

WHY ASSIGN THE MET'S COUNTERTERRORISM SQUAD TO INVESTIGATE MURDOCH?

The NYT has a long article exploring why Scotland Yard allowed bags and bags of evidence showing News of the World's widespread hacking to sit unopened for four years. One reason, it explains, is because Scotland Yard's counterterrorism unit led the investigation, rather than the special crimes unit. Since the counterterrorism unit was so busy investigating alleged terrorism, it had no time to investigate Murdoch.

The police have continually asserted that the original investigation was limited because the counterterrorism unit, which was in charge of the case, was preoccupied with more pressing demands. At the parliamentary committee hearing last week, the three officials said they were working on 70 terrorist investigations.

Yet the Metropolitan Police unit that deals with special crimes, which had more resources and time available, could have taken over the case, said four former senior investigators. One called the argument that the department did not have enough resources "utter nonsense."

Another senior investigator said officials saw the inquiry as being in "safe hands" at the counterterrorism unit.

The NYT further explains how often key police figures and NotW figures socialized together.

Executives and others at the company also enjoyed close social ties to

Scotland Yard's top officials. Since the hacking scandal began in 2006, Mr. Yates and others regularly dined with editors from News International papers, records show. Sir Paul Stephenson, the Metropolitan Police commissioner, met for lunch or dinner 18 times with company executives and editors during the investigation, including eight occasions with Mr. Wallis while he was still working at The News of the World.

[snip]

Andy Hayman, who as head of the counterterrorism unit was running the investigation, also attended four dinners, lunches and receptions with News of the World editors, including a dinner on April 25, 2006, while his officers were gathering evidence in the case, records show. He told Parliament he never discussed the investigation with editors.

And it shows how much money exchanged hands between the police and Murdoch's empire.

But that still doesn't explain how the counterterrorism unit would ever have been the appropriate entity to investigate illegal wiretapping by a newspaper.

Meanwhile, I can't help but think, in addition to all the ways Murdoch's empire has corrupted journalism and politics in the US and UK, its other great sin: making torture (and Dick Cheney's absolutist approach to counterterrorism) popular. It did so with its news programs. But even more so, it did it with 24.

For all its fictional liberties, "24" depicts the fight against Islamist extremism much as the Bush Administration has defined it: as an all-consuming struggle for America's survival that demands the toughest of

tactics. Not long after September 11th, Vice-President Dick Cheney alluded vaguely to the fact that America must begin working through the “dark side” in countering terrorism. On “24,” the dark side is on full view. Surnow, who has jokingly called himself a “right-wing nut job,” shares his show’s hard-line perspective. Speaking of torture, he said, “Isn’t it obvious that if there was a nuke in New York City that was about to blow—or any other city in this country—that, even if you were going to go to jail, it would be the right thing to do?”

Since September 11th, depictions of torture have become much more common on American television. Before the attacks, fewer than four acts of torture appeared on prime-time television each year, according to Human Rights First, a nonprofit organization. Now there are more than a hundred, and, as David Danzig, a project director at Human Rights First, noted, “the torturers have changed. It used to be almost exclusively the villains who tortured. Today, torture is often perpetrated by the heroes.” The Parents’ Television Council, a nonpartisan watchdog group, has counted what it says are sixty-seven torture scenes during the first five seasons of “24”—more than one every other show. Melissa Caldwell, the council’s senior director of programs, said, “ ‘24’ is the worst offender on television: the most frequent, most graphic, and the leader in the trend of showing the protagonists using torture.”

The show’s villains usually inflict the more gruesome tortures: their victims are hung on hooks, like carcasses in a butcher shop; poked with smoking-hot scalpels; or abraded with sanding machines. In many episodes, however,

heroic American officials act as tormentors, even though torture is illegal under U.S. law.

Fox created the war on terror in the popular imagination. And 24's views on torture played a key role in the development of our own torture protocols, most notably at Gitmo.

In fact, just before Scotland Yard buried the Murdoch scandal in its counterterrorism unit, Ginni Thomas set up a love-fest for 24 at the Heritage Foundation, "moderated" by Rush Limbaugh.

Now all of that is not to suggest that the US intervened with Scotland Yard to make sure Murdoch's tabloids could get away with wiretapping Brits (though it did also happen to coincide with the Bush Administration's successful efforts at covering up its own wiretapping scandal). All of that is not to say that there was any connection at all between this British cover-up and Murdoch's American teevee shows.

But I do think its possible that counterterrorism officials might have felt a certain affinity for the world view Murdoch popularized.