

Media Diversity Institute Submission - IMPRESS Code Review: Call for Evidence

Media Diversity Institute (MDI) works internationally to encourage accurate and nuanced reporting on race, religion, ethnicity, class, age, disability, gender and sexual identity issues in media landscapes around the world. While our work is grounded in the principles of freedom of expression and values of diversity and inclusion, our day-to-day work focuses on cultivating practical skills to combat negative stereotypes and disinformation, improve media and information literacy, and influence the conversation on diversity and the media.

In response to the call for evidence for the IMPRESS Code Review, Media Diversity Institute (MDI) hereby submits information and experience on some points mentioned in the call which relate closely to our work. Specifically, we would like to comment on Clause 4 of the Code, Discrimination, and its insufficient coverage of images. Our evidence for this submission comes largely from one of MDI's projects, [Get The Trolls Out! \(GTTO\)](#), which aims to reduce hate speech, discrimination and intolerance based on religious grounds in the European media space. Our consortium of partners in Germany, Belgium, Poland, Greece, France, the UK, and Hungary monitors the media for anti-religious cases and react through complaints, educational content, and reactions on social media.

Clause 4 – Discrimination

We believe that IMPRESS' code on discrimination in the media is thorough and addresses the issue of incitement of hatred against groups vulnerable to discrimination. However, while we are aware that a large part of the press is undoubtedly text-based, we think that Clause 4 overlooks the key role of images in giving an additional layer of meaning to a story, and therefore how audiences make sense of the news. Whether this is images on the front page of a print newspaper, or the images which accompany articles on news sites and on social media platforms, images are often the first element that readers see, and that, along with the headline, can leave a strong impression. Considering this, we would suggest a revision of the Clause 4 which would include a specific mention of the care that it is needed when illustrating a news story about a group vulnerable to discrimination, as images might reproduce virulent stereotypes and incite to hatred.

We are aware that Clause 1 on Accuracy mentions that "headlines and images, [...] must be accurate representations of the stories they accompany" and that "taken together, text and photographs may be an accurate representation of the facts"; however, we believe that by not mentioning images, Clause 4 currently does not adequately address the degree, manner, and extent to which journalism practices impact on discrimination.

Here is a recent case that demonstrates the importance of addressing this issue (for a more detailed breakdown, please click on the hyperlink):

[The Independent using an inappropriate image misrepresenting young Muslim girls](#)

On 14 April 2020, The Independent published an article titled "In Pakistan, sex workers face a cruel dilemma." The article explored how sex workers in Pakistan are affected by COVID-19 and social distancing measures. When promoting the article on Facebook, The Independent used an image of young girls wearing headscarves. The article at no time mentions underage girls or Islam, so the choice of image was confusing. After criticism and complaints, The Independent changed the image. Cases like this show how something which may seem unimportant, like an image, can have a significant impact on discrimination against a minority group. An example

like this can play into the hands of those who already hold dangerous ideas about a group of people, and only reinforces their discriminatory ways of thinking.

Images used in articles should be relevant to the content and should not be used as a way to promote harmful stereotypes and narratives against minorities. In our media monitoring work, we have identified several cases of image misuse on news sites in the UK, especially for articles related to immigration. For example, the news site Politicalite regularly uses images to promote inaccurate and harmful narratives, [as in this case](#). We find that images can be used to discriminate against minority groups in subtle, and sometimes less subtle, ways.

Our research has shown that particularly Muslim women are victim to misrepresentation in the media through images that misrepresent or stereotype them as submissive.

We are aware that IMPRESS is focussed on the United Kingdom; however, we would like to provide another example, which took place in Belgium, to demonstrate the need for images to be more included in the Code.

One of the partners in the GTTO project, The European Network on Religion and Belief (ENORB), submitted several complaints to the Belgian news site DH.be for using images of Muslim women that did not accurately reflect the content of the article, prompting the retraction of the stereotyping images. In October 2019, ENORB wrote to the editor of DH.be on the subject of an article using an image of a woman in a niqab to illustrate 'hostility of Belgian residents to the wearing of head coverings'. The image was removed and replaced by a woman wearing a hijab - a much more common and representative item of clothing worn by Muslim women. In December 2019, the same website published an article titled: 'Wearing the veil prohibited in two schools in Antwerp' also used a niqab as their display image. ENORB contacted DH.be again saying 'a mainstream media spreading this image misleads readers, it reinforces stereotypes and removes an understanding of the nuances and the diversity which exist within the Muslim community'. The editor responded within half an hour, briefly stating that they changed the image in question following ENORB's request. In June 2020, a photo chosen by DH.be to illustrate an article on COVID-19 infections depicted Muslim women wearing the veil, which may mislead readers and imply, although indirectly, a link between these women and the resurgence of the virus. The image was edited following ENORB's complaint to the news media.

Not only does this case show the need for more regulation around image use in the media, but it also demonstrates how news platforms are sometimes unaware of the effects their images are having. We feel that by stating this more clearly in the IMPRESS Code, editors and journalists will be urged to think more carefully about the images they choose and avoid asserting harmful stereotypes through pictures.

Submission information

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Are you happy for IMPRESS to contact you in the future? (please select one of the following options)

- **Yes**
- No

Which of the following best describes you? (please select one of the following options)

- A publisher who has applied to join IMPRESS
- A publisher who is considering whether to join IMPRESS
- A publisher who has no plans to join IMPRESS
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- **A civil society organization, NGO or charity**
- A freelance journalist
- A trade body
- A representative from another regulator
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Would you be happy for IMPRESS to publish your response? (please select one of the following options)

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