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FROM THE OMBUDSMAN

Ms Bianca Strohmann
IPSO
Email: Bianca.Strohmann@ipso.co.uk

16th December 2015

Dear Bianca,

Thank you for your email of 14 December.

While I recognise the thoughtful response from the complainant, I am afraid that it does not seriously challenge the Sun's central point here: the front page, and the inside coverage, was not misleading in its contention that 1 in 5 Muslims in this survey had displayed sympathy for young Muslims leaving the UK to fight for ISIS in Syria.

As we have conclusively established, the ordinary meaning of the poll question – in conjunction with the context in which it was asked, including the preceding questions – related clearly and solely to ISIS. The contrary argument is simply not sustainable.

The complainant has suggested that the question could have meant that respondents might have felt sorry for those who had potentially been “exploited” into fighting for ISIS. That attempt at semantic wriggling does not alter the underlying meaning of the question, though. Even the sentiment of sympathy in the sense of sorrow is still sympathy. And – I might add – it is sympathy with people who have elected to join an organisation with an unparalleled reputation for brutality. Such sympathy, in our view, is improper, whatever the motivation.

There can be no suggestion that the photograph of Emwazi is somehow misleading. The survey question related to young Muslims who leave the UK to fight in Syria. He is a legitimate illustration of precisely that phenomenon. He is also, more generally, a poster boy for ISIS, and – as we have established – the survey related to opinions about ISIS.

I have sought to address the individual points made by the complainant below:

Why did we provide other coverage by the Sun

The complainant asserted that it was “inexcusably negligent for British newspapers to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment”. We wished simply to show the proud record the paper has in articulating, where relevant, a positive account of the Muslim community. We have covered the brilliant work being done by anti-extremist groups like Inspire, for example; we have written about the contribution Muslims make to British society. The motive for the article under complaint was not due to a desire to be anti-Muslim, but to report a newsworthy survey.

The comments from Tony Blair

One aspect of the complaint is that the Sun's story – insofar as it related to the scale of pro-ISIS sentiment within the Muslim community – was inaccurate. It was, therefore, relevant to refer to the comments of a former Prime Minister and envoy to the Middle East, which made the same broad point. He said:

“Every day millions of young people are taught a view of the world and religion completely incompatible with peaceful co-existence... as a recent documentary in the UK showed, there are community centres, mosques, seemingly innocuous charity organisations, that are fronts for this ideology”

Accuracy and the Survation poll

First of all, the post on Vice News is written anonymously and cannot be considered as evidence in this dispute. There is no means of testing the veracity of its claims or otherwise.

It is simply untrue for the complainant to say that “in polling context is not what matters”. Context always matters in a series of polling questions. That is why, in political polling the voting intention question will always be the first in a set of poll questions – so any preceding questions do not influence the respondent on their voting intention.

Indeed, the point about context is made doubly important when one considers that the poll was a telephone survey. A telephone poll requires respondents to enter a dialogue with the questioner; it is not simply a case of reading a question and ticking boxes. Therefore when someone listening on the phone to a questioner has heard them talk in previous questions about whether Islamic leaders have **publicly condemned ISIS**, and ask respondents to **think about the root causes of ISIS** and **ISIS leaders who exploit vulnerable young people**, the next question asking about fighters in Syria has been placed in a very clear context.

The complainant's distinction between “sympathy with” and “sympathy for” is a distinction without a material difference. If someone had sympathy “with the Nazis”, many would rightly accuse that person of being a Nazi sympathiser. Most people would – and should – have no sympathy with or for anyone fighting for a regime that pushes gay people from towers, calls for terrorist acts on the streets of London and Paris, and beheads British aid workers. Sympathy and support when dealing with such extremes as ISIS can be considered, to all reasonable purposes, synonymous. To argue anything else is to be pedantic. In any event, the specific wording of this part of the question was included in the paper for readers to judge for themselves.

We have addressed the issue of “jihadi” in our previous response.

The lack of news reporting on the numbers of British Muslims travelling to fight *against* ISIS is critically important to this dispute. Mr Ismail's entire contention, which the Sun disputes, rests on the idea that the polling question could be misinterpreted so as not to mean ISIS fighters. Indeed, in the original complaint he went so far as to claim there were “a number of Britons who have left the UK to fight *against* IS” (while not providing any evidence to support this claim) and “a number of ways in which responses to a question about ‘fighters in Syria’ might be interpreted.”

Our view, which we have corroborated by an analysis of press coverage, is that the overwhelming narrative around young Muslims leaving to fight in Syria relates to those joining ISIS. That can scarcely be in serious doubt.

Sky and Daily Mail poll reporting

It is impossible to create a distinction between “ISIS”, “jihadis” and “extremists” in the context of the polls produced for Sky News or the Sun. The questions themselves move from “terrorist acts” to “ISIS leaders exploiting young people” to the “bombing of ISIS in Syria”. If one is referring to extremists or jihadis based in Iraq and Syria – in this context – it can only realistically mean ISIS.

As a tabloid newspaper, the Sun operates within the framework of ordinary, understandable meanings. The meanings here, in our view, are clear.

It cannot be inaccurate or misleading to not include polling from non-Muslims or to not include previous datasets. Polls are frequently produced in newspapers without previous polls for reference or with the same poll questions being asked to different communities or religions. It is very common for polls conducted by reputable companies registered to the British Polling Council (such as Survation) to stand alone and be interpreted independently of any previous polls. While the polling company might prefer to see other datasets included, there is no onus on the Sun to do so.

The original complaint focused on the idea that the question was ambiguous. If that is indeed the problem, Mr Ismail’s desire to see other datasets included is contradictory. Either the question is ambiguous and should be dismissed, or it is useful but only if put in the context of previous polls on the topic.

Roy Greenslade helpfully addressed this subject in a column for the Evening Standard: (<http://www.standard.co.uk/business/roy-greenslade-the-suns-jihadi-poll-furore-shows-why-these-surveys-are-hard-to-interpret-a3128341.html>):

“Was the Sun’s interpretation of the polling results less valid than Survation’s own interpretation of its poll? Was it less valid than the report about a similar poll in March on Sky News, which stated that the overwhelming majority of Muslims have no sympathy with the jihadis?”

Would readers be misled?

There can be no doubt that the coverage across the whole newspaper framed the question clearly, and readers would have been able to understand the issue at stake.

Even taking the front page on its own, we have argued (conclusively, we believe) that the headline and article represented accurately the thrust of the information possessed by the Sun. We believe that the question asked by Survation allowed a reasonable interpretation that 1 in 5 Muslims showed sympathy towards those young Muslims leaving the UK to fight for IS.

The number of complaints, which have been largely co-ordinated by interest groups mobilising people on social media, has no real bearing on this point. Outrage (albeit in some quarters very genuinely felt) about the Sun tackling an issue such as this does not mean that the Sun has breached the Code on accuracy.

Indeed, we would argue that this complaint is an attempt to force disagreement with an editorial decision into an argument about accuracy that is without merit. We do not believe that IPSO should be persuaded by such an attempt.

However, as I have said, there can be no doubt that the complainant has genuine concerns, which we respect. In the final sentence of his letter, Mr Ismail refers to a desire to seek “mediation towards a resolution”. I wonder what he has in mind here and if it is possible to resolve this complaint. The Sun is proud of its record of reporting issues relating to the Muslim community, and we would welcome any suggestions IPSO or Mr Ismail may have with regard to resolving this complaint amicably.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "PK Kennedy". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized.

Philippa Kennedy OBE
Sun Ombudsman