

IMPRESS FAILS TO MEET ITS OWN STANDARDS

Press releases often carry a section at the end, typically headed “Notes for editors”, containing background information and references relating to the release itself or the issuing organisation. On 26 September 2017 the approved press regulator, IMPRESS, published a news item entitled “IMPRESS is growing fast, with publishers reaching 4.5 million readers”. The release went on to explain that IMPRESS was consolidating its position, with a standards code in force and more publishers joining. All pretty routine stuff – but the devil was in the detail for those who read on and reached item 7 of the notes. This was a link to a document entitled “Addressing concerns about IMPRESS’ impartiality: Final report of the internal review panel.”

The report concluded that the Chief Executive of IMPRESS, Jonathan Heawood, and two members of the board – a journalist, Emma Jones and Professor Máire Messenger Davies – had all breached IMPRESS’ internal standards. In the case of Mr Heawood, the report found he had shared a pattern of material in the form of 19 retweets which made generalised criticisms of the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, and which showed support for the Stop Funding Hate campaign. Ms Jones, in an article, and Professor Davies, in a number of retweets, were also adjudged to have risked creating the impression of bias by making highly critical comments directed (in the case of Ms Jones) towards Fleet Street publishers in general and (Professor Messenger) at the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and the Murdoch press. Mr Heawood’s postings in particular had been the subject of comment by the News Media Organisation (NMO), which represents national and local newspapers, and criticism by some titles, including *The Sun*. The report, which is dated 17 May 2017 but did not come to general attention until 26 September, stated that the Press Recognition Panel (PRP) was right to indicate the breaches of internal standards by all three parties raised serious issues about IMPRESS’ compliance with criterion 23 for recognition under the Royal Charter for self-regulation of the press. Criterion 23 provides:

The membership of a regulatory body should be open to all publishers on fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory terms, including making membership potentially available on different terms for different types of publisher.

Compiled by three IMPRESS board members (including the chairman, Walter Merricks), the report makes 20 recommendations for action and seeks the views of the PRP on these and the new draft IMPRESS Code of Conduct. Jonathan Heawood, Ms Jones and Professor Davies have all admitted unintentionally breaching IMPRESS internal standards, and will not sit as members of a new regulatory subcommittee once it is established. The final paragraph of the report (14.4) summarises the issues facing the recognised press regulator:

We believe that IMPRESS faces a real challenge regarding how it balances and manages the requirement to have individuals with experience of the press involved in its Board and committee while

Articles

Jury direction – an antipodean experiment 2

A more fundamental distinction for the contemporary economy between employee and independent contractor status 9

Institute News 17

Articles (cont’d)

How realistic are the fears about Brexit? 24

at the same time retaining the confidence in its independence and impartiality of a partisan press with strong views on the form of regulation and the public. It must embrace that challenge. We believe it can.

The future of IMPRESS must be in doubt after the findings of its internal report and in view of other outside pressures on the organisation. The NMA has written to the PRP asking how it intends to proceed in the light of the breaches of standards by the IMPRESS Chief Executive and two board members. Notwithstanding the optimistic tone of its 26 September press release, the membership of IMPRESS comprises about 41 publishers producing some 70 mainly local and specialist publications; the organisation has been boycotted by national newspaper publishers who have either backed the unofficial regulator, IPSO (the Independent Press Standards Organisation), or remained unattached to any supervisory body. The Conservative Party is committed to repealing section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which provided a strong financial incentive for titles to sign up to IMPRESS by carrying the threat of exposing newspapers not signed up to an approved regulator to paying the costs of both sides regardless of whether a complaint was rejected.

The national press continues to draw attention to the link between IMPRESS and the former Formula 1 President Max Mosley, whose father, Sir Oswald Mosley, was leader of the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s. Max Mosley, a leading campaigner for press control, used family money to bankroll IMPRESS, and his perceived lack of impartiality has led to opposition from bodies such as the NMA. In 2008 he brought a successful privacy action against the *News of the World* over the newspaper’s false claim that he had taken part in a “Nazi orgy”.

A legal challenge to the decision to recognise IMPRESS was brought by the NMA, but rejected by the High Court on 12 October which refused permission to appeal - something the NMA may contest.

The PRP will consider what action to take against IMPRESS at a forthcoming meeting. Whatever the outcome of this, the model of press regulation introduced by the Royal Charter has few champions and as matters stand the likelihood is the government will eventually seek to introduce a compromise self-regulatory system with IPSO at its centre.

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