

Miss Pamela Campbell v Sunday World

Clauses noted: 1

Miss Pamela Campbell of Belfast complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article headlined "Neighbour rings cops with lies about me even though I helped with tragedy", published in the Sunday World on 29 March 2009, was inaccurate and misleading in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The article reported claims by the complainant's neighbour, Kelly Patterson, that she had been harassed by the complainant. She said a number of the allegations in the piece were inaccurate: Ms Patterson had not comforted her after the death of her brother; the dispute with her neighbour was long-standing and did not occur only after the death; she had not called Ms Patterson a 'child killer'; and she had not told people that Ms Patterson was having an affair with a taxi driver.

The newspaper said that it had published an interview with the complainant in October 2008 about the death of her brother in which she claimed that her family had been targeted by loyalist paramilitaries. It had then published Ms Patterson's views on these general claims of intimidation in addition to specific allegations against her in the article under complaint. The complainant had been quoted in the article broadly countering the allegations against her. It offered to publish a further interview with the complainant on her current plight, but this would not refer to any antagonism between the neighbours.

Adjudication

The article was, in the Commission's view, a personal account of Ms Patterson's position regarding the complainant and her claims about the targeting of her family. This followed an earlier interview with the complainant on the subject of her family. Readers would clearly recognise that there were two sides to this dispute and the Commission felt that the newspaper had represented the basic positions of both women.

However, the complainant had denied the accuracy of particular claims within the story. The newspaper had not been able to provide any corroborating evidence to support these allegations. Nor had it carried a specific rebuttal of them by the complainant. The Commission felt that readers would, therefore, have been misled into believing that Ms Patterson's claims had been substantiated or accepted. The newspaper could have remedied this by offering to run the complainant's response to the individual points under dispute. It had failed to do so and the result was a breach of the Code.

The Commission was also concerned about the length of time it had taken for the newspaper to respond throughout the complaint. This was unacceptable and also represented a clear breach of the preamble to the Code which states that editors "should co-operate swiftly with the PCC in the resolution of complaints".

The complainant, together with her sister, Grace Campbell, and her mother, Mrs Pamela Campbell, also complained that the article had intruded into the family's privacy in breach of Clause 3 (Privacy) of the Code.

The complaint was not upheld.

The article had been accompanied by a photograph of Miss Campbell and Mrs Campbell's house and car, which was parked on the driveway. The complainants said that the registration plate was fully visible, as was the number of the house. Given the family's situation with loyalist paramilitary death threats, this represented an intrusion into their private lives.

The newspaper said that the photograph showed both Ms Patterson's home and the complainants' home, which were relevant to the article. The newspaper had not identified the car as belonging to the family. Indeed, it did not know that it belonged to the family.

Adjudication

The Commission has previously said that newspapers should not gratuitously identify the homes of individuals who might be exposed to specific security problems.

The first point for the Commission was that the reference to the complainant's street was not a gratuitous detail, as the location was relevant to a story about a neighbour dispute. Furthermore, the street name on which the family property was located had been published, with the complainant's consent, by the newspaper in October 2008. The Commission did not agree that the photograph of the property was sufficiently clear for readers to have spotted the specific house number. Against this background, the publication of this information about the complainant's address was not intrusive in breach of Clause 3 (Privacy) of the Code. Nor did the publication of a photograph showing - without clarity - the number plates of cars parked outside the property constitute an intrusion under the terms of Clause 3.

This part of the complaint was therefore not upheld.

Adjudication issued 28/01/2010