

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why hasn't Boris Johnson handed over his phone to the Covid inquiry?

This is a global player original podcast just terrible. I just think this thing has got to stop. I think I probably said enough to be honest, but I never ever want to go through this again. And we're all waiting, you know, we're all just waiting for it to play itself out. So, what do you think should happen next? Because the scandal just keeps going and going. I think, you know what? I'm just going to be like you. I'm just going to wait and see. I've got to go and do my radio show now. That is a BBC presenter being doorstepped by a BBC reporter outside a BBC building talking about another as yet unnamed BBC presenter before this particular BBC presenter goes into the BBC to present his BBC radio show. Just when he thought it couldn't get any more convoluted, any more meta, any more, let's face it, weird, this has become a news organisation trying to do a news story about its own people. Welcome to the newsagents.

The newsagents.

It's Emily. It's Lewis. And it is John. And we're at newsagents HQ. And we'll be coming back to the BBC story a little later and asking the question, how does an organisation report upon itself? And can there be a real separation between the B in BBC, the broadcasters and the C, the corporation? But first, we're going to start somewhere completely different because this feels like a week in which a lot of attention has been spent on one story whilst others have passed us by. And we're looking particularly at what has happened in the saga of Boris Johnson's phone, going right back to the beginning of Covid and all those WhatsApp messages that he says he's very happy to hand over, but so far haven't been handed over. And we're also going to look at the cabinet secretary's words this morning in the case of the appointment of Sue Gray. So people might remember the craziness of couple of weeks where there was a kind of triangle between Rishi Sunak in the cabinet office, the Covid inquiry led by Baroness Hallett, which is now on the way, and Boris Johnson. And this all centred around the question of whether or not material that Boris Johnson had in his possession, his notebooks, his phone, his government phone with all of his government WhatsApps, would be handed over to the inquiry, which is what Baroness Hallett, the chair, wanted. Now it got really complicated and weird and convoluted, where we got to a point where the cabinet office and Rishi Sunak's government was saying they didn't want it to be handed over. Boris Johnson came out and said, yes, I actually have got no problem with all being handed over at all. Some time inevitably passes. And tell surprise, what we thought was going to happen isn't what Boris Johnson has done. So there was a deadline on Monday, which Boris Johnson had to hand over all this material, including his old phone. And Monday came and Monday passed 4pm. And that material was not handed over. And Downing Street said that ministers had passed on all the information in their possession, which did not include said phone. So let me play the part of Boris Johnson for the purposes of this podcast, because we have spoken to his office, some would say typecasting. I can't quite do the voice. Anyway, this is the statement from his office. Mr Johnson is cooperating with the government appointed technical consultants, whoever they are, to carry out this process, which is underway. He continues to cooperate fully with the inquiry. And as previously stated, has no objection to disclosing the material in question to the inquiry. And we are told on sort of background that the phone is in the possession of lawyers for this purpose and not him. And he wants to see everything disclosed as quickly as possible. So on one level, maybe Boris Johnson is absolutely cooperating in full. But given that a court case was taken out, and the action was taken, where Lady Hallet won the case,

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why hasn't Boris Johnson handed over his phone to the Covid inquiry?

saying that everything should be handed over, it's noteworthy that it hasn't happened yet. Yeah, he did hand over unredacted WhatsApp messages, diaries, and around 24 notebooks to the Cabinet Office. That was back at the end of May. And the judges at that point said the fact that two thirds of the messages requested had been found to be relevant proved that Lady Hallet was justified in requesting the WhatsApp messages. And they said it was then up to her, Lady Hallet, to decide how to handle any irrelevant material, and that she'd return any documents which she found to be obviously irrelevant. It's also worth saying that Boris Johnson's phone number has been in the public domain. I mean, not most, but a lot of journalists will find that they have his cell phone number going back 15 years. And it always sort of makes me think of the difference between being a minister or a prime minister in Tony Blair's day, when famously he didn't have a phone. You know, just think of the chaos that he saved himself by never having committed anything to text or to WhatsApp. I think he didn't even have email. No, he didn't. He didn't send a single email while he was prime minister.

I mean, incredibly lucky to the point where Boris Johnson has sort of handed out his phone to, well, let's be honest, Lord knows how many people.

Well, how many late night TV shows, let's say, or radio shows have booked Boris Johnson a loose end at some point before he became an MP and before he became mayor. That's why his phone number was out there. He was a sort of denizen of Westminster and has been for all that time. And that is why he is saying and has said that he was unable to hand over the phone because there was a security problem at some point while he was prime minister. There was a suggestion that

there may have been a security breach or whatever because this number was so ubiquitous and so well known. And the suggestion is, and again, this just reminds us of so much of the chaos of the Johnson years, right? The suggestion has been that he hasn't been able to switch that phone on again ever since. An extraordinary situation that is very Boris Johnson. So this inquiry set up by the government that should have access to everything. The courts have agreed it must have access to everything and it hasn't yet got that. By the way, the significant thing that happened this week, which is, of course, the government lost the case. What a total waste of time that was. We talked about it on this show. We covered the story. Every legal expert at the time was saying that the government has not got a prayer of winning this case, that the public inquiries act means that the chair on a statutory footing of a public inquiry can have the access to whatever documents they want. And there was all this weird briefing that was coming out of number 10 saying, oh, no, this is an important point of principle. We can't just hand over unnecessary information that concerns the private lives of officials and so on. Everyone was going, hang on a minute. Lady Hallett isn't going to be interested in that. She's not interested in the tiny little micro details of civil servants' lives. It is up to her to decide what is germane and what is important and what isn't. And what a waste of time for the inquiry and public money that the government has done

in terms of fighting this case. And of course, all it's done is we've seen in the short life of the COVID inquiry. And this is why this story matters. We've just seen this inquiry, which was supposed to provide so many answers to so many families caught up and the rest of us in the pandemic repeatedly have sand thrown in to the gears. And whatever the true motivations about this, the impression that's been created for the public has not been a positive one in

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why hasn't Boris Johnson handed over his phone to the Covid inquiry?

terms of how some of the players involved have handled themselves with regards to it. Well, you talk about the waste of time and money. There's just one other point to make very briefly. I mean, what appalling optics that a government which sets up a public inquiry that should be full and frank and leave no stone unturned, except for the stones we don't want unturned. So therefore, you can't hand over these things. So you set it up and then say, actually, we'd like to hobble your fearless full and frank inquiry by not handing everything over to you.

Literally, just yesterday, we were talking about Donald Trump. And I know these comparisons are slightly invidious and they don't always work. But yesterday, we were literally talking about Donald Trump and his team trying to push back his next court appearance date in December. And there is something about the obfuscation and the endless delay and the kind of, I'm slightly too important for this and I can't be quite where you want me to because of, you know, who I am and the fact that I'm also running for president, that just makes you think, again, that out of lockstep with actually that sense of responsibility that comes with being the leader or the former leader, the ex-leader of a country. Well, in news that is sort of related to Boris Johnson or at least Boris Johnson's behavior, we heard this morning a really quite vicious swipe by Simon Case, who is the head of the civil service, the cabinet secretary, who was pushing back in no uncertain terms at leaders, prime ministers, former prime ministers, he means, who have attacked the civil service as this kind of politicized blob.

Obviously, I don't agree with a characterization, which is insulting, dehumanizing, totally unacceptable. It would surprise me if current ministers were using this language, not least because if they were, I think it would indicate something akin to self-defeating cowardice. Self-defeating because insulting the people who work for you, who are delivering public services on your behalf, advising you day in, day out, as the prime minister said, that's the self-defeating cowardice because you know these people can't answer back.

I think that exchange was absolutely fascinating for two reasons. One, we shouldn't forget how close Case was to Johnson. He tried to make himself and the wider Johnson team, including Dominic Cummings, who's basically chosen by that team to replace Sir Mark Sedwell, the former cabinet secretary, because they thought this was a guy who would be more malleable, more amenable

to what they wanted to do. But also because I think what you can see in that clip is you can feel the shifting sands of power in Westminster, right? You can't forget the background to this and his relationship with Sue Gray. Sue Gray used to work under him. She was the second permanent secretary at the Department for Leveling Up. There is no love lost between Sue Gray and Simon Case. Sue Gray felt during the Sue Gray process, I think probably not unreasonably, that she did not receive adequate political support from the civil service machine when MP after MP and part of the Johnson operation were going for her in the aftermath. She felt very exposed. There are suggestions that one of the reasons she decided to take this job with Kit Stammer was for precisely that reason. Now, Whitehall, just like us and everybody who watches politics, they watch polls even more closely than we do and they can feel the shifting sense of power because what will Case know that in 12 months, 18 months time, who is he potentially going to be working with, in a sense, kind of working for, one Sue Gray who will be Kit Stammer's chief of staff and who is being recruited by Stammer specifically to shake up the civil service and make sure that they have a means of governing which will be effective when they go in from day one. That's

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why hasn't Boris Johnson handed over his phone to the Covid inquiry?

what you can see there with Case. And that is fascinating because civil servants I spoke to, senior civil servants, were saying that actually Sue Gray was treated disgracefully by Simon Case and that there was a big job that she wasn't really considered for which was absolutely she was right for. Simon Case didn't want her to be in a position that was close to him where she could outshine him and so therefore one of the options and one of the explanations, as you've said, is that perhaps one of the reasons she went towards Kit Stammer is she felt her civil service career had been thwarted and blighted and could go no further. So she takes it up and if Kit Stammer won the next election, as you say, the chief of staff to the prime minister has a mighty power and Simon Case would find himself having to navigate that rather awkwardly. It wasn't the only sign of the kind of shifting dynamics of Westminster as well. He was also asked about Nadine Doris and about whether or not she's not yet Baroness Doris. Not yet and indeed William Rag, the chairman of the committee, actually had a great name for her or the opposite

phrase for her. He described her as the lingering member for mid-beds. I mean, normally when someone's

lingering, you know... You'd never want to be a lingering member. I mean, that's just not an attractive image, is it? I mean, at least be a forthright, upstanding member if you're going to be one at all. Yeah, and Simon Case went on to suggest that the Cabinet Office is, quote, seeking further advice on whether the 1925 Honours Prevention of Abuse Act could be deployed after officials were sent threatening messages from Nadine Doris. So, you know, you can really see that this political operation, the Johnson Doris Cummings, that was absolutely dominant in Westminster in Case was a sort of prime facilitator of, conciliatory too, is now so distant and so in the sort of subarctic politically that you've got the Cabinet Secretary appearing before a parliamentary select committee and slamming almost every member of it.

We haven't yet talked about what could be the literary moment of the year.

Quite so. You've missed it. That Harper Collins have announced today that Nadine Doris has a new book coming out. It is called The Plot, The Political Assassination of Boris Johnson.

Yeah, and Pippa Creerah, bless her, from The Guardian has tweeted, wasn't it Boris Johnson who politically assassinated Boris Johnson? I'm sure that'd be a very judicious take.

Very judicious and thoroughly impartial assessment. Nadine, as we know, is a best-selling author. I mean, she's brilliant on fiction, so that's what I'm saying.

Good gag, mate. In a moment, we're going to be discussing how an institution like the BBC covers a story about the BBC and our own experiences of actually interviewing our bosses, having to talk to our colleagues, all the times in which we as journalists have grappled with trying to do the BBC story.

This is The Newsagents.

There was something almost surreal about the way yesterday unfolded. Tim Davy, the director-general,

stands up, gives an interview at lunchtime and says that the BBC is halting its investigation into the as-yet unnamed presenter while the Metropolitan Police does its work.

And then somewhere else in the BBC, the news division was actually stepping up its investigation into the unnamed presenter. And a report came out at four o'clock in the afternoon, which we reported on yesterday, saying that said unnamed presenter had been in contact with someone on a

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why hasn't Boris Johnson handed over his phone to the Covid inquiry?

dating app. And when the person, the recipient of the WhatsApp messages, got wind of who it was, said, I'm out you. And then said presenter was pretty cross and sent some abusive messages.

And that became the lead story on the BBC.

And then we went from this story that had been broken by the BBC to another story that had been broken by the sun, about a third person coming forward to complain about text messages that they'd received from the same presenter. So you have this very odd position, which is the sort of sun journalists and the BBC journalists, weirdly working, competing, but working in the same circle together. And you have the organisation, the corporation, if you like, on a different setting. Now, in one way, we should be very pleased with that.

We want to have Chinese walls between the editorial side and the management side.

But there is something a bit distasteful, I think, about if you know this stuff about a colleague, why isn't your first duty to then go to HR or to go to a senior manager or to say,

I think this is going on, rather than to turn it into a news story? I mean,

the question is, if the sun hadn't gone, would they have done that story on their own colleague without actually going first to somebody within the organisation, within management, to try and understand what was behind it? Because otherwise, every single complaint that goes through a news organisation could be turned into a news story.

Especially if there's no illegality. And the BBC story yesterday did not contain,

as far as we were told, any suggestion of illegality. It contained the suggestion that someone may have been rather abusive or used expletives, and the person involved felt rather threatened. I've used expletives before, I don't know about you. Well, my mum listens,

I would never use expletives. Name me a notation when you don't use expletives.

You're swearing, mate, Liz, I'm not surprised about that. Honestly, you'd have been sat months ago, if that had been the bar. But look, as John said, perhaps if in this case, the person involved was threatening to suggest that they might expose the fact they've been having that relationship, it isn't surprising that the presenter felt rather threatened by it.

If you're scared of something coming out, you respond in kind.

So I had raised on the podcast yesterday that this was a bit weird and is the BBC eating itself, and I tweeted something similar. Late last night, I got contacted by a senior BBC manager, who said, you know, I was the editorial lead for all of this, and that it was just an example of good journalism, and that the BBC was showing that the news division is independent.

But how independent can that be? I mean, I understand that there is a difference between the broadcasters and the corporation. But this was an investigation which was in some ways helping the Sun story. And I'm not saying it was, but can you imagine if it felt as though BBC News was the provisional wing of the Sun. And I know that there is a lot of unease within the corporation over the way that story came out. And would they do it if it were a Guardian story, or if it were an independent story? Or is there extra pressure or feeling of the need to be on it because this is the Sun and it's a particular type of newspaper? Of course, correction.

We don't know that. We don't know. I'm not saying, look, I think we should preface this by saying, this isn't to defend whoever this person is. This isn't about that, because there may be more stories which emerge. Who knows? The question is whether or not, I mean, I watched the 10 o'clock

news last night, and people there, people I know were, it was quite interesting, they consistently

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why hasn't Boris Johnson handed over his phone to the Covid inquiry?

had a line that they were using, which they said, the BBC treats this story like it would any other story. Now, the essay question is, is that really the case? Or is it as so often is the case, often with the BBC, that it understandably cares about perception, and it cares about managing perception? And in this case, there is the potential for an overcorrection because it is trying to manage a self-flagellation because there is disproportionate to the actual story, the importance of the story, and the details of the story. Look, I can see how this could sound. You know, oh, these three ex-BBCers are now having to go at the BBC because, you know, they can. And actually, I would say that we've all been in the same position where you've had to work really hard to cover a story within your own news organisation. I mean, a zillion years ago, in 1998, I was working for a Hong Kong news corporation, CNBC, which then merged. And I had to be the correspondent that went on air to announce the merger, and that 50 people had lost their jobs, of which I was one. You know, it's a very weird position to be in when you're trying to sort of find that the right side of corporate versus news news. I've interviewed Mark Thompson, a former director general, on Newsnight and found that you have to sort of feel sterner and more sturdy in your questioning and more robust about everything you're asking, precisely because you don't want people to be sort of assuming that you're soft-soaping your boss. And so that tendency to overcorrect is very valid and very real. And I suppose we should ask, the BBC is still a news organisation. And if other places are leading on the story, why shouldn't it? Yeah, the point about it is though, let's go back to when the story broke on Saturday morning and the suggestion of illegality that the presenter had been soliciting photos from someone who was not yet 18, which is against the law. There was no suggestion of any illegality in what the BBC's own report came

up with last night. And if there is no suggestion of illegality and a presenter being a bit rude to someone who was on a dating app or messaging with or whatever it happens to be, then that's people's private lives. Where does that cross into the public interest and the lead story? And if you had rung up and said, I've had a very odd exchange with a BBC presenter and he's been rather shirty with me, someone will shrug their shoulders and go, oh well, there you are, sorry about that. But it's not the lead story. Yeah. And I think the question we have to ask is, would the story that was out yesterday ever have made it in any other situation or any other context? And actually, did it even have much connection to the Sun story? Does it even really have? Does it augment it in any significant way? Does it provide any evidence in any significant way? The only tie in is text. Yeah. Is a digital communication. A young person, but a young person who is above the age of consent. And that's the thing. And we're still ultimately talking about occasionally some suggestion of illegality, but no proof of it. I think even the Sun road back on that. Yeah. They said, oh, we never said it was. Yeah, that's the thing. Everything with the story is hinting and a nudge in a wink and maybe and who knows and second hand and no name and no name. And so the

question ultimately has got to be the BBC has to balance, yes, perception of it being impartial and treating this story like any other, but also treating this story like any other and using just your own sort of sense of journalistic proportionality on whether or not that applies to this. And then there is this other really weird element to this story, which is we've got a BBC presenter who is not named and presumably does not want to be named, otherwise they would have named themselves.

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why hasn't Boris Johnson handed over his phone to the Covid inquiry?

And then we have in particular, another BBC presenter, very well known BBC presenter, Jeremy Vine, who does not want to be associated with this story. He's obviously said that it's not him. And he dislikes the fact that his name has been attached to it on Twitter and so on, but who nonetheless keeps finding himself and perhaps arguably making himself the name associated

with this story. It was not only doorsteps on his way to his BBC radio show earlier today, but he was also spoke about it on his Channel 5 TV show.

Because this presenter hasn't identified himself and has not been identified, you could almost say anything about the person. Bizarrely, as I understand it, even if the presenter is sacked, the BBC may not be allowed to name them. So this is why keeps coming back to the presenter and he has to show, this presenter has to show some degree of concern for those people, and I'm one of them, who've been falsely accused. Well, I would say Jeremy is a friend of mine. And I disagree with him on this. I think that whoever the presenter is needs to work it out himself. I cannot begin to imagine the sort of pressure, the sort of anguish turmoil that is going on in his life with all the different aspects. It's probably not what you need to hear from your colleagues. And just to hear from your colleagues, come on, for the sake of me, can you, can you out yourself, please? I'm not sure that's the best look. I mean, there is another element, which is that, I mean, we've seen it on these screens or opposite in the studio that have the rolling news channels on. At the moment, if you look at a rolling news channel and you see BBC crisis story, the facial seeing is obviously not the unknown unnamed presenter, but Jeremy Vine. So you're in a sort of slightly weird position where obviously completely understandably, you know, Jeremy wants to distance himself from this story, but by talking about it and by calling on this person to come out, he's the only person who can be associated with it and shown on screen. There's a way of not being the story, and that's by not being the story.

By STFU. Shut the fuck up. Shall we do that? I think we should.

And on that note, we'll be back in just a moment. We used to be serious presenters.

This is The News Agents.

So we're going to take you now from internecine warfare to real warfare. And we're going to the NATO summit where our Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has just been speaking on the podium. That's why

he missed Prime Minister's questions today. He had a speech scheduled for mid afternoon.

Together with our G7 partners, we have agreed to provide the long-term bilateral security commitments that Ukraine needs. These commitments mark a new high point in international support

for Ukraine. And I want to be clear, they are not a substitute for NATO membership.

The summit communique echoes the UK's long-held position that Ukraine's future is in NATO.

But there has been some feather ruffling carried out by the Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, who has also been speaking, not at the podium, but separately, in which he said to the Ukrainians, please, could you be a little more grateful for what we do for you?

Which kind of when bombs are raining down on your head,

probably writing a thank you letter is not what you've got in mind.

Yeah, he sort of did it in a very clever way at arm's length using the passive tense. He said, there's a slight word of caution here, which whether we like it or not, people want to see

[Transcript] The News Agents / Why hasn't Boris Johnson handed over his phone to the Covid inquiry?

gratitude. And it sort of puts himself on the side of you and I both know that Zelensky should have what he wants. But you know what people are like, people want to see gratitude. And Zelensky is already hopping mad, actually, because this whole summit has been with the intention of talking about the help it can give to Ukraine. And Zelensky wants a firm timetable in place that accepts Ukraine as a member of NATO. And whilst all the other countries have said, oh, definitely, yeah, don't worry, no, of course, we totally see it. They won't put down in writing a timetable whilst war is still ongoing. So he's already feeling that he doesn't quite know what this NATO thing is about. Then you get Ben Wallace talking about the need for gratitude. And there was one other thing that he said as well, which was that last summer he drove 11 hours to Ukraine only to be presented with a list of requested supplies to which Ben Wallace replied, I'm not Amazon. I think that's what they call charity fatigue. I mean, if you go back 18 months, we were falling over ourselves. Ben Wallace was falling over himself to try and be the country that ran to everything that Ukraine needed. And actually, 18 months on, you understand what he's saying. You can't always do everything on the spot. But it's that slightly flippant tone. It's the facetiousness, which just suggests that, you know what, we've given you quite a lot. Where's our payback now? Yeah, anyway, we are a bit like Amazon. We're going to try and deliver a podcast to you between four and six on your doorstep, or we'll leave it with a neighbour. See you tomorrow. Bye bye. Bye bye. This has been a global player, original podcast and a Persephoneka production.