

IMPRESS Code Review: Call for Evidence

Submission from Church Action on Poverty, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, National Union of Journalists and On Road Media

In 2020, our organisations co-produced [Reporting Poverty: A Guide for Media Professionals](#), based on workshops and extensive discussions with people in poverty, charities, community groups and professional journalists.

The guide brought together important first-hand perspectives on how poverty is reported, and how people in poverty are treated or portrayed in the media. We invite you to include the guide on the [additional guidance section of your website](#), alongside other third-party professional guides.

In addition, we believe there are two areas where Impress could improve the code.

1) Accuracy, headlines and images (Paragraph 1.15 of the code guidance)

The code in its current form states that headlines and images “must be accurate representations of the stories they accompany,” and adds:

“Taken together, text and photographs may be an accurate representation of the facts; viewed in isolation, they can misrepresent things. Care should be taken in the writing of headlines and the placing of photographs. How an image is presented, including how it is captioned, and how it is cropped or otherwise altered, may also amount to a significant inaccuracy.”

We would welcome the addition of specific reference in this section to the use of stock images.

In media reports about poverty, a handful of stock images are used far too often, but in our work on this we find that nobody recognises themselves or their communities in these images. Many people find these images offensive and feel they contribute to shame and stigma, reinforce fatalism, and fail to reflect the breadth of poverty in the UK. We know that poverty exists in every town and city in the country, and that it affects families and individuals, and people of all ages. Yet a small selection of images, most of which were taken 10 to 12 years ago and which show very extreme and narrow examples of UK poverty, are still repeatedly used to accompany more nuanced stories. This narrows and distorts the issue, and gives the public a skewed and inaccurate story. (This issue has also been addressed by the [What's The Problem?](#) project and by [Church Action on Poverty](#).)

We propose paragraph 1.15 be adapted as follows (added text in bold):

*Taken together, text and photographs may be an accurate representation of the facts; viewed in isolation, they can misrepresent things. Care should be taken in the writing of headlines and the selection and placing of photographs. How an image is presented, including how it is captioned, and how it is cropped or otherwise altered, may also amount to a significant inaccuracy. **Care should also be taken in the choice of stock pictures, to ensure they accurately reflect the issues raised in the story they accompany. Particular consideration should be given to the age of any picture, its original purpose and subsequent changes in any identifiable locations. Further advice is available in the Reporting Poverty guide.***

2) Discrimination

Our organisations work frequently with people who have personal experience of poverty, but those people are not defined by that poverty. There can be a tendency in careless media reports to pigeon-hole people or communities and to define them by one aspect of their situation. Such articles can be pejorative and stigmatising for the people in the story, as well as reductive and narrowing for the readers. We would like to see Impress guard against this and to proactively encourage care in the reporting of complex situations. Relevant work in this area has also been undertaken by Lankelly Chase, whose 2019 report [Telling A Different Story](#) highlighted shortcomings in some media reports of social disadvantage.

We propose the following revised wording for paragraphs 4.14 and 4.15 of your guidance (proposed amendments in bold).

*The reference to 'race' in the list of protected characteristics may include a person who identifies as being from the Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller communities. Examples of other 'characteristics that make that person vulnerable to discrimination' may include socio-economic status, immigration status, or receipt of welfare and benefits payments. Publishers should be aware that some characteristics that make a person vulnerable to discrimination are transient such as some people's experience of mental illness. The clause includes religious belief but excludes political beliefs. It is not, therefore, intended to cover negative references to a person holding extreme political views. **Socio-political issues are complex and care should be taken to avoid reductive language that defines people in stories by single characteristics, such as them being homeless or in receipt of benefits, or which restricts the understanding presented to the public.***

*Publishers must only reference a person's protected characteristic(s) where relevant to the story, **and must do so only in a proportionate way and in a balanced context.** This is not intended to prevent journalists from providing information about a subject that builds a picture helpful to a reader's understanding of the context.*