Online prominence – February 2011

One of the key functions of the Press Complaints Commission is the negotiation of published remedies to complaints, in the form of letters, corrections and apologies. Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code requires that corrections and apologies be published with "due prominence". In print editions, over 80% of texts negotiated through the PCC appear on the same page as, or on an earlier page, than the original article, or in a designated corrections column.

The prominence of online publication is an area that has previously been less well-defined. This note sets out some of the issues that editors should take into consideration when proposing the prominence of online corrections and apologies. It is clear that different publications will have adopted different practices in this area, with the possibility of texts appearing as stand-alone items, at the head of the original story or in designated corrections columns.

The starting point for the Commission will be that, if an article appears in print and online, the proposed remedy will often appear in both media. This note is not designed to be prescriptive, and will take into account the existence of differing practice. The test, in the end, will be whether the requirement of "due prominence" is met. The following points are relevant:

- Negotiation is a key part of the PCC process, and discussion between complainant, editor and PCC will be necessary in the placement of online - as offline - corrections and apologies. Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code states: "in cases involving the Commission, prominence should be agreed with the PCC in advance".

- Readers will access information on newspaper and magazine websites via different means (such as searches or links), so there is not automatically a correlation between the original location of an article and the placement of a correction or apology. The existence of a paywall may impact on how a site is initially accessed, and this should be taken into account. However, for stand-alone corrections and apologies, editors should give consideration to appropriate placement on the relevant section where the original article appeared (such as the "news" or "showbusiness" section, for example).

- If the resolution to a complaint is a stand-alone text (an apology, correction or letter), it will generally be appropriate to link to the original article under complaint (should it still be published online) and for the original article to link back to it. If the original article has been removed, then how long the apology, correction or letter should remain online should be the subject of negotiation with the PCC.

- Corrections or apologies that appear on the original article should be clearly marked.

- If the outcome of a complaint is that the text of the article is significantly amended, then consideration should be given to the publication making explicit reference to the existence of the alteration. How quickly the text has been amended will be a factor in this consideration.

- Care must be taken that the URL of an article does not contain information that has been the subject of successful complaint. If an article is amended, then steps should be taken to amend the URL, as necessary.

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- Online corrections and apologies should be tagged when published to ensure that they are searchable.

Online prominence of upheld adjudications

When a complaint is upheld by the PCC, the editor is obliged to publish it with "due prominence". Here is some guidance about online publication:

- As with corrections and apologies, consideration must be given to the adjudication appearing in the relevant section of the website. This can be discussed in advance with the PCC.

- If an article has been found to be in breach of the Code by the PCC, it should either be removed from the archive and replaced by the adjudication, or a link to the upheld adjudication should be prominently displayed on the article itself. This can be discussed in advance with the PCC.

- The adjudication, when published, should be tagged to ensure that it is searchable.