

PRESS ASSOCIATION SUBMISSION TO THE LEVESON INQUIRY

The Press Association is pleased to respond to the request for a submission to the Leveson Inquiry. We will outline: our commitment to high editorial standards; the importance of the Code of Practice in our daily reporting; the role of the Press Association Trust; the measures in place to police standards; our role in helping members of the public caught up in stories; our strong belief in the freedom of expression and the public interest watchdog role of the press and media; the voluntary regulation of the press and the importance of maintaining a vigorous, independent media.

THE PRESS ASSOCIATION

The Press Association is the national news agency of the United Kingdom and Ireland. It was founded in 1868 and provides a service to every major media organisation covering print, broadcast and online.

Throughout its history the Press Association has been committed to high editorial standards, providing customers with a service that strives to be accurate, fair and fast. They must be able to use a PA story without making any further checks, so a heavy burden of responsibility rests upon the shoulders of PA editorial staff.

In our central role serving the media we provide detailed news and sports coverage from across the UK and have teams of reporters covering the Royal Courts of Justice, the Old Bailey, Parliament and the devolved governments of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. As part of our normal operations we regularly challenge reporting restrictions and help regional and local papers to do so as part of our commitment to a free press, the public's right to be properly informed, and the principle of open justice.

MAINTAINING EDITORIAL STANDARDS

Editorial standards are the responsibility of the editor and he reports to the independent Press Association Trust, set up three years ago to monitor editorial performance and to report to the PA Group main Board.

The editor formally reports to the PA Trust twice a year and is in more frequent contact if circumstances dictate. The Trust takes a close interest in the steps taken to maintain high editorial standards. If there is a serious problem or an issue with the Editors' Code of Practice policed by the Press Complaints Commission the Trust expects to be notified and to receive an explanation of the circumstances. It will also require the editor to outline the steps being taken to prevent a recurrence.

At a practical level, we try to make maintaining high editorial standards part of the day-to-day working life of PA. We are not unusual in this respect and do not claim to be a paragon of journalistic virtue: we believe that the overwhelming majority of media organisations we serve take a similar view.

At PA, all journalists are instructed to operate at all times within the terms of the Editors' Code of Practice, the industry standard – in its spirit and not just to the letter. There is a link to the Code on the PA intranet and amendments to it are drawn to the attention of staff through our internal editorial communications. A statement of our editorial values is also on the intranet and is intended to complement the Code as a guide to editorial conduct. I have appended a copy to this submission.

The staff on the newsdesk are expected to be alert to the dangers of unintentional breaches of the Code – the level of detail in a suicide inquest, pictures taken when there might be an expectation of privacy, stories concerning children etc. If they become aware that a judgment on content needs to be made they will consult the duty editor. If we feel that we cannot publish an item because of the Code the journalist responsible for the content is contacted and their error is outlined to them to prevent a recurrence. If we think that the incident has highlighted a general cause for concern – the coverage of inquests has been particularly difficult because of the grey area regarding "excessive detail" in the Code – we include it as an item in the briefing that goes to all editorial staff and in a general staff message.

If it is clear that an error may have been made remedial action is taken: the story is corrected or the picture withdrawn, advisories are sent to customers and a content correction procedure is initiated to remove the offending item from online sites.

If contacted by the PCC we comply with the requirement to respond within seven days of a complaint being made. If we believe that the complaint is justified we fully cooperate with the complainant and the PCC to make amends.

The editorial ethos that we maintain at PA does not countenance sharp practice or lawbreaking.

Our strict rule on sourcing – all stories have a source, usually named in the copy - provides us with significant protection from the activities of a rogue member of staff accessing dubious sources of content. If an un-sourced story was submitted we would expect it to be challenged by desk staff.

Desk staff are also expected to be alert to other legal problems – the risk of libel, the possibility of contempt, identification of victims in certain court cases etc.

Last year we instituted an annual seminar with the Press Complaints Commission, at which desk staff are briefed on current issues and can raise issues that have affected us. We are now building on this to increase our briefings for staff and the resources they have available to refresh their knowledge of Code matters. We also highlight to staff any legal issues which we believe might cause difficulties.

POOLED COPY, PICTURES AND VIDEO FROM THE PRESS ASSOCIATION

The debate about privacy often centres on celebrities who expect to be in the public eye at least some of the time and profit from it.

But ordinary people sometimes find themselves in extraordinary situations and become the centre of wholly unexpected media attention. It can happen when they are grieving, vulnerable and bewildered by the turn of events that has upset the equilibrium of their lives. Every day the press makes efforts to relieve the distress of such people – efforts that are often overlooked in the general clamour surrounding the privacy of high profile personalities.

Help is at hand for members of the public in these circumstances and can be provided by the Press Complaints Commission and the Press Association.

From our experience at PA the PCC effectively offers assistance to members of the public. It can send a private advisory note to editors, making clear an individual does not wish to comment publicly on their situation and this can help to prevent unwanted media approaches.

The PCC can also issue a private 'desist notice' which requests that journalists and photographers cease their approaches with immediate effect.

Sometimes people involved in these stories wish to make a statement but do not wish to have journalists approaching them. In these circumstances the Press Association is often called upon to provide a pooled report, which all of the media can access and use.

This is a common occurrence and spares many people the attentions of the media: once words and pictures are supplied on a pooled basis there is no longer any need for journalists to "doorstep" families.

Perhaps the best example of PA providing this service was following the Dunblane massacre. Some families did not wish to speak to the media and wished their child's funeral to be private. Others did wish to celebrate their child's life but did not want a media "scrum" developing at the funeral. In these circumstances a PA reporter and photographer attended to represent the whole of the media.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-REGULATION OF THE MEDIA

The Press Association would like to take this opportunity to express support for self-regulation of the press. The phone hacking scandal is deplorable: there was criminality by journalists and the Leveson Inquiry will no doubt fully explore the actions of police and politicians and the reasons why it took so long for the full shocking story to emerge.

We believe there is a widespread acceptance that the Editors' Code of Practice is very good and it has evolved effectively in recent years. We would argue that in the reforms that will follow, the PCC's remit must expand from complaint resolution to effective monitoring of standards and compliance procedures in newspapers and magazines and their associated online publications.

The Press Association believes a mechanism must be found to achieve this whilst still retaining self-regulation.

Vigorous, independent, ethical journalism is a force for good and should operate within an effective self-regulatory framework


Jonathan Grun

Editor

Appendix

The Press Association's statement of editorial values as posted on the Agency's intranet.

WHY PEOPLE TRUST THE PRESS ASSOCIATION

The core editorial values of the Press Association can be summed up in three words: fast, fair and accurate. All are equally important: the PA does not sacrifice accuracy or balance for the sake of speed. As we sometimes say: "We must be first - but first we must be right."

These are the guiding principles for everything the PA reports, photographs, writes or broadcasts and they underpin our reputation for journalistic integrity. They explain why PA is trusted both by those we report on and the customers who use the service. They believe we offer them a fair deal.

The responsibility on the PA and its journalists is immense. The Press Association helps set the news agenda. It influences both the decision-making and what eventually appears each day in newspapers and broadcast media across the country and around the world. When a story breaks, the cry across the newsroom that "it's on PA" is the catalyst for action.

The PA's official history says: "Throughout the media industry, the PA has a reputation for speed, accuracy, fairness and flexibility. It does not have any political views. It writes no opinionated editorials - or editorials of any kind whatsoever. It does not campaign or crusade. It simply gathers the news and the pictures and distributes them as fast as modern communications systems will allow."

The following notes outline how our guiding principles apply. It is essential that these rules are honoured not only to the letter but in the full spirit. That is what PA's sense of fair play is about.

:: Every reasonable endeavour will be made to ensure all material transmitted in the name of the Press Association is factual, fair and is sent to customers without unnecessary delay.

:: All our stories carry attribution and wherever possible the source is identified and on the record.

:: All PA reporters, writers and photographers will follow rigorously the PCC Code of Conduct in its true spirit.

:: Any serious error of fact will be corrected at the earliest opportunity and, where applicable, a suitable apology or clarification will be transmitted to customers.

:: To be trusted the PA must be editorially independent. It is the duty of the PA Editor to resist attempts by any individual or organisation to unduly influence the content of the PA wire.

:: Organisations cannot buy their way onto the PA wire - a business relationship with PA's commercial division will not influence the editorial judgment of journalists providing the main wire. The usual news values will apply. Likewise, individual journalists will not file copy or pictures as the result of receiving an inducement and in disregard of editorial judgment.

:: All PA customers will be treated equally, regardless of size, influence or power and with courtesy and consideration. We go the extra mile to help all our customers.

:: Our responsibility to our customers means that we must combine vigour in pursuing stories with caution. For example, when following up exclusives, we must balance the demand to get a story on the wire with the requirement to behave responsibly.

:: When the PA provides pooled coverage on behalf of all the media, we will supply the material to all the organisations who usually participate in pooled coverage and at our discretion to other media organisations.

:: The PA's central role in the media allows us privileged access to information but we will never exploit this position and will ensure that such material is provided to all our customers. Embargoed information must never leak from PA: it would be a betrayal of the trust placed in us.

:: In general the PA will not make payments to individuals for stories, features or pictures. Any exception must be agreed at department head level and such transactions must adhere strictly to the PCC Code of Conduct.