

Decision of the Complaints Committee

17684-23 Ward v Daily Mail

Summary of Complaint

1. Bob Ward complained to the Independent Press Standards Organisation that the Daily Mail breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Practice in a leader column headlined "Climate hysteria", published in print and online on 21 March 2023.
2. The editorial – which appeared on page 14 of the newspaper – followed the publication of a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) the day before.
3. The column reported that the "prophecies of catastrophe by UN climate scientists" were "distinctly familiar": "[d]isastrous global warming", "[d]isastrous floods", "heatwaves", and "famine"; with "time running out for humanity". It then said that the public had heard "hair-raising predictions many times over the years and they often fall short of reality". After stating that "[n]obody believes more strongly than [the publication] that we should strive to look after [the] planet", the leader asked: "wouldn't it be easier to trust the green lobby – and encourage people to make sacrifices to help the environment – if such hysterical language was avoided?".
4. The complainant – an expert reviewer of the IPCC report – said the column was inaccurate and misleading, in breach of Clause 1. First, he said that it wrongly characterised the IPCC report as "[c]limate hysteria", containing "hysterical language" and "prophecies of catastrophe"; he said the report was a factual synthesis on the causes and potential consequences of climate change, with evidence-based projections of future risk.
5. Secondly, he said the column wrongfully claimed that "hair-raising predictions [...] often fall short of reality" when, in fact, previous reports by the IPCC – for example, projecting increases in global temperatures, rising sea levels and changes to the frequency and magnitude of extreme weather events – had proved "remarkably accurate". In support of this, he noted that the report itself provided an overview of the accuracy of projections from previous IPCC assessment reports, and concluded that there was "medium confidence that past projections of global temperature are consistent with subsequent observations".
6. The complainant also disputed that the report was published by "UN climate scientists". Though the report was commissioned and approved by the member governments of the IPCC, the complainant said its authors were not employed, or employees, of the UN; they were employed by universities and similar institutions in the UK and other countries.
7. Finally, he said the column wrongly described the report's authors as "the green lobby"; they were climate scientists.

8. The publication did not accept a breach of the Editors' Code. It said that the column – a short, concise editorial comment on the stories of the day – was clearly presented as the newspaper's view and distinguished as such. It argued that the column was not specifically and solely focused on the IPCC report. Rather, it was a subjective assessment of the language often deployed during discussions of climate change. It was entitled to interpret and characterise the IPCC report and its response – as well as the wider issue of climate change – in the way that it did and had sufficient basis to do so. It noted that The IPCC report had claimed "time was running out for humanity" and "nearing the point of no return"; the Secretary-General of the UN described the IPCC report as a "survival guide for humanity"; Greenpeace claimed it was "our final warning"; the Shadow Secretary of State of Climate Change and Net Zero Ed Miliband MP argued for action to ensure "a liveable future"; and Greta Thunberg claimed that, by 2030, the world would face "the end of civilisation as we know it". It also noted that a corresponding news article, within the same edition of the newspaper, had set out that the IPCC report had in effect suggested that time was running out for humanity and the world was nearing the point of no return. It was entitled to be sceptical of these claims and doing so did not render the article inaccurate or misleading.
9. Further, the publication said "prophecies" was simply a synonym for "predictions", adding that in the context of the article there was no material difference between these terms – a point which the complainant disputed as he said it suggested they were in some way unscientific and would be understood by readers as such.
10. The publication also denied that the disputed claim "hair-raising predictions [...] often fall short of reality" related specifically to the IPCC report and was inaccurate. The publication argued that there were numerous examples of similarly catastrophic claims that have either failed to materialise or have not reflected reality by failing to take into account other changes in the climate. To demonstrate this, the publication shared several examples, including, the claim that by 2007, large parts of the Netherlands would be rendered uninhabitable by flooding; and by 2020, Britain would have a "Siberian climate" as the system of atmospheric circulation broke down.
11. In addition, the publication did not accept that the article was inaccurate to state that the IPCC report was published by "UN climate scientists". It noted that the IPCC described itself on its website as "the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change". It also noted that IPSO had previously adopted the description of the IPCC as the "UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change" in 2019 when considering a previous complaint from the complainant.
12. Finally, the publication did not accept that its description of the "green lobby" was inaccurate or misleading. It said that this was editorial judgment and a characterisation of the collective focused on addressing climate change, and which it had a sufficient basis for, highlighting a range of activists, commentators and other bodies.

Relevant Clause Provisions

Clause 1 (Accuracy)

- i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.
- ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and — where appropriate — an apology published. In cases involving IPSO, due prominence should be as required by the regulator.
- iii) A fair opportunity to reply to significant inaccuracies should be given, when reasonably called for.
- iv) The Press, while free to editorialise and campaign, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.

Findings of the Committee

13. The Editors' Code makes clear that newspapers can publish contentious or controversial opinions or arguments, as long as these are clearly distinguished as such. Where there are factual claims, care must be taken not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information. The Committee emphasised that its role was to evaluate the complaint under the Editors' Code and not to attempt to reach a position on matters best left to public debate.
14. The complainant had raised a number of objections to the newspaper's commentary on the IPCC report and the wider issue of climate change. The article under complaint, however, was an editorial piece, and the newspaper was entitled to set out its position on the topic – in particular, its view that the language deployed regarding the issue was often hyperbolic. The column clearly set out the newspaper's position on this, and it had been able to provide a clear basis for its characterisation of the language as "hysterical". Further, although the complainant disputed that the IPCC report contained "prophecies of catastrophe", the basis for this characterisation was also set out in the column: the IPCC report had forecast increased global temperatures and increased risk of flooding, heatwaves, and famine. The Committee did not, therefore, consider that there had been a failure to take care over these characterisations, and there was no inaccuracy that required correction under Clause 1(ii). There was no breach of Clause 1 on these points.
15. The Committee next considered the complainant's concern that the column claimed "hair-raising predictions [...] often fall short of reality". The column did not suggest that this claim related specifically to the predictions made by the IPCC. Rather, it was a general observation by the publication regarding the accuracy and credibility of predictions over and for which the publication provided a sufficient basis for. The Committee did not, therefore, consider that there had been a failure to take care over this claim, and there was no inaccuracy that required correction under Clause 1(ii).
16. The Committee next considered whether the description of the authors of the IPCC report as "UN climate scientists" amounted to an inaccuracy. In circumstances where the IPCC had been established by the United Nations Environment Programme and World

Meteorological Organisation in the 1980s, and the IPCC described itself on its website as a “United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change”, the Committee did not consider that this description represented a failure to take care over accuracy or gave rise to any inaccuracy that required correction under Clause 1(ii). There was no breach of Clause 1 on this point.

17. Finally, the Committee considered the complainant’s concerns regarding the term “green lobby”. The Committee did not consider that this term referred specifically to the climate scientists or the authors of the IPCC report. Instead, it was a passing reference to an unspecified collective which, it considered, used “hysterical language” when discussing the threats posed by climate change and which the publication had provided a basis for. In such circumstances, the Committee did not consider that this reference represented a failure to take care over the accuracy of the article, or constituted a significant inaccuracy requiring correction under the terms of Clause 1 (ii). As such, there was no breach of Clause 1.

Conclusion(s)

18. The complaint was not upheld.

Remedial action required

N/A

Date complaint received: 23/03/2023

Date complaint concluded by IPSO: 14/07/2023.