

Submission BBC consultation draft editorial guidelines 2024

from CAMERA UK <https://camera-uk.org/>

(formerly BBC Watch)

Section 1.7 Complaints

“The BBC Complaints Procedure sets out the timeframes that complaints will normally be answered within...”

The BBC regularly fails to meet the timeframes it has set for itself. Our experience spanning many years shows that a significant proportion of complaints are not answered due to the timeframe having expired and some complaints are never answered at all.

For example, of the Stage 1a complaints we have submitted to date in 2024, 25% were not answered due to the timeframe having expired and 9% were not answered at all.

In recent years the Complaints Procedure has been the topic of consultations both by the BBC (2020) and OFCOM (2022) and it was addressed in the mid-term review published earlier this year.

Members of the public have however seen little improvement in its functioning and there is clearly an urgent need for the BBC to address the issue in depth.

Section 2: Impartiality

“2.4.12 Presenters, reporters, correspondents and on-air editors are the public face and voice of the BBC; they can have a significant impact on perceptions of whether due impartiality has been achieved. Audiences should not be able to tell from BBC output – or anywhere else – the personal opinions of its journalists, news and current affairs presenters, or factual journalism presenters and journalists on matters of current public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on ‘controversial subjects’ in any other area. They may provide professional judgements, rooted in evidence and professional experience, but may not express personal views on such matters publicly, including in any BBC-branded output or on personal blogs and social media.”

A version of this clause already appears in the existing editorial guidelines but it is not adequately observed or enforced, particularly – but not exclusively – when personal social media activity is in a language other than English.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/03/02/bbc-journalists-october-7-massacre-israel-gaza-conflict/>

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13205515/BBC-plunged-new-bias-row-journalists-damning-report-accusing-Israeli-soldiers-beating-humiliating-medics-like-videos-celebrating-Hamas-terror-attacks.html>

“Contributors’ Affiliations and Supplied News Material

2.4.17 It should not be assumed that contributors to BBC output are unbiased or impartial. For those from organisations such as charities, think-tanks or universities, it may be necessary, when relevant, to give appropriate information about affiliations, funding or particular viewpoints. The same applies to individual researchers, journalists, scientists or other experts and, on occasion, to contributors who may be relating their own experiences. The key test is to consider whether the audience would be misled if such information was not made available. It may also be necessary to consider whether such affiliations might risk undermining trust in the contributor's professional credentials or in the perceived authenticity of their experiences."

A version of this clause already appears in the existing editorial guidelines and yet it is regularly ignored, both in relation to individual contributors and representatives of NGOs.

<https://camera-uk.org/topic/contributors-affiliations/>

With regard to "the key test", it should be obvious that audiences need that information in order to be able to put a contributor's claims and statements into their appropriate context. For example:

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/07/01/bbc-news-again-ignores-editorial-guidelines-in-doctor-interview/>

The sentence relating to "undermining trust in the contributor's professional credentials" is not clear enough. Is the BBC really suggesting that audiences should not be informed of a contributor's relevant affiliations and viewpoints if doing so would detract from his or her credentials or perceived authenticity? For example:

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/06/17/what-the-bbc-doesnt-tell-audiences-about-a-frequent-contributors-particular-viewpoints/>

<https://camera-uk.org/2023/11/14/bbc-journalists-continue-to-ignore-impartiality-and-social-media-guidelines/>

<https://camera-uk.org/topic/mohammad-marandi/>

"2.4.18 Video and audio news releases or other material (for example, voice notes being used as pre-recorded rights of reply) supplied by outside organisations, such as companies, emergency services, government agencies, interest groups, sports clubs, campaigners, charities or other organisations seeking a platform, may sometimes be offered as a way of avoiding appropriate scrutiny. Such use may jeopardise impartiality or the perception of impartiality; the BBC should normally only use extracts from such material when it is not itself able to gather it and its use is justified by its editorial significance.

Any use of video and audio news releases, or other material supplied by outside organisations, should be clearly labelled, stating who supplied it and explaining any relevant circumstances in which it was produced."

This clause should also address the issue of reports produced by third parties, including political NGOs. All too often the BBC uncritically promotes such reports without clarifying the "particular viewpoints" of their authors and the campaigning motivations behind them. For example:

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/08/11/bbc-news-uncritically-promotes-an-ngos-political-campaign/>

<https://camera-uk.org/2022/02/03/uncritical-amplification-of-ais-apartheid-smear-from-bbc-news/>

“Protests and Demonstrations

2.4.21 Protests and demonstrations are an important part of the democratic process and they are routinely covered as part of the BBC’s news output. Interviews with organisers, protesters and demonstrators should be impartial, rigorous and challenging; the output should include alternative perspectives. In addition, it is important that content makers:

- assess the risk that previewing protests and demonstrations might encourage people to take part and therefore change the nature of the event; however, this should not prevent advance discussion about the issues that underpin the protest”

The BBC should not provide advance advertising for political demonstrations, as was the case in November 2023:

<https://camera-uk.org/2023/11/13/bbc-impartiality-compromised-by-reporting-on-uk-demonstrations/>

Section 3: Accuracy

“Accuracy in Live Content

3.4.7 Achieving due accuracy in live content can be challenging, as there may be little opportunity to verify factual claims. Where possible, and particularly if an issue is controversial, risks should be identified in advance and measures taken to mitigate them. This may include ensuring the appropriate preparation is undertaken so that the content contains sufficient challenge or context; or ensuring other contributors are able to provide additional challenge. Significant inaccuracies that may arise should be corrected quickly.”

A version of this clause already exists and yet it does not prevent the airing of inaccurate content. Appropriate preparation should include examination of an interviewee’s record and identification of inaccurate claims he or she has promoted in the past. Relying on other contributors to challenge inaccuracies is not an effective or acceptable strategy. For example:

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/06/21/bbc-issues-belated-correction-on-inaccurate-icj-claim/>

“Correcting Mistakes

3.4.34 Serious factual errors should be acknowledged and mistakes corrected promptly, clearly and appropriately. Inaccuracy may lead to a complaint of unfairness. Corrections should be appropriately scheduled, taking into account the audience when the error was broadcast or

published and should set out what was wrong as well as putting it right. The Corrections and Clarifications page on the BBC website allows for a public acknowledgment of a mistake.”

The tardiness of the BBC Complaints procedure means that more often than not, factual errors are not corrected in a timely manner. It is highly unlikely that members of the public will visit the Corrections and Clarifications page on the off chance that something they heard or read months ago has been corrected. Any correction should also appear as a matter of course in the original content and should not be left to the discretion of the division of the BBC concerned. For example:

<https://camera-uk.org/2016/09/14/bbc-radio-4-programme-edited-following-bbc-watch-complaint/>

“Mistakes in online content including on demand

3.4.35 Where there is an expectation that content will continue to be available, such as on BBC News Online; or is available on demand, such as on BBC iPlayer, serious breaches of editorial standards must be corrected and the error acknowledged. In exceptional cases, content may be removed. It should be clear what changes have been made, unless there are editorial or legal reasons not to do so. Where mistakes are unlikely to be a serious breach of editorial standards, a correction should be published on that platform, so that it is visible before the output is re-played. Such on-demand content does not then normally need to be changed or revoked.”

This instruction can only be relevant if complaints are addressed in a timely manner. All too often a programme which, for example, remains available online for a month after broadcast has disappeared from the online platform before an error is acknowledged and corrected. Examples:

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/06/21/bbc-issues-belated-correction-on-inaccurate-icj-claim/>

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/11/04/camera-uk-prompts-correction-to-bbc-genocide-disinformation/>

“3.4.36 In online text content, any mistake that alters the editorial meaning should be corrected. It is important to acknowledge what was wrong, correct the error, and make it clear that the article has been amended.”

Footnotes explaining corrections are currently not added as a matter of course. Again, members of the public are unlikely to spend their time searching out a report they read weeks ago in order to see whether or not a footnote (which would be more effective if placed at the top of the article rather than the bottom) has been added. For full transparency, the BBC News website should have a dedicated page displaying all corrections. After all, the aim is surely to ensure that members of the public receive the corrected information.

In addition, it is abundantly clear that the current complaints procedure does not adequately ensure that the same errors do not reappear in BBC content. For example, in recent months the BBC has had to correct at least nine inaccurate representations of the

January 2024 ruling put out by the ICJ, yet such misinformation continues to appear in BBC content.

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/12/09/bbcs-bowen-still-promoting-icj-disinformation-after-corrections/>

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/12/08/bbc-radio-4-podcast-promotes-still-more-genocide-disinformation/>

Section 4: Conflicts of Interest

“4.3.13 Any individual commenting publicly, including on social media, on BBC matters or stories, or issues concerning other broadcasters or broadcasting policy, must consult their line manager in advance, unless it comes within their professional remit.”

Given the damage done to perceptions of the BBC’s impartiality – including in relation to future content - by public statements made by BBC employees (see examples below) it is questionable whether consultation with a line manager sufficiently addresses this issue.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/bbc-bias-israel-gaza-tim-davie-b2639654.html>

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/11/14/bbc-journalist-who-complained-about-israeli-propaganda-promotes-hizballah-messaging/>

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/12/04/bbc-beirut-staff-display-double-standards-on-media-tours/>

“Public Expressions of Opinion, including on Social Media

This should be read in conjunction with Section 2: Impartiality and guidance: Personal Use of Social Media

4.4.14 Where individuals identify themselves as being linked with the BBC, and are content makers in on-air or off-air roles or are presenters primarily associated with the BBC, their public expressions of opinion on controversial issues or matters of current public policy have the potential to compromise their own and the BBC’s impartiality or cause other reputational damage. This includes displaying emblems, joining protests or marches, supporting campaigns or signing petitions, writing open letters to the press, to politicians, or to any external organisation. Any such view placed in the public domain, may present an actual or perceived conflict of interest.”

Once again, the BBC does not currently adequately enforce these instructions, particularly – but not exclusively – when the social media posts concerned are not in the English language. The damage done to the BBC’s reputation by some BBC Arabic correspondents celebrating or supporting the massacre of Israelis on October 7 2023 cannot be overstated.

The signing of petitions is clearly a relevant part of this clause:

<https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/gaza-journalists-foreign-correspondents-israel-egypt-access/>

However, the question that remains is how the BBC – which has failed to ensure that similar guidelines were observed in the past – intends to enforce this instruction.

This clause should also address the compromise to BBC impartiality caused by members of BBC management signing petitions and supporting campaigns on behalf of the BBC. For example:

<https://cpj.org/2024/02/more-than-30-news-outlets-affirm-support-for-journalists-in-gaza/>

Section 12: War, Terror and Extreme Violence, Disaster and Disorder

“Referrals to Director Editorial Policy and Standards

12.3.1 Any proposal to attend an event staged for the media by organisations proscribed under UK law, or groups known for extreme violence in pursuit of political or ideological objectives, must be referred to a senior editorial figure or, for independent production companies, to the commissioning editor. Referral must also be made to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

12.3.8 Any proposal to approach an organisation (or an individual member of an organisation) designated a ‘terrorist group’ by the UK Home Secretary under the Terrorism Acts, and any proposal to approach individuals or organisations responsible for extreme violence in pursuit of political or ideological objectives, to participate in BBC output whether in the UK or internationally must be referred in advance to Director Editorial Policy and Standards.”

These guidelines already exist but currently there is no way for BBC audiences to know whether they were in fact followed and what were the reasons for the Director’s approval of, for example, a BBC journalist interviewing a senior member of a terrorist organisation proscribed under UK law or attending a mourning ceremony for another.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/videos/cdd4rpv5jp0o>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyl3yg7wzzo>

While the reason for inclusion of the phrase “staged for the media” in this clause is unclear – it should surely apply to any event – the issue of media tours organised by proscribed terrorist organisations is particularly relevant. Reports produced as a result of such tours should be clearly marked as such from the outset, rather than relying on the inclusion- or not – of that information in the body of the report. For example:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c36p55j598lo>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjr4e51p83do>

For full transparency, the standards according to which such approvals are granted should be made public and such an item should be marked as having been approved.

“12.4.2 The BBC should make it clear if reports are censored or monitored or if content makers are asked or required to withhold information. The BBC should explain, wherever possible, the conditions under which it is operating.”

This clause already exists but is not currently adequately applied in BBC reporting from areas in the Middle East under the control of terrorist organisations such as Hamas and Hizballah.

<https://camera-uk.org/2016/08/14/mapping-changes-in-the-bbcs-disclosure-of-restrictions-on-journalists/>

“Use of Language

12.4.7 Reporting of extreme violence in pursuit of political or ideological objectives should be timely and responsible, bearing in mind the requirement for due accuracy and due impartiality. Care is required in the use of language that carries implicit value judgements. The perpetrators of extreme political or ideological violence are not viewed in the same way by all audiences.

12.4.8 The term ‘terrorist’ should only be used with attribution ie. when quoting or citing its use by others. Content makers should not adopt other people’s language as their own; their responsibility is to remain objective and report in a way that enables audiences to make their own assessments. The BBC should convey to the audience the full consequences of an act by describing the perpetrators as, for example, ‘bombers’, ‘gunmen’, ‘kidnappers’, ‘insurgents’ and ‘militants’.”

A version of this clause already appears in the existing editorial guidelines. Nevertheless, it is routinely ignored by BBC journalists reporting on events closer to home, with the result that while the perpetrator of an attack in, for example, London is described – accurately – as a terrorist, the perpetrator of an attack in Jerusalem is a “militant”. For example:

<https://camera-uk.org/2024/07/26/bbc-value-judgements-on-terrorism-again-on-display/>

London: [ABSURDITY OF BBC’S ‘LANGUAGE WHEN REPORTING TERRORISM’ GUIDANCE ON DISPLAY AGAIN](#)

London: [BBC AGAIN IGNORES ITS OWN EDITORIAL GUIDELINES IN LONDON TERROR REPORTS](#)

Stockholm: [BBC’S VEHICULAR TERRORISM DOUBLE STANDARDS ON DISPLAY AGAIN](#)

Barcelona: [BBC BIAS ON TERRORISM HIGHLIGHTED AGAIN IN REPORTS FROM SPAIN](#)

Tunisia: [THE BBC, TERRORISM AND ‘CONSISTENCY’](#)

Norway: [MAPPING THE BBC’S INCONSISTENT USE OF THE WORD ‘TERROR’](#)

Germany: [BBC PORTRAYAL OF ATTACKS ON SYNAGOGUES DIFFERS ACCORDING TO LOCATION](#)

The issue of “value judgements” is particularly problematic. The term terrorism is not a label of disapproval but a description of methods and actions. The term describes the use violence as a means, rather than end aims of which one may approve or disapprove.

https://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/11/one-mans-terrorist-is-another-mans-freedom-fighter.html

Interestingly, following a number of terror attacks in Europe in 2016, the BBC did manage to find a “working definition” of terrorism for its own use:

“Terrorist attacks are acts of violence by non-state actors to achieve a political, social, economic or religious goal through fear, coercion or intimidation.”

<https://camera-uk.org/2016/08/21/bbc-finds-a-working-definition-for-terrorism-in-europe/>

<https://camera-uk.org/2016/07/26/bbc-news-finds-terror-without-quotation-marks-in-europe/>

<https://camera-uk.org/2015/11/19/radio-4-gives-insight-into-bbc-avoidance-of-the-use-of-the-term-terror-in-israel/>

In other words, the terminological double standard applied to terrorism in different geographical locations is precisely the sort of “value judgements” which the BBC claims to avoid.

<https://camera-uk.org/2023/10/15/does-the-bbc-really-want-to-be-known-as-objective-about-the-mass-slaughter-of-israelis/>

In relation to the instruction “Content makers should not adopt other people’s language as their own”, it is worth noting that the BBC does precisely that when, for example, it describes a geographical area using the ‘legitimising’ term created by an invader and occupier – ‘West Bank’ – or when it describes people as ‘settlers’ in its reporting on the Middle East conflict.