

Press and ABC polar opposites in complaints arena

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- From: [The Australian](#)
- March 14, 2012 12:00AM

THE government's report into the media by Ray Finkelstein QC was released last week.

What caught my attention was the complaints-handling procedures of the proposed News Media Council.

Finkelstein says: "The media outlet concerned has two days to respond to a complaint and the panel then has a further two days to resolve the complaint and make a decision." It seems most complaints would be resolved in a week, a tight timeframe.

Some media outlets, such as this newspaper, respond rapidly to correct factual errors and deficiencies in reporting.

A major mechanism not discussed in Finkelstein's report is the publication of letters to the editor. Just last week The Sydney Morning Herald announced the appointment of the new ABC chairman, omitting to mention his previous relationship with the ALP. I sent a letter to the editor highlighting the unreported connection that was published the next day.

In The Australian recently, an apology was posted for a report that purportedly defamed Tim Flannery within seven days of the article appearing. There is no commercial rationale for prolonging the complaints process.

The ABC, on the other hand, has turned the process of correcting even the most basic factual errors into a saga. If Finkelstein had the ABC in mind as a model for handling complaints, it is clear he has never put himself through this harrowing process. I have.

For example, a recent report on ABC radio's AM program erroneously claimed that South Australia had experienced the hottest start to summer in 100 years. There was no basis for the sensationalist statement. It took 58 days to settle, with action taken only after I submitted an analysis of SA weather stations along with news reports from January 1960 when temperatures were higher.

Even then, the ABC was reluctant to make the correction, producing more than 1000 words of argument over three emails for a story only 600 words long.

In June 2010, the ABC claimed that "Studies show temperatures are rising faster at Mount Everest than in the rest of South Asia".

When challenged on the source of the studies, the ABC took two months to point to a table in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report. However, the table showed that temperatures were rising faster in another region of South Asia. Moreover, the IPCC table contained significant errors that were later corrected. It took three months for the ABC to publish a correction.

In July last year, the ABC's Background Briefing broadcast The Lord Monckton Roadshow. ABC reporter Wendy Carlisle claimed that Christopher Monckton misrepresented the science of climate change, providing two examples. One example involved a scientific study on the death of four polar bears in the Arctic. On the drowned polar bears the study states: "Polar bears swimming in open water near Kaktovik drowned during a period of high winds and correspondingly rough sea conditions between 10 and 13 September 2004."

This was conveyed by Monckton as: "They died because there was a big storm with high winds and high waves, and they got swamped." However, in Carlisle's opinion, "The paper suggests that the polar bears most likely drowned because there was less sea ice for them to seek refuge on because of climate change."

She went on to state, "Lord Monckton is not one to let the facts stand in the way of a show." It seems that neither are Carlisle and the ABC.

Rather than admit an error, ABC Audience and Consumer Affairs involved the ABC's chief editor, managing director Mark Scott. Scott's office responded, "In relation to the various references by Al Gore, Lord Monckton and Background Briefing to the issue of drowned polar bears, the managing director did not regard it as proportionate in the circumstances to go into the detail.

"Noting that specialist literature is open to varying interpretations by specialists and non-specialists, and that both in public presentations such as Lord Monckton's and in journalism such as Background Briefing, specialist literature must necessarily be tightly compressed, the managing director concluded that the program did not breach the accuracy standard in the ABC Code of Practice."

In a well known 2007 British High Court case about the accuracy of Al Gore's film, An Inconvenient Truth, judge Michael Burton concluded, on the polar bears in question: "The only scientific study that either side before me can find is one which indicates that four polar bears have recently been found drowned because of a storm. That is not to say that there may not in the future be drowning-related deaths of polar bears if the trend continues."

It took the ABC 51 days to put together a reply that refused to acknowledge basic factual errors in the program were made. I wasn't satisfied, and the matter has been with the Australian Communications and Media Authority since last September.

Looking over the ABC's website, the past 20 upheld complaints took an average of 58 days to go from broadcast to posting on the ABC website. The last 20 corrections listed on the ABC News corrections web page took an average of 21 days from broadcast to listing. This is clearly unacceptable by anyone's definition, especially Finkelstein's, it seems. He proposes a turnaround of just four days. In 2010-11, the ABC received 41,258 complaints; for some reason Finkelstein mentioned only the 22,875 written complaints in his report. Of the written complaints, 4864 were investigated and only 463 (9.5 per cent) were upheld.

In the unlikely event the News Media Council comes into being it shouldn't look to the ABC for its complaint-handling process, lest it create more mugs like me.

Marc Hendrickx edits the ABC News Watch blog.