



Re: Complaint by Kate Clanchy (ref: 30/01/2024)

Date of complaint: 30 January 2024

Articles complained of:

1. [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/11/society-of-authors-philip-pullman-tweets -kate-clanchy](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/11/society-of-authors-philip-pullman-tweets-kate-clanchy) (online only)
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/13/pointing-out-racism-in-books-is-not-an-attack-kate-clanchy> (online only)
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/18/the-book-that-tore-publishing-apart-harm-has-been-done-and-now-everyones-afraid> (Print headline “Damaged goods: how did a book go from being feted and prize-winning to sparking the bloodiest debate in publishing?”)

Dates of publication (1) 11 August 2021; (2) 13 August 2021; (3) 18 June 2022

Decision

Introduction

1. Throughout this decision, Kate Clanchy will be referred to as “the Complainant” and the above-mentioned articles as the Articles. Guardian News & Media will be referred to as “GNM”, the former Press Complaints Commission Code as “the Code”,¹ the office of the readers’ editor as RE and review panel as “the Panel”.

The Articles

2. The Complainant complains about three articles published between August 2021 and June 2022 (“the Articles”). Each of the Articles relays accounts of an online backlash against writers of colour who had, in 2021, criticised certain content within the Complainant’s book “*Some Kids I Taught and What they Taught me*”. The Complainant’s specific complaints in relation to each of the Articles is as follows:

¹ Although the PCC Code has now been replaced by the Guardian’s own Editorial Code, this complaint falls to be decided under the PCC Code. For the purposes of this decision, there is no material difference between the relevant provision.



The First Article (11 August 2021)

3. The relevant paragraph complained of is as follows:

“In a now deleted comment made in response to a Tweet he wrongly thought to be about Clanchy, he [Phillip Pullman] wrote that those who do not read a book before condemning it would ‘find a comfortable home in Isis or the Taliban’. Authors of colour who criticised Clanchy, including Chimene Suleyman, Monisha Rajesh and Sunny Singh, went on to receive racist abuse from social media users.² Pullman has now tweeted an apology for the harm he has caused.”³

The Second Article (13 August 2021)

4. The Complainant complained of (a) the photograph featuring two of her former students which, she said, has caused the two young people “considerable distress” as they did not recognise the claims made in the Second Article and had been falsely represented as victims of abuse;⁴ and (b) paragraph 4:

“Pullman suggested we were looking for offence and likened us to Isis and the Taliban, a comment which came as the three of us were already under a coordinated racist attack from the ‘alt-right’ which targeted our emails and social media”.

5. The Second Article is a comment piece written by one of the authors who claims to have suffered online abuse following her criticism of the Complainant’s book.

The Third Article (18 June 2022)

6. The Complainant complained of the accuracy of paragraph 6:

“Three writers of colour, Monisha Rajesh, Prof Sunny Singh and Chimene Suleyman, who had challenged Clanchy on Twitter, endured months of racist abuse and sometimes violent threats.”

7. The Complainant further complained of Section 2, paragraph 1:

² Emphasis added.

³ The relevant Tweet was published at 11.30am on 9 August 2021.

⁴ This does not form part of the Complainant’s complaint to the Panel. The RE dealt with it by saying that any complaint in this regard should be raised by the two young people in question.



“Avalanches of racist hate mail ensued. Every time the story hit the headlines, she’d [Monisha Rajesh] log off social media or get someone else to sift her emails but, even then, she says, it was unavoidable. ‘I would start getting WhatsApps from friends saying, ‘Are you OK?’, and I’d think, ‘Oh God, another one’. It preoccupies you. I’d be trying to put my kids to bed and I’d get a WhatsApp...it’s never-ending.”

Complaint to the RE

8. The Complainant first complained to the RE on 29 November 2023 in relation to the First and Second Articles. These complaints related to articles first published over two years earlier. On 3 December 2023, she made a further complaint about the Third Article. The Complainant requested that the Guardian supply assurances for the verification of the reported nature of online abuse allegedly directed at the three authors referred to in the Articles. She said that she had commissioned a forensic social media report and that her investigator could not find any relevant racist abuse of the three women between 9 and 11 August 2021.
9. The complaint in relation to the Articles was rejected in its entirety. The RE considered that it failed to demonstrate sufficiently *prima facie* grounds to suggest an investigation into the sources of verification for the Articles was necessary. The RE noted that the complaint related to comments made on social media over two years earlier. The events had been widely reported in similar terms in the national and specialist press at the time, and relevant Guardian staff told the RE that they had been satisfied from their contemporaneous observations about the nature of the online exchanges. The RE considered there could not be sufficient confidence in the ongoing availability of potentially relevant online material to investigate satisfactorily; nor would it be reasonable or proportionate to ask journalists to recall specific posts given the passage of time. In relation to the reference in the First and Second Articles to Phillip Pullman, the RE considered that it should be him, as the subject of those sections, to bring forward any complaint about its accuracy.
10. The RE did draw attention to an article in the industry publication *The Bookseller* reporting on an open letter signed (at the point of publication) by over 150 persons from within the book industry, condemning *“the abuse suffered by Monisha Rajesh, Professor Sunny Singh and Chimene Suleyman following their criticisms of Kate Clanchy, who is writing a new version of her book for the autumn with the help of ‘specialist readers’.”* The *Bookseller* article and the letter were both published shortly before publication of the First Article.



The RE considered these to be evidence of contemporaneous reports of the abuse alleged in the Articles. She also referred to a video still in the public domain posted by Chimene Suleyman on 9 August 2021 evidencing screenshots of racist abuse she had received following her online criticism of the Complainant's book.

11. On 15 December 2023, the Complainant wrote asking the RE to reconsider her decision not to investigate. The Complainant gave reasons as to why she had delayed in making her complaints and suggested that she was not asking to see original sources but merely confirmation "in a letter that [the Editor] has seen a police report or original letter". She further suggested that it was not appropriate to rely on the Bookseller article and letter as they were simply reporting what others had reported rather than undertaking their own investigative journalism. The Complainant dismissed the screenshot Tweet referred to as being unconnected with either the Complainant or Phillip Pullman, arguing that it represented evidence that Ms Suleyman had been subject to racist abuse but not that this had been subsequent or consequent to any discussion about the Complainant, Phillip Pullman or the book. The Complainant suggested that if racially motivated abuse or hate had been received by letter or email, that these should be capable of verification by way of police report.

12. There then followed a period of some delay in the RE providing a substantive response. This was due to a combination of illness and the Christmas holiday period. A substantive response was provided on 19 January 2024, the material parts of which are as follows:

"There is a discretion in taking forward a complaint ... the decision on whether to investigate is based initially on whether the complaint raises a significant prima facie inaccuracy (or other editorial code issue), with another important consideration, when there has been a significant passage of time, being whether it's possible to investigate satisfactorily and fairly and such a distance from events"

"Your complaint suggests the Guardian breached the editorial code by stating that the three individuals [...] were subject to racial abuse. Underlying this concern appears to be that you say neither you nor your investigator have found social media posts that amount to such abuse. Set against this, I have spoken to relevant editorial staff who have told me that they were satisfied from their own observations at the time about the nature of comments directed at those who had criticised your book.



I also noted the fact that 150 publishing industry figures had signed the open letter by the time of the first Guardian article, which I consider material to observations at the point of publication. Meanwhile, the video roll of tweets directed at Chimene Suleyman was included in my earlier reply only as an example, but given the abuse apparent in that threat stems originally from a tweet she made about your book, notwithstanding how it might later have been shared, I consider it remains relevant.

The articles about which you have contacted us are respectively two and a half and 18 months old, and the nature of social media means I do not consider that there are strong grounds nor sufficient confidence in the continuing availability of potentially relevant material for me to instigate a satisfactory investigation. Neither would I consider it reasonable, for example, to ask editorial staff to recall specific posts at this distance.”

13. For those reasons, the RE concluded that it was not fair, reasonable, or proportionate from a Code point of view to investigate further.
14. The Complainant responded asking *inter alia* for the Panel’s details. On 26 January 2024, the RE responded attaching the Panel request form and instructions on how to complete it. She further pointed out that it would be a matter for the Panel as to whether or not it considered the complaint given the Articles were by now more than 12 months old. The RE confirmed her agreement with the earlier decisions taken on behalf of her office not to take the complaint further.

The Complaint to the panel

15. The Complainant complained to the Panel on 30 January 2024. Her complaint is in essentially the same terms as it was to the RE. In summary, it is that the Articles contain material inaccuracies in that they suggest that as a matter of fact, the three named individuals suffered coordinated abuse, often of a racially motivated nature, and that this abuse was received as a consequence of their criticism of the Complainant’s book and/or their criticism of the Tweets by Phillip Pullman defending the Complainant. The Complainant says the RE did not address her central concerns about corroboration and Editorial Process. The Panel notes that the Complainant refers not only to the Code but to Clause X of the Guardian’s Editorial Guidelines which provides that “*journalists should be tenacious in seeking reliable corroboration ... journalists should be particularly careful in verifying online, social media and email sources. They should state the level of substantiation they have been able to achieve*”. The Panel’s remit is to consider whether there has been any breach of the Code. It is not able to



consider as a standalone matter whether there has been any failure to comply with other editorial processes or guidance.

Relevant aspects of the Code

16. The Complaint gives rise to issues under Clause 1 of the Code which provides as follows:

“Accuracy

- i) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text.*
- ii) A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortion once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and - where appropriate - an apology published. In cases involving the Commission, prominence should be agreed with the PCC in advance.”*
- iii) A fair opportunity to reply to significant inaccuracies should be given, when reasonably called for*

Discussion

(a) Time Elapsed since Publication

17. The Panel notes the observations made by the RE in relation to the substantial delay in bringing a complaint in relation to the Articles, all of which were published at least 12 months before the Complainant first complained to the RE. The Complainant cites several reasons for that delay. The Panel does not consider it necessary to repeat those reasons here. While complainants are encouraged to raise complaints in a timely manner, and at least within 12 months of publication, in this case, and exceptionally, where the RE has in effect already considered the substance of the complaint, and where the additional passage of time from conclusion of that process to an appeal to the Panel is limited, the Panel has decided to consider the appeal. However, the Panel agrees that the elapsed time between publication and complaint – whatever the reason – is a relevant factor in its overall assessment as to



whether there has been a breach of the Code. That is particularly so where, as is the case here, the complaint relates to matters published on social media where original material is no longer available. It is inevitably more difficult to investigate a complaint of accuracy in those circumstances. The Panel further considers that it is appropriate to consider the proportionality and reasonableness of that exercise in determining the outcome of the complaint.

(b) Review of RE Decision

18. As above, the Panel notes that the RE, while raising a concern about the length of time since publication, did consider the merits of the complaint. The Complainant is dissatisfied with the rigour of that exercise. The Panel is concerned not with carrying out its own investigation into the underlying material – an exercise which would be more difficult now in any event – but with whether the RE’s decision that there had been no material breach of Clause One of the Code was a reasonable one in all the circumstances. The Panel’s view is that it was.
19. Each of the Articles refers to abuse – including racist abuse – received by three women of colour. It is important to note that the statements complained of do not suggest that the Complainant was personally responsible for the abuse – including racist abuse – and threats suffered by the three individuals in question. There is no such attribution on any reasonable reading of the Articles nor is there any evidence of the same before the Panel. Rather, it is suggested that the racist abuse received came about after each of them had either criticised the Complainant’s book or criticised Phillip Pullman’s Tweet which offered some support to the Complainant in response to the backlash she was facing. This abuse was reported by each of the individuals concerned both via their own Twitter accounts and, in the case of the Second Article, via an opinion piece written as a first hand account of the abuse suffered. Further, the author makes clear that she and others were *already* the subject of a coordinated attack from the alt-right both online and via emails. This statement would not reasonably be understood as meaning that it was the Tweet from Phillip Pullman which had sparked the abuse.
20. The RE points to the open letter and corresponding report in the *Bookseller* which condemned the abuse received by the three individuals in question. This was published *before* the First Article. While the Complainant says this is not corroboration, the Panel considers it reasonable for the noted concern of 150 (now 950) members of the writing and publishing community who say they “*have watched in horror as three of our colleagues ... have been targeted, harassed and gaslighted online*” to have been relied upon. This cannot be said



to have come from the Guardian's reporting – the letter was published before the First Article. Neither can it simply be dismissed as “rumour”. It was reasonable for the Guardian to rely on this as a source of evidence and to report upon it.

21. The RE also referred – by way of example – to a screenshot showing a number of racist Tweets directed towards one of the women in question. The Complainant says this should be given very little weight (a) because it is not evidence of a coordinated mass of abuse against all three women; and (b) because it pre-dates the Philip Pullman Tweet, being targeted towards a Tweet published on 3 August 2021. The Panel disagrees. The fact that it pre-dates the Pullman Tweet is insufficient to demonstrate any material inaccuracy in any of the Articles. Nor does the fact that it relates to only one of the women in question. The Second Article makes clear that the women were *already* the victim of a coordinated campaign of abuse by the alt-right. The First Article says that it was authors of colour “who criticised Clanchy” who went on to receive racist abuse from social media users. It does not say that they received such abuse in response to the Pullman Tweet. By this point, there was already an ongoing online debate about parts of the Complainant's book in which each of the three women in question had publicly participated and in response to which they had received abuse both online and via other means.
22. Further, the original Tweet links the screenshotted abusive messages with the earlier criticism made of the Complainant's book. While the Complainant may say that the response received was as a result of Ms Suleyman's Tweet making criticisms of whiteness and made in ignorance of the real nature of the dispute, the abuse occurred in the wider context of the public comments made by women of colour, including Ms Suleyman, which were critical of aspects of the Complainant's book.
23. Against this, the Complainant offers evidence via a forensic social media report which she says demonstrates the absence of any recorded abuse online against the three named women between 9 and 11 August 2021. This report considered public domain material only, and could only reflect material which has stayed available. It also considers only a very limited period of time. It was therefore reasonable for the RE not to treat it as compelling evidence when considering whether any of the Articles breached the Code. The Panel does not consider the absence of evidence of online abuse during that time period to mean that there was in fact no online abuse of the type described in the Articles.
24. Finally, the Panel notes that the RE did not simply take what was said at face value or decline to carry out any investigation. She spoke to editorial staff, who told her they were satisfied with the accuracy of what had been written at the



time of publication. The passage of time makes it inherently more difficult to corroborate the online material, much of which may now have been deleted or removed. It is not reasonable to expect them to furnish the RE with police reports to corroborate the accounts of hate mail (not least because such communications may well not have been reported to the police).

Conclusion

25. The Panel does not have before it any compelling evidence that the RE was wrong in finding that there had been no breach of Clause One of the Code. In all the circumstances, the Panel does not find any material inaccuracy in any of the Articles and accordingly there has been no breach of the Code.

Dated: 27.03.24

Signed:

John Willis, Chair review panel.

Signed:

Valerie Nazareth

Signed:

Richard Danbury, panel member



Signed:

Martin Rosenbaum, panel member