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## **The BBC's Editorial Standards— Essential Information**



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## 1.1 Introduction

The BBC's Editorial Guidelines embody the wisdom of more than 100 years of programme making, content production and journalism. They are designed to support creativity and to help content makers weigh up risks and make difficult editorial decisions. The BBC needs the trust of its audience—and maintains that trust by the strength of its editorial decision making. The Guidelines set the editorial standards for all BBC content and also satisfy the requirements of the BBC's regulator Ofcom.

The BBC's Royal Charter<sup>1</sup> specifies the BBC's Mission, which is to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain. The Royal Charter also establishes the BBC's independence from government, guarantees its editorial and creative freedom and safeguards the licence fee.

The Charter sets out the BBC's Public Purposes:

1. To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them.
2. To support learning for people of all ages.
3. To show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services.
4. To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom.
5. To reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world.

The Royal Charter and the accompanying Framework Agreement<sup>2</sup> establish that it is a duty of the BBC Board to set the standards for the BBC's editorial and creative output and services. The BBC must publish, review periodically and ensure the observance of guidelines designed to secure appropriate editorial standards for its UK Public Services. It must

<sup>1</sup> Broadcasting: Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016

<sup>2</sup> Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016

also safeguard and maintain the editorial integrity and high quality of the BBC World Service and BBC Monitoring.

Producing and upholding these Editorial Guidelines fulfils those requirements. They apply to all content broadcast or published by the BBC whoever creates it and however and wherever in the world it is made or received. The Director-General, as the BBC's editor-in-chief, is ultimately responsible for its editorial content, but everybody involved in making content for the BBC must work to the standards set out in these Editorial Guidelines. All output made in accordance with these Editorial Guidelines will also meet the requirements of the BBC's regulator, Ofcom<sup>3</sup>.

The Editorial Guidelines set out the BBC's regulatory and ethical obligations, which often go further than the law. There will be occasions when content is judged legally safe to publish or broadcast, but still raises regulatory or reputational risks for the BBC. In these circumstances the BBC seeks to behave ethically. While lawyers and the Editorial Guidelines provide advice, editorial responsibility and the final decision whether to publish or broadcast content remains with the editorial management of the BBC.

In exceptional circumstances, there may be a proposal or action that would seem inconsistent with the Editorial Guidelines. This must have very strong justification and must be discussed and agreed with the Divisional Director. Director Editorial Policy and Standards must also be consulted.

Deliberate breaches without referral or negligent breaches of the Guidelines of a serious nature may result in disciplinary action.

3 The Ofcom Broadcasting Code

## 1.2 The BBC's Editorial Values

Audiences **trust** the BBC and they expect it to adhere to the highest editorial standards.

The BBC has a right to **freedom of expression** under human rights legislation, which is reflected in the Charter. This freedom is at the heart of the BBC's **independence**. Its audiences have a right to receive creative material, information and ideas without interference. But audiences also expect the BBC to balance its right to freedom of expression with its responsibilities to audiences and to contributors.

The BBC operates in the **public interest**—reporting stories of significance to audiences and holding power to account. In its journalism in particular, the BBC seeks to establish the **truth** and use the highest reporting standards to provide coverage that is **fair** and **accurate**. The BBC's specialist expertise provides professional judgement and clear analysis.

The BBC is **impartial**, seeking to reflect the views and experiences of audiences, so that its output as a whole includes a breadth and diversity of opinion, and no significant strand of thought is under-represented or omitted. The BBC is independent of outside interests and arrangements that could compromise its **editorial integrity**. However, its editorial standards do not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles.

Freedom of expression enables the exchange of information and ideas without state interference. It helps to inform public debate—encouraging curiosity, criticism and engagement. It allows, for example, dramatists, satirists and comedians to comment on the world around them. However, freedom of expression is not an absolute right—it carries duties and responsibilities and is also subject to legal restrictions and limits.

In exercising freedom of expression, appropriate **protection must be offered to vulnerable groups** and the BBC must avoid **causing unjustifiable offence**. People's **privacy** must be respected; private information should normally only be put into the public domain where the public interest outweighs an individual's legitimate expectation of privacy.

The BBC has a particular responsibility towards children and young people and must preserve their right to speak out and be heard. Where they contribute to or feature in BBC output, due care must be taken to ensure that their dignity and their physical and emotional welfare are protected.

Children have a right to access information and ideas; however, the BBC must ensure that content that might be unsuitable for them is scheduled appropriately.

## 1.3 The Public Interest

The BBC's Mission<sup>4</sup> specifies that it must 'act in the **public interest**'. It is in the public interest that the BBC should fulfil its mission to provide output to inform, educate and entertain. There is no single definition of public interest; it covers a wide range of values and principles relating to what is in the best interests of society, and it includes:

- freedom of expression
- providing information that assists people to better comprehend, or make decisions on, matters of public importance
- preventing people being misled by the statements or actions of individuals or organisations
- exposing or detecting crime or significantly anti-social behaviour
- exposing corruption, injustice, significant incompetence or negligence.

<sup>4</sup> Article 5 The BBC's Mission, Broadcasting: Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016

## 1.4 Editorial Justification

The concept of editorial justification recurs throughout the Editorial Guidelines and is central to the application of the BBC's values and standards.

Editorial justification is the judgement that the benefit from any editorial decision or content outweighs any negative impact. Editorial justification should be made on a case-by-case basis and take account of the impact on contributors, or where relevant those closest to them, and audiences. It includes, but is not limited to: balancing the privacy of individuals against the public interest in revealing information about them; and balancing the use of potentially offensive output against the BBC's and audiences' freedom of expression.

## 1.5 Ofcom

Under the Charter, Ofcom must regulate the standards of relevant BBC UK Public Service content to ensure it meets the requirements of Ofcom's Standards and Fairness Codes<sup>5</sup>. It therefore considers complaints against some BBC broadcast content.

Ofcom does not regulate standards for the BBC World Service. BBC commercial broadcast services, provided by BBC companies, are not UK Public Services but they are subject to Ofcom's content standards regulation where they are distributed under Ofcom licences.

Where Ofcom finds a breach of its Broadcasting Code, it may require the BBC to broadcast a statement of its findings. Where Ofcom considers its code has been breached 'seriously, deliberately, repeatedly or recklessly' it can impose sanctions which range from a requirement to broadcast a correction or statement of finding to a fine of no more than £250,000.

<sup>5</sup> Article 46 Principal functions of Ofcom, Broadcasting: Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016

## 1.6 Accountability

The Charter sets out the BBC's duty to be transparent and accountable. The BBC must publish an Annual Report and Accounts which must include information showing how appropriate editorial standards have been set, reviewed and met. It must also include information about how the BBC has served the nations and regions of the UK and whether there have been significant changes to any Public Services. The BBC must also report on how complaints have been handled and what has been learned from them.

Additionally, the BBC Board will hold the BBC Executive to account to ensure editorial standards are maintained. It will commission thematic reviews in key areas of public debate and these findings will be published.

## 1.7 Complaints

The BBC is open in acknowledging mistakes when they are made and wants to learn from them. It is required to set and publish procedures for the handling and resolution of complaints. The BBC Complaints Procedure<sup>6</sup> sets out the timeframes that complaints will normally be answered within and relates both to the obligations of its Public Services and also its commercial operations.

Complaints about most BBC content<sup>7</sup> are dealt with by the BBC first, as set out in the Complaints Procedure<sup>8</sup>. Complaints are handled by BBC Audience Services in the first instance, but complainants dissatisfied with the response can ask the BBC's Executive Complaints Unit (ECU) to investigate.

The Executive Complaints Unit deals with complaints about possible breaches of the BBC's editorial standards in connection with specific programmes or items of content. It deals with complaints about any BBC service, platform or product where the BBC has editorial

<sup>6</sup> BBC Complaints Framework and Procedures June 2020 [www.bbc.co.uk/contact/sites/default/files/2024-05/Complaints\\_Framework\\_eng\\_0.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/sites/default/files/2024-05/Complaints_Framework_eng_0.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Individuals may make first-party complaints relating to fairness and privacy directly to Ofcom

<sup>8</sup> BBC Complaints Framework and Procedures June 2020

responsibility. This includes international, public and commercial services and BBC-branded magazines.

The Executive Complaints Unit will also consider 'general complaints', which may be complaints about editorial issues which are directed at the output as a whole rather than specific items, or about a range of non-editorial matters.

The Executive Complaints Unit's decisions are subject to review by the Director-General, as the BBC's editor-in-chief.

Where the Executive Complaints Unit identifies a serious breach of the editorial standards set out in these Guidelines, its finding will normally be published on the BBC complaints website. It may also direct the BBC to broadcast an apology or correction.

If complainants are not satisfied with the Executive Complaints Unit finding, and the complaint relates to BBC content regulated by Ofcom, the complainant can refer the matter to Ofcom, after the BBC has finished considering the complaint. Ofcom will adjudicate on whether there has been a breach of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

Complaints about BBC World Service content and BBC content on social media do not come within Ofcom's remit and are considered within the BBC's complaints process, in line with the Complaints Procedure.

## 1.8 Accessibility

The BBC is committed to being inclusive and accessible to all audiences and is required by law to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure disabled people can access output.

The BBC provides subtitling, audio-description and sign language services, but what is considered 'reasonable' will evolve as technology develops<sup>9</sup>.

Ofcom also sets mandatory requirements for all broadcasters<sup>10</sup>.

Decisions taken throughout the production process will affect whether output is accessible to people with some visual impairment, including colour blindness, hearing loss or speech impairment. Producers must take account of the requirement that, as far as reasonably practicable, BBC content is accessible to those audiences.

See guidance: Visually Impaired and Hearing-Impaired Audiences

## 1.9 How to use the Guidelines

1.9.1 Knowledge of and familiarity with the Editorial Guidelines is an essential professional skill. Everyone who makes or presents BBC content is contractually required to observe and abide by them.

1.9.2 When applying these Guidelines, individuals and teams are expected to make most of the necessary judgements, but some issues require careful consideration at a higher level. No one should hesitate to ask for advice, and the Editorial Guidelines therefore advise, and sometimes require, reference to more senior editorial figures, Editorial Policy or specialists such as Programme Legal Advice or safety experts.

<sup>9</sup> BBC Policies: Subtitles on TV and Audio description on TV. Available on Gateway for BBC staff or via commissioning editors for independent producers

<sup>10</sup> Ofcom's Code on Television Access Services

- 1.9.3 Editors and managers must be prepared to discuss areas of concern and be ready to offer guidance. They must support producers and other staff in the editorial management of their content, including the effective supervision of on-air presenters, reporters and other on-air roles.
- 1.9.4 Issues may arise that overlap with, or are separate from, editorial concerns. The BBC has specialist internal advisers on legal, data protection, safety, pronunciation, international filming, health and safeguarding matters, who should be consulted as appropriate. BBC News maintains bureaux around the world, a political research team and a head of statistics.

The BBC has a separate legal team in Scotland who can advise on Scottish legal issues.

Any decision to proceed with content or continued publication of content contrary to BBC legal advice must be referred to the Divisional Director and Director Editorial Policy and Standards.

## Editorial Guidance

- 1.9.5 The Editorial Guidelines are supplemented by further guidance, which is available on the BBC Editorial Guidelines website. The guidance contains additional information about how specific areas of the Guidelines can be applied and interpreted. New guidance is written when necessary.

## Referrals

- 1.9.6 The BBC's reputation rests on sound decision making, and the referrals system ensures that complex editorial decisions are properly considered. Referrals lie at the heart of the BBC's editorial process and are a source of its strength. No one involved in the making or presenting of BBC output should hesitate to refer editorial dilemmas.
- 1.9.7 The Editorial Guidelines specify a number of Mandatory Referrals. These may be to senior editorial figures within the

output division, Editorial Policy, including Director Editorial Policy and Standards or, on occasion, other areas of the BBC.

Mandatory Referrals are an essential part of the BBC's editorial and compliance process and must be observed.

The Mandatory Referrals are summarised in each section of the Guidelines. However, they must be read in the context of the relevant cross-referenced Guidelines to be fully understood.

The more important or contentious the issue, the higher the referral needs to be. The content maker is responsible for knowing who to refer their query to. If in doubt, refer.

- 1.9.8 On occasion, the Editorial Guidelines suggest or require referral to an internal BBC resource that independent production companies are unable to access. In such cases, independents should make the BBC commissioning editor or equivalent aware.

Contracts with independent production companies should define where legal liabilities lie and independent production companies should take independent legal advice as appropriate. However, independent production companies may refer legal questions of an editorial nature through their commissioning editor who may discuss them with Programme Legal Advice.

- 1.9.9 Any significant breach of the editorial standards in the Guidelines should be referred promptly to an appropriate senior editorial figure, who will consider what action may be needed—including whether content should be amended, corrected or removed or if an apology should be given.

## **Editorial Policy**

- 1.9.10 While responsibility for editorial content lies with output teams, advice can be sought from Editorial Policy. The Editorial Policy team, led by Director Editorial Policy and Standards, provides advice on how to work within the Guidelines at every stage of the production process for every type of content. The earlier

that potentially contentious content is referred the better. Advice is available 24 hours a day.

In addition to the referrals specified in each section, Editorial Policy can be consulted on questions about how to interpret or apply the Editorial Guidelines.

## Editorial Compliance and Standards

Editorial justification is the judgement that the benefit from any editorial decision or content outweighs any negative impact. Editorial justification should be made on a case-by-case basis and take account of the impact on contributors, or where relevant those closest to them, and audiences.

- 1.9.11 The BBC's compliance obligations require that all content that is not live is reviewed before publication or broadcast and the results of that review recorded and kept. Separate guidance is available for live output. Most news output is normally treated as live. All live programmes that include pre-recorded inserts are treated as live.

**See** guidance: Live Output

The Editorial Guidelines, referrals and advice from Editorial Policy can inform the judgements that are essential to the editorial compliance of BBC output. Legal advice may also be necessary.

Advice on the compliance process is available from the Heads of Editorial Standards/Compliance and Complaints and/or compliance managers in each output division.