

Prince Harry Takes On Rupert Murdoch's U.K. Tabloids in a High-Stakes Trial



Barring a late settlement, Harry's lawsuit against News Group Newspapers will begin Monday, with potential consequences for the royal family, the media baron and even The Washington Post.

Prince Harry will get his long-awaited day in court against Rupert Murdoch's British tabloids on Monday, as his lawsuit against News Group Newspapers for unlawful gathering of private information finally goes on trial in London.

Harry is one of only two plaintiffs left from an original group of about 40; the rest, including the actor Hugh Grant, have settled with News Group. The other plaintiff, who is also scheduled to take the stand, is Tom Watson, a former deputy leader of the Labour Party, who alleges that News Group hacked his phone and targeted him for political reasons.

Harry has so far refused to settle, casting his suit as a last chance to hold the British news media to account for one of its darkest periods. In addition to hacking phones, the tabloids hired private detectives and encouraged journalists to lie and misrepresent themselves to gain access to highly personal data.

"One of the main reasons for seeing this through is accountability because I am the last person that can actually achieve that," Harry said last month in an interview at The New York Times's DealBook Summit.

He acknowledged that any settlement might not compensate him for his legal costs, and that with News Group aggressively seeking to settle its remaining litigation out of court, it was not clear whether any cases would follow his.

Still, the prospect of multiple days of testimony by the prince, who left Britain for Southern California in part because of what he said was the relentless media intrusion into his life, guarantees a riveting spectacle.

Lawyers involved in previous hacking cases said Harry was taking a risk in exposing himself to several days of cross-examination. He is citing 30 articles that span a period from 1996 to 2011, some of which asserted that he was a regular drug user. His lawyer, David Sherborne, said that was not true.

If Harry continues to reject any settlement offer from News Group, under English law he is at risk of paying substantial legal costs if the court does not award him a commensurate amount at the end of the trial. While a last-minute settlement is still possible, lawyers said he seemed intent on airing his charges in open court.

Lawyers for Harry say Mr. Lewis, a former News executive who helped manage the company's response to the hacking scandal in 2010 and 2011, and is currently the publisher of The Washington Post, was part of a scheme to conceal evidence of hacking by removing files from a computer belonging to Rebekah Brooks, the chief executive of News U.K. The files were transferred to a USB drive that either was lost or has not been opened because it was encrypted, according to a complaint submitted by the plaintiffs.

Mr. Murdoch, 93, testified before Britain's Parliament in 2011 that he should not be held personally responsible for hacking, given that he ran a global company with 53,000 employees. But he shut down News of the World, the tabloid most closely linked to hacking, and issued a contrite apology.

For Harry, Mr. Murdoch has remained an archnemesis. Harry and his older brother, William, have long held his tabloids, among others, responsible for the death of their mother, Diana, Princess of Wales, who was killed in a car accident in Paris in 1997 while being pursued by photographers.

In his memoir, "Spare," Harry described Mr. Murdoch's politics as being "just to the right of the Taliban's."

"I didn't like the harm he did each and every day to Truth, his wanton desecration of objective facts," Harry wrote. "I couldn't think of a single human being in the 300,000-year history of the species who'd done more damage to our collective sense of reality."

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