

Listening devices - a briefing note from the Editorial Review Group

The Press Complaints Commission Code of Practice allows all journalists to go about their job in a professional manner, reporting events fairly and accurately.

However, recent events have put pressure on The Code and it is important that we keep abreast of the challenges in relation to the legal, ethical and moral issues facing editors. The move to multi-channel publishing has also increased the pressure facing us all.

As a result of recent court cases and the Press Complaints Commission's stance, the Johnston Press Editorial Review Group has decided that it would be prudent if we were to send out regular alerts on issues and updates covering all aspects of the journalistic code - including digital.

All of us should abide by the Press Complaints Commission code. One recent issue that has attracted the headlines covers the use of listening devices.

This forms the first of what will be regular reminders on what the policy covering publication should be:

LISTENING DEVICES

Following the jailing of a News of the World reporter for mobile phone offences, the group has also decided to remind all editors of the Code of Practice in relation to the use of listening devices.

It does not allow newspapers or websites to seek, obtain or publish material which has been acquired by using clandestine listening devices or hidden cameras.

Any journalist who believes there is a public interest issue which might justify such action must gain approval from the senior editor in his company BEFORE the gathering of such material begins. That editor must make the Chief Operating Officer aware that he has sanctioned its use to allow the decision to be logged.

Other than in those exceptional circumstances, journalists should not intercept private or mobile telephone calls, messages or emails, remove documents or photographs without authorisation or breach the Data Protection Act.

Neither should journalists misrepresent or engage in subterfuge - either through commission or omission - of any kind in pursuit of information.

***Obtaining such material by using clandestine listening devices is against the law and could result in a prison sentence. It would also result in company disciplinary action against the individual or individuals that could lead to dismissal from the company.**