Re: Complaint by Aaron Maté (ref: 23.12.22)
Date of complaint: 23 December 2022

Article complained of: “Network of Syria Conspiracy Theorists Identified”
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/19/russia-backed-network-of-syria-conspiracy-theorists-identified

Date of publication: 19 June 2022 (print and online)

Decision

Introduction

1. Throughout this decision, Aaron Maté will be referred to as “the complainant” and the above-mentioned article as the Article. Guardian News & Media will be referred to as “GNM”, the former Press Complaints Commission Code as “the Code”, the readers’ editor as RE and review panel as “the Panel”.

The Article

2. The Article complained of is an article which appeared both in print and online on 19 June 2022 in the Observer. It reports on the findings of a study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a UK-based ‘think-tank’, for the Syria Campaign advocacy group. The headline of the article was changed within a few hours of publication on 19 June 2022 from “Russia-backed network of Syria conspiracy theorists identified” to “Network of Syria conspiracy theorists identified”.

Complaint to the RE

3. The Complainant is a Canadian journalist. He first complained to the RE on 23 June 2022 on the basis that GNM had failed to offer him an opportunity to respond to the allegations about him in the Article prior to publication and that this had been unfair.

4. The Article refers to the Complainant in the following terms:
“Since 2020, journalist Aaron Maté at the Grayzone is said by the report to have overtaken Belley as the most prolific spreader of disinformation among the 28 conspiracy theorists identified.”

5. The RE considered the Complaint under the wider GNM Guidelines, rather than the Code. The reason for this was that the former does not include any pre-publication right of reply (as set out below). However, the wider GNM Guidelines says “The voice of opponents no less than of friends has a right to be heard…It is well to be frank; it is even better to be fair: (CP Scott, 1921). The more serious the criticism or allegations we are reporting the greater the obligation to allow the subject the opportunity to respond.

6. The RE decided that a right of reply should be offered, post-publication. This was done in the form of a lengthy footnote appended to the online version of the article on 10 July 2022 (amended on 12 July to correct an error in phrasing), with a cross-reference to the footnote included at the relevant point in the Article referring to the Complainant. It was included in the next Observer weekly online corrections column to make clear that the Article had been amended to include a response from the Complainant.

7. The Article contains two, substantial, footnotes as follows:

“The headline of this article was amended on 19 June 2022 to remove a reference to the network being “Russia-backed”. As indicated in the text, the network was “frequently backed by a coordinated Russian campaign”, but not exclusively so. It was further amended on 18 August 2022 to give additional attribution to the ISD study in the headings and opening paragraphs.

Footnote added 10 July 2022: Aaron Maté, who was not contacted for comment prior to publication of this article, responded afterwards. Maté said that, “neither the study or the Observer offer any evidence [for the assertion that I am ‘the most prolific spreader of disinformation’ on Syria among a ‘network’ of ‘28 conspiracy theorists’]”; he said the study did not substantiate that anything he had shared was disinformation and “does not even attempt to refute a single claim of mine”. Maté said it had faulted
him for arguing that the OPCW “investigation into the Douma chemical attack was flawed” but he defended his reporting, suggesting the ISD study “cannot contest” an argument that was based on OPCW leaks. He also believed there was a conflict of interest because the ISD’s funders included some western governments that had been involved in the war in Syria and because the Syria Campaign was founded by “a billionaire financier” who was a supporter of the Syrian opposition.”

8. Following these additions, the RE considered the matter resolved. However, on 26 July 2022, the Complainant made a further complaint with the RE on the grounds of “verification and accuracy”. Again, “verification” appears not in the Code but in the wider GNM Guidelines. The Complainant suggested the Article was inaccurate as follows:

   i) It did not substantiate the claim that he was a ‘conspiracy theorist’
   ii) The ISD did not call him a ‘conspiracy theorist’
   iii) The word ‘network’ did not appear in the ISD report.

9. Although the RE considered that the Article was clear as being an account of the findings of a named report, rather than adopting them as fact, a number of further amendments were made to the Article in order to address the Complainant’s concerns. The Article now clarifies the attribution of the research in the headlines and top of the article, reduces the number of references to ‘network’, added ‘research finds’ to the standfirst, changed ‘new analysis reveals’ to ‘new analysis says’ and added ‘according to the research’ to the second paragraph. The RE considered that the term ‘conspiracy theorist’ was justified and reflected the language used in the ISD / Syria Campaign study reported in the Article.
The Complaint to the panel

10. The Complainant complains to the Panel in substantially the same terms as his complaint to the RE. He maintains that, notwithstanding the inclusion of the two footnotes and the amendments to the Article, it is still inaccurate in that it refers to him as a “conspiracy theorist” in circumstances where the study cited does not, he says, make any such claim. He maintains that the reference to him being part of a ‘network’ of conspiracy theorists is inaccurate. In essence, the Complainant suggests that the Article places undue reliance on what he says is an unreliable source (the ISD / Syria Campaign) and goes beyond mere reportage. He requests a retraction and apology.

Relevant aspects of the Code

11. 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

12. The Panel’s remit is to consider whether there has been any breach of the Code. The Panel does not regulate GNM, its journalists or review complaints against wider GNM Guidance. Accordingly, it limits this decision to consideration of Clause 1 and not the wider GNM Guidance.
Discussion

13. The Panel has considered correspondence between the RE and the Complainant and has read and considered the Article in its original and amended forms. It has also considered the relevant parts of the ISD / Syria Report referred to in the Article. It notes that there have been significant and substantial amendments to the Article, including the addition of a lengthy and robust reply from the Complainant. While the Panel considers the first version of the Article was arguably more sensationalist in tone, which perhaps went beyond merely reporting the findings of a report, the amended version is considerably different and, in the Panel’s view, presents a much more balanced picture.

14. The Panel finds that the Article, in its current form, is clearly a report of what is said in the Syria / ISD Report. It does not purport to pass off the contents of that report as its own findings or as matters of fact. Moreover, the Article contains hyperlinks to the source document, which readers are able to click through to see the original findings.

15. The only reference to the Complainant in the Article is as follows:

“Since 2020, journalist Aaron Maté at the Grayzone is said by the report to have overtaken Beeley as the most prolific spreader of disinformation among the 28 conspiracy theorists identified. [Maté rejects the claim – see 10 July 2022 footnote.]” (emphasis added).

16. The Panel notes that the word “network” now appears only in the headline and first paragraph, where it is defined as being “a network of more than two dozen conspiracy theorists”. Although this word is not used in the Report itself, the Panel does not consider that its inclusion in the Article gives rise to any material inaccuracy. The Report refers to a group of 28 individuals. The Report cited in the Article repeatedly refers to “conspiracy theories” and those responsible for spreading “conspiracy theories”. For example, it says that “Despite extensive video, documentary and witness evidence of the crimes committed by the Syrian regime, unfounded conspiracy theories still manage to find some support – not least among a group of British academics.” A Tweet by the Complainant is then pasted immediately below, and he is named in the next paragraph as having “overtaken Beeley as the most prolific creators and spreader of disinformation among the 28 actors we investigated.” In the circumstances, the Panel finds that the amended version of the Article, particularly given the inclusion of the Complainant’s reply is a fair and accurate account of the Report’s findings.
Conclusion

17. For the reasons above, the Panel finds that there has been no breach of the Code and dismisses the appeal.

Dated: 5.5.23

Signed:

John Willis, Chair review panel.

Signed:

Elinor Goodman, panel member.

Signed:

Richard Danbury, panel member