

NI Group Limited
J Ungoed-Thomas
First Statement
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**IN THE MATTER OF THE LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND
ETHICS OF THE PRESS**

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF
JON UNGOED-THOMAS**

(1) Who you are and brief summary of your career history.

- 1** I am chief reporter at the Sunday Times and have worked since for the newspaper since January 1998. As chief reporter, I work on investigations for general news stories, cover political stories and report on major breaking news stories, including major crime stories. I report to the Managing Editor (News). I previously worked as a general news reporter on the Daily Mirror and the Daily Mail.
- 2** I trained on the Eastern Daily Press/Eastern Evening News and National News Agency, a London agency which provides articles to national newspapers and other outlets. A significant proportion of the stories I covered were crime related and involved interviewing police officers. I studied newspaper journalism at City University before joining my first newspaper.
- 3** The Sunday Times, as a weekly paper, does not have a designated crime reporter as a daily newspaper would. It will pick up on crime and police matters where they are breaking news or a major story. Often we will follow a story which has been developing during the week and look to find a new angle or development. I will often be deployed on such stories, and will help the newsdesk co-ordinate the coverage, in addition to my reporting role.

Relations between the Media and the Metropolitan Police

(2) What have been your impressions, over the years, about the culture of relations between the Metropolitan Police Service and the media?

- 4** My view is that the Metropolitan Police press bureau carefully restricts access to officers and senior officers. I consider that more informal access to officers - often just by telephone - was more often permitted when I first started working in London. It is now more likely that such an approach by a journalist - for example approaching a senior investigating officer on a murder case for comment - is referred to the press office in the

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first instance. The press office does provide a fast and professional response to journalists and is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This is particularly important for a Sunday paper.

(3) Describe the personal contact which you had with the Metropolitan Police at the various stages of your career. The Inquiry would like an overall picture of the type, frequency, duration and content of your contact with the Metropolitan Police.

5 As a general news reporter working in London for the daily papers, National News, the Daily Mirror and the Daily Mail, I had frequent contact with officers, often at the scenes of crime or by telephone. I wrote articles on major crimes and approached Metropolitan Police officers for interviews for more information on a crime-related story such as a murder. I also often spoke to police officers outside court where a hearing was taking place when preparing articles for publication on a court case, to check facts such as the outcome of the hearing or the next steps in a case. Officers involved on the case would provide useful background on the investigation. Information which would otherwise be the subject of a reporting restriction under the Contempt of Court Act for example, would sometimes be provided by a police officer on the case outside court on the basis that it could be used only in the event of a conviction, or it would be provided after the case had concluded. Officers in my view provide this information ahead of time to ensure that the press is informed in some detail of how the investigation was conducted, and the background of the defendants, on the understanding that the contempt laws and the other restrictions are in play. It involves a degree of co-operation and trust, but the officers also know that the reporters and the editors of their newspapers are legally bound not to publish anything that might undermine the trial.

6 At the Sunday Times, I have worked on a wide range of stories which have involved close contact with the Metropolitan Police, ranging from the 7 July 2005 London bombings to the criminal investigation into honours recommended for businessmen who had given loans to the Labour Party. While working on these stories, I normally made inquiries of the police through the press bureau.

7 The Sunday Times may wish to look in depth at one specific aspect of police work. In these cases, I ask for a briefing directly from an officer by approaching the press bureau for direct contact or may approach an officer directly. I have in one case, for example, been given the contact details of a senior officer by another contact which enabled me to ring the officer directly.

8 A briefing might be for background only, which means I would not attribute any of the information to the officer unless that was agreed later, or it might be on-the-record in which case I could attribute all of the comments to the officer.

- 9 It would typically be suitable to have a background briefing if the newspaper was interested in a specific subject -- such as human trafficking -- but did not have a specific article in mind. It provides a forum in which an officer -- who might be accompanied by a press officer -- can speak freely without the concern that everything he says will be considered for publication.
- 10 If I am researching a specific article for publication, I would ask for an on-the-record interview. For example, I researched an article last year which involved speaking to a number of ticketing experts about the Olympics and the risk of the games being targeted by touts. A press officer arranged an on-the-record briefing with an officer who was looking at the issue of combating ticket touts.
- (4) **Without prejudice to the generality of question (3) above, please set out the contact which you have had with the person occupying at any given time the following posts giving, as best you can remember, the dates and summarising the gist of the communication which you had with:**
- a. **the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.**
 - b. **the Deputy Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.**
 - c. **Assistant Commissioners of Police of the Metropolis.**
 - d. **Deputy Assistant Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.**
 - e. **Head of Public Affairs.**

In each case, who initiated the contact, and why?

- 11 I have had not had any individual direct contact with the person occupying the post of Metropolitan Police Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Assistant Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police, Deputy Assistant Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police or the Head of Public Affairs of the Metropolitan Police during my time as a national newspaper reporter.
- (5) **Did you ever have the personal mobile telephone number of home telephone number of the people listed at a-e above?**
- 12 I have never held the home telephone numbers or mobile telephone numbers of any of the individuals holding the posts of Metropolitan Police Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Assistant Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police, Deputy Assistant Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police of the Head of Public Affairs of the Metropolitan Police.

- (6) **Describe what you were seeking to gain from the Metropolitan Police through your personal contacts with MPS personnel.**
- 13 Contact made with Metropolitan Police officers is to gather information for articles beyond the information already known to the press and in the public domain. The details provided in police press bulletins issued by the press bureau will often be scant on detail. An interview with an officer involved in the case can help provide that much-needed detail to write an informative and interesting article. An interview with a senior officer can also provide quotes for the article, again to make it a more engaging read rather than a perfunctory crime report. Interviews would typically be secured through the press bureau, but I have on many occasions approached investigating officers directly.
- 14 The press bureau – if it agrees to the request - would arrange a briefing at a suitable time once I had explained the purpose of the interview. A senior officer approached directly might agree immediately to provide information, but it might be for background only. He also might first check with a press officer before speaking to me or refer my inquiry to the press bureau.
- (7) **Describe in general terms and using illustrative examples what you consider the Metropolitan Police has been seeking from you in personal dealings with them during your career.**
- 15 The press office sometimes makes senior officers available for interview to highlight particular issues of concern for the force, or on which they believe there ought to be increased public awareness. On this basis I have, for example, met Metropolitan Police officers involved in investigating stalking offences and computer crime. During an investigation into child trafficking and benefit fraud which was published in August 2009, I was given a briefing by a senior officer from the Metropolitan Police working on Operation Golf, then tasked with tackling organised crime and child trafficking. The purpose of the briefing was to highlight the successes of the operation and the need for similar anti-trafficking operations to be properly funded. I approached a senior officer directly, who was known to a contact of mine. He checked with his press officer and then agreed to provide me with a briefing, which was partly background and partly on-the-record. No press officer was present at the interview.
- 16 The most common reason for a briefing is where police are very keen to generate publicity around a particular incident or crime, such as an unsolved murder or a robbery. Officers need and actively seek media publicity by way of scheduled press briefings to make people aware of the crime and highlight their appeals for information.

(8) To what extent do you accept, and have you accepted, hospitality from the Metropolitan police?

17 To the best of my recollection, I have not accepted any hospitality from the Metropolitan Police, nor offered it, apart from coffees in meetings and at press conferences. After nearly two decades working for national newspapers, I may have on occasion bought an officer a drink, for example after a court hearing and perhaps meeting them in a bar while covering a major story, but I cannot recall any specific occasion where I have done this.

(9) Insofar as you accept, or have accepted, hospitality from the MPS, what is, or was, the nature of the hospitality that you provide or have provided?

18 See my answer to question 8 above.

(10) To what extent do you, or have you, provided hospitality for the Metropolitan Police?

19 See my answer to question 8 above.

(11) Insofar as you provide, or have provided hospitality for the Metropolitan Police, what is, or was, the nature of hospitality that you provide, or have provided?

20 See my answer to question 8 above.

(12) Have you ever attended a formal press conference called by the MPS? If so, for what purpose was it called and do you think that it was valuable?

21 I have never attended a formal Metropolitan Police press conference while at The Sunday Times. One key role of a Sunday newspaper journalist is to dig out exclusive angles on a news story. Press conferences are obviously widely covered by other media outlets and will typically not be the most productive use of time for a senior Sunday newspaper reporter who is helping to co-ordinate the coverage and is trying to cover a fast-moving and significant story. During a major incident, I usually brief a freelance to cover such press conferences or ask the newsdesk to assign a general news reporter to cover the press conference. The general news reporter would typically phone the press bureau to check details about the press conference and would then file his article to the newsdesk, a copy of which would be sent to me.

Relations with Other Police Forces

(13) What have been your impressions, over the years, about the culture of relations between police forces other than the MPS and the media?

22 In the last five years my view is that many police press offices have tried to discourage police officers being directly approached in the first instance, but to establish themselves as the first point of contact for all journalists and to increase their role. Ten or fifteen years ago, it was possible to approach officers directly and check information or even conduct a

- short interview for publication. Such inquiries are now often directed to the press office and it is more difficult in my experience to get direct access to officers. Previously it would be possible to quickly work out which police station or incident room was dealing with a specific incident and approach that station directly to ask an officer for an interview.
- 23** Police forces have however become much more aware of the need to provide a steady supply of information to reporters during a major incident or after a major crime where they are seeking information. They choose to do this through regular press office releases, press conferences and arranging interviews with the victims of crime or their families.
- (14) Have you had personal contact at Chief Constable, Deputy Chief Constable, or Assistant Chief Constable level? If so, as best you can remember, please state the dates and summarise the gist of such communications.**
- 24** I have interviewed very senior officers on major crime stories. For example, I met with Jacqui Cheer, the then-Assistant Chief Constable of Essex police while covering the murders in Ipswich at the end of 2006, and interviewed David Stephens, the then-Chief Constable of Essex police, while covering the Stansted hijacking in February 2000. Both of these interviews were arranged by press officers whom I contacted at the respective police forces
- (15) Describe the personal contact which you had with other police forces at the various stages of your career. The Inquiry would like an overall picture of the type, frequency, duration and content of your contact with other police forces.**
- 25** As a local reporter, I sometimes had daily contact with police officers or press officers at Norfolk and Suffolk Police. A typical meeting comprised an officer providing details of crimes on my patch in which the police were appealing for information.
- 26** During my career on the National News Agency, Daily Mirror and Daily Mail, I interviewed senior police officers investigating major crimes on a routine basis. I often contacted senior investigating officers by telephone who would provide me with information about a major crime they were investigating. I would typically establish the police station which was dealing with the incident or the investigating officer, which might be detailed in the press bureau press release, and phone the station directly, identify myself as a journalist and ask to speak to the investigating officer.
- (16) Describe what you were seeking to gain from these contacts with other police forces.**
- 27** In each case when I contacted officers directly for information, I was seeking information on major crimes or incidents to investigate a story with a view to the publication of an article.

(17) Describe in general terms and using illustrative examples what you consider that other police forces have been seeking from you in personal dealings with them during your career.

28 One of the key driving factors for police officers and press officers is to publicise police investigations and continuing enquiries to try to encourage further witnesses to come forward. Press conferences with the families of victims of crime are often arranged to ensure a large amount of publicity and to emphasise appeals for information. Sometimes the police are keen to flag a specific aspect of a crime on which they are appealing for information.

(18) To what extent do you accept, and have you accepted, hospitality from other police forces?

29 To the best of my recollection, I have neither accepted hospitality from other police forces nor offered it, apart from coffees in meetings. After more than two decades working for local and national newspapers, I may have on occasion bought an officer a drink, for example after a court hearing and perhaps meeting them in a bar while covering a major story, but I cannot recall any specific occasion where I have done this.

(19) Insofar as you accept, or have accepted, hospitality from other police forces, what is, or was, the nature of the hospitality that you accept, or have accepted?

30 See my answer to question 18 above.

(20) To what extent do you, or have you, provided hospitality for other police forces or any of their personnel?

31 See my answer to question 18 above.

(21) Insofar as you provide, or have provided hospitality to other police forces, or any of their personnel, what is, or was, the nature of the hospitality that you provide, or have provided?

32 See my answer to question 18 above.

General Matters

(22) Have the police ever formally or informally ever given you prior notification about proposed arrests, raids or other action? If so, please elaborate.

33 I have on one occasion recently been provided with prior notice of a raid. The information was provided in confidence and I would not wish to comment further, but it was done through a press office with the approval of senior officers. I do not recollect ever being given prior notification of a raid or arrest apart from this occasion.

(23) Have you ever been offered "off-the-record" briefings by the police? If so, please elaborate.

34 Yes, I have been offered off-the-record briefings probably fewer than 10 times in the last five years, all of which have involved a face-to-face meeting.

35 Such briefings are confidential and revealing confidential sources without their permission is against the PCC Code of Conduct and my employment contract. It is also unethical for a reporter who has been provided with an off-the-record briefing to disclose the source and content of that briefing. The value of such briefings is that it allows officers to speak freely and provide useful intelligence, without being nervous that anything they say might be published. The information helps provide useful background and credibility to an article, and helps the reporter understand the intelligence on which police officers may base their assertions.

(24) What mechanisms, if any, are in place in your workplace to monitor and record hospitality as between the police on one hand and you, or your fellow journalists on the other?

36 I disclose contacts to whom I have provided hospitality in my expenses forms. Under News International's editorial expenses policy (which I understand has been provided to the Inquiry and has the reference MOD100015807), I must have approval from the Managing Editor (News) and the legal department before offering significant hospitality to police officers. I have not sought approval because I have not offered any hospitality to police officers.

(25) What training, guidance, policies and/or practices are in place in your workplace governing contact between you and your fellow journalists on the one hand [and] the police on the other?

37 News Corporation's anti-bribery and anti-corruption policy, of which an amended version was issued in September 2011 (which I understand has been provided to the Inquiry and has the reference MOD100014805), governs payments to officials. My employment contract also states that I must act lawfully and in accordance with the PCC Code of Conduct. Good journalistic practice is expected in all sections of the newsroom and reporters are expected to be able to explain the nature of their sources and how they have followed leads to their News Editor during an investigation and before a story is contemplated for publication. I think the guidance at the Sunday Times is sufficient, as it is driven by the expectation of good conduct and operation within the law and is overseen by senior editorial staff, while respecting confidentiality of sources.

- (26) **What editorial or management oversight, or control, if any, is there over communications between journalists and police at your media outlet?**
- 38 Charles Hymas, the Managing Editor (News), knows whether reporters have contact with police and provides management oversight where necessary.
- (27) **What ethical issues do you consider arise, or need to be held in mind, by a journalist communicating in the course of his or her employment with the police, or anyone serving with, or employed by, a police force?**
- 39 It is always important that information provided by the police is checked where possible to ensure it is fair and accurate. Payments should not be made to officers and the sources of any confidential briefing or information should be kept confidential.
- (28) **What payments (if any) are considered to be legitimate financial transaction between persons serving with or employed by a police force and journalists and your media outlet? Please explain.**
- 40 I would not consider any payments from me to a police officer would be a legitimate financial transaction, and have never made such payments. Other transactions would be a matter for the lawyers at Times Newspapers and News International.
- (29) **What role do you consider that the Metropolitan Police Service Directorate of Public Affairs (especially its Press Bureau) and corresponding parts of other police forces fulfil? What, in practice, do they do?**
- 41 The role of the Metropolitan Police press bureau is to respond to media inquiries, provide accurate and timely information on daily crimes and provide fast and reliable information on serious developing incidents. Other police forces often provide a meagre press office service at the weekend and duty inspectors are increasingly reluctant to give out additional information. By comparison, the Metropolitan Police press bureau is always open for inquiries. This is an invaluable resource for a Sunday newspaper.
- (30) **How, in practice, do you get access to the police?**
- 42 To get access to the police, I call the Metropolitan Police press bureau to answer any inquiries. On occasion, I will make a direct approach to an officer.
- (31) **Does the Head of Public Affairs at the Metropolitan Police Service and/or corresponding persons in other police forces act, or seek to act as gatekeepers controlling access by the media to other police personnel?**
- 43 The role of the press bureau at the Metropolitan Police Service and police forces in other parts of the country is in part to restrict access to police personnel.

(32) If so, what is your attitude to this stage of affairs?

44 I think it is fair enough that the Head of Public Affairs acts as a gatekeeper but, I expect like all journalists, feel that as a result there is not enough access, quickly enough, at key times.

(33) To what extent, in your opinion, does the MPS' Press Bureau, and corresponding parts of other police forces, exist to manage the relevant police force's corporate image in the media?

45 Managing the Metropolitan Police Service's corporate image is a significant part of the press bureau's role. Press offices in other forces fulfil a similar role. They need to ensure that they can secure the confidence of the public in what they are doing and are seen to be transparent.

(34) Is it necessary for police forces to have a press office, and what is your view as to the utility and role of police press officers?

46 It is crucial for police forces to have a press office. The key role is to ensure a steady flow of information to reporters without unnecessarily hampering operational officers with inquiries and to ensure journalists working on an in-depth story speak to the most appropriate officer at the most appropriate time.

(35) Is it common for persons working for police press offices to have a background in the media?

47 It is as far as I am aware, common for police press officers to have a background in the media.

(36) What proportion of personnel working in police press offices do you estimate have a media background?

48 See my answer to question 35 above.

(37) Is any form of media background predominantly found amongst police press officers (e.g. tabloid, broadsheet, television)?

49 My experience of most police forces is that they have a high proportion of press officers who have worked for the regional newspapers and the local media. It is the only discernible pattern I have noted in police press office recruitment.

(38) To the best of your knowledge is there any discernible patterns in the movement of personnel from the media into police press offices and vice versa?

50 See my answer to question 37 above.

About HMIC

(39) **What is your view of the recommendations contained in HMIC's recent report "Without Fear of Favour" insofar as they concern relations between the media and the police?**

51 I have concerns about all contact between journalists and reporters being recorded, as proposed in the report. This would be likely to increase officers' possible nervousness and sensitivity about talking to the media, and further restrict the flow of information. An officer who is dealing with a particular investigation or a particular aspect of crime clearly has all the information at his fingertips without it having been filtered by a press officer. A briefing from such an officer can help provide a more rounded and better informed article. Journalists are also more likely to spot a new angle on a story and get something published if they are given direct access to an officer who actually knows the subject thoroughly. A précis from a press officer is less likely to be published.

52 The report finds no evidence of endemic corruption between police and the media, but notes many officers are already "wary" of the media and refer inquiries which they are authorised to deal with to the media office. This trend is likely to be accentuated by the report's proposals. The vast majority of exchanges between journalists and police officers are proper and in the public interest, serving both the public and the police. Unnecessary restrictions on those exchanges would mean less effective communication with the public.

(40) **Do you consider that there are further or different steps which could and/or should be taken to ensure that relationships between the police and the media are and remain appropriate? Please explain when answering this question what you consider to be appropriate contact between the police and journalists in a democratic society.**

53 I think appropriate contact can include background briefings, interviews and some limited hospitality. As stated above, I think it is right that significant hospitality is recorded. However, I think officers should be given some discretion to deal with individual journalists who may be following a particular story, without recording all exchanges or every drink in a pub. For example on a major story, the journalists themselves may have useful information - they might have spoken to someone who later becomes a suspect or they might have found some key new witnesses. The exchange of information between officers on the ground and reporters on a story is important, and by suggesting a drink in a bar with a reporter might be inappropriate could result in both officers and the police missing information which might help an inquiry or might trigger a witness' memory if it was put into the public domain.

54 The flow of information from police forces which is in the public interest has in some cases been hampered by press officers because they have restricted access to officers and I would not want to see that trend continue.

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

Signed 

Dated *January 31 2012*