

The Council for Arab-British Understanding submission to the BBC on its Editorial Guidelines

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The Council for Arab-British Understanding (Caabu) is a not-for-profit cross-party organisation whose mission is to work for a British Middle East policy that promotes conflict resolution, human rights and civil society in the Arab world through informed debate and mutual understanding.

On the whole, the BBC editorial guidelines reflect an objective to represent an accurate, factual, and diverse range of viewpoints for its broadcasts and news stories.

The aim of this submission is not to analyse where or when editorial guidelines might have been breached, but to look at where the editorial guidelines themselves can be enhanced.

The main issue that we will focus on is that of “balance” and “impartiality”. The BBC is known for its stated commitment to presenting a wide variety of opinions and [“Section 4: Impartiality”](#) of its [Editorial Guidelines](#) reflect that.

There are some elements that need to be more thoroughly expanded upon within the guidelines. It should be noted that Caabu finds impartiality and a balance of opinions to be instrumental in broadcasting and an important part of free speech – a key pillar of a functioning democracy.

Caabu does have concerns with the presentation of a “false balance”. This should be avoided. For example, the reality on the ground in a conflict zone needs to be reflected properly to the audience. Depicting opposing views without rigorously dissecting claims does not necessarily reflect that reality.

Paragraph 4.3.2 of the guidelines highlights the need to achieve “due weight” where “minority views should not necessarily be given similar prominence or weight to those with more support or to the prevailing consensus.” Paragraph 4.3.3 goes on to say, “there is no view on any subject which must be excluded as a matter of principle, but we should make reasoned decisions, applying consistent editorial judgement, about whether to include or omit perspectives”.

While this is understandable, there needs to be further expansion on what “due weight”, or “consensus” might mean if the majority view or consensus poses harm or a greater risk. This clause may hinder or obstruct certain minority views – which could be equally important for audiences to hear or read – from sufficiently explaining their viewpoints and

rationale for why this view may be taken and in turn, allow for potential harmful majority views to continue taking precedence in public discourse.

Although this idea of “consensus” and “scrutiny” is elaborated in Section 4.3.15 saying that “our reporting should not use language and tone which appear to accept consensus or received wisdom as fact and self-evident... BBC output should avoid reinforcing generalisations which lack relevant evidence”. While this is welcome, the elaboration focuses more on the issue of accuracy of reporting of majority views, as opposed to what the protocol would be if the majority view was a harmful one. Indeed, 8.3.3 does stipulate that “we must ensure that material which contains hate speech is not included in our output unless it is justified by the context”. As this is a separate point in a separate section, we recommend there be a specific subsection on what the course of action should be if the majority view is one that might be harmful and how to sufficiently address it.

There needs to be thorough and proper scrutiny of views – even if they are widely held ones – to fulfil the BBC objective of fair and accurate reporting. Otherwise, the BBC could run the risk of unintentionally perpetuating or making way for harmful views, to maintain a notion of (what could be deemed as) “false balance”.

4.3.14 does express that “contributors expressing contentious views... must be challenged while be given a fair chance to set out their response to questions. Minority views should be given appropriate space in our output... consequently, we will sometimes include in our output people whose views may cause serious offence to many in our audiences... the potential for offence must be weighed against the public interest and any risk to the BBC’s impartiality”.

Here, there needs to be an explanation of the justification or the contexts as to why the BBC will include views that can cause serious offence. This is because they can (unintentionally) result in perpetuation of harmful attitudes, stereotypes and in some instances violence, even if protected groups and categories (under hate speech and protection laws) are not explicitly invoked.

Therefore, although we are not recommending the removal of this stipulation, we recommend that it is elaborated by explaining the type of contexts and instances in which this would be justified by the BBC.

Overall, we find that while the guidelines do go to important efforts to maintain accuracy, balance and impartiality, there are elements within ‘balance’ and ‘impartiality’ in particular, that need to be elaborated and expanded upon, in order to provide audiences with a well-rounded, accurate, and factual picture.