

Code Committee Chairman's annual report: 2005

The Editors' Code of Practice is a living document. It cannot stand still. It must keep pace with changing society. That is one of its strengths - and explains why today's Code is so different from that pioneered in 1991. The Code Committee's role of constant reviewing and revising the rules is vital to this, but the evolutionary process does not stop there.

Last year, for example, a major step forward was the publication of *The Editors' Codebook*, a handbook produced by the Code Committee and published by the UK trade associations: the Newspaper Publishers Association, the Newspaper Society, Periodical Publishers Association, the Scottish Daily Newspaper Society and the Scottish Newspaper Publishers Association.

Its job was to set the Code in context - to show, through PCC adjudications, how it worked in practice. The book was seen as a very positive development for self-regulation, not only in Britain, but internationally. European Union Commissioner for Culture, Ms Vivien Redding, praised it as a fine example of local solutions to local problems. The British Embassy in Beijing, which has already translated the UK Editors' Code into Mandarin for the benefit of the Chinese media, is also looking at translating the Codebook. But once again the process must move on. Our thoughts are now turning to how we can develop the Codebook theme by making it available on the Internet, where it could be updated periodically with case law developments and Code changes.

One such change during 2005 was the incorporation of the term *gender* into the categories - race, colour, religion, sexuality, etc - covered by the Discrimination clause. This was a direct response to the changed legal status of the transgender community. It had always been the Committee's - and PCC's - view that discrimination against trans individuals was covered by the existing Code. However, the Committee accepted that the legal status of trans people had been significantly altered by the introduction of the Gender Recognition Act, and that it was proper that the Code should reflect that with a specific gender reference. The Committee does not make such changes lightly: there could easily be an infinite list of protections, which ultimately would become meaningless and dilute the effect.

The Code is, after all, intended to have meaning and influence, and not become a device that diminishes freedom of expression. Nor is it intended to be the only implement in the toolbox. Editors are answerable not just to the PCC, but to their own readers, on whose trust and support they rely for survival. They know that they forfeit that trust at their peril. The Code does not, for example, cover taste and decency, which is very subjective and will vary with

different audiences. But editors still have to make their own judgments. It is significant that, while they were not prevented from doing so by the Code, no mainstream British newspapers or magazines published the Danish cartoons.

We start 2006 with two new Committee members, Adrian Faber, Editor of the *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, and David Pollington, Editor of *The Sunday Post*. They were nominated by the Newspaper Society and the Scottish Daily Newspaper Society respectively to replace Perry Austin-Clarke, of the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, and Derek Tucker, of the *Press and Journal*, Aberdeen, who will now serve as a PCC commissioner. I'd like to thank them, and the whole Committee, for their support during the year. The process of evolution could not continue without their hard work and diligence.

Les Hinton

Chairman of the Editors' Code of Practice Committee

Executive Chairman, News International