

6 October 2009

Dear Sir/Madam,

I'm writing to complain about the publication of a Q&A by Debbie Randle with two members of the British National Party on the Newsbeat section of the BBC News website on 30 September 2009 - http://news.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/hi/the_p_word/newsid_10000000/newsid_10002000/10002087.stm . I should emphasise that I am complaining about the web feature alone, not the broadcast interview of which this is apparently an edited transcription of.

I believe the decision to publish the feature was wholly irresponsible. The headline is "BNP members challenged on their beliefs", yet the piece does nothing of the sort. In its original version, it allowed the two BNP members - who are actually its PR spokesman and someone involved in their record label [1] - to imply that England footballer Ashley Cole was not British (which is inaccurate, he was born in London). They are not pressed on claims of government "indoctrination" or on claims that immigration would take away people's "identity", and a baffling analogy between species and race is left unchallenged. Nor are they pressed on links between the BNP and violence, or its fascist origins. Was the reporter even aware of her interviewees' backgrounds? It is nothing more than a puff-piece for the BNP.

I do understand that the BBC's editorial policy unit has decided the BNP should now be covered like any other political party - however, any emerging political group should be subject to the strictest scrutiny in a BBC interview. This was not the case in Debbie Randle's web feature. I also understand that Newsbeat is aimed at a younger audience, but "young" should not equal "stupid", and what appears on the Newsbeat website should be as watertight as what appears on the rest of the BBC News website. Again, this was not the case.

The BBC editorial guidelines [2] state that in dealing with "controversial subjects", "we must ensure a wide range of significant views and perspectives are given due weight in the period during which a controversial subject is active". This is not the case in the BNP feature, which also solely links to the party's website, and not others which present different points of view. Why weren't groups like Hope Not Hate or Unite Against Fascism spoken to? And when can we expect to see similar features with the Greens and UKIP, who have similar representation in Brussels and on local councils?

Publication of this feature also seems to cast doubt on the attention given to the Newsbeat website, compared with the rest of the BBC News site. Whereas in most other organisations, a web feature would be a chance to publish more content, it appears that Newsbeat decided to publish less. On Twitter, Debbie Randle dismissed criticism from Guardian columnist Roy Greenslade by saying he should have listened to the broadcast interview, and not a "shorter transcript" [3]. Why should he? And why is Newsbeat publishing features on the web which it knows do not give the full story? Newsbeat editor Rod McKenzie's editor's blog article [4] only concerned the broadcast interview, and did not even mention - or link to - the web feature. It would appear the website is just an afterthought.

My initial complaint was met with a response from Newsbeat editor Rod McKenzie focusing solely on the broadcast interviews, which were not the subject of my complaint. It appears other complainants were also sent this stock response, without anyone actually bothering to check what the complaint was about [5]. A follow-up complaint to

Mr McKenzie was passed to website editor Julian Marshall - who I know personally from previous employment at the BBC - who accepted my point about the Ashley Cole feature and amended the introduction to the piece, but disagreed with me on the other points.

However, this episode throws up such serious questions about the editorial processes at Newsbeat, and whether its management is taking its website seriously or not, that I feel this incident should be investigated further. Who decided to publish this limp plug for the BNP? Why is it only "a shorter transcript", without even embedding the (apparently tougher) broadcast interview? Why does Rod McKenzie not appear to be taking complaints about his website seriously?

I used to work on the main BBC News website as a journalist, and remain an admirer of the many excellent reporters and production staff on the site, because they understand the subtleties of journalism on the web. But, in the case of Newsbeat, when broadcasters treat their website with cavalier disregard, as has happened here, it damages the reputation of BBC News online as a whole. Even just in the way complaints about this feature have been handled, there are many lessons the BBC should learn from this tawdry incident.

Yours sincerely,

Darryl Chamberlain

notes:

1. <http://www.hurryupharry.org/2009/09/30/young-bnp-mixed-race-relationships-the-result-of-brainwashing/>
and <http://www.nothingbritish.com/09/mark-collett-and-joe-smith-on-radio-1/>
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/impariality/controversialsu.shtml>
3. <http://twitter.com/DebsR/statuses/4528162324>
4. http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2009/10/newsbeat_and_the_bnp.html
5. <http://sarahditum.com/2009/10/06/unsatisfaction-newsbeat-and-the-bnp/>