

Mr Ravin Soobadoo v Wanstead & Woodford Guardian

Clauses noted: 1, 6

Mr Ravin Soobadoo complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article headlined "Porn star teacher's sadness at leaving job", published on the Wanstead & Woodford Guardian website on 13 July 2010, incorrectly attributed a quotation to his fourteen year old daughter, and referred to her as a sixth form student, in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) and Clause 6 (Children) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The article reported that a teacher had stepped down from his post after it had been found that he had been working as a porn star. The complainant's daughter, who was 14, was quoted in the piece saying the teacher had spoken "openly and truthfully about sex" and that she would "more likely catch STIs without his lessons". The complainant said that his daughter had not made any comment to the newspaper and was not a "sixth-form student". The complainant had contacted the newspaper directly, and it had removed the quotation from the online article and provided the email it had received containing the comment. The complainant said that his daughter had not written the email and that her account may have been hacked. He said that the newspaper should have taken care to authenticate the quotation, and obtain the necessary consent, before publication.

The newspaper's understanding was that the teacher only taught sex education to sixth form students and it had therefore assumed that the comments had been submitted by a pupil aged over sixteen. It regretted the error, and had undertaken to alter its policy on requesting comments from readers on school-related stories. Nonetheless, the newspaper did not consider that there was any evidence to suggest that the comment had not been submitted by the complainant's daughter. The newspaper said it had not interviewed the complainant's daughter and the publication of the comments did not represent an intrusion.

Adjudication

There was clearly a dispute as to whether the complainant's daughter had indeed sent the comment attributed to her. The newspaper had published it in good faith on the basis that she had. However, the Commission was concerned - bearing in mind the subject of the story - that the newspaper had not taken more care following receipt of the email. Above all, it had not established the age of the complainant's daughter before publication.

Clause 6 (Children) of the Editors' Code of Practice has a requirement that children under 16 should not be interviewed on issues involving their own welfare without the consent of a custodial parent. The Commission accepted that the newspaper had not approached the complainant's daughter directly; however, it had sought information from school pupils about a controversial issue regarding their teacher. By doing so, and publishing the outcome, the newspaper had engaged in an interview of sorts.

The attributed comments referred to the sexual health of the pupil, which was certainly a matter which related to her welfare. As such, the Commission considered that the newspaper should have sought to establish her age before publication. Had it done so, it would have also been in a better position to verify the identity of the person who sent the email. It also would not have been able to publish the comments without parental consent.

The Commission was concerned that the newspaper had not given sufficient consideration before publishing a comment of this nature from a school child, and upheld the complaint on that basis. It welcomed the fact that the paper had changed its policy regarding how comments (on school stories) might be solicited in future.

Adjudication issued 02/11/2010