

The Presswise Trust, working on unethical media behaviour encounters financial problems.

Bill Norris

For the past nine years, a UK-based media ethics charity called The PressWise Trust has been operating a unique service. For ordinary citizens who suffer at the hands of unethical media behaviour - as opposed to those who can afford to rush to law - it has been offering free confidential advice and information, and practical help in getting their complaints resolved. The repercussions of intrusive or unfair reporting can be devastating to the private citizen. More than one person has been driven to suicide by the stigma associated with publication of erroneous facts.

The PressWise staff - all experienced journalists - investigate complaints, explain media practices and the regulatory system, negotiate with editors and provide tenacious advocacy when required. Over the years, a steady stream of enquiries about media malpractice have been referred to them by Citizens Advice Bureaux, solicitors and voluntary organisations.

It may seem surprising that such a service is necessary. After all, the UK has a Press Complaints Commission, lavishly financed by the newspaper industry, which is supposed to deal with complaints from the public. The public perception, however, is that the PCC is unduly biased towards the industry it serves; a perception to which many of its decisions bear witness. It was dissatisfied complainants who set up the Trust in the first place.

There are also five regulatory bodies for broadcasting funded by the industry and the state. These are shortly to be merged under a new regime which is expected to apply an even lighter touch to content regulation.. Hence the need for PressWise.

“We believe that press freedom is a responsibility exercised by journalists on behalf of the public,” says Trust Director Mike Jempson who gave up a career in the media to develop PressWise. “In an open democracy journalists should be trusted by the public rather than despised.”

“Our work is designed to improve standards and support ethical media practices,” he says. “We are only too aware of the trauma that can be caused by abuses of media power. We have witnessed a great hunger for information and ideas about ethical practices, especially in the merging democracies of the former Soviet Union, and in Africa and Asia. Sadly, there is less enthusiasm in the UK where the media are driven by ratings and revenue.”

In recent years the Trust has expanded its activities into the training field, visiting 29 countries with courses for media professionals and NGOs on a variety of ethical topics. These courses, carried out in partnership with the British Council, the European Commission, the International Federation of Journalists, UNICEF, the World Health Organisation and the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund among others, have largely concentrated on the media treatment of children.

Journalists from Armenia to the Philippines, from Macedonia to Mauritius, have been helped to understand that their reporting of children affected by conflict or disaster, crime or sexual abuse, can radically alter their subjects' lives if not handled with sensitivity.

Nor is that all. Since 1999, working in partnership with refugee community organisations, the Trust has been operating the RAM Project (Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media) to highlight the issue of inaccurate and prejudicial coverage of asylum issues in the UK and Europe. The project operates its own website at www.ramproject.org.uk, which is in addition to the Trust's own comprehensive website at www.presswise.org.uk. Now work is proceeding on a project to encourage world-wide standards on the reporting of suicide.

It is a not undistinguished record for a small and under-funded charity. But funding, or rather the lack of it, seems set to bring it all to an end. PressWise operates with one full-time and three part-time staff on an annual budget of less than £100,000 which, to set it in context, is less than two-thirds of the salary paid to the chairman of the Press Complaints Commission for his part-time services.

Until now core funding has been provided principally by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and contributions from the public service union UNISON, supplemented in recent years by earnings from training contracts. The former funding is now exhausted, and the latter is insufficient to maintain operations. Unless a new source of finance is discovered by May 1, the PressWise Trust will be forced to dismiss its staff, close down its website, and cease to exist. It will be a pity.

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