

The Press Complaints Commission

Who we are

The PCC is an independent body which administers the system of self-regulation for the press. It does so primarily by dealing with complaints, framed within the terms of the Editors' Code of Practice, about the editorial content of newspapers and magazines (and their websites, including editorial audio-visual material) and the conduct of journalists. It can also assist individuals by representing their interests to editors in advance of an article about them being published.

The purpose of the PCC is to serve the public by holding editors to account. We strive to protect the rights of individuals, while at the same time preserving appropriate freedom of expression for the press. We proactively advertise our services and reach out to people who may be in need of our help. We aim to promote high standards by developing clear guidance and practical principles through our rulings, and offering training and advice to editors and journalists.

How we work

The Commission comprises seventeen members and has a majority (ten) of "lay" or public members (including the Chairman) with no connection to the newspaper and magazine industry. The remaining seven Commissioners are serving editors. The PCC enforces the Editors' Code of Practice agreed by the newspaper and magazine industry, which deals with issues of accuracy and privacy in reporting and how journalists should behave in gathering the news.

The PCC acts by:

- negotiating remedial action and amicable settlements for complainants;
- issuing rulings on complaints;
- using published rulings as a means of guiding newsroom practice across the industry;
- publicly censuring editors for breaches of the Code;
- passing on pre-publication concerns to editors to prevent the Code being breached;
- passing on requests to editors that their journalists cease contacting individuals, and so prevent media harassment;
- issuing formal guidance, based on its interpretation of the Code, to the industry on important issues;
- instigating its own investigations under the Code in the public interest where appropriate;
- conducting training seminars for working journalists and editors;
- and liaising with other press councils internationally.

We are committed to transparency and accountability and publicise all of our rulings. We also raise awareness among policymakers, public agencies and charities, lawyers, officials, journalists and the general public about the work of the PCC.

Standards

The system is designed to maintain standards in the press by enforcing the terms of the Code and so holding editors to account, while still preserving appropriate freedom of expression.

This is primarily achieved by the PCC administering an efficient and free complaints service. We encourage complainants, as the more people use the system, the more editors are held to account for their decisions. This will - and indeed does - lead to a rise in standards.

Some "standards" issues fall outside the remit of the Commission: questions of taste and offence; tone of coverage; newsworthiness of stories; quality of writing. It would be inappropriate for the Commission to comment upon these issues, as they are not covered by the Code of Practice. The test for the PCC must be whether the Code has been breached.

Sanctions

The PCC can enforce a range of sanctions, summarised below:

- negotiation of an agreed remedy (apology, published correction, amendment of records, removal of article);
- publication of a critical adjudication, which may be followed by public criticism of a title by the Chairman of the PCC;
- a letter of admonishment from the Chairman to the editor;
- follow-up from the PCC to ensure that changes are made to avoid repeat errors and to establish what steps (which may include disciplinary action, where appropriate) have been taken against those responsible for serious breaches of the Code;
- formal referral of an editor to their publisher for action.

Proactivity

The PCC cannot act on every story or issue that arises in connection with the press. It would not be practical, or possible, to monitor the output (online and in hard copy) of newspapers and magazines, and to seek to establish whether it complies with the Code of Practice. The Code is designed to protect individuals, and the PCC needs to respect the wishes - and consider the evidence - of those individuals when investigating complaints about information relating to them.

So, if an issue relates to a named individual, the PCC will generally not conduct investigations without that person's consent. However, the Commission will not just wait for complaints to come in. We endeavour to:

- contact those at the centre of news stories to offer our services, when we become aware - either through information from individual Commissioners or the Secretariat, or third parties - of issues of possible concern relating to the application of the Code;
- act to help complainants shape their concerns, so that a complaint can be considered as efficiently as possible;
- of our own volition, initiate investigations relating to possible breaches of the Code where there are no obvious first parties who might complain (for example in cases involving payments to witnesses or criminals);
- issue guidance on best practice in areas that have caused public concern;
- help train journalists and editors about the application of the Code;
- raise awareness of the PCC with representatives of vulnerable people and interest groups; to enable them to use the service effectively;
- advertise and market our services as widely as possible.

When there is a major incident, attracting considerable media coverage, we will ensure that we act decisively and quickly.