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**SPEECH BY SIR CHRISTOPHER MEYER, CHAIRMAN OF THE
PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION, AT A DINNER TO MARK
THE 9TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE ALLIANCE OF
INDEPENDENT PRESS COUNCILS OF EUROPE (AIPCE) HELD IN
THE SIGNET LIBRARY, EDINBURGH, ON 20TH SEPTEMBER 2007.**

[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

That media self-regulation has never been more viable or credible is amply demonstrated by our presence here tonight. Among our number are delegates from at least 25 different countries, representing the oldest press council – that of Sweden, which started work in 1916 – to the newest – that of Ireland, whose ombudsman Professor Horgan we welcome here tonight and whose office begins work shortly.

That represents a span of 91 years in which self-regulation has grown in scope and effectiveness.

In between time – and particularly recently – many new self-regulatory bodies have begun work, in sometimes challenging circumstances.

Their founders are motivated by common aims: to enhance public confidence in the press; to promote high standards of journalism; and to ensure that governments do not write and enforce rules on editorial content. For there is no functioning democracy worthy of the name where the government interferes with the rights of its citizens to communicate with one another through the press. So it is particularly gratifying that we can welcome many colleagues from Eastern Europe who have had one of the most difficult balancing acts of all: to persuade a press which has relatively recently gained new freedoms, and a governing class which has tasted state control of the press, that self-regulation is not only in the interests of the press itself and the public at large, but also is a force which underpins democracy.

Never has self-regulation been a more appropriate answer to the question of how to enhance the quality of journalism in a free society. There are two unanswerable arguments in its favour.

There is the philosophical one about freedom from state control that I have mentioned. The march of technology into the digital age does not weaken this point one jot.

And there is now a practical consideration that has only recently become a feature. The flow of information is now global, and instant. The digital age, which even now is still really in its infancy, has revolutionised the way in

which we receive news and communicate. It will only develop further. For my own part I use plenty of American news websites along with a healthy dollop of British blogs, which are unregulated and which are sometimes hosted by servers based outside the UK.

If information is now an international commodity, then it will clearly be impossible for national governments in a free society to ring-fence their own jurisdiction and expect to be able to impose rules on what can be reported.

Don't just take my word for it: witness what is happening in France. There, decades of strict privacy laws are becoming obsolete – not because of successful legal challenges, but because the internet is rendering them useless both by breaking news and by forcing traditional media to adapt to the new online competition.

Perhaps this is why we now detect a new mood among legislators and officials, both nationally here and also at the European level. Self-regulation is now widely seen as an example about how standards can be maintained in the new information world. Its essential qualities of flexibility, common sense rules and the co-operation of news providers in putting things right quickly are attracting new plaudits.

In the UK – as in most European countries – self-regulation has also been trusted to oversee standards for audio-visual material on newspaper and magazine websites. Such services could traditionally only have been broadcast on a regulated television channel. Now they are ubiquitous.

But because the Code of Practice applies to them, consumers can be reassured about the quality of the information, and that they have rights to complain if things go wrong. Politicians can rest easy that there is no regulatory vacuum requiring attention. The news industry itself can show that it has taken responsibility for its new products, at a time when there is intense scrutiny about the reliability of the media.

For the issue of trust in media services has never had greater resonance, at least here in the UK. There have been waves of scandals involving deceptions in the television industry this year. And it would be wrong to suggest that the press itself has a totally virtuous history. So there have been great public debates about public trust in the media. To my mind, press bodies like ours have a vital role to play. It will be essential, in an environment where people are bombarded with information through countless different channels, for consumers to be able to distinguish between the products available – what is reliable, and what is rubbish.

The industry's own action in drawing up a set of agreed rules for journalists, and then tasking an outside body with enforcing them, is precisely the sort of corporate responsibility that should help maintain and enhance trust in the press. What bemuses me sometimes is when newspapers, magazines and their websites are shy about telling their readers about this virtue. When media generally are clamouring to demonstrate that they can be trusted, their subscription to an independent professional standards body should be the most important tool in the box.

So, to reiterate a point I have made many times over the last year: yes, some publications are good at advertising the PCC and publishing boxes telling their readers about the Code of Practice. But for the industry as a whole, the report card is patchy. There can and should be greater prominence for such statements. Some newspaper websites now see the logic in including a reference to the Code of Practice and the PCC. This is good practice, to be encouraged. It is a sensible and proportionate step which shows to people generally that the industry takes the issue of trust seriously and does not seek to shirk its responsibilities. It is surely a wise commercial move too.

Which all brings me back to why self-regulation has more significance now than ever. It is an old concept, of course. But the big idea inherent in self-regulation – that self-imposed rules are more effective and more philosophically desirable than legal ones – has obvious relevance to today's media environment where anyone can be a publisher and national legal boundaries are meaningless.

Its success might also act as a beacon to those new media operators who seem confused about what is the right thing to do in an age when they are party to the dissemination of falsehoods or the conduit for cyber-bullying. It will not be enough – in the face of future horror stories about children committing suicide following online video bullying, for instance – for such businesses to do the bare legal minimum.

That is not what taking responsibility means.

But at least there is already a model of how voluntarily to establish successful ombudsman services which can react quickly to resolve problems and act as an outlet for grievances before things become too serious.

Our conference here in Edinburgh has brought together people from Ireland in the West to Azerbaijan in the East. The quality and range of our discussions on issues such as privacy, newsgathering, and the internet have demonstrated two key truths.

First, that the business of press regulation is fluid and cannot conform to a uniform European standard. Rules vary according to cultural differences and public expectations. Pan-European regulations for journalists would be unworkable.

Second, that self-regulation is in good hands across Europe. The challenges of the converged digital world are being anticipated and met. The privacy of the individual is being protected while the freedom of the press is maintained.

Press Councils, press ombudsmen and Press Complaints Commissions offer a transparent form of modern, light touch media regulation whose time has come.

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