

NI Group Limited
G. M. Smart
Second Statement
"GMS1"
6 January 2012

**IN THE MATTER OF THE LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND
ETHICS OF THE PRESS**

**SECOND WITNESS
STATEMENT OF
GORDON MURRAY SMART**

- 1** On 14 October 2011, I made a statement in response to a section 21 notice issued to me. This statement responds to two matters raised in Christopher Atkins' witness statement dated 28 November 2011 and in his oral evidence, heard on 6 December 2011.
- 2** In paragraphs 21 and 22 of Mr Atkins' witness statement, he refers to two "fake celebrity stories" which he says were planted by his team and published in the Sun in 2009, specifically:
- (i) a story that Guy Ritchie had injured himself juggling cutlery in a restaurant, which was published on 29 March 2009; and
 - (ii) a story that Sarah Harding from Girls Aloud was secretly a fan of quantum physics, which was published on 2 April 2009.
- Copies of both stories as published appear at Exhibit GMS1.
- 3** Before turning to the stories in question, I hope it may assist the Inquiry if I first provide a little context on the sorts of prank calls and false tips that we have received in the past.
- 4** From time to time the Bizarre desk on The Sun receives e-mails or phone calls from people purporting to give us tip-offs about stories, which turn out to be false. Sometimes the same false tip-off - or a variation on it - is given to us a number of times. For example, we often receive information about a well-known divorced couple meeting up to rekindle their romance, usually on a motorway service station on the M25.
- 5** Each call we receive, we check, which can sometimes involve hours of our time being wasted. These sorts of prank tip-offs have even become something of an in-joke in showbiz journalism with PRs, because we even check the apocryphal tales. For example, every couple of months or so we are given a tip that the Beckhams have paid a couple

getting married to postpone their wedding because they want to renew their vows at the same venue, or, more recently, so they could baptise their daughter Harper Seven. We still check these stories with the Beckhams' PR agent each time we receive such a tip, just in case it happens to be the time the story is true.

6 In the past, we have also been the subject of prank calls which have then been broadcast. For example, the Radio 1 DJ Scott Mills would regularly record and broadcast "fake" stories on his drive time show and also when he stood in for Chris Moyles on the Radio 1 Breakfast show. On one occasion he called me, with his sidekick Mark Chapman, and faked a sighting of Britney Spears at a petrol station, which he went on to broadcast live on air. Following that broadcast, we received a series of copycat calls from fans of his show. Teenagers would ring in regularly with fake sightings of other celebrities and other made-up stories. The Channel 4 comedy series Fonejacker would also make sporadic calls to us from fictitious comedy characters. These were less frequent, but a call with Sean Hamilton was broadcast in 2007. Another similar series broadcast in 2010 was called Facejacker. I suspect, although I have no proof, that we were also targeted for this series.

7 In the Spring of 2009 the staff on the Bizarre desk noticed that we were being targeted with a series of what appeared to be prank calls. During this period of approximately four weeks, I believe my colleagues and I received at least five such phone calls each day during the week. We also received text messages and e-mails containing similar false tip-offs.

8 I recall that we alerted Chris Pharo, the News Editor at The Sun, and the news desk to this trend. We thought it was good practice to keep each other informed if a spate of prank calls were coming in.

Sarah Harding story

9 At around this same time, Jess Rogers, who worked on the Bizarre column, received a call from someone claiming to have information about Sarah Harding reading Stephen Hawking's then new book on quantum physics. Jess explained to the caller how much we paid for stories, and acted in an enthusiastic manner on the phone since all my staff are expected to be as polite as possible to callers and treat all potential stories professionally. Jess subsequently informed me, as department head, of the call.

10 Sarah Harding is someone who I have close relationship with. By way of example, I recently worked with her on some front page stories concerning sensitive personal issues for her – stories that I believe came about because of the trust we have built up over the years. For over two years she dated one of my close friends, so my wife and I have been out for dinner with her and her partner on a couple of occasions privately. I have also met her at a number of showbiz events. On one of these occasions, I recall that Sarah had

mentioned to me that she was considering buying a telescope, which seemed to me to fit with the tip-off we had been given.

- 11 Following the tip-off, two conversations were subsequently had with Sundraj Sreenivasan from Supersonic PR, who is the publicist for both Sarah Harding and Girls Aloud and with whom I have a good relationship, having known him since 2004. Jess spoke with him first, and relayed to him the tip-off we had been given. Mr Sreenivasan told Jess that, whilst he wouldn't ask Sarah about something so trivial, he had no issue with the story running.
- 12 I then spoke to him about the story in passing, when I was calling about another of his clients. During our conversation, I believe I recalled the story about the telescope to him and he said it was fine to run it and that it wouldn't surprise him at all if she did own the book.
- 13 Mr Atkins claims that the story was a lead on Bizarre and that, if he had charged for the story, on publication he would have received £600. Neither of these claims is correct. The story was not a lead on Bizarre; rather it was the third story on that page. In terms of payment, the story would have been worth around £100 if Mr Atkins or his colleagues had provided all of the detail. As things stood, half of the story came from my own personal knowledge of Sarah and he would only have been paid roughly £50.
- 14 The "fabricated source quote" referred to by Mr Atkins was a summary of the conversation I had had with Mr Sreenivasan, written in "Sun speak".

Guy Ritchie story

- 15 At around the same time in 2009, the most junior member of staff on Bizarre, Sophie Barnett, received a call about Guy Ritchie through a ring-in who claimed to be a waitress at Scott's restaurant in Mayfair. The caller claimed Mr Ritchie had injured himself juggling cutlery during dinner in the restaurant the previous evening.
- 16 I have a good relationship with Mr Ritchie. We have mutual friends and have spent a lot of time together socialising. I knew that he was sporting a facial injury at that time, which I had put down to his regular martial arts sessions, but I thought the story was worth following up. I rang a contact of mine, who must remain anonymous, and he confirmed that Mr Ritchie had been to Scott's that week and had in fact been under the influence and "mucking about" in the restaurant. Mr Ritchie is well-known for enjoying a night out and high jinx with his friends.
- 17 Mr Ritchie has a PR agent who looks after his film releases and we will often put professional queries to that agent rather than risk clouding my personal relationship with Mr Ritchie. However, in our experience, Mr Ritchie's agent is not always particularly quick to return calls and so on this occasion we decided to run the story on the basis of the corroboration we had got from my contact, without seeking a comment from his agent on it.

In making this decision, I also had regard to the fact that the story was not in my view a damaging one.


- 18 It is worth adding that quite often the material in Bizarre is fairly trivial. I see the pages as a place to entertain our readers. The Sun is a mass market newspaper and part of my job on the column is to intersperse some of the more serious news stories with more light-hearted entertainment. These sorts of stories are typically written in a lively way, with colourful language in the vernacular. Both of these stories were of that nature, and both were minor stories – the Guy Ritchie story was, for example, one short paragraph in a piece about Geri Halliwell.

The release of Starsuckers

- 19 With the release of Starsuckers we learnt that the both of the stories were fake. That is something that we take very seriously at The Sun. I recall that Dominic Mohan, the Editor, rang me whilst I was on holiday to request an explanation from me as to why the stories had been published. This episode served to reiterate the importance of checking anonymous tips particularly thoroughly, and I also took the opportunity to remind my staff about the importance of rigorous questioning of any ring-ins.
- 20 I don't recall ever being approached for a comment from Mr Atkins about either the Sarah Harding story or the Guy Ritchie story prior to or following the broadcast of his documentary. With permission from the Editor I would have happily explained to Mr Atkins the basis on which we ran the stories.

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed



Dated

08.01.12

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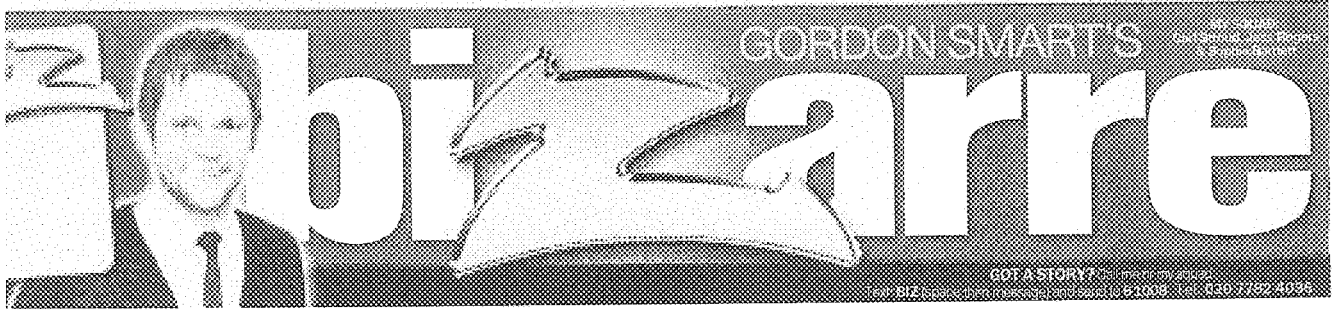
EXHIBIT "GMS1"

This is the exhibit marked "GMS1" referred to in the second witness statement of Gordon Murray Smart dated the 6th day of January 2012.



Date 02 April 2009
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SARAH'S A BOFFIN

I THOUGHT SARAH HARDING's bedtime reading wouldn't stretch much further than the latest guide to London's nightlife.

But the **GIRLS ALONG** star is a secret stargazer with much weightier tomes on her bedside table. Yes, Camden's most glamorous caner reads mind-boggling books about astronomy and quantum physics.

Top of her current reading list is brain box **STEPHEN HAWKING's** *A Brief History Of Time*.

A source said: "There's a lot more going on under that blonde barnet than Sarah's given credit for. She's a smart cookie and does read an awful lot."

The Lancashire lass is so keen to stimulate her grey matter that she has even bought a telescope.

The Bucks house she shares with fella **TOM CRANE** has a huge skylight — so she can probe the skies to her heart's content.

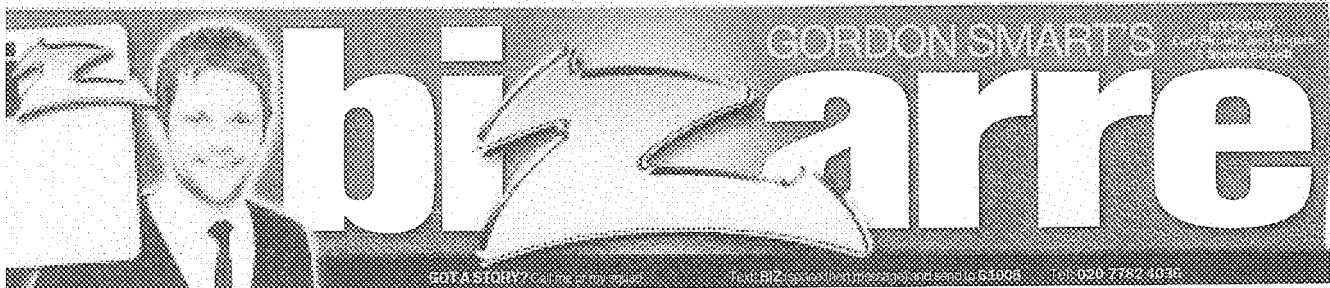


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Geris new House mate

GIVEN that GERI HALLIWELL is wired to the moon, I'm amazed that just two weeks after her latest aborted romance she has found yet another fella.

The ex-Ginger Spice scrubs up OK but I thought this time round she'd be on the singles market for ages before any bloke dared get involved with her.

Earlier this month she binned Italian yacht tycoon FABRIZIO POLITI after meeting him only last December then getting engaged over Christmas.

Now she is already going out again with her ex NICK HOUSE. Geri and entrepreneur Nick – who has a share in London clubs Mahiki and Whisky Mist – dated briefly last December before she found Fabrizio.

Fun

Now pals say they are dating again. One told me: "Geri is out for fun now she has split from Fabrizio. She enjoys Nick's company. They click."

They met up at GUY RITCHIE's pub The Punchbowl, in London's Mayfair, after knocking 'em dead in a gold frock at The Boat That Rocked premiere.

Guy was seen leaving with a black eye – picked up juggling clumsily with cutlery after one drink too many while dining with pals at Mayfair restaurant Scott's the other night.

Geri and Nick left The Punchbowl separately, *right*, to avoid being snapped on their way to new Chelsea club Tini, where they partied until 1am. *You're a brave man, Mr House.*

