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Tackling the media scrum

The Press Complaints Commission's anti-harassment hotline often allows people in the news to regain their privacy

Stephen Abell

guardian.co.uk, Monday 28 March 2011 14:58 BST

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Media scrums are a feature of British journalism. Photograph: Andy Myatt/Alamy

Media scrums – the crowds of reporters, photographers and hangers-on that assemble around a celebrity or people in the news – are a feature of British journalism.

They may congregate because of a legitimate news story where an unfortunate family is the centre of attention, or they may be made up of freelance paparazzi in pursuit of a celebrity shot. We saw them after the Cumbria shootings, where the media descended on the Whitehaven area, seeking to explain what had happened. Or they can crop up following stories of marital infidelity by public figures, or whenever scandal looms.

The [Press Complaints Commission](#) has developed a system to deal with the issue, and we hope more people will become aware of it. A 24-hour anti-harassment hotline allows people facing unwelcome press attention to get in touch with a senior member of the PCC team at any time to ask for help. We can then disseminate their request for privacy across the whole newspaper and magazine industry, to some news and picture agencies, and to broadcasters.

It is an interesting (perhaps) regulatory wrinkle that the broadcasting regulator, [Ofcom](#), has no powers prior to transmission, and so cannot deal formally with concerns about the presence of broadcast crews. The PCC fills the void by communicating directly with broadcasters.

A PCC "desist request" is an example of collaborative work across the industry, rather than any form of legalistic restraining order. Because it is voluntary, it can be more effective than a confrontational legal approach, at least as an initial response to a problem.

The PCC circulates about 100 requests every year. So about twice a week we are using a system of voluntary collaboration to protect the privacy of people who ask for our help. This has increased year-on-year for the last three years, as more people become aware of the service and it becomes more established in newsrooms.

The request goes to relevant senior figures within each news organisation: editors, managing editors, legal departments. The idea is simple: we are providing journalists with information to prevent them intruding on people's lives by contacting or photographing them.

It is worth emphasising that this is no more than a request, but the code enforced by the PCC requires that editors heed such a request (either by instructing members of staff, or not taking freelance copy), unless they feel that the public interest will be served by persistent approaches. In the case of a family coming to terms with the death of a loved one, no such public interest is likely to be present.

The system does not assume that no one involved in a news event will wish to speak to the press. Even in the saddest stories there are those who wish to communicate their thoughts about what has happened.

However, we feel the PCC can perform a legitimate service in representing those who have decided not to speak. The response is generally immediate and effective. Indeed, that is why we proactively contact those at the centre of news stories to offer our services either directly to them or via representatives, such as police family liaison officers or MPs.

During the recent inquest we did a lot of work with families in west Cumbria connected to the Derrick Bird shootings, and will visit the region soon to meet them face-to-face.

An example of someone who approached us directly was a mother whose son had taken his own life. She was aware there would be legitimate attention from the media in the inquest but asked the PCC to make clear that she did not wish to offer any comment. This wish was respected, and we were told a few days later that we had helped during the particularly difficult days.

At the heart of all of this is the intent to protect the vulnerable. The strict rules on photographing or approaching children, for example, are widely followed. But a large number of those contacting the PCC are concerned about how the presence of journalists might adversely affect their children, and we seek to ensure those concerns are allayed.

One key constituency is mothers connected to those in the public eye, who wish to pursue their normal lives with their children without harassment. Once editors are aware of a potential problem, the market for such images is reduced, and the pressure on the individual is relieved.

In the end, the system has applications across all types of journalism. It is now regularly used by public figures (often via PRs and lawyers) who are the victims of paparazzi harassment. The idea is that we are able to inform editors of concerns about general paparazzi behaviour, or specific incidents.

If an individual is being subject to persistent pursuit and harassment (being followed in cars, say, or staked out at home), we want to warn editors so they do not become complicit in behaviour that is in breach of their own code.

One benefit of this all of this that editorial decisions are left in the hands of editors. This is not a watered-down injunctive system. However, it means that editors are given the relevant information to make responsible decisions, and are expected to do so. It is striking – as complainants will testify – how often such decisions are taken.

This is not to say there is no place for legal action, or that problems do not arise, but rather that the PCC offers a service that is free, confidential and collaborative, which should be viewed as a legitimate and effective option. It will never be a perfect solution to a potentially messy problem, but it is a practical response that can bring real relief to those who use it.

Stephen Abell is the director of the [Press Complaints Commission](#)

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