



Dáithí O’Ceallaigh
Chairman, Press Council of Ireland
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Launch of 2012 Annual Report of the Press Council of Ireland and the Office of the Press Ombudsman

At a time when the issues of press accountability and regulation have become the focus of a great deal of national and international attention, It is worth recalling that the Press Council of Ireland and the Office of the Press Ombudsman, although relatively recent entrants to the field, have in the period since their establishment achieved a well-deserved reputation among their peers.

This is in no small part due to the principles which underpin our structures. One of these is the importance of a free and vigilant press as an essential component of any democratic society. The other is that the freedom of the press must – if it is to secure acceptance and credibility with the press itself and with the wider public - be exercised within an independent system of accountability and redress.

This is achieved because the editors of all member publications have committed themselves to observe their Code of Practice, because the decisions on whether there has been a failure by any publication to observe this Code are made by an independent system which editors do not control, and because members of the public now have ready and free access to this system for the resolution of their complaints about the press.

Public confidence in this system can be gauged from the fact that in the five years since it was established, it has received over 2,000 complaints, some of them from very senior figures in Irish public and business life. In all cases where complaints were upheld, publications have published our decisions – some of them of substantial import – upholding

the reputation of individuals and organizations/or professional bodies and correcting serious errors.

The debate in Britain about press regulation has prompted considerable interest in what has been described as “the Irish model”, to which Lord Justice Leveson paid considerable attention in his report, and which is – significantly and encouragingly – partly reflected in his recommendations.

Side by side with criticism of the press has come a growing realisation that press freedom is a public good in itself, that news organizations are repositories of substantial civic value, and that the need for appropriate mechanisms of accountability and redress becomes ever more evident as the news cycle increases in speed and impact.

There are two aspects of our work during the year under review which I would like to emphasise in this context. One is our continuing and active membership of AIPCE – the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe. The AIPCE, it is worth noting, is an “Alliance”, not an “Association.” It does not adopt policy positions, or set itself up as an international watchdog. It comprises a large number of organisations, all of them voluntary, which differ substantially in composition, but which share a common purpose: the defence of press standards, and of press freedom. It also operates as an important mentor in quite a number of countries outside Europe where journalists, and the newspapers they work for, are setting up similar organisations or dealing with similar problems. Here, as in journalism itself, shared experience and insights are the true currency of best practice. The second aspect of our work refers to developments that have been taking place within the European Union itself, and our response to them. Commissioner Neelie Kroes, as you will be aware, has recently received a report from a high-level study group in relation to media accountability and regulation within the Union.

Our Council has studied this in considerable detail, and has made a submission to Commissioner Kroes as part of the consultation process she initiated after receiving this report.

Broadly speaking, while we have welcomed some aspects of this report, and particularly the evidence it provides of a growing interest in, and commitment to, press freedom and diversity at the heart of Europe, we are concerned at the idea, inherent in parts of this Report, that these very valuable objectives can best be achieved by creating new Europe-wide institutions for accountability and professional practice in journalism, with powers that might, indeed, also impact negatively, if unintentionally, on the vitality and independence of a free press.

These issues are, fundamentally, as much cultural as they are legal and political and while press councils must play their part in deepening and consolidating press freedom everywhere, especially in member states of the Union where it may be under threat or inadequately valued and respected, we should take care lest a response the problems of any one state or of a small number of states generate an inappropriate template for the union as a whole.

The response by the Press Council of Ireland to this initiative is now available on our website.

The impact of new and social media in this rapidly evolving situation cannot be ignored. Nonetheless, the fact remains that for many consumers of new media, the websites and the other forms of on-line presence of what are sometimes described as “legacy media” still command an authority that has been hard-won and must be defended and enhanced.

The fall-out from Leveson should, rather than tempting us to indulge in defensiveness and the blame game, prompt us to launch a determined fight-back on behalf of all good journalism, and the vital role it plays in all democratic societies.

That said, we also believe that, to a very great extent, best professional practice in journalism is not content-specific, and that digital journalism, whether on the websites of the established print media or on digital-only websites, should fundamentally be judged by the same criteria that have been elaborated, on the basis of hard-won experience, by the print media over many decades.

The Press Council of Ireland will continue to play its part in this endeavour, and we particularly acknowledge and welcome the support of the industry itself – at a time when its traditional business model is under extraordinary pressure – for putting its money where its mouth is, as part of the essential public service it provides.

I am grateful to Conor Brady for accepting our invitation to launch our Report here today, and I am sure that the Report itself will repay study by anyone who is interested or involved in press standards in Ireland or indeed generally.

ENDS