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Editing of letters can prove crucial

Essence of bus pass argument was lost in cut

I AM very pleased that Ipswich is to be the venue of the next Press Complaints Commission (PCC) open day.

The event will provide an opportunity for those who deal with the press and the general public to speak directly with PCC officials and representatives of the local press and will enable them to contribute to the way newspapers and magazines are regulated.

The PCC is a regulatory body which deals with the magazine and newspaper industry in the United Kingdom. It is tasked with upholding a Code of Practice to which editors are expected to adhere. The code is designed to protect individuals from intrusion, discrimination, harassment and inaccurate reporting.

I use the Code of Practice when considering complaints referred to me, as it forms the bedrock of press regulation.

I do, however, have a wider remit and am tasked to look at complaints about Star coverage from a point of view of what a reader should be able to expect from its local paper.

In my column I have a very wide remit. I have absolute freedom to be critical and my column is not edited in any way. This means that I comment on issues which, while they may fall within the code, cause distress and anger to readers.

The event is one of a series held by the PCC, but this is the first time that a town of the size of Ipswich has hosted an open day. Previous events have been held in larger cities such as Leeds and Cardiff so it is no small honour for our county town to be singled out in this way. It will provide a great opportunity to discuss press standards.

I hope that as many members of the public as possible together with those

'Her letter could have been from another worker echoing the original point. I therefore feel that a little more care was necessary on this occasion to preserve the essence of the letter.'

with a professional interest in press coverage take the opportunity to come along.

The event is to be held at the St Nicholas Centre, Cutler Street, Ipswich next Tuesday, starting at 1pm.

The panel includes Sir Christopher Meyer, chair of the PCC; Tim Toulmin, director of the PCC; the Rt Rev John Waive, a lay commission member; Nigel Pickover, editor of The Evening Star; and myself.

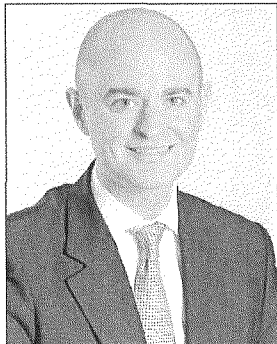
The event is free with no tickets required although it would be helpful if you could register your interest in attending by contacting Tonia Milton on 02078310022 or by e-mail at tonia.milton@pcc.org.uk

On the complaints front a reader's letter headed "Let the rest of us get to

The Ombudsman

Former Suffolk fire chief MALCOLM ALCOCK gives his independent view on the Evening Star's editorial coverage

e-mail: ombudsman@eveningstar.co.uk



TOWN GUEST: Tim Toulmin, director of the PCC

work on time", commenting on the number of people using free passes on buses at peak times, prompted a reply from Mrs Berry.

Mrs Berry, who has a bus pass herself, agreed and wrote to the effect that their use should be restricted to off peak journeys. During the editing process her first paragraph, making her bus pass status clear, was omitted.

As a result a complaint was received which contended that the paragraph was an essential part of the letter. The issue was that she was an elderly lady agreeing with somebody who obviously still needed to get to work. Further it could have appeared that she was having a go at the older bus traveller. Mrs Berry had also asked for her address to be withheld, which had in fact been included in part.

I have found that the first paragraph of the letter was cut out due to pressure on space within the letters column. While I understand that all letters cannot necessarily be printed in full, I do think on this occasion that

the editing did materially affect the sense of the letter.

The whole point was that she nonetheless supported those who needed to get to work although she was a beneficiary of the bus pass scheme. As printed her letter could have been from another worker echoing the original point. I therefore feel that a little more care was necessary on this occasion to preserve the essence of Mrs Berry's letter.

The issue of printing addresses in the letters column is a little more complicated. It is The Star's policy only to withhold addresses of writers in exceptional circumstances.

Anonymous letters are never printed which is common press practice. In fact the whole address is never published, only the street and town. It was the deputy editor's judgement on this occasion that there were no grounds for withholding the address.

In an age of e-mail and blogs there are all too many avenues for semi-anonymous comments which often amount to little more than rants. I think that the Star's policy is sensible as anonymous comments have little value.

Those writing letters should know that part of their address is likely to be published. This encourages considered and constructive correspondence.

On this occasion the request was to withhold the address "if possible".

It is most likely that if there was a definitive request not to show the address that the letter would not have been printed at all. Given the circumstances I do not believe that there were sufficient grounds to withhold the address.

That is all for this month, but as always if you are dissatisfied by the way the editorial staff have dealt with a complaint you can contact me and I will investigate and take it forward on your behalf. I can be contacted in writing at The Star or by email at ombudsman@eveningstar.co.uk



LEADING THE PANEL: Sir Christopher Meyer, chair of the Press Complaints Commission