



Twelve-month Report

January-December 2023

Published 29 February 2024

1. Summary

The Ombudsman, Fiona Cameron, was appointed in September 2022 following an [independent review of ABC complaint handling](#). A key recommendation of this review was a commitment to a process of regular public reporting. Further to the [Ombudsman's Six-month Report](#) which set out the revised complaint handling process, including the introduction of an internal review function, this report summarises the major issues of the year.

Total complaints received primarily through the [online complaint form](#) numbered 24,533 and include 19,313 *general complaints* largely about matters of personal taste or preference. *General complaints* are managed by the Audience Support team and may be referred to the news or content divisions for further action. The remaining 5,220 complaints are categorised as *content complaints* and relate to specific content broadcast or published by the ABC and concerning editorial standards such as independence, integrity, impartiality and accuracy. Content complaints are the focus of the Ombudsman's Office and of this report.

Of the 5,220 individual content complaints received there were 6,539 separate issues identified, the highest number in the last 5 years. 51% of all issues raised, related to the Israel-Gaza war (the war) and 11% concerned the Indigenous Voice to Parliament (the voice).

An organised campaign about a single episode of *Q+A* (alleging bias in favour of Israel), raised 1,974 issues. If all related multiples of this campaign are excluded from the statistics to account for the outlier effect, the war raised 1,375 issues (30%). The majority of these (78%) relate to bias with 58% suggesting content was pro-Israel/anti-Palestine/anti-Hamas and 41% concluding pro-Palestine/pro-Hamas/anti-Israel bias.

Much has already been made of content relating to the [Indigenous Voice to Parliament](#) but with reference to complaint issues raised, 73% (505) alleged bias with 82% of these suggesting the 'Yes' side was favoured. This report notes that bias reflects the personal and subjective views of individual complainants and that in the context of vigorous interviews, bias complaints can favour the interview subject who must navigate testing interview techniques that uphold recognised standards of objective journalism.

In regard to both the war and the voice, the ongoing sensitivity for the ABC is the extent and circumstances in which ABC employees can air, publish or otherwise reflect personal views or perspectives. There is considerable interest across the ABC in better understanding the circumstances where content may be labelled analysis, opinion or lived experience. The Ombudsman broadly referenced this sensitivity in two separate reports: triple j [Blak Out](#) and [Hip Hop Show](#) and noted that it would be beneficial for the ABC to more clearly set out expectations for staff in this regard.

While complaint numbers are a useful reflection of audience engagement, often content that is uncomfortable attracts more criticism. The ABC needs to be mindful of this tension to avoid being fearful of delivering on charter obligations to provide innovative and comprehensive programming while being thick skinned enough to clarify and explain decisions, acknowledge misjudgements and, where appropriate, apologise.

2. Complaint numbers

The table below details complaints received primarily through the ABC’s online complaint form. The vast majority of these (79%) are categorised as *general complaints* about matters of personal taste or preference or the ABC more broadly including program schedule times and complaints about the personal use of social media by ABC staff. *General complaints* are not the business of the Ombudsman’s Office. The remaining 21% are categorised as *content complaints* relating to specific ABC content, broadcast or published by the ABC and concerning the ABC’s editorial standards such as independence, integrity, impartiality and accuracy. *Content complaints* are the focus of the Ombudsman’s Office.

Single *content complaints* may concern more than one issue and the Ombudsman’s Office assesses every issue before determining if an investigation is appropriate. Other courses of action available to the Ombudsman’s Office include referring the matter to the relevant ABC division for direct response or noting the matter without response if the complaint is considered not in good faith or otherwise trivial. Further information relating to the Complaint Handling Process can be found [here](#).

Table 1
Complaint Numbers 2023

Complaints	Jan-Jun 23	%	Jul-Dec 23	%	Full Year 2023	%
Total ¹	11,395		13,138		24,533	
General	9,936	87%	9,377	71%	19,313	79%
Content	1,459	13%	3,761	29%	5,220	21%
Content complaint issues ²						
Investigated	1,482		5,057		6,539	
Not upheld	415	78%	2,923	93%	3,338	91%
Resolved	78	15%	162	5%	240	7%
Upheld	42	8%	50	2%	92	3%

¹The number of single complaints (may contain more than one issue)

²The number of issues identified in content complaints

The 5,220 *content complaints* assessed by the Ombudsman’s Office reflect a 5-year high due to multiple complaints about a single episode of *Q+A* which dealt exclusively with the war. 987 complaints (raising 1,974 issues) about this episode were investigated by the Ombudsman’s Office. The complaints were concerned that the program was partial, favouring an Israeli perspective, and included harmful or offensive content. The Ombudsman’s Office observed that a substantial number of complaints were identically worded and that this was the result of a campaign calling on people to contact the ABC and outlining how to structure complaints. A summary of this matter is provided in section 4 below (Programs most complained about).

The sheer volume of war related complaint issues (51%) has radically altered the more usual pattern for investigated complaints over the full year. In 2022, 24% of investigated issues had been resolved or upheld compared to only 10% in 2023. Removing the multiple complaint

issues in relation to the Q+A campaign accounts somewhat for the outlier effect as shown below with 19% of investigated issues having been resolved or upheld.

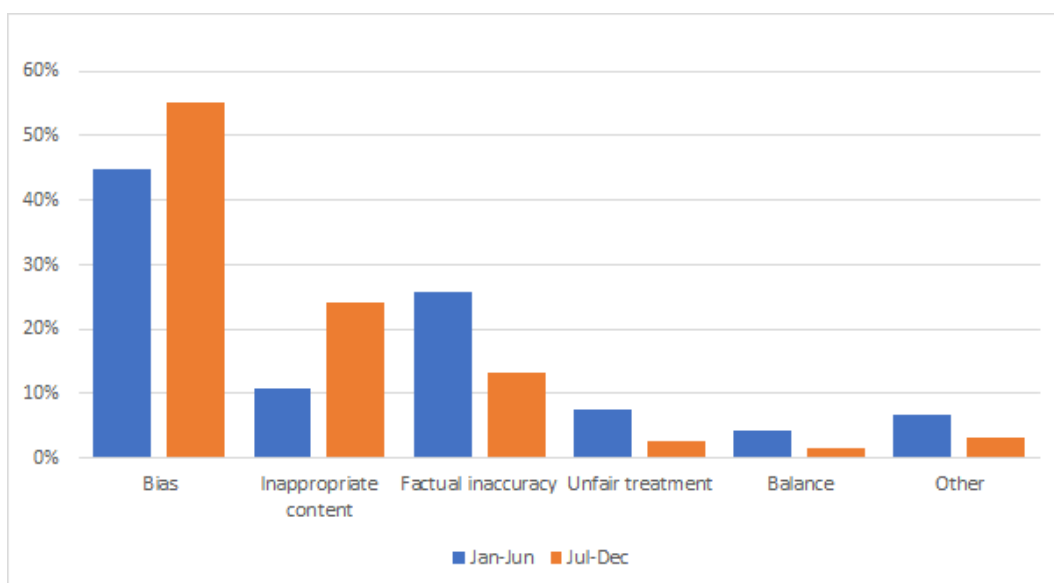
Table 2
Content Complaint Issues 2023
Q+A multiples removed

Complaints	Jul-Dec 23	%	Full Year 2023	%
Content complaint issues	3,085		4,567	
Investigated	1,163	38%	1,698	37%
Not upheld	951	82%	1,366	80%
Resolved	162	14%	240	14%
Upheld	50	4%	92	5%

3. Categories of complaints

Complaint issues are categorised with reference to a complainants’ own words. If the complainant references bias or balance concerns the complaint is tagged accordingly. The Ombudsman's Office would assess this type of complaint against the ABC’s standards for impartiality and diversity of perspectives. This requires assessing the impartiality due in the given circumstances, including factors such as the type, subject and nature of the content and the likely audience expectations. While the table below depicts the most complained about categories, it reflects the personal and subjective views of individual complainants and not necessarily any particular problem with ABC content. Investigation outcomes (discussed at section 5) are a better gauge of issues relating to particular programs.

Graph 1
Categories of Content Complaint Issues 2023



2023 saw a considerable increase in complaints alleging bias, along with an increase in complaints of inappropriate content and a decrease in those relating to accuracy. The increase in bias complaints is mostly attributed to the ABC coverage of the war (2,038 bias complaints, around half of which related to Q+A). The increase in complaints alleging inappropriate content in 2023 is also due to the campaign of complaints about the single episode of Q+A.

7.30 Interviews – bias assessment

The Ombudsman’s Office assessed 725 issues related to a range of interviews on the 7.30 program across the year. 69% (500) claimed bias or lack of balance. The majority, 68%, were about coverage of the Israel-Gaza conflict, 14% related to the voice and 10% were about an interview with Russia’s Ambassador to Australia (alleging that it displayed anti-Russian bias).

Bias complaints about 7.30 interviews tend to suggest that the subject being interviewed is being treated unfairly and appear to come from audience members who identify with the interviewee’s perspective. This ignores the duty of the anchor to conduct a testing interview that does not allow the interviewee to use the occasion as a political platform. It is the anchor’s responsibility to put other points of view to the interviewee and to interject and make reasonable efforts to ensure the questions asked, are answered. Posing testing questions and then allowing the interviewee to respond to those questions is a recognised standard of objective journalism.

Below is a snapshot of complaints relating to 7.30 interviews on the Israel-Gaza conflict:

- Interview with Dr Mustafa Barghouti, leader of the Palestinian National Initiative, on 10 October. 63 complaints alleged the host was rude and adopted a pro-Israel stance.
- Interview with Dr Basem Naim, Hamas’s head of international relations, on 17 October. 40 complaints alleged the host was rude and displayed an anti-Palestinian bias, however, a further 13 complainants said that it was “reprehensible” that the ABC platformed a leading official of a proscribed terrorist organisation. The Ombudsman’s Review Report is available [here](#).
- Interview with Mark Regev, a senior adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, on 26 October. 13 complainants said that the host was rude and displayed an anti-Israel bias although four complained that platforming Regev demonstrated a pro-Israel bias. The Ombudsman’s Review Report is available [here](#).
- Interview with Ambassador Majed Bamyia, the Deputy Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the UN, on 30 October. The 12 complainants alleged that the way the interview was conducted demonstrated an anti-Palestinian bias The Ombudsman’s Investigation Report is available [here](#).
- Interview with former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on 1 November. 164 complaints prompted by the inflammatory remarks made by Mr Olmert in relation to his opening statement which questioned how many innocent civilians were killed in an airstrike on a refugee camp in Gaza. The Ombudsman’s Investigation Report is available [here](#).

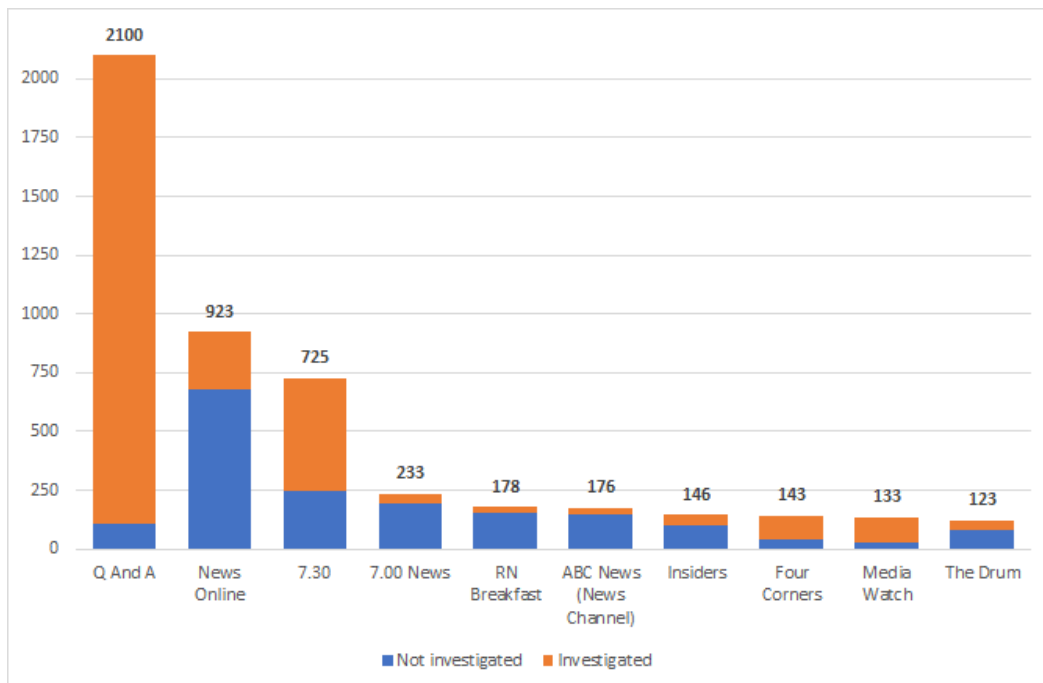
The Ombudsman has reviewed 7.30’s numerous interviews about the war, and we are satisfied that every interview has been suitably rigorous and informative, testing the interviewee’s

positions and claims. 7.30 has conducted a range of interviews on the war, presenting a broad perspective over time consistent with the ABC’s editorial standards.

4. Programs most complained about

The table below identifies the most complained about programs or platforms. This year *Q+A* has attracted the most complaints, however, adjusted for the multiple campaign complaints already discussed it would come in at number nine.

Graph 2
Programs/platforms most complained about 2023



72% of issues raised across the top ten programs in 2023 related to coverage of the war (3,022) and the voice (469) with complaints about ABC News Online covering a wide range of stories and themes reflecting its broad remit and reach.

Israel-Gaza conflict (the war)

The campaign about an episode of *Q+A* raised 1,974 issues. The complaints largely went to concerns of impartiality (that it was pro-Israel) and harm and offence (not challenging alleged Islamophobic and racist comments by a panellist). The program did raise opinions, perspectives and positions that were contentious and would have caused offence to many viewers. However, the Ombudsman found that the program was justified given the editorial context and posed appropriate questions and challenges. It was also considered that the program did not favour any perspective with the host explicitly stating its objective to “de-escalate tensions and restore respect”. The investigation report is available [here](#).

47 issues were received about the ABC’s coverage of the explosion at al-Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza on various programs and platforms. 35 issues alleged an anti-Israel bias, and that the

coverage was inaccurate as it either explicitly or implicitly attributed the explosion to an Israeli airstrike. 12 issues alleged a pro-Israel bias because it reported the responsibility for the explosion as disputed and did not attribute it conclusively to Israel; or the IDF's version of events was preferred.

ABC News made two updates to correct a headline and a caption which unequivocally attributed the hospital explosion to an Israeli air strike. One tweet/X was posted on the morning when the first story was published – at 6.29am. Later in the morning when it was evident that it had become out of date, it was taken down. Six complaints about this content were **resolved**. The majority of complaints were **not upheld** - the Ombudsman's Office was satisfied that the various items of content were in keeping with accuracy and impartiality standards. The Investigation Report is available [here](#).

Of the 725 issues raised about the 7.30 program, 70% related to the coverage of the Israel/Gaza conflict. Further discussion of these matters is discussed in the above section.

The Indigenous Voice to Parliament (the voice)

Across 2023, the Ombudsman's Office handled 693 complaint issues relating to coverage of the voice across various programs and platforms. Broadly, 73% (505) alleged bias or lack of balance with 82% of these suggesting the 'Yes' side was favoured.

In total, 259 complaint issues about Voice coverage were investigated by the Ombudsman's Office. Eight were found to be in breach of editorial standards and eleven were resolved to the satisfaction of the Ombudsman (the content area having taken appropriate remedial action). For further information about upheld and resolved matters see section 5 (Investigation Outcomes).

Four Corners/TikTok

There were 97 issues raised about the *Four Corners* episode '*Blocked: The Battle over Youth Gender Care*' and a related online article and social media video. Complaints about the *Four Corners* story and associated report were investigated by the Ombudsman's Office and **no breach** of editorial standards was found. Thirteen complaints were specifically about a video posted on the ABC TikTok account and the ABC News and ABC Queer Instagram accounts. The video was an animated clip using the voiceover from Sapphire, a 10-year-old trans girl whose story was included in the *Four Corners* episode. Her identity was masked in the episode.

Complainants were concerned about the appropriateness of the video. The ABC content team amended the social video to provide a link to the full *Four Corners* episode, to give viewers greater context and to clarify that the video was part of a broader report on issues facing the young trans community and included discussion about the merits of gender affirming care. The Ombudsman determined that this action adequately resolved the concerns raised. The Ombudsman's Investigation Report is available [here](#).

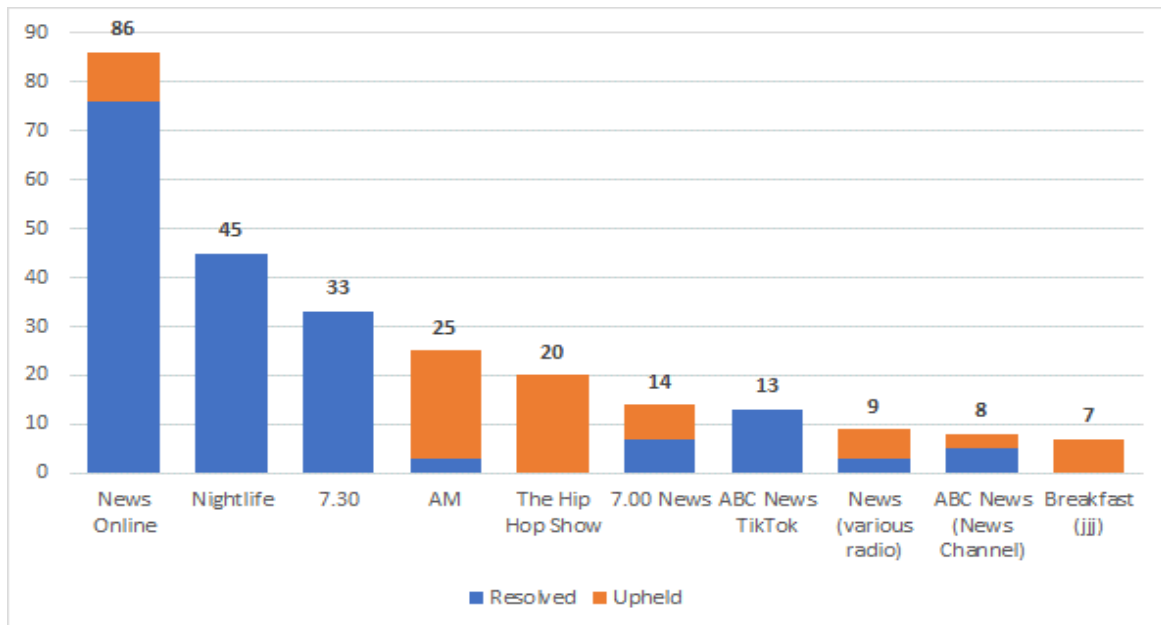
Media Watch

93 issues were raised about a range of issues relevant to the *Media Watch* segment ‘*Transgender TERF war*’. The majority of these issues were not upheld, however, one aspect of one complaint (relevant to the misquoting of a contributor) was resolved when the program agreed to publish an Editor’s Note on the webpage transcript accompanying the segment and clarify the matter on the ABC’s Corrections & Clarifications page. The report is available [here](#).

5. Investigation Outcomes (Resolved or Upheld)

While the vast majority of investigations (91%) were not found to be in breach of editorial standards (recalibrated to 80% when excluding Q+A multiples) some 332 complaint issues were either resolved (240) or upheld (92) as a result of an Ombudsman investigation.

Graph 3
Programs/platforms with issues resolved or upheld 2023



Resolved Complaints

Resolved complaints are considered those where appropriate action has been taken to adequately remedy the concern raised and where any further action (such as allocating resources to an ongoing investigation) would not be warranted. The vast majority of resolved complaints occur in the News Online space where relatively minor accuracy issues can be quickly corrected.

Matters may also be resolved where a program commits to undertaking a future action to address a relevant concern. This was the case with 44 issues raised about an interview on ABC Radio’s *Nightlife*. The investigation report is [here](#).

Another 32 issues about the posting of highly inflammatory comments from a 7.30 interview to the social media platform X without requisite context were considered adequately resolved after ABC News agreed to remove the post (Investigation Report [here](#)). A further six issues about the Israel/Gaza conflict were resolved relating to coverage of an explosion at al-Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza (Investigation Report [here](#)).

The resolved issues relating to ABC News TikTok, concern an animated clip related to *the Four Corners Blocked* program (discussed in the previous section).

Late in December a further 90 complaints were received about another ABC News TikTok video. These complaints (while resolved) have not been recorded in the 2023 figures as the investigation process was only finalised in early in 2024 and the report published on 8 January [here](#).

Upheld Complaints

In 2023 there were 92 complaint issues found to be in breach of the editorial standards. 22 of these refer to the AM story 'Alice Springs Town Meeting Angers Aboriginal People' reported on earlier in the year and available [here](#).

A further 20 relate to triple j's *Hip Hop Show* about an episode that contained presenter comments about the Israel-Gaza war. The complaints alleged comments made in the program lacked impartiality. The presenter, an external contributor engaged on a short-term basis, made comments that were framed as her personal opinions. The Ombudsman found the program breached the ABC's standards for due impartiality and for the responsible management of controversial program material. The investigation report is [here](#).

The seven upheld complaints concerning the triple j *Breakfast* program relate to explicit content that lacked sufficient editorial context and failed to properly consider the anticipated audience listening at 8.45am on a weekday. The investigation report is [here](#).

Other upheld complaints broadly relate to material accuracy issues and include inaccurate references that the 1967 referendum granted indigenous Australians the vote and inaccurate references to a non-existent 'flora and fauna' act.

Summaries of all complaints upheld or resolved are published [here](#) and [here](#). Full Investigation Reports of significant matters are published [here](#).

6. Internal and External Reviews

The new Complaint Handling Process introduced a mechanism where complainants who are dissatisfied with a response from the ABC may seek an Ombudsman Review. In 2023, the Ombudsman's Office finalised 91 such reviews.

Most of these requests were declined (68) as the Ombudsman concurred with the response already provided. Twenty three (23) requests into 20 matters were further considered (reviews published [here](#)), with 4 resolved.

The Review process has provided the Ombudsman with an opportunity to clarify and in some circumstances discuss with content areas how programs have or may present contentious subjects.

An example is a review into a complaint about an interview on *Weekend Breakfast* with the Director-General for the Hague Initiative for International Cooperation (thinc.). The complainant expressed concern that the interview did not make clear that this organisation is a pro-Israel think tank.

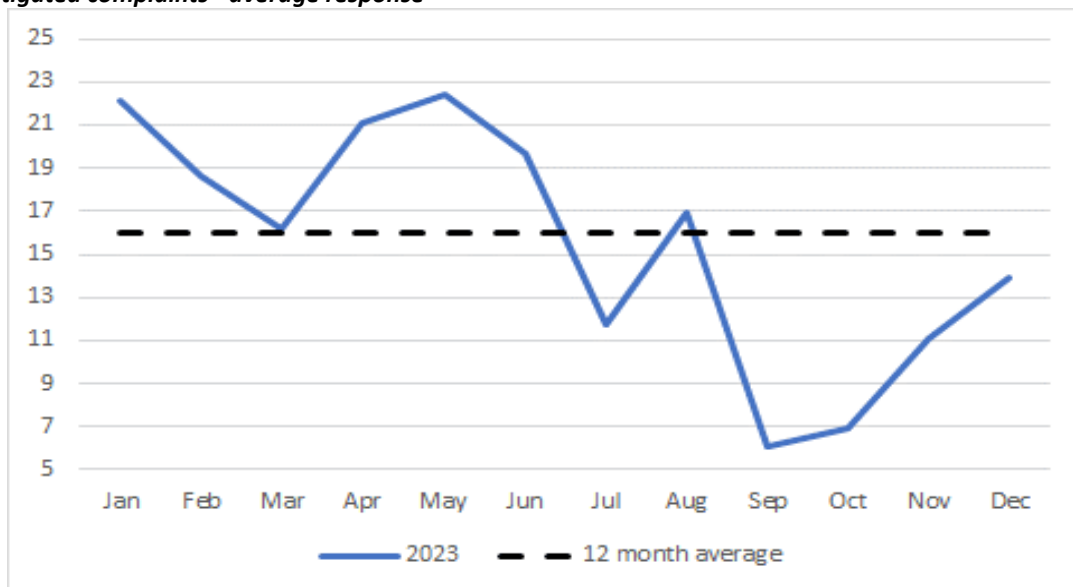
After discussing this matter with ABC News an Editor’s Note was added to the online version of the interview: ‘*The Hague Initiative for International Cooperation is a pro-Israel think tank*’. With the addition of the editor’s note, the interviewee’s statements are clearly presented as partisan views and not factual content. ABC News communicated to staff the importance of this type of information for audience members. The Review is available [here](#).

Publishing the [Ombudsman Investigation Reports](#) and [Reviews](#) also allow the Australian Communications and Media Authority (the external regulator) to readily establish actions taken by the ABC to inform any decision to investigate code complaints they receive. ACMA did not investigate any of the ABC Code complaints they assessed in 2023.

7. Response times

In the July to December period, response times were under the 16-day, 12-month average and considerably below the five-year average of 20 days. The effective and efficient resolution of reasonable complaints is the overriding objective of the complaints handling process. Various factors, however, can affect response times including the volume of complaints, the complexity of investigations and staff resources.

Graph 4
Investigated complaints - average response



8. Conclusion

In conclusion the 2023 year has been dominated with complaints about the Israel/Gaza conflict. Apart from upholding impartiality complaints on a triple j music show, the Ombudsman has found the ABC's coverage to be professional, wide-ranging and reflective of newsworthy events.

Reporting from an international warzone on developing situations is challenging, so assessing the accuracy of what is broadcast at a specific time means considering what information was available at that time. Coverage should be transparent about what the ABC knows and does not know; be explicit about what information can be or has been verified; attribute accusations of responsibility and include relevant perspectives on contentious matters. Particular care must be taken where there is a risk of losing context, for example, with headlines and photo captions.

Audience complaints form part of a public exchange with the ABC from which all parties can benefit. The Ombudsman's Office provides a link between audiences and content makers and we aim to ensure reasonable complaints are heard across the ABC. Our primary objective is to resolve complaints in a timely fashion and to support the ABC to uphold the high standards it sets for itself including independence, integrity, impartiality and accuracy.