

Ombudsman Investigation Report

Four Corners: *Cocaine Nation* and *Meth Highway*

Executive summary

This investigation found that *Cocaine Nation* and *Meth Highway* failed to meet the ABC's editorial standards for accuracy, fair and honest dealing and independence and integrity.

Both programs relied on anonymous, disguised and confidential sources involved in criminal activity. However, important information about those sources was either not verified or not disclosed to audiences. As a result, audiences were given a misleading impression of who key contributors were, the basis on which the ABC was relying on them and the level of confidence that could reasonably be placed in their claims.

The breaches were the result of a combination of factors. These include management's failure to properly interrogate, inadequate upward referral, a culture that favoured limiting knowledge about sources given perceived risks, insufficient verification and factchecking, and a failure to provide the audience with the context necessary to assess the reliability of the information presented.

The cumulative effect of these failings undermined confidence in the integrity of the programs and caused the ABC to fall short of its editorial obligations. The recommendations focus on corrective action for audiences, stronger requirements for the use and verification of anonymous sources, clearer approval processes, improved fact-checking practices and stronger editorial oversight of high-risk investigations.

Summary of findings

Finding 1 – One person appearing in *Cocaine Nation* in two significantly different ways is materially misleading to the audience in breach of accuracy standard 2.2.

Finding 2 – In *Cocaine Nation*, reasonable efforts were not made to verify either the claimed role of "Jason" as a cocaine trafficker or the substantive claims he made, despite his material contribution to the story. This breached standard 2.1, which requires material facts to be accurate and presented in context. Further, the program presented Jason's purported role and account as fact without disclosing to the audience that his identity had not been independently verified in breach of standard 2.2.

Finding 3 – In *Cocaine Nation*, failing to seek approval for the decision to disguise and protect the identity of the ‘sweeper’ [...] was a failure of upward referral and editorial oversight in breach of fair and honest dealing standard 5.9c.

Finding 4 – In *Meth Highway*, the failure to independently verify the identity of ‘Brendan’ and his claimed role as a meth cook, together with the reporter’s failure to disclose his relationship with ‘Brendan’ to the audience, was materially misleading and breached standard 2.2. This information was material to the audience’s assessment of the source’s credibility and the circumstances of the meeting. In the absence of this context, the scene conveyed a sense of uncertainty and risk that was inconsistent with the underlying circumstances.

Finding 5 – Failures in editorial decision-making, upward referral, source management, verification, factchecking and oversight resulted in audiences being significantly misled. The cumulative effect of these failures undermined trust in the programs and caused the ABC to fail to maintain its independence and integrity in the production of *Cocaine Nation* and *Meth Highway*. The programs breached standard 1.1.

Recommendations

1. Remove both programs from ABC platforms. We acknowledge this has already occurred.
2. Conduct a comprehensive investigation into both programs and their use of anonymous and confidential sources. This investigation should not be limited to the specific issues examined by the Ombudsman but should consider the programs more broadly. We understand this work is already underway.
3. Post a correction on the ABC’s Corrections & Clarifications page acknowledging that aspects of the programs were materially misleading.
4. Review and amend editorial standard 5.9 and the associated guidance on [Attribution/ Anonymity of Sources](#) to clearly identify the senior officer responsible for approving anonymous source arrangements. This should explain the verification expected when granting anonymity and using confidential sources and the contextual information that should be provided to audiences to enable them to understand the basis on which the source is being relied upon.
5. Provide the Four Corners team with further training about tensions between legal risk and editorial risk. For example, legal risk should not negate obligations under the editorial standards to ensure accuracy and verification for anonymous sources.

6. Set clear expectations about fact-checking and upward referral for the Four Corners team.
7. Take steps to ensure that Four Corners provides less experienced reporters and story teams with adequate support from management, particularly when making high-risk programs.

Background

The ABC Ombudsman accepted the ABC Board's request to investigate two Four Corners programs *Cocaine Nation* broadcast 22 May 2023 and *Meth Highway* broadcast 22 April 2024.

This followed concerns raised by staff members about the veracity of confidential and anonymous sources used in the programs.

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for this investigation dated 1 July 2026 are attached as Annexure 1.

Methodology

The Ombudsman reviewed both programs as they were broadcast and published, reviewed both transcripts, fact-check documents, rough cut and fine cut scripts (as were available).

The Ombudsman reviewed several other internal communications and documents provided during the investigation.

The Ombudsman conducted 8 formal interviews over two weeks and sought a range of other contributions as necessary.

Fiona Cameron
ABC Ombudsman

20 August 2026



1 July 2026

Fiona Cameron
ABC Ombudsman

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Dear Fiona

Review into Four Corners stories 'Cocaine Nation' and 'Meth Highway'

Terms of Reference:

In accordance with the ABC Ombudsman Charter, the ABC Board requests for the ABC Ombudsman to investigate concerns raised about the Four Corners stories 'Cocaine Nation' broadcast on 22 May 2023 and 'Meth Highway' broadcast on 22 April 2024.

The Ombudsman is to objectively and independently investigate and make findings about the following matters:

1. whether, in 'Cocaine Nation' the identity of a disguised anonymous source was knowingly portrayed to the audience in a way that was misleading and inaccurate in a material way;
2. whether, in 'Cocaine Nation' material context about the behaviour and views expressed by one named source was omitted in a way that was materially misleading and inaccurate
3. whether, in 'Meth Highway' a disguised anonymous source was knowingly portrayed to the audience in a way that was misleading and inaccurate in a material way;
4. Having regard to the matters above, determine whether the ABC complied with the editorial standards as set out in the Editorial Policies in relation to these stories.

Review Process

1. The Ombudsman will carry out the investigation in line with the relevant authority outlined in the published ABC Ombudsman Charter.
2. The Editorial Director will assist the Ombudsman's Office to access any material and any former or current ABC staff that may be necessary to assist with the review. Given the nature of the subject matter being examined some material may be redacted by the ABC prior to being provided to the Ombudsman to protect source anonymity.

3. Nothing in the above process is intended to require the ABC or anyone spoken to by the Ombudsman as part of this process to produce any material or information that would, or would be likely, to reveal the identity of a confidential source.
4. The Ombudsman may make additional recommendations on what corrective action, if any, could be taken by ABC management to rectify any editorial standards issues identified.
5. The investigation will be carried out in a confidential manner.
6. The Ombudsman will provide an investigation report to the ABC Chair and the Managing Director on behalf of the ABC Board outlining the investigation, findings and any recommendations.

Yours sincerely



Kim Williams
ABC Chair