



ABC Television

Accuracy and complaints handling

The complainant

On 13 November 2000 the ABA received a written complaint concerning the obituary of Sir Mark Oliphant broadcast by ABC Television in the ABC News on 17 July 2000. The complainant alleged that the ABC stated that Germany had also been developing the atom bomb during World War II. The complainant contended that this was an inaccurate statement as the facts now show that Germany was not developing an atom bomb. The complainant also stated that the response by the ABC was inadequate.

Relevant code of practice

4.1 News, Current Affairs and Information Programs

In programs produced by ABC News and Current Affairs Departments and information programs:

- (a) Every reasonable effort must be made to ensure that the factual content of programs is accurate. Demonstrable errors will be corrected in a timely manner and in a form most suited to the circumstances.

Complaints

8.1 This Code of Practice does not apply to complaints concerning programs which are or become the subject of legal proceedings.

Complaints that the ABC has acted contrary to this Code of Practice should be directed to the ABC in the first instance. Phone complainants seeking a response from the ABC will be asked to put their complaint in writing. All such written complaints will receive a response from the ABC within 60 days from receipt of the written complaint.

The ABC will make every reasonable effort to resolve complaints about Code of Practice matters, except where a complaint is clearly frivolous, vexatious or not made in good faith or the

complainant is vexatious or not acting in good faith.

Decision

The news item was an obituary of the Australian scientist Sir Mark Oliphant who had just died. The obituary gave a brief overview of Sir Mark's life with comments on his contributions to society. During the course of the obituary the reporter noted that:

when war broke out in 1939 he worked on developing radar, but in 1943 the brilliant young scientist was recruited by the Americans into the Manhattan Project, embroiled in a deadly race with the Germans to develop the nuclear bomb.

The complainant in his letter to the ABA stated that:

Given the facts which now show that Germany was not developing an atomic bomb then the conclusion is that ABC News was propagating the propaganda of the time, broadcasting factually incorrect information which ABC News should have known was incorrect and should have been able to confirm.

In this regard the ABC, in its response to the ABA, states that:

While the ABC did not state in the story that Germany was actually developing an atom bomb during World War 2 there is conclusive evidence to suggest that at least in the period 1939-42 Germany was working on developing some form of nuclear weaponry and that until 1944 the allies believed Germany was engaged in full-scale development.

The ABC also quoted historical references to support the above statement including a published record of an interview with Sir Mark Oliphant in which he indicated his belief that the



Investigations



Allies and Germany were in a race to develop nuclear weapons. They stated that it is important in an obituary to discuss a person's life in a context contemporary to their life and that it is not appropriate to overlay this with later values or interpretations of past events.

The ABA was of the view that the obituary of Sir Mark Oliphant did not breach section 4.1(a) of the code.

Complaints handling

The National Editor, TV News at the ABC, Mr John Budd, responded to the complainant on 30 October 2000 and stated:

Thank you for your comments concerning our obituary on Sir Mark Oliphant, and my apologies for not replying earlier.

I think your letter itself answers the question you ask of us. Without wishing to delve into the atomic semantics of the issue, we never said Germany had its own Manhattan project. However, the Americans certainly pushed the idea of a race.

I have advised the reporter concerned of your complaint.

The ABC submitted to the ABA that the complainant claimed that the obituary stated that Germany had its own Manhattan Project and that this issue was addressed by Mr Budd. In support of this contention the ABC noted that in his letter the complainant said:

In the segment on Sir Mark Oliphant it was stated that he went to work on the Manhattan Project – the American project to build atomic bombs, and it was also stated that Germany was also developing an atomic bomb.

...

I am interested therefore to study the sources of information which you used to confirm for yourself, before broadcasting this information that Germany had its own 'Manhattan Project'....Your references will be most useful and very much appreciated.

The ABC also submitted that:

Mr Budd's response sought to correct [the complainant's] misunderstanding of the ABC report in question by advising that the obituary did not report that Germany had its own Manhattan

Project. Since the ABC had not said that Germany had a Manhattan Project, it was impossible for us to supply references for such a statement.

Mr Budd's letter did not discuss in detail the issues raised by [the complainant] because they were not central to the request for references. Mr Budd did, however, acknowledge the point made in [the complainant's] letter that the Americans certainly pushed the idea of a race.

As you would appreciate, the ABC has limited resources at its disposal. In this case, Mr Budd did make a reasonable effort to resolve [the complainant's] complaint by explaining that the basis of his complaint was incorrect—the ABC had not stated what [the complainant] claimed it had. It would not have been appropriate to divert ABC resources to a search for historical references that would assist [the complainant's] understanding of relevant events in World War II Germany. The unfortunate fact that [the complainant's] complaint was based on an inaccuracy should not require the ABC to make unreasonable effort to resolve it.

The ABA accepts that it would not have been appropriate to divert resources to researching historical references. Although the phrase alleged by the complainant was not used, and in the view of the ABA the statement actually made was not inaccurate in the context of the obituary, the response did not appear to adequately address the issue of accuracy raised by the complainant. The ABA was of the view that the ABC in responding to the complainant did not make every reasonable effort to resolve the matters raised as required by section 8.1 of the code.

Action taken

The ABA notes that the ABC recently advised that it follows a policy of continuous improvement in its approach to complaints and that it is currently working towards introducing new software to assist with recording and managing complaints, as well as other types of audience contact.

Given the steps being taken to address the issues raised regarding complaints handling procedures the ABA will take no further action on this matter at this time, but it may take this matter into consideration if it finds similar future breaches of the code.

