

Did News Corp. properties break any U.S. laws?

Editors at the *New York Post* pulled junior staffers into two closed-door meetings on Tuesday and told them, "We have to be on our P's and Q's and not engage in any kind of obvious, unethical journalistic things," according to a source close to the *Post*.

Which is perhaps to be expected. As the British phone hacking scandal that has brought Rupert Murdoch's media empire to its knees continues to engulf the embattled mogul and his U.K. company, one question is riveting American media watchers and lawmakers: What, exactly, went down in Murdoch's U.S. newsrooms?

For its part, the FBI is [launching an investigation](#) into allegations that the *News of the World* hacked into 9/11 victims' phones, the AP reports. According to sources who have worked at the *Post*, such an investigation may not reveal *News of the World*-style hacking by News Corp's U.S. properties, but would expose a pattern of unethical practices and methods. "Everything else," one source tells *Adweek*, would come out. "It's hardly below the surface."

Just as in the U.K., the U.S. newsrooms have been places that have tolerated and often encouraged behavior that has teetered over the line of ethical behavior. This has included reporters who have lied about the fact they are journalists, treated cops to trips to strip clubs, hacked into social network accounts of crime victims, and accepted bribes from sources—and not been fired.

The *Post* has endorsed a policy which allows reporters to lie about their identities in order to gain information. And it has involved a pattern of rewarding people who supply the paper with information and other benefits and punishing those who don't.

While the *Post* itself may not hack phones, insiders also say that it has not been uncommon for the tabloid to refer certain stories to the *News of the World*, which then developed them on its own and which the *Post* would subsequently run with.

But hacking Facebook accounts is something the *Post* would routinely do, according to two former photographers. The photographers, who spoke on condition of anonymity, describe one reporter gaining access to accounts for private information in crime victims' social networks, including at least one person who had been involved in a sex scandal.

The photographers, and several other former employees, say they had been regularly asked to conceal their identity as journalists, and to lie and sneak their way into a hospital room and an apartment building—dressing up as a doctor in the former case and as a Consolidated Edison employee in the latter.

As for graft, in 2007, then-Page Six editor Richard Johnson (current editor of Murdoch's *The Daily*) [admitted to accepting \\$1,000 in cash](#) from restaurateur Nello Balan. "Richard Johnson made a grave mistake in accepting cash from Nello Balan," *Post* editor Col Allan said in a statement that March. "After he informed me of his error in judgment, he was reprimanded, and policies were adopted that render such ethical lapses completely unacceptable."

"Frankly, if you want to learn the worst practices in journalism, there's no better place than at the *New York Post*," says another former reporter who also spoke on the condition of anonymity. "But criminality? No."

A coterie of ex-*New York Post* employees and Fox News confidants have painted a picture for *Adweek* of a sleazy news-gathering culture more than happy to routinely bend ethical rules, if not break the law.

Private Eyes Are Watching You?

“We definitely got a lot of material from private eyes,” says former Page Six gossipmonger Jared Paul Stern, who *was* fired for trying to exhort money from a subject he was writing about.

The use of private investigators is where *News of the World* got into hot water in the first place: Glenn Mulcaire, a private investigator retained by Murdoch's British tabloid, was charged by the Metropolitan Police in 2006 with intercepting voicemail messages left for members of the British Royal Family. Further investigating implicated other journalists and staff at the paper; eventually, thousands of citizens and numerous politicians and celebrities were found to have been targeted by the interceptions.

So far the *Post* has dodged hacking charges, although several members of Congress have asked the Justice Department to investigate whether U.S. laws were broken, particularly in relation to any attempt to hack in to the phones of 9/11 victims.

“There’s not much the *Post* wouldn’t stoop to, really,” adds Stern, who left the paper in 2006 after getting caught asking billionaire businessman Ron Burkle for money in exchange for keeping negative information about him out of the *Post*.

One name ex-*Posties* have connected to the paper as a source is Beau Dietl, a former New York cop-cum-private-investigator-cum-security-pundit on Murdoch’s Fox News.

Contacted by *Adweek*, Dietl demurred. “I’ve never been asked to do anything like phone tapping, honestly never,” he says. “I’m a former law enforcement officer. We don’t commit crimes and that’s a crime. That’s a felony. I’m very strong into the anti-hacking. They should all be locked up over there, whoever did it.”

Importing Reporting Tactics

Whoever “did it” may be no stranger to New York. *Post* alums recount an unofficial paper policy of exchanging News Corp. employees with British and Australian writers and editors from Murdoch’s overseas newspaper arm, News International. “There really was a lot of cycling through, a lot of Brits and Australians at the paper,” says Stern. “They had all come from other Murdoch papers.”

Most notable among them are Emily Smith, the *Post*’s gossip editor and former *Sunscribe*, and especially Col Allan, the *Post*’s combusive editor in chief—“an ogre,” Stern called him, who is in daily contact with Murdoch himself, according to several at the paper.

Another former *Post* reporter who subsequently moved into television suggests the entire culture of the paper changed when Allan came on board in 2001. “We had been considered a little dicey because we would do stuff like sneak into apartment buildings, renegade stuff,” he says today. “The Aussies came in and they looked at us as a joke. They were arrogant and ambitious. One of them was a really nice guy. Col Allan is a total prick.”

Explains a different former *Post* employee, “It’s another culture because you don’t pay for news here like they do.”

Nobody *Adweek* contacted for this story had any knowledge of phone hacking or pay for play. But the Murdoch maelstrom has just barely reached these shores. Stay tuned for more news of the world.

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