

Over the course of the last few years, the PCC has dealt with a number of cases where numerous individuals have complained about the same issue – some have been orchestrated, others have arisen spontaneously. The ease with which complaints can be made and increasing access to the internet are two drivers of this trend. In 2009, there were some very notable examples of what might be described as ‘multiple complaints’.

Top 5 for 2009

1// 25,000+

Jan Moir in the Daily Mail –
“Why there was nothing ‘natural’
about Stephen Gately’s death”

2// 5,971

Fourteen articles in 10 different
newspapers relating to the
British National Party

3// 395

James Martin in the Mail on Sunday –
“The Tesla Roadster is the all-electric
supercar that’s as fast as a Ferrari”

4// 197

OK! Magazine – “Jade Goody
Official Tribute Issue”

5// 76

Sunday World – “Grotesque” (Front
page photograph of a suicide victim)

Campaigns

Jan Moir and Stephen Gately



An article by Jan Moir in the Daily Mail, which made comments about the death of pop star Stephen Gately, caused particular outrage and led to over 25,000 people expressing their concerns in writing to the Commission. That level of contact was completely unprecedented – in the whole of 2008, the PCC received fewer than 5,000 written contacts.

This situation raised all sorts of questions for the Commission – as well as highlighting the power of social networking websites. For instance, how does a small

organisation (with 15 members of staff) actually process so many complaints? And more fundamentally, should volume alone have an impact on the way in which concerns are judged?

A number of changes have been made to the Commission's website and databases so that our systems can better cope with a spike in complaint emails. However, the issue for the PCC can never be how many people have taken a dislike to an article, or been offended by it. What is at stake is whether or not the Editors' Code of Practice has been breached – and that is unaffected by the number of individuals who complain.

That said, even though the PCC will not consider sheer weight of complaints to be necessarily an indicator that the Code has been breached, it recognised that there was a need for the genuine concerns of a large number of people to be aired and debated fully. This it did in a lengthy ruling at the beginning of 2010. And because a complaint had been made by Stephen Gately's partner, Andrew Cowles, the Commission was able to rule on concerns (under Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) and Clause 12 (Discrimination) of the Editors' Code of Practice) that would not have been open to consideration on the basis of the other 'third party' complaints.

James Martin on cyclists

A piece by the well-known chef, James Martin, which appeared in The Mail on Sunday in September, drew the wrath of almost 400 complainants, who objected to his characterisation of cyclists. Many were also concerned at his description of having deliberately run a group of bicycle riders off the road by passing them at speed in his car while blaring his horn.

The newspaper removed the reference to cyclists when it became aware of the level of concern that had been caused. Mr Martin also offered a profuse apology on his own website. A number of complainants remained unhappy and asked the Commission to make a ruling on the case. This it did, concluding that, while clearly causing considerable offence, the article had not breached the Editors' Code of Practice.

The BNP

The PCC also received a number of multiple complaints about articles concerning the British National Party. Members and supporters of the party, often acting in concert (and sometimes using identical wording in their letters), said the reports in question were misleading. However, it was clear to the Commission that the issues at stake were inextricably linked to the party as an official body. As a result, it took the view that it would only consider the substance of the complaints if they were raised by BNP officials. A number of formal complaints have subsequently been dealt with on this basis.