

My day at the nerve centre of complaints against the press



MEETING: Yours truly, and right, PCC director Tim Toulmin

ONE of the features of being an ombudsman is that you never know what is going to turn up in your mailbox.

For example, I never expected an approach from the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) asking me to visit them in London.

Apparently they had picked up one of my articles and wanted to learn more about the role of The Evening Star's ombudsman. As I left for London I was intrigued by the PCC's interest. Did they see my role as challenging their own?

The PCC offices are situated on the third floor of Halton House in Holborn. I was met by director Tim Toulmin, who straight away made me feel at ease. He was very interested in my role as ombudsman and it was an opportunity for me to get to know the staff and the work of the commission.

The PCC is actually quite a small organisation with only about 14 staff. I was able to have a long conversation with the two assistant directors, Stephen Abell and William Gore.

They were unaware of any other local paper with an ombudsman and saw my role as a very bold and positive step by the Evening Star to maintain press standards and a positive dialogue with its readership.

At the heart of the work we both do is the Code of Practice, which I have often quoted in this column and is sometimes known as The Editors' Code.

The Code has 16 clauses, covering areas of accuracy, privacy, newsgathering and discrimination. It is intended to give the press a set of rules on how to report the news and to give the PCC a framework by which to judge the public's complaints.

The full code can be viewed at www.pcc.org.uk

In 2006, the PCC dealt with 3,325 complaints, with 72 per cent regarding accuracy.

Once a complaint finds its

Invitation to see how commission keeps editorial standards in check ...and to tell my side of the story!

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



way to the PCC it is allocated a file number and the case becomes "live". The officers of the commission endeavour to resolve issues amicably if possible and the vast majority are.

If the issues cannot be resolved the case will be put before the full commission, 16 independent members from various walks of life. They then make a final adjudication on the case, the ultimate sanction is for their findings to be published prominently in the appropriate newspaper or magazine.

We spoke at length of the work of the PCC during what has become known as "the Ipswich killings" last year.

Although there were no formal complaints at that time, the PCC had worked with the press and the police to ensure that standards of reporting were met.

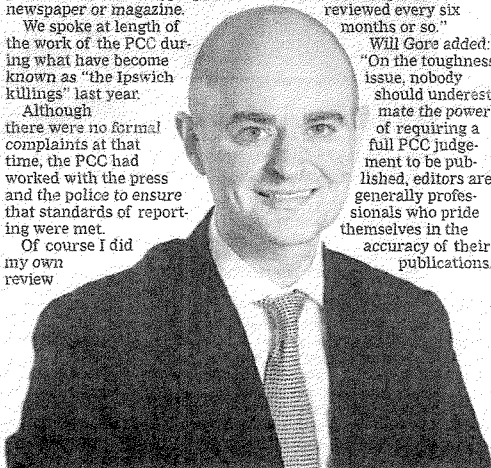
Of course I did my own review

of the Star's reporting of those events earlier this year.

I was intrigued to know what the assistant directors thought of the code - was it tough enough and should it have the force of law behind it?

Stephen Abell said: "One of the advantages of self-regulation is that the code can be adapted quickly to meet changing circumstances. Since the formation of the PCC in 1991, the code has undergone more than 30 changes and is reviewed every six months or so."

Will Gore added: "On the toughness issue, nobody should underestimate the power of requiring a full PCC judgement to be published, editors are generally professionals who pride themselves in the accuracy of their publications."



In truth it is hard to see what other sanctions could be imposed. Fines would be one possibility, but would it really be a deterrent when a top story can massively increase circulation?

We went on to discuss my role and my methods of working. I was encouraged by their views.

They were very supportive and we discussed how we would each deal with certain cases.

The PCC has to make its judgements purely on whether an article breaches the code or not, while my role has more freedom.

My first judgement is always whether there has been a breach of the code, but I can then go further. Even if I do not believe there has been a breach, I can take a view on the reporting and the editorial policy.

This judgement is based upon how the Star should act within the local community and how a layman views its activities.

I am given absolute freedom to publish my views without editorial interference. This means I am often critical of reporting even if it is technically within the code. I base my judgements on what I believe the standards of an "average" Star reader and how they want their news reported.

On the whole we both saw our roles as complementary, local issues can often be addressed by myself. In fact, the assistant directors couldn't recall the last PCC complaint concerning the Evening Star.

My normal column dealing with readers complaints will return shortly.

If you have a complaint for The Ombudsman to investigate write to him at The Evening Star, 30 Lower Brook Street, Ipswich, IP4 1AN.

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