

Press Complaints Commission v Crawley Observer

Clauses noted: 5

The Press Complaints Commission has investigated whether an article published on the Crawley Observer website under the headline "Chainsaw death was 'carefully thought through' suicide", contained excessive detail about the method of suicide used in breach of Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) of the Code.

The Commission found a breach of the Code.

The article reported the suicide of a man, who had taken his own life using a chainsaw.

The article contained a long and graphic reference to the method of suicide. It set out the precise apparatus that had been constructed by the individual to enable his death.

The newspaper indicated that it had taken the article from a live feed from the Press Association and published it unamended. PA subsequently made clear that it had quickly realised that the content of its copy was too explicit, and then issued a second version of it. Unfortunately, this did not replace the version on the Crawley Observer due to a procedural failure at PA. Even before being aware of the PCC complaint, PA took several steps to ensure that the situation would not be repeated. The newspaper made clear that the issue had now been discussed at the highest levels within Johnson Press and that it would work with PA to ensure compliance in future.

Adjudication

Clause 5 (ii) was introduced specifically to prohibit the inclusion of detail that would act, in effect, as a blueprint for the method of a suicide. It is crucial that newspapers abide by its terms, in order to minimise the risk of copycat suicides. This means that, particularly in inquest reports (many of which will be provided by external agencies), care needs to be taken in the editing process to remove excessive detail.

On this occasion, the online article contained far too much detail. It was a matter of concern that the newspaper had allowed the material to be published on its website, as this was a clear breach of the Code. The Commission welcomed the newspaper's response to this complaint and trusted that the situation would not be repeated.

Adjudication issued 02/01/2009