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Press Complaints Commission

Can journalism and quality of information be regulated? We talk to **Tim Toulmin**, Director of the Press Complaints Commission, about its action towards the newspaper and magazine industry.



What does the PCC do?

The PCC is a non-statutory body – set up by the UK newspaper and magazine industry but given complete operational independence – which aims to keep the quality of journalism high by enforcing the terms of an agreed Code of Practice. The Code affects nearly 40,000 journalists, and covers areas such as accuracy, news gathering methods, and privacy. If someone complains, we will investigate the matter with a view either to making a ruling under the Code, or negotiating the publication of a correction, apology or other remedy. If we uphold a complaint, the publication must publish our criticisms unedited and with due prominence. This is an effective 'name and shame' sanction.

Who uses the PCC?

Anyone who is the subject of stories in newspapers, magazines and their websites can complain. So, while the overwhelming majority of people who approach us are ordinary members of the public, we also deal with celebrities, royals, politicians – even foreign heads of state. We also do a lot of work with organizations who work with vulnerable people – police family liaison officers; the Samaritans; coroners' offices and so on.

What are the priorities for the organization over the next few years?

Media convergence has completely changed the landscape for the print and broadcast media, their regulators, and the consumer. The structural changes are enormous and permanent: competition is now global; there are no entry bars to publishing because it is so cheap and there is no scarcity of resource; and press and broadcasters are now going head to head online. The greatest challenge – already underway – is how to keep standards of journalism high in this new world.

Fortunately, the element of buy-in from editors and journalists that is inherent in a system of self-regulation means that we are working with the industry – and therefore with the grain of

these developments – rather than against them. I think any form of imposed regulation on online journalists would be completely unworkable as well as offensive in principle. So the best hope for the maintenance of standards going forward is independent but voluntary regulation.

Finally, as our competence now extends to video and sound on newspaper and magazine websites, our relationship with Ofcom is increasingly going to be important to ensure that there is nothing wildly contradictory about our online activities and that our respective jurisdictions continue to be respected.

Is there a secret to being a successful regulator?

Getting the tone of the relationship with the regulated industry right. This might be different for statutory forms of regulation, but for the PCC this means maintaining the respect of the industry while keeping a suitable distance from it.

How do you engage the public in your work?

Three times a year we hold public meetings in towns and cities across the UK. This year so far we have been in Leeds and Bridgend. Members of the public ask us any questions they like, or put proposals to us. After one meeting in Belfast, when some health professionals presented us with evidence of the phenomenon of copycat suicides, the Code of Practice was changed to address this. Members of the public also sit on our board – anyone can apply to be a member of the PCC – and in fact they are the majority. Industry representation is kept to just 7 out of 17 members, making the PCC the most independent press self-regulatory body anywhere in the world. And there are no journalists or civil servants on the full time staff. We also, of course, research public attitudes to current issues such as privacy and social networking.

What is the most common myth about your organization?

That we are not proactive. The problem is with the name 'Press Complaints Commission' – it sounds as if we have to wait for complaints to come in. In fact, the PCC is highly active in training journalists about the Code so that breaches are avoided in the first place; in spotting where and when vulnerable people might come into contact with the media and offering to help before there is a problem; and in working behind the scenes, for example to minimize the impact of media scrums. Another common misunderstanding is about the power of peer pressure: some people don't rate it and think that only a system of fines would be an adequate deterrent or punishment. They couldn't be more wrong. When the PCC sharpens its claws for a public criticism of an editor the howls of pain are loud and clear. No editor wants their decisions held up in public by their professional standards body as an example of bad practice. On the other hand, fines are a corporate rather than a personal punishment, and therefore not as keenly felt.

What sort of measures are taken to ensure the PCC's independence from the industry?

This goes to the heart of the PCC's credibility. For an effective system of self-regulation it is essential for the organization to be funded by the industry (albeit at arm's length and with no strings), and for members of the profession to sit on its board. But, of course, some people will be suspicious of these arrangements. That is why, in addition to the PCC being run independently, there is an audit panel which publicly scrutinizes our work; an independent reviewer (Sir Brian Cubbon) who will take any complaints about the way in which PCC cases have been handled; and a finance committee (responsible for overseeing the budget) made entirely of public members of the Commission.

