

Phone message tapping, the PCC and the Editors' Code of Practice

EMBARGO: IMMEDIATE 09.08.06

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The Press Complaints Commission has received a number of enquiries following the news that the police are investigating allegations about a News of the World journalist and the interception of telephone messages. The Commission cannot of course comment on the specific matters that are being investigated by the police.

However, in addition to the general law, journalists are also bound by the terms of the press Code of Practice. Clause 10 (i) of the Code states that:

"The press must not seek to obtain or publish material acquired by using hidden cameras or clandestine listening devices; or by intercepting private or mobile telephone calls, messages or emails; or by the unauthorised removal of documents or photographs".

Sir Christopher Meyer, Chairman of the PCC, said:

"We make no comment about the current allegations for obvious legal reasons. But on the general issue, it is absolutely clear that intercepting private or mobile telephone messages is completely unacceptable under the Code, unless there is a compelling public interest reason for doing so. Even then journalists must also of course abide by the terms of the law. The Commission reserves the right to investigate the newspaper's conduct in this case, if, at the end of the legal process, it appears that there are unresolved questions about its application of the Code of Practice.

The PCC has also made it unambiguously clear in recent guidance to journalists on the Data Protection Act, and in a speech I made earlier this year, that offering money for confidential information, either directly or through third parties, may be illegal and that journalists must have regard to the terms of the Act".

ENDS

Notes for editors

1. In 2003 the PCC upheld a complaint against the Sun newspaper for publishing the transcript of a private telephone conversation. The adjudication can be found here
2. The Guidance Note on the Data Protection Act can be found here
3. A copy of the full text of Sir Christopher Meyer's speech made earlier this year can be found here
4. The PCC is an independently-run self-regulatory body which administers a 16 clause Code of Practice on editorial standards and newsgathering methods for print journalists. More information - including details of its rulings and complaints that breach the Code of Practice - can be found at www.pcc.org.uk.
5. For more information, contact Stephen Abell on 020 78310022.

Phone message tapping

The Commission has discussed the issue of phone message tapping in light of the Clive Goodman case. It resolved to write to the editor of the News of the World with a number of questions arising from the matter, once sentencing has taken place.

For further information, please contact Stephen Abell on

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