

# NEWSLETTER OF THE PRESS COUNCIL OF IRELAND AND THE PRESS OMBUDSMAN



## Office of Press Ombudsman hears more complaints in first half of '09

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### *'Much greater awareness of Office'*

There was a significant rise in cases handled by the Office of the Press Ombudsman in the first half of 2009. Complaints within the Office's remit rose to 123, compared to 91 in the first half of its inaugural year in 2008.

"The statistics for the first six months of 2009 point to a much greater awareness and understanding of the Office, whose usefulness and efficiency is becoming increasingly apparent both to the reading public and the publishing industry," the Press Ombudsman, Professor John Horgan said. "This is borne out by both the number and range of complaints being lodged, and the attention that editors and my Office give these complaints."

The six monthly statistics, he said, also demonstrated two other significant trends. One was the rise in the number of complaints which were successfully conciliated between the Office of the Press Ombudsman and the editor of a publication. The other was the increase in the number of cases where the Press Ombudsman decided that sufficient remedial action had been offered by the publication to resolve the complaint.

"The many examples of conciliation and of remedial action by publications reflect the substantial and effective commitment of editors to the complaints process," he added. "They also point to the successful development and refinement of complaint-handling systems within the various member publications of the Press Council." Click [here](#) to view the statistics for the first six months of 2009.

## CHANGES TO CODE OF PRACTICE FOR NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS



A number of changes have recently been made to the Code of Practice, in the interests of clarity and in the light of the experience of the Press Ombudsman and Press Council of the first two years operation of the new structures for press accountability.

The changes were agreed by the Code Committee in consultation with the Press Council. The Code Committee is composed of six editors, the Press Ombudsman and a representative of the National Union of Journalists.

For clarity, Principle 2.1. of the Code has now been divided into two in order to separate the two ideas of this Principle – that newspapers and periodicals are entitled to advocate strongly their own views, but that comment, conjecture, rumour and unconfirmed reports shall not be reported as if they were fact.

The original Principle 2 of the Code of Practice now reads as follows:

*2.1 Newspapers and periodicals are entitled to advocate strongly their own views on topics.*

*2.2 Comment, conjecture, rumour and unconfirmed reports shall not be reported as if they were fact.*

The title of Principle 8 has been changed. Its original title – “Incitement to Hatred” was thought to be potentially misleading. This is because, although incitement to hatred is a breach of the Code, so is the publication of material “likely to cause grave offence” in relation to certain groups. The Code Committee felt that singling out the more extreme breach of the Code as a title for this Principle could lead to misunderstanding, and accordingly amended the title to “Prejudice”.

The full text of the Code of Practice can be accessed [here](#).



## CHANGES TO PUBLICATION GUIDELINES

People who complain to the Press Ombudsman about articles in newspapers or periodicals frequently cite more than one—sometimes up to six or seven—different Principles of the Code in the belief that this will increase the chance that at least one of their complaints will be upheld. In practice, however, it is very rare that a complaint is upheld under more than one Principle.

Because each element of a complaint has to be the subject of a separate decision, it therefore frequently happens that a decision upholding a complaint under any Principle—which has to be published by the publication concerned—also includes lengthy material about complaints that have not been upheld.

After considering this at its September meeting, the Press Council decided to make a significant change in its Publication Guidelines.

The requirement that newspapers or periodicals should publish all decisions of the Press Ombudsman or of the Press Council upholding complaints against them remains a core element of these guidelines.

In future, however, where a complainant cites several Principles of the Code, and the complaint is upheld under some but not under others, newspapers and periodicals will be required to publish only the part of the decision upholding the complaint.

They remain of course free to publish, at their discretion, the other parts of the decision, as long as they publish them in full.

All publications must adhere to guidelines laid down by the Press Council of Ireland when publishing decisions of either the Press Ombudsman or the Press Council.



## COMPLAINTS RESOLVED INFORMALLY

All complaints that have been formally resolved, either through conciliation or by a decision of the Press Ombudsman or Press Council, can be accessed [here](#).

An increasing number of complaints, however, are now being resolved informally, following advice from the Office to complainants, who then contact the publication directly. In such cases the submission of a formal complaint is avoided. It is an indication of the commitment of editors to resolve complaints in a speedy and satisfactory manner.

Some of the complaints resolved in this manner include the following:

- A complaint was received from a local authority about an article which it stated contained inaccurate information. Following its approach to the Office the local authority contacted the editor directly and secured the publication of a letter setting out its side of the story.
- A man complained about the mis-spelling of the name of the town in which he lived by a number of newspapers. His complaint was resolved when the newspapers in question published corrections.
- A man complained about an article reporting on the death of his son, which stated that he was killed as a result of feuding gangs. The complaint was resolved when the man contacted the editor and an interview with him was published in the next edition of the newspaper.
- The CEO of an NGO complained that an article had misquoted him. The complaint was resolved when the newspaper published a clarification and a letter from the complainant.



## Issues and events since our last Newsletter

### **AGM Coroners Association of Ireland**

Addressing the Annual General Meeting of the Coroners Association of Ireland in early September, the Press Ombudsman pointed out that reporting suicide, and inquests on those who had died by suicide, was posing many issues for publications which had, in the past, often not reported such events at all.

Emphasising the need for sensitivity in line with Principle 5 of the Code of Practice, he pointed out that not only newspapers, but society as a whole, was learning how best to deal with this most difficult of subjects – a subject that could not be ignored, but the reporting of which required great sensitivity and understanding of the plight of bereaved families. You can read the full text of his address [here](#)

### **Regional Newspapers and Publishers Association**

Complainants about articles in newspapers and periodicals did not need to engage solicitors to ensure success, the Press Ombudsman told a meeting of the Regional Newspapers and Publishers Association in Tullamore in September.

“In fact,” he said, “although engaging a solicitor is of course a right available to anyone, this can sometimes slow down the whole process, because publications which receive solicitors’ letters, either directly or through our Office, tend to have them dealt with by their own solicitors rather than directly by the editor. This can add to the complexity of negotiations, the length of time for processing complaints and may, in some circumstances, reduce the possibility of conciliation between the parties.” You can read the full text of his address [here](#)

### **Conference on “Future of Journalism”, Cardiff University**

The Press Ombudsman made a joint presentation, with Will Gore of the UK Press Complaints Commission, on the work of their respective organisations, to a conference on “The Future of Journalism” in Cardiff University in September. The full text can be accessed [here](#)