

# 3

## Accuracy



# Accuracy

## 3.1 Introduction <sup>44</sup>

## 3.2 Principles <sup>44</sup>

## 3.3 Mandatory Referrals <sup>45</sup>

## 3.4 Guidelines <sup>46</sup>

- **Gathering Material** <sup>46</sup>
- **Accuracy in Live Content** <sup>47</sup>
- **Reporting Statistics and Risk** <sup>48</sup>
- **User-Generated Content, Social Media and Other Online Material** <sup>48</sup>
- **Material from Third Parties Including Video and Audio News Releases** <sup>49</sup>
- **Note-Taking** <sup>50</sup>
- **Avoiding Misleading Audiences** <sup>51</sup>
- **Content Affected by Changing Circumstances** <sup>57</sup>
- **Correcting Mistakes** <sup>57</sup>
- **Accuracy and the Nations** <sup>58</sup>

## 3.1 Introduction

The BBC is committed to achieving due accuracy in all its output. This commitment is fundamental to its reputation and the trust of audiences. The term 'due' means that the accuracy must be adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectation and any additional information provided by the BBC that may influence that expectation<sup>1</sup>.

The due accuracy required of, for example, drama, entertainment and comedy, will not usually be the same as for most factual content. The requirements may even vary within a genre, so the due accuracy required of factual content may differ depending on whether it is, for example, factual entertainment, historical documentary, current affairs or news<sup>2</sup>.

## 3.2 Principles

- 3.2.1 The BBC must do all it can to ensure due accuracy in all its output.
- 3.2.2 All BBC output, as appropriate to its subject and nature, must be well sourced, based on sound evidence, and where possible corroborated. Content producers should be honest and open about what they don't know and avoid unfounded speculation. Claims, allegations, material facts and other content that cannot be corroborated should normally be attributed.
- 3.2.3 The BBC must not knowingly and materially mislead its audiences. Content producers should not distort known facts, present invented material as fact or otherwise undermine audiences' trust in the BBC's content.

<sup>1</sup> The section of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code that relates to this is 5: Due Impartiality and Due Accuracy and Undue Prominence of Views and Opinions

<sup>2</sup> The Framework Agreement accompanying the BBC Charter requires the BBC to observe the accuracy requirements of the Broadcasting Code; however, by applying 'due accuracy' to all output, the BBC exceeds that requirement

- 3.2.4 Serious factual errors should normally be acknowledged and corrected quickly, clearly and appropriately.
- 3.2.5 In news and current affairs content, achieving due accuracy is more important than speed.

### **3.3 Mandatory Referrals— must be referred in advance**

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

#### **Referrals to Director Editorial Policy and Standards**

- 3.3.1 Any proposal to rely on a single unnamed source making a serious allegation or to grant anonymity to a significant contributor making a serious allegation must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards and Programme Legal Advice.

See 3.4.21

#### **Other Referrals**

- 3.3.2 Where content producers believe they have broadcast a defamatory inaccuracy, Programme Legal Advice must be consulted.
- 3.3.3 Any content producers intending to produce output about Northern Ireland or significant projects involving the Republic of Ireland, should notify Director Northern Ireland of their proposals at an early stage. Similarly, content producers creating material which deals with significant national or regional issues or themes about England, Scotland and Wales who are not based in the relevant nation should inform the director of that nation.

See 3.4.37

- 3.3.4 A senior editorial figure must be responsible and accountable for overseeing the deployment and continuing use of any Artificial Intelligence (AI). They should seek advice from Editorial Policy, who may consult the AI Risk Advisory Group, before any decision to deploy the AI.

For independent production companies a senior editorial figure, who is responsible for compliance within the production team, should be responsible and accountable for its use of AI.

See 3.4.27

## 3.4 Guidelines

### Gathering Material

- 3.4.1 Accuracy is not simply a matter of getting facts right. Relevant opinions as well as facts may need to be weighed and considered to get at the truth.

Where appropriate to the output and wherever possible, content makers should:

- gather material using first-hand sources
- check facts and statistics, identifying important caveats and limitations
- validate the authenticity of documentary evidence and digital material
- corroborate claims and allegations made by contributors
- weigh, interpret and contextualise claims, including statistical claims.

See guidance: Reporting Statistics; and Investigations

- 3.4.2 In news and current affairs content, achieving due accuracy is more important than speed.

- 3.4.3 Content producers should try to witness events and gather information first hand. Where this is not possible, talk to first-hand sources and, where practicable, corroborate evidence.

See 3.4.20–3.4.23

- 3.4.4 Content producers should be reluctant to rely on a single source. If they do rely on a single source, it should be credible, and a named, on-the-record source is always preferable.  
**See** 3.4.20–3.4.23
- 3.4.5 Research interviews with sources making serious allegations should, wherever practicable, be recorded. In circumstances where recording might inhibit the source, full notes should be made, preferably at the time or, if not, as soon as possible afterwards.  
**See** 3.4.15  
**See** Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.30
- 3.4.6 Information, facts, documents and digital material must be checked and verified to achieve due accuracy. If content producers have been unable to verify material, they should usually say so and attribute the information.

## 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.  
**See** Section 2 Impartiality: 2.4.5–2.4.10  
**See** guidance: Live Output

## Reporting Statistics and Risk

- 3.4.8 The same scepticism that is used when gathering information should be applied to statistics and numbers and they should not necessarily be taken at face value. When output includes statistics, numbers should be explained clearly, put into context, weighed, interpreted and, where appropriate, challenged. They should be presented clearly and attributed. The statistics must be accurate and verified where necessary, with important caveats and limitations explained. A range of evidence should be used to put statistical claims into context and help audiences to judge their magnitude and importance. Where claims are wrong or misleading, they should be challenged.
- 3.4.9 The reporting of risk can have an impact on the public's perception of that risk, for instance with health or crime stories, or stories about the economy, weather or climate. Content makers should avoid worrying audiences unduly and contextualise reports to be clear about the scale of the risk. This is particularly true in reporting health stories that may cause individuals to alter their behaviour in ways that could be harmful. The emotional impact of pictures and personal testimony should be considered, particularly on perceptions of risk.

**See** Section 8 Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: 8.4.10

**See** guidance: Reporting Statistics

## User-Generated Content, Social Media and Other Online Material

- 3.4.10 It should not be assumed that user-generated material is accurate; it may need to be verified and it should always be clearly identified. Care must be taken with content that may have been supplied by anyone with a vested interest, rather than a disinterested bystander. User-generated content may not provide a complete picture.

**See** guidance: User-Generated Contributions

- 3.4.11 Even apparently reliable sources of information on the internet may not always be accurate or complete. It may be necessary to check who is running the website or confirm with an individual or organisation that the material is genuine.

See guidance: Internet Research

- 3.4.12 Fact must be distinguished from rumour, particularly—but by no means exclusively—on social media, where misinformation and disinformation may be deliberate. Error or rumour can spread quickly and corrections rarely attract the same attention as the original story.

Additional scrutiny may be necessary if material from a social media site or other internet source is being used to corroborate a fact. Material that content producers did not gather themselves should be attributed.

## **Material from Third Parties Including Video and Audio News Releases**

- 3.4.13 Material supplied by third parties, including news providers, needs to be treated with appropriate caution, taking account of the reputation of the source.

The BBC should normally only rely on an agency report if it can be substantiated by one of its journalists or if it is sourced from a reputable news agency.

Material supplied by third parties should only be used if it is credible and reliable.

Any credit or attribution that is included relating to the use of third-party material should be in accordance with the appropriate BBC credit guidelines.

See Section 12 War, Terror and Extreme Violence, Disaster and Disorder: 12.4.1–12.4.4 and 12.4.19

See guidance: Crediting and Labelling External Relationships

3.4.14 Content makers should be reluctant to use video and audio news releases or other material including voice notes supplied by outside parties who may have vested interests. This includes material from companies, emergency services, government agencies, interest groups, sports clubs, campaigners, charities or other organisations or individuals seeking a platform. It can often be offered to avoid the scrutiny of an interview and may be inaccurate. Whilst the organisation supplying the material may claim that it has been produced objectively, the BBC cannot vouch for the circumstances in which it was produced or the editorial standards applied.

Extracts from such material should not normally be used unless content makers are not able to gather it themselves and its use is editorially justified.

Any use of video and audio news releases, or other material supplied by outside parties, should be clearly labelled. It must be stated who supplied it and any relevant circumstances in which it was produced must be explained.

**See** guidance: Video and Audio News Releases

**See** Section 2 Impartiality: 2.4.18

## Note-Taking

3.4.15 Accurate, reliable and, wherever possible, contemporaneous notes of all significant research and other relevant information must be taken. Records of research must be kept, including documents, background notes, emails and any other written correspondence, as well as messages and information exchanged on social platforms. They should be kept in a way that allows double-checking, particularly at the scripting stage and, if necessary, by another member of the team.

When the BBC broadcasts serious allegations made by an anonymous source, full, timely notes must be kept of interviews, conversations and information that provide the basis for the story.

**See** 3.4.5

**See** Section 6 Fairness: 6.4.31–6.4.36 and Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.30

**See** guidance: Investigations

## Avoiding Misleading Audiences

- 3.4.16 The BBC must not knowingly and materially mislead audiences with the content it produces. Producers may need to clarify the nature of some content by labelling (for example, verbally, in text or with visual or audio cues) to avoid being misleading.
- 3.4.17 Due accuracy must be adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectation, and any additional information provided by the BBC that may influence that expectation.

The requirements may even vary within a genre, so the due accuracy required of content may differ depending on whether it is, for example, factual entertainment, content about the natural world, documentaries including historical content, drama, comedy, current affairs or news.

Content producers may use different techniques to bring a narrative to life but must still be accurate.

**See** guidance: Recording the Natural World; Fictitious News Bulletins; and Reporting and Portrayal of Tribal Peoples

- 3.4.18 When analysing datasets the methodology should normally be available to the audience, including any relevant uncertainty or margins of error.

Content producers using any automated analysis of data should give it a sense check, particularly if the outcomes appear unusual or surprising.

**See** Section 11 Statistics, Data, Polls and Surveys: 11.4.23

- 3.4.19 Omitting significant details may lead to inaccuracy. Audiences should be provided with the relevant facts, complete information and context to enable them to have an accurate understanding of the content.

## Sources

- 3.4.20 Sources of information and significant contributors should normally be identified and their credentials made clear so that audiences can judge their status.
- 3.4.21 Whenever anonymity is agreed, both the journalist and the source must understand the extent to which they are being anonymised and how this commitment extends to all those in the BBC who are aware of their identity.

When quoting an anonymous source, especially a source making serious allegations, content makers must take all appropriate steps to protect their identity. However, they should give the audience whatever information they can about them and in a way that does not materially mislead about the source's status.

**See** Section 6 Fairness: 6.4.31–6.4.36

Where it is sought, the relevant editor, including the Director-General, as editor-in-chief, has the right to be told a source's identity and is equally obliged to keep this information confidential. In cases involving serious allegations, journalists should resist any attempt by an anonymous source to prevent their identity being revealed to a senior BBC editor or, for independent production companies, the relevant commissioning editor. If this happens, it should be made clear that the information obtained confidentially may not be broadcast.

Any proposal to rely on a single unnamed source making a serious allegation or to grant anonymity to a significant contributor making a serious allegation must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards and Programme Legal Advice, who will consider whether or not:

- the story is of significant public interest<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Section 1 The BBC's Editorial Standards:  
1.3 The Public Interest

- the source is of proven credibility and reliability and in a position to have sufficient knowledge of the events featured
- a serious allegation was made or substantiated off the record
- a response to serious allegations has been sought  
**See** Section 6 Fairness: 6.4.43–6.4.46

and will consider any

- legal issues
- safety concerns, for example for whistle blowers  
**See** guidance: Investigations
- sensitive and personal issues.

3.4.22 The reporting of allegations made by an anonymous source should be scripted carefully to explain:

- the nature of the allegation
- that the allegation is being made by an anonymous source and not the BBC.

When the allegations have not been independently corroborated, journalists should consider if it is appropriate to inform the audience.

3.4.23 Live unscripted two-ways should not normally be used to report allegations. It must be the editor’s decision as to whether they are an appropriate way to break a story. When BBC colleagues follow up a story, they must ensure they understand the terms in which the allegations are to be reported and do so accurately.

## Links to Third-Party Websites

3.4.24 Links from BBC content to sites operated by others should normally lead to those which are credible. Where editorially justified, content producers may link to external sites significant to a current news story, but their credibility should be assessed before doing so.

**See** Section 2 Impartiality: 2.4.10 and Section 15 Independence from Commercial and Other External Interests: 15.4.22

**See** guidance: Links and Feeds

## Production Techniques

3.4.25 There are very few recorded programmes that do not involve some intervention from the production team, but there are acceptable and unacceptable production techniques. Consideration should be given to the intention and effect of any intervention. It is normally acceptable to use techniques that augment content in a simple and straightforward way, for example by improving clarity and flow or making content more engaging. This may include craft skills such as some cutaway shots, set-up shots to establish interviewees and asking contributors to repeat insignificant actions or perform an everyday activity. It is usually unacceptable to use production techniques that materially mislead the audience about the reality of the narrative or events.

For news, factual and some factual entertainment content, unless clearly signalled to the audience or using reconstructions, content makers should not normally:

- stage or re-stage action or events which are significant to the development of the action or narrative
- inter-cut shots and sequences if the resulting juxtaposition of material leads to a materially misleading impression of events.

Commentary and editing must never be used to give the audience a materially misleading impression of events or a contribution.

3.4.26 It should be ensured that any digital creation or manipulation of material such as the use of synthetic content does not distort the meaning of events, alter the impact of genuine material or otherwise materially mislead audiences. Content producers should also be aware that digital manipulation of photographs, video and documents have been used to hoax broadcasters.

## Use of Automated Technology and Artificial Intelligence

- 3.4.27 The use of technologies, such as automation or artificial intelligence, may lead to inaccuracy in BBC content. That may be caused by algorithmic bias or training data; content or answers that appear plausible but are not necessarily factually accurate—often known as hallucinations; or plagiarism and mimicry. The BBC must not knowingly and materially mislead audiences through any use of AI.

A senior editorial figure must be responsible and accountable for overseeing the deployment and continuing use of AI. They should seek advice from Editorial Policy, who may consult the AI Risk Advisory Group, before any decision to deploy the AI.

For independent production companies any proposed use of AI, where there may be a material impact on audience-facing content, should be discussed as part of the commissioning process. A senior editorial figure who is responsible for compliance within the production team, should be responsible and accountable for its use of AI.

- 3.4.28 Any product that uses AI to distribute or curate content is considered to be an editorial experience and therefore subject to editorial approval and human oversight.
- 3.4.29 Any use of AI by the BBC must be transparent and clear to the audience. The audience should be informed in a manner appropriate to the context and it may be helpful to explain not just that AI has been used but how and why it has been used.  
**See** guidance: The Use of Artificial Intelligence

## Reconstructions

- 3.4.30 In factual programmes, reconstructions should not over-dramatise in a misleading or sensationalist way. Reconstructions are the explicit re-staging of an event or events. They should normally be based on a substantial and verifiable body of evidence. They should also be identifiable as reconstructions,

for example by using verbal or visual labelling or audio or visual cues, such as slow motion or grading. It should be obvious to the audience where a reconstruction begins and ends.

News programmes should not normally stage reconstructions of current events because of the risk of confusing the audience. But reconstructions staged by others may be reported.

**See** Section 8 Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: 8.4.11

## **Factually Based Drama**

- 3.4.31 When a drama portrays real people or events, it is inevitable that the creative realisation of some dramatic elements such as characterisation, dialogue and atmosphere may be fictional. However, the portrayal should be based on a substantial and well-sourced body of evidence wherever practicable and care should be taken to ensure it does not distort the known facts, including chronology, unduly.

Sensitivities will often be at their highest when a drama has, as its central purpose, the portrayal of living people, people with living close relatives or recent events. Care should be taken to achieve due accuracy.

It is important to explain the drama's factual basis (or use of dramatic licence) with clear information.

**See** Section 6 Fairness: 6.4.58-6.4.59 and Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.9

## **Archive Material**

- 3.4.32 Archive material should not be used in a way that materially misleads the audience about a situation, events or the subject being depicted. Editorial material that content makers plan to re-use or reversion may have become inaccurate, or out of date and where appropriate it should be made clear to audiences that the material is archive.

**See** Section 13 Use of BBC Content After Publication or Broadcast: 13.4.10

## Content Affected by Changing Circumstances

- 3.4.33 Content prepared some time before publication or transmission, for example because of re-scheduling, must be checked to make sure it has not been overtaken by events. This could include the known death of a contributor, the arrest, appeal or charging of a suspect or significant life changes. In some cases, an appropriate label or an on-air announcement may be required; in others, the alteration or removal of some material may also be required.

See Section 13 Use of BBC Content After Publication or Broadcast: 13.4.11

## 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.

**Programme Legal Advice must be consulted if it is believed a defamatory inaccuracy has been published or broadcast.**

## Mistakes in online content including on demand

- 3.4.35 Where there is an expectation that content will be permanently 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 a timely manner. 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 in on-demand content 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 content does not then normally need to be changed or revoked.

- 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.

**See** Section 13 Use of BBC Content After Publication  
or Broadcast: 13.4.24–13.4.30

**See** guidance: Removal of BBC Online Content

## Accuracy and the Nations

- 3.4.37 Any content producers intending to produce output about Northern Ireland or significant projects involving the Republic of Ireland, should notify Director Northern Ireland of their proposals at an early stage. Similarly, content producers creating material which deals with significant national or regional issues or themes about England, Scotland and Wales who are not based in the relevant nation should inform the director of that nation.

- 3.4.38 The UK has diverse political cultures in the different nations. When UK audiences are affected differently by a story or issue it should be made clear. Content producers should be careful about making references to governmental and legal structures which may vary.

**See** Section 10 Politics and Public Policy: 10.4.1–10.4.2

**See** guidance: Reporting the UK