

Analysis of complaints

From 1 April to 30 September 2016 the Unit reached findings on 105 complaints concerning 100 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
Topics of Complaint

	<u>No of Complaints</u>	<u>No of Items</u>
Harm to individual/organisation	6	6
Infringement of privacy	2	2
Bad example (adults)	1	1
Bad example (children)	1	1
Political bias	6	6
Other bias	33	31
Factual inaccuracy	39	36
Offence to public taste	2	2
Offensive language	1	1
Offence to religious feeling	1	1
Sensitivity and portrayal	2	2
Racism	5	5
Commercial concerns	2	2
Standards of interviewing/presentation	4	4
Total	105	100

In the period 1 April – 30 September 2016, 21 complaints were upheld (6 of them partly) – 20% of the total. Of the items investigated in the period, complaints were upheld against 17 items (17% of the total). 6 complaints, about 6 items, were resolved. The bulletin includes summaries of these cases.

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 (8 in this period) which require longer or more complex investigation. During the period 1 April – 30 September 2016, 82% of replies were sent within their target time.

Summaries of upheld/resolved complaints

Today, Radio 4, 3 December 2015

Complaint

Two listeners complained that the programme had inaccurately reported that a peaceful vigil in Walthamstow, in protest against Parliament's decision to authorise air strikes in Syria, had targeted the home of the local MP, Stella Creasy, and had been part of a pattern of intimidation towards Labour MPs who had supported the decision.

Outcome

The claim that the demonstration had targeted Ms Creasy's home, and the implication that it was intimidatory in nature, originated from a single Facebook posting which later proved to be misleading (the demonstration's destination was Ms Creasy's constituency office, which was unoccupied at the time, not her home, and it was peaceful). Nevertheless, it had been taken up by a number of commentators on social media and by reputable news outlets, including The Independent and The Guardian. The first reference to the story in the 3 December edition of **Today** was in a review of the morning's papers. Later in the programme, a report by Ross Hawkins included an audio clip from the demonstration, stated that it had taken place outside the constituency office, and carried an interview with one of the organisers who described it as "*very peaceful*". Shortly after this, Nick Robinson interviewed John McDonnell about divisions in the Labour Party in relation to the vote on bombing Syria in terms which reflected the belief that the demonstration had taken place outside Ms Creasy's home and had been an instance of bullying and intimidation (a belief which Mr McDonnell did not contest). The 7 December edition of **Today** included a correction which made the venue of the demonstration clear but did not address the question of intimidation. The ECU found that the 3 December programme had been duly accurate in its review of the papers, but inaccurate in the references to the matter during the interview with Mr McDonnell, and that the 7 December correction had left a significant element of inaccuracy to stand.

Partly upheld

Further action

The Editor of **Today** has reminded staff of the need to check with the BBC newsroom for advice where there are conflicting accounts of recent events.

Broadcasting House, Radio 4, 6 December 2015

Complaint

Following Hilary Benn's speech in the Commons debate on air strikes in Syria, the programme included an item on notable political speeches and their impact. Discussing the emergency debate on the Argentinian invasion of the Falklands in 3 April 1982, the presenter and guests agreed that Michael Foot's speech, though much superior to Mrs Thatcher's as a piece of oratory, had misjudged the mood of the occasion and led to the wrong outcome for him. A niece of Mr Foot's complained that the clip used in illustration was in fact from his speech of 29 April, and that his 3 April speech had been mischaracterised.

Outcome

The programme had confused the two speeches, leading to a misleading impression of the reception of the 3 April speech (though what the presenter and guest said was fair comment in relation to the 29 April speech and its impact). In response to the complaint, a correction was published on the Corrections & Clarifications page, and a similar correction was later added to the page of the **Broadcasting House** website where the programme could be replayed. In the view of the ECU, this sufficed to resolve the issue of complaint.

Resolved

Steve Wright in the Afternoon, Radio 2, 3 December 2015

Complaint

The programme included an interview with the editor of the monthly magazine “What Doctors Don’t Tell You”. A representative of Good Thinking Society complained that it was not made clear that the interviewee represented a particular viewpoint on the efficacy conventional medicine, and had been allowed to make unchallenged claims in support of that viewpoint.

Outcome

The ECU agreed that the interview did not make clear that the magazine is attended by a degree of controversy, and that Ms McTaggart’s views weren’t challenged in an appropriate way. As a result, listeners might well have formed an impression of the relative efficacy of orthodox medicine and alternative therapies which was less than accurate or balanced.

Upheld

Further action

The Editor of **Steve Wright in the Afternoon** has reviewed the structure of interviews in the programme in the light of this case. In future, additional research will be carried out on potential interviewees. If the research identifies possible topics of discussion which lie outside the programme’s usual focus on entertainment and artistic endeavour, the programme-makers will consider inviting one of the programme’s regular contributors who has relevant expertise to join the on-air conversation.

The Big Questions Twitter page, 23 January 2016

Complaint

The 17 January edition of the programme (on BBC1) included a discussion under the headline “*Does social media reveal men’s hatred for women?*”. One of the participants was Connie St Louis, who had been the victim of harassment on social media after reporting comments by Sir Tim Hunt at a lunch in Seoul which she had attended, and another was a well-known blogger who had encouraged his readers to target Ms St Louis. During the discussion, Ms St Louis incorrectly said that the blogger had recently tweeted that he wanted someone assassinated (he had in fact been “de-verified” on Twitter, but for a different reason). The programme-makers subsequently agreed that a statement by Ms St Louis, apologising for the error and giving an account of how it arose, should be published on the programme’s Twitter page, where it appeared on 23 January. Four viewers complained that it repeated claims about Sir Tim’s remarks which had been shown to be inaccurate, misrepresented what he himself had said about Ms St Louis’ reporting and failed to be impartial in relation to the controversy the remarks had generated.

Outcome

For the most part, the tweet was a factual account of the circumstances leading up to the incorrect statement for which it apologised. However, it also included the following references to Sir Tim:

[the blogger] accused St Louis of lying about Tim Hunt on the programme. This was incorrect. St Louis did not lie in the reporting of Tim Hunt sexist comments. Professor Sir Hunt said on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, when asked to comment on the story reported by St Louis; “his comments had been accurately reported and he stood by them”. A twitter campaign to discredit St Louis was mounted by [the blogger] and many others in an attempt to reversion the facts of the story.

This account of what Sir Tim had said on **Today**, though called into question by the complainants, was duly accurate. However, the reference to his “*sexist comments*” reflected

an interpretation of what he had said in Seoul which was the subject of ongoing controversy (a reflection reinforced by the suggestion that contrary interpretations were “*an attempt to reversion the facts*”). In this respect, the tweet fell below the standards of due accuracy and impartiality which apply to material broadcast or published by the BBC.

Partly upheld

Further action

The programme team has been reminded that BBC editorial standards apply to contributions from third parties on BBC Twitter pages, even when it is clear that they represent a personal view.

Don't Tell the Bride, BBC3, 25 January (8.00pm)

Complaint

In an exchange between the bride and her elder sister, the word “twat” was used. A viewer complained that this was inappropriate before the watershed, and should at least have been preceded by a warning.

Outcome

Although not among the terms characterised by the Editorial Guidelines as “*the strongest language*” (which must not be used on television before the watershed), the word “twat” is unusual in having an innocent meaning for some viewers but an obscene meaning for others. On this occasion it was used in an affectionate context and without any sense of aggression, but this was not sufficient to mitigate the offence it is capable of causing to a segment of the audience.

Upheld

Further action

The finding was widely discussed and debated by senior editorial figures in BBC Television and has been noted.

Farming Today, Radio 4, 4 February 2016

Complaint

The programme included an item about homeopathic treatment of farm animals. A representative of Good Thinking Society complained that it gave a wholly positive impression of homeopathy, whereas extensive testing has not shown it to be effective in treating any medical condition in animals or humans.

Outcome

In response to the complaint, the Editor of the programme acknowledged that the item had not met the BBC's editorial standards and reminded the programme team of the need for accurate and balanced reporting in relation to scientific matters. In the ECU's view, this sufficed to resolve the issue of complaint.

Resolved

Front Row, BBC Radio 4, 22 February 2016

Complaint

The programme included an interview with the Israeli writer A B Yehoshua during which the interviewer referred to a novel by Dorit Rabinyan as having been “*banned*” by the Israeli Minister of Culture. A listener complained that this was inaccurate, as the book had not been banned and the Minister of Culture had not been involved in the matter.

Outcome

A decision had been taken by the Pedagogic Secretariat of the Ministry of Education that the novel, “*Border Life*”, which deals with the relationship between an Israeli woman and a Palestinian man, would not be included in the list of required reading for the equivalent of A-Levels. Although the decision and the reasons advanced for it have given rise to controversy, the book remains freely available in Israel, and it was misleading to refer to it as “*banned*”.

Upheld

Further action

The programme team will ensure that presenters are appropriately briefed on issues of political controversy which may be touched on in the course of particular interviews.

Newshour, World Service, 22 February 2016

News bulletins, World Service, 22 February 2016

مسلحو القاعدة في اليمن "على جبهة واحدة مع التحالف السعودي" في معركة ضد الحوثيين, (Al Qaeda fighters in Yemen are "on the same front with the Saudi coalition" against the Houthis), BBC Arabic online

Tweets, Mohamed Yehia, 22 February 2016

Yemen conflict: Al-Qaeda joins coalition battle for Taiz, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

The Embassy of the United Arab Emirates complained that these items gave the misleading impression that troops from coalition forces (including those of the UAE) had been fighting alongside those of al-Qaeda in Yemen.

Outcome

Although it was made clear in the body of **Newshour** that coalition forces had not engaged the Houthis on the same occasions and in the same places as al-Qaeda, the introduction to the programme, and the further items which drew on it, gave the impression that they had been fighting alongside each other. This was misleading.

Upheld

Further action

The online items were edited to remove the misleading impression.

News (00.15am), News Channel, 10 March 2016,

Has Fukushima's radiation threat been exaggerated?, bbc.co.uk

A viewer complained that an expert who took part in Rupert Wingfield-Hayes' report from Fukushima had made a serious error when calculating annual exposure on the basis of radiation measurements taken on the spot (an error reproduced in the associated online article), thus giving a misleading impression of the level of risk to health in the Fukushima exclusion zone.

Outcome

The expert had made a miscalculation, and the level of annual exposure would have been about 25 times more than she suggested. However, BBC News had published a correction before the complaint reached the ECU. In view of the fact that, taken as a whole, the report did not give a misleading impression of the risk to health in the Fukushima exclusion area, the correction sufficed to resolve the issue of complaint.

Resolved

Praise or Grumble, BBC Radio Sheffield, 16 April 2016

Complaint

A listener complained about the use of the f-word by two callers to this live programme.

Outcome

The presenter had acted quickly to terminate the calls and offer appropriate apologies. In the view of the ECU, this was sufficient to resolve the issue of complaint.

Resolved

Vanessa Feltz, Radio London, 26 May 2016

Complaint

The programme included an interview with Simon Woolley of Operation Black Vote (OBV) about their poster, featuring an elderly Asian woman apparently being harangued by a white skinhead, which had given rise to controversy. Mr Wooley complained that Ms Feltz had displayed partiality in relation to the controversy, and that the extent and tenor of her interventions had resulted in unfairness to himself and OBV

Outcome

Ms Feltz's interventions did not exceed what was warranted in raising the issues of controversy and pressing Mr Woolley for a response, so there was no unfairness. However, some of them were phrased in terms which suggested that she endorsed the criticisms which had been made of the poster, resulting in a lack of due impartiality.

Partly upheld

Further action

The presenter has been reminded of the need for the careful phrasing of questions, allowing for the exigencies of live broadcasting, lest their import be misunderstood.

Victoria Derbyshire, BBC 2/BBC News Channel, 6 June 2016

Complaint

A viewer complained that, during a debate on the issues in the referendum campaign, Victoria Derbyshire had misleadingly suggested that reallocating the UK's net contribution to the EU budget to other areas such as the NHS would have a severe impact on farm subsidies.

Outcome

Challenging a point made by Jane Collins MEP, Victoria Derbyshire said "*if that £8.5bn went to the NHS, that would mean farmers who get more than 50% of their income from the EU would be decimated*". This reflected a confusion between the UK's net contribution (of £8.5bn after payments from the EU to the UK, including agricultural subsidies, have been taken into account) and its gross contribution. Although Ms Collins tried to rebut the suggestion, she did not do so in terms which would have removed the misleading impression.

Upheld

Further action

The relevant information was drawn to the presenter's attention after the broadcast, and will be borne in mind when the programme returns to the subject.

News (10.00pm), BBC1, 20 June 2016

Complaint

The bulletin included a report by the Business Editor on the views of UK businesses in advance of the referendum. A viewer complained that his suggestion that exports to the UK from the rest of the EU were "*roughly the same value*" as the UK's exports to the rest of the EU was both inaccurate and indicative of bias in favour of the remain campaign.

Outcome

Although there have been years when the UK's trade deficit with the rest of the EU was relatively narrow, it has averaged 15% over the last ten years, rising to 23% in 2015. The phrase "*roughly the same value*" was therefore misleading in relation to the current picture. However, the inaccuracy did not colour the Business Editor's analysis of business opinion, which was duly impartial.

Partly upheld

Further action

The information has been brought to the attention of the Business Editor and the wider Business Unit.

News (6.00pm), BBC1, 29 July 2016

Complaint

The bulletin included a report on the Pope's visit to Auschwitz. Lord Alton and Fr Leo Chamberlain of Ampleforth jointly complained that the reporter had presented a disputed view of the stance of the Catholic Church in relation to the Third Reich as if it were established fact.

Outcome

The reporter said "*Silence was the response of the Catholic Church when Nazi Germany demonised Jewish people and then attempted to eradicate Jews from Europe*". In the judgement of the ECU, this did not give due weight to public statements by successive Popes or the efforts made on the instructions of Pius XII to rescue Jews from Nazi persecution, and perpetuated a view which is at odds with the balance of evidence.

Upheld

Further action

The finding has been brought to the attention of the editorial team responsible for the report so that any future coverage might reflect historical understanding more closely.

News (10pm), 27 August 2015 & Syrian conflict: The lives of the refugees who fled, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

The bulletin included a report on Syrian refugees, which was introduced as follows:

So far this year its estimated more than 340,000 people have crossed into Europe, escaping war, persecution and poverty. The vast majority are fleeing the conflict in Syria, as such under international law they are classed as refugees.

Similar wording appeared in the related online item. A viewer complained that the available data did not support the statement that Syrians formed the "vast majority" of the refugees.

Outcome

According to figures issued by Frontex and the UNHCR, during the period in question Syrians were the largest single group travelling across borders into Europe illegally. As they constituted less than 50% of the total, however, the phrase "vast majority" was inaccurate.

Upheld

Further action

Reporters have been reminded of the need to cross-reference statistics when covering movements of migrants and refugees to ensure accuracy.

Dashcam captures lorry shunting car on M1, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

The article reported an incident in which a lorry had cut in on, and allegedly bumped, a car on the M1. The driver had called the police while following the lorry, and had been critical of the slow police response. Footage of the incident, captured on the driver's dashcam, was embedded in the article, with a soundtrack of the call to the police. The driver complained that this gave the misleading impression that he had made the call while the incident was occurring.

Outcome

In a longer report elsewhere on bbc.co.uk the text of the article made clear that the driver had called the police after the initial incident had occurred. There was no such clarification in the text of the article complained of, so there was nothing to

correct the impression created by the combination of footage and soundtrack that the call was contemporaneous with the incident.

Upheld

Further action

The website team has been reminded that edited material may affect the audience's understanding of the timeline of a story if it is not set in context by accompanying text.

Heysel disaster: 30th anniversary marked in England, Belgium & Italy

Heysel disaster: English football's forgotten tragedy?, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

A reader of these articles had complained about the statement (which occurred in both of them): "[Thirty-nine fans died](#) when an internal wall collapsed at the ground in Brussels before the 1985 European Cup final between Liverpool and Juventus". As a result, it was changed to read: "[Thirty-nine fans died](#) when people were crushed against a wall that then collapsed at the ground in Brussels before the 1985 European Cup final between Liverpool and Juventus". He then complained to the ECU that the new form of words was also inaccurate as a description of a situation in which deaths had occurred at some distance from the wall, and there was no reason to believe that the wall's collapse had caused any deaths.

Outcome

In the ECU's view, the revised statement did not convey the impression that deaths had resulted directly from the collapse of the wall, and was duly accurate as a description of a situation where the wall had blocked a possible avenue of retreat by the Juventus fans. This aspect of the complaint was therefore resolved. However, the second article also contained the sentence: "*Fleeing the threat, the latter (ie the Juventus supporters) ran towards a concrete retaining wall, which collapsed as they began to climb over, killing 39 people*" (which had been overlooked when the changes noted above were made). This perpetuated the impression the reader had complained of, and his complaint was upheld in that respect.

Resolved/Upheld

Further action

The second article was corrected.

Women write better code, study suggests, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

A reader complained that the headline of this article was misleading, that the study on which it was based was so flawed as not to merit reporting, and that the terms of the report were not duly impartial in relation to the question of the benefits or otherwise of workforce diversity in particular fields of employment.

Outcome

Whether the study should have been reported was a matter of legitimate editorial discretion and, in the ECU's view, the article did not deal with matters which were controversial in the sense which would require a balance of views. However, there were no grounds for believing that the women among the cohort selected by the study were representative of women in general, and thus no basis for generalising about women's relative ability. To that extent, the headline was inaccurate.

Partly upheld

Further action

The headline and the text of the article have been amended to reflect the finding.