

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

Thursday 24 December 2015

Our ref: 09324-15

Dear Ms Kennedy,

I thank you for your letter dated 16 December but I am afraid that it brings us no closer to a resolution of this complaint given the fastidiousness with which you approach the subject of misleading readers with the distortion and misrepresentation of the poll results conducted for the newspaper by Survation and published on 23 November.

I stand by my complaint, and the detailed response I sent on December 11, setting out how and why the poll results have been misrepresented amid my arguments that it constituted a breach of Clause 1 of the Editors' Code of Practice.

I do not accept that the other poll questions clearly naming ISIS/ISIL in the question is sufficient defence to suggest that the question and answer which was placed on the front page need not have mentioned IS to be construed as alluding to ISIS/ISIL. As I have established in my previous letter, the coverage of the same question in an earlier poll merited vastly different media coverage precisely because the poll question DID NOT specify a named group. I have provided details of this coverage in my earlier letter.

It seems to me that The Sun has chosen to adopt the same question for the reasons provided by the polling company (to allow for comparisons over time) without (a) establishing those comparisons fully by publishing results from the non-Muslim sample group (b) distorting the results to name ISIS/ISIL in contradistinction to earlier coverage of the same poll question thereby reinforcing a contrast (where one is negligible at best) between Muslim and non-Muslim responses to the same question.

I reject the suggestion that ways in which the poll question may have been interpreted amounts to "semantic wiggling" and the inference that "sympathy for" and "sympathy with" is a distinction without material difference.

You will no doubt be aware of the scrutiny of the survey questions by polling companies including pollsters who worked on the Survation poll itself. I would like to refer you to a blog by one of those involved in conducting the survey on precisely this point, about the question, responses from survey respondents and the manner in which those responses have been subsequently misused to portray something quite different:

"None of the people I polled who responded to the question with the 'some sympathy' answer supported jihadis. One woman gave me thoughtful, considered answers to every question. She thought that David Cameron would probably be right to bomb Syria, and that Muslims did have a responsibility to condemn terrorist attacks carried out in the name of Islam. But she also had some sympathy with young British Muslims who joined fighters in

Syria. "They're brainwashed, I feel sorry for them," she said. And so I ticked the box, "I have some sympathy for young British Muslims who go to join fighters in Syria."

It is clear that how the question about "sympathy with" those who travel to Syria to join fighters was not uniformly interpreted in the manner in which you suggest nor is the difference between "sympathy with" and "sympathy for" negligible in this context. There is a world of difference between those who regard young Muslims as being brainwashed into believing the murderous propaganda of IS and empathising with their weakness of mind, and those who express an affinity with that brutal regime.

It seems to me that you have decided for survey respondents that the questions must be about ISIS/ISIL and that any sympathy expressed with those who travelled to join fighters in Syria must be condemned as sympathy for IS. It is not clear to me, or to the many thousands who have complained about the newspaper's portrayal of the survey results, that this is what the poll asked or indeed what respondents were answering to. You have deliberately chosen to interpret these results in a particular way and you are unwilling to countenance the important methodological and qualitative questions which arise from so singular and pre-determined a reading of the poll results.

I wonder, given your emphatic defence of the interpretation of these results, why the responses from the non-Muslim sample were not therefore included in the coverage? Surely if any sympathy with those who have travelled to Syria to join fighters is to be highlighted and condemned as sympathy for a brutal regime, then the responses from the March poll which showed similar levels of non-Muslims answering in the same way as Muslim respondents would merit coverage too? Why discriminate when, in your view, "Sympathy and support when dealing with such extremes as ISIS can be considered, to all reasonable purposes, synonymous"?

Are non-Muslims who express sympathy less interesting or relevant than British Muslims who do so? The polling figures suggest that there is not much disparity in the numbers.

I also want to contest your presumption that the only conceivable understanding of those young British Muslims who have travelled to Syria to fight "relates to those who have joined ISIS".

I have previously argued that this is a meaning you have taken and not one that is established in fact.

I would like to refer you to the evidence of Mr Charles Farr, who until recently was director of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism and is now chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, to the Home Affairs select committee on 24 November (source: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/countering-extremism/oral/25039.pdf>).

I have highlighted the detail of significance:

Charles Farr: The figures that I think are being shared most widely are the figures about the numbers of people of interest to the security service who have been to Syria and Iraq and the numbers who have come back. I suspect you have already had that. It is between 750 and 800 who have gone since the conflict began and about 50% of those have returned. Those are the really important numbers for us. *Not all those people, I would emphasise—because I think it has been misreported—have joined ISIL. That is a smaller subset of that group but, of course, a percentage certainly have. (emphasis added)*

At a conference held in June of this year, Mr Farr stated that the numbers of British Muslims who had travelled to Syria and Iraq numbered a "few hundred" adding, "It's not to say the challenges they pose are not significant, they are. But ... the more we overstate them the more, frankly, we risk labelling Muslim communities as somehow intrinsically extremist,

which actually despite an unprecedented wealth of social media propaganda, they have proved not to be. So I think we need to be cautious with our metaphors and with our numbers.”

You will appreciate that I wholly contest your presumption that there is "scarcely any doubt" that the "overwhelming narrative" about young British Muslims travelling abroad relates to ISIS/ISIL.

I hasten to add the observation by Mr Farr that there has been “mis-reporting” about the numbers who have joined ISIL. In the context of our present discussion on accuracy, I think that is very important to note. It seems to me that the "overwhelming narrative" is one newspapers want to push, not one that is grounded in empirical evidence which presents actual numbers and proportions of those who have travelled abroad or their purposes for doing so.

Indeed, the gross effects of this “mis-reporting” are evident in the headline published by the paper on 23 November and in the response you have provided. The latter clearly illustrates the impact of “mis-reporting” about British Muslims who have travelled to Syria such that a question which did not specify ISIL (or ISIS) was erroneously identified in your headlines in several places and “mis-reporting” of the numbers involved cited as your defence that there is "scarcely any doubt" about its meaning. I would argue that doubt abounds and that in choosing to adopt an interpretation that privileges IS as a factor, you have wilfully neglected to give due regard to the facts.

I do believe the question posed by Suration was ambiguous but its portrayal in earlier coverage (by Sky News and the Daily Mail) reflected this ambiguity by drawing no firm conclusions that the results were in direct relation to IS (see my previous letter for examples of this earlier coverage). This is in stark contrast to the manner in which The Sun has portrayed the results.

I reiterate my contention that the front page headline and the corresponding inner pages are in breach of Clause 1 of the Editors' Code of Practice. As no acceptance of a breach is forthcoming from the newspaper, I suggest this complaint proceed to the regulator's Complaints Committee for resolution.

Yours sincerely,

Sufyan Ismail
CEO.