

Accuracy

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3.1 Introduction

The BBC is committed to achieving due accuracy in all its output. This commitment is fundamental to our reputation and the trust of audiences. The term 'due' means that the accuracy 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 expectation¹.

The due accuracy required of, for example, drama, entertainment and comedy, will not usually be the same as for most factual content. The requirements may even vary within a genre, so the due accuracy required of factual content may differ depending on whether it is, for example, factual entertainment, historical documentary, current affairs or news².

This means all BBC output, as appropriate to its subject and nature, must be well sourced, based on sound evidence, and corroborated. We should be honest and open about what we don't know and avoid unfounded speculation. Claims, allegations, material facts and other content that cannot be corroborated should normally be attributed.

The BBC must not knowingly and materially mislead its audiences. We should not distort known facts, present invented material as fact or otherwise undermine our audiences' trust in our content.

We should normally acknowledge serious factual errors and correct them quickly, clearly and appropriately.

- 1 The section of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code that relates to this is 5: Due Impartiality and Due Accuracy and Undue Prominence of Views and Opinions.
- 2 The Framework Agreement accompanying the BBC Charter requires us to observe the accuracy requirements of the Broadcasting Code; however, by applying 'due accuracy' to all output, we exceed that requirement.

3.2 Mandatory Referrals

(Mandatory Referrals are part of the BBC's editorial management system. They are an essential part of the process to ensure compliance and must be observed.)

Referrals to Director Editorial Policy and Standards

3.2.1 Any proposal to rely on a single unnamed source making a serious allegation or to grant anonymity to a significant contributor making a serious allegation must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards and Programme Legal Advice.

See 3.3.18

Other Referrals

3.2.2 Where we believe we have broadcast a defamatory inaccuracy, Programme Legal Advice must be consulted.

See 3.3.28

3.3 Guidelines

Gathering Material

3.3.1 Accuracy is not simply a matter of getting facts right. Relevant opinions as well as facts may need to be considered. When necessary, all the relevant facts and information should be weighed to get at the truth.

Where appropriate to the output and wherever possible, we should:

- gather material using first-hand sources
- check facts and statistics, identifying important caveats and limitations
- validate the authenticity of documentary evidence and digital material
- corroborate claims and allegations made by contributors

- weigh, interpret and contextualise claims, including statistical claims.

See Guidance online: Reporting Statistics; and Investigations

3.3.2 In news and current affairs content, achieving due accuracy is more important than speed.

3.3.3 We should try to witness events and gather information first-hand. Where this is not possible, we should talk to first-hand sources and, where practicable, corroborate their evidence.

3.3.4 We should be reluctant to rely on a single source. If we do rely on a single source, it should be credible, and a named, on-the-record source is always preferable.

See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.3.18

3.3.5 We should, wherever practicable, record our research interviews with sources making serious allegations. In circumstances where recording might inhibit the source, full notes should be made, preferably at the time or, if not, as soon as possible afterwards.

See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.3.15

3.3.6 We must check and verify information, facts and documents, where required to achieve due accuracy. If we have been unable to verify material we should usually say so and attribute the information.

Accuracy in Live Content

3.3.7 Achieving due accuracy in live content can be challenging, as there may be little opportunity to verify factual claims. Where practicable, and particularly if an issue is controversial, content makers should take steps to ensure due accuracy.

Where possible, risks should be identified in advance and measures taken to mitigate them. This may include

ensuring the appropriate preparation is undertaken so that the content contains sufficient challenge or context; or ensuring other contributors are able to provide additional challenge. Significant inaccuracies that may arise should be corrected quickly.

See Section 4 Impartiality: 4.3.4-4.3.8

See Guidance online: Live Output

Reporting Statistics and Risk

3.3.8

We should reserve the same scepticism for statistics as we do for facts or quotes and not necessarily take numbers at face value. When our output includes statistics, we should explain the numbers clearly, put them into context, weigh, interpret and, where appropriate, challenge them, present them clearly and attribute them. The statistics must be accurate and verified where necessary, with important caveats and limitations explained. We should use a range of evidence to put statistical claims into context and help audiences to judge their magnitude and importance. Where claims are wrong or misleading, they should be challenged.

3.3.9

The reporting of risk can have an impact on the public's perception of that risk, particularly with health or crime stories. We should avoid worrying our audiences unduly and contextualise our reports to be clear about the likelihood of the risk occurring. This is particularly true in reporting health stories that may cause individuals to alter their behaviour in ways that could be harmful. We should consider the emotional impact pictures and personal testimony can have, particularly on perceptions of risk.

Advice is available from Head of Statistics, BBC News.

See Section 10 Politics, Public Policy and Polls: 10.3.21-10.3.40

See Guidance online: Reporting Statistics

User-Generated Content

- 3.3.10** User-generated content raises particular challenges. We should not assume that the material is accurate and, depending on how we plan to use it, should take reasonable steps to seek verification. We must take care over how we use any material that may have been supplied by a member of a lobby group or anyone with a vested interest in the story, rather than a disinterested bystander. We should ensure that user-generated content is clearly identified as such.
- See Guidance online: Reporting Statistics

Material from the Internet and Social Media

- 3.3.11** Even apparently reliable sources of information on the web may not always be accurate. It may be necessary to check who is running the website or confirm with an individual or organisation that the material relevant to them is genuine.
- See Guidance online: Internet Research

- 3.3.12** Care needs to be taken to distinguish fact from rumour, particularly – but by no means exclusively – on social media where misinformation may be deliberate and where error or rumour can spread around the world in minutes, while corrections find it harder to gain traction.
- Additional scrutiny may be necessary if material from a social media site or other internet source is being used to corroborate a fact. Material that we did not gather ourselves should be attributed.

Material from Third Parties

- 3.3.13** Material supplied by third parties, including news providers, needs to be treated with appropriate caution, taking account of the reputation of the source.

We should normally only rely on an agency report if it can be substantiated by a BBC correspondent or if it is attributed to a reputable news agency.

We should only use other material supplied by third parties if it is credible and reliable. This includes weather reports, financial markets information and music charts.

Any credit or attribution that is included relating to the use of third-party material should be in accordance with the appropriate BBC credit guidelines.

See Guidance online: [Crediting and Labelling External Relationships](#)

3.3.14

We should only broadcast material from third parties who may have a personal or professional interest in its subject matter if there is an editorial justification. The source of this material should be identified. This includes material from the emergency services, charities and environmental groups.

We should be reluctant to use video and audio or other similar material from third parties. We do not normally use extracts from such material if we are capable of gathering it ourselves. The editorial significance of the material, rather than simply its impact, must be considered before it is used. If it is editorially justified to use it then we must explain the circumstances and clearly label the source of the material in our output.

See Guidance online: [Video and Audio News Releases](#)

Note-Taking for Journalism and Factual Programmes

3.3.15

We must take accurate, reliable and, wherever possible, contemporaneous notes of all significant research and other relevant information. We must keep records of research including written and electronic correspondence, background notes and documents. They should be kept in a way that allows double-checking, particularly at the scripting stage, and if necessary by another member of the team.

When we broadcast serious allegations made by an anonymous source, full, timely notes must be kept of interviews, conversations and information that provide the basis for the story.

See Section 3 Accuracy: 3.3.5, Section 6 Fairness to Contributors and Consent: 6.3.26-6.3.31 and Section 7 Privacy: 7.3.22

See Guidance online: Investigations

Avoiding Misleading Audiences

3.3.16

We must not knowingly and materially mislead our audiences with our content. We may need to clarify the nature of some content by labelling (for example, verbally, in text or with visual or audio cues) to avoid being misleading.

See Guidance online: Recording the Natural World

3.3.17

Sources

We should normally identify on-air and online sources of information and significant contributors and provide their credentials, so that our audiences can judge their status.

See Guidance online: Investigations

3.3.18

When quoting an anonymous source, especially a source making serious allegations, we must take all appropriate steps to protect their identity. However, we should give the audience what information we can about them and in a way that does not materially mislead about the source's status.

See Section 6 Fairness to Contributors and Consent: 6.3.26-6.3.31

Whenever a promise of anonymity is made, both the journalist and the source must understand how this commitment extends to all those in the BBC who are aware of the identity of the source.

Where it is sought, the relevant editor, including the Director-General, as editor-in-chief, has the right to be told a source's identity and is equally obliged to

keep this information confidential. In cases involving serious allegations we should resist any attempt by an anonymous source to prevent their identity being revealed to a senior BBC editor or, for independent production companies, the relevant commissioning editor. If this happens, it should be made clear that the information obtained confidentially may not be broadcast.

Any proposal to rely on a single unnamed source making a serious allegation or to grant anonymity to a significant contributor making a serious allegation must be referred to Director Editorial Policy and Standards and Programme Legal Advice, who will consider whether or not:

- the story is of significant public interest³
- the source is of proven credibility and reliability and in a position to have sufficient knowledge of the events featured
- a serious allegation was made or substantiated off the record
- a response to serious allegations has been sought.

See Section 6 Fairness to Contributors and Consent: 6.3.38-6.3.41 and will consider any

- legal issues
- safety concerns, for example for whistleblowers

See Guidance online: Investigations

- sensitive and personal issues.

3.3.19

We should script carefully the reporting of allegations made by an anonymous source to explain:

- the nature of the allegation
- that the allegation is being made by an anonymous source and not the BBC.

3 See Section 1 The BBC's Editorial Standards: 1.3 The Public Interest.

When the allegations have not been independently corroborated, we should consider if it is appropriate to inform the audience.

3.3.20

We should not normally use live unscripted two-ways to report allegations. It must be the editor's decision as to whether they are an appropriate way to break a story. When BBC colleagues follow up a story they must ensure they understand the terms in which the allegations are to be reported and do so accurately.

3.3.21

Online Links to Third-Party Websites

Links from BBC websites to those operated by others should normally lead to sites which are credible. Where editorially justified, we may link to external sites which give particular views of a person or organisation significant to a current news story and in such cases we may not be able to guarantee their credibility.

See Section 4 Impartiality: 4.3.9 and Section 14 Independence from External Interests: 14.3.20

See Guidance online: Links and Feeds

3.3.22

Production Techniques

There are very few recorded programmes that do not involve some intervention from the production team, but there are acceptable and unacceptable production techniques. Consideration should be given to the intention and effect of any intervention. It is normally acceptable to use techniques that augment content in a simple and straightforward way, for example by improving clarity and flow or making content more engaging. This may include craft skills such as some cutaway shots, set-up shots to establish interviewees and asking contributors to repeat insignificant actions or perform an everyday activity. It is usually unacceptable to use production techniques that materially mislead the audience about the reality of the narrative or events.

For news, factual and some factual entertainment content, unless clearly signalled to the audience or using reconstructions, we should not normally:

- stage or re-stage action or events which are significant to the development of the action or narrative
- inter-cut shots and sequences if the resulting juxtaposition of material leads to a materially misleading impression of events.

Commentary and editing must never be used to give the audience a materially misleading impression of events or a contribution.

3.3.23

We should ensure that any digital creation or manipulation of material does not distort the meaning of events, alter the impact of genuine material or otherwise materially mislead our audiences. We should also be aware that digital manipulation of photographs, video and documents has been used to hoax broadcasters.

3.3.24

Reconstructions

In factual programmes, reconstructions should not over-dramatise in a misleading or sensationalist way. Reconstructions are when events are quite explicitly re-staged. They should normally be based on a substantial and verifiable body of evidence. They should also be identifiable as reconstructions, for example by using verbal or visual labelling or visual or audio cues, such as slow motion or grading. It should be obvious to the audience where a reconstruction begins and ends.

News programmes should not normally stage reconstructions of current events because of the risk of confusing the audience. But reconstructions staged by others may be reported.

See Section 8 Reporting Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour: 8.3.11

3.3.25 **Factually Based Drama**

When a drama portrays real people or events, it is inevitable that the creative realisation of some dramatic elements such as characterisation, dialogue and atmosphere may be fictional. However, the portrayal should be based on a substantial and well-sourced body of evidence wherever practicable and we should ensure it does not distort the known facts, including chronology, unduly.

Sensitivities will often be at their highest when a drama has, as its central purpose, the portrayal of living people, people with living close relatives or recent events. Care should be taken to achieve due accuracy.

It is important to explain the drama's factual basis (or use of dramatic licence) with clear signposting.

See Section 6 Fairness to Contributors and Consent: 6.3.51-6.3.52 and Section 7 Privacy: 7.3.8

3.3.26 **Archive Material**

Archive material should not be used in a way that materially misleads the audience about a situation, events or what is being depicted. Labelling may be required.

See Section 13 Re-use, Reversioning and Permanent Availability: 13.3.1-13.3.5 and 13.3.9

Programmes Affected by Changing Circumstances

3.3.27

We must check programmes recorded some time before transmission to make sure they have not been overtaken by events, such as the known death of a contributor, the charging of an offender, or significant life changes. In some cases an on-air announcement will be required, in others, the alteration or removal of some material.

See Section 13 Re-use, Reversioning and Permanent Availability: 13.3.10

Correcting Mistakes

3.3.28

We should normally acknowledge serious factual errors and correct such mistakes quickly, clearly and appropriately. Inaccuracy may lead to a complaint of unfairness. An effective way of correcting a serious factual error is saying what was wrong as well as putting it right.

Where we believe we have broadcast a defamatory inaccuracy, Programme Legal Advice must be consulted.

Mistakes in on-demand and online content

Where mistakes in our on-demand content, which is available online after broadcast, are unlikely to be a serious breach of editorial standards, a correction should be published on that platform, so that it is visible before the output is played. Such on-demand content does not then normally need to be changed or revoked.

Where mistakes to our on-demand content are likely to be considered a serious breach of editorial standards, the content must be corrected and the mistake acknowledged, or in exceptional cases removed. We need to be transparent about any changes made, unless there are editorial or legal reasons not to do so.

In online text content, any mistake that alters the editorial meaning should normally be corrected and we should be transparent about what was wrong.

See Section 13 Re-use, Reversioning and Permanent Availability: 13.3.22-13.3.28

See Guidance online: Removal of BBC Online Content