



AN INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE COUNCIL

The Australian Press Council was established in 1976 and is the principal body that issues and monitors standards of good practice for Australian newspapers, magazines and their associated websites. It is also the principal body that considers complaints about coverage of news or comment across this range of publications.

Role

The Council's three main areas of work involve:

- **developing standards** that constitute good media practice and are applied by the Council when considering complaints;
- **responding to complaints** from the public about material in Australian newspapers, magazines and associated digital outlets that relates to news or comment;
- **issuing statements** on policy matters within its areas of interest, including through submissions to parliamentary committees, commissions and other public bodies.

Membership

The Council has 22 members, comprising:

- **the independent Chair and eight public members**, who have no affiliations with a media organisation;
- **nine nominees of media organisations**, including all the major publishers of newspapers and magazines as well as the principal union for employees in the media industry;
- **four independent journalist members**, who are not employed by a media organisation.

The current Chair of the Council is Professor Julian Disney AO, who is Professor of Law and Director of the Social Justice Project at the University of New South Wales.

Resources

The Council's core funding is provided by the "constituent bodies", which comprise News Limited, Fairfax Media, Seven West Media, ACP and all other major newspaper and magazine publishers in Australia. The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, which represents journalists and other workers in the media, is also a constituent body. The Myer Foundation has provided additional project funding, as have several of the constituent bodies.

The Council has a secretariat based in Sydney. Council meetings are usually held there but the Complaints Committee often meets in other cities.



Some of the 750 publications subject to the Council's jurisdiction

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WHAT WE DO

OVERVIEW

The Council pursues its goals by:

- considering complaints and concerns about material in newspapers, magazines and journals, published either in print or on the Internet;
- encouraging and supporting initiatives to address the causes for readers' complaints and concerns;
- keeping under review, and where appropriate, challenging developments which may adversely affect dissemination of information of public interest and thus threaten the public's right to know;
- making representations to governments, public inquiries and other forums on matters concerning freedom of speech and access to information;
- undertaking research and consultation about public policy affecting freedom of speech, and promoting public awareness of such issues;
- promoting an understanding of the workings of the Council and its Standards of Practice within the print media and the broader community, through forums and consultations; and encouraging feedback for Council's consideration.

Standards

The Council's Standards of Practice for the print media are contained in its Statements of Principles, Specific Standards and Advisory Guidelines. The Standards of Practice are applied by the Council when considering complaints and are used as the basis for statements by Council representatives about good media practice, whether addressing practitioners within the industry or the broader community.

The Standards of Practice are developed after consultation with the media industry and members of the broader community. They are subject to ongoing review in the light of experience, research and consultation. The Council also undertakes research and convenes conferences and seminars on aspects of media standards.

Complaints

The Council's mandate to consider complaints extends to all print publications and related digital outlets, such as websites, of its constituent bodies. The print publications collectively account for about 98% of all print media sales in Australia.

The Council currently receives more than 450 complaints each year. About three-quarters of the ones that are fully pursued by the complainant result in a correction, apology or some other form of action being taken. Where the complaint cannot be resolved without a formal adjudication, the relevant publisher is required to publish the adjudication promptly and with due prominence.

Policy

The Council issues statements on policy matters within its areas of interest, including through submissions to parliamentary committees, commissions and other public bodies. It also undertakes research and convenes or participates in conferences and seminars on policy issues. In recent years, the Council has focused on issues such as freedom of information, freedom of expression, privacy and the protection of whistleblowers.

MAKING A COMPLAINT

What can be complained about?

- **Types of material:** Complaints may relate to news reports, articles, editorials, letters, cartoons, images and other published material. However, the Council does not consider complaints about advertising material, except where the complaint is that the material is not clearly identifiable as advertising. Complaints are treated as being against the publication, not any individual journalist or editor.
- **Types of publications:** The Council considers complaints about material published in Australian newspapers and magazines that are produced regularly and are available to the general public (not, for example, only to members of a particular organisation). It also considers complaints about the websites of these newspapers and magazines.
- **Legal action:** The Council's complaints process is provided as an alternative to legal proceedings, not in addition to them. If legal proceedings have commenced, the matter cannot be dealt with.

Who can complain?

Any person may lodge a complaint, irrespective of whether they are identified in the material or are directly affected by it. However, where the complaint relates to a perceived breach of privacy the Council usually will not proceed without the consent of the person or group whose privacy was directly affected.

Where a number of complaints are received about the same material, the Council may decide to accept one complainant as representative of the others. In this situation, all complainants will be notified of this course of action and of the final outcome.

When should a complaint be made?

A person can complain to the Council without having previously raised the matter with the publication. In most cases, however, the Council will then ask the complainant to raise it with the journalist, editor or whoever else at the publication is responsible for handling complaints.

Complaints to the Council must usually be made within sixty days of the day on which the relevant material was initially published or posted to a website. Exceptions may be made in special circumstances, such as where it was reasonable for the material not to have been noticed earlier by the complainant or there were good grounds (such as pending court proceedings) for delaying submission of a complaint.

How should a complaint be made?

Complaints should be made by completing the Council's Complaint Form (available online or by phoning the office for a copy) and submitting it to the Council either online or by email, fax, or post. As the Council's complaints process is a relatively informal alternative to legal proceedings, complaints should be made and pursued by complainants themselves, or their family or friends. Legal representation is permitted only in exceptional circumstances.

Press Council adjudication



Press Council adjudications are printed in prominent locations within publications.

STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

The Council's Standards of Practice comprise three elements: binding Statements of Principles, binding Specific Standards and non-binding Advisory Guidelines.

Statements of Principles

The Council has a General Statement of Principles and a Statement of Privacy Principles. They deal with the following ethical issues.

General:

1. Accurate, fair and balanced reporting
2. Correction of inaccuracy
3. Publishing responses
4. Respect for privacy and sensibilities
5. Honest and fair investigation; preservation of confidences
6. Transparent and fair presentation
7. Discretion and causing offence
8. Gratuitous emphasis on characteristics
9. Publication of Council adjudication

Privacy:

1. Collection of personal information
2. Use and disclosure of personal information
3. Quality of personal information
4. Security of personal information
5. Anonymity of sources
6. Correction, fairness and balance
7. Sensitive personal information

Specific Standards

The Council has begun issuing Specific Standards that apply the Principles in specific contexts.

1. Reporting of suicide (the first Standard, issued in August 2011)
2. Access to patients in hospitals and similar institutions (due for release October 2011)

Advisory Guidelines

The Council has also issued a number of Advisory Guidelines. They cover topics such as:

- Advertorials
- Alteration of images
- Ambit claims
- Asylum Seekers
- Bias accusations
- Chequebook journalism
- Election reporting
- Health and medical matters
- Letters to the editor
- Opinion polls
- "Race" reporting
- Recalls of goods
- Religious terms
- Selection of stories
- Suppression of names

The Standards Project

The Council commenced a three-year Standards Project in July 2011 to strengthen its Standards of Practice and to monitor the extent to which they were being complied with.

The Project involves general consultations about standards of practice in the print media and then detailed consideration of specific priority areas. An Independent Advisory Panel will help the Project to identify key issues and responses.