

Miss Sophie Rhys-Jones and The Sun newspaper

Last Wednesday, Buckingham Palace complained on behalf of Miss Sophie Rhys Jones about intrusive pictures of her in that morning's edition of The Sun.

Complaining was the right way forward - not least because, as a result, the newspaper apologised and gave assurances about its future conduct. Other people in the public eye should follow this example - and that of thousands of ordinary people - and complain when they have a grievance against a newspaper or magazine.

Before dealing with the formal complaint, there are certain matters I want to make clear.

To begin with, I have to say that it is not in principle an obvious failure of self regulation that, when something has gone wrong and the Code been breached, editors apologise for their actions. The editor of The Sun did so speedily on Wednesday afternoon, and that was the right course of action.

However, it cannot be acceptable simply to break the Code one day and apologise the next. The newspaper's apology in no way excuses the grave error which was made, nor lessens the distress which it caused Miss Rhys Jones. The decision to publish these pictures was reprehensible and such a mistake must not happen again. In particular, I want to make clear that Miss Rhys Jones should enjoy the same rights to respect for her personal life, and the same protection from the Code of Practice, as anyone else.

Next, I want to reiterate that any newspaper intruding into the privacy of any individual must be able to justify itself on the grounds either of genuine public interest or of consent. If it cannot, as happened in this case, it should not be printing an intrusive story. The Code of Practice which obliges all editors to this course of action is in their contract of employment - and I will not hesitate to bring any serious breaches to the attention of the employer concerned.

Finally, I want to underline that self regulation by newspapers and magazines through the PCC has - with a few exceptions - genuinely been a success. This regrettable episode - which I have to say no conceivable privacy law could ever have prevented - does not detract from that in any way.

A decade ago - before the existence of the Code of Practice and of the PCC - these sorts of stories were common place. Today, they are much rarer and when they do occur they rightly attract condemnation from the PCC, the newspaper industry and - most importantly - the public. That in itself shows how much things have changed for the better. But further progress requires constant vigilance on our part, and I am determined that this should continue.

As far as the formal complaint is concerned, Buckingham Palace has indicated to me today that this statement, together with the newspaper's own statement later this afternoon, resolves the issues they raised with us. There is therefore no remaining complaint on which the Press Complaints Commission will need formally to adjudicate.

ENDS

2 June 1999