

Russians and Chinese “cracked” the Encrypted Files? Sunday Times Reporter Pleads Ignorance

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So we've already written about the [massive problems](#) with the Sunday Times' big report claiming that the Russians and Chinese had “cracked” the encryption on the Snowden files (or possibly just been handed those files by Snowden) and that he had “blood on his hands” even though no one has come to any harm. It also argued that David Miranda was detained after he got documents from Snowden in Moscow, despite the fact that he was neither in Moscow, nor had met Snowden (a claim the article quietly deleted).

That same report also claimed that UK intelligence agency MI6 had to remove “agents” from Moscow because of this leak, despite the fact that they're not called “agents” and there's no evidence of any actual risk. So far, the only official response from News Corp. the publisher of The Sunday Times (through a variety of subsidiaries) was to [try to censor](#) the criticism of the story with a DMCA takedown request.

Either way, one of the journalists who wrote the story, Tom Harper, gave an [interview to CNN which is quite incredible to watch](#). Harper just keeps repeating that he doesn't know what's actually true, and that he was just saying what the government told him — more or less admitting that his role here was not as a reporter, but as a propagandist or a stenographer. Here's [the key snippet](#):

If you can't see or hear that, it's Harper saying “we just publish what we believe to be the position of the British government.” This is a claim that he repeats throughout the interview, pleading ignorance to anything factual about the story. In short, his argument is that he heard these allegations through a “well placed source” within the UK government and he sought to corroborate the claim... by asking *another source* in the UK government who said “that's true!” and Harper ran with it.

Some more highlights. CNN's George Howell kicks it off by asking how UK officials could possibly know that the Chinese and Russians got access to the files, and Harper immediately resorts to the “hey, I just write down what they tell me!” defense:

Um... well... I don't know the answer to that, George. Um.... All we know is that... um... this is effectively the official position of the British government. Um.... we picked up on it... um... a while ago. And we've been working on it and trying to stand it up through multiple sources. And when we approached the British government late last week with our evidence, they confirmed, effectively, what you read today in the Sunday Times.

Again: government official tells them stuff, and they confirm with another government official — and that's the story. Note that he says he showed the UK government "evidence" yet there is no evidence in the article itself. Just quotes and speculation. He goes on, trying to downplay the entire point of journalism, which should be to ferret out the truth. But, to Thomas Harper, if you question his report, you should be asking the government about it, not him. That's not his job.

It's obviously allegation at the moment, from our point of view. And it's really for the British government to defend it.

So, you publish an explosive story based on anonymous quotes and already proven falsehoods, and then you refuse to defend it, saying that it's the government's job to do so? Do you even know what a journalist is supposed to be doing, Harper?

Howell digs deeper, questioning how the UK government even knows which files Snowden took — and questioning if the UK government has been able to decipher that as well. Harper, again, pushes it aside, saying he has no idea and they avoided such tricky questions altogether:

Again, that's not something we're clear on. So, we don't go into that level of detail in the story.

It's then that he makes the "we just publish what we believe to be the position of the British government" claim. Howell then points to one of the many contradictions in the story: the idea that Russia/China hacked into the Snowden files... and the claim that they were just handed over. And again, Harper pleads ignorance. He's just the stenographer:

Again, sorry to just repeat myself, George, but we don't know, so we haven't written that in the paper. Um... you know, it could be either. It could be another scenario.

Howell then points out that his story is just the British government's claims, and then asks about the MI6 "agents" that were supposedly moved, and again, Harper pleads ignorance:

Um.... Again, I'm afraid to disappoint you, we don't know. There was a suggestion, um, that some of them may have been under threat. Um. Er. Um. But... the um... statement from senior Downing Street sources suggests that no one has come to any harm, which is obviously a positive thing from the point of view of the West.

Huh. So now he's the spokesperson for "The West?" Fascinating.

Again, Howell, somewhat nicely, points out that Harper is doing nothing more than stenography: "So, essentially, you're reporting what the government is saying, but as far as the evidence to substantiate it, you're not able to comment or to explain that at this point." And, Harper basically agrees.

No. We... we picked up on the story a while back, from an extremely well

placed source in the Home Office, um... and then... um... carried on trying to substantiate what was going on through various sources in various agencies throughout Britain. And then finally presented the um... um... story, to the government, and they effectively confirmed what you read in today's Sunday Times.

In short: one government official told them this, and they asked other government officials, who all had a personal interest in having the answer be “yes” and after enough government officials all agreed on the same talking point, good boy Tom Harper wrote it all down and presented it as fact.

A few times in the interview Harper makes the accurate and reasonable point that when you're dealing with the intelligence community, getting evidence is often quite difficult. That's absolutely true. But then there's a way of presenting that kind of story and it's not the way Harper did so. When you have a story like this, where many of the details seem highly questionable, you don't just talk to government officials, but you try to reach out to other sources who can further the story. But Harper admits that they had no interest in doing this — they were just presenting the government's side of the story. Even that *can* be done in a journalistic manner, in which case the article should not present itself as presenting factual information, as it does, but the idle speculation of government officials who won't put their names or positions behind what they're saying.

Harper concludes the interview by saying that it's very difficult to say things with “certainty” when reporting on national intelligence issues — but if that's the case, why did the Sunday Times report present its findings with exactly that kind of certainty? Wouldn't the *reasonable* thing to do be to *highlight* the questionable claims and to detail what was known and what was not actually known? But that's not how Harper and the Sunday Times did it at all. And now he's trying to pass off the blame, saying that it's the UK government who needs to defend the “journalism” that *he* supposedly did. Given that he's admitting he just scribbled down and republished their thoughts, perhaps that's true concerning defending the facts of the story. However, it does seem quite reasonable to ask Harper to defend what sort of journalism he's actually doing.

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