

As trustees we have responsibility for guarding the editorial independence of the BBC and making sure it is beholden to no outside interest, whether political or commercial.



Trustee Mehmuda Mian Pritchard, member of Editorial Standards committee (Manchester September 2007).

"Ensuring impartiality is a key priority for us. We have asked all programme areas – not just news – to consider this."

Ensuring impartiality

Impartiality is one of the cornerstones of BBC editorial values. The public value it and demand it. It underpins the public trust in the BBC without which the BBC cannot function. Impartiality depends on accuracy, balance, context, distance, even-handedness, fairness, objectivity, open-mindedness, rigour, self-awareness, transparency and truth. It is about breadth of view and completeness.

Ensuring the impartiality of BBC output is a key priority in our work of upholding editorial standards. This work includes overseeing the way the BBC sets and meets its own editorial standards and the way it complies with Ofcom's broadcasting standards.

We approve the Executive's editorial guidelines setting out the values and standards we expect of all BBC content. We are also responsible for ensuring the Executive deals properly with complaints. Where appropriate, we hear appeals. From time to time we commission research to inform our editorial standards work. In the past year we have commissioned a review of the impartiality of the BBC's network news and factual coverage of the four nations of the UK (see page 18). We have also reviewed the Executive's response to last year's serious editorial failures (page 11).

This work is managed through the Trust's Editorial Standards committee, which is also the body that hears appeals on editorial complaints. The members of the committee are listed on page 48.

Editorial compliance

Every six months the Executive reports to the Trust on editorial compliance issues and the committee scrutinises these reports. In 2007/08 the committee noted 56 breaches of editorial compliance upheld either by BBC management or by the committee itself. This compares with a total of 38 in the previous year. While this represents a 47% increase,

these accounted for just 0.045% of complaints received by the BBC.

The committee considered a number of impartiality complaints. Three of these related to *Horizon: Nuclear Nightmares*, broadcast on BBC Two in July 2006, in which scientific evidence of the effects of nuclear radiation was discussed without sufficient reference to alternative opinions. The committee noted the importance of ensuring the impartiality of all output – not just news – and asked all programme areas to give consideration to this.

The committee also upheld a number of complaints about editorial inaccuracies in BBC online journalism. While these did not amount to serious editorial breaches, they highlighted the need for web teams to acknowledge errors pointed out by users and make corrections promptly. The committee asked the Executive to encourage web teams to respond more effectively to these initial complaints to prevent their escalation through the complaints process.

Ensuring editorial integrity and independence can pose particular challenges for BBC programme makers when they work with external partners. One of BBC One's most successful programmes in 2006 was *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* – a talent contest in which viewers helped choose the star for a commercial West End production of *The Sound of Music*. In July 2007 the committee considered a complaint that the programme had breached BBC guidelines. The complaint cited the involvement of the producers of the West End show, Andrew Lloyd Webber and David Ian, in the BBC production.

In deciding not to uphold the complaint, the committee noted that as this was the first programme of its kind it was likely to test the guidelines and that, given the programme

format, it would have been impossible to avoid some degree of product prominence for the West End show. Although some mistakes had been made initially, the production team had taken steps to address them and it was appropriate to give some latitude to innovative programmes to put mistakes right.

The committee receives reports from the Executive on those breaches of the guidelines that the Executive itself has acknowledged. This allows the committee to determine if any further action is required. Last year the Executive reported breaches of the impartiality and accuracy guidelines in two editions of *Newsnight* broadcast in January and June 2007 and as a result the committee asked to see new guidance on polls, votes and straw polls, and published its findings on the breaches.

The Executive also reported a breach of the guidelines regarding the use of the most offensive language pre-watershed during the *Live Earth* concert broadcast in July 2007. The committee was concerned that following similar editorial breaches during the *Live 8* concert in 2005, Ofcom had noted that the BBC had offered to consider using a delay in future to prevent similar breaches, but a delay was not used for *Live Earth*. The committee decided that any such further breaches of the guidelines would be unacceptable. The committee also noted that the explanation for not using time delay provided by the Executive on the complaints website was inaccurate in detail, and requested changes.

Swearing on air during *Live Earth* was also the subject of a sanction issued by Ofcom against the BBC in April 2008. Ofcom required the BBC to publish an on-air finding. Ofcom upheld a total of 17 programme standards complaints against the BBC and resolved three others. These included a sanction

The BBC can afford to be neutral because they do not have to pander to commercial organisations.



Member of public at Trust research workshop.

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The number of editorial appeals heard by the Trust – of which two were upheld and seven partially upheld.

against the BBC regarding a competition on *Blue Peter* in November 2006, for which Ofcom fined the BBC for the first time. The Editorial Standards committee noted that a number of breaches related to matters of fair dealing and consent, and is looking to the Executive to ensure that programme makers deal straightforwardly with contributors.

In 2008/09 the committee will continue to scrutinise the Executive's efforts to ensure editorial compliance of all output. There is a particular need to ensure that in secret recordings any obscuring of identities is effective. The Executive must also continue to monitor prominence across BBC television output to ensure the BBC's editorial independence and integrity. The committee will continue to monitor the work of the Executive's Complaints Management Board. This board, which is chaired by the Deputy Director-General and has senior management representation from each programme division, has the authority to order changes in programme areas and to put in place corrective measures to prevent repetition of mistakes.

EDITORIAL COMPLAINTS

The BBC process for handling editorial complaints has three stages. At the first stage complaints are dealt with by the programme team or by BBC Information. Complainants dissatisfied with this Stage 1 response can take their complaint to either the independent Editorial Complaints Unit or to a senior member of the appropriate BBC division. Complainants who dispute this Stage 2 ruling can appeal to the Editorial Standards committee (ESC), which hears those complaints it considers appropriate and which are of substance.

The BBC received 123,529 Stage 1 complaints in 2007/08, and the target of responding to 93% of them within 10 days was met. The ESC was pleased to note the improvement from 90% last year.

The Editorial Complaints Unit received 270 complaints in 2007/08, up from 187 in 2006/07, and upheld 47 of these in full or part. The committee was pleased to note that despite the rise in complaints, the unit improved its turnaround times and dealt with 74% of complaints within the target time compared with 42% last year.

The committee itself heard 57 appeals in 2007/08, of which two were upheld and seven partly upheld. The increase in appeals, as well as the complexity of the complaints, affected the committee's own turnaround times. It regrets this and is seeking to improve its performance in 2008/09. The ESC has always measured the time it takes to consider a complaint from the date a request for an appeal has been received to the date the finding was posted to the complainant. Under this measure the ESC dealt with 16% of appeals within its 16-week target turnaround time. The committee's published terms of reference, however, calculate turnaround times from the date the committee agrees to take an appeal to the date it hears and decides the matter. This measure of the time taken to hear complaints disregards preparatory work necessary to determine whether a complaint falls within the ESC's remit as well as administrative procedures following the hearing involved in publishing the finding. On this basis the ESC determined 67% of appeals within 16 weeks.

Improving complaints handling

During 2007/08 the editorial standards committee developed a new complaints framework (see panel on facing page), which will be published in July 2008. The committee will monitor the effectiveness of the new processes, which are designed to make complaints handling more efficient and transparent.

Volume of editorial complaints received at Stage 1

Complaints answered

05/06	150,143
06/07	123,693
07/08	123,529

Findings of editorial appeals heard by the Editorial Standards committee

Upheld

06/07	2
07/08	2

Partially upheld

06/07	4
07/08	7

Not upheld

06/07	26
07/08	48

Training

The Executive reports to the Trust annually on how its arrangements for training staff help deliver the public purposes, as well as contributing to the wider broadcasting industry. We welcome the investment made in the last year to training a highly skilled workforce, particularly the focus on editorial standards where we believe the BBC can have a key role in supporting standards across the industry. The full report, and the Trust's commentary, are available on the Trust's website.