



Office of the Press Ombudsman

**Speech of the Press Ombudsman, Peter Feeney at the launch of the
2014 Report of the Press Council of Ireland and Office of the Press Ombudsman**

The Morgan Hotel, Dublin 2

Friday 22 May 2015 (embargo 11am)

Looking at the statistics for complaints received over the last year the Principle most cited by complainants is Principle 1 (Truth and Accuracy). Roughly a third of all complainants base their complaint on their perception that something has been reported inaccurately. This emphasises the importance of one of the most basic requirements of all journalism, “check your facts and then check them again”. This requirement might seem obvious, but we are in a period where the volume of information available to all is exponentially increasing and access to that information is infinitely greater.

The ordinary citizen now has access to hugely more information than previously. This is due both to technological advances in digitally stored information and to more information being made available through Freedom of Information legislation. This access to information empowers the citizen, but it also challenges the journalist because he or she is frequently no longer the gate-keeper to information. These days the reader of a newspaper, magazine or online publication has far greater opportunities to access information directly and, as a result, are better informed. Journalists should not see this as a threat, but as an incentive to “up their game”. They should strive to get it right, to present their readers with all the relevant information and to do so in a fair and clear manner. They should not rush to judgment before assessing all the relevant information and viewpoints. They should try to keep their personal views separate from their critical assessment of what is relevant to stories.

If journalists fail in this task or come up short they risk becoming increasingly irrelevant as they lose the essential trust with their readers which fundamentally cements the relationship between the journalist and the public. If readers no longer believe what they read they will look elsewhere. This is particularly the case at a time when there is growing cynicism towards all aspects of public life and growth in conspiracy theorists’ rhetoric that “it’s all one big stitch up” with an establishment determining the narrative and oppressing the ordinary man and woman. There are increasingly obvious signs to be found in social media of a growing distrust of “traditional” media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) which are frequently characterised as part of the establishment.

This presents particular challenges as resources become more and more stretched with both circulation and commercial revenue under pressure from the general decline in the economy and from the increasing slice of commercial revenue which is being directed away from traditional media towards digital media. Newspapers have responded by increasing their investment in their digital publications, seeing themselves as “platform neutral”, with their journalism directed towards both print and digital services.

One side effect of this is the move towards 24 hour news, with online news media constantly changing and updating their lead stories. Online media now compete directly with broadcast media to be first with new breaking stories. This puts pressure on the working journalist to get his or her report out quickly. The danger in this is obvious, insufficient time to check facts, not getting confirmation before publishing, not giving opportunities to respond to people criticised in reports, feeding off other news sources without checking, etc. This is where the Press Council Code of Practice provides journalists and editors with guidelines to work towards, and assists the reader, across all platforms, in knowing that the standards applied are directed towards providing the best information available

Principle 5 (Privacy) generated almost one in ten complaints last year. The right to privacy is tempered by the principle of 'public interest'. There is a difficult call to be made between the public's right to know and the individual's right to privacy. It is impossible to lay down exactly when the public interest justifies what would otherwise be an intrusion into a person's privacy. Editors need to give careful consideration when privacy issues arise in reports: is the subject matter of the report of sufficient public interest to require that the reader be informed of something that might otherwise be regarded as private information? This consideration does not just apply to the private citizen, it also applies to the person in public life. Participating in public life does not mean the abandoning of all rights to privacy, and indeed the Code of Practice clearly states that public persons are entitled to privacy. But clearly there may be aspects of a public person's life that are more open to scrutiny than a person's who does not seek any involvement in public life. However, publication of relevant details of a public person's private life and circumstances may be justifiable only in certain circumstances, and must only be published in keeping with the provisions of the Code of Practice.

One in eight complaints received last year referred to children. All of the considerations about privacy apply with additional vigour when reporting involves children. Principle 9 of the Code requires journalists to have regard to the vulnerability of children. I have had to consider on a number of occasions since taking office last September the issue of privacy and children. With the growth in usage of digital media such as Facebook and twitter more and more personal information and comment on and by children is easily accessible. Journalists must not take the view that just because information about children is available digitally it can be published in newspapers and magazines unilaterally. Consideration should be taken of the right to privacy and the right of protection that is available to children. This is particularly the case when children are before the courts. Journalists need to take great care to ensure that children's privacy is not breached through reporting something said in court.

I would like to conclude by thanking my predecessor, Professor John Horgan, the Chairman of the Press Council, Press Council Members and the Case Officer and Administrative Manager of the Office for all the assistance I have received over my first eight months as Press Ombudsman. I am certain that the transition from the founding Press Ombudsman to his successor was made much more smoothly by all the good will and help I have received. Needless to say, all the decisions taken in regard to complaints since last September are my responsibility. I have tried to be even-handed in my regard for the public's right to have their complaints considered in a fair and objective manner and the rights of journalists to have their work assessed in a very public manner with the same considerations of fairness and objectivity.

Thank you.