

Newspaper corrections faster and more prominent under IPSO

New research on trends in newspaper complaints handling shows that corrections and clarifications by IPSO member publications have improved since IPSO's launch in 2014, with the time taken to correct inaccuracies falling from a median of six days to three (2011 compared to 2016). Corrections have become more prominent at national newspaper titles with the introduction of designated corrections columns on page two and on specified 'letters' pages.

Other key findings include:

- In 2011, less than half of the 17 publications sampled had established corrections columns; by 2016, 14 (including all national newspapers) had them.
- Post-IPSO, in publications where the corrections column regularly appears on page two, over 95% of corrections were published on that page.
- 90% of corrections published in a publication with a corrections column on page two were on a more prominent page than the original article.
- All newspapers in the research sample now publish information for members of the public on how to make a complaint as required by IPSO.
- Qualitative analysis of interviews with newspaper compliance staff suggests improved complaints handling under IPSO.

Why the research was undertaken

IPSO commissioned the research, which was carried out by the Centre for Media Freedom at the University of Sheffield¹, to inform its work on editorial standards. Robust and efficient complaints handling processes are one of the ways IPSO members can distinguish their content as professionally produced and regulated. Proper complaints-handling by publishers is essential for public accountability; enabling publishers to provide redress for any failures where they occur and continually improve editorial standards.

How the research was carried out

The research included quantitative analysis of newspaper corrections from a sample of 17 national, local and Sunday newspapers in 2011 and 2016, looking at their quality, speed and prominence. It analysed all corrections published in 2011² and 2016 included in the sample publications, reviewing 281 corrections published in 2011 and 564 corrections published in 2016.³

¹ Dagoula, C., Harrison, J., and Katsirea, I. (2019) *IPSO Research on Editorial Standards and Complaints Handling*. Sheffield: Centre for Media Freedom. Available at

² IPSO was established in September 2014. Prior to IPSO the majority of UK newspapers were regulated by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) under a voluntary arrangement.

³ Since 2016, there have been a number of changes in the industry. In 2018 Reach PLC acquired Northern and Shell (The Daily Express, The Daily Star) and the Express and Star titles, bringing together and standardising complaints handling and procedures across the titles.

These quantitative findings were supplemented with qualitative methods, in the form of interviews with newspaper compliance staff, which focused on changes in attitudes to and resourcing for, complaints handling at publishers of varying sizes.

Key research findings

Significant improvements in the prominence of national newspaper corrections

In 2016, 82% of newspaper corrections columns either appeared regularly on page two or on the letters page (The Times, Daily Star and Daily Express). Where a corrections column regularly appears on page two, over 95% of corrections published in 2016 were published on that page.

Of publications with page two corrections columns, 90% of all corrections printed in 2016 appeared further forward than the original article. Even including publications with corrections appearing on the letters page, more than half (57%) of corrections in 2016 appeared further forward than the original article.

The positioning of corrections in newspapers is important. The prominence of the correction makes clear to readers the nature, gravity and significance of a correction. Placing corrections in a prominent place improves accountability and openness by highlighting errors and making readers aware of the correct information. It also provides readers with accurate information in the public discourse.

Corrections columns improve accountability

As well as correcting and clarifying, a corrections column provides information about a newspaper's complaints process and approach to editorial standards, as well as a mechanism for making newspapers accountable to their readers resulting in improved transparency in complaints handling.

The research team identified that in 2011, less than half of the 17 publications sampled had a regular corrections column and corrections were published in a more scattered fashion across the newspapers. Post-IPSO, this has risen to all national newspapers and several local newspapers, which have all established corrections columns and embedded them in the complaints handling processes of paper.

Positioning the column on the same page builds familiarity for reader and raises awareness of corrections. This increase in corrections columns speaks to an increased professionalisation of, and openness in, complaints handling and accountability.

Corrections made faster

The Editors' Code requires that significant inaccuracies are corrected promptly. Under IPSO, newspapers are publishing corrections more quickly: an average (median) of three days in 2016 compared to six days in 2011.

Prompt correction of inaccuracies ensures that readers are aware of the correct position in a timely fashion, whilst the issue is still in the public consciousness and whilst readers will still be aware of the original content.

High quality of corrections

The Editors' Code requires that corrections to significant inaccuracies or misleading claims are published promptly and with due prominence. IPSO's Complaints Committee has determined

that an adequate correction should identify any inaccuracy or misleading information and provide corrective information so that readers can be informed of the correct position.

The research identified improvements in the quality and clarity of newspaper corrections and also identified occasions on which publications had gone beyond those requirements, although the researchers identified occasional instances of what they considered to be shortcomings in this area.

Improved complaints handling

Qualitative analysis of interviews with newspaper compliance staff suggests a strong shift to a more professionalised complaints-handling approach under IPSO. Many newspapers have formalised their complaints processes and expanded their complaints handling teams. These processes have come about as publishers have worked to make their complaints handling more systematic.

“I like the fact that we’ve now got a structured complaint process...once IPSO becomes involved...we have a time frame to try and resolve it. I think it is an effective process.”

In the qualitative analysis, many of the interviews focused on an increase in editorial standards training being offered. The interviews also backed up the findings about speed and prominence of corrections.

“Since IPSO arrived we do take the presentation of corrections very seriously.”

“We take the view that sometimes we will need to give, under due prominence, the correction a lot more prominence than the original article.”

Next steps

Analysing corrections can be a difficult area from which to draw conclusions but the identified improvements in complaints handling, improved prominence and speed of corrections since the establishment of IPSO are pleasing. The research has enabled IPSO to identify areas where standards in complaints handling could be improved further still:

- IPSO will produce guidance for editors and journalists on how to publish effective corrections based on learning from the research. IPSO will also encourage publishers to incorporate the IPSO mark into their established corrections columns, to enhance their demonstration of professionally produced, externally regulated content.
- IPSO will use this research as a benchmark to continue the monitoring of standards of complaints handling, and to support wider media literacy work around publisher accountability and helping the public to easily identify professionally produced products and content.
- The qualitative interviews for this research explored how publications believe the complaints process has changed since IPSO’s establishment. IPSO will give further consideration to future projects exploring readers’/citizen perspectives of this.

IPSO also wants to explore in more detail how prominence and speed of correction should work in the world of digital publishing. This will include engaging with the public as well as publishers to understand expectations and approaches. You can read the full research report at <https://www.ipso.co.uk/monitoring/research/>

