

Muslim Council of Britain

Introduction

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), founded in 1997, is an inclusive umbrella body of mosques and Islamic associations that seeks to represent the common interest of Muslims in Britain. It is pledged to work for the common good of society as a whole. Its affiliate base reflects the diversity of Muslims in the UK, being made up of hundreds of mosques, educational and charitable bodies, cultural and relief agencies and women and youth groups and associations across the UK from a range of ethnic, geographical and theological backgrounds and traditions.

Concerns are often raised to the MCB about irresponsible reporting in the media, most recently in a survey conducted in which over 100 Muslim organisations and institutions responded, reflecting experiences of Muslim communities in England, Scotland and Wales. Affiliates in areas as diverse as Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow and London responded alongside smaller organisations in Shropshire, Burnley and Lincoln.

In a climate in which almost 40% of the British population would support policies to reduce the number of Muslims in the UK, Islamophobia has become a norm within many sections of society, and claiming that the media has played no role in the growth in Islamophobia is no longer a tenable position:

- Research by the University of Cambridge concluded that mainstream media reporting about Muslim communities is contributing to an atmosphere of rising hostility toward Muslims in Britain (see [here](#)).
- Findings of an Islamophobia Roundtable in Stockholm two years ago showed that the regular association of Islam and Muslims with crime and terror in the media and on the internet is vital to the spread of Islamophobic rhetoric (see [here](#)).

Furthermore, headlines of national newspapers on topics related to Muslims over the past few years show how an environment of hate and hostility is created:

- Outright misleading articles e.g., “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis” (The Sun), “Muslims ‘silent on terror’” (The Times) and “UK mosques fundraising for terror” (Daily Star Sunday).
- Conflation of the faith of Islam with criminality and violence: e.g., “Muslim sex grooming” or “Imam beaten to death in sex grooming town” (The Times), FGM or so-called honour killings (Daily Mail).
- Sensationalism and scaremongering about the apparent threat posed by Muslims is also widespread. Just look at headlines such as: “BBC puts Muslims before you” (Daily Star); “Halal secret of Pizza Express” (The Sun); “Muslim vote could decide 25 per cent of seats” (Daily Mail).

It is in this light and with the shortcomings in IPSO’s Editor’s Code, its lack of appropriate deterrent and the unwillingness of IPSO to take action (e.g. investigation leading to financial penalty), we welcome the opportunity to respond to this Consultation.

Response to the Code

- **1. Accuracy:**

- *Inclusion of “misleading”*: As the Code currently stands, it seems that an article which is intentionally misleading but not inaccurate, misrepresenting or distorting facts, would not be in breach of this Clause. Given the significant number of articles that set out to mislead the public, in particular with regards to linking issues to Islam, for example, where no such link exists, it is important that this is included within the Code.
- *Headlines not supported by the text*: Whilst this provision may not sit within this Clause of the Code, it is important that there exists a clause that prevents newspapers using headlines that may be accurate (or at least defensible) but old and not relevant to an article. Therefore, claims made in headlines should be supported by the text.
- *Quotation marks*: Whilst perhaps more relevant for any guidance to the Code, it should be clear that using quotation marks, does not absolve a publication of responsibility to be accurate.
- *Correction of inaccuracy*: the current Code does not provide sufficient guidance as to the means of correcting an inaccuracy. Any correction involves the following:
 1. *Change in article*: the original article should be changed where possible e.g. online, with citation of the change made
 2. *Admission of mistake*: all reasonable measures should be taken to ensure that the people who may have seen the initial article, see the correction. Clear guidance is required to ensure that “due prominence” means what it says:
 - **Print**: An inaccurate headline should not be able to be corrected in small font in a corrections box that nobody reads. The correction should be of equivalent size and prominence (e.g. front page where the mistake was on the front page) to the error
 - **Online**: As above – if the inaccurate headline was on the front page, then the correction should be on the front page of the website at a similar time and for a similar length of time as the original article, with a set minimum.
 - **Social media**: If the article was tweeted or shared on social media, the correction (and apology) should be posted on all such media. If the original article was tweeted or shared multiple times, the correction should also be posted multiple times.
 3. *Apology*: Where relevant, an apology must be part of **any correction** because admitting a mistake is not sufficient when breaching a Code. Consider an individual who lies to another person. Admitting the lie is insufficient without an apology. This is currently not within the Code as it stands.
 4. *Compensation*:
 - Where there has been harm to an individual due to an inaccuracy by the publication, it should be clear that pursuing action through Impress does not prejudice any compensation that may be sought through civil proceedings.
 - If a publication is consistently inaccurate (even if not all have gone through the process to be deemed breaches of the Code), there needs to be a sufficient financial deterrent after an investigation, to deter future breaches of the Code.

- **4. Discrimination**

- *4.1 Inclusion of “prejudicial”*: As the Code currently stands, prejudicial references on the basis of faith, colour...etc. by a publisher would not be considered a breach if they are not pejorative. This leaves open the potential for a publication to claim that a line in an article is prejudicial but not pejorative. It is therefore important to include the term “prejudicial” in addition to “pejorative”
- *4.2 Relevance*: Reference to a protected characteristic that is irrelevant to the story is considered a breach of the proposed Code. However, “relevance” by itself is too high a threshold. The onus should be on publications to justify why the protected characteristic is “genuinely” relevant to the “core argument of the story” to prevent passing references to protected characteristics that are unnecessary.

For example, consider the headline: “Muslim sex grooming” in a situation where the perpetrators of sex grooming happened to be Muslim but being Muslim was not the reason for the crime in any way. In a factual piece, unless there was any evidence to support it, one might argue that being Muslim is relevant as the individuals were Muslim; but it would be impossible (*ceteris paribus*) for one to argue that it was of genuine relevance to the core argument of the story given that the story is about sex grooming, not about being Muslim.

This point is of particular importance given the consistent conflation of the faith of Islam and Muslims with criminality through the usage of “Muslim” and “Islam” as descriptions of criminals when their faith is irrelevant to the crime being committed. It is important that the Code is able to ensure that such discriminatory usage is not acceptable.

- *4.3 Discrimination against groups*:
 - *Scope of this provision*: unlike section 4.1, this clause does not include “or another characteristic which makes that person vulnerable to discrimination”. Whilst it is praiseworthy that there is a clause to protect specific minority groups, this omission leaves open the right for publication to discriminate against or stereotype groups such as refugees (e.g. being called cockroaches) or those in poverty (e.g. being called benefit scroungers).
 - *Threshold of this provision*:
 - *Clarity*: The current wording of inciting hatred, is unclear. Does incitement require intent (if so, how could it be proven). Could a statement be inciting hatred without the usage of insulting language?
 - *Level of threshold*: It also seems unclear as to why a statement has to be in breach of the law (Public Order Act) for it to be in breach of the Code. The purpose of the Code, as I understand it, is to encourage the highest standards within the media, and therefore, the threshold should be considerably lower than just “within the law”. Better terminology such as “inciting hatred or levelling abuse” would be preferable so as to prevent columnists using newspapers as a loudspeaker to abuse groups. Guidance can be provided to

clarify that critique of a faith is materially different from abuse of its adherents.

- **Other:**
 - Guidance document: The code should be supplemented with guidance documents with case studies of what falls within and outside the Code
 - Scope: Will there be provisions to explain the scope of the Code e.g. international arms of a British-based publication and social media posts by the publication and by authors of articles associated with the paper
 - Will there be a separate consultation on the process that will complement the Code to explain:
 - Handling of complaints:
 - Multiple complainants
 - Where the complainant does not articulate the complaint well, but a breach is clear
 - Appeals process
 - Dealing with breaches of the Code:
 - Consistent breaches of the Code by a publication
 - Recording of breaches: where there is a resolution but a breach is clear, will this be recorded somehow
 - Governance and transparency:
 - Diversity within the individuals in the entire process
 - Transparency into code breaches, complaints made and investigations launched