchman, dealt in cocaine, guns, prostitutes and fake passports while drawing benefits. Mahmood’s final paragraph said: “Yesterday, immigration and police officers, acting on our tip-off, pounced as Qema delivered the fake British passport”.

At face value, it appeared that Mahmood had got his man, to use the cliché, bang to rights. The police thought so too, charging Qema with possession of cocaine, intent to supply the drug, and possessing a fraudulent instrument (the forged passport). What the police did not know and, it may be argued, did not care to know, was how Qema had been encouraged to commit the crimes. Within days he appeared at London’s Bow Street magistrates court and pleaded guilty to all three charges. A month later, at Southwark crown

¹ ‘Asylum’s Mr Big: Cops swoop after we expose scandal’, *NOTW*, 13 February 2005

court, he was sentenced to prison for four-and-a-half years.

Qema appealed against the length of sentence and, in June 2005, the court of appeal reduced it by nine months. The following year, he also sought to appeal against his conviction, arguing that he had been bewildered at the time of his arrest and was unaware of the implications of pleading guilty in what were a set of extraordinary circumstances. He was stymied because there is no automatic right of appeal against a conviction from a magistrates' court if a person had pleaded guilty. Therefore, as far as was known in public, including by me, that was the end of the matter. Qema served out his prison term and years passed before the story behind Mahmood's story finally emerged to vindicate Qema's contention that he had been the victim of an elaborate sting.

Two pieces of good fortune turned everything around for Qema. First, he benefitted from the services of a pro-active solicitor, Paul Butcher, who happened to be acting for another of Mahmood's victims (see red mercury incident, chapter 8). Second, the *agent provocateur* used by Mahmood to entrap Qema, Florim Gashi, contacted me to confess his part in several Mahmood entrapments.² He revealed that Qema had been the victim of a honeytrap. Through an Albanian-language internet chatroom, Qema was contacted by a person called "Aurora", whom he believed to be a female. In fact, Gashi was pretending to be Aurora and he said he was operating on orders from Mahmood. Aurora, in promising to help Qema obtain lucrative security work with a wealthy Arab family, suggested he would improve his chances of landing the job if he got hold of drugs and forged identity documents. Although initially reluctant, Qema eventually succumbed to Aurora's pleas. He turned up to a meeting with a man called Mohammed (Mahmood) and passed him three wraps of cocaine in return for £210 of the *News of the World's* money.

Qema agreed to supply more a week later, along with a fake British passport, as requested by "Mohammed" for his cousin. During that second meeting at a London hotel, Mahmood was accompanied by one of his team, Kishan Athulathmudali. Within minutes of Qema handing over more cocaine and the passport, police officers pounced to arrest him. But Mahmood had not informed the police that Qema had been induced by him to supply the cocaine and passport as a "sweetener" in order to secure a job.

These circumstances, including Gashi's evidence about having helped to entrap Qema, were put to the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC) in 2009. It decided that Qema's conviction was "unsafe" and referred the

² Florim Gashi interview with author Roy G, 6 September 2005, Dubrovnik, Croatia. For other Gashi details, see chapters 6 & 7

case back to Southwark crown court in the belief it would not be upheld. It was not. In September 2010, the court accepted that the prosecution's failure to disclose Gashi's part in the sting may have been an abuse of process. It allowed Qema to withdraw his guilty pleas, and, in the absence of further prosecution evidence, the magistrate recorded formal not-guilty verdicts. It is truly astonishing that this significant repudiation of Mahmood's "investigation" received no publicity until I reported it in January 2011.³ Even then, there was little media interest. Qema, director of a security company rather than a nightwatchman, followed up by trying to sue the *NOTW*'s owner, News Group, for malicious prosecution. A High Court judge summarily dismissed his action.⁴

Qema's initial arrest and sentence got virtually no coverage. The CCRC decision got no coverage at all. Despite the quashing of his conviction, with its major implications for the integrity of Mahmood's journalism, there was no media interest. Qema was an innocent victim of a newspaper sting operation but, as an immigrant, he lacked a public profile. Matters were very different for an actor, John Alford.

There were many similarities in his case with that of Emma Morgan's. Like her, he was lured into committing an illegal act. Like her, his career was wrecked. Like her, he lost his home. Like her, he would go on protesting his innocence ever after. Unlike her, however, he was consigned to prison.⁵ And unlike her, the aftermath proved to be truly cataclysmic. It helped to set in train a string of events that culminated in criminal acts neither I nor Paddy, nor anyone, would seek to defend.

Alford's nightmare began one summer's day in 1997 with a phone call to his agent from a woman posing as the personal assistant of His Royal Highness Sheikh Mohammed Al-Kareem from Dubai. In fact, she was Sarah Issitt, a *NOTW* news desk administrator drafted into Mahmood's "gang" at his request.⁶ At the time, Alford was a TV star, having sprung to fame, aged 14, in the hugely popular children's series, *Grange Hill*. Then, as an adult, he graduated to another successful prime-time series, *London's Burning*. He was also a singer, having had three Top 30 hits. But his stardom was to end soon after meeting two sheikhs (Mahmood and his gang member, Akbar Ali Malik), and their entourage, at a suite in the Savoy hotel. He had been collected from his home by a Rolls-Royce driven by Alan Smith.

3 'Another reverse for the fake sheikh as victim's conviction is quashed', *The Guardian*, 31 January 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/3shpur23>

4 *Besnik Qema v News Group Newspapers Ltd*, 29 February 2012, EWHC 1146 (QB); 'Qema v News Group Newspapers Ltd', High Court (Queen's Bench Division), May 2, 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/3fksj8c8>

5 She was not arrested because she was outside British jurisdiction

6 Issitt, original police witness statement, 12 September 1997; Issitt (2021), op cit

Mahmood told Alford that if he was prepared to attend the opening of a Dubai nightclub there was a chance of landing a £1million film role opposite Robert De Niro and/or Al Pacino. To Alford, the natural next step in his career was a Hollywood movie. He took the bait. Then came the sting. Mahmood told Alford he was planning to hold a party the following Saturday and wished to obtain drugs. In response, Alford evidently showed a keen knowledge of cocaine, but said he no longer used it.⁷ However, he agreed to obtain the drug on the basis that Mahmood was now a friend.

Once they moved on to have a meal in the hotel's restaurant, Alford began to get cold feet. According to Issitt, in order to persuade him to cooperate she "went over the line" by flirting and making a blatant promise of sex. Mahmood was aware that her bold initiative was counter-productive because the approach might sound far too aggressive on the tape recordings. He was worried that Issitt had gone too far, "that we had been too pushy in terms of the inducements".⁸

By that time, Alford had acceded to the request. Like many young celebrities, he had previously taken cocaine and knew a friend who could supply it. He was handed £300 of the *NOTW*'s money and was driven by Smith to visit a dealer, where he bought two grams of cocaine and 11 grams of cannabis.⁹ While they were preparing to meet Alford, Mahmood and his team – including Malik, Conrad Brown, photographer Bradley Page, and Melvyn Heraty, a private detective posing as the sheikh's minder – had discussed his likely fate should he fall into their trap. In a video clip later obtained by *Panorama*, Mahmood was filmed saying: "If he supplies, his career's over... he's finished". He laughed loudly at the prospect. As *Panorama*'s reporter, John Sweeney, remarked: "It is impossible to watch this surveillance tape without feeling sympathy for Alford".¹⁰ Unless you were a *NOTW* journalist, such as news desk executive Greg Miskiw, who called it "an exquisite con trick".¹¹ Miskiw's journalistic rationale can be gauged from his contemptible declaration to one of his reporters: "That is what we do - we go out and destroy other people's lives".¹²

In Alford's case, that is exactly what happened. On his return to the hotel, he was caught on the concealed video camera dropping the drugs on a table. "Stupidly", he said years later, "I decided to do what they asked... I

7 Issitt (1997)

8 Issitt (2021)

9 'TV actor "tricked into supplying drugs by bogus Arab prince"', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 April 1999; 'Alford jailed for nine months', BBC News, 26 May 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/3yju2st>

10 'Panorama: How we uncovered the Fake Sheikh's sting tactics', *The Independent*, 14 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/2v9u667c>

11 Miskiw (2024), op cit, p185

12 'Pottergate: we publish the secret tapes', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 2002

just felt I was totally in over my head”.¹³ Two weeks after the Savoy meeting, the *NOTW* carried the story on three pages, with a front page headline accusing Alford of being a “cocaine dealer” and a leading article calling him “a flaming menace”.¹⁴ Within days, Alford was arrested and charged (under his real name, John Shannon) with supplying drugs. While on bail, he was fired by *London’s Burning* producers and he was dropped by his record label.

It was almost two years before he came to trial, at which he defended himself. Mahmood, experienced at giving evidence, dealt easily with Alford’s cross-examination. In answer to one question, he told Alford: “I didn’t destroy your life. You destroyed your own life... you could have said no”.¹⁵ When asked why he had believed Alford was a drug-dealer, Mahmood told the court he had received an initial tip-off from one of Alford’s showbusiness friends. He had said as much in his original article, stating he had been approached by a “contact of the star” who claimed that the actor “deals in large quantities” of cocaine. Mahmood would not, of course, identify the anonymous source. Sarah Issitt was certainly unaware of there being “any actual ‘real’ source”.¹⁶

Now, the refusal to identify a source is good journalistic practice. But a reporter relying on a single anonymous individual to launch an investigation with devastating consequences for a target opens the door to potential abuse. Several questions arise. Is the source telling the truth? What is the source’s motive? And, of course, does the source really exist? Then there are questions for the newspaper’s executives. Are they content to allow their reporter to proceed without knowing the source’s identity? Do they ever ask to know? Do they allocate resources for an expensive “sting” operation without being aware of the source?

These questions, which could be asked of every Mahmood story, were hugely significant because – in Alford’s case, as with others – the allegation of criminal activity was Mahmood’s public interest justification for his investigation. It was an essential test within the terms of the editors’ code of practice as administered by the Press Complaints Commission, the industry’s so-called regulator. A clause in the code stated that subterfuge, including the use of “hidden cameras or clandestine listening devices”, should “generally be justified only in the public interest”.¹⁷ In other words, reporters would need *prima facie* evidence of wrongdoing in order to start

13 ‘Fake sheikh wrecked my life’, *Sunday People*, 27 July 2014

14 ‘London’s Burning star is cocaine dealer,’ *NOTW*, 24 August 1997

15 ‘London’s Burning star “tricked into drug deal”’, *Daily Mirror*, 27 April 1999

16 Issitt, *op cit*

17 Clause 10, “Clandestine devices and subterfuge”, Editors’ Code of Practice, 1991-2011

inquiries that might compromise a person's privacy. To investigate without prior knowledge came to be known in the trade as "fishing expeditions", and the PCC regarded such ventures as a breach of the code.

Mahmood was acutely aware of the code's injunction, as he made clear in his first statement to the Leveson inquiry. "When I would present a possible investigation", he wrote, "I would be required to explain to the news editor or the editor why I believed the source of the story was reliable".¹⁸

He continued with an example: "If I were told by a source that a celebrity was involved in the illegal use of drugs, the first question on my lips and on those of the news editor's would be, 'How do you know? What evidence is there to support this?' Only if I, the news editor, and often the editor, were completely satisfied that the source was genuine and that there were reasonable grounds to investigate, would we start work to substantiate the allegations". But did they take his word on trust? Did they not require him to name his source?

Alford was convinced that there was no source. Aside from the single incident where he supplied cocaine on Mahmood's orders, and paid for it with *NOTW*'s money, no other evidence was produced to show he was a drug-dealer. He came to believe there might be a more sinister explanation for his being a Mahmood target. He recalled that in October 1996, after attending the National Television Awards, he went on to a party at a London nightclub where he had a "drunken argument" with the actor Ross Kemp, the then boyfriend (later husband) of Rebekah Wade (later Brooks). At the time, she was deputy editor of the *NOTW*. According to Alford, in a statement made during his legal action against News Group Newspapers for intruding into his privacy, there was an exchange between him and Kemp which began with Alford disparaging journalists.¹⁹

"I had said that the place was full of hacks and expressed how much I disliked them. Kemp said, 'my partner is a journalist' and I drunkenly said something like 'there you go then', and used foul language... I would later learn that I had clearly said the wrong thing to the wrong person ... I believe Mr Kemp told Ms Wade what I had said and, as a consequence, she subsequently set her hounds loose on me to destroy me, by which I mean that she and Ross Kemp targeted me for a false Mazher Mahmood 'sting'".

Belief is not, of course, proof. Kemp and Brooks have always denied the

18 Para 8, first written witness statement, Leveson inquiry, 14 October 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/26rtwbdn>

19 Paras 76-77, particulars of claim, John Shannon v NGN, 13 October 2021; 'Drugs sting of young actor was reprisal for nightclub spat with tabloid boss Brooks - legal documents claim', Byline Investigates, 10 September 2021 <https://tinyurl.com/yt2xj7hy>

allegation. [I wrote to Kemp and Brooks about Alford's allegation to offer them the chance to comment. Neither responded]. Given Alford's certainty that he had never dealt in drugs, it was unsurprising that he has spent years seeking the reason he was targeted by Mahmood.

In his closing address to the jury, Alford impressed many people in the court with his eloquence. Even the judge, Stephen Robbins, was moved to hail it as "brilliant".²⁰ Alford referred to himself as a victim of journalism from the dark ages, arguing that he was lured into obtaining the drugs. He declared: "I am not a drug dealer, never was, and never will be".

But the prosecuting counsel, Martin Hicks, was unimpressed by Alford's rhetoric, saying that he had given in to "greed, vanity and a desire for self-advancement".²¹

Alford did admit he was "technically" guilty of the charge, contending that where the law and justice clashed, justice deserved to win. He asked the jurors at London's Snaresbrook crown court to stand up for fairness rather than prejudice. Two of them did just that... but the other ten did not and he was found guilty on a majority verdict.

Despite Judge Robbins conceding that "a strong element of entrapment" had clearly played a significant part in Alford committing the offence, he thought a jail term appropriate.²² He sentenced Alford to nine months.²³ In the event, after agreeing to wear an electronic tag, he served only six weeks, which took account of previous time spent in custody.²⁴ He lost his appeal, and his application to appeal to the House of Lords was denied.

Aged just 27, his entertainment career was effectively over. Finding it impossible to get work as an actor, he scraped a living as a roofer, scaffolder and minicab driver. There were periods when he was forced to survive on benefits. It is fair to say that from this point on, a life that had seemed set fair, spiraled out of control. Before I deal with his chaotic personal life, his many clashes with authority and his ultimate disgrace, it is important to record key events related to the case itself.

Firstly, Sarah Issitt, who broke down while being cross-examined by Alford, registered her regret at taking part in the entrapment. In 2021, some twenty-two years after giving her evidence, she confessed to "not telling

20 'Praise for "drug" star', *Daily Mirror*, 5 May 1999; 'Alford behind bars for cocaine dealing', *Daily Record*, 6 May 1999; 'You will be jailed', *Daily Mirror*, 6 May 1999

21 'TV fireman faces jail over drugs', *The Guardian*, 6 May 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/5t3u2ckf>
Hicks would sing a very different song about Mahmood three years later in the Beckham kidnap case (see chapter 7)

22 'Actor jailed for dealing in drugs', *The Guardian*, 27 May 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/mt4u6abm>

23 'TV star jailed on drugs offences', *Liverpool Echo*, 26 May 1999

24 'London's Burning star released', *BBC*, 16 July 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/2tswretw>

the truth during the trial” and to having “a guilty conscience about what happened to Mr Alford and my own role in it”. She described herself as being, in 1997 and 1999, “a stupid young and naïve girl” who “got involved in something that I didn’t know was so dark”.²⁵ In retracting her earlier evidence, she said that during the meal “Alford was trying to avoid agreeing to get the drugs, and we had to pull out all the stops by way of persuasion”.

Her ploy included “telling him, falsely, that I was bisexual and that me and my girlfriend would come and ‘party’ with him if he could get the drugs. He knew I was offering a threesome. I did get carried away... He did eventually agree and went and got them. But I had gone too far.” Issitt explained: “It was made clear to me that we could not succeed in what we were trying to do to Mr Alford if there was any evidence that we had been too pushy in terms of the inducements offered when he was unwilling to co-operate. If it came out that the nature of conversation involved these inducements the whole story would fall”. Issitt was convinced that her pushiness was the reason why, despite the conversation being recorded, Mahmood claimed the tape was blank.

Secondly, aside from the scale of insults heaped on Alford by Mahmood and the newspaper, there were surprisingly vitriolic attacks on two of his supporters, his then fiancée Tina Mahon and the former world champion boxer, Terry Marsh. They were named in an article which referred, inaccurately, to Alford’s “thuggish sidekicks” having made “attempts to intimidate” witnesses.²⁶

Both of them sued the *NOTW* for libel. Mahon settled out of court for an undisclosed sum; Marsh was awarded £30,000 in damages after the newspaper’s counsel admitted the libel and conceded that Marsh “was not involved in any improper conduct whatsoever”.²⁷ An apology duly appeared in the newspaper.²⁸ During the trial, both Mahon and Marsh noticed a couple of threatening figures in the courtroom who, it transpired, were “two personal protection security operatives” hired from a private investigations company for £300 by the *NOTW*. Although Mahmood suggested they were there because he required protection, Issitt believed their presence was meant to intimidate her, to ensure she supported the *NOTW*’s version of what had happened.²⁹ She confirmed that she was never threatened by Alford or anyone connected to him.

A couple of months after Alford was released from prison he attended

²⁵ Issitt, op cit

²⁶ ‘Flaming liar’, *NOTW*, 9 May 1999

²⁷ ‘Paper must pay ex-boxer £30,000’, *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 16 February 2001

²⁸ ‘Correction: Tina Mahon and Terry Marsh’, *NOTW*, 11 February 2001

²⁹ Issitt, op cit

the trial of another man entrapped by Mahmood, the Earl of Hardwicke, and Mahmood took the opportunity to make a further accusation against the actor. During cross-examination Mahmood spoke, as he did often, about receiving death threats due to his work in exposing criminals. He said: "During this case I have asked my barrister to make representations because I have been subject to threats and intimidation in relation to this case". Hardwicke's counsel, Alun Jones QC, asked: "By whom?" Mahmood replied: "John Shannon has turned up today with some of his friends. Three days ago, I was informed by our crime correspondent that Mr Shannon had taken out a contract on me. He is here in court today, obviously to support Lord Hardwicke".³⁰

In his memoir, written some ten years after the sting, Mahmood professed to liking Alford because of his "cheeky boyish charm".³¹ However, his antipathy towards the actor for daring to describe his journalism as harking back to the dark ages was evident. He accused Alford variously of self-denial, self-righteousness, being a drug connoisseur, offering a feeble defence of entrapment, making a bizarre speech to the court, trying to bribe his driver, Alan Smith, and "bleating to the European Court of Human Rights" (another failed appeal).³²

Not every action failed, however. When it was discovered that the *NOTW* had commissioned private investigators to carry out unlawful information gathering against Alford, as a prelude to the sting and during the trial, he sued the paper's publisher, Murdoch's News Group Newspapers. The company settled the case by paying Alford a rumoured six-figure sum.

Alford's life story from 1999 onwards became a sad saga of broken domestic relationships, periods of apparent breakdown and bizarre behaviour which led to further convictions. In one incident in 2019, officers were called after Alford clambered into a bin lorry in north London. After throwing a dustbin at the lorry and smashing the windscreen, he shouted that the police were in league with Rupert Murdoch, Rebekah Brooks and Mahmood.³³ One of his sympathetic supporters believed that the episode, and others like it, indicated how Alford's feeling of injustice about the newspaper sting had driven him mad.

That may be so. However, it does not excuse the crimes he committed

30 'Actor placed contract on my life, reporter says', *The Times*, 17 September 1999

31 *Confessions*:189

32 European Court of Human Rights declared Alford's application inadmissible, 6 April 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/58sduewc>

33 'John Alford: London's Burning and Grange Hill star admits resisting arrest', *BBC News*. 29 January 2019 <https://tinyurl.com/4bpmeya3>; 'TV star shouted "My name's John Alford, I'm fighting Rupert Murdoch & corrupt police officers" as he was arrested for hijacking bin lorry', *London Economic*, 29 January 2019 <https://tinyurl.com/mmsp8kxz6>

in 2022, which cannot possibly be ascribed to his continuing hurt over the *NOTW* entrapment. Alford was convicted of sexually assaulting two girls, aged 14 and 15.³⁴ After the verdict, which was delivered in September 2025 just before this book went to press, he was granted bail. But the judge at St Albans crown court warned him to expect a custodial sentence.

Another who served a prison term after a Mahmood “exposure” was Alex Smith, a magician, hypnotist and self-styled “media prankster”. It was a bizarre escapade. According to Smith, who was 22 years old at the time, he tried to hoax Mahmood in a stunt that backfired spectacularly. He sent an anonymous letter to the *NOTW* in which he claimed that he (Smith) was a “big time” pimp as part of his plan to expose Mahmood’s unethical practices. According to Mahmood, he decided to approach the magician following an eccentric appearance on the Kilroy TV show in March 1998 during which Smith exposed himself.³⁵ As a result, the two men met at a Manchester hotel and, during that encounter, Smith was filmed receiving £400 from Mahmood to acquire a thousand fake £1 coins, which he later handed to the reporter. This transaction was the secondary part to Mahmood’s story, which centred mainly on allegations that Smith offered to provide “12-year-old girls for sex”.³⁶

But it was the bogus coins that led to Smith being arrested and sent for trial at Manchester crown court on two charges under the 1999 Forgery and Counterfeiting Act.³⁷ The following year he pleaded guilty while stressing that he believed he was taking part in a publicity stunt. The judge took his plea into account by giving him a lighter jail sentence, six months, than might have been expected.³⁸ Smith, who worked under various stage names such as Alex Leroy and Dr Jonathan Royle, has been fighting ever since to clear his name, making his case in two lengthy self-published books and a website.³⁹ Although he lost appeals against his conviction and failed to persuade the CCRC to declare his conviction unsafe, his campaign did result in a successful claim in phone hacking litigation against Murdoch’s company.

Prosecution following a Mahmood sting also took Brenda Tonnesson to prison. According to his article, youngsters queued outside the woman’s “seedy den” in Eastbourne, Sussex, to buy drugs. A man who claimed to

34 ‘Former Grange Hill actor John Alford found guilty of sexually assaulting teenage girls’, *The Guardian*, 5 September 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/2ua6wx4z>

35 ‘Kilroy gets nudes flash’, *The Sun*, 24 March 1998; ‘Stripper hired by TV Kilroy’, *Daily Mirror*, 24 March 1998

36 ‘“Kiddies” TV star is drug-dealing pimp’, *NOTW*, 12 April 1998

37 ‘Entertainer is charged’, *Heywood Advertiser*, 11 June 1998; ‘Entertainer on trial’, *Heywood Advertiser*, 27 August 1998

38 ‘£1 trick jails a hypnotist’, *Manchester Evening News*, 2 March 1999; ‘Belly button man jailed for coin con’, *Shropshire Star*, 2 March 1999

39 *Imposter*, Vols 1 and 2, <https://tinyurl.com/4v3e5ssp>

know her had introduced her to Mahmood and his photographer who told her they worked for a sheikh whose brother was a heroin addict. Could she help? Once she agreed to do so, they gave her £50 and she handed over four wraps of the drug, a total of 0.93 grams.⁴⁰ After the story was published, Tonnesson was badly beaten by local vigilantes and her life was threatened. She fled to Merseyside.

At her crown court trial in 1997, she pleaded guilty to supplying a Class A drug and was sentenced to a year in prison.⁴¹ It was admitted she was a heroin addict with two convictions for minor drug offences, but she denied dealing. Tonnesson appealed against the length of her sentence and received a sympathetic hearing from the appeal court judges, chaired by Lord Justice Otton. Noting the trouble that Mahmood had taken to entrap her, he thought people (the public) would be left with a sense of unease that it had been necessary to go to such lengths to put her in the dock. He registered surprise that the trial judge had not taken entrapment into account as a mitigating factor.⁴²

He then made two crucial points: firstly, although it was legitimate for police officers to entrap criminals, in such circumstances some mitigation of the sentence was possible. Where the entrapment was by journalists, even greater leniency was reasonable, and the fact of the sting should be mentioned. Secondly, the fact the woman had been “set up to commit the offence” should not have been ignored. She had been tempted by the journalists to obtain and supply the drug to them, and had committed the offence only as a result of their blandishments. Had the men been police officers, that would have lightened the sentence.⁴³ In the exceptional circumstances of the case, therefore, Otton and his fellow judges reduced the woman’s sentence to six months.⁴⁴ It is surely fair to wonder why the CPS, aware of the perils of evidence gained through entrapment, should have prosecuted Tonnesson on that evidence alone.

The Hardwicke sting had similar features to the one perpetrated on Alford. Joseph Philip Sebastian Yorke, the 10th Earl of Hardwicke, and his business partner, Stefan Thwaites, were running a scooter franchise in Tooting, south London, in 1998 when they were contacted by a man claiming to represent a wealthy Arab businessman. Then Mahmood, who introduced

40 ‘Reporter exposes heroin dealer’, *Eastbourne Gazette*, 24 December 1997

41 ‘Maz bags baddie number 88: Kiddie heroin dealer jailed’, *NOTW*, 21 December 1997

42 ‘Law Report: Entrapment by journalists mitigated sentence’, *The Independent*, 20 February 1998 <https://tinyurl.com/anbtd3fu>; ‘Journalist entrapment element in sentencing’, Law report, *The Times*, 3 March 1998

43 The decision was cited in April 2004 at the European Court of Human Rights when it considered the case of John Alford (see chapter 7) <https://tinyurl.com/58sduewc>

44 ‘Drug dealer’s sentence cut’, *Eastbourne Herald*, 20 February 1998

himself as “Perry Khan”, called into their showroom to say the businessman would like to make a giant purchase. He was willing to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds to buy fifty off-road scooters, almost their entire stock. Profits were anything but healthy, and it was unsurprising that the pair leapt at the offer. Mahmood, as ever, had baited the hook generously enough to dazzle his targets.

As requested, they turned up at the Savoy Hotel to be shown into a suite where they were greeted by Mahmood and “the sheikh” (played by one of his team, Ali Malik). Negotiating the deal was something of a formality. Hardwicke and Thwaites were only too delighted to accept the sheikh’s offer. In celebratory mood, encouraged by Mahmood, they had enjoyed several glasses of champagne before he sprang his trap. How about us having a line or two of cocaine? Surely, they knew a dealer? Mahmood handed over £200 of the *NOTW*’s money to the men in order to pay for the drug.

The procurement was crucial because the law must be broken to provide the *NOTW* with its essential public interest justification. Hardwicke was no stranger to cocaine, having previously received a police caution for possession. He and Thwaites duly arranged for two grams to be delivered to the hotel. On its arrival, covert video cameras recorded Hardwicke saying: “Come on, bring on the Charlie. I want a big fat line”. He was also filmed snorting it through a £5 note.

The following day, Mahmood gilded the lily by persuading Hardwicke to give him a tour of the House of Lords and giving him £120 for a further 1.5 grams of cocaine. All was revealed the following Sunday in Mahmood’s page one article, with two more pages inside.⁴⁵ As a result, Hardwicke and Thwaites were arrested and charged with supplying a Class A drug.

A year later, Mahmood spent almost three days of a six-day trial in the witness box and Hardwicke’s barrister, Alun Jones, put him under intense pressure during his cross-examination (part of which appears in the previous chapter). Jones’s questions were designed to highlight the underhand nature of the “investigation” and the insistent pressure on Hardwicke to supply drugs. Even so, the evidence against the earl was overwhelming. As I wrote at the time, “it might be thought that jurors would be somewhat prejudiced against a privileged young peer indulging in such hedonistic, and illegal, activities”.⁴⁶ But the consistent line taken by Hardwicke’s counsel, during his cross-examination and in his final address, proved persuasive.

Having accused Mahmood of being an “impulsive and malicious liar”,

45 ‘Drugs baron sits in the Lords’, *NOTW*, 6 September 1998

46 Roy Greenslade, ‘Shut your trap’, *The Guardian*, 27 September 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/b8w4ny78>

Jones argued that the reporter's conduct and the *NOTW*'s editorial policy involved "serious breaches of the criminal law".⁴⁷ Thwaites's lawyer, Deborah Morris, was also forthright in her condemnation of the reporter, accusing his team of having spiked the champagne and describing Mahmood as a "foul-mouthed liar" who was as "slippery as an eel and about as treacherous as a snake".⁴⁸ The effect of the defence's line of attack meant that the jury became as interested in the nature of the sting as they were by the offences. After retiring for seven hours, they found Hardwicke and Thwaites guilty but handed a note to the judge saying they had had difficulty in reaching their decision. Their rider said:

*"The jury would like to say that the circumstances surrounding this case have made it very difficult for us to reach a decision. Had we been allowed to take the extreme provocation into account we would undoubtedly have reached a different verdict".*⁴⁹

This was a very rare act by a jury, and Judge Pontius felt he must acknowledge it. Therefore, his pre-sentence statement was carefully calibrated to balance criticism of the convicted men with criticism of the newspaper. Of Hardwicke and Thwaites, he said: "I am more used, when sentencing defendants who have been convicted of the supply of illegal drugs, to seeing in the dock men and women of deprived backgrounds and disadvantaged circumstances".⁵⁰ But he conceded that their decision to procure the cocaine "was the result of a sophisticated and obviously carefully planned piece of subterfuge... Were it not for that elaborate sting you would not, I accept, have committed these particular offences".

Pontius continued: "In all the circumstances, and given the jury's carefully considered note, which I read as a plea to me to exercise particular mercy in this case, I have concluded that the circumstances are so exceptional that I am justified in suspending the prison sentences". Both Hardwicke's two-year jail sentence and Thwaites's 15-month sentence were suspended for two years. In a final comment, the judge stressed that although the sting did not amount to an abuse of criminal justice "it nevertheless seems that journalists should carefully examine and consider their approach to such investigations". The *News of the World* hierarchy, especially editor Phil Hall and legal manager Tom Crone, were extremely upset by the outcome of the

47 'Suspended sentence for drug peer', *BBC News*, 22 September 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/23p74d9w>

48 'Diana claim in peer's cocaine case', *The Herald*, 21 September 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/caz7tcxz>

49 'Mercy for earl snared into drug dealing', *The Independent*, 23 September 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/5cjcxhz5>

50 'Drug peer sentenced', *NOTW*, 26 September 1999

trial. In their view, it was the judge's decision which was exceptional, and they accused "crafty defence lawyers" of convincing the jury that Hardwicke had been "set up".⁵¹

Hardwicke and Thwaites appealed unsuccessfully against their conviction. In upholding the verdict, the appeal judges explained that while "there is no defence of entrapment in English law", evidence obtained through its use "is admissible".⁵² In other words, the criminal act itself was not necessarily negated by the method employed to reveal it. Nor, they ruled, was the information revealed by Mahmood and his team invalidated by their previous history. The judges rejected Jones's submission that Judge Pontius should have been made aware of "the full track record of the journalists". They ruled that it was right for the case to be judged without reference to a "wider examination of the *News of the World's* journalistic activity". This was a hugely significant judgment in Mahmood's favour, the implications of which are explored in the next chapter.

And then there was the disturbing case of Neil Montgomery. He was an academic employed by GW Pharmaceuticals, a company which pioneered treatment for multiple sclerosis through the application of a cannabis plant derivative. Montgomery, who had given evidence to the House of Lords on cannabis, was in the process of finishing a PhD thesis in February 2002 when he was approached by a man (Mahmood) who said he had a pharmaceutical company in Pakistan and wanted to talk about the medical uses of cannabis. The following day he met the man again at an Edinburgh hotel to discuss the possibility of Mahmood's company obtaining a licence to produce cannabis-based medicines. A day later, with Montgomery having assured himself in online research that Mahmood's company, Pak Pharmaceuticals, existed, Mahmood sprang his trap. He said he had friends coming from London and would like them to enjoy some cannabis. Could Montgomery help? He could and did, handing over two small packets of herbal cannabis.

The following Sunday, the *NOTW* ran Mahmood's article accusing Montgomery of being a cocaine dealer.⁵³ Alerted to the story by a *Guardian* reporter, Montgomery argued that the article was "peppered with falsehoods" and called it "a pantomime".⁵⁴ Everyone who knows me, he said, "knows I am not a coke dealer". But the damage to Montgomery was life-changing. He lost his job with GW Pharmaceuticals and his freelance work dried up. He had to sell his house and was forced to declare bankruptcy. Some friends

51 'We must wage war on vermin', *NOTW*, 26 September 1999

52 Court of appeal judgment, 10 November 2000 <https://tinyurl.com/y79kwjv4>

53 'Labour's top drug advisor is cocaine dealer', *NOTW*, 24 February 2002

54 'Drug adviser denies dealing in cocaine', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/47ydcscd>

turned their backs on him. He suffered from anxiety and paranoia.

Montgomery, who had previously testified as an expert witness on behalf of 180 people who had used cannabis for therapeutic purposes, found himself in court on a charge of supplying the drug. He pleaded guilty. In mitigation, his lawyer explained that, although Montgomery had been “rash and foolish”, he had been the victim of “an elaborate hoax”. The sheriff, while accepting that Montgomery had been “set up”, sentenced him to carry out 150 hours of community service.⁵⁵ The *NOTW* boasted of unmasking a “pro-cannabis campaigner” and “nailing” a “pot guru”.⁵⁶ Notably, there was no reference whatsoever to him dealing cocaine, the allegation originally made in Mahmood’s article, for which there was no evidence. But, with Montgomery’s reputation damaged, a libel action based on that inaccuracy would have been impossible to mount.

A key question remained. How had Mahmood first discovered details about Montgomery which enabled him to pull off his sting? According to a legal claim against the *NOTW*’s publisher, News Group Newspapers (NGN), Montgomery believed that voicemail messages on his mobile phone were intercepted by private investigators.⁵⁷ It was this unlawful information gathering which gave Mahmood the kind of knowledge which enabled him to manipulate Montgomery.

In Montgomery’s case, as with Alford and Hardwicke, the emphasis was on encouraging the target to break the law by purchasing or supplying drugs. Although drug-taking can be adjudged as either illegal and immoral, or both, it was apparent even to the sanctimonious *NOTW* that usage alone was not reprehensible enough to warrant subterfuge and entrapment. Accusing targets of hypocrisy – of not living up to their public (role model) image – was all very well, but to ensure that the method used to obtain the story passed the public interest test, it was more acceptable if the users could be transformed into “dealers”.

To put Mahmood’s efforts at the newspaper in context, it is important to record that he was far from the only reporter at the *NOTW* engaged in exposing drug use by the famous.⁵⁸ Nor was he the only one to indulge in subterfuge. What made Mahmood stand out from his colleagues was his productivity, his ubiquity – turning over small-time criminals in Bradford

55 ‘Cannabis expert was also dealer’, *BBC News*, 10 September 2003; ‘Government drug adviser who dealt cannabis avoids going to prison’, *Daily Mail*, 11 September 2003

56 ‘We nail Labour pot guru’, *NOTW*, 14 September 2003

57 Claim BL-2022-001699, Neil Montgomery and News Group Newspapers, 11 July 2023

58 Examples: ‘Blue Peter goody-goody is a cocaine snorting sneak’, *NOTW*, 18 October 1998; ‘This is Camilla’s son high on coke’, *NOTW*, 16 May 1999; England rugby captain exposed as drug dealer’, *NOTW*, 23 May 1999

one minute, a celebrity the next, a member of the royal family the next – and his theatricality. As the Fake Sheikh, he had created a memorable personality, a figure of fun with a serious agenda. As such, he was not only a story-getter but, very often, he *was* the story. He was the public face of the *News of the World*. Indeed, for many people, he *was* the *News of the World*.

Chapter 7

Bend it like Florim: the Beckham kidnap plot

“Maz directed everything. He was Spielberg.”

— Florim Gashi

As the twentieth century neared its end, what had once been beneficial about Britain’s popular journalism – the melding of information and entertainment in a form that was both appealing and enlightening for a mass audience – had all but vanished. From the 1970s onwards, newspapers had lost their way, the deleterious consequence of Rupert Murdoch’s commercial success as a proprietor at the expense of his rivals. His baleful influence on editorial content in order to maximise sales had all but eliminated the concept of public service as the basic purpose for newspaper publication.

Nowhere was this more obvious than at his *News of the World* where the only criterion for content was its effect on circulation. Therefore, the single task for his editors was to increase or, at the very least, to maintain the sales margin over competitors. Yet they were obliged to achieve this during a period in which the overall press audience was in inexorable decline, especially on Sundays. Inevitably, it meant that the paper with a predilection for appealing to the basest of human characteristics – an overweening interest in sexual tittle-tattle, celebrity gossip and sleazy crime – doubled down on its traditional agenda. Given that few people, if any, chose to speak to the *NOTW*, its reporters went to increasingly extreme lengths to obtain printable material.

For Mahmood, extreme lengths were his speciality. And nowhere was this more obvious than in his fabricated story about the conspiracy to abduct Victoria Beckham. It cannot be told without introducing his so-called informant, Florim Gashi. Before we meet him, it is important to recognise that no-one emerges from this outlandish affair with any honour. Not Gashi, not Mahmood, not the *NOTW*, not Scotland Yard, not the Crown Prosecution Service, and not the Attorney General. The five men accused of the plot,

immigrants and asylum-seekers, some of them thieves, some of them would-be thieves, all of them down on their luck and open to persuasion, were completely innocent of plotting to kidnap Victoria. However, at the outset, it should be said that two were guilty of theft and all of them were, arguably, guilty of venality and vulgarity. Moral crimes possibly, not criminal ones.

So, who was Florim Gashi? He told me he was born in April 1976 in Podujevo, a town near Pristina, capital of Kosovo, the Balkan region in which ethnic Albanians, like Gashi, were then struggling for independence from neighbouring Serbia.¹ The intensity of the conflict was deepening in March 1998 when he left to seek asylum in Britain.² Fluent in Albanian and Serbo-Croat, Gashi was quick to learn English on his arrival in London. From the outset, he found it difficult to make ends meet. Short and slight, he was not built for manual work, and by his own account, he had little education. Even so, he was street smart and clever enough to secure a succession of low-paid jobs. Living to an extent on the margins, he got involved in low-level crime. Early in 2000, he received two police cautions, one for carrying a knife and another for receiving stolen goods. The following year, he was arrested for trying to cash a stolen cheque and for possessing a false passport. He received a suspended four-month jail sentence on each charge.

His fortunes changed months later when he realised he might profit from selling stories about crimes rather than committing them. Where better to start than within his own Kosovan expatriate community with a story about a provider of forged passports? After all, he had just been sentenced for possessing one. Getting in touch with Mahmood was easy because the *NOTW* regularly provided a contact number beneath his articles. Gashi's first tip to Mahmood concerned a Kosovan "gang" selling fake passports – said to be manufactured at a bar restaurant on Wandsworth Road, south London – through a mosque in Brixton.³ It resulted in one man, Shaheen Begolli, being arrested and sentenced to jail for a year. The judge also awarded the newspaper £300 from Begolli's funds as compensation for the fee Mahmood had paid him for the forged Spanish passport.⁴ Although an unexceptional story by Mahmood's standards, it was interesting that, some nine years' later, he chose to list it as one of his "top convictions".⁵ Both he and Gashi immediately understood they could be useful to each other.

1 Taped interview with author Roy G, Dubrovnik, 6 September 2005

2 Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008 and then won recognition as an independent state

3 'Fake passport scam', *NOTW*, 30 December 2001

4 'Passport to prison: Crook we exposed is jailed.. and ordered to pay us £300', *NOTW*, 2 June 2002

5 'Mazher Mahmood: Top 12 court victories', *NOTW*, 10 July 2011

Although Gashi wasn't paid for the passport story, he guessed, rightly, that money would be forthcoming down the line.⁶

It is necessary to state, as Mahmood and the *NOTW* did endlessly, that Gashi was a proven liar. This made him anything but a reliable source and considerably undermined his credibility on those occasions when he acted as a witness against his former employer. I was never under any illusion that he had lied many times and did not accept his statements at face value. Despite that, once he changed sides to denounce Mahmood, his recantations had more than a whiff of truth about them. Whenever I was able to check details of his allegations, I found him to have been honest, as did the lawyers he helped. When set against the "official" *News of the World* version of events, his alternative was always the more plausible.

There was no disagreement between Mahmood and Gashi that they worked together on various stories – at least fifteen of them, according to Gashi⁷ – over the following couple of years. The level of Gashi's participation in each case was unclear, with both men later offering different interpretations about their relationship. Mahmood maintained that Gashi was a tipster who, on his own initiative, sometimes manufactured stories. Gashi, however, maintained that it was Mahmood who was the master manipulator, instructing him on what was required. He merely did as he was told. In Gashi's colourful Hollywood allusion, "Maz directed everything. He was Spielberg".⁸

Gashi's involvement in his second story for Mahmood illustrates the difficulty in getting at the truth. It concerned claims that traffic wardens in Wandsworth, south London, were dealing in drugs. Gashi happened to be a warden at the time, employed by the parking company, Apcoa. After tipping off Mahmood, he was teamed with Mahmood's cousin, "Jaws" Qureshi, to provide the necessary taped evidence of wardens engaging in drugs transactions.⁹ But who was the puppet-master, pulling the strings to entrap the wardens? Mahmood or Gashi? Years later, they blamed each other. The story itself was, by Mahmood's standards, mundane. It did not get a major slot in the paper, appearing only on pages 18 and 19, and, as so often, was wildly exaggerated. To describe a couple of people selling small quantities of heroin and cannabis as "drug traffickers" was absurd.¹⁰ There was a follow-

6 Taped interview, op cit. Gashi told me he wasn't paid for that specific story, but he suggested elsewhere that he received £1,000 in cash from Mahmood

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

9 Gashi witness statement, Alin Turcu vs News Group Newspapers, 21 September 2005

10 'Drug traffickers: Parking wardens peddle heroin on the High St', *NOTW*, 1 September 2002; 'Wardens caught in drugs "sting"', *News Shopper*, 9 September 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/dbxjy52z>

up article about the refunding of parking fines imposed by the offending wardens.¹¹ Elsewhere, there was also a report that the wardens were fired.¹² The woman named in the article later claimed Gashi had provided her with the drug,¹³ but the truth remains unclear. The long-term significance of the story was Gashi's involvement and its connection, through him, to Mahmood's most audacious and notorious sting: the fabricated plot to abduct Victoria Beckham.

Gashi, promised money by Mahmood for his drug-dealing wardens' tale, seized on another potential pay-day after learning through his Albanian acquaintances that men were trying to sell a jewelled turban (or antique crown) stolen from the vault of Sotheby's auction house.¹⁴ Mahmood was interested enough to encourage Gashi to set up a meeting with the two men, an Albanian named Luli Azem Krifsha and a Romanian, Jay Sorin.¹⁵ They told Mahmood, who posed as a wealthy potential buyer, that they were seeking £40,000 for a turban they wrongly thought to be worth ten times as much. What happened after that meeting is a matter of a dispute which was to have far-reaching consequences. According to Mahmood, he couldn't interest his bosses in the story of a stolen turban and, while absorbing that rejection, Gashi called to say the men were part of "a dangerous gang" who were planning to kidnap a Saudi prince. Then, supposedly, Krifsha switched targets by suggesting they abduct Beckham instead. According to Gashi, the switch of target from the prince to Victoria was entirely Mahmood's idea.

Whatever the case, whether it was Krifsha, Gashi or Mahmood who instigated the plot, there is no dispute that Mahmood's technical expert, Conrad Brown, fitted Gashi with recording equipment, including a pinhole camera, to record conversations between Krifsha, Sorin, and three other alleged gang members. They were Krifsha's Romanian flatmate, Joe Rivas, who had previously worked at Sotheby's; a cash-strapped Romanian doctor, Adrian Pasareanu, who was in Britain to extend his medical qualifications; and his Romanian flatmate, 18-year-old Alin Turcu.¹⁶ Some of the nine covertly taped recordings were made at the Atoca restaurant on Wandsworth Road, a bar that also featured in Gashi's passports story. Another was made at a pub in Brixton. At least one took place at Gashi's flat. It stretches credulity

11 'Payback time: Drug wardens' 3,600 parking tickets cancelled', *NOTW*, 8 September 2002

12 "'Sting' traffic wardens fired', *News Shopper*, 27 September 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/mrx8msbe>

13 Brian Altman, prosecuting counsel, Middlesex Guildhall crown court, 2 June 2003

14 Mahmood described it as a crown in his first article, as a turban in his first police statement, and as a crown in *Confessions*, p89

15 Krifsha was a pseudonym. His real name was Lulesim (or Lulim) Balliu. Sorin's given first name was Rusu

16 Turcu was a pseudonym used to gain entry to Britain. His real name was Bogdan Stefan Maris

to read them as proof of a plot. A fairer assessment shows them to be little more than the equivalent of pub badinage in which the participants, three of whom were petty criminals, were engaged in a silly fantasy.

Several points were clear from the transcripts of the recordings. Firstly, in 256 pages, there were noticeably few references to Victoria Beckham. Secondly, Gashi struggled to maintain their interest in her kidnap or, indeed, the kidnap of anyone. Thirdly, the discussions were so disjointed it was impossible to perceive any semblance of a plot. In fact, the stand-out feature of the tapes is their incoherence. There was no point at which the five men sat down together and talked about the kidnap. As conspiracies go, it was childishly chaotic, with no-one appearing to take it seriously. The first person to raise Victoria's name was Gashi, and he had to regularly remind the men of their target. As Sorin remarked to his friend Peter: "He wants us to kidnap Victoria Beckham".¹⁷ The surreal nature of their conversations was perfectly illustrated by Pasareanu's comment: "I want to play against Liverpool for Manchester United in place of Beckham".¹⁸

Gashi maintained the tapes were doctored and that at least two were destroyed because they revealed his coaching of the men, urging them to follow the script Mahmood had prepared in advance. "In particular", he said in later evidence, "there was a recording made at the claimant's [Alin Turcu's] home on the night of Thursday 24 October which showed clearly that the whole Beckham kidnap plot was a joke".¹⁹ He added: "I had to prompt Adrian to say the right things [on film]". Mahmood trenchantly denied that claim, arguing the plot was all Gashi's doing. What he could not deny was the part played by "Jaws" Qureshi.

At Mahmood's suggestion, Gashi introduced him to the "gang", using the cover name Ahmed, as the potential driver of the getaway car. The tapes record him mentioning Victoria's name even more often than Gashi. Then there is the matter of the gun. Gashi claimed Mahmood insisted "he needed to see one of the five carrying a gun".²⁰ So, Gashi bought one, a fake pistol, from his former Apcoa traffic warden supervisor, Robin Hallsworth.²¹ The weapon, known as an RIP (Replica Imitation Forearm), would have looked real enough to someone without a knowledge of guns.²² Pasareanu would

17 Recording transcript CGB/9, dated 27 October 2002

18 Recording transcript CGB/7, dated 26 October 2002

19 Gashi witness statement in Alin Turcu vs News Group Newspapers, 21 September 2005

20 Ibid

21 Hallsworth confirmed this in a formal statement to Gashi's lawyer. Gashi's girlfriend, Dominique Morris, also confirmed seeing Gashi with the gun. In Gashi's signed statement to police on 9 November 2002, he lied by saying it was Adrian's gun. He acknowledged the lie to me.

22 It is unclear whether it was a BB pistol (using ball bearings) or an airsoft one, utilising lightweight plastic projectile balls

have been unaware it was a fake when he was covertly filmed posing with it at Gashi's flat. None of the others saw it, let alone touched it.

Mahmood's next requirement was for at least one of the five to be photographed near the Beckhams' home in Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire, jokingly known as "Beckingham Palace". Gashi persuaded Sorin to take the trip by pretending that his girlfriend worked as a nanny for a wealthy family and that it provided an opportunity for a robbery. He wanted to show him the house. Sorin was accompanied by two Romanian friends, known only as John and Peter, as his putative burglary accomplices. Sorin didn't know he was being taken to the Beckhams' house, and the other four knew nothing of the trip in advance. Gashi, who had no idea where the Beckhams lived, relied on Mahmood – who was in contact from a following car with Conrad Brown – to guide him to the address. On arrival, Sorin was duly pictured, without his knowledge, close to the entrance of the Beckhams' property.

Some of the taped talk concerned the method for capturing Victoria – a mysterious chloroform-like spray – and the place where she was to be hidden, a flat behind a disused newsagent's shop on Brixton Hill. Amid the laughter, there was at least one blood-curdling reference to the possible need to murder her and her children (three-year-old Brooklyn and new-born baby, Romeo). As alarming as that might seem, it did not come across as anything more than inappropriate, tasteless black humour interspersed with fanciful bravado. What is clear throughout is that whenever the conversation moved away from the kidnapping both Gashi and Qureshi reintroduced the subject. They continually had to keep the "gang" on track. The five were the most casual of conspirators.

Even if it is accepted that Gashi was the architect of the plot, as Mahmood asserted, it was blindingly obvious that Mahmood was a pro-active partner in the enterprise. He ensured Gashi was wired up; he arranged for his cousin to be recruited as driver; and he shadowed Gashi on the trip to the Beckhams. From start to finish, over a period of less than three weeks, Mahmood was across each facet at every stage. It is impossible to see Mahmood in the subsidiary role, not least when we take account of the similar methods of subterfuge and persuasion he had previously employed to mastermind his stories. The notion that Gashi, of his own volition, had the wit and knowledge to organise every component of the plot in order to comply with the newspaper's (and the police's) evidential requirements was truly incredible. Mahmood had the experience, the track record, the resources and, of course, the cunning. Gashi was, without doubt, duplicitous. He admitted it to me and, in various affidavits, to lawyers and to Scotland Yard. But he didn't have enough savvy to engineer a story of such magnitude. Nor is it believable that these five men, some of them criminals, all of them

displaying a relaxed attitude towards the law, had any genuine intention of abducting Victoria Beckham.

By autumn 2002, she was, courtesy of being a member of the Spice Girls pop group and through her marriage to Manchester United's star footballer, David Beckham, one of the world's most recognisable celebrities. In view of the couple's reputed wealth, she might have been considered an understandable kidnap target. Understandable, but so highly improbable as to be unimaginable given that the abduction of a famous person in Britain in modern times had never happened.²³ For Mahmood, that was an irrelevant detail. The very idea of a gang of gun-wielding foreigners plotting to hold lovely Posh Spice to ransom had all the ingredients he knew were guaranteed to sell many thousands of newspapers, with the added bonus of boosting his own journalistic kudos.

Mahmood and his *News of the World* editor, Rebekah Wade (later Brooks), faced a dilemma. They knew they must inform the police of a potential major crime, but they wanted to ensure the exclusivity of their story. As the happy recipient down the years of Scotland Yard leaks, Wade knew she could not trust the police to keep the Beckham name secret. If that was the first irony, then the second was the visit to the *NOTW* office of a senior Yard officer who, after prompting from Sotheby's head of security, was investigating the theft of the turban along with a painting and four antique books. That officer was Detective Inspector Ian Horrocks, who just happened to be head of the Metropolitan Police kidnap team. Yet, at that first meeting with Mahmood, he was unaware of any kidnap plot. He learned only that Mahmood had an informant inside a gang of thieves, who were armed. It wasn't until a subsequent meeting with Horrocks, at a hotel in Victoria on Wednesday 30 October 2002, that Mahmood revealed the kidnap conspiracy. Crucially, as a consequence of the wishes of his editor, Wade, he withheld the name of the target.²⁴

On that basis, according to Mahmood's original police statement, as witnessed by one of Horrocks's team, Detective Constable Mike Hulme, "it was agreed that a joint operation would be set up" to arrest the gang four days' later, on the Saturday. The timing was pivotal for the *News of the World* because it would provide the paper with a scoop the following day and thwart the chances of a rival finding out what was happening. It was not until the Saturday morning, when Horrocks hosted a police station discussion to orchestrate the arrests, that Mahmood finally revealed Victoria Beckham's name.

23 The previous highest profile kidnap was of Muriel McKay, wife of Rupert Murdoch's deputy, Alick McKay, who was abducted in December 1969 and murdered soon after.

24 Witness statement, Mazher Mahmood, 3 November 2002;

The men were lured to the Ibis Hotel in London's Docklands on the understanding that Mahmood, posing as a wealthy businessman, was about to hand over £45,000 for the turban. They drove into a trap. As the paper's readers discovered, across seven pages of the next day's *NOTW*, "armed police" arrested "an international terror gang preparing to kidnap David Beckham's wife, Victoria, and their two young children... after our reporters infiltrated the group who planned to ransom Posh for £5m or kill her".²⁵

Three of the men – Krifsha, Sorin and Rivas – were arrested in the hotel car park. An hour later, Pasareanu was arrested, along with his girlfriend, Monica, at their south London flat. Next day, Turcu was arrested at his Croydon flat with Liana Pasareanu, Adrian's sister. According to the detective who handcuffed him, Turcu "found the whole incident laughable", saying: "Some people make up things like James Bond but don't really mean it".²⁶ Evidently, this casual quip did not give the police pause for thought. Similarly, when all five men first appeared together in court, the judge remarked on how, at the mention of Victoria Beckham's name, they smiled.²⁷ They were not treating the charge seriously.

The *NOTW*'s story was replete with wild exaggerations, calling the men members of "an Eastern bloc crime syndicate", claiming that "our reporters daily risked death as they teased out information from the kidnap gang", and alleging that "the thugs" had "smuggled a chloroform-based attack spray from Italy". It falsely referred to Pasareanu having an 8mm handgun. Victoria Beckham spoke of her "absolute and total shock", adding: "I'm incredibly grateful to the *News of the World*". An ecstatic Inspector Horrocks was quoted as saying: "You've done a fantastic job and taken on dangerous criminals. We're extremely grateful". Another delighted former Met policeman, commander of the flying squad, John O'Connor, said it was "a serious plot" and that "the *News of the World* has carried out a wonderful piece of work".²⁸

Journalists, ever able to read between the lines of hyped-up copy, were quick to question the story's authenticity even though they lacked the inside knowledge which would have added substantially to their suspicions. Once I was able to read transcripts of the tapes it was obvious that Mahmood's articles contained exaggerations that amounted to untruths. It was laughable to suggest that "our reporters daily risked death" during "weeks

25 'Posh kidnap: Moment News of the World saves Victoria and her sons from thugs', *NOTW*, 3 November 2002

26 Witness statement, Det Con Andy Howard, 17 January 2003

27 'Beckham five are denied bail', *The Times*, 5 November 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/bddd8j5m>

28 Years later, O'Connor lamented the close links between the Yard and News International, 'The Met and Murdoch: a cosy relationship that began in Wapping', *The Guardian*, 18 July 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/2mx9ve95>

spent infiltrating an Eastern Bloc crime syndicate” engaged in a “cold-blooded... well-oiled operation”. There was not “a nine-man abduction team”. Mahmood knew that the men were not, as he wrote, “armed at all times”. He must have known the only weapon was a harmless pistol. No “month-long surveillance” of the Beckhams’ house had taken place. Turcu was not in charge of surveillance.²⁹ Mahmood was aware the men didn’t have an overseas bank account in which to deposit ransom money.

However, Mahmood did betray an awareness of his story’s weakness by getting in his rebuttal before his potential critics could take him to task. The plot, he wrote, could not be attributed to “the usual loose criminal fraternity talk”. By mentioning that particular point, without prompting, he was correctly forecasting the likely attacks on his story’s central flaw. Soon after publication, and ever since, sceptics of the Beckham kidnap have declared that the plotting amounted to little more than light-hearted, if obnoxious, pub banter.

What happened to the five alleged plotters was far from light-hearted. Krifsha, Rivas and Sorin were initially charged with theft while Pasareanu and Turcu faced a charge of conspiracy to rob a member of Sotheby’s staff. All were remanded to prison and were subsequently charged with conspiring to abduct Victoria Beckham. I smelt a rat right away, a feeling confirmed once I obtained copies of the tape transcripts and the witness statements, some forty of which were made by police officers, with others from Sotheby’s staff. While there was plenty of evidence to suggest two of the men might have been guilty of theft, what the documents lacked were any grounds to justify a kidnap charge against any of the five. No evidence was found at the men’s homes. No gun was recovered. None of them said anything incriminating. On advice from their solicitors, three refused to speak at all. Of the two who did, Pasareanu was the most voluble and most revelatory, referring to Gashi as Ghisa or Grisha. He was the person, he said, who set up all these accusations that I’m the subject of”.³⁰ He had “crazy plans” and “permanently kept on trying to get us... to kidnap Victoria Beckham... I never treated this issue with seriousness [sic]”.³¹ Shown a photo of himself holding the replica gun, he said unhesitatingly it was “the result of a set-up by Grisha”.

Krifsha said the same. When asked about his involvement in a conspiracy to kidnap Victoria he replied: “It’s completely made up... was a joke”.³² He said he had met Gashi only three weeks before and “from the first day that

²⁹ Eady judgement, paras 95,104, Alin Turcu vs News Group Newspapers, 4 May 2005

³⁰ Police witness statement, second tape, dated 3 November 2002

³¹ Police witness statement, third tape, dated 3 November 2002

³² Police witness statement, 3 November 2002

he meet me I thought this guy... is not right, you know, like an idiot". At one point, Detective Constable Gerry Farrell asked: "Are you saying that Florian [Florim] was the one who suggested the kidnapping?" Krifsha replied: "Yes sir... We are laughing, that was a joke". He said he had not wanted to spend much time with Gashi or take phone calls from him "because he was talking all the time about kidnap".

In the belief that the covert recordings would prove his innocence, Krifsha persistently urged his police interviewers to listen to them. "You'll see, nobody was serious..." He was convinced they would exonerate him. Asked why he appeared willing to go along with Gashi's kidnap idea he explained that he felt it necessary "to keep him happy" because Gashi was the intermediary with the turban's potential buyer. The interviews with the five men did not provide an iota of proof of guilt. Without confessions or physical evidence of any kind beyond the video and audio tapes, everything hinged on an interpretation of the taped conversations. It meant that Gashi, wouldn't just be the star witness, he would be the sole witness. The case would depend entirely on his credibility.

Knowing that to be the case, the consequent actions of Scotland Yard and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) were bizarre. Why did they ever think their prosecution could succeed? Police officers and lawyers knew of Gashi's criminal record. They also knew Gashi had been paid by the *NOTW*. In Mahmood's signed statement, made the day after his story was published, he told the police: "Only at my insistence with the paper did they agree to pay Flo £5,000, in the form of a cheque, for the Beckham kidnap information".³³ He added that, in his view, Gashi deserved £50,000. Yet, while the men spent seven months on remand in prison, the authorities continued to believe it worthwhile putting them on trial. Seen in retrospect, it was an astonishingly negligent decision.

When the five men stood in the dock at Middlesex Guildhall crown court on 2 June 2003, they already knew their ordeal was about to end. Three days before, their lawyers had been officially informed that "in the light of information that has recently come to light", the abduction charges would be withdrawn.³⁴ The *Daily Mirror* couldn't conceal its glee when reporting that the trial had "collapsed in farce".³⁵ In company with every other paper and broadcaster, it told how the prosecutor, Brian Altman, had had to admit to the judge that the case was being dropped because the main witness,

33 Mazher Mahmood, police witness statement, 4 September 2002. It was, in fact, £10,000. Gashi said Mahmood told him to pretend it was £5,000

34 Letter dated 30 May, signed by Sally Walsh, Principal Crown Prosecutor

35 'Becks kidnap trial fiasco: Posh kidnap trial collapses over witness who was paid', *Daily Mirror*, 3 June 2003

Gashi, was not only regarded as unreliable but might even have instigated the plot.

Altman's statement was replete with infelicities. He told how the paper had paid Gashi £10,000, as if the payment was a new revelation. He contended that because the Yard was brought so late into the plot it had been impossible for the police to carry out their normal professional evidence-gathering procedures, making them reliant on Gashi's testimony. That had not, however, prevented them from charging the men and locking them up. Oddest of all was Altman's failure to criticise Mahmood's part in the scandal. It was left instead to Pasareanu's barrister, Martin Hicks QC, to do that by arguing that his client had "been the victim of a set-up by Mr Mahmood and his associates".³⁶ Hicks referred to the story having been concocted in order to "further Mr Mahmood's notorious career" and called on Judge Simon Smith "to express his utter condemnation of Mazher Mahmood and the *News of the World*". The judge obliged. "I am minded", he said, "to refer the whole of this matter to the Attorney General to consider the temptations which money offered for stories, in particular about celebrities, gives rise to".

In the aftermath of the trial's collapse, the *NOTW* and the CPS issued statements which, in attempting to justify their actions, contained falsehoods. The "surprised and perplexed" *NOTW* claimed it had "co-operated fully with the police" and that "no information was concealed or held back". But it had, of course, "held back" the very significant matter of the identity of the kidnap target. It had held back Gashi's manipulative role. It had held back the provenance of the gun. It had concealed every aspect of the "plot". The CPS repeated in public what it had informed defence lawyers in private, that it could not "put forward Mr Gashi as a witness" because of "information which has recently come to light". In fact, information about Gashi had been in the light throughout the seven months the men were held on remand. It was known that Gashi had been paid and known that Gashi had a compromising criminal record.

In response, the CPS claimed the mistake had occurred because two different offices were dealing with Gashi.³⁷ That claim upset the *NOTW*. In a lengthy leader justifying its story, the paper condemned "the tawdry tactics" of the CPS, which had "cocked it up. And set about laying off the blame".³⁸ It pointed out, correctly, that it had told the police Gashi had been

³⁶ Hicks, incidentally, had been prosecuting counsel in the 1999 trial of John Alford (chapter 5). *Confessions*, p100

³⁷ Joshua Rosenberg, 'Separate offices left CPS team in the dark', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/yc8fzh87>

³⁸ 'The truth', *NOTW*, 8 June 2003

paid and that he had been an informant in the Wandsworth drugs story. It did concede that “there are some uncomfortable details about Gashi” who “hasn’t always been 100 per cent honest”. The police were disappointed by the CPS’s decision, as Britain’s senior officer made clear some months later. Sir John Stevens, the Metropolitan Police commissioner, invited Mahmood and Wade’s successor as editor, Andy Coulson, for drinks at Scotland Yard. According to Mahmood, Stevens “told me he felt my work on the Beckham kidnap case had been excellent and that, in his view, the evidence was overwhelming”.³⁹

Media reaction to the fiasco was unsurprisingly hostile towards the *NOTW*.⁴⁰ Among the critics was a former editor of *The People* who condemned the “malodorous stench of entrapment in a wholly unethical journalistic sting”.⁴¹ “The newspaper that crowed so loudly about its scoop”, said the *Daily Telegraph*, “has now been left with egg on its face”.⁴² Several commentators cast Mahmood as a dupe, with one paper viewing Gashi as “a serial fantasist” who had provided “what he knew Mahmood wanted”.⁴³ Elsewhere, there was misplaced optimism that the “collapse of the trial will curb chequebook journalism”.⁴⁴

Speculation that the Attorney General would investigate the *NOTW* also proved wide of the mark.⁴⁵ Offered a chance to deal with the journalistic abuse of payments, Lord Goldsmith averted his gaze. Scotland Yard launched an investigation, Operation Canopus, to consider the ramifications of Gashi’s role in the failed prosecution. Meanwhile, little attention was paid to the fate of the five men. Rivas pleaded guilty to stealing the turban, painting and books from Sotheby’s while Krifsha admitted handling the same items. They were jailed for three and two years respectively, which the *NOTW* dared to hail as a Mahmood success.⁴⁶ Sorin, an illegal immigrant and reported in Romania to have been a skilful handball player in his schooldays,⁴⁷ was deported and later settled in Italy. In the face of likely deportation, Turcu returned to Romania in September 2003.

39 *Confessions*, p102

40 ‘A case that shames press, police and prosecution’, Anthony Scrivener, *The Independent*, 4 June 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/28xm8ucb>; ‘Beckham kidnap gang: Was there really a Posh Spice plot? Suspicions grow that kidnap talk was hot air’, *Dublin Evening Herald*, 4 November 2002

41 Bill Hagerty, *The Independent*, 8 June 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/ycyu5v6x>

42 ‘Hunt is on for Beckham case culprit’, *Daily Telegraph*, 4 June 2003

43 Tony Thompson, *The Observer*, 8 June 2003

44 *The Times*, 4 June 2003

45 ‘Tabloid faces inquiry over Beckham “sting”’, *The Independent*, 3 June 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/mvp3uudy>

46 ‘Maz nails Sotheby’s thieves’, *NOTW*, 6 July 2003. Rivas became a hardened criminal and was murdered in December 2022 in Malta, *Times of Malta*, 15 December 2022

47 ‘An eminent physician and a handball player among the Romanian criminals arrested for the attack on the Beckham family’, *Adevărul*, 5 November 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/5rvzv92s>

As for Pasareanu, his *bona fides* as a doctor were hardly reported in Britain, unlike the United States and Romania, where a news agency, in company with several newspapers, told of his recent graduation from a university in Craiova, southern Romania.⁴⁸ His father, Ioan, a doctor in Craiova, was quoted as saying of his son's arrest: "It's incredible. He left the country a month ago to take a language exam and to have his studies recognised, so he could practise in England".⁴⁹ After his release, Pasareanu left Britain to continue with his medical studies in Ireland and, once qualified, went on to work as a psychiatrist in Norway.⁵⁰

Although Pasareanu threatened to sue the *NOTW*, nothing came of it. Turcu, represented by a determined lawyer, David Price, did pursue the paper and, in so doing, brought several disturbing aspects of the case out of the shadows. Most significant of all, he was supported by Gashi's testament. It proved to be a long road for Price who represented Turcu on a no-win no-fee basis and had to overcome the fact that Turcu refused to return to Britain for the action in April 2005. There were some interesting moments in court, such as Price's cross-examination of "Jaws" Qureshi, who was caught out in a lie. Qureshi agreed he had been asked by Mahmood, to "initiate conversation about the kidnap", a point which he had denied hours before in the morning session. When it was put to him that he had lied, he replied: "I did not lie, I got it wrong".⁵¹

Mahmood was evidently pleased to have his "day in court" in order to answer "ludicrous allegations" by "the so-called posh papers" that he had set up the plot.⁵² His performance in the witness box earned him praise from the *NOTW*'s lawyer, John Kelsey-Fry QC, as "the best he'd seen in his entire career".⁵³

Price contended that the paper had libelled his client by accusing him of being involved in the kidnap plot. He told the court of Gashi's manipulation and said Turcu had done little more than mixed in "bad company and engaged in tasteless conversation in bars instigated by [Gashi]". The judge, Mr Justice Eady, was wholly unconvinced by the argument, declared that it was a credible plot, and rejected the claim.⁵⁴ The *News of the World*, although

48 'Posh plot thickens', *Tampa Bay Times*, 5 November 2002, <https://tinyurl.com/ceusb3jm>

49 'An eminent physician...' *Adevărul*, op cit

50 'News of the World closed after 168 years! They lied about three Romanians kidnapping Victoria Beckham', *Cancan* 11 July 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/49zk4453>

51 'NoW researcher accused of lying', *The Guardian*, 7 April 2005 <https://tinyurl.com/5dp5985u>

52 *Confessions*, p101

53 *Ibid*, p102. Kelsey-Fry represented Mahmood when he was on trial for perjury in 2016 (chapter 14)

54 "'Vindicated': libel judge clears News of the World in Beckham kidnap case', *Press Gazette*, 6 May 2005 <https://tinyurl.com/y36rmxd6>

delighted with the verdict, was left with a bill for costs of £400,000.⁵⁵ Turcu appealed and on the eve of that hearing in 2007, the newspaper caved in, admitting that Turcu had not, after all, been a party to the plot. It agreed “to make a modest donation to a charity on Mr Turcu’s behalf”.⁵⁶ It was Gashi who turned the tide in Turcu’s favour by providing “new evidence”.⁵⁷ I had put Price in touch with Gashi, and he flew to Vienna to take Gashi’s statement.⁵⁸

Gashi’s decision to denounce Mahmood in the summer of 2005 was the transformational moment in this unseemly saga. He was deported from Britain in June and two months later he contacted both me and Detective Inspector Horrocks at Scotland Yard to say he had reflected on his behaviour and now wanted to tell the truth about his work on behalf of Mahmood. He stressed he was not seeking money, telling me: “I am responsible for innocent people going to jail. I tricked them, and I’m ashamed”.⁵⁹ Before flying to interview Gashi in Croatia, I met Horrocks who told me that I shouldn’t believe a word uttered by Gashi. In spite of his warning, the Yard took Gashi’s change of heart seriously enough to fly three officers to Dubrovnik to hear what he had to say. I got to the city just ahead of them and managed to spend several hours with Gashi before passing him on, as agreed, for his debriefing with Horrocks. Our reactions to what Gashi told us were very different. I saw it as a confession; Horrocks viewed it as just another set of lies from a proven liar.

When I came to write the story of Gashi’s Damascene conversion I was confronted by legal problems. Liars make for poor witnesses, which unnerved *The Guardian*’s editors and lawyers. The *NOTW*, once happy to pay Gashi for his work on its behalf, was quick to point to his lack of credibility and to threaten legal action should I suggest Mahmood was the villain of the piece. I was unable therefore to publish the central point of Gashi’s allegations, that his activities as an *agent provocateur* were carried out on instructions from Mahmood.⁶⁰ I was lampooned by *Private Eye* for failing to do so.⁶¹

Indeed, my article, which said Scotland Yard were investigating several Mahmood stories, had little or no impact. That investigation, known

55 ‘We win in court’, *NOTW*, 8 May 2005

56 ‘NoW apologises in Beckham case,’ *The Guardian*, 14 February 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/catb98fa>

57 ‘Man accused of Beckham kidnap plot wins apology’, *The Independent*, 15 February 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/bdhf3u4n>

58 Gashi witness statement, Alin Turcu vs News Group Newspapers, 21 September 2005

59 ‘Police probe News of the World stories’, *The Guardian*, 17 October 2005 <https://tinyurl.com/mtpee2db>

60 Ibid

61 Street of Shame, *Private Eye*, 14-27 October 2005

as Canopus Two, was little more than a face-saving publicity gimmick. Mahmood was called in for questioning. He complained that he was confronted by “a whole range of allegations” made by Gashi which, he said, “were later proved to be false”.⁶² When asked why he used sources such as Gashi, he replied: “I’ve got bent police officers that are witnesses, that are informants.”⁶³ Evidently, his interrogators didn’t think his insult to the forces of law and order merited further inquiry. Nor did the detectives think it worthwhile to test the veracity of Gashi’s revelation about how he had obtained the fake gun. (It was Turcu’s lawyer, David Price, who obtained the evidence to confirm its provenance).

My initial reaction to the Yard’s apathy in dealing with Gashi’s about-turn was that senior officers, such as Horrocks, were embarrassed by giving the “plot” undue credence. They had been too trusting of Mahmood and the *NOTW*, and therefore did not want to revisit the circumstances of their own involvement. Nor did they wish to reconsider their long-term relationship with either the *NOTW* or its notorious fake sheikh. But years passed before I came across a newspaper article, in the Edinburgh-based *Scotsman*, which suggested a rift within the Met police. There had been concern about the Yard’s “close involvement” with the *NOTW*.⁶⁴

Quoting an inside police source, the article claimed the force knew it was “playing with fire” by allowing its firearms unit, SO19, to be photographed while arresting suspects. The source was quoted as saying: “Police officers are usually reluctant to be drawn into newspaper investigations. Their resentment of journalists treading on police territory is compounded by the knowledge that a newspaper’s evidence may not be precise enough to satisfy a criminal court. They also know there is a danger that evidence may be contaminated by suggestions of intentional or unintentional entrapment. The legal ramifications of this case could cause a lot of problems for the newspaper”.

This requires a caveat. Apart from the anonymity of the source, the author was anonymous too. It carried an odd byline, “The Newsroom”. Also, as far as I can ascertain, that source was not quoted anywhere else. Although this tends to undermine its credibility, the lengthy direct quote was so specific it had the ring of truth about it. Nor, significantly, was it denied. It would certainly help to explain the reluctance of the Canopus Two detectives to delve too deeply into the closeness of the relationship with News International. They would, in effect, have been investigating

62 Oral evidence, Leveson inquiry, 25 January 2012, <https://tinyurl.com/6eearkrx>

63 See first mention, chapter 4

64 ‘Beckham kidnap case thrown out amid claims newspaper bribed key witness’, *The Scotsman*, 3 June 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/5n6w9n57>

themselves. Moreover, it should be viewed in the context of the warmth of the Met police commissioner's decision to share drinks with Mahmood and Coulson (as above).

Despite the trial's collapse and despite the resulting widespread scepticism about the kidnap plot, Mahmood survived the controversy. Predictions that his time was up proved to be, as so often, completely unfounded.

Chapter 8

Why did no-one join the legal dots?

“He [Mahmood] is certainly charismatic and highly intelligent but we submit he is dangerously deceitful, ruthless, exploitative and corrupt.”

— Jeremy Dein QC

The *News of the World* made much of those occasions when Mahmood’s stories led to successful prosecutions. And there cannot be any doubt that several were justified. The majority of people who were convicted as a result of his work were guilty of a range of crimes, including people-smuggling, drug-dealing, counterfeiting, and heinous sexual offences. Some were sent to prison; some were fined; some had their illicit income confiscated. Along the way, he brought to justice crooked lawyers, bent police officers, dodgy doctors and hypocritical preachers. But there were a surprisingly large number of cases that were less than straightforward.

To excuse his mendacity by suggesting that the good outweighed the bad is unacceptable at several levels. Aside from those who were properly convicted there were altogether less culpable victims who lost their livelihoods – jobs, homes, income – because of his stories. Some lost their liberty. Some suffered permanent mental anguish. Mahmood wrecked their lives. Then there was the matter of his indiscriminate deployment of subterfuge, a ruse so controversial that police forces across the world rarely use it and, even when they do, are constrained by rules to prevent abuse. There was no independent oversight of Mahmood’s operations. As the Leveson inquiry report made clear, the Press Complaints Commission lacked both the will and the investigative power to hold the *NOTW* to account for its questionable reporting methods.¹

As we saw in chapter 6, Mahmood’s methodology was bitterly contested

¹ Part J, section 6, Leveson report, November 2012

in the cases involving John Alford, Besnik Qema, Alex Smith, Brenda Tonnesson, Lord Hardwicke and Neil Montgomery. In those instances, judges and juries, sometimes reluctantly, decided to convict. Media criticism of Mahmood and the *NOTW* was therefore muted. By contrast, the collapse of the Beckham kidnap trial did prompt questions by some newspapers and broadcasters. However, the storm passed relatively quickly. Neither Mahmood nor the *NOTW* were held to account. It was just one of several missed opportunities for a deeper inquiry into how Mahmood went about his work. Just occasionally, and too rarely, objections to Mahmood's cavalier conduct were raised in courtrooms and caused legal setbacks. In addition, there were times when judges or magistrates – and, very occasionally, the police – were moved to air their concerns about his methods.

When those happened, the *NOTW* reacted in one of two ways: outrage or silence. It chose the former in cases involving well-known people, or those involving sensational stories that attracted wider media coverage and thereby provoked negative publicity. It could not afford to overlook such instances. However, when the victim was not a public figure, or if the story failed to get media coverage, the *NOTW* simply concealed the details by failing to report them. It is hugely significant in terms of the newspaper's culpability that the editorial hierarchy were aware at an early stage that some of Mahmood's stories alleging criminal activity were later found to be flawed.

Mahmood's career might have ended much sooner if someone outside the paper had been in a position to join up the legal dots. Or, of course, if courts had been allowed to view Mahmood's record. Then a disturbing sequence of contentious stories in which Mahmood was the subject of trenchant criticism would have been revealed. Juries dealing with individual cases were never allowed to know what had happened in previous cases. Therefore, they were unable to see the whole picture. For example, jurors at the Tulisa Contostavlos trial in 2014 were unable to take account of the litany of Mahmood's prior legal reverses or examples of his dishonesty. Judges routinely disallowed any reference to Mahmood's prior history. These decisions severely inhibited lawyers representing people who were prosecuted due to a Mahmood sting.

Before I deal with some of his reverses, it is astonishing to realise that a giant clue to Mahmood's duplicitous character occurred just one year into his *NOTW* career with a story headlined: "The great pension book fiddle".² It was, he claimed, "the biggest social security scam ever carried out in this country" and led to two men being charged with conspiracy to defraud the

2 *NOTW*, 30 August 1992

Department of Social Services. Their trial, which did not take place until April 1994, collapsed in extraordinary circumstances. In retrospect, it is amazing it went unreported. It wasn't until 2024 that my co-author, Paddy French, by accessing material gleaned from the archive of News UK, the *NOTW*'s publisher, was able to reveal the reason for the failed prosecution.³

During his evidence to Inner London crown court, Mahmood spoke of his story having been based on information supplied by a confidential source. A defence lawyer suggested that this was a man who had threatened one of the defendants. In response, Mahmood insisted that his informant was not that person. The next day, however, police officers admitted to the defence that Mahmood's informant was indeed the same person. He also happened to be a police informant. As a result, in order to protect the man's identity, the prosecution withdrew its evidence and the trial was halted. As Paddy remarked, it was the first example of Mahmood giving misleading evidence in the witness box.

The new material also cast light on a second Mahmood story. Two months after the trial's collapse Mahmood was responsible for a splash about a Wimbledon ticket tout – identified only as “pony-tailed Alan” – who, he claimed, acted as a pimp and drug-dealer.⁴ By his standards, the story did not seem to be overly remarkable. What was truly remarkable, however, was the behind-the-scenes communications it provoked between officers in two branches of the Metropolitan Police's specialist operations units. The story carried a quote from a Met Police spokesman promising to “investigate the allegations thoroughly”. Too thoroughly perhaps for Mahmood's liking because a drugs squad detective, having discovered how Mahmood had obtained both the tickets for the tennis championships and a quantity of cocaine, regarded his methods as borderline illegal. His report was passed to a senior officer who, according to a note to his superior, then spoke to the Met's crime operations group (SO10).⁵ He was informed that Mahmood was known to them “in an unfavourable context” and that any decision on how to treat him should take account of “sensitive information held at SO10”. In other words, there was a concern that should Mahmood be prosecuted for his Wimbledon story it was likely that information about his part in the collapsed pension book trial might become public. SO10 also asked the Met's criminal intelligence branch (SO11) whether Mahmood had requested “participation status” in carrying out his Wimbledon investigation.

3 Paddy French, 'Framed', <https://tinyurl.com/y7dfxje4>

4 'Wimbledon vice scandal', *NOTW*, 26 June 1994. When we asked Mahmood “gang” member Alan Smith if he was “pony-tailed” Alan, he did not reply. See chapter 4.

5 Detective Inspector Julian Headon to Detective Chief Superintendent William Hatfull, 8 Area Westminster, 14 July 1994

They were informed that “no authority” was granted to him.⁶ So, despite the drugs squad concerns, Mahmood was not prosecuted.

None of this Met Police disquiet emerged in public although, since the documents were recovered from News International’s archive, the contents must have been made known at some time to Mahmood, and to his employers. They should have triggered concerns within the company, especially in its legal department. In the light of his future close relationships with police forces, it was extraordinary that no account was taken of such high-level disquiet about his behaviour and methods.⁷ Instead, just two months after the Wimbledon story, he was “working with police officers” to investigate a gang of forgers who “planned to flood the world with £100 million in fake banknotes”.⁸ Allowing for the amount being wildly exaggerated, the story appeared to hold up.

He described how the men, Tony Hassan and Anthony Caldori, handed him a case of forged notes and were then arrested by watching police. A senior detective was quoted as praising the newspaper. Mahmood’s story contained references to the men’s criminal past. In Caldori’s case, it mentioned details of his record and the fact he had once escaped from jail. It was more than ten months before the men went on trial at Isleworth crown court. Mahmood, despite being known to the Met Police “in an unfavourable context”, appeared as a prosecution witness. He underwent a tough cross examination from the men’s lawyers about his methods while, according to the *NOTW*, “the men in the dock grinned”.⁹ Defence counsel then called on the judge to halt the trial, contending that the jury could have been prejudiced by the publication of Mahmood’s story. Judge Hezlett Colgan agreed, regarding the publication of the men’s criminal records to be “an abuse of process”. As a result, the men walked free.¹⁰

That wasn’t the end of the matter for Mahmood and the *NOTW*. Two years’ later, the Attorney General hauled the newspaper into court to face a charge of contempt. Lord Justice Pill and Mr Justice Astill found against the newspaper and fined the *NOTW* £50,000 on the grounds that Mahmood’s

6 Memos between Detective Chief Inspector N. Giles (S010) and Commander John Grieve, S011 director of intelligence, 18-19 July 1994

7 Similarly, the *NOTW*’s editors – Patsy Chapman in 1992 and Piers Morgan in 1994 – did not curb his activities

8 ‘We smash £100m fake cash ring: Cops swoop on gang of forgers’, *NOTW*, 11 September 1994

9 ‘No wonder villains laugh at the law - Investigation: We expose fakers... and are fined £50,000!’, *NOTW*, 20 July 1997

10 Edward Trevor, ‘Judge frees crooks nailed by News of the World,’ *NOTW*, 30 July 1995. Edward Trevor was a ‘house name’, not a real person

article “beyond doubt constituted a contempt of court”.¹¹ In the judges’ view, “the portrayal of the men as career criminals [in Mahmood’s article] was very likely to be remembered” by jurors, especially because Mahmood was a trial witness. In imposing the fine, Lord Justice Pill said: “The effect of the contempt upon the due administration of justice and the public interest is serious and a substantial penalty is required”. If Colgan’s judgment had been a surprise, then that of Pill and Astill was a shock. For the first and last time it united Fleet Street behind the *News of the World*, with four editors going public in their criticism of the court’s decision, including those of the *NOTW*’s main rivals, the *Sunday Mirror* and *The People*.

Just as significantly, *The Guardian*’s Alan Rusbridger and *The Independent*’s Andrew Marr issued statements condemning the judgement. Rusbridger thought it was “plain dotty”. The paper had been punished because it had informed the police before publishing the story. Not informing the police, however, would allow criminals the opportunity “to pack their bags and get rid of any evidence”. Marr agreed. “It seems to be against the public interest to threaten publications with contempt if they publish details of an investigation hours after contacting the police. If in future the media feels it must publish first then hand over material, this will surely be against the public interest and allow some criminals to get away or destroy evidence”. Both Rusbridger and Marr overlooked the fact that the major factor was the revealing of the men’s previous crimes rather than the prior tip-off to the police.

Mahmood also conveniently chose to overlook the salient point, namely that his most glaring journalistic error was the inclusion of the men’s previous offences. It was certain to prejudice any prosecution, as the paper’s experienced sub-editors and, of course, its legal department, would surely have known. It is therefore surprising that their criminal records were published. Mahmood let that pass in his article raging against the judges’ decision. It means, he wrote, that “we cannot liaise with police during the course of our investigations any more... The decision is a serious blow to investigative journalism and contradicts previous verdicts in cases where we used exactly the same methods”.¹²

It might be argued that one simple question to jurors at the first trial would have allowed the prosecution to go ahead. They could have been asked whether they were readers of the *News of the World*. Those who said they were could then have been excluded. But the obvious risk was

11 ‘Law Report: Newspaper article was contempt of court’, *The Independent*, 17 July 1997
<https://tinyurl.com/2asns53m>

12 ‘No wonder villains laugh at the law - Investigation: We expose fakers... and are fined £50,000!’, *NOTW*, 20 July 1997

of someone not telling the truth. Anyway, aside from that, Mahmood was the sole witness and was bound to be questioned about the contents of his article, including his reference to previous criminality.

Mahmood and the *NOTW* were not prepared to accept that they were guilty of contempt and seized on the first opportunity to illustrate the risks of exposing a criminal without informing the police in advance. Within two weeks of the Pill/Astill judgement, the paper carried the results of a Mahmood investigation into “the nation’s most grotesque monster”. Allegedly. According to the story, the man was “a pimp who sells girls as young as 12 for sex”.¹³ The graphic details of his supposed abuse of youngsters, and those of his accomplice, were sickening to read. Yet, said the paper’s leading article, he is “walking free... because two dotty judges in the High Court have banned the *News of the World* from handing incriminating evidence to the police before we publish it”.¹⁴ (The “dotty” was borrowed from Rusbridger, of course). The paper continued: “There is no reason why, this morning, he should not have destroyed much of the evidence against him, silenced any witnesses and slid away under the stone from where he should never have been allowed to emerge”.

As predicted, the man did vanish. After six months, the *NOTW* offered a £1,000 reward for his capture, reiterating its criticism of the judges.¹⁵ When finally caught, the man was jailed for a year after pleading guilty to “permitting the taking of indecent photographs”.¹⁶ He was not convicted of other serious charges levelled against him in Mahmood’s article. Had Mahmood overstated the nature of the man’s activities? Or did the fact that the man had had time to go on the run make it impossible for the police to charge him with more serious offences? It is impossible now to get at the truth. But one fact is indisputable: the judge viewed Mahmood’s role as a mitigating factor for the man’s behaviour. When sentencing him, at Bradford Crown Court, Judge John Cockroft told him: “It is obvious that, to an extent, you were provoked and encouraged by the undercover reporter”.¹⁷

The Pill/Astill ruling and the Cockroft comment were pointers to the way in which Mahmood’s investigations were taking him into legal grey areas. When exposing criminality, a worthy journalistic exercise, it was necessary to draw a fine line between what was, and was not, reasonable and proportionate. In every instance, there were potential legal and

13 ‘Most evil man in Britain’, *NOTW*, 27 July 1997

14 ‘Dotty judges let rat walk free’, *NOTW*, 27 July 1997

15 ‘£1,000 reward to catch runaway pervert’, *NOTW*, 14 December 1997; ‘Judges let evil beast off hook’, *NOTW*, 14 December 1997

16 ‘Our Maz puts child pervert behind bars’, *NOTW*, 20 December 1998

17 ‘Prison for man who sold film of girl’s strip’, *Bradford Telegraph & Argus*, 18 December 1998
<https://tinyurl.com/4fptnzcw>

ethical pitfalls. Entrapment, luring a person to commit a crime, was always regarded as a controversial course of action, one which the police avoided because, as agents of the state, they feared committing an abuse of process. Journalists, however, were not constrained by rules that governed the police. It did not prevent several police forces from taking advantage of Mahmood's entrapments by arresting his "victims" and ignoring the context in which they were "exposed", a parasitical practice which led to courtroom challenges and defeats.

In 1998, for instance, police in Bradford followed up a Mahmood story which alleged that a 15-year-old schoolboy was controlling prostitutes by exploiting their dependency on drugs.¹⁸ The youth was charged with four drugs offences and on the first day of his trial, prosecuting counsel revealed disturbing details behind the story. It transpired that the teenager had been approached by Mahmood's associate – his cousin, "Jaws" Qureshi – in order to negotiate a drugs deal. When police questioned the youth, he argued he had been set up. He said Qureshi was responsible for obtaining the drugs and he felt intimidated by him while on their way to meeting the buyer, "an accountant from London" (Mahmood).¹⁹ On the second day of the trial, Mahmood underwent what was reported to be a "fierce cross-examination" from the boy's counsel who poured scorn on his account. After Mahmood stepped from the witness box, Judge Alastair McCallum accepted the defence's submission that the boy should be discharged and halted the trial.²⁰ The police had mistakenly relied on Mahmood being a star witness, as did the Crown Prosecution Service.

Judge McCallum's decision received no media coverage outside Bradford. Another under-reported courtroom controversy involved Rhodri Giggs, brother of the then Manchester United footballer, Ryan. He was prosecuted after a Mahmood article accused him of dealing in cocaine and acting as a pimp.²¹ His story alleged that Giggs, an estate agent, sold drugs and sex workers to his house-hunting clients. Following Giggs's arrest,²² the *NOTW* boasted that he "fell for a classic *News of the World* undercover operation" and the paper proudly boasted how it had pulled the wool over his eyes:

"Our reporters took on the identities of wealthy foreign businessmen looking to invest in property in London's Docklands. A suite at a top hotel completed the impression that

18 'This is a pimp of 15 selling drugs to schoolgirl hooker', *NOTW*, 18 October 1998

19 'Pupil sold drugs to teacher, court told', *Telegraph & Argus*, 23 November 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/mt6nxb5e>

20 "'Schoolboy drugs' trial jury discharged', *Telegraph & Argus*, 24 November 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/yc73rdsz>

21 'Giggsy's brother peddles cocaine and vice', *NOTW*, 18 April 1999

22 'Star's brother's drugs charge', *South Wales Echo*, 20 October 1999

we were who we claimed to be. We contacted the unsuspecting employers of Rhodri Giggs, City Lets International, and claimed to be interested in renting an expensive flat. It was not long before Rhodri had turned the conversation away from property...and on to drugs and sex. Later our team splashed out on booze and lap-dancers at a nightclub to further the illusion. We got our man".²³

That gloating sounded hollow once Giggs appeared at Manchester crown court to answer charges of possessing and supplying cocaine. The prosecuting lawyer had the ignominious task of informing the judge that, on reflection, the Crown Prosecution Service would not be proceeding with the case because it had serious concerns over the evidence. This consisted of tape-recorded conversations between Mahmood and Giggs. According to the court report in the *NOTW*'s sister paper, *The Sun*, the tape "said to detail the alleged drugs deal had no such discussion on it" and "a key witness statement also failed to 'accurately reflect' the phone conversation between the witness and Rhodri".²⁴

This was an extraordinary turn of events which raised questions about Mahmood's trustworthiness. After formally acquitting Giggs, Judge Stuart Fish asked the prosecutor, David Friesner, whether the Crown was thinking of charging Mahmood with incitement to supply drugs and illegal possession of them. Friesner replied: "It is not something that has been considered, though it has crossed my mind".

Judge Fish replied: "I am sure it is a matter that will receive some attention and consideration".

Yet the judge's exchange with Friesner was only reported in detail by *The Independent*.²⁵ So, no attention was paid to the case's collapse. No consideration was given to the judge's clear wish for action.

Mahmood's editor, Phil Hall, perhaps fearing that the judge might be taken at his word, went on the offensive. He wrote to the CPS to say he couldn't understand why the case had been dropped due to "an unclear, inconclusive tape when there was another crystal clear audio tape" of a conversation between Giggs and Mahmood.²⁶ Giggs, who lost his job as an estate agent, did not pursue his threat to sue the *NOTW*.²⁷ So, Mahmood

23 'Under cover not underhand', *NOTW*, 30 May 1999

24 'Giggs brother drug rap KOd', *The Sun*, 17 March 2000

25 'Reporter may face charges in Giggs case', *The Independent*, 17 March 2000 <https://tinyurl.com/ysyz2am3>

26 'NoW backs Mahmood after attack by judge', *Press Gazette*, 24 March 2000

27 In March 2021, Giggs accepted "substantial damages" from the *NOTW*'s publisher over phone-hacking, *Daily Mirror*, 4 March 2021. This was not related to the Mahmood sting

survived to sting another day. Indeed, for a further 5,500 days.

If both the Hardwicke jury's statement and Giggs's trial reverse had been viewed together, they should have sounded alarm bells. Within six months, two judges had aired similar disquiet about Mahmood's entrapment methods. Was that the reason Mahmood failed to mention either in his *Confessions* memoir? Nor did the *NOTW* feel it necessary to report the Giggs reversal. Its silence, and the lack of coverage elsewhere, reduced the chances of rival media criticism and negated any possible political interest. It is also necessary to view the lack of wider media condemnation in the context of other cases that passed under the radar.

For example, coverage of a trial that followed a Mahmood story about a prominent National Hunt jockey, Jacqui Oliver, was restricted to just a couple of regional newspapers. It was a further instance of his evidence being successfully challenged, but the judge's scepticism about his work was concealed due to the lack of national media attention, plus the *NOTW*'s noticeable silence about what happened in court. According to Mahmood's 1992 article, Oliver had made "a fortune by masterminding a huge credit card swindle" along with her boyfriend, Kuldip Singh Sander.²⁸ He based his allegation about Oliver on conversations he secretly taped while entertaining her to dinner at a London restaurant while pretending to be acting on behalf of a sheikh eager to offer her "a dream job".²⁹ Oliver was arrested at a second meeting with Mahmood the day before his story was published. Kuldip was arrested in Birmingham.³⁰

Two-and-half years passed before she appeared at Birmingham crown court with Kuldip and three other men accused of plotting to defraud banks and credit card companies. Unlike the four men, the only evidence against her were Mahmood's tapes. After lengthy legal argument, Judge Iain Black ruled that the alleged "confession" on the tapes was inadmissible. Citing "legal reasons", he did not explain why in open court. Since the prosecution had no other evidence against her, she was declared not guilty.³¹ For Oliver, the damage had been done. While on bail, her riding career had faltered due to "her battered reputation".³² After her acquittal, Oliver considered launching a libel action against the *NOTW*, but nothing came of that. Kuldip's trial did go ahead and, after being found guilty, he was sentenced to five

28 'Girl jockey comes a cropper in credit card swindle', *NOTW*, 6 September 1992

29 'Lady jockey was "duped"', *Daily Mirror*, 14 January 1995

30 'Jockey and friend face fraud probe', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8 September 1992

31 'Jockey is cleared of fraud plot role', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 January 1995 *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 21 April 1995. See chapter 6 reference to Tony Lambrianou

32 'Jacqui's nightmare', *Daily Mirror*, 3 March 1993; 'Cleared rider now faces biggest race of her life', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 14 January 1995

years in jail.³³ However, this was a successful prosecution that Mahmood did not choose to boast about.

One of the most disturbing examples of a Mahmood courtroom reverse involved a young woman from east London called Nazia Fazil. She was alleged by Mahmood to be “a lynchpin” in “a massive illegal immigrant ring”.³⁴ According to his story, which ran across three pages, beginning on page one, she had been part of an operation responsible for smuggling more than 2,000 benefit scroungers into the country. He described her as a teacher who instructed people in India how to enter Britain illegally and provided them with forged passports. Mahmood quoted Fazil as telling her ‘students’: “The immigration people [in Britain] are stupid”. Following publication, Fazil was arrested and charged with attempting to obtain a passport by deception and possessing a false birth certificate with intent to deceive.

On the face of it, the allegations against Fazil were convincing. *NOTW* readers would therefore have been amazed by what happened when Fazil appeared for trial at Middlesex Guildhall crown court. The prosecutor, Jonathan Barnard, rose to announce that he was offering no evidence against her.³⁵ He explained that Fazil had originally contacted Mahmood as a whistleblower to urge him to reveal the existence of an illegal immigration racket. Barnard said: “She thought she was acting with these journalists... She believed she was working with Mr Mahmood to expose a lack of security at Petty France”.³⁶ Instead, “she was the focus of the[ir] investigation”.

If that was something of a surprise, then his next statement was truly shocking. Barnard revealed that on Mahmood’s covertly-recorded tape, which he had given to police, he was heard whispering to a colleague: “I’m going to stitch her up”. In response, the judge, Fabyan Evans, was reported to have “reacted with fury”. He was outraged at the way Fazil had been “set up” by Mahmood and condemned the way she had been treated by the *NOTW*. He concluded: “One’s instant reaction is that the *News of the World* should pay for all the costs of these proceedings”.³⁷ Quite so. The case against Fazil relied entirely on Mahmood’s story and his evidence was wholly undermined by his own tape-recording. There was yet another inaccuracy. Mahmood’s story referred to Fazil as “a regular at the Petty France passport office in Central London”. In fact, she *worked* at the passport office.

33 ‘Former boyfriend of woman jockey jailed’, *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 21 April 1995

34 ‘*News of the World* busts school for scroungers’, and ‘Immigration people in Britain are stupid... just do your homework and everything will be easy’, *NOTW*, 16 January 2000

35 ‘Tabloid “set up” passport worker’, *Waltham Forest Guardian*, 9 August 2001 <https://tinyurl.com/227u4pbz>

36 For fifty years until 2002, the passport office was located in Petty France

37 *Ibid*

But Mahmood got away with it, as did the *NOTW*. The judge's outrage was reported by only one newspaper, a local weekly with a smallish circulation in east London. So, publicity that might well have led to questions about Mahmood's truthfulness was avoided. If questions were raised internally, there was no evidence that Mahmood was reined in. He and the paper brushed aside all criticism, ignoring the weight of judicial censure.

One of Mahmood's "investigations" that did attract national media attention, and a great deal of criticism, was an outrageous fairy story known as the red mercury case. The circumstances were anything but straightforward. In September 2004, the *NOTW* splashed on a potentially momentous yarn which alleged that three men had tried to buy radioactive material known as red mercury, a potential component of a so-called "dirty bomb".³⁸ The article reported that the men had been arrested by counter terrorism police prior to publication because Mahmood had infiltrated the gang "in a joint operation with Scotland Yard". This oddest of gangs, all from Edgware in north London, was composed of Deutsche Bank employee Dominic Martins; Coutts security guard Roque Fernandes; and Somalian-born trader Abdurahman Kanyare.

Within days, the trio appeared in court on three terror-related charges.³⁹ They were then remanded to London's Belmarsh Prison, the jail used for suspects facing national security offences, where they were to spend almost 20 months before coming to trial at the Old Bailey in April 2006. The court heard about a convoluted plot which began with an unidentified Saudi Arabian approaching Kanyare to ask if he could obtain red mercury. Kanyare told Fernandes about the approach and he, in turn, asked Martins if he could help. Enter a mysterious informant, called Mr B, said to have worked in the chemical industry and to have been Martins's former brother-in-law.⁴⁰ On hearing what Martins wanted, he decided to blow the whistle by contacting Mahmood at the *News of the World*. Mahmood then tipped off the police and, allegedly, worked hand-in-glove with members of the Metropolitan Police anti-terrorist squad. He explained in court that he contacted Scotland Yard on 9 September 2004, just two weeks before he sprang his trap.⁴¹

When Mahmood, posing as Mohammed and claiming to have a kilogram of red mercury for sale, met the men at a hotel, officers were there to

38 'Dirty bomb foiled by News of the World: Armed terror cops in swoop on gang', *NOTW*, 25 September 2004

39 "'Dirty bomb plot' three in the dock: Just one week after our story shook the world..', *NOTW*, 3 October 2004

40 'Bomb bankers' appear in court', *Brent & Kilburn Times*, 27 April 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/4jjepubj>; 'I still do not know what red mercury is', *Brent & Kilburn Times*, 3 August 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/33ymdafd>

41 'Mahmood thought "dirty bomb plot" was a set-up', *The Guardian*, 16 May 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/2efs8vyf>

arrest them. It is necessary at this point to explain that red mercury is considered to be something of an urban myth. To quote an International Atomic Agency spokesman, “red mercury doesn’t exist. The whole thing is a bunch of malarkey”.⁴² Yet, according to the Mahmood article, Martins attempted to buy this non-existent substance for £300,000. Described by one commentator as “a wacky plot that Blackadder’s Baldrick might have cooked up”, he lampooned the deal as “a buyer who never materialises, with money that is never produced, wants a substance that doesn’t exist, from a man who hadn’t, and never would have, a gram of the stuff”.⁴³ He might well have added that the three men didn’t have the funds to buy it anyway. Truly, a farce. But the police and the CPS thought otherwise.

The men claimed they had been tricked. Rather than seeking radioactive material, they appeared to think – courtesy of Kanyare – that red mercury had one of three properties: a medicine to cure impotence, an elixir to prolong life, or a liquid to wash the dye from banknotes. Despite these far-fetched explanations, the jury was even less convinced by the prosecution’s claim that the men were genuinely trying to obtain radioactive material and acquitted them of conspiring to fund terrorism and also conspiring to obtain a “highly dangerous” substance for the purposes of terrorism.⁴⁴

They would surely have taken into account the forthright statements of two defence barristers. Stephen Solley QC, acting for Martins, called Mahmood a “serial deceiver of the courts, of the police, of the CPS and of the Customs and Excise”, arguing that justice had gone “out of the window” in a bid to sell newspapers. Kanyare’s lawyer, Jeremy Dein QC, accused Mahmood of being “charismatic and highly intelligent but... dangerously deceitful, ruthless, exploitative and corrupt”.⁴⁵ [Mahmood was, famously, to face Dein in a courtroom ten years later in the Tulisa Contostavlos case – see chapter 14]

Mahmood was unhappy with the cross-examination he underwent over several days. “I was subjected”, he later wrote, “to relentless assaults by barristers... The mud-slinging was worse than anything I had experienced before”.⁴⁶ One reason for his upset was his belief that his story was, in a sense, underwritten by the police. He claimed that officers had read his copy in advance of publication “and made minor amendments”. In the

42 ‘What is red mercury?’ David Adam, *The Guardian*, 30 September 2004 <https://tinyurl.com/4zeaxmtj>

43 Peter Burden, *News of the World? Fake Sheikhs & Royal Trappings* (Eye Press, 2008), pp92,94

44 ‘Trio cleared of red mercury plot’, *BBC News*, 25 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/mmcebtja>

45 ‘Mahmood is “dangerously deceitful”, court told’, *The Guardian*, 6 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/3e2vny56>

46 *Confessions*, p97

circumstances, it was unsurprising that the police and the CPS defended their decision to prosecute. But there was considerable media criticism of them and, particularly, of Mahmood, with predictions, all unrealised, that the acquittals marked the end of his undercover operations.⁴⁷

A *News of the World* spokeswoman said the paper was “entirely satisfied” that the investigation was conducted with “wholly proper” methods and in close liaison with the police.⁴⁸ She said: “Our story resulted from a thorough and legitimate investigation by Mazher Mahmood, one of the paper’s most senior and experienced reporters, whose exposés have led to over 200 convictions” (a wholly inaccurate figure – see chapter 10). As for Mahmood, he remained defiant, drawing for his confidence on the knowledge that throughout “the entire job I was basically working for Scotland Yard’s anti-terrorism squad. I was registered as a participating informant; every single movement I made was on their orders. Quite often, as it came out in court, I didn’t agree with what they were doing, but I had to do it as I was working for them”.⁴⁹ *The Times* properly noted: “The outcome of the case depended heavily on the evidence of Mr Mahmood”.⁵⁰ And the jury’s not-guilty verdicts suggested they didn’t believe him.

Given the fact that the trial involved terrorism and was held at the Old Bailey, it was impossible for the *NOTW* to ignore the not guilty verdicts and the resulting criticism. However, Mahmood escaped without a scratch. If only the red mercury case had been viewed in concert with his previous legal controversies, his career should have come to an end. Another dot, another chance missed.

One of Mahmood’s highest profile victims was the Radio 2 disc jockey, Johnnie Walker, whom he exposed as a drug-user. A front page picture showed Walker snorting a line of cocaine.⁵¹ Playing the role of a media tycoon who was eager to set up a new radio service, Mahmood had invited Walker to London’s Grosvenor House hotel to meet his three Arab business partners. Concealed video cameras captured the entire meeting. According to the article, Walker engaged in “grotesque actions” by tipping cocaine –

47 ‘Fake sheikh accused after terror plot acquittals’, *The Guardian*, 26 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/cnwkb8n>; ‘As prosecution fails, is time running out for the News of the World’s fake sheikh?’, *The Independent*, 26 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/yc26sbeb>; ‘NoW’s Mahmood under attack after “dirty bombers” cleared in court’, *Press Gazette*, 27 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/4a7fctxz>; ‘Clouds gather around the fake sheikh’, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/c8e9tt4m>

48 ‘News of the World defends methods as “dirty bomb” trio acquitted’, *Press Gazette*, 25 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/3byu47h7>

49 Interview, *Press Gazette*, 9 May 2008 <https://tinyurl.com/ytvbsxr4>

50 ‘Three cleared of plotting dirty bomb’, *The Times*, 26 July 2006 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/3x42pedr>

51 ‘We film top BBC star as he snorts cocaine’, *NOTW*, 25 April 1999

“the evil powder” – on to a table and dividing it into lines before snorting it “deeply up his nose”.⁵² (Mahmood’s articles often featured a turgid lexicon of disgust). The *NOTW* also carried a leading article, “Johnnie’s dark secret”, which sarcastically observed that his willingness to sell drugs to anyone was “taking public service broadcasting a step too far”.

Walker was also said to have acted as a pimp by offering, and then providing, two Russian sex workers to Mahmood’s team. After the story appeared, Walker was suspended by the BBC and arrested by the police. Six months later, he appeared at Horseferry magistrates court and pleaded guilty to possession of cocaine. Although the stipendiary magistrate, Rosamond Keating, admonished Walker she directed her harshest comments at the *NOTW*, expressing disgust at Mahmood’s methods, saying she didn’t approve of how the journalists had acted, and referring to the published article as “filth”.⁵³

Keating also observed that the paper’s form of journalism made it difficult for someone to receive a fair trial. It was part of the reason for her handing Walker a lenient sentence, a £2,000 fine, although his obvious contrition and his willingness to join a rehabilitation programme were key factors in his favour.⁵⁴ His BBC bosses agreed. Within an hour of the court case, it was announced that Walker would return to his radio show. Managers were impressed by the way he had handled the crisis.⁵⁵ Eight years later, in his autobiography, Walker claimed that Mahmood’s story was the push he had needed to seek help. “I was grateful”, he wrote. This was gleefully reported in the *NOTW*: “Walker praised the News of the World for rescuing him from his sordid drugs and porn hell”.⁵⁶ Mahmood, wholly unused to such praise from a victim, was delighted. “I was preparing for the same old entrapment arguments to be hurled at me yet again”, he wrote, “but Walker gallantly put his hands up”.⁵⁷

When giving evidence at the Leveson inquiry, Mahmood recalled that Walker “thanked me for helping him resolve the demons that were possessing him at the time. He was grateful for my intervention”.⁵⁸ This was a singular example. No-one else who featured in Mahmood’s stories expressed an iota of gratitude for his work. Just the opposite. Once they realised how they had been deceived by him, they were enraged.

52 ‘Junkie Johnnie Walker peddles drugs and vice: Radio 2 DJ cocaine shame’, *NOTW*, 25 April 1999

53 ‘Radio 2 DJ keeps his job after cocaine conviction’, *The Times*, 14 October 1999; ‘BBC won’t sack Johnnie Walker over cocaine’, *Daily Telegraph*, 14 October 1999

54 ‘DJ fined over drugs offence’, *BBC News*, 13 October 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/3df5beej>

55 ‘Drugs-case DJ on way back to BBC’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 14 October 1999

56 ‘We save drugs DJ’, *NOTW*, 27 May 2007

57 *Confessions*, p205-6

58 Leveson inquiry, oral evidence, 12 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/3bskxvk4>

Despite his confidence in his own abilities, and his evident delight in playing tricks on people, Mahmood's journalistic nous was not infallible. In the aftermath of the July 2005 London bombings, in which 52 people were killed by four Islamic suicide bombers, a Mahmood "world exclusive" revealed the existence of a "fifth bomber".⁵⁹ His story told of a Muslim fanatic called Imran Patel who was "lined up" to join the gang. It was replete with detail about his relationship with the bombers, potential new targets, and the commitment of fellow Muslims to jihad. Within days, however, Patel appeared at Leeds magistrates court on a charge of wasting police time by "knowingly making a false report to Mazher Mahmood".⁶⁰ Patel had concocted a fictitious story in the hope of a £5,000 payment. No money was handed over.

At his trial, the court learned that Imran had sent a series of emails to Ian Edmondson, the *NOTW*'s associate news editor, in which he outlined his "information".⁶¹ Mahmood, assigned the task of interviewing Imran, spent two hours with him and, in spite of the extraordinary nature of Imran's claims, he accepted his story without apparent qualm or secondary checks. His article carried no caveats.

District Judge David Kitson, when sentencing Imran to four months in jail, told him the hoax had "diverted police for six days at a cost of £60,000" with "enormous consequences" for the police inquiry.⁶² Although the *NOTW* did not part with any money, it didn't think its readers needed to know its investigations editor had been so gullible.

Mahmood was also taken in by another hoax. In 2008, nine-year-old Rubina Ali, an Indian girl raised in a Mumbai slum, became famous after appearing in the Academy Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*. Two months after the Oscars ceremony, Mahmood's page one "world exclusive" told how Rubina's "poverty stricken" father, Rafiq Qureshi was seeking to sell Rubina for £200,000 to a sheikh from Dubai.⁶³ Across four more pages, *NOTW* readers learned how Qureshi had negotiated to have Rubina adopted by the sheikh (Mahmood). For an experienced reader of newspapers, especially one grounded in Mahmood's work, there was much about the narrative that was questionable. The central allegation appeared to rest on the word of an anonymous source – "our informant, now a city tour guide"

59 'They groomed me as 5th bomber', *NOTW*, 23 October 2005

60 'Bomb plot "time waster" in court', *Birmingham Post*, 28 October 2005

61 'Jail for man who claimed to be bomber', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 26 November 2005

62 'Jail sentence for London bomb lie', *Birmingham Post*, 26 November 2005; 'Hoaxer who claimed to know bombers is jailed', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2005 <https://tinyurl.com/2w3cynne>

63 'Slumdog star for sale,' *NOTW*, 19 April 2009. NB: This Qureshi has nothing to do with Mahmood's cousin, "Jaws" Qureshi

– and Qureshi’s brother-in-law. Although Qureshi did not speak English, Mahmood felt confident enough of the translations to quote him. Between the lines, it was evident that it wasn’t Qureshi who had asked for money. The main inside page headline, “This child is special, an Oscar child. So now we want £200k”, was misleading because that phrase was attributed not to Qureshi, but to his brother.

Within hours of the *NOTW*’s publication, Indian news agency reporters visited Qureshi who bluntly denied Mahmood’s story. He was quoted as saying: “All these accusations on me are wrong. They [the sheikh couple] wanted to set a trap around me and take my child. This has been happening from a long time now. Earlier, my first wife also created several problems to take my child away from me. I do not know who is behind all this”.⁶⁴

Significantly, Rubina was quoted as saying: “I want to remain with [my father]”.⁶⁵ According to the report, Rubina’s mother, Kursheed, said she had heard about Qureshi’s intention to sell his daughter two weeks before. It suggested Kursheed, or someone close to her, may have been Mahmood’s source. That possibility was given greater credence the following week with the publication of Mahmood’s interview with Kursheed in which she didn’t conceal her intense dislike for her former husband.⁶⁶ She filed a formal complaint against Qureshi and called for him to be jailed.

The huge success of *Slumdog Millionaire* meant the story got world-wide coverage and, under the international media glare, the Mumbai police took Qureshi and Rubina in for questioning. Outside the police station, Qureshi told reporters he had been lured to “a fancy hotel” by someone who claimed they wanted to help Rubina.⁶⁷ Next day, the local station chief, Prakash Salunkhe, told the *Hindustan Times*: “When we questioned Rubina, she said she does not want to go anywhere, and wants to live with her father. Similarly, Rafiq Qureshi said he has no intentions of ‘selling’ her”.⁶⁸ Then his colleague, Police Inspector Rahim Shaikh, announced that there was no question of charging Qureshi. “There was not any crime”, he said. “The matter is closed”. The police could not find any evidence to support the *NOTW*’s allegations, and their attempt to question Mahmood and his two colleagues – including his then girlfriend, Zee, who pretended to be a Dubai

64 ‘Rubina’s father rubbishes allegation of selling daughter’, *Asian News International*, 19 April 2009

65 ‘Slumdog child star’s father denies trying to sell her’, *Agence France-Presse*, 20 April 2009

66 ‘Rubina’s dad is an evil liar. I’ll do whatever it takes to get her back. Slumdog scandal star’s real mum weeps over plot to sell daughter’, *NOTW*, 26 April 2009

67 ‘India probes dispute over “Slumdog” star’, *Associated Press*, 20 April 2009

68 ‘Slumdog... money tale gets knotty’, *Hindustan Times*, 21 April 2009 <https://tinyurl.com/4ab8zc3k>

princess⁶⁹ – failed because the trio had left their hotel.⁷⁰

Several British papers carried reports about there being no case for Qureshi to answer, but the *NOTW* ignored that development and published a series of readers' letters critical of Rubina's father under the headline, "Slumdog dad is a monster". It was soon generally accepted, except by the *NOTW*, that the claims about Qureshi's willingness to sell Rubina for adoption were false. They emanated from his ex-wife due to her loathing for him and his second wife. Rubina remained loyal to her father and rejected the newspaper's claims as lies.⁷¹ She went on to do a university course and, after her father's death from tuberculosis in 2020, she opened a beauty salon near Mumbai.

It was understandable, if lamentable, that Mahmood was not held to account for the *Slumdog* story. British editors were never going to fund journalists' trips to Mumbai to get at the truth. They wouldn't have been much interested in the outcome anyway. As so often down the years, media apathy allowed Mahmood and the *NOTW* to operate without proper scrutiny.

So, let's recap by considering the dots, the occasions on which there were significant courtroom incidents involving judicial criticism of Mahmood and his methods: Hassan/Caldori (1995), Tonnesson (1997), Oliver (1998), the Bradford schoolboy, Hardwicke, Giggs, Walker (all 1999), Fazil (2000), Beckham kidnap (2003), Qema (2005), and the red mercury "plot" (2006). Eleven dots. Viewed together, they present a picture very different from the one the *News of the World* sought to paint of Mahmood being a brilliant investigator responsible for "hundreds" of prosecutions (a mathematical fallacy debunked in chapter 10).

69 "Zee", speaking to camera on Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 2

70 'Indian police end probe of "Slumdog" star's dad', *Associated Press*, 23 April 2009

71 'Double life of the little girl from the slum', *Redditch Advertiser*, 18 July 2009 <https://tinyurl.com/5e8x4sr3>

Chapter 9

Phone-hacking? Terrible – not me, mate...

*“Hand on heart, I can say that I had never
heard of phone hacking until the first arrests in
August 2006.”*

— Mazher Mahmood

Mazher Mahmood was adamant. Until 2006, when the *News of the World*'s royal editor, Clive Goodman, was arrested he knew nothing about phone hacking. “It was the first time I had ever heard of this practice”, he said in a statement to the Leveson inquiry.¹ “Hand on heart”, he wrote in the *NOTW*'s final issue, “I can say that I had never heard of phone hacking until the first arrests in August 2006”.² When he appeared before the inquiry he was asked whether he knew of anyone else involved in hacking. “No”, he replied, and seeking to distance himself from a method he affected to despise, he was vague about who might have been responsible: “All the fingers were pointed towards the news desk”.³ Mahmood would continue to distance himself from any link to, or knowledge of, voicemail interception by his colleagues.

When it came to the use of private detectives, some of whom were involved in phone hacking, he was a shade more circumspect but equally firm. “Private investigators were never the source of any investigation that I pursued”, he stated in written evidence. In oral evidence, he underlined the point: “Can I just stress very clearly that I never ever commissioned a private detective to do any work for me”.⁴ He did concede that very early in his *NOTW* career “I was told to work with one firm of private investigators by

1 First written statement, to Leveson, 14 October 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/26rtwbdn>

2 ‘Heroes and villains: we’ve saved children from paedos & nailed 250 evil crooks’, *NOTW*, 10 July 2011

3 Mahmood, oral evidence, 12 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/2uzz42rj>

4 Ibid. NB: Mahmood was assigned to the news desk, but had greater autonomy than any other reporter.

the then news editor”, but added that “they only worked on my instructions and were never tasked by me to obtain information or to source a story”.⁵ He avoided mentioning the firm’s name, claiming that he worked with their investigators on about twenty stories, adding: “I stopped working with them at the end of 1992 or early 1993”.⁶

That statement does not stand up to scrutiny. As part of his investigation into Mahmood for the Leveson inquiry, my co-author Paddy French uncovered evidence that he used private detectives in July 1999. He found an invoice for £1,488.72 from Law & Commercial Services (an alternative name for the Southern Investigations detective agency), a firm controlled by two private detectives, Jonathan Rees and Sid Fillery. It concerned “observations” and “confidential inquiries” into an immigration story carried out by Fillery and another of the firm’s operatives, “Mel” (Melvyn Heraty), following a “request” by “Maz Mahmood”.⁷ Subsequently, *Panorama*’s John Sweeney and Meirion Jones discovered a letter from Fillery to Mahmood about the same assignment: “Dear Maz, further to our rather enjoyable operation to assist you, I now take the liberty of enclosing a note of our charges”.⁸ The attached invoice was addressed to “Mr Maz Mahmood, Investigations Editor”.

Although Mahmood argued that it didn’t prove he was responsible himself for commissioning the agency, the *Panorama* pair found another document which stated: “Source met Maz... Maz was with a plain clothes officer who was selling a story to Maz”.⁹ The authors of a book about the murder of Rees’s former partner, Daniel Morgan, also unearthed Southern Investigations’ invoices billed to the *NOTW* for five stories in 1997 which carried Mahmood’s byline.¹⁰ In addition, they noted that Fillery acted as an “extra” in a Mahmood sting operation, and that the agency supplied people to help Mahmood gatecrash Sylvester Stallone’s wedding.¹¹

Yet more evidence of Mahmood’s link to Southern, and to Fillery, was revealed by two authors of another book who investigated Metropolitan police corruption. According to their researches, the agency carried out “a

5 First written statement, op cit

6 Ibid

7 ‘The life and times of a serial perjurer’, *Press Gang*, 10 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/3j6cj5mb>

8 Letter dated 30 July 1999 from Law & Commercial Services (Southern Investigations). *Panorama* screened on BBC1, 12 November 2014

9 ‘Lord Goldsmith calls for review of convictions as undercover reporter is exposed’, *The Independent*, 12 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/54w2xcfh>

10 Morgan & Jukes, op cit, p177

11 ‘Rocky’s rooftop bride’, *NOTW*, 18 May 1997

series of assignments with Mahmood” in the wake of the David Mellor story.¹² They detailed an anecdote which illustrated Mahmood’s close relationship with Fillery, telling how he acted the part of the sheikh’s private secretary during one of his (failed) sting operations.

When Mahmood gave evidence to Lord Justice Leveson in October 2011 and strenuously denied his involvement with private detectives, he was well aware he had used one just two years earlier. A question from Leveson’s counsel, David Barr, was aimed at reminding him of the incident. “Can I ask you... whether you can recall ever working with Mr Derek Webb?” As Mahmood knew, Webb was a private investigator, a former police officer known as “the Silent Shadow” because of his surveillance expertise (which Webb confirmed during his own evidence to Leveson).¹³

Mahmood’s answer, to put it at its most generous, was economical with the truth. He said Webb was “a man that I came across, I think, on one or two occasions. He may have worked on one or two of my investigations... he was assigned to my stories by the news desk. I can’t remember what stories they were but I think only on a couple of occasions”.¹⁴

It was yet another example of Mahmood’s inability to tell the truth. A tranche of internal *NOTW* emails that came to light five months after he gave evidence proved he knew much more about Webb than he let on. The messages revealed his involvement in the commissioning of Webb to follow Labour MP Tom Watson in September 2009.¹⁵ Watson was unequivocal in stating to Leveson that covert surveillance by Webb “was commissioned by Mazher Mahmood with someone called ‘Conrad’ acting as an accomplice”.¹⁶

Mahmood had passed on a wholly inaccurate tip to the news desk that Watson was having an affair with a devout Muslim woman. In reply, the desk executive asked him to “get Derek on the case” in order to trail Watson and his supposed amour.¹⁷ That executive may well have formally commissioned Webb, but an email sent by Mahmood to assistant editor Ian Edmondson which stated “Derek en-route to Brighton” revealed his knowledge of Webb’s role. The exchange of memos between Mahmood and the news desk proved his response to the Leveson inquiry counsel’s question had

12 Michael Gillard & Laurie Flynn, *Untouchables: Dirty cops, bent justice and racism at Scotland Yard* (Cutting Edge Press, 2004), p274-5

13 Oral evidence to inquiry, 15 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/aeaukpns>

14 Oral evidence, op cit

15 ‘Email trail: How Tom Watson was stalked’, *The Independent*, 22 May 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/3pwn3c5h>; ‘News of the World’s “fake sheikh” had Tom Watson followed, emails show’, *The Guardian*, 22 May 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/mvdjanrm>

16 Tom Watson, first witness statement to Leveson inquiry, 21 May 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/298tsryr>

17 It being a false story, nothing was published

been disingenuous.

Then there was Glenn Mulcaire, the most prolific private investigator on the *NOTW*'s payroll, who wasn't in any doubt about Mahmood's regular use of his services. Mulcaire usually worked to instructions from assistant editor Greg Miskiwi, who acted as "Glenn's conduit" to make requests on behalf of several reporters. None of Mahmood's stories, wrote Miskiwi, "would have been remotely possible without the puzzle pieces we got from Glenn Mulcaire, Southern Investigations and the rest... Maz knew full well the abundance of fruits that our consultants' shadowy gum shoes could bring him. Later on, he'd deny ever working with PIs directly, but in reality he had personal relationships with the boys at Southern Investigations..."¹⁸ Miskiwi thought Mahmood and Mulcaire "viewed each other with frosty suspicion, but I was all too happy to act as a neutral go-between".

Mulcaire's version of events is similar. He wrote: "Mahmood's name was never very far from Greg's lips", appearing "in dispatches almost every day, or several times a week".¹⁹ He may be guilty of overstating his role by describing himself, Miskiwi and Mahmood as "the axis" or "the dream team".²⁰ He also went so far as to claim: "I was there to supply the bullets for the likes of Mahmood to pull the trigger". Even if Mahmood was only ever connected to private investigators like Mulcaire and Southern Investigations at one remove, through executives like Miskiwi, he could not have been unaware of his dependence on their work. They provided information he used in his stings.

Mulcaire's recollection of his regular work for Mahmood accords with evidence disclosed by his former employer, Murdoch's News Group Newspapers (NGN), publisher of the *NOTW*. According to a legal claim made by one of Mahmood's victims against NGN, Mahmood made extensive use of PIs to hack into the mobile phones of his potential targets.²¹ The claim cites internal NGN invoices "which reveal he commissioned eight different private investigators on at least 83 occasions between October 1999 and July 2005". Among the eight is Mulcaire's firm, Global Intelligence Services, and the claim specifies examples of his having provided information on stories carrying Mahmood's byline.²² Also listed are Starbase, a firm Mahmood is said to have commissioned 35 times, and Express Locate International, with 32 commissions. Additionally, two examples of his use of PIs were found in

18 Miskiwi (2024), op cit, p186

19 Glenn Mulcaire, *Shadowman* (Yellow Press, 2024), p169

20 Ibid. p171

21 Claim BL-2022-001699, Neil Montgomery vs News Group Newspapers Ltd, 30 September 2022

22 'EastEnder Nat's lover is drug dealer', *NOTW*, 10 June 2001; 'Drug dealing vice girl works in Commons', *NOTW*, 16 March 2003

NGN's records of payments to contributors.

The documentation clearly suggests that Mahmood's evidence to the Leveson inquiry requires a retrospective investigation as to its truthfulness. He was speaking to the tribunal some six months after his newspaper was shut down. That July 2011 closure followed the revelation that several *NOTW* journalists had been responsible for the illegal interception of hundreds of people's voicemail messages. The scandal broke during the lengthy investigation by *The Guardian's* Nick Davies into the industrial scale use of phone hacking at the *NOTW* by reporters and editorial executives.²³ Although we have concentrated on Mahmood's questionable methodology, he was far from alone among the *NOTW's* staff in the use of unethical or illegal techniques.

In cynical Fleet Street jargon, these were known as the "dark arts". It was second nature for *NOTW* reporters to engage in subterfuge. Blagging – pretending in a phone call (and sometimes face-to-face) to be someone else to fool a person into disclosing private information (addresses, phone bills, bank statements, social security records, tax records, health records) – was a routine activity, even though outlawed.²⁴ Trespass was common. The theft (of photos or documents) was not unknown. In addition, there was tapping of live phone calls by inserting bugs into BT junction boxes, the placing of listening devices in rooms or cars, and the use of tracker devices to follow cars. Bribes were paid to some police officers for information. Computers were hacked.

The result of illicit and unethical methods were articles that often stretched credulity to the limit and, on occasion, contained outright falsehoods. None of which disturbed the sleep of the paper's editors, reporters and sub-editors. There was a total disregard among the staff, up to and including the proprietor, for the consequences of stories that cost people their jobs or reputations while holding them up to ridicule. At the *NOTW*, there was no difference between the public interest and what was interesting to the public. All that mattered was creating a newspaper with the greatest chance of selling as many copies per issue as possible.

During Mahmood's time on the *NOTW*, a succession of editors – Patsy Chapman (1988-93), Piers Morgan (1994-5), Phil Hall (1995-2000), Rebekah Brooks²⁵ (2000-03), Andy Coulson (2003-07) and Colin Myler (2007-11) –

23 Nick Davies, *Hack Attack: How the Truth Caught Up with Rupert Murdoch* (Chatto & Windus, 2014)

24 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. But the Data Protection Act 1998 did offer a defence for information deemed to be in the public interest

25 Until her second marriage to Charlie Brooks in 2009, she used her maiden name, Rebekah Wade

worked to Murdoch's simple brief. To his mind, a mind shared by those editors, readers were the only ethical judges who counted and they delivered their verdict across the shop counter every Sunday. If they bought the paper, then that was all the justification editors required to justify the content. Every editor put reporters under persistent pressure to provide stories likely to maximise the paper's sale, and none more so than Brooks and Coulson. The stories they regarded as the most saleable generally involved celebrities, members of the royal family and senior politicians, people who were the least likely to speak to the paper. To overcome this barrier, reporters who were already versed in the use of journalism's dark arts, explored every possible loophole to penetrate people's privacy. Digital technology, in the form of mobile phones, provided a big breakthrough. From about 1998 onwards, journalists at several newspapers – particularly the *NOTW*, the *Sunday People* and *Sunday Mirror* – discovered that voicemail messages left on mobiles offered an unrivalled window into people's personal lives. Story-getting suddenly became a whole lot easier.

Piers Morgan was editing the *Daily Mirror* in April 1998 when the paper's Irish edition ran an exclusive story which revealed that a reporter had listened in to voicemails left on the mobile phone of Ireland's prime minister, Bertie Ahern.²⁶ The article explained the hacking technique in some detail. I didn't discover this until August 2011, when I read an archived copy of the story.²⁷ As I knew from my days as *Mirror* editor, the Irish edition was published separately in Dublin and the chances of Morgan seeing it, let alone reading it, were highly unlikely. I quoted two staff who agreed with me.²⁸ More recently, I received further evidence that Morgan had not known of the story.²⁹ Years later, however, Morgan did develop an intimate knowledge of phone-hacking, as mentioned by a high court judge, Mr Justice Fancourt, in 2023.³⁰

In separate conversations, Morgan boasted to singer Charlotte Church, model Naomi Campbell and TV presenter Jeremy Paxman how easy it was to access mobile phone messages if users failed to change their factory setting pin codes. But wiser users keyed in their own codes. How could they be obtained? The solution at the *NOTW*, after Morgan had left the paper, was provided by Mulcaire, who was recruited by Miskiw in 2000 as a blagger and

26 'Mirror taps Bertie's mobile. We listen to his message in Cabinet phone scandal', *Daily Mirror* (Ireland), 18 April 1998

27 Free library archive <https://tinyurl.com/4fxrs2ek>

28 'The day the Irish Mirror hacked a prime minister's phone', *The Guardian*, 15 August 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/4dhvwpnr>

29 Emailed off-the-record briefing by an Irish-based member of staff, 12 May 2025

30 'I don't believe a word of it, Piers', *British Journalism Review*, Vol 35/1, February 2024. Cf. Piers Morgan, *The Insider: The Private Diaries of a Scandalous Decade* (Ebury Press, 2005), p279

hacker.³¹ Even when people set their own pin codes he managed to obtain them through his blagging skills and, having accessed people's messages, he recorded them. In 2005, he worked for Goodman, who was finding it increasingly difficult to get royal stories and was therefore under pressure for his failure from his editor, Coulson. In order to save his job, Goodman encouraged Mulcaire to hack into members of the royal household serving Princes William and Harry. Both the journalist and the blagger were unaware that their activities alerted the authorities to what was going on. Even so, nine months passed before they were arrested on suspicion of intercepting voicemail messages.³² The arrests shocked the rest of Fleet Street, not least those who were also engaged in hacking.

Murdoch's company, News International, immediately instituted a damage limitation exercise. At its heart was a big lie that would go on being repeated for the following six years. Goodman was "a rogue reporter" who had acted alone.³³ Many popular paper journalists knew otherwise and the trade magazine, *Press Gazette*, quoted an unnamed crime reporter as saying other *NOTW* staff also used Goodman's source. He also said the practice of "phone screwing" was common at the Sunday tabloids, adding that "most reporters pay non-journalists to carry it out".³⁴ I also reported a Radio 4 interview with a former *People* and *NOTW* reporter, Mike Jarvis, who said journalists routinely paid informants, who were at arm's length from the paper, to discover phone records, text messages and voicemail recordings. He said: "Everybody knows it goes on, and everybody turns a blind eye".³⁵ At least one commentator saw no harm in it. Stephen Glover argued in *The Independent* that Goodman's techniques "were not necessarily reprehensible" and that the *NOTW* is "not as unscrupulous, as it once was". He was wrong on both counts.³⁶

When Goodman appeared at the Old Bailey in November 2006 he pleaded guilty to conspiring to intercept mobile phone messages involving the royal family. Mulcaire admitted the same charge and, most interesting of all, he pleaded guilty to five further charges of intercepting voicemail messages.³⁷ These involved Simon Hughes MP, actress Elle Macpherson, publicist Max

31 Davies, op cit, p43

32 'Two charged in "phone-tap" probe', *BBC*, 9 August 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/4dz9kyvc>

33 "Rogue reporter" was a derivation of the 2007 claim by *NOTW* editor Colin Myler that Goodman was a "rogue exception": 'News of the World in the clear over Goodman case', *The Guardian*, 18 May 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/7svrn3ek>

34 Roy Greenslade, "Phone-screwing" common among red-tops', *The Guardian*, 10 August 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/seur8zhu>

35 Roy Greenslade, 'At last, the tabloids' dirty secret is exposed', *The Guardian*, 9 August 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/32rxhzkw>

36 Roy Greenslade, 'What the press commentators are saying...', *The Guardian*, 4 December 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/2eceevez>

37 'Goodman pleads guilty,' *The Guardian*, 29 November 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/mv7um3re>

Clifford, sports agent Sky Andrew, and Gordon Taylor, chief executive of the Professional Footballers Association. What now seems remarkable is that the Mulcaire revelation failed to stimulate greater media interest or a more searching police investigation. The five extra names attributed to Mulcaire were not royal. Goodman had not written stories about them. It was therefore clear he was not the only rogue.

The raid on Mulcaire's home had turned up 11,000 pages of detailed notes about his interceptions plus tapes and discs. Why did the Metropolitan Police not follow the evidence? Why were other *NOTW* staff who had used Mulcaire's services, and identified in his notes, not prosecuted? Why did the police not alert every potential hacking target listed by Mulcaire? Why, indeed, was there not a major inquiry into the *News of the World's* illicit journalistic activities?

These questions were left hanging in the air when Goodman and Mulcaire were sentenced in January 2007, with Goodman receiving a four-month jail sentence and Mulcaire getting six months.³⁸ Further eye-watering revelations emerged during the hearing. The *NOTW* had paid Mulcaire £104,988 for his services. In addition, he had been paid £12,300 by Goodman (via his newspaper expense account). On the day they were sentenced, Coulson announced his resignation as *NOTW* editor and issued a statement in which he insisted he had no knowledge of any illegal activities.³⁹ Two months later, News International's then executive chairman, Les Hinton, told a parliamentary committee that a "rigorous internal investigation" had found no evidence of widespread hacking at the *NOTW*.⁴⁰ And that, in public at least, was the end of the story. Behind the scenes, however, one of Mulcaire's hacking targets, Gordon Taylor, pursued a claim against the *NOTW* for breach of privacy. He was well served by his solicitor, Mark Lewis. Aware that he had a strong case, and also that News International was desperate to avoid a court hearing which would reveal that hacking was rife within the *NOTW*, Lewis turned down a succession of increasing offers – £50,000, £150,000, £350,000 – until he accepted a payment of £700,000 for his client. Two other payments were agreed for Taylor's legal advisor and solicitor, taking the total to £1 million. But the settlements, in June 2008, were covered by confidentiality agreements.⁴¹

They remained a secret until Nick Davies's explosive revelation of their

38 'Clive Goodman sentenced to four months', *The Guardian*, 26 January 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/2x8fmh93>

39 'News of the World editor quits', *The Guardian*, 26 January 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/34s3rj54>

40 Oral evidence, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 24 October 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/ym8yduw>

41 Davies, op cit, pp158-9

existence in *The Guardian* in July 2009.⁴² Again, it was a story that should have prompted intense political and media interest. After all, by that time Coulson was director of communications for Prime Minister David Cameron. Davies's articles also revealed the hacking of other senior MPs, such as John Prescott and Tessa Jowell. Scotland Yard was quick to react in order to negate Davies's story. Assistant commissioner John Yates issued a statement within 24 hours to say a "most careful investigation" had been carried out previously and "no further investigation is required".⁴³

Yates had put his finger in the dyke. Over the following months, people who discovered their messages had been intercepted began to take legal action. Several papers carried allegations about indiscriminate hacking by *NOTW* reporters and staff at their red-top rivals. One key revelation by Davies in December 2010, that actress Sienna Miller, had been hacked, drove a coach and horses through News International's "rogue reporter" defence.⁴⁴ With Scotland Yard under increasing pressure, it launched a fresh investigation into the phone hacking affair, Operation Weeting. That was under way when Davies and his colleague Amelia Hill delivered the bombshell news that the mobile phone of a 13-year-old murdered girl, Milly Dowler, had been hacked.⁴⁵ It was the transformational moment in the saga.

The public had been largely unmoved by the hacking of celebrities' phones. But the revelation about Milly, along with the suggestion her messages might have been deleted by the paper, thereby giving false hope to her parents that she might be alive, caused an unprecedented public outcry against the paper and Rupert Murdoch. One of his first calls was to Hinton, his former Wapping chief who had been translated in 2007 to New York as chief executive of Dow Jones, publisher of the *Wall Street Journal*. He informed him that he planned to close the *News of the World*, which Hinton thought "desperate" and "foolish".⁴⁶

Murdoch, speaking from London, was closer to the reality of the widespread revulsion. Advertisers were pulling out, a boycott of readers looked likely, and there was rising political opposition. Suddenly, the public discovered the venality at the heart of Britain's best-selling newspaper. Aside from phone hacking, there were revelations about the frequent employment of private investigators, about bribery, and about the sinister

42 'Murdoch papers paid £1m to gag phone-hacking victims', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2009 <https://tinyurl.com/2s38ys8>

43 'Met police refuse to reopen phone-hacking inquiry', *The Guardian*, 9 July 2009 <https://tinyurl.com/5h9jpv8f>

44 'Phone hacking approved by top News of the World executive – new files', *The Guardian*, 15 December 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/4wakr4w2>

45 'Missing Milly Dowler's voicemail was hacked by News of the World', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/39y6tpw7>

46 Les Hinton, *The Bootle Boy: an untidy life in news* (Scribe, 2018), p391

nature of close links between the paper's senior executives and senior police officers at Scotland Yard, which had emboldened *NOTW* journalists to act with impunity. People learned at last how reporters had been encouraged by their editors to obtain stories by any means possible.

It was Murdoch's son, James, who made the public announcement that the *NOTW*'s issue of 10 July 2011 would be its last.⁴⁷ Just three months before, editor Colin Myler, had called it "the greatest newspaper in the world".⁴⁸ He made his boast at the annual British Press Awards ceremony where he collected four awards, two of them on behalf of Mahmood for his cricket spot-fixing scoop (see chapter 13) which also earned him the title of news reporter of the year. Myler was speaking hours after the paper's chief reporter, Neville Thurlbeck, and former news editor, Ian Edmondson, had been arrested. Days later, another former news editor, James Weatherup, was also arrested.⁴⁹ In subsequent months, several more *NOTW* staff were arrested, including Coulson, and his predecessor, Rebekah Brooks, News International's chief executive. But Mahmood was not among them.

Unlike hundreds of staff who were made redundant because of the closure, Mahmood stayed inside the Murdoch stable. Within the organisation, his star remained in the ascendant. It had been noticeable that in the wake of Goodman's arrest and imprisonment, Mahmood's self-congratulatory memoir, *Confessions of a Fake Sheik*, was published by Murdoch's company.⁵⁰ He acknowledged help from Murdoch's personal assistant in making "this book come to life".⁵¹ In a puff masquerading as a review by the paper's film critic, Robbie Collin, it was described as "explosive".⁵² It contended that "Maz's success has a high price" because of "numerous death threats", and it repeated the false claim about his being responsible for the jailing of "more than 230 villains". Clearly, the timing of the book's release and the boosting of its author was aimed at distracting people from the growing criticism over hacking.

Similarly, at the moment of the paper's closure, with Mahmood declaring himself totally innocent of phone-hacking, he was given top billing in the *NOTW*'s final issue. Praise was heaped on him across two pages in articles which claimed that "hundreds of crooks and monsters rue the day... Mazher

47 'Hacked to death', *The Times*, 8 July 2011 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/mrs4r8pa>

48 'In the air: News of World wins four Press Awards', *London Evening Standard*, 10 April 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/rue8wkkh>

49 'Unexpected arrest in phone-hacking case leaves News of the World stunned', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/3tmp6bbh>

50 *Confessions*, 2008

51 *Confessions*, px. He thanked her by name, Karen Colognese. She married John Witherow in July 2024

52 'Sheik and awe', *NOTW*, 31 August 2008

Mahmood got them in his sights”.⁵³ He was also given space to boast about his record and he seized the opportunity to distance himself from the cause of the paper’s downfall. “Hand on heart, I can say that I had never heard of phone hacking until the first arrests in August 2006. As investigations editor, there is a part of me that feels that I should have known what was going on. However, I concentrated on exposing wrongdoing outside my office, never imagining that danger lurked within”.⁵⁴ Some of the paper’s editorial staff must surely have gasped at his nerve, best described by the Yiddish expression “chutzpah”.

Determined not to let Mahmood go for reasons which have never been explained, Murdoch prevailed on the *Sunday Times*’s editor, John Witherow, to let the reporter who had once left the paper in ignominy to rejoin the staff. [Witherow had been working on the foreign desk at the time of Mahmood’s 1988 departure, but would not necessarily have been aware of the reasons he went]. Whether Witherow was genuinely happy to take him back was unclear although, in public, he obeyed the corporate code by calling him “a remarkable operator” and giving him a clean bill of health on the grounds that he had not been involved in phone-hacking.⁵⁵ Witherow told MPs: “Clearly, we checked him out very carefully and needed reassurances that he was not involved in any way with the phone hacking, which he assured us he wasn’t, and independently we were assured he wasn’t”.⁵⁶ One of those assurances, according to Mahmood when giving evidence to the Leveson inquiry, was that he no longer used Gashi as a source.⁵⁷

Yet, just three months before, Witherow had issued an edict outlawing the use of subterfuge by his reporters, prompting an insider to predict that Mahmood would not be hired because “without stings” he “is nothing”.⁵⁸ Murdoch thought otherwise and Mahmood was hired on a £150,000 salary to work “under his own steam”.⁵⁹

He was to spend fourteen months at his former paper, producing more than twenty stories, six of them making the front page, of which two were the main leads (splashes, in Fleet Street jargon). Several involved subterfuge. It

53 ‘Dirty dozen: Crimebuster Maz reveals his top 12 court victories’, *NOTW*, 10 July 2011; ‘Great sheiks’, *NOTW*, 10 July 2011

54 ‘Heroes & villains: we’ve saved children from paedos & nailed 250 evil crooks’, *NOTW*, 10 July 2011

55 ‘Sunday Times editor defends “remarkable” Mazher’, *Press Gazette*, 1 November 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/ynkme8d2>

56 ‘Sunday Times editor: we checked out Mazher Mahmood before hiring him’, *The Guardian*, 31 October 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/58mhzzyh>

57 Oral evidence, Leveson inquiry, 25 January 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/6eearkrx>

58 ‘Sunday Times bans use of subterfuge’, *The Guardian*, 5 August 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/mryh3uj6>

59 ‘News of the World’s “fake sheikh” starts work at Sunday Times’, *The Guardian*, 2 September 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/ed22ms27>

could be argued that, in most cases, there was a public interest justification for publication. He exposed a range of crimes, such as data theft, trade in human organs, and insurance swindles, plus four examples of immigration scams. In twelve of his stories, as usual, the people he accused of criminal or unethical behaviour had an Asian background. There were also three follow-ups to his *NOTW* cricket spot-fixing story. One of his splashes, about a gang based in Greece providing fake documents to people seeking to enter Britain illegally, was little more than a re-run of several stories he had written previously for the *NOTW*.⁶⁰

It passed without controversy, unlike the second, about female genital mutilation (FGM), which was co-authored by the paper's associate editor, Eleanor Mills.⁶¹ One of the central allegations concerned Omar Sheikh Mohamed Addow, a Somali-born dentist with a practice in Birmingham. Mahmood's unidentified female colleague – said to be a 33-year-old freelancer of Ghanaian origin⁶² – first approached a Birmingham GP, Dr Ali Mao-Aweys, also from Somalia. She told him she wanted two nieces, aged 10 and 13, to be circumcised. He referred her to Addow. According to the article, Addow was initially wary, saying: "I am against the ritual circumcision of the female". His mood changed, supposedly, "during the short journey from his surgery to his nearby flat to discuss the matter privately". After an hour of private discussion, he then appeared to agree to carry out some form of FGM.

Two weeks after publication, Addow and Mao-Aweys were arrested as a "result of information, including covert video recordings, provided to police by undercover reporters", meaning Mahmood and his team.⁶³ Mahmood quoted Detective Inspector Caroline Marsh of West Midlands police as saying: "I am grateful to the *Sunday Times* for the information provided and we are currently investigating what we regard as very serious allegations". As so often with Mahmood, things proved not to be as straightforward as his articles suggested. I reported that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) dropped charges against the pair.⁶⁴ Harry Ireland, head of its West Midlands region, explained why in some detail:

"The main evidence in this case is from the undercover journalist or agent but she has consistently failed to sign

60 'Illegals enter UK on "passports for hire"', *Sunday Times*, 8 January 2012 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/yur6pkw8>

61 'Britain's 100,000 mutilated women', *Sunday Times*, 22 April 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/mvrzspc4> 'I can circumcise them here: £750 for first daughter' <https://tinyurl.com/4zrcr9nz>

62 'Undercover Sunday Times reporter "had sex with dentist" during Mazher Mahmood sting', *The Independent*, 28 August, 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/227kemfn>

63 'GP and dentist arrested over female mutilation', *Sunday Times*, 6 May 2012:9

64 Roy Greenslade, 'No charges against doctors arrested after Sunday Times investigation', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/43trnndt>

her draft statement for the police despite being given every opportunity to do so over the past five months.

I also have concerns over discrepancies between her draft statement and the evidence from the covert recordings. For example, at one stage, the covert recordings record the doctors refusing to help the woman with her request.

I am also troubled by the fact that the covert recordings disclose a time gap which is insufficiently accounted for when the undercover journalist or agent apparently went with one of the doctors from the surgery to his home. Unless there is a very compelling explanation for this, the covert evidence is very unlikely to be admissible in evidence. That explanation has not been forthcoming”.⁶⁵

Ireland went on to say: “Having carefully reviewed the evidence obtained by the police, I have decided there should be no further action against either of these two men... there is insufficient evidence for a realistic prospect of conviction”. He pointed out that a search of the men’s homes, computers and phones failed to provide any evidence they were involved in FGM. No report of the CPS decision not to prosecute appeared in the *Sunday Times*.

More disturbing information about the case emerged the following year, long after Mahmood had departed from the *Sunday Times*. During a misconduct hearing against Addow, conducted by the General Dental Council, its barrister, Tom Kark QC, alleged that the freelancer working for Mahmood had had sex with Addow after they entered his home. Kark said archly: “We may form the view that the journalist had gone to extra lengths to get her story”.⁶⁶

When the claim was put to the *Sunday Times*, a spokesman said: “The journalist in question was a freelance engaged in a legitimate undercover investigation... She categorically denies having had sexual intercourse or any other sexually intimate contact with Dr Addow”.⁶⁷ There was, however, no proof that the woman, who remained anonymous, was a journalist. (Note Ireland’s ambivalent reference to her as “journalist or agent”).⁶⁸ Neither Mahmood nor the newspaper has ever revealed her identity, a dubious

65 ‘FGM in Britain: Two male doctors arrested over mutilation claims released from bail without charge’, *PA/Huffington Post*, 20 September 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/ydpu747v>; ‘Sunday Times’ fake sheikh’s Birmingham genital mutilation exposé condemned by CPS’, *International Business Times*, 20 September 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/5atjh9y2>

66 ‘Sunday Times reporter “had sex” with dentist during sting operation’, *The Guardian*, 28 August 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/45nwdx4t>

67 ‘Undercover freelance reporter working for Sunday Times “had sex with dentist during Fake Sheikh female circumcision sting”’, *Mail Online*, 27 August 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/37berh46>

68 ‘Withering heights’, *Press Gang*, 22 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/4prevxrc>

and inappropriate extension of the customary journalistic protection of a source's confidentiality.

Addow, who had left Britain to work at a hospital in Somalia, did not attend the hearing or enter a plea. He was struck off on the grounds that he had offered to carry out FGM and had been responsible for an intimate examination of the freelance "reporter".⁶⁹ The following year, Dr Mao-Aweys appeared before the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service on a charge of offering FGM. His lawyers argued that he was the victim of journalistic entrapment.⁷⁰ He was adjudged to be guilty of misconduct and struck off the medical register.⁷¹

Throughout most of Mahmood's tenure at the *Sunday Times*, the Leveson inquiry was sitting. Set up by Prime Minister David Cameron within hours of *The Guardian's* Milly Dowler revelation, it was tasked with inquiring into the culture and ethics of the British newspapers. For Mahmood, it meant a series of uncomfortable probes into his conduct and claims. One involved answering questions about his knowledge of the private investigator, Webb (as above). Another centred on his exaggerated claim about the number of convictions for which he had been responsible (see next chapter). His evasions and obfuscations necessitated him providing four written statements and making two appearances as a witness, where he enjoyed the privilege of not being filmed.

One of his appearances followed his fruitless attempt to avoid telling the truth about his 1988 departure from the *Sunday Times* (see chapter 3). He was asked by counsel: "Is it right that you left the *Sunday Times* under something of a cloud the first time around?" Mahmood replied: "We had a disagreement; correct".⁷² I wasn't prepared to let him get away with that and wrote a trenchant item on my *Guardian* blog, calling his answer "a euphemistic description of the reality".⁷³ As a result, the Leveson inquiry contacted me and asked me to provide a written statement along with related documentary evidence. I was happy to do so.

With this information to hand, Mahmood faced a cross-examination when he made his second appearance in front of Lord Justice Leveson.⁷⁴ The inquiry's counsel, David Barr, began by pressing Mahmood to admit that his so-called "mistake" was, in fact, "an act of dishonesty". I watched

69 'Dentist struck off for offering female mutilation', *Sunday Times*, 8 September 2013 (pay wall) <https://tinyurl.com/5hypo7fxh>

70 'Doctor in FGM cases accuse journalists of entrapment', *The Times*, 14 May 2014:22

71 'FGM doctor struck off', *The Times*, 31 May 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/56nx67jn>

72 Oral evidence, Leveson, 12 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/27rtuw6u>

73 'The real reason that Mazher Mahmood left the Sunday Times under a cloud', *The Guardian*, 14 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/4wzdubu2>

74 Oral evidence, 25 January 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/ms2t6u3w>

as Mahmood ducked and weaved, his tactic in previous courtroom appearances. But Barr had the physical evidence, and Mahmood could not avoid admitting in public – and for the first time – exactly what he had done: “tampering with the computer file”.

Unable to wriggle free, he offered a new defence: “I’d had a series of run-ins with Mr Greenslade... and rather than incur the wrath of an executive I didn’t get on with, I foolishly thought the best way would be to cover my mistake. It was the wrong thing to do, and I resigned”.

Barr pressed him further: “Can we explore... whether or not there was in fact a disagreement”.

Mahmood replied: “What I was referring to by ‘disagreement’ was that I had a disagreement with Mr Greenslade, who didn’t like the way that I worked... I felt he didn’t like me, and ever since has displayed obsessive hostility towards me. There were a number of run-ins I had with him. There were disagreements over several stories”.

Barr ignored the side-step: “We’ll come to that in a moment, but isn’t the position that your answer to me was disingenuous because the true position was that you had left the *Sunday Times* because you had committed an act of dishonesty?”

This time, Mahmood couldn’t duck, replying: “Correct, absolutely”.

At that point, Lord Justice Leveson took over. “You say that there were several disagreements. The inquiry has been provided with information which suggests that Professor Greenslade doesn’t accept that. He can’t recall any disagreements. Might you be mistaken in your recollection?”

Mahmood could not provide a single example. His attempt to rewrite history and to bamboozle the inquiry had failed, making a nonsense of having granted him the special privilege of giving evidence out of sight of the cameras. His blather convinced me that, under proper scrutiny, it was possible to hold him to account and expose him as a liar. But it had no effect on his employment at the *Sunday Times*. He was allowed to go on working for the paper for a further twelve months without sanction. He had survived a scandal that had caused the resignations of Hinton, Brooks and Tom Crone, the *NOTW*’s legal manager with whom he had worked closely for 20 years. Murdoch’s son, James, had been required to step down as News International’s executive chairman and shipped off to the United States. The Metropolitan Police commissioner, Sir Paul Stephenson, had been forced to resign, as had assistant commissioner, John Yates, and the Met’s communications chief, Dick Fedorcio. Several of Mahmood’s long-time colleagues were under arrest. Yet he survived.

Murdoch had been damned by a parliamentary select committee for exhibiting “wilful blindness to what was going on in his companies and publications” and condemned as “not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major international company”.⁷⁵ Not that Murdoch cared over much. Months later, addressing a room full of angry *Sun* journalists, one of them – using a method perfected by Mahmood – covertly recorded their boss as he fulminated against police incompetence and decried “gangs of cops” for arresting reporters in dawn raids. The tape eventually reached Channel 4 News, which broadcast it.⁷⁶

At one point, he is heard to excuse story-getting methods used at *The Sun* and the *NOTW* as “part of the culture of Fleet Street”.⁷⁷ Murdoch was, in effect, standing four-square behind the “dark arts” and, by extension, those employed by the Fake Sheikh. He underlined it by saving Mahmood from the axe when he closed the newspaper.

To no-one’s surprise, Murdoch was not prepared to abandon the Sunday tabloid market to the *Sunday Mirror* and *Sunday People* for long. In February 2012, seven months on from the *NOTW*’s demise, he launched the *Sun on Sunday*, a seventh day issue of his sales-winning daily. The new paper’s incoming political editor, David Wooding, doubtless echoing Murdoch’s briefing to staff, stressed: “This is not the *News of the World* in another guise, this is *The Sun* publishing on another day”.⁷⁸

Few of the old *NOTW* staff were hired and Mahmood was left on his *Sunday Times* perch throughout the rest of the year, waiting for ten months until he joined the *Sun on Sunday* in December 2012. Regardless of Wooding’s claim, there was no question of Mahmood abandoning the dark arts he had perfected at the *News of the World*. Nor would Murdoch have expected his favourite tabloid investigator to clean up his act.

75 ‘Panel in hacking case finds Murdoch unfit as news titan’, *New York Times*, 1 May 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/476nvmk9>; ‘Beginning of the end?’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/tmptu66td>

76 ‘Revealed: the Rupert Murdoch tape’, *Channel 4 News*, 3 July 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/4czasmn6>

77 ‘Scotland Yard seeks Rupert Murdoch secret tape’, *The Guardian*, 5 July 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/v2j6xpm>

78 ‘Rupert Murdoch to launch *Sun on Sunday* next weekend’, *The Guardian*, 20 February 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/4jewxnvj>

Chapter 10

Fake convictions

“During my career at the paper I was responsible for over 250 criminal prosecutions... There was a clear public interest in exposing these individuals.”
— Mazher Mahmood

Nothing is quite as revealing about Mahmood’s (lack of) truthfulness than his oft-repeated claims about the number of convictions for which he was responsible. When facing complaints about stories, both he and the *News of the World* chose to counter criticism by pointing to his unsurpassed “hit rate”, the ever-increasing number of people who were successfully prosecuted following his revelations. His credibility when giving evidence in trials was reinforced by his statements about the number of convictions he had helped to bring about. Lawyers rarely challenged him and, by implication, these declamations of his “successes” enhanced his status to the detriment of the defendants.

Yet there was no independent verification of his claims. So, year by year, the total mounted until, by the time the newspaper was closed in 2011, he laid claim in its final issue to having been responsible for 250 successful prosecutions.¹ Months later, he told the Leveson inquiry: “During my career at the paper I was responsible for over 250 criminal prosecutions... There was a clear public interest in exposing these individuals”.² Earlier, in the same statement, he was more specific, saying the total was 253.³ Then, in later evidence, he raised it to an inexplicable 261.⁴

Mahmood was not alone in boasting of his prowess as a journalistic detective. Tabloid reporters across Fleet Street were awed by reports of the

1 ‘Heroes & Villains: We’ve saved children from paedos & nailed 250 evil crooks’, *NOTW*, 10 July 2011

2 Para 31, first written statement to Leveson inquiry, 14 October 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/26rtwbdn>

3 *Ibid*, para 2

4 Oral evidence to Leveson inquiry, 12 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/27rtuw6u>

number of times his stories led to arrests, prosecutions and convictions. Within the *NOTW*, he enjoyed firm support from senior executives who defended his work by referring to his conviction rate. His editors, particularly Rebekah Brooks and Phil Hall, often praised his ability to put people in the dock. Another, Andy Coulson, spoke warmly of “Maz’s investigative expertise”.⁵ A fourth, Colin Myler, while falsely claiming that Mahmood had put 220 people in jail, called him “an absolute professional”.⁶ The newspaper’s former deputy editor, Neil Wallis, said in his Leveson evidence that Mahmood had been “instrumental in securing the conviction of more than two hundred criminals”.⁷ The paper’s legal manager, Tom Crone, agreed, stating that Mahmood was responsible for the “successful prosecution of hundreds of criminals”.⁸ But were those figures even close to the truth?

My co-author, Paddy French, is a veteran journalist who had long been sceptical about Mahmood’s claim. He believed the 253 total was highly improbable. To test its veracity, he researched Mahmood’s *NOTW* output and concluded, as he reported to Leveson, that only 52 “named individuals” could be identified as having been convicted of criminal charges due to Mahmood’s articles, plus a further 18 unnamed people.⁹ Paddy’s pressure, reinforced by interest in the subject by Channel 4’s political correspondent, Michael Crick, prompted John Witherow, editor of the *Sunday Times* and therefore Mahmood’s immediate boss after the *News of the World*’s closure, to act. A firm of lawyers, Linklaters, were called in to analyse Mahmood’s record. Its results were anything but pleasing to Mahmood, to Witherow, and to Rupert Murdoch’s Wapping management.

According to the Linklaters research, only 94 named people were definitively convicted due to Mahmood’s stories.¹⁰ Mahmood himself claimed that the 94 had been successfully prosecuted for 134 offences.¹¹ This transformation, replacing the number of convicted individuals with the number of their offences, did not accord with the way Mahmood and the

5 ‘NoW fury after Beckham kidnap case is thrown out’, *Press Gazette*, 17 May 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/37r6ykm>

6 ‘Colin Myler: sex, drugs and responsibilities’, *The Independent*, 21 January 2008 <https://tinyurl.com/6um8jd8j>

7 Wallis, first witness statement, Leveson inquiry, 7 October 2011. <https://tinyurl.com/359pjy8m> Wallis was *NOTW* deputy editor (from January 2003) and then executive editor (from early 2008) until he resigned in June 2009

8 Crone, second witness statement, Leveson inquiry, 25 October 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/5y234utz>

9 French, first witness statement, Leveson inquiry, 2 May 2012. <https://tinyurl.com/2xpxz22m> He acknowledges the research contribution of Chris Nichols

10 Mahmood, fourth witness statement, Leveson inquiry, 18 July 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/2phy2u73>

11 ‘134 of Mahmood’s claimed 253 convictions proven’, *Press Gazette*, 20 August 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/3bdx2xce>

NOTW had previously reported his “successes”. For example, the headline over his final piece for the paper referred to him having “nailed 250 evil crooks”.¹² Anyway, no list was issued in public, so it was impossible to identify either the individuals or the stories, and Linklaters did not reply to my polite inquiry for details.¹³

Mahmood was therefore obliged to make a second apology to the inquiry. He had been already been forced to admit failing to tell the truth about the reason for his departure from the *Sunday Times* (see chapter 9). Now, he needed to explain why his claim to have been responsible for the conviction of 253, let alone 261, people was untrue. His humiliating fourth witness statement to the inquiry was replete with dubious excuses and disingenuous apologies.

He began by claiming he had kept only “a broad running check” of convictions rather than a detailed record. That in itself was an extraordinary confession since he had previously been so specific about numbers. He attempted to pass the blame to his former paper by saying that it had not maintained a “proper log”. Yet it had not prevented the NOTW from publishing, at regular intervals, a supposedly precise running total. In order to explain the inflated figure Mahmood moved the goalposts by contending that his total included “over 140 illegal immigrants who I believe were deported as a result of my work”. He wrote:

“My understanding was that an illegal immigrant commits a crime by being present in this country and I saw deportation as the sanction imposed in respect of that criminal conduct which I had exposed. I now understand from Linklaters that it is unlikely that these individuals would have been the subject of criminal prosecutions per se, because whilst they commit a criminal offence by being in the UK without leave to remain, a prosecution is not required in order for them to be deported. That is not something which I was previously aware of, and I apologise for my error in including these individuals in the number of convictions originally given to the inquiry”.

This was pathetic stuff. Not “previously aware of?” An experienced journalist was attempting to convince the judge that he believed deportations equated with criminal convictions. As for the sudden introduction of 140 deportations, where was the proof? Given that there was no “proper log”, how had he arrived at that nice round figure? As Paddy pointed out in his

12 ‘Heroes & villains: we’ve saved children from paedos & nailed 250 evil crooks’, NOTW, 10 July 2011

13 Email sent, 29 February 2024

second Leveson statement, Mahmood's immigration articles were "vague as to what subsequently happened to the alleged illegal immigrants". Anyway, he did not record the names of the people involved. Nor was there independent evidence to support his claims that people he alleged to be illegal immigrants were subsequently deported.¹⁴

It beggars belief that he, or anyone at the paper, had recorded the number of deportations, or even that they could know whether they had occurred. No experienced journalist, especially one who spent as much time in the courts as Mahmood, could credibly equate criminal prosecutions with deportations. Another of his excuses was just as feeble. He admitted that his total had included "13 individuals who were barred from their professions or by their relevant sporting bodies, or dismissed by the police or prison service". He added: "Again, I understand from Linklaters that such actions do not amount to prosecutions or convictions and so I apologise to the inquiry for including these individuals in my first statement".

Overall, it amounted to a climbdown of epic proportions. Here was a man who had consistently pointed to his success in putting "hundreds" of villains in the dock being forced to admit he had not. A man who relished exposing hypocrisy was exposed as a hypocrite himself. It was a further example of him being a stranger to the truth. The same, of course, applied to the newspaper.

Lord Justice Leveson, inexplicably, did not comment on Mahmood's exaggerated convictions claims. In his report he wrote of "my reservations about certain aspects of Mr Mahmood's evidence which I address elsewhere".¹⁵ But he addressed no such reservations in the four published volumes of his final report. His mentions of Mahmood referred instead in neutral terms to the claims he made in evidence, such as his investigative journalism being "motivated by public duty".¹⁶ Leveson also remarked that the number of successful prosecutions due to Mahmood's stories was a "testament to the fact that his methods had been tested and considered appropriate time and again by the courts".¹⁷ Mahmood was very fortunate to emerge unscathed without further forensic inquiry into his conviction rate.

I wasn't prepared to let the matter pass. While difficult to imagine that Linklaters would have presented false evidence to a judicial inquiry, I decided the gaps between the original Mahmood-*NOTW* claim, Paddy's findings, and the Linklater research merited a fourth reassessment. Armed with a full electronic database of all of Mahmood's *NOTW* articles, I was able to carry

14 Paddy's second Leveson statement, 10 September 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/24esbknf>

15 Para 2.11, part F, Vol II, Leveson report, November 2012

16 Ibid, para 2.9

17 Ibid, para 5.4

out a more detailed assessment and managed to find more cases than Paddy but far fewer than Linklaters. I positively identified 71 individuals who were convicted as a result of his stories (as listed in Appendix 2) with a further four unnamed people. Whether we accept the Linklaters figure (94) or mine (75), the stand-out fact is that Mahmood and his NOTW editors had grossly exaggerated his success rate.

My research into the 523 articles that appeared in the *NOTW* under Mahmood's sole byline (plus a further 70 in which he shared bylines) reveals that wished-for outcomes sometimes clouded reality. A substantial proportion of his articles concluded by stating that "our dossier is available to the police" or similar variations. Expectation of official action was rarely realised. There may have been follow-up investigations by the authorities; there may have been arrests; there may have been charges. But not every arrest led to prosecutions and not all prosecutions led to convictions. As has been detailed in previous chapters, some people were acquitted and some trials collapsed.

The conflation of arrests, prosecutions, convictions, deportations and de-registrations from professional, legal and medical bodies muddled the waters. Without any consistent internal accounting, there was a tendency to pluck figures from thin air. Quite possibly, other members of staff, acting innocently or without sufficient knowledge, were responsible for random claims. It wasn't spotted for twenty years because no-one was scrutinising their work. As for Mahmood, he didn't trouble to correct any "errors".

Whether it was unintentional error or premeditated deceit, the facts about the fabrication of Mahmood's convictions – better referred to as successful prosecutions – can be found in the frequent blurbs which recorded the tally of his courtroom "victories". Let's begin by considering his output from the moment he joined the paper, in December 1991, until July 1995, when the paper laid claim to "Mahmood's stories" having "resulted in 54 prosecutions".¹⁸ This was, without any shadow of a doubt, a laughable overstatement. Most of his stories to that point had been about immorality rather than criminality, meaning that police inquiries, let alone arrests, would not have been appropriate. Of those stories which did expose illegality, only a minority engendered police inquiries. Up to 30 July 1995, just four of Mahmood's stories had led directly to successful prosecutions, resulting in seven identifiable people being convicted. The 54 total was demonstrably false. It is impossible to know why the *NOTW* felt confident enough to assert it. Similarly, Mahmood must have been aware it was wrong. He and the *NOTW* benefitted from the failure of rival papers to challenge

¹⁸ 'Crimebuster's fair cops', *NOTW*, 30 July 1995

the claim.

The importance of the 54 figure is that it acted as a base point of reference for later claims over the following years. One other oddity was its unheralded appearance. Over the course of the previous four-and-a-half years, although the paper had reported the specific prosecutions of the seven individuals, it had not mentioned them in terms of there being a larger Mahmood total.¹⁹ If there really had been 47 more, why was the paper silent? Given the *NOTW*'s pride in boosting Mahmood's achievements, why had it failed to mention so many successes? In retrospect, the announcement of "54 prosecutions" should be viewed as the foundation of a myth.

The next mathematical sleight of hand arrived just three months later in October 1995 when the total was said to have risen magically to 77.²⁰ In that period, 23 more convictions were attributed to Mahmood, transforming stupidity into absurdity. During those months, the paper reported only one conviction linked to a Mahmood story: a club-owner fined for keeping a disorderly house.²¹ With the base now set so high, inaccuracies continued over the following couple of years. In March 1996, the jailing of a man Mahmood had exposed for living off immoral earnings, was said to have brought "the total of villains successfully prosecuted... to a staggering EIGHTY in four years".²² Staggering indeed, but not in the way the paper suggested.

And so it went, year by year. A pattern of wilful misinformation had been set, leading to the announcement in December 1997 that a woman had become "the 88th villain Mahmood has collared in three years".²³ Eighty-eight in three years! That didn't come close to reality (and given that Mahmood had joined the paper six years before, the three-year reference made no sense). To put that claim in perspective, and ignoring the three-year stipulation, the *NOTW* was suggesting that 54 prosecutions in July 1995 had increased to 88 by December 1997. The facts, as recorded by the paper in the course of that period, show that only 16 named people who featured in Mahmood stories were successfully prosecuted. A further eight unnamed people were also convicted. After calling on readers to provide Mahmood with story tips that might help him attain 100 prosecutions, the

19 See 'Five years for child sex pair nailed by the News of the World', *NOTW*, 4 July 1993; 'Jail for drugs Mr Big', *NOTW*, 5 September 1993; 'Jailed! Forgery gang we nailed', *NOTW*, 12 December 1993; 'We get an evil gun dealer banged up', *NOTW*, 27 March 1994

20 Edward Trevor, 'News of the World praised over sex club exposure', *NOTW*, 22 October 1995

21 '£100 tickets for lottery of lust', *NOTW*, 24 October 1993; "'Sex raffles" man is fined', *Birmingham Mail*, 18 October 1995

22 'Court you! We nail solicitor running sex agency and selling drugs', *NOTW*, 4 December 1994; 'Time To Say Thanks!', *NOTW*, 24 March 1996

23 'Maz bags baddie number 88: Kiddie heroin dealer jailed', *NOTW*, 21 December 1997

paper claimed, in May 1999, that he had achieved that target.²⁴ At that date, however, my own count was 28.

It is a common joke among Fleet Street journalists, and often said with a measure of injudicious pride, that they are innumerate. The editors of the *NOTW* certainly lived down to that boast in terms of Mahmood's track record. Innumeracy also appeared to have afflicted Tom Crone in February 2000 when he was quoted as having said: "Mahmood has helped to win 102 convictions".²⁵ (At the time, my total stood at 31). Not that anyone, whether internally or among the readership, seemed to worry about the ever-increasing total.

It reached "a staggering 111" – there's that staggering again – in June 2002 and a 119th conviction was announced six months later.²⁶ Those figures, both published during Rebekah Brooks's editorship, were repeated soon after in a leading article which lauded Mahmood for his Beckham kidnap story.²⁷ It was certainly true that 2002 was the year in which Mahmood achieved his largest convictions rate, with ten people being successfully prosecuted, all of whom were given prison sentences. Seven of them were arrested in a police operation that was directly prompted by a Mahmood story about fake marriages arranged on behalf of illegal immigrants.²⁸

A large proportion of Mahmood's articles involved immigrants and asylum seekers, people hailing from a similar background to his own. At least 28 of those actually prosecuted due to his stories were of Asian origin, from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Their protests about his methodology often went unheard, thereby escaping the media scrutiny to which his celebrity stories were subjected. It was also the case that several people of British heritage who viewed their convictions as miscarriages of justice were unable to challenge them successfully.

Before I go further into the realms of fantasy counting, it should be said that there was no need for Mahmood and the *NOTW* to gild the lily in terms of his overall numbers. Even if all the dubious cases were deleted from his total, and even if the overall total had been correctly logged, his record would still rank as remarkable. For one journalist to be responsible for the successful prosecution of so many people was exceptional. It may well be a record. As a journalistic vigilante, Mazher Mahmood was unique.

24 'Help Maz make it 100', *NOTW*, 4 January 1998; 'Under cover, not underhand: How our reporters fearlessly seek truth', *NOTW*, 30 May 1999

25 'Wrong, Roger', *NOTW*, 13 February 2000

26 'Passport to prison': crook we exposed is jailed', *NOTW*, 2 June 2002; 'Maz's mafia hit: Russian crime boss is conviction number 119', *NOTW*, 29 September 2002

27 'Maz is amazing', *NOTW*, 3 November 2002

28 'This young bride has 8 husbands, but she doesn't know she wed 7 of them', *NOTW*, 3 September 2000

Mahmood's idiosyncrasy was echoed in the *NOTW*'s statistics. By 2005, the paper was boasting that Mahmood's convictions total had reached a remarkable 134.²⁹ My count to that date? A more modest 59. Three years later, with the paper on the defensive after the Max Mosley privacy trial (see chapter 15), it ran an editorial extolling its journalism and applauding Mahmood's contribution. "Our investigations editor", it said, had "been successful in securing 232 criminal convictions in the past 18 years".³⁰ There was no factual basis to the jump from the inaccurate 134 to the wildly inaccurate 232 in under three years when, in reality, fewer than a dozen convictions could be attributed to Mahmood's stories. Yet that figure was repeated the following month in another leading article and in the "review" of Mahmood's "sensational new book".³¹ Truth had taken flight.

Two big lies arrived together in 2010 when the paper crowed about "the 250th crook jailed thanks to... Mahmood".³² The total was, of course, fallacious. As for jail, that was wholly false too because many of the convictions had not resulted in prison terms. In the *News of the World*'s final issue, Mahmood was careful enough to avoid the jail claim by saying he had "clocked up more than 250 successful prosecutions".³³ In fact, the real figure was much closer to the 71 that I was able to name. I accept that there were convictions which Mahmood could not recall and some which went unreported by the paper. However, even allowing for a reasonable margin, it was obvious that the figures Mahmood presented to the Leveson inquiry were fake.

29 'Brilliant job Maz, says judge', *NOTW*, 10 April 2005; 'Maz the master!', *NOTW*, 4 September 2005

30 'Call this justice?', *NOTW*, 27 July 2008

31 'Sheiken, not stirred', *NOTW*, 31 August 2008; 'Sheik and awe', *NOTW*, 31 August 2008

32 'Bunged up! – News of the World Fake sheikh catches his 250th villain', *NOTW*, 24 January 2010

33 'Heroes & Villains: We've saved children from paedos & nailed 250 evil crooks', *NOTW*, 10 July 2011

Chapter 11

Living the lie, telling lies, and ditching a friend

“The whole ideology of the News of the World is based on truth.”

— Rebekah Brooks

In the 1950s, *The People* newspaper boasted that its famous investigative reporter, Duncan Webb, was under constant threat from the gangsters he exposed. Webb created an image of himself as a man in fear of his life. He claimed his desk was protected by bullet-proof glass, his front door was fitted with eight locks and he rarely slept at the same address two nights running.¹ Among Webb’s greatest admirers was one of his young reporting assistants, Laurie Manifold, who went on to become the newspaper’s investigations editor and, in that role, became an influential mentor to Mazher Mahmood in the early part of his career.²

From 1991 onwards, Mahmood strove to emulate Webb’s public profile as a courageous crime-fighter. He wrote and spoke of putting himself in harm’s way and the necessity of having a bodyguard, sometimes more than one. He often told of being in fear for his life from the dangerous people he had exposed. The *News of the World* played its part by creating a byline in which his face was shown in silhouette while taking every opportunity to boost his guise as the “Fake Sheik”. The concealment of his identity, in company with his assertion that it was a necessary precaution to protect him from attack, was something of a publicity gimmick. The same could have

1 Roy Greenslade, ‘How to make an excuse and leave’, *British Journalism Review*, Vol 29/3, 2018

2 See chapter 1

been said about every *NOTW* reporter. Their pictures weren't published.³ They were often responsible for writing about, and confronting, violent people. In court actions, they gave evidence openly. Like Mahmood, they worked undercover and used subterfuge. Unlike Mahmood, however, they were not accorded the special promotional privileges he enjoyed.

As a consequence, it was hardly a surprise that Mahmood came to view himself as a journalistic celebrity, living his own legend. He was, by his own admission, a man apart from the rest of the staff. He didn't mix with them and sometimes rejected advances from those eager to work with him. When reporter Paul McMullan asked if he could join his team, he turned him down flat: "Yeah, that's not happening".⁴ He later denied even knowing McMullan.⁵ He spent as little time as possible in the office and, although he was assigned to the news desk, he often worked directly to the editor or other senior executives. That was less of a surprise than the way he was treated by judges and magistrates. They were persuaded to accept his hype by allowing him to give evidence from behind screens as did, even more remarkably, Lord Justice Leveson, during his inquiry into press ethics. Mahmood had convinced everyone that his life, as distinct from that of every other British journalist, depended on his being given exceptional protection. It would not have been surprising if this official courtroom recognition influenced juries in favour of Mahmood's evidence. As for *NOTW* readers – along with the wider public – they were encouraged to buy into the romanticised image of a lone champion of righteousness.

Mahmood took every opportunity to justify the precautions by stressing how often he was threatened. In a *Press Gazette* interview, he said he couldn't remember a week in which he hadn't received a death threat.⁶ He, and the paper, reported several. In 1996, Mahmood revealed that a man was running a mail order drugs business from his prison cell.⁷ The following year, that man was alleged to have offered a £5,000 contract to have Mahmood shot.⁸ In May 1999, editor Phil Hall claimed Mahmood was being protected by a full-time minder following "a number of early morning visits to his flat by strangers wanting to settle old scores".⁹ At the beginning of 2002, two contracts on Mahmood's life were reported. In the first, he was said to have been given 24-hour police protection after an underworld source

3 In a blurb lauding five of its reporters, including Mahmood, the *NOTW* concealed the faces of Roger Insall, Neville Thurlbeck, Paul McMullan and Ray Levine: 'Yes, we're guilty (but only of busting crooks)', *NOTW*, 4 January 1998

4 Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 1

5 Mahmood oral evidence to Leveson, 12 December 2011

6 'Scoops and scrapes of Mahmood', *Press Gazette*, 6 April 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/28yc3u4r>

7 'Cons go into jail drugs business', *NOTW*, 24 March 1996

8 '£5,000 plot to kill News of the World crimebuster', *NOTW*, 9 March 1997

9 'Scoops and scrapes', op cit

revealed “reliable information” about a £100,000 price tag on his head.¹⁰ The second followed Mahmood’s exposure of a man running a Russian brides racket. The culprit, who was jailed for four years, was said to have put out a £30,000 contract on the reporter.¹¹ In yet another example, police informed Mahmood of a £10,000 contract on his life following an article about a south London gang of fraudsters. It was withdrawn after one of his minders, Lenny McLean, supposedly stepped in (see chapter 4).¹²

Even though it is difficult to know whether there was any truth behind every threat, it is likely that some did occur. Unlike the outraged celebrities fooled by Mahmood who chose to go to law, it was unsurprising that criminals exposed by Mahmood preferred to use illicit methods to retaliate. Nor do I doubt that Mahmood sometimes put his life at risk. However, claims that he was outstandingly courageous require a caveat. In reality, he was rarely, if ever, alone. Bodyguards, notably “Jaws” Qureshi until his paralysing accident in 2007 (chapter 4), were always on hand. Other minders were also recruited, and Conrad Brown was a constant companion. Mahmood rarely turned up to court without escorts. At the 1999 Hardwicke trial, the defending counsel described them as “a couple of heavies”. Mahmood countered that they were his driver and a minder.¹³ Appearing in public and arriving at courts with bodyguards was part of Mahmood’s masquerade to reinforce his claims of living in fear of retribution. However, seen from the perspective of his targets, including nervous witnesses giving evidence on the *NOTW*’s behalf, the sight of burly men at the back of a courtroom could be construed as a form of intimidation.

Among the threats mentioned above, the most curious of them was that alleged £5,000 contract on Mahmood’s life in 1997 because, despite what appeared to be cast-iron proof, the man said to have issued the threat was neither arrested nor prosecuted. It was a curious claim which stemmed from a story the year before which was almost certainly concocted. In March 1996, across two pages, Mahmood reported that convicts at Channings Wood prison in Devon were running a mail-order drugs business.¹⁴ It claimed that drugs smuggled into the jail were “so plentiful” there was enough left over to sell to addicts outside. Heroin and cannabis were alleged to have been sent out through the post because the authorities did not check outgoing mail as rigorously as they did incoming correspondence. Mahmood named his source as “ex-prisoner Alan Smith”, the man who would become his driver,

10 ‘£100,000 price on Maz’s head’, *NOTW*, 13 January 2002

11 ‘Wed this sexy blonde and pick up £5,000: Mafia marriage scam had offers men couldn’t refuse’, *NOTW*, 3 March 2002; *Confessions*, p83

12 *Confessions*, pp146-7

13 ‘The sheik unveiled’, *The Guardian*, 4 October 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/mr474xkc>

14 ‘Cons go into jail order drugs business’, *NOTW*, 24 March 1996

aide and co-conspirator and who had appeared in previous Mahmood stories (see chapter 4). Smith supposedly introduced Mahmood to Paul Moyle who was enjoying a spell of home leave while serving a year's sentence for acting as a drugs courier. Moyle was quoted and pictured, as were other prisoners alleged to be dealers. But was any of it true?

Mahmood's editorial bosses clearly thought so. They carried a leading article that decried "our revelation" that "criminals are selling drugs from the safety of their cells" and "making money from the very criminal rackets they are in prison for".¹⁵ The paper called it "a mockery of justice" and "an outrage". The prison's governor, Jerry Petherick, also thought it an outrage, but for a very different reason. He believed the story to be preposterous, explaining to a local newspaper that to import drugs into jail and then export them "does not make business sense" because "drugs in prison are more expensive than drugs on the street".¹⁶ One unattributed sentence also undermined the story's veracity: "Even prisoners had been expressing their doubts about the allegations".

Those prisoners named in Mahmood's article were segregated as Petherick sought to discover whether the allegations were justified. He also encouraged the police to investigate, which they did. Nothing came of their inquiries however because, as Petherick recalled recently, there was nothing to find.¹⁷ He said: "Neither we nor the police could substantiate the claim of drugs being sold from inside the prison. It was a nonsense". What about Moyle? Petherick was unable to recall more than he "was probably spoken to".

One year later, Moyle was accused – in a story written by the *NOTW*'s then crime correspondent, Neville Thurlbeck – of seeking a hitman to murder Mahmood.¹⁸ According to the article, Moyle's "hatred" for Mahmood "had festered" since the publication of the prison drugs story. He was evidently taped saying to the would-be assassin (an undercover *NOTW* reporter): "I want him shot dead... I'd suggest driving past him on a motorbike, shooting him and racing off". This movie-like scenario had more than a hint of farce. Then there's the fascinating issue of how the newspaper discovered the plot. Thurlbeck wrote: "Moyle's search for an assassin got back to the *News of the World*" via "an underworld source". Given the fact that Moyle had originally met Mahmood through Smith, it is very possible that the source was Smith.

15 'Sweep prisons clean of drugs', *NOTW*, 24 March 1996

16 'Police probe Channings Wood story', *Torbay Express and South Devon Echo*, 25 March 1996

17 Phone conversation with author Roy G, 25 April 2025

18 '£5,000 plot to kill News of the World crimebuster', *NOTW*, 9 March 1997

Regardless of how the newspaper came to know of the plot, if there was any truth to it why wasn't Moyle arrested? Although Thurlbeck's article refers, in Mahmood-like fashion, to "our dossier on Moyle" being "available to the police", there was no record of the police taking action. Instead, the article stated that Moyle "now plans to move to Spain".

The notion that Smith was the source was given greater credence by allegations in the second part of Thurlbeck's tale, which told of "another thug who's got it in for Mazher... John Spraggen, whose sideline is luring girls into prostitution". He was alleged to have "laid on two heavies to give our ace investigator 'a good roughing-up'". Spraggen who, unlike Moyle, did not feature in a previous Mahmood story, was said to be a "crooked car dealer" from West Drayton, Middlesex. Smith, who was also in the motor trade, happened to live in West Drayton. Admittedly, this does not amount to being conclusive proof of Smith being the source of both "plots". All the same, it was intriguing.

As with Moyle, Spraggen's attempt to find someone willing to beat up Mahmood led him to yet "another *News of the World* contact" who recorded his threats. The article concluded by stating that the tape "is available to police". But how genuine were these threats? Why did the police fail to act? Why, with its star reporter's life in danger, did the *NOTW* not run a leading article complaining about police apathy? Why didn't Mahmood, who rarely missed the opportunity to trumpet the number of convictions for which he was responsible, not kick up a stink about Moyle and Spraggen evading prosecution?

Mahmood's most dangerous assignment on the face of it was his trip to Afghanistan in 2001, accompanied by Brown and Qureshi. According to the *NOTW*'s billing, Mahmood "risked his life" by posing "as a fanatical Muslim extremist".¹⁹ In his report, he told of interviewing a gun-toting Taliban leader in his mountain hide-out.²⁰ He also devoted a chapter in his book to the trip, telling how he guided Brown to say morning prayers to Allah.²¹ It was noticeable that this Afghan adventure was published way back in the paper. The editor, Rebekah Brooks, did not think it warranted the kind of billing his domestic articles enjoyed. She preferred him to concentrate on high-profile targets, household names, even though, as he often emphasized, the majority of his stories involved alleged criminals. This material, according to him and to successive *NOTW* editors, was the reason so many people

19 'Video nasty: We infiltrate propaganda film show recruiting Bin Laden's suicide bombers', *NOTW*, 30 September 2001

20 'Behind the lines with the Taliban: Investigations Editor Mazher Mahmood makes secret trip to Afghanistan to meet soldiers of Islam', *NOTW*, 23 September 2001

21 *Confessions*, pp57,62

sought retribution.

Mahmood told of only two assaults by his victims. Ironically, one of them was said to have been made by a vicar rather than a career criminal. Angry at the *NOTW* reporting that he had left his wife in favour of a young man, it was claimed he drove a car at Mahmood, knocking him down.²² The other involved a story alleging that a 15-year-old Bradford schoolboy was acting as a pimp and selling drugs (see chapter 8).²³ According to Mahmood, when he admitted he was a reporter, the boy lashed out. “The kid could punch”, he wrote, “I was dazed and seeing stars... Fortunately, my minder Jaws... rushed to my aid. He calmed the schoolboy’s tantrum and took him home”.²⁴ Despite the sensational nature of this alleged assault, it went unreported in Mahmood’s *NOTW* article.

Much more frightening than those incidents was an alleged attack on his parents’ home in Birmingham by a gang he exposed for cloning credit cards. He wrote: “They smashed the front door off its hinges and used a machete to hack apart the entire contents of the lounge before leaving a warning note for me”.²⁵ His first public mention of this assault occurred during the Hardwicke trial after counsel had questioned his claim to have received death threats. “That’s right”, said Mahmood. “My parents get (sic) their homes macheted”. The barrister asked: “Are you being a bit theatrical, Mr Mahmood?” He replied: “No, I’m not. I’m telling you the truth”.²⁶ Several questions remain unanswered about the episode. How did the gang know where Mahmood’s parents lived? Why was there no report of the incident in the *NOTW* at the time? Why was there no report of a police investigation, let alone a prosecution? Why, given Sultan Mahmood’s public profile, has it proved impossible to find any story about it in the local press?

Mahmood came to be regarded as the *NOTW*’s most important reporting asset. He was, according to executive editor Neil Wallis, its highest paid.²⁷ Successive editors, buying into the belief that Mahmood’s fake sheikh celebrity was a major plus, heaped praise on him, continually boosting him in blurbs and leading articles as its “ace investigator”.²⁸ This glorification

22 ‘Vicar dumps wife for rolls with sandwich boy called Surman’, *NOTW*, 4 September 1994 (byline shared with Phil Taylor); *Confessions*, p195

23 ‘This is a pimp of 15 selling drugs to schoolgirl hooker’, *NOTW*, 18 October 1998

24 *Confessions*, p197

25 *Confessions*, p8

26 ‘The sheik unveiled’, *The Guardian*, 4 October 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/mr474xkc>

27 Wallis in Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 1

28 ‘Help us nail the villains!’ *NOTW*, 11 February 1996; ‘Our man brings baddies to book’, *NOTW*, 27 July 1997; ‘Our Mazher’s just amazing’, *NOTW*, 9 March 1997; ‘Dial M for Mazher’, *NOTW*, 24 August 1997; ‘Ministers praise our Maz’, *NOTW*, 21 September 1997; ‘Our jean-ius Mazher nabs clothing cheat’, *NOTW*, 14 June 1998; ‘Mazher’s one-man war on crime’, *NOTW*, 1 October 2000; ‘Courage of our hero Mazher’, *NOTW*, 3 November 2002; ‘Mazher wins again’, *NOTW*, 23 May 2004

was bound to have an effect on Mahmood's ego, which manifested itself in outbursts of diva-like behaviour. One female reporter who worked with him on a foreign assignment told how he rejected the four-star hotel that the office had booked for them, successfully demanding an upgrade to a five-star alternative.²⁹ Another woman wrote of him scorning other members of staff as amateurs and exuding "a regal air".³⁰ Wallis, one of his admirers, thought "he became more difficult to manage" and "didn't like to be questioned".³¹

One particular incident illustrates his self-conceit. In January 2003, two teenage girls were shot dead as they were leaving a party in Birmingham. The murders, the result of a feud between gangs, led the news agenda for days afterwards and occurred against the background of an increase in firearms crime. The story prompted the *NOTW*'s assistant editor, Greg Miskiwi, to ask Mahmood to discover how easy it might be to obtain a gun.

According to Mahmood's story, as published, "*News of the World* investigators bought an AK47 machine gun from a Birmingham thug just hours after the murder of the girls' murder".³² They, meaning Mahmood and Conrad Brown, posed as drug dealers when meeting "a West Indian called Dee, with a strong Brummie accent" who demanded £2,000 for "something special, an AK". Mahmood's tale continued:

"Because of the huge police presence in Birmingham, Dee insisted that the handover take place near Bristol. We were directed to a fallen log marked by a red handkerchief tied to a bush in a country lane... we placed the cash there in a white envelope at 2am yesterday morning, then left. Thirty minutes, after a call from Dee, we returned to the log and found the AK47 inside a black bin liner. The weapon is now available to police".

I rolled my eyes on reading this fictional nonsense, unaware at the time of what lay behind it. Within a day, I learned of Mahmood's outrage at his story being placed on page 9 which, in his view, underplayed its significance and failed to reflect his reporting "heroism". In response, he and Brown decided to resign. Their walk-out soon became known to Jean Morgan, the well-informed reporter at the newspaper trade magazine, *Press Gazette*. In recounting Mahmood's fascinating story-behind-the-story, she began by stating that he "stormed out of the office on Saturday night after he heard that the story of his attempt to buy a gun – which had almost cost him his

29 Confidential briefing, 17 February 2025

30 Christine Hart, 'Fake wife blows lid on Fake Sheikh', *Byline Investigates*, 7 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/mrxjhkyj>

31 Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 1

32 'Our man buys AK47 on streets', *NOTW*, 5 January 2003

life – was going to make just seven paragraphs at the bottom of a page”.³³

Morgan, clearly briefed by Mahmood, said that following Miskiw’s request, he had “contacted some Yardies and arranged to pick up the gun at a Birmingham park”. But, “when he asked to see the gun, it was put to his head and a gang of five men in balaclavas appeared with guns and machetes. Mahmood and his informant were ‘given a severe kicking’ and just escaped a knifing. They paid the Yardies all the money they had”.

Mahmood was then phoned at home on Saturday morning by Miskiw and put under “intense pressure” to provide a gun. In response, Mahmood supposedly “rang some of his heaviest contacts and procured a Kalashnikov AK47”, which he dumped on Miskiw’s desk. He then “made his views known, and left”. Morgan’s piece continued: “He is said to be angry at the poor way investigations are used by the paper while showbiz stories are splashed”. She also quoted a “senior journalist” as saying: “I have worked with Maz and Conrad for several years and I know how hard they work and the risks they take, and the disbelief when top investigations are not printed in favour of silly TV buy-ups”.

Within two days Mahmood was said to be back at work. Both he and the *NOTW*’s managing editor, Stuart Kuttner, denied rumours that he had quit. Morgan quoted Kuttner as saying: “Mazher had a difficult working week. Going out onto the streets of Birmingham in the aftermath of that appalling double murder and checking out how these gangs come by their guns is not an assignment many reporters would want. Nevertheless, Mazher Mahmood, who is one of the bravest and most resourceful reporters, was readily prepared to do so. He succeeded in buying not a little pocket gun, but an AK47, which is a lethal automatic weapon. He has not resigned”. And Morgan concluded with an upbeat quote from Mahmood: “I am still here, back on the streets, and the villains had better look out”.

It is difficult to disentangle the truth. If Mahmood knew he could lay his hands on an AK47 from “his heaviest contacts” why did he go to the trouble of dealing with a mysterious West Indian in Birmingham called Dee? If he and Brown were beaten up, why was that not in his story? What were their injuries from the “severe kicking”? Were they treated in hospital? Having had the money stolen in Birmingham, why did Miskiw sanction further funds to enable the acquisition of the AK47? The overarching point is that the published story, with its farcical claim about Mahmood retrieving a machine gun from a plastic bag next to a fallen log in a Bristol country lane was, as his *Press Gazette* statement revealed, completely untrue.

33 ‘Mystery of “resignation” over NoW’s gun probe’, *Press Gazette*, January 9 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/mvktuuccd>

Mahmood's threat to quit worked out well for him because Kuttner's positive spin in the aftermath added yet more lustre to his self-image. And his hubristic "resignation" may well have influenced the way in which the paper treated his exposure of multiple "gun-runners" a couple of months later.³⁴ Mahmood got front page billing and plenty of space inside for "one of the most dangerous investigations carried out by the *News of the World*". His far-fetched story told of obtaining guns from a series of unlikely characters, such as the "the Colonel" from Belfast operating on Blackpool seafront; Dougie, a Harley-Davidson biker in Newcastle; and Leonid, an Albanian asylum-seeker in north London. On each occasion, said the article, "our man risked death if his cover had been blown". My eyes rolled again.

Mahmood underlined his bravery in his *Confessions* book, published in 2008, a claim reinforced in a leading article that said he had "risked death".³⁵ In the paper on the same day was a pseudo review of his book – little more than a publicity blurb – which also highlighted the dangers he had faced.³⁶ His success, it said, had come at "a high price" with numerous death threats. What went unrecorded in Mahmood's book were his journalistic exploits which, for one reason or another, rebounded on him. His "confessions" are therefore selective, failing to live up to his sub-title: "The king of sting reveals all".

"All" did not include, for instance, the controversial and contested stings on Lord Hardwicke, Rhodri Giggs and Besnik Qema. "All" didn't touch on the entrapment of Emma Morgan, nor on that of Lindsey Stone, the so-called baby-for-sale mother. "All" did not include his key role in bringing about the dismissal of his long-time *NOTW* friend and colleague, Steve Grayson.

According to reporter Graham Johnson, the saga began when Rebekah Brooks, then the deputy editor, pointed out to him an article in the *Daily Telegraph* about a sighting of the Beast of Bodmin Moor.³⁷ He reacted by pretending to be something of an expert on the subject.³⁸ As Johnson well knew, the Beast of Bodmin – a phantom black cat said to be the size of a puma – was Cornwall's answer to the mythical Loch Ness monster. Brooks noted that the *Telegraph* story was based on claims of a sighting by some Cornish councillors travelling in a coach and an analysis of paw prints found in the vicinity by a team from Newquay Zoo. The picture, carried by a Devon newspaper among others, was somewhat unconvincing.³⁹ But she ordered

34 'These two guns were delivered to our door. It was as easy as ordering pizza'; 'I'll get you a Beretta, grenade or an Uzi... and I don't care what you use them for', *NOTW*, 20 April 2003

35 'Sheiken, not stirred', *NOTW*, 31 August 2008

36 'Sheik and awe', *NOTW*, 31 August 2008

37 'Beast of Bodmin is alive and breeding', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October 1997

38 Johnson, op cit, p172

39 'Now it's Beasts of Bodmin', *Western Evening Herald*, 18 October 1997

Johnson to go to Cornwall anyway on the grounds that “there could be something in it”. Then, with Conan Doyle’s *Hound of the Baskervilles* in mind, she had another thought: “I want you to get dressed up like Sherlock Holmes... do a number on the Beast”.

Dressing up reporters was one of Brooks’s hallmarks. She was standing in for the editor, Phil Hall, who was away on holiday, and she was eager to make her mark. In fact, making a mark had been the consistent theme of her *NOTW* career since arriving in 1989 as a secretary. She soon managed to secure an editorial post, becoming a feature writer before taking a junior executive role on the paper’s magazine. Her abilities were recognised in 1994 by the then editor, Piers Morgan, who appointed her as features editor. She showed her mettle soon after by plundering a scoop from another Murdoch title, the *Sunday Times*, by wearing a cleaner’s outfit and hiding in a toilet for two hours to obtain a copy of its magazine as it came off the presses.⁴⁰ When Morgan departed, to be replaced by Hall, Brooks was elevated to the deputy editorship. At 29, surrounded by executives with vastly more experience, she was conscious of the kudos she would earn by landing an exclusive in the editor’s absence.

My reading of what happened in the Beast of Bodmin incident is tempered by my suspicion that her senior staff stepped in to save her from herself while, of course, saving their own skins as well. The ruthless nature of the internal competition among the *NOTW*’s executives certainly played its part in the unfolding drama.⁴¹ Johnson’s immediate boss, the features editor, Ray Levine, was central to what happened. He began by getting into the spirit of Brooks’s madcap idea by recruiting a freelancer, Ricky Sutton, to play Dr Watson. While Johnson and Sutton sorted out costumes, the picture desk assigned Grayson, Mahmood’s favourite photographer, to join them on their journey to Cornwall. They had barely arrived when Sutton was pulled off the job because he was told he was needed back in London.

Sherlock would have to do without his trusty assistant. Dressed in his deerstalker hat, magnifying glass in hand, he dutifully posed in front of bushes as Grayson snapped away.⁴² Back at the newspaper office, Levine thought the pictures too light-hearted. He wondered whether Johnson and Grayson were failing to take the job seriously enough, as if it was possible to treat it seriously anyway. Both knew they were engaged on a fruitless mission. To make matters worse for Grayson, he found himself fielding calls from Mahmood who wanted him to work on a paedophile investigation.

40 Morgan, op cit, p50

41 Nick Greenslade, op cit, p65

42 Grayson, op cit, p256

An attempt to enhance claw marks on a tree and suggest they were evidence of the Beast failed to satisfy Brooks. Levine told Johnson: “Rebekah wants you to stay down... she wants a picture of the Beast”. What Levine said next, or what Johnson thought he said, proved momentous: “Somehow, we will have to engineer it in some way”.⁴³ Johnson and Grayson interpreted Levine’s remark as a sign that they should fabricate a picture. The die was cast. They would find a puma in a safari park and pretend it was a big cat on the moors. The hoax would be believable, thought Johnson, because Grayson had a solid reputation within the newspaper due to his work with “the legendary Mazher Mahmood”.⁴⁴ The irony of his belief in the friendship between Grayson and Mahmood would soon become apparent. A puma was duly pictured at Dartmoor Wildlife Park, the images were Photoshopped to locate the animal in suitable scenery, and wired to the *NOTW* picture desk.

At this point, it was difficult to know who was fooling who. Did anyone at the office really believe the pair had found the Beast? Did Johnson and Grayson, the hoaxers, imagine they were engaged in a hoax within a hoax in which Brooks was pulling their strings? Why did Brooks not realise the pair had stunted the pictures? If so, did she care? After all, the *NOTW* pulled stunts all the time. According to Johnson, during Brooks’s first conversation with Grayson, he “was more than happy to play ball with her... convinced that ultimately she was the Mr Big pulling the strings”.⁴⁵ Grayson also assumed she was in on the plot.⁴⁶ But who else among the *NOTW* hierarchy were in the loop? Johnson felt it necessary to maintain the façade when questioned by Levine even when directly challenged. In a call to Johnson, Levine said: “If they’re stunted, you can tell us now. We’ll all have a laugh and move on”.⁴⁷ Johnson, oddly continuing to believe he was in league with his editor and that her executive staff were unaware of the secret Beast cabal, refused to own up. Similarly, when Grayson was called by managing editor Stuart Kuttner and asked about the provenance of the pictures, he thought he was protecting Brooks and Levine by maintaining that they were genuine. “I was stunned”, he said. “How could they not see they were a joke?”

As jokes go, this one had an unfunny pay-off. Brooks believed she had a scoop worthy of spending £300,000 on TV advertising and extending the paper’s print run in the expectation of increased circulation. Murdoch had been informed about the *NOTW* having a sales-winning exclusive. Although Grayson stuck to the story about finding the Beast when summoned to meet Kuttner, she began to have second thoughts. Who better to get at the truth

⁴³ Johnson, op cit, p190

⁴⁴ Ibid, p195

⁴⁵ Ibid, p209

⁴⁶ Grayson, ope cit, p257

⁴⁷ Johnson, op cit, p211

than her investigative sleuth, and Grayson's mate, Mazher Mahmood? He was ordered to grill Grayson who, because "Maz was someone I considered a friend I spoke openly about the whole situation".⁴⁸

Mahmood immediately called Brooks and told her not to run the story. Then he rang Grayson again and told him the editor was on to him. Realising the game was up, Grayson called Brooks and confessed. He said he had been bullied by Levine, who had insinuated that he stunt the photograph. It meant that five prepared pages had to be replaced overnight. Out went the world exclusive pictures of the Beast of Bodmin. In their place, *NOTW* readers were treated to an article sympathetic to Louise Woodward, a young British woman convicted of murdering a baby in the USA.⁴⁹

Grayson was fired for gross misconduct. Johnson resigned. Unlike Johnson, Grayson was not prepared to take it on the chin. He launched an industrial tribunal case against the *NOTW* for unfair dismissal. He had worked for the paper for six years, most of the time hand-in-glove with Mahmood. Reflecting on that relationship months later, he said: "I couldn't believe it because Maz was someone I considered a friend".⁵⁰ Grayson's action, as he conceded later, was a mistake.⁵¹ David was fighting Goliath, and this time the giant was a guaranteed winner. He argued that he was acting under instructions to fake the picture, and that such fabrication was the norm at the *NOTW*.⁵²

In their evidence, Brooks, Kuttner and Mahmood denied it. In Brooks's case, she did so in the most audacious fashion: She said:

"The whole ideology of the News of the World is based on truth".

John McVicar, who covered the tribunal in Stratford, east London, did not report whether her tongue was in her cheek as she said it.⁵³ The tribunal's finding, that Grayson had not been unfairly dismissed, was inevitable. Stuart Duncan, the tribunal chairman, concluded that Grayson had been "party to the submission of a false story and pictures" and had repeatedly lied about it.⁵⁴

Mahmood had made a determined enemy in Grayson, who took every opportunity to tell the world what he knew about his former colleague.

48 Grayson, op cit, p258

49 'My love for nanny Louise: She's not guilty says boyfriend', *NOTW*, 2 November 1997. Woodward's conviction was overturned on appeal. She was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter

50 John McVicar, 'Grayson favoured to turn screws on rag', *Punch*, 1 August 1998

51 Grayson, op cit, p259

52 'I was under pressure to fake picture of the Beast', *Pinner Observer*, 3 September 1998
<https://tinyurl.com/bddts9ew>

53 John McVicar, 'Cat in a Bodmin spoo', *Punch*, 12 September 1998

54 'Sacking upheld', *Pinner Observer*, 22 April 1999

He was, for example, a key witness in the *Panorama* documentary.⁵⁵ Not that Mahmood cared. Some six months after Grayson lost his employment tribunal case, Mahmood was asked about his part in unmasking his former friend's involvement in the Beast of Bodmin stunt. He simply replied: "I blew the whistle on him and he was sacked".⁵⁶ As far as Mahmood was concerned, making enemies went with the territory even if they were friends or family. Everyone he turned over, celebrity or criminal, was bound to hold a grudge against him. Nor would these grudges abate. Who could ever forget or forgive a man who ruined their livelihoods?

He made much of living in fear of retribution, arguing that it was the reason for concealing his identity. On two occasions, the paper claimed he had been given 24-hour police protection, firstly in 1992 when "thugs put a contract on his life" according to an unnamed "Flying Squad detective", and secondly in 2002, after an underworld source revealed there was a £100,000 contract on his life.⁵⁷ Whenever obliged to be a trial witness he persuaded judges and magistrates to allow him to give evidence from behind a screen. He turned up to courts with his face hidden by hoods or scarves, sometimes both. No-one could get near him because he was accompanied by minders paid for by the *NOTW*. He relished the theatricality, aware that it added to his self-image as a celebrated lone journalistic wolf, scourge of wrongdoers and debunker of hypocrites. Many of his victims were vulnerable, most were small-time criminals, a fair proportion were celebrities lured by the promise of enhanced fame and fortune. It was noticeable that he generally avoided tackling politicians and, when he did, things didn't quite work out as expected.

One target was Labour MP Diane Abbott. He sent her an email in the name of Sam Fernando, claiming to be PR for a senior Kashmiri figure in the Jaish-e-Mohammed Muslim organisation. After a follow-up phone call, she invited him and his colleague to Portcullis House, the building next to the Commons where many MPs have offices. The men talked about the conflict between Muslims and Hindus, and Abbott explained the system of tabling parliamentary questions. "Out of nowhere, one of them said, 'Money is not a problem... would a donation help?'" They were also insistent she should go to Dubai. Her suspicions that all was not as it seemed were confirmed 48 hours later with the arrival of a letter from a travel agent named Tariq Mahmood. It said: "Plot of the *News of the World* to stitch you up". He went on to explain he knew about it because Mazher had approached him

⁵⁵ 'The fake sheikh exposed', *Panorama*, BBC One, 12 November 2014

⁵⁶ Hardwicke trial, cross-examination. 'The sheik unveiled', *The Guardian*, 4 October 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/mr474xkc>

⁵⁷ 'Cops give our man 24-hour protection', *NOTW*, 12 July 1992; '£100,000 price on Maz's head', *NOTW*, 13 January 2002

and “insisted I should pretend that I am a Kashmiri leader who encourages terrorism... I refused to do this dirty job”.

Abbott believed the men were trying to coax her into accepting cash for questions. As for the Dubai trip, that was an attempt to accuse her of travelling with terrorists. Having rejected both demands, Mahmood’s article fell back on the pathetic excuse that Abbott’s invitation to two men supposedly linked to a terrorist organisation represented a breach of parliamentary security.⁵⁸ No-one took that seriously enough to hold Abbott to account. *The Guardian*’s Hugh Muir managed to track down Tariq Mahmood who explained: “I clearly told Mazher that I did not want to be involved in his fake journalism”.⁵⁹

Two years later, Mahmood fell foul of another MP, George Galloway, and dared to reuse the same *nom de sting*, Sam Fernando. If Mahmood was merely clumsy in trying to recruit a travel agent to set up Abbott, then his attempt to entrap Galloway was wholly inept. Fernando and Pervaiz Khan (Mahmood) posed as “Islamists” when they dined at the Dorchester Hotel with Galloway. He was surprised when the pair asked whether it was possible to sponsor MPs or fund political parties. Surprise turned to suspicion once they talked about Jewish people and made an insensitive remark about the Holocaust death toll. They were clearly trying to get him to make anti-semitic remarks. Galloway was far too savvy to fall into that trap. As he made to leave, Khan said that his driver wanted a picture taken with him. Galloway spotted the man’s gold teeth and remembered a description of Mahmood’s minder, Jaws Qureshi, in Andrew Marr’s book.⁶⁰

Galloway, who believed Mahmood was trying to lure him into accepting campaign contributions from foreign donors, an illegal act, went on the offensive. Recognising that secrecy was hugely important to Mahmood, he seized on the opportunity to embarrass him by threatening to post his photograph online. The *NOTW* and Mahmood immediately obtained a high court injunction to prevent Galloway from doing so. Galloway recruited me to join him at a press conference in Westminster in which we argued that Mahmood had forfeited his right to prevent his image being made public by the nature of his unethical journalism. Galloway handed out two photos of Mahmood and also sent copies to MPs and to the Queen’s private secretary. “The time has come to expose this man to the wider world”, he said.⁶¹ Our initiative was described by the trade magazine, *Press Gazette*, as

58 ‘Enemy within: *News of the World* man poses as member of hunted terror group... and MP Abbott invites him into Parliament’, *NOTW*, 16 May 2004

59 ‘Sting or probe’, *The Guardian*, 24 May 2004 <https://tinyurl.com/mzh9n6jy>

60 Marr, op cit, p46

61 ‘Galloway distributes photos of “fake sheikh” Mahmood’, *Press Gazette*, 4 April 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/2r62juj8>

“an extraordinary campaign to destroy the career of arguably Britain’s most famous investigative journalist”.⁶²

There was an *Alice in Wonderland* atmosphere in court the following day as the *NOTW*’s lawyers addressed the judge. They had to argue that the newspaper which had made a fetish of unrestrained disclosure by seeking to expose the identity of people protected by court orders and by casually invading people’s privacy was now trying to suppress the press freedom it advocated as its guiding principle. I detected their embarrassment. Mr Justice Mitting, in registering his surprise at the paper’s submission, demolished it in a few swift sentences. “I am satisfied”, he said, “that the true purpose of this application is not the protection of Mr Mahmood’s life and physical integrity but the protection of his earning capacity and position as an investigative journalist and his utility to his employers in that respect”. He contended that Mahmood’s claim would be more likely than not to fail at a full trial and therefore he ruled in Galloway’s favour by agreeing to lift the injunction.

The *NOTW* decided not to appeal. Mahmood attempted to make up for this by devoting several pages of his book to a bilious attack on Galloway.⁶³ He had not dented Mahmood’s ability to operate undercover, as his exploits afterwards proved. But he was unable to be quite as cavalier. There was a deeper issue, however, which got overlooked at the time. Under the editors’ code of practice, the clause devoted to the use of subterfuge stated that it should be used “only in the public interest and then only when the material cannot be obtained by other means”. This effectively outlawed what are known in the trade as “fishing expeditions”. The attempted entrapments of Abbott and Galloway took place without any *prima facie* evidence against either of them. Yet the Press Complaints Commission, which administered the code, did not feel it necessary to act in response to Mahmood’s blatant flouting of the rule.

One of the more bizarre episodes in Mahmood’s career was a cack-handed attempt to sting the stinger by the then editor of *The Spectator*, Boris Johnson. The future prime minister assigned the magazine’s sketch writer and theatre critic, Lloyd Evans, to carry out the mission. It was aimed at debunking the claim that the *NOTW* acted only in the public interest. Their ruse involved Evans approaching the paper to sell a fake story about Johnson dealing in drugs. Guessing that the paper would seek to verify the tale by recording a phone conversation between them, they agreed in advance a supposedly incriminating script. As expected, a *NOTW* reporter,

62 ‘Fake sheikh showdown’, *Press Gazette*, 6 April 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/jbegr3tv>

63 *Confessions*, pp294-303

Nadia Cohen, wired Evans up and, on hearing the tape, she fell for it. Or did she?

She reported back to her office, and then told Evans: “They’re calling in the big guns... no less a divinity than Maz Mahmood is to meet us”. It is unclear whether it was Cohen or Mahmood who spotted it was a set-up. But one, or both, realised something was wrong before that meeting took place and neatly side-stepped the trap. Adopting the moral high ground, Mahmood told Evans he wasn’t prepared to expose Johnson because the story would not pass the public interest test. “This isn’t the way we work”, he said. “Boris isn’t a drug dealer, in the normal sense. He doesn’t do it for a living; he doesn’t corrupt children. OK, dealers like that, yeah, we go after them, but not in this case. That’s entrapment. And entrapment is not the way we work”.

Mahmood, drawing on his youthful cricketing past, had played the straightest of straight bats. Evans and Johnson had not grasped two important aspects of subterfuge – planning and attention to detail. When Evans eventually chose to write about the incident, some fifteen years after the event, he did not conceal his bitterness at his failure. His article was laced with snobbish, somewhat racist, disdain.⁶⁴ He described Mahmood as being “a nondescript Pakistani... early thirties, crumpled, chain-store clothes, cheap black shoes”, an example of “the *News of the World* look – suburban and featureless”.

64 Lloyd Evans, ‘How The Spectator snared the Fake Sheikh – 15 years ago’, *The Spectator*, 13 November 2014 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/ycy8m84f>

Chapter 12

Crowning achievements?

“Rebekah won’t have liked the results of the fishing expedition. There was no evidence that Prince Harry was using drugs, soft, hard or otherwise.”
— Glenn Mulcaire

Few of Mazher Mahmood’s activities better illustrate the baleful influence of his employer, Rupert Murdoch, than the stalking of Prince Harry. The saga played out over more than twenty years and culminated in a huge financial settlement in January 2025.¹ This unprecedented climbdown by Murdoch’s company after a protracted legal action by the prince did not get the media coverage it deserved.² Neither the press nor broadcasters bothered to investigate the how and why behind the story, which, of course, was the reason for the settlement. By denying Harry the trial he wanted, News Group Newspapers prevented the full truth from emerging. Nevertheless, plenty can be told.

It began, according to the *NOTW*’s assistant editor, Greg Miskiw, in February 2001 when rumours apparently reached the paper from Gloucestershire that the prince, then aged 16, was spending his nights drinking.³ Another alleged tip suggested he was taking drugs. When the editor, Rebekah Brooks (then Wade), was informed “she wanted it, big time”, wrote Miskiw. She set what came to be known as Project Prince Harry in motion. Miskiw commissioned Glenn Mulcaire, the private investigator under contract to the paper, to indulge in his dark arts, such as hacking into the mobile phones of Prince Harry’s aides, to see what he could discover. Months passed. Thousands of pounds were spent. “It was a fishing expedition”, Miskiw admitted, “but we got nothing”. Mulcaire agreed:

1 ‘Prince claims “historic” win over Sun owner after settling intrusion case’, *The Guardian*, 23 January 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/ykkf6ekf>

2 Steven Barnett, ‘Not finally’, *British Journalism Review*, Vol 36/1, March 2025

3 Miskiw, op cit, chapter 31; ‘Murdoch CEO Brooks illegally spied for a year on teenage Prince Harry’, *Byline Investigates*, 7 April 2020 <https://tinyurl.com/y36jvw8a>

“Rebekah won’t have liked the results of the fishing expedition. There was no evidence that Prince Harry was using drugs, soft, hard or otherwise”.⁴

Miskiwi, with Brooks at his back, then called on Mahmood and his team with instructions “to make it work”. Royal editor Clive Goodman was also assigned to the project. No expense was spared in order to prove that the teenager who was then third in line of succession to the British throne was a drug user. But it proved impossible to obtain concrete proof that the tittle-tattle was true. At least, that was the view of Miskiwi and Mulcaire, both of whom were sent to prison on phone-hacking charges, which does, of course, undermine their credibility. Anyway, neither was aware of matters uncovered by what Miskiwi called “a secret parallel operation” authorised by Brooks. Its results were to prove crucial to events. Before we deal with what Mahmood’s investigation did, or didn’t, reveal, let’s leap forward to January 2002.

Two weeks into the new year, the *News of the World* ran a front page story, “Harry’s drugs shame”, which alleged that the prince had been sent to a rehabilitation clinic by his father after admitting using cannabis.⁵ It was a page one “world exclusive” that ticked all of Murdoch’s boxes. It set the news agenda; it reflected his anti-monarchist views; it was orchestrated by his favoured executive, Brooks; and it was written by his favoured investigative reporter, Mahmood. For the overwhelming majority of the paper’s readers, the story narrated in five articles across six inside pages would have had the ring of truth. For the seasoned journalist, however, the holes in its authenticity were obvious because the main article relied on a single, curiously well-informed, anonymous source. All the damning details in that article – jointly bylined Mahmood and Goodman – were attributed to an unidentified “family friend”. Two of the supporting articles were suspicious for a similar reason.

The “friend” was quoted as saying that the prince had, “during a two-month period covering June and July 2001”, fallen in “with a bad lot at the Rattlebone Inn”, a pub in Wiltshire near Highgrove, his father’s home. According to the source, Harry was introduced to cannabis by Guy Pelly, a friend to both Prince William and Harry.⁶ When Harry’s alleged drug use was brought to the attention of his father, the then-Prince Charles, he consulted his eldest son, 18-year-old William, before confronting Harry. Charles

4 ‘How Rebekah Brooks had Prince Harry’s life hacked at Eton’, *Byline Investigates*, 27 May 2020 <https://tinyurl.com/4tnm3tux>

5 ‘Harry’s drugs shame: Prince admits: I smoked pot at Highgrove’, *NOTW*, 13 January 2002

6 Pelly firmly denied the allegation, but took no action against the paper. ‘Student denies doing drugs with Harry’, *BBC News*, 15 January 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/2n67ve6d>; ‘I’ve never given Harry drugs’, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 January 2002 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/4sue5exm>

supposedly remained “very calm” when “gently” questioning his son and asking him to “tell the truth”. In response, Harry was said to have been “very mature about it and quickly realised the error of his ways”. A key passage of the quote by the “friend” followed:

“Charles was so concerned that he decided swift action needed to be taken. About three years ago, he’d opened a new centre for drug rehabilitation called Featherstone Lodge in Peckham... Charles asked William to suggest to Harry that perhaps he should spend some time there to familiarise himself with the dangers of drugs”.

The next paragraph, outside of quotation marks, stated:

When Harry had spent time listening to the horror stories of addicts who had progressed from cannabis to cocaine to heroin, he returned to Highgrove for a heart-to-heart that he will never forget.

A “senior aide” to Prince Charles was also quoted as saying that Harry was asked to visit Featherstone Lodge on the understanding that “attending group therapy on the evils of drugs would educate him away from fashionable assumptions that cannabis is ok and doesn’t lead to harder, more serious, drugs”.

This was a cunningly constructed article and, as clever as both Mahmood and Goodman were at stitching together tall tales, it is highly doubtful that they alone were responsible for the form in which it appeared. The same could be said of their secondary piece, which dealt with the prince’s visit to the south London rehab clinic, headlined: “Prince was left reeling: He sat down with junkies and listened to their horror stories”. Once again, it was the mysterious “family friend” who spoke about it at length and in detail. Also quoted was the chief executive of Phoenix House, the charity responsible for Featherstone Lodge, Bill Puddicombe. He confirmed that Harry had met inmates and praised Prince Charles for “responsible parenting” by showing his son “the consequences of drug-taking”. His carefully crafted statement was supportive of what amounted to a false narrative.

Puddicombe knew the true situation, telling the *Daily Mail*: “We thought Prince Charles was merely setting an example of good parenting. We only became aware of it when we were contacted by the palace to say the story was going to break”.⁷ He also knew that there is a marked difference between *visiting* a rehab clinic and *being admitted* to a rehab clinic as a patient. The

⁷ ‘Detox clinic gave its royal visitor a shock’, *Daily Mail*, 14 January 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/mry78hfw>

average reader could be forgiven for thinking otherwise, having been led to believe the prince, after confessing to his father that he had smoked cannabis, entered a clinic at Prince Charles's insistence. Most newspapers across the political spectrum also accepted the story at face value.⁸ But it just wasn't so. The article was chronologically flawed and, much more pertinently, devoid of any hint of the Machiavellian machinations which preceded its publication. For the truth is that the story as published was the result of a deal negotiated by the *NOTW*'s editor, Brooks, and Prince Charles's deputy private secretary, Mark Bolland, then widely "recognised as the real power behind the future King of England".⁹ He had also recently picked up an award as PR professional of the year for his work in improving Charles's image.¹⁰ His standing with Princes William and Harry can be gauged by their nickname for him, Lord Blackadder.

Savvy journalists were quick to spot what had happened, notably the *Daily Telegraph*. Its leading article, registering sympathy for the young prince, saw him as the victim of "the deal struck last weekend between St James's Palace and the *News of the World*".¹¹ It decried "intrusive coverage" that had been "sanctioned by advisers around his father, in short those very people a vulnerable teenager might look to for support". It also pointed to the way in which the paper had "unctuously praised" Prince Charles and made him "look good". The *Telegraph* editor, Charles Moore, aware that Bolland lived with (and later married) the director of the Press Complaints Commission, Guy Black, berated the PCC for supporting the story's publication on the grounds that there was "no issue to be raised in respect of privacy". Both the palace and Black were swift to deny any knowledge of a deal, which the *NOTW* underlined in an editorial of its own, castigating the "arrogant" *Telegraph* editor for his false claim.¹²

Despite Black's denial, barely a year passed before he acknowledged in a *Guardian* interview "that horse-trading did take place" between Bolland and the *NOTW*.¹³ He passed it off as an example of the normal activity of professional PRs and praised Bolland, saying: "Mark is a genius at dealing with these things". In the light of those previous denials, it was an

8 'Price Harry taken to drink and drugs rehab clinic', *The Guardian*, 13 January 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/zwsmf4av>; 'Why St James's Palace decided to come clean', *The Times*, 14 January 2002

9 'Has the Puppet-Master of St James's finally pulled one string too many?' *Daily Telegraph*, 1 December 2001 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/3zab4e76>

10 'Bolland scoops top PRO gong at PRWeek Awards', *PRWeek*, 2 November 2001 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/paycutyd>

11 'A prince unprotected', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 January 2002 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/mryjscy4>

12 Leading article, *NOTW*, 20 January 2002

13 'Media mediator', *The Guardian*, 3 March 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/38w4df8j>

astonishing about-turn. Black felt aggrieved by the criticism of his role. “A huge amount of myth has grown up... I got a huge amount of flak for doing my job”. Asked if he knew about the story before it ran, he replied: “I may have known about it a day before publication, but there was no question of interference, or trying to stop it”. This nonchalant confession that he had previously been economical with the truth prompted the *Daily Telegraph* to recall that the Bolland-Brooks trade-off had been officially denied.¹⁴ The palace stuck to its prior position. A spokesman was quoted as saying: “We said at the time there had been no such horse-trading and we are not aware of any evidence to the contrary”.

That statement was contradicted by Bolland, echoing Black, when he finally admitted he had, after all, struck a deal with the paper. He waited to do so until after stepping down from his royal post and cutting all ties with Prince Charles.¹⁵ Just ahead of accepting a contract to become a *News of the World* gossip columnist, he gave a candid interview to *The Guardian*.¹⁶ It was riveting, although it was anything but the whole-hearted truth.¹⁷ He said several newspapers, principally the *NOTW*, had approached him over a number of months before the January 2002 splash with claims about Harry indulging in drink and drugs. He dismissed these as untrue until the *NOTW*, following “a big investigation down in Gloucestershire”, produced a dossier of evidence that was “compelling”.

Bolland therefore decided to work in concert with the paper in order to exercise a measure of control over the content. In so doing, he gave Brooks the information – the princely visit to Featherstone Lodge – which provided her with the “hook” she required to turn unsubstantiated allegations into a guaranteed front page spectacular. In turn, Bolland was able to ensure that his boss, Prince Charles, would look like a caring, thoughtful, sensible father, all part of his wider strategy to improve Charles’s image as he sought to secure public support for both him and his mistress, Camilla Parker-Bowles.¹⁸

But there was a big hole, an abyss, in the story. As *The Guardian*’s reporter, Ian Katz, pointed out to Bolland, Harry had visited Featherstone Lodge some time in June or July 2001 while the so-called evidence of his drug-taking and drinking was garnered by Mahmood’s team later in the

14 ‘Palace accused of “horse-trading”’, *Daily Telegraph*, 4 March 2003

15 ‘Prince’s secretary to quit’, *Daily Telegraph*, 3 February 2002 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/42yxa4hm>; ‘Prince Charles cuts all ties with his spin doctor’, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 January 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/45jwyu6z>

16 ‘Bolland in talks with News of the World’, *The Guardian*, 27 October 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/yvzuvkju>

17 ‘It was me what spun it’, *The Guardian*, 27 October 2003 <https://tinyurl.com/3w64p8dk>

18 Among his initiatives to persuade Fleet Street of her merits was an approach to Murdoch’s key executive, Les Hinton. Hinton, op cit, pp344-5

summer, say August or September. Therefore, the sequence of events described by the *NOTW* was a nonsense. Bolland's wholly unconvincing reply was that the chronological "error" was the *NOTW*'s fault. "It was misleading to present the centre as the solution", he was quoted as saying. He claimed to have been "embarrassed" at the "triumphalist manner" of the paper's presentation.

Triumphalist? True, but that was a minor matter when set beside the overall perception created by a story that had no basis in fact. Prince Harry had not been sent to the clinic as a result of his father being informed about his drug-taking (itself unproven). It was revealed to be a non-story. Harry had been humiliated by the paper. He had not been sent to rehab. The boy had merely visited the centre, because that's what members of the royal family do. It was simply one of the prince's normal royal duties, not a specific demand by his father.

Then there is the matter of the *NOTW*'s "dossier", which Bolland had found so "compelling". According to a short piece headlined "Cocaine for £30 at the Rattlebone", there wasn't the slightest evidence that the prince had frequented the pub, let alone drunk alcohol there or ever taken drugs. (The prince later admitted drinking there, but the paper found no proof at the time). Mahmood's undercover "team" had discovered nothing in the least bit incriminating against Harry.

Unusually, Mahmood himself took a back seat during the Rattlebone inquiries in the belief that his skin colour might attract unwelcome attention. So, his team leader inside the pub was his technical expert, Conrad Brown. He was joined by a recent newsroom hiring, Gemma Calvert, who was selected because, being young and attractive, it was thought she would be more acceptable to the younger clientele. Neither of them declared who they were when speaking to drinkers. In their short article, they claimed that cannabis was "smoked openly at the bar" and that they were allegedly "offered" a bag of cocaine. No-one was quoted as knowing Prince Harry or having seen him. There was no link to him. Guilt was being ascribed by association.

Bolland, having previously spent five years as PCC director, would not have regarded such a lame report as compelling evidence against Prince Harry.¹⁹ There are three possibilities: one, he was shown genuine "incriminating" material which was withheld from publication as part of his deal with the paper; two, he was shown false material designed to pressure him into making a deal; three, he saw nothing and merely accepted what he

¹⁹ As PCC director, Bolland piloted an agreement that the princes' privacy would be respected by newspapers during their schooldays

was told. Whatever the case, the published Mahmood-Goodman story was, in all respects, a confected fabrication.

Indeed, in a postscript that wasn't published by the *NOTW*, several newspapers reported that a man was fined £600 for supplying cannabis to Conrad Brown at the Rattlebone Inn after "being persistently asked for drugs" by the journalist.²⁰ Nor did the *NOTW* think it important to report the fact that no police action would be taken against the prince because, as a spokesman for the Wiltshire force put it: "None of the inquiries made revealed any involvement whatsoever by Prince Harry". The spokesman also announced that inquiries into the alleged events at the Rattlebone Inn "were now finished... we now consider the matter closed".²¹ In other words, there was no story.

It wasn't until 2023 that the prince went public with his own objection to the story and his intense distress about how it came about. In his memoir, *Spare*, he contended that it was "all lies...wrong, wrong, wrong".²² He explained that it was his father's former aide, whom he considered to be his mentor, Mark Dyer (known as Marko), who first informed him that the *NOTW* claimed to have "evidence" of his drug-taking. Dyer revealed that he had attended "a clandestine meeting" with one of the editor's "lieutenants". The prince asked Dyer to go back to the editor [Brooks] and "tell her she had it all wrong".

Dyer later informed the prince that his father had decided on a different strategy. They would "play ball with her". Through Bolland, a deal would be done. Prince Charles's spin doctor, observed Harry, was going "to spin me right under the bus".²³ And that is exactly what happened. The fact that Bolland, Black, Brooks and her then husband, the actor Ross Kemp, were on such friendly terms that they had taken a foreign holiday together only served to convince Harry he had been stitched up. He had to fume for years before launching a legal action against Murdoch's company for intrusion and unlawful information gathering only to be frustrated in his desire for a trial in open court. In securing "substantial damages", he won what his barrister called "a monumental victory".²⁴ However, it meant he was unable to show the British public how Murdoch's newspapers, the *NOTW* and *The Sun*, had breached his privacy. How, for example, had the *NOTW* obtained

20 'Journalist got drug at Harry's pub', *Shropshire Star*, 26 February 2002; 'Drugs inquiry clears Prince Harry', *BBC News*, 28 February 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/m3ft23vd>

21 "'No police action" over Prince Harry', *Daily Mail*, 28 February 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/ytwuwuen>; 'Prince Harry in the clear', *The Scotsman*, 1 March 2002

22 Prince Harry, *Spare*, (2024), p86

23 Ibid, p87

24 'Sun owner to pay Prince Harry "substantial" damages', *BBC News*, 22 January 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/yjamb5wd>

its original tip? What part had phone-hacking, even at one remove, played in the paper's activities? Had the publishing company executed a cover-up by deleting computer files?

After the Rattlebone nonsense, Prince Harry remained a target for both the *NOTW* and for Mahmood. In 2004, he and Goodman wrote again about the prince's youthful exploits. They were bylined along with reporter Polly Graham on an article about a visit by Harry and his elder brother to a London nightclub.²⁵ This time, the sources were named and it passed without provoking much comment. But tabloid obsession with the two princes persisted. In the hunt for information about them, their aides' phones were hacked, as was that of their friend, Guy Pelly. In 2007, Mahmood joined the intrusive cabal by attempting to entice Pelly into disclosing royal secrets. No expense was spared. Pelly, then the marketing director of a London night club, was flown to Las Vegas with his girlfriend at the bidding of a "venture capitalist" (Mahmood) eager to invest in his business expansion plans. The illusion was enhanced by the creation of a fake website. After one meeting, it was suggested that the couple should join Mahmood and his "executives" at a lap-dancing club where they were plied with drink. Despite the alcohol, Pelly became suspicious when too many questions were asked about the royal family.

One of Pelly's friends who spoke to the *Mail on Sunday* said he also spotted a stray wire peeping out of a briefcase.²⁶ "Guy is in an absolute state of panic", said the friend. "He knows someone has tried to stitch him up." In fact, he knew exactly who was responsible because the paper quoted Pelly's father as saying: "I know about the *News of the World* thing... and the Las Vegas trip". In my *Guardian* blog the following day, I suggested Pelly should ask one pertinent question of the Press Complaints Commission: what was the public interest justification for the entrapment?²⁷ But, just as he had five years before, Pelly, doubtless embarrassed by the visit to the lap-dancing club, let Mahmood and his paper off the hook. No complaint was made.

During his first decade at the *NOTW*, Mahmood had shown little interest in royal matters. Aware that the territory was dominated and fiercely guarded by Goodman, his only involvement had been in tangential stories. The pair did share a byline on a splash in 1995, involving John Bryan, a former boyfriend of the Duchess of York (Sarah Ferguson). The photographer who accompanied Mahmood to Los Angeles, Steve Grayson, said their initial aim

25 'For years we've had to put up with dull, boring royals but now at last we can bring you...the AristoPack', *NOTW*, 8 February 2004

26 'Prince William's friend rumbles lap-dancing club sting to make him spill royal secrets', *Mail on Sunday*, 29 September 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/y2rznv8e>

27 'Sheikh's trivial pursuit is a disgrace', *The Guardian*, 1 October 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/yxujaxmv>

was to persuade Bryan to obtain cocaine.²⁸ When that failed, they asked him to hire sex workers. He refused. But carefully edited tape-recordings suggested otherwise and it enabled Mahmood to present a story which was published on the front page.²⁹ Aside from this, Mahmood's contributions, relying on the most tenuous of royal links, did not create waves.³⁰

Once Mahmood entered the royal arena, two of his three stings generated huge publicity and a measure of palace embarrassment. In all three cases, it would be fair to describe his targets as marginal royals. It was also debatable whether there were genuine public interest justifications for his revelations. None of the three did anything illegal. However, in two instances, it could be argued that they were seeking to profit from their status, which just about passed the public interest test. Given their privileged position, and the fact they were guilty of impropriety, it was arguable that the public did have a right to know.

Mahmood's first sortie, in 2001, was the entrapment of Sophie Rhys-Jones, Countess of Wessex, wife of the Queen's youngest son, Prince Edward. It proved to be something of a media, and royal, spectacular. Rhys-Jones, in company with a business partner, Murray Harkin, ran a public relations agency, R-JH, and one of their employees, accounts manager Kishan Athulathmudali, felt his work was not appreciated. According to Mahmood's version of events, he was contacted directly by Athulathmudali because he "felt I had the right credentials to carry out an undercover sting on his boss".³¹

As I pointed out at the time, there was a very different, and more convincing, account in which Athulathmudali made his initial approach – as he confirmed in a legal deposition – to the publicity agent Max Clifford.³² As everyone who, like me, dealt with the slippery Clifford, nothing with him was ever straightforward. He supposedly took the story first to the *Mail on Sunday* rather than the *News of the World*. The *MoS*'s chief reporter then spent three hours with Athulathmudali in which he related his inside tale of Rhys-Jones trading on her royal connections to drum up business. But the reporter and her editor didn't think they could rely on him as a single source and rejected the story. Meanwhile, Rhys-Jones found out what Athulathmudali was up to, and tried to gag him, a ploy that ultimately

28 *Panorama*, BBC, 12 November 2014

29 'Fergie's ex in vice and drugs shame', *NOTW*, 8 October 1995

30 'Diana's charity boss in sex and drugs shame', *NOTW*, 19 March 1995; 'Sex, drugs and security scandal at Di's home: Aide sneaks in junkies', *NOTW*, 4 August 1996; 'Perverts play sex games on Queen's doorstep', *NOTW*, 25 August 1996

31 *Confessions*, p256; evidence to Leveson Inquiry, first witness statement, para 9, 14 October 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/26rtwbdn>

32 'Out for the countess', Brian MacArthur, *The Times*, 7 April 2001; 'A sting in the tale', Roy Greenslade, *The Guardian*, April 2001 <https://tinyurl.com/42s3bs6d>

failed.³³ Clifford, not wishing to lose out on a potentially fat fee, introduced Athulathmudali to Mahmood. Single-sourcing was not a problem for him because he planned to persuade Rhys-Jones to talk about her employee's allegations.

Mahmood took his time. At two meetings with Harkin, he offered him the bait. Again, there are two versions of what was on offer. In one, the lure was a lucrative contract for R-JH to promote a Dubai leisure complex.³⁴ In another, it was a two-year £20,000-a-month PR account for a Saudi prince. That would mean £480,000 for Rhys-Jones's company.³⁵ Mahmood, who needed the countess herself to accept the deal, reported back to his editor, Brooks, and was surprised at her reluctance to authorise the next stage in his sting. She had two objections. First, it was admirable that a prince's wife was earning money rather than depending on funding by taxpayers. Second, she recalled the public row that broke out just before Rhys-Jones's marriage in 1999 when *The Sun* had published a topless photo of her.³⁶ At that time, there was considerable sympathy for Rhys-Jones, from the public and from the Press Complaints Commission, which resulted in the *NOTW*'s sister paper swiftly publishing a full-page apology.³⁷

Mahmood, with backing from an assistant news editor, Neville Thurlbeck, stuck to his argument that the countess was cashing in on her royal status for private gain. Brooks relented. So, at a fateful meeting in a suite at the Dorchester Hotel, Rhys-Jones walked into the *NOTW* trap. According to Mahmood, she bowed to the sheikh, played on that occasion by one of his team, Akbar Ali Malik.³⁸ Maybe she did. What cannot be disputed is that Rhys-Jones, primed to expect a bumper pay-day and anxious to please her potential client, made several indiscreet remarks about members of the royal family and senior politicians. She was, of course, unaware that she was being videoed and taped.

Mahmood felt he had the countess, to use his phrase, "bang to rights".³⁹ It was hardly necessary to read between the lines to realise she was trading on her royal status. She told him: "If anybody ever gets some kind of additional profile or benefit from being involved with us because of my situation, that's an unspoken benefit. It's not something that anybody

33 'Sophie slaps court gag on her PR man: Judge's ruling stops executive telling all', *NOTW*, 25 March 2001

34 *Confessions*, p257

35 'Fallout of a royal farce', *The Observer*, 8 April 2001 <https://tinyurl.com/4mw4cwav>

36 'Sophie topless', *The Sun*, 26 May 1999

37 'Sun apologises to "devastated" Sophie Rhys-Jones', *The Guardian*, 26 May 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/4xd2mx3t>

38 *Confessions*, p261; 'The Scurra', *Daily Mirror*, 11 April 2001; 'If she buys into it, it becomes a reality... there's potential for Edward as well', *NOTW*, 8 April 2001:6-7

39 *Confessions*, p266

promises, it's something that just occurs. Most of our clients do end up having extra mentions in the press". She pushed it further still by telling the sheikh: "In your own country when people find we're working for you, the chances are you'll get people interested. 'Oh gosh, they've employed the Countess of Wessex's PR company.'" No wonder one commentator argued that she had made "a monumental fool of herself", calling her "calamitous" and "hapless".⁴⁰

The gosh factor was evident also in her unguarded comments on personalities. She suggested that Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles were "number one on people's unpopular people list", and that they were unlikely to marry while the Queen Mother was alive. She criticised the prime minister, Tony Blair, as being too presidential and "ignorant of the countryside". She thought the Tory leader, William Hague, sounded "like a puppet", and that his predecessor, John Major, was "completely wooden". Even after hearing some of the recordings, Brooks remained hesitant and decided, to Mahmood's chagrin, to contact Buckingham Palace. This resulted in an extraordinary deal. The contents of the tape would remain secret and, in return, Rhys-Jones would give the *NOTW* an exclusive interview, which the palace could vet before publication.

If the deal was extraordinary, then the interview itself, conducted by Carole Aye Maung, was even more so.⁴¹ Incredibly, Rhys-Jones chose to tackle rumours about her husband's sexuality by saying: "I can tell you he's not gay. I had heard something before we met, but... I never believed it... How I'd love to be able to go out and sing it from the rooftops".⁴² By speaking to the *NOTW*, she had reached 13 million rooftops in Britain alone. In fact, the interview got world-wide coverage.⁴³ Given her public relations experience, it was surprising she was prepared to speak so candidly, thereby earning a rebuke from the palace.⁴⁴

But the interview did not stop speculation in other newspapers about what she was supposed to have said to Mahmood. The *Mail on Sunday* was able to draw on material from its debriefing of Athulathmudali to guess at what Rhys-Jones might have said.⁴⁵ Other papers, probably briefed by Clifford, also published sensational and inaccurate claims about what the countess had told Mahmood. The palace, having got embroiled in a dispute

40 Ronald Stevens, 'The Sophie and Rebekah show', *British Journalism Review*, Vol 12/No2 2001

41 Mahmood was given an "additional material" credit

42 'My Edward is NOT gay' and 'I would love to sing it from the rooftops: there's nothing sham about our marriage', *NOTW*, 1 April 2001:1,2,3

43 'World press questions UK monarchy', *CNN*, 9 April 2001 <https://tinyurl.com/mpj75ekt>

44 'Palace rebukes Countess over political remarks', *The Times*, 2 April 2001

45 'Queen's outrage at Sophie insults', *Mail on Sunday*, 1 April 2001 <https://tinyurl.com/2xjpaiku>

with the PCC, felt it necessary to issue official denials.⁴⁶ Brooks, in retaliation at other papers making hay with her scoop, then published transcripts of the tapes in order to “set the record straight”.⁴⁷ According to the paper’s legal manager, Tom Crone, this was done by agreement with Rhys-Jones’s lawyers.⁴⁸

Across ten pages, the *NOTW* carried what *The Guardian* called “the full and excruciating contents” of Rhys-Jones’s statements to Mahmood.⁴⁹ These proved that the countess had not insulted the Queen nor the Queen Mother, as had been falsely reported. It was also clear that she had not been as rude about politicians as had been suggested in rival papers. In response, the Queen issued an uncharacteristically forthright statement saying she deplored “the entrapment, subterfuge, innuendo and untruths to which the Earl and Countess have been subjected”.⁵⁰ She followed up by authorising a review of the commercial affairs of members of the royal family.⁵¹ A leading article in *The Times* called for even greater reform.⁵² Rhys-Jones was obliged to give up her public relations business and, the following year, both she and Edward announced that they were severing all their business links.⁵³ As for Athulathmudali, he was so enamoured with Mahmood and the *NOTW* that he ended up working as a reporter for the paper, often acting as an assistant to Mahmood, usually under aliases, such as Alex D’Souza, Alex De Mel, Sanjay DeSava, Sanjay De Silva and Marcus De Silva.

In tabloid terms, Mahmood had achieved an appreciable success. His exclusive had dominated the media sphere for more than a fortnight and forced the Queen to act over the business affairs of her family. (Edward and his wife were obliged to give up commercial life, a punishment sweetened by a £500,000 addition to their existing £341,000 annual income).⁵⁴ The paper’s public interest justification rested on revealing that a person with royal privileges was covertly seeking ways to fill her wallet. It was also reasonable to argue that Mahmood’s use of subterfuge was justified. Only by going undercover was he able to obtain positive proof of Rhys-Jones’s use of her royal connections to enhance her chances of landing a business contract.

46 ‘The Queen in urgent talks over Countess’, *The Times*, 5 April 2001; ‘Wakeham acts to avert press, split with Palace’, *The Times*, 6 April 2001

47 ‘Sophie: The Tapes’, *NOTW*, 8 April 2001; *Confessions*, p268

48 Tom Crone, 2nd witness statement to Leveson inquiry, 25 November 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/5y234utz>

49 ‘Word by word, Sophie digs herself deeper into trouble’, *The Guardian*, 8 April 2001 <https://tinyurl.com/kv7ndxks>

50 ‘The indiscretion of Sophie Wessex’, *The Guardian*, 9 April 2001 <https://tinyurl.com/5yudta5t>

51 ‘Queen to set rules for working royals’, *The Times*, 9 April 2001:1

52 ‘Monarchy and money: The Wessex affair should be an opportunity for further reform’, *The Times*, 10 April 2001

53 ‘Sophie and Edward quit business roles’, *BBC News*, 2 March 2002 <https://tinyurl.com/4a3kf2d5>

54 ‘They’ll get £850,000 handout’, *NOTW*, 3 March 2002

Mahmood's lesson from the Prince Harry and Rhys-Jones revelations was that royal stories generated publicity which tended to add to his journalistic prestige. In 2005, he proved that point again by breaking a story which provoked another public fuss. His sting on Princess Michael of Kent, whose husband was first cousin to Queen Elizabeth, was hyped way beyond its significance.⁵⁵ Despite occasionally representing the Queen on foreign assignments, Prince Michael did not receive a parliamentary annuity or income from the privy purse. He was expected to support his family through his own efforts. However, he and his family did enjoy the privilege of living in a grace-and-favour apartment at Kensington Palace. In 1980, they also bought an 18th century house in Gloucestershire, Nether Lypiatt Manor, but over time its upkeep proved too expensive and they put it up for sale with an asking price of £6 million. There were few takers and, by autumn 2005, Mahmood realised the absence of a sale offered him an opportunity to entrap Princess Michael. A wealthy sheikh was just the kind of buyer she would welcome with open arms.

The princess had a track record for outspokenness, and it is difficult to see the value in encouraging her to do what she had done so many times before. Persuading her to be indiscreet would be like shooting fish in a barrel. And so it proved. More significant still, where was the public interest justification? Unlike Rhys-Jones, she was not using her royal connections, such as they were, to her advantage. Yet the *NOTW* devoted a surprising amount of resources to the enterprise. The paper paid for Mahmood to hire a Twin Squirrel helicopter, enabling "the sheikh" to arrive on the grounds of Nether Lypiatt in style.

Unsurprisingly, she greeted the prospective buyer warmly. When he asked why she was selling, she answered that she and her husband couldn't afford it any longer, which was probably the truth. She complained about their being strapped for cash. Mahmood, wearing a hidden tape recorder, then coaxed her to talk about members of the royal family, which she did, up to a point. She called Diana, Princess of Wales, a "bitter" and "nasty" woman, and said Prince Charles was jealous of her popularity and had merely married a "womb". She thought Prince William was too young to marry his girlfriend, Kate Middleton. None of this was in the least bit startling or even interesting. Were these trivial comments really worth the hiring of a helicopter?

Mahmood, and his bosses, were probably grateful when the princess, anxious to do a deal on the house, asked for a second meeting, this time at London's Claridges hotel. Over dinner, she offered just one remark that the paper thought news-worthy. She defended Prince Harry for wearing Nazi

⁵⁵ 'Pushy sells out royals', *NOTW*, 4 September 2005

insignia to a fancy dress party, arguing lamely that “if he had been wearing the hammer and sickle there wouldn’t have been so much fuss made”. And that was that. But the *NOTW* made the most out of it with a claim that the “Fake Sheik strikes again”. On the front page, and across four inside pages, it accused Princess Michael of “an appalling act of betrayal” and, just as unconvincingly, contended that by getting so close to the Kents, Mahmood had exposed a “shocking security lapse”.⁵⁶

Although other papers picked up the story the following day, it got only passing attention, largely regarded as just another addition to Mahmood’s legend as a trickster.⁵⁷ The accusations of betrayal and of security concerns were nonsensical, and could be ignored as tabloid hyperbole. *The Times* caught the mood with a light-hearted leading article somewhat sympathetic to Princess Michael as the victim of “an imposter” asking “preposterous” questions while pretending to be a potential house-buyer.⁵⁸ She brushed it off by saying: “I’ll laugh in time. I was fair game”.⁵⁹ Mahmood was delighted with the story, listing it and the Rhys-Jones sting as among his five favourite exposés.⁶⁰

If he had been making his list two years later, his third royal sting would probably have topped the lot. It certainly deserved its sensational tag in the sense that it created a long-running public storm. Furthermore, it raised important questions about what constituted “the public interest”. It renewed arguments over Mahmood’s use of subterfuge. It caused controversy over the online publication of video footage. Aside from domestic coverage, it was the subject of world-wide attention. It also, according to its victim, Sarah, Duchess of York, trashed her reputation and, in the process, cost her a fortune in lost income.

According to his statement to the Leveson inquiry, Mahmood received information from “someone close” to the duchess who “knew she was very keen to raise cash”. Furthermore, he and his bosses “were satisfied” that she had sold access to her ex-husband, Prince Andrew, to “one individual” who “had travelled to Kazakhstan” with the prince.⁶¹ As a consequence, Mahmood approached the duchess while posing as a western businessman, rather than a sheikh. At a second meeting, she was filmed offering Mahmood access to the prince for a fee of £500,000. She was seen on the video accepting a

56 Ibid

57 ‘Princess “duped” by fake sheikh trick’, *The Times*, 5 September 2005

58 ‘Whatever works: In a flat property market, why not try candour?’, *The Times*, 5 September 2005

59 ‘He sheiks me laugh’, *NOTW*, 30 October 2005

60 ‘My favourite exposés’, *Financial Times*, 6 September 2008. The others were the Newcastle United directors; Sven Goran Eriksson; and Sophie Anderton

61 Evidence to Leveson inquiry, second witness statement, para 9, 8 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/y5wft9mu>

“deposit” of \$40,000 in cash, which she took away after it was stuffed into a computer bag.

A picture of her sitting in front of bundles of dollars was published on the front page in May 2010 with the headline, “Fergie ‘sells’ Andy for £500k”.⁶² On the paper’s website, the four-minute video of the duchess “negotiating” with Mahmood began: “This is the moment when the Duchess of York is exposed making bogus cash-for-access claims about Prince Andrew”.⁶³ The voiceover, and the newspaper, stated that the prince, an official UK trade envoy at the time, was entirely unaware of his ex-wife’s money-making activities. She was accused of being “greedy” and making false claims that she could secure a “big deal” for the “businessman” by introducing him to the prince.

In much of the video – described as “a Hindenburg moment in a lifetime of bad decisions”⁶⁴ – the duchess was repetitive and incoherent. One journalistic watcher thought she appeared “to be on the edge” while talking “in a strange staccato manner”.⁶⁵

At one point, she said:

“Then that is then like then you open up all the channels whatever you need, whatever you want and then that’s what, and then you meet Andrew and that’s fine. And that’s that’s that’s when you really open up whatever you want”.

Her incoherence raised inevitable suspicions that she had been provided with too much alcohol, which the *NOTW* denied. She later admitted she had been drinking without suggesting that Mahmood had provided it, saying: “I was in the gutter at that moment”.⁶⁶ She also spoke of being in financial difficulties and of her “devastation” at the exposure.⁶⁷ According to Mahmood’s article, she told him: “I haven’t got a bean to my name... I left the royal family for freedom and... it means I am bereft”.

The article suggested that the starting point for its “investigation” was Mahmood’s prior knowledge of the duchess “cashing in on unknowing Andrew by setting up deals with foreign businessmen”. But, given that

62 ‘Cash for royal access sensation’, *NOTW*, 23 May 2010; ‘Duchess of York “wanted cash for Prince Andrew access”’, *BBC News*, 23 May 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/4stk6wwd>

63 ‘Fergie sells Andy’, *ProRepublica*, <https://tinyurl.com/2zs3en6p>

64 ‘Britain’s Mazher Mahmood: crusading journo or muckraking sensationalist?’, Elizabeth Renzetti, *Toronto Globe & Mail*, 3 September 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/2k834na4>

65 ‘From sashes to ashes’, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 May 2010

66 ‘Duchess of York: “I was in the gutter”’, *Daily Telegraph*, 31 May 2010; “‘Out of control” Sarah Ferguson tells Oprah she needed money to help out friend’, *Hello!*, 2 June 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/3c3fsyx2>

67 ‘Duchess “devastated” by tabloid sting’, *The Times*, 23 May 2010 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/2j5ax4yp>

she was not guilty of a crime, was there a public interest justification for exposing her attempt to make money? Although there was a similarity with the Rhys-Jones episode, in that she was attempting to profit from her links to royalty, she was divorced from Prince Andrew, and was not therefore, as she said herself, a member of the royal family. The *NOTW*'s royal editor, Robert Jobson, did his best to justify his colleague's entrapment, contending that the public interest was served because the "desperate" duchess was "prepared to jeopardise the reputation of her ex-husband and of the country, and of an important international ambassadorial role, which is, after all, funded in terms of the expenses by the taxpayer".

This was a thin argument, which, at the time, I bought, and I was rightly taken to task for doing so.⁶⁸ My critic, the anonymous writer of the *Inform* blog, offered a "proper justification" for the story's publication by arguing that the duchess was offering "access to a public official" for a payment that was wholly disproportionate to the "monetary value" of the service offered.⁶⁹ The businessman was hoping to benefit from something of great value which he could not have obtained by approaching Prince Andrew through proper channels. It meant that the whole transaction was "tainted" and its exposure therefore justified. (The same argument could be applied to the Rhys-Jones case).

None of the three stings, however, was to have the long-lasting consequences of Mahmood's role in obtaining the controversial picture that was to haunt Prince Andrew ever after. It showed the prince strolling through New York's Central Park with the convicted paedophile, Jeffrey Epstein.⁷⁰ On the day it appeared in the *NOTW* I was full of praise for the paper and for Mahmood.⁷¹ The single image of the men deep in conversation confirmed the prince's close friendship with a man who had been jailed two years before for soliciting teenage girls into prostitution. It underlined the prince's lack of judgement, although eight years were to pass before its full implications struck home during his car-crash interview with the BBC's Emily Maitlis.⁷²

In his article accompanying the picture, Mahmood reported that the prince had spent four days staying at Epstein's New York home. He asked: "Just what is the fourth in line to the throne doing meeting a convicted

68 'Why the News of the World was right to expose the Duchess of York', *The Guardian*, 24 May 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/bddxp9su>

69 'Privacy, the Duchess of York and the Public Interest', *Inform Blog*, 25 May 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/335wjs3s>

70 'Prince Andy & The Paedo', *NOTW*, 20 February 2011:7

71 'News of the World publishes a first-class royal scoop', *The Guardian*, 20 February 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/s96dkhn8>

72 'Prince Andrew and the Epstein scandal: the Newsnight interview', *BBC Two*, 16 November 2019

child-sex pervert... even if he is a billionaire?” Strangely, the *NOTW*’s editor, Colin Myler, failed to put the picture – later to achieve iconic status – on the front page, preferring two TV-related stories of little consequence. That wasn’t the only oddity, however, because it was questionable whether Mahmood deserved his solo byline once the story behind the picture’s provenance emerged.⁷³ There is little doubt that it was Mahmood – in New York in December 2010 on another assignment – who received the original tip that Prince Andrew was in the city on an unofficial visit.

He alerted the *NOTW*’s New York stringer, and former staff reporter, Annette Witheridge, who had no clue where the prince might be. She went on to do the hard work. First, she called the British consul general’s residence, where Andrew had previously stayed, but not this time. Then, recalling that the prince had once been photographed with Ghislaine Maxwell at a Madison Avenue restaurant, she wondered if he was staying with her. So, on a freezing cold night on 3 December 2010, Witheridge and a New York-based British photographer, Jae Donnelly, staked out Maxwell’s New York town house, which had been purchased for her by her good friend, Epstein. They drew a blank. Next morning, they switched their stake-out to Epstein’s Manhattan town house, and a further day later their luck finally changed. A group of men came out of the house and Witheridge was close enough to hear British accents, guessing they were royal protection officers. She phoned Mahmood who arrived with photographer Conrad Brown.

But it was Witheridge and Donnelly who took the initiative when Epstein and Prince Andrew emerged to take their fateful walk in Central Park. She took the wheel of Donnelly’s car to chase the pair but got stuck in traffic, so Donnelly jumped out. He ran into the park and climbed up a rock, the perfect vantage point to take a picture of the men as they walked below. A job well done. Three mysteries remain, however. Why wasn’t Witheridge, who had played such a major part in obtaining the story, given a byline with Mahmood? Why did the *NOTW* wait until 20 February 2011 to publish an exclusive picture taken on 5 December 2010? And why was it not placed on the front page?

73 What follows is culled from three sources: ‘How the only known photo of Prince Andrew and the pedophile happened’, *Vanity Fair*, 16 December 2021 <https://tinyurl.com/2v3ejjea>; ‘Jeffrey Epstein wanted park pic which brought down Andrew to repair reputation’, *Daily Mirror*, 28 September 2022 <https://tinyurl.com/2h2xav4u>; ‘Andrew: The Problem Prince’, *Channel 4*, originally screened 1 May 2023

Chapter 13

Sporting stings and a cricketing mystery

“I was sacked because of the Fake Sheikh; 90 per cent of what he said about me was lies.”

— Sven-Göran Eriksson

A mong Mahmood’s victims were several sports stars. Like celebrities, they were guaranteed to provide big *News of the World* headlines and the likelihood of generating coverage across the rest of the media. In most cases, he employed his familiar routine. Grandiose promises were made. Those who took the bait were either coaxed into committing a crime or encouraged to be indiscreet. As a consequence, their livelihoods were wrecked and they were held up to ridicule. Some were prosecuted and went to jail. One problem for modern professional sports stars was their reliance on agents, managers, PRs and lawyers to organise their lives. Often, these supposedly wise advisers proved to be even more gullible than their clients, failing to protect the people who paid them their fat fees. Their judgement was often impaired by their own greed.

One of Mahmood’s highest profile casualties was the England football manager, Sven-Göran Eriksson. Five months before the 2006 World Cup, Mahmood’s story claiming the manager was guilty of “dirty deals” and preparing to “dump England” was accorded seven pages.¹ Eriksson had thought he was speaking privately to a wealthy Arab businessman (Mahmood) interested in opening a sports academy. The *NOTW* dressed up their secretly recorded conversation, aboard a yacht in Dubai, as if Eriksson was preparing to “betray” England. Experienced football correspondents, such as the *Sunday Telegraph*’s Patrick Barclay, argued that his statement about seeking a future job in club management and his views on members of the England team were “hardly explosive”.² But the Football Association

1 ‘Sven’s dirty deals: Shock Sheikh investigation’, *NOTW*, 15 January 2006

2 ‘Germans dance to Klinsmann tune’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 2 July 2006

thought otherwise by announcing that Eriksson would leave his job after the World Cup. Despite denials at the time, the *NOTW* allegations were the major factor in the FA's decision to dispense with Eriksson's services, as he confirmed years later.³ In 2016, in the wake of Mahmood's conviction, Eriksson was reported to be suing Mahmood for having cost him his job, saying: "That man was a disaster for my professional life. England was the biggest job of my life, and he took it away from me... I was sacked because of the Fake Sheikh; 90 per cent of what he said about me was lies".⁴ He remained aggrieved until his death in August 2024.⁵

Eight years before the Eriksson story, Mahmood's biggest sporting coup, which earned him his first reporter-of-the-year award, involved the chairman and deputy chairman of Newcastle United football club, Freddy Shepherd and Douglas Hall.⁶ Mahmood was so proud of the story he devoted ten pages of his memoir to detail how he caught them out.⁷ In the book, he said the impetus for the sting was a tip-off from a Spanish-based freelance, Nigel Bowden, whose nickname, "Slippery of the Costas", he did not think it wise to mention.⁸ Instead, in the paper, he referred to being "tipped off six weeks ago by Tynesiders shocked by Hall's sessions with Marbella prostitutes". Mahmood played a sheikh eager to develop a football team and assembled a large team in Marbella, including Conrad Brown, Akbar Ali Malik, photographer Steve Burton, and John Miller, the bounty hunter who acted as his minder.⁹ Shepherd and Hall drank liberally, later claiming, without any evidence, that their drinks were spiked.

Blissfully unaware they were being recorded, they made a series of unguarded statements, mocking their club's fans, referring to Geordie women as dogs, and ridiculing the team's star player, Alan Shearer. In the aftermath, both were obliged to resign, but they were major shareholders and returned to the board ten months' later, prompting resignations from three directors and the club's stockbrokers.¹⁰ Hall exiled himself to Gibraltar, complaining three years later on a brief return to Newcastle: "I've hidden in the background because I got more than I could stand from the

3 'Eriksson still bitter about England sacking', *Sunday Times*, 13 October 2019 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/43abt88v>

4 'Sven-Goran Eriksson set to take legal action against 'Fake Sheikh' Mazher Mahmood', *Sky Sports News*, 6 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/43852k8w>

5 'Eriksson still bitter..', op cit; 'Sven-Göran Eriksson obituary', *The Guardian*, 28 August 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/yacw9dnr>

6 'Vice girls shame of top soccer bosses', *NOTW*, 15 March 1998

7 *Confessions*, pp18-27

8 Ian Hepburn, *Press Gazette*, 17 February 2005 <https://tinyurl.com/mr36d2dw>

9 'Rogues set up shamed soccer duo', *Daily Mirror*, 25 March 1998

10 'Disgraced pair make comeback', *The Guardian*, 10 December 1998 <https://tinyurl.com/4hjyfm6>

newspapers”.¹¹ He and Shepherd sold Newcastle United many years later, making a reputed £146m.¹² At Shepherd’s death in 2017, Shearer spoke of him as “my great friend”.¹³

There was little public sympathy for Shepherd and Hall. Although they hadn’t committed a criminal offence, the *NOTW* viewed their hypocrisy as sufficient justification to publish. Less justifiable were Mahmood’s allegations of adultery against two football stars, Ian Wright and John Barnes, which were inexplicably given front page slots.¹⁴ But Mahmood was much praised by footballers for an investigation in which he was able to exonerate three Leicester City players accused of rape in Spain in March 2004.¹⁵ Two months later, Mahmood exposed the men’s accusers, to use the *NOTW*’s description, “as a bunch of lying hookers”.¹⁶ Within a couple of weeks, the players were formally cleared of all charges, and the *NOTW* ran a leading article praising their reporter along with a statement from one of the trio thanking the paper.¹⁷

Mahmood’s commendable work on behalf of the Leicester footballers was something of a one-off. I have dealt in detail elsewhere with his stings on snooker player John Higgins and jockey Kieren Fallon (chapter 5). Another of his sad victims was Joe Calzaghe, a boxer with the distinction of being the longest reigning super middleweight world champion in boxing history before his retirement from the ring in 2008. Named as BBC sports personality of the year in 2007, he went on to work for the charity Help for Heroes and also took part in *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2009. The following year, Mahmood enticed Calzaghe into his net by offering him a lucrative business opportunity.¹⁸ In one of their drink-fuelled meetings, Calzaghe talked about using cocaine. When confronted with his taped “confession”, he issued an apology, gleefully carried by the *NOTW* in its hyped-up “exclusive”.¹⁹ It prompted *The Guardian*’s boxing correspondent, Kevin Mitchell, to castigate the “absurd... self-righteousness” of the *NOTW*’s

11 Interview, *Sunday Times*, 18 March 2001

12 ‘Former owners Shepherd and Hall got £146m from Newcastle’, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2009 <https://tinyurl.com/yrrdts4c>

13 *BBC news*, <https://tinyurl.com/3mrz3mze>

14 ‘Soccer star Wright cheats with burger bar beauty’, *NOTW*, 12 January 1997; ‘Barnes plays it flirty away from home: He charms lovelies in Spain’, *NOTW*, 2 June 1996; ‘Barnes plays footsie with girl from the FT’, *NOTW*, 16 February, 1997

15 ‘Three footballers on rape charge’, *The Guardian*, 6 March 2004 <https://tinyurl.com/539ddw24>

16 ‘Soccer star “rape victims” are secret £700 hookers: Truth behind stories that shocked Britain’, *NOTW*, 9 May 2004

17 ‘Footballers cleared of sex charges in Spain’, *Press Association*, 21 May 2004 <https://tinyurl.com/3bzv6sjc>; ‘Mazher wins again’, *NOTW*, 23 May 2004; ‘Dickov: Thanks so much’, *NOTW*, 23 May 2004

18 ‘Calzaghe cocaine shame: Strictly star admits secret drug sessions’, *NOTW*, 28 March 2010

19 ‘I’m sorry.. I’ve let everyone down’, *NOTW*, 28 March 2010

“stingmeister” for “tricking Calzaghe into revealing something a little bit less than shocking”.²⁰ He wrote: “This was no great public service. All the paper has done is embarrass a proud fighter” who “needs a helping hand (if he wants it), not a kick in the guts”. There was sympathy also from *The Times*’s columnist, Matthew Syed, who noted that many retired athletes sought “a new kind of high to compensate for the absence of the elation of sporting victory”.²¹

All of Mahmood’s sports stories pale, however, beside what he, and many journalists, sporting and otherwise, regard as his greatest scoop: the revelation that members of Pakistan’s cricket team had agreed to stage certain incidents during a Test match to assist gamblers, a phenomenon known as spot-fixing. Tom Crone, News International’s legal manager, was full of praise. “In my 25 years working here”, he is reported to have told the *NOTW* editor, Colin Myler, “I think this is the best investigative story I’ve ever seen. Something is going to happen in the middle of a Test match and we can report that we already knew it was going to happen”.²² As a knowledgeable cricket fan who regularly attended Test matches Crone instantly grasped the story’s significance.

Mahmood’s revelation that three Pakistani players had taken part in a spot-fixing conspiracy during a Test match with England at Lord’s in 2010 stands out as the Fake Sheikh story that received the highest praise and the least criticism.²³ I also joined the appreciative chorus, accepting that the methods he employed to expose the conspiracy, including the use of subterfuge, were justified in that specific instance.²⁴ The story earned Mahmood two British Press awards – reporter of the year and scoop of the year – plus a Sports Journalists’ Association award. An entire book, by the *Sunday Times*’s then sports editor, Nick Greenslade (no relation), was devoted to what he called “cricket’s greatest scandal”.²⁵ It appeared to illustrate a point I made on several occasions about Mazher’s journalistic skills. If used properly in the service of the public they were a powerful weapon to expose iniquity. However, Greenslade’s account runs counter in

20 ‘Tabloid criticism of Joe Calzaghe is self-righteous nonsense’, *The Guardian*, 29 March 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/42tm25pp>

21 ‘Calzaghe floored by pernicious combination’, *The Times*, 31 March 2010 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/c49vbmsh>

22 Nick Greenslade, ‘How the News of the World exposed cricket’s greatest scandal’, *Press Gazette*, 28 August 2020 <https://tinyurl.com/mss4pbxa>

23 ‘Caught! Match-fixer pockets £150k as he rigs the England Test at Lord’s’, *NOTW*, 29 August 2010

24 ‘Why the News of the World’s Pakistan story was justified’, *The Guardian*, 6 September 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/59muydfv>

25 Nick Greenslade, *Thin White Line*, op cit

some key aspects to inquiries by another journalist, Ed Hawkins.²⁶

Before I deal with the details of Mahmood's story, it should be seen in the context of Mahmood's previous claims about the rigging of sports events. In April 2000, he interviewed Salim Malik, a former captain of the Pakistan team who was awaiting the outcome of a judicial inquiry into match-fixing. Mahmood met Malik at a London restaurant and pretended to be a businessman seeking to make money by betting on cricket matches. In a video recording of their conversation, Malik was heard agreeing to rig a forthcoming Pakistan-England Test match in company with another player. Mahmood's story was published days before Malik was handed a life-time ban.²⁷ In July 2003, Mahmood accused footballer-turned-TV-personality John Fashanu of taking a £5,000 bribe to fix football matches.²⁸ Fashanu responded by claiming that he realised he was being set up and took the cash straight to the police.²⁹ The *NOTW* hit back the following week with further claims, and also contested Fashanu's claim to have handed the money to the police.³⁰ But nothing came of the allegations and Fashanu's television career continued.

Now for the cricket spot-fixing story.³¹ The saga is supposed to have begun in January 2010 when Mahmood was told by a Pakistani cricket contact that Mazhar Majeed – an English-based agent representing a number of players in the Pakistan squad – was acting on behalf of an Indian gambling syndicate in order to fix matches, or incidents within matches. But Mahmood didn't feel able to follow up the tip until, seven months' later, "a secret source" emailed him a cache of "incriminating" messages to and from Majeed's mobile phone. This material was compelling evidence of Majeed's involvement in match-fixing. Mahmood, posing as a wealthy Anglo-Indian businessman named Mohsin Khan and claiming to represent a private equity firm with links to a consortium in Singapore, contacted Majeed on the spurious grounds that the consortium wished to set up a T20 tournament in the Middle East. Majeed was, like Mahmood, the son of

26 Ed Hawkins, *Bookie gambler fixer spy: A journey to the corrupt heart of cricket's underworld* (Bloomsbury, 2012); 'The sting: Truth behind the amazing story that exposed cricket's dirty secrets', *Daily Mail*, 12 November 2012.

27 'Caught at last.. the man fixing test matches: For first time real evidence of corruption in cricket is uncovered by News of the World', *NOTW*, 21 May 2000; 'Malik guilty of match-fixing', *BBC News*, 24 May 2000 <https://tinyurl.com/32779d9m>; 'Banned! Cricket match-fixer that we exposed barred for life', *NOTW*, 28 May 2000; 'Onus on Iqbal to clear his name', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 May 2001

28 'Fash - I fix football matches', *NOTW*, 27 July 2003

29 'I went straight to the police over "soccer bribes", says Fashanu', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 July 2003; 'FA waits on Fashanu "sting"', *The Times*, 28 July 2003

30 'Fash lured me into match fixing plot', *NOTW*, 3 August 2003; 'Where's the cash, Fash?', *NOTW*, 14 September 2003

31 Unless stated otherwise (as in the case of Ed Hawkins), I have followed Nick Greenslade's narrative

Pakistani immigrants. At their first meeting, at the Hilton hotel in London's Park Lane, he assured himself that "Khan" was the kind of wealthy man who would be a willing party to a betting scam. So he told him he could induce three of the players he represented to indulge in certain events during a match.

Majeed named them as Salman Butt, the captain, and two fast bowlers, Mohammad Amir and Mohammad Asif. He suggested that Amir and Asif would, at three prescribed points, bowl no-balls. Butt, by deciding who bowled and when, was therefore essential to the plot. At a second meeting, Majeed said "Khan" would need to pay £150,000 in order for him, and the players, to carry out the plan. Mahmood convinced his editor, Myler, and the in-house lawyer, Crone, that he believed Majeed.

Mahmood was duly given a large bag containing bundles of £50 notes to hand over to Majeed. To ensure the success of the sting, Mahmood was aware he had to obtain three pieces of evidence. Two were, by Mahmood's standards, easily achieved. Majeed was covertly tape-recorded outlining his scheme, and he was covertly videoed counting out the money in a room at the Copthorne Tara hotel in Kensington. The third part was, of course, the most crucial of all: the cricketers must be seen to carry out Majeed's orders. This did not require subterfuge because the match was broadcast by Sky TV, and the no-balls, which occurred as predicted, were shown on screen.

Myler decided to alert Scotland Yard. The warm response to his call by the commissioner, Paul Stephenson, illustrated the closeness of the *NOTW*'s links to the Metropolitan Police. He sent an assistant commissioner, Cressida Dick, and two other senior officers to the newspaper's office to assess the material. After viewing it, Dick told Myler and Crone that officers would act at the conclusion of that day's play, and asked Mahmood to help ensure Majeed was at his Croydon home when they arrived. Arrests duly followed. Majeed, Butt, Asif and Amir were charged with conspiring to cheat at gambling and conspiring to accept corrupt payments. Months later, the cricketers were banned from playing by the International Cricket Council.³² All four men were then convicted and sentenced to terms in jail.³³ Mahmood, who gave his evidence from behind a screen while undergoing two days of fierce cross-examination, had pulled off what Nick Greenslade called "a landmark moment" for both cricket and for journalism.³⁴

Given Mahmood's track record, it was unsurprising that there was a

32 'ICC bans Salman Butt, Mohammad Asif & Mohammad Amir', *BBC News*, 5 February 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/3psydkch>

33 'Salman Butt and Pakistan bowlers jailed for no-ball plot', *BBC News*, 3 November 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/53pnrn7y>

34 'How the News of the World exposed cricket's greatest scandal', *op cit*

measure of scepticism about his great exclusive. Would the crime have occurred without his provocation? I did not think so at the time and nothing subsequently came to light to change my mind. Majeed was a willing instigator and he knew he could manipulate the three players, mainly because they were poorly paid compared to cricketers from other nations. Then there was the matter of Majeed's emails sent to Mahmood by his unidentified source. Could they have been obtained by hacking? Mahmood certainly denied it.³⁵ Well he would, wouldn't he?

Compelling testimony emerged in 2019 which offered a much more plausible reason for the emails entering the public domain. In his autobiography, Shahid Afridi, a former Pakistan captain, revealed how one of Majeed's sons "dropped his father's mobile phone in the water" on a Sri Lankan beach in June 2010.³⁶ On his return to England, Majeed took the phone to a shop to have it repaired. By chance, that shop owner happened to be a friend of a friend of Afridi's and, having discovered the series of email messages, told his friend who, in turn, told Afridi's friend. Once this was reported to Afridi, he showed the messages to Waqar Younis, then the Pakistan team's head coach. "Unfortunately", wrote Afridi, "he didn't escalate the matter and take it upstairs. Both Waqar and I thought it was something that would go away, something that wasn't as bad as it looked, just a dodgy conversation between players and Majeed".³⁷ According to Afridi the content of the emails "leaked out to others" via text messages and he speculated that this was "probably the same period when the *News of the World* executed their sting operation".

This theory was supported by journalist Ed Hawkins, who spent two years investigating "cricket's underworld".³⁸ He reported that in early summer 2010 "a whistle-blower emailed the ACSU [the International Cricket Council's Anti-Corruption and Security Unit] with messages downloaded from Majeed's Blackberry. The ACSU claim they did not have the manpower to react. The whistle-blower instead went to the *News of the World*".

For Hawkins, however, the route by which Mahmood obtained those emails was irrelevant because he argued that the entire affair was an exercise in make-believe. He scorned Mahmood's story, calling it "the fix that wasn't".³⁹ According to the Indian bookmakers he interviewed it was "not possible to bet on the timing of a no-ball". There was no market for such bets because the instant anyone laid big money on such an incident the

35 'Mazher Mahmood denies that phone hacking secured spot-fixing story', *The Guardian*, 12 October 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/2jukvnsr>

36 *Game Changer* (Harper Sport India, 2019); Greenslade, Nick:237ff

37 Shahid Afridi, *Game Changer* (Harper Sport, 2019), pp142-3

38 Hawkins (2012), op cit

39 Ibid, chapter 16

bookie would suspect the gambler had inside information. The bet would therefore have been rejected. "It was convenient for the media to ignore this point", wrote Hawkins, "it would have spoiled the story". Although he made his case well, it did not invalidate the fact that Mahmood had revealed the willingness of three Pakistan players to indulge in corrupt practices. As Hawkins conceded, the trio were guilty of "cheating the game, their teammates and the spectators". In that sense, praise was surely due to Mahmood.

Hawkins was on strong ground when critical of Mahmood's follow-up story in which a fourth Pakistan player, Yasir Hameed, was alleged to have said "almost every match" had been fixed.⁴⁰ Hameed swiftly issued a statement saying his comments, made to a man claiming to be a sponsor offering him a £50,000 airline deal (Mahmood, of course), were simply a repeat of allegations made against Butt, Amir and Asif.⁴¹ He also said that two days after speaking to "the sponsor", Mahmood called to offer him £25,000 to give a statement against the three players. After refusing to do so, he claimed he received a text threatening to expose him for drinking wine during the interview. For his trouble, Hameed was derided by Afridi as "a child".⁴²

Hameed then made a formal complaint to the Press Complaints Commission about Mahmood's story citing inaccuracy, breach of privacy, harassment and misrepresentation of his character.⁴³ It took several months for the PCC to consider how to respond, but when it did, its decision was a remarkable departure from its usual inaction. It ordered the paper to remove the Hameed story from its website along with the related video footage pending a formal ruling at the end of the spot-fixing trial. As an Indian newspaper remarked, Hameed had "scored a moral victory" over the *NOTW*.⁴⁴ Indeed, he had. The PCC had never previously struck a blow against Mahmood. Yet no British newspaper thought it important enough to record this unprecedented order by the commission, unlike the cable sports channel, ESPN, which quoted the PCC as saying the case was on hold until it could pursue the matter.⁴⁵ That never happened because, unknown to anyone at the time, the *NOTW* would be shut down the following month

40 "We've made massive amounts of money, yeah.. they pay me for the information", *NOTW*, 5 September 2010

41 'Pakistan betting scandal: Yasir Hameed denies making match-fixing claims', *The Guardian*, 5 September 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/ycx42ax2>

42 'Hameed faces ACU grilling over claims', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 2010; 'Pakistan captain claims Yasir Hameed has the "mind of a 15-year-old"', *The Guardian*, 5 September 2010 <https://tinyurl.com/4nxvxdfu>

43 'Yasir Hameed files complaint against NOTW', *ESPN*, 8 February 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/sfs7r9m4>

44 'UK Press Complaints Commission upholds Hameed's complaint', *Indian Express*, 15 June 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/mry4apdv>

45 'Hameed gets partial newspaper victory', *ESPN*, 14 June 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/mrmd8uzr>

and the PCC would itself be wound up. Therefore, a potentially fascinating case never reached a conclusion.

However, the spot-fixing story did mark one conclusion for Mahmood. It apparently brought to the end his five-year relationship with a woman known as Zee. After their initial online meeting, the pair had grown very close, often flying around the world together. The notoriously secretive Mahmood was relaxed enough in her company to pose alongside her in a series of photographs, which Zee showed off in a TV documentary.⁴⁶ She had been on hand for several of Mahmood's stings, even playing a key role in the *Slumdog Millionaire* story (see chapter 8). But she said she felt acutely sorry for young Mohammed Amir on the grounds that "kids do stupid things" and pleaded with Mahmood to leave him out of the story. "Maz refused", she said. "He didn't like to be questioned. He took me to the airport next day, and that was it... I never heard from him again".⁴⁷ Mahmood could not bear criticism, even from a close friend.

46 Isfryn & Lacey, op cit, episode 2

47 Ibid

Chapter 14

One lie too many leads to prison

“There are strong grounds for believing that Mr Mahmood told me lies when he gave evidence to me... there are also strong grounds for believing that the underlying purpose of these lies was to conceal the fact that he had been manipulating the evidence.”
— Judge Alistair McCreath

Mahmood announced his return to a red-top tabloid in 2013 with a triumphant tweet: “Back in business! Exposed today in the *Sun on Sunday*, ex-boxing champ Herbie Hide fixing fights and drugs”.¹ He was boasting about a sting on the boxer who had twice held a world heavyweight title before effectively retiring from the ring in 2008. Hide had fallen into one of Mahmood’s familiar traps by being coaxed into procuring drugs and agreeing to throw a fight for “businessmen interested in organising exhibition bouts in the Middle East”.² Hide was arrested on a charge of conspiring to supply cocaine and, after initially pleading not guilty, admitted the offence. He was sentenced to twenty-two months in prison.³ On appeal, partly due to “the sting element”, the term was cut to eighteen months.⁴

Mahmood’s transition from the *Sunday Times* to the *Sun on Sunday* was made without any formal announcement by News International. After

1 Tweet, 24 February 2013

2 ‘The Fixer. Champ Herbie peddles cocaine & offers to throw title fight’, *Sun on Sunday*, 24 February 2013 (hereafter SoS)

3 ‘Coke peddler Herbie jailed for 22 months’, *The Sun*, 30 November 2013; ‘Herbie Hide, former world heavyweight boxer, jailed for selling cocaine’, *Daily Telegraph*, 29 November 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/2yk3dp7h>

4 ‘Hide jail time cut’, *The Sun*, 5 February 2014; ‘Herbie Hide cocaine jail sentence cut on appeal’, *BBC News*, 4 February 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/472y9m6y>

“going straight” – well, straightish – for fourteen months at the broadsheet, he quietly joined *The Sun*’s Sunday title on 1 December 2012. It wasn’t quite a return to his old routine because the resources he had previously enjoyed at the *NOTW* were somewhat less generous. Even so, he was still provided with adequate funds to engage in subterfuge and entrapments. He was also given the freedom to work with some members of his old gang. The Fake Sheikh was back at his mucky business... up to a point. His contributions were noticeably slight when compared with his former body of work.

For those of us who had observed his career at the *NOTW*, there was a sense of déjà vu in charting his choice of *Sun on Sunday* subjects. There were the immigration scams.⁵ There were various low-level rackets, such as benefits, insurance and charity frauds.⁶ There was some nonsense about unnamed bankers, lawyers and a peer having sex and drug orgies.⁷ And, for good measure, a couple of Mr Fixits made appearances.⁸ He certainly had a public interest justification for his exposure of a Romanian man who offered to sell his 14-year-old stepdaughter to work in a British brothel.⁹ But it didn’t get a page one showing, unlike his two revelations about football match-fixing.¹⁰

Compared to his former days on the *NOTW*, the striking feature of his *Sun on Sunday* articles between February and June 2013 was the lack of celebrity targets. And, apart from the Herbie Hide story, none of his articles made the front page. Was there a feeling within the paper that he had lost his touch? By the spring of 2013, he may well have been feeling under pressure to land an agenda-setting story. His editor, Victoria Newton, had previously been deputy editor at the *NOTW*, and would have known about his prolific output there. Was she entirely relaxed about his work rate? Whether he felt under the gun or not, Mahmood was nothing if not a self-starter and would have been acutely aware of his failure to emulate his *NOTW* days. It appears that within days of arriving at his new paper, he had had a celebrity target in his sights.¹¹

5 ‘Big fat Greek weddings’, *SoS*, 3 March 2103; ‘Smashed: we help cops nab gang who smuggle two lorryloads here every week’, *SoS*, 1 December 2013

6 ‘Bogus Bulgar benefits racket exposed’, *SoS*, 17 March 2013; ‘Exposed: doc’s scams that cost us all’, *SoS*, 14 July 2013; ‘Scam that puts £44 on your car insurance’, *SoS*, 28 July 2013; ‘Scambag: Callous crook gets £500 a day conning Brits out of H4H cash’, *SoS*, 8 September 2013

7 ‘£5m-a-year VIP brothel’, *SoS*, 20 April 2014

8 ‘Big fat Greek weddings’, *SoS*, 3 March 2103; ‘Bieber’s fixer is dealer’, *SoS*, 12 May 2013

9 ‘Sold for sex at 14: Evil traffic in child slavery to UK’, *SoS*, 23 February 2014

10 ‘Ex-Prem stars in match fix probe’, *SoS*, 8 December 2013; ‘World Cup match fix sensation’, *SoS*, 1 June 2014

11 “In early December 2012, I received information from a confidential informant that Tulisa Contostavlos was regularly taking drugs and arranging the supply of drugs to her close friends” – Mahmood statement read to court, 21 September 2016

By the end of 2012, Tulisa Contostavlos, a young woman who had enjoyed a brief period of stardom, was trying to revive her flagging career. In the good times, in the late 2000s, she had enjoyed success as a member of the hip-hop band, N-Dubz. She followed that with hit singles as a solo artist and expanded her fan base as a judge on ITV's hit series, *The X Factor*. That lucrative gig didn't last long because a former boyfriend posted a sex video on the net and she was dropped from the show. At 24, she was eager to find her way back to her former level of fame and fortune. Perhaps it was a measure of her naivete that she decided her best hope of doing so was to relocate to Los Angeles, where she had no public profile.

Her vulnerability must have been obvious to Mahmood.¹² Desperate for work, she knew almost no-one in California. He guessed, rightly, that she would be relatively easy to fool. Far less easy to understand is why he, and his *Sun on Sunday* bosses, thought it worthwhile to devote huge resources to entrap a fading star.¹³ At best, it would be a one-off splash and a couple of inside spreads, with a possible follow-up, little more than a two-week "sensation", if that. Nor was it clear at the time what piqued Mahmood's interest in Tulisa. Why did he believe – wrongly, as it transpired – that she was a drug user and drug dealer?

More than a year later, in an article Mahmood drafted in the mistaken anticipation of Tulisa being convicted of a drugs offence, he claimed that his investigation "began after a tip from one of her inner circle who claimed that she was brazenly arranging drugs for her pals on nights out". As we have seen, such anonymous tips – always impossible to verify – were a common justification for Mahmood's investigations. It was odd he did not mention the tip-off in his original story. Odder still, of course, was the later discovery that she had no history of drug-taking let alone drug-dealing.

By his standards, Mahmood's sting on Tulisa was easily – if expensively – accomplished, and amounted to, as the prosecuting barrister later put it, "a carefully orchestrated deceit, masterfully done".¹⁴ The initial approach was made in March 2013, via Twitter, to Tulisa's friend and personal assistant, Gareth Varey, by a woman claiming to be a casting director working for 21st Century Fox, the film studio then owned by Murdoch's News Corporation.¹⁵ She said she could put Tulisa in touch with a wealthy Bollywood producer, Samir Khan (Mahmood), who was interested in helping her to start an acting career. To that end, he would like to meet her in Las Vegas and agreed

12 For a lengthy narrative of the entrapment, see 'The sting in the singer's tale', *Press Gang*, 29 August 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/ymkxscev>

13 John Kelsey-Fry QC, closing speech, Old Bailey, 29 September 2016

14 Sarah Forshaw QC, Old Bailey, 21 September 2016

15 Tulisa Contostavlos, *Judgement: The brutally honest memoir from N'Dubz star Tulisa*, p9

to fly her and her assistant, from LA. At Vegas airport, she was greeted with a stretch limousine and driven to a five-star hotel where she met “a very friendly, sweet and petite Indian woman” who called herself Nish.¹⁶ Later that evening, Nish introduced her to Khan and his “cousin”, Rahul.

They told her they thought she would be perfect for a role in a film starring Leonardo di Caprio, which they were co-producing. The play-acting continued when Nish apologised because she had to make a call to Cameron Diaz.¹⁷ The trap was set and Tulisa’s head was turned. Her belief that Khan was a wealthy producer was reinforced when he paid for her and the assistant to fly first class from Vegas to London ahead of a meal at one of the capital’s most expensive restaurants, Nobu, followed by a meeting at Mayfair’s Metropolitan Hotel on 10 May.

There, ‘Khan’ and ‘Nish’ plied Tulisa, Gareth and her friend, Michelle McKenna, with drinks. Although they hinted that Tulisa was perfect for the £3 million role, they also suggested a more established actress, such as Keira Knightley, might be in the running.¹⁸ Could Tulisa provide proof she was a good enough actor to play the part of a “bad girl” or “ghetto girl”? According to Tulisa, in order to enhance her chances of being chosen, she played up the bad girl image: “I don’t even remember half the shit I came out with, but it kept coming, like verbal vomit”.¹⁹ She boasted about having smoked weed as a teenager, and that a former boyfriend, Adam, sold cocaine. This was just what Mahmood and his team wanted to hear, prompting them to ask if she could get them the drug. “Half my phone book sells it”, she was reported by Mahmood as saying. “Of course I can get it for you”.²⁰

Believing her reference to drugs would enhance her street-smart persona, she called Adam and asked him if he could provide “white sweets”, a euphemism for cocaine. Adam refused to help. Gradually, with continual offers of more drink, Tulisa came to believe she was being lured into having sex with the producers in order to get the part.²¹ At one point, Mahmood was recorded saying on his phone to an associate: “They are getting totally pissed and I am just putting on the masquerade of joining in with them”.²² By the time the meeting concluded, Tulisa, Gareth and Michelle, befuddled by drink, accepted the offer of a lift home from Mahmood’s driver, Alan Smith.

16 Ibid

17 Nick Greenslade, *op cit*, p217

18 *Panorama*, November 2014, showed a video clip of that conversation; Contostavlos, *op cit*, p15

19 Ibid:18-19

20 ‘Half the guys I know deal drugs... of course I can get it for you’, *SoS*, 2 June 2013

21 Contostavlos, *op cit*, p23

22 Sarah Forshaw QC, closing speech, Old Bailey, 29 September 2016

Mahmood, aware that Tulisa's boasting was all on tape, must have been delighted. Confident she was on his hook, he waited for some ten days before landing his prey. He contacted her through Gareth to request that she fix him up with "white sweets" for "a lads' night out" in London. During a subsequent phone conversation, Tulisa told Mahmood about a friend who could "sort it out immediately". She then texted him the phone number of Michael Coombs. As a result, Mahmood agreed to pay £800 of *NOTW* money for half an ounce (14g) of cocaine, which Coombs delivered to him in the Belgravia suite of the Dorchester Hotel.

Ten days later, the *Sun on Sunday* ran a page one "world exclusive" headlined "Tulisa's Cocaine Deal Shame". It was followed by four pages inside, with headlines such as "Dark side of X-Factor Tulisa" and "Star's vile boast about her life selling drugs".²³ The following day, *The Sun* ran another splash, "Drug shame exclusive: We will arrest Tulisa, say cops". The prediction came to pass. Within days, Tulisa and Coombs were arrested and, six months after that, they were charged; her with "being concerned in the supply of class A drugs", and him with supplying them. It should be stressed that no evidence was produced of Tulisa being a drug-dealer in the accepted sense of that description.

The Guardian's columnist, Marina Hyde, lampooned Mahmood's "investigation", belittling the fact that "so many man hours" were dedicated to such an "absolutely essential public-service task" and deriding the police for "lavishing so much manpower on following up News International stories about comparatively minuscule offences".²⁴ I wrote of such stories being "the journalistic equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel", arguing that Mahmood could have chosen to entrap "any pop star, former pop star, not to mention thousands of non-pop stars... in similar fashion".²⁵ But the most surprising critique of the "hoax" came from the *Sun on Sunday's* rival, the *Sunday People*, which, in a rare dog-eat-dog intervention, clearly sympathised with Tulisa for being the victim of Mahmood's sting.²⁶

Ahead of Tulisa's trial, her solicitor, Ben Rose, issued a statement saying that the evidence against his client had been "manufactured by the *Sunday Sun* [sic] and Mazher Mahmood". His most telling point was that the case was "not simply about drug supply. It is about the limits which we set on the

23 SoS, 2 June 2013:1,2,3,4,5

24 'Tulisa's cocaine arrest: the greatest newspaper investigation ever', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/heerhy8c>

25 'Tulisa sting lacks any journalistic merit', *The Guardian*, 7 June 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/nhb8ue5j>

26 'Tulisa £8m Bollywood deal sting,' *Sunday People*, 9 June 2013:1,4,5

conduct of journalists”.²⁷ This concern about journalistic conduct proved to be prescient. I was asked by one of Rose’s colleagues to give evidence on Tulisa’s behalf about my experience of Mahmood’s *Sunday Times* duplicity and his embarrassing recall by the Leveson inquiry. I agreed to do so, but the judge, taking his lead from judges in several previous cases, refused to allow the jury to know about Mahmood’s chequered history.²⁸ More hopefully, I put the solicitors in touch with Florim Gashi. They were delighted by his statement, given by video link, calling him “a stunningly good witness – really remarkable”.²⁹ But, once again, the judge ruled that none of the “bad character evidence concerning Mahmood was relevant”.³⁰ He was determined to deal only with the specifics of the story before him.

The beginning of Tulisa’s trial, at London’s Southwark crown court on 14 July 2014, looked ominous, with Coombs pleading guilty to his charge. The prosecution, while conceding that it was “a *Sun* newspaper sting”, reminded jurors that Tulisa’s drugs arrangement was “real”.³¹ Mahmood’s evidence was, of course, crucial. He was, as usual, allowed to shield his face from the court, and underwent a “testy cross-examination”.³² He denied trying to entice Tulisa into a drugs deal and “vehemently rejected” claims that he had spiked her drinks in order to make her more amenable to offering him drugs. He did agree that the way he gained access to Tulisa had involved “some necessary subterfuge and dishonesty”, but did not think this amounted to manipulation. He said, as he said many times before: “You can’t manipulate someone into supplying cocaine”.

The key questioning, however, came at the end of Mahmood’s cross-examination by Tulisa’s counsel, Jeremy Dein QC, the barrister he had faced in 2004 in the red mercury trial, during which he accused Mahmood of being “dangerously deceitful, ruthless, exploitative and corrupt” (see chapter 8). This time, Dein would not need to rely on rhetoric. He had an ace up his sleeve. His initial question must have appeared to the jury, and to the assembled press, as something of a diversion. He asked Mahmood whether he had spoken to Alan Smith, his long-time aide and driver, about Smith’s police statement. It related to what had been said in the car when he was driving Tulisa home, along with her assistant and a friend, after the

27 ‘Tulisa Contostavlos drugs court latest: singer pleads not guilty to supply of Class As’, *The Independent*, 19 December 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/4h4ddv4v>

28 ‘At last Mazher Mahmood is brought to book for his subterfuge’, *The Guardian*, 21 July 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/4ftskmec>

29 Email, Jane Hickman to RG, 27 June 2014

30 Email, Jane Hickman to RG, 16 July 2014

31 ‘X Factor star set up cocaine deal’, *The Times*, 17 July 2014; ‘Former X Factor judge helped to supply cocaine, court told’, *The Guardian*, 16 July 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/5n7hjs4j>

32 ‘Sun reporter denies entrapping former N-Dubz singer Tulisa into drug deal’, *The Guardian*, 17 July 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/3e9fwxux>

Metropolitan Hotel meeting. Mahmood's answer sealed his fate.

To grasp the reason, it is necessary to relate the back story.³³ After the sting, Mahmood had handed his so-called "dossier" to the police. Tulisa's lawyers noted there was no deposition from Smith. On a hunch, they wondered what he might have to say and so, some weeks before the trial, they insisted the police should take a statement from him. A detective duly interviewed Smith and, from the resulting notes, he drew up a statement. Smith told of an argument in the car when Tulisa's friend spoke about wanting some drugs. "Tulisa said something about someone in her family having a drug problem", Smith stated. "She was really negative about it and you could tell she did not approve of him being after drugs". In other words, it lent credibility to Tulisa's claim that she had only been pretending to be a bad girl when first approached by Mahmood.³⁴

But the next day, Smith asked the police officer to amend his statement. Crucially, in his revised version, he said: "At one stage that there was talk of drugs. Tulisa's assistant said something about it, but I can't remember exactly who said what". Therefore, in Smith's second statement, he had removed the references to Tulisa's "negative" view of drugs and her disapproval of her friend for wishing to obtain them. Both statements were handed to Tulisa's legal team and a few days later, in a pre-trial hearing, Mahmood was questioned about them.

Jeremy Dein: Just coming back to one matter of detail, Miss Contostavlos was driven home by your driver Mr Smith. Is that correct?

Mazher Mahmood: Correct.

JD: I assume that Mr Smith did not have a recording device?

MM: No.

JD: But did you subsequently ask or find out, discuss with Mr Smith anything that was said in the car?

MM: No.

JD: Because I just want to see whether you are aware of this. Mr Smith made a statement to the police saying that in the car Miss Contostavlos was talking about drugs and saying that a member of her family had a drug problem and she disapproved of drugs. All I want to know from you is whether you discussed that with Mr Smith at any stage?

MM: No.

³³ 'The sting in the singer's tale', op cit

³⁴ Ibid

When the trial opened a few weeks later, Mahmood may have been confident he could ride out the discrepancies in Smith's two statements. The prosecution was not calling Smith so he would not be cross-examined on the issue. However, Tulisa's legal team remained suspicious of the circumstances surrounding Smith's change of mind and decided to ask the CPS to bring him to court as a potential witness. While Mahmood was giving evidence for the prosecution, Tulisa's lawyers interviewed Smith in the presence of a Scotland Yard detective. During that interview, Smith revealed he had emailed the first draft of his statement to Mahmood and that his decision to amend it followed subsequent conversations with the reporter.

The next day, armed with Smith's explosive new statement, Dein knew he had his man. When he confronted Mahmood with Smith's revelation Tulisa noticed the reporter's "face change". He "gulped uncomfortably", she recalled, looking as if "he'd seen a ghost".³⁵ In a feeble attempt to rescue himself, he said the conversations with Smith "must have slipped my mind". Nothing, however, could change the fact he had been caught out telling a lie under oath, and the inevitable result was the trial's collapse. The judge, Alistair McCreath was scathing:

"It should not be forgotten that Mr Mahmood is the sole progenitor of this case; the sole investigator; the sole prosecution witness; a man who has exercised his journalistic privilege to create a situation in which the identities of others involved in this investigation are unknown... someone who appears to have gone to considerable lengths to get Ms Contostavlos to agree to involve herself in criminal conduct, certainly to far greater lengths than would have been regarded as appropriate had he been a police investigator. None of that, taken on its own or taken together, was sufficient to allow me as a matter of law to halt this case. But there now must be added to the mix two very important factors.

"First, there are strong grounds for believing that Mr Mahmood told me lies when he gave evidence to me on the 27th of June. Second, there are also strong grounds for believing that the underlying purpose of these lies was to conceal the fact that he had been manipulating the evidence in this case by getting Mr Smith to change his account. Had I known of that when I gave my decision [not to allow the admission of bad character evidence] at the end of last month, then I have no doubt at all that my decision would have been very different indeed. And

35 Contostavlos, op cit, pp230-32

that is why I have now said, armed with the knowledge that I now have, that this case cannot go any further".³⁶

This was all very well, but only up to a point. McCreath, echoing judges in previous cases involving Mahmood, had decided at pre-trial hearings to prevent Tulisa's lawyers from calling witnesses who would have spoken about the reporter's history. This would have enabled the jury to perceive a pattern of questionable behaviour in previous "investigations" plus his lack of truthfulness in evidence to the Leveson inquiry just two years before (including his claim about the number of convictions, his claim not to have used private detectives, and his apology for mispresenting the reason for his departure in 1988 from the *Sunday Times*).

Anyway, justice was served at last. Tulisa was allowed to walk free, as was Coombs, despite his having pleaded guilty to supplying cocaine. Outside court, a vindicated Tulisa condemned the "horrific and disgusting entrapment" by Mahmood, saying "justice has been done". Mahmood had lied, she said, "to stop crucial evidence going before the jury". He had pressured Smith to change his statement to strengthen his case. In an interview days later, Tulisa said: "If I was a drug dealer or a bad person, I can understand that. But there's a difference between entrapping a criminal and setting up an innocent person".³⁷ Few of Mahmood's victims had put it better.

The Sun swiftly announced that Mahmood had been suspended (on full pay), pending an investigation. But a spokesman tried to put a gloss on matters by saying: "We are very disappointed with this outcome, but do believe the original investigation was conducted within the bounds of the law and the industry's code".³⁸

Soon afterwards, I spoke to a senior *Sun* executive who confided that the general view within the organisation was that Mahmood would escape prosecution for perjury, and even if he was charged it was extremely unlikely that he would be convicted. His certainty was surely bolstered by the fact that Mahmood was not immediately arrested by the police, unlike Tulisa, unlike Alford, unlike Hardwicke, unlike Herbie Hide, all of whom were taken into custody within days of their alleged sins being published in the *NOTW*.

However, the trial's collapse in such controversial circumstances had

36 'Mazher Mahmood: what the judge said in collapsing the Tulisa trial', *The Guardian*, 21 July 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/43mm7fs2>; 'A sting too far for the "fake sheikh"? Judge condemns reporter for changing his story', *The Guardian*, 22 July 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/mrbfx3ha>

37 'The Fake Sheikh and me: Tulisa talks', *The Guardian*, 2 August 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/4chbcdwt>

38 'Fake Sheikh may face perjury case after Tulisa sting unravels', *The Independent*, 22 July 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/yc78dmdz>

changed matters for the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). It announced that it was dropping a case against a doctor and a pharmacist who had been charged for illegally selling abortion pills following a Mahmood story for the *Sunday Times*.³⁹ There was “no longer a realistic prospect of conviction”, said the CPS statement, because it relied on evidence provided by Mahmood. Similarly, drugs charges were dropped against a so-called celebrity PR, Leon Anderson, and his nephew, both the subjects of a Mahmood exposure just two weeks before the Tulisa story.⁴⁰ Lawyers who acted for several of Mahmood’s previous victims talked of making representations to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. Despite my source’s confidence that Mahmood would not be charged, I became aware of a measure of concern among some of Murdoch’s senior staff. Memories of the phone-hacking implosion had concentrated minds at the company’s new London Bridge headquarters.

The Metropolitan Police launched a special inquiry to decide whether Mahmood should be prosecuted, Operation Silverhawk. It was anything but swift, and while we waited for the outcome, a BBC *Panorama* team acted. Reporter John Sweeney and producer Meirion Jones, having interviewed some of Mahmood’s targets, became convinced he had created crimes and fabricated evidence to carry out his stings. They also discovered the missed chances by the police to hold Mahmood to account. Eager to give his victims the chance to explain how they were entrapped and the life-changing consequences they suffered, Sweeney and Jones successfully argued their case within the BBC to screen the documentary. When a date for broadcast was announced, lawyers acting for News International and Mahmood, supposed advocates of press freedom, sought a high court injunction to prevent it being shown. As a result, it was pulled from the schedule.⁴¹ Mahmood issued a statement calling the programme, which he had not seen, “deeply irresponsible and not in the public interest or in the interests of justice”.⁴² His major concern was the revealing of his identity. During the subsequent high court hearing it was revealed that the Attorney General, after an approach by Mahmood’s legal team, had asked the BBC to delay the programme while police made up their mind whether to charge

39 ‘Doctor risks lives by selling abortion pills’, *Sunday Times*, 30 September 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/2rkbr6zf>; ‘CPS drop case because Mazher Mahmood was the main witness’, *The Guardian*, 15 September 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/y2t9r6hj>

40 ‘Stars’ Mr Fxit is drug dealer’, *Sun on Sunday*, 12 May 2013:6,7; ‘Third drugs prosecution collapses due to concerns about evidence from Sun’s Mazher Mahmood’, *Press Gazette*, 24 September 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/475sfy8r>

41 ‘*Panorama* exposé on Mazher Mahmood delayed for legal reasons’, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/2adcvhm9>

42 ‘BBC *Panorama* documentary deeply irresponsible, says Mazher Mahmood’, *The Guardian*, 11 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/4y8wzu9h>

Mahmood.⁴³ This was a remarkable, arguably unprecedented, intervention by the state's senior law officer. As the judge pointed out, it was irrelevant in terms of the injunction and he found in favour of the BBC.⁴⁴

The publicity generated by the delayed screening of *Panorama* probably helped to boost the size of its audience.⁴⁵ It was a fine piece of work, giving a platform to Alford, Emma Morgan, Tulisa, and John Bryan. There was also a compelling appearance by one of Mahmood's former colleagues, photographer Steve Grayson, who called Mahmood "Pinocchio on speed". A remorseful Grayson admitted his part in setting up people who he said had not merited exposure by the *NOTW*. A video clip of Mahmood and his team rehearsing the sting on Emma Morgan illustrated the elaborate planning. As for the man who provided her with cocaine, "Billy", *Panorama* included a statement from him read by an actor: "I'd like to apologise to Emma for my part in stitching her up. The only real criminal was Mazher Mahmood. He gave me the money to buy the cocaine". Another video clip, of the Alford set-up, showed Mahmood giggling at the prospect of ruining Alford's life. The actor, grim-faced, told Sweeney: "I've been through hell".

Few newspapers commented on the *Panorama*, which was dismissed by Mahmood as based on allegations "from two unreliable witnesses": Florim Gashi and Grayson.⁴⁶ He said Grayson had pursued a vendetta against him since his firing over the Beast of Bodmin affair. More months passed without any indication from Scotland Yard about its inquiries into Mahmood's part in the collapsed trial until, in June 2015, I discovered that the CPS was, at last, "studying" a file compiled by the Met police.⁴⁷ A month later, on the first anniversary of the trial's collapse, I complained about the CPS dragging its heels.⁴⁸

I was not alone. Paddy French was also concerned at the delay, noting that Mahmood seemed to be enjoying kid-glove treatment.⁴⁹ Given that Mahmood had survived so many courtroom reverses, I began to think he would escape justice yet again until the CPS announced, in late September, that both Mahmood and Smith had been charged with conspiracy to pervert

43 "Fake sheikh" fails to prevent *Panorama* exposure of his appearance', *The Guardian*, 7 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/432t3w3v>

44 'Mazher Mahmood loses injunction bid against *Panorama*', *BBC News*, 7 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/3aa9akwh>

45 'The fake sheikh exposed', *Panorama*, BBC One, 12 November 2014

46 'Fake Sheikh blames "Beast of Bodmin grudge" for BBC claims', *The Independent*, 11 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/4k5bd2hs>

47 'CPS reviewing police file on *Sun on Sunday*'s Mazher Mahmood', *The Guardian*, 15 June 2015 <https://tinyurl.com/ynkrrkbe>

48 'Why are we still waiting for the CPS decision on Mazher Mahmood?', *The Guardian*, 20 July 2015 <https://tinyurl.com/aejn3em>

49 'Number 10 silent on Fake Sheikh intervention', *Press Gang*, 22 December 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/2u7ywp4u>

the course of justice. Mahmood issued a defiant statement saying he would “vigorously” contest the charge.⁵⁰ The following month, I attended the first hearing at Westminster magistrates court, watching on the pavement outside as a hooded Mahmood, surrounded by bodyguards, turned up. How ironic. Mahmood had previously used bodyguards when giving evidence against his victims. Now, he was using them to protect himself as a defendant.

Once again, my News International source indicated that there was a strong belief within the company that Mahmood, still on full pay, would not be convicted. I admit, having seen Mahmood jump so many hurdles in the past, I shared his view. Almost a year later, Mahmood and Smith appeared for trial at the Old Bailey. For the first time, Mahmood was not offered the benefit of a screen in court although he chose to wear a hoodie when arriving at the hearing each day.

The opening statement by the prosecuting counsel, Sarah Forshaw QC, was straightforward enough. In effect, she picked up where Judge McCreath had left off by saying that Mahmood had conspired with Smith to tamper with evidence in order to “improve” the case against Tulisa by concealing the fact she disapproved of drugs. Forshaw said Mahmood had a “vested interest” in the singer being convicted, to protect his reputation as “the king of sting”. But Smith, by relating Tulisa’s true feelings about drugs in his first police statement, had proved to be Mahmood’s “Achilles heel”.⁵¹

The case presented by Forshaw, which included evidence from the police sergeant who took Smith’s statements, Andrew Nicklin, was overwhelming. It was unsurprising therefore that Mahmood and Smith decided not to give evidence on their own behalf, prompting Forshaw to comment: “The conspiracy to pervert the course of justice is now a conspiracy of silence. You may think if they were innocent men with nothing to hide, wouldn’t they be shouting it from the roof tops?”⁵² Instead, Mahmood relied on a statement he had given to detectives when interviewed in September 2014 at Charing Cross police station. He told them that his “operation against Tulisa Contostavlos was properly planned and lawfully undertaken... I had no need to invent, suppress or manipulate evidence”. He suggested “the court was looking for an excuse to drop the case” and complained that he had “no support from prosecution counsel”. He stretched credulity further by turning himself into a victim, arguing that after two days in the witness box at Tulisa’s trial, “I was thoroughly confused. I was doing my best to

50 'Fake Sheikh' charged with perverting justice', *The Times*, 30 September 2015

51 'Fake Sheikh had vested interest in Tulisa prosecution, court told', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/bdxxsfrw>; *The Times*, 22 September 2016

52 "'Fake Sheikh" will not give evidence at conspiracy trial', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/yshscee6>

answer the questions but was steamrolled into answers. It felt like all sides were trying to discredit me”.⁵³

Mahmood’s counsel, John Kelsey-Fry QC, did his best with a bad hand. It was understandable, he said, that Smith might have forgotten what Tulisa had said and, in such circumstances, natural that he would consult Mahmood. But, he said, Mahmood was aware that he should not discuss Smith’s evidence, which was why he advised him to go back to Sergeant Nicklin. It was entirely unsurprising that the jury didn’t buy that argument, swiftly finding him and Smith guilty as charged.⁵⁴ Sixteen days later, Kelsey-Fry, playing yet another poor hand, tried to paint a picture of Mahmood in pitiful terms. He was divorced and only able to see his 14-year-old son on a fortnightly basis. He was also “a very frightened man” whose career was over and aware that his lifetime’s work “will be for ever tarnished”.⁵⁵ Kelsey-Fry admired Mahmood, having once congratulated him on his performance in the witness box.⁵⁶ He told the judge that “whatever people may say of him today” his “career has provided some valued service”, but conceded that Mahmood “has brought a catastrophe upon himself”.

Kelsey-Fry pointed out that his client, having been responsible for sending people to prison, “is not expected to be the most welcome, nor the most popular, inmate”.⁵⁷ Judge Gerald Gordon also acknowledged two letters pleading for sympathy, one from the *Sun on Sunday*’s editor, Victoria Newton, and the other from the GP of Mahmood’s “elderly and infirm” mother. None of the mitigation appeared to persuade the judge to exercise leniency. He told Mahmood: “It was your idea. You were the intended beneficiary. The motive was to protect and enhance your reputation. You wanted another scalp and Tulisa Contostavlos’s conviction would have allowed that, and to achieve that, when you saw a problem, you were prepared for the court to be deceived”.⁵⁸ He sentenced Mahmood to a jail term of 15 months, and ordered him to pay £30,000 in costs. He was told he would serve half his sentence before being released on licence. As for Smith, his “misguided loyalty” to Mahmood earned him a 12-month suspended sentence.

53 ‘Fake Sheikh says police questions confused him’, *The Guardian*, 24 September 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/bcrjdhrm>

54 “‘Fake Sheikh” Mazher Mahmood guilty of tampering with Tulisa trial evidence’, *The Guardian*, 5 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/yjajspte>

55 ‘Fake Sheikh jailed for 15 months as victims could sue for £800m’, *The Times*, 22 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/uwmsfbpb>

56 Confessions, p102. Kelsey-Fry acted for the NOTW in the libel action brought by Alin Turcu in 2005 (chapter 7)

57 ‘Mazher Mahmood: “Fake Sheikh” jailed for 15 months’, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/fhhzwbd3>

58 Ibid

Murdoch's company sought to polish Mahmood's record. In announcing that his employment had been terminated, a News UK spokeswoman said: "Mazher has led scores of successful investigations during his 25-year career with the company. His work has led to the exposure of criminality and wrongdoing". Her final sentence did have the virtue of truthfulness: "It is a source of great regret that his time with the company should end in this manner".

As for the police, *The Guardian* reported that Scotland Yard had ignored previous warnings not to trust his work. It pointed to statements made in 2003 and 2005 by Mahmood's "former helper" (meaning Gashi) about the journalist "setting people up routinely".⁵⁹ A source, said to have "knowledge of the Met's internal workings", was quoted as saying the Met continued to make use of Mahmood's services after 2005.

In company with *The Times*, *The Independent* and the BBC, *The Guardian* ran articles speculating that the Criminal Cases Review Commission would likely declare at least six guilty verdicts suffered by Mahmood victims to be unsafe. There was also an expectation that more of his victims would launch appeals against their sentences or take legal action against News UK. With Murdoch's company continuing to pay out vast sums for its phone-hacking crimes, it was suggested that post-Mahmood litigation would result in a payout greater than £800 million.⁶⁰ None of these forecasts came to pass. At the time of writing, none of the victims' legal hopes have been satisfied.

59 'Met accused of ignoring warnings on "fake sheikh"', *The Guardian*, 6 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/wz8yyep9>

60 'Sentence for Mazher Mahmood closes one chapter, but the legal fallout rumbles on', *The Guardian*, 21 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/yc4rcrbs>

Chapter 15

Rogue editors at a rogue newspaper

“Mr Mahmood carries on with great style the long tradition of investigative journalism at the News of the World.”

— Rupert Murdoch

Initially imprisoned in one of Britain’s harshest prisons, Belmarsh, Mahmood was transferred within a couple of days to one of Britain’s softest: Ford open prison in west Sussex. Let’s leave him in his comfortable cell for a moment while we go back to reconsider history and context because, as is blindingly obvious, he did not do what he did without the committed support of his editors (aka enablers). And they did not do as they did without persistent pressure from their proprietor.

Rupert Murdoch knew few journalists by name at the *NOTW* below the senior ranks. Mahmood was an exception. At one point, after two articles about immigration,¹ a Labour peer from a similar Pakistani background to Mahmood, wrote to Murdoch to express his admiration for the reporter. Murdoch replied: “I was pleased to read your praise for the work of Mazher Mahmood, in particular of his recent articles on illegal immigration. Mr Mahmood carries on with great style the long tradition of investigative journalism at the *News of the World* and I can quite understand his high standing in Britain’s Asian community”.²

That statement was wrong on every count. The “long tradition” was based on a wilful misreading of the paper’s past. Mahmood’s “great style” was a grotesque exaggeration. His “high standing” within the Asian community was both unproven and a matter of dispute. After all, Mahmood perfidiously

1 ‘*News of the World* busts school for scroungers: 2,000 migrants taught how to cheat way to UK’, *NOTW*, 16 January 2000; ‘I could smuggle in man from moon: Cheeky boast of crook behind migrants racket’, *NOTW*, 6 February 2000

2 Letter from Rupert Murdoch to Baron Ahmed of Rotherham, 16 February 2000

preyed upon vulnerable people from his own background heedless of the consequences.

Murdoch's appreciation for his reporter had less to do with Mahmood's journalistic contribution than the belief that his stories sold newspapers. In essence, he viewed Mahmood as a key marketing tool at his British publishing profit centre. For Murdoch, newspapers were a business, a special business because they afforded him political power which he could use to further his business interests. He therefore took a close interest in what was published in his papers.

He was hardly alone in the pantheon of newspaper owners by interfering in editorial affairs. What made him unique, however, was a five-fold combination of attributes: an intimate knowledge of the process; an intermittent attention to detail; an intuitive belief that he understood the desires of a mass audience; a gambler's willingness to take risks; and, perhaps most important of all, a seemingly infallible instinct for detecting when his executives were not being entirely truthful. Within his organisation, there was no agreed linear chain of command. Executive titles were largely meaningless. Management structures were irrelevant. Corporate governance proved impossible to attain in a company where Murdoch exercised single-handed rule. His idiosyncratic *modus operandi* involved him taking counsel on the subject at hand from a range of people within his companies. But this apparent democracy was subverted by what his executives called "telephone terrorism". Aware that their jobs depended on his whim and nervous about what he knew from other sources, they were intimidated by his questions and always conscious of his temper.

Murdoch's pressure was relentless. When he called an editor to talk over a problem he or she couldn't be sure whether he had spoken previously to another executive, or executives plural, about the same matter. He was harsh on those who dissembled and it was no exaggeration to say editors lived in fear of his calls. A former editor who started off by admiring Murdoch and later disdained him, Andrew Neil of the *Sunday Times*, called him the Sun King who ruled "over great distances through authority, loyalty, example and fear".³ And nowhere was this more evident, argued Neil, than at *The Sun* and the *News of the World* because he was "far more brutal with his tabloid editors".⁴ Indeed he was. I witnessed the effect of these methods at first hand during five years as assistant editor at *The Sun*, which occasionally necessitated me dealing with his calls.⁵

3 Neil (1996):160

4 Ibid:175

5 I was assistant editor at *The Sun*, June 1981 to December 1986

It was not good enough for editors only to fulfil Murdoch's central requirement, a continual improvement in a paper's circulation, because he also concerned himself with content. And he ranged across every area. Are we running too much crime or too little? We don't have to have sex on every page, do we? Is it too sleazy? Was that really the best splash? How much did that interview cost? Why pay so much? How did the *Daily Mirror* get that exclusive? Where are our scoops? Why is our business coverage so slight? Are we doing enough with sports? Why are you letting that columnist recycle unreadable rubbish? Politics was always a sensitive subject. Have you spoken to the prime minister lately? Did you think it wise to go in so hard? Or, of course, its opposite: I see you let that bastard off the hook? Then there were questions about staffing. Is it time to promote X? Have you thought about hiring Y from the *Mail*? Most stomach-churning of all: do you think you're losing your touch?

Murdoch's silences were as frightening as his calls. If days passed without any contact, especially if a management executive happened to mention that he had been "speaking to KRM", paranoia took over.⁶ Why had he not called you? Did it indicate that Murdoch was upset with you? Did it mean that you were about to be replaced? While his calls caused fear and trembling, his failure to call provoked suspicion and intense anxiety. The criticism could be deflected. As most of his editors came to realise Murdoch loved gossip. If the titbit was juicy enough, or the story was told entertainingly, then it was possible to divert him from a bout of sullen aggression. Sometimes, he would ask how a particular story was obtained. And sometimes, his editors told him the truth. They tended to operate on a need-to-know basis, especially over costs. In trying to cope with budgetary constraints, a consistent but somewhat chaotic feature of life within his UK outfit, News International, they were always aware of Murdoch's ferocity should they spend what he regarded as over the odds. Consistent in his inconsistency, there were other occasions when he encouraged big-spending.

Money aside, he was intrigued by how certain stories, particularly political stories, were landed, although it's fair to say he was not overly interested in the mechanics of general story-getting. That's one half of the reason for accepting his word that he didn't know about phone-hacking. The other half was the reticence of his editors to tell him any more than was strictly necessary. If Murdoch did not specifically ask about a subject, they learned not to volunteer information. In spite of their fear, and arguably because of it, they kept as much to themselves as possible. It is therefore highly unlikely that *NOTW* editors and senior executives would have revealed that their staff were listening in to voicemails in order to obtain stories. However,

6 KRM: common acronym used by senior staff for Keith Rupert Murdoch

even if they did not mention using private investigators, he would have been relaxed about reporters paying for information, whether to detective agencies, bureaucrats, members of the public, or police officers. As he revealed when addressing *Sun* staff, he saw nothing wrong with “payments for news tips from cops” on the basis that it’s “been going on for a hundred years” and “was the culture of Fleet Street”.⁷

The salient point is that, even if he was unaware of the specifics of story-getting, it does not exonerate him. He set the stage. He was responsible for creating the climate which encouraged reckless and ethically dubious behaviour by his *NOTW* editors and reporters who were trying to fulfil his insistent demands. It is also reasonable to argue that he did not care to know exactly how they went about their work. He would not, for instance, have realised the sinister import of the editorial department’s payments to private investigators. Although Murdoch liked to see himself as a hands-on boss, and was pleased that the world saw him in a similar light, it was partly a myth. Call it personality propaganda or, quite simply, ego. It suited him to be cast as the omniscient chairman of a vast company. Hacking proved it was not so, and Murdoch was forced to admit his fallibility days after closing the *NOTW* by famously telling a committee of MPs: “This is the most humble day of my life”.⁸ While that statement of humility was something of a ruse – a public apology delivered by a man who seemed, falsely, to be suffering from senile dementia – it was a rare admission of personal failure.

No-one close to Murdoch put it more candidly than Irwin Stelzer, his adviser for forty years. In a carefully crafted criticism of his friend, he wrote: “Although never charged with direct responsibility for the hacking, or even with knowledge of it, Rupert arguably set the tone for the corporate culture that emphasised scoops as a competitive tool”.⁹ There was no ‘arguably’ about it. Scoops were the currency of Sunday tabloids and Murdoch, believing them to be circulation gold, showed scant interest in exactly how they were procured. His major role was to harass editors to ensure a steady supply of them in order to attract the largest possible audience in a declining market.

Beyond circulation, Murdoch paid relatively little attention as to how the *NOTW* performed, showing far less interest in its internal operation than he did at *The Sun* (and, for that matter *The Times* and *Sunday Times*). One caveat: he did intervene if he discovered its reporters were looking into the lives of actors in films or TV shows produced by his US-based Fox outlets. Then, depending on how he felt about the individual, he decided whether

7 Covert tape made March 2013 and broadcast by Channel 4, 3 July 2013

8 ‘Murdoch’s ‘most humble day’, *The Independent*, 19 July 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/4zdm8yyf>

9 Irwin Stelzer, *The Murdoch Method* (Atlantic Books, 2018), p144

or not to allow publication.

It was also the case that once hacking by *NOTW* staff was proven beyond doubt, Murdoch oversaw what he might have termed “damage limitation” and what should more properly be called a cover-up. His company’s executives deleted vast tranches of emails, issued statements that were nothing short of lies and hired lawyers to mount the strongest possible legal defences to claims by hundreds of innocent hacking victims. Nothing about his actions after the closure of the *NOTW* suggested humility and defeat. They amounted instead to defiance, cynicism and contempt for those who had suffered from his employees’ illicit news-gathering.

As I noted in chapter 4, before Mahmood joined the paper in 1991, Murdoch’s stewardship of the *NOTW* had been lamentable. It didn’t improve. In January 1994, he gave the editorship to 28-year-old Piers Morgan, an unashamed self-publicist without an ethical bone in his body.¹⁰ Some of the stories he ran led to accusations of unacceptable intrusions into privacy, such as an exclusive revelation about phone calls made by Princess Diana.¹¹ Another involved the woman then married to Princess Diana’s brother who was undergoing treatment at an addictive disorders clinic.¹² It was so obviously without merit that, following a complaint by Earl Spencer, the Press Complaints Commission issued a damning censure. Murdoch was then pressured by the PCC’s chairman to admonish Morgan in public. He obliged by saying of his editor: “The young man went over the top”.¹³ He added disingenuously: “This company will not tolerate its papers bringing into disrepute the best practices of popular journalism which we seek to follow”. Proof of his insincerity came with Morgan’s revelation that, in private, Murdoch apologised to him for the “necessary” public reprimand.¹⁴

Morgan was also responsible for running a story about an MP who, with the paper’s connivance, was inveigled into a threesome.¹⁵ Even the paper’s right-wing columnist, Woodrow Wyatt, protested that it was an unacceptable invasion of privacy and dared to write an article for *The Times* pointing out that the revelation was not in the public interest. “That anyone is entitled to privacy in their homes, in their cups or in their beds, is a concept wholly alien to the *News of the World*”.¹⁶ Murdoch was not prepared to let that criticism pass. Months later, Wyatt was informed that his weekly column would

10 ‘Dial M for Morgan’, *Press Gang*, 29 June 2015 <https://tinyurl.com/4w2v6fnm>

11 ‘Di’s cranky phone calls to married Oliver’, *NOTW*, 21 August 1994

12 ‘Di’s sister-in-law in booze and bulimia clinic’, 2 April *NOTW*, 1995

13 ‘Murdoch lashes editor shock’, *The Independent*, 11 May 1995 <https://tinyurl.com/33m7pr4h>

14 Morgan (2005), op cit, p82; Cf. ‘A pretty despicable man’, *Press Gang*, <https://tinyurl.com/544tmm2t>

15 ‘Tory MP, the tycoon and the Sunday school teacher’, *NOTW*, 9 April 1995

16 ‘Why Britain badly needs a privacy law’, *The Times*, 11 April 1995

become a monthly, prompting Wyatt to remark in his diary that Murdoch was “such a coward” because “he’ll never tell you anything unpleasant to your face”.¹⁷ Morgan departed around the same time to be *Daily Mirror* editor, where he was soon stoking more controversies to embarrass his new employer.

He was replaced by his deputy, Phil Hall, who proved to be a fan of Mahmood’s journalism, often acting as a passionate defender of his work. He described Mahmood as “the most diligent reporter we had”.¹⁸ He promoted him to be investigations editor and oversaw the string of wildly exaggerated claims about Mahmood’s conviction rate. Hall once refused to answer questions from a journalist about Mahmood, arguing that “Maz doesn’t like being written about”. In response, an incredulous *Daily Telegraph* writer remarked: “Gosh Phil, neither do his victims”.¹⁹

During Hall’s five-year term as editor, some of Mahmood’s most bitterly contested entrapments were published, including those on Emma Morgan, John Alford, Lord Hardwicke and Ryan Giggs’s brother. There were other controversies too, such as the payment to a woman who became pregnant with octuplets. The paper’s £1million offer depended on her having eight live births which was viewed as a callous incentive to continue with the pregnancy despite contrary medical advice.²⁰ Hall was also criticised for paying a witness in a trial involving Gary Glitter.²¹ He came under fire yet again for a Mahmood-style drugs sting on an England rugby captain, Lawrence Dallaglio, which was carried out by a young female reporter.²²

The rugby player, who was forced to resign from the team, complained that he was the victim of a honey trap. Hall did not deny recruiting women – known, inevitably, as “Hall’s Angels” – specifically to entrap men.²³ “The best cover on an investigative story can sometimes be a couple”, Hall explained. “You cannot send two blokes to an orgy”. *The Times* referred to Hall’s female recruits as “a new force in British journalism, an echelon of physically admirable female twenty-somethings” hired “explicitly to reinforce the paper’s established tradition of outing sexual peccadillos

17 Sarah Curtis, *The journals of Woodrow Wyatt: From Major to Blair* (Macmillan, 2000), p582

18 ‘A tabloid “Fake Sheikh”, bane of crooks and royalty, finds he’s now the story’, *New York Times*, 19 November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/2s3nmra6>

19 ‘The dirty digger’, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 June 2003 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/5yhsk2js>

20 ‘Pushing the limit’, *Washington Post*, 13 August 1996

21 ‘News of the World under investigation for £10,000 payment to witness’, *The Guardian*, 13 November 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/5n7aus3w>

22 ‘England rugby captain exposed as drug dealer’, *NOTW*, 19 May 1999. David Aaronovitch, ‘What is immoral? Cheap stories about celebrities taking drugs’, *The Independent*, 24 May 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/3h9yv7ep>

23 ‘Honeytrap: women who expose all’, *BBC News*, 24 August 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/2xakd8pa>

and celebrities' contraventions of the law".²⁴ Asked to justify the *NOTW*'s salacious exposés, he said the paper had been doing it for fifty years: "We're naughty and fun".²⁵ In the same interview, he was asked what proportion of his paper's stories he paid for. He replied: "100 per cent", making no distinction between paying a journalist, a tipster or the subject of a story.

When questions were raised about the relevance of the *NOTW*'s exposure of cocaine users in a society where drug-taking was so prevalent, Hall had a ready explanation. "Some people say we should not go after the users, only the dealers", he said, "but if you take away the market there is no place left for the dealers to operate. Taking cocaine is an illegal activity".²⁶ It is difficult to know whether he was being disingenuous or naïve when he added: "If a *News of the World* journalist took cocaine I would sack them. There is no way we can preach to people about drug-taking and then do it ourselves". According to a *NOTW* staffer, he should have looked closer to home!²⁷

Unsurprisingly, Hall was full of praise for Murdoch, saying: "Every time you were in trouble he was the first person on the phone being 100 per cent supportive all the time. As a company there's no red tape... You get straight to the top and you get a quick decision... You don't have to discuss it by committee".²⁸ This confirmation of Murdoch's editorial involvement illustrated his interest in stories but it did not prove that he was aware of the reporting methods used to obtain them.

Hall's greatest triumph may also have caused his downfall. Towards the end of 1999, the *NOTW* reported that Lord (Jeffrey) Archer, then the Conservative party candidate for mayor of London, had committed perjury during a libel trial.²⁹ He immediately withdrew from the mayoralty contest, was disowned by his party and was eventually charged with perverting the course of justice. He was sentenced to a four-year prison sentence after being convicted at the Old Bailey. The story won the 2000 scoop of the year, but Murdoch did not share his editor's delight. Archer, a best-selling author, was published by his company, HarperCollins. There were suggestions that he asked Hall not to run the story, although News International's executive chairman, Les Hinton, indicated that Murdoch was merely upset at Archer's plight.³⁰ Whether true or not, Hall was sacked in May 2000.³¹ He was dismayed

24 'Celebrity sinners brought down by "Hall 's Angels"', *The Times*, 24 May 1999

25 Naomi Marks, 'The editor who broke Archer', *The Independent*, 23 November 1999 <https://tinyurl.com/48aryeh9>

26 'Cocaine: a nice line in scandal', *The Times*, 21 May 1999

27 Johnson, op. cit, p93. Cf Nick Davies, *Hack Attack* (Chatto & Windus, 2014), p29

28 'Phil Hall: operating from the top of the PR tree', *The Independent*, 5 February 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/4xjzrbu2>

29 'Archer quits as *News of the World* exposes false alibi', *NOTW*, 21 November 1999

30 Hinton, op cit, p325

31 'News of the World editor quits', *BBC News*, 23 May 2000 <https://tinyurl.com/mr3ucwwm>

but later sought to put a good face on it by saying: “I was devastated for about a day”.³² In denying suggestions that the incident played a part in Murdoch’s decision to fire him, he said he had known for some time that Murdoch – no longer “100 per cent supportive” – was eager to replace him with his deputy, Rebekah Brooks (then known as Wade).

So, days ahead of her thirty-second birthday, she became *NOTW* editor. She had survived the Beast of Bodmin embarrassment and an uncomfortable period on *The Sun* as deputy editor to David Yelland, for whom she had little time. Eager to make her mark, she found a way to create a mighty political row following the murder of an eight-year-old girl, Sarah Payne. Her killer had several previous convictions and was on the sex offenders’ register, prompting calls for greater public knowledge of people on the register. Sarah’s mother, Sara, learned that a campaign in the USA after a child’s murder had resulted in Megan’s Law, which required authorities to provide information about registered sex offenders. She mentioned its existence during an interview with a *NOTW* reporter and “within twenty-four hours” she was visited by Brooks who proposed a campaign for a British equivalent, Sarah’s Law.³³ It was launched with the naming and shaming of Britain’s “worst convicted paedophiles”.³⁴

In Sara Payne’s words, after the publication of that article, “all hell broke loose” with a split between those passionately for it and those vehemently against it. A chief constable called it grossly irresponsible. The Home Office said providing public access to the register would be unworkable. There were pockets of vigilante action against supposed sex offenders, although some reported instances were either wildly exaggerated or completely untrue. Under considerable pressure, Brooks suspended the initiative after two weeks, only to resurrect it eighteen months later following the murderer’s conviction.³⁵ Brooks, who rarely gave interviews, even appeared on television to argue her case.³⁶

No story in Brooks’s two-and-a-half year stint as *NOTW* editor was as memorable as the naming and shaming episode. Her personal involvement, most obviously her befriending of Sara Payne and her commitment to the campaign, came to define her. But she was involved in several other stories. When Mahmood entrapped Sophie Wessex it was her idea to coax the countess into giving an embarrassing interview. As we have seen, she played a leading part in the publishing of allegations about drug-taking by

32 ‘Former tabloid stalwart aims to give Hello! a touch of class’, *Campaign*, 9 February 2001 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/4zppnzwv>

33 Sara Payne, *Sara Payne: A mother’s story* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2004)

34 ‘Named, shamed’, *NOTW*, 23 July 2000

35 ‘Named, shamed’, *NOTW*, 16 December 2001

36 *Breakfast with Frost*, BBC1, 16 December 2001 <https://tinyurl.com/3mtb2www>

Prince Harry. She also handled the negotiations with the police ahead of the Victoria Beckham kidnap story, although she left the *NOTW* before the row over the collapsed trial broke out.

Her appreciation for Mahmood's sheikh act mirrored her own propensity for stunt journalism. In order to associate the newspaper with the Harry Potter movie phenomenon, she pressed a 29-year-old *NOTW* reporter, Charles Begley, with a supposed passing resemblance to the character, into changing his name by deed poll and dressing up with a cloak and broomstick. Begley played along for a while but was said to have baulked when told to remain in disguise following the 9/11 World Trade Centre catastrophe.³⁷ The paper's managing editor, Stuart Kuttner, wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* to deny Begley's allegation that he had been ordered to continue in the Potter role after the attacks.³⁸ Days' later, the *Telegraph* published transcripts of tape recordings of five phone conversations between Begley and three *NOTW* executives which gave some credence to his claim.³⁹

At the time, aside from the *Telegraph*'s media diarist, journalists failed to grasp the implications of what Begley had done. Why had he taped phone calls with his editorial bosses? He explained that it was routine behaviour among the *NOTW*'s reporters because they were sometimes ordered to do things that "could rebound on them and there was a very real fear that senior staff would pass the buck to save themselves, and the reporter would always end up as the fall guy".⁴⁰ It was the clearest of insights into the culture of a dysfunctional, fearful newsroom riven by a lack of trust.

Brooks, who presided over that state of affairs without apparent concern, was careful to keep Mahmood on side. He was one of the very few staff invited to the lavish party she hosted after her wedding to the actor Ross Kemp in June 2002.⁴¹ In her final month, prior to becoming editor of *The Sun*, she dealt with her investigative editor's temper tantrum when he objected to the placement of his gun-buying story. Her successor was her deputy, and her lover, Andy Coulson. Their six-year on-off affair began in 1998.⁴² Soon after his appointment, he and Brooks appeared side by side at a House of Commons select committee hearing during an inquiry into privacy and media intrusion. At one point, Brooks was asked by an MP whether the *NOTW* had ever paid police for information. She replied: "We

37 'Harry Potter stunt goes up in smoke', *The Guardian*, 3 October 2001 <https://tinyurl.com/4bntwxuy>; 'When Harry met Rebekah', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 August 2002

38 Kuttner, 'Our serious role', letter to *Daily Telegraph*, 3 September 2002

39 'Pottergate: we publish the secret tapes', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 2002 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/4shb4xtd>

40 Diary, *Daily Telegraph*, 13 September 2002

41 *Confessions*, p153

42 'Andy Coulson: affair with Rebekah Brooks was "wrong"', *The Guardian*, 14 April 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/yc67peb9>

have paid the police for information in the past”.

When asked if the practice would continue into the future, Brooks was clearly floundering when Coulson intervened on her behalf: “We operate within the code and within the law, and if there is a clear public interest then we will”. As the committee’s final report noted, his public interest claim was irrelevant because such payments were illegal, both for the paper and for the police.⁴³ The exchange, which revealed a long-held truth about tabloid newspapers’ transactional relationships with the police, also illustrated both Coulson’s cool self-possession and his insouciant willingness to justify the unjustifiable. What it concealed was his ruthlessness and a propensity for bullying staff, which was exposed when a sports reporter was awarded £792,736 by an employment tribunal for unfair dismissal and disability discrimination.⁴⁴

Coulson took Murdoch’s notion of creative tension – the setting of department against department and executive against executive – to an extreme level. At one time, he appointed two competing news editors.⁴⁵ He also encouraged risk-taking by his reporters. In June 2003, one of them, David McGee, used fake credentials to obtain a job as a prison warder in order to snatch photographs of Ian Huntley, who was awaiting trial on charges of murdering two girls in Soham, Cambridgeshire. It won an award for front page of the year and the paper successfully resisted a legal action.⁴⁶ Under Coulson’s watch, phone-hacking became a routine activity for certain *NOTW* reporters and executives, as was the employment of private investigators. Meanwhile, Coulson backed Mahmood to the hilt, dealing equably with the embarrassment of his cack-handed attempt to entrap George Galloway and his reverse over the red mercury case. *The Guardian*’s press correspondent wisely argued that such incidents “merely stiffen his [Coulson’s] resolve”.⁴⁷ His paper was garlanded with awards in 2004, with Mahmood being commended. Then, in 2005, it was named as newspaper of the year and the following year it was handed the prestigious Hugh Cudlipp award.

Five months later, in August 2006, the *NOTW*’s royal editor, Clive Goodman, and the private investigator, Glenn Mulcaire, were arrested for intercepting voicemails on the phones of palace aides. At that point, several

43 Para 92, House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *Privacy and media intrusion*, 2002–03 <https://tinyurl.com/3s7m2fxv>

44 ‘News of the World faces £800,000 payout in bullying case’, *The Guardian*, 23 November 2009 <https://tinyurl.com/mun6ara5>

45 Davies, op cit, p34. The competitors were Ian Edmondson and James Weatherup

46 ‘Charges dropped against News of the World reporter’, *The Guardian*, 27 April 2004 <https://tinyurl.com/yc5bds6t>

47 ‘Tabloid stung but the stings go on’, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/uuadtxb3>

fascinating conversations must have taken place, between Coulson and Goodman; between Coulson and News International's executive chairman, Les Hinton; between Coulson, Goodman and the newspaper's legal affairs manager, Tom Crone; between Coulson and Murdoch; and between Murdoch and Hinton. All that is known is that by the time Goodman stood trial at the Old Bailey in November that year, he decided to plead guilty to conspiring to intercept mobile phone messages. Mulcaire admitted the same charge plus further charges of intercepting the messages of five people, none of them royal.

Not until Goodman and Mulcaire were sentenced, in January 2007, was Coulson's resignation as editor made public. He had supposedly quit two weeks before.⁴⁸ It was, of course, orchestrated. Coulson announced he was taking "ultimate responsibility" for the Goodman "events", airing "deep regret that they happened on my watch". For his part, Hinton was quoted as saying he understood "Andy's logic" and claiming that under "Andy's leadership, the *News of the World* reached great heights". Murdoch kept quiet. These were the opening scenes to a farce with several acts which were spaced out over the following four years until the closure of the paper and the arrest and conviction of Coulson along with other members of his editorial team.

Mahmood, one of the few senior *NOTW* journalists to avoid arrest in the phone-hacking scandal, found himself a new champion in Coulson's successor as editor, Colin Myler. He was executive editor of Murdoch's *New York Post* when called on by his boss to steady the *NOTW* ship. He appeared to have the necessary background, having formerly edited the *Sunday Mirror* with several stints on other Fleet Street tabloids. But the *News of the World* newsroom was quite unlike that of any of his previous papers. He found it "very laddish and very male dominated... very loutish".⁴⁹ While trying to exercise control over a wayward staff his first major task on Murdoch's behalf was to stage an internal investigation into Goodman's hacking activities. The result, as expected, was a whitewash: Goodman was said to be a "rogue reporter" who had acted entirely alone.

As for Mahmood – "Myler's go-to guy for scandal"⁵⁰ – he was editor during the disputed Fake Sheikh stings on Jodie Kidd and John Higgins, the father of *Slumdog Millionaire* star Rubina Ali, and the Duchess of York when bartering access to her ex-husband, Prince Andrew. Myler rejected the growing criticism of such entrapments, viewing Mahmood as "probably

48 'News of the World editor quits', *The Guardian*, 26 January 2007 <https://tinyurl.com/ms2nerze>

49 Myler, oral evidence to Leveson inquiry, 14 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/53xa23ns>

50 'The tabloid turncoat', *New York magazine*, 20 April 2012 (paywall) <https://tinyurl.com/86cav3vm>

one of the most professional newspaper journalists in the world”.⁵¹ His own professional standing was undermined by the unwarranted exposure of the sex life of Max Mosley, president of the Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile (FIA), the governing body for Formula One motor racing.

The story accused Mosley of engaging in “a Nazi-themed orgy”, linking him to his late father, Oswald Mosley, founder and leader of a British fascist party. Due to his sympathy for Adolf Hitler, he and his wife were interned during the second world war around the time of Max’s birth. But Max had long ago distanced himself from his father’s politics when the *NOTW* carried its sensational front page.⁵² It relied on Mahmood-style covert filming of Mosley engaged in a sadomasochistic sex session with five women. He strenuously denied the Nazi claim on which the newspaper depended as a public interest justification for its story and sued for breach of privacy. In court, the *NOTW* was unable to produce any convincing evidence to back up its Nazi accusation. Mosley was therefore awarded £60,000 in damages and Murdoch’s company was required to pay legal costs of £900,000.⁵³ Mosley did not leave it there, soon emerging as the paper’s fiercest and most assiduous critic.

Myler cut a sorry figure during the trial, having to admit that none of the video stills he was shown by Mosley’s counsel demonstrated a Nazi scenario. He was also embarrassed by the fact that the paper had not bothered to translate the German spoken by the participants. As Myler later confessed, “the *News of the World* was humiliated by Mr Mosley’s court victory... I was humiliated”.⁵⁴ Even worse was the discovery that his chief reporter, Neville Thurlbeck, had pressured two of the five women into cooperating with the paper by threatening to identify them and expose them as prostitutes. The judge, Mr Justice Eady, suggested it amounted to blackmail. Years later, Lord Justice Leveson referred to the approaches as outrageous and was unimpressed with Thurlbeck’s plea that although he sent the emails, they had been dictated to him by the news editor, Ian Edmondson.⁵⁵ Again, Myler faltered when asked about the incident. He told Leveson the emails were “totally inappropriate” and that, “in hindsight, I should have reprimanded them [Thurlbeck and Edmondson] and a letter should have gone on the

51 ‘Colin Myler: “No apologies” for printing Max Mosley story’, *Press Gazette*, 5 May 2009 <https://tinyurl.com/yef85284>

52 ‘F1 boss has sick Nazi orgy with 5 hookers’, *NOTW*, 30 March 2008

53 ‘Max Mosley wins £60,000 in News of the World privacy case’, *The Guardian*, 24 July 2008 <https://tinyurl.com/yszpahr5>; ‘Max Mosley privacy case cost News of the World almost £1m, editor tells MPs’, *The Guardian*, 5 May 2009 <https://tinyurl.com/3324664t>

54 ‘Colin Myler grilled over Mosley sex party “blackmail” bid’, *Press Gazette*, 14 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/3t6pk7vm>

55 ‘Leveson calls NoW emails to women in Max Mosley story “frankly outrageous”’, *The Guardian*, 14 December 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/5afh8646>

personnel files”.

Myler gave his evidence to Leveson some six months after Murdoch closed the *NOTW*. He had not informed Myler of that closure decision in advance, choosing instead to deal solely with Rebekah Brooks, chief executive of News International (News Int). By then, Myler and Murdoch were no longer reading from the same hymn book because, in order to limit the damage to his company, Murdoch was prepared to junk his editor. Similarly, on advice from his daughter, Elizabeth, he was also prepared to junk his son, James, the chairman of the News Corporation subsidiary which included News Int.⁵⁶

Although the split between Myler and James was central to the crisis which engulfed News Int, both can be seen in retrospect as scapegoats. The disagreement between the two men concerned their different memories of a conversation about the need to settle a legal action by a phone-hacking victim, Gordon Taylor, head of the Professional Footballers’ Association. His lawyer had discovered a copy of an email that contained transcripts of voice messages left on his phone. It was addressed to the *NOTW*’s chief reporter, Neville Thurlbeck, and written by reporter Ross Hindley.⁵⁷

When Myler saw the “For Neville” email both he and the paper’s lawyer, Tom Crone, understood its significance. It totally undermined the company’s rogue-reporter defence. It proved that Goodman was not the only member of staff to benefit from phone-hacking, a fact Crone outlined in an email to Myler, which he forwarded to James. It was understood that if the wider use of hacking was to remain a secret it would be necessary to negotiate a confidential deal with Taylor. According to Myler and Crone, they explained the situation to James and he therefore agreed to pay Taylor £700,000. According to James, he did not read the “For Neville” email, arguing that Myler and Crone had failed to explain why making a settlement with Taylor was essential. He said he agreed to do so without understanding its ramifications.

Regardless of who was telling the truth, Rupert decided his son would have to retreat to New York, which would mean leaving London under a cloud. An angry James believed it was Brooks who should have been required to fall on her sword.⁵⁸ Myler also felt undermined by Brooks. Having learned about the interception of voicemail messages by *NOTW* staff, he remain loyal to Murdoch by continuing to edit the paper and working with people he suspected of being hackers or, at least, the recipients of

56 McKay Coppins, ‘Growing up Murdoch’, *The Atlantic*, April 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/2v7e6kxv>

57 Ross Hindley (aka Ross Hall) was Phil Hall’s nephew

58 Coppins, op cit

information provided by hackers. That loyalty to Murdoch ended when his proprietor took Brooks into his confidence when he decided to close the *NOTW*. Myler was enraged at being excluded from the decision and was infuriated further at being informed about it by Brooks rather than by Murdoch. He fundamentally disagreed with the closure, which he made clear when Brooks, flanked by two security guards, announced “the most devastating news” to assembled staff. As she offered to answer questions, Myler reportedly stepped in to say: “No Rebekah, I think it’s best if you leave the floor. An entire newspaper has been sacrificed to save one person”.⁵⁹ It was assumed that he meant James, but he could well have meant Brooks. Asked a couple of years later about his relationship with Brooks, he told an interviewer: “I don’t think we’ll be exchanging Christmas cards.”⁶⁰ Myler’s resentment was understandable. After participating in what was, in effect, a cover-up, he became the sacrificial lamb.

There was no question of Murdoch giving Myler a new post, unlike his deputy, Victoria Newton, who was retained to take an executive job at *The Sun*.⁶¹ Newton was eventually appointed as editor of the *Sun on Sunday* some nineteen months after its launch, finding herself as Mahmood’s boss once more.⁶² She would not have thought of restraining her celebrity reporter who, by that time, was contemplating a starring role in the prosecution of Tulisa Contostavlos. Mahmood felt invulnerable. Despite being exposed as a liar at the Leveson inquiry, it had made no difference to his standing within Murdoch’s company. Former colleagues were heading for jail while others were coming to terms with journalistic obscurity. He, however, sailed on. Editors had come and gone. Chapman had retired from journalism; Morgan, having been fired as *Daily Mirror* editor, was building a TV profile; Hall had launched a public relations company; Brooks and Coulson were facing a phone-hacking trial; Myler had gone off to New York to edit the *Daily News*, the rival to Murdoch’s *New York Post*. Mahmood, Murdoch’s dependable headline-maker, had outlasted all six of them and was bringing in *News of the World*-style stories about immigration scams, Mr Fixit drug dealers, and an alleged Romanian sex slavery racket.⁶³

It seemed like business as usual for him and for Murdoch, who changed

59 ‘News of the World closure: how the staff reacted’, *The Guardian*, 10 July 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/c2bn6fjf>

60 ‘Colin Myler, the last editor of the News of the World: Rebekah Brooks? I don’t think we’ll be exchanging Christmas cards’, *The Guardian*, 30 October 2015 <https://tinyurl.com/5n7xwfcz>

61 ‘Former News of the World deputy Victoria Newton rejoins the Sun’, *The Guardian*, 14 September 2011 <https://tinyurl.com/mupt7wca>

62 ‘Sun on Sunday overhaul expected in September’, *The Guardian*, 28 August 2013; ‘Sun on Sunday appoints Victoria Newton as editor’, *The Guardian*, 13 September 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/5apebadr>

63 ‘Sold for sex at 14: evil traffic in child slavery to UK’, *Sun on Sunday*, 23 February 2014

his British company's name, from News International to News UK, in the vain hope that it would distance his business from the taint of phone-hacking. The BBC's media correspondent saw it as an attempt at "brand decontamination".⁶⁴ It was part of a dramatic reorganisation for Murdoch's empire, with his company being split into two. Its publishing division, News Corporation, was separated from its more profitable entertainment division, which assumed the title of 21st Century Fox.

In Britain, the chief executive of News UK, Mike Darcey, tried to spin the change as a "bright new chapter" with "fundamental changes of governance and personnel" allied to "new policies and procedures" along with a "transformed executive team".⁶⁵ I criticised the announcement at the time for its "fatuous corporate-speak vacuity".⁶⁶ Worse was the blatant cynicism. While News UK was fighting off claims from hacking victims, Darcey had the gall to claim that the new company would "challenge the world around us, using our voice to bring about positive change and hold powerful and vested interests to account". Yet Murdoch and his minions railed against other media, especially *The Guardian*, for daring to hold his powerful and vested interests to account. It was against this background, marked by the enthusiastic support of successive editors and consistent proprietorial backing, that Mahmood prospered... until he was sent to prison.

64 'News International changes name to News UK', *BBC News*, 26 June 2103 <https://tinyurl.com/yc393u76>

65 'Rupert Murdoch's News International changes name to News UK', *The Guardian*, 26 June 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/ytme77hx>

66 'New name and new logo - but News UK's boss is still Rupert Murdoch', *The Guardian*, 26 June 2013 <https://tinyurl.com/42wc8hem>

Chapter 16

A serial perjurer

*“I have now spoken to police officers
who say they were misled by Murdoch’s empire.
I won’t let this rest.”
— Gordon Brown*

Despite the forecast by Mahmood’s counsel that he might suffer if sent to jail, there were no reports of any such incident. Having served a shade less than half his sentence at Ford open prison, he was released in February 2017, just ahead of his 54th birthday. His journalistic career was over. There was no possibility of him being rehired by the *Sun on Sunday* or any of Rupert Murdoch’s newspapers. It did not mark a total breach with the organisation, but the scale of his continuing connection remains a matter of conjecture.

Firstly, it is not known who settled the £30,000 in costs which the trial judge ordered Mahmood to pay. Did it come from his pocket or the company’s coffers? Secondly, it is uncertain whether he was paid a severance fee and, if so, how much. What was clear from the company’s official statement, which formally announced the termination of his employment, was the need for an ongoing relationship.¹ The spokeswoman said the company would “vigorously defend” any civil claims brought against it as a result of Mahmood’s stories. For that to work in News UK’s favour, he would need to be both available and accommodating. And in 2024 he was on hand to provide a witness statement on behalf of the company during its legal battle with Prince Harry, referring to himself as “a semi-retired public relations consultant”.²

Following his release, one of his first decisions was to change his name or, to be more accurate, amend his name. He became Mazher Mahmood

1 ‘News UK fires jailed undercover reporter Mazher Mahmood — but vows to fight any legal claims against the “Fake Sheikh”’, *Business Insider*, 21 October 2016 <https://tinyurl.com/vwpppzpzb>

2 Witness statement on behalf of News Group Newspapers, 14 November 2024

Chishty.³ Chishty [sometimes Chishti] was the name of his family's Sufi order and, although used by Mahmood's mother as her surname, his father had not done so. His choice illustrated his continuing closeness to his mother. Paddy discovered that while awaiting trial, he had paid £1.2 million for the long-term lease of a flat in a modern development in Windsor on the bank of the Thames.⁴ Described by estate agents as enjoying "an enviable riverside position", it was close to the castle beside a footbridge across to Eton high street. He was not short of money, having previously owned at least two flats in a pricey apartment block in London's Kensington. By 2025, he was driving a bright red Tesla with a personalised number plate.

He plays badminton along the river from his flat, at Windsor Leisure Centre. I spoke to one of the regular players at a session which he did not attend. I sent him letters offering him a right of reply to certain of the allegations made in the previous chapters. The first came back marked "Return to Sender". There was no reply to the second. Similar offers made to Rupert Murdoch and Rebekah Brooks also elicited no replies.

So, from what Paddy and I can gather, Mahmood continues to live a comfortable life. There remain so many questions which only he can answer. Looking back at what we have recorded in previous chapters, it is fair to ask whether there has ever been a journalist as cynical as him.

This man cared about nothing except his own advancement. From the start of his newspaper career, he allowed no-one to stand in his way. He betrayed his parents by exposing family friends and he destroyed his brother's career at the BBC for a scoop. He had no compunction about exposing those unwitting sources. But when it suited him to cover his tracks, he made much of sticking to the journalistic principle that sources must be protected.

Whenever there was a problem with his work, his response was "not me, mate". In his first staff job, as a reporter at the *Sunday Times*, he lied to cover his tracks after making an error and, when found out, he resigned to avoid the ignominy of being fired. Instead of taking this as a warning to behave ethically, he simply doubled down. A few years later, at the *News of the World*, a prosecution resulting from one of his articles collapsed after he was caught lying on oath about an informant.

In order to protect the web of lies he wove, he surrounded himself with an unsavoury crew which included convicted criminals, including some very dodgy private detectives. Although he did useful work, he also fabricated

3 Companies House, confirmation of name change, 21 February 2017, as director of Quayside House (Thames Side) Management Co Ltd (06790900)

4 Land Registry UK, 28 October 2015

stories, often using members of his own “gang”. His journalism left a trail of human misery which included a suicide. He showed no remorse for any of these victims.

His perjury continued at the Leveson inquiry where he lied about the reason for his resignation from the *Sunday Times*, a lie that I exposed. He lied about the number of successful criminal prosecutions for which he claimed responsibility, a falsehood exposed by my co-author. He stated unequivocally that he did not use private eyes only for later evidence to show how those “investigators” often played an essential role in his operations. Yet he dared to claim to Lord Justice Leveson, and to the world, that ethics were the bedrock of his work.

So how did this unscrupulous reporter get away with it for nearly a quarter of a century? Answer: Rupert Murdoch. The media titan created the high-pressure environment that encouraged his editors and journalists to produce a sales-winning newspaper by any means possible... a newspaper calculated to appeal to the basest of human instincts. It was an act of supreme cynicism in which two dirty diggers – Murdoch and Mahmood – were only too delighted to collaborate.

Both men sought to distance themselves from the scandal that caused the *News of the World's* closure: the industrial-scale interception of mobile phone messages and the use of shady private eyes to facilitate such intrusion into privacy. Mahmood's denial of involvement was echoed in Murdoch's infamous two-faced statement about being humbled by the dark arts employed by *News of the World* journalists only to tell a private meeting of *Sun* journalists that they had done nothing wrong.

For Murdoch, Mahmood represented the people he most appreciated: rule-breakers, larrikins in Australian slang, those prepared to go the extra mile and beyond to land a story. In 2000, Murdoch wrote to a member of the House of Lords extolling Mahmood as an exemplar of investigative journalism. When forced to close the *NOTW*, Murdoch made hundreds redundant. But he spared Mahmood from the axe, easing his path back to the *Sunday Times*, where I'd caught him lying more than two decades earlier.

The protection racket worked both ways. Mahmood's 2008 memoir, *Confessions of a Fake Sheikh*, had been published soon after the hacking scandal first emerged into daylight. It was aimed at diverting attention from Clive Goodman's arrest in order to buttress the Murdoch line that he was the single “rogue reporter” who had betrayed the *News of the World's* true values. When that was exposed as a blatant lie after the Milly Dowler scandal broke five years later, it forced the closure of the *NOTW*. Significantly, in its

final issue, it was Mahmood who was given pride of place as the paper's star reporter. Similarly, at the Leveson inquiry, Murdoch's managers confidently wheeled out Mahmood as a paragon of journalistic virtue. Even when his lies proved to be a PR disaster, the tycoon stood by his protégé while preparing the ground for his leading role at the *Sun on Sunday*. It seemed as if, for Murdoch and Mahmood, the truth itself was a lie.

Murdoch's cynicism was evident in the way he handled the post-hacking crisis by setting up the Management and Standards Committee (MSC) to "ensure that the highest standards of editorial practices are upheld".⁵ In addition, as Murdoch told his staff, it was "instructed to cooperate with the police".⁶ In the case of Mahmood, neither of those aims were achieved despite the expense of £200 million on the MSC over the course of five years until 2015,⁷ when the Metropolitan Police closed its investigation into News Group Newspapers (NGN). It failed to prevent Mahmood from bringing further disgrace to Murdoch's empire despite several warnings. In 2012, my co-author wrote to one of Murdoch's most senior lieutenants, News Corp vice president Jack Horner, to inform him that Mahmood was a "serial perjurer".⁸ Horner, a key figure in managing the scandal, didn't reply and ignored subsequent reminders. Paddy also copied in John Witherow, then Mahmood's editor at the *Sunday Times*, which also elicited no reply.

Three months later, Paddy emailed Witherow: "It seems to me that you have decided that the false claims Mazher Mahmood made to the Leveson inquiry are not serious enough to warrant his dismissal".⁹ He requested that Witherow should instruct News International's lawyers to "carry out a survey of Mazher Mahmood's witness statements in the many criminal cases where he has given evidence. I am concerned that he may have committed perjury in some of these". Paddy did not receive a reply.

It's difficult not to draw the conclusion that even when told of Mahmood's dishonesty Murdoch thought him too valuable to allow to go. Even when he was finally exposed as a liar and perjurer in the Tulisa Contostavlos case Murdoch didn't abandon the reporter. I talked to two senior NGN executives who were confident he would be found not guilty of conspiring to pervert the course of justice. If he had been cleared, Murdoch would surely have welcomed him back into the fold. This, after all, is what happened with Rebekah Brooks, one of Mahmood's most fervent admirers, when the jury

5 Para 2.8. Part E, Leveson report, p426 <https://tinyurl.com/47xzberu>

6 'Rupert Murdoch's email to The Sun employees', *BBC News*, 17 February 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/ye2y48ze>

7 News International annual reports, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015

8 Email, 9 May 2012. Horner was vice president of corporate and affairs and communications. He quit News Corp in August 2012

9 Email, 12 September 2012

at her hacking trial declared her not guilty.¹⁰

Murdoch was not alone in covering up for Mahmood. After the Tulisa trial several prosecutions were abandoned because Mahmood could no longer be trusted as a witness. Mahmood's previously unimpeachable word had become fatally tainted. Yet no action was taken to correct the alleged miscarriages for which he had been responsible in previous years. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) sent out information packs to more than twenty of Mahmood's victims inviting them to submit evidence. All were rejected despite serious flaws.

Then there was the matter of the police. Murdoch's lieutenants, including Rebekah Brooks, Andy Coulson and Mahmood, had close links with the Met at the highest level. After the collapse of the Beckham case, for example, Mahmood and Coulson were invited to have drinks with Commissioner John Stevens.¹¹ Were those cosy relationships the reason that the Met treated wrongdoing at the *News of the World* with kid gloves? Note the difference between the way police dealt with Mahmood's victims and Mahmood himself. Police arrested actor John Alford just five days after the publication of Mahmood's story about him. It took police 14 months to arrest Mahmood after the Tulisa trial collapsed due to his lies. Surely, the Met were not surprised. Several of its officers knew from as early as 1994 that Mahmood was willing to lie on oath. Yet, for two decades, police forces put him in the witness box on their behalf.

Just like Murdoch's MSC, the Met was warned about Mahmood. In 2012, my co-author wrote to deputy assistant commissioner Sue Akers to urge her "to examine Mr Mahmood's testimony in all of the court cases he gave evidence in to see if he has potentially committed perjury — and possibly attempting to pervert the course of justice". He argued that Mahmood gave false testimony in several trials by exaggerating the number of successful prosecutions spawned by his stories. His falsehoods, by emphasising his credibility, correspondingly weakened the credibility of defendants. Although the Met acknowledged the email, Akers did not respond.

Two years later, Paddy made an official complaint to the chair of the Met's watchdog, the Independent Police Complaints Commission, Dame Anne Owers, about Akers's failure to reply.¹² He pointed to allegations that the Met "has bent over backwards to protect Mahmood" and that "his protection by senior officials of Rupert Murdoch's News UK with influence at New Scotland Yard meant that he was virtually 'untouchable'". Owers did

¹⁰ 'Hacking trial: Coulson guilty, Brooks cleared of charges', *BBC News*, 24 June 2014

¹¹ *Confessions*, p102

¹² Email, 10 December 2014

not reply.

Four months later, in April 2015, a senior Met detective finally responded to Paddy French's complaints about Mahmood's alleged perjury in the Alford case. It came from detective inspector Howard Holt, the operational head of the Met's Special Inquiry Team, part of the Homicide and Major Crime Command. This was also the team in charge of Operation Silverhawk, the investigation into the collapse of the Tulisa Contostavlos case.

Holt said he had "instructed his team to conduct a full and thorough assessment" of the allegation that Mahmood had committed perjury in the trial of John Alford. He said that Mahmood was "an investigative journalist and not an expert witness" and that the cases stemming from his exposés "were not reliant on how many successful criminal prosecutions he has obtained hitherto". He concluded: "During my review of your allegations I have not formed any reasonable grounds to suspect that a crime has been committed by Mr Mahmood in relation to the Perjury Act 1911".¹³ He said his team had reviewed the relevant material and noted that whenever Mahmood gave evidence defence lawyers had had the chance to cross-examine him. He did not believe there were grounds to accuse Mahmood of a crime. In other words, "move along now, nothing to see here".

Is it possible, however, that the former prime minister, Gordon Brown, will succeed where Paddy and a number of lawyers have failed by convincing the police and the CPS to act? In April 2025, he made a complaint, based on new evidence following the Prince Harry trial, that Murdoch's company, NGN, had obstructed justice by deleting emails.¹⁴ Brown told of former Met detectives who argued that, had they known about the deletions in 2011, they would have investigated more fully.

"This is not an allegation made lightly", wrote Brown. "The Murdoch team did not only assault people's individual liberties, but designed an elaborate cover-up". His article, headlined "I have now spoken to police officers who say they were misled by Murdoch's empire. I won't let this rest", called for the police and the director of public prosecutions, to "take up this serious challenge to the rule of law".¹⁵

For Brown, the issue "is not of mere historical interest". And that is exactly the point Paddy and I also regard as relevant in terms of Mahmood's twenty-five years at the *News of the World* and the *Sun on Sunday*. We find it extraordinary that he should have been able to go on reporting after a

13 Holt letter, 22 April 2015

14 'Gordon Brown makes criminal complaint against Rupert Murdoch's media empire', *The Guardian*, 26 April 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/bdz44u3h>

15 *The Guardian*, 26 April 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/233bap5u>

catalogue of legal reverses. By our reckoning, at least ten prosecutions involving 18 defendants collapsed as a result of Mahmood's evidence (see Appendix 3). His role in these cases was criticised by eight judges: two justices of appeal and six crown court judges.¹⁶ Even when people were adjudged guilty due to Mahmood stories, some judges aired criticism of him, his methods, and his newspaper.¹⁷

On the basis of what we have revealed, we believe there is clear evidence of wrongdoing on Mahmood's part throughout the course of his work for Murdoch's organisation. We have illustrated miscarriages of justice. We have joined up the dots. We believe his victims, despite the passing of the years, deserve redress. It is not too late for the authorities to act.

¹⁶ Lord Justice Pill, Mr Justice Astill, judges Hezlett Colgan, Stuart Fish, Iain Black, Fabyan Evans, Simon Smith and Alistair McCreath

¹⁷ They included Lord Justice Otton, judges Timothy Pontius and Stephen Robbins, and stipendiary magistrate Rosamond Keating

Acknowledgements

First, I want to pay tribute to my co-author, Paddy French. His overall command of the material, allied to a keen attention to detail, made this the smoothest of collaborations.

We are particularly indebted to Hugh Tomlinson KC of Matrix Chambers for his vital legal advice, and also to Tamsin Allen of Bindmans solicitors.

Thanks are due to a number of people who read versions, in whole or part, of the manuscript. They include Peter Burden who pronounced our book to be “a thorough exposure of Mahmood’s bogus career”.

Evan Harris and Dan Waddell provided informed comments and advice, as did Nick Davies, Brian Cathcart, Julian Petley, Graham Johnson, Bruce Goodison and Jenny Evans.

We also appreciated the results of readings by Dan French, Denis Gregory, Jenny Holt, Matthew Scott and Charlotte Prager Williams.

In terms of the research, Paddy and I had invaluable help from a number of people who wish to remain anonymous. We understood their reticence to be identified and thank them for their help.

Posthumous thanks are due to my cousin, Christopher Stocking, who provided crucial contacts at TV-am. Sadly, he died while I was writing the final chapters. Among other collaborators, we would like to thank Chris Nichols for his research, plus Paddy’s wife, Tricia Scott, my wife, Noreen, and our grandson, Otis Kelly.

Special thanks, finally, to our designer Terry Evans.

Appendix 1:

Timeline

(Relevant chapters in brackets)

March 1963, born in Birmingham

December 1979, writes, aged 16, for the *Birmingham Mail*

Summer 1981, sells video piracy story to the *News of the World*

May 1984, starts contributing to *The People* and acquires Arabic costume

September 1985, joins the *Sunday Times*

April 1988, his BBC moonlighting story gets his brother the sack

December 1988, resigns from the *Sunday Times*. Later, joins TV-am

December 1991, hired by the *News of the World*

July 1992, upsets editor Patsy Chapman over David Mellor story
(chapter 4)

August 1992, pension book story (chapter 8)

October 1993, 150th anniversary of the *News of the World*

October 1994, promoted to chief investigative reporter by Piers Morgan

January 1995, case against jockey Jacqui Oliver collapses (chapter 8)

July 1995, trial of three men accused of forgery halted due to “abuse of
process” (chapter 8)

January 1996, Emma Morgan sting (chapter 5)

April 1997, promoted to investigations editor by Phil Hall (his deputy is
Rebekah Wade, Brooks from 2009)

July 1997, *NOTW* fined £50,000 for contempt of court over his forgery
story (chapter 8)

August 1997, John Alford sting (chapter 6)

October 1997, Beast of Bodmin Moor story (chapter 11)

March 1998, sting on Newcastle United bosses (chapter 13)

September 1998, Lord Hardwicke sting (chapter 6)

April 1999, stings on Johnnie Walker and Rhodri Giggs (chapter 8)

March 1999, named as Journalist of the Year for Newcastle United story

November 1999, Bradford schoolboy case collapses (chapter 8)

- May 2000**, Rebekah Wade (Brooks) becomes *NOTW* editor
- March 2001**, Sophie, Countess of Wessex, sting (chapter 12)
- April 2001**, marries for the second time
- August 2001**, Nadia Fazil case collapses (chapter 8)
- January 2002**, Prince Harry drugs story published (chapter 12)
- February 2002**, Neil Montgomery sting (chapter 6)
- March 2002**, named as Reporter of the Year, and co-winner with Conrad Brown for Scoop of the Year, for the Sophie sting
- November 2002**, Victoria Beckham “kidnap” story (chapter 7)
- January 2003**, threatens to resign over placement of his gun-buying story (chapter 11). Brooks becomes *Sun* editor, Andy Coulson becomes *NOTW* editor
- July 2003**, John Fashanu sting (chapter 13)
- March 2004**, Kieren Fallon sting (chapter 5)
- May 2004**, failed sting on George Galloway (chapter 11)
- September 2004**, “Red mercury” dirty bomb story (chapter 8)
- February 2005**, Besnik Qema sting (chapter 6)
- March 2005**, “Baby for sale” story (chapter 5)
- September 2005**, Princess Michael sting (chapter 12)
- January 2006**, Sven Goran Eriksson sting (chapter 13)
- August 2006**, arrest of *NOTW* royal editor Clive Goodman and private investigator Glenn Mulcaire on phone-hacking charges
- January 2007**, Coulson resigns from *NOTW* after jailing of Goodman and Mulcaire. Colin Myler becomes editor
- September 2007**, Jodie Kidd sting (chapter 5)
- September 2008**, Publication of his *Confessions* book
- March 2008**, *NOTW* claims Max Mosley had taken part in a Nazi-themed orgy with five women
- April 2009**, *Slumdog Millionaire* sting (chapter 8)
- July 2009**, *The Guardian* reveals that News International paid £1m in settlements to three phone-hacking victims
- March 2010**, Joe Calzaghe sting (chapter 13)
- May 2010**, John Higgins sting (chapter 5)
- May 2010**, Sarah, Duchess of York, sting (chapter 12)
- August 2010**, cricket spot-fixing story (chapter 13). He ends his five-year relationship with “Zee”

February 2011, Prince Andrew picture with Jeffrey Epstein (chapter 12)

April 2011, wins scoop of the year and news reporter of the year awards for cricket spot-fixing story

July 2011, Rupert Murdoch closes the *News of the World*

August 2011, rejoins the *Sunday Times*

December 2011, gives evidence to Leveson Inquiry

January 2012, recalled to give evidence again to Leveson Inquiry

February 2012, Murdoch launches the *Sun on Sunday*

April 2012, controversy over *Sunday Times* FGM story (chapter 9)

May 2012, first Paddy French statement to Leveson Inquiry

July 2012, Roy Greenslade oral evidence to Leveson Inquiry and fourth Mahmood statement

September 2012, second Paddy French statement to Leveson Inquiry

1 December 2012, Mahmood joins the *Sun on Sunday*

February 2013, Herbie Hide sting (chapter 14)

June 2013, Tulisa Contostavlos sting (chapter 14)

July 2014, Tulisa trial collapses

September 2015, charged with conspiracy to pervert the cause of justice

October 2016, convicted and sentenced to jail

Appendix 2:

Criminal prosecutions linked to Mahmood's *News of the World* stories

Total: 75, of whom 50 were imprisoned [including one who fled the country and one whose conviction was quashed on appeal]. Nine were given suspended sentences; five were fined; two were handed community service orders; one was deported; and the eight others received sentences which are not known to the authors.

1993 Terry Valvona, Rosemary Iredale, Norman Wardell, Syed Rizvi,
Parghat Singh Heer, Fahim Iqbal

1994 Dave Benmore

1995 Salim Mumtaz, Iqbal Rajah, Arif Din, Ghulam Murtaza, Shafiq
Mumtaz [fled country] + 4 unnamed, Steve Cramm, Kuldip Sander,
Gurvinder Chopra

1996 Gordon Brown, Paul Garlick, Stephen Harvey, Kim Lisles,

1997 Mohinder Singh, Bruce Allen, Jonathan Pickering, Brenda Tonnesson

1998 Iqbal Master, Clifford Davies, Sunil Patel, Anant Shah

1999 John Alford, Earl Hardwicke, Stefan Thwaites, Johnnie Walker, Alex
Smith

2000 Manohar Rangwani, Mohamed Tajh Khan, Mohammed Yousif, Gary
Harris, David Weir, Barry Dickinson, Josie Daly

2001 Karen McPhillips, Anthony Florenzo

2002 John Holland, Shaheen Begolli, Antonio Russo, Ismail Pirbhai,
Ibrahim Patel, Sarfraz Dudhwala, Mohammed Nasib, Salma
Chowdhury, Robert Pickles, Jacqueline Grahams

2003 Joseph Rivas, Luzum Balliu, Neil Montgomery, David Cheney, Sultan
Merchant

2004 San Keung Yau, Keith Blasdale

ROGUES

- 2005** Agha Mohammed [deported], Tariq Lone, Besnik Qema [conviction quashed 2010]
- 2006** Paul Singh Arora, Adeolu Magbagbeola
- 2007** Rani Kashyap, Joginder Kashyap, Fleur Brown
- 2008** Mohammed Kutub Uddin, Gary Pennant
- 2010** Suresh Kumar
- 2011** Angela Martin, Natasha Martin

Appendix 3:

Failed prosecutions

*These ten criminal prosecutions took place
as a result of stories published under Mazher
Mahmood's byline*

Collapsed, April 1994. Trial of two people charged with conspiracy to defraud the Department of Social Services is halted. **Story:** “The great pension book fiddle”, *News of the World*, 30 August 1992 (chapter 8)

Collapsed, January 1995: Jockey Jacqui Oliver cleared of plot to defraud banks when judge ruled tapes recorded by Mahmood were “inadmissible”. **Story:** “Girl jockey comes a cropper in credit card swindle”, *News of the World*, 6 September 1992 (chapter 8)

Collapsed, July 1995. Trial of Anthony Caldori and Tony Hassan stopped when judge ruled they could not get a fair trial because Mahmood revealed prejudicial material. The *News of the World* was later fined £50,000 for contempt of court. **Story:** “We smash £100m fake cash ring: cops swoop on gang of forgers”, *News of the World*, 11 September 1994 (chapter 8)

Collapsed, November 1999. Trial of 15-year-old Bradford schoolboy stopped after Mahmood had given evidence. **Story:** “This is a pimp of 15 selling drugs to schoolgirl hooker”, *News of the World*, 18 October 1998 (chapter 8)

Collapsed, March 2000. On opening day of trial, the Crown Prosecution Service withdrew evidence against Rhodri Giggs on grounds of its “serious concerns” about the veracity of Mahmood’s tape-recordings. **Story:** “Giggysy’s brother peddles cocaine and vice”, *News of the World*, 18 April 1999 (chapter 8)

Collapsed, August 2001. The trial of civil servant Nazia Fazil stopped when prosecuting counsel informed the judge that Mahmood was heard on tape telling a colleague “I’m going to stitch her up”.

Story: “*News of the World* busts school for scroungers”, *News of the World*, 16 January 2000 (chapter 8)

Collapsed, June 2003. Trial of five men accused of plot to abduct Victoria Beckham is halted on opening day when prosecution announced that the key witness, Mahmood’s informant, was unreliable because he had been paid by the newspaper and had a history of criminality. **Story:** “Posh kidnap: Moment *News of the World* saves Victoria and her sons from thugs”, *News of the World*, 3 November 2002 (chapter 7)

Cleared, July 2006. Three men accused by Mahmood of trying to buy a non-existent substance, “red mercury”, were cleared of terrorism-related charges by a jury. **Story:** “Dirty bomb foiled by *News of the World*: Armed terror cops in swoop on gang”, *News of the World*, 25 September 2004 (chapter 8)

Conviction quashed 2010. Albanian immigrant Besnik Qema was jailed for four-and-a-half years after pleading guilty to drug offences and possessing a forged passport. But his conviction was quashed after the Criminal Cases Review Commission found that Mahmood had entrapped Qema using a paid informant. **Story:** “Asylum’s Mr Big: Cops swoop after we expose scandal”, *News of the World*, 13 February 2005 (chapter 6)

Collapsed, July 2014. Singer Tulisa Contostavlos was charged with supplying cocaine on the basis of a Mahmood story. It was halted when the judge realised Mahmood had lied on oath. As a result, he was charged with conspiring to pervert the course of justice. He was found guilty in September 2016 and sentenced to jail for 15 months. **Story:** “Tulisa’s Cocaine Deal Shame”, *Sun on Sunday*, 2 June 2013 (chapter 14)

Bibliography

- Afridi, Shahid, *Game Changer* (Harper Sport India, 2019)
- Bainbridge, Cyril, and Stockdill, Roy, *The News of the World Story* (London: HarperCollins, 1993)
- Brown, Gerry, *Exposed!* (London: Virgin Books, 1995)
- Burden, Peter, *News of the World? Fake Sheikhs & Royal Trappings* (London: Eye Press, 2008; 2nd ed., 2009)
- Chippindale, Peter, and Horrie, Chris, *Stick It Up Your Punter!* (London: Mandarin, 1992)
- Collins, Michelle, *This Is Me* (London: Michael O'Mara, 2014)
- Curtis, Sarah, *The journals of Woodrow Wyatt: From Major to Blair* (London: Macmillan, 2000)
- Contostavlos, Tulisa, *Judgement: The brutally honest memoir from N'Dubz star Tulisa* (London: Blink, 2025)
- Davies, Nick, *Hack Attack: How the Truth Caught Up with Rupert Murdoch* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014)
- Davies, Nick, *Hack Attack: The Full Story of the Phone Hacking Scandal* (London: Vintage, 2025)
- De Burgh, Hugo, ed., *Investigative Journalism* (London: Routledge, 2000)
- Edwards, Robert, *Goodbye Fleet Street* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988)
- Fallon, Kieren, *Form: My autobiography* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2017)
- French, Paddy, First statement to Leveson Inquiry, May 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/2uu4afky>
- French, Paddy, Second statement to Leveson Inquiry, September 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/bdf7kcz7>
- Gillard, Michael and Flynn, Laurie, *Untouchables: Dirty cops, bent justice and racism at Scotland Yard* (Edinburgh: Cutting Edge Press, 2004)
- Grayson, Steve, *Don't Ask, Don't Get* (London: Kavanagh Tipping, 2008)
- Greenslade, Nick, *The Thin White Line: The Inside Story of Cricket's Greatest Scandal* (London: Pitch Publishing, 2020)
- Greenslade, Roy, *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits from Propaganda* (London: Macmillan, 2003)
- Greenslade, Roy, Statement to Leveson Inquiry, July 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/4ey5bb9m>

- Greenslade, Roy, 'Why I'm out to nail Mazher Mahmood', *The Independent*, 16 April 2006 <https://tinyurl.com/mryz2wmc>
- Hawkins, Ed, *Bookie gambler fixer spy: A journey to the corrupt heart of cricket's underworld* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012)
- Hickman, Martin, 'The Ballad of Andy and Rebekah', *London Review of Books*, Vol 36/14, 17 July 2014
- Hinton, Les, *The Bootle Boy: an untidy life in news* (Australia: Scribe, 2018)
- Johnson, Graham, *Hack: Sex, Drugs and Scandal from Inside the Tabloid Jungle* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012)
- Leapman, Michael, *Barefaced Cheek: The Apotheosis of Rupert Murdoch* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983)
- Mahmood, Mazher, *Confessions of a Fake Sheik* (London: HarperCollins, 2008)
- Mahmood, Mazher, Fourth witness statement to Leveson Inquiry, 16 July 2012 <https://tinyurl.com/5f3h66bj>
- Mahmood, Sultan, *Urdu Journalism in Britain* (Lahore, 1978)
- Mahmood, Waseem, *Good Morning Afghanistan* (London: Eye Books, 2007)
- Mahmood, Waseem, *Beyond the Frame: A filmmaker's search for identity* (2025, awaiting publication)
- Marr, Andrew, *My Trade: A Short History of British Journalism* (London: Macmillan, 2004)
- McLean, Lenny, *The Guv'nor: The autobiography of Lenny McLean* (London: John Blake, 2003)
- McMullan, Paul, *Privacy is for paedos* (London: Yellow Press, 2023)
- Miller, John, *Former Soldier Seeks Employment* (London: Macmillan, 1989)
- Miskiwi, Greg, with Cusack, Joseph, *Master of the Dark Arts: I was Fleet Street's phone hacker* (London: Yellow Press, 2024)
- Morgan, Alastair, & Jukes, Peter, *Untold: The Daniel Morgan murder exposed* (London: Blink, 2017)
- Morgan, Piers, *The Insider: The Private Diaries of a Scandalous Decade* (London: Ebury Press, 2005)
- Mulcaire, Glenn, *Shadowman* (London: Yellow Press, 2024)
- Neil, Andrew, *Full Disclosure* (London: Macmillan, 1996)
- O'Malley, Tom, and Soley, Clive, *Regulating the Press* (London: Pluto, 2000)
- Press Gang, Mazher Mahmood series: 'Fake convictions', August 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/ktcyd32y>; 'The sting in the singer's tale', August

- 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/ymkxscev>; 'Lying to Leveson', November 2014 <https://tinyurl.com/43kwn4rb>; 'Withering Heights', November 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/4mvasu8r>
- Press Gang, Piers Morgan series: 'Dial M for Morgan', June 2015 <https://tinyurl.com/4w2v6fnm>; 'Down in the gutter', June 2015 <https://tinyurl.com/4szue3hz>; 'A Slicker full of lies', November 2015 <https://tinyurl.com/yprwa6cr>
- Quaisrani, Sajid Mansoor, *Urdu Press in Britain* (Islamabad: Mashal Publications, 1990)
- Payne, Sara, *Sara Payne: A mother's story* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004)
- Prince Harry, *Spare* (London: Bantam, 2023)
- Shannon, Richard, *A Press Free and Responsible: Self-regulation and the Press Complaints Commission 1991-2001* (London: John Murray, 2001)
- Shawcross, William, *Rupert Murdoch* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992)
- Somerfield, Stafford, *Banner Headlines* (Shoreham: Scan Books, 1979)
- Stelzer, Irwin, *The Murdoch Method* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018)
- Thurlbeck, Neville, *Tabloid Secrets: The Stories Behind the Headlines at the World's Most Famous Newspaper* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2015)
- Watson, Tom, and Hickman, Martin, *Dial M for Murdoch: News Corporation and the Corruption of Britain* (London, 2012)

Index

NB: barristers designated QC, as they were at the time, now KC

- Abbas, Zaheer 4
 Abbot, Diane 147-8
 Addow, Sheikh Mohamed 122-4
 Afghanistan 42, 139
 Afridi, Shahid 175
 Ahern, Bertie 116
 Ahmed, Qamar 6
 Ahmed, Rauf 6
 Ahmed, Lord (of Rotherham) xi, 193
 Akass, Jon 22
 Akers, Sue 213
 Alford, John (John Shannon) 38, 40, 63-70, 75, 87n, 94, 188, 189, 198, 203, 213-4, 221
 Ali, Rubina 107-9, 203
 Allen, Bruce 221
 Altman, Brian 80n, 86-7
 Amir, Mohammad 174ff
 Anderson, Leon 188
 Andrew, Sky 118
 Arora, Paul Singh 222
 Archer, Lord Jeffrey 32, 199
 Asif, Mohammad 174ff
 Astill, Mr Justice (Sir Michael) 96-7
 Athulathmudali, Kishan 40, 54, 62, 159, 161-2
 Aye Maung, Carole 161

 Balliu, Lulesim (see Krifsha)
 Barclay, Patrick 169
 Barnard, Jonathan 102
 Barnes, John 171
 Barr QC, David 113, 124-25
 Beast of Bodmin 143-7, 189, 200
 Beckham, Brooklyn 82
 Beckham, David 83
 Beckham, Romeo 82
 Beckham, Victoria 77, 80-4, 109, 201, 224
 Begley, Charles 201
 Begolli, Shaheen 78, 221
 Benmore, Dave 221
 Berliner, Jeff 22
 Biggs, Ronnie 39
 Black, Guy 154-5
 Black, Judge Iain 101
 Blair, Tony 161
 Blasdale, Keith 221
 Bolland, Mark 154-6
 Bowden, Nigel 170
 Bradford, city of 2, 33, 75, 98-99, 109, 140
 Bragg, Melvyn 42
 Brooks, Rebekah (nee Wade) xi, 66-7, 69, 83, 115-6, 120, 125, 128, 133, 135, 139, 143ff, 151-2, 157, 160, 200-02, 205, 206, 213
 Brown, Conrad 32, 37, 42, 58, 64, 80-82, 137, 139, 141-2, 156-7, 170
 Brown, Fleur 222
 Brown, Gerry 32
 Brown, Gordon [former Prime Minister] ix-x, 209, 214
 Brown, Gordon 221
 Bryan, John 158-9, 189
 Bunning, Det Insp Alex 56
 Burton, Steve 40, 170
 Butcher, Paul 62
 Butt, Salman 174ff

 Caldori, Anthony 96, 109, 223
 Calvert, Gemma 156
 Calzaghe, Joe 171-2
 Cameron, David 119, 124
 Campbell, Naomi 116
 Canopus (Met Police operations) 88, 91
 Carwithen, John 55-6
 Channings Wood Prison 35, 137
 Chapman, Patsy 27-30, 41, 43, 96n, 115, 206, 218
 Chapman, Ray 7
 Cheney, David 221
 Chopra, Gurvinder 221
 Chowdhury, Salma 221
 Church, Charlotte 116
 Clifford, Max 117-8, 159-61
 Cockroft, Judge John 98
 Cohen, Nadia 150
 Colgan, Judge Samuel Hezlett 96-7

- Collin, Robbie 120
 Collins, Michelle 58
 Contostavlos, Tulisa 94, 104, 180n, 181ff,
 206, 212, 214, 224
 Cooke, Anastasia 23
 Coombs, Michael 183-4, 187
 Coulson, Andy xi-n, xii-n, 56, 88, 92, 115-
 120, 128, 201-03, 206, 213
 Cramm, Steve 221
 Crick, Michael 128
 Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC)
 62-3, 70, 188, 192
 Crone, Tom 40-41, 73, 125, 128, 133, 162,
 172, 174, 203, 205
 Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) x, xi, 71,
 77, 86-8, 99-100, 104-105, 122-3, 186,
 188, 189, 210, 213-4
- Daily Mail* xi, 8, 9, 153
Daily Mirror 49, 53, 86, 116, 198, 206
Daily Star 8, 9
Daily Telegraph 53, 88, 143, 154, 198, 201
 Dallaglio, Lawrence 198
 Daly, Josie 221
 Darcey, Mike 207
 "Dark arts" (UIG) x, 25-6, 27, 29n, 115-6,
 117-8, 126, 151, 211
 Davies, Clifford 221
 Davies, Nick 115, 117n, 118-9, 199n, 202n,
 217
 De Bruxelles, Simon 11-12
 De Niro, Robert 64
 De Sancha, Antonia 29
 Dein QC, Jeremy 93, 104, 184
 Diana, Princess of Wales 163, 197
 Di Caprio, Leonardo 182
 Diaz, Cameron 182
 Dick, Cressida 174
 Dickinson, Barry 221
 Din, Arif 221
 Donnelly, Jae 167
 Douglas, David 52
 Dowler, Milly 119, 124, 211
 Dudhwala, Sarfraz 221
 Duncan, Stuart 146
 Dyer, Mark 157
- Eady, Mr Justice (David) 89, 204
 Edwards, Bob 8
 Edmondson, Ian 107, 113, 120, 202n, 204-5
 Epstein, Jeffrey 166-7
 Eriksson, Sven-Göran 164n, 169-70
 Evans, Judge Fabyan 102
 Evans, Lloyd 149-150
- Fallon, Kieren 38, 53-4, 171
 Fancourt, Mr Justice (Timothy) 116
 Farrell, Det Con Gerry 86
 Fashanu, John 173
 Fazil, Nazia 102, 109, 224
 Featherstone Lodge 152-5
 Fedorcio, Dick 125
 Ferguson, Sarah (Duchess of York) 158,
 164-6, 203
 Fernandes, Roque 103-5
 Fillery, Sid 39, 112-3,
 Fish, Judge Stuart 100
 Florenzo, Anthony 221
 Forshaw QC, Sarah 190
 Fox, Aylia x, xii, 7n, 40
 French, Paddy xiii, 33, 95, 112, 128-31, 189,
 208, 210, 212-4
 Reveals pension book scandal 94-5
 Uncovers use of private detectives 112
 Leveson statements 33, 128-131
 Contacts with News International,
 Independent Police Complaints
 Commission, Metropolitan Police 212-
 14
 Friesner, David 100
 Frost, David 21, 23, 26
- Galloway, George 148-9, 202
 Garlick, Paul 221
 Gashi, Florim 32n, 40, 56, 62-3, 77-82, 85-
 91, 121, 184, 189, 192
 Giggs, Rhodri 99-101, 109, 198, 223
 Giggs, Ryan 42, 99
 Glitter, Gary 198
 Glover, Stephen 117
 Goldsmith, Lord 88
 Goodman, Clive 28n, 111, 117-8, 120, 152-3,
 157-8, 203, 205, 211
 Gordon, Judge Gerald 37n, 191
 Grahams, Jacqueline 221
 Grayson, Steve 32n, 36-8, 42-3, 47-8, 143ff,
 158, 189

- Greenslade, Nick 9n, 25n, 32n, 41n, 172-4, 182
 Greenslade, Roy xiii, 13, 16, 51, 72-3, 84, 90-91, 124-25, 130-31, 148-9, 166, 184
 Relationship with MM at *Sunday Times* 13, 18-21, 124-5
 Interview with Florim Gashi 78-9, 90
 Suspicious over Higgins sting 51-2
 Baby-for-sale discovery 55-6
 Re-check of MM's conviction numbers 131ff
- Hagerty, Bill 29
 Hague, William 161
 Hall, Douglas 170
 Hall, Phil xii-n, 49, 73, 100, 115, 128, 136, 144, 198-200, 218, 206
 Hallsworth, Robin 81
 Hameed, Yasir 176
 Hardwicke, Earl of (Joseph Philip Sebastian Yorke) 38, 69, 71-4, 75, 94, 109, 137, 143, 147n, 187, 198, 221
 Harkin, Murray 159
 Harris, Gary 221
 Harris, Nick 51-2
 Hart, Christine ix, 40, 141n
 Harvey, Stephen 221
 Hassan, Tony 96, 109, 223
 Hawkins, Ed 172, 175-6
 Heraty, Melvyn 40, 64, 112
 Hicks QC, Martin 67, 87
 Hide, Herbie 179, 180, 187
 Higgins, John 51-2, 171, 203
 Hill, Amelia 119
 Hindley, Ross 205
 Hinton, Les 118-9, 125, 155n, 199, 203
 Holland, John 221
 Holt, Det Insp Howard 214
 Horner, Jack 212
 Horrocks, Det Insp Ian 83-4, 90-1
 Howell, Denis 4
 Hughes, Simon 117
 Hulme, Det Con Mike 83
 Huntley, Ian 202
 Hussein, Saddam 23
 Hyde, Marina 183
- Insall, Roger 9, 30
 Iqbal, Fahim 221
 Iqbal, Rajah 221
- Iredale, Rosemary 221
 Ireland, Harry 122-3
 Issitt, Sarah xi, 40, 63-5, 67-8
- Jarvis, Mike 117
 Jobson, Robert 166
 Johnson, Boris 149-150
 Johnson, Graham 9n, 143ff
 Jones, Gary 30, 41
 Jones, Meirion 112, 188
 Jones QC, Alun 45-7, 69, 72-4
 Jowell, Tessa 119
- Kanyare, Abdurahman 103-5
 Kark QC, Tom 123
 Kashyap, Joginder 222
 Kashyap, Rani 222
 Katz, Ian 155
 Keating, Rosamond 106
 Keeler, Christine 25-6,
 Kelsey-Fry QC, John 89, 181n, 191
 Kemp, Ross 66-7, 157, 201
 Kempson, Trevor 8, 26-7
 Khalid, Usman 13
 Kidd, Jodie 45n, 50-1, 203
 Kitson, Judge David 107
 Knightley, Keira 182
 Kray, Charles 34
 Kray, Ronnie 35
 Krifsha, Luli Azem (Lulesim Balliu) 80, 84-6, 88, 221
 Kumar, Suresh 222
 Kuttner, Stuart 142-3, 145-6, 201
- Lambrianou, Tony 34-5
 Lambton, Lord 27
 Leveson, Lord Justice (Brian) viii, 13n, 113, 124-5, 130, 136, 204
 Leveson Inquiry 21n, 33, 52n, 56n, 66, 93, 106, 111-2, 115, 121, 124-5, 127-8, 130, 134, 159n, 162n, 164, 184, 187, 203n, 206, 211-2
 Levine, Ray 144-5
 Levy, Norma 27
 Lewis, Arnold 26
 Lewis, Mark 118
 Linklaters (solicitors) 128ff
 Lises, Kim 221
 Lone, Tariq 222
 Ludford, Bill 22

- Macpherson, Elle 117
 Magbagbeola, Adeolu 222
 Mahmood, Farah 15
 Mahmood, Mazher 25, 127
 Childhood, schooling, early journalism 1-10
 Sunday Times controversies, departure 12-13, 17-21
 Joins *News of the World*, early period 25-28
 Suicide of man he exposed 42-3
 Risk-taking, threats 42, 136-40, 143
 Tape-recording disputes 52-3, 81, 86, 100
 Baby-for-sale story 54-58
 Pension book scandal 94-6
 Prosecution, courtroom reverses 94-105, 122-3, 127ff
 Unlawful information gathering 111ff
 Confessions book published 120, 211
 Rejoins *Sunday Times*, FGM story 121, Leveson statements, appearances 111-13, 127-29, 136, 211-12
 Name change 209-10
 Threatened 'resignation' 141-3
 Imprisonment 193, 209
 Mahmood, Shamim 2, 4, 14
 Mahmood, Sultan 2-6, 16, 140
 Mahmood, Tariq 147-8
 Mahmood, Waseem 2-7, 11, 14-16
 Mahon, Tina 68
Mail on Sunday 158, 159, 161
 Maitlis, Emily 166
 Majeed, Mazhar 173
 Major, John 31, 161
 Mao-Aweys, Dr Ali 122, 124
 Malik, Akbar Ali 38-9, 64, 72, 160, 170
 Malik, Salim 173
 Manifold, Laurie 8-9, 135
 Marr, Andrew 7, 25, 49, 97
 Marsh, Det Insp Caroline 122
 Marsh, Terry 68
 Martin, Angela 222
 Martin, Natasha 222
 Martins, Dominic 103-5
 "Marwan" 39
 Master, Iqbal 221
 Maxwell, Ghislaine 167
 McCallum, Judge Alastair 99
 McCreath, Judge Alistair 179, 186-7
 McGee, David 202
 McGrath, J A 53
 McKenna, Michelle 182
 McLean, Lenny 32n, 34, 39, 137
 McMullan, Paul 136
 McPhillips, Karen 221
 McVicar, John 146
 Mellor, David 23, 27, 28-30, 113
 Merchant, Sultan 221
 Mill QC, Ian 52
 Miller, John 39, 58, 170
 Miller, Sienna 119
 Mills, Eleanor 122
 Miskiw, Greg 29, 41n, 64, 114, 116, 141-2, 151
 Mitchell, Kevin 171
 Mitting, Mr Justice (Sir John) 149
 Mohammed, Agha 222
 Mohammed, Kutub Uddin 222
 Montgomery, Neil 74-5, 94, 221
 Mooney, Pat 51-2
 Moore, Charles 154
 Morgan, Emma 45, 47-9, 63, 143, 189, 198
 Morgan, Daniel 39n, 112,
 Morgan, Jean 141-2
 Morgan, Piers 41, 49, 96n, 115, 144, 197-8, 206
 Morgan, Robin 11
 Morris, Dominique 81n
 Morris, Deborah 73
 Mosley, Max 134, 204
 Moyle, Paul 138-9
 Muir, Hugh 148
 Mulcaire, Glenn 114, 117-8, 151-6, 202-3
 Mumtaz, Salim 221
 Mumtaz, Shafiq 221
 Murdoch, Elizabeth 205
 Murdoch, James 120, 125, 205
 Murdoch, Rupert xi, 45-7, 69, 77, 116, 119, 126, 151-2, 193, 199-200, 202-3, 205-6, 209, 211
 Acquires *News of the World* 26-27
 Management style, corporate culture 194-197
 "Dark arts" defence 126
 Closure of *News of the World* 206
 Changes company name 207
 Murtaza, Ghulam 221
 Myler, Colin 115, 128, 167, 172, 174, 203-6

- Nasib, Mohammed 221
 Neil, Andrew 20, 41n, 194
 Newcastle United FC 38-9, 164n, 170-1
News of the World (NOTW) ix, xii, 7, 23, 25, 30, 76, 77, 93, 119-20, 135, 146, 194ff
 Newton, Victoria 180, 191, 206
 Nicklin, Det Sgt Andrew 190
- O'Connor, Commander John 84
 Oliver, Jacqui 101, 109, 223
 Otton, Lord Justice 71
 Owers, Dame Anne 213
- Pacino, Al 64
 Page, Bradley 64
Panorama, BBC 47-8, 64, 112, 147, 188-9
 Parker-Bowles, Camilla 155, 161
 Pasareanu, Adrian 80-1, 84-5, 87, 89
 Pasareanu, Liana 84
 Patel, Ibrahim 221
 Patel, Imran 107
 Patel, Sunil 221
 Paxman, Jeremy 116
 Payne, Sara 200
 Pelly, Guy 152, 158
 Pennant, Gary 222
 Petherick, Jerry 138
 Pickering, Jonathan 221
 Pickles, Robert 221
 Pill, Lord Justice (Sir Malcolm) 96-7
 Pirbhai, Ismail 221
 Pontius, Judge Timothy 46, 73-4
 Prescott, John 119
 Press Complaints Commission (PCC) 27, 50, 58, 65-6, 93, 149, 154, 156, 158, 160, 162, 176-7, 197
 Price, David 89-90, 91
 Prince Andrew 164ff, 204, 220
 Prince Charles 152-4, 161, 163
 Prince Edward 23n, 159, 162
 Prince Harry 46n, 117, 151ff, 163, 201, 209, 212-14
 Princess Michael of Kent 163
 Prince William 117, 152, 158n, 163
Private Eye 26, 90
 Profumo affair 25-6
 Puddicombe, Bill 153
- Queen Elizabeth 162-3
 Qema, Besnik 61-3, 143, 94, 109, 220, 222, 224
 Qureshi, Kursheed 108
 Qureshi, Mahmood "Jaws" 32-4, 79, 81, 89, 99, 137, 139, 148
 Qureshi, Rafiq 107-9
- Rangwani, Manohar 221
 Red Mercury 103-5, 109, 184
 Rees, Jonathan 39, 112
 Rennell, Tony 13
 Rhys-Jones, Sophie (Countess of Wessex) 159ff, 164-6, 200
 Rivas, Joseph 80, 84-5, 88, 221
 Rizvi, Syed 221
 Robbins, Judge Stephen 67
 Rose, Ben 183
 Rusbridger, Alan 97-8
 Russo, Antonio 221
- Sala, George Augustus 49
 Salunkhe, Prakash 108
 Samrai, Paul 32n, 37-8, 57
 Sander, Kuldip Singh 101, 221
 Shah, Anant 221
 Shearer, Alan 170-1
 Shaikh, Insp Rahim 108
 Shepherd, Freddy 170-1
 Shrimley, Bernard 10
 Silcock, Bryan 20
 Singh Heer, Parghat 221
 Singh, Mohinder 221
Shumdog Millionaire 107-9, 177, 203
 Smith, Alan 32n, 35-6, 63, 69, 95n, 137-140, 182, 184ff
 Smith, Alex 70, 94, 221
 Smith, Judge Simon 87
 Solley QC, Stephen 104
 Somerfield, Stafford 25, 26
 Sondheim, Stephen 10
 Sorin, Jay (Rusu) 80-2, 84-5, 88
 Southern Investigations 29, 39, 112, 114
 Spencer, Earl 197
 Spraggen, John 139
 Stallone, Sylvester 112
 Stelzer, Irwin 196
 Stephenson, Sir Paul 125, 174
 Stevens, Sir John 88, 213
 Stewart-Moore, Christopher 53

- Stone, Lindsey 54-5, 57
 Stronge, Thomas (Ben) 26, 42-3
Sun on Sunday 126, 179-80, 183, 191, 209, 212, 214
Sunday Mirror 97, 116, 203
Sunday People (The People) 8-9, 11-12, 23, 29-30, 54, 88, 97, 116, 117, 135, 183
Sunday Telegraph 169
Sunday Times 8, 9, 11-12, 17-23, 28, 38, 121-25, 129, 144, 179, 188, 196, 210-12
 Sutton, Ricky 144
 Sweeney, John ix, 64, 112, 188-9
 Syed, Matthew 172
- Tajh Khan, Mohamed 221
 Taylor, Gordon 118, 205
 Taylor, Sir Teddy 39
The Guardian 74, 90, 97, 115, 119, 124, 148, 154-5, 158, 162, 171, 183, 192, 202, 207
The Independent 97, 100, 117, 192
The Observer 11
The Scotsman 91
The Sun 48, 160, 196, 200-01
The Times 162, 164, 192, 196, 197, 198
 Thomas, Jerry 22
 Thurlbeck, Neville 120, 136n, 138-9, 160, 162, 204-5
 Thwaites, Stefan 71-4, 221
 Tonnesson, Brenda 70-1, 94, 109, 221
 Turcu, Alin (Bogdan Stefan Maris) 34n, 79n, 80-1, 84-5, 88-91, 191n
 TV-am 21-23
- Valvona, Terry 221
 Varey, Gareth 181-2
- Wade, Rebekah (See Brooks, Rebekah)
 Walker, Johnnie 105-6, 109, 221
 Wallis, Neil 25, 128, 140-41
 Wardell, Norman 221
 Warren, Frank 39
 Watson, Tom 113
 Weatherup, James 120, 202n
 Webb, Derek 113, 124
 Webb, Duncan 135
 Weir, David 221
 Wessex, Countess (see Rhys-Jones, Sophie)
 Wickham, David 8
 Williams, Michael 13, 19-21, 28
- Witheridge, Annette 31-2, 167
 Witherow, John 12, 120n, 121, 128, 212
 Wooding, David 126
 Woodward, Louise 146
 Wright, Ian 171
 Wyatt, Woodrow 41, 197-8
- Yates, Asst Commissioner John 119, 125
 Yau, San Keung 221
 Yelland, David 200
 Yeo, Tim 31
 York, Duchess of (see Ferguson, Sarah)
 Yousif, Mohammed 221
 Younis, Waqar 175
- Zee 40, 108, 109n, 177
 Zia-ul-Haq, Muhammad 13

**NEWS OF THE
WORLD**

**THE
Sun
ON SUNDAY**


THE SUNDAY TIMES

*"I have now spoken to police officers who say they were misled
by Murdoch's empire. I won't let this rest."*

— Gordon Brown

*"This culture ... permeated from the top throughout the
organisation ... speaks volumes about the lack of
effective corporate governance at News Corporation and News
International. We conclude, therefore, that Rupert Murdoch
is not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major
international company."*

— House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee

*"The whole ideology of the News of The World is
based on the truth."*

— Rebekah Brooks

*"Rebekah won't have liked the results of the fishing
expedition. There was no evidence that Prince Harry was using
drugs, soft, hard or otherwise."*

— Glenn Mulcaire

"Lies, I said. All lies."

— Prince Harry

*Barrister: "Does Mr Murdoch approve of this activity
(buying cocaine)?"*

Mazher Mahmood: "He obviously does, yes."

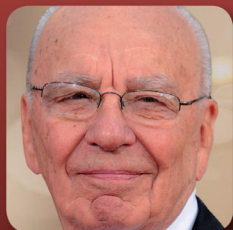
— R v Hardwicke court case

*"In all my years, I have not come across a single Asian villain
who has simply turned to me and said, 'It's a fair cop, guv'. Even
when faced with overwhelming evidence, my Asian brethren try
to either lie or talk their way out of it."*

— Mazher Mahmood

FOR A QUARTER of a century the “Fake Sheikh” was Rupert Murdoch’s most famous British reporter — until he was sent to prison for conspiring to pervert the course of justice.

ROGUE presents shocking new evidence senior Murdoch executives knew all along Mazher Mahmood was a dangerous journalist — a man willing to lie to see his victims convicted.



“Mr Mahmood carries on with great style the long tradition of investigative journalism at the News of the World.”

— Rupert Murdoch

“The whole ideology of the News of The World is based on the truth.”

— Rebekah Brooks



“Lies, I said. All lies.”

— Prince Harry

“Roy Greenslade and Paddy French have pulled together the whole sordid story of this liar with a press card, a man happy to ruin lives and be handsomely rewarded by the ruthless corporation which made money out of his stories.”

— Nick Davies, former special correspondent
of *The Guardian*.



BALLYARR

ISBN 978-1-7391022-1-0



9 781739 102210 >

Price: UK £15.00