

IMPRESS Code Review: Call for Evidence

Sikh Press Association Submission

1. Journalism online

“Whether the Code reflects the realities of news gathering and publication online, with particular focus on Artificial Intelligence (AI), data and open source journalism; the use of social media accounts, groups and pages and whether the Code is applicable to different kinds of news providers, including non-professional and citizen journalists.”

Sourcing information solely online through “respected” sources should not absolve journalists/outlets of inaccuracies. For example, the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi is readily labelled “The Sikh New Year” online on webpages many may view as credible sources of information (EG BBC, Wikipedia). However, these sources are inaccurate.

Clause 1.1 of Accuracy should recognise “reasonable steps” towards accuracy is doing more than regurgitating the first source found and it should be considered reasonable to do more research, including sourcing information from those closer to the issue and not those that cover it generically as part of wide-scale coverage of various topics.

The online behavior of bots to influence a narrative should also be considered in regards to clause 1.3. Countries such as India are well known to use an army of bots (or IT Cells) to influence online narratives.

2. Discrimination

“Whether Clause 4 of the Code is fit for purpose, and adequately reflects how discrimination is experienced by those with protected characteristics, particularly in an online context. Specifically whether the discrimination standard adequately addresses the degree, manner, and extent to which journalism practices impact on discrimination in society and whether they sufficiently reflect the relationship between discrimination and other clauses of the Code such as accuracy, privacy, and harassment.”

Impress need to consider discrimination of communities through framing of news through a specific lens. For example, headlines which have proclaimed “Sikh gang/s” are behind a crime or that “Sikh extremism” is an issue have tarnished the entire Sikh community as having an issue of criminality within it.

This is particularly dangerous for Sikhs. In the USA, Sikhs have actually been murdered because of a media conflation between the look of a Sikh (beard and turban) and that of a terrorist. Sikhs stand out so much that any individual could be targeted for perceived reprisal against the community if we are accused of having “Sikh gangs” or “Sikh extremists”. Until we see an equivalent of Christian extremism or Christian gangs being reported on this way, no community should be allowed to be reported on in this way to ensure the safety of said communities. Therefore, Clause 4.3 should forbid discrimination linking an entire community to such negatives, and the potential repercussions such communities can suffer

from them must be considered too.

Discrimination should also include repeatedly linking a community to a particular issue. Historically, many feel the black community have been overly linked to street crime and Muslims overly linked with terrorism. For Sikhs, the issue of “interfaith marriage protests” is overly linked to the community. Should this issue be brought up without facts about how recent the last protest was and how frequent the protests are, this should be liable to be called discrimination, as it portrays an issue as being more prominent than it really is.

Subsequently, this means individuals should be allowed to complain based on discrimination felt on behalf of said community. This may best be suited to arbitration from relevant community groups and Sikh PA would be on hand to help on Sikh community issues.

3. Harassment

“Whether the Code reflects how journalists gather information, approach individuals and organisations for stories and comment, engage with audiences and readers and address and deal with threats, abuse, and intimidation when it is experienced by employees and contributors. Whether the Code takes sufficient account of the speed, delivery, and the emotional tone of journalism online and how that mode exacerbates online harassment, hate speech and any subsequent harm.”

Impress should recognise how reporting can lead to harassment from the public, something seemingly not yet covered in clause 5. Similar to discrimination, it must be recognised that linking an issue to an entire community (eg the “Sikh gangs” example) can lead to harassment of individuals within that community, and individuals should be allowed to complain about harassment suffered due to a negative press depiction of said community.

For reporting journalists, ignoring a fact about an organisation or individual to portray them a specific way in a news report written without said org/individual’s input should be considered unfair. For example, there are articles which have described Sikh community group as being “associated with the right-wing”. This is despite the fact the said community group have openly condemned and distanced themselves from the right-wing. In such cases, overlooking a readily available fact to focus on a more sensational narrative should be considered unfair and a breach of clause 1 and possibly for and 5.

4. Accuracy

“Whether the Code embodies best practice around signaling news content, the use and placement of corrections, and clarifications (for example, practices around labelling, positioning and transparency), the conflation of fact and opinion and the use of click-bait headlines. Whether the Code embodies best practice for testing veracity, verifiability and robust news gathering, particularly online.”

Regarding clause 1.1, reasonable steps to ensure accuracy must include speaking to/reading from someone/an org directly involved with furthering understanding on said topic. For example, whilst the BBC Religion archives may be considered credible sources of information, they contain inaccuracies on the Sikh faith, such as labelling the festival of Vaisakhi “The Sikh New Year”. Impress must consider it a breach of clause 1 to regurgitate such information without checking with those closer to the topic.

On clause 1.3, the influence of biased sources should also be considered in complaints about accuracy. The clause calls for differentiation between conjecture, fact, opinion and statements. What is considered fact should not be based on who has reported it, or else journalists can end up amplifying a biased source. For example, reports from the Indian state can often state something as fact which is contested by others, such as the number of deaths in a communal incident/protest. Impress should ensure complaints about accuracy gives space to contest what is considered fact depending on the source, when it may actually just be a statement, and appropriate changes should be made when applicable.

5. Fairness

“Whether the Code sufficiently addresses standards of fairness within newsgathering practice, such as dealing fairly with those reported on and avoiding misrepresentation with respect to comment.”

In regards to fairness and avoiding misrepresentation, Impress need to ensure they recognise that an aspect of fairness is balance. Terminology used can be unfair if it is not balanced.

Journalists have a duty to find out how prominent certain perceptions are of individuals/incidents are before labelling them a certain way, lest they breach clauses 1 and 4. For example, due to differing perceptions about modern Sikh history, some revered Sikh figures have been described in news reports as “militants/radicals” and something akin. Fairness means also including how many within the community may view such figures, which would be as freedom fighters/saints/celebrated martyrs.

The public should be able to complain about unfair terminology, when used without relevant balance.

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6. Children

“Whether the Code is aligned with best practice with respect to informed consent and information gathering on matters affecting children.”

Impress must consider whether simply blurring out the face of a child under-16 but still reporting where they go to school and an incident they were involved is a breach (or not) of clauses 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3.

From the perspective of The Sikh Press Association, simply blurring out the face but including facts that could easily lead to countless people learning the identity of said child should be considered breaching the clauses and be liable for a complaint to be accepted by Impress, depending on the potential impact of the child (breaching clause 3.1 and 9).

7. Public Safety

“Whether the Code adequately addresses matters that impact on public and community safety, such as terrorism, domestic violence, and public health.”

As mentioned prior, The Sikh Press Association categorically state that certain types of reporting on a community can lead to the endangerment of anyone that is visibly part of said community, an issue which greatly impacts Sikhs.

As such, complaints about public safety (most likely based on breaches of clauses 1, 4, 5 and 7) should be able to be made on behalf of anyone within a community impacted by a news report or other. For example, if another headline speaks of “Sikh gangs” involved in criminal activity, complaints about this endangering the safety of all Sikhs that are visibly part of the community must be taken seriously and acted upon by Impress.