Press Complaints Commission

Source: Whitstable Times {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Thursday 23, September 2010
Page: 46
Area: 220 sq. cm
Circulation: 3791 Weekly
BRAD info: page rate £709.92, scc rate £2.61
Phone: 01227 767 321
Keyword: Press Complaints Commission

durrants

Press Complaints Commission upholds complaint about story

MR EDWARD Clark complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article headlined "Storm over 'drug addict' accusation" published in this newspaper on April 30 was inaccurate and misleading in breach of Clause 1 (accuracy) of the Editor's Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The article reported an allegation, sent in an anonymous email to the newspaper, that the complainant – who had been awarded the lead role in his lo[illegible] operatic society's latest p[illegible]uction – was an "ex-heroin user".

The complainant said this was incorrect: he had never used heroin in his life.

He had made clear his absolute denial of the claim to the newspaper before publication and this had been included in the article.

He said the newspaper should not have published the story based on the unsubstantiated claims of a single anonymous source.

The newspaper said that deciding to run the article was a "difficult call". However, the anonymous email contained a serious allegation about the complainant and it had decided to investigate by contacting the complainant and the chairman of the operatic society for their comments.

The article gave the complainant the opportunity to deny the allegation.

Following the complaint, the newspaper removed the online version of the article; published letters of rebuttal from the complainant's mother and the chairman of the operatic society and published an apology to the complainant for any distress called.

Adjudication

The Commission accepts that newspapers often receive anonymous tip-offs which, after further investigation, lead to published stories.

However, it is important that newspapers are able to demonstrate that they have taken care to ensure the accuracy of the material in accordance with the terms of Clause 1 of the Editor's Code.

In this instance, the newspaper had reported a serious allegation of drug use which had been made by an uncorroborated, anonymous source.

Although the complainant's denial had been obtained (and was reported) there was no suggestions that the newspaper had made other efforts to ascertain whether the original claim had any basis in fact. This, in the Commission's view, constituted a clear editorial lapse.

The fact that the complainant's denial had been published did not absolve the newspaper of its own responsibility for care over the accuracy of the claim against him. The Commission was surprised that the newspaper had assumed the contrary.

While the Commission welcomed the subsequent attempts made to resolve the complaint, it concluded that the newspaper had failed to take care not to publish inaccurate information in breach of the Code. The complaint was upheld.

The Commission also wished to record its concerns about the length of time the newspaper had taken to respond to its enquiries.