Press Complaints Commission

From the Chairman

Alan Rusbridger, Esq.,
The Editor,
The Guardian,
119 Farringdon Road,
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11th June 2003

Dear Alan,

Many thanks for your letter of 9th June, and for publishing my letter yesterday.

I appreciate your strong views on this particular issue; and I am grateful for our continuing and constructive dialectic on how self-regulation will evolve. It is only by thinking matters such as this through that we can ensure we are providing the best possible service to the public. I hope you and I will continue to engage on these issues.

On the specific matter of Neil Wallis, I think this is largely academic as he will be leaving the Commission anyway during the course of the next month. His position – and his successor – are of course principally (and rightly) matters for the industry to sort out.

Where I differ from you is over the issue of whether or not the PCC can make findings of fact. Sometimes we can, where the facts are obvious. But there will be rare occasions when (as we discussed at the dinner in the British Library) it would simply be impossible to do so without legal powers. We are then in an entirely different arena, populated by lawyers, from which in my view the public would not gain.

But in the Cox case I do not believe the facts were in dispute in a way that would have stopped the PCC from making a finding. This is a matter of privacy where we would simply have had to balance one individual's right to her private life with any competing claims – I doubt there are any – of public interest. Any dispute between editor and photographer over the origin of the pictures is quite irrelevant.

The PCC could in theory now make a finding under the Code. I imagine, however, that she has an agreement with the newspaper that the damages were in full and final settlement, in which case it would obviously be inappropriate for us to do so.

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Might I raise another matter with you? I noted in Roy Greenslade's column on Saturday that he said that my plea for front-page breaches of the Code meriting front-page corrections was "a step in the right direction."

I was rather perplexed therefore to see that the correction and apology for the 31st May front page lead on Jack Straw and Colin Powell – which was self evidently a breach of Clause 1 – was only corrected on page 25. I know that you will argue that readers are used to looking there for corrections. That is why, incidentally, it is very hard for the PCC ever to dictate precisely where corrections should appear and with what prominence – though this will not always deter me from trying. But if Roy is arguing that other newspapers should correct front page errors with front page corrections, does that presage a change in Guardian policy, too? Or is the Guardian exempt from that dictum? And, indeed, if you ever had to publish a critical PCC adjudication, would that receive equal prominence; or also be published on the letters' page? How would my "step in the right direction" fit with Guardian policy?

Do keep in touch.

With very best wishes.

Yours ever

Christopher

Sir Christopher Meyer