

SECTION 3: ACCURACY

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

The BBC is committed to achieving due accuracy. This commitment is fundamental to our reputation and the trust of audiences, which is the foundation of the BBC. It is also a requirement under the Agreement accompanying the BBC Charter¹.

The term 'due' means that the accuracy must be adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectation and any signposting that may influence that expectation.

Therefore, we do all we can to achieve due accuracy in all our output, though its requirements may vary. The due accuracy required of, for example, drama, entertainment and comedy, will not usually be the same as for factual content. The requirements may even vary within a genre, so the due accuracy required of factual content may differ depending on whether it is, for example, factual entertainment, historical documentary, current affairs or news.

Accuracy is not simply a matter of getting facts right. If an issue is controversial, relevant opinions as well as facts may need to be considered. When necessary, all the relevant facts and information should also be weighed to get at the truth.

Where appropriate to the output, we should:

- gather material using first hand sources wherever possible
- check and cross check facts
- validate the authenticity of documentary evidence and digital material
- corroborate claims and allegations made by contributors wherever possible.

¹ Paragraph 44 (1) *Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation, July 2006*

In news and current affairs content, achieving due accuracy is more important than speed.

3.2 PRINCIPLES

3.2.1 We must do all we can to ensure due accuracy in all our output.

3.2.2 All BBC output, as appropriate to its subject and nature, must be well sourced, based on sound evidence, thoroughly tested and presented in clear, precise language. We should be honest and open about what we don't know and avoid unfounded speculation. Claims, allegations, material facts and other content that cannot be corroborated should normally be attributed.

3.2.3 The BBC must not knowingly and materially mislead its audiences. We should not distort known facts, present invented material as fact or otherwise undermine our audiences' trust in our content.

3.2.4 We should normally acknowledge serious factual errors and correct them quickly, clearly and appropriately.

3.3 MANDATORY REFERRALS

(Mandatory Referrals are part of the BBC's editorial management system. While they will not, in themselves, meet the Principles in the Editorial Guidelines, they are an essential part of the process to ensure compliance and must be observed.)

Referrals to Director Editorial Policy and Standards

3.3.1 Any proposal to rely on a single unnamed source making a serious allegation or to grant anonymity to a significant contributor must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards and Programme Legal Advice.

(See 3.4.13)

Other Referrals

3.3.2 The proposed wording of all written appeals for contributors, including those for entertainment programmes, must be referred to the relevant divisional representative or, for independents, to the commissioning editor.

(See 3.4.9)

3.3.3 Any proposal to use an internet resource (such as a chat room, message board or social networking group) to find contributors must also be referred to the relevant divisional representative or, for independents, to the commissioning editor.

(See 3.4.9)

3.4 PRACTICES

Gathering Material

3.4.1 We should try to witness events and gather information first hand. Where this is not possible, we should talk to first hand sources and, where necessary, corroborate their evidence. We should be reluctant to rely on a single source. If we do rely on a single source, a named on-the-record source is always preferable.

We should record our research interviews with sources wherever possible. In circumstances where recording might inhibit the source, full notes should be made, preferably at the time or, if not, as soon as possible afterwards.

(See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.4.10)

3.4.2 In all our content we must check and verify information, facts and documents, where required to achieve due accuracy. If we have been unable to verify material sufficiently, we should say so and attribute the information.

3.4.3 There are separate considerations for user generated content. We should not automatically assume that the material is accurate and should take reasonable steps, depending on how it is to be used and if necessary to achieve due accuracy, to seek verification. We must take special care over how we use any material that we suspect has been supplied by a member of a lobby group or organisation with a vested interest in the story, rather than a disinterested bystander.

We should carefully scrutinise and, if necessary to achieve due accuracy, corroborate eyewitness accounts submitted by email before using them, for example by talking to eyewitnesses on the phone.

We should ensure that user generated content is clearly identified as such.

(See Guidance online: User Contributions in News Output)

3.4.4 Particular care is required when researching on the internet or using material from websites. Even normally reliable sources of information on the web may not always be accurate. We should also be alert to the possibility of hoax websites; the most convincing material on the web may not be what it seems. It may be necessary to check who is running the website or confirm with an individual or organisation that the material is genuine.

(See Guidance online: Internet Research)

Material from Third Parties

3.4.5 Material supplied by third parties needs to be treated with appropriate caution, taking account of the reputation of the source.

We should normally only rely on an agency report if it can be substantiated by a BBC correspondent or if it is attributed to a reputable news agency.

We should only use other material supplied by third parties if it is credible and reliable. This includes weather reports, financial markets information and music charts. We need to ensure that any credit given for the use of third party material is in accordance with BBC credit guidelines.

3.4.6 We should only broadcast material from third parties who may have a personal or professional interest in its subject matter if there is a clear editorial justification. The material should be labelled. This includes material from the emergency services, charities, and environmental groups.

We should be reluctant to use video and audio news releases or other similar material. We do not normally use any extracts from such releases if we are capable of gathering the material ourselves. The editorial significance of the material, rather than simply its impact, must be considered before it is used. If it is editorially justified to use it then we must explain the circumstances and clearly label the source of the material in our output.

(See Guidance online: Video and Audio News Releases)

Finding Contributors

3.4.7 We should make checks to establish the credentials of our contributors and to avoid being “hoaxed”. The nature of these checks should be appropriate to the nature and significance of their contribution, the content and the genre.

We should consider whether it is appropriate to make more in depth checks about people who are the main subject of, or who are to make a significant contribution to, the output. This may include ensuring they are interviewed, and if necessary checked by, more than one member of the production team using a combination of the following:

- documentary evidence to validate their identity and story
- corroboration from people other than those suggested by the contributor
- self declaration of personal information that may bring the BBC into disrepute, for example, criminal convictions or political affiliation.

Asking some contributors to consent to a Criminal Records Bureau check may also be considered.

(See Section 6, Fairness, Contributors and Consent: 6.4.1)

3.4.8 We should not use agencies that deal with actors and performers to find people to talk about matters outside their specific profession or experience. It can be useful to contact news and other specialist agencies but all appropriate checks must be carried out on any information or contacts they supply.

Appealing for Contributors

3.4.9 We should only appeal for contributors to factual and factual entertainment programmes as a last resort when other appropriate research methods have been exhausted. When we do use advertisements or make appeals within programmes we must word them carefully to avoid bringing the BBC into disrepute.

There are risks in advertising for contributors whether using posters or personal adverts in newspapers, specialist publications, or the internet. The people who reply are self-selecting and may seek to appear regularly as “serial guests”. Appropriate checks should be made to screen out unsuitable or untruthful applicants.

We should not use third party websites that help people wanting to appear in the media, except when seeking contestants or audiences for entertainment programmes. Even then all appropriate checks should be made to screen out unsuitable or untruthful contributors.

The proposed wording of all written appeals, including those for entertainment programmes, must be referred to the relevant divisional representative or, for independents, to the commissioning editor.

Any proposal to use an internet resource (such as a chat room, message board or social networking group) to find contributors must also be referred to the relevant divisional representative or, for independents, to the commissioning editor.

When posting on websites to find contributors or research material, we should normally be identifiable as working for the BBC and, where email details are provided, use a BBC address.

(See Section 6 Fairness, Contributors and Consent: 6.4.17)

Note-taking

3.4.10 We must take accurate, reliable and, wherever possible, contemporaneous notes of all significant research and other relevant information. We must keep records of research including written and electronic correspondence, background notes and documents. They should be kept in a way that allows double-checking, particularly at the scripting stage, and if necessary by another member of the team.

When we broadcast serious allegations made by an anonymous source, full timely notes of interviews, conversations and information that provide the basis for the story must be kept.

(See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.4.1, Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.22 and Section 6 Fairness, Contributors and Consent: 6.4.10 - 6.4.12)

Avoiding Misleading Audiences

3.4.11 We must not knowingly and materially mislead our audiences with our content. We may need to clarify the nature of some content by labelling (for example, verbally, in text or with visual or audio cues) to avoid being misleading.

Sources

3.4.12 We should normally identify on-air and online sources of information and significant contributors, and provide their credentials, so that our audiences can judge their status.

3.4.13 When quoting an anonymous source, especially a source making serious allegations, we must take all appropriate steps to protect their identity. However, we should give the audience what information we can about them and in a way that does not materially mislead about the source's status.

(See Section 6 Fairness, Contributors and Consent: 6.4.10 - 6.4.12)

Whenever a story originated by the BBC involves an anonymous source, the relevant editor has the right to be told their identity. In cases involving serious allegations we should resist any attempt by an anonymous source to prevent their identity being revealed to a senior BBC editor. If this happens, the reporter should make it clear that the information obtained confidentially may not be broadcast.

Any proposal to rely on a single unnamed source making a serious allegation or to grant anonymity to a significant contributor must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards and Programme Legal Advice. We will need to consider:

- whether the story is of significant public interest²
- whether the source is of proven credibility and reliability and in a position to have sufficient knowledge of the events featured
- any legal issues

(See Section 18 The Law)

- safety concerns, for example for whistleblowers

² See Section 7 Privacy: 7.1 The Public Interest

- whether a response to serious allegations has been sought from the people or organisations concerned

(See Section 6 Fairness, Contributors and Consent: 6.4.25 - 6.4.27)

- sensitive and personal issues
- whether the serious allegation was made or substantiated “off the record”.

3.4.14 We should script carefully the reporting of allegations made by an anonymous source to explain:

- the nature of the allegation
- that the allegation is being made by an anonymous source and not the BBC.

When the allegations have not been independently corroborated, we should consider if it is appropriate to inform the audience.

We should not normally use live unscripted two-ways to report allegations. It must be the editor’s decision as to whether they are an appropriate way to break a story. When BBC colleagues follow up a story they must ensure they understand the terms in which the allegations are to be reported and do so accurately.

Online Links to Third Party Websites

3.4.15 Links from BBC Online to third party websites should normally lead to sites which are factually accurate. We may link to external sites which give particular views of a person or organisation significant to a current news story and in such cases we may not be able to guarantee their factual accuracy. But we should not support the message, information or promotions on third party sites.

(See Section 14 Editorial Integrity and Independence from External Interests: 14.4.19 - 14.4.20)

(See Guidance online: Links and Feeds)

Production Techniques

3.4.16 There are very few recorded programmes that do not involve some intervention from the production team, but there are acceptable and unacceptable production techniques. Consideration should be given to the intention and effect of any intervention. It is normally acceptable to use techniques that augment content in a simple and straightforward way, for example by improving clarity and flow or making content more engaging. This may include craft skills such as some cutaway shots, set-up shots to establish interviewees and asking contributors to repeat insignificant actions or perform

an everyday activity. It is usually unacceptable to use production techniques that materially mislead the audience about the reality of the narrative or events.

For news and factual content, unless clearly signalled to the audience or using reconstructions, we should not normally:

- stage or re-stage action or events which are significant to the development of the action or narrative
- inter-cut shots and sequences to suggest they were happening at the same time, if the resulting juxtaposition of material leads to a misleading impression of events.

Commentary and editing must never be used to give the audience a materially misleading impression of events or a contribution.

3.4.17 We should ensure that any digital creation or manipulation of material, including the use of CGI or other production techniques to create scenes or characters, does not distort the meaning of events, alter the impact of genuine material or otherwise materially mislead our audiences. We should also be aware that digital manipulation of photographs, video and documents has been used to hoax broadcasters.

Reconstructions

3.4.18 In factual programmes reconstructions should not over dramatise in a misleading or sensationalist way. Reconstructions are when events are quite explicitly re-staged. They should normally be based on a substantial and verifiable body of evidence. They should also be identifiable as reconstructions, for example by using verbal or visual labelling or visual or audio cues, such as slow motion or grading. It should also be obvious to the audience where a reconstruction begins and ends.

News programmes should not normally stage reconstructions of current events because of the risk of confusing the audience. But reconstructions staged by others may be reported.

(See Section 8 Reporting Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: 8.4.13 - 8.4.14)

Factually Based Drama

3.4.19 When a drama portrays real people or events, it is inevitable that the creative realisation of some dramatic elements such as characterisation, dialogue and atmosphere may be fictional. However, the portrayal should be based on a substantial and well-sourced body of evidence whenever practicable and we should ensure it does not distort the known facts, including chronology, unduly. It is important to explain the drama's factual basis (or use of dramatic licence) with clear signposting.

Sensitivities will often be at their highest when a drama has, as its central purpose, the portrayal of living people, people with living close relatives or recent events. Particular care should be taken to achieve due accuracy.

(See Section 6 Fairness, Contributors and Consent: 6.4.29 - 6.4.30
and Section 7 Privacy: 7.4.7)

Archive Material

3.4.20 Archive material should not be used in a way that materially misleads the audience about a situation, events or what is being depicted. Labelling may be required.

(See Section 13 Re-use and Reversioning: 13.4.3 - 13.4.5)

Reporting Statistics and Risk

3.4.21 We should report statistics and risks in context and avoid worrying the audience unduly, especially about health or crime. This may involve giving trends, taking care to avoid giving figures more weight than can stand scrutiny. If reporting a change, consideration should be given to making the baseline figure clear. For example, a doubling of a problem affecting one in two million people will still only affect one in a million. It will usually be appropriate to report the source of figures, and sometimes the margin of error, to enable people to judge their significance.

We should consider the emotional impact pictures and personal testimony can have on perceptions of risk when not supported by the balance of argument. If a contributor's view is contrary to majority opinion, the demands of due accuracy and due impartiality may require us to make this clear.

(See Section 10 Politics, Public Policy and Polls: 10.4.31 - 10.4.41)

(See Guidance online: Reporting Risk)

Managing Online Content

3.4.22 At the time when BBC content is posted online, the department responsible for its creation should decide on a coherent strategy for its management over time. Consideration should be given to how frequently pages need to be updated or how they are to be treated if they are not to be updated.

3.4.23 News pages and any content that advertises its topicality, or where users might reasonably expect it to be topical, must be kept up to date. Content that appears to be topical but is, in fact, clearly out of date may undermine the BBC's reputation for high editorial standards. This includes databases of material gathered over time.

To avoid materially misleading users, it should normally be clear when the content they are accessing was first published and, where relevant, when it was last updated significantly.

For example, pages may have a date stamp from the moment of publication and/or they may be labelled as archived (e.g. by displaying a prominent banner stating that the page is no longer being updated).

When a material change is made to an item of content, the change should normally be indicated to users unless, for example, there are legal or editorial reasons not to do so.

3.4.24 Unless content is specifically made available only for a limited time period, there is a presumption that material published online will become part of a permanently accessible archive and will not normally be removed.

For news stories, the archive is intended to act as a permanent public record. However, on a limited number of occasions we may decide not to add a topical link to a specific archived news page. Very exceptionally, we may require a page to be removed. Such exceptional circumstances may include legal reasons, personal safety risks, or a serious breach of editorial standards that cannot be rectified except by removal of the material. Any proposal to remove an online news page from the archive should be referred to the Editor News Online, who may wish to consult Programme Legal Advice and Editorial Policy.

In other areas, we may occasionally have to remove some audio-visual content, a section of a specific programme, or in exceptional cases the whole programme. This may be for personal safety, privacy, fairness, legal reasons or a serious breach of editorial standards. However, it should only be done with the approval of the relevant senior editorial figure.

An appropriate mechanism, including a system of referrals, should be in place to remove or revoke BBC online content, whether it is text or audio-visual, short form or long form, and published on a BBC site or syndicated elsewhere.

(See Guidance online: Taking Down Online Material)

Checking Programmes

3.4.25 We must check programmes recorded some time before transmission to make sure they have not been overtaken by events, such as the known death of a contributor, the charging of an offender, or significant life changes. In some cases an on-air announcement will be required, in others, the alteration or removal of some material.

(See Section 13 Re-use and Reversioning: 13.4.3)

Correcting Mistakes

3.4.26 We should normally acknowledge serious factual errors and correct such mistakes quickly, clearly and appropriately. Inaccuracy may lead to a complaint of unfairness. An effective way of correcting a mistake is saying what was

wrong as well as putting it right. Where we may have broadcast a defamatory inaccuracy Programme Legal Advice should be consulted.

(See Guidance online: Taking Down Online Material)