

PCC upholds complaint against magazine following payment to associate of convicted criminal

The Press Complaints Commission has upheld a complaint against Pick Me Up magazine under Clause 16 (Payment to criminals) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The magazine had published a first person account of a woman who had slept with a man on the night that he had committed murder. The daughter of the victim complained to the PCC that the magazine had breached the Code by paying the woman for the story, as she was an associate of a convicted criminal: the two individuals were, she argued, more than just acquaintances (for example, they shared the same friends). In the complainant's view, there was no purpose to the story other than financial gain to both the woman and the magazine at the expense of her mother's death. This argument was disputed by the magazine, which did not consider that the subject of the story was an 'associate' of the criminal, but rather a passing acquaintance.

Clause 16 of the Editors' Code prohibits payments to "convicted or confessed criminals or to their associates - who may include family, friends and colleagues" for stories which "seek to exploit a particular crime". The Commission ruled that the sexual relationship between the murderer and the woman he slept with meant that the woman could reasonably be described as an 'associate', while the fact that the focus of the article was entirely on the woman's association with the murderer meant that the story exploited the crime. Although the woman had been entitled to tell her story to the magazine, the payment for it could not be justified. The complaint was therefore upheld. Further complaints made under Clause 1 (Accuracy) and Clause 5 (Intrusion into grief or shock) were not upheld by the PCC.

Stephen Abell, Director of the PCC, commented: "Complaints under Clause 16 of the Editors' Code are relatively rare, so it is important that editors take note of this important ruling. The Code is rightly very strict in this area and - while freedom of expression does mean that newspapers and magazines can publish individuals' stories regardless of their involvement or association with crimes - the Code is very clear that payment must not be made to criminals or their associates for stories or information that exploit a particular crime, unless there is a public interest in doing so. This decision is a reminder to the industry to treat stories of this sort with particular care".

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 16 (Payment to criminals) states:
 - i) Payment or offers of payment for stories, pictures or information, which seek to exploit a particular crime or to glorify or glamorise crime in general, must not be made directly or via agents to convicted or confessed criminals or to their associates - who may include family, friends and colleagues.
 - ii) Editors invoking the public interest to justify payment or offers would need to demonstrate that there was good reason to believe the public interest would be served. If, despite payment, no public interest emerged, then the material should not be published.
 3. To read the adjudication, which has been published in the 26 May edition of the magazine, please [click here](#).
 4. For more information, please contact Jonathan Collett on 020 7438 1246 or 07740 896805.
- 20 May 2011