

“The Chronicle Series”

Congleton Chronicle – Alsager Chronicle - Biddulph Chronicle – Sandbach Chronicle

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Ipsos Annual report, April 2019.

Complaints

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

- This year we have had no formal complaints made against us to Ipsos.
- We have made one error that breached the code of conduct but was dealt with internally.

After a couple of years of minor errors, we have seen more irate complaints this year.

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

In the one case where we did breach the code, the complainant did not want matters to go any further.

The one complaint we saw sent to Ipsos was over a letter. A Remain-supporting reader wrote a letter sarcastically portraying the UK in a world where the right had been in ascendancy for some decades and adopted the kind of language that might be used in such a scenario, including the word “wog”. It was clearly a satire but someone complained. The complaint was not proceeded with.

However, it did change our behaviour when we used some old photos from 1970s as Christmas fillers. We gathered some old photos from Christmases past and, rather amazingly, two of the photos featured revellers “blacked up” for fancy dress. I printed one – it had Laurel and Hardy and a blacked up figure alongside two Star Wars characters and a punk, (labelled “punk” on his T-shirt as it was all so new) and I thought it was a historically interesting photo on the cusp of two eras. The other photo was more blatant and clearly not acceptable. I cropped the head, and explained why in a caption. We had no complaints about either.

The IPSO-standard error was over a planning issue. We (and probably all other local papers) have many housing developments on our patch and some are less than wanted; one council failed to develop a local plan and a number of developments went ahead that would not normally receive planning permission. As well as being unpopular, at some of these sites, developers have breached their planning conditions, such as over hours of work or tree protection.

We ran a story about a development and reported neighbours' complaints that it did not have planning permission. It did. This was “a significant inaccuracy” as per the code. We had also not spoken to the developer, a less clear cut issue but still an error. The developer complained and I confessed and explained what had happened, and he was happy with a grovelling apology. Reporters were told to check the status of planning applications on the council planning portal.

We seem to have had more irate complaints this year, because more information is available.

We have all court lists emailed to us and all cases go in, so men who have knocked their wives about and teenagers banned for drug-driving all get their cases reported. This is not always popular with the defendants, especially those handed domestic violence protection orders.

We had a solicitor's letter over a letter to the editor that was merely rude about a local politician, who herself as been fairly rude about others. We had two "fake" solicitors' letters, ie letters written by complainants masquerading as their own solicitors. Poor grammar and lack of legal knowledge are the giveaways.

We also had a complaint from a dog owner whose dog was savagely attacked by another. The owner of the attacking dog went to court and then his friends launched a crowd-funding appeal to cover his legal costs. The news angle was the crowd-funding appeal not the attack per se but the victim's owner was very irate that we had given the other party publicity. We never actually resolved this: [REDACTED]

We use the *London Gazette* and Companies House websites to pick up and follow company liquidations. This can provoke complaints, including threats of legal action. The stories are always accurate and benefit from privilege.

As in previous years, all our other mistakes are usually silly errors, for example, saying a charity event has raised £2,000 instead of £200. By the terms of the editors' code these would not be significant inaccuracies.

Ips0 has said that all complaints should be advised of the code of conduct but – as we have pointed out to Ips0 - 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.

We are aware that Ips0 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 Ips0 prior to publication – it would have to be a story we had doubts about in the first place.

Ips0 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 Ips0 is not involved. As we pointed out to one complainant, a negative ruling to Ips0 would not actually produce a different outcome to what we do voluntarily.

Letters

The major influence of Ips0 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). People now ask for letters to be fact-checked. It is ironic that the facts we check include the blatant lies told by certain politicians, who do not have a code of conduct to which they must adhere.

We point out that factually accurate letters would not be factchecked, although some people are disappointed not to 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 Ipsos 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 formal complaints referred to IPSO over the year. We have made one error that breached the editor's code but resolved that locally.



Jeremy Condliffe
Chairman / Editor / Responsible person