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Information Commissioner's Office  
Promoting public access to official information  
and protecting your personal information

## Press Release

### **Information Commissioner exposes league table of media's trade in personal information**

In a new report to Parliament the Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, today names some of the UK's newspapers and magazines discovered to have bought people's personal information in search of a story. The list is a long one and includes tabloids, broadsheets and magazines, but not all media outlets appear.

The list was assembled following the Operation Motorman raid at premises in Hampshire which led to prosecutions of private investigators. In that operation, the Information Commissioner's staff uncovered numerous invoices addressed to newspapers and magazines detailing prices for providing their journalists with pieces of personal information. Altogether, 305 journalists were identified as recipients of a wide range of information.

Richard Thomas, Information Commissioner, said: 'I repeat my call for a two year jail term to deter those convicted of trading unlawfully in personal information and I am very encouraged that the government has consulted publicly on this. The Identity Cards Act 2006 provides the blueprint with a two year custodial sentence for those unlawfully disclosing information. The same deterrent is needed protect far more sensitive information such as bank accounts, phone bills and health and criminal records.'

'People care about their personal privacy and have a right to expect that their personal details remain confidential. Who they are, where they live, who their friends and family are, how they run their lives: these are all private matters. Individuals may choose to divulge such information to others, but information about them held confidentially should not be available to anyone prepared to pay the right price.'

The Information Commissioner has recently prosecuted Sharon and Steven Anderson, and Anthony Gerald Clifford for unlawfully obtaining personal information. Whilst the prosecutions were successful, the courts were only able to impose low penalties.

Today's report, 'What Price Privacy Now?' sets out the reactions from the media, the security industry, financial bodies and government to the Information Commissioner's initial report on this subject, published in May 2006. Progress has been significant and encouraging. Overwhelmingly responses indicate support for the proposals to stamp out the unlawful trade. Many organisations have taken steps of their own to raise awareness and tighten security as well as more generally condemning the illegal trade. In particular, the Commissioner welcomes the Government's consultation on increased sentences.

Richard Thomas continued: 'This is nothing to do with curtailing freedom of speech. It is everything to do with responsible behaviour within the existing law. It has been illegal since 1994 for anyone who, whether directly or through middlemen, obtains personal information from public or private sector organisations by bribery, impersonation and similar means. There is a clear public interest defence in the Data Protection Act which means that investigative journalists and others exposing public malpractice have nothing to fear.'

The current low penalties have failed to deter an underworld market which is so active that we have been able to construct a tariff for details of mobile phone records, criminal records, bank statements and similar private information. Operation Motorman led only to conditional discharges. A custodial sentence is needed to deter people from any involvement with this trade.'

**ENDS**

If you need more information, please contact the Information Commissioner's press office on 020 7025 7580 or visit the website at: [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk)

**Notes to Editors**

1. The Information Commissioner promotes public access to official information and protects personal information. The ICO is an independent body with specific responsibilities set out in the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003.
2. The report is presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 52(2) of the Data Protection Act 1998.
3. The evidence is contained in invoices found by the Commissioner's staff during a raid at private investigator's premises in Hampshire in 2002. The Commissioner has decided to release the information following a Freedom of Information Act request.
4. The current maximum penalty at a magistrates' court for convictions under Section 55 of the Data Protection Act is a £5000 fine..
5. Recent prosecutions have resulted in Sharon Anderson being fined a total of £4,200 and Steven Anderson being fined £3,300. Each was ordered to pay a contribution to prosecution costs of £3,694. Anthony Gerald Clifford will be sentenced on 12 December.
6. The following publications are listed in the report:  
Daily Mail, Sunday People, Daily Mirror, Mail on Sunday, News of the World, Sunday Mirror, Best Magazine, Evening Standard, The Observer, Daily Sport, Sunday Times, The People, Daily Express, Weekend Magazine (Daily Mail), Sunday Express, The Sun, Closer Magazine, Sunday Sport, Night and Day (Mail on Sunday), Sunday Business News, Daily Record, Saturday (Express), Sunday Mirror Magazine, Real Magazine, Woman's Own, Daily Mirror Magazine, Mail in Ireland, Daily Star, Marie Claire, Personal Magazine, Sunday World.
7. For more information about the Information Commissioner's Office subscribe to our e-newsletter at [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk)