

Review of Editor's Code of Practice

Introduction

This submission has been prepared by Katrine Petersen of the Grantham Institute – Climate Change and Environment at Imperial College London and Bob Ward of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

This submission addresses both the Editors' Code of Practice and the 'The Editors' Codebook'. It focuses on Clause 1: Accuracy, and offers recommendations in how both the Code and Codebook should be improved and strengthened to reduce the number of inaccurate and misleading articles about climate change that are currently being published by members of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO).

Background analysis

Since IPSO was established on 8 September 2014, it has published 14 decisions by its Complaints Committee on complaints relating to climate change. All of the complaints related to breaches of Clause 1 of the Editors' Code of Practice. For 10 complaints, the Complaints Committee decided after investigation that there had been no breach. However, there is dissatisfaction among many of the complainants that the decision of 'no breach' allowed the publication of inaccurate and misleading information about climate change to escape sanction because of the way in which Clause 1 of the Editors' Code is interpreted by IPSO members and by the Complaints Committee. Examples of this dissatisfaction can be found in the following online articles:

- <https://www.carbonbrief.org/press-complaints-process-exercise-in-futility-for-scientists>
- <http://www.lse.ac.uk/GranthamInstitute/news/fundamental-flaw-in-press-watchdogs-complaints-process-helps-newspapers-to-promote-climate-change-denial/>

Given that many thousands of articles about climate change have been published by IPSO members since IPSO's establishment, the number of complaints is relatively low. However, it should be noted that the number of complaints is not necessarily a good indicator of the level of accuracy in articles about climate change that are published by IPSO members.

We note that the 'Foreword' to the Codebook by Neil Benson, Chairman of the Editors' Code of Practice Committee, points out that "it has become even more difficult for the public to separate the truth from a murky maelstrom of fake news, propaganda and manipulation". It adds: "From websites peddling 'news' that is intended to mislead, to interference by an array of 'bad actors' using social media to further their often-opaque agendas, the public has never been confronted with such a toxic diet of disinformation". It should be acknowledged that the spread of fake news, propaganda and manipulation includes inaccurate and misleading articles on climate change that are published by IPSO members.

Opinion articles

Of the 14 decisions by IPSO about articles on climate change, 7 related to op-eds, features and columns rather than news stories. In many of these cases the authors of the articles regularly write articles that dispute the risks of climate change by misrepresenting or distorting the evidence and mainstream expert conclusions about its causes and potential consequences.

It is widely recognised in the climate change research community that there are some columnists who regularly write articles for IPSO member publications disputing the risks of climate change by systematically misrepresenting or distorting the evidence and mainstream expert conclusions about

its causes and potential consequences. Many of these articles are inaccurate and misleading, but no complaints are submitted because the IPSO complaints process is perceived to be unlikely to result in appropriate corrections or sanctions.

Columnists and reporters who regularly write articles for IPSO member publications disputing the risks of climate change by systematically misrepresenting or distorting the evidence and mainstream expert conclusions about its causes and potential consequences, often have affiliations to campaign groups, which are known to disseminate inaccurate and misleading information about climate change. These affiliations are often not transparently declared by authors of the articles. These campaign groups include the Global Warming Policy Foundation, which has been sanctioned by the Charity Commission because it “promoted a particular position on global warming”.

Some of the columnists who regularly write inaccurate and misleading articles about the risks of climate change also write articles that dispute the risks of other environmental and health risks. These articles appear to reflect the ideological beliefs of the authors, who often have no relevant qualifications or training about the subjects of their articles. Such articles, which downplay health and environmental risks through misinformation, can expose audiences to harm and do not promote the public interest.

We are concerned that the staff of comment desks of IPSO member publications often do not have any scientific qualifications or training and do not understand scientific processes and practices. As a result, comment desks of IPSO member publications are unable or unwilling to fact check opinion articles, and do not always consult their own specialist reporters, such as science or environment correspondents, about the content of opinion articles before publication.

We are also concerned that comment desks, and indeed the IPSO Complaints Committee, believe that much of the established findings on climate science are merely opinions, and that there is no meaningful difference between scientific publications by qualified experts and blogs by enthusiastic amateurs. This perception has been reinforced by the current version of the Codebook in its section on ‘Comment, conjecture and fact’. The Codebook states: “Clause 1 (iv) protects the press’s freedom to editorialise and campaign, but it also demands that the press must distinguish between comment, conjecture and fact. That may lead to opinionated columnists being asked to justify the factual basis for cases they are arguing. In the news columns it might result in a complaint because a claim has been presented as a fact.” Among the examples that are cited is a previous complaint about an article on climate change by the late Christopher Booker, which was published by ‘The Sunday Telegraph’ in January 2015.

The complaint was submitted by Professor Terence Sloan of Lancaster University, who pointed out a number of false claims in the article, including the allegation that temperature records around the world have been “subjected to continual ‘adjustments’, invariably in only one direction”. Professor Sloan demonstrated that this and the other claims were untrue and ignored a substantial scientific literature on how raw temperature readings are corrected to take account of differences in calibrations and other technical issues. However, the IPSO Complaints Committee decided not to uphold the complaint and stated: “On balance, it concluded that the newspaper had provided adequate material to avoid a finding by the Committee that it had failed to take care over the accuracy of the article, in the context of a clearly contentious opinion piece”. The “adequate material” did not include any scientific papers, but instead drew on unreliable sources, such as a blog by a retired accountant.

Referring to this example, the Codebook states: “The newspaper said climate change was a controversial subject in which all claims were contestable by reference to opposing studies and opinions.” It adds: “IPSO said the article was an opinion piece in which the columnist sought to challenge established scientific views on global warming. There was still dispute about the interpretation of historical temperature data, and the columnist was entitled to select evidence to support his position.” Hence the Codebook endorses the publication of articles by IPSO members which cherry-pick evidence in order to support a position on a scientific issue, regardless of whether it misleads the audience.

Recommendations for changes to the Editors’ Code of Practice

The current wording of Clause 1i) could be misinterpreted as promoting a slightly casual approach ensuring the accuracy of content, and that it might not apply equally to both news stories and opinion articles. A stronger and clearer version of Clause 1i) could be: “The press must take reasonable steps to ensure that they do not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text. These measures should be applied equally to all material, including opinion articles.”

It is an oversight that the current Code is silent on the issue of the transparency about affiliations and potential conflicts of interest for the authors of opinion articles. We recognise that this issue is more important for publications which are seeking to be objective and neutral. However, we believe it is in the public interest for audiences to be made aware if an author has an ideological affiliation or conflict of interest that might influence the content of an article published by an IPSO member. We recommend that the Code should include an amendment to an existing Clause, and an additional Clause, which indicates that any relevant affiliation or potential conflict of interest of an author should be transparently declared in the article or by-line.

Recommendations for the ‘The Editors’ Codebook’

We recommend that the Codebook should provide stronger guidance on how comment desks should check the scientific accuracy of opinion articles, including that they should consult their specialist reporters, such as science or environment correspondents, about the content before publication as part of the commitment to Clause 1i) of the Editors’ Code of Practice.

The current version of the Codebook states: “Science stories can be complex and difficult to report. The Science Media Centre has produced helpful guidelines, which are not binding but give useful pointers to getting stories right”. This refers to ‘10 best practice guidelines for reporting science & health stories’, which state: “Above and beyond specific guidelines, familiarity with the technicalities and common pitfalls in science and health reporting is invaluable and every newsroom should aim to employ specialist science and health correspondents. Wherever possible the advice and skills of these specialists should be sought and respected on major, relevant stories; the guidelines below will be especially useful for editors and general reporters who are less familiar with how science works.” We believe that this guidance should be explicitly included in the Codebook and should make specific reference to opinion articles as well.

We recommend that the section of the Codebook on ‘Comment, conjecture and fact’ should include guidance on checking the accuracy of opinion articles that draw on material from unreliable sources, such as blogs, and exercising due caution about publication, particularly when they are in conflict with expert sources.

We recommend that the example on climate change which is included in the section on ‘Comment, conjecture and fact’ should be removed as it is a case when an IPSO member published inaccurate and misleading material based on unreliable sources, and the IPSO Complaints Committee failed to take appropriate action.