

PCC response to 2007 Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee Report

I have been asked by the board of the Press Complaints Commission to write to you in response to the Select Committee's recent report.

There is much in the report that the Commission welcomes. In particular, the Committee's findings that there is no case for a statutory regulator of the press and that a privacy law would be undesirable are important statements of principle that the Commission wholeheartedly endorses. As to its own performance, the Commission was grateful that the Committee highlighted the amount of pro-active and behind the scenes work that the PCC carries out, and for its conclusion that this was some of the most valuable work that it undertakes. The Commission recognises, though, that there is still a job to do in raising awareness of the range of services that it offers. Several initiatives have been planned in order to achieve this, including publication of a new pocket leaflet which outlines in a brief and accessible way how the PCC can help people. This includes out of hours contact details for Commission staff. It has been sent to civil servants, government ministers, MPs, members of the devolved assemblies and many others who advise or may come into contact with people who are in the news.

Similarly, the Commission was pleased that the Committee welcomed the extension of its remit to include audio-visual material on newspaper and magazine websites. Since the publication of the Committee's report, the PCC has made its first ruling on a complaint about audio-visual material, upholding a complaint that mobile phone footage taken during a lesson and published on a newspaper's website intruded into the privacy of pupils while they were at school. The Commission notes that the report raised the question about whether the remit should go even further. The Commission's flexible structure means that it will be able to adapt quickly to any further developments in technology, and indeed it would be surprising if this was the last occasion on which the Commission's remit ever changed. We will keep the Committee notified of any new moves in relation to online regulation.

The Report contained welcome support for the principle of conciliating complaints, but suggested that the Commission should make greater efforts to publicise breaches of the Code that are settled without the need for an adjudication. The Commission accepts this recommendation, and is looking into ways that this could be achieved which do not undermine the advantages of having a complaint resolved rather than adjudicated.

The Commission notes the Committee's findings on both the Clive Goodman case and the Data Protection Act, and its endorsement of the conclusions of the PCC's report into subterfuge. There are two things to report. The first is that the Commission has hosted a training seminar for national newspaper journalists on undercover newsgathering. It invited Mick Gorrill from the Information Commissioner's Office to speak on the Data Protection Act. A similar event will be held in September for Scottish journalists in Glasgow, where Mr

Gorrill—who appeared before the Select Committee—has again kindly agreed to speak. The Commission will also shortly be offering in-house training to all major newspaper publishers. The second thing to report is that the Commission will be writing to newspaper and magazine companies in the autumn to find out how they have responded to the recommendations in the Commission's report.

Finally, the Commission was somewhat dismayed to be criticised for its handling of the situation regarding photographers and Kate Middleton, and for the publicity that the Committee chose to give to this unjustified criticism. It was Commission officials who took the initiative and proactively approached her lawyers in January to offer to help. We had ourselves spotted that the situation appeared to be troubling, even before the notorious scrum on Miss Middleton's birthday. As a result, a series of conversations followed with her representatives, during which the Commission made clear that it was ready to act at a moment's notice. This the Commission did as soon as it was requested to do so. The Commission rejects the idea that it should intervene in cases without the say so of the person affected. Apart from being objectionable in principle, it would very quickly establish a two-tier service which favoured celebrities and high profile people and which would be impossible to enforce fairly. The Commission was also equally disappointed that there was no recognition in the report of how it has developed an effective system of handling pre-publication concerns about newsgathering, which delivers results without the need for a formal complaint.

However, that point aside, the Commission welcomes the numerous constructive comments and suggestions contained within the Report.

Tim Toulmin

Director

1/10/07

Press Complaints Commission

PCC welcomes Select Committee report on self-regulation

The Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee has just published responses to its report into self-regulation of the press.

The PCC said that it welcomed the report:

“In particular, the Committee’s findings that there is no case for a statutory regulator of the press and that a privacy law would be undesirable are important statements of principle that the Commission wholeheartedly endorses. As to its own performance, the Commission was grateful that the Committee highlighted the amount of pro-active and behind the scenes work that the PCC carries out, and for its conclusion that this was some of the most valuable work that it undertakes.”

The Commission was also pleased that the CMS Committee had endorsed its approach to the regulation of online editorial information, and, in response to a suggestion that its remit should go even further, said:

“The Commission’s flexible structure means that it will be able to adapt quickly to any further developments in technology, and indeed it would be surprising if this was the last occasion on which the Commission’s remit ever changed.”

There was also support from the Committee for the principle of conciliating complaints without the need for a formal ruling. The Committee suggested that the PCC makes greater efforts to publicise breaches of the Code that are settled in this way. The Commission said it would look into ways this could be achieved.

However, the Commission was disappointed that the report did not contain any recognition about the way it had developed effective procedures to deal with concerns about pre-publication newsgathering – such as objections to harassment. It rejected criticism about the way it had handled the situation involving Kate Middleton and media scrums early in 2007.

To read the Commission’s response in full, [click here](#)

The Government endorsed self-regulation. It told the Committee that:

“We certainly agree with the report’s over-arching conclusion – that self-regulation of the press should be maintained. We further agree that there is no case for statutory regulation and that a free press is a hallmark of our democracy.”

It also welcomed the Commission’s recommendations to the industry on how to minimise the risks of another scandal involving phone message tapping.

“We believe that the implementation of these measures will do much to bolster public confidence in the way information for stories is gathered”, it concluded.

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