

Viscount Monckton v New Scientist

Clauses noted: 1

Viscount Monckton of Brenchley complained to the Press Complaints Commission that two articles published in the *New Scientist* on 16 August and 30 August 2008 – respectively headlined “Are some things best left unsaid?”, and “Editors must be our gatekeepers” – contained inaccuracies in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code. He also complained that the magazine’s editing of his letter of response raised a further breach of the Code.

Following remedial action taken by the magazine, no further action was required. The complaint was not upheld.

The complainant said that the first article contained a number of inaccuracies about a paper he had written about climate change for another publication, *Physics and Society*. Most significantly, it was wrong to say that he had failed to correct the false impression of the editors of *Physics and Society* that he held a doctorate of science. Neither he nor the scientist who recommended him to the editors had claimed he had such a qualification, and his correct title had appeared on all correspondence with the publication. He also objected to: an implication that his paper was not technical; a suggestion that it contained nothing new; and a claim that climate scientists had long debunked his views. Furthermore, he had not – contrary to an allegation in the piece – claimed that his paper had been accepted by a peer-reviewed scientific journal, although he said it had been peer-reviewed by a professor of physics. The complainant also argued that the implication of the second article – which had not directly referred to him – was that his paper would not have withstood peer-review. He said that the magazine had not published his letter of response.

The magazine said that it stood by both articles. It had not previously received the complainant’s letter, as it had been sent directly to the journalist. But it undertook to publish the letter in the next available issue – which the complainant said he would accept as a resolution to the matter providing it was not edited. However, the magazine made some changes: it removed both a claim that the complainant’s *Physics and Society* paper was peer-reviewed and a direct link to that paper; and it added a link to a webpage which criticised the complainant’s work. The complainant said that the magazine had used underhand tactics to thwart the Commission’s process.

The magazine said that it had not agreed to publish the letter unaltered. It had brought the publication date forward in order to publish the complainant’s response as quickly as possible. It was not its policy to seek approval for editing of letters.

Adjudication

The Commission wished to consider two main issues in relation to this complaint. The first was whether the publication of the edited letter was an adequate response to the complaint that the two pieces contained inaccuracies. The second was the manner in which the magazine had approached the Commission’s investigation and attempts to resolve the matter.

On the first point, the Commission considered that the published letter covered the main points of dispute, and was therefore a proportionate response to the complaint of inaccuracy. There appeared to be a significant difference between the parties, so it was right that the complainant should have had the opportunity to make readers aware of his position through the publication of his letter.

The Commission did not consider that the removal of the link to the complainant’s paper was a significant omission, as the letter included the title of the paper and the name of the publication – and a link was in any case provided in the online version of the letter. Given that it did not seem to be disputed that *Physics and Society* itself said that its articles were not peer-reviewed, it did not

seem unreasonable for the magazine to make an amendment on this point. That a professor of physics had looked at the paper and asked for clarifications had been made clear in the letter. The inclusion of an editorial note – while irritating to the complainant – was not in itself a matter that breached the Code.

In terms of Clause 1, the Commission therefore concluded that the publication of the complainant's letter was a sufficient response to the complaint, and no further action was required. The complaint was not upheld.

But the way in which the magazine arrived at this outcome was not satisfactory. The magazine had initially indicated that the letter would be published in the 4 October edition, but had subsequently moved the date forward – and made alterations to it – without informing the complainant or the PCC. This denied the complainant the opportunity of responding to the alterations before publication. This was contrary to the spirit of conciliation which the Commission encourages and unhelpful in terms of resolving the complaint appropriately. The Chairman of the Commission has written to the editor for assurances that the situation will not be repeated in future.

Adjudication issued 6/11/2008