



## MAKING COMPLAINTS ABOUT JOURNALISM

Don't be afraid to contact the editor of an offending publication or programme at once if they have published something that is inaccurate, unfair, intrusive or otherwise harmful, about you and those around you.

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If you need help contact **MediaWise** on 07968 031 532 for advice.  
We can advise on whether you have grounds for a complaint, assist in presenting it,  
and monitor its progress.

Send copies of your cuttings, tapes and correspondence to  
The MediaWise Trust, c/o 41 Brook Road, Bristol BS16 3SL  
or scan and email them to: [mediawisetrust \(at\) protonmail.com](mailto:mediawisetrust(at)protonmail.com)  
[www.mediawise.org.uk](http://www.mediawise.org.uk)

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Abusive or threatening language is counter-productive. Your upset may be justified and understandable, but you are unlikely to be taken seriously if you use emotive language or make wild accusations. A reasonable and reasoned approach usually gets better results from editors and puts you in a stronger position to complain if their initial response is unsatisfactory.

Provide evidence to back up a complaint about inaccuracy, if you have it. You are not obliged to supply personal information that others have no right to see.

Be clear about what you would like to see happen next – publication of a letter, a formal correction, an apology? If the editor agrees, try to confirm the wording in advance, and ask when and where it will appear (negotiate if you don't like it).

If you write to an editor but you don't want your letter to be published/broadcast write 'Not for publication' across the top. However, getting a letter published is a good way of airing issues and generating debate. Keep letters for publication short and to the point (preferably under 150 words... it can be done!) And consider who are you aiming at - the journalists or the readers/audiences?

If you are not satisfied with an editor's response - including the length of time it takes to get a reply - complain to the appropriate regulator (see below). Each regulator has slightly different procedures which are explained on their websites. To make best use of their services, it helps to get things right from the start.

That's where MediaWise can help. We have been supporting 'victims of media abuse' since 1993

### COMPLAINTS ABOUT PRINTED OR ONLINE PUBLICATIONS

In the UK, printed and online publications operate under a system of self-regulation. They are entitled to be partisan and to hold and promote political opinions. The right to freedom of expression means Columnists and Letters Pages are generally exempt from regulation unless they include factual inaccuracies.

In the post-Leveson regulatory system, the preferred approach is for complainants to go directly to the editor of a publication. Local and national newspapers are now expected to have an internal complaints procedure and to publish corrections/apologies promptly. Even if you first send your complaint to IPSO (see below) the regulator will send it to the appropriate editor for an initial response.

Funded by the industry the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) offers a free service to members of the public with complaints about articles in most local, regional and national newspapers, periodicals and magazines. It polices a Code of Practice devised by a committee of editors, and reviewed annually.

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**Independent Press Standards Organisation** [www.ipso.co.uk](http://www.ipso.co.uk)

Gate House, 1 Farringdon Street, London, EC4M 7LG

Tel: 0300 123 2220

Email: [inquiries@ipso.co.uk](mailto:inquiries@ipso.co.uk)

24 Hour emergency advice line, for cases of harassment by a journalist or for pre-publication advice:  
07799 903 929

(Please leave a message explaining the nature of your concern and you will be phoned back)

When complaining about newspapers or magazines, you are expected to be able to say which clause/s of the Editors' Code of Practice may have been breached:

[www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice](http://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice)

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The Editors' Code of Practice covers:

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|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Accuracy                      | 10. Clandestine devices and subterfuge  |
| 2. Privacy                       | 11. Victims of sexual assault           |
| 3. Harassment                    | 12. Discrimination                      |
| 4. Intrusion into grief or shock | 13. Financial journalism                |
| 5. Reporting Suicide             | 14. Confidential sources                |
| 6. Children                      | 15. Witness payments in criminal trials |
| 7. Children in sex cases         | 16. Payments to criminals               |
| 8. Hospitals                     | 17. The Public Interest                 |
| 9. Reporting of Crime            |   |

Complaints to IPSO should normally be made within FOUR MONTHS of the article appearing OR within a year if it remains on the publication's website. Complainants are expected to supply a copy of the offending article/s, specify which clauses in the Code of Practice have been breached and how, and to provide evidence to support their case.

**If you need help contact MediaWise on 07968 031 532**

IPSO staff may try to resolve the matter directly, and your letter will be sent to the editor of the publication for comment. You then get a chance to respond, and the editor is then asked to comment further. If this process does not resolve the matter, your complaint will go to the IPSO Complaints Committee for adjudication. If they decide the Editors' Code has been breached they can instruct the publication to print a correction and/or apology stating where that should appear. They may also levy a fine for serious breaches.

IPSO has complete discretion over which complaints are dealt with and how, but it is willing to launch its own 'standards' investigations, and take up complaints from 'third parties'. Normally the complainant should have been named in or directly affected by the offending item.

Where issues are sufficiently serious IPSO may launch an investigation, even if a significant number of interested parties have not complained. It may issue editorial guidance notes to editors. Special interest groups, including MediaWise, persuaded the old Press Complaints Commission to issue guidance and/or modify the Editors' Code on coverage of asylum-seekers and refugees, children, mental illness, payments to witnesses and convicted criminals, Special Hospitals, suicide, and transgender issues.

Details of an IPSO 'experimental' in arbitration service are not yet clear. There is no system of financial compensation for complainants, but complainants are at liberty to pursue legal action against offending publications if their complaints are upheld.

*The Guardian, The Observer, the London Evening Standard, and the Financial Times* are not part of IPSO, and complaints about them should be directed to their Readers' Editors.

Meanwhile an alternative regulatory system has been developed to comply with the terms suggested by Lord Justice Leveson. The **Independent Monitor for the Press (IMPRESS)** meets the requirements laid down by a Recognition Panel established under Royal Charter. It regulates 160 publications.

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**IMPRESS**

[www.impress.press](http://www.impress.press)

Email: [info@impress.press](mailto:info@impress.press)

Tel: 020 3325 4288

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## COMPLAINTS ABOUT RADIO OR TELEVISION BROADCASTS

If you hear/see something inaccurate or objectionable, call or email the radio/TV station. Every broadcaster keeps a log of calls received after programmes are broadcast, and comments are passed on to the editor/producer. If enough people make similar complaints, the issue will be discussed in editorial meetings. Radio and television are regulated under statute, which means that tougher rules and sanctions are involved.

Complaints about any programme broadcast on commercial television or radio are dealt with by the **Office of Communications (Ofcom)**, and can be made online, here: [www.ofcom.org.uk/complaints](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/complaints)

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**Ofcom** [www.ofcom.org.uk](http://www.ofcom.org.uk)

Ofcom, Riverside House, 2a Southwark Bridge Road, London, SE1 9HA

Tel: 020 7981 3040 or 0300 123 3333

Fax: 020 7891 3333

Textphone: 020 7981 3043 or 0300 123 2024 (for the deaf or hard of hearing).

Commercial radio and television is expected to abide by the broadcaster's in-house rules, but is also subject to the Broadcast Codes policed by Ofcom:

[www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code)

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There are two main categories of complaint: fairness and privacy, and serious broadcast complaints (material deemed 'harmful, offensive, misleading,' or which raises 'an issue of impartiality, accuracy or contained inappropriate commercial activities'). You can make a fairness or privacy complaint only

if your privacy has been invaded or a broadcast has treated you unfairly. Third party complaints are not considered.

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### **The Ofcom Broadcasting Code**

A comprehensive document with which companies agree to comply when obtaining a licence to broadcast. Each broadcaster will also have its own more specific in-house guidelines designed to ensure that the Ofcom Code is not breached. Ofcom consults the industry and the public in developing the Code, which has 10 core sections:

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| 1. Protecting the under eighteens    | 6. Elections and Referendums           |
| 2. Harm and offence                  | 7. Fairness                            |
| 3. Crime, disorder, hatred and abuse | 8. Privacy                             |
| 4. Religion                          | 9. Commercial references on TV         |
| 5. Due impartiality and due accuracy | 10. Commercial communications on radio |
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Complaints about programmes must be made within 20 days of the broadcast, (a considerable reduction from past practice). Ofcom may consider complaints that arrive later, but only in exceptional circumstances. There is no requirement to say which clause of the Ofcom Code you feel has been breached, nor to provide a copy of the programme but you must supply as much detail as possible about when and where it was broadcast.

Ofcom can fine a broadcaster, revoke or shorten a licence, call for an apology or pull programmes off air. Its findings are published in a Programme Complaints Bulletin.

## **COMPLAINING ABOUT BBC RADIO & TV**

The British Broadcasting Corporation operates under a Royal Charter. As the premier public service broadcaster it is expected to set and keep high standards. Supervised by the BBC Trust, it has its own internal Complaints Unit which is the first port of call for anyone wishing to complain about any domestic BBC service. All calls of criticism or praise for BBC domestic local or national radio and TV programmes are logged and passed on to the programme producers. The extensive BBC Editorial guidelines set the standards the BBC expects of its producers: [www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines](http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines)

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### **BBC Editorial Guidelines**

Probably the most comprehensive and detailed guidance available to broadcasters anywhere, all BBC staff are supposed to be familiar with it. Its coherent sections cover:

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|--|---|
| 1. The BBC's Editorial Standards             | 10. Politics, Public Policy and Polls               |
| 2. How to Use the Guidelines                 | 11. War, Terror and Emergencies                     |
| 3. Accuracy                                  | 12. Religious Content                               |
| 4. Impartiality                              | 13. Re-use, Reversioning and Permanent Availability |
| 5. Harm and Offence                          | 14. Independence from External Interests            |
| 6. Fairness to Contributors and Consent      | 15. Conflicts of Interest                           |
| 7. Privacy                                   | 16. External Relationships and Financing            |
| 8. Reporting Crime and Anti-social Behaviour | 17. Competitions, Votes and Interactivity           |
| 9. Children and Young People as Contributors | 18. The Law   |
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You can complain to the BBC in writing, by phone or online, about unfairness and inaccuracy or poor taste and standards. Explain when the offending item was broadcast and on which service. Complaints should normally be made within 30 working days of the broadcast, and the BBC should respond initially within 10 working days.

If you are unhappy about reporting allegations of serious breaches of the its own Guidelines to the BBC itself, Ofcom will also consider complaints about BBC programmes.

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**BBC Programme Complaints Unit**

[www.bbc.co.uk/contact/complaints](http://www.bbc.co.uk/contact/complaints)

PO Box 1922, Darlington, DL3 0UR

Tel: 03700 100 222 & 03700 100 212 (textphone)

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An internal investigation may take place and the appropriate personnel alerted about any action that may need to be taken. The BBC broadcasts corrections and apologies where deemed appropriate; lessons learned are communicated to staff; and the outcome of complaints is published in quarterly reports on the BBC website.

You are supposed to be kept informed, and if you are not satisfied with the outcome contact the BBC Editorial Complaints Unit within 20 working days, appeal to the BBC Trust, or refer the matter to Ofcom.

## OTHER METHODS OF SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

### NUJ Ethics Council

The **National Union of Journalists** ([www.nuj.org.uk](http://www.nuj.org.uk)) expects its members to abide by a Code of Conduct ([www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code](http://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code)) and has an Ethics Council that will consider complaints from and about its own members, however, and has no control over actual publication.

Write to the Ethics Council or the editor of *The Journalist* at NUJ Headland House, 72 Acton Street, London, WC1X 9NB. Email: [info@nuj.org.uk](mailto:info@nuj.org.uk)

### Publicity

The campaigning group **Hacked Off** ([hackinginquiry.org](http://hackinginquiry.org)) is always keen to hear from people who feel they have had a raw deal from the press, and are willing to go public about it, (but it is better to seek redress first).

Hacked Off, The Leather Market, Weston St, London SE1 3ER. Phone: +44 (0) 20 3735 8844. Out-of-hours: +44 (0) 7554 665 940. General enquiries: [campaign@hackinginquiry.org](mailto:campaign@hackinginquiry.org)

The satirical magazine **Private Eye** [www.private-eye.co.uk](http://www.private-eye.co.uk) also delights in exposing wrong doing or hypocrisy in the print and broadcast media.

Private Eye, 6 Carlisle Street, London, W1D 3BN. Tel: 0207 437 4017. Email: [stobes@private-eye.co.uk](mailto:stobes@private-eye.co.uk)

You could write to your local MP to find out if s/he would be willing to raise the issue in the House of Commons.

### Go online

Many special interest groups have websites that are willing to post comments about significant breaches of media ethics relating to their clientele. However, remember that when you publish anything, even emails and tweets, you are subject to the Defamation Act – so be careful what you say, and how you say it, and make sure you have reliable evidence to back up your claims.

**Legal action**

Seeking redress through the courts can be very expensive although it may have the merit of obtaining compensation. There are many grounds on which you may be eligible to take legal action – breaches of privacy and confidentiality, or defamation (libel) and malicious falsehood – but it is vital that you seek advice from a specialist law firm.

**Protest demonstrations**

If you feel more robust action should be taken over outrageous media misbehaviour, make sure you have a lot of support/ers, and can organise and manage the protest safely. The media are quick to exploit bad publicity about their rivals. A picket of a local newspaper may be covered by the local TV stations (and vice-versa). National or online campaigns can also win broader support and the publicity to effect change. Go for a colourful, good natured events; anything that turns ugly will do more harm than good.

**Don't forget MediaWise is always here to help – 07968 031 532**