



Summary of Results: PCC Focus Groups

Press Complaints Commission

March, 2011

Background



- ❑ 3 Focus groups were held in London focus group viewing facilities (2 in Hammersmith and 1 in Cheam) from the 8th to 16th of November, 2010.
- ❑ Focus Groups were chosen because they enable a frank and healthy dialogue with real people and - when properly moderated - reveal insights that cannot be uncovered using any other methodology.
- ❑ Respondents were recruited from all over the city and the suburbs.
- ❑ 1 group was made up of 18 – 29 year olds, 1 group of 30 – 44 year olds and 1 group of 45 – 65 year olds.
- ❑ All were recruited to represent a broad range of political views, occupations and life stages. Care was taken to ensure that respondents were articulate and opinionated but not extreme in their views.

Research Objectives



- ❑ To explore levels of awareness and understanding of regulatory processes in the media and specifically of the PCC.
- ❑ To explore the general notion of Freedom of Speech as an essential pillar of our society and how this stacks up with their concerns – if they exist – of the intrusiveness of media.
- ❑ To explore the issue of tasteless reporting vs unfair reporting, and to clarify how people view controlling things that they simply don't like vs things that should not be allowed.
- ❑ To investigate responses to the PCC's stated goals and gain insight and feedback on how they feel the PCC should seek to communicate and publicize those goals.
- ❑ To explore responses to specific communication sound bites and to optimize their usage and their expression.

Focus Group Design



- ❑ The groups were each 2 hours long and after roughly one hour – after the conversation had been directed towards the press and satisfactions/concerns with the way the press perform in the UK – a definition of the PCC was revealed.

- ❑ After the reveal of the PCC, a series of statements and sound bites were also explored.

PCC Reveal Statement



- ❑ *The Press Complaints Commission is the self-regulatory body for the UK newspaper and magazine industry. This independent Commission is made up of 10 public members and 7 editors. The Chairman is a public member with no connection to the industry.*
- ❑ *The PCC applies a Code of Practice written by newspaper and magazine editors that covers accuracy, privacy and newsgathering methods.*
- ❑ *It considers complaints from members of the public, and either resolves them (by, for example, negotiating apologies) or publishes decisions about whether the rules have been broken.*
- ❑ *It also:*
 - *Trains journalists & editors on how to follow the Code of Practice*
 - *Works with members of the public who request help to prevent publication of inaccurate or intrusive stories.*
 - *Provides a 24 hour helpline –available to anybody - to prevent harassment by journalists (especially in cases involving bereavement)*
- ❑ *The PCC is paid for by newspaper and magazine publishers but operates independently and is a free service to the public.*

Additional Sound Bites



- Freedom of expression is important in a democratic society.
- The government should not be involved in the regulation of the press.
- The PCC provides a public service.
- The PCC service is fast, free and fair.
- The PCC is an example of independent self-regulation.
- Unlike the legal system, the PCC is free, fast and maintains your privacy
- The newspaper and magazine industry, not the taxpayer, should fund its own policeman.
- We work to raise standards in the newspaper and magazine industry.
- The PCC listens to your concerns and ensure your voice is heard.



Main Findings

The Differing Roles of the Press



- □ □ There was general agreement that the UK press is one of the best in the world for accurate, honest and balanced reporting.
- Newspapers were still felt to have a role to play in providing commentary, in depth analysis and entertainment.
- There were differences between daily and weekly (Sunday) newspapers, the former being used more for keeping up to date and the latter for analysis and commentary
- Younger respondents especially relied on the internet for late breaking news, though often via the online versions of newspapers, suggesting that branding - and the mutually reinforcing role between online and offline - will continue to grow in importance.

Invasion of Privacy is not my problem - YET!



- Very few respondents thought that invasion of privacy was an issue for “regular people” – and certainly not for themselves.
- There was a general feeling that invasion was the price of fame.
- However when prompted later in the discussions about the possibility of accidental fame/notoriety/public relevance (as in when they are the neighbour, colleague or relative of someone involved in a tragedy) then everyone was quick to agree that the press may need to be controlled.
- Once the respondents had understood the role and scope of the PCC (not spontaneously appreciated by anybody it should be said), local press was seen as an important target for the PCC to be involved in regulating.

Freedom of Speech



- There was unanimous agreement that freedom of expression is an essential part of life. However some confusion existed - especially with the older respondents - when probed about aspects such as taste.
- Younger respondents found it much easier to accommodate the acceptance of subjects, and approaches to subjects, that they didn't like on the grounds that they are an inevitable result of freedom of speech.
- The majority of all age groups felt that market forces are the best controller of bad taste - "if you don't like it, don't buy it"

Extremes are Protected by Other Mechanisms



- There was general trust that “other mechanisms” exist to protect the public.
- While there was very hazy notions of what these mechanisms might be (Royal Family, National Security, etc), there was again a general feeling amongst all groups that these mechanisms function effectively and reasonably.

Prompted Awareness OK. Understanding Very Limited



- ❑❑❑ Only 1 or 2 respondents were able to mention the PCC spontaneously though once mentioned the majority of respondents felt they had heard of the Commission.
- ❑ However there was very limited understanding of how the PCC operates and what it actually does.
- ❑ This lack of understanding - fuelled in part by minority pockets of cynicism - generated a scepticism about the effectiveness of the PCC.
- ❑ While this scepticism was to some extent expelled as the positive actions of the PCC were revealed (Training, 24 hours help line etc), it seems there is a default assumption that a lack of awareness must mean there is limited positive action.
- ❑ This illustrates the need to explain the PCC's role and actions. Simple awareness without understanding can lead to misconceptions.

Embedded doubt on Effectiveness



- ❑❑ Before the reveal on the workings of the PCC, most respondents felt the Commission would not have much teeth.
- ❑ After the reveal, while some activities (Training, 24 hour help line) were seen as surprising and positive, there was only marginal improvement in the perception of the Commission's effectiveness.
- ❑ However further probing and discussion on the concept of industry self-regulation revealed that - with appropriate communication - the PCC could be seen as an important factor in maintaining industry standards.

Commission Composition a Welcome Surprise



- ❑ The low awareness of the PCC meant there was minimal prior knowledge on the composition of the Commission. The general assumption was that it would be loaded in favour of the industry.
- ❑ The reveal of the PCC's structure and purpose caused substantial positive surprise and alerted all 3 groups to the possibility that the PCC has more teeth than they had imagined.
- ❑ The cynical elements in the groups of course pointed to the presence of 7 industry members as evidence of bias, so it may well be worthwhile explaining the benefits of a balanced and informed commission structure.

The Power of an Apology



- ❑ Again here, when discussing the role of the PCC in requiring code violations to be corrected publicly, the cynical assumption tends to be that an apology rarely has the prominence of the offending piece.
- ❑ Having said that, there was very little appetite for monetary fines as an alternative.
- ❑ There may be value in exploring a more transparent communication of offenses and repeat offenses.

Code Training - Real Potential



- ❑ Most were surprised and pleased that the PCC trains editors and journalists, but there were some unanswered questions:
 - How often?
 - How in depth?
 - Who conducts it?
 - Is there a pass mark, or is it just required attendance?
- ❑ Training was thought to be a good and very positive initiative if done right.

24 Hour Helpline a BIG Surprise



- ❑ Real surprise and interest that this service existed, although some scepticism about what the help line really would provide.
- ❑ And the more cynical respondents assumed it would be a 9-to-5 service via a call centre in Bangalore.
- ❑ Nevertheless this is a real service that is demonstrable and valuable and once explained should go a long way to providing evidence of the PCC's commitment.

Industry Funding the Best Option



- ❑ While a minority in all groups – basically the cynics – felt that industry funding with industry members on the Commission was self-serving, the majority felt that the PCC had to be funded by the industry.
- ❑ The notion that the industry not the tax payer should fund its own police force was generally thought to be correct.
- ❑ Interestingly there was some suggestion that independent self-regulation is in fact an oxymoron.

Free, Fair and Fast. Fast? - Prove it!



- ❑ Free and Fair were qualities thought to be reasonable and expected from the PCC.
- ❑ But Fast was understood to be a relative term. Fast in comparison to what exactly?
- ❑ There was considerable support and encouragement for speedy resolution of complaints, and speedy advice via the helpline.
- ❑ However some were not optimistic about the ability of the PCC to get a swift resolution sorted out and felt that fast without some sort of guarantee would end up being an empty promise.



Implications

Implications for the PCC



- ❑ Awareness is not the core problem, it is understanding.
- ❑ Some of the facts behind the PCC are important to dispel perceptions of unlevel playing fields. Thus the composition of the PCC is important, how the members are chosen is important, and the role of the industry members is important.
- ❑ The services the PCC offers – and the benefits to the regular public – need to be spelled out. Especially the 24 hour help line.
- ❑ The volume of work carried out by the PCC, and the extent of its remit, are also important. Because most people don't need – and don't expect to need – the PCC to help them, they only think about "Bad Journalism" in the context of tabloid headlines and celebrities. Embracing the activity of the Commission in local and regional press - as well as national press - would demonstrate how it works for "real people" as a genuine public service.
- ❑ The prominence of an apology is assumed to be insignificant in comparison to the prominence of the original code violation. Whatever can be done to ensure that the penalty fits the crime would be a good thing.

Implications for the PCC (con.)



- ❑ Industry training also needs to have a higher profile. While we assume training can't go as far as to award licences – which could be revoked after “n” code violations – the value of this training, and the way in which it is provided, could provide significant evidence of the PCC's intention and independence.
- ❑ In our view the Press Complaints Commission has to find a reason for being that answers the question as to why it is needed in the first place.
- ❑ Then all the various storylines that have appeared in these focus groups can be positioned as support and evidence for this fundamental “raison d’etre”.
- ❑ Protection of the public and protecting freedom of expression then become examples of the PCC at work.

Specific Communication Implications



- ❑ Where examples of the Commission in action are used, include local/regional, as well as national, activity.
- ❑ Quantify the activity of the Commission (no. of complaints, % of successful complaints etc)
- ❑ Professional contracts (journalist and publication) should require adherence to Code
- ❑ The notion of listening and “hearing your concerns” is powerful
- ❑ Spell out the staffing of the Helpline and its remit & authority
- ❑ “Raising the standards of the industry” is a legitimate higher goal for the PCC for some people but would require specific support and reason-to-believe.
- ❑ Independent self-regulation strikes some as an oxymoron. Emphasising that the PCC is the independent body that delivers and executes the self-regulation of the industry might be more compelling.
- ❑ Free and Fair are fine. Fast needs explanation.