

# “The Chronicle Series”

Congleton Chronicle – Alsager Chronicle - Biddulph Chronicle – Sandbach Chronicle

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## Ipsos Annual report, March 2018.

### Complaints

I will start with the most relevant issue before dealing with the required sections.

- This year we have had no complaints made against us to Ipsos.
- We have not made any errors that breached the code of conduct.

Although we do not alert every complainant to the existence of the editor's code, if we received a complaint that was a possible breach of the code, we would.

As stated last year, since the creation of Ipsos we have noticed a change in the complaints we get. The more serious errors – where an angle in a story is inaccurate or misleading – have largely gone, because we ask ourselves: “How would Ipsos rule if a complaint was made”. What we are left with are genuine mistakes, and what people perceive as mistakes.

The genuine mistakes are usually silly errors, often down to fat fingers; for example, saying a charity event has raised £2,000 instead of £200. By the terms of the editor's code these would not be significant inaccuracies.

Ipsos has said that all complaints should be advised of the code of conduct but – as we have pointed out to Ipsos - this makes no sense when the issue is whether a summer fete raised £100 or £125. We simply acknowledge the complaint and run a correction.

The most serious error was one of our editor's (this writer), downloading the wrong Ofsted report for a school. The school sent in a Press release and pre-empted Ofsted uploading the latest report. The old report and the new were similar, and the school saw the funny side, so no complaint was made.

We are aware that Ipsos offers pre-publication advice, but we work on the principle of “If in doubt, leave it out” so it is hard to see under what circumstances we would consult with Ipsos prior to publication – it would have to be a story we had doubts about in the first place.

Ipsos asks how we would handle a story once a complaint had been made to it. The answer is, no differently to how we would handle a story once a complaint had been made by a reader. We answer to our readers and we do not treat reader complaints less seriously because Ipsos is not involved. As we pointed out to one complainant, a negative ruling to Ipsos would not actually produce a different outcome to what we do voluntarily.

## **Letters**

The major influence of Ipso has been to be more rigorous in fact-checking letters. Rather than withhold letters that contain factual errors we run a factcheck underneath letters. This has proved quite popular and entertaining (and it entertains us).

In last week's paper, one reader wrote to ask for a factcheck on whether "it was a sensible thing to relay our military weaknesses to the rest of the world via the newspapers".

The downside of correcting letters is being accused of being a Corbynista. Last year the accusation was of converting to Islam, an indication of where most factual errors are made.

(One letter this last week complained: "Sorry, my Corbynista friend, but as an editor, you do tend to let your left-wing leanings slip out into the open on a regular basis.... Ever likely you don't think Corbyn would make a good prime minister. He's probably too liberal for you." Another last week complained: "On pages 36 and 37 there were eight letters and of those there was my letter ... and the other six letters had all been plucked out of the editor's boiling cauldron of anti-Brexitism.")

Obviously, we print all letters, and people who complain we selectively print letters, in letters that we print, seem to miss the obvious.

We have pointed out that factually accurate letters would not be factchecked.

I now turn to more formal information.

## **The company**

We are family-owned paid-for weekly whose titles date back to 1893. In an earlier form, we go back further, and a similar business has operated from our address for at least 250 years.

We publish four titles. The Congleton Chronicle is our flagship title. We also publish the Biddulph Chronicle, Sandbach Chronicle (est 1944) and the Alsager Chronicle (est 2014).

We are a traditional paper in many ways but try to be outspoken and act as a voice for the community. We cover most council meetings and all magistrates' courts. We have a strong op-ed section, including editorial.

## **Standards**

Our minimum standard is the editor's code of conduct. We also adhere to the US Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics. Editorial staff are furnished with copies of the code and guidance, and these are regularly referred to. All our stories are verified. We speak to both sides of any story. The only times this fails is with new trainees, when they are learning on the job.

## **Rebuttals**

We do have an issue with comments of rebuttal. We always contact parties who are being criticised, but a large proportion do not reply before "deadline". Cheshire East Council probably responds about 30% of the time and sometimes complains its comments do not make the paper. "Deadline" is in quotes because the deadline is flexible: we do not sit around waiting for comments but have to make up pages throughout the week.

We have a standard footnote for stories for which we have not received a comment: "X was contacted for a comment but had not replied by the time we went to press". We do sometimes get complaints from people who comment at 3pm on a Wednesday – we aim to have the paper done by around 5pm – and whose comments do not go in. In these cases, we offer them a follow-up story the following week.

## **Checking**

All stories are checked on the page by the editor or his deputy, and any stories that do not appear fair are pulled from that page, though this is rare.

We are a small company so adherence to standards is perhaps different to larger news centres. The editor closely follows the news list for the week and will speak to a reporter if a possible risk can be seen. Stories are checked on the page, as stated above.

## **Complaints**

In theory, we have a formal complaints procedure, in practice it is rarely used. This is the fourth Ipso report we have produced and the formal complaints system, as stated in the information panel we print every week, has not been used once.

We are accessible to readers, particularly via social media, and most readers communicate via email. Most of our staff live in the area. We have amicable relationships with local groups and societies.

Complaints arrive in a variety of ways: social media, the telephone, email, being stopped in the street, via family members. Any that concern factual errors or “proper” errors are recorded and investigated.

Complaints are channelled according to their seriousness. Most are dealt with by the reporters and more serious ones by our deputy editor. He may consult the editor.

As the old saying has it: “The man who never made a mistake never made anything”; mistakes go with the job. We have no problem printing corrections and apologies. We see apologies as a way of maintaining our standing in the community, and not as something to hide. If we make a mistake, we admit to it and people appreciate this.

Complaints where we have made a factual error, or error of judgement that warrants an apology, are logged in a book. More serious emailed / Facebooked complaints are saved digitally. We investigate the causes and if appropriate, issue a clarification / apology / correction, depending on the circumstance. If the error is more than a simple mistake we will consult the staff member who is responsible, to avoid the mistake happening again.

## **Traceability**

Our website is behind a paywall, so no stories go on the web that have not been in the paper. All excerpts of hard news stories that go on social media are subbed and have been in the paper.

Some community news and police alerts will go on social media before being in the paper but have full traceability.

We are a training ground for reporters and our IT was designed with this in mind. We keep copies of all stories in the raw and subbed forms. This was to allow reporters to access copies of their original stories and subbed stories for their logbooks, but it means we have copies of everything as it goes into the system. We keep copies of all type in the original form it was emailed to us, copies after pre-subbing processing has occurred and copies of the final stories. Anything posted on social media will have its source saved.

Training: we take on trainees who leave once they have passed the NCE. We do not have a separate training system for mistakes – training is an integral part of our system.

## **Letters**

We have noted Ipso's rulings on the need for factual accuracy in letters. We print between four (a quiet week) and eight (busy) pages of opinion a week, usually five or six, and are very tolerant of outspoken views and comments. Freedom of speech is only free when it offends.

The highest number of factual corrections over the past 12 months have concerned Brexit, whereas last year it was migration and Islam.

The fact-check is only used when there are one or two factual errors – usually these errors are beliefs that are widespread to some degree, so it is important to flag them as false and not simply delete them. If there are a number of errors, we will edit them out.

## **Positioning**

All corrections go on the letters page. We have noted Ipso rulings on letters pages, but our letters pages are the best-read part of the paper, so we are in no sense “burying” corrections. We average six pages of letters every week. We run a corrections panel in the same position in the letters section, whether or not we have corrections to make. We do not use page templates or run identical lay-outs each week, so it is hard to run the corrections section on the same page each week.

If the complaint was about a front-page story (or any other prominent page lead) the correction would go there if we/the complainant felt this was necessary.

## **Summary**

We have had no complaints referred to IPSO over the year. We have made no errors that breached the editor’s code.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeremy Condliffe". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered on the page.

Jeremy Condliffe  
Chairman  
Responsible person