

“The Chronicle Series”

Congleton Chronicle – Alsager Chronicle - Biddulph Chronicle – Sandbach Chronicle

Proprietors: Heads (Congleton) Ltd.
Company number: 2154383 VAT: 157 331471

Market Square,
Congleton
CW12 1BW.

Ips0 Annual report, May 2023.

From: Jem Condliffe, chairman and editor, and responsible person in terms of Ips0.

Complaints in the year

Complaints are again down, probably because we still have fewer staff in this post-pandemic world and the computer system we adopted for lockdown means I get to see every story at least once before it goes near a page. I don't take out many howlers - usually it's names being wrong or minor facts not being right.

We've had two flurries of real complaints this year, both over same sex marriage. Evangelical Christians who believe the bible has words to say on this topic write and say same sex marriage is a sin (or an abomination) and then people who disagree write back and say they have no right to express this offensive opinion.

While I disagree with the antis' view, they clearly are entitled to hold it and it is, unfortunately, the law of the land to boot (whatever the Church of England thinks, it is prevented by law from carrying out same sex marriages).

Letters on migration and gender rights have also provoked complaints.

Court cases have produced the usual complaints, ranging from “you're gutter scum looking for a news story” to “you've not right to print my address”. I now write complainants a long and sympathetic email pointing out that court registers are tedious to write up, that we run all court cases and always have and they are not “sensationalist” and to “sell papers” (if only), and that the person they should be blaming is the criminal.

Although we do not alert every complainant to the existence of the editor's code, if we received a complaint that was a possible breach of the code, we would.

Ips0 asks how we would handle a story once a complaint had been made to it. The answer as always is: no differently to how we would handle a story once a complaint had been made by a reader. We answer to our readers, and we do not treat reader complaints less seriously because Ips0 is not involved.

As we pointed out to one complainant, a negative ruling to Ips0 would not produce a different outcome to what we do voluntarily.

Letters

I have continued to be rigorous in fact-checking letters. Rather than withhold letters that contain factual errors I factcheck underneath them, giving letter writers the option of expressing commonly held but erroneous opinions. This has proved popular and entertaining (and it entertains me). Brexit is no longer discussed, with the hot topics now being covid, excess deaths, gay rights and alleged crimes committed by migrants.

Two letters have been labelled as misleading at their head, one about local government (who was to blame for what and who had done what), the other about the fabricated assaults by migrants on New Year's Eve in Hamburg a few years back.

People also regularly write “but the editor can factcheck this”. The lone local representative of Lawrence Fox's party says factchecks are part of mainstream media's attempt to silence the truth even though, as I have pointed out, we print all his letters.

The company

We are a family-owned paid-for weekly whose titles date back to 1893. In an earlier form we go back further, and a similar business has operated from our address for at least 250 years. We publish four titles. The Congleton Chronicle is our flagship title.

We also publish the Biddulph Chronicle, Sandbach Chronicle (est 1944) and the Alsager Chronicle (est 2012).

We are a traditional paper in many ways but try to be outspoken and act as a voice for the community. We cover council meetings and magistrates' courts. We have a strong op-ed section, including editorial.

Standards

We adhere to the editor's code of conduct. All our stories are verified. We speak to both sides of any story. The only times this fails is with new trainees, when they are learning on the job. We have a standard footnote for stories for which we have not received a comment: "X was contacted for a comment but had not replied by the time we went to press". We do sometimes get complaints from people who comment at 3pm on a Wednesday – we aim to have the paper done by around 5pm – and whose comments do not go in. In these cases, we offer them a follow-up story the following week.

Checking

All stories are checked on the page by myself my deputy, and any stories that do not appear fair are pulled from that page, though this is rare. We are a small company so adherence to standards is perhaps different to larger news centres. I closely follow the news list for the week and will speak to a reporter if a possible risk can be seen. Stories are checked on the page, as stated above.

Complaints In theory, we have a formal complaints procedure, in practice it is rarely used. We had a complaints system, as stated in an information panel we print every week, which was not been used since Ipsos required these reports and I have since abandoned. We are accessible to readers, particularly via social media, and most readers communicate via email. Most of our staff live in the area. We have amicable relationships with local groups and societies.

Complaints arrive in a variety of ways: social media, the telephone, email, being stopped in the street, via family members. Any that concern factual errors or "proper" errors are recorded and investigated.

Complaints are channelled according to their seriousness. Most are dealt with by the reporters and more serious ones by our deputy editor. He may consult me.

As the old and now politically incorrect saying has it: "The man who never made a mistake never made anything"; mistakes go with the job. We have no problem printing corrections and apologies. We see apologies as a way of maintaining our standing in the community, and not as something to hide. If we make a mistake, we admit to it and people appreciate this.

Complaints where we have made a factual error, or error of judgement that warrants an apology, are logged. Emailed / Facebooked complaints are saved digitally. We investigate the causes and if appropriate, issue a clarification / apology / correction, depending on the circumstance. If the error is more than a simple mistake, we will consult the staff member who is responsible, to avoid the mistake happening again.

Traceability

No stories go on the web that have not been in the paper, although few stories go on the web. Any excerpts of hard news stories that go on social media are subbed and have been in the paper. Some community news and police alerts will go on social media before being in the paper but have full traceability.

We are a training ground for reporters and our IT was designed with this in mind. We keep copies of all stories in the raw and subbed forms. This was to allow reporters to access copies of their original stories and subbed stories for their logbooks, but it means we have copies of everything as it goes into the system. We keep copies of all type in the original form it was emailed to us, copies after pre-subbing processing has occurred and copies of the final stories. Anything posted on social media will have its source saved.

Training: we take on trainees who leave once they have passed the NCE. We do not have a separate training system for mistakes – training is an integral part of our system.

Positioning

All corrections go on the letters page. We have noted Ipsos rulings on letters pages, but our letters pages are the best-read part of the paper, so we are in no sense "burying" corrections. If the complaint was about a front-page story (or any other prominent page lead) the correction would go there if we/the complainant felt this was necessary.

Jem Condliffe
Chairman
Responsible person.