

PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION

CHARTER COMMISSIONER



2006

REPORT OF THE CHARTER COMMISSIONER

1. I continued in 2006 to consider complaints about the handling of complaints by the Press Complaints Commission where the Commission had taken a decision. I do not review the substance of the Commission's decision, only the handling of the complaint. I report my findings to the Commission, with any recommendations.

Commission decided that it could take no action. I found that the newspaper had not commented on an official US Government denial of the story that the complainant had sent in at a late stage. The editor agreed to publish a clarification, which the complainant agreed resolved the complaint.
2. I received 45 complaints. This represents under 6% of the decisions where the Commission did not uphold or resolve a complaint that was within its terms of reference. (The figure for 2005 was 7%.) I examined the PCC file in all cases. The Commission accepted all my recommendations.
3. In these four cases my investigation led to a substantial change in the outcome of the original complaint:-
 - a. The complaint was that a prominent article on the cost of teachers' pensions had ignored the contributions that teachers make. The Commission's decision, which was not altogether clear, found no breach of the Code. The editor agreed to annotate his records to register the complainant's point. This resolved the complaint.
 - b. It was reported that the President of a South American country had been wanted for extradition to the United States before he died some years ago. After conflicting evidence and much correspondence the Commission decided that there was no breach of the Code. His letter to me appeared to raise new points. These were put to the newspaper, which offered to publish a clarification. This did not satisfy the complainant. The Commission decided that sufficient remedial action had been offered.
 - c. A headline about drinking habits in different countries was criticised as inaccurate. The Commission decided that this was not a breach of the Code. His letter to me suggested that the editor should at least apologise to him. This was put to the editor, who wrote a suitable letter of apology, and the complainant agreed that this resolved his complaint.
 - d. The complainant's name was wrongly printed in his letter to a newspaper, even though, he said, his correct name was well known to the paper. The Commission decided that this was not a breach of the Code. His letter to me suggested that the editor should at least apologise to him. This was put to the editor, who wrote a suitable letter of apology, and the complainant agreed that this resolved his complaint.
4. In 12 other cases the Commission agreed with me that further action was needed. For example -
 - a. The complainant was misquoted in a newspaper

- report and complained directly to the editor. A correction was published without his agreement. He found the wording unsatisfactory. The Commission originally decided that the editor had taken sufficient remedial action. After the complainant's letter to me, the Chairman of the Commission wrote to the editor about the personal comments he had made about the complainant and about the need for corrections to be satisfactory to the complainant.
- b. A complaint was held to be outside the remit of the Commission, but the complainant was not told for three months and after some correspondence. After his letter to me he was given the sincere apologies of the Commission and assured that procedures would be reviewed in the light of this experience.
 - c. A complicated complaint about inaccuracy was rejected by the Commission. After his letter to me, the complainant was given a detailed reply and told that the Commission was sorry about the minor mistakes in the decision, which stood.
 - d. I conveyed the Commission's apologies for the mistakes made in the earlier correspondence with the complainant, and gave a fuller explanation of the decision that there had been no breach of the Code.
 - e. New legal points were raised with me. I put them to the Commission for consideration. A revised adjudication was approved. The decision that there was no breach of the Code was confirmed.
5. In the remaining cases I was satisfied that the complaint to the Commission had been properly handled. I was able to assure the complainant that it had been considered by the whole Commission. Where possible, I added an explanation of the Code and the Commission's policy and practice.
 6. In most of these cases the complainant was in effect asking me to review the substance of the Commission's decision (which I could not do). The complainant's starting point was often that newspapers should be "fair, responsible and balanced", which went far beyond the requirements of the clauses of the Code. The complainant would rely on the statements in the preamble to the Code that "All members of the press have a duty to maintain the highest professional standards" and "It is essential that an agreed code be honoured not only in the letter but in the full spirit." The right to free expression was rarely mentioned.
 7. None of the dissatisfied complainants who wrote to me in 2006, or indeed in the previous two years, have asked for a fine to be imposed on the newspaper that had upset them.

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