

What can you do when a journalist gets things wrong? - a MediaWise guide

Media regulation

Journalists are the eyes and ears of the public. In a democratic society they must be free to investigate and report matters of public concern.

And the public should be able to trust them to provide accurate information.

Many who find themselves 'in the news' are unhappy about the way their story has been presented or the way journalists have obtained information.

Regulatory bodies for the print & broadcast media receive some 10,000 complaints a year. Inaccuracy and unfairness top the list of complaints about journalism.

Many laws restrict what can be published but not the behaviour of journalists, and there are few legal remedies for inaccurate reporting.

Legal aid is not available for libel cases, which are very expensive, but it can be obtained if you are claiming that a 'malicious falsehood' has been published.

There is no statutory regulation of the Press. Instead there is an entirely voluntary system which does not have the force of law.

The industry has drawn up a Code of Practice and funds the Press Complaints Commission to resolve or adjudicate complaints. Editors agree to publish the PCC's criticisms, but damages cannot be awarded.

Parliament has empowered Ofcom to regulate broadcasting. They can order broadcasters to publish apologies and corrections, while serious breaches can result in fines or even the loss of a licence to broadcast.

The BBC is governed by a Royal Charter and also has its own internal regulatory system.

Dealing with unwanted attention

If you are approached by journalists for information, you are under no obligation to co-operate. If you would prefer not to get involved, simply tell them, politely but firmly.

Don't be surprised if they persist - that is their job. However, if they refuse to leave your premises or to stop pestering you on the 'phone, you are entitled to call the police.

If your refusal to co-operate is used against you unfairly; if falsehoods are published about you, or what you say or do is not reported accurately, you have every right to complain.

If you think a journalist, a publication or a broadcaster has behaved unethically or unfairly, it is important to complain.

If you think a publication or programme has broken the law or published a libel, consult a specialist lawyer.

Making complaints

Be clear about your complaint. If it is about accuracy, make sure your facts are correct.

- List the factual errors and the evidence to back up your claim. If you think the presentation of the story implies something improper, find out if others share your interpretation before complaining.

- Now register your complaint. Call the editor or the producer, identify the offending item and outline your objections. Most broadcasting stations have a Duty Officer who will pass on your views to the producer.

- Then write to the editor or producer in more detail and request that a correction and/or an apology be published.

- If you are unhappy about their response, contact the appropriate regulatory body. They will inform you of their procedures, and any time limits for submission of complaints. You may be asked to show how a publication or programme has breached the formal Codes of Practice. You can still complain even if you cannot make a direct link.

- Keep copies of cuttings and letters and make notes about any telephone conversations.

- When writing a letter for publication, make your points clearly and briefly. You do not have to accept this as your only means of redress.

- *If you would like help or advice contact MediaWise on 07968 031 532.*