

UK scraps plans for new inquiry into media wrongdoing

March 1 2018, by Jill Lawless



In this Tuesday, Jan. 9, 2018 file photo, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Matt Hancock smiles after leaving a cabinet meeting in London. The British government has scrapped plans for an inquiry into alleged media law-breaking and relations between journalists and the police. Culture Secretary Matt Hancock said Thursday, March 1 that reopening the "costly and time-consuming" inquiry was not the right thing to do. (AP Photo/Alastair Grant, file)

The British government on Thursday scrapped plans for an inquiry into allegations of media law-breaking, a decision praised by press organizations but condemned by victims of tabloid intrusion.

Britain held a year-long, judge-led inquiry into press ethics after the 2011 revelation that employees of the News of the World tabloid had eavesdropped on the mobile phone voicemails of celebrities, politicians and a teenage murder victim.

Owner Rupert Murdoch shut down the 168-year-old newspaper amid a wave of public revulsion and a criminal investigation. Several journalists were convicted, and Murdoch's company has paid millions in damages to dozens of hacking victims.

In the inquiry's 2012 report, Lord Justice Brian Leveson said "outrageous" behavior by some in the press had "wreaked havoc with the lives of innocent people whose rights and liberties have been disdained."

At the time, the government said there would be a second phase of the inquiry, looking at "unlawful or improper conduct" within [media](#) organizations and whether they had inappropriate relations with the police.

But successive Conservative-led governments delayed acting on the promise, and Culture Secretary Matt Hancock finally killed it on Thursday.

"We do not believe that reopening this costly and time-consuming public inquiry is the right way forward," he told lawmakers in the House of Commons.

Hancock also said the government would revoke a recommendation that [media organizations](#) sign up to a state-backed regulator or face being

forced to pay costs in libel cases, even if they won.

Media organizations had strongly opposed the move, saying it could stifle free speech.

Hancock said there had been major press reforms in Britain since the Leveson report, along with "a seismic change in the media landscape" with the rise of social media.

Hancock said the threat to high-quality journalism now came from "issues like clickbait, fake news, malicious disinformation and online abuse."

"These are today's challenges and this is where we need to focus," he said.

Labour Party culture spokesman Tom Watson said the decision was "a bitter blow to the victims of press intrusion."

Former BBC presenter Jacqui Hames, whose phone was hacked by the News of the World, said the Conservatives had promised they "would get to the bottom of press and police corruption by completing the Leveson Inquiry."

"Today this government have made a clear choice to side with the unaccountable and unelected press barons over the rights of ordinary people in this country," she said.

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