

Rt Hon Sir Alan Moses
Chair
Independent Press Standards Organisation
Gate House
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24 January 2019

Dear Sir Alan,

I am writing to you, as Chair of the Independent Press Standards Organisation and its Complaints Committee, to express my concern about a recent decision by the Committee about a complaint that I submitted in July 2018. I believe that the decision (05555-18 Ward v The Daily Mail) has exposed a fundamental flaw in the IPSO complaints process, namely that the Complaints Committee does not seek advice from relevant experts when considering scientific issues, such as climate change. In this case, the failure to seek expert advice exposed newspaper readers to inaccurate and misleading information that could create risks for them.

On 26 July 2018, the 'Daily Mail' published an article by Christopher Booker with the headline 'The predictable cry has gone up: climate change is causing the heatwave. Sorry, that's just hot air...'. The entire aim of the article appears to have been to persuade the newspaper's readers that climate change is having no impact on the likelihood or intensity of heatwaves in England, including during summer 2018. The final paragraph of the article stated: "We shall continue to have abnormally hot summers from time to time, just as we did in 1976 and 1846, way back before global warming was invented. Meanwhile, we can only keep praying for rain."

The article contained numerous false claims about the scientific evidence for heatwaves. The article completely ignored robust and rigorous analysis by the Met Office which shows that the occurrence of heatwave conditions is becoming more frequent. For instance, a paper by Michael Sanderson and colleagues at the Met Office on 'Historical trends and variability in heat waves in the United Kingdom', published in the journal 'Atmosphere' in 2017, concluded: "Positive trends in numbers and lengths of longest heat waves were identified at many stations using data from 1961. These results are consistent with the anthropogenic climate warming signal."

Instead, Mr Booker's article misled readers by misrepresenting meteorological records. For example, Mr Booker's article stated: "Neither, until the past few weeks, have we seen a single summer to compete with the sweltering 2003". In fact, the Met Office records show that the average maximum temperature in the UK during summer 2006 was higher than in

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Chair:
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summer 2003. The Met Office's website includes a page on heatwaves, which states: "In August 2003, the UK experienced heatwave conditions lasting 10 days and resulting in 2,000 deaths. During this heatwave, a record maximum temperature of 38.5 °C was recorded at Faversham in Kent. In July 2006, similar conditions occurred breaking records and resulting in the warmest month on record in the UK." Mr Booker's article cited only data from the Central England Temperature (CET) record. The CET record shows that there were three days during summer 2006 when the maximum temperature exceeded 30°C, compared with two days in 2003.

Mr Booker also claimed that "this kind of summer heat is far from unprecedented" because June 2018 was only the 18th warmest in the CET record based on mean temperature. However, mean monthly temperature does not provide an indication of the occurrence of heatwave conditions. Mr Booker and the newspaper argued that he should be free to ignore the criteria used by the Met Office and other meteorological organisations to define heatwaves and, indeed, summer.

Since Mr Booker's article was published, there has been further confirmation that heatwaves have been increasing in frequency in the UK. In December, the Met Office announced the results of research which showed that climate change made the 2018 record-breaking UK summer temperatures about 30 times more likely than they would have been naturally. Further research on the CET record published this week in a paper on 'Warming trends in summer heatwaves', in the journal 'Geophysical Research Letters', found a twofold to threefold increase in heatwaves in England since the late 1800s.

The Complaints Committee decided that Mr Booker's misrepresentations were considered to be legitimate. The decision is due to be published on the IPSO website on 24 January 2018. However, the inaccurate and misleading article by Mr Booker was both a breach of the Editors' Code of Practice, and an act of recklessness that could have created risks for the newspaper's readers. The article was published on 26 July, which turned out to be the hottest day of the summer, when the maximum temperature in the CET record exceeded 30°C and a heatwave alert was issued by the Met Office and Public Health England. The latest statistics published by the Office for National Statistics show that there were hundreds of additional deaths during the period of heatwave conditions.

It was reckless for the newspaper to publish Mr Booker's article, denying that the risks of heatwaves are increasing. The Adaptation Sub-Committee of the Committee on Climate Change has warned that many vulnerable people are not taking precautions to protect themselves from the impacts of heatwaves, partly because they wrongly believe that the probability of hot weather is decreasing. Mr Booker's inaccurate and misleading article will have contributed to confusion and misunderstanding about the risks of heatwaves, and it was extremely irresponsible for the 'Daily Mail' to publish it. It is still worse that IPSO has now failed to take action over it. The online version of the error-filled article remains on the newspaper's website.

This failure is not an isolated incident. Over the past few years, IPSO has occasionally taken action against inaccurate and misleading articles about climate change, but too often it has failed to hold its member newspapers to account for misrepresenting the evidence. For instance, last year, IPSO rejected my complaint about another article by Mr Booker, published in 'The Sunday Telegraph', which wrongly claimed that North America was not experiencing warming. IPSO also refused to uphold my complaint against two articles published by 'The Mail on Sunday' which repeated false allegations that had already been ruled by IPSO to be breaches of the Editors' Code of Practice.


I believe that these failures are the result of a serious flaw in the IPSO process for considering complaints: the Complaints Committee does not seek advice from experts when considering

scientific issues, such as climate change. This fundamental weakness is being exploited by individuals, such as Mr Booker, who persistently misrepresent the facts and mislead the public, placing them at risk. As a result, the Complaints Committee is failing to enforce the Editors' Code of Practice, and IPSO failing to uphold the public interest.

I recommend that the IPSO complaints process should be reviewed without delay to find ways in which it can be amended to require appropriate consultation with experts on scientific issues, such as climate change.

Given the importance of this issue, and I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport, the Chair of the House of Commons Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Chair of the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R.E.J. Ward". The letters are cursive and connected, with a distinct loop for the 'W'.

Bob Ward
Policy and Communications Director

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cc Rt Hon Jeremy Wright MP
Mr Damian Collins MP
Ms Mary Creagh MP