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The **Chartered** Institute of **Journalists**

RESPONSE TO PUBLICITY CODE ENFORCEMENT CONSULTATION

Protecting the independent press from unfair competition – response to consultation

The following is the submission from the Chartered Institute of Journalists, (CIOJ).

Formed in 1884, the CIOJ is the world's oldest established professional body for journalists, and a representative voice of media and communications professionals throughout the UK and the Commonwealth. We are a non-party political membership organisation and a trade union (IOJ TU).

Q.1: Views on the proposed legislation are invited, and in particular do consultees see the proposals as fully delivering the commitment to give greater force to the Publicity Code by putting compliance on a statutory basis?

The CIOJ warmly welcomes this proposal to put the previously voluntary Publicity Code on the statute book.

The CIOJ has been campaigning vigorously for some time on this issue, which we feel is vital to protect our local newspaper industry. We have lobbied MPs and made representations to Parliamentary inquiries on this subject.

Our members have become increasingly concerned at the creeping impact of these town-hall 'Pravdas' on local newspapers, mainly in terms of loss of advertising revenue.

There is also a growing trend towards local authorities setting up their own in-house publicity teams, often using former journalists, to promote their own version of the LA's 'news'. Such 'news' is often biased and unbalanced in its reporting, giving local residents a skewed version of the facts behind the way their local council is run, and failing to highlight any shortfall in standards that may occur.

Only local media, such as the local press, which is independent of political or other influence, can hold local authorities to account for the way they handle taxpayers' money.

In addition to stifling freedom of speech by preventing direct contact between council staff and journalists, these press offices are producing the sort of slick but biased publications which are doing so much damage to local newspapers.

The not inconsiderable cost of such publicity teams is funded by taxpayers' money and this would seem to contradict the section of the Code which states that council publications should be "cost effective and objective."

The CIOJ believes that taxpayers' money should not be used to fund local government campaigns or as a lobbying tool.

Some LAs have been claiming that their publications are "cost-effective" because they are

supported by advertising. Yet often the so-called ads turn out to be other LA departments advertising their services. So the authority is simply using the budget of one department to fund another – all of it from the public purse.

Some LAs claim that their own publications can be justified because local papers no longer have the high circulation figures they once did, so advertising in them is not cost-effective.

The CIOJ believes this is based on a false premise. All local newspapers now have a web presence and increasing use of the internet by all sections of the community means the effective circulation of local papers is as high, if not higher, than it has ever been.

In addition, many local papers are either free, or have free editions, which are delivered to virtually every home in the local area.

Q2: If there is alternative to the power of direction, how will this meet the aim of improved enforcement of the code?

There is no viable alternative to backing the Code with legislation. Many LAs have continued to flout the guidelines, proving they are unwilling to comply on a voluntary basis, and must now be forced to do so.

A further point should be added – if a local authority publication is the subject of a court order, or has been warned about contravening the guidelines, then it should be forced to print this in a prominent place in its publication.

Q3: This consultation invites evidence of the circumstances where the code was not met and the implications of this on competition in local media

There are numerous examples of LAs ignoring the guidelines on frequency of publication and content.

One such is the Greenwich Time, which continues to publish weekly in direct contravention of the Government's guidelines. In addition, it mimics the design of local newspapers, a further contravention of the Code.

The Code's recommendations that LA publications should be "objective, even-handed and appropriate" are flouted by this publication, which apparently ran a story about Greenwich Council freezing its council tax on its front page for three consecutive editions.

There have also been claims that the council sometimes holds back stories from the local press until they are published as exclusives in its own paper.

Another example is the Waltham Forest News, which has been published fortnightly in defiance of Government guidelines. One of our members has been monitoring this publication and estimates that it costs at least £500,000 a year. The council claims it costs the taxpayer nothing because costs are offset by advertising. But closer inspection reveals that the ad revenue is mainly generated from inter-departmental adverts, so the tax-payer is still footing the bill.

The managing editor of Newsquest North and East London told our member: "There is no question at all that the Council's [Waltham Forest's] decision to launch its own 'newspaper' [and] withdraw virtually all of its advertising from the Guardian Series delivered a mortal blow to the Guardian Series." This resulted in redundancies and the closure of their Chingford office.

The impact on local newspapers of loss of advertising revenue is two-fold; if LAs offer advertising space to local businesses in their publications at a rate which undercuts that of local papers, then it is no surprise when advertisers desert their local newspapers.

In addition, LAs have been withdrawing their own support of local newspapers by ceasing to place public notices in them, a practice which was commonplace until recently.

We suggest that local authorities should be forced to place public notices in local newspapers. In doing so, LAs would be supporting local industry – not just the jobs of journalists, but of the many other associated local jobs they represent such as newsagents and printers.

In conclusion:

The CIOJ is very concerned about the implications of LA actions detailed in this consultation, not least because our local newspapers are facing huge challenges to their future survival from areas such as loss of advertising revenue and the implications – financial and otherwise – of statutory regulation of the Press.

The loss of our local Press presents a greater threat to democracy and will have far-reaching implications for our local communities which they serve.

We are therefore very pleased to see this initiative, which will help to support our local newspapers, and we hope that it will be implemented in full as soon as possible.