

Mr Stan Collymore v The Sun

Clauses noted: 1, 10

Mr Stan Collymore complained to the Press Complaints Commission through David Price Solicitors and Advocates of London that an article published in The Sun on 3 November 2004 headlined 'I lied' was inaccurate in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code of Practice. He also complained that material for the article had been obtained by subterfuge in breach of Clause 10 (Clandestine devices and subterfuge).

The complaint was upheld.

On 1 November the complainant made allegations that he had been beaten up in Dublin by several rugby players during the previous evening. Two days later the Sun published the article under complaint, trailed on the front page with the headline 'I lied: Stan Collymore's sensational signed confession to the Sun'.

The complainant said this was inaccurate because the claim that he had made a signed confession of various misdeeds (including lying about the alleged attack) was false. In reality he had been duped into signing a 'confession' that the newspaper had invented by agreeing to give an autograph to somebody who had pretended to be a fan. The fact that the 'confession' had been obtained as a result of a scam appeared only in the text of the article – which appeared on an inside page – and the complainant maintained that many readers would not have realised that the 'confession' was bogus.

The newspaper acknowledged that it had carried out a stunt, but argued that readers would not have been misled by the piece since the article included a clear reference to how the 'confession' had been obtained. In relation to the complaint about the use of subterfuge, the newspaper suggested that, since the nature of the scam was made clear in the article, none had taken place.

Adjudication

The Commission was in no doubt that the material published on the front page was entirely misleading. The complainant had not confessed to lying. While the text of the article – which appeared on pages 4 and 5 – sought to clarify the nature of the stunt, the newspaper had not taken sufficient care to highlight the way in which the confession had been obtained. Its failure to do so was neither within the letter nor the spirit of the Code and was a serious breach of Clause 1.

Turning to the complaint under Clause 10, the Commission noted that the newspaper had obtained the complainant's signature as a result of subterfuge, seemingly in order to use the material it had acquired in a misleading way. In these specific circumstances, and with no reasonable public interest defence – which there must be for the use of subterfuge – the Commission concluded that there had been a breach of Clause 10.

Adjudication issued 2004