

Press Complaints Commission v Daily Mirror

Clauses noted: 5

The Press Complaints Commission has investigated whether an article published in the Daily Mirror on 20th November 2008 headlined "Man cut his head off in flat protest", and online under the headline "Man chops off his own head with chainsaw in eviction protest", contained excessive detail about the method of suicide used in breach of Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the Code.

The Commission found a breach of the Code.

The articles reported the suicide of a man, who had taken his own life using a chainsaw. Both articles contained the same amount of detail, and set out the precise apparatus that had been constructed by the individual to enable his suicide.

The newspaper did not consider that the Code had been breached. It argued that the method of suicide was so exceptional that the reporting of it was in the public interest. It did not consider that the reporting could encourage copycat suicides. It also questioned whether the restriction on the right to report inquests in full was practicable for newspapers or consistent with the principle of open justice. It was willing to remove the paragraph from the website as a gesture of goodwill.

Adjudication

Clause 5 (ii) was introduced specifically to prohibit the inclusion of detail that would act, in effect, as a blueprint for the method of a suicide. It is crucial that newspapers abide by its terms, in order to minimise the risk of copycat suicides. This means that, particularly in inquest reports (many of which will be provided by external agencies), care needs to be taken in the editing process to remove excessive detail.

The Commission disagreed with the suggestion that the Code should not restrict detail in inquest reports. Clause 5 of the Code enshrines the right to report inquests, but this does not mean that publishing every detail will always be acceptable. The risk of copycat suicides has been accepted by the newspaper industry, and inquest reporting is one area where special care should be taken.

On this occasion, both the print and online article contained far too much detail and had not been sufficiently edited. It was a matter of concern that the newspaper had allowed the material to be published in both versions. The Commission expected that the situation would not be repeated, as this was a clear breach of the Code.

Adjudication issued 02/01/2009