

PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION

**PRESS COMPLAINTS COMMISSION OPEN DAY
14 OCTOBER 2008 – ST NICHOLAS CENTRE, IPSWICH**

The Press Complaints Commission is the regulatory body for the newspaper and magazine industry in the UK. It upholds a Code of Practice to which editors must adhere, and which acts to protect individuals against intrusion, discrimination, harassment and inaccurate reporting.

If you are interested in press standards, need to know what to do if you have a complaint about a newspaper or magazine article, or are interested in the future of your local newspaper, come along and find out more.

Surgery - from 1.00-1.45pm: an informal surgery for anyone who would like more information about the PCC. You can pop in to pick up some printed information or talk directly with a senior member of the Commission's staff.

Question Time – from 2pm: an opportunity to grill a panel of experts, including the PCC's Director Tim Toulmin and a public member of the Commission member; plus the Deputy Editor and Readers' Ombudsman of the Ipswich Evening Star.

Venue: St Nicholas Centre, 4 Cutler Street, Ipswich IP1 1UQ

The event is free and open to anyone who wishes to attend. If you wish to reserve a space please contact Tonia Milton on tonia.milton@pcc.org.uk or by telephone 020 7831 0022

www.pcc.org.uk

An E mail version is available upon request – tonia.milton@pcc.org.uk

IPSWICH OPEN DAY

14 October 2008

The PCC visited Ipswich in October for the latest in its series of Open Days. Over 50 attendees attended this free public meeting at the St. Nicholas Centre in the heart of the town, which was designed to encourage debate about the press and explain to the public how the PCC works on a day-to-day basis.

Tim Toulmin, the PCC's Director, began the proceedings by introducing the work of the PCC, and summarising its various services. He then invited the audience to put their questions to a panel of experts, which consisted of the editor of the Ipswich Evening Star, Nigel Pickover; the paper's ombudsman, Malcolm Alcock; and one of the PCC's lay Commissioners, the Rt Rev John Waine. With different experiences of the PCC and the industry, each panel member was able to offer an important perspective on how the system of self-regulation overseen by the PCC operates.

The ensuing discussions covered a variety of topics, including: how the local press covered the murders in Ipswich in 2006; the importance of the press 'owning up' to mistakes; the funding of the PCC and make-up of its board; and the politics of news selection and presentation. Audience members came from a variety of backgrounds including the voluntary sector, the local Council and the local football club. We were also pleased to welcome a group of Media Studies students from a local college who were studying media regulation as part of their course.

The Evening Star's Ombudsman system is highly unusual in the UK regional press. Nigel Pickover and Malcolm Alcock were able to offer a fascinating insight into how this system works at the Star, explaining that the Ombudsman helps to resolve many minor complaints about editorial content directly, without the need for PCC involvement. The content of the Ombudsman's monthly column - which both summarises recent complaints and looks at how the Star covered particular topics - may not be changed by the editor, thereby allowing him to be critical of the paper when necessary.

PCC staff also ran a surgery earlier in the day, which enabled people to discuss specific queries in private. This session - which is run at all PCC Open Days - can be very helpful if an issue is of particular sensitivity, or if people are not already familiar with the PCC's work.

To read a report by Malcolm Alcock in the Evening Star about the Open Day, please [click here](#).

Malcolm also visited the PCC's offices in 2007. To read the column he wrote as a result of this visit, please [click here](#).

The PCC has held two Open Days throughout the UK every year since 2003. Details of forthcoming Open Days are always posted on this website but if you have any questions in the meantime, please contact the PCC's Information and Events Manager, Tonia Milton, on 020 7831 0022 or tonia.milton@pcc.org.uk.

Evening Star, Ipswich
10/10/08

PCC roadshow is coming to town

Press complaints panel open to questions

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

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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 Wahne, 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 02076310022 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

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 Hulton 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

m.alcock@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 have 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

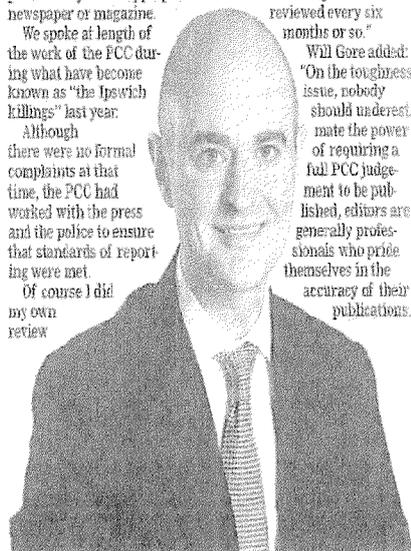
of the Star's reporting of those events earlier this year.

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 1961, the code has undergone more than 39 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.