

Analysis of complaints

From 1 April to 30 September 2010 the Unit reached findings on 111 complaints concerning 103 items (normally a single broadcast or webpage, but sometimes a broadcast series or a set of related webpages). Topics of complaint were as follows:

Table 1

		<u>No of Items</u>
Harm to individual/organisation (victim complaint)	11	11
Harm to individual/organisation (3 rd party complaint)	3	3
Infringement of complainant's privacy	1	1
Political bias	9	9
Other bias	28	25
Factual inaccuracy	36	35
Offence to public taste	3	3
Bad language	1	1
Sensitivity and portrayal	11	8
Racism	2	2
Bad example (adults)	1	1
Commercial concerns	5	4

http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/pdf/ecu_oct09mar10.pdf);

a finding which the Editorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust has ruled shall not be published pending the outcome of its consideration of the complainant's appeal.

Standards of service

The Unit's target is to deal with most complaints within 20 working days of receiving them. A target of 35 days applies to a minority of cases (16 in this period) which require longer or more complex investigation. During the period 1 April – 30 September, 72.5% of replies were sent within their target time.

Summaries of upheld complaints

File on 4, Radio 4, 25 March 2008

Outcome

In response to a previous complaint, the programme had been edited to address the

News (10.00am), BBC News channel, 29 January 2010

Complaint

In an item on the proceedings of the Chilcot Inquiry, the reporter referred to the evidence given by Sir Christopher Meyer the previous November about a meeting between Tony Blair and George W Bush in the Spring of 2002, and reporting him as having said that, during the meeting, Mr Blair had *“signed a deal in blood...that the UK would go to war alongside America if that was their decision”*. A viewer complained that this was a misleading account of Sir Christopher’s evidence which, together with the use of footage of demonstrators outside the Inquiry venue, resulted in bias against Mr Blair.

Outcome

Sir Christopher, while making clear that he believed the meeting had led to agreement on the need for regime change, had also made clear that options other than military action were still under consideration, and it was inaccurate to report him as having suggested that an absolute commitment to go to war alongside the US had been made. However, as the item also reported Mr Blair’s dismissal of Sir Christopher’s evidence in relation to the meeting, the inaccurate reporting of that evidence did not result in imbalance. The footage of demonstrators simply illustrated what was happening outside the Inquiry venue at the time, and had no bearing on the issue of impartiality.

Partly upheld

Further action

All involved in the broadcast have discussed the story and the issues it raised. Senior editors on the News channel will continue to emphasise the need for editorial vigilance in terms of ensuring that space and time is made for proper and sufficient context to be given when reporting specific and detailed quotations from witnesses in long-running inquiries.

Great Lives, BBC Radio 4, 2 February 2010

Complaint

The subject of the programme was the biologist WD Hamilton. During the programme, the invited expert (who was also a sister of his) attributed his death to complications arising from malaria (contracted because he believed he had acquired immunity to the disease, and consequently did not take anti-malarial medication during what proved to be his final expedition). Another sister complained that this was inaccurate, citing the Coroner’s finding that the cause of death was *“Multi-organ failure due to upper gastrointestinal haemorrhage due to a duodenal diverticulum and arterial bleed through a mucosal ulcer”*.

Outcome

The programme-makers made due efforts to verify a claim which, as far as they were aware, was uncontroversial. They consulted a number of reference sources and contemporaneous obituaries, which appeared to confirm that WD Hamilton’s death was due to malaria or malarial complications, and the ECU’s investigation established that he had indeed contracted malaria during his final expedition. However, the ECU also established that the conclusions of the pathologist who conducted the post mortem were as stated in the Coroner’s finding. The pathologist had suggested the possibility that the ulceration and consequent haemorrhage had resulted from a pill (which might have been taken because of malarial symptoms) lodging in the diverticulum; but, even if this suggestion were correct, the link between malaria and the observed causes of death would be entirely indirect.

Partly upheld

Further action

The programme will not be repeated in its present form. The finding was discussed at meetings attended by Radio Network Controllers, Executive Producers and Editors, and the programme-makers themselves.

The Andrew Marr Show, BBC1, 7 February 2010

Complaint

In the course of an interview with Alastair Campbell, Andrew Marr quoted an estimate for Iraqi casualties since the allied occupation which he described as "*internationally accepted UN figures*". A viewer complained that the figures in question in fact came from an estimate in The Lancet, and were not internationally accepted (being significantly higher than most other estimates). He asked for the error, which had been acknowledged in response to his initial complaint, to be corrected on air.

Outcome

The ECU agreed that the inaccurate attribution was a breach of editorial standards. However, as the thrust of Andrew Marr's question did not rest upon the accuracy of the figures or the attribution, but upon the assertion that "*an awful lot of people died*" (which remained the case whichever estimate was cited), the acknowledgement of the error by the programme team, together with the publication of a summary of the matter on the complaints pages of bbc.co.uk in due course, was sufficient to resolve the complaint.

Resolved

Generation Jihad, BBC2, 8 February 2010

Complaint

Two viewers complained that the programme was inaccurate in stating as a fact that Muhammed al-Durrah had been shot by the Israeli Defence Force. One added that the inclusion of footage of the incident would have an inflammatory effect on UK Muslims.

Outcome

The facts of the case have never been conclusively established, so it was inappropriate to present one version of events as though it was not in dispute. However, there was no basis for assuming that the inclusion of an often-shown piece of footage, in the context of a programme which highlighted the importance of conflicting interpretations of events in the

the issue in hand (which was, on any understanding, abuse perpetrated under the aegis of the Church). However, the item in question did not distinguish clearly between instances of abuse which had been proven in court and instances where allegations of abuse had not been tested, and gave the impression that two men connected with the school, rather than one, had been convicted of abuse at the school (the second being someone who was convicted for offences elsewhere, and after he left the school). Nevertheless, the item's treatment of its subject did not show bias against the Catholic Church; the Diocese of Middlesbrough had been invited to respond to criticism made in the item, but had declined to do so.

Partly upheld

Further action

The Inside Out team has discussed the findings, including the lessons to be learned from the failure to distinguish between proven cases of abuse and untested allegations of abuse as well as the importance of scrutinising the script for accuracy.

Breakfast, BBC1, 1 March 2010

Complaint

Two viewers complained that an item in which Carol Vorderman was interviewed about her online maths school amounted to promotion of a commercial product.

Outcome

The ECU agreed that the item gave an impression of promotion and endorsement.

Further action

The Editor of Breakfast News will have further discussions with her team about the relevant editorial guidelines on Editorial Integrity and Independence, including the chapter on Product Prominence.

News (8.00am), Radio 4, 2 March 2010

Complaint

The introduction to an item in this bulletin (and the two preceding ones) said *"Israel's military operations in December and January, to try to halt Hamas rocket fire, destroyed homes, hospitals, schools and other infrastructure"*. A listener wrote that, while he accepted the accuracy of the reference to homes and other infrastructure, he did not believe there were grounds for saying that schools and hospitals (in the plural) had been *"destroyed"*.

Outcome

The impact of the Israeli operation (known as Operation Cast Lead) has been the subject of reports by several organisations, and these reports provide sufficient evidence that a number of schools were destroyed (in the sense of damaged beyond repair, or rendered unusable for their purpose). There was also incontrovertible evidence of serious damage to parts of two hospitals. However, it was not accurate to speak of any hospital as having been destroyed. Although the introduction, taken as a whole, was not seriously misleading as to the overall scale of damage caused by Operation Cast Lead, it was misleading in that particular.

Partly upheld

Further action

The Editor of Radio 4 News will highlight and discuss the imprecision in the introduction with his team.

Immigration by numbers, News Online, 30 April 2010

Complaint

In a blog prompted by the use of an inaccurate immigration statistic by Nick Clegg in one of the televised Leaders' debates, the BBC's Home Affairs Editor wrote that *"far from taking British jobs, the official stats suggest 8,000 more non-EU workers left the UK than came to live here in 2008"*. A reader of the blog complained that the statistics in question did not support this contention.

Outcome

As the statistics in question recorded only people's reasons for entering or leaving the country, and did not record the original reasons for entry of those leaving, they did not yield a figure for the net inflow/outflow of non-EU workers. Although a postscript to the blog directed readers to a further entry which addressed the issue on the basis of different statistics, it did not have the effect of correcting the original error.

Further action

The Editor of News Blogs will speak to the Home Affairs Editor about the findings and the need for clear corrections on blog posts.

Claims that aid intended for famine relief in Ethiopia had been diverted to buy arms

Complaint

In March 2010, in reports about aid money donated to Ethiopia in the mid-1980s, a number of BBC programmes and online items implied or stated that large amounts of money raised by Band Aid and Live Aid for famine relief in Ethiopia had been diverted by a rebel group to buy weapons. Following a complaint from the Band Aid Trust the BBC investigated these statements and concluded that there was no evidence for them, and that they should not have been broadcast.

Assignment, World Service, 4 March 2010

This edition of **Assignment** consisted of an investigation by Martin Plaut, the BBC's Africa Editor, into claims that aid intended for famine relief in Tigray during the Ethiopian famine of 1984-5 had been subject to large-scale and systematic diversion by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its relief agency REST, to buy arms and for other political purposes. The Band Aid Trust ("the Trust") complained that the programme and coverage generated by it had given the inaccurate and unfair impression that much or most of the money raised under the Band Aid banner had been diverted, whereas Band Aid was noted for the effectiveness of its monitoring of funds, and there was no evidence that funds raised by Band Aid had in fact been used to buy arms. This impression was damaging to the Trustees personally (implying negligence on their part) and to the good repute of the Trust as a custodian of charitable funds.

The Trust complained that the programme

1. gave an impression that Band Aid money was diverted to rebels of the TPLF and used to buy weapons when there was insufficient evidence to support the claim;
2. claimed that there was evidence of *"the systematic diversion of aid received by REST to buy arms for the TPLF"* when there was not;
3. included Band Aid in the allegations being made in order to sensationalise the story when there was insufficient evidence to justify doing so;

The programme was not clear about the extent to which the evidence of Aregawi Behre (who was the source of the claim that REST had, at a certain point, decided to divert 95% of aid money to the purchase of arms and other political purposes) was open to question. [5, 9]

The evidence of Gebremehdin Araya (who claimed to have swindled the Christian

Upheld

The Trust's complaints about the following items were not upheld:

PM, Radio 4, 3 March 2010

The Andrew Marr Show, BBC1, 7 March 2010

The Media Show, Radio 4, 10 March 2010

Further action

Apologies to the Band Aid Trust were broadcast on BBC1, the News Channel, Radio 4 and World Service. Appropriate steps were taken to guard against visitors to any relevant BBC online items being given the impression that the evidence of diversion applied to Band Aid money.

Note

In earlier correspondence with the Trust, BBC News had identified a number of other items arising from the **Assignment** story in which an inaccurate or potentially misleading impression had been given.

A headline on the News Channel and the BBC1 **One O'clock News** to the effect that millions of pounds given to Live Aid was used by rebels to buy guns.

Text on a website page which gave the impression that only a small amount of money raised by the charities involved in the Ethiopian famine reached the hungry.

A caption on News Channel during a guest interview which read "*It's claimed 5% donations spent on Ethiopians*".

An introduction to a report by Martin Plaut on the BBC1 **One O'Clock News**, the News Channel and BBC World which associated Live Aid money with the claim that only 5% of the aid money reaching Tigray was used to feed the hungry.

The action taken by the BBC was addressed to the breaches of editorial standards already acknowledged by BBC News, as well as to those found by the ECU.