

PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION

From the Chairman

7 November 2007

Tim Bowdler CBE
Chairman
Press Standards Board of Finance
21 Landsdown Crescent
Edinburgh
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Dear Tim,

I thought it might be useful in advance of next week's PressBoF meeting to let you have a few thoughts on topics which the Board will no doubt wish to discuss.

AV remit

We were all, I think, a little anxious after the extension of the Commission's remit in February this year, that there would be a flood of complaints with unwelcome implications for cost and workload at Halton House. This is to report that, so far at least, the feared inundation has not taken place.

We have to date received 5 complaints about audio-visual material: 3 have been adjudicated, 1 resolved and 1 not pursued. Your agreement to extending our remit has proved timely and very welcome. All 5 complaints related also to print material in newspapers. Had we been able to handle only the latter and not the former, I think our credibility would have taken a knock. As it is, judging from reactions outside your industry (politicians, OfCom and ASA, lawyers), thanks to the PressBof decision, the PCC is seen to have taken a lead on how to regulate information in the digital age; and this in turn has significantly strengthened the argument for self-regulation. I had the unusual experience last Saturday of attending a meeting of the Bar Association – usually the Lions' Den for the Chairman of the PCC – where I was congratulated on the move into A/V and no-one questioned the effectiveness of self-regulation!

CHAIRMAN
Sir Christopher Meyer

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We have been heartened also by the editorial reaction, with on-line editors telling us that the move into A/V – and our adjudications - have helped bring clarity where previously they were unsure which rules applied.

So far, so good, I think.

Subterfuge report

I am sorry to have missed the last Board meeting where you had a first discussion of the report. I have to say that, as I mentioned at the time, I was extremely worried by the possible political fall-out from the Goodman/Mulcaire case and the damage this could do to self-regulation. It put a premium on responding fast, comprehensively and effectively. Despite some carping at our decision not to interview Andy Coulson, the report has gone down well, effectively killing the case as an issue in Westminster and Whitehall. It has, as you know, been welcomed by the Government, the Opposition and the Select Committee; and, I believe, has contributed to the current and welcome bipartisan consensus behind self-regulation and against a privacy law, buttressed by the Prime Minister himself.

As to the recommendations in our report to help minimise the chances of another Goodman, I gather that at your last meeting, PressBoF asked the PCC to find out industry reaction. We have had a good number of substantive replies to my letter of 11 October; but I know that some of the national groups prefer to wait, pending further discussion on 15 November.

We can give you chapter and verse next week. But suffice it to say that the substantive reaction to our recommendations has been universally positive, though, naturally enough, different publications intend to put them into practice in different ways, if it is not already what they are doing anyway. Additionally, some have told us that they do not use subterfuge in any circumstances. I think this varied approach is perfectly legitimate and defensible so long as the measures in place are evidently effective and will withstand any future public scrutiny.

Publicity for the PCC

In my introduction to the PCC's most recent annual report, I said that I thought the press itself still had more to do in improving the visibility of the PCC, and that I would be raising the issue with the industry during 2007. PressBoF's request for us to contact the industry over the subterfuge report has given me the opportunity to do this. I believe that it is in everyone's interests for it to be clear which publications – both in paper and online – subscribe to the Code.

The response so far has been extremely encouraging. We have had numerous requests for the PCC's advertisements which newspapers and magazines carry free of charge. But particularly pleasing has been a broad welcome for the idea of publishing a statement on publications' websites, making clear that they subscribe to the Code and including a link



to the PCC site. Some sites include the PCC's logo (an example, which many of you have already seen, is attached). Judging from the responses we have received, this is rolling out extensively across the industry. While there will always be more to do, I intend to welcome this publicly in our next annual report as an example of the press leading the way in taking the issue of trust in media services seriously.

I look forward to seeing you on the 15th November.

With kind regards.

Yours ever,



/ Sir Christopher Meyer

