

The BBC Falls for Murdoch's Bait

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Global Research, July 14, 2023

Region: [Europe](#)

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It should be called for what it is. The recent apoplectic, lurid coverage of what was, at best, a matter for a corporation's human resources department dominating several news cycles even as drownings continued in the Mediterranean, war continued being waged in Ukraine and climate change continued issuing ominous reminders of its existence.

The issue at hand? Allegations that a BBC presenter, said to be a "household name", had paid £35,000 to a youth over a period of several years in return for sexually explicit photos. The payments are said to have started when the young person in question was 17, leading to questions about whether a crime had taken place in the making, sharing or possessing of incident images.

The story made [its debut](#) in that king of rags, *The Sun*. The howls followed. As an article headline read: "Top BBC star who 'paid child for sex pictures' could be charged by cops and face years in prison, expert says."

Within a few days, three issues started to thump and pulsate in the mediascape: whether the as yet unnamed presenter had solicited the images in the first place; whether the BBC had shown indifference in ignoring the complaints of that behaviour by a concerned family member; and whether the entire matter was, according to the lawyer representing the young person, "rubbish".

The whole affair led to various episodes of sheer terror within the BBC itself, with Jeremy Vine, a colleague of the still unnamed presenter [demanding](#) the identity be revealed in order to stop "yet more vitriol being thrown about at perfectly innocent colleagues at his", placing the broadcaster "on its knees".

The BBC found itself in a bizarre, masochistic bind of constantly covering itself, repeatedly running stories on the matter, including a report on July 11 that a second young individual had supposedly received abusive messages from the presenter via a dating app. Much of this was put down to journalistic integrity, not wishing to sweep such matters under the carpet.

More details emerged, even as the NATO summit in Vilnius continued. The unnamed person was outed as BBC anchor Huw Edwards. On July 12, it was revealed by his wife, Vicky Flind, that he had been hospitalised, suffering a mental breakdown – the handiwork, it was claimed, of *The Sun*'s lurid coverage. But what also emerged was that the police had found no evidence or grounds to suggest that a crime had been committed. The whole matter had been an issue of outing the private life of a public figure.

The excuses and apologies are thickening over the reasons for the coverage, fed by platoons of analysts, journalists, and pundits. The BBC, [reasons](#) former president of CBS, Howard Stringer, is “always at the centre of the storm because of its power.” It's seen, like the monarchy, “as a symbol of continuity in a polarised society.” Edwards, having himself broken the news of Queen Elizabeth II's death, having led BBC coverage of King Charles III's coronation, and having been an anchor of BBC News at Ten, “captured that sense of stability.”

A far better reading of this was that the BBC had fallen for the bait crudely laid out by Murdoch's less savoury publications. In its self-policing zeal, the corporation had effectively done the bidding of a tabloid. In doing so, former editor of *The Guardian* Alan Rusbridger [suggested](#) it had “lost its sense of proportion”. The BBC, he observed, “gets into this mindset where it feels it must make up for sluggishness in handling issues by showing a clean pair of hands in covering them.” Such a mindset was well aided by the conduct of previous employees, such as the late comedian and predatory Jimmy Savile, whose conduct was only exposed after his death in 2011.

While its own management regarding complaints was hardly beyond rebuke – the BBC director-general, Tim Davie, did [only involve himself](#) in the matter after *The Sun* put additional allegations from the mother to the broadcaster on July 6 – the colossal canvas here is obvious. This was a salvo fired by the Murdoch Empire.

Since the 1980s, Murdoch has done venomous battle with public broadcasters through his various press outlets, with the BBC being foremost among his targets. In his own, [revealing words](#), “A monopoly is a terrible thing – until you get one.”

In 1985, a sense of Murdoch's attitude to the corporation was made clear in a January leader in *The Times*. “The BBC,” [it went](#), “should not survive this parliament in its present size, in its present form and with its present terms of reference intact.” The implications were all there: cutting, trimming, slimming.

Again, the same view is to be found on July 17, 2015 in the paper's [leader](#) titled “Slimming Auntie,” this time in response to the [DCMS Green Paper on BBC Charter renewal](#). The nub of the issue: the BBC's boggling power, aided by public funds. “The corporation is a broadcaster, not a publisher. It cannot expect a renewed charter to endorse a status quo that lets it trample on private sector rivals with public funds. Technology has allowed the BBC to expand as if on steroids.”

Such opinions stem from an individual who presided over the now defunct *News of the World*, a central outlet in the phone-hacking scandal that eventually saw the demise of Britain's most popular lavatory reading. It catalysed the Leveson Inquiry, which managed to at least get a confession from Murdoch that the paper had been engaged in a cover-up over the extent of the phone hacking.

On May 1, 2012, a UK parliamentary select committee report found that the media mogul “exhibited wilful blindness to what was going on in his companies and publications” and concluded that he was “not a fit person to exercise the stewardship of a major international company”. Such an exemplary steward for public interest journalism.

The Sun, for its part, [denies ever suggesting](#) the need for a criminal inquiry in the Edwards saga. Just see its journalism as doing a public duty, aiding desperate parents. “From the outset, we have reported a story about two very concerned and frustrated parents who made a complaint to the BBC about the behaviour of a presenter and payments from him that fuelled the drug habit of a young person.” How very noble of them.

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