

A woman v London Jewish News

Clauses noted: 1, 2, 3

A woman complained to the Press Complaints Commission that a letter headlined "Jewish students and allegiance to Zionism" published in the London Jewish News on 12 September 2003 was misleading in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code and contained private material in breach of Clause 3 (Privacy). She also contended that the newspaper had failed to provide her with an opportunity to reply to the letter in breach of Clause 2 (Opportunity to reply) of the Code.

The complaint was rejected.

The complainant said that a letter published by the newspaper was misleading in its criticisms of her since it misrepresented her views on Israel and Palestine. She also said that the letter referred to private correspondence she had sent to its author, thereby invading her privacy. The reference to her private correspondence was also inaccurate since the author of the letter claimed it had been unsolicited and was threatening. In light of these concerns the complainant said that she deserved an opportunity to reply to the critical correspondence.

The newspaper said that it had published numerous letters from the complainant in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian situation and a number in response from people that held different views. The letter about which she complained was, said the newspaper, a reasonable response to her own expressed opinions and did not contain any confidential information that ought not to have been disclosed.

The complainant maintained that the letter constituted a personal attack based on a misrepresentation of her views and especially her private correspondence. She said that she would not have objected to publication of her private email to the letter's author in full. What she did not accept was an interpretation of it being published to which she had not been given a chance to respond.

Adjudication

The Commission acknowledged the controversy that can be generated by debate on a newspaper's letters page, particularly on such an emotive issue as the situation in Israel and Palestine. However, it emphasised that a correspondent may not automatically expect the right of reply to any letter that is critical of them personally or their views.

In this particular case the Commission noted the complainant's contention that a correspondent had misrepresented her views and had referred to a private email that had been sent to her by the complainant. On the question of accuracy the Commission considered that the author of the letter was entitled to her interpretation of the complainant's views and was not misleading in claiming that the email from the complainant had been unsolicited – the published material was, therefore, not in breach of Clause 1 of the Code. It therefore followed that there was no breach of Clause 2, which says that an opportunity to reply to inaccuracies must be given when reasonably called for.

Turning to the question of an alleged invasion of privacy the Commission emphasised that newspapers must always take care when publishing readers' letters that they do not intrude into the private lives of others. However, in this instance the Commission noted that the list of 'apologists for the Israeli embassy' as mentioned in the letter under complaint (and referenced from the complainant's email) had clearly been referred to by the complainant in her own published letter of 1 August. The Commission considered that the content of the email was already, therefore, in the public domain and did not conclude that the references in the letter under complaint could raise a breach of Clause 3 of the Code.

Relevant ruling

Noble v Jersey Evening Post, 2002

Adjudication issued 2003