

PCC Complaints in the Year of Leveson: 2012 Complaints Data and Trends



*The hacking scandal and Leveson Inquiry have stimulated public scrutiny of the practices and activities of the British press. In the midst of this scrutiny, the UK Press Complaints Commission **has released** its overall press complaints statistics for 2012. LSE's Jacopo Genovese analyses the numbers, and asks whether the greater public attention has had a significant effect on press behaviour.*

The Press Complaints Commission has just published the **Annual Review for 2012**, which summarises the data on complaints made by readers on the content published on newspapers or magazines, and the consequent decisions taken by the PCC. In 2012 newspaper behaviour and the role and reform of the PCC received a great deal of attention because of the Leveson Inquiry. There was also news in March 2012 that the PCC would apparently close down. As the Annual Review shows, rather than closing down, the PCC handled more complaints than ever before. A close look at the data indicates that the upsurge in complaints does not necessarily mean an increase in violations of the Editor's Code. In fact, although more cases with merit were ruled upon, a higher percentage of those decisions did not find violations of the Code.

Notes About the Data

Before starting the analysis, it is worth noting that following a decision taken in 2011, the Press Complaints Commission has moved into a "transitional phase" (PCC Annual Review 2011, p. 1), which has resulted – among other things – in the publication of shorter and more concise annual reports. However, this transition has not affected the quality of the statistics reported. It should also be noted that way the data has been categorised by the PCC has slightly changed over the years, somewhat complicating year-to-year comparison and the analysis of trends.

The Overall Picture

Table 1: Total Complaints, Rulings and Agreed Resolutions 2007-2012

Year	Total Complaints	Total Rulings or Agreed Resolutions	Sub-Categories of Total Rulings				
			Breaches of the Code [^]	Upheld Adjudications ^{^^}	Successfully Mediated Cases	Rulings with No Breaches of the Code	Total Key Cases with No Breach Ruling following Formal Adjudication
2012	12191	1937	101	13	535	1274	14
2011	7341	1713	102	20	597	986	8
2010	*7000	1687	188	18	557	***924	****0
2009	**37000	***1731	111	18	***609	993	****0
2008	4698	1420	102	24	552	***742	****0
2007	4340	1229	154	16	483	560	16

[^]Complaints where redress was obtained but did not resolve the case to the complainants' satisfaction

^{^^}Critical public ruling against titles that had breached the Code and had failed to remedy to the breach

*Approximation

**Described as "Total contacts in writing"; Approximation

***Estimation

****Includes 68 cases in which the matter "was resolved even before the Commission launched its investigation"

*****Category not mentioned in the report

Table 1 – Total Complaints, Rulings and Agreed Resolutions, from 2007 to 2012 (Source: PCC)

Table 1 reports the total amounts of complaints received by the PCC from 2007 to 2012, and the corresponding data on total rulings, subdivided by category. The number of total complaints has constantly increased (the data from 2009 is not reliable, as it refers to "total contacts in writing" rather than to a formal number of complaints). This trend can at least in part be explained by the increased recourse to email as a medium through which complaints are made (PCC Annual Review 2009, p. 6). The year 2012, in particular, has seen a sharp increase (66%) in total complaints; however, more complaints do not necessarily translate in a higher number of cases. A single article that has been reported to the PCC can – and on average does – receive multiple complaints.

More Complaints, More Breaches?

Table 2: Case Outcomes as a percentage of Total Cases

Year	Total Rulings or Agreed Resolutions	Rulings/Complaints	Sub-Categories of Total Rulings (% of Total Rulings)				
			Breaches of the Code [^]	Upheld Adjudications ^{^^}	Successfully Mediated Cases	Rulings with No Breaches of the Code	Total Key Cases with Breach Ruling following Formal Adjudication
2012	1937	15,89%	5,21%	0,67%	27,62%	65,77%	0,72%
2011	1713	23,33%	5,95%	1,17%	34,85%	57,56%	0,47%
2010	1687	24,10%	11,14%	1,07%	33,02%	54,77%	0%
2009	1731	**4,67%	6,41%	1,04%	35,18%	57,37%	0%
2008	1420	30,23%	7,18%	1,69%	38,87%	52,25%	0%
2007	1229	28,32%	12,53%	1,30%	39,30%	45,57%	1,30%

[^]Complaints where redress was obtained but did not resolve the case to the complainants' satisfaction

^{^^}Critical public ruling against titles that had breached the Code and had failed to remedy to the breach

**Calculation based on "total contacts in writing" rather than in total complaints

Table 2 – Case Outcome as % of Total Cases (Source: PCC)

The increase in the overall number of total rulings, does not necessarily mean a higher number of violations of the Editor's Code by newspapers. This is due to the fact that there some cases triggered by complaints are determined to have merit but still not involve a breach of the Editor's Code. What Table 2 shows, in fact, is that despite a 13.08% increase in total rulings or agreed resolutions from 2011 to 2012, the share of those that were judged to not represent any breach of the Code increased as well from 57.56% to 65.77%. This is further shown by the column

“Rulings/Complaints”, which reports the ratio between “Total Rulings and Agreed Resolutions” and “Total Complaints”. This measure has gotten smaller over the last three years, despite the increasing numbers of overall complaints.

Table 3: Total Other Outcomes, from 2009 to 2012 (data not reported for 2007 and 2008)

Year	Total Complaints	Other Outcomes					
		No Finding possible	Complaints Outside PCC's Remit	Complaints Not Pursued	Complaints Raising Matters of Taste and Decency	Complaints Ruled Out as being from Third Parties	Complaints Disallowed on Grounds of Delay
2012	12191	7	715	2215	100	109	12
2011	7341	3	751	2125	96	106	13
2010	7000	8	821	2774	78	102	2
2009	37000	8	777	2600	196	155	5

Table 3 – Total Other Outcomes, from 2009 to 2012 (data not reported for 2007 and 2008) (Source: PCC)

Moreover, the number of total complaints includes all the complaints that have not been pursued before the end of each year, the complaints without merit, and the complaints associated to the cases where no finding was possible for irremediable conflicts in the evidence. In other words, the total figure includes ones that are not worthy of consideration by the PCC. If the increase in overall complaints was due to an increasing number of unsustainable or frivolous complaints the number of meritless cases would also be increasing. However, looking at Table 3, we can see that there has not been great variation in absolute terms over the last 4 years in the number of meritless cases. This indicates that the overall increase specifically reflects increasing numbers of complaints that have merit and are appropriate to the remit and functions of the PCC.

Breaches and Potential Breaches of the Editor's Code

Table 4: Percentage variation from the previous year within sub-categories of rulings

Year	Total Rulings or Agreed Resolutions	Sub-Categories of Total Rulings (% of Total Rulings)					Total Key Cases with Breach Ruling following Formal Adjudication
		Breaches of the Code [^]	Upheld Adjudications ^{^^}	Successfully Mediated Cases	Rulings with No Breaches of the Code		
2012	13,08%	-0,98%	-35,00%	-10,39%	29,21%	75,00%	
2011	1,54%	-45,74%	11,11%	7,18%	6,71%	N.A.	
2010	-2,54%	69,37%	0,00%	-8,54%	-6,95%	N.A.	
2009	21,90%	8,82%	-25,00%	10,33%	33,83%	N.A.	
2008	15,54%	-33,77%	50,00%	14,29%	32,50%	-100,00%	

[^]Complaints where redress was obtained but did not resolve the case to the complainants' satisfaction

^{^^}Critical public ruling against titles that had breached the Code and had failed to remedy to the breach

Table 4 – Year-to-Year Variation (Source: PCC)

Those cases that have merit fall into four categories in terms of outcomes: “Breaches of the Code”, “Upheld Adjudications”, “Successfully Mediated Cases” and “Rulings with no Breaches of the Code”. The first three represent the situations in which the PCC has ruled that a publisher has breached the Editor's Code, or those contentious situations where the parties reach an agreement without a formal ruling, which may or may not involve a breach of the Code. Table 4 shows the year-to-year variation of the data, illustrating the increase or decrease from the preceding year in each category, and we can see that in 2012 there has been in fact a reduction in those first three categories in which the newspaper was determined to be in the wrong.

What does the Data Tell Us?

Looking at the statistics from the PCC Annual Review for 2012, we can conclude that compared to 2011 there has been an increase in the cases handled by the PCC. There has also been some reduction in the proportion of these in which the PCC determined that publishers had breached the Editor's Code. It would still be a bit of a stretch to claim, **as some have**, that this necessarily reflects an improvement in press behaviour.

As we have also seen, 2012 has been characterised by a significant increase in the total number of complaints and in the number of total rulings and agreements, which could suggest that the press has been under a greater degree of scrutiny from the public. The announcement of the closure of the PCC in the early part of the year might have deterred some people from reporting cases, but it might have been counterbalanced by the publicity of the Leveson Inquiry, making people more aware of the PCC and its function. There was, after all, an increase in cases with merit and within the remit of the PCC.

Finally, we see that the increase in the total number of complaints corresponds to a higher number of total rulings or agreed resolutions; but these have not resulted in a greater number of adjudicated breaches of the Code, and the number of rulings in favour of publishers has increased. Does this indicate that the Leveson Inquiry led to more responsible behaviour by newspapers and editors? Or could it be that with newspapers "under attack", the PCC began ruling more defensively? Or could it be simply that an increasing number of people who feel wronged by the press are looking to the PCC for a remedy, but do not understand the subtleties of what constitutes a breach?

The post gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

References

[PCC Annual Review 2012](#)

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