

IPSO Response: Examining trends in editorial standards in coverage of transgender issues

New research commissioned by press regulator IPSO has identified significant changes in the reporting of transgender issues over the last decade. These include:

- a dramatic rise in the number of articles published
- marked changes in subjects and topics addressed, sometimes generating wide and fierce debate
- measurable evolution in terminology, with improvements particularly seen in use of language
- varying perceptions on broader editorial standards issues.

The research was conducted by Mediatique and used the Editors' Code as a lens to examine trends and developments in editorial standards.¹ It pointed to a variety of factors which may influence changes in editorial standards, including the impact of notable news events; changes in societal attitudes; engagement by groups and organisations; and regulatory guidelines designed to support reporting.

Why the research undertaken

Some of the most contentious and sensitive issues handled by IPSO relate to the reporting of transgender matters. Coverage generates wide and sometimes ferocious debate, raising complex questions around balancing the public interest in reporting freely on important societal issues with the potential impact on vulnerable individuals.

This research is intended to add to the evidence base for discussions of media coverage in this area; to engage with some of the challenges of reporting on this topic; and to improve understanding of ways to contribute to improving editorial standards.

How the research was carried out

The research aimed to identify any changes in editorial standards in the reporting of transgender matters. To do this, the researchers:

- Conducted a quantitative analysis of over 12,000 articles in selected national and regional newspapers and magazines between January 2010 and May 2019, looking at trends in subject matter covered and terminology used.
- Examined 11 detailed case studies spanning prominent subjects/events, analysing them to identify issues which potentially aligned with the Editors' Code.²
- Carried out 43 in-depth interviews with editors, publishers, journalists, and groups and individuals interested in reporting in this area from all perspectives.³

¹ The researchers were not tasked with making judgements on whether the Editors' Code was engaged, or whether there were any breaches of the Code; it was used as a lens to identify potential issues.

² The researchers did not make any judgments on whether the Code had been engaged or breached.

³ See full research report for a list of participants.

Key findings

There was a significant increase in the number of articles discussing transgender matters between January 2010 and May 2019

- The number of articles increased during the analysis period, with the largest increase in the past five years. Although it is not possible to directly attribute this to any one factor, in recent years there has been a rise in stories relating to “policy” as well as “personalities”.
- The proportion of transgender-related stories in the tabloid press has increased. At the start of the analysis period, most stories were published in the broadsheets. Now, half of all stories feature in tabloid papers.

There has been a marked change in the nature of coverage

The type, tone and focus of coverage has developed over the analysis period and can be broadly categorised into three sequential phases (recognising some overlap).

1. “Disrespectful” (mostly seen at the beginning of the analysis period). Coverage included terms and references now considered pejorative; tone could be considered mocking.
2. “Human interest” (mostly seen in the middle of the analysis period). Stories concerning transgender celebrities/notable people (e.g. Caitlyn Jenner, Chelsea Manning) which isolate specific examples of challenges faced by transgender individuals. Tone predominantly supportive or neutral.
3. “Policy and legislation” (mostly seen at the end of the analysis period). Government proposals (like the Gender Recognition Act, interventions for transgender children etc.) have shifted coverage towards debating complex questions relating to transgender matters in policy and legislation and potential impacts on wider society. Increase in questioning tone of coverage.

There has been a measurable evolution in terminology

- There have been improvements in use of terminology and language through the analysis period, which has coincided with changes in the nature of coverage and increased public understanding.
- In most articles featuring a transgender individual, that individual’s preferred pronouns are now used throughout.
- Concerns remain from some research interviewees around the use of language which they believe readers will find hard to grasp, such as preferred plural pronouns and non-binary gender identities, and there are particular topics where the use of pronouns can be contested by some (e.g. reporting of crimes).

Some concerns around broader editorial issues

The Editors’ Code contains a number of clauses which could be relevant to the reporting of transgender issues: Accuracy, Privacy, Harassment, Children, Hospitals and Discrimination. IPSO’s guidance for editors and journalists is designed to demonstrate how the Code applies in such reporting.

The research identified perceptions amongst some interview participants of increased hostility towards transgender individuals as issues are discussed and debated, which they viewed as

potentially indicative of tangibly worsening standards. Other interviewees noted concerns around potential infringement on freedom of expression and challenges around making sure the issues were written about clearly and understandably.

This divergence in views speaks to the complexities and challenges of reporting on these issues and is perhaps the reason why no single way of influencing change was identified as most effective; rather, a number of factors can converge to make a collective impact.

Ways of impacting editorial standards

One of the aims of the research was to identify the drivers of change for improvement in editorial standards in order to offer insights to IPSO and other interested groups on the most effective ways to impact reporting standards in specific subject areas. The research demonstrates several things which have made possible impacts on editorial standards in relation to reporting transgender matters:

- Notable news events (for example reporting around the accident involving Dr Kate Stone and the death of Lucy Meadows) provided “crunch points” for examining the impact reporting can have, leading to more nuanced coverage.
- Changing societal attitudes as issues come to the fore and public understanding increases can affect what is considered acceptable coverage – this has certainly been the case as the news agenda relating to transgender issues evolved during the analysis period.
- The work of groups and organisations interested in standards was found by many to be valuable, particularly when it brought together those with experience of the issues with those who didn’t have lived experience. Interactions between transgender people and media professionals; respectful engagement on social media; and the direct engagement of specific individuals around reporting of their story were noted by many research respondents to be impactful.
- Response to IPSO’s guidelines on reporting around transgender issues was mixed; some felt they had made little difference whereas others found them useful both in terms of demonstrating how the Code should apply and as a benchmark for organisations around wider engagement with the press.

Next steps

In response to the research, IPSO will:

- Review the IPSO transgender guidance
- Share insights from research with individuals and organisations interested in raising editorial standards in this area
- Continue to publish our monitoring of complaints made under Clause 12, including those relating to transgender matters
- Consider ways that IPSO can act as convenor – bringing people together to talk about reporting on complex or challenging editorial issues.

The full report

Read the full report here at <https://www.ipso.co.uk/monitoring/research/>