

PCC upholds complaint against Sunday Times over intrusion into grief

The Press Complaints Commission has upheld a complaint against The Sunday Times under Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complainant was the mother of a young man who had died at university, and there was speculation that he had taken his own life. Shortly after the article was published, the mother complained to the PCC that the piece was inaccurate and insensitive. While this complaint was ongoing, another reporter from the newspaper contacted the complainant's daughter via Facebook and, despite the fact that the daughter made clear that the family did not wish to speak, asked for information about the PCC complaint (including sending her a copy of the article so that the family could highlight what was wrong with it). This upset the complainant's daughter.

The newspaper apologised for this second approach to the family, and explained that the reporter was a freelance and unaware of the PCC complaint. It accepted, however, that the reporter should not have continued to question the complainant's daughter once she had mentioned the complaint. The paper also offered to send a private letter of apology to the family.

The PCC upheld the complaint. In its ruling, it said it was "regrettable that a communication failure at the newspaper resulted in a further approach being made to the family despite the fact that there was an outstanding complaint about the previous coverage". It also said that it would have been "sensible" for the reporter not to have pursued the matter directly with the complainant's daughter once the complaint was brought to her attention. The combination of these two factors led the Commission to conclude that the handling of this approach was intrusive in breach of Clause 5, and the complaint was upheld on this point.

PCC Director Stephen Abell commented: "Clause 5 of the Code rightly gives strong protection to people who find themselves the subject of media attention at a time when they are grieving. The Code makes clear that 'enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion' and sets out the high standards the Commission expects publications to meet in this area."

A copy of the full adjudication, which was published yesterday, can be found [here](#).

ENDS

For further information, please contact Jonathan Collett on 020 7831 0022 or 07740 896805.

Notes to Editors

1. The PCC is in regular contact with those representing bereaved people, in order to explain how its services can help. We give a large number of talks and seminars every year to explain our work, including to police family liaison officers and Coroners. For more information about this, please contact Will Gore on will.gore@pcc.org.uk or Catherine Speller on catherine.speller@pcc.org.uk.

2. A further complaint under Clause 1 (Accuracy) about an article headlined "Harry Potter' student found hanged in his Oxford room", published in The Sunday Times on 11 October 2009, was not upheld. The newspaper had taken old information from the complainant's son's social networking page, which the complainant said created a misleading impression of her son as a deeply troubled young man. The Commission ruled that newspapers were entitled to make use of publicly available material on such sites, when reporting the death of an individual. Editors should, however, "always consider the impact on grieving families when taking such information (which may have been posted

in a jocular or carefree fashion) from its original context and using it within a tragic story about that person's death".

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