

LEVESON INQUIRY INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

WITNESS STATEMENT OF CAMILLA WRIGHT

I, Camilla Wright, editor of Popbitch, will say as follows:-

1 WHO ARE YOU AND BRIEF SUMMARY OF CAREER HISTORY.

1 My name is Camilla Wright.

2 I make this statement in compliance with a notice sent on 19 December 2011.

3 In this statement I have answered the questions asked of me in good faith and to the best of my recollection.

4 Nothing in this statement should be taken to indicate any waiver of legal privilege.

5 I read Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford University. After gaining experience in business and the third-sector I started to write for economic and financial magazines. I then started to write on a freelance basis on popular culture issues for consumer magazines. I co-founded Popbitch in 2000, and since 2004 have been full-time publisher and editor. I have also written for magazines, tabloids and broadsheet newspapers on a freelance basis offering comment on the media and popular culture.

2 WHAT MATERIAL POPBITCH PUBLISHES AND WHY

6 Popbitch publishes a weekly email newsletter comprising a round-up of news about popular culture, politics, sports, celebrities, the entertainment industry and the media to its registered subscribers. Supporting material, such as reviews, youtube videos, and links to other

websites, are published on popbitch.com, which also hosts a messageboard/discussion forum of entertainment industry professionals and fans.

7 The material in Popbitch is text-based - we took the decision not to base Popbitch on paparazzi shots of celebrities. The weekly round-up of celebrity news and pop culture is aimed at a time-poor subscriber base who nonetheless want to keep up with this world, so the content is designed to be light-hearted, humorous and entertaining.

8 I started the Popbitch weekly newsletter to be an irreverent and personal look at aspects of popular culture, aimed at adults. The idea was to reference the old-style Hollywood magazines which popularised the publication of insider information and to try to act in the style of something like a Private Eye for the celebrity world. Popbitch doesn't just cover the stars of popular culture but looks behind the scenes at areas missed by the popular media, plus the stories behind the stories and why certain stories got published and others didn't. Popbitch looks at the hypocritical gap between how those in the public eye seek to be portrayed, and how they really act. This is, of course, an area in which those involved have come to have great influence in British culture and life, and where there is a lot of money being made, but where there is traditionally too little investigation.

3 THE INQUIRY WISHES TO UNDERSTAND THE EXTENT TO WHICH YOUR WEBSITE IS BASED IN THE UK. WHERE ARE YOUR SERVERS LOCATED? 4 DO YOU CONSIDER THE UK COURTS TO HAVE JURISDICTION OVER THE WAY IN WHICH YOUR WEBSITE IS OPERATED IN THE UK AND FAR DOES THIS JURISDICTION EXTEND?

9 Some of Popbitch's servers are located in the UK and others are located outside UK.

10 I consider that UK courts have jurisdiction as far as matters relevant to UK law, such as libel and privacy. I understand that this covers publication in the UK.

4 HOW YOU SOURCE STORIES, MATERIAL AND OTHER POSTS AND WHERE YOU CONSIDER THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHECKING SOURCES OF INFORMATION TO LIE, WITH YOU, OR THE PERSON WHO HAS PROVIDED YOU WITH THE INFORMATION.

11 There are many different ways that material is sourced, but I would consider that the responsibility for checking information (if it needs to be checked) lies with Popbitch, if we are publishing the story in our newsletter. But with the third-party if they are simply posting it on the messageboard.

12 Popbitch's newsletter is written largely by a network of contributors, many of whom have extensive experience and prestige in world of media, news gathering, the entertainment industry, business or politics. I trust much of what is relayed through these individuals - and even if they are not the source of a story, they can often provide a very useful service of helping us to check the veracity or plausibility of new stories. We have about 200-250 that I

- would call trusted (mostly confidential) sources in this circle that are known to me or my closest team members.
- 13 If stories are not originated from a member of the Popbitch team or from one of our "inner circle" of trusted sources, it can come in from many other ways such as:
- 13.1 - Unsolicited emailed tips and stories. When a story comes in from a new or anonymous source we are likely to try to engage in a discussion with that person (usually by email) to chat further about their story. I find that's a useful way to come to a decision about whether someone or their information can be trusted.
- 13.2 - Registered users of the popbitch messageboard forum. We can go back through that poster's history on the board to determine whether or not any particular story is likely to be reliable as a first check.
- 13.3 - Stories found by staff writers or freelance contributors
- 13.4 – Personal experience written in by readers. If a story involved a reader's personal experience we'd most likely engage in an email discussion to make sure we're getting a largely unembellished version. Then we'd be likely to write it up as "X writes - and do it in their words. If this elicits a response - whether supporting or contradicting - we'd typically write that addition in the next issue. Sometimes the type of content of the story would be so inoffensive and jokey that we would feel it appropriate to write up as told to us.
- 14 The amount of checking on each story would be done on a case by case basis, depending on the type of story and its subject matter. Popbitch's subject matter ranges from the serious to the incredibly trivial.
- 15 In every significant story we would look into it to see if the story was plausible - many tips or stories can be disproved quickly., e.g. by a simple internet search, phone calls placed to relevant people or by clarifying details with another confidential source.
- 16 For many of the stories that come in - unless we can be certain that we need no secondary source - we look to find someone or something else to confirm the details of the story.
- 17 *For example - a story came in, through a regular contributor, about issues at a TV channel. Although we were pretty sure their source worked at the TV station, we didn't know who it was, and therefore how fair the story given was to the channel and the individuals concerned.*
- 18 *We therefore went to another potential source to see if they could get someone to try and confirm this story. Upon receiving their version - which tallied quite closely with what we'd previously been told - we could not be certain that source 1 and 2 weren't the same.*
- 19 *So we found another source - definitely a different one - and they confirmed probably 50% of the original story. we were then satisfied that this was a general view held with the station*

rather than a slanted, personal view and felt able to run most but not all of the original story. Since then the information given about personnel and programme changes were proved to be correct.

20 We don't offer payment for stories or tip-offs to try and avoid providing an incentive for people to embellish stories or to pass on sensitive information that they wouldn't be comfortable doing without such a financial inducement. (Some of the best stories or jokes that get sent in have on occasion earned their contributor a fun present such as a CD, book or gig tickets)

21 If needs be we do have immediate access to specialist media law solicitors.

5. TO WHAT EXTENT TO WHICH YOU ARE AWARE OF THE SOURCES OF INFORMATION WHICH MAKE UP THE CENTRAL STORIES FEATURED ON YOUR BLOG/WEEKLY EMAIL TO SUBSCRIBERS.

22 Most of the sources of information are known and trusted by us - either we know them in the real world of we have a history of knowing them through email and therefore have a background of trust that they have certain areas of expertise and knowledge. Some stories or tips come in from anonymous sources.

6. TO WHAT EXTENT YOU TAKE STEPS TO CHECK THE ACCURACY OF POSTS WHICH ARE POSTED BY INDIVIDUAL USERS?

Messageboard:

23 Popbitch accepts no responsibility for the content of the messageboard nor any other content posted by or provided by third parties. Popbitch disclaims all liability for such content to the fullest extent permitted by law.

24 Everyone who registers to use the messageboard is provided with a set of rules to help them become part of the community. In order to post on the message board everyone has to register and provide a working email address, but they don't have to use their real-life name or identity online. We have never revealed the identity of any poster without their permission.

25 These are the relevant terms & conditions:

We've put together some information which you should find helpful for using the board.

Dos and Don'ts

1. Don't out anyone's real identity on the board - even by accident - popbitch world is an alternative reality for your chosen alter ego.

2. *Do have fun and enjoy yourself. Best stories of the week can win presents (*or at least we used to claim this but haven't sent out a CD, DVD or book prize for a messageboard story since about 2003.)*
 3. *Don't start a new thread on the board when you can reply to an old one.*
 4. *Don't post stories about stuff like what you had for lunch, whether your girl/boy friend was nice to you yesterday etc because it'll either be deleted or people will throw ridicule and insults at you.*
 5. *Do have a thick skin - you might think you are posting something great but other posters might laugh or insult you because they think it's old or boring.*
 6. *Don't be racist, homophobic, personally abusive. Otherwise pretty much anything goes.*
 7. *Do email hello@popbitch.com if you have a great story just in case it gets missed on the message board.*
 8. *Don't complain on the board if you do get deleted. Postings like "why was xx deleted" will ALWAYS be deleted. And remember it's not a perfect system some users get away with posting shit and sometimes your stories won't be appreciated. Sorry.*
- 26 Should users be aware that a user is posting untrue or malicious information they will make their opinions quite clear to them and this is by far the best way we have ever found in practice to police the forum. We do not actively moderate the forum, but a selected group of long-established posters are deputed to help set the tone, make sure posters know that they responsible for what they post themselves but to make sure that no-one is inadvertently breaking the law.
- 27 We can take the sanction of de-registering any account misusing the messageboard.

7. THE EXTENT TO WHICH YOU CONSIDER THAT ETHICS CAN AND SHOULD PLAY A ROLE IN THE BLOGOSPHERE - AND WHAT YOU CONSIDER ETHICS TO MEAN IN THIS CONTEXT

- 28 Internet publishers such as Popbitch are subject to the same laws as the rest of the media.
- 29 The blogosphere and enhanced freedom of expression engendered by the internet has provided a depth of research, checking and crowd sourcing that can at times lead to positive outcomes for the media.

30 Some newspapers have tried to use Popbitch to post stories that they wouldn't do themselves so they can then quote them as being on the internet and therefore they can publish as in the public domain. I've tried to avoid Popbitch being used for this purpose.

8. DO YOU HAVE ANY POLICY WHICH RELATES TO COMPLAINTS ABOUT POSTS, ARTICLES OR WEB PAGES WHICH ARE LIBELLOUS, DEFAMATORY OR CONSIDERED TO BE AN INVASION OF PRIVACY? IF NOT DO YOU HAVE ANY RELEVANT PRACTICES? DO YOU EVER REMOVE AVAILABILITY TO SUCH PAGES ON THAT BASIS? THE INQUIRY WOULD BE GRATEFUL FOR SOME EXAMPLE OF THIS, ANONYMISED IF NECESSARY). COPIES OF ANY POLICIES SHOULD ALSO BE PROVIDED.

31 We would look at every complaint on a case by case basis – Popbitch is published by a small and close-knit team. Written policies have not been needed.

** Posts on Messageboard*

32 If someone emails about a post on the messageboard we try to answer their query as quickly as we can - and we would weigh up the third party's right to freedom of expression compared with the complaint of the person/brand involved. Often we would contact the poster to ask them to explain/justify their posting. If we think that the complaint is justified we can delete the posting and generally explain the reasoning for this to the messageboard users.

33 *Example 1 - a senior and well known entertainment executive complained that someone had posted a story relating to their family. We upheld their view that while they were a fair target, their family member wasn't, and removed the post.*

34 *Example 2 - the executive in charge of a TV show emailed to complain at the tone of a review posted about the show on the messageboard. We felt that it was fair comment and refused their request to remove the posting*

** Stories related to Popbitch newsletter/website*

35 If someone contacts us regarding a story we would try to answer the query soon after we receive it - even if it is just to assure the person that the email has been received. Again, we look at each on a case by case merit.

36 The Popbitch newsletter is written very much as a two way exchange and allows for corrections and relevant information to be added from subscribers and those who feature in stories. If we think that it is justified we would be unlikely to refuse a right of reply.

37 *For example 1, after writing a story about a celebrity, he emailed us to dispute some of the facts. In the following issue we were happy to publish this celebrity's email in his own words, thereby giving him a right of reply.*

- 38 Many of our stories are written in the words of a third party – i.e. one of our readers - and it usually involves their first-person interaction with a celebrity (and I use celebrity in a wide context). The intention of this is to relay their information without adding our editorial support.
- 39 *For example 2, we ran a series of anecdotes from readers who claimed they had met a celebrity who was rude to them. During the week we were sent three different stories involving the same actor.*
- 40 *After publishing them, we received in excess of 20 emails with very different experiences of meeting this actor. The following issue we published a follow up which represented the extent to which people had emailed to give an entirely different (and positive) view of this actor's behaviour.*
- 41 *The mechanics of the Popbitch email newsletter allow for the updating and correcting of information and offer a simple way to give a right of repl more easily than a magazine or newspaper perhaps can.*
- 42 Should we be contacted by the legal representative of someone claiming defamation or invasion of privacy, we take the relevant steps of our own, such as gaining legal advice.

9. HOW DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE REGULATED?

- 43 I consider that popbitch is self-regulated, subject to UK law.
- 44 Popbitch's weekly newsletter, being a subscription service, relies on staying relevant to and accepted by its 350,000+ registered subscribers for its continued existence. Therefore, our tone and content is very much regulated or guided by our readership. We receive hundreds of emails a week making comment on the subject matter and content of the newsletter – and we take seriously all thoughtful input, both positive and negative.
- 45 Unlike much of the internet and blogosphere Popbitch is a commercial product reliant on mainstream advertisers and sponsors for its funding. It is therefore important to have good editorial standards.
- 46 Popbitch seeks to comply with relevant local laws.

10. THE INQUIRY WOULD ALSO WELCOME YOUR VIEWS ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE CONTENT OF WEBSITES, AND THE MANNER IN WHICH YOU OPERATE, CAN BE REGULATED BY A DOMESTIC SYSTEM OF REGULATION.

- 47 I can only comment that the Popbitch style of self regulation described above seems to work well.

48 I think it would be helpful to look at the definition of public interest. As it stands it is not fit for purpose and needs to be broadened.. The media and internet storm on privacy, superinjunctions and the use of the Human Rights Act article 8 shows us that there needs to be informed debate on this subject. The narrow view of what should be published as relevant to the public interest has in the past appeared to be limited to political and national security issues and public figures. And yet the dictionary definition says that the public interest is something that involves things in which the general populace has a stake or interest. We live in an era in which a much wider caste of public figure has enormous influence over the general populace. Film stars have moved into the kind of public policy arena which was once the preserve of diplomats (George Clooney - Darfur, Angelina Jolie – Balkans). Football players have enormous influence on consumption behaviour and public opinion. Stars share their private lives directly with the public but at the same time employ armies of advisers to make sure the commercial viability of their “personal brand” is not compromised in the media. Surveys suggest that the behaviour of the rich and famous effects behavioural change on the public far more that that of our politicians. And the actions of the financial elite affect the livelihoods of the whole country. And yet you wouldn't know this from the narrow definition of public interest that has been unchanged from a previous era which bears little relevance to the culture and society we are today.

49 I believe that the facts stated in this Witness Statement are true.

Signed

Dated ... 16th January 2012.....