

Ms Philippa Kennedy OBE  
Ombudsman  
The Sun  
1 London Bridge Street  
London SE1 9GF.

11 December 2015

**Our ref: 09324-15**

Dear Ms Kennedy,

Thank you for your letter dated 4 December, and for the enclosures which I have read thoroughly.

I would like to respond to a number of points raised in your letter and reassert my contention that the article did indeed breach Clause 1 of the Editors' Code of Practice and the requirement on publishers "not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information."

I would like first of all to state that a number of articles enclosed with your response are not relevant, in my view, to this complaint. I am grateful for the opportunity to be apprised of other coverage about Islam and Muslims, particularly in relation to Daesh (or IS) but none of this has a bearing on whether the paper committed a breach on this occasion. I have therefore, put aside these other articles, and will focus my comments on the published articles that have direct bearing on my complaint.

I would also like to add that the inclusion of reports about the former Prime Minister's speech is not entirely relevant either. Mr Blair is entitled to his opinion of course but it is of little consequence for our purposes. Not least because you have incorrectly cited from his speech to the Library of Congress in Washington DC on 3 December.

In his speech, which can be found on his website (<http://www.tonyblairoffice.org/news/entry/the-depth-of-the-challenge-why-force-alone-will-not-defeat-islamist-extremi/>, accessed 11 December 2015) Mr Blair said:

"Those who believe in concepts of the Caliphate and the Apocalypse – so much part of DAESH propaganda – stretch deep into parts of Muslim societies."

He did not, as you infer, say that "support for Isis stretched "deep into parts of Muslim societies"." That is the wording in the report published in The Guardian newspaper but these were not the words of the former PM. It is important to make a distinction between IS propaganda and "support for Isis" itself. It is a point made all the more acute in light of my complaint resting on the grounds of inaccuracy.

His other remark, "A belief in innate hostility between Islam and the West is not the preserve of the few", has also, in my view, been misrepresented. It is the case that a "belief in innate hostility between Islam and the West is not the preserve of the few" and one need only look at the burgeoning anti-Muslim rhetoric among far right and neo-Nazi movements in Britain and Europe today to observe that those who hold to such viewpoints are increasing in number. To infer that it is certain Muslims who hold such views is a selective interpretation of those remarks to project the problem as one arising among sections of Muslims societies alone masking the ugly reality of Islamophobia in the UK and Europe.

## Accuracy and the Survation poll

1. You have stated that the “context of the question could not be clearer”.

It is a matter of fact that in polling context is not what matters, it is the wording of the question that is paramount. It is the case that the question from which the headline was drawn, “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis” did not include any reference to “jihadis”, to “IS” or to “IS fighters”. Furthermore, the question posed asked respondents about sympathy “with” not sympathy “for”.

It is quite possible, indeed evidenced if you read the commentary of one person involved in conducting the survey ([http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/i-conducted-the-muslim-poll-the-sun-jihadi-sympathy?utm\\_source=vicenewsfb](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/i-conducted-the-muslim-poll-the-sun-jihadi-sympathy?utm_source=vicenewsfb)), that the sympathy expressed by respondents “with” young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria, is of a form that speaks of regret at their misguidance. To quote from the aforementioned link: "They're brainwashed, I feel sorry for them."

It is indicative of the difficulty of assuming the detail behind “sympathy”, without digging further to understand its meaning better that a superficial treatment of an expressed sympathy is the result.

On the front page you have grossly mis-represented the poll question by making three major errors:

- (a) Inferring that the poll data suggested sympathy “for”
- (b) Inferring that the poll data suggested sympathy for “jihadis”
- (c) In the opening sentence of the accompanying article by Tom Newton Dunn, it states: “Nearly one in five British Muslims have some sympathy with those who have fled the UK to fight *for IS in Syria*”.

On page 5, you have further entrenched the error by printing the headline, “*Sun poll reveals sympathy for Brit IS fighters*”. Again, the poll question made no mention of “IS fighters” or “IS in Syria”.

You appear to suggest that news reporting on British Muslims who have travelled to Syria to join IS forms a “comprehensible narrative” and that your articles should be viewed within this context. The lack of news reporting on the numbers of British Muslims who may have travelled to join the Free Syrian Army or other factions is not, in my view, a credible reason to suggest that those polled in the survey were necessarily reading into the question an “IS reference”. Nor is it credible to infer from your own search of the Factiva database a view that would be held by the Muslims polled. It may well be the case that Muslims are more aware of the complexity of the situation in Syria and that the “comprehensible narrative” is not as comprehensive as you like to imagine. In any case, the attitudes of British Muslims on these matters can be gleaned from qualitative and quantitative data, not from searches of online databases which may inform your outlook.

2. You have provided details of articles published by Sky News and the Daily Mail which relied on survey data, including a question which was framed in exactly the same way as the poll conducted by The Sun.

I have looked at these articles and would like to draw your attention to the following detail:

- (a) The headline of the Sky News article correctly identified a majority as having no sympathy with ‘extremists’ – there was no mention in the title of “IS” or a named body of extremists.
- (b) The body of the article refers to “extremist groups” and states: “*including Islamic State*”, it does not make a categorical link to IS, it refers to is as one of many possible groups.
- (c) In another part the article refers to “terrorist groups in Syria”, again, no suggestion of “IS” or “jihadis” as named groups.
- (d) The article included details of non-Muslim responses to the same questions and therefore attempted to draw a wider comparison with views held by others in society. In contrast, The Sun made no effort to compare Muslim responses with non-Muslim responses although, as Survation explained and as argued in your defence for retaining the exact wording of the question, the same format was used to render results comparable across datasets. I have

enclosed screenshots of the earlier data and draw your attention to this comment on the Survation website:

*Interestingly, when we polled the remainder of the British population in March, 4% of non-Muslims expressed “a lot of sympathy with young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria” and 9% expressed “some sympathy”, suggesting that attitudes held by the Muslim and non-Muslim populations are not that different.*

- (e) The Mail Online article, again, used a very different headline in its coverage of the Sky News poll. Similarly, in its coverage of the same question, it referred to “terror organisations *such as ISIS*”. It did not make a categorical link with “IS” or “jihadis”. In another place in the article, it refers to the numbers who showed they had “a lot of sympathy *for the likes of Jihadi John*”. Again, this is not a categorical link and the article takes care not to infer that these were identified by respondents in answer to the survey questions.
- (f) In contrast, The Sun referred to “jihadis” and “IS in Syria” on the front page and to “Brit IS fighters” on page 5.

I reiterate that The Sun’s coverage of the poll was in breach of Clause 1 and is a demonstrable example of failure to abide by the requirement to take care “not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information”.

### **Full coverage of the poll**

1. You state that in its full coverage of the poll the newspaper (a) referenced the March poll conducted for Sky News and highlighted the fall in numbers sympathising with young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria (b) included two positive Muslim voices (c) sought no reaction from politicians who might seek to capitalise on the findings.

In relation to the above, I respond as follows:

- (a) The mention of the Sky News poll did not, as I have already stated, include statistical data from the March survey or indeed include the paragraph which I have copied above and which clearly contextualises the polling data by including a control group for broader comparison. Were it indeed your intention to highlight the “minority” view, this would have been better done by including fuller information from, as you indicate, the Sky News poll which was referenced.
- (b) The two positive Muslim voices are a marvellous contribution though this in no way mitigates the greater damage done by the inaccuracy of your reporting and the alarmist front page.
- (c) While no reactions were directly sought from politicians who might capitalise on the results, I daresay the front page and headline on page 5 would be enough to do sufficient damage as to render the exclusion of a hostile protagonist of no material consequence.

### **Would readers have been misled?**

I wonder how you propose to measure whether or not readers were misled beyond making an assumption?

I would argue that the sheer volume of complaints that have been raised in relation to the article is evidence of its “misleading” readers, and that this is evident and demonstrable. A huge number of readers have indeed been misled by the very fact of their complaining about the article having explored the poll data more closely and taken exception to the manner in which you have distorted the results and their meaning.

It is also, in my view, the case that the image of Mohammed Emwazi, so prominently displayed on the front page, will have added to the degree of misapprehension that has resulted from the paper's blatant mis-representation of the polling data.

I reject the suggestion that The Sun's coverage of the poll falls within the remit of editorial freedom and restate my contention that the issue here is about standards of accuracy required of publications and your breach of those standards as iterated in the Editors' Code of Practice.

I welcome the regulator's examination of this complaint and its mediation toward a resolution.

Yours sincerely,

Sufyan Ismail  
CEO.