

## **COMPLAINT ADJUDICATION**

---

**Dermot Hudson**

**and**

**The Ferret**

---

### **Clause 1. Accuracy**

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

**1.2. Publishers must correct any significant inaccuracy with due prominence, which should normally be equal prominence, at the earliest opportunity.**

**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**

**David Leigh, David Robinson, Shelina Janmohamed, Walter Merricks (Chair)**

**29 June 2020**

## 1. Summary of Complaint

- 1.1. The Complainant is Dermot Hudson, chairman of the UK Korean Friendship Association (KFA) complaining on behalf of the KFA (“the Complainant”), about the accuracy of published information.
- 1.2. The Respondent is The Ferret Media Ltd, which publishes online as The Ferret, and is an investigative journalism platform co-operative for Scotland and beyond, that has been regulated by IMPRESS since 16 June 2016.
- 1.3. The complaint concerns the accuracy of an article that first appeared online on The Ferret on 4 March 2020 with the headline, “*The Western friends of North Korea*”.
- 1.4. The complaint is assessed against the IMPRESS Standards Code, the relevant clauses are:

### *Clause 1 (Accuracy)*

- 1.1. Publishers must take all reasonable steps to ensure accuracy.*
- 1.2. Publishers must correct any significant inaccuracy with due prominence, which should normally be equal prominence, at the earliest opportunity.*
- 1.4. Whilst free to be partisan, Publishers must not misrepresent facts or distort the facts.*

## 2. Background

- 2.1. The article concerned the Korean Friendship Association (KFA), a group supportive of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), Dermot Hudson, and a former member of the organisation, Alexander Meads. It was based on interviews with both Mr Hudson and Mr Meads.
- 2.2. The article claimed that “the KFA take a much more ideological stance than many other groups and adopts a more confrontational approach in its unwavering support for North Korea and the Kim dynasty”.

- 2.3. The article described Mr Hudson's formal work with North Korea's Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, his position as official UK delegate for the KFA and his support for the political ideology of 'Juche Idea'.
- 2.4. The article went on to introduce Alexander Meads, a former member of the KFA, and states that he was "abruptly expelled in 2018" from KFA. It went on to explain that Mr Meads joined the KFA when he was 14 years old. The article quotes Mr Meads, concerning the work he allegedly did for the organisation as the Commissar of the UK branch of the KFA in 2017. It reports Mr Meads as stating that, "His job was to maintain discipline and security", which included cold calling individuals at 2am.
- 2.5. The article went on to state that Mr Meads' fourth and final visit to North Korea, in September 2018, was a "turning point" for Mr Meads at which point he says he realised "the contradiction between North Korea's socialist ideology and the godlike reverence shown to the country's leader", and that he was then "shunned by delegates and officials thereafter".
- 2.6. The article states that after Mr Meads' final trip, "he was pushed out of the KFA, although he claims not to have been given a concrete reason for his expulsion".

### **3. The Complaint**

- 3.1. The Complainant contacted The Ferret on 5 March 2020 and made a complaint on the grounds of Accuracy. The Publisher rejected the complaint, as it did not consider the complaint engaged the IMPRESS Standards Code.
- 3.2. The Complainant subsequently contacted The Ferret on 4 April 2020 and made a second complaint on the grounds of Discrimination. The Publisher rejected the complaint, as it did not consider the complaint engaged the IMPRESS Standards Code.
- 3.3. A full copy of correspondence between the parties was provided to the Regulatory Committee.
- 3.4. The Complainant subsequently made a complaint to IMPRESS, and after seeking clarification of the basis for the complaint, IMPRESS rejected the discrimination element of the complaint on the grounds that it was based on allegations related to the political or ideological beliefs of the DPRK and did not

relate to any of the protected characteristics set out in the Code such as race or religion.

- 3.5. IMPRESS confirmed the substance of the complaint as follows, a full copy of which was provided to the Committee. The Complainant argues that a breach of Clauses 1.1, 1.2, and 1.4 of the IMPRESS Standards Code has occurred.
- 3.6. Regarding Code Clause 1.1, Mr Hudson considers that the Publisher did not take all reasonable steps to verify the claims that were made in the article. He considers that he, as a directly affected party, should have been given an opportunity to respond to the claims made in the article.
- 3.7. He considers that the inaccuracies were significant and that they misrepresented the nature and work of the KFA; that the article represented the organisation in a negative light and therefore gave the reader a 'bad impression' of the KFA.
- 3.8. He says that he had no knowledge of Mr Meads cold calling individuals at 2am and that he was not instructed or encouraged to by the UK KFA.
- 3.9. He says that the statement that Mr Meads was 14 years old when he joined the KFA is inaccurate.
- 3.10. The relevant statements from the Article are:

*This could range from online background checks in those considered to be a danger to the group, to cold calls at 2am, and even turning up unannounced an enemy's house or workplace."*

---

*He joined the organisation at just 14 years old, after a chance encounter with the Friends of Korea umbrella group, which included the KFA*

- 3.11. Regarding, Code Clause 1.2, Mr Hudson considers that the Publisher failed to correct the inaccuracies described, with due prominence or equal prominence, at the earliest opportunity.
- 3.12. Regarding, Code Clause 1.4, Mr Hudson considers that the Publisher misrepresented and distorted the facts concerning Meads' expulsion from the

Case Ref: 0284/2020

organisation and subsequent treatment by the organisation to further its partisan view of the KFA. He disagrees with the description of the expulsion of Mr Meads as being “abrupt[ly]”.

- 3.13. Mr Hudson states that Mr Meads was informed of the reasons for his expulsion and was provided an opportunity to respond but did not do so.
- 3.14. Furthermore, Mr Hudson states that Mr Meads was not shunned but that he distanced himself from the delegation.
- 3.15. The relevant statements from the Article are:

*Alexander Meads was a member of the KFA until he was abruptly expelled in 2018.*

---

*The contradictions between North Korea’s socialist ideology and the godlike reverence shown to the country’s leaders was pointed out by Meads, who was shunned by delegates and officials thereafter.*

---

*After his final trip to North Korea, Meads was pushed out of the KFA, although he claims not to have been given a concrete reason for his expulsion.*

#### **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. The Publisher raised several points in support of its position that all reasonable steps to ensure accuracy were taken. The Publisher claims, that prior to publication, it checked that claims were supported by sufficient evidence. The Publisher says that the claims in the article were based on information provided to Alexi Demetriadi (“the Author”) by Mr Meads, the subject of the article.
- 4.3. The Publisher considered that Mr Meads’ account of his time in the KFA was credible, based on the information provided which included photographs, blog

posts and social media posts, and that this information was taken into consideration alongside similar accounts published on other media platforms.

- 4.4. The Author says that Mr Meads' claims concerning his age were corroborated by Mr Meads' family. Furthermore, the author goes on to explain that Mr Meads provided photographic evidence of him at a meeting in 2012 at the age of 15, which is allegedly published on the Complainant's blog.
- 4.5. The Author goes on to say that Mr Meads told him he was appointed as the 'Commissar' of the UK KFA and instructed to "investigate enemies". The Author says that Mr Meads provided screenshots of conversations with the Complainant, requesting him to investigate those who wanted to join the group and attend events. The screenshots were provided to the Committee.
- 4.6. The Author says that Mr Meads stated that he was given verbal instructions to cold-call enemies and previous "traitors", and specifically referred to 2am calls in the interview.
- 4.7. Regarding Code Clause 1.2, the Publisher dismissed the complaint on all grounds and therefore it did not consider that a correction would be a suitable remedy.
- 4.8. Regarding Code Clause 1.4, the Author states that Mr Meads did not know the reason for his expulsion until he saw a post made by the KFA on Facebook on 22 May 2019. Furthermore, the Publisher considers it is a matter of perception whether the expulsion was abrupt.
- 4.9. Regarding the claims made by Meads regarding being "shunned" and "isolated" by members of the organisation, the Publisher considers this to be Mr Meads' perception of his treatment, therefore, does not consider this to be inaccurate or a misrepresentation.
- 4.10. The Author accepted that a mistake may have been made regarding the date of Mr Meads' expulsion. The Author states that the phrase "abruptly expelled in 2018" should have been "2019" or that the "forced out/shunned" should have been used in the place of "expelled".

## **5. Compliance**

- 5.1. The Ferret 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 by informing the Complainant of his right to refer the complaint to IMPRESS.

## **6. The Committee's Findings**

- 6.1. The Committee noted that, as the content of the article made clear, there was ill feeling between Mr Hudson and Mr Meads and that the two individuals had fallen out. The Committee considered whether having interviewed Mr Meads and obtained his story, it was necessary for the Publisher to put Mr Meads' statements and allegations to Mr Hudson. The IMPRESS Standards Code Guidance on Clause 1.1 makes clear that when assessing whether all reasonable steps have been taken to ensure accuracy, consideration should be given to the significance of any possible inaccuracies and their likely consequences. The Committee noted that none of the statements attributed to himself were contested by Mr Hudson. The Committee considered whether the disputed facts were significant to the accuracy of the article. The Committee considered that the ordinary reasonable reader would understand that the article was principally about the ideological stance of the KFA and the account that Mr Meads gave of his time as a member. Therefore, the accuracy and representation of Mr Meads' age when he joined the KFA, his claim that he cold-called people at 2am and the circumstances of his expulsion did not materially impact on the thrust of the article. The Committee further considered that the accuracy or inaccuracy of those facts was unlikely to have consequences for the parties.
- 6.2. Though publishers should make reasonable attempts to contact people whose reputations may be at stake prior to publication and publish their comments to ensure the veracity of a story, given that the disputed facts did not have consequences for the reputation of any person, the Committee considered that it was not necessary for the publisher to have checked Mr Meads' allegations with Mr Hudson. The publisher, therefore, had taken sufficient reasonable steps before deciding to publish the article. Nor was the publisher obliged to publish a correction, since none of the disputed facts were significant to the article.
- 6.3. The Committee similarly concluded that because in this instance the disputed facts concerning Mr Meads' expulsion were not significant to the article, the publisher had not misrepresented or distorted the facts in its presentation of the article.



Case Ref: 0284/2020

6.4. There had been no breach of Clause 1 of the IMPRESS Code.