

consumers into having their diamonds independently appraised before purchase. The survey was conducted on behalf of the Diamond Certification Laboratory of Australia (DCLA), an internationally-accredited diamond grading company.

While it supports independent certification of diamonds, the JAA contended that DCLA used the poll to vilify the entire Australian jewellery industry.

AAP said it established that DCLA was a reputable organisation that would be expected to have a valid and authoritative view on the state of the diamond industry, but did not question the scope or methodology of the poll.

The Sydney Morning Herald responded that it took the AAP article at face value. It said it generally accepts that its wire services follow proper procedures, and it is impossible for an entity like smh.com.au to afford the time and staffing needed to check the huge volume of stories that AAP contributes.

In the Council's view, newspapers and their websites are solely responsible for their editorial content, regardless of the source. The use of unchecked material is at the publisher's own risk.

While DCLA may well be an expert on diamonds, its Press Release did not state its own views about the honesty of jewellers, but rather those of an unknown number of people attracted to an online poll. AAP and/or smh.com.au should have questioned the methodology and depth of the survey so that their editors could make an informed judgment on whether or not to publish, or, if published, so that readers could form their own opinions as to its veracity. Having published the article the website should have offered redress to JAA when it became aware that the survey was an online poll. The JAA withdrew its complaint against news.com.au after that website made such an offer.

The Australian Press Council has clear guidelines on the reporting of opinion polls, of which AAP and smh.com.au should be well aware. They encourage editors to be cautious of open access online polls, where the sample size is unknown, the questions asked are unknown, and where the results have been generated by self-selecting respondents and not by proper statistical sampling.

The guidelines on opinion polls, and on other sensitive issues, are accessible on the Council's website, and are commended to all editors.

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The Australian Press Council was established in 1976 with the responsibility of preserving the freedom of the press within Australia and ensuring the maintenance of the highest journalistic standards, while at the same time serving as a forum to which anyone may take a complaint concerning the press.

It is funded by the newspaper industry, and its authority rests on the willingness of publishers and editors to respect the Council's views, to adhere voluntarily to ethical standards and to admit mistakes publicly.

The Council consists of 22 members. Apart from the chairman (who must have no association with the press), there are 10 publishers' nominees, ten public members (7 attend each meeting), two independent journalists, a journalist representing the MEAA and a retired editor. The publishers' representatives are nominated by metropolitan, suburban, regional and country newspapers and by magazines and AAP. The public is represented by people with no previous connection with the press.

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