



**Extract from remarks by Professor John Horgan, Press Ombudsman, at the launch of the Annual Report of the Press Council of Ireland and the Office of the Press Ombudsman**

**Dublin, Monday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2013**

Although statistics can sometimes be misleading, or tell only part of the whole story, I think that one thing can be deduced with some clarity from the figures for my office contained in this Report. This is the extent to which complaints that have been successfully conciliated or mediated under the auspices of our Conciliation Officer, Bernie Grogan, continue to form a substantial percentage of all resolved complaints

This in turn suggests – and I believe it to be the case – that our system has bedded down well, and in particular that the publications that are members of our Council are continually improving their own internal systems of complaint-handling. I have the impression – and it is only an impression, I emphasise – that we now see more frequent corrections and clarifications in our publications than heretofore – corrections and clarifications which have not involved any intervention by my Office.

Even though these are not particularly numerous, and rarely enough arise from serious errors, they show that journalists and editors take their responsibilities to truth and accuracy seriously, are prepared to address serious complaints in a serious manner – whether they involve my office or not – and recognise that speedy and appropriate responses like these in fact enhance a publication's reputation rather than diminish it.

I anticipate that, in future, our conciliation service will be increasingly supplemented by mediation. Those of you who are familiar with the territory will know that whereas conciliation is, by and large, carried out remotely, mediation is a different model in which the two parties are brought together personally to see whether they can arrive at a mutually satisfactory resolution of the problem at hand by talking through it face to face.

The process, whether it succeeds or fails, is entirely confidential – I as Ombudsman am not allowed to know anything in relation to a mediation hearing, in case I need ultimately to make a decision on the complaint. It demands trust and good faith to a high degree, and, while it is not a suitable way of dealing with every complaint, sensitively and skilfully handled it can have many advantages.

Some of the historic functions of the print media have of course been cast in a different light by new technology. In an age in which there can be virtually instantaneous digital communication of events both large and small, the ‘scoop,’ while it is by no means a thing of the past, is rarer these days – and I don’t know that this is necessarily a sign that civilisation as we know it is coming to an end.

Indeed, the supersonic speed at which much information travels these days will, with luck, push us back into assessing our news media at least as much on their depth as on their speed. Journalism doesn’t only supply facts: it carries meaning, context, usefulness – as well, of course, as occasionally rumour, entertainment and gossip. And much recent criticism of the press can in fact be understood, at least partly, as an expression of the high standards that many members of the public still expect from journalism. I for one hope that they go on expecting, and demanding, these high standards from us.

In a recent speech to an American university audience, the NBC news anchor Scott Pelley put it pithily:

“If you’re first, no one will ever remember. If you’re wrong, no one will ever forget.”

It would be so much easier, of course, if everyone was agreed on what these high standards are. In journalism, while accuracy can be defined fairly readily, truth presents more of a moving target. And there are times when none of the codes and precepts by which we work can provide simple answers to complex questions. The Press Council Code of Practice does not contain rules and regulations to cover every conceivable eventuality: it is based on broad principles which have to be applied, with as much common sense as possible, to a wide variety of situation.

Editor and journalists do not need to refer to the code every time they sit down at a keyboard, and I would be very surprised- and a bit disheartened – if they did. The Code of Practice represents a certain ethical framework which, ideally, be reflected in some of the difficult decisions they have to make, on a daily or sometimes even an hourly basis. But as well as ethics there are two other “E”s which are, in my opinion, at least as significant as the “E for Ethics.”

One of them is, simply, Experience. The other is Empathy.

Experience is self-explanatory, and is often an excellent guide. Ethics – or best professional practice, as I prefer to describe it – is probably needed less often, perhaps as a tie-breaker, when some external assistance is needed to come to a decision on a knotty issue. But empathy is also important, and need not in any sense imply a mushy sort of surrender to emotion.

Take privacy, for instance. It is a huge topic. Journalists generally agree that inflicting gratuitous distress or grief on individuals is not professionally acceptable. Members of the public are also familiar with the dictum that the truth is often necessary, and sometimes hurts. The public interest also sometimes justifies what would, in other circumstances, be unjustifiable.

Between these boundaries, however there is a vast, largely uncharted landscape with few signposts, and where rules, principles or guidelines offer scant assistance. It may well be that in such circumstances empathy will be, at least for some, a useful if not an infallible guide.

To put it another way: what – a journalist might ask himself or herself privately – what would it be like if the boot was on the other foot? What would it feel like if I, the journalist, was the subject of this story rather than its director, producer and cameraman?

There are no easy answers to any of these questions – but they're not meant to be easy. That's why journalism is such a difficult, as well as such a rewarding occupation. And it's also why I personally am glad to be part of it, and why I can point to the fact that without the wholehearted cooperation of journalists and editors at every level, it would be very much less rewarding, and very much less useful to society as a whole, than I believe it is today. I am grateful for all the support and cooperation we have received in the past year, not only from journalists and editors, but of course also from the Council and its Chairman, Daithi O'Ceallaigh, and, last not least, from our dedicated staff, Bernie and Miriam.

ENDS