

The Leveson Inquiry

Witness Statement for Part 1, Module 1

WITNESS STATEMENT OF STEVE COOGAN

I, **Steve Coogan**, of C/o Collyer Bristow LLP, 4 Bedford Row, London, WC1R 4DF will say as follows:

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1. I make this statement in connection with my role as a Core Participant in the Leveson Inquiry.

Introduction

2. I learned years ago that aspects of my personal life – and for that matter my professional work - do not meet with the approval of some tabloid editors or proprietors. But I do not believe that gives them the right to hack into my voicemail, intrude into my privacy or the privacy of people who know me or print damaging lies.
3. I am an actor, comedian and writer. I never entered into a Faustian pact with the press. I did not become successful in my work through embracing or engaging in celebrity culture. I never signed away my privacy in exchange for success in what I do. I am not someone who courts press attention. I don't turn up to openings. I do not preach morality to anyone, nor do I set myself up as a role model. Readers of the press may find my personal activities entertaining but I don't see what right they have to know about these things and -- perhaps more importantly -- I am sure they have no idea of the unpleasant, underhand methods that journalists use to get these stories or the distress their methods can cause, not just to me but to innocent third parties caught up in it.
4. The following are experiences from my life over the past fifteen years which demonstrate, in my view, that bad behaviour by tabloid journalists is not an aberration but is systemic. They show that such

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journalism isn't just damaging for the people who are written about, but also for their families, friends and other innocent people associated with them. And I believe it is also dehumanizing for the readers; they do not regard the people they read about as 'real people' and therefore have no regard for how they are treated. I have grouped the experiences according to type.

Targeting other members of my family

6. The first time I was the subject of an intrusive tabloid story was in January 1996 when the Daily Mirror published two 'kiss and tell' stories about me. One was written by Kate Thornton. She wrote a cheque that was paid to a person I had had an affair with as part of getting her to 'tell all'. Thornton also doorstepped the pregnant mother of my daughter several times in a vain attempt to get her to talk. Other members of my family and my partner's family were doorstepped and harassed. Parents, grandparents, brothers, friends and work colleagues were phoned at home, at work and stopped in the street.
7. In March 1996 a journalist phoned my daughter's great-grandmother, who was in her eighties at the time. The reporter pretended to be doing a survey for the council but asked increasingly personal questions about me and about my daughter's mother. When challenged, the reporter admitted she was from the Daily Mirror. She insisted that this was the way things were done and urged the old lady to 'spill the beans so it would be over with'. The Mirror had apparently obtained the phone number by copying the sender's address from the back of a letter in the communal lobby of my flat.
8. I agreed to do a profile for the Sunday Times in 2008, ironically in the hope of redressing misrepresentations elsewhere in the press. The published interview contained several untruths and also a photograph of my children taken by a member of the paparazzi using a telephoto lens. At the time it was taken I confronted the photographer and was told he was taking photographs of something else. The photos were then sold to an agency called Big Pictures, which in turn sold them to the Sunday Times. The newspaper accepted it was wrong to publish a photo of my children without my permission and printed an apology. It was a one-inch item on page two or three and I had to tell my friends where to find it. It had

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nothing of the prominence of the offending article. The point is that these transgressions should not occur in the first place. A miniscule apology is closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

9. I want to stress in this respect, that – even though the redress available to me is inadequate - at least I have a platform to complain about what has happened, but of course ordinary people caught in the cross-fire and subject to this sort of intrusion have no such platform.

Stalking and surveillance

10. Over the years, journalists and photographers have frequently camped outside my house day and night, watching who comes and goes (the News of the World's Paul McMullan was one of them). Sometimes I have been alerted to this by generous neighbours knocking on my door to let me know about 'the men in the cars with cameras' outside my home. Some of these reporters have gone through the rubbish in my bins, and some have followed me in cars when I left home.
11. I am bringing a civil action in relation to the hacking into my voicemail. In addition to the hacking evidence, I have seen evidence in Glenn Mulcaire's notebook of amounts of money I have withdrawn from cash machines, and details of hotel bills I have paid and the payment method used. It is a staggering intrusion into my (or for that matter, anyone's) privacy.
12. I have been told by friends that journalists have visited pubs in Brighton on 'fishing expeditions', asking people if they knew me or knew any stories about me, who my friends were, who I was spending time with and any other personal details. These incidents have been happening on and off for at least the past ten years. There is a horrible cumulative effect of being under constant surveillance.

Entrapment and blackmail

13. In August 2002 I received a phone call from Rav Singh, a reporter with Andy Coulson's Bizarre column in The Sun. He tipped me off that I was about to be the target of a sting from Coulson's office. He told me I would receive a call from a girl with whom I had spent some time and that she would try to lure me into talking about intimate details of my life. The call would be recorded and Andy Coulson would be listening. When the call came I deadpanned it

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and nothing was printed.

14. Naturally, I felt grateful for this tip-off but, as can be seen from the example below, this episode was probably a ruse to gain my trust or a sense of debt to Rav Singh, presumably on the basis that the story they actually had did not appear to be very much and they wanted a "better" story in the future.
15. In April 2004 Rav Singh, who now had his own gossip column in the News of the World, phoned me. He wanted to 'negotiate' about an article that was to be printed the next day about a relationship I had had. Singh said that if I were to admit certain parts of the story the paper would omit other details that I felt would be embarrassing to my family. I trusted him, partly as a result of the earlier tip-off, so I had a conversation with him on what I thought was a confidential basis. Afterwards Coulson, by then the editor of the News of the World, called my publicist and told him they had recorded the whole phone conversation and would publish all of the details including those they had agreed not to. The promises had been a sham to get me on the phone and get more details in my own words. I was in a vulnerable state at that time in any event and they knew it and used my vulnerability to their advantage,
16. Strangely I don't think it was malicious personal vendetta against me. My feeling is that it was a dispassionate sociopathic act by those who operate in an amoral universe where they are never accountable. It has become the mind-set of those who work in tabloids, as a result of the environment and working culture that has been created. It's rather like the mafia – nothing personal just 'business'. If they thought that saying something nice about someone – whether justified or not – would suit their business model, they would do that.
17. I have been the victim of several kiss-and-tell stories and it appears to me that they followed a pattern. A reporter confronts a woman and tells her that he knows what has been going on between her and myself and that he is about to publish the story. He mentions a couple of details which lend veracity to the claim. He then tells the woman the story will be highly unsympathetic to her, although if she co-operates he can change it to make her look sweet and lovely – and he will give her money too. Of course the whole thing is a bluff,

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built on guesswork or on information gained illegally or by deception. The woman does not know it, but they usually can't print anything unless she co-operates.

Blatant falsehoods

18. In August/September 2007 the Daily Mail printed a number of articles which repeated the lie that I was somehow responsible for, or connected with, Owen Wilson's alleged suicide attempt. One headline was 'The truth about the man blamed for "leading Owen Wilson to the brink of suicide"'. There was absolutely no truth in the allegation. I had not been in the same continent as Owen for nine months prior to his episode and I had never taken drugs with him or in his presence. I issued a curt denial -- I didn't get involved in elaborate protestations of innocence because I feared this would only lead to the lie being repeated more widely.
19. I am sure the Mail was aware the allegation was untrue as they even placed the headline in quote marks to try to cover themselves. Even the most cursory journalistic inquiry would have quickly established as much. But the Mail is not interested in the whole truth; it is interested in 'good copy' and what sells, and if that happens to be the truth that's a happy coincidence.
20. This story caused serious damage to my professional reputation -- for example, I had to make representations to film industry figures in the USA in order to convince them that it was false. Thankfully I was able to do so but the experience was an extremely unpleasant one. Whilst those who knew me realised it was untrue, there were many, many people who must have read it and believed this nonsense. Four years later the story is still on the Mail's website, easily found through Google. I can't see how Paul Dacre's page two retraction suggestion would make the blindest bit of difference.

General Points

21. While some regard the personal sexual exploits of celebrities as, quote, 'tittle tattle' and entertainment, when you are the subject of such a story it is not 'harmless fun'. It can be harmful, difficult and of course both damaging and upsetting to innocent third parties caught up in it. It goes without saying that none of these stories set out above was in any way in the public interest.
22. These examples of tabloid intrusion are typical, and provide the bread and butter of the tabloids, but its familiarity and regularity

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does not stop it being fundamentally wrong.

23. As the examples above show, it is not merely a matter of the publication of the story being a damaging and hurtful invasion of privacy, but also the way the "news" is gathered is itself toxic, unethical, unjustified and damaging.

The fear of tabloid revenge

24. My experiences are by no means unique and I believe that in making this submission I represent not just myself but many others in the public eye. I have spoken to many high-profile people who feel as I do but by their own admission don't have the stomach to complain or resist. It takes time and it is not cheap -- and if you confront the tabloids you always risk provoking them into doing something worse to you as an act of revenge.
25. When I was considering legal action in relation to one particular story published by News Group Newspapers I took advice from my Lawyers and PR advisers. My PR advisors, who are extremely experienced with dealing with News International, asked me if I wanted to 'make enemies of these people'. When I asked one of my advisors to elaborate, they said that my lack of action could be used as a bargaining chip in the future; that I would get treated more sympathetically should the papers choose to run another damaging intrusive story about me.
26. His use of words 'these people' left me with an impression of an all-knowing, amorphous beast which can reach anywhere and touch anyone. These type of 'popular' papers operate like a protection racket: 'Let us operate with impunity, without impediment or any kind of regulation and we will leave you alone. We might even be nice to you or help you get elected. But if you make life difficult for us then we will take revenge. We won't beat you up; we'll just instruct our minions to drag your name through the mud by any means necessary'. This is why I decided to take action. I don't like bullies -- playground ones or Australian ones in suits.
27. I'm sure that even now, after all the damaging information that's come out since the revelation that Milly Dowler's phone was hacked and the subsequent inquiries and investigations, even after all that, there are still public figures who are frightened to put their heads

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above the parapet for fear they will be targeted, whether by News International or Paul Dacre or others.

28. I sometimes wonder whether, when this is all over, when the dust has settled, they will come after me again. But they have intruded on my privacy extensively already over a long period of time. They may well look for revenge by raking up old stories, throwing abuse or making things up, but I've got pretty used to that over the past 15 years and as a result it is less of a deterrent to me speaking out than it might have been in years gone by. So unlike the many others who share my views I am more able to speak out against the tabloids, with less fear of being targeted but just because I am one of a small number who are prepared to do this does not mean that there are not a very large number of people in the public eye who have suffered the same treatment by the press over the years.

Redress

29. The current system does not provide for adequate redress, even for people like me who can afford lawyers. It is just as effective (that is, just as ineffective) to say and do nothing and just put up with the damage and the upset, than by trying to do something about it under the current system. I have learned this from bitter experience.

- If I take legal action or otherwise seek specific redress it runs the risk of antagonising the press further against me
- Complaining or suing "gives the story legs", while doing nothing helps it go away in the short term. In the case of Owen Wilson, for example, it was in the best interests of my friend that the story went away as soon as possible, saying absolutely nothing that would allow the media to take it forward, even though I had been treated outrageously.
- And what redress is there that is adequate after the event? The genie can not be put back in the bottle, the damage has been done, much of it irremediable. My lawyers have often advised me that my best interests are not served by complaining or by legal action.

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Conclusion

30. Kelvin MacKenzie's contemptuous treatment of the inquiry is emblematic of an industry unaccustomed to being challenged about its methodology. This attitude is at the heart of the problem. The lack of answerability, the notion that they are not accountable, encourages a puffed-up arrogance among editors and proprietors. And that attitude trickles down through the ranks to the journalists, many of whom see no limit to the methods they can use to get information.
31. Genuine public interest journalism should be separated from the muck-rakers who use it as a cloak to justify increasing sales by any means necessary. There is no public interest in the vast majority of their stories, just the objective of increased sales and happy shareholders. If the tabloids were mostly engaged in journalism that did some good, I wouldn't be here.

Statement of Truth

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

DATED the 9 day of November 2011

SIGNED: