

Reporting on Muslims and Islam

There is a significant public interest in the reporting of religions and religious communities in the UK. This document focuses specifically on the reporting of Muslims and Islam, but many of the issues it raises are relevant to the reporting of any religion or community.

The reporting of Muslims and Islam may pose challenges for journalists and editors. This document is designed to help them understand how the Editors' Code is applied to these issues and to assist them on reporting these important matters. It does not supersede the Editors' Code or create new obligations.

This guidance focuses on the application of Clause 1 (Accuracy) and Clause 12 (Discrimination). Other areas of the Code may also be relevant.

Key points

- The reporting of Muslims and Islam in the UK is of significant public interest.
- Journalists must take care not to report inaccurately, which can be difficult particularly where there is more than one interpretation of a point of belief, where individuals come from diverse backgrounds, cultures and communities and make individual choices about how to interpret and practise their religion.
- Journalists can use various methods to ensure coverage is accurate, including providing contextualising information, presenting different opinions and approaching second sources.
- Journalists should not make pejorative or prejudicial remarks about an individual on the basis of their religion (or other personal characteristics). Reference should only be made if genuinely relevant to the story.

1. Contextual information about Muslims and Islam in the UK

Levels of knowledge and awareness about Muslims and Islam in the UK vary significantly.

The following contextual information may be helpful for journalists researching or writing stories about Islam and Muslims.

- 2011 census data¹ recorded that Muslims make up under 5% of the population of the UK – approximately 2.8 million people.
- According to the census about two-thirds of British Muslims are of Asian ethnicity.
- Over 47% of Muslims in the UK are UK-born. 2011 census data shows that 73% of Muslims stated that their only national identity is British or other UK identity.²
- The median age for Muslims in the UK is 25, the lowest median age of all religions.
- Islam means 'submission to the will of Allah' (God).
- The practical foundations of Islam are known as 'The Five Pillars of Islam'. These are the Shahada, (the declaration of faith), daily prayers, giving to charity, the fast of Ramadan, and Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca.
- 'The Six Tenets of Faith' are: belief in One God, belief in His Books, belief in His Angels, belief in His Prophets (the final of whom is Muhammad), belief in the Day of Judgement, and belief in His Divine Decree.
- The Quran is the principal source of Muslim faith and practice. It is considered to be the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.
- The Sunnah refers to practices based upon what the Prophet Muhammad said, did, agreed to or condemned. The Hadith are the books containing the life, actions, and sayings of the Prophet and are a major source of religious law and moral guidance.
- You can also find further information on the [external resources](#) page on IPSO's website.

2. The public interest in reporting

Reporting religion is a matter of significant interest. It is relevant to the historical and societal context within which we live, as well as the daily news agenda. An estimated 75% of the population of England and Wales identify with some kind of religious faith.³

Journalists can play an important role in developing and enhancing understanding of all faiths, and those of no faith.

A free press exercising its rights to speak freely will produce a plurality of views, contributions to debate and journalistic approaches. This may include the publication of views which may be critical, challenging or could be considered by some to be offensive towards particular religions or religious communities. However, care must still be taken to comply with the Editors' Code.

Challenging and shocking content

The Editors' Code is designed to deal with any possible conflicts between the right to freedom of expression and the rights of individuals, such as their right to privacy. It makes clear that newspapers have the fundamental right to freedom of expression which includes the right to inform, to be partisan, to challenge, shock, be satirical and to entertain.

Newspapers and magazines are free to publish what editors think is appropriate so long as the rights of individuals – which are protected under the Code – are not infringed.

3. Accuracy

Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code requires journalists to take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images.

Taking care to report accurately

- There is no 'one Islam'. Muslims are not a monolithic community and come from diverse backgrounds, cultures and communities and make individual choices about how to interpret and practise their religion and its relevance to their lives.
- The basis for traditions or interpretations may be difficult to attribute, as they may relate to religious or cultural factors. For example, there are differences in the way religious texts are translated or interpreted.
- Muslims are not wholly defined, motivated or informed by their faith – there are many other aspects of their identity, as is the case with all individuals with religious identity.

There are many different organisations or individuals that journalists may consider approaching for information when taking care over accuracy. When doing so, it may be helpful to consider the expertise of the person/organisation, their background and any previous comments on the issues. Journalists may also find it useful to speak to a diverse range of voices within communities.

Opinion pieces

Newspapers are entitled to publish opinion pieces, including critical pieces, but must take care to comply with the Code, for example not to publish inaccurate, misleading and distorted information or discriminate against an individual.

Generalisations

There exist a number of generalisations and stereotypes in British society, including around Islam and Muslims. While the Code does not prohibit the use of generalisations within

coverage, it does require that journalists draw a distinction between comment, conjecture and fact in their reporting. Journalists should take care that stereotypes do not feature in factual coverage so as to uphold this distinction.

Selection of images

Images powerfully convey the meaning of a piece and the Code requires journalists to take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted images. In particular, consider whether an image may misrepresent or create a distorted impression of the issue being reported on.

Headlines

Headlines are a powerful tool, used to convey the heart of a story, or as part of campaigning journalism in the public interest. The Code makes clear any claim made in a headline must be supported by the text of the article, however eye-catching headlines will not necessarily summarise the story.

Breaking news

When reporting on breaking news, including possible acts of terror carried out in the name of Islam, journalists may be presented with conflicting and incomplete information, or information from eyewitnesses which proves to be inaccurate. There may also be unconfirmed claims of responsibility for acts of terrorism, which turn out to be false.

Fast-developing news stories will, by their nature, involve the reporting of detail which, while believed to be accurate at the time of publication, is clarified or refuted as events become clearer. The Code should not inhibit reporting of breaking news, but particular care should be taken to distinguish between comment, conjecture and fact where a situation is fast-moving, and information is incomplete.

Social media is often a useful source of information in breaking news situations. Journalists should take care around the accuracy of claims sourced from social media.

IPSO provides detailed [guidance](#) on using material from social media on its website, which may be helpful.

Key questions

1. What steps will you take to verify the information you are publishing is accurate?
2. How will you present the information you are publishing?
3. What images are you using to accompany your article and why?
4. Is the headline supported by the text?
5. What steps will you take to verify any information taken from social media?

4. Discrimination

Clause 12 of the Editors' Code says journalists must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's religion (as well as certain other protected characteristics) and must only publish details of an individual's religion (or other protected characteristics) if it is genuinely relevant to the story.

Clause 12 seeks to protect individuals while respecting the fundamental right to freedom of expression enshrined in the Preamble to the Code.

It does not prohibit prejudicial or pejorative references to a particular religion, even though criticisms may cause distress and offence.

Journalists must consider whether the fact that an individual is Muslim is relevant to the article before publishing that information.

The details of someone's religion may be genuinely relevant to the piece being written, perhaps because their religion is a relevant biographical detail or their actions were motivated by their religion. But if an individual's religious identity is irrelevant, then referring to it would breach the Code.

Clause 12 should not be interpreted as preventing criticism merely because, as is inescapable, many individuals subscribe to that faith. Were it otherwise, the freedom of the press to engage in discussion, criticism and debate about religious ideas and practices would be restricted.

Key questions

1. Is the language you are using prejudicial or pejorative to an individual's religion?
2. Is the individual's religion genuinely relevant to the story?

5. Other issues to consider

Some concerns about the reporting of Islam and Muslims in the UK do not raise issues under the Editors' Code, but journalists and editors may find it helpful to be aware of, and consider, the following issues and be aware of IPSO's position on them.

Language

As discussed in section 4, the Editors' Code prevents journalists from using prejudicial or pejorative language about an individual's religion. Beyond that, neither IPSO nor the Code seeks to specify or limit the language that journalists can use to report on Islam or Muslims in the UK. This would curtail freedom of expression and the ability of the press to challenge, scrutinise, and debate.

Editorial selection

A free press serves the public with a variety of views, contributions to debate, and journalistic approaches. The selection and presentation of material for publication is a matter for individual editors provided that the Editors' Code has not otherwise been breached.

Balance

Selection of material is a matter for individual editors, who under the terms of the Code are free to "editorialise and campaign". However, care must be taken to ensure omission of information does not lead to inaccurate or distorted reporting.

Case studies

These case studies explore IPSO's decision-making on complaints relating to the reporting of Islam and Muslims.

All of the rulings mentioned below can be found on IPSO's website:
[www.ipso.co.uk/
rulings-and-
resolution-statements](http://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements)

[Manji v The Sun](#)

A column in The Sun questioned why a "young lady in a hijab" had presented the Channel 4 news on the night of a terror attack in Nice. The article set out the columnist's opinion on the hijab, Islam in general and Channel 4's choice of interviewer. The article was highly critical of Channel 4 for permitting a newsreader to wear the hijab when presenting the news.

The column was acknowledged to be deeply offensive to the complainant, who was the newsreader. The column did reference her, to explain why the columnist was discussing whether newsreaders should be allowed to wear religious symbols but did not include a prejudicial or pejorative reference on the grounds of her religion. The columnist was entitled to express his views, despite many people finding those offensive. The complaint was not upheld.

Key point: Publications can publish views that people may find offensive, including relating to religious expression, but must not make prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual when doing so.

MEND v The Sun

Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) complained that The Sun reported the results of a poll inaccurately in an article that said that “nearly one in five British Muslims has some sympathy with those who had fled the UK to fight for IS in Syria”. MEND said this was misleading because the poll question about sympathy had referenced those “who leave the UK to join fighters in Syria” and did not mention IS.

The newspaper said it had reported the poll results accurately.

The Committee ruled that 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 IS and for IS itself. 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.

Key point: Publications must take care not to publish inaccuracies or misleading or distorted information and must distinguish clearly what is opinion, claims, and fact.

Muslim Association of Britain v The Daily Telegraph

An opinion piece in the Daily Telegraph reported on the links between a UK political party and various Muslim representative groups. The complainant, a named group, disputed claims made in the article. The publication said the claims were based on statements made by the organisation, other publicly available information, and government reports.

Although the organisation disagreed with the newspaper’s characterisation of it, the question for IPSO’s Complaints Committee was whether the newspaper had taken care, as required under the Code, not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information.

The newspaper had relied on several statements issued by senior individuals within the organisation to provide the basis for its characterisation of the wider ideological beliefs the article described. The newspaper was entitled to rely on these public statements, and although the complainant did not agree with the newspaper’s interpretation of these, it did not deny their accuracy. The material provided

by the newspaper was sufficient to support the columnist's characterisation. The complaint was not upheld.

Key point: Newspapers are entitled to publish opinion pieces, even if others disagree with them, but must do so in a way that complies with the terms of the Code. Care must be taken not to publish inaccurate or misleading information.

[Muslim Council of Britain v The Times](#)

The Muslim Council of Britain complained about the accuracy of an article which attributed an increase in the numbers of lambs slaughtered without being stunned to the influence of halal certification bodies.

The article said that the increase in non-stun slaughters had risen sharply because some halal certification bodies deemed that meat cannot be halal if the animal has been stunned prior to its slaughter.

The publication based its claims on government data showing that the number of non-stunned slaughters and registered non-stun abattoirs had increased sharply.

IPSO's Complaints Committee ruled that in circumstances where the publication's claim was supported by the data, it had taken sufficient care over accuracy and was entitled to characterise this rise as related to the influence of bodies which do not allow certain types of slaughter techniques. The complaint was not upheld.

Key point: Newspapers must take care not to publish inaccurate or distorted information and distinguish between comment, conjecture and fact.

[Versi v express.co.uk](#)

Express.co.uk reported breaking news about a shooting in a Spanish supermarket, including a claim that according to local police, the gunman had shouted "Allahu Akbar" as he opened fire. The publication relied on local media reports in Spain for information about the attack.

Later reports made clear that the police did not believe there was a political or religious motive and that other witnesses denied that the gunman had shouted those words. The complaint was upheld and the publication was required to publish a correction on this point.

Key point: Newspapers must take care not to publish inaccurate information when reporting on fast-developing news stories. Care should be taken to represent any claims as such until these are confirmed.

Adams vs Metro

Daniel Adams complained that an article in Metro, reporting comments made by the deputy leader of Rotherham Council on child sexual exploitation, was inaccurate. The complainant said that the picture chosen to accompany the article, which included a local Mosque, implied a connection between Islam and child sexual exploitation.

The newspaper said the image was a stock image of Rotherham and denied that it implied any connection between the Mosque and crimes committed, or more broadly between Islam and child abuse.

The Committee did not agree the image suggested that the wider Muslim community had been involved in child abuse. The newspaper had illustrated an article about Rotherham with an image of Rotherham. It did not uphold the complaint but noted that care should be taken around choice of images.

Key point
Consider whether an image may misrepresent or create a distorted impression of the issue being reported on.

End notes

1 Available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census>

2 Muslim Council of Britain (2015) British Muslims in Numbers: A Demographic, Socio-economic and Health profile of Muslims in Britain drawing on the 2011 Census. Available at http://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf

3 Office of National Statistics (2020) Exploring religion in England and Wales. Available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/exploringreligioninenglandandwales/february2020>

Pre-publication advice

IPSO offers free, 24-hour non-binding advice on how the Editors' Code applies to editors and journalists at regulated publishers. Please contact us on 0300 123 2220 or advice@ipso.co.uk

For urgent out of hours advice please call

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