

The Camp for Climate Action v Evening Standard

Clauses noted: 1

Alex Harvey of The Camp for Climate Action complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article headlined 'Militants will hit Heathrow' published in the Evening Standard on 13 August 2007 was inaccurate in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The front page article reported that climate change activists at Heathrow were planning to bring the airport to a standstill, via hoax packages and assaults on the security fence. The piece said that 'two-man teams' had already 'used the cover of darkness to look for weak points along the perimeter fence'. The complainant said these allegations were fabricated. Moreover, Camp for Climate Action had not been contacted for comment on the specific claims.

The newspaper said that its source was an undercover reporter who, during his two days at the camp, had heard conversations where protesters discussed the tactics to which the article referred. The journalist had made notes – which the paper provided to the Commission – soon after he had heard the conversations. The article made clear that the conversations had not taken place during an official meeting. He had also seen two protesters checking out the security fence – although the paper accepted that only one 'two-man team' had been spotted, and it offered to clarify the suggestion that there had been more. The complainant said it would not have been possible for the journalist to have seen such a mission – something the newspaper disputed – and rejected the offer.

The newspaper's evidence to the Commission set out that its reporter had heard, at an unofficial gathering of no more than four protesters, a man 'in his late 20s' say 'We need to make people sit up and take notice. Leave some packages around Heathrow. That'll make them take notice'. This remark appeared to be the basis for the front page headline which categorically reported that "Militants will hit Heathrow", and a sub-headline which said 'Hoax bombs to cause alerts'. Beyond the comments by the 'man in his late 20s' – whose status and identity were unclear, as was whether any plan actually emerged – there was no other evidence for these bold claims.

This was a matter of concern for the Commission. There was nothing in the headline to indicate to readers the insubstantial basis of the claims. Neither was there adequate qualification in the text of the article. And within this context, the failure to make clear the limited numbers of those who allegedly planned 'to pose as customers to get into McDonald's and Starbucks in the terminals and then cause trouble' was also misleading. On the newspaper's account, perhaps only one or two people were overheard suggesting this at small unofficial gatherings. The complainant denied this in any case – something that was not reflected adequately in the piece. The claim that 'two-man teams' had tested the perimeter fence was also a significant error in the context of the alarmist nature of the report.

The subject matter of the piece would have been of considerable importance to those living in and travelling to London, yet adequate care had not been taken over the presentation of the piece, which was materially misleading. This was a serious breach of the Code. The Commission considered that the newspaper should have recognised this at an early stage and been more forthcoming in its attempts to remedy the complaint.

There were further allegations of inaccuracy. The complainant said that a further article headlined 'In the shambolic climate camp, protesters plot a campaign of panic', published on 14 August 2007, contained a number of inaccuracies, ranging from the amount protesters were asked to contribute

on arrival to the description of individuals conducting meetings as 'Elders' (which had also been used in the article of 13 August).

This second article was the undercover reporter's account of his two days at the camp. In its defence, the newspaper said that the undercover reporter had attended site meetings and been privy to private conversations. However, it offered to publish a clarification about whether the camp leaders had described themselves as 'Elders'. It also offered to consider a letter for publication.

Adjudication

Before considering the further complaints of inaccuracy, and whether or not the offers to resolve them were adequate, it was important to state that the Commission would never be able to resolve definitively what the journalist saw or heard when he was at the camp. What was clear was that the journalist had been present and had provided notes in support of some of the claims. The newspaper was entitled to publish a report on what was a controversial demonstration. Moreover, it would have been clear to readers from the manner in which the 14 August article was published that it was the subjective experience of the undercover reporter, and that, by extension, other people would have had different experiences and views of the camp.

But it was nonetheless right for the newspaper to offer to remedy some of these minor points of dispute. There seemed to be an inconsistency in the notes about whether some of the protesters called themselves 'Elders', and so the offer of a clarification on this point struck the Commission as a proportionate response. Other alleged inaccuracies were also relatively trivial – such as the level of the entry charge to the camp and whether there was a lengthy debate about whether to dig a hole for the camp loos – and these could have been addressed in the published letter.

The Commission acknowledged that these offers were made some months after publication of the articles. However, given that both sides had taken time to establish the full details of their positions, it considered that they were sufficient. This part of the complaint could now be remedied by publishing the clarification and the letter – if the complainant wanted to submit a letter for publication on the outstanding points – or this part of the ruling.

Adjudication issued 10/03/2008