



FINAL ADJUDICATION

Robb Masters and Plant Based News

Clause 1 Accuracy

1.1. Publishers must take all reasonable steps to ensure accuracy.

1.4. Whilst free to be partisan, publishers must not misrepresent or distort the facts.

Complaint Dismissed

No Breach of Code

Before IMPRESS Regulatory Committee A

Chris Elliott, Claire de Than, Cordella Bart-Stewart, Liz Munro, and Walter Merricks (Chair)

29 November 2021

1. Summary of Complaint

- 1.1. The Complainant is the former Chair of The Vegan Society, Robb Masters (“the Complainant”), a directly affected party seeking to ensure the accuracy of a published article.
- 1.2. The Respondent is Plant Based News (“the Publisher”), a news website covering topics such as nutrition, health, the environment and veganism, that has been regulated by IMPRESS since 22 March 2019.
- 1.3. The complaint concerns the accuracy of an article that first appeared on Plant Based News on 5 August 2021 with the headline, ‘*Everything You Need To Know About The Vegan Society Controversy*’.
- 1.4. The complaint is assessed against the IMPRESS Standards Code, the relevant clauses are:

Clause 1.1 Publishers must take all reasonable steps to ensure accuracy.

Clause 1.4 Whilst free to be partisan, publishers must not misrepresent or distort the facts.

2. Background

- 2.1. The article concerns the resignation of several trustees from The Vegan Society following allegations that the charity is ‘institutionally racist’ and ‘homophobic’. It first quotes Eshe Kiama Zuri, the now former Vice Chair of the organisation’s Council of Trustees, which comprises of individuals providing experience and insight to The Vegan Society. Zuri summarises in their resignation letter that ‘The Vegan Society is not a safe place for young people, for Black people, for Queer people or for any other marginalised people’.
- 2.2. The article continues by setting out the thoughts of Robb Masters in the following relevant statement:

And in Ex-Chairman Masters' resignation letter, he reported a 'toxic environment'. Masters also reported that transphobia and ableism were common within the council.

2.3. The article then features The Vegan Society's statement in response to the resignations, which acknowledges internal conflict amongst the Board and 'the challenges it must address' in becoming a more diverse and inclusive organisation. The Vegan Society also states that 'it is regrettable that the most recent resignations were received the day before a planned mediation session'.

2.4. The article further adds the following relevant statement:

In their letter, Zuri confirmed they did not want to go through a mediation to avoid reliving difficult experiences...

2.5. The article goes on to summarise an investigation commissioned by The Vegan Society into Zuri and Mr Masters' alleged inappropriate behaviour. The article quotes Ijeoma Omambala QC, who concludes (in the investigation report) that there is no evidence to suggest that Mr Masters has acted unlawfully or in breach of his obligations. Additionally, in the report, Omambala sympathises with Zuri's anger and frustration with posts made by The Vegan Society, but then goes on to criticise their 'inappropriate and unprofessional' language used in response. Omambala notes that the vast majority of complaints made against Zuri have not been upheld and that Zuri was repeatedly misgendered by the society.

2.6. The article continues by describing mitigating factors which were set out in the investigation report such as a 'profound personal animosity' towards Zuri and their identity, as well as 'their stance on various political issues'.

2.7. The article also features Omambala's assessment of Zuri's concerns about treatment by some Council members, raising issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion, which 'have not been adequately addressed in a timely way'. The article further describes the failure of the Council to undertake inclusivity and diversity training, which had been previously suggested by Zuri.

3. The Complaint

3.1. The Complainant did not contact the publisher directly, but expressed concern via Twitter that the article only mentioned allegations directed at Eshe Kiama Zuri and failed to reference the allegations made against him. The Publisher acknowledged this and added the following statement in an update to the originally published article on 10 August 2021:

In summary, the council claimed Zuri had shared 'racist' comments online, and that Masters had 'enabled' discriminatory behavior.

In the report, Omambala said: "I do not uphold any of the complaints brought against [Masters]. There is no evidence to suggest that [Masters] has acted unlawfully or in breach of his obligations as a Trustee or as Chair of the Society."

3.2. The Complainant submitted his original complaint to the Publisher on 6 August 2021, with IMPRESS acting as an intermediary between the two parties. The Publisher did not consider that the article breached the IMPRESS Standards Code and rejected the complaint. A full copy of correspondence between the parties was provided to the Regulatory Committee.

3.3. The Complainant was not satisfied with the Publisher's response and subsequently escalated the complaint to IMPRESS on 9 September 2021. After seeking clarification as to the basis for the complaint, IMPRESS confirmed the substance of the complaint as follows, a full copy of which was provided to the Committee.

3.4. Firstly, the Complainant does not consider that the Publisher took all reasonable steps to ensure accuracy. He claims that the Publisher provided a verbal assurance to Sam Calvert (Head of Communications at The Vegan Society) that it would seek the perspectives of all parties involved in the investigation before publishing the article.

3.5. The Complainant understands that the Publisher ultimately only reached out to one of the former Trustees, Joel Bravette, before subsequently deciding against interviewing him. The Complainant does not consider that this approach for comment was sufficient to represent the events accurately. The Complainant, in support, refers to a WhatsApp exchange between Bravette and Robbie Lockie (Co-founder and Co-Director of Plant Based News), in which Lockie reiterates the Publisher's intention to give 'everyone the right to respond'.

3.6. Secondly, the Complainant considers that the Publisher misrepresented the investigation commissioned by The Vegan Society into his and Eshe Kiama Zuri's alleged inappropriate behaviour. The Complainant's primary concern is that the article excludes information about the involvement of both Tim Barford (founder of Vegfest UK) and the involvement of the Publisher in making the allegations and the subsequent investigation. The Complainant understands that Barford was the person who made the complaints about his and Zuri's alleged inappropriate behaviour which then led to the investigation by Ijeoma Omambala QC, whereas the Publisher inaccurately characterises the Council of The Vegan Society as the party that made these complaints.

3.7. The Complainant considers that the omission and mischaracterisation of the parties involved was a deliberate attempt by the Publisher to protect themselves from any criticism concerning their complicity in Barford's allegations, which the Complainant describes as a 'racist, transphobic and ableist bullying campaign' targeted at Zuri. The Complainant considers that this misrepresentation by the Publisher presents a distorted version of events to the reader and has served to fuel criticism towards himself and Zuri.

3.8. The Complainant understands that the Publisher has a personal and professional relationship with Barford and Vegfest UK, and that this raises a conflict of interest. The Complainant considers that the Publisher must have been aware of Barford's involvement in the investigation due to him being a 'high-profile figure within the vegan movement'. In support, the Complainant cites former editor of Plant Based News, Maria Chiorando, 'praising' Barford in two articles by the Publisher. He adds that Chiorando's departure from the editorial team in February 2021 does not mean that they played no role in the writing of the article, claiming that the article appears to have been in progress (in one form or another) since late 2020 when Chiorando had discussions with Barford.

3.9. The Complainant says that he was informed by the CEO of the Vegan Society that prior to the commissioning of an investigation, Chiorando had found Zuri's social media posts 'offensive' and therefore, that the Publisher had planned to run an 'exposé' article on issues within The Vegan Society Council. The Complainant refers to the following passage from Ijeoma Omambala QC's investigation report as further evidence on this point:

it is clear that a significant driver of the decision to commission an external investigation was an assertion made by one complainant to members of the SMT that an external news agency, Plant Based News, was planning to run an 'expose' article on issues within Council.

The Complainant argues that the Publisher then endorsed Barford during the investigation; in support, he has provided evidence that Chiorando 'liked' Barford's public social media post about the investigation.

3.10. The Complainant considers that the Publisher also misrepresented both his own and Eshe Kiama Zuri's experiences as Trustees of The Vegan Society through the use of inaccurate statements, in order to downplay the seriousness of their allegations made against the society. It did so by omitting key details from their respective resignation letters. Therefore, the Complainant considers that their experiences have not been accurately described by the Publisher.

3.11. In sum, the Complainant considers that the article is 'heavily biased' (omitting the Publisher's own complicity in the controversy), and therefore the headline (*Everything You Need To Know About The Vegan Society Controversy*), omissions and factual errors taken together amount to significant inaccuracies requiring correction. The Complainant considers that the statement 'the council claimed Zuri had shared 'racist' comments online' is not accurate, and argues that this was the view of only one of the members of the society (who made such a claim), rather than the official position of the society's Council.

3.12. The Complainant also says that the Vegan Society commissioned the investigation in March 2021, rather than February 2021 as stated by the Publisher, in response to complaints made in December 2020. He considers that the Publisher is misleading the reader by implying that the investigation was in relation to comments made in February 2021 when, in reality, the complaints were from December 2020.

4. Response of Publication

4.1. IMPRESS invited the Publisher to provide additional information in response to the Complainant. The Publisher's response is summarised below, a full copy of which was provided to the Committee.

- 4.2. Regarding Clause 1.1, the Publisher considers that the article was based on information or documents in the public domain, and that most of the piece reproduces verbatim extracts from those documents without comment. The Publisher also says that the intention was to run a fact-based article free of any opinions or perspectives of any parties involved in the Vegan Society controversy. The Publisher therefore considers that it was unnecessary to speak to or contact any of the individuals involved without compromising the accuracy of the article and concludes that all reasonable steps to ensure accuracy were taken.
- 4.3. The Publisher refutes the claim that it made a statement, whether to Sam Calvert (Head of Communications at The Vegan Society) or otherwise, about whom it would be speaking to regarding the article. The Publisher says that it did not interview anyone in relation to The Vegan Society investigation.
- 4.4. Regarding Clause 1.4, the Publisher says that it had no knowledge of Tim Barford's involvement in the investigation and rejects the Complainant's allegation that the article deliberately omitted this information. It argues that failure to mention Barford or any other complainant by name is not indicative of its support for any complainant. The Publisher further adds that it played no part in either the instigation or the conduct of the investigation.
- 4.5. The Publisher says that there is no basis for the Complainant's allegation that former Editor Maria Chiorando 'found Eshe's posts offensive' and that the terms of reference for the investigation were agreed by the Board of Trustees of The Vegan Society, as stated in the Investigation Report by Ijeoma Omambala QC. The Publisher further states that Chiorando left the Publisher company in February 2021, and therefore played no role in the writing or publication of the article.
- 4.6. The Publisher says that it plays no role in the affairs of The Vegan Society and that there was no 'commissioning' of an external exposé in relation to the alleged behaviour of the Chair and Vice-Chair of The Vegan Society. The Publisher states that it does not run 'exposés', apart from in the reporting of unethical treatment of animals.
- 4.7. Regarding the allegation that Maria Chiorando 'praises' Tim Barford in two articles, the Publisher says that it would not be unusual for its editor to comment favourably upon a supplier of vegan services, and that this has no bearing on any involvement of Barford in the investigation. The Publisher notes that while

Chiorando may have had a discussion with Barford, she also had conversations with The Vegan Society in order to gather the full story from both sides.

4.8. The Publisher also says that regardless of whether or not any of their employees 'liked' a post by someone who may have made a complaint against a trustee of The Vegan Society Council, this provides no evidence of any complicity of the Publisher, or that of Barford, in the investigation.

4.9. The Publisher refutes the claim that it misrepresented the experiences outlined by the Complainant and Zuri in their respective resignation letters and that the statements complained of in the article are accurate summaries. The Publisher states that it is common when reporting on matters of such complexity and detail (as the simultaneous resignation of five trustees of a charity) that such summary statements are used.

4.10. The Publisher accepts that the statement 'the council claimed Zuri had shared "racist" comments online' is inaccurate. While the Publisher does not believe this error detracts from the overall accuracy of the article, it would be willing to issue a statement on its website correcting this point.

4.11. The Publisher accepts that the investigation report by Ijeoma Omambala QC may have been commissioned in March 2021 rather than February and is willing to correct the record. However, the Publisher says that the article did not seek to imply that the comments had been made by Zuri in February rather than December.

4.12. In relation to the allegation that the headline of the article is misleading, the Publisher considers that articles titled 'Everything You Need to Know About...' are commonplace and subjective, and would be understood by the ordinary reader as such. Despite the use of such a headline, the Publisher maintains that its article accurately covers all key aspects of the story.

5. Compliance

5.1. Plant Based News complied with the requirements of the IMPRESS Regulatory Scheme (Paragraph 3.2.) by acknowledging the complaint within 7 calendar days and issuing a final decision letter within 21 calendar days.

6. Analysis and Findings

- 6.1 The Committee considered that the Publisher had done a reasonable job reporting on the key facts surrounding this controversy and had quoted and linked to reliable source documents sufficiently. The Committee did not consider that it was necessary for the Publisher to contact each former trustee of the Vegan Society for comment, to fulfil its duties under Clause 1.1. The Committee therefore decided that there was no breach of Clause 1.1 (reasonable steps to ensure accuracy).
- 6.2 The Committee acknowledged that while some statements used by the Publisher to summarise the thoughts expressed by the Complainant and Zuri in their respective resignation letters were perhaps inelegantly phrased, they did not amount to significant inaccuracies which required correction under Clause 1.2 (significant inaccuracies requiring correction). It was also noted that links to the full resignation letters were provided in the article, and that these sufficiently contextualised the Publisher's statements.
- 6.3 The Committee considered that the headline *Everything You Need To Know About The Vegan Society Controversy* was not inaccurate. Such headlines are very commonplace in journalism and the ordinary reader would not interpret this figure of speech literally. Further, the Committee did not view the inaccurate date in relation to the commissioning of the investigation as a material fact that amounted to a significant inaccuracy, particularly so considering that the Publisher was willing to correct the record with clarifying amendments. Therefore, the Committee decided that there was no breach of Clause 1.4 (must not misrepresent and distort facts).
- 6.4 Finally, the Committee determined that even if the Publisher had an association with Tim Barford, this did not have an evident bearing on the accuracy of the article. Further, the Committee did not judge Maria Chiorando's liking of a social media post by Barford to have impacted upon the accuracy of the article overall.