

Finding of the Editorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust

Newsbeat 13 June 2014

Finding of 10 November 2014

Summary

Newsbeat is Radio 1 and Radio 1Xtra's news service provided by BBC News. It is specifically targeted at younger audiences and has a long track-record of reporting news in a way that is likely to inform and engage Radio 1 and Radio 1Xtra's audience.

On 13 June 2014, Newsbeat broadcast a report which included a recording with a British man who had travelled to Syria to fight with ISIS. In a video which had been posted online called "*The ISIS Show Podcast*", Abu Sumayyah described how fighting with ISIS was "*actually quite fun*", he compared it with a computer game and said it was: "*better than... Call of Duty*".

Excerpts of the video were taken from the internet and broadcast in a Newsbeat report at 12.45pm on BBC Radio 1, Friday, 13 June 2014. Information taken from the video was also used in a Newsbeat online report.

The recorded news item did include some context which indicated the degree of violence ISIS used and how it was perceived internationally. However the extremist was not interviewed by the BBC and did not face direct challenge or question from BBC journalists in relation to the claims he was making. The online report did not include any context which explained ISIS's methodology or the international response to it. While both the broadcast report and the online report referred to the material as originating from "The ISIS show podcast" there was no further information to allow audiences to understand what editorial controls there had been over the original output. The Executive reported these Breaches of the Editorial Guidelines orally to the Editorial Standards Committee of the Trust (the "Committee") on 11 September 2014.

The Committee considered this was a serious breach of the Editorial Guidelines for Impartiality and for Harm and Offence. Trustees requested that the Executive provide answers to various questions with a view to identifying the editorial failings that had occurred and considered whether appropriate measures were in place to prevent similar breaches in future.

Trustees considered that the absence of an appropriate warning and the failure to include sufficient context to question the comments by Abu Sumayyah led to a breach of the Editorial Guidelines for Harm and Offence in terms of the BBC's "*responsibility to protect children and young people from unsuitable content*" and in terms of "*...including material that condones or glamorises violence, dangerous or seriously anti-social behaviour*".

Trustees also considered the failure both to offer challenge to the views that were aired and to include sufficient context to allow audiences to judge them was a breach of the Editorial Guidelines for Impartiality in terms of the requirement that: "*Contributors expressing contentious views, either through an interview or other means, must be rigorously tested*".

The broadcast report has been the subject of a complaint to Ofcom. Ofcom has upheld the complaint as a breach of two rules of the Broadcast Code, namely:

Rule 1.3: “Children must...be protected by appropriate scheduling from material that is unsuitable for them”.

Rule 2.3: “In applying generally accepted standards broadcasters must ensure that material which may cause offence is justified by the context...Appropriate information should also be broadcast where it would assist in avoiding or minimising offence”.

Background

The ISIS Show Podcast had been uploaded to the internet on 9 June 2014. Newsbeat’s production team became aware of it on 13 June 2014 and it had been referred to in press reports on the same day. Excerpts of the video were featured on that day’s lunchtime bulletin and the written report was published online the same afternoon.

At the beginning of the news programme, a clip from the video was played in the menu:

Newsreader: “We’ll hear from a man who left England to go and fight with the radical ISIS group.”

Clip: “It’s actually quite fun. Better than, how you’d say, what’s that game called, Call of Duty. It’s like that but really, you, 3D you know. You can see everything’s happening in front of you, you know it’s real, you know what I mean?”

The first story in that day’s bulletin was a report from Brazil looking ahead to England’s fixture with Italy in the world cup. This was followed by a Newsbeat ‘sting’ before the newsreader started the report which led into the video of the British extremist. The text of the report is set out below:

Newsreader: First though, let’s take you to Iraq. [helicopter noise].

The United Nations says Islamist fighters have now started executing civilians and soldiers in the country’s second biggest city. Seventeen people were shot on one street. The fighters are from ISIS, a group that broke away from Al Qaeda, they want to create a strict Islamic state across Iraq and Syria. Here’s president Obama:

“What we’ve seen over the last couple of days indicates the degree to which Iraq’s going to need more help. I don’t rule out anything because we do have a stake in making sure that these Jihadists are not getting a permanent foothold.”

This all comes as one British man reveals what it’s like to fight with ISIS in Syria. Newsbeat’s Anna Collinson’s been listening to this rare interview:

Anna Collinson: He’s a man from Britain with three kids. But eleven months ago, Abu Sumayyah left it all behind to fight what he calls a holy war:

AS: "...the first time I ever heard a bomb, I realised then – ok, you know, this err scary, you know?"

AC: Sumayyah has joined the ISIS group who have taken control of parts of Syria and Iraq. He's been speaking to presenters Jonathan Krohn and Emma Beals who host the ISIS Show podcast:

Jonathan Krohn: What's that noise? (unidentified noise in background)
It's really foreboding.

AS: A lot of bombing's going on at the moment. It's quite far away, but, err, you can hear it.

AC: Sumayyah says he's speaking from an internet café near his training camp in north west Syria. ISIS is also one of the main groups fighting government forces there.

AS: For us, to be here, it's freedom, totally freedom. I can walk around with a Kalashnikov if I want to, with an RPG if I want to.

AC: Sumayyah hasn't spoken to his children since he left the UK. He claims the Home Office has taken away his British citizenship. They've told Newsbeat they can't comment.

AS: This idea of us want to go back and plot terror attacks in our countries and so on and so forth, I think it's absolute rubbish. We're having a good life here, you know.

AC: Sumayyah says he has no plans to go back to the UK.

AS: See I felt like I was imprisoned in that country – you need err road tax, you need this and you need that and blah, blah, blah. It's just money making schemes.

AC: Some say ISIS is overtaking Al Qaeda as one of the world's most dangerous Jihadist organisations. Sumayyah believes what they are fighting for is right.

AS: It's actually quite fun. Better than, how you'd say, what's that game called, Call of Duty. It's like that but really, you, 3D you know. You can see everything's happening in front of you, you know it's real, you know what I mean?

Copied below is the original text of the Online report:

British fighter in Syria: It's like Call of Duty

A British fighter with the extremist group called ISIS in Syria and Iraq has compared terrorism to video game Call of Duty.

Abu Sumayyah Al-Britani left the UK 11 months ago to go and fight what he calls a holy war in the countries.

Speaking from an internet cafe near his terror training camp in Idlib, northwest Syria, Al-Britani said: "It's really really fun".

British spy chiefs are now worried about more British people signing up.

The father-of-three children boasted that life with ISIS, who have taken control of parts of Syria and Iraq, is "better than that game Call of Duty."

He was speaking to presenters Jonathan Khron and Emma Beals, who host the ISIS show podcast.

Al-Britani admitted "the first time I heard a bomb, I realised then this is scary you know (laughs)"

ISIS is also one of the main groups fighting government forces in Syria, which neighbours Iraq.

"For us to be here it's freedom. Total freedom. I can walk around with a Kalashnikov if I want to."

He hasn't spoken to his children since he left the UK and claims his British citizenship has been taken away from him.

The Home Office would not comment.

"This idea of us wanting to go back and plot terror attacks in our countries is absolute rubbish. We are having a good life here."

Al-Britani has said he has no plans to go back to the UK.

"I felt like I was in prison in that country, you need road tax, you need this, you need that, blah blah, it's just money making schemes."

Applicable BBC Editorial Guidelines

The relevant Editorial Guidelines are those relating to **Impartiality** and **Harm and Offence**.

"Due impartiality" means that: "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".

Impartiality: Contentious Views and Possible Offence

4.4.18 - Contributors expressing contentious views, either through an interview or other means, must be rigorously tested while being given a fair chance to set out their full response to questions. Minority views should be given appropriate space in our output; it is not for the BBC to suppress discussion.

Consequently, we will sometimes need to report on, or interview, people whose views may cause serious offence to many in our audiences. On such occasions, referral should be made to a senior editorial figure who may wish to consult Editorial Policy. The potential for offence must be weighed against the public interest and any risk to the BBC's impartiality. Coverage should acknowledge the possibility of offence, and be appropriately robust, but it should also be fair and dispassionate.

Harm and Offence

5.2 Principles...

5.2.4 - We must balance our responsibility to protect children and young people from unsuitable content with their rights to freedom of expression and freedom to receive information.

5.2.5 - We must ensure our audiences have clear information on which to judge whether content is suitable for children.

5.4 Practices

Audience Expectations

5.4.1 - We should judge the suitability of content for our audiences, including children, in relation to the expectations of the likely audience, taking account of the time and day on which it is available, the nature of the service and the nature of the content.

Violence

5.4.28 – We should take care to ensure that individual programmes, or programmes taken together across the schedule, avoid including material that condones or glamorises violence, dangerous or seriously anti-social behaviour, or material that is likely to encourage others to copy such behaviour, unless clearly editorially justified.

Response from the Executive

The Executive has set out its thinking in terms of its decision to cover this story. It noted that Newsbeat plays a significant role in making difficult and important stories comprehensible for a wide range of listeners – including those aged under 18 – and this is a subject that is of considerable interest and concern to them.

This was an important, ongoing subject for Newsbeat. It had run a series of stories including interviews with parents whose children had gone to fight in Syria or Iraq; warnings from police about the dangers young people faced if they sought to travel abroad to fight; information about ISIS - including what it stood for and was responsible for - and coverage of the apparent massacre of Iraqi soldiers by ISIS militants.

It noted that there had been a number of widely reported incidents of people who were under the age of 18 leaving the UK to join ISIS. There was considerable public discussion and concern about the extent to which parents could exercise control over their children and the story was, therefore, highly relevant to the programme's audience.

The Executive considered there was a significant public interest in broadcasting the interview itself and the production team had spent considerable effort verifying the footage was real before deciding to use it. Once that had been done, it was felt that this was a rare and valuable opportunity to understand through first-hand testimony the motivation of an individual who had chosen to fight with ISIS.

It considered the script explained the context of the fighting and the nature of ISIS and its followers. It reported the United Nations' claims, and explained the brutal tactics employed by ISIS against innocent civilians, making clear at the outset that terrible crimes were being committed in Iraq. It reported that some considered ISIS was "...*overtaking Al Qaeda as one of the world's most dangerous Jihadist organisations.*" By reflecting President Obama's views alongside the UN's it conveyed the extent to which ISIS had been condemned by the international community.

The Executive stated that their coverage of Abu Sumayyah's actions included the personal information that he had not spoken to his children for eleven months; that he considered the situation he was in was "scary" and his claim that he believed he had lost British citizenship.

They stated that the report had included the sound of gunfire and explosions and a reference to the atmosphere being one of '*foreboding*' which undermined Abu Sumayyah's comments that he was enjoying the life he was leading and that it was similar to a video game.

They noted that Abu Sumayyah had specifically stated that he had no desire to return to the UK and pursue acts of terrorism on British soil. This fed into the public debate about the dangers of home-grown terrorism that dated back to the 7/7 bomb attacks in London.

However, the Executive accepted that the broadcast was flawed in the following ways:

- More explanation should have been given about the way the interview had been obtained and who was behind it.
- Abu Sumayyah's claims were not directly challenged as they would have been if the interview had been given to a BBC Journalist.

- More contextual information should have been included about Abu Sumayyah's personal claims.
- It would have been preferable to have included more information about the reality of life in Syria for people recruited from abroad to fight in the Middle East.
- The report should have been preceded by a warning, alerting listeners to the potential for offence as a result of the views that would be expressed.

The Executive noted that, since the broadcast, the Programme Editor had spoken to the Duty Editor and reporter concerned and reminded them of the importance of including all appropriate context when dealing with this kind of story.

Trustees sought further information from the Executive to enable them to understand more fully the editorial controls that were in place prior to the breach. In particular, they questioned what time had elapsed between the programme team becoming aware of the existence of the video and its report being broadcast and published online; what level of senior editorial oversight there had been over the preparation of the broadcast report and what editorial oversight there had been in relation to the online report. The Trustees were particularly concerned to note that the online report included substantially less context than had been included in the broadcast item.

The Executive sent further responses, which made the following points:

- The online video was not an ISIS propaganda video, but had been produced by two freelance journalists who present a podcast looking at the methods of the extremist group.
- ISIS was not a proscribed organisation at the time the report was broadcast; there had not been reports of it being involved in kidnapping, nor had it carried out any of the beheadings that had subsequently taken place.
- The output was identified as a possible story during that day's editorial meeting at 8.10am. The video had been quoted in that day's papers, but the source of the video had not been identified. A producer initially spent time tracing the source of the information and then confirming that the people who produced it were independent journalists.
- The reporter was assisted by a senior broadcast journalist who, during the course of the morning, had ensured that further political context had been included and that the international response should also be reflected.
- The online report was written by a different journalist – as the reporter for the broadcast item had already worked beyond her shift. The article was approved prior to publication by a Senior Broadcast Journalist.

A new sign-off system was put in place by the Editor of Newsbeat shortly after this report had been broadcast/published. The new procedures included the following:

- One Assistant Editor oversaw the broadcast programme, approving most items and in particular contentious reports.
- A separate Assistant Editor oversaw the online reports – online reporting having expanded considerably over the past six months.
- All reporters and output editors had been reminded of the need for scrupulous sign-off and a sign-off sheet has been introduced which had to be completed prior to broadcast or online publication.
- The sign-off sheet specifically queried whether the output raised issues of harm and offence for young people and whether Editorial Policy need to be consulted.
- Editorial Policy has undertaken training with the Newsbeat team and further training is scheduled for the New Year.

Decision of the Committee

The Committee considered the complaint against the relevant editorial standards, as set out in the BBC's Editorial Guidelines. The Guidelines are a statement of the BBC's values and standards.

The Committee noted that the Guidelines relating to Impartiality and to Harm and Offence were relevant to this appeal.

Trustees agreed this was a significant subject for Radio 1's Newsbeat programme and that it was an important part of the BBC's output to provide news and information that was engaging and suitable for a younger audience. They considered that, in the light of the reports about young people travelling to Syria to join ISIS, this was a story that was particularly relevant to Newsbeat's audience. They agreed that there was an intrinsic value in hearing first-hand reports that could help to broaden understanding about other people's views and how they were motivated.

They noted that radio did not have a watershed, but that scheduling decisions had to take into account audience expectations and had to be informed by knowledge of when children were particularly likely to be listening. They noted that, while the bulletin had been transmitted during term time, it had been broadcast on a network that was aimed at a younger audience.

In particular, Trustees noted the following Guidelines for Harm and Offence:

We must balance our responsibility to protect children and young people from unsuitable content with their rights to freedom of expression and freedom to receive information.

We should take care to ensure that individual programmes... avoid including material that condones or glamorises violence, dangerous or seriously anti-social behaviour...

And the following Guideline for Impartiality:

Contributors expressing contentious views, either through an interview or other means, must be rigorously tested...

Consequently, we will sometimes need to report on, or interview, people whose views may cause serious offence to many in our audiences. ... The potential for offence must be weighed against the public interest and any risk to the BBC's impartiality. Coverage should acknowledge the possibility of offence, and be appropriately robust, but it should also be fair and dispassionate.

Harm and Offence

Trustees noted that the Newsbeat broadcast report included the following comments by Abu Sumayyah:

For us, to be here, it's freedom, totally freedom. I can walk around with a Kalashnikov if I want to, with an RPG if I want to.

We're having a good life here, you know.

See I felt like I was imprisoned in [the UK] – you need err road tax, you need this and you need that and blah, blah, blah. It's just money making schemes.

It's actually quite fun. Better than, how you'd say, what's that game called, Call of Duty. It's like that but really, you, 3D you know. You can see everything's happening in front of you, you know it's real, you know what I mean?

The online report included very similar but shorter quotes, in particular:

It's really really fun... better than that game Call of Duty.

For us to be here it's freedom. Total freedom. I can walk around with a Kalashnikov if I want to.

We are having a good life here.

I felt like I was in prison in [the UK], you need road tax, you need this, you need that, blah blah, it's just money making schemes.

Trustees considered it was a very significant part of the BBC's independent and impartial reporting that it should be able to reflect relevant opinion – even where it had the potential to cause deep offence. However, they noted that the BBC had a particular responsibility to protect children and that the Editorial Guidelines specifically warned of the risks of glamorising violence. They noted that clear signposting and warnings could be

used to reduce the risk of causing offence and to inform audiences about output that might not be appropriate.

They noted that ISIS was not a proscribed organisation at the time the report was broadcast. Notwithstanding that, they considered it had been well documented by that point – not least by Newsbeat – that ISIS had been involved in killing civilians. They considered that drawing an analogy between a violent, ideologically driven campaign that targeted civilians and a computer game had the potential to cause offence.

They noted that Abu Sumayyah described the casual use of Kalashnikovs and RPGs and suggested that this constituted “freedom, totally freedom”. They noted that he portrayed life in the UK as being unnecessarily restrictive and that, in comparison, he was enjoying “a good life” in Syria and that it was “actually quite fun” fighting with ISIS.

As the interview had not been conducted by a BBC journalist, Abu Sumayyah had not faced direct questions in relation to his claims that he had freedom or that he apparently enjoyed walking around with either a Kalashnikov or an RPG. Nor had he been questioned regarding his claim that fighting with ISIS was “actually quite fun” and that it was “better than... Call of Duty”.

However, Trustees considered it would have been straightforward for the reporter to have included further contextual information in response to the statements made by Abu Sumayyah, which would have had the effect of reducing the level of offence likely to be caused.

Trustees noted that the Executive now accepted the item should have been preceded by a warning that would have both served to offer some protection to younger listeners and also reduced the risk of causing offence.

Impartiality

Trustees considered the BBC played a highly significant public role in ensuring a wide range of views were heard – even on subjects that were contentious and potentially offensive. They considered this helped to inform and shape the public debate and went to the founding beliefs that the BBC should inform and educate. They noted the Editorial Guidelines on Impartiality stated: “...it is *not for the BBC to suppress discussion*”.

However, they noted the following requirement of the Editorial Guidelines on Impartiality:

Contributors expressing contentious views, either through an interview or other means, must be rigorously tested...

They noted that the broadcast item included the following context:

- The UN’s statement that ISIS fighters had started executing civilians and soldiers in Iraq
- 17 people had reportedly been shot on one street;

- The group wanted to create a strict Islamic state across Iraq and Syria;
- That President Obama did not “rule out anything” in terms of the action that would be necessary to make sure they did not get “a permanent foothold”;
- That bombing could be heard nearby, that the situation was “scary” and there was a sense of “foreboding”;
- That Abu Sumayyah had not spoken to his children for eleven months and claimed his British citizenship had been taken away from him;
- That some people considered ISIS was “overtaking Al Qaeda as one of the world’s most dangerous Jihadist organisations”;
- That it was Abu Sumayyah’s opinion that what he was “fighting for is right”.

They noted that the online report included the following context:

- ISIS was referred to as “the extremist group”;
- Abu Sumayyah’s activities were referred to as “terrorism”;
- That Abu Sumayyah was fighting “what he calls a holy war”
- The article referred to Abu Sumayyah’s “terror training ground”;
- That the first time Abu Sumayyah heard a bomb explode, it was “scary”;
- That Abu Sumayyah had not spoken to his children for eleven months and claimed his British citizenship had been taken away from him;

They considered the broadcast report included context to explain the general threat posed by ISIS and the international response to it. They noted that the online report specifically referred to the activities being pursued by Abu Sumayyah as “terrorism”, that ISIS was an “extremist group” and that Abu Sumayyah was based in a “terror training ground”. They acknowledged that the output producer had sought to confirm the statement made by Abu Sumayyah about his British citizenship with the Home Office. They noted that both reports highlighted that Abu Sumayyah had not spoken to his children for 11 months – which many listeners would consider an indication of the extreme position he had put himself in.

However, they noted that the online report did not have any of the international context that the broadcast report contained. They considered that the central claims made by Abu Sumayyah were that he was having fun, he had total freedom, he was enjoying the access to weapons that he had and considered that what he was doing was comparable with – and more fun than – playing a computer game. These were the most striking comments that had been taken from the video and the final point had been included in the menu to the Newsbeat bulletin.

Yet these claims had been without proper challenge in either the broadcast or online reports. The BBC was not in a position to question Abu Sumayyah directly – nonetheless, there were a range of means at its disposal which would have allowed it to challenge the statements that had been made. Trustees noted that the Executive accepted the report should have included information about what was known of the lives of people who had travelled to join ISIS. They agreed this would have helped to give context to Abu Sumayyah’s claims. They considered that it was a matter for the Executive to decide how to ensure its reports were duly impartial however there were a number of ways they could have provided additional challenge and context which would

have enabled them to use this valuable first-person account of an individual who had travelled to Syria to join ISIS in a way that met the requirements of the Editorial Guidelines for Impartiality.

Trustees acknowledged that both the broadcast report and the online report credited the source of the information as being from the “ISIS Show Podcast” and identified by name the journalists who were responsible for it. However they agreed with the Executive that it would have been beneficial for audiences to have been given more information about this. They considered that neither the podcast nor the journalists responsible for it were well known and it was valuable for audiences to be able to form their own opinion about the source for information. Trustees noted that the online report had subsequently been significantly re-written to include more context and challenge to the claims that were being made.

Trustees noted the tighter editorial processes that had been introduced by Newsbeat. They considered that the new system was intended to introduce greater continuity of editorial control over both online and broadcast output. They considered too that the sign-off list would be likely to help to ensure that the protection of children stayed front of mind for editorial staff.

Trustees considered that the absence of an appropriate warning and the failure to include sufficient context to question the comments by Abu Sumayah led to a breach of the Editorial Guidelines for Harm and Offence in terms of the BBC’s “responsibility to protect children and young people from unsuitable content” and in terms of “...including material that condones or glamorises violence, dangerous or seriously anti-social behaviour”.

Trustees also considered the failure both to offer challenge to the views that were aired and to include sufficient context to allow audiences to judge them was a breach of the Editorial Guidelines for Impartiality in terms of the requirement that: “Contributors expressing contentious views, either through an interview or other means, must be rigorously tested”.