

**Mr Bob Ward v The Sunday Telegraph**

Clauses noted: 1

Mr Bob Ward of the LSE's Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article headlined "Rise of sea levels is 'the greatest lie ever told'" published in The Sunday Telegraph on 29 March 2009 was inaccurate and misleading in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

Following an offer of sufficient remedial action, no further action was required.

The article was a column by Christopher Booker on the subject of climate change. The complainant said that this piece - which was primarily an account of the views of Dr Nils-Axel Mörner - contained a number of inaccurate and misleading statements, including that sea levels had dropped around Tuvalu in recent decades, when the scientific evidence indicated that they had, in fact, risen (this was repeated in a second article published on 25 July 2009).

The complainant argued that Dr Mörner's visits to the Maldives 'to confirm' the position had subsequently been disproved by other scientists. The article had also inaccurately stated that the satellite-based evidence of the IPCC (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) had been altered to show a global sea-level rise based on the findings of a single tidal gauge in Hong Kong. In fact, this alteration had been scientifically justified, and the final conclusion on the global sea-level rise was based on multiple measurements from satellite altimetry and tidal gauges based around the world.

Dr Mörner had also been quoted as claiming that 'not one' of the IPCC's contributing authors on sea level had been sea level specialists, when many of those contributing to the Fourth Assessment Report could lay claim to being experts on the subject. The article then referred to 'rigged computer models' - which was misleading as such models had no role in determining sea level - and 'deliberate ignorance', which appeared to be an allegation of deliberate scientific dishonesty on the part of the IPCC's scientists.

Finally, the article had misleadingly suggested that Al Gore, in the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, 'went much further' than the IPCC in suggesting there might be a sea level rise of 20 feet by the year 2100. In addition, it had implied that an accompanying image had come from Mr Gore's film, rather than the BBC's docu-drama *Flood*.

The complainant had submitted a letter for publication after these articles appeared, which the newspaper had declined to publish.

The newspaper said its article was intended to convey Dr Mörner's strongly-held views on a controversial field of scientific study. Dr Mörner's challenges to the view that sea level had been rising globally and around the Maldives had been published extensively. The newspaper cited a separate 2001 study by Cabanes et al., which confirmed that sea level had fallen around Tuvalu between 1993 and 1998. It was important to note that Dr Mörner's quoted surprise 'when he was appointed' at the lack of sea level specialists on the IPCC report review related to his appointment as a reviewer of the 2001 report, rather than more recent reports. Dr Mörner did now acknowledge that one or two of the authors could be described as specialists.

While it was true that the IPCC had acknowledged the possibility of a 7 metre rise in sea levels within millennia if Greenland and Antarctic ice were to melt, *An Inconvenient Truth* did not give any timescale for this process, and strongly implied that it would take place over a much shorter period.

The paper also stated that the article carried no claim or implication that the illustration used related to the film. At a late stage, it offered to publish a letter from the complainant, and to mark its cuttings with it in relation to the Tuvalu issue.

The complainant did not wish to take up this offer. He also provided the Commission with a further paper from Cabanes et al from 2006, which contained updated data that showed sea levels around Tuvalu had risen overall between 1993 and 2003.

### *Adjudication*

Newspapers are obliged, under the terms of Clause 1, to take care not to publish inaccurate information, and this applies as much to scientific matters as any other. Indeed, the PCC often considers, resolves and adjudicates on complaints about science reporting.

In this particular case, the Commission started from the position that a complex issue such as climate change will inevitably lead to robust and ongoing debate. It is not of course for the PCC to make findings of fact on where the truth about climate change lies, but to consider whether newspapers have abided by the terms of the Code when presenting information to their readers. For instance, they have the right to publish controversial or minority opinions, but they are obliged to distinguish between comment, conjecture and fact.

On this occasion, it was clear from the way in which the article was presented that it was a comment piece primarily concerned with highlighting Dr Mörner's views. The newspaper was entitled to do this under the Code, and its responsibility was for publishing his views accurately rather than for the accuracy of his views. Moreover, implicit in the coverage was the fact that Dr Mörner was a minority voice - and this in itself would have made clear to readers that there were other serious scientific positions on the subject.

Against this background, the Commission considered that most of the matters that the complainant had complained about were examples of clearly distinguished comment, representing either the columnist's or Dr Mörner's view of matters such as the sea levels, the Al Gore film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the IPCC. However, the Commission accepted that the article did not make clear the basis for the statement that sea levels been falling around Tuvalu in recent years. It appeared to be the case that the claim relied upon a particular piece of research from 2001, which has since been updated (to suggest that sea levels were, in fact, rising between 1993 and 2003).

This matter could have been clarified in a published letter, which the Commission considered was the most appropriate way of resolving this dispute and which could also have challenged Dr Mörner's or Christopher Booker's positions in general. Indeed, it seemed to the Commission that newspapers' letters pages generally are a highly suitable forum for debating such ongoing, complex, and divisive issues as climate change.

In that context, the Commission regretted that the newspaper had not published the complainant's original letter, or made an earlier offer during the PCC investigation to publish an alternative text - particularly given the fact that the Tuvalu claim had been clearly challenged. That said, the lateness of the offer did not mean it was no longer an appropriate response. Given the nature of the complaint and the article under dispute, it still represented a proportionate means of addressing the complainant's concerns.

Adjudication issued 23/12/2009