

Celebrity 'phone hacking' on the increase

Julia Day - The Guardian

PR advisers to the rich and famous are warning their clients to be on their guard amid claims that journalists are resorting to increasingly underhand methods to hack into celebrities' mobile phones.

As competition for celebrity stories increases, unscrupulous journalists are using hacking techniques to beat their rivals to scoops.

According to one well known PR man, some journalists are even tapping into phones to sabotage their rivals' chances in story bidding wars by deleting messages.

Hacking into strangers' mobile phone voicemail boxes is a relatively simple process but can only be used if the mobile phone user has not personalized his or her voicemail access code.

"There is a certain element in Fleet Street that sees this as a new form of investigative journalism and it's getting worse," said James Herring of Taylor Herring Communications, whose clients include Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan, Neil Morrissey and Caroline Feraday.

"We always advise our clients to change the default pin number on their mobile phones straight away as this bars strangers from accessing their voicemail.

"But now not only are celebrities being targeted, as journalists trawl for stories, but so are the people negotiating bids for stories.

"Newspapers are accessing people's voicemails and deleting the messages left by their rivals.

"This started as a dirty tricks ploy by the red-top Sunday papers but voicemail espionage has become epidemic."

Oliver Wheeler of Freud Communications, whose clients include Natalie and Nicole Appleton and Geri Halliwell, said the tabloids were not the only ones indulging in the practice.

"I advised all our clients to make sure they changed their pin numbers after I saw a journalist accessing someone else's voicemail. I was stunned - he was a senior business journalist," said Mr Wheeler.

James Hipwell, the former Daily Mirror City Slicker, who now works for celebrity PR guru Max Clifford, said this tactic was now common practice in Fleet Street.

"There are many stories every week - mainly showbusiness - that couldn't have been got by any other means," he said.

"It's underhand and it's not encouraged but it is common practice and everyone does it."