

## Full Fact Churnalism Corrections Correspondence

Film director Chris Atkins was asked to give evidence to the Inquiry on so-called 'Churnalism' – a term used to describe the process through which newspaper articles are written largely on the basis of press releases and agency copy. In many cases these stories turn out to be inaccurate (the hoax stories generated by Mr Atkins were deliberately so), and Full Fact has attempted to correct the record through the PCC.

Full Fact's complaints usually relate to matters of public importance. Churnalism does not fall under this head, but was an opportunity for us to probe the limits of the PCC process. In particular, we wanted to see what the duty to take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted claims in Cl. 1 actually means in practice.

What churnalism complaints taught us:

- The Cl. 1 duty to take care not to publish inaccuracies has no life of its own. It only operates as a mitigating factor in respect of the duty to correction. (Failure to take care may operate as an aggravating factor too but we have not seen this ourselves).
- Papers are highly adversarial in reacting to complaints and will refuse to print corrections even when stories are acknowledged to be hoaxes.
- Relations between press and politicians: one of the arguments run was that the story was reasonable to run because Downing Street commented on it. On the other hand, if a number of journalists put something to a press office, it may well feel impelled to comment, and it will not have time, and does not have the responsibility, to factcheck the story itself. It is not just readers who need to be able to rely on journalists meeting their own standards. We have seen in other cases that journalists rely on 'having put something to the department' as validation, even when the circumstances are such that the department could not be expected to comment in a meaningful or informed way, while the journalist themselves had all that was needed to fact-check the story. We think this is unhelpful.

### Full Fact's initial complaints

*These are drafts. For some reason the automated responses after we filled in the PCC's web form did not have the text of the complaints we submitted so we do not have a record of the precise complaints we submitted.*

### Mail

In relation to this article "Is Larry the Prowling St cat really Jo from a South London council estate?" that appeared on page 3 of the Daily Mail print edition on Thursday 24 February 2011 (can be viewed here: <http://cynicaljournalist.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/downing-cat.jpg>)

The article was based on a story created by independent film-maker Chris Atkins and the Media Standards Trust as a PR stunt to launch their website 'Churnalism.Com', outlined here by Mr Atkins: <http://mediastandardstrust.org/blog/fuel-to-the-fire/>.

It had been reproduced into a press release and disseminated amongst popular media outlets. The Daily Mail ran with the story clearly without checking the verifiability of the source and the content.

The article cites the claims of a 'Margaret Sutcliffe' who does not exist, presenting her to be a genuine individual.

The Daily Mail have since pulled the online version of the article from the website indicating that they are aware of the story having been fabricated.

They have therefore breached the code of practice regarding accuracy by publishing inaccurate, misleading and distorted information without issuing a correction.

### Metro

In relation this (<http://e-edition.metro.co.uk/2011/02/16/>) article that appeared on page 15 of the Metro on Wednesday February 16 2011 under the headline: "Stammerer is cured by Speech". The story also appears in an article on their website published on the same day and still viewable: <http://www.metro.co.uk/film/855656-the-kings-speech-cures-stammer-in-time-for-valentines-day-proposal>.

The article was based on a story created by independent film-maker Chris Atkins and the Media Standards Trust as a PR stunt to launch their website 'Churnalism.Com', outlined here by Mr Atkins: <http://mediastandardstrust.org/blog/fuel-to-the-fire/>.

It had been reproduced into a press release and disseminated amongst popular media outlets. The Daily Mail ran with the story clearly without checking the verifiability of the source and the content.

The article presents the individuals 'Steven Hammond' and 'Sue Booth' to be genuine individuals when they were in fact characters fabricated by Mr Atkins for the purposes of the hoax.

It presents as fact 'Mr Hammond's' claim that 'retired drama teacher Sue Booth' cured him of his stammer in a few weeks.

The Metro breached the code of practice regarding accuracy by publishing inaccurate, misleading and distorted information.

### Star

In relation to this article: <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/posts/view/176426> published by the Daily Star on 12 February 2011.

The article was based on a story created by independent film-maker Chris Atkins and the Media Standards Trust as a PR stunt to launch their website 'Churnalism.Com', outlined here by Mr Atkins: <http://mediastandardstrust.org/blog/fuel-to-the-fire/>.

It had been reproduced into a press release and disseminated amongst popular media outlets. The Daily Star ran with the story clearly without checking the verifiability of the source and the content.

Subsequently, the "chastity garter" product itself and the individuals in question, "husband and wife team Edward and Lucinda Hale" are all fictitious.

The article also seems to present the following fictitious claims as fact: "the new device slips around the woman's thighs and monitors whether she is sexually excited, using pulse rate and moisture levels"; "it then fires off a text message to her partner. It will also let him know if the band has been removed"; "the garters have also proved popular in the gypsy community".

The Daily Star have therefore breached the code of practice regarding accuracy by publishing inaccurate, misleading and distorted information.

## Responses

*Scott Langham, to whom each of the letters below is addressed, is Head of Complaints at the PCC.*

### Mail

Dear Mr Langham

Thank you for your correspondence for Mr Patrick Casey and Full Fact, an organisation who, I know, pride themselves on identifying inaccuracies.

This story, however, was not in itself inaccurate. It was an elaborate hoax based on deliberate lies.

Our story – which only ran in one edition – asked the question "Is Larry the Prowling St cat really Jo from a South London council estate?"

The answer to that question is No! So there has been no significant inaccuracy.

When newspapers run hoaxes themselves on April 1st they do not run corrections on April 2nd. In this case we were hoaxed, Downing Street were hoaxed and Battersea

Dogs Home were hoaxed because they gave out comments responding to enquiries that had been made because of a series of lies posted on Facebook.

Mr Casey says the article was based on a fabricated press release and was a story “created by independent film maker Chris Atkins and the Media Standards Trust as a PR stunt to launch their website”.

We take the view that the number of lies involved in setting up this stunt frankly proved nothing for the film maker or the Media Standards Trust who did not merit further coverage of their activity.

We had accurately quoted comments from Downing Street and Battersea Dogs Home who were also aware of the story from Media agencies.

We accurately quoted what was already in the public domain being displayed on a Facebook site – by a woman who was photographed there.

We made extensive efforts to find the lady concerned ourselves and made sure that we only reported “claims” throughout the story.

As seekers of facts – I would hope Mr Casey and his organisation now recognise that it would be quite wrong for the Mail to give any further publicity to this stunt.

We had reported accurately on a manufactured “truth” and do not see this matter as a serious inaccuracy in need of further action, or a breach of Clause 1(1) of the Code since we took great care to check the story and removed it promptly when it became clear it was a hoax.

Yours sincerely

Charles A Garside  
Assistant Editor

Metro

Dear Mr Langham

Thank you for your note from Mr Patrick Casey and Full Fact, an organisation which, I know, prides itself on identifying inaccuracies.

This story, however, was not in itself inaccurate. It was a hoax based on lies. When newspapers run hoaxes themselves on April 1st they do not run corrections on April 2nd. In this case we were hoaxed but believe no further action is needed.

The Metro story - which ran in only one edition and has been removed from our website - claimed ‘Stammerer is cured by Speech’ and reported how a man with a

stammer was treated by a retired drama teacher in an unorthodox way, using methods similar to those used by the (real) therapist portrayed in the film *The King's Speech*. The happy result here was that the sufferer was miraculously cured and able to propose to his girlfriend on Valentine's Day, two days before the account was published.

We were in fact tricked because this apparently heart-warming tale was entirely made up. Yet because these were 'characters', not people and the account was a fiction, there was no inaccuracy and certainly no significant inaccuracy under Clause 1 (1) of the PCC Code.

Mr Casey says the article was based on a fabricated press release and was a story "created by independent film maker Chris Atkins and the Media Standards Trust as a PR stunt to launch their website".

We take the view that publication of this bogus account, as a nib on page 16, had no harmful or misleading effect on the lives of genuine sufferers of stammers. We also believe the lies involved in inventing and circulating this fake material proved nothing for the film maker or the Media Standards Trust.

We trust that Mr Casey and his organisation accept that it would be entirely wrong for the Metro to give further coverage to this stunt.

Yours sincerely

Graeme Fort

Managing Editor

#### Star

We have no record of a response or in relation to the Star. This probably relates to the fact that the Star left the PCC in January.

#### **Full Fact's response**

*In between the paper's responses and the letter below we had our first meeting with the PCC, which was a getting-to-know-you meeting. We discussed this case in passing. From memory, we said we were not sure whether to pursue the complaint and asked advice. The PCC expressed surprise that we had raised a complaint over claims of relatively little consequence, in comparison to our usual serious public policy work.*

Dear Scott

Thank you for passing on the responses from the Mail and Metro, which given their similar thrusts I will treat together.

We believe it is important that false claims, once they have entered the public record, should be corrected on the public record once the inaccuracy is recognised. While we understand the papers' instincts to avoid further publicity, we believe that is the right principle here too.

Indeed, contrary to both responses, the Metro and the Daily Mail ran stories explaining their hoaxes from April 1st. It is incongruous for the papers to have pulled the churnalism hoax stories but not to have set the record straight for their readers.

Ultimately, though, we accept the papers' arguments that the inaccuracies in question are not significant inaccuracies under the Code. For that reason, we do not feel it would be constructive to continue to press for a correction in these cases and withdraw the complaints.

We are grateful to the papers for their explaining their thinking. We would have been more persistent about more significant claims, just as we hope the papers would have been more sceptical prior to publication.

We would like to write about the process of these complaints now they are resolved as they do raise interesting points of principle and would be grateful for confirmation that we can now quote from the correspondence under the PCC's Terms and Conditions.

Finally, I apologise for the delay to our response, which was due to an oversight on my part.

Best wishes

Will Moy

*Article published later reflecting on these complaints.*

[http://fullfact.org/blog/churnalism\\_press\\_complaints\\_commission\\_complaints-2733](http://fullfact.org/blog/churnalism_press_complaints_commission_complaints-2733)

### **'How the papers responded to our churnalism complaints'**

Earlier this year a series of hoax stories concocted by film maker Chris Atkins and the Media Standards Trust made their way into the press.

These included a bogus story on the kidnap of the Downing Street cat, and the existence of such things as the 'penazzele' and 'chastity garter' and were published in the Daily Mail, Metro, and the Daily Star.

Though devised to raise the profile of churnalism.com, a website which enables users to gauge just how much of their news is regurgitated press releases, the errors made were hardly acknowledged by the papers.

As we said at the time, despite the light-hearted nature of the stories, this still raised an important question in relation to the Press Complaints Commission code of practice which states:

“The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures.

“A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and - where appropriate - an apology published. In cases involving the Commission, prominence should be agreed with the PCC in advance.”

No corrections were printed, and in some cases the stories were still available online, so we passed the matter on to the PCC to get a response out of the papers.

To make the point we complained about two stories, which we were still able to get the text of. One that made it into the Metro on a man inspired by 'The King's Speech' to cure his stammer in time for Valentines day via unorthodox speech therapy. The other, which made it into the Daily Mail, covered reports that the new Downing Street cat Larry had been kidnapped from the aunt of a man called Tim Sutcliffe.

Unsurprisingly none of the papers jumped at the chance to inform their readers that they had published completely fabricated stories, deploying a number of arguments.

First of they claimed that the as the stories were hoaxes, they should be treated just in the same way as April Fool's day stories – which, they said, were not corrected.

In fact, both the both papers did publish a round up of April Fool's hoax stories including those perpetrated by their own papers (The Daily Mail's is [here](#) and Metro's is [here](#)).

We do note however the presumption from both papers that their readers are equally suspicious of the accuracy of their content on the other 364 days of the year.

Likewise, the responses argued that there was no damage done by the inaccurate stories and publication of a correction would only give further publicity to the MST's churnalism campaign, which the papers were unwilling to do.

From our experience it is unlikely that the wording of the responses would have needed to mention anything about the churnalism project, while still getting across the point that the stories were bogus.

But despite these red herrings, the other points the papers made mean we have decided to let the matter rest.

In the case of the kidnapped cat, the Mail argued that it had only reported the story as rumour not as fact, so despite the rumour turning out to be completely made up their report was not inaccurate.

In both cases it was also argued that the no damage was done by the publication of these stories due to the essentially lighthearted nature of the hoaxes.

Unlike other cases we have complained about there is little danger that the misinformation published likely to get repeated, nor have any impact on public policy – save for indirectly making the case for better regulation of the press.

After much agonising we eventually decided that to continue the complaints we would have had to insist that not only were inaccuracies significant, but that the stories printed were of significance, and on the latter issue we were more in agreement with the papers' viewpoint – for a change.

The churnalism stories demonstrated a lack of rigour in the newspapers' checking processes, and highlighted their capacity to spread misinformation. A PCC battle over the publication of a correction on the issue of a Downing Street cat is unlikely to remedy this problem.

But it once again raises the question of why newspapers are so adversarial on the issue of acknowledging errors at all. It is extremely rare for us to submit a complaint about a significant factual inaccuracy that is not initially dismissed by the paper.

Even in cases where papers have been indisputably wrong (such as over a basic error leading to stories reporting life expectancy on a Merthyr Tydfil estate was lower than in Haiti) several rounds of correspondence over several weeks have been required to get a worthwhile correction printed.

One of the problems at the heart the issue is not that papers get their facts wrong or indeed borrow heavily from press releases, but an unwillingness to acknowledge and act on the problems that may arise as a consequence.

Given the time and resource pressures in the media it is inevitable that mistakes get made, so why not be more willing to acknowledge and correct them when they are pointed out?

Perhaps it would make the embarrassment from these kind of hoaxes a little easier to swallow.