

On the reporting of cases involving paedophiles - 2000

Following a high-profile newspaper campaign which published details of convicted sex offenders, the Commission was asked by a number of interested parties to look into the issue to see whether any general guidelines could be issued to editors regarding the handling of similar campaigns.

In particular, the Association of Chief Officers of Probation (ACOP) and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) were concerned that high-profile campaigns identifying sex-offenders could hamper their work, which could in turn endanger public safety.

While it is not the role of the Commission to proscribe the publication of material that is legitimately in the public domain, it would urge editors to continue to think carefully before embarking on public campaigns of this nature. It recommends that editors should consult with representatives from the probation and local police services before publication. The appropriate contact for the probation services of England and Wales would be the Communications Unit of the National Probation Directorate on 020 7217 0658. Local social services are the likely equivalent in Scotland.

It also draws attention to the relevant areas of the Code of Practice:

First, it is essential that newspapers take the utmost care about the accuracy of any allegations that they are making given the scale of problems that could be created for innocent parties by inaccuracy.

Second, where there is an acknowledged inaccuracy, it is essential that editors correct it as soon as possible - with an apology if necessary.

Third, Clause 3 of the Code entitles everyone to respect for their private life. This includes people who have been convicted of crimes, although the reporting of someone's convictions would not normally be considered to be a breach of the Code. The Commission would particularly draw attention to the rights of relatives and friends of people who have been accused of sex crimes. Not only do they also have a right to respect for their private lives under Clause 3, but the Code also makes clear under Clause 10 that the 'press must avoid identifying [them] without their consent' - or unless there is a public interest in doing so.

Finally, the Code has strict provisions relating to the victims of sexual assault. Clause 7 relates to children in sex cases and says that the child must never be identified, that the word 'incest' must not be used where a child victim might be identified and that care must be taken to avoid any implication about the relationship between the accused and the child. Clause 11 adds that the press must not identify victims of sexual assault or publish material likely to contribute to such identification unless there is adequate justification, and, by law, they are free to do so.