

Mr Oli Bird v The Spectator

Clauses noted: 1

Mr Oli Bird of London complained to the Press Complaints Commission that a blog posting on the Spectator's website, published on 5 December 2009, contained inaccurate information in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complaint was upheld.

The piece under complaint was an entry on Rod Liddle's regular blog for the Spectator's website. It said that "the overwhelming majority of street crime, knife crime, gun crime, robbery and crimes of sexual violence in London is carried out by young men from the African-Caribbean community". The complainant said that was not the case and pointed to statistics produced by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), which showed that in the area covered by the Metropolitan police force, the majority of arrests for notifiable offences were of white people. In categories defined as 'violence against the person' and 'sexual offences', black people made up 32% of arrests. 58% of arrests for robbery were of black people but that was not an 'overwhelming majority'. The MoJ statistics did not give specific figures for knife crime or gun crime.

The magazine provided some evidence to substantiate the figures: a BBC report, which quoted an Inspector in the Trident Unit of the Metropolitan police as saying that 'for three out of every four shootings...in London, the victim and the perpetrator are from the black community'; a Daily Mail article, which reported that '124 out of 225 under-18s legally proceeded against for knife offences in the past three months are from the black community'; and a Sunday Times report which stated that '71% of people accused of mobile phone theft were black...'. It said that blogging was a conversational medium in which readers were able to disagree with the writer's opinion immediately, as had happened in this case. In that sense, the piece as a whole had been written by the columnist and those who had commented. In addition, it had published a separate blog by another author in which the accuracy of the claim was called into question.

Adjudication

The Commission recognised the magazine's argument that the nature of a blog post is often provocative and conducive to discussion. The blog in this case - which had been clearly attributed to the columnist - had certainly provoked considerable debate.

However, the magazine had not been able to demonstrate that the "overwhelming majority" of crime in all of the stated categories had been carried out by members of the African-Caribbean community. It was difficult to argue that the sentence in question represented purely the columnist's opinion, which might be challenged. Instead, it was a statement of fact. As such, the Commission believed that the onus was on the magazine to ensure that it was corrected authoritatively online. It could not rely merely on the carrying of critical reaction to the piece. The Commission upheld the complaint under Clause 1 of the Code.

Adjudication issued 29/03/2010