

MEDIA (CO)-REGULATION IN IRELAND - A SUCCESS STORY?

The Irish press regulation system is unique in how it operates. The Press Council of Ireland (PCI) is finely balanced, culturally sensitive and country specific. The regulatory body, while *recognised* in legislation, is not a statutory regulator. The 2009 act does not regulate the press; it merely enshrines in law what the press itself agreed to do by setting up the press council and ombudsman's office.

The PCI and the Office of the Press Ombudsman have been established by and large due to lobbying of a PR company, paid by the press industry in 2007 and 2008 respectively. The industry resisted the plans of the government to establish a statutory press regulatory body.

Both the Press Council and the Press Ombudsman are independent of government and, in operation, independent of the media. Newspapers are free to sign up or not (though all national newspapers are members, as well as virtually every regional paper). Moreover, all British newspapers with Irish editions subscribe to the code of ethics.



The powers of the ombudsman are limited, however. The office has no power to initiate inquiries of its own volition, and can only act on receipt of a complaint. The only sanction is a finding against a newspaper, which that newspaper must publish with due prominence.

The PCI has 13 members, each of whom is appointed by an independent Appointments Committee. The Appointments Committee seeks expressions of interest for the independent members of the Press Council by public advertisement, and chooses for appointment six of those who have responded. The Chairman is the seventh independent member of the Press Council. The Committee also appoints six members of the Press Council reserved for individuals with relevant experience of journalism and the press industry, on the basis of nominations received by the press organisations that participated in the Press Industry Steering Committee.

In short, there are seven independent members, five members representing the interests of media owners, and

one member representing the interests of journalists. The chair must be an independent member.

The act also lays down three broad criteria for the code of practice, namely:

- a) ethical standards and practices;
- b) rules and standards intended to ensure the accuracy of reporting where a person's reputation is likely to be affected;
- c) rules and standards intended to ensure that intimidation and harassment doesn't occur and that the privacy, integrity and dignity of a person is respected.

The Office of the Press Ombudsman received an average of 365 complaints per annum over 11 years, including online-only news publications. The Press Ombudsman has made a formal decision on 351 complaints (upholding 128 of these). In addition another 207 complaints have been resolved through conciliation or mediation.

There is a built in appeals mechanism whereby either the complainant or the publisher can appeal the decision of the press ombudsman on one or more of three grounds. Appeals are considered by the full press council. There have been 173 appeals in 11 years with the press ombudsman decision being overturned on 13 occasions.

The PCI has criticised social media as being "unaccountable" and for providing a space for "conspiracy theorists and "anti-science scaremongers" in its 2017 annual report.

Compiled by SCM (2019) from:

Accountable Journalism (2017). Europe: Ireland, <https://accountablejournalism.org/press-councils/press-council-ireland>

Greenslade, Roy (2017). After Leveson: how Ireland's 'underpinned' press regulation works, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2013/mar/21/press-regulation-ireland>

PRRI (25 May 2018). Latest Report of The Press Council of Ireland and the Office of the Press Ombudsman, <https://www.prii.ie/news/latest-report-of-the-press-council-of-ireland-and-the-office-of-the-press-ombudsman.html>

Press Council of Ireland (n.d.) <http://cullencommunications.ie/press-council-of-ireland/>