

## Response to the Inquiry into Religious Literacy in Print and Broadcast Media

### 1. About the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO)

1.1 The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) is the independent regulator of the majority of the UK's newspaper and magazine industry. We regulate over 1,500 print and 1,100 online titles, comprising 95% of national daily newspapers (by circulation), most local and regional newspapers, and a large and diverse range of magazines. This includes a small number of titles with a religious or partly religious focus including *Life and Times: The Magazine of the Church of Scotland* and *The Jewish Chronicle*.

1.2 IPSO's framework is one of independent self-regulation underpinned by legally enforceable contractual agreements with our regulated entities. It is not obligatory for publishers to join IPSO, but those that have done so set themselves apart by choosing to be independently regulated and held accountable to an agreed set of standards: the Editors' Code of Practice (the Code).<sup>1</sup> Our member publications display the IPSO Mark, a visual symbol that often appears near complaints information, corrections columns or in online footers, to denote to their readers that they are regulated and accountable.

1.3 IPSO investigates complaints about printed and online material that may breach the Code and can order newspapers and magazines to publish corrections or long-form rulings if the Code has been breached.

1.4 IPSO monitors compliance and standards and requires member newspapers and magazines to submit an annual transparency statement. We can investigate standards failings and, following a standards investigation, can fine publishers up to £1 million in cases where failings are particularly serious and systemic. We provide advice and guidance to editors and journalists and to the public.

1.5 While potentially less relevant to the terms of this inquiry, we also run a compulsory arbitration scheme where members of the public can make low cost legal claims against participating publishers, and a 24-hour helpline for people who are concerned about press intrusion.

1.6 More information about our work can be found at [www.ipso.co.uk](http://www.ipso.co.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/>

## **2. About our response**

2.1 Our response draws on our experience as an independent self-regulator of newspapers and magazines. Therefore, we have answered only the questions pertinent to our role and have included further information for the APPG's interest and to contextualise our response, in this section.

2.2 The main ways in which IPSO's regulatory remit intersects with religious literacy and reporting on religion are: i) handling complaints about potential breaches of the Code, ii) engagement with organisations and individuals interested in the reporting of religion.

### *The importance of reporting on religion*

2.3 Reporting religion is a matter of significant public interest. It is relevant to the historical and societal context within which we live, as well as the daily news agenda and world events. As the APPG acknowledges, "journalists must be free to report accurately on matters relating to faith without fear or censure".

2.4 Reflective of the general population, there are varying levels of religious literacy amongst journalists and very few specialist correspondents specifically covering religious affairs. Research published by the National Council for the Training of Journalists identifies that journalism as a profession is less diverse than the UK population as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

2.5 That said, media reporting plays an important role in developing and enhancing public understanding of faith and religion. A free press will inform, challenge, entertain, and scrutinise. It will produce a plurality of views, contributions to debate, and journalistic approaches. This includes the publication of views which are critical or challenging, and which some might find offensive.

2.6 A key part of accurately reflecting the diversity of religious belief and practice in the UK is scrutinising and challenging beliefs and practices that are, or are alleged to be, rooted in religious tradition, even if that is uncomfortable. The media makes an important contribution to continuing societal debate about the importance and purpose of religion in this country, and indeed the world, which plays out across many platforms. They may not always get it "right" – as some upheld and high profile complaints we've received in this area show – but members of IPSO make themselves accountable to an external independent regulator, demonstrate a commitment to following high standards and provide appropriate redress where those standards have been breached.

### *The Editors' Code and complaints*

2.7 The Editors' Code is designed to balance the rights of the individual and the public's right to know. Clause 1 (Accuracy) and Clause 12 (Discrimination) are

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<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.nctj.com/downloadlibrary/DIVERSITY%20JOURNALISM%204WEB.pdf> [accessed April 2020].

generally the clauses of the Code under which IPSO receives complaints about the reporting of religion and are discussed in detail below.

2.8 Clause 12 (Discrimination) of the Editors' Code includes religion as a protected characteristic. It states that the press "must avoid" prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's religion. Furthermore, details of an individual's religion "must" be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story. Clause 12 protects individuals while respecting the fundamental right to freedom of expression. It does not prohibit prejudicial or pejorative references to a particular group even though criticisms may cause distress and offence. For example, it does not prevent criticism of a particular faith; nor does it require that criticism be balanced against the views of adherents. Were it otherwise, the freedom of the press to engage in discussion, debate and scrutiny about religious ideas and practices would be restricted.

2.9 IPSO is aware that there is a great deal of interest in how Clause 12 works. To aid transparency around this, we publish quarterly instances where we have received more than 10 complaints about an article under Clause 12, explaining how the complaints have been dealt with.<sup>3</sup> This monitoring gives an indication of the types and volumes of complaints we see in this area. This includes some about religion but also includes complaints about a wide range of topics from football fans to veganism.

2.10 Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code requires publications to take care not to publish inaccurate information, including reporting on religious matters. The Code sets high standards for accuracy. It does not demand infallibility, but it does require that care should be taken and, when there is a significant inaccuracy, it expects prompt action to make amends and correct the record.

2.11 Other concerns in complaints IPSO receives around the reporting of religion do not necessarily engage the Code but can be subject to considerable public scrutiny. These include:

- Language – the Editor's 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.
- Editorial selection – selection and presentation of material for publication is a matter for individual editors, provided that the Editors' Code has not otherwise been breached. It is not for the regulator, or indeed any other body, to restrict freedom of expression beyond what is required by law or regulation. This means that there is no obligation, for example, for editors to publish a certain proportion of positive coverage of any religion or group.
- Stereotypes/generalisations – the Code does not prohibit their use in coverage for the reasons set out above, but it does require that journalists draw a clear distinction between comment, conjecture and fact in their reporting.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.ipso.co.uk/monitoring/clause-12-monitoring/> [Accessed April 2020].

- Opinion – opinion and comment pieces are a key part of print media, allowing for greater exploration of issues and providing different viewpoints to debate. As above, distinction must be drawn between comment, conjecture and fact, and the rules of the Code, including around accuracy and not discriminating against an individual, still apply.
- Balance – there is no requirement for balance in the Code. 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 reporting. It is not IPSO’s role to make determinations about whether coverage of religion is “nuanced and balanced” as this is not a requirement under the Editors’ Code, and is in many cases, a subjective matter.

### **3. Answer to question 3: Do you view the cultivation of religious literacy to be an important aim for your organisation?**

3.1 IPSO’s primary role is to enforce the Editors’ Code. While cultivation of religious literacy is not a core function of our regulatory remit, we believe it is crucial that reporting on religion adheres to the Code.

3.2 IPSO plays an important role as a resource for editors and journalists, serving varying levels of need across the media landscape. As well as our own guidance for journalists<sup>4</sup> which explores in detail how the Code applies to key topics, and our information for the public on how we can support them<sup>5</sup>, we also make available information and contacts for journalists from other organisations. This includes resources intended to promote religious literacy including from: The Religion Media Centre, The Buddhist Society, The Muslim Council of Britain, The Network of Sikh Organisations and The Sikh Press Association. Journalists are not obliged to follow these guidelines, which are separate to the Editors’ Code, but may find it useful to do so.<sup>6</sup> We welcome the opportunity to make available to our member publishers guidance, information and contacts from organisations with expertise in particular areas, including religion.

3.2 IPSO helps the public, including those from faith backgrounds, to understand the rules that newspapers and magazines must follow and to support them to complain and seek redress where appropriate. This includes engagement with groups interested in the reporting of particular issues, including faith groups, so we can listen to their concerns, support them to understand the circumstances in which regulatory action could address these, and help with convening wider industry engagement if appropriate.

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.ipso.co.uk/member-publishers/guidance-for-journalists-and-editors/>

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.ipso.co.uk/harassment/advice-for-the-public/>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.ipso.co.uk/member-publishers/guidance-for-journalists-and-editors/external-resources-for-journalists/>

3.3 IPSO supports editors and journalists to adhere to the Code, including around the reporting of faith and religion. We do this predominantly through our guidance for journalists, through our pre-publication service, which gives 24-hour non-binding advice about how the Code may apply to particular circumstances, and through training on the Editors' Code which is available to all our member publishers should they wish, including on the application of Clause 12.

#### **4. Answer to question 5. What steps has your organisation taken to engage with faith groups to discuss the representation of religion and belief?**

4.1 IPSO welcomes engagement with religious and faith groups and regularly meets with them for various purposes including listening to concerns about reporting and supporting them to understand regulation or communicate more widely with our member publications. This is a valuable part of our work, helping us to understand wider debates around the reporting of religion. Some examples include:

- Meetings with the Centre for Media Monitoring to discuss their recent reports on representations of Islam in the media, and Faith Matters to discuss IPSO's guidance on the reporting of Islam (February and March 2020).
- Meetings with the Sikh Press Association and the Network of Sikh Organisations about accuracy in reporting of Sikhism and the guidance they have produced in this area, which we subsequently made available to our member publishers via our website (July and September 2019).
- Presenting at Tell Mama's conference on Islamic stereotypes in the media, speaking to audiences about how the Editors' Code applies to the reporting of religion and how IPSO can help (December 2018).
- Attending the Religion Media Festival to discuss examples of "positive" reporting of religion, IPSO's regulatory role, and engaging widely with groups interested in religious literacy (April 2019).

4.2 Our engagement has resulted in some useful outputs which we make available to member publishers and the public to support religious literacy, including:

- a podcast for members of the public and journalists with the Network of Sikh Organisations (NSO) on the reporting of religion and Sikhism in particular, offering advice about how the Editors' Code might apply.<sup>7</sup>
- last year's IPSO lecture (April 2019), which was given by the Extremism Commissioner Sara Khan, on the role of the media in challenging extremism, including religious extremism<sup>8</sup>, and its accompanying podcast.

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<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/news6.-press-releases/podcast/>

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/lead-commissioners-speech-on-the-role-of-the-media-in-challenging-extremism>

4.3 Last year we began working on guidance for journalists on the reporting of Islam and Muslims, designed to help editors and journalists understand how the Editors' Code applies to the reporting of such matters. We have engaged with a range of stakeholders to ensure that the guidance is relevant and addresses key points of concern. This includes faith groups and a programme of visits to mosques and community groups across the country (as well as editors and journalists).

#### **5. Answer to question 6: What steps has your organisation taken to engage with other governmental and civil society organisations to discuss the representation of religion and belief?**

5.1 IPSO is independent of Government but as part of our commitment to openness and transparency we have engaged with a variety of governmental and civil society organisations where we are able to offer a valuable and useful perspective. Some examples include:

- The Anti-Muslim Hate Crime Working Group where we discussed our upcoming guidance for journalists on the reporting of Islam (July 2019).
- The Antisemitism Policy Trust and the APPG on Antisemitism where we attended the Sara Conference, a discussion on the intersection between antisemitism and misogyny (November 2019).
- The National Secular Society, where we discussed reporting around those who held no faith and how potential future guidance should be mindful of this (July 2019).
- Anas Sarwar SMP (Chair of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group (CPG) on tackling Islamophobia) to discuss the CPG's guidance on the reporting of Islam produced in conjunction with Newcastle University and the National Union of Journalists (February 2019).

5.2 In relation to both questions 5 and 6, we recognise the importance of engaging widely with organisations and individuals interested in the reporting of particular topics. We value this as a symbiotic dialogue; it is important for IPSO to understand concerns about reporting but it is also crucial for organisations to understand the purpose of IPSO's regulation and how it can work to support them.

#### **6. Answer to question 7: Do you monitor the representation of faith groups in the publications which you regulate?**

6.1 As well as the previously discussed Clause 12 reporting, IPSO monitors the number of complaints under clauses of the Code rather than by topic. We also undertake broad monitoring<sup>9</sup> of coverage through our standards function, using knowledge and data from daily work with complaints, wide monitoring of the media

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<sup>9</sup> We publish a summarised version of this on our website quarterly. See <https://www.ipso.co.uk/monitoring/editorial-standards-monitoring/>

landscape and engagement with groups to track patterns and identify areas of potential concern, with the aim of targeting interventions to raise press standards. For example, our wider monitoring and engagement with broader social and political concerns about how Islam is reported in the press, indicated there would be value in producing guidance for journalists in this area.

**7. Answer to Question 8: Do you engage with the publications which you regulate to discuss how they represent religion and belief?**

7.1 It is not IPSO's role to specify how editorial content should be presented, or certain subjects represented, so long as the Editors' Code has not otherwise been breached.

7.2 That being said, as part of the stakeholder engagement IPSO has undertaken in developing its guidance on Islam and Muslims, we have engaged widely with editors and journalists (as well as stakeholders from faith groups) to understand the issues that the guidance can help with.

7.3 In terms of complaints handling, regulated publications are sent a copy of complaints that IPSO cannot take forward because they do not raise a potential breach of the Editors' Code. This is so they are aware of any potential public concerns.

**9. Answer to question 9: Do you think that a) publishers, b) regulators and c) central government are doing enough to foster religious literacy in the media? If not, please suggest what further steps could be taken?**

9.1 IPSO believes that the role of the regulator should be to protect the public by upholding high standards, and to support regulated publishers to produce high quality content. This makes a contribution to religious literacy through ensuring reporting takes care around accuracy, does not discriminate against individuals on the basis of their religion, and, if these standards have been breached, by providing suitable redress.

9.2 IPSO's regulation supports religious literacy by carefully balancing protection of individual rights with freedom of expression. Any attempt to foster greatest religious literacy must take care not to impinge this. A free press should be able to challenge, scrutinise and hold to account; this is very important for a functioning, democratic, and tolerant society.

9.3 We believe that improved public media literacy could in turn support improved religious literacy. Appropriate levels of media literacy empowers people to act as informed citizens and gives the public the skills and knowledge to understand, analyse and critique the content they are consuming, allowing them to make informed decisions about how to engage with it.

9.4 We would also suggest that it is not just the agencies named above that should be responsible for improving religious literacy. Our engagement work demonstrates that

positive, proactive engagement between faith groups and the media can lead to more nuanced representations of faith and religion.

## **10. Conclusion**

10.1 We thank the APPG for the opportunity to give evidence to the inquiry and our Chairman Lord Faulks looks forward to discussing our response.

10.2 For any enquires regarding this response, please contact Vikki Julian, Communications Manager at [vikki.julian@ipso.co.uk](mailto:vikki.julian@ipso.co.uk)