

Analysis of complaints

From 1 October 2014 to 31 March 2015 the Unit reached findings on 340 complaints concerning 156 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	3	3
Political bias	5	3
Other bias	69	59
Factual inaccuracy	92	51
Offence to public taste	140	15
Offensive language	1	1
Violence	2	1
Sensitivity and portrayal	7	4
Bad example (adults)	2	2
Racism	3	3
Offence to religious feeling	11	9
Commercial concerns	1	1
Standards of interviewing/presentation	4	4
Total	340	156

In the period 1 October 2014 – 31 March 2015, 53 complaints were upheld (46 of them partly) – 15.5% of the total. Of the items investigated in the period, complaints were upheld against 10 items (3% of the total). 11 complaints, about 7 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 (10 in this period) which require longer or more complex investigation. During the period 1 October 2014 – 31 March 2015, 84% of replies were sent within their target time. During the reporting year as a whole, 85% of replies were within target.

Summaries of upheld/resolved complaints

News (10.00pm), BBC1, 6 March 2014

Complaint

An item on the vote by the Crimean parliament in favour of becoming part of Russia included a report from Brussels on reactions among EU leaders. While a graphic from a news programme on Russia Today was in vision, the reporter said "*Russian TV today showed Crimea as if it had already become part of their family*". A viewer complained that this misrepresented what Russia Today had in fact shown, which was graphics illustrating the two possible outcomes of the referendum.

Outcome

The programme team in Brussels were under the impression that Russia Today had indeed treated Crimea as being already part of Russia, but this was a misunderstanding. The situation was further confused by the fact that colleagues in London tasked with finding a copy of the graphic in question mistakenly selected a different graphic, showing the areas of Ukraine regarded as being ethnically Russian (including Crimea). The result of these misunderstandings was a misleading impression of what Russia Today had intended.

Upheld

Further action

The Editor has reminded staff that we should rely wherever possible on our own understanding of events rather than the reporting of others and that it is important to check graphics for accuracy.

Iain Lee, BBC WM 95.6, 24 May 2014

Complaint

The programme included a phone-in in which one of the topics was Ed Miliband's appearance and public persona. A listener complained that Iain Lee had shown bias in his comments about Mr Miliband, and that a caller's suggestion that, as a Jew, Mr Miliband should not have been eating a bacon sandwich (as reported and pictured in that week's newspapers) was inaccurate.

Outcome

The ECU found no breach of due accuracy, because Iain Lee had not endorsed the caller's suggestion that Mr Milliband had contravened the rules of his religion, and a Labour Party representative interviewed later in the programme had made clear that Mr Miliband did not claim to be a believing or practising Jew. Some of Iain Lee's comments on Mr Miliband's appearance and electoral prospects, however, went beyond the kind of provocative exaggeration which listeners to the programme might expect, and sounded like the expression of a strongly-held personal view.

Upheld

Further action

The Editor has reminded the presenter and the production team that, while the programme should continue to include lively and challenging debate, this must always be within the BBC's Editorial Guidelines.

Today, Radio 4, 1 July 2014

Labour - working with or against business?, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

Craig Oliver, Director of Communications at 10 Downing St, complained about coverage of a Labour Party publication, "Mending the fractured economy", in reports by Nick Robinson and news bulletins in **Today**. The publication's claim that 80% of new private sector jobs created between 2010 and 2012 were in London had been reported as "*stark fact*", whereas it was incorrect and contradicted by data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and it had been erroneously said to apply to "*the past four years*". In reporting the claim uncritically and inaccurately in the first instance, the BBC had supported a Labour narrative, and in later coverage it had presented the matter as a dispute between Conservative and Labour about statistics, when it should simply have admitted error and made an appropriate correction.

Outcome

The term "*stark fact*" was used only in Nick Robinson's blog, though the early **Today** reports gave a similar impression that the claim in question was undisputed. When this inaccuracy was pointed out, Nick Robinson updated his blog to explain how the figures were contested, and reports later in **Today** were similarly emended. In the view of the ECU, this sufficed to resolve the issue of complaint. It was also acknowledged that the figures related to 2010-2012, not "*the past four years*" (a misunderstanding which originated from an error in the executive summary of the publication, perpetuated in the accompanying Labour Party press release), and Nick Robinson's blog was corrected accordingly. However, items in subsequent news bulletins in **Today** repeated the error, and the ECU accepted that this was a breach of the BBC's editorial standards in relation to due accuracy.

However, the ECU did not accept that the figures in question, taken from the Centre for Cities report "Cities Outlook 2014", were incorrect or contradicted by the ONS. The apparent disparity arose from methodologies which differed, primarily in their definitions of the public sector and their use of different data sources. When "Cities Outlook 2014" was published in January it was prefaced by forewords by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Cities, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer had cited earlier figures from the same source in his 2010 Budget speech. So, although the figures were in fact disputed on this occasion, they came from a source which appeared to have been relied on at one time or another by all three major parties, and the ECU saw no grounds for the view that reporting them implied support for the narrative of one party.

Resolved/upheld/not upheld

Further action

The Editor of the Radio Newsroom has reminded staff of the need to check press releases for factual accuracy, and of the importance of correcting errors as soon as they are pointed out.

Today, Radio 4, 14 July 2014

Complaint

The 7.30am news bulletin referred to "*Israel's security operation*" when reporting, very briefly, on events in the Gaza Strip. A listener complained that this appeared to endorse an Israeli narrative concerning those events, thus creating an impression of bias.

Outcome

The form of words in question resulted from efforts to vary the scripts of the bulletins, and was used only twice in the course of the programme. If the term "*security operation*" had

been attributed to the Israeli government, there would have been no grounds for complaint. Without such attribution, however, the ECU agreed that the phrase tended to create the impression complained of.

Upheld

Further action

The Head of the Radio Newsroom has reminded staff writing scripts for news summaries that the need to be brief should not be met at the price of accuracy.

Today, Radio 4, 9 August 2014

Complaint

During a discussion about the issue of social justice in relation to the forthcoming referendum in Scotland, one of the participants said that Scotland had been a net contributor to the UK exchequer "*for the last 30-odd years*" – a claim which the presenter appeared to accept. A listener complained that the presenter had endorsed an inaccurate claim, resulting in bias in favour of one side in the referendum campaign.

Outcome

The claim in question is at least open to dispute, and it was not duly accurate for the presenter to respond in terms which might have given the impression that it was established fact. However, the issue of Scotland in relation to the UK exchequer was tangential to the topic of the discussion, and listeners would have been likely to understand the presenter's intervention as an attempt to keep the discussion on track rather than an endorsement of one side in the referendum campaign. In the view of the ECU, it did not result in a departure from due impartiality.

Partly upheld

Further action

The Editor of **Today** has discussed with the presenter the arguments around the issues of Scotland's net fiscal contribution to the UK and has directed her to research by the IFS on the statistical picture.

Richard Bacon, 5 Live, 11 August 2014

Complaint

A listener complained that Richard Bacon's statement that the Resurrection "*didn't happen*" and was "*made up*" was offensive to Christians

Outcome

The statement, which would have been unexceptionable in some contexts, was gratuitous in the context of a discussion of the origin of Homo Sapiens, and was capable of causing offence.

Upheld

Further action

The Editor has reminded staff that religious beliefs are central to many people's lives and care should be taken to avoid unjustified offence.

News (6.00pm & 10.00pm), BBC1, 11 September 2014

Complaint

42 viewers complained to the Editorial Complaints Unit about Nick Robinson's report on an international press conference given by Alex Salmond. Taken together, the complaints raised the following main issues about the report:

- that it had given an inaccurate and misleading account of what Mr Salmond had said;
- that the inaccuracy was intentional;
- that it was biased against the "Yes" campaign.

Outcome

Mr Robinson had put two questions to Mr Salmond, the first of which was about the possible consequences of RBS moving its headquarters to London. The second, referring to recent interventions from BP, Standard Life and John Lewis, was "*Why should a Scottish voter believe you, a politician, against men who are responsible for billions of pounds of profits?*". The report showed Mr Robinson putting the second question, after which he said "*He didn't answer but he did attack the reporting of those in what he called the metropolitan media*". Mr Salmond had in fact addressed the second question, but in terms which Mr Robinson judged did not amount to a real answer to its key points. Although the ECU understood the reasoning behind that judgement, it considered that viewers would have taken "*He didn't answer*" to mean that Mr Salmond had said nothing, or at any rate nothing meaningful, by way of response, and that the impression the report gave was inaccurate in that respect. However, it found no grounds for believing the inaccuracy to have been intentional, and it considered that the report overall gave a duly impartial account of Mr Salmond's main points.

Partly upheld

Further action

The Head of Political Programmes has reminded staff of the need to ensure that the necessary compression of analysis within a time-restricted medium meets the highest standards of accuracy demanded by the BBC in order that the audience can clearly follow the information with which they are presented.

Good Morning Scotland, BBC Radio Scotland, 18 September 2014

Complaint

The programme (on the day of the referendum) included the headline "*People living in Scotland are voting on whether or not they want to break away from the United Kingdom*". A listener complained that this conveyed a negative innuendo absent from the actual wording of the referendum question.

Outcome

BBC Scotland had already acknowledged to the complainant that this wording did not properly reflect the referendum question. In the view of the ECU, this sufficed to resolve the issue of complaint.

Resolved

Nick Conrad, Radio Norfolk, 17 November 2014

Complaint

Four listeners complained about some of the presenter's comments on the topic of rape.

Outcome

It had quickly been acknowledged that the comments were ill-judged and had caused offence. Nick Conrad had apologised at the beginning of the first edition of his programme to be broadcast after complaints had been received, and the BBC Executive had posted a statement of acknowledgement and apology on bbc.co.uk. Although the complainants questioned both the adequacy and the sincerity of these apologies, the ECU thought them sufficient to address the breach of editorial standards in question.

Resolved

Today, Radio 4, 19 November 2014

Complaint

The business section of the programme included a report on the launch by an American company of a range of Bob Marley-branded cannabis products. A listener complained that the report was "*an unremitting promotion*" of a drug illegal in the UK, and a breach of due impartiality in connection with the controversy over its possible legalisation.

Outcome

The report made clear that the products in question were to be marketed only in jurisdictions where the sale and use of cannabis were legal, and that the drug remained illegal in the UK. It therefore had no direct bearing on the domestic controversy over possible legalisation. However, the item included claims about the beneficial effects of cannabis while making no reference to possible deleterious effects. The Editorial Guidelines say programmes should "*deal with all aspects of illegal drug use...with due accuracy. Where necessary to achieve due accuracy, this should include, for example, the health implications and anti-social aspects of illegal drug use*". In the ECU's view, the report fell short of due accuracy in that respect – but, as News had already identified and apologised for the lapse, the ECU regarded that issue of complaint as resolved.

Resolved

Daily Politics, BBC2, 5 December 2014

Complaint

As part of the introduction to an item on the impact of the Chancellor's Autumn Statement, the programme reported the results of the most recent YouGov poll of voting intentions. Two viewers complained that the result for the Green Party had been omitted.

Outcome

In this context, and in view of the fact that the poll showed the Green Party one point ahead of the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party figure should have been included. When he became aware of the complaints, the Editor of the programme had apologised for the omission and explained that it had arisen from the unwitting use of a link which led to a page of the YouGov site which did not list the poll's results in full. In view of this, and the steps taken by the Editor to ensure that there could be no repetition of the error, the ECU regarded the issues of complaint as having been resolved.

Resolved

Saturday Kitchen Best Bites, BBC2, 28 December 2014

Complaint

The programme included archive footage featuring “civet coffee”, and showing a celebrity chef feeding a coffee bean to a captive civet cat in Indonesia. A viewer complained that this tended to promote a practice which was both cruel to the animals involved and against the interests of conservation.

Outcome

The footage gave the impression that the use of captive civet cats in coffee production was uncontroversial, and that their natural diet consisted entirely of coffee beans (a diet which can in fact cause illness and death).

Upheld

Further action

The finding has been shared with the TV Editorial Group, and the footage will not be re-broadcast.

A universal plug socket...at last?, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

This article, which originated as an item in Radio 4's **From Our Own Correspondent**, arose from the correspondent's discovery of a “universal” plug socket in his hotel room on a visit to China. A representative of the PlugSafe electrical safety campaign complained that this tended to promote a product which was intrinsically dangerous, and that the article's account of the origins of diverse national standards for sockets and plugs was misleading.

Outcome

The complainant's account of the intrinsic danger of the product was well-founded, as was his concern that, although illegal in the UK, it was readily available online. The article also gave a misleading impression of how diverse standards in this area had arisen.

Upheld

Further action

The article was replaced by a note explaining that it had given rise to safety concerns, and the original broadcast was removed from iPlayer.

Call to ‘breed Dartmoor Hill ponies for food’, BBC News Devon Website

Complaint

This headline originally read “‘Breed Dartmoor ponies for food’ says charity”. A breeder of Dartmoor ponies complained that this confused the unregistered hill ponies grazing on Dartmoor and known as Dartmoor Hill ponies (which were the subject of the proposal) with the pedigree Dartmoor pony breed, causing harm and distress to breeders such as himself and his wife. Although the new headline was accurate, he felt it should be accompanied by a correction and an apology.

Outcome

In the view of the ECU, the correction of the headline (and of an inaccurate reference to the Dartmoor Hill Pony Association as a charity) sufficed to resolve the issues of complaint.

Resolved

Eritrea profile, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

A reader of this country profile complained of a number of inaccuracies he considered derogatory towards Eritrea, including the statement that “A 2011 UN report estimated that about 70% of Eritreans cannot meet their food needs on their own”

Outcome

In response to the complaint, BBC News had already acknowledged that no such UN report was published in 2011 and that there was not enough evidence to support the claim that more than two thirds of Eritreans could not meet their own food needs. Noting that the article had been amended accordingly, and that the other statements contested by the complainant appeared to be accurate, the ECU considered the issue of complaint to have been resolved.

Resolved

Gaza: How Hamas tunnel network grew, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

Three readers of this article complained that the description of its author as “*an independent defence analyst*” was misleading, in view of his association with the Israeli military.

Outcome

BBC News explained that the description was intended to reflect the fact that the author is not a full-time employee of any institution, but accepts engagements as an external lecturer on a per-course basis only. The ECU thought this too narrow a basis for the description, noting that the author had published articles written from a clearly pro-Israeli perspective and under the imprimatur of explicitly pro-Israeli institutions, and agreed that the term “*independent*” was inappropriate.

Upheld

Further action

The Editor of BBC News Online has reminded staff that it is important to give sufficiently detailed information to enable readers to calibrate a contributor’s affiliations.

Gaza doctor: ‘There are 20 more murders a day’, 5 Live In Short, bbc.co.uk

Complaint

The headline for an audio clip of a doctor working in Gaza for Médecins du Monde quoted him as referring to “*20 more murders a day*”. A visitor to the page maintained that he had in fact used the word “*martyrs*”, describing the headline as “*an incendiary misquote*”.

Outcome

With the help of Médecins du Monde, the ECU established that “*martyrs*” was the word used. While doubting that the effect was “*incendiary*”, the ECU agreed that the word “*murders*” implied a judgement on the doctor’s part about the culpability of one party in the conflict which the word “*martyrs*” did not, and that its use was not consistent with due accuracy.

Upheld

Further action

The headline has been amended, and staff have been reminded to try to ensure that transcriptions are accurate.