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Dagoula, C., Katsirea, I. orcid.org/0000-0003-4659-5292 and Harrison, J. (2023) The Independent Press Standards Organisation and accuracy: a comparative study of complaints-handling procedures in four UK newspapers. *Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies*. ISSN 2001-0818

https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms_00109_1

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‘IPSO and accuracy: A comparative study of complaints handling procedures in four UK newspapers’

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Abstract

This study examines the attitudes of four IPSO regulated UK newspapers towards redressing inaccuracies in their print editions. It analyses the ways in which the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Sun* dealt with complaints, in order to assess their attitudes towards the editorial standard of accuracy. Further, this study aims to evaluate the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO)’s impact on the newspapers’ complaints handling processes throughout 2016, more than a year after its establishment, at a time when its regulatory arsenal had been consolidated and put into practice. We found that there was no evidence of any binary opposition in a spectrum of quality/popular press reflected in the sample newspapers’ respective attitudes and responses toward IPSO’s complaints handling standards on matters of inaccuracy. Furthermore, our evaluation of the position, timing and wording of the published corrections of all four newspapers did not confirm a marked difference in the extent to which they were prepared to demonstrate their accountability to their readers by drawing published inaccuracies to their attention. IPSO has contributed to more systematic complaints handling but more needs to be done. Our findings are of wider relevance beyond the specific period under investigation.

Keywords: accuracy; complaints handling; IPSO; journalism; newspapers; corrections

Introduction

Disputing the accuracy of a report is the basis for many complaints made against the press. More than 55 per cent of the complaints addressed to IPSO involve alleged inaccuracies (Editors’ Code of Practice Committee, 2022: 20). How such complaints are dealt with is important in determining the effectiveness of self-regulation. Accurate reporting overseen by effective systems of self-regulation, which safeguard the right of correction, is a powerful weapon against misinformation (Article 19, 2020; Henke et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021, 1506). At a time of low levels of trust in professional news media (Reuters Institute, 2022), credible complaints handling systems are important to show the adaptability of the press to learn from its mistakes. They testify to newspapers’ willingness to be accountable to their readers and to uphold the standard of accuracy (Appelman and Hettinga, 2021, 99). The Leveson Report (Vol. 2, Ch. 6, para. 9.1) stated that accuracy is ‘the foundation stone on which journalism depends’.

The standard of accuracy is common to many press councils’ codes of ethics. It serves the dual function of safeguarding individual reputation as well as societal interests in accurate information. While there is a growing body of research on codes of ethics (Appelman and Hettinga, 2021; Carney, 2017; Fielden, 2012; Limor and Himelboim, 2006; Wilkins and Brennen, 2004), there is only limited research on the

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way in which inaccuracy complaints are handled (Hettinga et al., 2018; Coad, 2005; Barkin and Levy, 1983). The way in which IPSO has performed as regards complaints handling has been examined only cursorily (Ramsay and Barnett, 2021; Media Standards Trust, 2019; Duffy, 2015), in meek (Piling, 2016) or in polemic terms (e.g. Hacked Off, 2015).

This article aims to address this research gap by scrutinising UK newspapers' responses to inaccuracy in a dispassionate way. We have focused on a comparison UK newspapers' response to complaints about inaccuracy in their print editions in 2016, more than a year after IPSO's establishment. In the same year, IPSO revised its rules and regulations for the first time, inter alia to control its complaints procedures and investigate in the absence of a complaint (Palmer 2016). Still, IPSO was criticised for having 'an accuracy problem' (Cathcart 2016). Our investigation aims to establish whether the sample newspapers' responses accorded with IPSO guidelines concerning the way publishers should redress inaccuracies quickly and prominently through printed corrections. The primary aim of this article is not to measure remedies for inaccuracy against a notional ideal standard, but to assess the extent to which newspapers comply with the IPSO framework.

Four newspapers have been included in our research sample: the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Sun*, representing a spectrum of what is generally referred to as popular/quality press. While recognising the fluidity of such categories, it is the case that distinctions are drawn between journalism that is preoccupied with partisan politics, sensationalism and human-interest stories and so-called quality journalism. The popular press is typically associated with both a decline in journalistic standards since the 1980s through an attachment to populism and political sectarianism, and with promoting emotive journalism that emphasises prurience, breaches of privacy and scandal (Bird, 2015; Lefkowitz, 2018). By contrast, quality journalism, arguably facilitates rational debate in the public sphere, emphasises matters of public interest and is more concerned with getting the facts right (Skovsgaard, 2014). This distinction has long possessed a metaphorical force that symbolises two distinctive types of journalism. However, it has been questioned in recent times on account of the recognition of an increasing tabloidization of the British press across all newspapers and the migration of journalists between news outlets since the advent of the internet (McLachlan and Golding, 2000). By including newspapers from across the quality/popular spectrum, this article aims to put to the test the significance of these distinctions as regards the adherence of UK national newspapers to the standard of accuracy.

This article proceeds by examining, first, the accuracy clause in the IPSO Code, while drawing on comparative insights from the rival IMPRESS Standards Code. Secondly, it explains its methodological approach and the key parameters of prominence, speed and adequacy of corrections which are used as a proxy for the quality of publishers' complaints handling procedures. Finally, it analyses the findings of this research before drawing some conclusions.

Complaints and UK Codes of Practice

After the Leveson Inquiry, a Press Recognition Panel (PRP) was set up under the Royal Charter on self-regulation of the press to judge whether press regulators meet the criteria recommended by Lord Justice Leveson for recognition under the Charter. By 2016 the UK had two new press regulatory bodies which succeeded the now defunct Press Complaints Commission (PCC): the Independent Press Standards

Organisation (IPSO), which regulates most national newspapers and many other media outlets, and IMPRESS, which regulates a much smaller number of outlets, including many online ones.

As a result of this divided regulatory landscape, two press codes are currently in operation in the UK: The Editors' Code of Practice (the Code) (IPSO a), and the Independent Monitor for the Press (IMPRESS) Standards Code. Both Codes stipulate in their very first clause that their respective member publishers need to adhere to the obligation of accuracy (IPSO a; IMPRESS a). To help with applying the former is the Editors' Codebook which interprets how IPSO understands the Editors' Code of Practice, and which highlights best practice for journalists to follow (the Codebook) (Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2022). It is important to note that, as is aptly underlined in the Codebook, journalistic truth does not require 'infallibility' (Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2022, 20). It demands that care should be taken 'not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images'. The Code does not further explain what 'taking care' involves. Instead, it relies on the Codebook to flesh out this obligation by outlining verification steps, which if neglected can lead to inaccuracies.

Since January 2016, the IPSO Code has been supplemented by a new reference in Clause 1 i) to the need for headlines to be supported by the text of the article beneath. This is an important addition that aims to counter the phenomenon of attention-grabbing headlines intended to drive news engagement, often referred to as 'clickbait' (Carney, 2017: 81; Kuiken, 2017). The Code further states that '[A] significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and - where appropriate - an apology published. In cases involving IPSO, due prominence should be as required by the regulator'. Changes to the Editor's Code of Practice have given IPSO the power to investigate in the absence of a complaint and to write its own complaint procedures (IPSO b). Also, a new exhortation to editors in the Code's preamble to maintain in-house procedures to resolve complaints swiftly, and to co-operate with IPSO, underscores the importance of effective complaints handling. Putting in place effective procedures for the reasonable and prompt handling of complaints is an obligation of regulated entities under the IPSO Scheme Membership Agreement (IPSO c). IPSO has the power to determine where a correction should be placed in accordance with Clause 1 ii) of the IPSO Code (IPSO a).

However, there has been sustained criticism concerning IPSO's reluctance to require that corrections should have equal prominence as the original article (Coad, 2018; Carney, 2017: 81; House of Commons 2006-07: Ev. 58 para. 88). The Editors' Codebook clarifies that 'due prominence' does not necessarily mean publication of a correction or adjudication at the same place as the offending article (Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2022: 16). The exact meaning of 'due prominence' is somewhat elusive (Piling, 2016, para. 102; House of Lords, 2015). The Codebook suggests that the placement of corrections in an established corrections and clarifications column, which is 'prominently labelled, appears regularly and gives details of how to complain to IPSO' is sufficient to satisfy the requirement of 'due prominence' (Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2022: 16). However, this does not guarantee that such a column has the same prominence as the original article. IPSO is more decisive as regards adjudications. It stipulates that they are placed, or signposted, on or before the page where the original article appeared (Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2022: 16).

The risk that corrections might be hidden away cannot easily be discounted, especially given that editors are accorded some discretion as to the eventual

placement of corrections (Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2022: 32). IPSO's direction that a given correction should appear on page two of the newspaper might be overridden by the editor on the ground of the impending publication of an important news story, as happened in the case of a libellous story about a beautician published by the *Mail on Sunday* (Cathcart, 2018; IPSO d). It is interesting to note that the IMPRESS Code requires corrections to normally be of 'equal prominence' (IMPRESS a: Clause 1.4). This is a welcome starting point. However, as clarified by the accompanying Guidance, a trivial inaccuracy might not merit a front-page correction, and the pressing importance of a breaking news story might justify displacing a correction from the front page. Deviations from 'equal prominence' are inevitable to a certain extent. The IMPRESS Guidance takes the sensible approach that 'a correction should be proportionate to the scale of the error' (IMPRESS a: 22).

The IPSO 'due prominence guidance' also recognises that the seriousness and consequences of the breach of the Code need to be taken into account when deciding on the prominence of a correction or adjudication. However, its approach is notably different from that of the IMPRESS Code. IPSO frames the placement of corrections in terms of balancing the provision of redress for the complainant with the restriction of the editor's freedom of expression, which in practice favours the latter. The IPSO 'Due prominence guidance' acknowledges that placement of corrections in a corrections column might be insufficient for the gravest inaccuracies, and that the publication of a front-page reference to an adjudication might be necessary in the case of a front-page breach (IPSO e). However, IPSO has been criticised for both its employment of the 'due prominence' criterion and for failing to ensure that corrections are offered promptly (Cathcart, 2018; Dixon, 2017; FCReportingWatch, 2020). Such criticism provides the context for the comparative study below.

Methodological approach

To evaluate published corrections and the complaints handling process, the study adopted a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods in order to form a multi-faceted understanding of complaints handling processes. The approach developed for the purposes of this study measures the prominence, the speed and the adequacy of published corrections and presents a comprehensive evaluation of complaints handling processes. Advanced search options were deployed by using a combination of terms that could be used by the publications to indicate a correction, specific time-periods, patterns and detailed descriptions. The collected data was ordered chronologically. After researching and systematically categorising each newspaper's corrections (by year and by month), a corrections database was produced. The corrections database was developed to include all variables used to analyse the data: the prominence, the speed and the adequacy of corrections. It also includes a set of additional variables: the correction page; the original page number; the date of the correction; the date of the original report; information about any IPSO adjudication relating to the publication; the inclusion of an apology; information about the clear identification of the error; the provision of accurate information, for instance by including an individual or organisation's denial of the claim, or by clarifying that it is not possible to establish the correct position. The data was evaluated against IPSO's complaints procedures and, in cases involving IPSO, its adjudications and resolution statements. For the analysis of the core parameters - prominence, speed and adequacy - IPSO guidelines were used as a template.

Prominence

The prominence of corrections was measured, in line with the IPSO 'due prominence guidance', by the existence of an established corrections column, by the location of corrections in each publication, and by comparing the original publication page and the correction page. Equal prominence and the prominent labelling of corrections were used as starting points in this evaluation.

Speed

The speed of corrections was measured by the length of the period between the date of publication and the date of correction. In cases resolved without IPSO's involvement, the publication's internal procedures normally conclude within 28 days, the so-called referral period. If a complaint cannot be settled between the publication and the complainant, after these 28 days IPSO begins to investigate the complaint. There is no fixed time limit for the investigation period (IPSO b). IPSO states that it deals with complaints within 35 days on average, but that 'many complaints are resolved much more quickly than that' (IPSO k). By way of comparison, IMPRESS offers an indicative timeframe of 42 days for the completion of an investigation but concedes that complex complaints may take longer (IMPRESS b). At the same time as the investigation, IPSO will seek to mediate between the complainant and the publication if appropriate. If mediation is successful, IPSO issues a resolution statement without deciding on whether there has been a breach of the Code. If the complaint is not resolved through mediation, IPSO's Complaints Committee decides whether there has been a breach of the Code. If the complaint is upheld, the publication may be asked to publish a correction or an IPSO adjudication. The complaints process is further prolonged if a review of the adjudication is requested. Both parties to a complaint can request a review within 14 days of the decision being issued. Where a review is requested, it can take the Independent Reviewer appointed by IPSO a week or more to review the complaint. It is therefore extremely rare for corrections to be published before 14 days have passed from the date IPSO issued a decision. Whilst there is no fixed timeframe for the publication of corrections, the abovementioned time brackets give an indication of what might be an excessive period for the resolution of a complaint.

Adequacy

Adequacy was measured by the wording of corrections. In published rulings and resolutions, IPSO's Complaints Committee has clearly set out what it considers to be an appropriate correction (IPSO f). It must identify the inaccuracy or misleading information; provide corrective/clarifying information, which might include an individual or organization's denial of the claim; or explain that it is not possible to provide corrective information. This study further considered whether the sample newspapers included additional signposts, such as the title and date of publication of the offending article, which would assist readers in retrieving it. Also, it was examined whether newspapers offered an apology. IPSO has no direct influence in that regard. Ever since its adoption in 2015, the Code states that the provision of an apology is only required 'when appropriate'. The Editors' Codebook clarifies that offering an apology is 'a matter for the editor's judgment, taking into account the spirit of the Code' (Editors' Code of Practice Committee, 2022). IPSO does not have the power to dictate the publication of an apology. At the same time, a newspaper's refusal to apologize where

an apology would have been appropriate breaches the Code, and can lead to an upheld adjudication.

The data analysis led to the production of statistical descriptions that were then tested via a series of structured interviews with key people involved with implementing IPSO complaints handling policies. Interviews were conducted with representatives, such as managing editors and editorial directors, from all four publications and lasted 45 minutes to one hour.

Findings

Daily Mail

The *Daily Mail* published 78 corrections in 2016. Out of these corrections, five followed IPSO's intervention and resulted in the publication of a correction or clarification. Two of these five corrections were published as a result of an IPSO ruling whilst the other three were published as part of an IPSO mediated resolution of the complaint. The remaining 75 corrections were published by the newspaper without an IPSO investigation. In terms of process, in the reference period and up to the present day, there is a perplexing multitude of avenues for complainants depending on whether they wish to make a formal complaint to IPSO or directly to the publication or prefer to take an informal route. The informal way of proceeding consists in sending an email to a dedicated email address or directly to the journalist or editor involved, or in using the Contact Us form. Complaints are assessed by the Readers' Editor and referred to the relevant managing editor in more serious cases (Associated Newspapers 2016).

Prominence

Corrections were published in a dedicated space entitled 'Clarifications and Corrections', positioned at the bottom of page 2. There is information available about the page on which the original article appeared for 75 of the 78 corrections published in 2016 (96%). The majority of the corrections (69) were published on an earlier page than the original article. On six occasions the corrections were published after the original article, which was a front-page story that continued onto several pages within the newspaper. A visual representation of the prominence of corrections, as measured by the page of publication, is shown in *figure 1*.

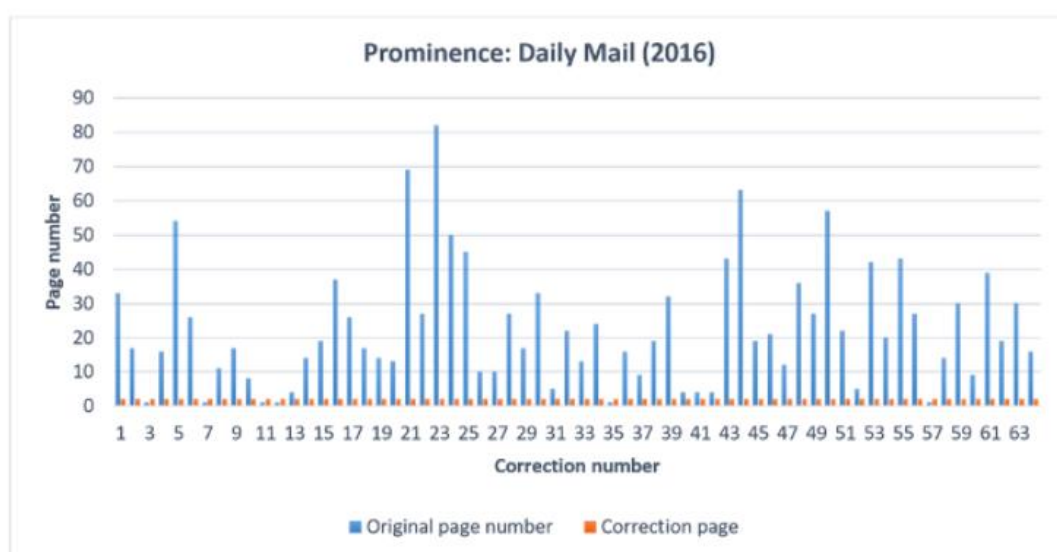


Figure 1. Prominence (*Daily Mail*, 2016)

Speed

The speed of corrections varied from 1 to 260 days. From the 78 corrections, 22 corrections exceeded IPSO's referral period of 28 days (*figure 2*). In four instances in 2016 (24 March, 25 July, 31 August 2016, and 12 October), corrections were published after 62, 59, 260 and 91 days respectively from the original publication date. The corrections were published following IPSO's intervention, which resulted in a ruling or resolution. They were published on the same day or very shortly after IPSO's ruling/resolution except for the correction of 31 August 2016 where the correction was published after 29 days. When considering these correction dates, the 14 days' review period for complaints also needs to be considered. The newspaper might occasionally prioritise a correction if for instance there is an 'intrusion' element, or if it affects someone personally in matters of grief or shock (Interviewee, *Daily Mail*).



Figure 2. Speed of corrections (*Daily Mail*, 2016).

Adequacy

No set formula can be observed for the identification of errors and the provision of corrective information. There are some occasions where corrections are unclear, thus reinforcing the confusion about the correct position. For example, in the correction below (*picture 1*) concerning Mr and Mrs Fry, a very brief correction was provided to the effect that the two "had been leading separate lives before his illness". This correction does not identify the alleged inaccuracy, probably so as to prevent a reoccurrence of the same issues that led to the correction being published. However, given that the very lengthy offending article was entirely founded on the incorrect allegations of a personal nature that were presumably at the heart of the complaint, the laconic correction could not possibly provide sufficient redress for the damage to the complainant's reputation. The apology provided in this case was entirely appropriate but was weakly-worded, especially given that the offending article was aimed at causing personal embarrassment.

Clarifications & corrections

■ A FEATURE on 27 June 2015 made allegations about ex-BBC Trust board member Anthony Fry and his partner. Contrary to the article, Mr and Mrs Fry had been leading separate lives before his illness. We apologise for any hurt or embarrassment caused.

■ To report an inaccuracy, email corrections@dailymail.co.uk. To make a formal complaint under IPSO rules go to www.dailymail.co.uk/readerseditor where you will find an easy-to-use complaints form. You can also write to Readers' Editor, Daily Mail, Northcliffe House, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5TT or contact IPSO directly at ipso.co.uk

Picture 1. Correction 27 January 2016

In an effort to enhance the quality of corrections and to exceed IPSO requirements, the *Daily Mail* included the date of the original article in 95% of its published corrections, but the headline was omitted in 94% of the corrections. The inclusion of an apology was relatively rare (26%), and was predominantly used when serious infringements had occurred, as required by the Code. For example, in the correction of 12 December 2016, which was published after a very lengthy timespan of 175 days, the newspaper offered an apology (Table 1). On occasion, a correction included information which aimed to explain that the responsibility for the mistake lay elsewhere. These explanations could be interpreted as seeking to justify the newspaper's position, and to distance it from published inaccuracies. This arguably weakened the corrections' remedial effect (*picture 2*).

Clarifications & corrections

■ IN common with other newspapers, we published a reputable news agency's story yesterday which said that stowaways intercepted in east London had told police that

they were 'from Europe'. In fact, while they had travelled to the UK in an Italian vehicle from mainland Europe, the migrants told police they were from Iraq and Kuwait.

■ If you wish to report an inaccuracy, please email corrections@dailymail.co.uk. To make a formal complaint under IPSO rules please go to www.dailymail.co.uk/readerseditor where you will find an easy-to-use complaints form. You can also write to Readers' Editor, Daily Mail, Northcliffe House, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5TT or contact IPSO directly at ipso.co.uk

Picture 2. Correction 17 June 2016

Daily Telegraph

The *Daily Telegraph* published 36 corrections in 2016. Three of the corrections followed IPSO's intervention (11 February, 02 May and 18 June 2016). In terms of process, in 2016 and up to now, complaints can be submitted via the relevant webform and standard mail, or can be referred to the newspaper by IPSO. In 2016, complaints that were legal in nature were referred to the Editorial Legal department, while other editorial complaints raising Editor's Code matters were handled by Compliance and Legal working together.[§] The newspaper aimed to conclude complaints speedily. Its 2016 Annual Statement states that 75% of editorial complaints were resolved within 3 working days, and more than 90% within two weeks (Telegraph Media Group 2016).

Prominence

The corrections were almost exclusively published on page 2, with the exception of three occasions, on 10 June 2016, 30 July 2016 and 03 September 2016, when the corrections were published on different pages (5, 33, and 7 respectively). The first two corrections concerned financial issues and were published in the 'Business' section of the paper, whereas the latter was published in the 'Travel' section. There was also one other instance (13 August 2016) where the correction was published on page 6 because pages 2 and 3 were dedicated to special coverage of the Olympics. The correction space was entitled 'Corrections and Clarifications' throughout, and the headline was highlighted by use of different coloured fonts. All corrections included a subheading, which indicated the topic/theme of the published text. The specific corrections column on page 2 was introduced post-IPSO, as there was no special place for corrections before then.

The original page number is available for all corrections. There are six occasions when the corrections were published on a later page than the original articles, as the original articles were all front-page stories. Two of these followed an

[§] These departments are now merged into an Editorial Legal & Compliance department.

IPSO resolution (11 February and 02 May). There are also four other instances when the corrections were published on the same page as the original articles (*figure 5*).

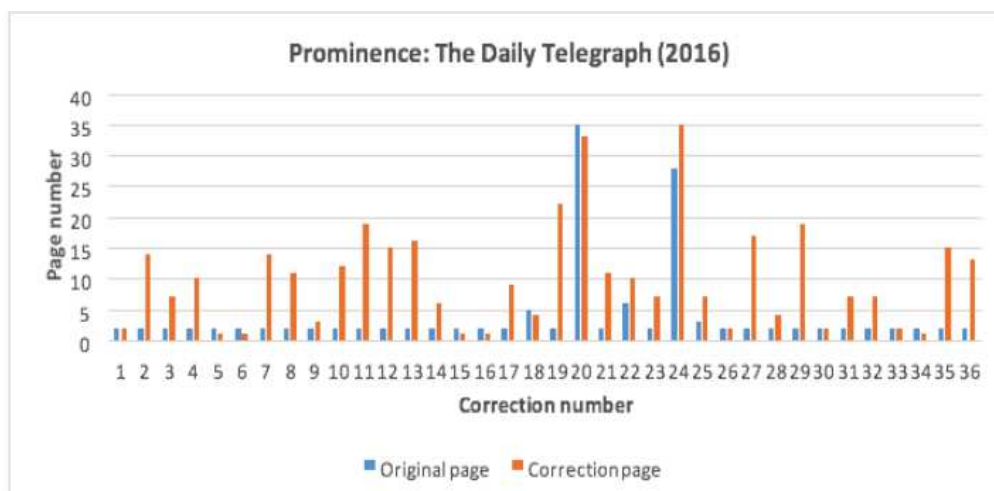


Figure 5. Prominence (*Daily Telegraph*, 2016)

Speed

In 2016, the *Daily Telegraph* mostly published its corrections in a short timeframe, and 78% of them were published within a month. Notwithstanding the effort to resolve complaints speedily, there were several occasions in 2016 on which it took longer to publish corrections (*figure 6*).

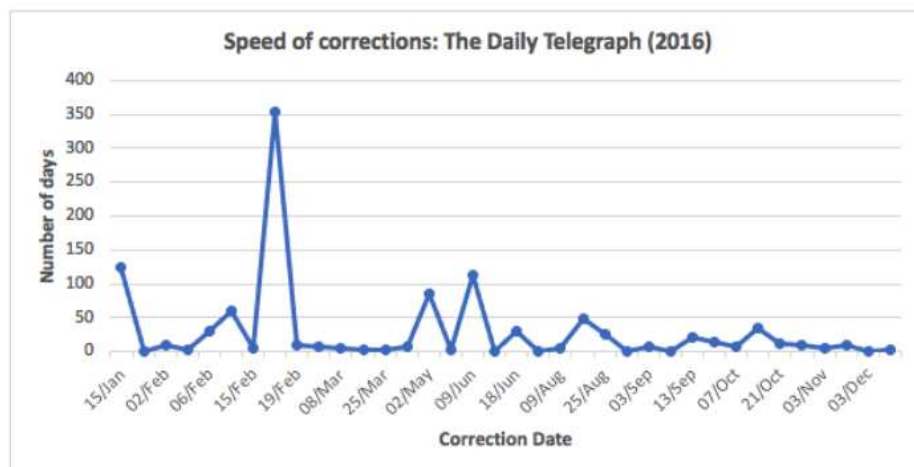


Figure 6. Speed of corrections (*Daily Telegraph*, 2016)

These cases concerned either personal affairs, sensitive matters or wrong allegations, as shown from the example below:

- Convictions of EU citizens: An article of Feb 17 said that criminal convictions of EU migrants have risen by 40 per cent in five years and that 700 offences are being committed by them every week. As the article explained, these figures relate to “notifications”, not to convictions alone. They also include breaches of court orders and convictions varied on appeal. We are happy to correct this. (The Daily Telegraph, 09 June 2016, timespan for publication: 112 days)

From the possibly delayed corrections, two involved IPSO interventions: the correction of 11 February 2016 that was published 59 days after the original article, and the correction of 02 May 2016 that was published after 86 days. The publication justified the overall delay on these two occasions with reference to the in-depth nature of IPSO investigation processes. On the first occasion, the complaint was received by IPSO 30 days after publication of the original article, on 11 January 2016, and it was concluded by IPSO on 10 February 2016. In the second case, the complaint was received nine days after publication of the original article, on 15 February 2016, and IPSO issued its decision on 14 April 2016. Taking the 14 days review period into account, the newspaper arguably published its corrections as soon as it was reasonably possible after the conclusion of the IPSO investigation. Nonetheless, a speedier resolution would have been in the interest of the complainants.

Adequacy

In most cases the *Daily Telegraph's* corrections clearly identified the original inaccuracy and the correct position, and occasionally offered a detailed account. Some corrections seemed lengthier or more unclear (for example, *picture 3*) when compared to other corrections by the same paper. Often, the lengthier corrections related to complex issues, such as the ones involving arcane points of law, where it would have been difficult to provide more accessible wording. Moving beyond the IPSO requirements, the date of the original article was always provided, but the title of the original publication was included in only 43% of the corrections. Apologies were included in 22% of the corrections and concerned mostly personal affairs. This seems to be in accordance with the Code requirement of an apology only 'where appropriate'.

CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

Charlotte Proudman

An article of 12 Sept contained incorrect details about a communication sent by Charlotte Proudman to her paternal grandmother. We wish to make clear that the last contact Miss Proudman had with her grandmother was more than two years before her death – not 'shortly before', as the article stated – and that Miss Proudman did not accuse her grandmother of having "failed in life". Nor had Miss Proudman 'thought up' her surname; she adopted her maternal family's surname. Her grandmother in fact died in January 2014, not April 2014 as stated. Miss Proudman has also asked us to clarify that one estranged family member expressed anger to the media, not her whole family. We are happy to set the record straight and apologise for the errors.

Picture 3. Correction 15 January 2016 (delay: 123 days)

The Sun

The Sun published 33 corrections in 2016. Out of those, six corrections were published following either rulings made by IPSO or resolutions mediated by IPSO. *The Sun* editorial complaints policy at the time provided that all complaints would be

acknowledged ‘within five working days’ (News UK, 2016).** The News UK 2016 annual statement further stated that complaints about editorial standards and requests for corrections were handled by *The Sun*’s dedicated Ombudsman who reported to the Managing Editor, while the former Managing Editor was also available for advice.†† Where possible, complaints would be settled within a matter of days (News UK, 2016). However, in many cases, this promise remained unfulfilled, as will be seen below.

Prominence

Corrections were published on page 2, in a dedicated space that was located either on the left-hand side or the right-hand side column, towards the lower half of the page. The newspaper made the corrections visible by positioning them in a light-blue box entitled ‘Corrections & Clarifications’ in capital letters. It included its complaints handling policy in the same box, but an IPSO logo acted as a divider between the correction and the policy statement, although sometimes the divider was positioned in the middle of the correction. From 94% of the corrections for which information was available, three were published on a later page than the original article. In two instances (15 and 28), the story was a front page article. On one occasion, the correction followed an IPSO ruling, whereas the other was the result of a resolved complaint (*figure 3*).

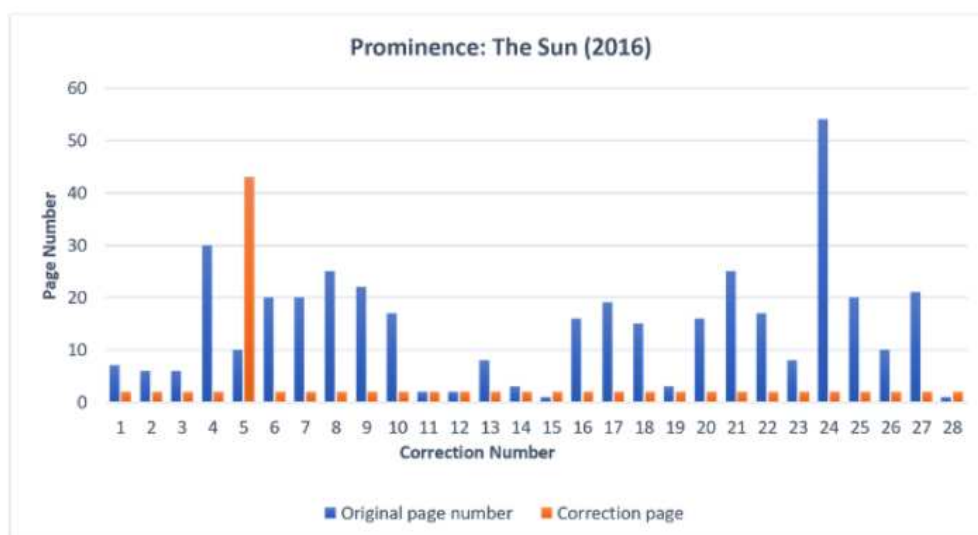


Figure 3. Prominence (*The Sun*, 2016)

Speed

Information is available for 32 corrections (out of 33). In this sample, there were 16 cases where the corrections were published more than 28 days after the original article. Overall, the time span for all corrections ranged from 1 to 300 days (*figure 4*).

** This commitment has been watered down in the meantime. The current complaints policy states that all complaints will be acknowledged ‘promptly’ (The Sun, 2020).

†† Complaints are now handled by the Head of Editorial Compliance, The Sun.

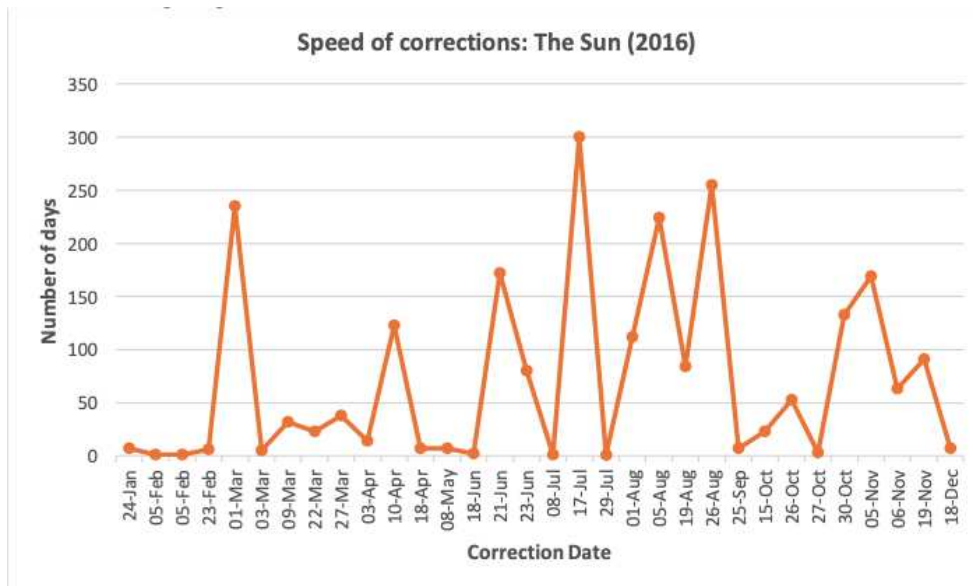


Figure 4. Speed of corrections (*The Sun*, 2016)

It is of concern that corrections published with a significant delay mostly concerned wrong allegations likely to affect the victims' reputation, as in the case of two corrections which were published after 172 and 255 days respectively:

- OUR January 1 article about Paul McKenna wrongly alleged that Paul McKenna was drunk on a flight to Barbados; was accordingly refused alcohol by the flight crew; and reacted to that refusal by launching into an abusive rant which reduced a female flight attendant to tears. We now accept that these allegations were untrue. We apologise to Mr McKenna. (*The Sun*, 21 June 2016, timespan for publication: 172 days).
- IN an article "Killer's Distress at Jail Uniform" (December 15, 2015) we stated that Mr Graham Coutts "wanted a £40,000 payout as he had to wear prison clothes for a hospital visit." In fact he is suing prison authorities because they did not respond to his distress when he was having a heart attack. (*The Sun*, 26 August 2016, timespan for publication: 255 days).

Notwithstanding the potential complexities of such cases, a speedier resolution – compared to IPSO's alleged average complaints handling time of around 35 days – would have been desirable (IPSO 2023).

Adequacy

The Sun largely identified errors clearly and stated the correct position. In one case, however, the newspaper attempted to explain the error by pointing the finger at the news agency that supplied the story (18 June 2016). The newspaper often provided information beyond the IPSO requirements by including the headline of the original article in 60% of the corrections, and its date in 85% of the corrections. An apology was included in 45% of the corrections. The newspaper made different linguistic choices in its apologies: for instance, in the correction of 30 October (Table 1), it included a subheading, indicating that an apology would be offered, whereas in the correction of 25 September the publication only included the word 'apologies' at the very end of the correction column. Finally, the correction of 24 January offered to remedy the publication of personal information concerning an athlete by removing all

articles from the newspaper's database, and by offering an apology for any distress caused. Strictly speaking this was not a correction given that no inaccuracy was involved, even though it was published in *The Sun's* corrections column.

The Times

The Times published 294 corrections in 2016, the highest number of published corrections amongst the publications that are included in the research sample. There were two IPSO rulings against the publication in 2016. However, the newspaper had already published the corrections before the IPSO decisions were issued. In terms of process, readers wishing to complain of a possible Editor's Code breach could use a dedicated form on *The Times* website or put their complaints in writing by email, fax or post. More serious complaints were handled by senior editorial executives with more than thirty years' experience, answering directly to the Editor. Routine complaints were dealt with by *The Times*' Feedback Editor. If there was exceptionally no prospect of solving the complaint directly with the complainant within the 28-day period allowed, readers were informed that IPSO could be asked to act from the outset as an intermediary (News UK 2016).

Prominence

206 out of the 294 corrections were published on a later page than the offending story. Even though corrections were published in different pages, ranging from page 20 to page 36, they were included in a specific column that included the headline "Corrections & Clarifications" in dark pink colour. In 19 cases, this concerned a story that was published on the front page. Referring to front page stories, the interviewee argued that 'due prominence' did not mean 'equal prominence' and that IPSO took a sensible approach to that. Having said that, *The Times* interviewee mentioned an occasion where the paper published a front-page correction without receiving a complaint, simply because it was a significant numerical error, and it was felt that it was important for the readers that they put it right (Interviewee, *The Times*).

Speed

In 2016, *The Times* published most of their corrections within a short time frame: 252 corrections (85%) were published within a week. In 16 cases there was a delay of more than 28 days between the publication of the original report and the publication of the correction. The interviewees argued that half of these complaints related to legal matters, whilst others related to delays in receiving the complaint or attempts to resolve more complex issues (Interviewee, *The Times*). Figure 7 depicts the corrections whose publication was delayed by more than 28 days.

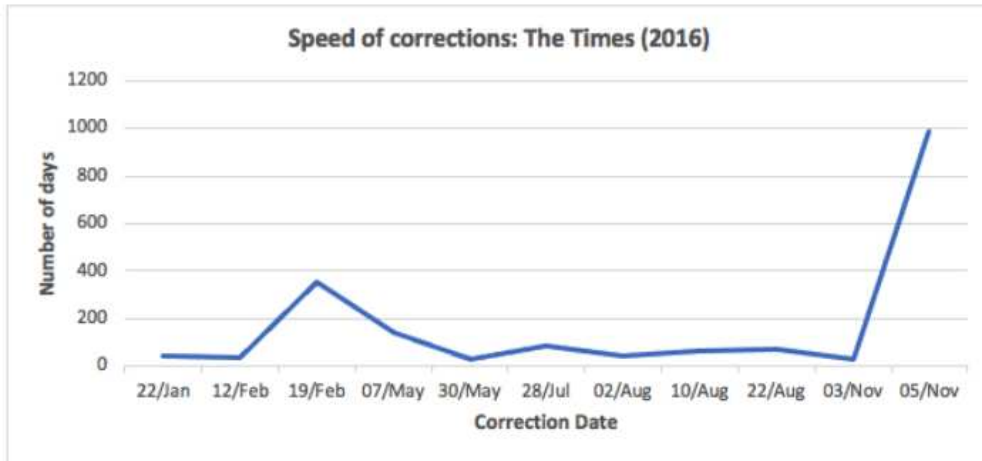


Figure 7. Speed of corrections (*The Times*, 2016)

Adequacy

In the vast majority of corrections, the newspaper identified the error clearly and offered sufficient information about the correct position. There are, however, a few instances in which the inaccuracy was not clearly identified and/or in which further corrective information was arguably needed to corroborate the corrections and to provide the full picture (*pictures 4 and 5*).

Corrections and clarifications

● We reported (News in brief, early editions, Feb 8) that the AQA exam board “refused to explain” how A-level English language papers had been wrongly marked. This was incorrect and we apologise for the error.

Picture 4. Correction 9 February 2016

● We stated (Magazine, Apr 16) that the amalgamation of two Bristol schools, Redland High School for Girls and the Red Maids’ School, was due to falling pupil numbers. This was incorrect.

Picture 5. Correction 21 April 2016

In the first of these cases the correction identified the inaccuracy without giving the AQA board’s explanation as to why the English language papers had been wrongly marked. In the second of these cases the true reason for the amalgamation of the two schools was not provided.

Another trend observed in 2016 is that the newspaper sporadically referred to ‘editing errors’ to explain that the error was not made by the original journalist but arose in the publishing process. Also, the publication occasionally attempted to distance itself from errors, either by referring to the inclusion of the correct position in a different part of the newspaper or by demonstrating that care was taken to rely on credible sources.

Moving beyond the IPSO requirements, 25% of the corrections included an apology. The type of cases in which an apology was offered varied, and apologies were included ‘where appropriate’ as required by the Code, for instance when the correction concerned a wrongful allegation that was likely to demean the victim (Table 1). Occasionally, the newspaper offered a long apology, and underlined this by using the term ‘apology’ in a subheading. As highlighted by the interviewee from *The Times*, ‘this would only be done as part of the negotiated resolution of a legal complaint.

Whether an apology is appropriate is determined on the basis of the damage that has been done' (Interviewee, *The Times*).

Analysis

Our findings show that all four newspapers had structured and systematic complaints handling processes in 2016. While the *Daily Telegraph* adopted centralised, systematic complaints handling processes post-IPSO, the other publications (*Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Times*) had a framework in place already since 2011.

Regarding the prominence and visibility of corrections, all four studied newspapers published daily a 'policy statement' on complaints handling policies. Most statements appear on a standard page, usually on page 2 or on a range of different pages as in *The Times*, where it variously appeared between page 20 and page 36. Still, the policy statement was consistently published on the letters page, which tends to attract readers' attention. However, even though the letters page is in general an appropriate location for the placement of corrections, and amounts to an 'established corrections column', the stark fluctuation of its position arguably undermines 'due prominence'. Table 3 provides a comparative analysis of our findings.

	No of corrections	IPSO Resolution/ Ruling	Prominence	Speed	Adequacy		
					Inclusion of title	Inclusion of date	Apology
Daily Mail	78	5 cases	92% of the corrections appeared on an earlier page	1-260 days (28% delayed)	6.4%	95%	26%
The Sun	33	6 cases	94% of the corrections appeared on an earlier page	1-300 days (50% delayed)	60%	88%	45%
Daily Telegraph	36	3 cases	83% of the corrections appeared on an earlier page	1-353 days (25% delayed)	42%	97%	19%
The Times	294	2 cases	30% of the corrections appeared on an earlier page	1-984 days (4% delayed)	24%	99.6%	26%

Table 3. Summary of research findings

Our findings show that *The Times* published a significantly higher number of corrections than any other publication in 2016. While many newspapers are reluctant to do so, the paper ran as many as 500 corrections per year. An interviewee noted: 'I think the 500 correction/year is a reasonable indication...of the kind of the volume you

are getting. Some of them would be quite small. The column is called clarification and corrections, so some are things we are clarifying, not correcting. But it shows the volume we get' (Interviewee, *The Times*). It should be clarified that some of these corrections are not actually breaches of the Code, and do not get picked up by IPSO, as they do not necessarily amount to a significant inaccuracy that requires correction under the Code.

The interviewee highlighted that all significant errors get a correction. Often, the paper prioritises corrections that have a legal dimension, or errors that may be “non-defamatory but significant factual errors that involve people” (Interviewee, *The Times*). This distinction exemplifies the difficulties with a third-party accuracy standard, which aims at the protection of public and private decision making as opposed to personal rights. Some argue that more decisive policing of third-party accuracy ignores the responsibility of readers who choose to believe misleading information in agreement with their worldview (Wragg, 2020: 173, 191). However, this study maintains that tough accuracy standards need to be upheld in the case of all factually incorrect reporting, especially if it aims to fuel popular prejudice at election times. This particularly applies to front page stories. When seriously misleading information is published on an important subject, a front-page correction may be warranted, regardless of the existence of an established corrections column (IPSO g, 2018).

The newspapers across the quality/popular press spectrum have been at pains to explain that ‘due prominence’ did not mean ‘equal prominence’. This distinction was emphasised in the interview with *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*. The interviewee at the *Daily Mail* claimed that the tabloid size with its restrictive layout meant that there were additional difficulties in publishing corrections on the front page. Front page corrections were therefore generally reserved for the most serious cases. Controversially, the Complaints Committee ruled that there was no need to publish a front page correction in the case of a front page article published a few days before the Brexit referendum, claiming that a group of migrants who arrived in the UK in the back of a lorry were ‘from Europe’, while in fact they were from the Middle East. This was implausibly justified on the ground that the inaccuracy in the headline ‘had minimal impact on the meaning of the article as a whole’ (IPSO h, 2016). The short page 2 correction of this story is shown in picture 6. It is submitted that in the case of such significant front-page inaccuracies, IPSO should use its power to dictate an equally prominent placement of the correction less sparingly.

Clarifications & corrections

■ IN common with other newspapers, we published a reputable news agency's story yesterday which said that stowaways intercepted in east London had told police that

they were 'from Europe'. In fact, while they had travelled to the UK in an Italian vehicle from mainland Europe, the migrants told police they were from Iraq and Kuwait.

■ If you wish to report an inaccuracy, please email corrections@dailymail.co.uk. To make a formal complaint under IPSO rules please go to www.dailymail.co.uk/readerseditor where you will find an easy-to-use complaints form. You can also write to Readers' Editor, Daily Mail, Northcliffe House, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5TT or contact IPSO directly at ipso.co.uk

Picture 6. Correction 17 June 2016 (*Daily Mail*)

Restrictions due to the layout of the tabloid format were also mentioned by the interviewee from *The Sun*: ‘If you think of a broadsheet first and then the tabloids, tabloids are much smaller size of a product, so what might not look overly excessive on a broadsheet (e.g., in terms of fonts) in a tabloid..., it takes a much bigger proportion, and it is much more significant on a page”. This seems a feeble justification for placing corrections of front-page articles containing significant distortions on page 2 of the print edition without signposting them on the front page. This was the case

with a 2016 article claiming in its prominent sub-headline that ‘4 in 5 jobs’ went to ‘foreign workers’ in the past year. This inaccurate claim was based on a misinterpretation of net figures provided by the Office for National Statistics. The newspaper offered to publish the correction, all the while disputing that the article was inaccurate and claiming that ‘for reasons of space and style, the newspaper may from time to time avoid unnecessary explanation when simpler and shorter phrases suffice’ (IPSO j, 2016).

Notwithstanding their reluctance to publish front page corrections, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* were more consistent overall in publishing corrections on the same or an earlier page than the original article, as the table 1 demonstrates. On the contrary, their record as regards timeliness left much to be desired. The empirical research shows that the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* did exhibit time lapses in the publication of some corrections, especially in cases that required IPSO’s intervention. The *Daily Telegraph* was also occasionally late in publishing corrections.

Newspaper	Date	Apology
<i>Daily Mail</i>	12 December 2016	AN ARTICLE on June 20 (‘Freud ‘drank in resort bar with ex-Maddie suspect’) reported claims in another newspaper that Robert Murat had known Sir Clement Freud in the Portuguese town where Madeleine McCann went missing. In fact, Mr Murat, who was totally cleared of any involvement in the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, never met or had any connection with the alleged paedophile ex-MP. We are happy to make this clear and apologise to Mr Murat for any suggestion he was involved in wrongdoing
<i>The Sun</i>	30 October 2016	ROBERT MURAT - AN APOLOGY On 19 June we published an article on the late Clement Freud and on Madeleine McCann. The article also referred to Robert Murat who was totally cleared of any involvement in the disappearance of Madeleine McCann. We would like to make it clear that Mr Murat never met or had any connection with Clement Freud. It was not our intention to suggest any wrong-doing by Mr Murat. We apologise to Mr Murat.
<i>The Times</i>	30 May 2016	In an article (“The warning that a triumphant team failed to heed”, News, May 2) we suggested that Ibrahim Hewitt is antisemitic. Mr Hewitt has asked us to clarify, and we accept, that this was incorrect and that he is not and never has been antisemitic. We are happy to put this on record and apologise to him for any distress caused.

Table 1. Inclusion of apologies

The interviewee from the *Daily Telegraph* mentioned that this was the case for complex issues such as personal affairs or sensitive matters (Interviewee, *Daily Telegraph*). Indeed, there were several occasions in 2016 when it took longer to

publish corrections. A tightening up of the long-drawn-out complaints process, and a speedier handling of complaints by IPSO would ensure that complainants are not dissuaded from reaching out to the regulator when no resolution with the paper can be found. This would guarantee that, in the words of the legal maxim, justice delayed is not justice denied. Correction speed is of the essence not only during times of political crisis, but also when individual reputations are at stake.

A case in point is that of *The Times*. For 2016, only 4% of the corrections were published later than 28 days. According to the interviewee, the process in the newspaper is quite fast because the senior editor is responsible for handling complaints. Complaints handling by people who are fully integrated into the editorial process was seen to bring 'huge advantages' as 'it's a much quicker and more straightforward and less bureaucratic system' (interviewee, *The Times*). Also, entrusting complaints handling to a person with a senior position in the paper guaranteed less negotiation, thus accelerating the decision-making process.

Finally, as far as adequacy is concerned, a trend observed in three of the publications (*Daily Mail; The Sun; The Times*) was the use of the correction to justify the inaccuracy and/or to distance themselves from it. Newspapers rely to a degree on copy from news agencies. However, responsibility for the published articles remains their own and they need to demonstrate that care was taken to avoid inaccuracies. On the positive side, there was evidence of good practice in terms of provision of information exceeding the Code requirements. All three publications displayed a preference for signposting the original article by way of its date of publication rather than its headline. This reference to the original article is commendable as it empowers the inquiring reader to get the full picture.

Conclusion

By 2016, all four newspapers had systematic complaints handling processes and an established corrections column in their print editions. The *Daily Telegraph* only introduced such processes post-IPSO. The other newspapers already had a policy in place, but it was professionalized under IPSO. The evaluation of the position, timing and wording of the published corrections has not confirmed a marked difference in their willingness to demonstrate their accountability to their readers. The traditional binary opposition between the 'quality press' and the 'popular press' is not reflected in their attitudes to complaints handling.

The *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* were found to be more consistent in their commitment to 'due prominence', a criterion which is resolutely interpreted by all sample newspapers as different from 'equal prominence'. To the extent that the newspapers can take refuge behind the vague wording in the Editors' Code, the expectation of readers that corrections are not hidden away can still be frustrated. This is especially problematic when grave inaccuracies appear in front page stories that can shape the public debate. IPSO's power to direct the placement of corrections can only be meaningful if such placement is commensurate with the scale of the error.

On the timeliness front, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun's* record leaves much to be desired. The same applies to the *Daily Telegraph*, while *The Times* was found to exhibit exceptional professionalism. Whether or not delays in the publication of corrections are on account of IPSO's involvement, a tightening up of this long-drawn process is advisable in the interest of upholding high journalistic standards. Finally, as regards the adequacy of corrections, the trend of using the correction column to justify the inaccuracy straddled the quality/popular press divide, and arguably had the potential to diminish the corrections' reparative effect.

In conclusion, IPSO has contributed to more systematic complaints handling processes, but more needs to be done. High standards in complaints handling signify publishers' willingness to act as good citizens and to make responsible use of the power they yield. The steps they take to meet journalistic standards and to learn from their mistakes demonstrate their willingness to adhere to their contractual obligations vis-à-vis IPSO, and more importantly vis-à-vis the public (Sjøvaag 2010). More than that, in an age when they are forced to co-exist with powerful new media players in a complex media ecology, responsibility and accountability are important hallmarks that may make the difference between extinction and survival.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

There are no conflicting interests.

Funding Acknowledgements

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research of this article: This work was funded by [details omitted for double-anonymised peer review]

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