

# A New Standards Code for the Press

## Code consultation

Deadline for responses: 5pm on Thursday 29  
September 2016

The logo for IMPRESS, consisting of the word "IMPRESS" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The text is centered between two solid black horizontal bars, one above and one below the text.

IMPRESS: The Independent Monitor for the Press CIC is the first truly independent regulator of the press in the United Kingdom. We exist to promote the freedom of the press and to encourage high standards in news reporting. As part of this commitment, IMPRESS is developing a new standards code for the press.

A standards code should embody the ethical standards expected of publishers, while not unduly infringing their capacity to investigate and report on important stories in the public interest. The code should be responsive to the challenges facing the media, as well as to calls from the public for hard-hitting, investigative journalism that upholds ethical standards.

The IMPRESS Standards Code is currently in draft form. The draft code sets out the standards we expect IMPRESS publishers to follow in newsgathering and in publishing information whether in the form of text, audio, photographic or other visual content. We expect our publishers to ensure that anyone contributing to their publications follows the same standards.

After the publication of a new standards code, IMPRESS will also issue accompanying guidance. The code will be regularly reviewed.

## **IMPRESS draft standards code**

**The IMPRESS draft Standards Code contains a preamble, a public interest exception and ten clauses. The clauses have been arranged alphabetically. All clauses are of equal value.**

### **Preamble**

**This section explains the purpose of the code and the obligations of publishers to uphold and enforce the code as set out in the IMPRESS Regulatory Scheme.**

All publishers regulated by IMPRESS agree to abide by the following rules, which together constitute the IMPRESS Standards Code.

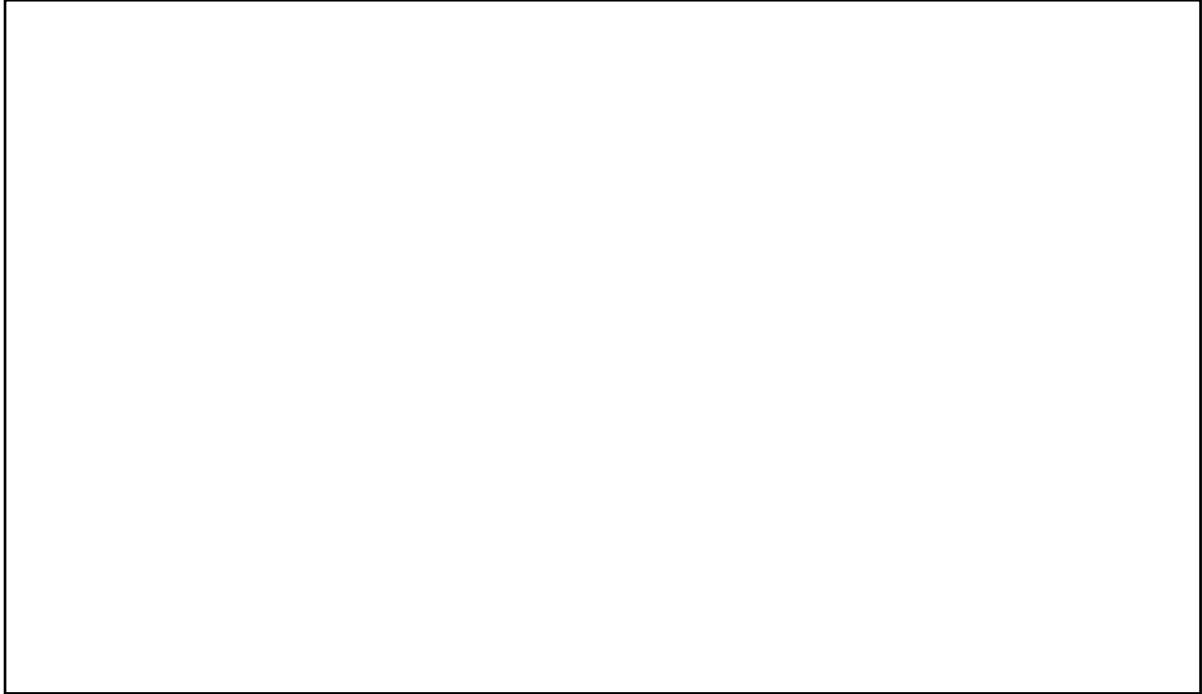
This Code is intended to be:

- A practical working tool which enables journalists, editors and publishers to do their jobs;
- Easily understood by the public; and
- Enforceable through regulation.

Publishers will be held directly responsible for compliance with this Code, which applies to all content and newsgathering activities for which publishers are responsible under the terms of their Regulatory Scheme Agreement with IMPRESS, regardless of the medium or platform of publication. All references here to publishers apply equally to anyone acting under a publisher's authority. All references here to journalists apply equally to anyone acting in a journalistic capacity.

**This Code is distinct from the law and publishers are separately responsible for ensuring that they comply with the law.**

**Question 5: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**



## **Public interest**

**This exception aims to recognise that there may be circumstances where a particular method of news gathering or item of content, which would otherwise breach one or more clauses of the code, is justified. This exception is intended to protect hard-hitting, investigative journalism where a publisher can demonstrate a clear and important reason for undertaking specific conduct or publishing a news story. Our public consultations and polling show that the public recognise a public interest justification in stories that, for example, expose corruption or wrongdoing, and which hold the government to account. The exception relates to specific clauses in the code. These are identified where relevant.**

**The Code Committee is particularly interested in hearing your views on the non-exhaustive list of public interest factors and the procedural steps a publisher must engage in to justify a public interest exception.**

## **PUBLIC INTEREST**

In certain circumstances, there may be a public interest justification for a particular method of newsgathering or item of content which may otherwise breach the Code. A public interest means that the public has a legitimate stake in a story because of the contribution it makes to a matter of importance to society. Such interests include, but are not limited to, the following:

- a.** The revelation or discussion of matters such as serious impropriety, incompetence or unethical behaviour that affects the public;
- b.** Putting the record straight where an individual or organisation has misled the public on a matter of public importance;
- c.** Revealing that a person or organisation may be failing to comply with any legal obligation they have;
- d.** The proper administration of government;
- e.** Open, fair and effective justice;
- f.** Public health and safety;
- g.** National security;
- h.** The prevention and detection of crime and fraud; and
- i.** The discussion or analysis of artistic or cultural works.

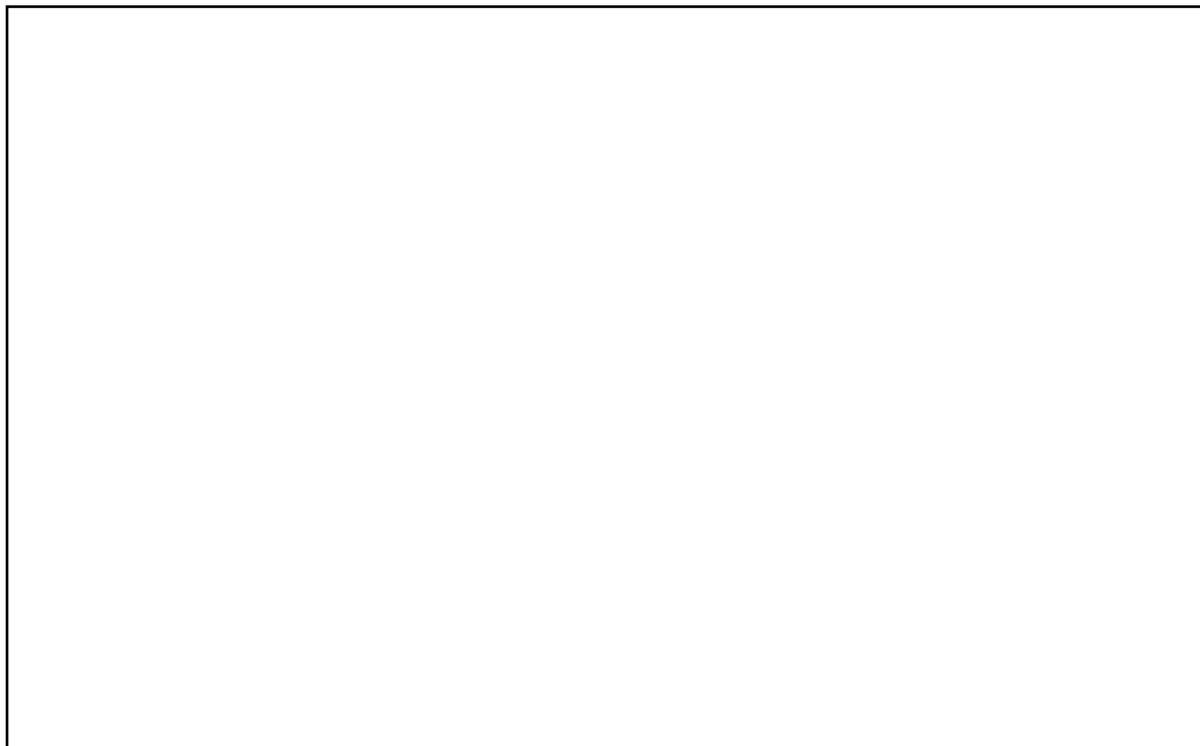
Where a publisher identifies a public interest justification for a particular method of newsgathering or item of content, they should, when undertaking an action that may otherwise breach the Code, make a contemporaneous note, which:

- i.** Establishes their reason for believing that the action is in the public interest;
- ii.** Demonstrates that relevant code-compliant measures have been considered before authorising the action;
- iii.** Explains their view that the action is likely to achieve the desired outcome; and
- iv.** Explains their view that any likely harm caused by the act does not outweigh the public interest in the action.

Where a public interest exception may apply, this is identified in the relevant clause.

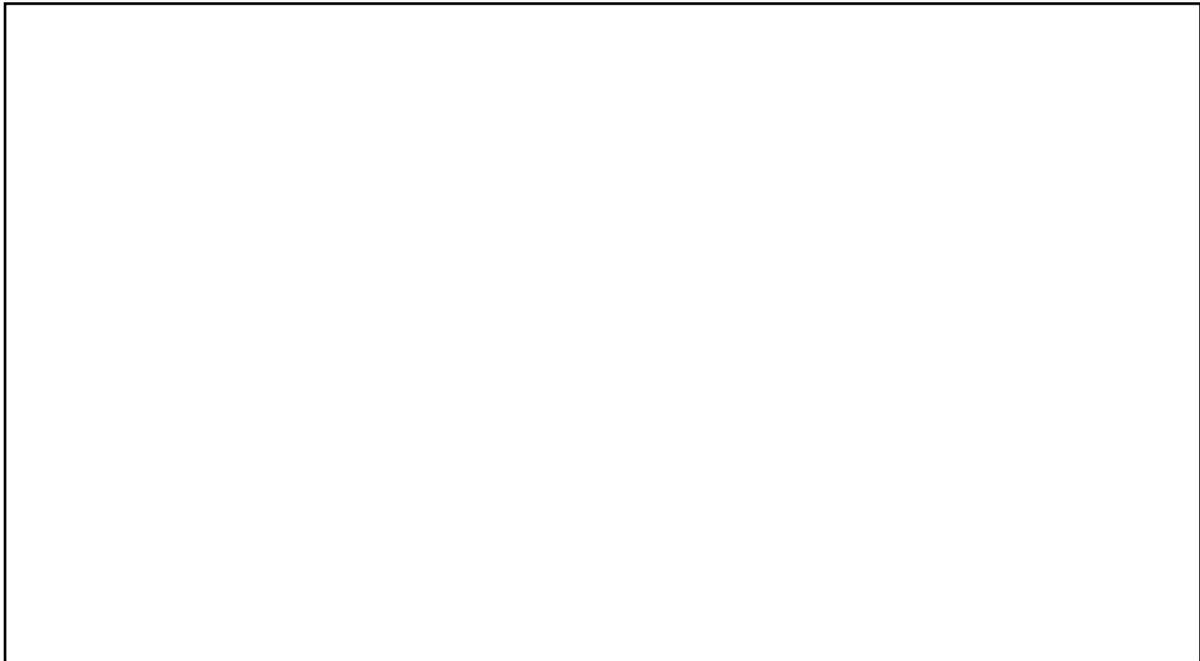
**Question 6: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**

There has long been debate about what is in the ‘public interest’ and editorial decision making processes and interpretations of this. Academics have argued that often there is a blurred line between what is in the ‘public interest’ and what is ‘of interest to the public’. Based on over ten years of research in the area of children, young people and the media, I would assert that it is vitally important to ensure that the Code and supplementary guidelines and materials ensures that the ‘best interests’ of children and young people, a key aspect of international rights standards, should be the primary consideration during editorial decision-making processes. In all dealings with children and young people, their ‘best interests’, their rights to privacy, protection and their well-being and family life should not be produced in the research behind and the news making process itself. As demonstrated in research I have conducted (Gordon, 2012), the ‘public interest’ defence is often used by the media to justify practices and approaches taken, however this defence should not apply to any situation or circumstances in which children’s and young people’s safety and best interests could be compromised. The Code and the supplementary materials needs to capture this point and ensure that the necessary protection mechanisms are in place.



**Question 7: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**

As outlined above it has been demonstrated in research I have conducted (Gordon, 2012), how the 'public interest' defence is often used by the media (particularly those conducting revelatory and investigative journalism outputs) to justify practices and approaches taken, however this defence should not apply to any situation or circumstances in which children's and young people's safety and best interests could be compromised. The Code and the supplementary materials needs to capture this point and ensure that the necessary protection mechanisms are in place. Regular training in children's rights; the international instruments and core practices; as well as child protection measures, needs to be built into journalism training and the codes of practice and supplementary guidance materials. This area needs to be regularly updated in line with judicial decision-making and developments in the law.



## **Clause 1: Accuracy**

**This clause aims to ensure a commitment to accuracy and truthfulness in news reporting. The public ranked accuracy as the most important ethical standard that should guide publishers. The public also ranked the principle of balance highly. In broadcasting, balance generally refers to a requirement of impartiality. By balance in relation to the print media, the public were in favour of a standard that ensures a publisher does not mislead through distorting or misrepresenting facts. This was reflected in public workshops where members of the public articulated a desire for honesty in the way news stories are published. Clause 1.4 aims to strike a balance between protecting the media's right to be partisan, while requiring that a publisher not misrepresent or distort facts.**

**The reference to correcting any 'significant inaccuracy' with 'due prominence' in clause 1.2 means that only serious inaccuracies must be corrected. This threshold bars trivial claims of inaccuracy. 'Due prominence' requires that the placement and size of a correction be proportionate to the placement and size of the original news article and the potential harm caused by the inaccuracy.**

### **1. ACCURACY**

- 1.1.** Publishers must take all reasonable steps to ensure accuracy.
- 1.2.** Publishers must correct any significant inaccuracy with due prominence at the earliest opportunity.
- 1.3.** Publishers must always distinguish clearly between statements of fact, conjecture and opinion.
- 1.4.** Whilst free to be partisan, publishers must not misrepresent or distort the facts.

**Question 8: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**

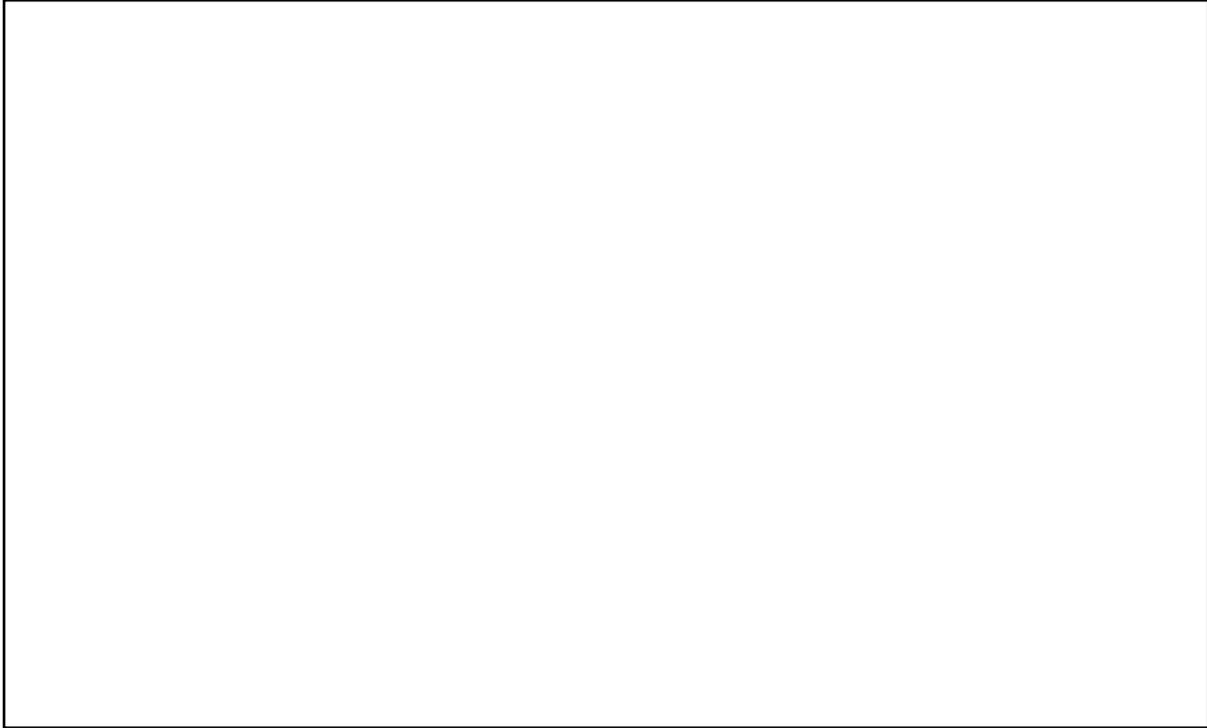
Based on my research findings and analysis (Gordon, 2012) I argue that those working in the media must ensure that the news items they produce are accurate. Those working in the media must guard against distorting the facts; producing news items that include generalisations, exaggerations, or that are sensationalist. If something is published that is inaccurate, the media needs to be ensure that all inaccuracies are amended and that this is done so within a reasonable time period.

Accuracy also relates to the contextualisation of media coverage and it is important that the Code and supplementary materials details the importance of contextualising the lives and experiences of individuals and social groups being reported on, as well as the situation being reported. Journalists, editors and others working in the media must ensure that the language they employ is impartial, and the Code and supplementary materials must stress the importance of avoiding language that is inflammatory, provocative or that incites hatred.

It is essential that the Code and supplementary materials highlight the importance of ensuring a right to reply, especially where inaccuracies or misinterpretations occur, the individual or social group affected should be guaranteed a right to reply, which would then enable corrections and/or the inclusion of additional significant information, in order to ensure that a wholly accurate picture is presented.



**Question 9: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**

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## Clause 2: Attribution

This clause aims to protect people's intellectual property by ensuring that publishers do not plagiarise material. This could occur where a publisher fails to credit the creator of material. This is particularly important given the ease with which content can be taken, and shared, from social media. A requirement not to plagiarise news content is common in press codes around the world.

### 2. ATTRIBUTION

2.1. Publishers must take all reasonable steps to identify and credit the originator of any third party content.

2.2. Publishers must correct any failure to credit the originator of any third party content with due prominence at the earliest opportunity.

### Question 10: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?

I have written about the media's use of children's and young people's images and comments taken directly from their social media pages. Please see: <https://theconversation.com/how-children-feel-when-journalists-exploit-their-social-media-profiles-49064>

The use of social media images of children is a grey area under the law. Significant questions exist over whether the media should access and publish images and comments from the social media accounts of children and young people and how appropriate it is for journalists to initiate direct contact with minors. The IMPRESS Code needs to make a stand on this issue.

It is very clear from the research I have conducted that regulatory rules are routinely breached by the media, often without an individual, such as a child or young people being aware of this. I have argued in the above piece that since their inception, there has existed criticism of regulatory bodies and frameworks over bodies that oversee the media.

In my work, I argue that very substantial changes are necessary in the media's professional and ethical practices and the regulatory processes, which now must take social media and journalists' use of it into account. Developing and also future policies and practices in this area must value and consider children's and young people's voices and experiences. IMPRESS needs to incorporate this into devising their charter Code and the supplementary guidance materials.

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**Question 11: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**

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### **Clause 3: Children**

**This clause aims to protect children from exploitation or distress caused by their interaction with the media. The Code Committee aimed to achieve this by requiring either parental consent or the assent of the child to interview or photograph a child under the age of 16. This is qualified by the paramount consideration of a child's safety and wellbeing. The public survey showed that the public ranked the protection of children highly amongst ethical journalistic standards.**

**At the same time, the clause aims to respect children's capacity to assent to interviews or photographs where they are not harmful to a child's interests.**

**The clause defines a child as someone under the age of 16. This is consistent with the laws in the United Kingdom which, for many matters, recognise consent at 16 years of age. Clause 3.3 obliges publishers to seriously consider requests for archived stories to be anonymised where the person making the request was a child at the time of the story and now regrets their identification in that story. This gives individuals some form of protection from embarrassing or distressing stories that were published when they lacked capacity to give informed consent.**

### **3. CHILDREN**

- 3.1.** Publishers must only interview, photograph or otherwise record the words or actions of a child under the age of 16 years with the assent of the child or a responsible adult and where this is not detrimental to the safety and wellbeing of the child.
- 3.2.** Publishers must not identify a child under the age of 16 years without the assent of the child or a responsible adult, unless this is relevant to the story and not detrimental to the safety and wellbeing of the child.
- 3.3.** Publishers must give reasonable consideration to the request of a person who was previously identified as a child under the age of 16 years in a news story and who now wishes their identity to be concealed.

**Question 12: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**



In line with international standards, the media also has an important role to play in promoting the personal development, well-being and education of children and young people. This includes awareness-raising and provision of accurate information about specific issues, as well as information about services/ facilities/ opportunities for young people. Similarly, the media needs to ensure that they accurately represent the opinions and experiences of children and young people and encouraging responsible engagement is important.

Jigsaw identification is a significant issue and this Code and the supplementary materials needs to address this and ensure that the best interests of children and their protection and safety is of paramount importance.

**Question 13: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**



## Clause 4: Discrimination

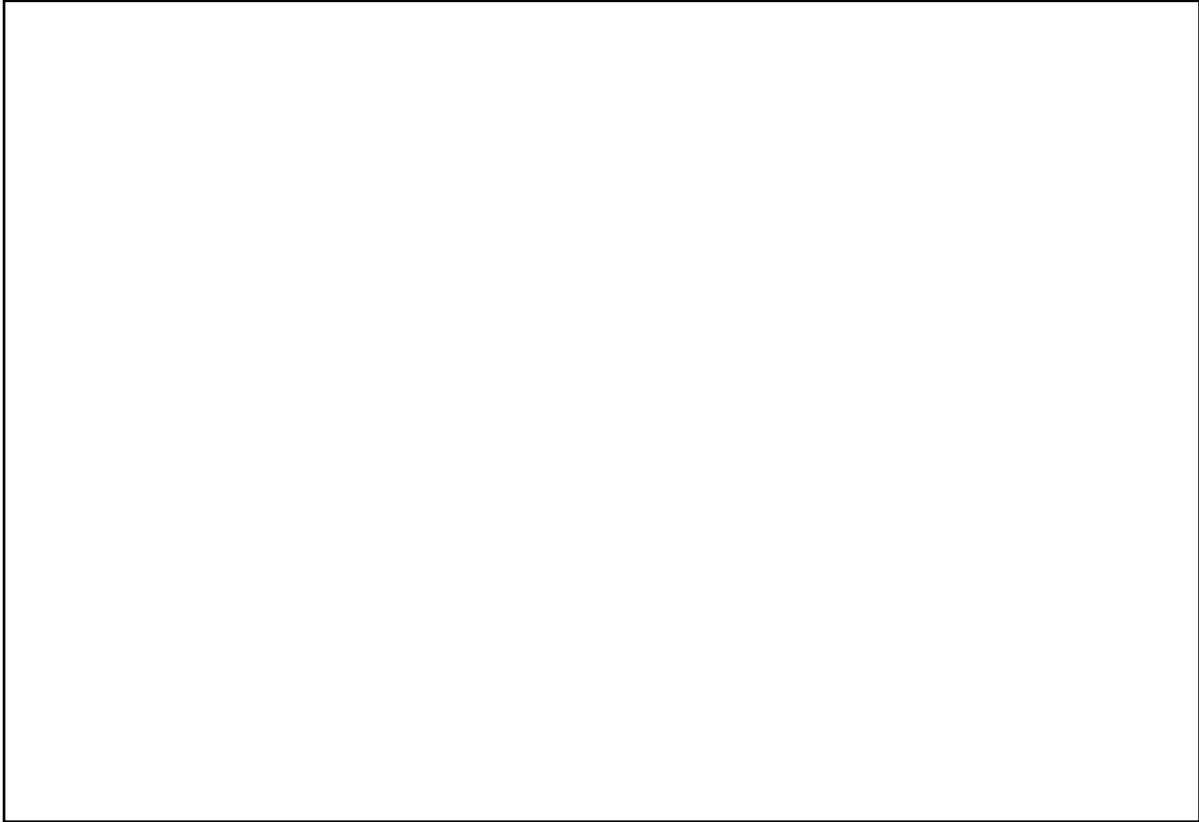
This clause aims to protect individuals whose personal characteristics may make them vulnerable to discrimination. The clause also aims to prevent publications that incite hatred against a group based on the group's characteristics. There was comprehensive support in our public consultations for a discrimination clause to protect minorities and others from discriminatory reporting.

Clause 4.1 aims to protect individuals from being referred to in a negative way on the basis of their personal characteristics like race or gender. Clause 4.2 aims to prevent publishers from including irrelevant references to a person's characteristics in a news story. Clause 4.3 aims to prevent the publication of news stories that incite hatred on the basis of certain characteristics. Each of the three clauses refers to protected characteristics listed in the *Equalities Act 2010*.

### 4. DISCRIMINATION

- 4.1. Publishers must not refer pejoratively to a person on the basis of that person's age, disability, gender reassignment or identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation or another characteristic which makes that person vulnerable to discrimination.
- 4.2. Publishers must not refer to a person's disability, gender reassignment or identity, pregnancy, race, religion or belief or sexual orientation unless this characteristic is relevant to the story.
- 4.3. Publishers must not incite hatred against any group on the basis of that group's age, disability, gender reassignment or identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

**Question 14: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**



**Question 15: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**



## Clause 5: Harassment

This clause aims to protect individuals from harassment and intimidation by journalists. The public are strongly in favour of a clause that prohibits forms of harassment by journalists.

The clause provides a general prohibition against intimidation as the Code Committee considers that there can be no circumstances where it will be justified to intimidate another person in the interests of newsgathering. The clause also requires publishers to ensure journalists do not engage in persistent and repeated attempts to contact and pursue a person. This sub-clause is subject to a public interest exception.

### 5. HARASSMENT

5.1. Publishers must ensure that journalists do not engage in intimidation.

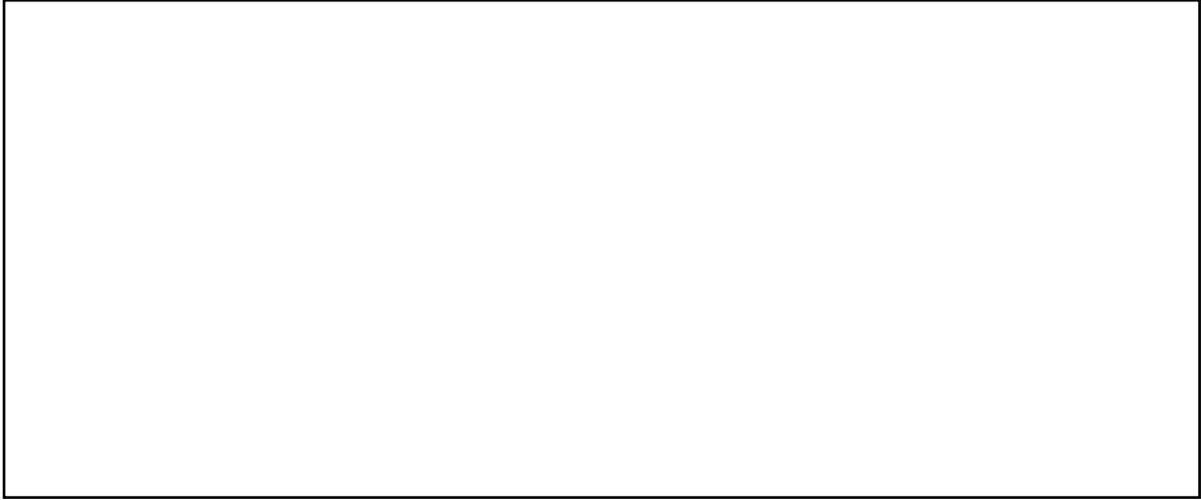
5.2. Except where justified by the public interest, publishers must ensure that journalists:

- a. Do not engage in deception or harassment.
- b. Always identify themselves as journalists and provide the name of their publication when making contact.
- c. Comply immediately with any reasonable request to desist from contacting, following or photographing a person.

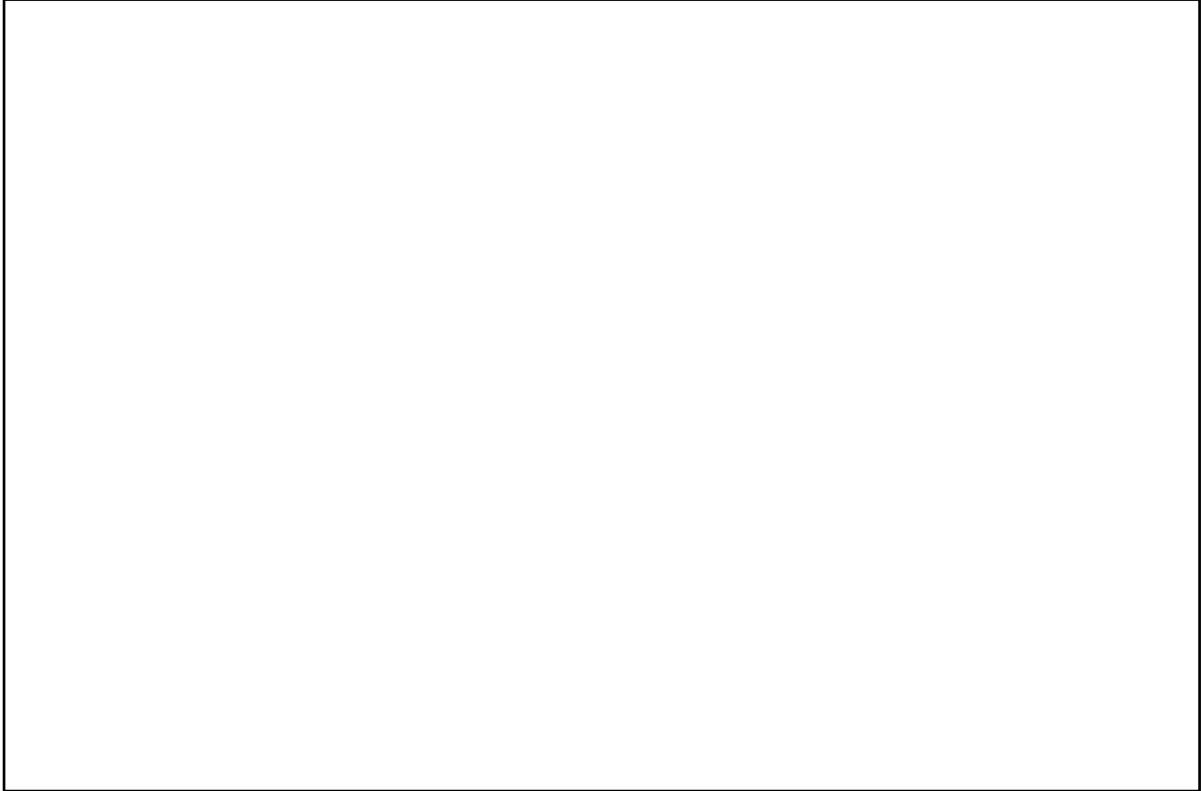
### Question 16: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?

Children, young people, their families/ guardians and advocates should not be harassed or subjected to pressure to engage in the process of media reporting. Also there should be no offer of reward or incentive for media engagement.

One of my research studies included the voices of 33 children and young people in Northern Ireland, aged between 14 and 23, who describe the direct impact of media intrusion on the grieving process. The levels of intrusion extended to journalists accessing phone numbers and telephoning the young people directly. Some said that they felt this was an intrusion into their privacy, as they had not given permission for such images or comments to be printed. See: <https://theconversation.com/how-children-feel-when-journalists-exploit-their-social-media-profiles-49064>



**Question 17: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**

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## **Clause 6: Justice**

**This clause aims to protect the principle of a fair trial. The public were concerned by examples of news stories that implied a person's criminal guilt prior to conviction. The public were also concerned about the need to protect the identity of children involved in criminal proceedings.**

**This clause aims to reflect these principles and concerns, while not burdening the principle of open justice. This means that journalists should be able to report on court proceedings except where not permitted by law. This clause does not attempt to recast the law of contempt of court. It is the responsibility of publishers to be aware of their legal responsibilities in this area. The clause protects particular classes of persons such as children in criminal proceedings and victims in sexual assault cases. The clause also prohibits the payment of witnesses and defendants in criminal trials and prohibits bribing public officials for information, except where permitted by law.**

### **6. JUSTICE**

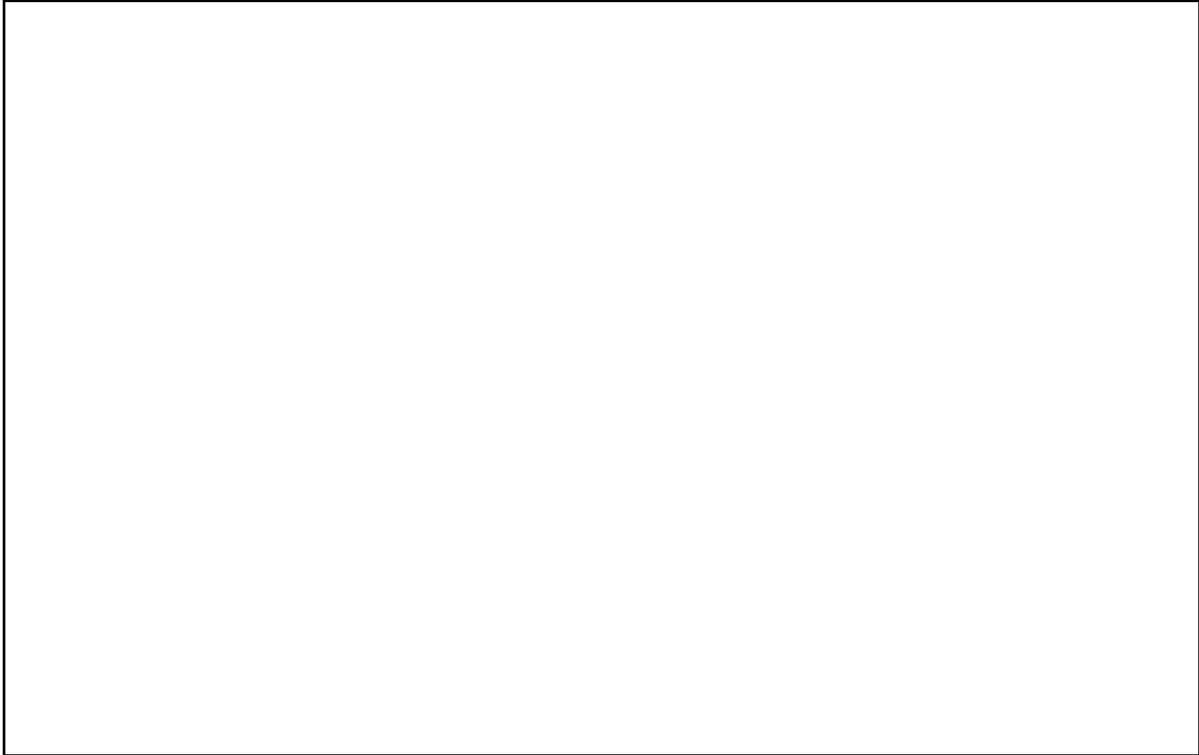
**6.1.** Publishers must take the greatest care not to prejudice any criminal investigations or legal proceedings, except as permitted by law.

**6.2.** Publishers must protect the identity of victims of sexual assault and children under 18 years of age who are or have been involved in criminal proceedings.

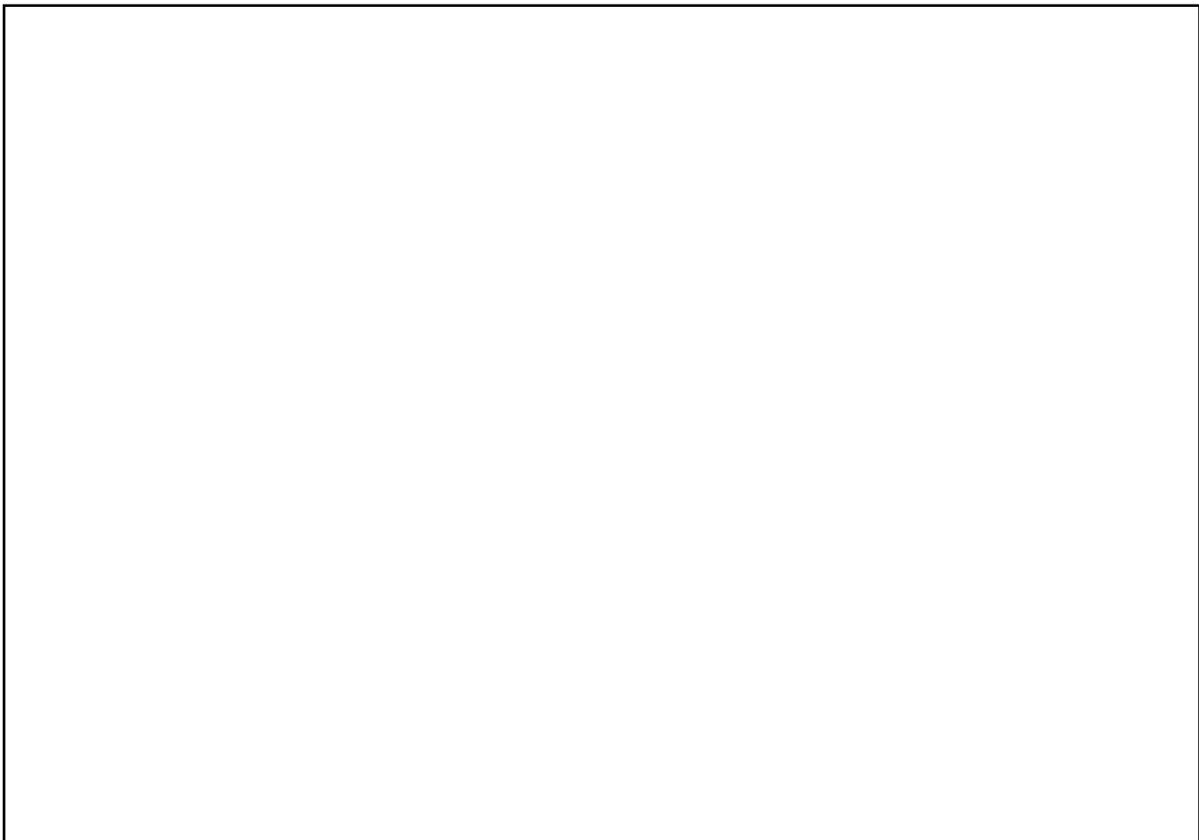
**6.3.** Publishers must not make payments to witnesses or defendants in criminal proceedings, except as permitted by law.

**6.4.** Publishers must not pay public officials for information, except as permitted by law.

**Question 18: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**



**Question 19: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**



## **Clause 7: Privacy**

**This clause aims to protect a person's privacy. A person may have a right to privacy about matters involving their private and family life, home and communications. The public were very concerned about intrusive press conduct and news stories. At the same time, the public recognised that in some circumstances, the public interest in a story may override a person's right to privacy. The Code Committee aims to achieve this balance by including a public interest exception.**

**The term 'reasonable expectation of privacy' is used in privacy law in the United Kingdom to explain the circumstances that give rise to a person's right to privacy. Whether a person has a reasonable expectation of privacy will be specific to the circumstances of a particular news story. For this reason, the Code Committee has developed a non-exhaustive list of indicative factors that may give rise to a reasonable expectation of privacy. The Code Committee is particularly interested in hearing your views on the list of non-exhaustive factors.**

### **7. PRIVACY**

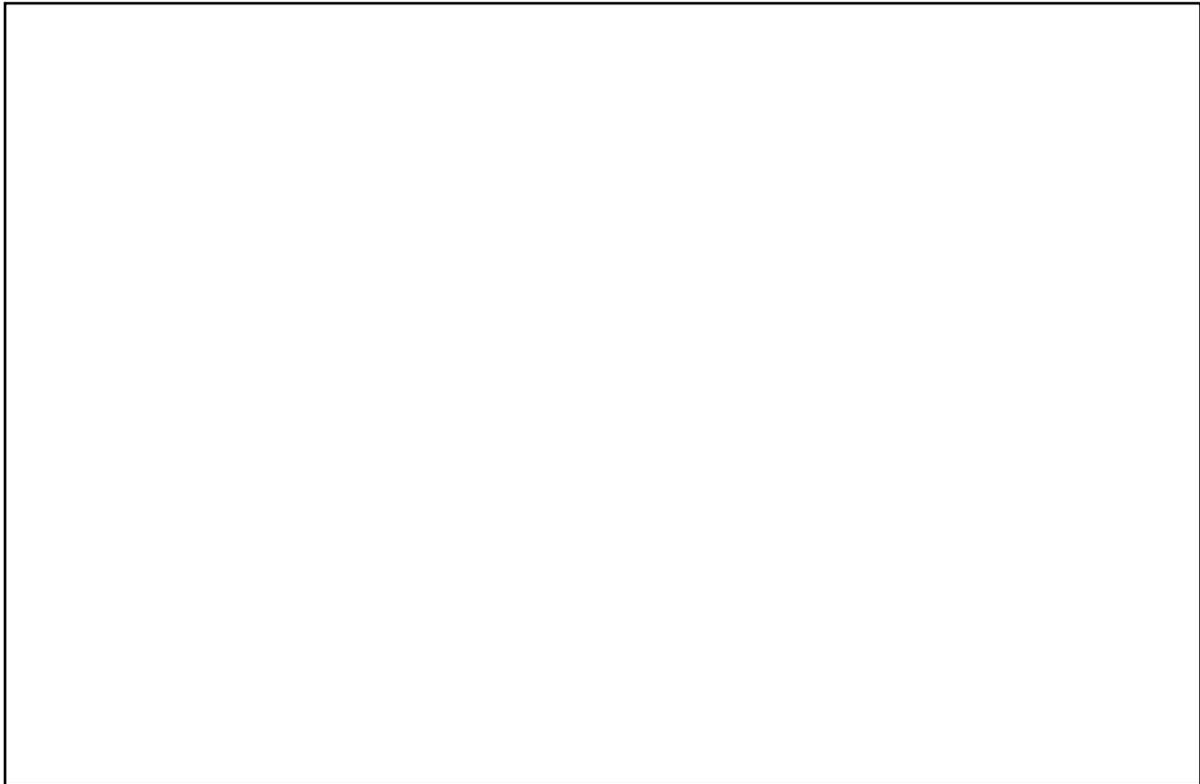
**7.1.** Except where justified by the public interest, publishers must respect people's reasonable expectation of privacy, which may be determined by factors which include but are not limited to the following:

- a.** The nature of the information concerned, such as whether it relates to intimate, family, health or medical matters or personal finances;
- b.** The nature of the place concerned, such as a home, school or hospital;
- c.** How the information concerned was held or communicated, such as in private correspondence or a personal diary;
- d.** The relevant attributes of the person, such as their age, occupation or public profile; and
- e.** Whether the person had voluntarily courted publicity on a relevant aspect of their private life.

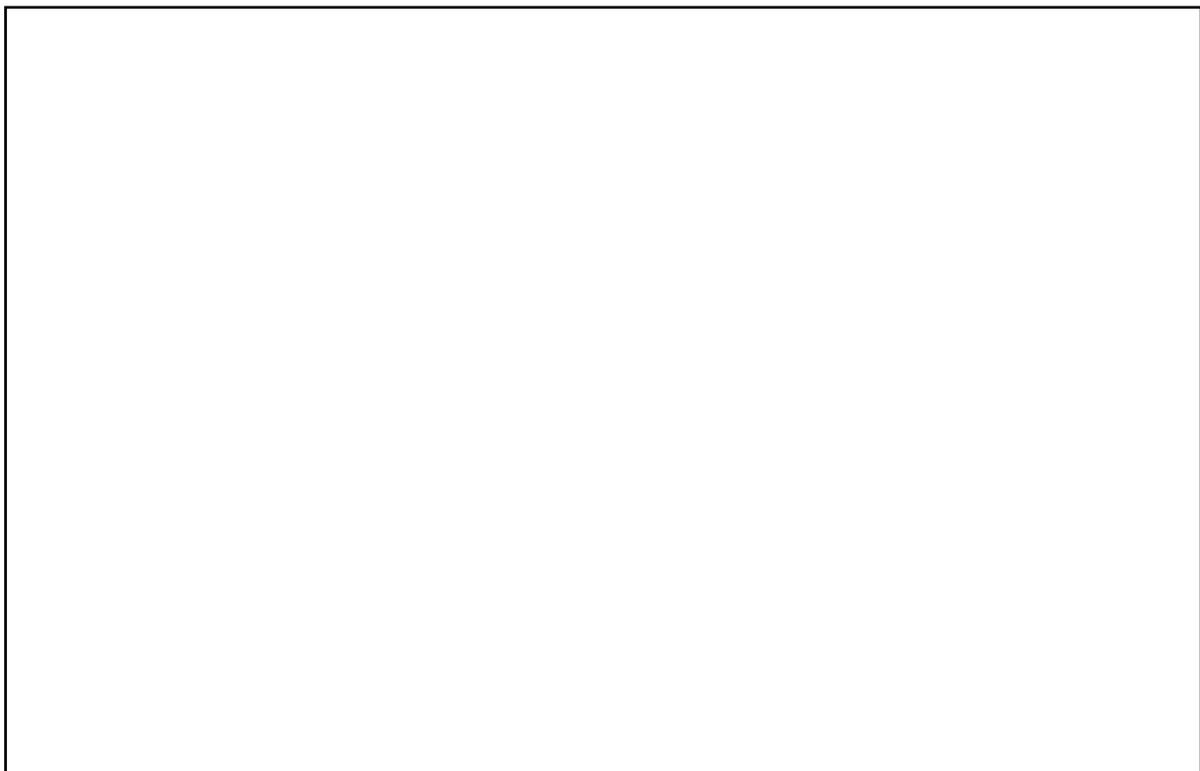
**7.2.** Except where justified by the public interest, publishers must:

- a.** Not use covert means to gain or record information.
- b.** Respect privacy settings when reporting on social media content.
- c.** Take all reasonable steps not to exacerbate grief or distress through intrusive newsgathering or reporting.

**Question 20: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**



**Question 21: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**



## **Clause 8: Sources**

**This clause aims to encourage the publication of news stories that are based on reliable and credible sources. As one way to achieve this, the clause aims to protect sources where confidentiality has been agreed to and not waived. As the responsibility is on a publisher to protect sources, this clause protects journalists from pressure exerted by publishers to name sources. The clause also prevents the fabrication of sources.**

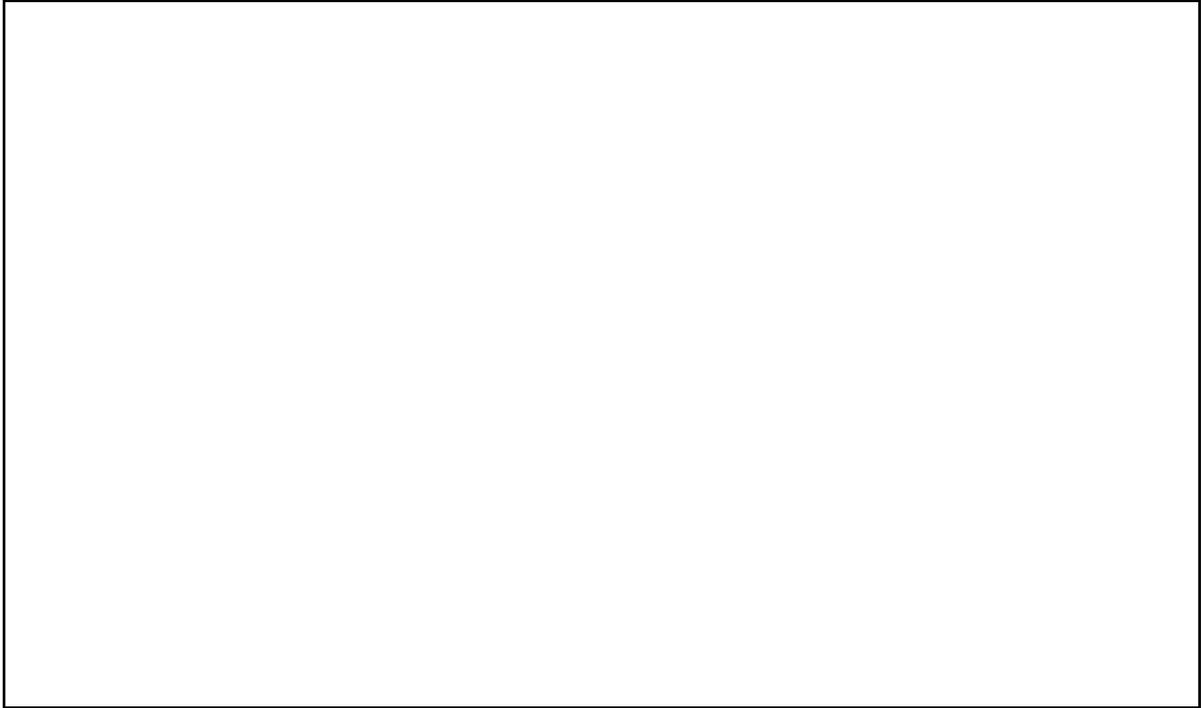
### **8. SOURCES**

**8.1.** Publishers must take care to protect sources where confidentiality has been agreed to and not waived by the source.

**8.2.** Publishers must ensure that journalists do not fabricate sources.

**Question 22: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**

**Question 23: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**

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## **Clause 9: Suicide**

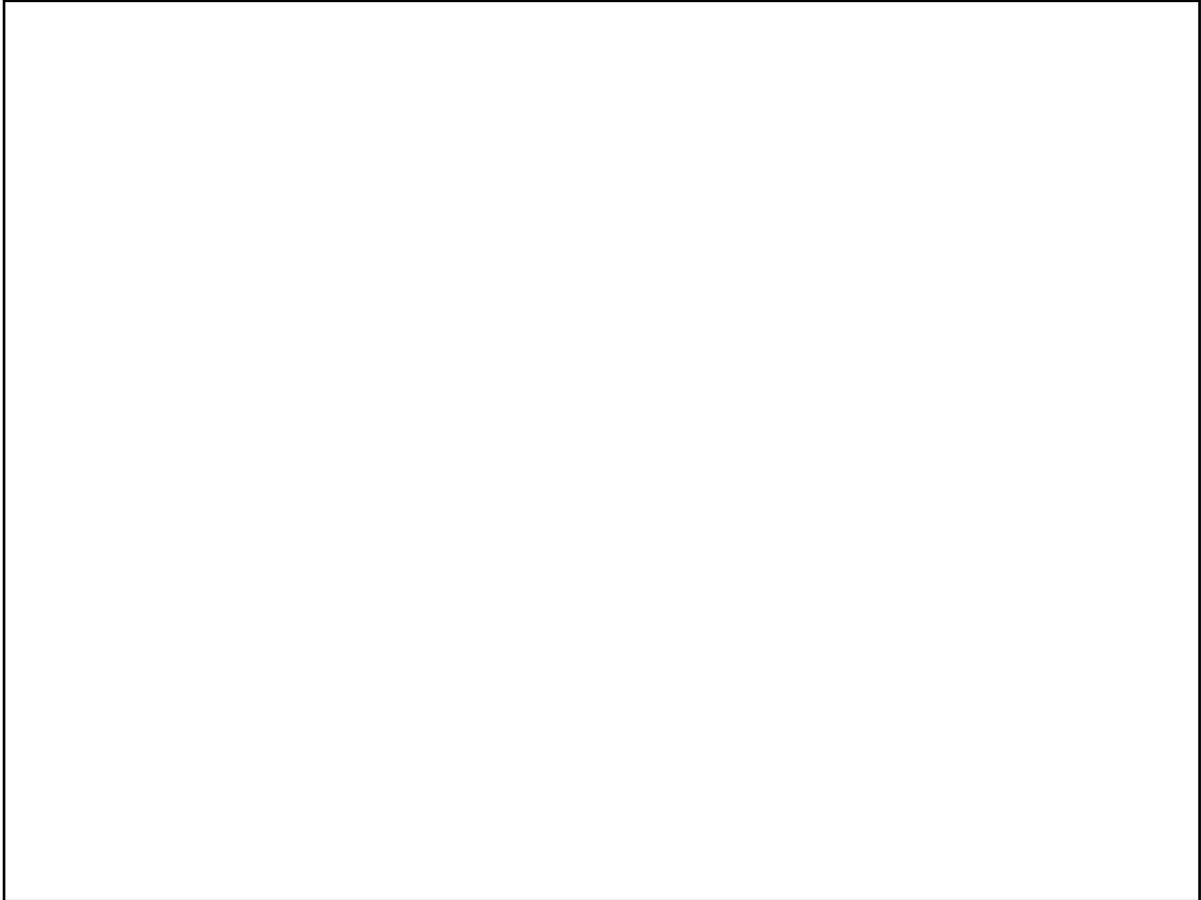
**This clause aims to prevent the reporting of suicide or self-harm that glamorises those acts and which provides excessive detail to the extent that the act could be imitated.**

### **9. SUICIDE**

**9.1.** When reporting on suicide or self-harm, publishers must not provide excessive details of the method used or speculate on the motives.

**Question 24: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**

**Question 25: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**

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## Clause 10: Transparency

**This clause aims to promote accountability and transparency in news reporting. The clause requires publishers to clearly identify where content has been paid for and is controlled by a third party such as an advertiser. The clause also requires publishers to declare ‘significant’ conflicts of interest and relationships with sponsors where a publisher receives an ‘unfair advantage’.**

### **10. TRANSPARENCY**

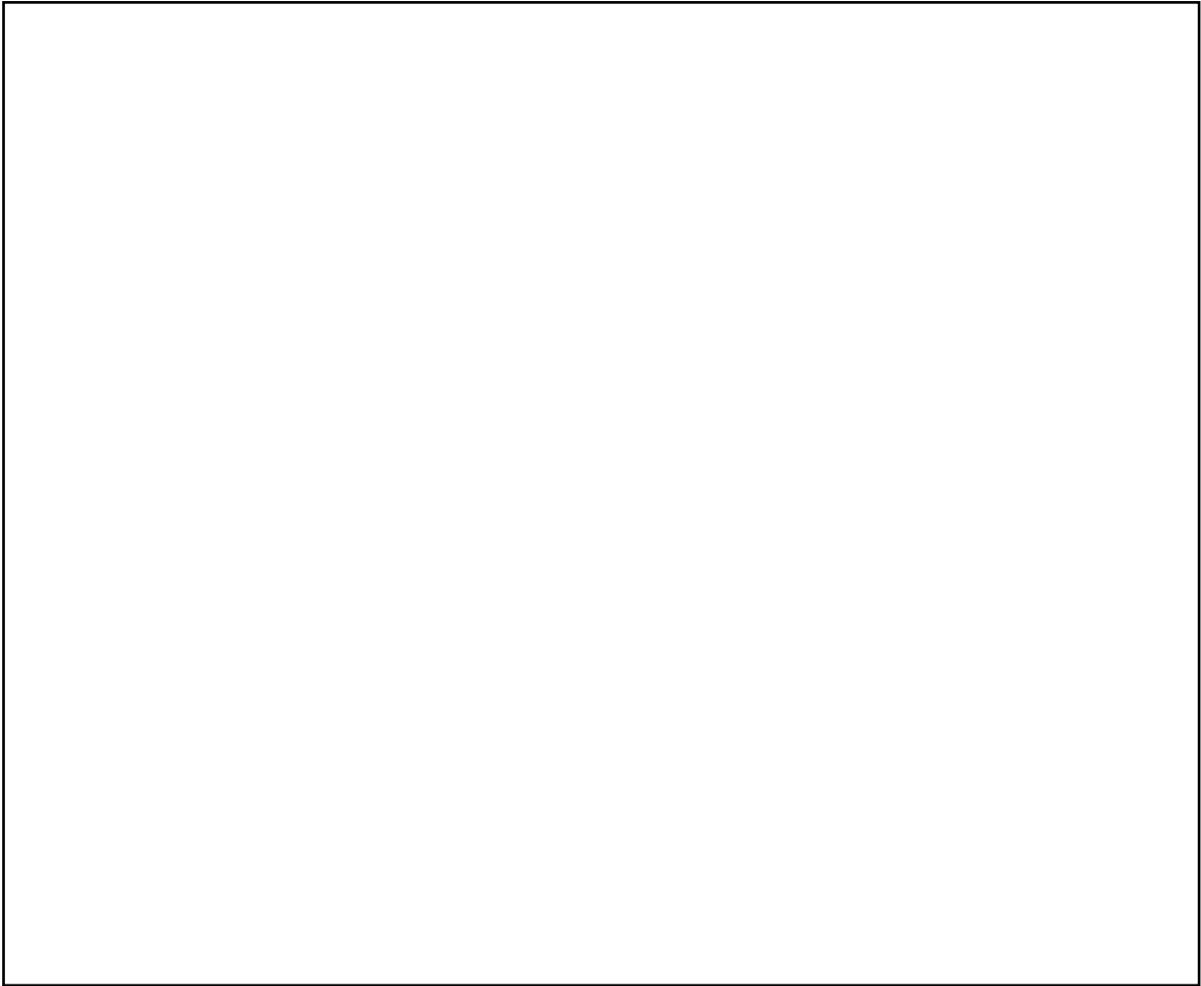
**10.1.** Publishers must make absolutely clear where content has been paid for financially or through a reciprocal arrangement and is controlled by a third party.

**10.2.** Publishers must take all reasonable steps to declare significant conflicts of interest and must not gain any unfair advantage from such conflicts.

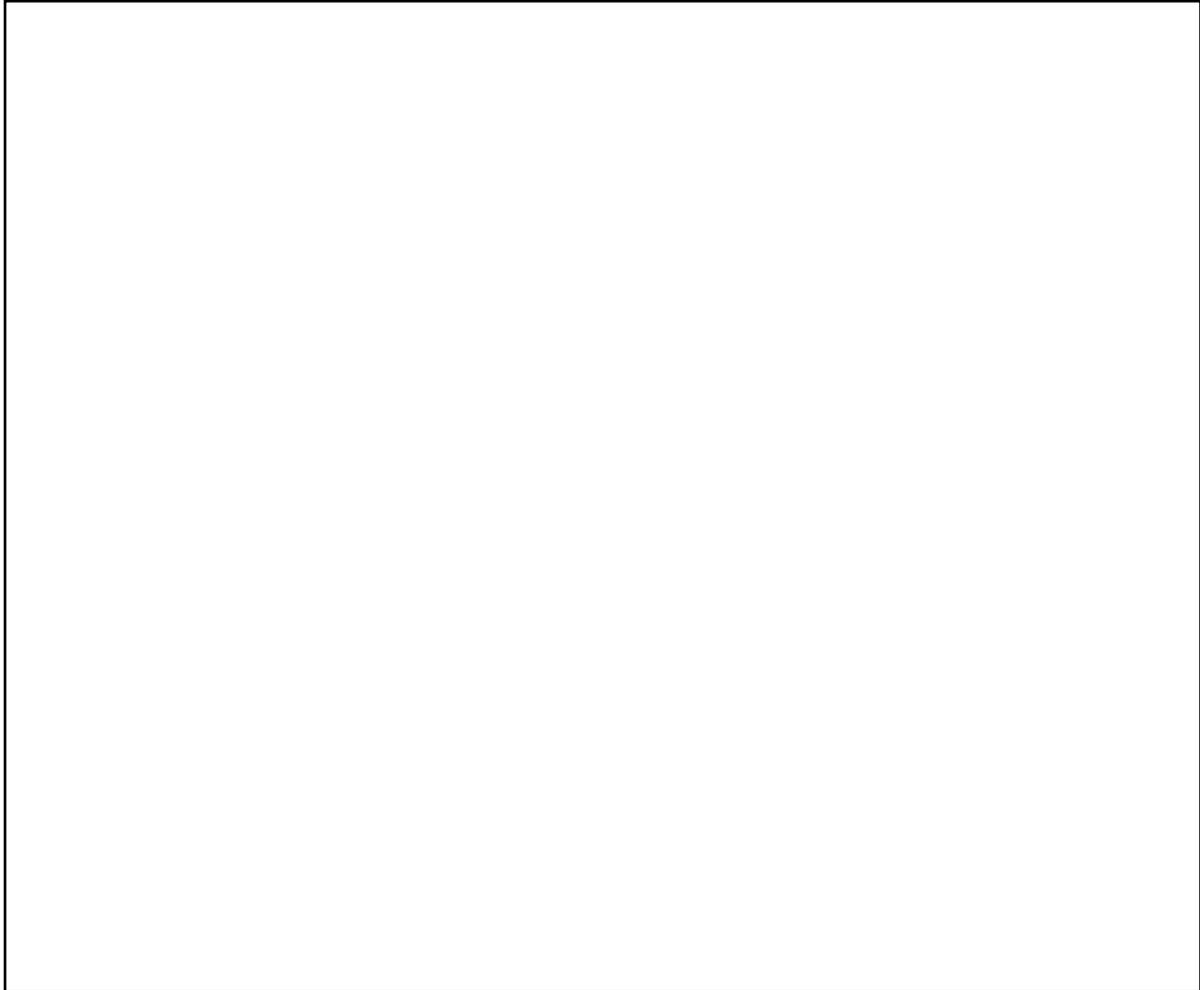
**10.3.** Publishers must correct any failure to declare significant conflicts of interest with due prominence at the earliest opportunity.

**Question 26: What, if any, changes would you recommend IMPRESS make to this clause?**

**Question 27: What recommendations would you make for guidance to this clause?**

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**Question 28: Are there any other issues that you believe the IMPRESS Code Committee should include in its Standards Code? If so, please explain why these issues are important and how they could best be addressed in a standards code.**

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**Question 29: Do you agree that the IMPRESS draft Standards Code is a practical working tool which enables journalists, editors and publishers to do their jobs? (please select one of the following options)**

**agree**

**Question 30: Do you agree that the IMPRESS draft Standards Code is easily understood? (please select one of the following options)**

**agree**

**However supplementary materials are required to accompany and training**

**Question 31: Do you agree that the IMPRESS draft Standards Code is enforceable through regulation? (please select one of the following options)**

**agree**