

Submission to the Editors' Code of Practice Committee by Peter Tatchell

2 March 2017

My name is Peter Tatchell and I have been campaigning for human rights, democracy, LGBT freedom and global justice since 1967. I am a member of the LGBT human rights group OutRage! and campaign for human rights both in Britain and internationally through the Peter Tatchell Foundation. In early 1987, I launched the world's first organisation dedicated to defending the human rights of people with HIV, the UK AIDS Vigil Organisation, and played a prominent role in the London chapter of the AIDS activist groups, ACT UP.

As I have previously commented, self-regulation isn't working. The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) was mostly ineffectual and a waste of time, and IPSO is no better. Despite some media improvements, too many LGBT people are still subjected to invasions of privacy, homophobic insinuations and sensationalist, inaccurate reporting. The methods of redress are weak, patchy and often dependent on a person being wealthy enough to take on media corporations. In addition to the above, I believe we should have an accurate and free press for the following reasons:

- Inaccurate reporting creates and adds to the stigma and negative stereotyping of groups who are already subject to discrimination.
- Accurate reporting can help dispel myths about diseases such as HIV, and educate people on the differences between HIV and AIDS – as well as helping public understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Disclosing a person's health condition without their permission is a gross intrusion of privacy and only serves to add to the existing stigma they face – including from healthcare professionals

One shocking incident was press reaction about Charlie Sheen's HIV status. Before he even went public about it, newspapers were running headlines like 'Hollywood was gripped with fear after a womanising A-list actor was diagnosed with HIV', stigmatising the condition and wrongly pointing to an individual's condition without their permission. This was a clear case of irresponsible journalism and a vile attempt at a headline grab.

Furthermore, one magazine was set to print an eight-page spread detailing the actor's diagnosis before he himself went public with it. There were insinuations re how many people Sheen had allegedly infected, how many sexual partners he had hid his condition from, and speculation and judgments about the actor's lifestyle. Intrusive, speculative reporting such as this was not in the public interest and serves to fuel stigma. For every celebrity who endures this, there are thousands of ordinary people who suffer the consequences of inaccurate and speculative reporting.

I was alarmed to see the Terrence Higgins Trust's 'People Living with HIV Stigma Index 2015 Survey', which looked at the impact increased stigmatisation has on individuals with HIV. The survey found that UK stigma had prevented 15% of those surveyed from seeing their GP in the last year, and 66% had avoided dental care. The survey also showed that only half of patients felt they had full control of the disclosure of their health condition.

It is with this in mind that I believe the Editor's Code should be expanded, and a new clause introduced to prevent the negative stereotyping and prejudicial coverage of groups subject to discrimination, unless this is clearly justified in the public interest. I also believe that the code should add that publications must take all reasonable steps to not exacerbate grief or distress, as well as preventing intrusion into the lives of people with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, by recognising that attacking or undermining the reputation of a diagnosed living or deceased individual causes great distress and harm.

Yours sincerely,



Peter Tatchell

Director, Peter Tatchell Foundation