

Ms Madeleine Moon MP v The Sunday Times

Clauses noted: 5

Ms Madeleine Moon, MP for Bridgend, complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article published in the Sunday Times on 25 May 2008, headlined "Death Valleys", was insensitive in breach of Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief and shock) of the Code of Practice.

The complaint was not upheld.

The complainant, representing some of those whose relatives had taken their own lives in and around Bridgend, said that – while the text of the piece was balanced and well-researched – the images used to illustrate the article were insensitive at a time of grief in breach of the Code. In particular, she was concerned about the publication of photographs of those who had died next to a large picture of a noose. She added that research indicated that pictorial representation of methods of suicide could encourage others to take their own lives.

The newspaper acknowledged that the relatives of those who had died might be upset by the juxtaposition of a noose and pictures of the dead. However, it argued that the whole point of the graphic introduction was to highlight the apparent happiness of the young people in the pictures with the harsh reality of what they had done. It maintained that it had conducted a serious investigation, and had dramatically portrayed it in a way that avoided glamorising suicide.

Adjudication

The complaint fell under the two different parts of Clause 5, which requires the publication of stories to be handled sensitively at times of grief, and, when reporting suicide, for care to be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used.

The Commission first considered whether the depiction of a noose constituted 'excessive detail' in the sense of the Code. It had to have regard to the fact that – regrettably – there had been a spate of deaths by hanging, and that this fact was well-known. The picture of the noose did not make public anything new about the deaths, or describe the actual process by which individuals had used particular materials to take their own lives. The Commission was not convinced that – given the context of enormous national and international coverage, which had focused on the common method of suicide that linked the deaths – the picture of part of the noose was an excessive detail in breach of the Code.

That said, the Commission recognised that many people would have a view about whether the use of the image was offensive or tasteless – but these are matters that fall outside the terms of the Code of Practice, and which the Commission cannot therefore consider.

The Commission then considered whether the use of the pictures of the deceased, next to the image of the rope, was insensitive to the relatives at a time of grief in breach of Clause 5 (i). Inevitably this juxtaposition would be an upsetting and stark reminder to the families about how their relatives had died, and the Commission regretted the distress that this had caused.

To a degree, any decision about the sensitivity of stories at times of grief will be somewhat subjective. But – in part to minimise the risk of straying into matters of taste and decency which the Code does not cover – the Commission has traditionally considered three questions when deciding whether this part of the Code has been breached: does the coverage break news of a death; does it treat it in a light-hearted way; and does it include gratuitous detail, such as gruesome descriptions about unusual deaths? In this case, the answer to all these questions was negative.

The Commission also had regard to the wider context of the article, and noted that the article explored this difficult subject in a serious and sensitive manner.

The Code was not therefore breached on this occasion. However, the Commission has – since publication of the article – issued a private advisory note to the press on behalf of some of the families concerned, which contained their request that photographs of their relatives not be used in any further stories about Bridgend.

Relevant rulings

Choose Life (NHS Scotland) v Daily Sport, 2009

A Boy v Sunday Times, 2007

Thompson/Duff v FHM, 2003

Adjudication issued 17/11/2008