



Media Diversity Institute  
Victoria Charity Centre  
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March 24, 2020  
London

Dear Editors Code of Practice Committee,

We, at the [Media Diversity Institute](http://www.media-diversity.org) (MDI), hereby respond to your public consultation of the Editor's Code of Practice, under the auspices of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). We are a London-based charity working in the United Kingdom and internationally to inspire professional, responsible and ethical media coverage. We are encouraged to see the Editors Code of Practice Committee hold this public consultation regarding the Code, which we strongly believe is in need of some revisions in order to operate in a dynamic, fair and just media environment.

One of our projects, [Get The Trolls Out!](#), seeks to harness the power of social media to disseminate innovative media outputs that generate dialogue and provide a powerful counter-narrative against online hate speech. Part of this project includes monitoring the media in the United Kingdom (and five other European partner countries) for anti-religious hate speech, which we have documented for the past three years. We believe respectful criticism of religion is a vital part of any thriving democracy, which means that we specifically focus on making sure that the media in question respects the rights and safety of people practicing their religion, rather than critiques of the religion itself. We respect the right to freedom of expression, and only call out hateful and inflammatory reporting that specifically crosses a line into discriminating against certain religious groups.

Due to this expertise, we are uniquely equipped to respond to this public consultation with constructive suggestions.

We would like to focus specifically on Clause 12 of the Code. This is the one we most often encounter through our work, and one that we have seen fail those affected by harmful reporting over and over again. We want to highlight the focus on the individual through this code, not groups.

## **12. Discrimination**

- i) The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability.*
- ii) Details of an individual's race, colour, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story.*



We complained directly to IPSO, as well The Telegraph, regarding an article published on August 5th 2018 titled: "[Denmark has got it wrong. Yes, the burka is oppressive and ridiculous – but that's still no reason to ban it.](#)" In this piece, Boris Johnson writes about Denmark's then-recent burka ban, and whether we should adopt the same laws in the UK. The piece spreads degrading messages about women who choose to wear the niqab and the burka, comparing women who wear Islamic attire to letter boxes and bank robbers. When we complained about this article using Clause 12 of the Code, IPSO decided that it did not breach the Editors Code, because Johnson referred to a group (Muslim women) and not an individual: *"Clause 12 is designed to protect identifiable individuals mentioned by the press from discrimination based on their race, colour, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation or any physical or mental illness or disability. It does not apply to groups or categories of people."* We feel this application of the Code is not satisfactory, and changes need to be made to Clause 12 to include groups.

In an [entry on the IPSO Blog](#), Complaints Officer John Buckingham outlines Clause 12 more specifically, also addressing the individual vs. group issue. Explaining why the Code only protects individuals, he states: *"For me, there's a difference between directing a pejorative (contemptuous or disapproving) term at a specific, named person, and directing it at a group as a whole: the effect of the language on any one member of the group is diluted."* We feel that this oversimplifies the situation: a hateful or derogatory remark made about a group can be equally as harmful as making it about an individual. In the week following Johnson's piece in *The Telegraph*, [Islamophobic incidents rose 375%](#) (the biggest spike in anti-Muslim hatred in 2018), with many using Johnson's exact language. For visibly Muslim women, the article was discriminatory and had real-life consequences; however, as Johnson attacked a group as opposed to an individual, IPSO did not uphold any of the complaints made against the paper. This case clearly shows that we cannot simply ignore all discriminatory remarks made towards a group, because the consequences can be just as harmful, if not more, then when it is directed towards an individual.

In his blog post, John Buckingham states: *"It's important in a free society that no group is considered above criticism, and that journalists are able to challenge the beliefs, practices, actions, opinions and traditions of different groups for the benefit of us all."* With this we agree, and we are not suggesting a change in the Code which prevents criticism of any group or individual. We are aware and agree with the right to criticize question and debate religion, and see this as a fundamental human right. However, discrimination is not criticism. We are suggesting a change to the Code which protects groups from discrimination, not criticism.

We have focused on Boris Johnson's article in *The Telegraph* in this response as we feel it clearly shows holes in Clause 12 of the Code; however, there are unfortunately many other instances of group discrimination in the press which are allowed per IPSO's Code. [Transphobia is rampant in the British press](#) and complaints are often not upheld because journalists attack a group, not an individual. [Racism is still regularly found in the UK media](#), with Clause 12 often protecting those who are spreading it.

The individual vs. group issue is not black and white, and the Code needs to reflect this. We suggest a change in Clause 12 which includes groups, as well as individuals under its protection. Complaints should be judged on a case by case basis, and the focus should be on discrimination, not criticism. We are looking forward learning from the public consultation contributions and to seeing how the Editors Code of Practice



Committee will respond to them. We hope to see a concrete change in Clause 12 that protects all groups from discrimination.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Milica Pestic".

Milica Pestic  
Executive Director  
Media Diversity Institute