



**Remarks by Press Ombudsman Mr Peter Feeney at the
Launch of the 2015 Annual Report for The Press Council and the Office of the Press Ombudsman in
Chartered Accountants House, Pearse Street, Dublin 2**

27 May 2016

The Press Council of Ireland and the Office of the Press Ombudsman are now into their ninth year of operation. We were established to defend press freedom and to provide a means whereby members of the public, if they find something in their newspapers, magazines and online news services that they feel does not live up to professional standards, may make a complaint and have that complaint dealt with in a fast, free and fair manner. Our stakeholders are the general public, the people who read newspapers, magazines and online news services. The public are entitled to find news reportage and comment that meets the highest standards. Our stakeholders too are those who work in journalism, the editors and reporters who are confident that their journalism meets the standards set out in the Code of Practice of the Press Council of Ireland. Membership is voluntary, any publication can opt not to join the Press Council. I am happy to say that all national newspapers, most regional newspapers, many magazines and many online news sites are members of the Press Council. This means that the vast majority of non-broadcast journalism created in Ireland is subject to the independent scrutiny of the Press Ombudsman and the Press Council.

The critical functions of the Press Ombudsman's Office and the Press Council is to offer an independent complaints handling service. Trust is central to the well-being of any news service. An authoritative complaints handling process can contribute to this sense of trust. In the competition between television, radio, online news services and newspapers for the confidence of users the establishment and maintenance of this sense of trust is critically important. I am certain that membership of the Press Council can contribute to readers' confidence in the accuracy and objectivity of what they read in their newspapers, magazines and online news services.

Last year there four complaints upheld where I judged Principle 9 (Children) had been breached and three occasions when Principle 5 (Privacy) were judged to have been breached. I would ask all editors and reporters to be aware of their considerable responsibility to protect children's interests and to respect the privacy of individuals. Of course there is no absolute right to privacy, but privacy can only be breached if publication of something private is already on the public record or if its publication can be justified as in the public interest. I would ask all journalists to consider carefully what "in the public interest" means and to not confuse the public being interested in something as necessarily the same as in the public interest.

Traditionally the determination of what is most important in news is taken by editors. The image that comes to mind, fuelled by countless movies based on stories of news hounds' investigations, is

of the morning news editorial where after all the editors and journalists gather together and decide after earnest debate what are the most important stories of the day. Deciding what is the lead story in print and broadcast is an important task. It sends a message that what is highlighted is the most newsworthy event of the day. It sets out a newspaper's priorities and gives an indication of the value system that underlies editorial judgment.

Today, for the first time, this important function may be slipping away from editors and journalists. A piece of recent research in America found that 60% of those who access Facebook and Twitter use these sites as sources of news. The first reaction is "so what" - diversity of sources for news is inherently good and widens the range of news judgments available to the public. The problem is that there is increasing concern that the determination of what is news in social media is not taken on traditional editorial grounds, but on grounds of popularity or more specifically what the user wants. The use of algorithms (IT programmes that determine order on the basis of popularity and perhaps even compatibility with commercial advantage) in determining news values in social media news sites is a matter of real concern. Facebook's trending bar which tells its users what are the most important stories is based on an algorithm that responds to users ticking the "like" icon. The concern about this is that its users only get the news they want to hear. This has serious implications for the ideal of informed citizens making objective choices. Another concern is the ability of sites to order news stories on the basis of users' histories of what they search on the web, what their interests are – shudder to think - what they have purchased online, is a real worry for anyone who believes that prioritising news stories must not be contaminated by any commercial considerations.

Finally I would like to pay tribute to Daithi O Ceallaigh and to Áine Hyland. The council has benefitted enormously from their attention and wisdom over the last six years. I would also like to thank the other members of the Press Council who have been so supportive over the last year. Lastly, a word of thanks to Bernie Grogan, our Case Officer and to Miriam Laffan our Office Administrator. 2015 was a difficult year with a move from our offices in Westmoreland Street to temporary offices off Mespil Road and then to our new offices in Pearse Street. All the extra work involved was undertaken efficiently and cheerfully.

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