

PCC upholds complaint against Courier & Advertiser over identification of victims of sex offences

The Press Complaints Commission has upheld two complaints against the Courier & Advertiser (Dundee) after it published material that was likely to contribute to the identification of two girls who had been victims of sexual offences.

The newspaper had reported on a court hearing at which a man had admitted sexual offences against two girls, both of whom were under the age of sixteen when the crimes occurred. The report made reference to the locations where the offences had taken place, including the names of the streets - two of which were the streets on which the victims lived. Their mothers complained (separately) that, because there were relatively few houses on the roads in question and because the report had stated their daughters' ages, both children had been identified to those in their local communities. The complainants contended that the newspaper had breached Clause 3 (Privacy), Clause 7 (Children in sex cases) and Clause 11 (Victims of sexual assault) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The newspaper accepted that its normal practice of only publishing outline details of cases involving sexual offences had not been properly followed. It removed the partial addresses from its online archive and circulated a note to staff reminding them of their obligations under the Code of Practice. In addition, the editor sent letters of apology to each complainant.

While welcoming the steps taken by the editor, the Commission concluded that "this was a bad mistake...The failure of the newspaper properly to consider the likely consequences of publishing information in the report, especially the references to the girls' partial addresses, was a serious one." As a result, it did not hesitate to uphold the complaints. The PCC's adjudication was published by the newspaper on Friday, in print and online.

It was a matter of concern to the Commission that this part of the Code had been breached. It has also upheld other complaints under Clauses 7 (Children in sex cases) and 11 (Victims of sexual assault) over the last year. Given the seriousness of the issue, and the potential for harm to those who might be identified, the Commission has decided to issue new guidance to the industry. This will be published later in the year.

Stephen Abell, the PCC's Director said:

"The Editors' Code is very clear about the identification of victims of sexual assault. In the vast majority of reports about sexual crimes newspapers take great care to abide by these requirements. However, if in doubt, newspapers should always err on the side of caution when considering what details to publish. The Commission is committed to ensuring the highest standards in this area. The PCC seeks always to help vulnerable people in its work, and it is hard to think of an issue more important than the protection of victims of sexual assault. That is why we will shortly be issuing guidance to help prevent any future breaches of the Code from occurring."

ENDS

Notes to editors

1. The PCC is an independent body which administers the system of self-regulation for the press. It does so primarily by dealing with complaints, framed within the terms of the Editors' Code of Practice, about the editorial content of newspapers and magazines (and their websites, including editorial audio-visual material) and the conduct of journalists.
2. Clause 7 (Children in sex cases) of the Editors' Code says:

1. The press must not, even if legally free to do so, identify children under 16 who are victims or witnesses in cases involving sex offences.
2. In any press report of a case involving a sexual offence against a child -
 - i) The child must not be identified.
 - ii) The adult may be identified.
 - iii) The word "incest" must not be used where a child victim might be identified.
 - iv) Care must be taken that nothing in the report implies the relationship between the accused and the child.
3. Clause 11 (Victims of sexual assault) of the Editors' Code says:
The press must not identify victims of sexual assault or publish material likely to contribute to such identification unless there is adequate justification and they are legally free to do so.
4. To read the adjudication please [click here](#).
5. For more information, please contact Jonathan Collett on 020 7438 1246 or 07740 896805.

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