

A woman v Evening Chronicle (Newcastle Upon Tyne)

Clauses noted: 14

A woman from Newcastle complained to the Press Complaints Commission that the Newcastle Evening Chronicle did not respect her confidentiality as a source in breach of Clause 14 (Confidential Sources) of the Code.

The complaint was upheld.

The complainant is a former employee of the Rural Payments Agency, a Government body that had been the subject of some criticism in the newspaper. She contacted the newspaper by email to share some of her experiences of the agency, but asked to remain anonymous. A reporter from the newspaper forwarded the email to the RPA for comment, without removing the complainant's details from it. The complainant argued that the Code had therefore been breached as she had been identified to her former employers as a source of information.

The newspaper accepted that a serious error had been made and apologised. It had formally disciplined the reporter, who was a trainee. He had subsequently contacted the RPA to explain that the email should not have been sent. The newspaper offered to apologise again to the complainant, in a private letter or in print.

The complainant was not satisfied with the newspaper's attempts to resolve the matter, and also objected to the length of time the newspaper had taken to deal with her complaint when she brought the matter to its attention.

Adjudication

This was a clear breach of Clause 14 of the Code, which states that "journalists have a moral obligation to protect confidential sources of information". It was a serious and thoughtless error to have sent on the complainant's details when she had specifically requested anonymity. The newspaper's acceptance that a mistake had been made limited the extent of the Commission's criticism, but the protection of confidential sources of information is a basic principle of journalism, and such an obvious and unnecessary breach of the Code could not pass without censure. The complaint was therefore upheld.

Adjudication issued 27/07/2006