



From the Chairman

11 April 2008

Assistant Chief Constable David Morris
South Wales Police
Cowbridge Road
Bridgend
CF31 3SU

Dear Mr Morris

Further to William Gore's letter of 19 March, I have now had the opportunity to look at your file on media coverage of the recent tragic events in and around Bridgend.

We have also been in touch with Madeleine Moon MP, who has sent us a similar dossier. I have replied with initial comments, which can be discussed further when, as I expect you know, I visit Bridgend on 16 May with the Director of the PCC, Tim Toulmin. This will be an opportunity also to discuss your own concerns. Tim and I will be hosting a lunch to which I hope you will be able to come. It will be attended by Madeleine Moon and members of the local community.

There is a fair degree of overlap between your dossier and Ms. Moon's. Some of the comments below are therefore very similar to those that I have sent to her. For example, I think it useful to break the matter down into two categories: wider issues for debate; and specific points arising from press coverage.

Starting with the wider issues:

1. Linkage. This bears particularly careful examination. Both you and Ms Moon have highlighted the fact that the media linked

CHAIRMAN
Sir Christopher Meyer

MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSION
Matti Alderson
Spencer Feeney
Colleen Harris MVO
Vivien Hepworth
Peter Hill
Simon Irwin
Ian MacGregor
Ian Nichol
Lindsay Nicholson
Esther Robertson
Eve Salomon
Dianne Thompson CBE
Derek Tucker
The Right Rev.
John Wayne KCVO
Tina Weaver
Rear Admiral
Nick Wilkinson CB

DIRECTOR
Tim Toulmin



incidents that, in fact, might not have been connected at all except for their relative geographical proximity. Nonetheless, it is also clear that some of the young people did know one another; and it does not seem unreasonable for journalists to have pursued the possibility of a link between the suicides, especially where the internet is concerned. 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. You will forgive me if I ask whether there is a possibility that off-the-record police briefing contributed to the speculation.

2. Pictures. The re-publication without consent by the mainstream media of material, especially photos, from sites such as Bebo and Myspace is increasingly contentious. It is something to which the PCC has been giving serious thought quite independently of the Bridgend suicides. There are several difficult questions to be addressed: to what extent is material of this kind 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? We have already commissioned research to help us reach sensible answers.
3. Approaches to relatives. The PCC has considerable experience of helping people who are recently bereaved. We have learnt along the way that different people find release from their grief in different ways. Some wish to have nothing to do with the media; others take comfort from talking publicly about their loved ones. That is why we do not believe that a blanket prohibition on approaches by the media to the bereaved is the right answer. More important is to try to ensure that people know their rights and their remedies when journalists' attentions are unwanted. In particular, as I have 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 for a reporter to engage in persistent pursuit where someone has made plain he/she does not want to talk.

The key for us is to disseminate information about our anti-harassment service as widely as possible. This is why, for example



we distribute our literature to coroners' courts. We also work to ensure that 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 newspaper harassment. It would be very helpful to know whether your officers – particular the family-liaison officers – were briefed on the PCC's anti-harassment service (which was, for example, very effective in protecting the Gary Newlove family from press intrusion).

4. Excessive detail about suicide methods. As you probably know, the PCC Code of Practice was strengthened in 2006 to highlight the importance of avoiding excessive detail when reporting suicides. In practice, this means newspapers should avoid giving information that would not be obvious or well-known. For instance, most people are aware that an overdose of Paracetamol can be lethal; but few would 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. The PCC has yet to make a formal adjudication in relation to a report of hanging. I am not sure 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 we come to Bridgend next month.

As to complaints about specific newspaper articles, it is important to note that the Commission generally does not accept complaints from 'third parties' – especially in relation to Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock). As you will appreciate, the Commission must be sure it is acting in a way that does not actually go against the wishes of grieving relatives, who may not want further publicity about their loss. Therefore, unless any of the bereaved wish to complain to us themselves (or through you as an intermediary) we will not be able to pursue a third-party complaint under Clause 5.



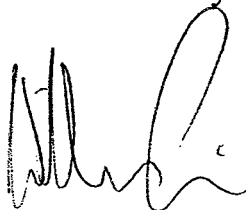
That said, there are clearly some articles that warrant further investigation under Clause 1 (Accuracy) – for example, those claiming that Wales has the highest suicide rate in the UK (which Madeleine Moon has drawn to attention). You have disputed a reference in the Times to a ‘police spokesman’ saying: “They may think it’s cool to have a memorial website. It may even be a way of achieving prestige among their peer group”. If this did not come from a spokesman it is clearly important to establish its origin.

Likewise, we would be interested to know why the Independent on Sunday stated more baldly than anyone else that “police confirmed...they are looking at websites such as Bebo, Myspace and Facebook...”.

We also plan to write to the Wales News Service with a number of queries.

I am very grateful to you for taking the time to put this file together. I hope we shall be able to discuss in person on 16 May the important issues to which it gives rise.

Yours sincerely

pp 

Sir Christopher Meyer

