

Murray Foote, Daily Record Editor, IPSO Roadshow Glasgow

Hi, I'm Murray and I have been Daily Record editor for three and a half years.

That does sound a bit like I'm addressing Alcoholics Anonymous – and looking around at some familiar faces in this room, perhaps I am.

In some quarters, being a tabloid journalist is a dirty secret that should NOT be made public. Some of the public attitudes to my profession are justified.

Many of them are entirely self-inflicted by an industry that has too often strayed off the path of honesty and integrity.

And it is why I'm a big advocate of IPSO.

I'm hugely proud to be Record Editor.

I think of myself as the title's guardian – for as long as my bosses keep signing the pay cheques.

I'm something of a Daily Record lifer.

My starting date at the Record almost exactly coincided with the title's circulation peak, when we were selling 800,000 copies a day in a country of five million people.

My arrival, however, heralded the start of the circulation decline and it's been steadily downhill ever since.

All told, I have been at the Record – save a couple of very brief spells at other newspapers – for more than a quarter of a century. I know, it's hard to believe for a man with this youthful complexion and luxuriant mop of thick hair.

And yes, I HAVE just breached the Editor's Code under clause 1. Accuracy.

Clearly, I'm no spring chicken. But with experience comes, hopefully, knowledge.

And I have first-hand experience of how working newspaper journalists have changed their attitude towards our industry watchdogs over the years.

And I can tell you categorically that the editor's code of conduct has never been more integral to our working lives every day, across every newsroom.

Twenty or so years ago, there was an ambivalence towards the editor's code. That is partly explained by the fact that the PCC was almost invisible to the majority of the population.

As recently as 2006, the PCC received just slightly more than 3000 complaints.

That's only 3000 complaints in an entire year made against a vast array of national and local newspapers across Britain.

This created an atmosphere in which the accepted view became: "We can play fast and loose with the editor's code because no one complains anyway."

Then, of course, came the phone hacking scandal, and everything changed.

And quite rightly. It had to.

It was a shameful period for this industry and one that could not be tolerated.

On a side issue, I am unaware of any incidences of phone hacking in Scotland.

Perhaps the biggest reason why journalists north of the border were not involved is this: We didn't know HOW to hack a phone.

I'm not saying that – had we known – we WOULD or WOULD NOT have done so.

Merely that the situation didn't arise.

Anyhoo .. I don't think it is possible to overstate the sea change that happened in newsrooms in the wake of the hacking scandal and the Leveson inquiry.

IPSO is now hard-baked into our working lives. When we discuss developing stories at editorial conference my first thought is almost always: Is this story IPSO compliant.

That question often takes precedence over contempt of court and defamation considerations, although both are still crucial.

Strict observance of the code is a clause in every Trinity Mirror journalist's contract of employment.

Flagrant disregard of the code will end in sackings. Thankfully, it has not yet happened.

Of course, newspapers do make mistakes. Quite frankly, it's surprising we don't make more. But hand on heart, it is never deliberate.

In years gone by, a trick of the trade for reporters was knowing which question NOT to ask. Shrewd reporters would have an inkling that the story they were working on was perhaps not all they thought.

But instead of having the story collapse because they didn't ask the question that would elicit the wrong answer, they simply did not ask the killer question.

That no longer applies. The ramifications of getting stories wrong are too great for both the individual or the title for which they work.

It is drummed into all staff that it is better to NOT publish than publish inaccurately.

When a story tip-off comes into the office, and it starts ringing alarm bells because there is a possibility that it may breach one or more clauses of the code, we now have minuted meetings where these possibilities are discussed.

On many occasions we conclude at the outset that some stories will never be publishable and they are shelved there and then.

On other occasions after dedicating many working hours, stories are progressed to a point when, again, they become so problematic that they are shelved.

And occasionally we publish a story that has been a bitch to get published but deserves to be told and are worth the blood sweat and tears.

If we lose an IPSO adjudication – and we have lost our share – I am answerable to the board of Trinity Mirror. In such cases I have to demonstrate that, as an editorial team, we have taken adequate remedial measures to avoid repeating such breaches.

It is time consuming but it is also essential.

We know that self-regulation is drinking in the last chance saloon.

If we cannot make IPSO work then this industry will be subject to statutory regulation.

Quite possibly we will be at the mercy of parties with a vested interest in curbing press freedoms for their own ends.

As both a journalist and a citizen of the world, those circumstances fill me with dread.

Freedom of expression is a hard won right that we dare not relinquish. We must make this work.

So, does that mean everything in the IPSO garden is rosy?

Well, to quote my dear old granny: Is it buggery.

There have been IPSO rulings against us where we have found the findings against us ranging from unduly harsh to downright unfair.

On one occasion, IPSO found against us by holding us to a more exacting standard than Scots Law demands of us.

But, as IPSO point out, the code of conduct was drawn up by newspaper Editors
It is regularly reviewed by newspaper editors

And IPSO are simply interpreting our own code.

And that's true ... but I do reserve the right to moan about it.

Another issue is the overhead of time.

There have been days when I have had more staff dedicated to answering complaints about previously published stories than have been working on new stories for the next day's paper.

In an industry where journalists are becoming increasingly thin on the ground, the workload can be burdensome.

There are some complaints that I believe are completely spurious yet IPSO insist that we jump through hoops to prove we are correct.

I accept there are good reasons for this, primarily IPSO's wish to be seen to deal with all complaints equitably rather than being accused of sweeping some under the carpet.

And that was one of the allegations regularly levelled at the PCC by its critics.

But often the time our staff spend contesting complaints makes life difficult.

And I'm one of the lucky ones. I have a number of reporters to call on on any given day.

Spare a thought for the local newspaper editor who has two reporters to fill his title and one of them is spending a large chunk of the working week dealing with a complaint about a story published weeks previously

And that is just the complaints that have actually reached IPSO.

Internally, we deal with multiple complaints every single day. Some simple, some complex.

As well as the Daily Record and Sunday Mail, we publish the Paisley Daily Express, a business magazine, 17 weekly newspapers across Scotland and a myriad of associated websites. Our business generates a huge amount of content that is pumped out across platforms and the complaints can come thick and fast.

I'll give you just one example by way of illustration.

Two weeks ago, one of our local papers received an email complaint from an irate mother complaining that we had published a picture of her daughter on her first day of school without permission. She wanted to know where we sourced the picture and who gave permission to publish.

It was a serious complaint. We were possibly looking at a clear breach of the editor's code.

An investigation was launched and what did we find?

The mother, using the same email address as she had used to complain, had sent us the picture asking that her local newspaper publish a picture of her darling daughter.

There was, however, one key difference between the two emails: The first one had been sent at 11pm on a Friday night.

Now while this complaint was dismissed relatively quickly, we get dozens of similar things every week and they all need dealt with and they all take time.

And while it can be a proper pain in the backside, I believe it is absolutely essential.

The newspaper industry needs a robust watchdog and I believe IPSO is such an animal.

It might not be perfect but it is ours.

And the alternative really does not bear thinking about.