

## The Way Ahead

### **Extract from the Chair's Foreword to the 2009-10 Annual Report of the Council**

The Council has decided to commence a major review of its standards and related material. This will include drawing on its existing statement of general principles to expand the range of specific situations for which it publishes guidelines or other advice. It will also draw on existing standards from other media regulators and publishers' internal codes, and will canvass the views of consumers. Practical examples, whether real or hypothetical, will accompany the standards in order to enhance their relevance and impact.

The Council is also beginning to strengthen dissemination of its standards. This will include seeking to embed them in internal materials which publishers instruct their staff to consult. Wider promotion of standards through interviews with print and electronic media will be actively sought, especially when particular journalistic practices are attracting public debate. Improvements in the prominence given to the Council's published adjudications are being implemented. Consideration is also being given to broader publication of the essence of key adjudications and of key outcomes from the many complaints to the Council which are resolved satisfactorily without a formal adjudication.

An essential part of the Council's responsibilities is to assess the practical effectiveness of its standards. While consideration of individual complaints is valuable in this regard, the Council has previously undertaken or commissioned a number of systemic reviews of media coverage of particular issues or events. The main aim has been to assess the adequacy or otherwise of the Council's standards and of compliance with them. This approach will continue to be a very important aspect of the Council's work and will be complemented by convening regular Round Table discussions involving editors and community leaders.

### **Responding to the Internet**

The advent of the Internet and related technologies is changing the role of the print media with ever-increasing speed. Many newspapers are placing greater emphasis on their on-line publications and on making these publications readily available through mobile devices such as "smartphones" and "tablets". Publishers are tending to change on-line content more frequently, to include audio or video material, and to incorporate or provide links to material from external sources including radio or TV. Many newspaper publishers are, in effect, becoming multi-media enterprises.

These developments can enable a greater range of information and opinion to be accessed and disseminated more widely, quickly and economically. On the other hand, the greater opportunities and pressures to publish rapidly can adversely affect the accuracy and quality of content. Print publishers are now subject to intense competition from on-line sources which do not incur printing or distribution costs and, in many cases, draw mainly on material generated by others rather than employ their own journalists. Some of these sources are less constrained by principles of good journalism, especially if they are effectively shielded from identification and sanction.

The Council's jurisdiction includes both the print and on-line publications of its members. It is increasingly receiving complaints about on-line content which raise difficult issues about the extent to which existing standards and processes for print

need to be adjusted or supplemented for on-line content. The assertion by many editors that the same standards should apply to print and Internet does not appear to be appropriate or realistic in all circumstances. Certainly it is not always being applied in practice, even by some who espouse it.

At present, only one of the Council members publishes solely on-line. The Council will continue to invite other on-line publishers to become members and thus subject to its regulation. This reflects a desire to avoid unnecessary duplication, inconsistency or gaps between the regulatory processes which apply to print and on-line publications in the area of news and current affairs. Consideration will also need to be given to the possibility of encouraging membership by serious bloggers who focus on the same area.

A related issue is whether the Council should encourage its publisher members to promote their membership prominently on their websites as well as in their other publications. This approach could help to indicate, and reinforce, their commitment to good standards of journalism and their respect for consumer concerns. It might help, in a modest way, to combat an Internet-induced "race to the bottom" which many experienced editors and journalists believe is threatening the standards and eventual viability of high-quality journalism.

These issues will not be easy to resolve in principle or practice. The rapidly growing convergence across media platforms should be accompanied by an appropriate degree of convergence between the standards and processes of the Council and other media regulators. The goal should be convergence, not uniformity; some differences and flexibility are essential to reflect differing circumstances and responsibilities. But failure to promote convergence may increase the risk of any formal changes in the ambits of respective regulators being unduly coercive, involuntary or disruptive.