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Trust review of BBC Editorial Guidelines underlines commitment to high standards

12 October 2010

The BBC's new Editorial Guidelines - the foundation of everything broadcast or produced by the BBC - are published today following a review commissioned by the BBC Trust.

The guidelines on impartiality, harm and offence, competitions, and coverage of brands or products have been updated, along with changes to the guidelines on accuracy, fairness, privacy, children and young people, and conflicts of interest. In addition, there are new guidelines on the re-use of material.

On impartiality, the requirements for 'due impartiality' across controversial subjects have been extended. Instead of 'controversial subjects' being defined only in terms of news and programmes on matters of public policy or political/industrial controversy - the standard for the rest of the broadcasting sector - they now include controversies within a range of topics including religion and science.

The guidelines have been revised by the BBC Executive for the Trust; the Trust then reviewed them and carried out a public consultation. This is the first time licence fee payers have been consulted on the guidelines, which are reviewed routinely every five years. The Trust received more than 1,600 responses from individuals and organisations to the consultation on the draft new guidelines.

Changes to the guidelines include:

The extension of the requirements for 'due impartiality' when covering controversial subjects, to include a wider range of topics in which controversy may arise, including religion, science, culture and ethics;

New requirements aimed at protecting people (not fictional or historic characters), from unduly humiliating or derogatory remarks for the purposes of entertainment;

A requirement to take account of the cumulative effect of repeated mentions of brands or products, such as films or bands, following concerns raised by the industry;

A requirement to avoid misleading audiences through programme editing or commentary, or through competitions which are not genuine.

Sir Michael Lyons, Chairman of the BBC Trust, said:

"We recognise the need for the BBC to be original, surprising and sometimes edgy. At the same time it must be fair, accurate, impartial and avoid giving broad offence. The need to get that right lies at the heart of these editorial guidelines - it's always been clear that the public expects the very highest standards from the BBC, and the editorial guidelines are a vital tool in achieving that.

"It's important to get them right, but it's also important to ensure that they're implemented in a way that does not over-complicate the making of great programmes. The Director-General and his team should continue to ensure that processes are made clear and simple, and that everyone understands what is expected of them."

Alison Hastings, Chair of the Trust's Editorial Standards Committee, which has overseen the update of the new guidelines, said:

"In approving the new guidelines we've listened to licence fee payers, drawn from our own experience on the Editorial Standards Committee, and taken account of changes in the media since the last review, to make sure that they are fit for purpose and they work for those actually making content for the BBC.

"We are clear that the guidelines are not about replacing sound editorial judgement with a set of rules - indeed, they give programme-makers certainty to enable them to take creative risks, and they ensure that the combination of great content and high standards continues."

Impartiality

The guidelines on impartiality have been updated, setting a fresh standard for the way programmes are made. The 2005 guidelines stated that 'controversial subjects' which must be treated with due impartiality were simply matters of public policy or political/industrial controversy. This is the standard that currently applies to the rest of the broadcasting sector.

The new guidelines extend the definition of 'controversial subjects' to include controversies in a wider range of topics - religion, science, culture and ethics, and other topics. In practice, this means that when BBC content deals with controversy within these subjects, it must be treated with a level of impartiality adequate and appropriate to the content, taking account of the nature of the content and the likely audience expectation.

Harm and offence

A new guideline has been introduced aimed at protecting 'real people' (as opposed to fictional characters or historic figures) from unduly intimidating, humiliating, intrusive, aggressive or

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Alison Hastings, Trustee**



derogatory remarks for the purposes of entertainment. This does not mean preventing comedy or jokes about people in the public eye, but simply that such comments and their tone are proportionate to their target.

Undue prominence

Following upheld complaints about BBC coverage of the launch of a U2 album in 2009, and a Radio One 'Harry Potter Day' the same year, the guidelines now require those responsible for producing BBC content to take account of the 'cumulative effect' that repeated mentions of a particular brand or product over a short period may have in giving the brand or product undue prominence, and to seek approval to feature a brand or product in this way.

Other provisions include updates to the guidelines on ensuring that audiences are not misled through editing or commentary of a programme or through unfair competitions where (for example) winners are not genuine or are pre-chosen. There are also new and strengthened guidelines covering gameshows, quizzes and talent shows, including those offering 'life-changing opportunities'.

A Trust commentary on the new guidelines has also been published today, along with independent audience research and responses to the public consultation on the editorial guidelines.

Notes to Editors

The new guidelines can be found on the BBC Guidelines website, and other documents published by the Trust today can be found here:
BBC Editorial Guidelines 2010

The public consultation on the new guidelines launched in October 2009.

"The impartiality must be adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectation and any signposting that may influence that expectation. Due impartiality is often more than a simple matter of 'balance' between opposing viewpoints. Equally, it does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles."

(Editorial Guidelines section 4: Impartiality, p.38)

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