

Press Complaints Commission v The Guardian

Clauses noted: 5

The Press Complaints Commission has investigated whether an article published in The Guardian on 20th November 2008 headlined "Man facing house move cut his own head off" 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 no breach of the Code.

The article reported the suicide of a man, who had taken his own life using a chainsaw. It referred to the existence of the chainsaw, how it had been activated and the fact that the individual had taken an undefined number of painkillers.

The newspaper indicated that it had deliberately confined the report to a brief news item, and taken the decision not to run a longer piece online. Both reporter and news editor were acutely aware of the PCC guidelines on suicide and several discussions on the content took place during the day.

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, due to the risk of copycat suicides. This means that, particularly in inquest reports (many of which would be provided by external agencies), care needs to be taken in the editing process to remove excessive detail.

The Commission considered that care had been taken to remove such detail. This involved a difficult judgement call, and the newspaper had – on this occasion – stayed on just the right side of the line. The Commission did not uphold the complaint on that basis.

Adjudication issued 02/01/2009