



From the Chairman

3 April 2008

Ms Madeleine Moon MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Ms. Moon,

Further to William Gore's letter of 19 March, I have now had the opportunity to examine your file of information about media coverage of the recent tragic events in and around Bridgend. I am sorry to have been a bit slow about this; but I am only just back at work after a fortnight's 'flu.

I am very grateful to you for the work that you have put into this. Your dossier – with a similar one from Assistant Chief Constable (ACC) I [redacted] of South Wales Police – will, I hope, prove to be a solid basis for progress and, in particular, for the PCC's visit to Bridgend on 16 May, which I am much looking forward to.

We have broken down the dossier into two categories: issues for debate, which could form part of a general review; and specific matters to be taken up with newspapers.

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To take the general issues first:

1. Linkage. This bears very careful examination. You make a valid point about the media's linking incidents that might have been wholly unrelated except for their relative geographical proximity. But the fact remains that some of the young people did know each other. In the circumstances, to pursue a possible connection between the suicides is not in itself an unreasonable line of enquiry, especially where the Internet is concerned. It must not be forgotten that the suicides gave rise to significant issues of public interest. The possible existence of on-line relationships between some of the young people who killed themselves – or, at the very least, the influence of on-line information about the suicides - unavoidably added to media speculation about linkage. I am aware that, according to the police, there was no evidence that the deaths had anything to do with the Internet. But this may not be the whole story. The media, I am afraid, often obtain off-the-record information from unofficial police sources that can be at odds with what the police are saying in public. I am not claiming that this is definitely what happened with the suicides. But the possibility has to be entertained and it is something for discussion when we come to Bridgend. ACC Morris himself acknowledges that the police took away for examination a computer belonging to one of the victims.
2. Pictures. You have identified an increasingly contentious issue in your reference to the use of pictures taken without consent from sites such as Bebo and Myspace. It is something to which the PCC has been giving serious thought quite independently of the Bridgend suicides. There are several questions to be addressed: to what extent is material on social networking sites in the public domain; are those who up-load photos and other material onto these sites aware that they could be reproduced in the mainstream media; and if they are not, what steps should be taken to make them aware of this possibility? The answers are not straightforward. We have already commissioned research to help us reach sensible solutions on these matters. This again is something for discussion in May.



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3. Approaches to relatives. In our experience, different people grieve in different ways. Some wish to have nothing to do with the media; others are only too happy to pay tribute to loved ones. I am therefore firmly against a blanket prohibition on approaches by the media. By the same token, we work very hard to ensure that people know their rights when journalists' attentions are unwanted. In particular, as I said to your regional and local media, people do not have to be interviewed by reporters; and it is a breach of the PCC Code of Practice to engage in persistent pursuit where someone has made plain he/she does not want to talk.

The big issue for us is to make our anti-harassment service as widely known as possible. This is why, for example, we distribute our literature to coroners' courts for the benefit of distressed relatives when there are inquest hearings. We also work to ensure that, through family liaison officers, all UK police forces are aware of what the PCC can do rapidly and effectively (24-hours a day, every day) to protect people from unwarranted newspaper harassment. One thing for discussion with ACC Morris will be the extent to which his family liaison officers were briefed on the PCC's anti-harassment service.

4. Excessive detail about suicide methods. As you know, the Code of Practice was strengthened in 2006 to highlight the importance of avoiding excessive detail when reporting suicides. What this means in practice is that newspapers should particularly avoid providing information that would not be obvious or well-known. For instance, most people are aware that an overdose of Paracetamol can be lethal; but most people would not know exactly how many tablets are likely to lead to death. Similarly, people may know that putting an electric heater in the bath is dangerous, but they should not be told exactly how to strip the wires from the heater's flex. The Commission upheld a complaint last year when a newspaper provided excessive detail along these lines. As to hanging, the PCC has yet to make a formal adjudication. I am not convinced that it would breach the Code of Practice to report that somebody had hanged themselves from, for example, 'a shower rail' or 'the landing banister'. Nor may it be improper to report that an individual used 'a belt' or 'a scarf and mobile phone charger'.



The above are all matters which we shall be discussing further here at the Commission before our visit to Bridgend in May.

As to complaints against particular titles, allow me to repeat one point I made at our meeting. This is that, on our Clause 5 (intrusion into shock and grief), the PCC will usually take up complaints only from those who are directly affected by the article or journalistic behaviour in question. The Commission must be sure that it is acting as grieving relatives wish, so as to avoid compounding their distress, for example, by publicising things that they would prefer to remain private. Unless any of the bereaved wish to complain either directly or through you, we would not be able to pursue a third-party complaint under Clause 5.

That said, we have identified from your dossier half-a-dozen articles that warrant further investigation. These are:

1. Daily Telegraph 11/02 – the quote which is attributed to you but which you deny making.
2. Daily Telegraph 24/01 – a reference to Bridgend having the highest suicide rate for young men in Britain.
3. Daily Telegraph 24/01 – the description of the weather in Bridgend.
4. The Times 19/02 – the description of Bridgend as a former mining town suffering from high unemployment.
5. The Times 23/01 – a reference to suicide rates in Wales being the highest in the UK.
6. Daily Post 19/02 – a reference to Wales being the ‘suicide capital of UK’.

We are writing to all the papers in question. Any further action will depend in part on their response. You may be disappointed that our list does not include the Glamorgan Gazette. But it does not appear that the material is in breach of the Code of Practice. It either sets out the view of the newspaper (which may or may not be fair) or reports views that were expressed by others.



We will be back in touch again before our meeting in May. We are replying separately to the dossier from ACC Morris. Meantime, I am delighted that you will be at our lunch on 16 May as well as on the panel for the Q and A session.

Yours sincerely



Sir Christopher Meyer

