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ENGAGE submission to the Leveson Inquiry

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At ENGAGE, we regularly monitor print, broadcast and social media to record and challenge misrepresentations and inaccurate reporting of Islam and Muslims in the UK.

We have in our parliamentary briefing paper on Islamophobia, enclosed herewith, argued for closer scrutiny and better self-regulation of the UK media in order to make it more responsive to bad practices, journalistic bias and the prevalent practice of exaggerating the influence of fringe Muslim groups to demonise the wider British Muslim population.

We have approached the PCC on a number of occasions to lodge complaints on coverage we have deemed to be inaccurate, unfair or discriminatory. A summary of these complaints is elaborated on in section one below providing details for the complaint (inaccuracy, misrepresentation, discriminatory reportage) together with the responses from the respective newspaper or the PCC to our complaint. Section two elaborates on cases lodged by third parties which reflect inaccuracy, poor reporting or discrimination. Section three concludes with our ongoing concerns on the modus operandi of the Editors' Code of Practice and its limitations with specific reference to media reporting of Islam and British Muslims.

SECTION 1

ENGAGE complaints to the Press Complaints Commission

- 1 We registered a complaint with the PCC in November 2008 in relation to an article in the Daily Star claiming that the sale of poppies was banned in certain parts of the UK, in particular the regions inhabited by the perpetrators of the London bombings of July 2005. The Daily Star reported the story under the headline 'Poppies banned in Terror Hotspots'. We had reason to believe that no such ban was in operation, a fact admitted in the story itself. We lodged a complaint on grounds that the news report was inaccurate and inflammatory given the prominence offered the story in the paper. Article illustrated below:



- 1.1 This complaint was successfully resolved by the Commission with the publication of a clarification in the paper, on page 2, which we felt inadequately addressed our initial concerns over "due prominence" of corrections.

- 2 We registered a complaint with the PCC concerning the inappropriate mention, in our view, of Lord Nazir Ahmed's religion (he is a Muslim peer) in news stories covering his road accident in December 2007 and the subsequent court case in November 2008. The PCC code protects against the irrelevant mention of descriptive details except in cases where it is germane to the story.
 - 2.1. We were first informed that our complaint was rejected for constituting a "third party" complaint. We submitted our petition again with an endorsement from Lord Ahmed agreeing to our proceeding with the complaint on his behalf.
 - 2.2 Nonetheless the complaint was returned with an explanation stating that the Commission did not feel any breach of the Code had taken place because "*Lord Ahmed was Britain's first peer of Muslim faith,*" and that he was "*active in public life on issues concerning Muslim interests,*" and therefore, "*Lord Ahmed's religion constituted an established part of his public profile.*"

- 2.3 It would seem to us that on this reasoning, individuals of some standing and prominence would be dealt a disadvantage by the Commission should they find themselves the subject of news stories because their public profile, and any aspect of it that would ordinarily fall within the remit of this clause, would be viewed as fair game for newspaper editors.
- 2.4 The clause should serve as a reminder that personal details and characteristics that could prejudice the subject's representation in a newspaper article should be avoided and the facts of the story distinguished from such details.
- 2.5 We restate the basis of our complaint in November 2008 and reiterate that "*The mention of the peer's religion [was] wholly unrelated to the subject at hand; his facing trial for dangerous driving.*"
3. We complained to the PCC concerning an article published in the Jewish Chronicle which inaccurately relayed details of a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia of which we were formerly the secretariat.
 - 3.1 The JC article originally reported that the meeting concluded with a vote by MPs present which we purportedly won by a single ballot. No vote took place at the meeting of the APPG and therefore, the outcome of a 'single vote' could not possibly be true.
 - 3.2 Our complaint was upheld though the Jewish Chronicle proceeded to publish an apology which was not, according to the PCC procedures, agreed in advance with us.
4. We have complained to the Daily Mail concerning an article published in June 2011 in which the author, Melanie Phillips, claimed that we were an '*extremist Islamist group*' and '*funded by the Government*'.
 - 4.1 We wrote to the Managing Editor, Alex Bannister, on two occasions. In the first instance Mr Bannister rejected our complaint as having no basis. When we pointed out his error in ignoring the explicit allegation that we were 'government funded,' we did not receive a reply despite sending reminders twice.
 - 4.2 We have since taken the matter up with the PCC, still unresolved. We would like to note the neglect of the newspaper in adequately addressing our complaint on the inaccuracies contained in the original article.



5. In September 2010, we complained to the PCC concerning front page coverage in the Daily Express of a '*Muslim plot to kill the Pope*'. The plot was non-existent and the paper published a correction which was wholly inadequate given the prominence granted to the initial, alarmist story (article illustration left).

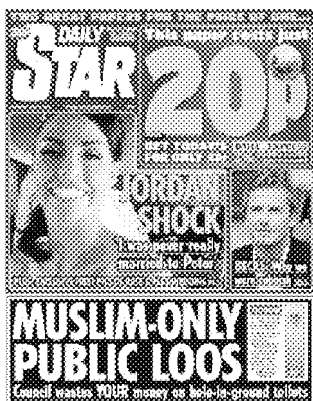
5.1 The original article included a front page headline and double page spread (pages 4 & 5) while the correction, admitting the gross inaccuracy of the original report, merited a single sentence buried under a news item on page nine of the paper.

6. In March 2011, we wrote to the PCC concerning an article in the Daily Mail which sought, in our view, to give the erroneous impression that a complaint made to a local council

concerning the smell of bacon from a cafe affecting a family home nearby was lodged by Muslims. The complainant was not a Muslim and we argued the article in the newspaper, headlined “*Café wins fight to fry bacon after Muslim complaints*” was entirely inaccurate.

6.1 The PCC argued the headline and article ought to be read together and that read this way, readers would not labour under the misapprehension that the complainants were Muslims. The decision seemed to us unsatisfactory and we would contend that headlines ought not to give false impressions which only further reading could reasonably dispel. Headlines should, as closely as possible, reflect the facts.

7. We complained to the PCC on the front page story published by the Daily Star which claimed Rochdale Council had installed ‘Muslim only public loos’ at a shopping centre in the city.



7.1 The story inaccurately reported the facts of the case which the PCC acknowledged in its decision (Mr Adam Sheppard vs Daily Star). The disregard for basic facts was attenuated by the prominence given to the inflammatory and misleading headline on the front page, as illustrated left.

SECTION 2:

Third party complaints to the PCC and successful legal challenges

We keenly encourage readers to respond to inaccurate, unfair or discriminatory reporting in the British media by writing letters to the editor or taking their complaints to the Press Complaints Commission. We take an interest in such cases, the nature of the complaint, and resolution, if any.

We are also keenly aware of the growing number of Muslims who seek redress of grievance through the courts for defamatory and libellous reporting. This section details examples of third party complaints and their resolution.

1. Ummah Welfare Trust successfully challenged the Sunday Express for its coverage of the charity publishing allegations of purported connections to terrorism under the headline “‘Jet bomb ordered by 9/11 spiritual leader”.

1.1 The charity successfully contested the newspaper’s claim that it had links to Anwar Al-Awlaki and that it raised funds for organisations on the proscribed list of terrorist organisations.

2. The Sun newspaper was forced to apologise to a British Muslim organisation, Ummah.com, for falsely ascribing a story on the organisation’s website to one of its readers when the comment posted on the forum was planted by the paper’s own ‘anti- terror expert’, Glen Jenvey.

2.1 The paper falsely accused the Muslim site of promoting a ‘target hit list’ of prominent British Jews and published a front page article, ‘Terror Target Sugar,’ illustrated below:



2.2 The Sun apologised to Ummah.com and removed the story from its online archives. The incident however, begs further questions on the methods employed by journalists to manufacture stories with an anti-Muslim bias and the lack of rigour for checking the facts before granting such stories front page prominence.

3. Shakil Akhtar, a mechanic from High Wycombe won a libel case against the News of the World for articles published in February 2008 claiming he was engaged in terrorist financing. NI apologised in open court for the false allegations and agreed to pay Mr Akhtar £100,000 in damages.
4. The BBC was forced to apologise to the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) for libellous allegations made by its Question Time panellist and Daily Telegraph columnist, Charles Moore, in March 2009. The BBC acknowledged that the MCB did not support the killing of British soldiers abroad and paid £45,000 in damages for the slander uttered in national television.

SECTION 3:

1. Our complaint of November 2008 in relation to articles published in the media concerning Lord Nazir Ahmed and the Daily Express article of September 2010, on 'Muslim plot to kill Pope' demonstrates the Code of Practice's limitations in handling complaints which are inaccurate or discriminatory when lodged by third party complainants.
2. We would restate here our disappointment that the Editors' Code does not make provisions for "third party" complaints when the media coverage, advertently and in all likelihood, will have an impact on the entire social group concerned.
3. In consideration of the enormous impact of coverage that is proven to be inaccurate, inflammatory, prejudicial and detrimental to the representation of social groups in society, whether composed of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or disability, the exclusion of "third party" complaints is deeply unsatisfactory and remains a grave deficit in the complaints handling powers and procedures of the Press Complaints Commission.
4. A more robust system of self-regulation is required, one which mandates the right of third party complainants to challenge misrepresentations, inaccuracies and false reporting. British Muslims as a social group collectively suffer from poor media practices, whether this be the excessive attention granted to fringe Muslim groups, like Muslims Against Crusades, by the media or poor fact-checking prior to publication. At present, they enjoy no recourse to redress of grievance where such incidents take place. Furthermore, where apologies are published by newspapers, they are in no way commensurate in scale and offer little or no redress for the damage done by the original published article.
5. Improving media practices and media responsibility on portraying and reporting fairly on Islam and British Muslims, without bias or discrimination or intent to incite anti-Muslim prejudice, is an urgent concern.

Submitted by Shenaz Bunglawala, Head of Research, ENGAGE to the Leveson Inquiry, 31st October 2011.

ENGAGE is dedicated to promoting greater media awareness, political participation and civic engagement amongst British Muslims.