

Sir Christopher Meyer launches Press Complaints Commission's 2005 Annual Report

The Chairman of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), Sir Christopher Meyer, has launched the organisation's 2005 Annual Report, claiming that in the fifteen years since the PCC was set up, it has "changed the culture" of the entire UK press industry.

In a speech at the Foreign Press Association in London today, Sir Christopher highlighted the substantial number of cases resolved by the PCC to the complainant's satisfaction – up 41% on 2004. Describing this result as "extraordinary", Sir Christopher also emphasised the progress made by the PCC in improving the prominence of clarifications and corrections published in response to resolved complaints:

"Over three quarters of corrections and apologies appear either on the same page or further forward than the article under complaint. Add those that appear in regular correction columns – which many argue have a prominence of their own – and the figure rises to 82%".

Acknowledging "the argument made sometimes for going straight to adjudication, instead of trying to resolve cases", Sir Christopher argued that "the relative economy with which this weapon is deployed only serves to underscore its effectiveness and deterrent power." Sir Christopher stressed his strong belief in the current system of critical adjudication over the oft-suggested alternative of levying monetary fines:

"I feel even more strongly than when I started at the PCC that the power of naming and shaming [editors] is a more potent sanction than the ability to impose a few thousand pounds worth of fines – if ever a proportionate tariff could be established."

..."Far better to hit sinning editors where it hurts most: in their self-esteem and professional reputation by obliging them to publish prominently and unedited the full text of the censure."

Referring to media convergence, Sir Christopher sees the PCC's characteristic "flexibility and capacity to adapt swiftly to changed circumstances" as a strength, and one which has ensured that the model of self-regulation is well suited to non-traditional forms of media, such as online journalism: "What chance is there of successfully applying a set of statutory rules to information transmitted online – where anyone can be a publisher and there is no spectrum scarcity? None. The only effective way of ensuring that online journalistic information is subject to certain standards is for those standards to be self-imposed."

Sir Christopher also gave warning that the PCC would not tolerate the publication of photographs taken by paparazzi in a way that breaches the terms of the Code, stating that "it will probably be only a matter of time before the Commission is asked to investigate, on the back of a photo published in Britain, a serious complaint of paparazzi harassment that is backed up by video or other evidence." In the event of such a complaint, he made clear that PCC condemnation would be "swift and harsh", arguing that "it is not right that the physical safety of individuals should be compromised in the pursuit of a photo".

Acknowledging the PCC still has more to do in raising its public profile, Sir Christopher said that the PCC has nevertheless "taken huge strides in recent years... in making the PCC known around the UK and in raising levels of confidence in our effectiveness and independence," and emphasised that it will be building on this success in 2006.

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Further information: Catherine Speller, Communications Officer, Press Complaints Commission
Telephone: 020 7831 0022; Email: catherine.speller@pcc.org.uk

Notes for editors:

1. The Press Complaints Commission is an independent body which deals with complaints from the public about the editorial content of newspapers and magazines. Its service is free. The Commission comprises 16 members, with lay (i.e. non-press) members always in majority whenever the Commission sits. The list of Commission members can be viewed at <http://www.pcc.org.uk/about/whoswho/members.html>.
2. The PCC administers the Code of Practice – a set of ethical rules to which the British press is obliged to adhere. The Code is drafted by members of the media industry, and is reviewed periodically by a special committee of editors (the Code of Practice Committee). Further information about the Code can be found at <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>.
3. The Commission received a total of 3654 complaints in 2005.
4. In 2005, the PCC monitored the placing of corrections and apologies by newspapers and magazines. The figure of 82% cited by Sir Christopher in his speech resulted from this research. The PCC will repeat the monitoring exercise in 2006.
5. Details of all the Commission's adjudications and resolved complaints can be found on its website – www.pcc.org.uk – which regularly breaks news about the outcome of complaints.
6. Before being appointed as Chairman of the PCC in March 2003, Sir Christopher Meyer served as Ambassador to the United States (1997-2003). He was formally Ambassador to Germany (1996-97) and Press Secretary to Prime Minister John Major (1994-96).
7. The 2005 annual report and the full text of Sir Christopher's speech will be available on the PCC's website (www.pcc.org.uk) from Thursday 25th May. For a hard copy, please contact Catherine Speller (contact details above).

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