

What about the Middle Men?

At **Phone Hacking: the Public Debate**, organised on 13 June by **POLIS** and **The Media Society**, Charlie Beckett lead with the question: “Is it time to get tough on the press?” Points, many familiar, were made both in favour and against more stringent regulation of the press. However, another question, raised by Charlotte Harris brings in a different angle, one that merits attention. She asked: “what about the middle men?”



Harris, a lawyer, was talking about the private investigators and PR agencies that make money selling stories and information to the press. David Aaronovitch of *The Times* also included in this group the individuals that use their positions to sell information from public institutions, what he called publicly owned secrets. There are, of course, varying degrees of legality between the methods used by a private investigator on a case and a person working for the NHS selling patient information. However there is a market in which these middle men operate. There are buyers and sellers.

This is not new information. As was pointed out during the debate, the Information Commissioner’s report **What Price Privacy** presented to Parliament in 2006 produced clear evidence that these transactions occur across the board. Their data produced only limited picture of the transactions involving an investigation company and their clients in short time period, but the press, including many major national newspapers, emerged as a significant client. In this report and the follow up *News of the World* was not even in the top three users of the services.

This means that the problem of the press using middle men and supporting the market for personal, often illegally obtained information is not limited to NOTW and is nothing new. These middle men are not the Deep Throat of the Woodward and Bernstein era – sources to be protected. They are people selling information for financial benefit. As the discussion on journalistic ethics and the future of self-regulation continues, is it useful to make some distinctions? Should we make a difference between the ethics of journalism and the market for personal information?

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