

# NY Times Dragged Into Sex Scandal At The BBC: Who Knew What When And/Or Forgets What They Knew

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Region: [Europe](#)

*I was on the BBC's World Have Your Say radio show discussing their high-profile sex scandal that is now getting reported in the US press. It involves a former, very popular and now very departed TV host named Jimmy Saville who has been accused of predatory child abuse, if not rape, of young girls and boys during 40 years as a celebrity presenter.*

- Listen to the BBC podcast <http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/whys>

Saville was an icon, even knighted by the Queen. He had apparently bragged and hinted at what he was up to with pride to colleagues but nothing was done to rein him in, stop his crimes, or alert the police.

Jimmy isn't alive to speak for himself although more than 200 victims have come forward to say he sexually assaulted them, Now, others in the BBC are being investigated for similar abuse as well.

But that's not really the scandal in a media that is always more consumed by its own role. The abuse of children is downplayed to a focus on how the media reported it, or didn't report it.

Tongues are clucking more about a BBC decision not to air a hard-hitting Newsnight investigation about Saville's "lifestyle." Newsnight is a program known for tough and credible investigations. Before its probe into Saville was slated to air, the episode was killed, ostensibly for unstated "journalistic reasons"

The executive who has since left, earlier praised the producers for their work, but then refused to air it— suggesting to many that other forces intervened to stop the broadcast.

The segment's producer Meiron Jones, who I happen to know because of his excellent investigative work with US journalist Greg Palast, had warned his boss back in December 2011 that that suppressing the report—especially while other BBC shows were running tributes to Saville, would lead to an explosion of criticism.

He was right, but it did take a while for this deeper story to emerge.

It's rare for one part of any media network to expose another, and there are now many incomplete investigations underway of what happened. (Many outsiders sneer at the idea of the BBC investigating itself!)

That has not stopped a torrent of criticism led by private media companies who resent the BEEB's power and popularity. After months of playing media "bad guy," the Murdoch press must be relieved to see the BBC's distress and reputation now being publicly sullied.

There are a few other unexamined points about all of this. One involves the role of the top leaders of the BBC. On Tuesday, the Director General George Entwistle defended the way the story is being handled, saying "the corporation was not trying to 'avoid answering questions' and had begun inquiries that were 'the opposite of an attempt to hide things.'"

Meanwhile the executive he replaced, former Director General Mark Thompson has just been named the President and CEO of the New York Times. He earlier denied any knowledge, "

Noted the Times that has been following this closely lest its reputation be affected: "On Oct. 13, Mr. Thompson said: 'I was not notified or briefed about the 'Newsnight' investigation, nor was I involved in any way in the decision not to complete and air the investigation. I have no reason to doubt the public statement by the program's editor, Peter Rippon, that the decision not to pursue the investigation was entirely his, and that it was made solely for journalistic reasons.'"

Yet, those "journalistic reasons" have not been disclosed. Producer Jones had warned, "I was sure the story would come out one way or another and that, if it did, the BBC would be accused of a cover-up," he said in an excerpt from the Panorama program released ahead of the main broadcast. "In fact I wrote an e-mail to Peter saying, 'The story is strong enough,' and the danger of not running it is 'substantial damage to BBC reputation.' "

The Associated Press now reports that the "New York Times Has Been Dragged Into BBC's Sex Abuse Scandal," reporting, "

"Thompson's role in the scandal has drawn the attention of The New York Times' public editor, Margaret Sullivan, who on Tuesday asked Times readers: "How likely is it that he knew nothing? A director general of a giant media company is something like a newspaper's publisher. Would a publisher be very likely to know if an investigation of one of its own people on sexual abuse charges had been killed?"

In a carefully worded paragraph that followed, she raised the issue of Thompson's fitness to serve as The New York Times chief.

"His integrity and decision-making are bound to affect The Times and its journalism — profoundly," she wrote. "It's worth considering now whether he is the right person for the job, given this turn of events."

Sullivan said while finding an answer was "not as easy as it sounds ... all these questions ought to be asked."

There is now a major damage control operation underway, in part, because the charges are so explosive.

Thompson's claim of no knowledge strains credibility.

There have also been other criticisms of earlier stories in which cases involving serious abuse charges and convictions were downplayed or not reported by the Times.

Today, at the BBC, supporters rationalize the scandal by saying sexual mores and public discussions of what were then considered “secret” behaviors were just never revealed, sanctioning what are now considered criminal activities.

Clearly, with the epidemic of the sexual abuse of children globally, more and more cases of child abductions, trafficking and abuse are being reported.

The BBC and all of our media networks have to recognize the seriousness of this crisis-how so many children violated and damaged- and act accordingly with more media visibility and calls for action.

One thing is for sure: if this happened at the BBC, you can be sure it happened elsewhere, and it is still happening in media and political institutions.

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