

Dr Richard A E North v The Sunday Times

Clauses noted: 1

Dr Richard A E North complained to the Press Complaints Commission that a correction published in The Sunday Times on 20 June 2010, headlined "The Sunday Times and the IPCC: Correction", was inaccurate and misleading in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code of Practice.

The complaint was not upheld.

The correction in question was published following a complaint to the PCC about an article which had appeared in The Sunday Times on 31st January 2010. The complaint was resolved between the parties without formal adjudication by the Commission. The relevant section of the correction under complaint was the following:

The article "UN climate panel shamed by bogus rainforest claim" (News, Jan 31) stated that the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report had included an "unsubstantiated claim" that up to 40% of the Amazon rainforest could be sensitive to future changes in rainfall. The IPCC had referenced the claim to a report prepared for WWF by Andrew Rowell and Peter Moore, whom the article described as "green campaigners" with "little scientific expertise". The article also stated that the authors' research had been based on a scientific paper that dealt with the impact of human activity rather than climate change.

In fact, the IPCC's Amazon statement is supported by peer-reviewed scientific evidence. In the case of the WWF report, the figure had, in error, not been referenced, but was based on research by the respected Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM) which did relate to the impact of climate change. We also understand and accept that Mr Rowell is an experienced environmental journalist and that Dr Moore is an expert in forest management, and apologise for any suggestion to the contrary.

The complainant said that two parts of the correction were inaccurate and misleading: the assertion that "the IPCC's Amazon statement is supported by peer-reviewed scientific evidence"; and the claim that the WWF report was "based on research by the respected Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM) which did relate to the impact of climate change".

The complainant said that he was the originator of the claim that the IPCC Amazon allegation was unsubstantiated, having made it on his blog before the publication of the article. The 31st January article had attributed a research credit to him. He said that the original assertion was correct, and the retraction of the article, and admission of error, had reflected on him personally.

The overriding issue for the complainant was whether the claim had been "substantiated", or "supported". He asked the Commission to agree with general scientific convention: "this demands that a claim of 'support', which justifies a claim in a scientific document (such as the IPCC report) being considered 'substantiated', is satisfied only when the claim is referenced. This must be either directly, or through a continuous chain of references, to an authoritative peer-reviewed work setting out primary research, which has been published in a reputable scientific journal (or publication of equivalent authority)".

The complainant said that the IPCC's Amazon statement had been referenced to a peer-reviewed scientific paper, in this case via the WWF report *Global Review of Forest Fires*. The WWF had indicated that the reference in question was research by the Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM) which, by common consent, was accepted to be its report *Fire in the Amazon*. To be used as "substantiation", the complainant said that this report should record primary research and be peer-reviewed, or be cross-referenced to papers that did so. *Fire in the Amazon*, the complainant contended, was not peer-reviewed, did not offer any original research and made no

reference to any peer-reviewed work. As such, the reference in the correction to the IPCC's Amazon statement being "supported by peer-reviewed scientific evidence" was inaccurate.

The complainant rejected a view that a work could be "supported" if a general body of peer-reviewed scientific work existed which agreed with assertions made, and it was not necessary to identify specifically that work within the paper or document in which the claim was made.

In terms of background, the complainant said that the IPCC report had stated that "up to 40% of the Amazonian forests could react drastically to even a slight reduction in precipitation", referring to the Rowell and Moore paper *Global Review of Forest Fires*. This paper contained a short sentence which appeared (in part) to support the IPCC claim: "Up to 40% of the Brazilian forest is extremely sensitive to small reductions in the amount of rainfall". In turn, this claim was contained in a paragraph for which there was only one reference - an article in the journal *Nature*. In the absence of any other citation, it could be assumed that this was the source on which Rowell and Moore relied. However, close examination of the paper (which was peer-reviewed) showed that it dealt largely with the effects of logging in the Amazon, with no reference to the 40% figure, or slight reductions in precipitation. As such, the *Nature* paper could not be taken to support the assertions by Rowell and Moore or the IPCC. The charge that the claim was "unsubstantiated" was sound.

The complainant accepted there was a view that the IPCC had made a referencing error, rather than a scientific error, as there was a significant body of evidence which warned of drought in the Amazon. However, the "correctness" of the IPCC claim was "not relevant" to his complaint; for the complainant, the issue was whether the IPCC's statement was "supported by peer-reviewed scientific evidence".

The newspaper said that the correction did not retract the entirety of the original article; rather, it corrected and clarified a number of points, the natural assumption being that those parts of the piece which were not corrected and clarified were accurate. That it chose to remove the article (and not rewrite it) was a matter of editorial prerogative.

The newspaper said that the specific part of the correction now under complaint related to an inaccurate assertion that a claim in the 2007 IPCC report (that 40% of the Amazon rainforest was sensitive to small changes in rainfall) had been based on research unrelated to climate change. It also acted to counter any false impression to readers that the claim as a whole had no basis in peer-reviewed science.

The newspaper stated that the background to the correction was as follows:

"The IPCC claim had been referenced to a WWF report, *Global Review of Forest Fires*. This report, written by Rowell and Moore, suggested in one paragraph that "up to 40% of the Brazilian forest is extremely sensitive to small reductions in the amount of rainfall". This paragraph went on to describe the increase in fire risk and the decrease in soil water availability in 1998. At the end of this paragraph there was a single reference to a 1999 paper by Daniel Nepstad concerning the impact of logging and fire on the Amazon. Some readers of the WWF report concluded that Nepstad's paper was therefore the source for the "40%" claim. However, Rowell and Moore had stated that the Nepstad paper was the reference only for the later part of the paragraph and not for the 40% claim. The reference for the 40% claim had been mistakenly omitted. According to Rowell, Moore and Nepstad, the "40%" claim should have been referenced to non-peer-reviewed research by "IPAM" (the Amazon Environmental Research Institute, founded by Nepstad) - either IPAM's 1999 overview *Fire in the Amazon* or the institute's website, both of which stated that "30-40% of the forests of the Brazilian Amazon are sensitive to small changes in rainfall"."

On this basis, the newspaper said that criticism of the IPCC report on the grounds that it had cited research related to logging rather than climate change was incorrect. The newspaper had accepted that the article was wrong on this point.

On the second issue, the newspaper said that the IPCC had been the subject of broader - and arguably legitimate - criticism for relying on a non-peer-reviewed WWF report, particularly since the relevant source in the WWF report was neither referenced nor a peer-reviewed paper. However, the overall claim itself did have some basis in peer-reviewed literature. In particular, the newspaper cited the following papers: Lewis, 2005, "Tropical forests and the changing earth systems" in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*; Huntingford et al., 2008, "Toward quantifying uncertainty in predictions of Amazon 'dieback'", in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*; Phillips et al., 2009, "Drought sensitivity of the Amazon rainforest" in *Science*; and Daniel Nepstad's 1994 *Nature* and 2004 *Global Change Biology* papers. After publication of the original article, Nepstad had released a public statement saying that these papers demonstrated that half of the Amazon forest had been critically affected by drought and that "in sum, the IPCC statement on the Amazon was correct".

The newspaper said that the complainant had argued that the term "unsubstantiated" could only refer to whether the IPCC report correctly referenced its claim to a peer-reviewed source; the original complainants, conversely, had suggested that readers would understand that there was no evidential basis in the claim whatsoever (which was not the case).

The newspaper said that it had accepted that there was potential ambiguity over the original use of the term "unsubstantiated". Its correction did not retract the term but noted that it had been used in the original piece. The correction clarified that there was "peer-reviewed scientific evidence that 'supports' the 40% claim. It does not express a view on whether this evidence is compelling or the claim itself correct. Nor does it assert that the IPCC report correctly referenced its claim to this peer-reviewed evidence".

Adjudication

It was important to note that the Commission had not previously made a ruling on the accuracy or otherwise of the 31st January article. That complaint had been settled between the complainants and newspaper, with the PCC acting as mediator, by the newspaper voluntarily publishing the correction. The Commission was now tasked with considering whether this correction was itself inaccurate or misleading. Indeed, it was being asked, in effect, to uphold a complaint against the newspaper for publishing (in good faith) a correction to an article to which the complainant had himself contributed. These unusual circumstances were acknowledged by the Commission when considering the complaint.

Under the terms of Clause 1, newspapers have an obligation to take care not to publish inaccurate or misleading information, including information of a scientific nature. Of course, the topic of climate change is one that brings with it robust and ongoing debate, often with strong disagreement between opposing sides. The Commission has previously ruled that it is not its role to "make findings of fact on where the truth about climate change lies, but to consider whether newspapers have abided by the terms of the Code when presenting information to their readers". The Commission therefore had regard for the fact that the complaint related to a topic where there were strongly competing views on complex technical issues which formed the subject of ongoing academic debate.

The complainant said that the correction was inaccurate and misleading by stating that the "IPCC's statement is supported by peer-reviewed scientific evidence" because it was not "supported" in the sense which is accepted by scientific convention. However, the Commission was of the view that the newspaper was entitled to express the correction in layman's terms. The Commission noted that the newspaper was able to demonstrate that peer-reviewed studies existed which, arguably, could be said to "support" the thrust of the IPCC's statement in a more general sense.

The Commission understood the complainant's position and agreed that the correction could have been expressed more clearly, but it was not - in the Commission's opinion - misleading to readers. The context here was important: the item was designed to correct what the newspaper accepted were potentially misleading elements to its original story; the correction itself was not a comprehensive scientific analysis of the subject, and readers would understand this. The Commission considered that the terms of this adjudication would usefully serve to set out, in greater detail, the issues surrounding the matter.

The complainant had also argued that the correction was inaccurate and misleading by stating that the WWF report "was based on research by the respected Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM) which did relate to the impact of climate change". Given that there had been a referencing omission - and the position had since been clarified by the authors of the report - the Commission was of the view that the newspaper was entitled to address this point in the correction. The correction did not claim that the IPAM research had been properly referenced or was itself peer-reviewed. It said that the research was "respected", which was clearly a value judgement on the part of the newspaper, and that it did relate to the impact of climate change. The Commission did not consider that these points could be said to be factually inaccurate or misleading.

● Adjudication issued 26/11/2010