

COMPLAINT ADJUDICATION

CHRISTOPHER GREY

and

THE SKWAWKBOX

Clause 1. Accuracy

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

Complaint upheld

Breach of Clause 1.4 (Accuracy)

Before IMPRESS Regulatory Committee A

Walter Merricks (Chair), Patrick Swaffer, Iain Christie, David Robinson, David Leigh, Andrea Wills, Máire Messenger Davies

15 December 2017

1. Summary of Complaint

1.1. The Complainant is Christopher Grey, a third party seeking to ensure the accuracy of published information. He has confirmed to IMPRESS that he is not an affected party or the representative of an affected party.

1.2. The Publisher is The SKWAWKBOX, a news website covering current affairs, that has been regulated by IMPRESS since 1 October 2017.

1.3. The complaint concerns the accuracy of an article that first appeared on The SKWAWKBOX on 12 October 2017 with the headline "*Penniless UC claimants pay 55p/min to call govt. Guess what millionaires pay*".

1.4. The complaint is assessed against the IMPRESS Standards Code. The relevant clause is:

Clause 1 (Accuracy):

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

2. Background

2.1 The article began by reporting an interview with Treasury Secretary, Liz Truss that had appeared during the BBC's *Daily Politics* programme and in which the potential 55p per minute cost of calls to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for Universal Credit (UC) claimants was challenged.

- 2.2 The article continued by stating *“However, not everyone is forced to pay through the nose to contact the government about their financial affairs. In fact, some don’t pay at all”*.
- 2.3 The article went on to explain the cost of calling ‘0300’ numbers, stating that these were charged at the same rate as a call to a normal landline. It included an excerpt of a webpage from area-codes.org.uk about ‘0300’ number call costs, that stated:
- “All numbers that start with ‘03’ are charged at the same rate as standard landline numbers that start with 01 and 02. If your phone tariff offers inclusive calls to landlines, calls to 0300 numbers will also be included in the same way.”*
- 2.4 The article went on to state:
- “...as the last couple of lines make clear, if you have a contract mobile or landline with included minutes, calls to an 0300 number **are** included in your package – so you can call one for free. So, does the government make 0300 numbers available to **any** groups of people who might want to contact it? It does. To **whom**? Well, the wealthy, of course. In fact, even the **very** wealthy – so-called ‘high net worth individuals’.*
- 2.5 The article listed several government departments that offer ‘0300’ numbers, including the High Net Worth Unit, the Capital Gains Helpline and the National Yachtline.
- 2.6 The article stated *“If you’re a millionaire or billionaire, you or a representative can call **absolutely free** or in the worst case – can you imagine a millionaire or millionaire’s[sic] dogsbody **without** a mobile contract with free minutes? – for the same as calling any landline”*.

2.7 The article concluded by stating:

*“Yup. If you’ve got a yacht or pleasurecraft...and you want a bit of help from HMRC on any potential tax issues, you can call free of charge. But if you’ve got nothing, in many cases **literally** nothing, well, it only stands to reason that you should rack up a £5.50 bill for every ten minutes you spend listening to infuriating music in the long, long queue – 45% of claimants need to get through, remember – while you wait for someone to answer and tell you that you’ll receive your money next week. Again. Or in six weeks or eight months or whenever we think we’ve milked you enough on our gougeline.”*

3. The Complaint

3.1. The Complainant e-mailed the Publisher to complain about the accuracy of the article and The SKWAWKBOX’s complaints department responded to the Complainant rejecting the complaint on the grounds that the article was explicit about the way that ‘0300’ numbers worked and so was not misleading.

3.2. The Publisher continued:

“The import of the article is that wealthy people will almost certainly have packages that give them free use of such numbers, while people in poverty are highly unlikely to have such a package. Again, this is stated explicitly in the article...

In view of the explicit and clear nature of information within the article that exactly provides the information we have failed to communicate, our finding is that your claim is invalid and we do not propose to make any changes or announcements.”

3.3. The Publisher also advised the Complainant that he had the right to escalate his complaint to IMPRESS if he wished.

3.4. The Complainant subsequently made a complaint to IMPRESS and, after seeking clarification of the basis for the complaint, IMPRESS confirmed the substance of Mr Grey's complaint with him, as follows:

"[The complainant] complains to IMPRESS that the article misleadingly implied that calls by UC claimants seeking assistance were being charged at a higher rate than the other helplines listed in the article:

'The story suggests that that there is a different government policy for telephone numbers for the rich. It fails to point out that the 0300 numbers that it discusses in the article and the 0345 numbers that are provided to Universal Credit users, use exactly the same charging structure. It misleadingly asks "does the government make 0300 numbers available to any groups of people who might want to contact it?". The final two digits on the telephone number are irrelevant here and are only included to try and make it appear that there is a difference between the telephone numbers provided by the government. As their graphic makes clear, the final two numbers are in fact arbitrary. The important numbers for phone call costs are the first two: 03. The entire article tries to paint a difference between the treatment of these two groups of people that in fact doesn't exist.'

The complainant contends that the inaccuracy of the article resulted in a breach of the IMPRESS Standards Code:

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

- 3.3 IMPRESS provided the Complainant with a full copy of The SKWAWKBOX's response (summarised in Section 4 below) and gave him the opportunity to provide a final reply to that response.
- 3.4 The Complainant reiterated that he felt the article suggested explicitly, and by the omission of facts, that the telephone number provided for UC claimants was charged differently to those numbers made available to wealthier people.
- 3.5 The Complainant disagreed with the Publisher that the main import of the article was that wealthy people were more likely to have packages that would allow them to call such numbers for free, although he did acknowledge that this was referenced in the article:
- “The import is that there is a difference in treatment by the government, that a “better” number is offered, that it is preferential. However, there is no mention in the article that Universal Credit claimants would be able to call that number for free or at a reduced rate on many mobile packages. The number of the UC line is not mentioned at all because to do so would undermine the misleading nature of their article.”*
- 3.6 The Complainant also raised a further issue regarding the fact that the headline and the body copy both stated that UC complainants ‘pay 55p per minute’, when this was the maximum charge. He therefore considered that it should state ‘up to 55p’.

4. Response of Publication

- 4.1. IMPRESS invited The SKWAWKBOX to respond to the complaint. The Publisher's response is summarised below.

- 4.2. The Publisher stated that it did not consider the article was misleading because it explicitly stated the cost of '0300' numbers and how they worked, along with explaining why the poor were almost certain to pay more than the rich for calling them.
- 4.3. The Publisher disputed that referencing the cost of calling '0300' numbers instead of '03' numbers was misleading, or that it was necessary for the article to explicitly explain that the UC helpline's '0345' number was charged in the same way as an '0300' number.
- 4.4. The Publisher also referred IMPRESS to its original response to the Complainant (summarised in Section 3 above).
- 4.5. In response to the Complainant's comments on its response, The SKWAWKBOX responded further as follows:

*"The government **does** 'make 0300 numbers available to any groups of people who might want to contact it'. This is simply factual. The fact that we have made this statement in immediate proximity to a table showing exactly how 0300 numbers work clearly makes the claim that we are in any way misleading incorrect. Mr Grey is free to disagree with the import, thrust and conclusions of the article - he is not justified in complaining that we have misled.*

Mr Grey is also under a misapprehension about the 'point of this article'. If we intended to make the point he seems to think we were making - that there is a difference between the 0300 and 0345 numbers - putting a table in the article showing that 0300 numbers would also be chargeable to low-income people would not be the way to go about it.

The point of the article is that the government makes available a system that costs low-income people to call it but will be entirely free for the wealthy. We

absolutely stand by that point. The import is indeed that there is a difference in treatment by government - as already explained above, that's exactly the effect of the numbers used.

On the 'final point', the use of '55p' rather than 'up to 55p' is entirely in line with the way in which the issue was treated by more or less all the media... Headlines, by their nature, have to be concise and convey the key details without being any more wordy than necessary...

The body of the article says that claimants pay 55p a minute. This is entirely true. It does not say 'all claimants' - and indeed, the poorer a claimant is, it's highly likely that s/he will have a poor phone plan that will charge the higher amount.

However, as a goodwill gesture and without any admission of fault, we will offer to change the body text (not headline) to 'up to 55p'..."

5. Compliance with the IMPRESS Regulatory Scheme

5.1. The SKWAWKBOX has complied with the requirements of the IMPRESS Regulatory Scheme (Paragraph 3.2), by acknowledging the complaint within seven calendar days, issuing a final decision letter within 21 calendar days, and informing the complainant of their right to refer the complaint to IMPRESS.

6. The Committee's Conclusions

6.1 Clause 1.4 of the IMPRESS Standards Code makes clear that, whilst they are free to be partisan, publishers must not misrepresent or distort the facts. Whilst the Publisher was entitled to express its view that the Government's treatment of UC claimants was unfair, the article had misleadingly given the

impression that this unfair treatment stemmed from the fact that the UC helpline had a different charging structure to other helplines that were more likely to be used by wealthy individuals, when that was not the case.

- 6.2 The article explained the cost of calling '0300' numbers and also contained a graphic which stated that all numbers that started with '03' would be charged at the same rate. The Publisher considered that this was sufficient to make clear that the UC helpline had the same charging structure as the other helplines that were referenced in the article. However, the article did not explicitly draw readers' attention to the fact that the UC helpline began with '0345' and would therefore be charged in the same way as an '0300' number.
- 6.3 Although the Publisher may have intended to express the view that UC claimants were less likely to have access to beneficial telephone packages and were therefore more likely to have to pay the maximum tariff of 55p per minute for calling '03' numbers, the Committee did not consider that this was the way the article would be interpreted by readers.
- 6.4 The headline and the body of the article also contained unqualified references to the 55p per minute cost of calling the UC helpline, when in fact this was the maximum tariff payable by individuals who only had the least beneficial mobile telephone packages. The Committee welcomed the fact that the Publisher had offered to amend the reference in the body of the article to state "up to 55p per minute" but it considered that the headline should also have stated "up to 55p per minute".
- 6.5 The Publisher had therefore breached Clause 1.4 of the IMPRESS Standards Code by misrepresenting or distorting the facts on which its opinion was based.

7. Remedy

7.1 A proportionate remedy for the breach would be for The SKWAWKBOX to amend the references to “55p per minute” in the headline and the body of the article to state “up to 55p per minute” and to publish a short correction with a link to the full adjudication. The correction should be published at the top of the home page of The SKWAWKBOX for 48 hours in the same-sized font as the original article and released on the same social media channels as the original article. The article should also include the correction at the top of the article for as long as it continues to be published on The SKWAWKBOX. The correction should read as follows:

Correction of article published on THE SKWAWKBOX on 12 October 2017

In an article first published on 12 October 2017 under the headline “Penniless UC claimants pay 55p/min to call govt. Guess what millionaires pay”, IMPRESS found that THE SKWAWKBOX had misrepresented or distorted facts in relation to the way that calls to the Universal Credit helpline are charged. THE SKWAWKBOX would like to clarify that the view expressed in the article, that the poor pay more than the rich to call Government telephone helplines, was based on the assumption that individuals of different economic means are likely to have access to different telephone packages, which will affect how much they are charged for dialling ‘03’ numbers. There is no difference between the charging structures of the different telephone helplines referenced in the article. THE SKWAWKBOX has also amended the article to make clear that 55p is the maximum tariff payable by those on the least beneficial mobile telephone packages, rather than the standard rate of calling the Universal Credit helpline, in line with the adjudication by IMPRESS. Click [here](#) to read the full adjudication.



Case Ref: 0093/2017