

The Bureau applauds the Guardian's pursuit of NI, but undercover reporting is still important

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The Guardian's investigation into News International continues to reveal unpleasant truths about the journalistic culture within the organisation.

The paper reports that Gordon Brown was subject to an onslaught of attacks on his personal data over a period of ten years, both during his time as chancellor and while he was prime minister.

In particular, the Guardian highlights evidence that a "blagger" gained access to Brown's bank details and a "conman" tricked a firm of London lawyers into handing over legal files.

Most unpleasantly, though, are allegations that the Sun published a story about the serious illness of Brown's young son, after accessing the child's medical records. The Sun has denied that it got the information about Brown's son from medical records. The Guardian has issued an apology admitting this allegation was wrong.

The Guardian has shown how reporters and investigators working for News International abandoned the principle of public interest and the need for prima facie evidence to justify its investigations.

Hard truth

Instead, the picture is of a dredge-net approach in the hope of catching anything that might make a headline.

But the Bureau also believes the Guardian's outright condemnation of the use of fronts and aliases by reporters fails to acknowledge an unfortunate but important truth about journalism.

Sometimes journalists have to disguise themselves as a necessary evil in order to get to the bottom of stories that genuinely are in the public interest.

Undercover reporting is part of the stock and trade of hard-hitting journalism. Not least of all by the Guardian.

In fact, some of the most-lauded work by journalists is uncovered in exactly this way – for example the recent Panorama expose of care home abuse by an undercover reporter.

Chilling effect

But the revelations at News International have re-awakened debate over whether to enforce tighter restrictions on journalists that would have a chilling effect on this kind of legitimate reporting.

This morning Christopher Graham, the information commissioner, called for journalists caught “blagging” information to be sent to prison for up to two years.

The Bureau wholeheartedly condemns invasions of privacy in the absence of prima facie evidence or the public interest, but there is a danger that as the press tries to off-load its shame over this scandal, the industry will play into the hands of those who would like to see press freedom undermined altogether.

The response to the News International fiasco should be founded on greater responsibility, not fewer rights.