Journalist protection and PCI recommendations: Advice is not legislation

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Prelims: Press Council of India, Article 19; Mains: GS-II free expression and institutional accountability



Original symbolic illustration: pcsmantra.com

Why in the news

A report of 19 November describes recommendations in the Press Council of India's 2026 Norms of Journalistic Conduct, released on National Press Day, 16 November, concerning complaints against journalists and caution in using stringent laws. Chairperson Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai recorded differences with some recommendations. These should not be presented as a unanimous new law or complete immunity from arrest.

Points of disagreement

The report describes suggestions to send complaints to PCI before criminal proceedings and inform the Council after arrests. The Chairperson noted that complainants may directly approach investigating agencies in the criminal process. She stressed that disagreement should not be equated with a national-security threat and that arrests under stringent laws require strong grounds.

Protection of sources

Alongside the principle that journalists should not be unnecessarily compelled to identify sources, the Chairperson suggested including the reasonable restrictions in Article 19(2). Source protection should therefore not be described as unlimited immunity from every judicial process.

PCI's role

The Council's official Norms page describes standards intended to balance press freedom with responsibility. It identifies a code-of-conduct role under Section 13 of the Press Council Act, 1978. Council standards, recommendations to government and parliamentary legislation are different instruments.

Exam use

An answer should bring together journalist safety, independent reporting, fair investigation and accountability under law. PCI is not a substitute for the police or criminal courts. A mandatory prior-clearance mechanism requires an applicable legal basis. At this stage, distinguish the reported recommendations from the recorded disagreement.

Mains practice question

How can institutions balance journalist safety with legitimate requirements of criminal investigation? (10 marks, 150 words)

Answer outline

1. **Introduction:** freedom
2. **Main body:** disagreement versus crime; due process
3. **Conclusion:** distinct institutional roles.

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Sources

https://presscouncil.nic.in/Norms.aspx
https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/government-urged-to-direct-plaints-against-journalists-to-pci-avoid-harsh-laws/article71721270.ece
Source status: the official page establishes the general mandate and older norms. An independent official copy of the new 2026 document was not found; the new recommendations and dissent are news-sourced.

Frequently asked questions

What do the PCI's 2026 Norms recommend?

As per a 19 November news report, the 2026 Norms of Journalistic Conduct, released on National Press Day (16 November), suggest routing complaints against journalists to the Council before criminal proceedings, informing the Council of arrests, and caution in using stringent laws. An independent official copy of the new document was not found, so these details are news-sourced. Source (https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/government-urged-to-direct-plaints-against-journalists-to-pci-avoid-harsh-laws/article71721270.ece)

On what points did the Chairperson record dissent?

Chairperson Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai noted that a complainant may directly approach investigating agencies in the criminal process. She stressed that disagreement should not be equated with a national-security threat, that arrests under stringent laws need strong grounds, and that source protection should carry a reference to the reasonable restrictions in Article 19(2). Source (https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/government-urged-to-direct-plaints-against-journalists-to-pci-avoid-harsh-laws/article71721270.ece)

What is the legal role of the Press Council of India?

The Council's purpose is to build standards of conduct that balance press freedom with responsibility, with a code-of-conduct role under Section 13 of the Press Council Act, 1978. Its standards and recommendations do not carry the binding force of parliamentary legislation. Source (https://presscouncil.nic.in/Norms.aspx)

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