



editorial  
policies

## Accuracy: News, Current Affairs and Factual Content

Issued: 11 April 2011

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### Status of Guidance Note

This Guidance Note, authorised by the Managing Director, is provided to assist interpretation of the Editorial Policies to which the Guidance Note relates. Guidance notes provide advice to assist in the interpretation of the Editorial Policies, which contain the standards enforceable under the ABC's internal management processes and under the ABC's complaints handling procedures.

It is expected that staff will normally act in accordance with the advice contained in Guidance Notes. In a given situation there may be good reasons to depart from the advice. This is permissible so long as the standards of the Editorial Policies are met. In such situations, the matter should ordinarily be referred upwards. Any mandatory referrals specified in Guidance Notes must be complied with.

### Key Editorial Standards

Excerpts of key editorial standards relevant to this Guidance Note are set out below. Other editorial standards may also be relevant, depending on the specific circumstances applying in each case.

#### 2 Accuracy

- 2.1 Make reasonable efforts to ensure that material facts are accurate and presented in context.
- 2.2 Do not present factual content in a way that will materially mislead the audience. In some cases, this may require appropriate labels or signposting other explanatory information.

### Scope of this Guidance Note

This note provides specific guidance for fact-based content. The ABC presents a wide range of fact-based content, including news and current affairs, documentaries, commentary, interviews, reviews, magazine-style and quiz programs.

### Mandatory Referral

Where UGC is to be incorporated into factual content, reasonable efforts should be carried out to verify the accuracy of any factual material contained or presented within UGC. If verification is not possible to the extent reasonably required, usage must be referred to the most senior person in the division designated for the purpose.

## Introduction

Accuracy is fundamental to credibility for a media organisation. Practical considerations affect the degree of accuracy which can be reasonably required of media content. The consequences of inaccuracy can vary greatly. Any lapse of accuracy is regrettable, may merit correction, and could indicate a need for more training or better quality control. Perfect accuracy is an aspiration which it is reasonable to strive for. It is not a standard which it is reasonable to enforce, nor is it what is expected in Standard 2.1 or 2.2. The Standards require reasonable efforts to be made to ensure accuracy, and that factual content be presented in context. Generally speaking, the more serious the implications of factual content, the greater the efforts to ensure its accuracy.

In applying the ABC's Accuracy Standards, it is important to give due regard to the nature of the specific content under consideration, as the Note on Interpretation in the Editorial Policies points out. The Principles of the Accuracy section are intended to assist in the many and varied situations in which the standards have to be applied. This Guidance Note provides further details about the concepts used and the ways they can apply in practice.

The Guidance Note covers –

1. **Accuracy relates to facts, not opinion** – *the basics of distinguishing fact from opinion*
2. **Attribution** – *attributing facts and opinions to experts*
3. **Verification** – *how to go about verifying facts*
4. **When is a fact 'material'?** – *this section explains when a fact is considered material to a piece of content*
5. **Ensuring facts are in context and not misleading** – *considering the context in which facts appear in content, the need for background and labelling to ensure accuracy and the risks of being inaccurate by omission*
6. **Accuracy of quotes** – *the way we deal with accuracy of quotes and attributed content – that is, content in the form of interviews, comments and indirect remarks which appear within ABC content but are attributed to third parties*
7. **The test of 'reasonable efforts'** – *an exploration of how level of effort to ensure accuracy differs depending on factors such as the nature of the content and the circumstances in which content is made or presented*
8. **Content acquired by the ABC** – *while the ABC accepts editorial responsibility for ALL content it broadcasts or publishes, the Accuracy Standards apply differently to content not created by the ABC, such as content acquired from third parties*
9. **User generated content** – *a look at some of the accuracy issues specific to user generated content. See also Principles and Standards section 9 (Public access and participation).*

## 1. Accuracy relates to fact, not opinion

The Accuracy Standards relate to facts, not opinion. A ‘fact’ describes things or events and is capable of being verified. Simple facts include basic information such as names, titles, dates, ages, addresses, amounts. Facts may be more complex, perhaps requiring a level of expertise. For example, explanations about how the human body works, the operation of the share market, or the regulatory powers of a statutory authority would be complex factual content.

Factual content is factual content regardless of who says it. A fact may be articulated by an ABC reporter or presenter, or it may be stated by a guest commentator or an interviewee. Where factual content is stated by a third party, the need for attribution and verification can still exist under certain circumstances (see below in 2. *Attribution* and 3. *Verification*).

For example, it is a fact that Nelson Mandela was released from prison on 11 February 1990. It does not matter if this fact was uttered by an ABC staff member, or by an interviewee. It is still a fact, capable of verification. It should also be kept in mind that information can be included in a story that is not capable of easy verification. Particularly in relation to controversial issues, facts can be in dispute and differing views may exist. In such circumstances, it is important to correctly characterise the information presented and its status.

Opinion is different from fact. An ‘opinion’ is a viewpoint that is based on a value judgement that cannot be proved or disproved. Opposing viewpoints may be equally legitimate.

For example, ‘The day Nelson Mandela was released from prison was the most significant moment in the history of South Africa’ is a statement of opinion. Views can differ – some may agree, others may disagree. The Accuracy Standards do not require efforts to be undertaken to prove that one view is ‘true’ or ‘right’. The standards relevant to the ABC’s treatment of opinion are set out in Section 4 of the Editorial Policies (Impartiality and diversity of perspectives).

The Accuracy Standards *do* apply to factual content which may be mentioned to support an opinion. To illustrate, a person expressing the view that Nelson Mandela’s release date was the most significant in South Africa’s history might argue for this view by saying that, after 11 February 1990, recorded levels of racial crimes fell and foreign investment increased. These constitute factual content on which the opinion rests. Only the factual content, not the opinion, is capable of verification.

## 2. Attribution

The Principles acknowledge that it is reasonable to rely on experts. When assessing contested or complex subject matter, it is important to work out which are matters of fact and which are matters of opinion or interpretation – especially statements of expert opinion – so that you know where your reasonable efforts at ensuring accuracy should be focussed. In many cases, for example, scientific data exists and can be verified, but is then subject to interpretation and analysis and this interpretation and analysis can differ, even

between experts in the field. An expert may give their opinion on a matter, based on their special knowledge of the facts. In most cases, it is reasonable to rely on the expertise of the commentator. Further steps may be required to verify where there is an obvious reason to doubt the accuracy of the statements of fact on which the expert may rely. Expert opinion can differ, even on the same facts. Where the implications of what a single expert is saying are very serious, it may be appropriate to test whether similarly qualified experts believe those same facts support such a conclusion. For example, if an expert seismologist cites data and predicts a devastating earthquake will occur under a big city next Thursday, the seriousness of the prediction would suggest that further expert views on the data be sought. This process may show that the data is not accurate. Expert opinions should be attributed to their source, or clearly signposted to allow the ABC audience to understand the status of the information being provided.

Our editorial standards require us to make reasonable efforts to determine the accuracy of factual content. It is good practice to check all facts – material and immaterial – but it is necessary to verify all material facts using reasonable efforts. If factual content cannot be verified directly by the ABC, then it should be attributed to its source and presented only as claims or with other appropriate qualification. Depending on its seriousness, it may not be appropriate to broadcast or publish it unless and until the ABC has verified it.

For example, if a legal firm claims that a recent judgement in favour of its client was the largest damages payout in Australian history, checks should be made with other appropriate independent sources to confirm the accuracy of this claim. If those checks cannot be made in the time available, or if the checks do not provide a sufficient level of verification, then this information should not be presented as a fact. If it is to be included, it should be described as a claim made by the legal firm.

If an attributed fact is included in a piece of content and the rest of the content is predicated on that fact being accurate (rather than it being simply reported as an assertion) then it is reasonable to expect the ABC to take some steps to verify its accuracy.

For example, if a news item begins with an ACTU statement about the 30% rate of unemployment in Australia being far too high, and then reaction is sought from employers about the unemployment rate and what can be done about it, it is reasonable to expect the ABC would take steps to check that unemployment really *was* 30% before building an entire story around that fact. Such verification is required even though it was an attributed fact.

This requirement to undertake reasonable efforts to verify the accuracy of facts attributed to others is greater when the information itself is more significant, and when the source of that information is more doubtful.

For example, the announcement of the assassination of a political leader by a reputable government source would be reported with confidence, but the same statement by a self-described witness to the event would be subject to checks before being relied upon, even with attribution.

### 3. Verification

Verification of facts normally involves checking with primary sources: going to original documents or transcripts, checking with individuals who were directly involved or faithfully documenting and presenting information you have directly witnessed.

If there is doubt, a second or third source may be required to verify or cross check. In each case, attempts should be made to ensure that all sources relied upon have direct knowledge of the facts being checked. Preference should always be given to official sources, to direct eyewitnesses and to acknowledged authorities when checking information.

The reasonableness of these checks will depend on the circumstances. For example, when checking the accuracy of a simple fact relating to an organisation, it is reasonable to rely on confirmation from an appropriate representative of that organisation. For a fact less obviously connected with a specific organisation, it is reasonable to consult an official or other reputable source or sources of information in the time available before broadcast or publication. An example of this would be referring to official sources like the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the OECD when verifying key national or international statistics on population, economic growth, or employment. Information on company activities can often be independently verified through sources like the Stock Exchange, while the Australian Parliamentary Library and a range of Government websites often provide fact sheets and background papers containing both current and historical data.

### 4. When is a fact ‘material’?

Reasonable efforts to ensure accuracy must be carried out for all material facts. Determining whether an inaccuracy in ABC content amounts to a breach of editorial policy will depend on whether the inaccuracy relates to a material fact or not.

For the purposes of the ABC’s Editorial Policies, a material fact is one which is relevant or essential to understanding the subject matter or issue being discussed, as distinguished from irrelevant or incidental.

For example, in a factual story about the decision of an MP to resign and thereby trigger a vital by-election, the name of the MP, the party he or she represents and the name of the electorate would all be material facts, as well as any statements made about the reasons for the resignation. However, factual information about the length of time the MP held the seat or the various portfolios he or she held while a minister, while important to get right, would not be considered material facts as they are of no significance to a reasonable person in understanding the story.

On the other hand, a detail like the correct date on which a song was released may well be material in the context of a music quiz show, where a high level of detailed accuracy is required in answers.

## 5. Ensuring facts are in context and not misleading

Inaccuracy can also arise through the omission of factual information or when material is presented out of context, where the result can materially mislead the audience.

For example, to state that a local authority has closed down a significant neighbourhood park, resulting in community protest, without including the fact that they have simultaneously opened up a larger park directly across the road could result in a breach of accuracy through omitting important context.

Not all information relating to an issue or event can be or should be included in every factual story and the editing and selecting process is a necessary part of the production process. However, decisions need to be made about what level of context is essential to an understanding of the key elements of an issue, and this context needs to be included to ensure accuracy.

## 6. Accuracy of quotes

The Accuracy Standards also apply to quotes. Quotes are different from attribution. Attribution is saying who made the statement, while quotes are a statement of exactly the words used by the person. In text, they are in quotation marks. In broadcast, they are normally the actuality of the person speaking, or information presented graphically in text. In text and broadcast, reasonable efforts must be made to quote accurately and in context, and not present quotes in a misleading way.

For information on when and how to confirm the accuracy of information contained in quotes, see 2. *Attribution*.

## 7. The test of ‘reasonable efforts’

When judging performance against the standards for accuracy, the expectation is that the content maker will make ‘reasonable’ efforts to ensure accuracy. This is important, as it acknowledges that perfect accuracy, while desirable, is not always achievable in the circumstances.

The Accuracy Principles set out the considerations that should be taken into account in deciding, in particular circumstances, what the ABC Accuracy Standards require. They include --

- the type, subject and nature of the content;
- the likely audience expectations of the content;
- the likely impact of reliance by the audience on the accuracy of the content; and
- the circumstances in which the content was made and presented.

### The type, subject and nature of the content

This puts the focus on the actual content itself. Is the *type*, say, an item of news or a nature documentary, a factual drama, a recipe online, some banter on radio, a review of someone’s products or services? Is its *subject*, say, a government’s new tax, a retrospective about an artist’s work, or the range of models in someone’s car

collection? Is the *nature* of the content, say, serious or light, analytical or off hand, contemporary or historical, frivolous or in earnest? Is the content, say, deliberate and authoritative or anecdotal, off the cuff, tentative?

For example, a major investigative current affairs story or documentary on a matter of significant public interest would carry a high burden in relation to ensuring accuracy of the key facts presented.

On the other hand, the broadcast of a sporting event which includes live commentary where the vision is available to the audience and the commentator is attempting to accurately describe events as they are occurring would have greater latitude when determining efforts to ensure accuracy as the situation unfolds.

### **The likely audience expectations of the content**

The focus shifts to the audience the ABC is serving. Who is the audience for the particular content in question? Is it an audience engaged with public affairs? Is it a specialist audience with more-than-general knowledge? Is it children, perhaps with an educational interest? Is it a mixed audience of mostly adults, leaning back to relax, be entertained, diverted, amused? Once the audience is in focus, ask yourself: What would a reasonable person in that sort of audience expect in terms of efforts to ensure accuracy in factual content of the type/subject/nature in question?

Generally speaking, the strongest expectation of accuracy applies to news and analysis of current events relating to political or controversial matters of public importance.

In general, the more substantial the piece of content the more likely the audience is to expect detailed context in the provision of factual content.

In a wide-ranging discussion, interview or talk-back situation the audience would be less likely to be relying on the precise accuracy of every fact presented and discussed, while at the other end of the scale, a news flash on a breaking story of major national or international importance, or the provision of time-critical information on a state of emergency are situations where audience expectation of accuracy would be high.

### **The likely impact of reliance by the audience on the accuracy of the content**

Here the focus is mostly on consequences. The reasonably expected efforts to ensure accuracy vary according to the information and the context in which the audience is turning to the ABC for it. Is there an election pending, so that voters might pay more attention and place greater reliance on the content in question than at other times? Is the content information about, say, extreme weather conditions, and being provided at a time when people likely to be affected by those conditions would expect from the ABC considerable efforts, especially if the conditions may have an impact on safety?

Where harm flows from inaccuracy, consider the degree of harm. This includes consideration of any harm or damage to the individuals, groups or organisations referred to in the content. Was the harm something that could be foreseen at the time the content was made and presented? Consider the efforts that were made to ensure accuracy. Consider qualifications that might be made to indicate that the

information should not be relied upon or that verification is still underway. Having regard to the harm, were the efforts reasonable?

The ABC is trusted as a credible source of information. If factual content is inaccurate, a consequence that should not be overlooked, but which should not be overstated either, is potential harm to that trust. For example, while a news item mistakenly reporting the death of a well-known public figure may be quickly rectified, people will remember the outlet that got it wrong. Such incidents can eat away at a reputation for reliability. Where risks to the ABC's reputation as a result of an error would be serious, the efforts required to ensure accuracy are greater.

### **The circumstances in which the content was made and presented**

The focus here is the practical reality for the people who made and presented the content. Many aspects may be relevant. For instance: was the program pre-recorded or live? Were events taking place far away or in an inaccessible location? Was language a barrier? Was the reporter on the road working in circumstances that affect accuracy? Were communications between those involved in making and presenting the content impaired in a way that was beyond control and relevant to the accuracy issue? If the setting was an interview, how much time did the interviewer and colleagues have for preparation?

In assessing reasonableness, it is important to take into account the amount of time content makers had to prepare the content, including: the time available to carry out checks for accuracy, the ease with which the material was able to be verified, the efforts taken to carry out these checks, and the length, complexity and preparation involved in the specific piece of content; the prior knowledge generally available on the subject being dealt with and the status and availability of that knowledge; and the skills and experience of the content makers. It is also important to identify the specific steps taken by the content makers to independently verify information being presented as facts within a piece of content, and any constraints that prevented further independent assessment of factual material. Material commissioned for broadcast or publication on the ABC by co-producers and independent producers has the same standard of accuracy required as material produced by the ABC. (See below 8. *Content acquired by the ABC*).

However, while the amount of time available to content makers and deadline pressures are factors in determining the reasonableness of efforts to ensure accuracy, the more controversial and investigative a piece of content is, the more time should be allowed for the necessary checks to be made. Given the importance of ensuring accuracy, particularly in relation to major investigative current affairs content, deferral of the broadcast or publication of the content should be strongly considered where necessary and possible, to ensure accuracy of material facts.

It is important to be realistic but not self-serving when considering the four factors, especially the last. No single factor 'trumps' the others each time. In particular cases, one factor may receive greater weight than others.

## **8. Content acquired by the ABC**

The ABC routinely obtains factual material from third parties for broadcast or publication. This includes, but is not necessarily limited to, content supplied

by other broadcasters, raw footage, audio and text from news agencies and content from other reputable independent sources such as distributors.

It also includes material provided such as video news releases and stock or pool footage from companies or government departments. This content can range from a single fact provided on, for example, a wire service like AAP or AFP, to a complete program.

Where the ABC is acquiring the content, the checks required in order to ensure accuracy will depend on the nature of the source and the material being provided. The following approaches are a guide --

- The ABC acquires raw news material (audio, video & text), live event coverage and completed news and current affairs content from reputable news agencies and broadcasters, both on an ad hoc basis and as part of ongoing contractual arrangements. Generally the ABC relies on the accuracy of this content without further checks, but accepts responsibility for its accuracy and will promptly correct any errors identified.
- The ABC acquires documentaries and other factual content from suppliers including distributors, broadcasters and independent producers. A key consideration in acquiring this content is the reputation and bona fides of the source. Checks should be made to determine if questions have been raised about factual accuracy of the material in relation to any previous broadcasts or publications. Where necessary, material may need to be amended, circumscribed or explained, particularly if additional information has come to light since the material was originally produced, broadcast or published.
- Third party providers may have a particular vested interest in the material being provided - for example, corporate video releases, footage or interviews that are provided by corporate or government sources, lobby groups, think tanks, etc..., and any such interest should be investigated. Such material where an interest has been identified will always be clearly attributed, and issues of contextual accuracy will be carefully considered. Where relevant, inclusion of such material in ABC content may require the addition of context or factual material from other sources in order to ensure overall accuracy.

## 9. User generated content

User generated content, including SMS messages, online comments, tweets, emails, photos, images, video or audio provided by users, should always be attributed as user generated content. Where UGC is to be incorporated into factual content, checks should be made to verify the accuracy of any factual material contained or presented within UGC. If verification is not possible to the extent desired, usage must be referred to the most senior person in the division designated for the purpose.





