

The BBC's Editorial Standards

01

1.1 (p.12)

Introduction

1.2 (p.13)

Our Editorial Values

1.3 (p.14)

The Public Interest

1.4 (p.15)

Ofcom

1.5 *(p.16)*

Accountability

1.6 *(p.16)*

Complaints

1.7 *(p.18)*

Accessibility

1.1 Introduction

The BBC's Royal Charter¹ specifies the BBC's Mission, which is to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain. It also establishes our independence from government, guarantees our editorial and artistic freedom and safeguards the licence fee, the unique funding arrangement which enables the BBC to pursue a distinctive mission.

The Charter sets out the BBC's Public Purposes:

1. To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them.
2. To support learning for people of all ages.
3. To show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services.
4. To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom.
5. To reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world.

The Royal Charter and the accompanying Framework Agreement² establish that it is a duty of the BBC Board to set the standards for the BBC's editorial and creative output and services. The BBC must publish, review periodically and ensure the observance of guidelines designed to secure appropriate editorial standards for our UK Public Services and safeguard the editorial integrity and high quality of the World Service and maintain high standards of editorial integrity and quality for BBC Monitoring.

1 Broadcasting: Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016.

2 Broadcasting: An Agreement Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016.

Producing and upholding these Editorial Guidelines fulfils those requirements; making our content to the standards in them is an obligation on all of us, led by the Director-General, as the BBC's editor-in-chief. All output made in accordance with these Editorial Guidelines will also thereby meet the requirements of our regulator, Ofcom³.

1.2 Our Editorial Values

Our audiences **trust** us and they expect us to adhere to the highest editorial standards.

We have a right to **freedom of expression**, included in the Charter and protected under the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998. This freedom is at the heart of the BBC's **independence**. Our audiences have a right to receive creative material, information and ideas without interference. But our audiences also expect us to balance our right to freedom of expression with our responsibilities to our audiences and to our contributors, subject to restrictions in law.

We operate in the **public interest** – reporting stories of significance to our audiences and holding power to account. In our journalism in particular, we seek to establish the **truth** and use the highest reporting standards to provide coverage that is **fair** and **accurate**. Our specialist expertise provides professional judgement and clear analysis. We are **impartial**, seeking to reflect the views and experiences of our audiences – so that our output as a whole includes a breadth and diversity of opinion and no significant strand of thought is under-represented or omitted. We are independent of outside interests and arrangements that could compromise our **editorial integrity**. Our editorial standards do not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles.

3 The Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

Free speech enables the exchange of information and ideas without state interference. It helps to inform public debate – encouraging us to be curious, engaged and critical. It allows, for example, dramatists, satirists and comedians to comment on the world around us. However, freedom of expression is not an absolute right – it carries duties and responsibilities and is also subject to legal restrictions and limits.

In exercising freedom of expression, we must offer appropriate **protection to vulnerable groups** and **avoid causing unjustifiable offence**. We must also respect people's **privacy** – only putting private information into the public domain where the public interest outweighs an individual's legitimate expectation of privacy.

We have a particular responsibility towards children and young people and must preserve their right to speak out and be heard. Where they contribute to or feature in our output, we must take due care to ensure that their dignity and their physical and emotional welfare are protected.

See Section 9 Children and Young People as Contributors: 9.1

As members of our audiences, they have a right to access information and ideas; however, we must ensure that content that might be unsuitable for them is scheduled appropriately.

1.3 The Public Interest

The BBC's Mission⁴ specifies that we must 'act in the public interest'. It is in the **public interest** to fulfil our mission to produce output to inform, educate and entertain. There is no single definition of public interest, but it includes freedom of expression; providing information that assists people to better comprehend or make decisions on matters of public importance; preventing people being misled by the statements

4 Article 5 The BBC's Mission, Broadcasting: Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016.

or actions of individuals or organisations. The public interest is also served in exposing or detecting crime or significantly anti-social behaviour and by exposing corruption, injustice, significant incompetence or negligence.

1.4 Ofcom

Under the Charter, Ofcom must regulate the standards of relevant BBC UK Public Service content to ensure it meets the requirements of Ofcom's Standards and Fairness Codes⁵. It therefore considers complaints against some BBC broadcast content.

See Section 1 The BBC's Editorial Standards: 1.6

It must also regulate BBC UK Public On-Demand Programme Services ('BBC ODPS') in line with these requirements, so far as Ofcom determines them relevant. These requirements are set out in Ofcom's Broadcasting Code.

Ofcom also considers complaints against BBC online material if the complainant is dissatisfied with the BBC response. Ofcom will give an opinion as to whether the relevant content meets these Editorial Guidelines, and may require the BBC to reconsider the matter. However, Ofcom has no further enforcement powers and the final decision is the BBC's⁶.

Ofcom does not regulate standards for the BBC World Service. BBC commercial broadcast services, provided by BBC companies, are not UK Public Services but they are subject to Ofcom's content standards regulation where they are distributed under Ofcom licences.

Where Ofcom finds a breach of its Broadcasting Code, it may require the BBC to broadcast a statement of its findings. Where Ofcom considers its code has been breached 'seriously, deliberately, repeatedly

5 Article 46 Principal functions of Ofcom, Broadcasting: Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation December 2016.

6 This does not apply to some categories of BBC content, including material on third-party platforms, social media and BBC corporate information.

or recklessly' it can impose sanctions which range from a requirement to broadcast a correction or statement of finding to a fine of no more than £250,000.

All BBC services are regulated by these Editorial Guidelines.

1.5 Accountability

The Charter sets out our duty to be transparent and accountable. We must publish an Annual Report and Accounts which must include information about how high editorial standards have been set, reviewed and met. It must also include information about how we have served the nations and regions of the UK and whether there have been significant changes to any of our Public Services. We must also report on how complaints have been handled and what we have learned from them.

1.6 Complaints

We are open in acknowledging mistakes when they are made and want to learn from them. We are required to set and publish procedures for the handling and resolution of complaints. The BBC Complaints Procedure⁷ sets out the timeframes that complaints will normally be answered within and must relate both to the obligations of our Public Services and also our commercial operations.

Complaints about most BBC content⁸ are dealt with initially by the BBC, as set out in the Complaints Procedure⁹. Complaints are handled by BBC Audience Services in the first instance, but complainants dissatisfied with the response can ask the BBC'S Executive Complaints Unit to investigate.

7 BBC Complaints Framework and Procedures October 2017.

8 Individuals may make first-party complaints relating to fairness and privacy directly to Ofcom.

9 BBC Complaints Framework and Procedures October 2017.

The Executive Complaints Unit deals with serious complaints about possible breaches of the BBC's editorial standards in connection with specific programmes or items of content. It deals with complaints about any BBC service or product where the BBC has editorial responsibility. This includes international, public and commercial services and BBC-branded magazines.

The Executive Complaints Unit's decisions are subject to review by the Director-General, as the BBC's editor-in-chief.

Where the Executive Complaints Unit identifies a serious breach of the editorial standards set out in these Guidelines, its finding will normally be published on the BBC complaints website. It may also direct the BBC to broadcast an apology or correction.

If complainants are not satisfied with the Executive Complaints Unit finding, and the complaint relates to BBC content regulated by Ofcom, the complainant can refer the matter to Ofcom, after the BBC has finished considering the complaint. Ofcom will adjudicate on whether there has been a breach of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

If the complaint relates to online material, Ofcom will consider and give an opinion as to whether the material breaches these Editorial Guidelines and may ask the BBC to reconsider the matter; however, Ofcom has no further enforcement powers.

Complaints about World Service content and our content on social media do not come within Ofcom's remit and are considered within the BBC's complaints process, in line with the Complaints Procedure

1.7 Accessibility

The BBC is committed to being inclusive and accessible to all our audiences. We are required by law to make 'reasonable adjustments' to our content to ensure disabled people can access our output.

The BBC provides subtitling, audio-description and sign language services, but what is considered 'reasonable' will evolve as technology develops¹⁰.

Ofcom also sets mandatory requirements for all broadcasters¹¹.

Decisions taken throughout the production process will affect whether output is accessible to people with some visual impairment (including colour blindness), hearing or speech impairment (for voice recognition). Producers must take account of the requirement that, as far as reasonably practicable, our content is accessible to those audiences.

See Guidance online: [Visually Impaired Audiences and Hearing Impaired Audiences](#)

10 BBC Policies: Subtitles on TV and Audio description on TV. Available on Gateway for BBC staff or via commissioning editors for independent producers.

11 Ofcom's Code on Television Access Services.

