

Our reference: 09324-15 (The Sun)
09296-15 The Times

17 February 2016

By email: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

As you are aware, the Complaints Committee of the Independent Press Standards Organisation considered your complaints against The Sun and The Times at its meeting on 27 January. Copies of the decisions are enclosed.

Having upheld your complaints, the Committee has made a requirement for The Sun to take remedial action. This is set out in paragraphs 24-26 of this decision.

Should you have any comments about the remedial action required, or in relation to any disputed points of fact in either decision, please contact me as soon as possible - and by **24 February** at the latest. The newspaper has also been provided with the opportunity to comment.

In addition, you are entitled to request that the decisions be reviewed should you believe that the process by which the Complaints Committee's decisions were made was substantially flawed. Should you wish to request a review, that request must be made in writing, explaining the grounds on which you believe the decision should be reviewed, within 14 days of the date of this letter. The Committee's decisions – both the outcomes and the terms of its rulings – remain confidential until they are published by IPSO, and we ask that you do not disclose it to others.

At the conclusion of the 14-day period – or following the resolution of any concerns raised during the comment and review stages – we will contact the newspaper to notify it that it should proceed with the remedial action required. The decisions will also be published on IPSO’s website.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely

Bianca Strohmann

Decision of the Complaints Committee

09324-15 Mend v The Sun

Summary of complaint

1. Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) complained to the Independent Press Standards Organisation that The Sun breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors’ Code of Practice in an article headlined “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis”, published in print and online on 23 November 2015.
2. IPSO had received a large number of complaints about the coverage. The Committee formally investigated the complaint from MEND, which had been made under Clause 1 (Accuracy)
3. The article, which appeared on the front page, reported the results of a poll commissioned by the newspaper. It reported that “nearly one in five British Muslims has some sympathy with those who had fled the UK to fight for IS in Syria”. It noted that the survey showed that “a clear

majority of the 2.7 million Brits who follow Islam are moderate". The article was illustrated on the front page with a photograph of Mohammed Emwazi, captioned "Support...Brit Jihadi John who went to Syria".

4. The coverage continued on pages 4 and 5 of the newspaper and included an article by a columnist for the newspaper, describing her reaction to what she presented as the fact of respondents' support for IS. She expressed her "shock, horror, bewilderment, anger and disbelief...Surely this can't be true? There cannot possibly be so many Muslims harbouring sympathy for such a murderous twisted ideology? ... a whopping one in five saying they've some, or a lot of sympathy for IS doesn't make any sense to me".
5. The coverage inside the newspaper also included a report by newspaper's political editor summarising reactions to the poll, with the sub-headline "Shocked Muslim leaders slam backing for jihadis", reporting that Islamic leaders had criticised any British Muslims who "have sympathy with those who join IS". The article noted that these leaders had spoken out after being informed that the newspaper's poll showed that 19% of UK Muslims have "some sympathy with those like Jihadi John". It then noted that the new poll showed that levels of sympathy had fallen in comparison to a previous poll carried out by another organisation. It reported that "if the poll reflected views across the country it would mean 500,000 have some support for jihadis".
6. These inside pages also quoted the question about "sympathy", with a bar chart showing the response: when asked "which of the following statements is closest to your view", 5% of those surveyed had a lot of

sympathy, 14% some sympathy and 71% no sympathy with “young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria”. Other questions related to the importance of respondents’ “Muslim or British identity”, the extent to which Islamic leaders in the UK had condemned IS, whether it is the responsibility of Muslims to condemn terrorist attacks carried out in the name of Islam, the possibility of the UK bombing of IS in Iraq. Asked about the “single biggest root cause of IS terrorist attacks”, 25% of those surveyed considered that “IS leaders who exploit vulnerable young people” were the biggest root cause of attacks.

7. The online article was substantially the same as the print version. It appeared on a page with the piece by the newspaper’s political editor, and was illustrated with a photograph of Mohammed Emwazi, known as “Jihadi John”, and a graphic including some of the questions asked in the survey, among them the question relating to sympathy.
8. IPSO received a large number of complaints about the article, largely under Clause 1 (Accuracy). A number of complainants raised concerns that the article breached Clause 12 (Discrimination). In accordance with its procedures when it receives a large number of similar complaints requiring investigation, IPSO selected a lead complainant.
9. The complainant said that the newspaper’s presentation of the poll was misleading. The question about sympathy had referenced those “who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria”; the possible answers did not mention IS. Those who responded to the question might not have intended for their answers to be understood as relating to those joining IS; a number of British Muslims had left the UK to fight against IS, or alongside anti-Assad forces or various Sunni groups. The newspaper

had therefore distorted the poll results by presenting them as demonstrating “sympathy for jihadis”.

10. The complainant also said that the relevant respondents to the poll had agreed that they had sympathy “with” those leaving the UK, not sympathy “for” them. He said that to express sympathy with those leaving the UK to fight in Syria could indicate that those surveyed empathised with the weakness of mind of the individuals fighting, and regretted their misguidance; it was misleading to present this as suggesting sympathy with the ideals of IS.
11. The complainant noted that earlier polls, commissioned by other organisations, had also polled non-Muslims and had found that the level of sympathy for those leaving the UK to fight in Syria were similar among the two groups. He considered it misleading for the article to compare the recent survey with earlier ones without publishing results from non-Muslim groups. The complainant said that the selection and presentation of the material was designed to inflame anti-Muslim sentiment.
12. The newspaper denied breaching the Code. It acknowledged that the matter under complaint was an emotive issue, but emphasised that it had not tried to sensationalise the information which it had obtained, or to cause distress to complainants. It had chosen to publish a story relating to what it considered to be a pressing contemporary issue. The coverage included the questions in full, along with comment from two positive Muslim voices.

13. The newspaper did not accept that the meaning of “those who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria” was ambiguous. It said that this question had been asked as part of a longer telephone survey, which had taken the form of a discussion, and that a number of previous questions, including the directly preceding one “thinking about the root cause of ISIS terrorist attacks, what do you think is the root cause”, had made explicit reference to IS. It did not consider that those surveyed would have been in doubt about the question’s meaning.

14. In addition, the newspaper argued that the question would be understood by respondents as referring to IS because, as a factual matter, the overwhelming majority of those who leave the UK to join fighters are joining IS. It provided an article from the New York Times, which reported the Director of the International Centre of the Study of Radicalisation as saying that 80 percent of British fighters in Syria had joined IS, 20 per cent had joined the Nusra Front, “al Qaeda’s Syrian branch”, and that “very, very few are joining other groups”. It also said that the media narrative around “young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria” had focused on those joining IS; in the past year it could find only one news story relating to a British Muslim joining Kurdish separatist group the PKK, which operates in some parts of Syria, and none joining the Free Syrian Army. The headline had referred to “jihadis”, which the newspaper noted was commonly accepted to mean those pursuing their religious beliefs via a violent struggle. It did not consider this to be an inaccurate description of young Muslims fighting in Syria in a conflict inspired by religion.

15. The questions had been written by the polling company, and had been designed to mirror questions asked in similar polls, to provide a

comparison with the earlier polls. The question about sympathy had used the same wording as earlier polls, and the newspaper said that the CEO of the polling company had confirmed to it on the day of publication that the question was intended to refer to IS. The two previous questions, making direct reference to IS, had been suggested by the newspaper but worded by the polling company. The newspaper did not consider that the omission of polling data from non-Muslims rendered the article misleading. The poll had been conducted by a company registered with the British Polling Council. It was intended to stand alone and could be interpreted independently of previous polls or other data sets.

16. The newspaper said that the sentiment of “sympathy” in the sense of regret or sorrow was still sympathy. It considered that sympathy with those who had elected to join an organisation such as IS was improper, regardless of the motivation.

Relevant Code provisions

17. Clause 1 (Accuracy)

(i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures.

(ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and – where appropriate – an apology published.

(iii) The Press, whilst free to be partisan, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.

Clause 12 (Discrimination)

(i)The Press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability.

Findings of the Committee

18. The essential question was whether the newspaper had taken sufficient care in reporting the findings of the poll. This required the newspaper to form a judgement on what those polled would have understood from the question, and to present a justifiable interpretation of the poll results.
19. There will be those who firmly believe that conducting and reporting a poll of this nature was in itself distasteful or socially harmful; such concerns do not constitute a possible breach of the Code. The newspaper was entitled to commission the poll, and it had used a reputable polling company to do so. The coverage had included the full text of the poll question, along with extensive commentary putting the findings into context, including comment from Muslim leaders, distancing themselves from extremism, and emphasising that the ideology of IS was condemned by the vast majority of British Muslims.
20. In assessing the accuracy of the newspaper's interpretation of the poll results, the Committee considered the entirety of the coverage. The newspaper had provided various interpretations of the poll result. These conflated important distinctions between those travelling to Syria and those already fighting in Syria; between "sympathy" for these individuals and "support" for their actions; and between individuals attracted by the ideology of IS, and the ideology of IS itself. The poll results had been reported by the newspaper as demonstrating that those surveyed

showed “some sympathy with those like Jihadi John”; the newspaper’s columnist states as fact that there was “support” for IS, and sympathy with a “murderous, twisted ideology”; the political editor had made reference to “support” for jihadis; and the picture caption of the front page referred to “support” for “Jihadi John”, emphasising the factual implication that sympathy for known terrorists and support for the ideology of IS are synonymous with sympathy for those who have left the UK to join fighters in Syria.

21. While the newspaper was entitled to interpret the poll’s findings, taken in its entirety, the coverage presented as a fact that the poll showed that 1 in 5 British Muslims had sympathy for those who left to join ISIS and for ISIS itself. In fact, neither the question nor the answers which referred to “sympathy” made reference to IS. The newspaper had failed to take appropriate care in its presentation of the poll results, and as a result the coverage was significantly misleading, in breach of Clause 1.

22. The Committee did not consider any complaints raised under the terms of Clause 12 (Discrimination), as these complaints did not raise a potential breach of the Code against any particular individual. In light of the large number of complaints raising concerns under this Clause, however, the Committee took this opportunity to note publicly that Clause 12 prevents pejorative or prejudicial reference to an individual’s race or religion. The article under complaint did not include pejorative or prejudicial reference to any individual. The terms of Clause 12 were therefore not engaged.

Conclusions

23. The complaint was upheld.

Remedial action required

24. Having upheld the complaint, the Committee considered the remedial action that should be required. In circumstances where the cumulative effect of the coverage had been a misleading factual presentation of the survey results, the appropriate remedy was the publication of an upheld adjudication. The Committee gave careful consideration to requiring a reference to this to be published on the front page, but decided that the adjudication should appear on page 4 or 5, or further forward. The newspaper had taken steps to inform readers about the nature of the poll and the questions asked. Furthermore, the breach of the Code had been established by the Committee based on the cumulative effect of the coverage, the majority of which appeared on pages 4 and 5.

25. The headline of the adjudication must make clear that IPSO has upheld the complaint, and refer to its subject matter; it must be agreed in advance. It should also be published on the newspaper's website, with a link to the full adjudication appearing on the homepage for 24 hours; it should then be archived online in the usual way. Should the newspaper intend to continue to publish the article online, without amendment, in light of this decision it should publish the adjudication in full, beneath the headline.

26. The terms of the adjudication to be published are as follows:

Following an article published in The Sun on 23 November 2015 headlined "1 in 5 Brit Muslims' sympathy for jihadis", Muslim Engagement and Development (Mend) complained to the Independent Press Standards Organisation that The Sun had published inaccurate

information in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Practice. IPSO upheld the complaint and has required The Sun to publish this decision as a remedy to the breach.

The article reported the results of a poll commissioned by the newspaper. It reported that "nearly one in five British Muslims [had] some sympathy with those who had fled the UK to fight for IS in Syria" and was illustrated on the front page with a photograph of Mohammed Emwazi, captioned "Support...Brit Jihadi John who went to Syria".

The coverage continued on pages 4 and 5 of the newspaper and included an article by a columnist for the newspaper, describing her reaction to what she presented as the fact of support for IS, and an article by the newspaper's political editor, which noted that 19% of UK Muslims have "some sympathy with those like Jihadi John".

The complainant said that the presentation of the poll was misleading; those surveyed had not been asked about the ideals of IS, and to express sympathy with those leaving the UK to fight in Syria could indicate that those surveyed empathised with the weakness of mind of the individuals fighting, and regretted their misguidance

The newspaper did not accept that the meaning of "those who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria" was ambiguous. It said that previous questions in the telephone survey had made explicit reference to IS, and the overwhelming majority of those who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria are joining IS. It said that the sentiment of "sympathy" in the sense of regret or sorrow was still sympathy. The newspaper emphasised that its coverage of the poll went beyond the front page

story. It had included the questions in full, along with comment from two positive Muslim voices.

In assessing the accuracy of the newspaper's interpretation of the poll results, the Committee considered the entirety of the coverage. The newspaper had provided various interpretations of the poll result. These didn't make sufficiently clear that there were important distinctions between those travelling to Syria and those already fighting in Syria; between "sympathy" for these individuals and "support" for their actions; and between individuals attracted by the ideology of IS, and the ideology of IS itself.

Taken in its entirety, the coverage presented as a fact that the poll showed that 1 in 5 British Muslims had sympathy for those who left to join ISIS and for ISIS itself. In fact, neither the question nor the answers which referred to "sympathy" made reference to IS. The newspaper had failed to take appropriate care in its presentation of the poll results, and as a result the coverage was significantly misleading, in breach of Clause 1.

Decision of the Complaints Committee

09296-15 Mend v The Times

Summary of complaint

1. Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) complained to the Independent Press Standards Organisation that The Times breached Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Practice in an article headlined "One in five British Muslims has sympathy for Isis", published in print and online on 24 November 2015.

2. The article reported that, according to an opinion poll conducted by The Sun newspaper, one in five Muslims “has sympathy for fighters who choose to leave Britain to wage war in Syria”. It included comments from a number of prominent Muslim individuals, criticising the so-called Islamic State (IS). It also noted that some had questioned the reliability of the poll, with critics saying that it did not distinguish between “those who have gone out to fight for Islamic State and the multitude of other factions, including the Shia militants and Kurds fighting in Syria”. The article included an image of the poll question, taken from The Sun.
3. The article was also published in the same form online, without the image of the poll question.
4. The complainant said that the headline was inaccurate: the survey question reported had not made explicit reference to IS, and those surveyed could have believed it to refer to individuals fighting in Syria for other groups. The article had later referred to this point. It was inaccurate to report that 1 in 5 British Muslims had sympathy for the ideals of IS.
5. The newspaper did not accept a breach of the Code. It noted that the presence of British Muslims among IS fighters had been widely reported, with the estimated number ranging from 700 to 2000. In contrast, only a handful of cases in which British Muslims had joined other groups had been reported. The newspaper did not consider, therefore, that survey respondents would have been in any doubt as to which fighters the question referred to. Furthermore, the questions preceding that reported had made explicit reference to IS. The context of the question was therefore clear.

6. The newspaper noted that the question of whether there was a meaningful distinction between sympathy for those who fight for IS and sympathy for the ideals of IS was a matter of opinion. To clarify its headline, and following earlier complaints, it published the following clarification on 26 November, in its corrections and clarifications column on its letters page, on page 36:

We reported the findings of a Survation poll of 1000 British Muslims (News 24 Nov). Asked "How do you feel about young Muslims who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria?", 14% of respondents expressed "some sympathy" and 5 per cent "a lot of sympathy". The survey did not distinguish between those who go to fight for Islamic State and those who join other factions in Syria, and it did not ask about attitudes towards Isis itself. Our headline, "One in five British Muslims has sympathy for Isis," was misleading in failing to reflect this.

This was also added to the online article, and the online headline was amended to "One in five British Muslims has sympathy for young Muslims who join fighters in Syria".

7. The complainant did not consider that the correction had been published promptly, or with sufficient prominence.

Relevant Code provisions

8. Clause 1 (Accuracy)
 - (i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures.
 - (ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence.

Findings of the Committee

9. Respondents had been asked about their levels of sympathy for individuals “who leave Britain to join fighters in Syria”. They had not been asked about sympathy for IS itself, or its ideology. It was therefore misleading for the headline to present the survey findings as showing sympathy for IS. This distinction between sympathy for individuals and for the ideology of IS was significant: sympathy for the ideology would not allow for the sort of reasonable alternative explanation which might be given by someone who had expressed sympathy with the individuals involved. The headline misrepresentation of the survey findings represented a failure to take care over the accuracy of the article in breach of Clause 1 (i), and a correction was required to avoid a breach of 1(ii).

10. Following complaints, the newspaper had promptly published a clarification, in print and online, and had amended the online headline. The print clarification had appeared in the newspaper’s regular Corrections and Clarifications column, two days after the original article had been published. The Committee recognised the importance of such columns, which provide a consistent position for corrections. The article under complaint had appeared on page 11, and the publication of a clarification in the regular column was sufficiently prominent. The Committee considered that the action taken by the newspaper was sufficient to meet the terms of 1 (ii). There was no further breach of the Code on this point.

11. The text of the article had made clear that the question had referred to “fighters who choose to leave Britain to wage war in Syria”. It had not failed to distinguish between individuals and ideals, and the text of the article did not raise a further breach of the Code.

Conclusions

12. The complaint was upheld.

Remedial action required

13. The newspaper had promptly published a sufficiently prominent clarification, which corrected the inaccurate impression given by the headline, and had amended the online article and appended a clarification to it. No further action was required.