

***Mr Robert Cogswell v Evening Standard***

Clauses noted: 1

Mr Robert Cogswell of Surrey complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article published in the Evening Standard on 28 July 2004 headlined "Animal rights terror leader" was inaccurate in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code of Practice.

Following the offer of remedial action by the newspaper, there were no issues to pursue under the Code.

The article was based on an interview with the complainant, who is involved in animal rights campaigning. Among other things, it alleged that he was a 'terror leader' and the 'mastermind' behind a recent animal rights event, which the newspaper characterised as a 'terror camp'. It also claimed that the complainant had connections to terrorist organisations and alleged that he had split from the 'hard line' SHAC group in order to form an organisation against the establishment of a primate research facility in Cambridge, known as SPEAK.

The complainant said that the article was incorrect in regard to these central allegations, and in other respects. He said that he was not the leader of a terror movement, and could not reasonably be described as a terrorist. He added that SPEAK was neither involved in, nor condoned, illegal activity. He could point to numerous occasions in the public domain where he had personally distanced himself from unlawful activity. He said that his website represented a place for open discussion on the subject of animal rights, although he did not endorse all of the sites to which it was linked. Regarding the camp itself, the complainant said that he played no role in its organisation, and maintained that his involvement was confined to links between the camp's site and the SPEAK website. He added that he had never been involved in the organisation of SHAC, and could not therefore have split from it to form the new group SPEAK.

In its defence, the newspaper suggested that SPEAK had been involved in the publication of contact details for animal testing figures, which was an act of terrorism considering what the likely outcome of such action would be. It said that the complainant had been involved in fundraising for the Animal Liberation Front, and that the website for which he was responsible had connections to extremist organisations. Ultimately, of course, no activist was likely to admit publicly to being a terrorist, but the material with which the complainant was associated could be seen to promulgate a 'tacit terrorist message'. The complainant himself had been accurately quoted in the article as refusing to condemn violence.

Against that background, the newspaper did not consider that the other points under contention – including the reference to the camp, which was attended by speakers with clear terrorist credentials – constituted significant inaccuracies. The complainant had been happy to speak authoritatively about the organisation of the camp, and its site had been linked directly into the SPEAK website. The complainant had been a well-known supporter of SHAC before SPEAK was established. However, in a bid to resolve the complaint, the newspaper offered to publish a short statement on its letters page so that the complainant could make his position clear.

The complainant did not consider the offer to be sufficient.

***Adjudication***

The article contained a number of details that the complainant considered to be inaccurate, two of which in the Commission's view were matters of significance. These were the allegations that the complainant was a 'terror leader', and that he was the 'mastermind' behind a recent camp for animal rights activists.

It was clear to the Commission that the complainant was closely associated with the animal rights movement. Indeed, he had been connected to extreme aspects of it – not least through his website – and had founded a campaigning group responsible for direct action against animal testing. It was in this context that the allegation that he was a ‘terror leader’ – rather than a ‘terrorist’ – had to be considered. The complainant had also associated himself with the camp, and described its organisation at some length, in his conversation with the reporter.

In the Commission’s view, the central dispute concerned the manner in which the newspaper had presented its claims about the complainant. The newspaper had certainly offered a robust criticism of the complainant’s activity, as it was entitled to do. The question for the Commission to consider was whether, in doing so, the newspaper had created a misleading impression of his behaviour. The newspaper had shown that the complainant was a prominent figure in the animal rights field, that he had spoken knowledgably about the camp, and that there were links between its organisation and the SPEAK website. However, the extent to which he had helped to organise the camp, or could be described as a ‘terror leader’, were clearly matters of dispute. In these circumstances, the Commission thought it appropriate for the newspaper to offer to publish the complainant’s position in a further piece. It considered that the offer to publish a statement on its letters’ page was therefore a necessary and appropriate step to remedy the complaint.

The complainant also complained about a number of other alleged inaccuracies which – while they were not, in the Commission’s view, matters of particular significance – could also have been dealt with in the published statement. The offer was a sufficient remedy to the complaint, and there were therefore no outstanding issues under the Code for the Commission to pursue.

Adjudication issued 2004