

RUPERT MURDOCH'S HACKS

How interesting that Rupert Murdoch's empire was the subject of not one, but two, hacking stories this weekend.

You probably heard how, in the US, someone hacked Fox News' Twitter account in the middle of the night leading into Fourth of July. Shortly thereafter, that thread posted a series of three tweets reporting that Obama had been assassinated. The Secret Service is investigating that hack.

Good thing this didn't happen on a news day when markets were open.

Meanwhile, in the UK, the Guardian reported the most heinous detail yet in its years-long investigation into how News of the World has hacked people's cell phones as a news-gathering tool: they hacked the cell phone voice mail of a 13-year old girl, Milly Dowler, who had been abducted. Because they deleted some of the voice mails on the phone after it had filled up, her family believed that she was still alive. The hack may have confused investigators and destroyed evidence in the case.

Then, with the help of its own full-time private investigator, Glenn Mulcaire, the News of the World started illegally intercepting mobile phone messages. Scotland Yard is now investigating evidence that the paper hacked directly into the voicemail of the missing girl's own phone. As her friends and parents called and left messages imploring Milly to get in touch with them, the News of the World was listening and recording their every private word.

But the journalists at the News of the World then encountered a problem. Milly's voicemail box filled up and would accept no more messages.

Apparently thirsty for more information from more voicemails, the paper intervened – and deleted the messages that had been left in the first few days after her disappearance. According to one source, this had a devastating effect: when her friends and family called again and discovered that her voicemail had been cleared, they concluded that this must have been done by Milly herself and, therefore, that she must still be alive. But she was not. The interference created false hope and extra agony for those who were misled by it.

[snip]

The deletion of the messages also caused difficulties for the police by confusing the picture when they had few leads to pursue. It also potentially destroyed valuable evidence.

Most damning, though, is that NoW informed the police investigating the kidnapping they had hacked the girl's cell phone—and possibly their own. But neither the police, nor Scotland Yard in its subsequent investigation of NoW's hacking, did anything against the tabloid for this hack.

This is interesting not just because it expresses how NoW's hacking had real human consequences on people beyond celebrities. But also because it highlights, again, how inadequate initial investigations of this scandal were—and may remain.

Politicians in the UK are now squabbling over whether this should impact Murdoch's attempt to acquire the rest of BSkyB.