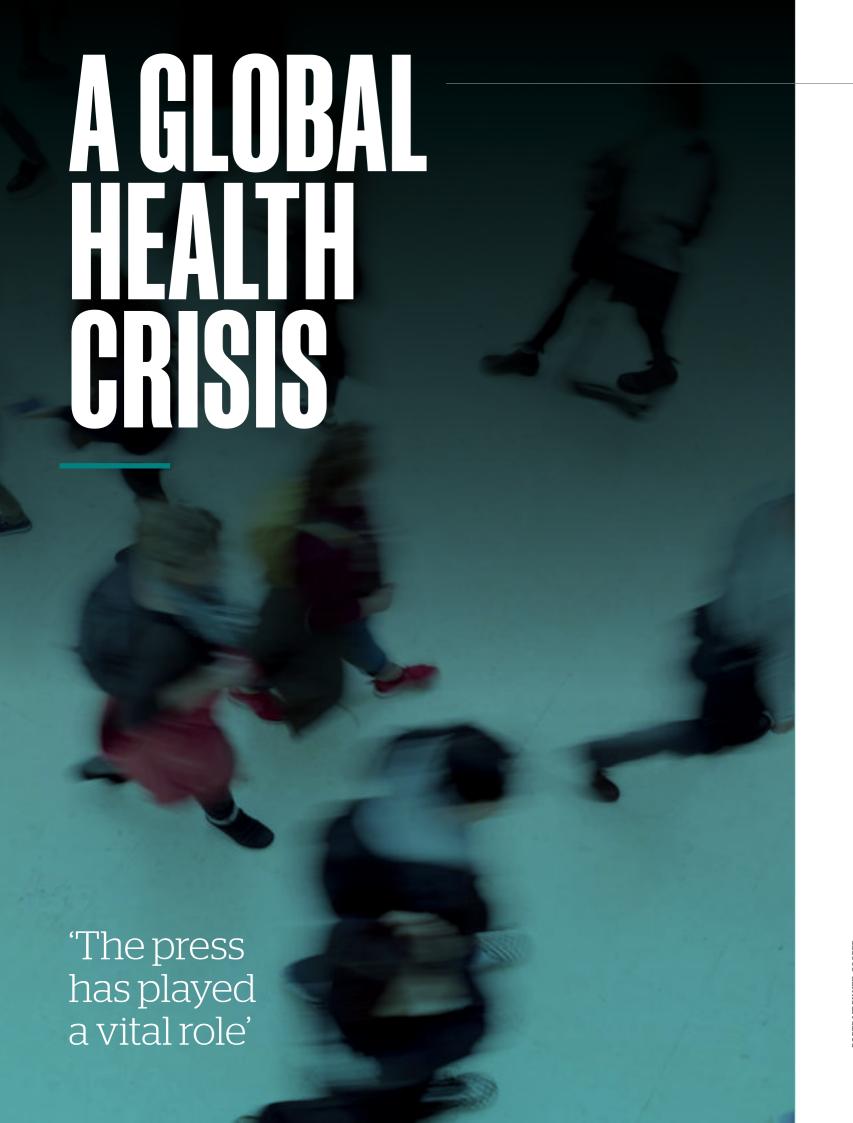
How the British press is reporting on the pandemic







IPSO Chair Lord Faulks QC

### View from the Chair

THE PRESS has played a vital role during the Covid-19 pandemic, informing the public of critical public health information and scrutinising the response to this unprecedented global health crisis. It is clearer now than ever how essential it is for the public to be able to turn to trusted, accountable sources of news at such testing moments.

This report examines how IPSO, as the independent regulator of most of the UK's newspapers and magazines, saw the pandemic unfolding, and how it responded to the crisis.

A core part of IPSO's work – and source of evidence for this report – is the thousands of complaints it receives each year about instances in which the Editors' Code of Practice may have been broken. By its nature, looking at complaints tends to focus only on where things have gone wrong. Yet it is notable that of over 30,000 complaints IPSO received in 2020, only about 10% were about Covid. This

related to 1,270 articles: a small proportion of our complaints. This represents a vanishingly small slice of the coverage that Covid attracted throughout the UK press, from the time that the scale of the story started to emerge in February 2020 – including countless reports, graphs, "explainers", comments and investigations.

I have no doubt that journalism published by IPSOregulated titles over the last 18 months saved lives, in the UK and around the world. But this pandemic is not over yet. By publishing this report now, we hope that it will inform editorial decision-making over the next period of the pandemic and beyond, as well as highlighting the important role that regulation plays in ensuring that a quality, accountable press will be here when it is needed - which, indeed, is always.

Soward Fall



IPSO CEO Charlotte Dewar

### **Introduction from the CEO**

THIS REPORT looks primarily at the period March 2020 to April 2021, encompassing the run-up to the first national lockdown as the scale of the challenge slowly dawned on the country and the world, through to the beginning of the easing of lockdown measures after the third lockdown.

It sets out how IPSO responded to the pandemic, including the steps it took to disseminate information about editorial standards issues as they arose and privacy notices it issued on behalf of people affected by the pandemic.

Drawing on information from regulated publishers' annual compliance statements for 2020, it provides insight into how Covid impacted publishers' operations and how they responded.

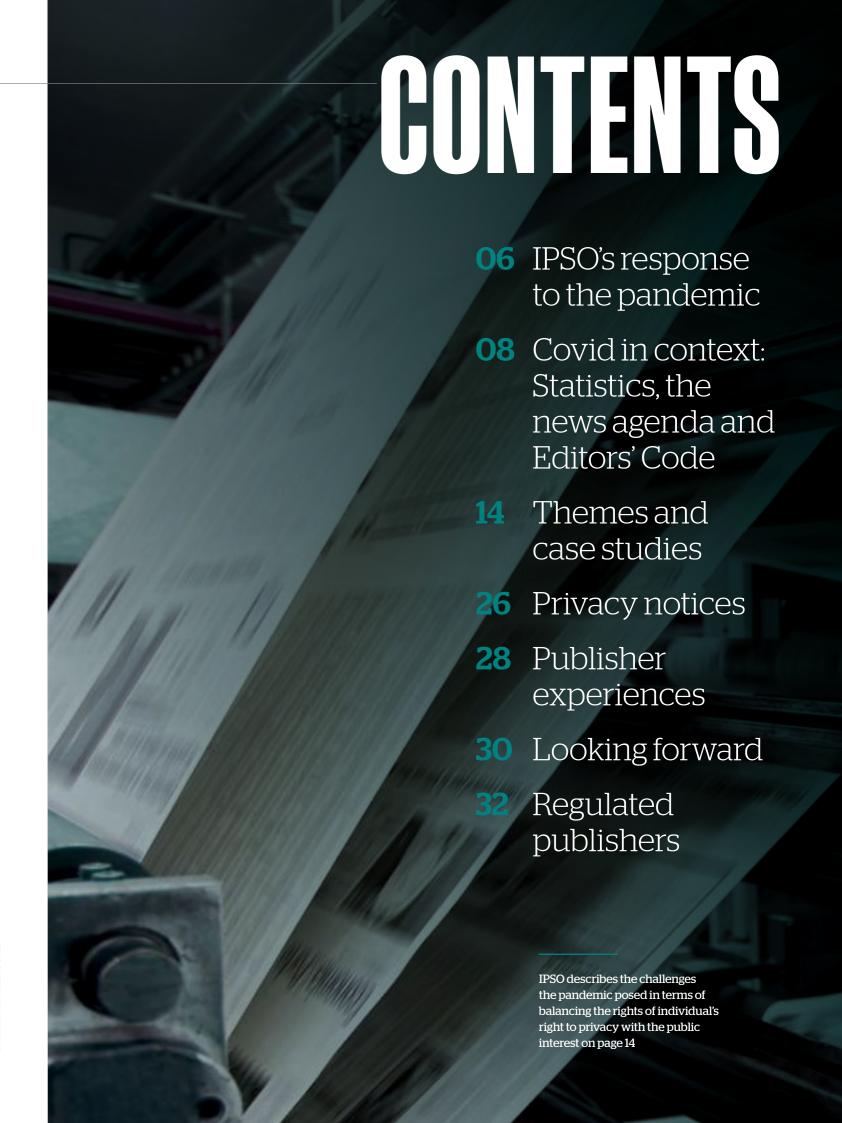
It draws out some of the key dilemmas we could see that editors and journalists were grappling with, and the approach we took to working through those questions. Among the themes it highlights are the use of photography, coverage of science and research, and concerns about possible discrimination, using case studies to highlight key decisions.

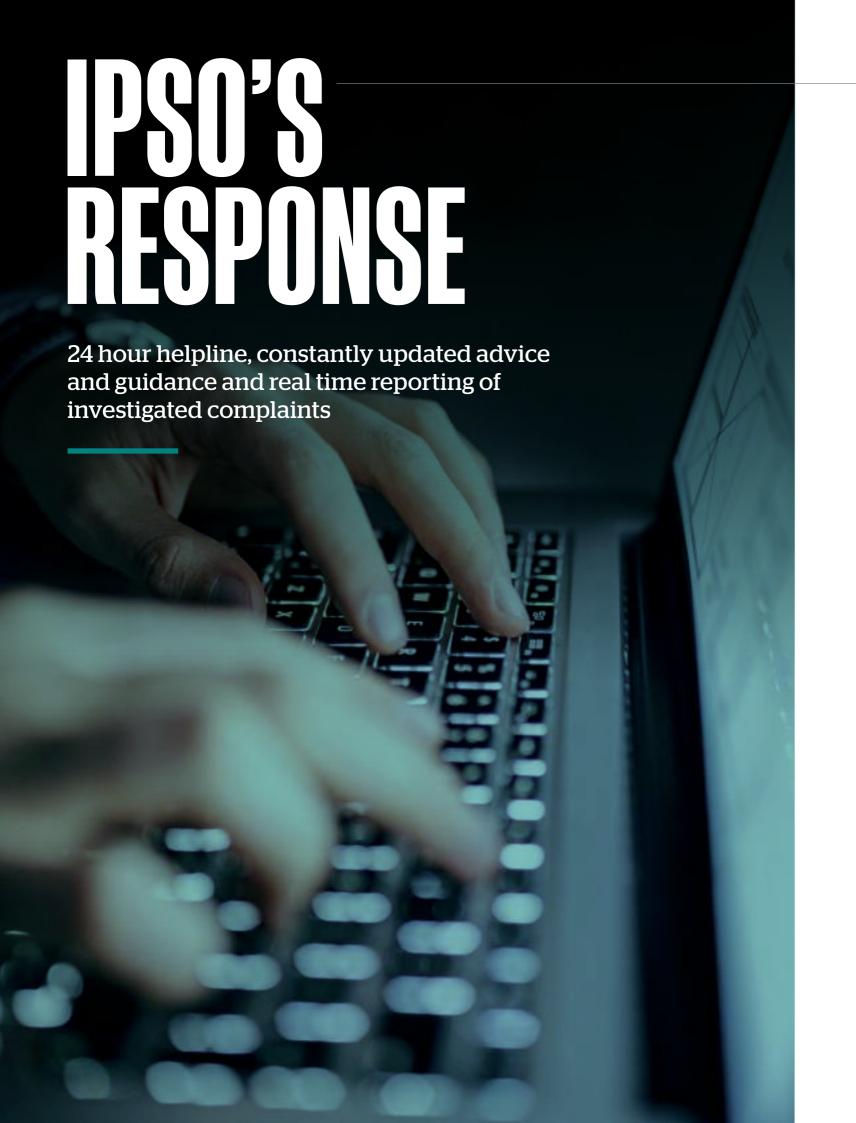
The rulings in this report illustrate the efforts made by editors and journalists to fulfil the Code's requirement to take care over accuracy, whether or not IPSO ultimately upheld the complaint as a breach of the Editors' Code.

Cutting across many of these examples is the underlying challenge that we faced: how to protect the right to challenge, to provoke, to scrutinise as a free press should, at a time when lives were at stake, and information was incomplete at best.

While in some cases we found examples where individual pieces of journalism had fallen short of the standards we expected, this dialogue between science and journalism was crucial to improving scientific understanding and informing the public.

harlotte Demas







### Six key actions

COVID CHANGED how journalism was done, and IPSO recognised early that regulation would play a key role in helping the press adapt to this new world.

#### Regulated, accountable news

All IPSO-regulated publications, in print and online, must follow the Editors' Code and are accountable to IPSO as their independent regulator. The IPSO mark, already displayed on all our regulated publications, became a vital way to signal publishers' public commitment to accurate reporting from trusted sources.

#### Action on Covid complaints

To date IPSO has opened 77 investigations into complaints about editorial material and journalistic behaviour on Covid-19 which potentially breached the Editors' Code. All rulings on investigated complaints are published to inform both the public and our regulated publishers on how the Code applies to these issues.

#### Help with potential press intrusion

IPSO operated its 24-hour emergency helpline for concerns about potential press intrusion. Privacy notices were issued where appropriate. We also

contacted organisations on the front line to advise them about this service, including all NHS Trusts and hospital communications teams. Where we identified concerns about press intrusion, both in relation to the pandemic and other issues, we made proactive approaches to explain how IPSO could help.

#### Real-time guidance on emerging issues

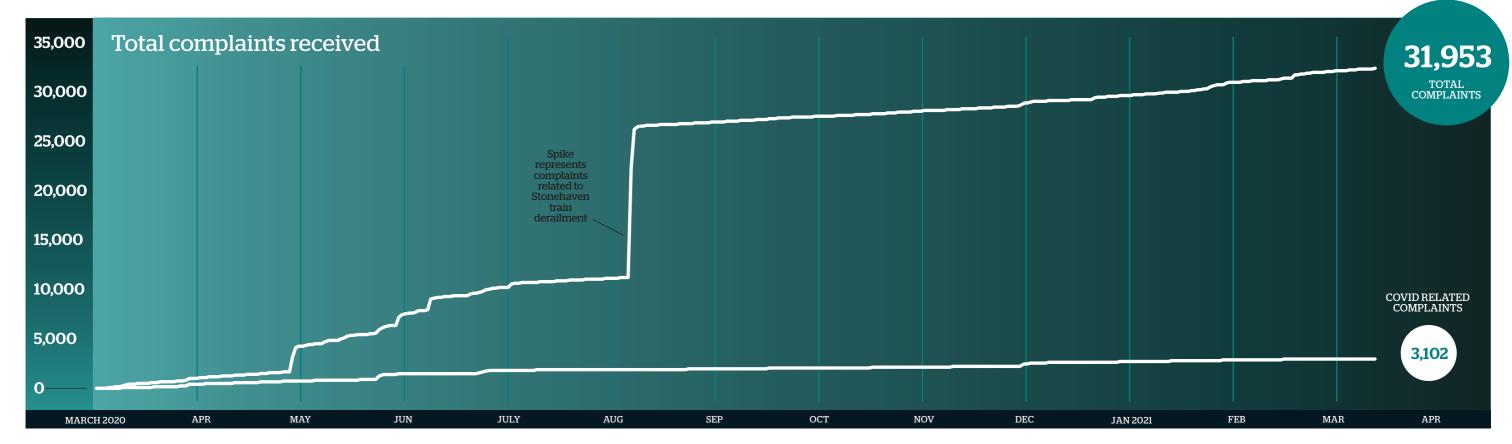
IPSO published case studies as they became available, providing immediate guidance on reporting of Covid-related issues by drawing out key learning points for editors and journalists.

#### Regular communication

IPSO's blog and newsletters highlighted and explained broader issues which have come to the fore during the pandemic, for example, on journalists and social distancing and below the line comments, to highlight novel issues raised by reporting during a pandemic.

#### Advice

The changing climate of journalism during the pandemic can be overwhelming for the public and journalists alike. IPSO will continue to produce guidance for the public and the industry to help them navigate the rapidly changing Covid climate.



# COVID IN CONTEXT

This was IPSO's busiest ever period, with over thirty thousand complaints received

IPSO'S COMPLAINTS process deals with potential breaches of the Editors' Code of Practice. Each complaint received is assessed individually to determine if there has been a possible breach of the Code. If a possible breach is identified, the complaint is investigated.

#### Total complaints received

IPSO received 3,102 complaints about 1,270 separate articles relating to Covid, around 10% of what was

ultimately a record year in 2020 for IPSO complaints. Over 30,000 were received January to December 2020, and nearly 32,000 received during the analysis period of March 2020 to April 2021. Nearly half of the complaints received in the analysis period related to one article on the Stonehaven train derailment, which represented nearly 58% of total complaints received during the period. [1]

Covid was one of a number of important and well-

covered issues on the news agenda during this time. Other notable topics with high numbers of complaints included Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and domestic abuse reporting.[2]

Given the enormous proliferation of channels through which news is delivered including apps, videos, and social media, it is impossible to quantify with confidence the proportion of content regulated by IPSO that gave rise to a complaint, but it is surprising and notable that under 10% of complaints that came through IPSO related to Covid at a time when it dominated the news agenda to such an extent.

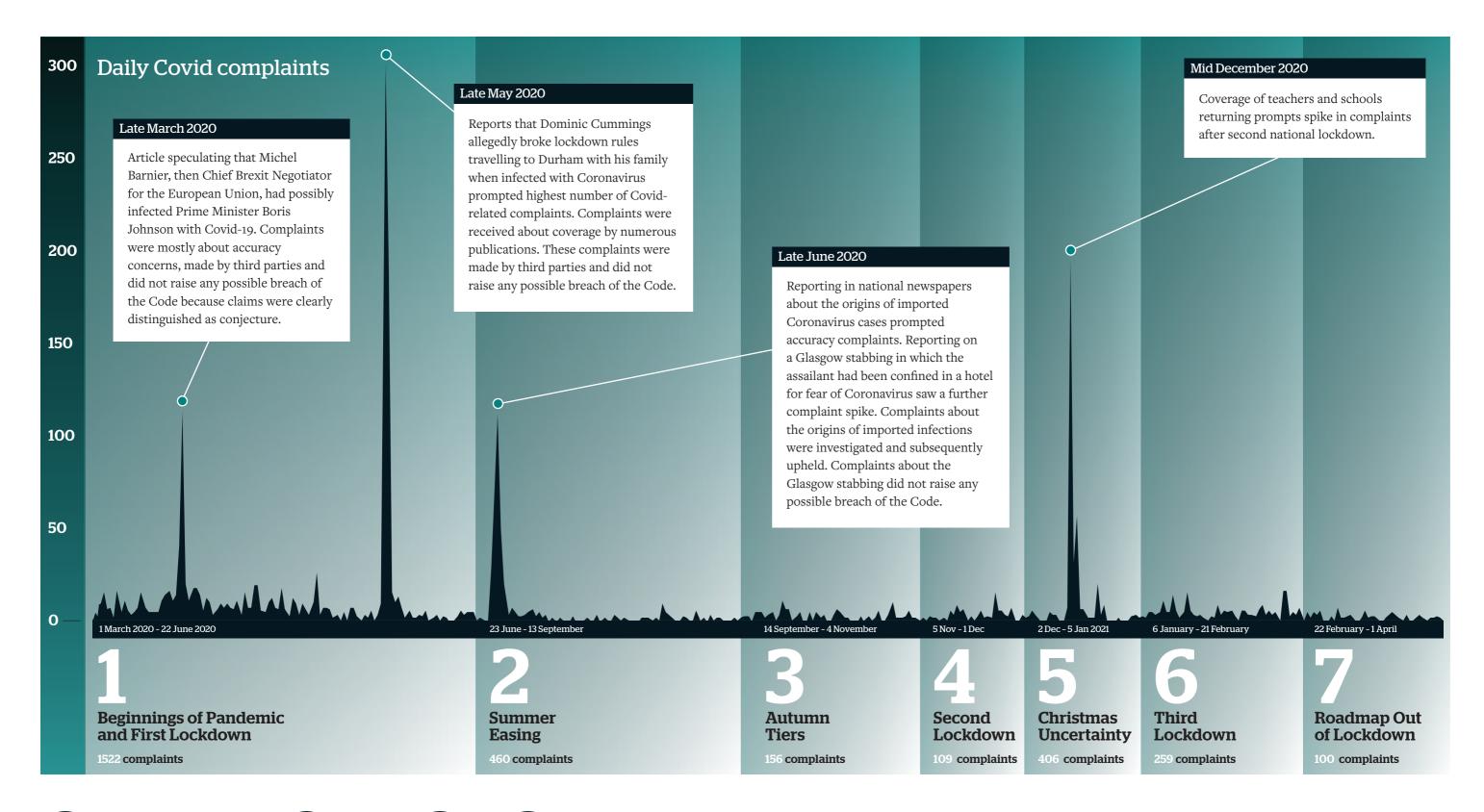
#### Methodology

In order to identify Covid complaints, each article complained about has been categorised according to whether or not the main subject of the article related in some way to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has also allowed some core themes around topics complained about to be identified.

[1] More on how IPSO dealt with this complaint here https://www.ipso.co.uk/news-press-releases/news/response-to-scottish-sun-article-headlined-death-express/[2] These complaints were made mostly by third parties (people not directly affected by the coverage) and did not raise any specific breaches of the Code.

| Notable themes of complaint  |             |            |                      |
|--|-------------|------------|----------------------|
| SUBJECT  | DATE        | COMPLAINTS | PROPORTION           |
| Stonehaven derailment complaint  | August 2020 | 16,860     | Nearly 58%           |
| Covid-related complaints   |             | 3,102      | Just under 10% (9.7) |
| Reporting of religion, including a comment piece on Pagans   | April 2020  | 2,560      | 8%                   |
| Reporting of domestic abuse, including an article on comments by the ex-husband of author J.K. Rowling | June 2020   | 1,119      | 3.5%                 |
| Coverage of BLM protests   | June 2020   | 1,166      | 3.6%                 |
| Total complaints in the period   |             | 31,953     |                      |

8 IPSO COVID REPORT 9



# SEVEN STAGES

UK Coronavirus reporting and news agenda

ALMOST HALF of all Covid-related complaints were received during the first half of the analysis period. Owing to the unprecedented nature of the health crisis, complaints relate mostly to the likelihood of lockdown measures being instituted and the accuracy of presentation of scientific and epidemiological information. As national lockdown was implemented, April complaints turned towards coverage of the Prime Minister's battle with Covid-19, "claps for carers" and the rising death rate of the first wave.

May was dominated by complaints about lockdown compliance. The summer and autumn saw low numbers of complaints surrounding Covid-19 (though high numbers about matters unrelated to Covid-19 including BLM, JK Rowling and Stonehaven). An increase in complaints numbers is not seen again until the end of the second lockdown, around teachers returning to the classroom and uncertainty over lockdown restrictions over Christmas.

10 IPSO COVID REPORT 11

# THE EDITORS' CODE

Covid complaints received by Editors' Code clause

ALL COMPLAINTS to IPSO must be made under the Editors' Code. The majority of complaints were made under Clause 1 (Accuracy). Given the fast-moving nature of information during the pandemic and some of the challenges of reporting, it is not surprising that many concerns related to accuracy.

There were also a number of privacy and harassment concerns, mostly relating to so-called "super spreaders" and those suffering with Covid-19

infections at the beginning of the period. Complaints about potential discrimination are also notable. Most complaints related to perceived discrimination against specific groups rather than an individual, which does not fall under the remit of the Editors' Code.

Complaints can be made under more than one clause of the Code, so the cumulative total of complaints in the chart below is higher than the total of Covid complaints received.

#### Covid complaints by Editors' Code clause



| Clause 1  | Accuracy                   | 2581 | 83%   |
|-----------|----------------------------|------|-------|
| Clause 2  | Privacy                    | 851  | 27%   |
| Clause 3  | Harassment                 | 540  | 17.4% |
| Clause 4  | Intrusion into grief       | 380  | 12%   |
| Clause 5  | Suicide                    | 14   | 0.45% |
| Clause 6  | Children                   | 113  | 3.6%  |
| Clause 7  | Children in sex cases      | 7    | 0.2%  |
| Clause 8  | Hospitals                  | 84   | 2.7%  |
| Clause 9  | Reporting of crime         | 189  | 6%    |
| Clause 10 | Clandestine devices        | 52   | 1.7%  |
| Clause 11 | Victims of sexual offences | 14   | 0.45% |
| Clause 12 | Discrimination             | 563  | 18%   |

# Covid complaints by numbers

All complaints are carefully assessed, and if any complaint might be a potential breach of the Editors' Code, it is investigated fully.

Investigations opened into Covid-related issues

47

Rulings issued

38
Corrections published\*

12

Related privacy notices issued

3102

Complaints and enquires received about Covid related content



Case studies highlight challenging areas of the Code



SOME COMPLAINTS raised concerns that images used to illustrate articles created a misleading impression - particularly around social distancing and whether this was being adhered to during lockdowns.

Use of images falls under Clause 1 (Accuracy) which makes clear that editors and journalists must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images.

IMAGES Various Daily Express

Photographs which allegedly showed lapses in social distancing led to complaints about distortion in images

IPSO RECEIVED 22 complaints that a photograph published on the front page of the Daily Express was inaccurate. The image, of large crowds on Brighton promenade, accompanied an article about warnings for breaking social distancing  $rules. \, Complainants\, said\, the\, photo\, had\, been$ taken last summer, and claimed that some cranes appearing in the picture had since been removed.

The Express denied the image was inaccurate. It provided the metadata for the picture, which showed it had been taken a day before publication. The publication also provided a Twitter post by a member of the public in which they apologised for initially alleging that the article was inaccurate. This person had since stood from where the photograph was taken from and confirmed that the same cranes that had appeared in the photo were present.

IPSO's Complaints Committee did not uphold the complaints as metadata provided by the publication demonstrated that the photo was contemporaneous and therefore not misleading.

NOT UPHELD

Photography is covered under Clause 1



IMAGES Tarman (1) mirror.co.uk

UPHELD



#### Photographs showing individuals allegedly failing to maintain social distancing led to disputes about how guidance and laws applied

GLEN TARMAN complained that mirror.co.uk breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) in an article about cyclists allegedly ignoring lockdown rules. The article was accompanied by a photograph of six cyclists stopped at a junction (above).

The complainant, one of the cyclists pictured, said that the article and image were misleading. He said that he had been cycling for exercise with one other member of his household, as permitted by government guidelines at the time. He said that he did not know or engage with any of the other cyclists pictured and always maintained a twometre distance from them. He said that the angle of the photo gave a distorted impression of the distance between him and the other cyclists.

The publication did not accept it had breached the Code. It maintained that the photo did not distort the position of the cyclists and provided photographs taken by the photographer in the same set. It said that the distance kept between the cyclists in the disputed image was not in line with the government's guidelines at the time of publication.

The Complaints Committee found that the suggestion that the complainant was ignoring lockdown rules was significant, given that he was clearly identifiable. Just because he was shown cycling in close proximity to others, when guidelines at the time did not allow people to meet members of a different household, did not mean he was breaking or ignoring the rules. The complaint was upheld and standalone correction was required in addition to amendment to online article.

IPSO ruled that an image of cyclists stopping at junction did not prove lockdown rules were broken

### Use of Statistics

USE OF statistics was a common concern and particular challenge given the rapidly changing nature of information and the proliferation of different calculations and analysis. Statistics and numbers were crucial to the reporting of the pandemic, and this was extremely challenging given the fast-moving nature of the data and the fact that data sets were of varying quality.

In Forth v The Sunday Telegraph, a complaint centred on rate of new Covid infections based on statistics from SAGE. The complainant disputed the accuracy of the claim using different figures provided by the World Health Organisation.

IPSO's Complaints Committee did not uphold the complaint, recognising that there are multiple sources which newspapers are entitled to rely on, so long as they make clear the basis of their claims.

In Portes v Metro, the headline of an article on increases in non-Covid deaths using Office of National Statistics figures created the misleading impression that deaths had risen sharply, whereas they had in fact been displaced from hospital to home. The article was misleading on a matter of significance during a public health emergency. The complaint was upheld and Metro was ordered to publish an adjudication with a front page reference.

#### STATISTICS

#### Forth 🜓 The Sunday Telegraph

NOT UPHELD

#### With statistical methologies changing and disputed, making clear the source of evidence was important

CHRIS FORTH complained that The Sunday Telegraph breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) in a report on information presented to the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). The complainant said that the number of new cases of Covid-19 in the article was inaccurate and pointed to World Health Organisation data showing a lower number of recorded cases at the time in question.

The publication did not accept that it had breached the Code. It said that figures on Covid-19 infections are compiled by various bodies and that inevitably there would be discordant results based on differing methodologies. In this case, the publication said it was reporting accurately on figures given to SAGE.

The Committee recognised that when reporting on COVID-19, there are multiple sources which newspapers are entitled to rely on but they must make clear the basis of their claims. In this instance, the article had accurately reported

IPSO did not uphold complaint about the rate of Covid infections based on statistics from SAGE

information provided by a person who attended SAGE meetings, and had made clear it was discussing the findings of SAGE. It did not purport to be reporting the official daily confirmed infection rate released by the Government, and therefore was not misleading in the way the complainant had suggested. The publication had taken care not to publish inaccurate information. The complaint was not upheld.



IPSO COVID REPORT | 17 16 IPSO COVID REPORT

**STATISTICS** Portes **(1)** Metro

Accurate presentation of statistics is vital to keeping the public well-informed. They must be presented within their accurate context and headlines must be supported by the text

JONATHAN PORTES complained that Metro breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) in an article headlined "DEATH TOLLS SOAR ... NOT FROM COVID". He said the headline and standfirst gave the misleading impression that non-Covid deaths from a variety of diseases had risen very sharply, when the ONS figures the article was based on did not show extra deaths from these causes. He said the statistics related only to deaths at home and the article failed to mention that deaths in other settings, such as hospitals, had fallen. He also said that the claim that deaths were "up 26,000 on the same period last year" was inaccurate. The increase cited was against the five-year average, not figures from the preceding year.

The publication did not accept that the article breached the Editors' Code. It said the headline



was supported by the text of the article, which made clear the headline referred to deaths "at home" rather than overall deaths. It said this was supported by comments included in the article. The publication accepted that the data published by the ONS showed that deaths at home were up 26,000 against the five-year average. It offered to publish a correction in its page 2 corrections column, which the complainant said was inadequate as it did not address the main point of complaint and was insufficiently prominent.

Whilst the front-page article included the phrase "deaths at home", it was not until page 6 that the article referred to the displacement of deaths from hospital settings by quoting a statistician. The Committee considered that this presentation gave the impression that there had been an increase in overall deaths and was misleading.

The Committee also found that the article had incorrectly reported home deaths were up 26,000 "on the same period last year", with the newspaper accepting that this was based on the five-year average. This represented a further failure to take care not to publish inaccurate information.

The Committee considered the article was misleading on a matter of great significance during a global public health emergency. The complaint was upheld it was ordered to publish an adjudication, which should be referenced on the front page of the newspaper.

Upheld complaint about misrepresented statisitcs resulted in adjudication with front page reference

**OPINION** Whitehead (1) telegraph.co.uk

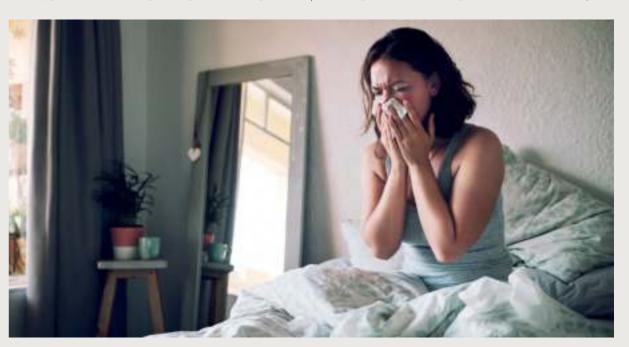
#### Disputes of fact involving comment pieces were considered in context, but requirements to take care over accuracy applied

JAMES WHITEHEAD complained that telegraph. co.uk breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) in a comment piece on Britain pursuing a Coronavirus 'herd immunity' strategy. The complainant said that the basis of the author's claim was inaccurate, as no natural immunity to Covid-19 would be gained by people who have had a common cold caused by a Coronavirus. The complainant said that therefore the author's claim that London would reach herd immunity on this basis was also inaccurate.

The publication did not accept it had breached the Code. It emphasised that the article was clearly presented as an opinion piece on a topic of considerable scientific uncertainty.

The Committee ruled that in the context of this article, readers would judge the term 'natural immunity' as meaning possessing antibodies offering protection from contracting Covid-19, which was not accurate in this circumstance. As a result, both statements were significantly misleading and the Committee ordered a standalone correction and correction added to the online article.

IPSO upheld a comment piece on herd immunity



### **3** Opinion Pieces

MANY COMPLAINTS related to comment and opinion were about accuracy, specifically where particular data had been selected to support a point of view. In Bromley v the Spectator, the complaint hinged on the accurate presentation of data chosen to support the view advanced in the piece. Publications are free to publish articles, including those by subject experts with a specific

point of view, and for them to defend their choice of valid data and statistics. However, even in opinion and comment pieces care must still be taken over accuracy. The Complaints Committee upheld a complaint about a comment piece on herd immunity in the Telegraph, despite it being presented as such, due to misrepresentation of the data used.

18 IPSO COVID REPORT IPSO COVID REPORT 19

**OPINION** Bromley **(1)** The Spectator

NOT UPHELD

Publications are free to publish articles, including those by subject experts with a specific point of view, and to defend their choice of valid data and statistics to support this

ADAM BROMLEY complained that an article in The Spectator headlined "Ten reasons to end the lockdown now" was inaccurate. The article was an opinion piece, which outlined why a columnist believed lockdown should end. It included the assertion that "Somewhere around 99.9 per cent of those who catch the disease recover".

The complainant disputed this figure and said that the article was inaccurate because no peerreviewed or reliable studies had put the infection death rate of Covid as low as 0.1%. He provided



sources which put the death rate much higher ranging from 0.3% to 1.4%.

The publication did not accept a breach of the Code. It made the distinction between infection fatality rate (percentage of people who die of all those infected, including asymptomatic patients) and case fatality rate (amount of people who have died divided by the number of confirmed cases). It said that it would take months, or even years, to know for certain what the infection death rate is which is why the article had not said a certain figure but had described the number as "somewhere around". It provided multiple studies which reported that 0.1% was within the range of the reported infection death rate.

The publication had provided studies which demonstrated a range of infection fatality rates and the figure of 0.1% fell within this. The figure had been proceeded by "somewhere around" rather than asserting as fact that the true figure was definitively 0.1%. The article was a comment piece which affected the way in which readers would have understood the passage. On this basis, the publication had not failed to take care to avoid inaccuracy and there was no significant inaccuracy requiring correction.

Publications are free to publish articles, including those by subject experts with a specific point of view, and for them to marshal and defend their choice of valid data and statistics to support their point of view.

IPSO did not uphold complaint about opinion piece on why a columnist believed that lockdown should end

SOCIAL MEDIA Devlin (1) dailyrecord.co.uk



#### Social media posts must be supported by text of the linked article. Posts cannot rely on the article text to correct misleading impressions

MICHAEL DEVLIN complained that dailyrecord. co.uk breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) in an article about the Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's socially distanced visit with her parents. The complainant said that the article and its related Facebook post were inaccurate because the accompanying photograph (which was taken prior to the Covid pandemic) gave the misleading impression that Ms Sturgeon had breached social distancing guidelines.

The publication said the headline of the article made clear that the visit had been "socially distanced" and that this was reiterated throughout the article. In its ruling, IPSO's Complaints Committee

noted that the article itself made clear the First Minister's visit was socially distant and that the online version accompanying the photograph had been taken before the pandemic. However, the Facebook post did not contain any reference to the fact that the visit had been socially distanced, or that the image had been taken prior to lockdown. The Committee determined that this was misleading. As this had been confined to the Facebook post, it said that the publication should publish a correction on the same Facebook account as the original post.

A correction was required on Facebook following an upheld complaint about a Nicola Sturgeon article

### 4 Social Media

CONTINUING A longstanding trend, corrections for inaccuracies have also been required on social media, for example in Devlin v dailyrecord.co.uk where an inaccuracy in an article about Nicola Sturgeon visiting her parents appeared on a Facebook post.

In Goodger v dailystar.co.uk, the publication had to publish a standalone correction following an upheld complaint about an Instagram live story, where it could not demonstrate it had taken care around accuracy of reporting.

20 IPSO COVID REPORT IPSO COVID REPORT 21

**DISCRIMINATION** Pak Hung Chan (1) Mail on Sunday

Care must be taken not to discriminate against individuals

### on the basis of protected characteristics

PAK HUNG CHAN complained that The Mail on Sunday breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) and Clause 12 (Discrimination) in an article reporting on the reopening of live meat markets in China. The article featured pictures of live and slaughtered animals available for sale. The complainant said the photographs were old images taken in Vietnam and featured in an article in a Hong Kong publication in 2015 and therefore were not taken on the date reported. They provided screenshots from social media which they said supported this. They also said that the article discriminated against Chinese people.

The publication denied any breach of the Code. It said that it was assured by the photographer, the proprietor of the news agency which it considered reputable, that the images were taken in China on 28 March 2020. The publication provided the print counterpart of the online article published in the Hong Kong publication and noted that this version did not feature the photographs in question.

IPSO's Complaints Committee noted that the complainant's position that the photographs were taken in Vietnam in 2015 was based on information he had seen posted by other individuals on social media and was not based on first-hand experience or knowledge. The publication had provided copies of the 2015 articles by the Hong Kong publication in which the photographs were allegedly published and the images were not featured. The metadata provided by the publication showed the date that one of the images was created. The Committee was satisfied that the publication had provided material in



A market in China

support of its position that the images were taken in China on 28 March 2020 and there was no failure to take care not to publish inaccurate information.

The terms of Clause 12 are designed to protect specific individuals mentioned by the press against discrimination on the basis of their race, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation or any physical or mental illness or disability. These terms do not apply to groups or categories of people, and therefore the complainant's concerns that the article discriminated against Chinese people in general did not engage the terms of Clause 12.

#### SOCIAL MEDIA Goodger (1) dailystar.co.uk



#### Care must be taken when using information taken from social media

REALITY TV personality Lauren Goodger complained that the dailystar.co.uk had inaccurately reported on an Instagram live video. The article alleged that the complainant had said that she "doesn't agree with masks" and "won't be taking the vaccine if it was offered to her". The complainant said she had done a live stream but had not said the quotes used in the article.

The publication said a reporter had watched the livestream and taken contemporaneous notes. The livestream had not been saved locally but a transcript of notes had been taken. This document did not include any of the quotes in the article, which the publication said was due to the reporter using the cut and paste function to put them into the article, meaning that the notes did not include the contested quotes. The publication supplied screenshots of viewer comments from the livestream, said that a breakfast television programme had reiterated what the publication said was part of the livestream and noted that the complainant had retweeted someone saying that they would not be getting the vaccine. During the complaints process, the publication offered to publish a footnote on the article: "Since this article

was published, Lauren Goodger has advised that she no longer holds the views and comments that she stated in her Instagram Live".

There was a disagreement between the complainant and the publication as to whether the complainant had said the quotes which had been attributed to her. As the livestream could not be provided by either party, the Committee was not in a position to definitively make a finding as to the content of this video. However, under the Code, publications are obliged to demonstrate that they have taken care not to publish inaccurate information.

On balance the Committee decided that in the absence of contemporaneous notes or other evidence that demonstrated this to be the case, the publication had failed to take care over accuracy and had breached Clause 1. The allegations were significant as they formed the basis of the article, and related to claims regarding Covid-19. The Committee upheld the complaint and considered that the appropriate remedy was the publication of a correction to put the correct position on record.

Taking contemporaneous notes is essential

### Potential Discrimination

REPORTING OF the origin of Covid and virus variants led to concerns about potential discrimination against groups of people and possible wider societal impacts of articles. Clause 12 of the Code prevents publications from making discriminatory references about individuals based on their race, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation or any physical or mental illness or disability; in these cases, however, the concern was often that inaccurate or insensitive reporting could lead to discrimination, rather than about directly pejorative references.

IPSO COVID REPORT | 23 22 IPSO COVID REPORT

## 6 Reporting of Scientific Research

ACCURATE REPORTING is vital to keeping the public well informed, particularly around new and developing research. However, reporting research can be challenging, especially around emerging research or where there are conflicting pieces or

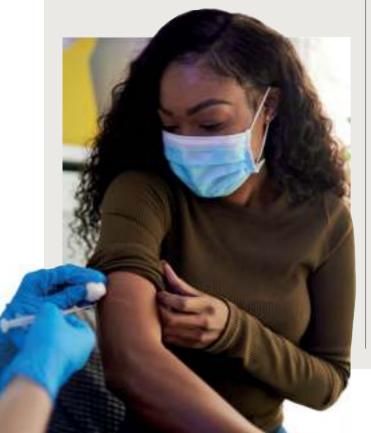
different interpretions. Particular care should be taken around ensuring accuracy in headlines. Even if research is used as part of a comment piece to support an argument being advanced, it must still be reported accurately.

RESEARCH Ackroyd U Lytham St Anne's Express

#### Complaint about accuracy of readers' letter on vaccine research resolved with correction

PETER ACKROYD complained that a reader's letter in the Lytham St Annes Express about Covid vaccine research, which suggested that vaccines were being rushed out, was inaccurate.

The letter stated that Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and the Moderna vaccine were "experimental", "rushed" and that people who wanted the vaccine were "literally human guinea pigs". The



complainant said that as safety and efficacy phase trials were complete it was inaccurate to say people who wanted the vaccine would be "human guinea pigs". The complainant also noted that the vaccines had been approved by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and that whilst the vaccines had been approved quickly, there was no suggestion this had been done in a hurried manner or that they had suffered as a result of the speed with which they been produced.

The publication did not accept a breach of the Code. It said that readers' letters are clearly marked and that the page acts as a forum for readers' opinions. It said it did not wish to censor the opinions of readers but offered the complainant the opportunity to write a rebuttal letter.

During IPSO's investigation, the newspaper offered to publish a correction addressing the points raised in the letter, which the complainant said resolved the complaint to his satisfaction. The Complaints Committee did not make a determination as to whether or not the Code had been breached.

Reporting around vaccine research was the subject of complaints to IPSO

RESEARCH Richard Evans (1) Mail on Sunday



#### Care must be taken to distinguish between reseach findings and and comment on potential implications

RICHARD EVANS complained that a comment piece in The Mail on Sunday was inaccurate. The piece reported on Facebook censoring posts and said that the columnist had "been given Facebook's seal of disapproval" after he posted about "Covid muzzles" (face masks) and had stated that "a major experiment shows they're useless".

The complainant said the study the article referred to must have been the Danmask-19 experiment. He said the article was therefore misleading because the study suggested that those wearing masks had a 14% lower risk of contracting Covid-19 and that the numbers of Covid-19 cases amongst participants was not high enough to reach statistical significance. Therefore, the study was inconclusive. It did not test whether masks stop the wearer transmitting the virus, only whether it stops the mask wearer being infected themselves, when the former was the main reason behind Government advice to wear masks.

The publication did not accept a breach of the Code. It confirmed that the study referred to was the Danmask-19 study. It said the findings of this study were that 1.8% of people wearing masks got Covid-19, compared to a control group without masks of which 2.1% got Covid-19. It said that the researchers found that this was not statistically significant and that the data was "compatible with lesser degrees of self-protection", which it said meant mask wearers were not better

protected than non-mask wearers to the extent that it was statistically significant. The statement that the study showed masks were "useless" was the columnist's opinion, and that it was a passing reference in a comment piece. It said it was the complainant's view that the study was "inconclusive" and that the columnist did not accept this view.

Newspapers must take care not to publish inaccurate information, even in comment pieces. The columnist was entitled to share his interpretation of the study in the column, provided it was clearly presented as such and readers would not be misled as to the study's conclusion. The statement in the article that the study found masks to be "useless", without explaining what function of mask wearing was being assessed, was misleading: the study had not found masks to be ineffective in the onwards transmission of Covid-19 from wearer to others.

Furthermore, the article had not mentioned that the study had made clear that the findings concerning the effectiveness of masks in reducing the risk of infection for the wearer were "inconclusive". The newspaper had, therefore failed to take care not to publish misleading information. The complaint was upheld and the publication was required to publish a correction.

Complaint about piece which referred to Danmask-19 study on mask wearing upheld

# PRIVACY NOTICES

Reporting on evolving stories like the pandemic brings with it particular challenges. The requirements of the Editors' Code - for accuracy, privacy, and the conduct of journalists when approaching people - remain the same.

CLAUSE 2 (Privacy) makes clear that everyone is entitled to respect for their private and family life, home, physical and mental health, and correspondence, including digital communications.

Clause 4 (Intrusion into grief or shock) says that any approaches in circumstances of grief or shock must be made with sensitivity. It is of course up to specific individuals whether or not they want to talk to the press, but if they are asked not to contact people, journalists should desist from making approaches.

In the vast majority of cases, journalists comply with the rules. If someone has made it clear that they do



not want to speak to reporters, IPSO has a 24- hour harassment helpline to offer support to those who believe they are the subject of press intrusion.

IPSO can provide advice and has the power to issue privacy notices to the industry which make it clear that a person does not want to speak to the press. Follow-up contact confirms that the notices are extremely effective as a tool to tackle media scrums or to prevent harassment. They can also pass on concerns about the potential publication of intrusive material or help protect families at a time of grief or shock. For example, a notice may make clear that those who have suffered a bereavement do not want to talk to the press. In 2020 we issued privacy notices for specific individuals affected by Covid as well as for hospitals in respect of patient and staff privacy. The pandemic has also highlighted some new challenges in relation to privacy.

#### Photography

In breaking news situations, photography is important to give readers a real sense of what is going on but care must be taken around privacy. Journalists and editors do not generally need consent to use photographs taken in a public places which do not show private activity or reveal anything

IPSO contacted every hospital communications team to make them aware of our privacy notice service

private about someone. However, someone may have a reasonable expectation of privacy in relation to a medical emergency, receiving medical care, or perhaps times of personal grief or shock, even if they are in a public place, so journalists should be alert to this, especially in a rapidly developing scenario.

During the pandemic IPSO was made aware of concerns relating to photography outside hospitals. We contacted every hospital communications team to make them aware of the privacy notice service.

#### Privacy of individuals during the pandemic

In order to make sure what they are reporting is accurate, journalists may want to approach people

to find out more about their experiences, but it is up to individuals whether or not they choose to speak to the press. IPSO made proactive approaches to individuals where we thought it would be useful for them to know about the service. IPSO's Complaints Committee also made an important privacy ruling during the pandemic that a Covid-19 diagnosis is a matter of health, and therefore information about which individuals can have a reasonable expectation of privacy. Editors invoking the public interest in relation to a Covid diagnosis will need to demonstrate that they reasonably believed publication - or journalistic activity taken with a view to publication – would both serve, and be proportionate to, the public interest.

#### PRIVACY A Woman (1) blackpoolgazette.co.uk

UPHELD

# Individuals have a reasonable expectation of privacy around information to their health. Any disclosure of such information must be justified in the public interest

A WOMAN complained that blackpoolgazette. co.uk breached Clause 2 (Privacy) in an article which reported on a primary school class that was told to self-isolate following a positive test for Covid-19 by a staff member. The complainant said that the article breached her privacy because although she was not named in the article, she was identifiable as the staff member who had tested positive. The result of her test had not been common knowledge within the school community, and she said the newspaper's decision to refer to her as "a staff member in a Year One class" made her identifiable to those within the school community and beyond.

The newspaper did not accept that it had breached the Code. While it accepted that the article could identify the complainant to members of the school's community, it said that it was known within the community prior to the publication of the article that the complainant had received a positive test result. The newspaper did not accept that the complainant could be identified by those beyond the local community and said that there was a public interest in communicating the information to minimise the risk of wider infection.

In deciding whether the woman's privacy had been breached, IPSO's Complaints Committee had to consider whether the complainant was identifiable from the information contained in the article, whether the complainant had a reasonable expectation of privacy in respect of her diagnosis, and whether, if the complainant did have a reasonable expectation of privacy, the publication of the information be justified in the public interest.

The Committee found that the article included sufficient information to identify the complainant as the recipient of the positive test result. Whether an individual has contracted Covid-19 is clearly a matter relating to their health, and therefore was information about which the complainant had a reasonable expectation of privacy. The publication was entitled to make its assessment about what information was in the public interest, but in the view of the Committee, there was insufficient justification that the public interest outweighed the intrusion into the complainant's privacy. The complaint was upheld and an adjudication was required, with links to the newspaper's website and Facebook page.

26 IPSO COVID REPORT 27

# **PUBLISHER EXPERIENCES**

Publishers told us about the impact of Covid on their journalism and operations

#### Importance of trusted, accountable news

Many publishers highlighted the important role of regulated accountable news during the pandemic, particularly to the communities and audiences they serve. There was also recognition of some of the challenges around taking care over accuracy given the fast moving and changeable nature of information.

"The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges for our titles and journalists. But our teams have risen to those challenges to produce a huge range of high-quality, trustworthy and code-compliant content that has reinforced why and how a vibrant and healthy local media is so vitally important."

"During an event like the Coronavirus pandemic there is a great deal that is not known. In such times, it is more important than ever that publications give voice to a wide range of expert opinion – including, perhaps especially, those whose opinions go against the grain. No newspaper or magazine should act as a megaphone for government announcements: when the stakes are high, scrutiny matters more than ever."

THE SPECTATOR

ARCHANT

"Our commitment to our communities was to provide information that they could trust and rely upon as well as encourage those who were doing so much in the battle against Covid."

JPI MEDIA

#### Challenges to news production

Like many organisations, publishers faced challenges to their usual ways of working and had to adapt to continue to deliver news. Like most organisations, publishers faced challenges such as learning to use technology to communicate with colleagues, and concerns about staff welfare while they were isolated.

"Because of the pandemic our reporters have not been able to travel to jobs around the region as they would normally have done, but despite our initial fears that this might damage our relationship with our communities, it has led to increased engagement, with us ensuring people have been kept abreast of local Covid updates as well as national announcements, even more community news and business stories...there have also been difficulties and challenges, particularly when dealing with the local NHS and Health and Social Care Partnerships, Police Scotland and our local council."

Wyvex Media

"Our titles were produced entirely remotely for the first time (in more than 150 years in the case of the Eastern Daily Press) and our journalists have produced a daily diet of important, informative, challenging, campaigning, helpful and entertaining content."

ARCHANT

"There were also some challenges around newsgathering, particularly around viewing inquests and court cases remotely, instead of in person."

ROTHERHAM ADVERTISER

#### Supporting local communities

Many publishers highlighted the important work they had undertaken to support their local communities during the pandemic.

"Most [of Tindle's newspapers] ran campaigns to encourage community involvement in the various initiatives which had sprung up, including appeals for volunteers, items for food banks, information when the vaccine roll-out began, and such like. For some newspapers, the appeals were so successful that more volunteers came forward than were needed." TINDLE NEWSPAPERS

"We launched a number of high profile campaigns: Health Heroes - to celebrate the NHS and care staff on the front line of the pandemic; Acts of Kindness - to congratulate the people who went the extra mile to help others; The Big Thank You - to recognise all our key workers; Support Local - to encourage people to support local shops and businesses."

"Our publications have helped galvanise and bring our communities together." Quest Media Network

#### Importance of accurate reporting

ARCHANT

Publishers also recognised the importance of accurate reporting.

"It was also a year when PA's commitment to fast, accurate and impartial reporting was more important than ever, and clearly valued and respected by our many customers". PA Media

"The interests of our readers and the requirement to report in a factual and non-sensationalist way will continue to drive the nature of our editorial decision making and content creation".

"All of our editorial team are aware of their duties in reporting such a sensitive subject, and have been asked

More on publishers' annual statements for 2020 is available at https://www.ipso.co.uk/monitoring/annual-statements/

to take extra steps to ensure information is verifiable and well sourced, particularly when taking into account the huge amount of misinformation that has spread on social media during the pandemic".

#### Financial impact of Covid

The pandemic has had a significant impact on some publishers. Some newspaper groups had to suspend some of their titles during lockdown, particularly free ones; and many suffered financial losses, with one describing 2020 as a "financial annus horribilis." In more positive news, several publishers, particularly in the magazine and B2B sector reported an increase in website traffic and subscriptions.

"Life and Work lost much of its unique distribution network during 2020 as many sales are distributed through congregations and this has hit hard in early 2021...In common with other print titles we have ground to recover as the full impact of Covid-19 continues to stalk our business but remain hopeful of recovery in the mid to long-term as we reposition our planning." LIFE AND WORK MAGAZINE

"Financial pressures brought about by the pandemic mean that our weekly free newspaper – the Barnsley Independent – is no longer being published". BARNSLEY CHRONICLE

"Financially, 2020 was an Annus Horribilis, with advertising, event and subscription revenues down 40%."



# LOOKING FORWARD

With IPSO CEO Charlotte Dewar

THERE IS no doubt that Covid will continue to present challenges for press regulation and the newspaper and magazine industries, with the full impact still unknown – but there is much to be positive about. The pandemic has demonstrated the value of accountable news in an unprecedented way. It has given the regulated press an opportunity to show that it is engaged in a different enterprise from the army of social media posters sharing the latest rumour or fear, and why journalists were rightly recognised as essential workers throughout the crisis.

Of the huge number of stories about Covid, a relatively small proportion resulted in complaints about potential breaches of the Code, and an even smaller proportion were upheld. While upheld rulings have highlighted areas for improvement, we see clear evidence of the industry reacting swiftly to issues highlighted by IPSO and by the broader Covid coverage debate. There were also some key issues that continued to challenge the industry, and by extension IPSO as its regulator.

#### Statistics

It's crucial for reporting to get numbers right in the face of rapidly changing data and information, particularly where these are used in headlines. In some cases, there is no one "right" answer; at those times, transparency is particularly important. It is notable that the one front-page reference IPSO ordered following an upheld complaint related to presentation of statistics.

#### Use of images

Taking caring over the accuracy of images can be nuanced but it is important. Especially early in the pandemic, the use of images to show social distancing came under huge scrutiny. At that point publications needed to be prepared to show that they could back up the integrity of the story.

#### Comment and opinion pieces

Care must be taken to distinguish between comment

and fact, but this can be extremely difficult. In a number of cases IPSO faced the challenge of balancing protection of freedom of expression (and particularly contrarian views) with the rigorous requirements of the Editors' Code in relation to accuracy. The course of the pandemic demonstrated the value of protecting dissent; some views that were initially considered controversial later came to be widely accepted, and others that were initially mainstream were

later discredited. Critical to these decisions was consideration of whether evidence cited in support of the opinion was presented accurately and without distortion.

Public health continues to be at risk from Covid and from Covid misinformation. As the independent regulator of the majority of newspapers and magazines in the UK, IPSO will continue to do its part to ensure that readers can rely on trusted, accountable sources of news to protect themselves from both threats.



# DIRECTORY

School Report

Somerset Life

Sidmouth Herald

South West Bride

Sporting Shooter

Sudbury Mercury

Suffolk Resident

Suffolk Bride

Surrey Life

Sussex Life

SW Resident

The Comet

Stowmarket Mercury

Surrey & Sussex Bride

The Bereavement Guide

The Docklands & East

London Advertiser

The Guide Resident

The New European

The Royston Crow

Watton and Swaffham

Waveney Advertiser

Welwyn & Hatfield Times

Weston, Worle & Somerset

Weston, Worle & Somerset

Weddingsite couk

Mercury Midweek

Wishech Standard

Woodford Recorder

Attleborough Mercury

Argyll Bute

ASSOCIATED

**Associated Newspapers** 

Wymondham and

Wood and Vale

Yorkshire Bride

Yorkshire Life

Your Chickens

Argyll Media

Dunoon Observer &

Isle of Bute News

Daily Mail

inews.co.uk

Mail Online

Metro couk

Metro Scotland

Scottish Daily Mail

The Mail on Sunday

Scottish Mail on Sunday

Metro

Argyllshire Standard

Thetford & Brandon Times

The Hill Resident

The Resident

Tillergraph

Times

#### IPSO member publishers in 2021



#### **ACT Publishing Ltd**

Hort News (Hortnews.com) The Commercial Greenhouse Growe The Fruit Grower The Vegetable Farmer



#### AD Sales Ltd

**Bodmin Voice** Cornwall Today Newquay Voice Penzance Voice Saltash Voice St Austell Voice The Sunday Independent Truro Voice

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Downham Market Life

East Anglian Daily Times

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EADT Suffolk

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Newham Recorder

North Devon Gazette

North Norfolk News

North Somerset Times

Norwich Evening News

Portishead and Clevedon

Romford and Havering Post

Norfolk Bride

Norwich Extra

Pink 'Un

Resident

Pure Weddings

Romford Recorder

Royal Coast Resident

Saffron Walden Reporter

Rifle Shooter

Norwich Resider

#### Barrnon Media Limited Cumberland & Westmorland Herald



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gardenanswersmagazine.

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Grazia

Golf World

graziadaily.co.uk

heatworld.com

horsedeals.co.uk

Improve Your Coarse

Land Rover Owner

landscapemagazine.co.uk

livefortheoutdoors.com

MCN (Motorcycle News)

modernclassicsmagazine

moderngardensmagazine

Landscape

MCN Sport

Model Rail

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mcnsport.co.uk

model-rail.co.uk

Modern Classics

Modern Gardens

moio4music.com

motherandbabycouk

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Performance Bikes

Parkers Car Price Guide

performancebikes.co.uk

petproductmarketing.co.uk



#### **Baylis Media Limited** Maidenhead Advertiser

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railmagazine.com

Rail

Ride

Trail

ride.co.uk

Sea Angler

seaangler.co.uk

sewells.co.uk

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Todav's Golfer

steamrailway.co.uk

todaysgolfer.co.uk

Trout & Salmon

Trout Fisherman

What Bike?

vours.co.uk

Yours

trailrunningmag.co.uk

troutandsalmon.com

troutfisherman coulk

Practical Sportsbikes

practicalclassics.co.uk

practicalfishkeeping.co.uk

practicalphotography.com

practicalsportsbikesmag.

Slough & South Bucks Express Windsor, Ascot & Eton Express



#### **Blog Preston** blogpreston.co.uk



#### **British Film Institute** Sight & Sound

CaerphillyObserver

#### Caerphilly Media Ltd Caerphilly Observer



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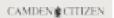
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Tesco Gift Guide Tesco Home Tesco Magazine Tesco Real Food Tesco Toys The Club The Collection

The Mandarin Oriental Magazine

#### **CILEx Journal**

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#### Citizen News & Media

camdencitizen.co.uk Hackney Citizen hackneycitizen.co.uk islingtoncitizen.co.uk



#### **Conde Nast International** voguebusiness.com

#### DC THOMSON

#### DC Thomson Group

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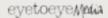
Wilson Magazine The People's Friend The People's Friend Pocket The People's Friend Special The Scots Magazine This England



#### DnG Media

UK Club Golfer

Annandale Herald Annandale Observer DNG24 (dng24 co.uk) **Dumfries Courier** Moffat News





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Fusion Flowers Weddings

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#### Future PLC

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Shoot in Scotland

Shooting Industry

shootinguk.co.uk

sporting-rifle.com

SuperYacht World

supervachtworld.com

Sporting Gun

Sporting Rifle

Style at Home

teamrock.com

techradar.com

thefield.co.uk

t3.com

The Field

Total 911

Total Film

TV Times

Wallpape

wallpaper.com

Web Designer

What's on TV

whatsontv.co.uk

Woman & Home

Windows Help & Advice

womanandhome.com

Woman & Home Feel

Woman & Home Feel

womanmagazine.co.uk

Woman's Own Special

womansweekly.com

Woman's Weekly Fiction

Woman's Weekly Living

What Hi-Fi?

Good Food

Good You

Woman's Own

womansown.co.uk

Woman's Weekly

World of Animals

Yachting Monthly

Yachting World

vbw.com

vachtingmonthly.com

yachtingworld.com

Woman

Total Guitar

TV & Satellite Week

TV Broadcast Europe

Directory

Magazine

Shooting Club Directory

Shooting Times & Country

The Shooting Gazette

#### Eve to Eve Media

Delicious Magazine deliciousmagazine.co.uk Healthy Food Guide healthyfood.co.uk



#### Faversham House Ltd

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FusionFlowers

#### **Fusion Flowers Limited** Fusion Flowers Magazine

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Horrorville Horse & Hound horseandhound.co.uk How It Works iCreate Ideal Home idealhome.co.uk Ideal Homes Complete Guide to Christmas Imagine FX iPad: The Complete Manual itproportal.com kotaku.com lifehacker.co.uk Linux Format Linux Format Special Linux User & Developer Living Etc MacForma Made Simple Bookazines maximumpc.com Metal Hammer Minecraft Motor Boat & Yachting

Homes & Gardens

mbv.com Mountain Bike Rider mbr.co.uk

Music Week musicradar.com

N-Photo Official Playstation Magazine Official Xbox Magazine Official Xbox Magazine (US edition) Period Living

PC Gamer PC Gamer (US edition) pcgamer.com Photo Plus

Photoshop Creative Pick Me Up Pick Me Up Special PiUser

plotfinder.net Practical Boat Owner pbo.co.uk Practical Caravan

Practical Motorhome Professional Photography Prog Real Crime

Real Homes realhomes.com Retro Gamer Rhythm Rugby World rugbyworld.com

SFX & Total Film Specials

bellamagazine.co.uk

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Third Sector

What Car?

whatcar.com

thirdsector.co.uk

Windpower Monthly

windpowermonthly.com

Chronicle

Heads (Congleton) Ltd

Alsager Chronicle

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Reveal

Men's Health Runner's World Women's Health

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holdthefrontpage.co.uk holdthefrontpage.co.uk

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Hurst Media Company Ltd Celebrity Secrets Checklist

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granthamjournal.co.uk Gravesend Messenger Haverhill Echo haverhillecho.co.uk Kent Business Kent Messenger (Maidstone Malling

Kentonline.co.uk Kentish Express (Ashford, Romney Marsh, Tenterden editions) Kentish Gazette (Canterbury, Whitstable Herne Bay Lincolnshire Free Press

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MadeForMums.com Sittingbourne News Extra motdmag.com Spalding Guardian Marine Society and Sea spaldingtoday.co.uk Cadets: Sea Farer Mega

The Stamford Mercury stamfordmercury.co.uk Mollie Makes Suffolk Free Press molliemakes.com suffolkfreepress.co.uk Mountain Biking UK Thanet Extra mbuk.com

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Radio Times Film Guide Battersea Cats and Dogs Home: Paws Royal Opera House BBC Andy's Amazing RSPB: Bird Life RSPB: Nature's Home BBC Countryfile RSPB: Wild Times BBC Good Food RSPB: Wing Beat bbcgoodfood.com Scouts: Make Do Share BBC History Scouts: Scouting BBC Match of the Day Simply Christmas **BBC Mr Tumble: Something** Simply Crochet Special simplycrochetmag.co.uk BBC Music Simply Knitting classical-music.com theyarnloop.com **BBC** Wildlife Simply Sewing discoverwildlife.com simplysewingmag.com **BBC Go Jetters!** BBC Sky At Night **BBC World Histories** skyatnightmagazine.com historvextra.com The Knitter bikeradar.com The Osteopath (General Butterfly Conversation Osteopathic Council) Cbeebies Art Today's Quilter Cbeebies Magazine todaysquilter.com Cheebies Specials BBC Top Gear Cheebies Make and Play BBC Top Gear New Car countryfile.com Buvers Guide Cross Stitch Favourites RRC Ton of the Pons CSMA: Boundless Tour de France Guide cvclingnews.com We Love Craft Cycling Plus Who Do You Think You cyclingplus.com World of Cross Stitch Disney Frozen Disney Frozen Funtime WWF: Action Disney Princess Create & WWF: Go Wild Collect WWF: Impact Disney Stars Your Home **BBC Easy Cook** Yourhomestyle.co.uk

#### Jersey Evening Post

#### Jersey Evening Post

Jersey Evening Post **Business Brief** Confidential Everybody Loves Jersey/ Jersey Loves Food Who's Who Jersey Weddings Prime Time Home 360

Move Jersey Almanac

JPI Media

Absolute Leeds

(Buckingham)

History Revealed historyrevealed.com Homes & Antiques

homesandantiques.com Homestyle

English Heritage: the

Enjoy Cross Stitch

BBC Science Focus

sciencefocus.com

BBC Gardeners' World

gardenersworld.com

gardensillustrated.com

Gardens Illustrated

Get Into Craft

Girl Talk Art

Hatchimals

Girl Talk

Magazine

English Heritage Members

English Heritage: Kids Rule

iAM Roadsmart iuniormagazine.co.uk Lego City Lego Ninjago Love Crochet Love Knitting for Baby

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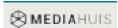
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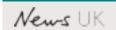
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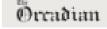
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