

# Briefing Paper: Prioritising Accuracy over Empathy in Controversial News Reporting

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**Date:** Monday, 04 August 2025

**Version:** 0.001

## Contents

1	Introduction.....	2
2	Accuracy and Empathy in Media Standards .....	2
3	Case Study 1: The Casey Report (2025) – When Covering Up Facts Backfires .....	3
3.1	Key lesson from the Casey Report.....	5
4	Case Study 2: The Sandie Peggie Tribunal – Accuracy vs Empathy in Language .....	6
4.1	Policy and Regulatory Context .....	7
4.2	Key Lesson from the Pronoun Dispute .....	8
5	Media Impartiality, Public Trust, and the Perils of Getting it Wrong .....	9
6	Short-Term vs. Long-Term: Weighing the Trade-offs .....	10
6.1	Short-Term Benefits of Empathy.....	10
6.2	Short-Term Drawbacks of Empathy (when overextended).....	11
6.3	Short-Term Benefits of Accuracy .....	11
6.4	Short-Term Drawbacks of Emphasising Accuracy.....	12
6.5	Long-Term Benefits of Accuracy.....	12
6.6	Long-Term Drawbacks of Neglecting Empathy .....	13
7	Recommendations for Community News Providers.....	14
7.1	Adhere Rigorously to Editorial Standards.....	14
7.2	Provide Context to Balance Empathy and Facts .....	14
7.3	Engage with Community Voices .....	14
7.4	Develop Clear Language Guidelines.....	15
7.5	Foster a Culture of Editorial Independence.....	15
7.6	Train and Support Journalists.....	15
7.7	Promote Media Literacy in Your Audience .....	16
8	Conclusion .....	16
9	Sources .....	17

## **1 Introduction**

This briefing paper is prepared for civic society organisations, local authorities, and news media organisations. It examines the tension between accuracy and empathy in journalism, arguing that while empathy and kindness are valuable, accurate reporting is ultimately more important for public information, especially on controversial issues. By analysing recent examples – notably the Casey Report (2025) on grooming gangs and a high-profile tribunal case involving contested pronouns – we assess short-term vs. long-term advantages and disadvantages of prioritising accuracy over empathy. We also outline relevant media regulations (Ofcom’s Broadcasting Code and BBC Editorial Guidelines) to clarify what is meant by accuracy and empathy in a journalism context and provide recommendations (particularly for community news providers) on balancing these principles.

## **2 Accuracy and Empathy in Media Standards**

Accuracy in journalism refers to factual correctness, truthfulness, and reliability of information. UK media regulation places accuracy at its core. For example, the Ofcom Broadcasting Code explicitly requires that “news, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality”<sup>[1]</sup>. The term “due accuracy” means information should be as accurate as possible, taking into account the nature of the content and audience expectations. The BBC Editorial Guidelines likewise state that the BBC is “committed to achieving due accuracy” as a fundamental requirement under its Charter<sup>[2]</sup>. Notably, the BBC emphasises that “accuracy is not simply a matter of getting facts right” – in contentious issues, relevant viewpoints and context may need to be included to convey the truth fully<sup>[3][4]</sup>. This principle ensures that complex or controversial topics are reported with nuance and all pertinent evidence, rather than oversimplified. Accuracy is so vital that, in BBC news and current affairs content, it is considered more important than speed in reporting, underscoring that getting it right matters more than being first with a story<sup>[3]</sup>. Furthermore, both Ofcom and BBC guidelines demand prompt correction of significant mistakes to maintain accuracy and public trust<sup>[5]</sup>.

Empathy in media reporting can be understood as showing compassion, respect, and sensitivity toward individuals or groups involved in or affected by news stories. Empathy is not explicitly mandated in regulatory codes by name, but it is reflected in rules on avoiding unnecessary harm or of-

fence. For instance, Ofcom’s Section Two on Harm and Offence requires that material likely to cause offence must be editorially justified by context and that “generally accepted standards” be applied to provide adequate protection for the public<sup>[6]</sup>. This means journalists should consider the feelings and dignity of those portrayed or impacted, and refrain from needlessly harsh or derogatory language.

The BBC Editorial Guidelines similarly encourage sensitivity – for example, ensuring fair treatment of interviewees and vulnerable contributors, respecting privacy, and avoiding derogatory stereotypes – which all stem from an ethic of empathy and “do no harm”. In practice, empathy in journalism might involve using respectful language for individuals (e.g. preferred self-descriptions or names), being mindful of cultural or ethnic sensitivities in how facts are presented and acknowledging the human impact of events. These practices align with the media’s duty to minimise harm: discriminatory or offensive content should be handled with care and only included when editorially warranted<sup>[6]</sup>. Empathy is thus about kindness and respect – it seeks to humanise reporting and avoid compounding trauma or social stigma.

Importantly, prioritising empathy should not mean avoiding uncomfortable truths. Both Ofcom and the BBC stress that impartiality and accuracy must be maintained even when stories are sensitive. The Ofcom Code’s principle of “due impartiality” means not taking sides on controversial matters, and it goes hand-in-hand with accuracy<sup>[1]</sup>. The BBC’s guidelines likewise demand that the broadcaster “must treat matters of politics and public policy with due accuracy and impartiality”<sup>[7]</sup>. In other words, empathy should never become an excuse for factual distortion or bias. Balancing empathy with accuracy is crucial: journalists are expected to tell the truth but can do so in a way that is fair and considerate. The following case studies illustrate what happens when this balance is lost – when either accuracy is compromised in the name of sensitivity, or when efforts at empathy provoke controversy over factuality.

### **3 Case Study 1: The Casey Report (2025) – When Covering Up Facts Backfires**

One recent example highlighting the primacy of accuracy is Baroness Louise Casey’s National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation (commonly called the Casey Report), published in June 2025 in the UK. This report investigated the failure of institutions to tackle so-called “grooming

gangs” – groups of men who preyed on vulnerable girls for sexual abuse over years. Casey’s findings revealed a startling “culture of ignorance” and avoidance within authorities, where uncomfortable facts were downplayed or ignored<sup>[8][9]</sup>.

A key issue was authorities’ reluctance to collect and report data on the ethnicity of the offenders involved in these grooming gang crimes. Over the past decade, multiple towns in England suffered child exploitation scandals predominantly involving men of South Asian (particularly Pakistani) heritage abusing mostly white British girls. However, fear of being accused of racism led many officials and agencies to shy away from explicitly noting ethnic patterns<sup>[10]</sup>.

The Casey Report found that in local police data from several regions (Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire), there was “clear evidence of over-representation among suspects of Asian and Pakistani-heritage men” in these crimes<sup>[11][12]</sup>. Yet, at a national level, two-thirds of police records did not record ethnicity at all, making it impossible to get an accurate national picture<sup>[12]</sup>. In fact, vital information had been literally censored in some cases – Baroness Casey recounted finding the word “Pakistani” “tippexed out” (whited-out) in an archived child protection file<sup>[13]</sup>. According to Casey, well-intentioned “do-gooders” in the system removed such references, believing that mentioning ethnicity would fuel racism<sup>[13][14]</sup>. This was done out of a misplaced sense of empathy or political correctness – essentially, a desire to protect minority communities from stigma.

In the short term, this avoidance might have felt “kind” or cautious. In the long term, it proved disastrous. Casey condemned the practice, warning that hiding facts only “gives racists more ammunition”, not less<sup>[15]</sup>. When authorities fail to openly address issues like ethnic patterns in criminal networks, it leaves a void often exploited by extremist groups. Casey noted that if “good people don’t grasp difficult things, bad people will” – meaning that suppressing facts allowed figures like the far-right English Defence League (EDL) to monopolise the narrative<sup>[16]</sup>. Indeed, public trust was eroded by the perception of a cover-up.

For years, victims and the public had suspected that political sensitivities were placed above child safety; the Casey Report confirmed that “questions about the ethnicity of those behind the abuse had been dodged for years” partly due to “fear of appearing racist, raising community tensions or causing community cohesion problems”<sup>[10]</sup>. Such “blindness, ignorance... and even good but misdi-

rected intentions” allowed abuse to continue and justice to be delayed<sup>[17]</sup>. In short, excess empathy (or rather, fear of offending) led to inaccuracy, which in turn led to more harm.

From a regulatory and ethical standpoint, this is a clear failure of accuracy. Authorities have a duty to gather truthful data, and news organisations have a duty to report it truthfully. Casey herself stressed that examining offender ethnicity is “not racist” but rather necessary for understanding the crime pattern<sup>[18]</sup>. By not collecting or reporting these facts, public authorities breached the public’s trust and failed in their duty to protect children<sup>[19][20]</sup>. News media, for their part, were criticised for not rigorously questioning these gaps earlier. Some news organisations were slow to investigate or prominently report the ethnic dimension of grooming gangs, perhaps out of caution or empathy toward minority communities. However, failing to follow up with accurate reporting meant the public remained uninformed and vulnerable to misinformation. As Yvette Cooper (UK Home Secretary) remarked when apologising on behalf of the government, there had been “too much reliance on flawed data, too much denial... too many victims being let down”<sup>[21]</sup>. Going forward, police are now being ordered to record ethnicity in such cases<sup>[22]</sup>, and a national inquiry has been launched, underscoring a renewed commitment to truth and transparency over political sensitivities<sup>[23][24]</sup>.

## **1.1 Key lesson from the Casey Report**

In contentious social issues (like crimes involving specific communities), trying to be “kind” by omitting facts is counterproductive. Short-term, it may avoid uncomfortable conversations; long-term, it undermines public trust, fails victims, and enables extremists to hijack the narrative<sup>[16][25]</sup>. Accuracy – even when the facts are upsetting – is crucial to informed discussion and effective solutions. Empathy and respect can still be shown in how facts are presented (for example, contextualising that the vast majority of British Pakistani people are law-abiding, to prevent scapegoating<sup>[26]</sup>), but should not extend to hiding the facts. As Baroness Casey put it, “we cannot and must not shy away from these findings”, because only by “examining and exposing them to the light” can we prevent abuse and dispel falsehoods<sup>[26]</sup>.

#### 4 Case Study 2: The Sandie Peggie Tribunal – Accuracy vs Empathy in Language

Another example highlighting the accuracy-empathy tension is the Sandie Peggie vs. Dr Beth Upton tribunal (2024-2025), an employment tribunal in Scotland that gained media attention for its dispute over pronoun usage. This ongoing case involves a female nurse (Sandie Peggie) who complained about a trans-identified doctor (Dr Beth Upton, who is biologically male) using the women's changing room at a hospital. The details of the case are complex, but for this briefing we focus on how “accurate language” became a point of contention in the hearings.

At the tribunal, Ms. Peggie's lawyer (Naomi Cunningham) consistently referred to Dr. Upton as a male – using pronouns “he/him” and calling Dr. Upton “a man” – despite Dr. Upton identifying as a trans woman<sup>[27][28]</sup>. Cunningham argued this was factually correct: she stated in the tribunal that using male pronouns was simply employing the “correct sex pronouns”, implying it is natural and accurate to refer to someone male as “he”<sup>[29]</sup>. In her view (and that of her client), accuracy in describing sex took precedence over sparing feelings. This approach was very much deliberate – as Cunningham put it in questioning a witness, the only reason people normally call Dr. Upton “she” is because they have “trained [themselves], with considerable effort of will, to refer to someone male as she/her”, and when she disrupted that training by using “he/him”, the witness momentarily reverted to the biologically accurate pronoun<sup>[29]</sup>. Her argument was that referring to a male individual as male was objectively true and that any confusion or discomfort it caused was a product of enforced language conventions rather than malice.

On the other side, the lawyer for NHS Fife (the health board) accused Cunningham of being “offensive” and breaching appropriate conduct by “misgendering” Dr. Upton<sup>[27]</sup>. The tribunal was reminded of expected standards (an “equal treatment benchmark” issued in May 2025) advising legal participants to “use an individual's preferred pronouns or alternatively gender-neutral ‘they’ to help minimise offence”<sup>[30]</sup>. Only in certain contexts (such as directly discussing “a biological male attacker” in a crime) did that guidance allow referencing someone's sex, and the NHS lawyer argued “this does not apply in this case”<sup>[31]</sup>. The NHS Fife counsel further contended that Cunningham's persistent use of “he/him” was “creating a hostile environment” for witnesses, “discombobulating” them because “they are not used to hearing Dr Upton” referred to in that way<sup>[32][33]</sup>. In other words, the empathetic or courteous approach, from their perspective, was to respect Dr. Upton's female gender identity in language – both out of civility toward Dr. Upton and to maintain a non-confusing

atmosphere for others. The Employment Judge even intervened to ask Ms. Cunningham if she wished to reconsider her language, though she declined and continued using male pronouns<sup>[34]</sup>.

This tribunal thus became a microcosm of the larger societal debate: should journalistic or legal language favor biological accuracy or social empathy in the case of transgender individuals? For Ms. Peggie and her lawyer, using female pronouns for Dr. Upton was seen as an inaccuracy that obscured a material fact (that Dr. Upton is male) – a fact they considered central to why a female nurse might not want to share a changing space. For the opposing side (and arguably for inclusivity advocates), insisting on male pronouns was seen as needlessly hurtful and biased, given Dr. Upton lives as a woman; they viewed it as an unethical refusal to show basic respect, hence “offensive” and against professional norms<sup>[27]</sup>.

In media reporting on this tribunal, outlets had to navigate this same issue. Some reports (especially in mainstream press) referred to Dr. Upton with female pronouns and as “a transgender woman” to respect identity, while more advocacy-oriented or alternative media highlighted the pronoun clash, implicitly siding with the “accuracy” argument. The Scotsman’s coverage explicitly described it as a “war of words over pronouns” at the tribunal<sup>[35]</sup>. It quoted how Ms. Cunningham was “told she was being ‘offensive’ and must use ‘appropriate language’” by the other side<sup>[27]</sup>, and how she countered that she was simply using correct terms.

The fundamental question raised is: in journalism (and public discourse), does accuracy mean strictly describing a person’s biological sex, or does it mean reflecting the reality of their social identity? And conversely, does empathy require adopting the individual’s preferred terms even if some consider that a factual “fiction”?

## **1.2 Policy and Regulatory Context**

The Ofcom Broadcasting Code and BBC guidelines do not directly dictate pronoun usage, but they do require due accuracy and due impartiality on matters of political or public controversy<sup>[36]</sup>. The status of transgender identities and gender-critical beliefs has indeed become a public controversy. Ofcom recently advised broadcasters to reflect both gender-identity and gender-critical perspectives in relevant discussions<sup>[37]</sup>. This suggests that media should neither uncritically enforce activist

terminology (e.g. always saying “trans women are women” without question) nor should they be gratuitously insensitive. The goal must be to inform the audience truthfully while treating subjects and contributors fairly. In the Sandie Peggie case, an accurate and impartial approach for a news report might be: “Dr Beth Upton, a transgender woman (biologically male), used the women’s changing room, which led Nurse Peggie to complain. In the tribunal, Peggie’s counsel repeatedly called Dr Upton ‘he’, arguing this was factually correct, while the health board’s counsel objected to this as offensive misgendering.” Such wording tries to present the facts (including the disputed pronouns and the reason behind each stance) without endorsing either side’s view outright. It’s a delicate balance.

### **1.3 Key Lesson from the Pronoun Dispute**

Empathy and accuracy can directly conflict at the level of language. On one hand, empathy would have a reporter or official use terms that make a person feel respected (in this case, “she/her” for Dr. Upton), in line with guidance to avoid causing offense<sup>[30]</sup>. On the other hand, strict accuracy (as perceived by biological definition) would mean using “he/him” or at least clarifying the person’s sex, to avoid confusing the audience or obscuring relevant facts<sup>[29]</sup>. There is no easy formula here – but the tribunal highlights why media organisations must handle such situations carefully.

They should neither deprioritise accuracy (for example, failing to mention pertinent facts like someone’s birth sex when it’s contextually relevant) nor abdicate empathy (for example, needlessly using demeaning language or failing to explain a person’s self-identification). According to the BBC’s editorial values, “due impartiality” involves reflecting a range of views so that “no significant strand of thought is knowingly un-reflected or under-represented”<sup>[4]</sup>. In practice, that means journalism should acknowledge the gender-critical perspective (which prioritises biological sex) and the trans perspective (which prioritises identity and dignity) when reporting on such controversies. By doing so with clear attribution and context, the media keeps the public accurately informed and demonstrates empathy through fairness and inclusion.



## 5 Media Impartiality, Public Trust, and the Perils of Getting it Wrong

The above case studies underscore a critical point for all news providers: if media organisations deprioritise accuracy and impartiality, they do so at their peril. Sacrificing factual rigor or balance in an attempt to be sympathetic, politically correct, or aligned with a particular narrative can severely damage public trust. In an era of polarised debate, audiences are increasingly attuned to bias or half-truths in news coverage. When they sense that journalists are obscuring facts or pushing a one-sided, emotive agenda, credibility is lost.

The initiative Seen in Journalism (SEEN) – a media watchdog group advocating for accuracy in reporting – has highlighted this danger. SEEN observes that some newsrooms, perhaps in thrall to activist language or afraid of backlash, have “adopt[ed] ideological framing” in certain topics (for example, presenting contested gender ideology as if it were settled fact) without clarifying the underlying debates<sup>[38]</sup>. By failing these tests of impartiality and accuracy, media outlets risk breaching their obligations and alienating audiences.

Seen in Journalism calls on editors to “apply the same accuracy standards to stories involving [gender identity] as they would to any contested policy issue”<sup>[38]</sup> – meaning journalists should verify claims, note relevant legal or scientific realities, and not simply repeat activist slogans. When broadcasters and journalists present an ideology or unverified narrative as settled truth, or ignore facts that don’t fit a chosen narrative, they “erode public confidence”<sup>[39]</sup>.

This erosion of trust is not just theoretical – it is reflected in audience feedback and regulatory scrutiny. Ofcom’s research has found that perceived bias or inaccuracy (breaches of due impartiality) lead audiences to feel “let down” and lose faith in broadcasters<sup>[40]</sup>. Viewers and readers expect news to give them an honest account of events, even when those events are uncomfortable to hear. If they consistently encounter selective reporting, euphemistic language, or errors that seem born of ideological slant, they may turn away from mainstream news entirely.

Impartiality, in particular, goes hand in hand with accuracy to uphold trust. The Ofcom Code underscores that accuracy and editorial independence are core principles<sup>[36]</sup>. Journalists must be independent from both government and activist influence – serving only the public’s right to know the truth. For instance, if a newsroom chooses to use only the preferred gender terms out of solidarity

with trans activists, but never mentions relevant factual context (like sex or related data), they might appear to be taking a side rather than reporting neutrally.

Conversely, if a news outlet crudely misgenders individuals to make a point, they risk appearing hostile and biased on the other side. Either extreme undermines impartiality. A survey by the UK Parliament's Trust in News providers report noted that impartiality and accuracy are the top drivers of audience trust<sup>[40]</sup>. Empathy alone cannot build that trust – facts and fairness must lead. Indeed, media organisations that openly align with specific activist causes (even for compassionate reasons) can face pushback. For example, Ofcom has cautioned that even seemingly virtuous stances (like a broadcaster sponsoring Pride events) could compromise perceptions of impartiality on related issues<sup>[41]</sup>.

Ultimately, the only way to work through contentious social issues is through informed, accurate, and non-partisan discussion grounded in facts. No matter how well-intentioned, reporting that veers into propaganda or “fantasies” pushed by zealots – whether they be political activists or other socially malign actors – will fail the public. As one media commentator put it, journalists must avoid presenting ideology as settled fact or “disregard[ing] the legal status of [opposing] beliefs”, because doing so “undermines human rights and civic trust”<sup>[42]</sup>. Society is best served when journalism shines light on reality (even harsh reality) and provides a platform for rational, fact-based debate. Empathy should complement this mission by ensuring coverage remains civil and mindful of human impacts, but it should never distort or suppress the truth.

## **6 Short-Term vs. Long-Term: Weighing the Trade-offs**

It is useful to summarise the advantages and disadvantages of prioritising accuracy vs. empathy in both the short term and long term:

### **1.4 Short-Term Benefits of Empathy**

An empathetic approach in reporting – using gentle language, omitting inflammatory details, or adopting the terminology of affected groups – can reduce immediate offense or harm. It may prevent the stigmatisation of vulnerable communities and make sources or interviewees more comfortable sharing their stories. For example, downplaying the ethnic angle in crime reporting might

avert an immediate spike in community tensions. Likewise, using a transgender person's preferred pronouns might prevent them feeling disrespected or distressed in the moment. Empathetic media coverage can also signal to audiences that the outlet cares about human feelings, potentially building goodwill with certain segments of the public (particularly those who prioritise inclusivity and respect).

### **1.5 Short-Term Drawbacks of Empathy (when overextended)**

If empathy is prioritised at the expense of facts, the audience may be left misinformed or confused. Important details might be glossed over or “sugar-coated,” impairing the clarity of the story. In the Casey Report scenario, the short-term “empathetic” choice to avoid mentioning the perpetrators’ ethnicity kept the coverage more comfortable for some, but it also denied the public a truthful understanding of the pattern<sup>[43]</sup>. In some cases, over-cautious language can even reduce impact – e.g., saying a perpetrator “had inappropriate relations with minors” out of delicacy, instead of plainly “raped children,” might fail to convey the severity of the crime to the public. Moreover, a segment of the audience may perceive empathetic, euphemistic reporting as patronising or as a sign the media is withholding truth. This can cause immediate suspicion or anger (especially among those who are aware of facts from alternative sources). In short, excessive empathy in reporting can trigger a backlash in the short term from audiences who detect political correctness overriding honesty.

### **1.6 Short-Term Benefits of Accuracy**

Prioritising accuracy means the public gets the facts straight. In the immediate term, this equips citizens to react appropriately to events. Accurate reporting of a controversial issue can prompt swift corrective action or public pressure on authorities. For instance, when media outlets started accurately reporting the Rotherham grooming scandal in the 2010s (after initial reluctance), it galvanised national outrage and policy responses. Accuracy in language – calling things by their proper names – can also cut through ambiguity.

In the Sandie Peggie case, using the biologically accurate terms clarified the nature of the dispute (a male in a female space), which some argue is critical information. Another short-run advantage is credibility among those “in the know”: if people see that a news source isn’t shying away from facts, they are more likely to trust its reporting on that issue immediately. However, these benefits

depend on the audience's values; those who prioritise social harmony might not appreciate blunt factuality in the short run.

### **1.7 Short-Term Drawbacks of Emphasising Accuracy**

Telling the unvarnished truth on a contentious matter can have immediate negative fallout. It may offend or distress individuals and communities. Reporting explicitly on ethnic crime patterns can, in the short term, feed prejudices or provoke community anger (as Casey acknowledged by urging the public to “keep calm” and not misinterpret the data<sup>[44]</sup>). Similarly, insisting on factual descriptors (like “male” for a trans woman) will likely upset transgender individuals and allies, potentially leading to public complaints, protests, or social media backlash against the media outlet. Journalists might also face personal harassment for being perceived as insensitive or biased. Additionally, a strict focus on facts without acknowledging human emotions can make a report seem cold or lacking compassion, which in the short term can alienate segments of the audience who expect a more compassionate tone (for example, in reporting on tragedies, an overly clinical report might seem heartless). Thus, the immediate downside of “just the facts” can be public relations headaches and hurt feelings.

### **1.8 Long-Term Benefits of Accuracy**

In the long run, accuracy is the cornerstone of public trust and informed society. Media outlets known for forthright, factual reporting build a reputation for reliability. Over time, even if facts are uncomfortable, audiences come to value a source that “tells it like it is” because they know they are not being misled. Accurate reporting on controversial issues also facilitates genuine solutions: by identifying real problems (however controversial), policymakers and communities can address them head-on.

The Casey Report's push for accurate data collection is meant to enable targeted interventions (e.g. directing resources to areas most affected, irrespective of ethnic sensitivities)<sup>[22][24]</sup>. Long-term, a commitment to truth also inoculates the public against misinformation. If mainstream media hide certain facts, the public may seek those facts from fringe or extremist outlets, which often come with conspiracy-laden narratives. By contrast, if mainstream sources cover the facts responsibly, it

leaves less room for malicious actors to fill the void with rumors. In essence, accuracy up front prevents a later explosion of anger when the truth eventually comes out. It also aligns with journalistic ethics and regulatory standards, protecting news organisations from breaches and sanctions. As one analysis noted, “the media’s credibility depends on fair and accurate reporting..., and if these principles are not upheld, we will continue to see a decline in public trust”<sup>[45]</sup> – implying that rigorous accuracy is the antidote to dwindling trust.

### **1.9 Long-Term Drawbacks of Neglecting Empathy**

If a news provider chronically disregards empathy – coming across as routinely harsh, offensive or biased in tone – it may cultivate an image of cruelty or bigotry that alienates large parts of the public (even if its facts are correct). For example, consistently referring to trans individuals in demeaning ways or singling out minorities in crime reporting without context could, over years, erode the outlet’s reputation among moderate audiences and among the communities depicted. It might also foster social division: a public diet of unfiltered facts without empathy can dehumanise subjects of stories, reinforcing an “us vs them” mentality (e.g., viewers seeing immigrants or minorities only in a negative, criminal light if reports lack nuance or positive stories to balance). In the long term, this can harm social cohesion, and the media outlet might be dismissed as sensationalist or discriminatory, diminishing its influence except among a narrow audience. There is also a regulatory risk: patterns of offensive or insensitive broadcasting can draw penalties from Ofcom or self-regulatory bodies, especially if they breach standards on hate speech or cause unwarranted distress.

In summary, short-term empathy can maintain peace, but long-term accuracy builds trust. The challenge for media is to not choose one or the other absolutely, but to navigate the trade-offs wisely. The ideal is to pursue accurate, factual reporting presented in an empathetic manner. This means telling the truth but using thoughtful language and context to mitigate potential harm. As illustrated, avoiding truth “for now” often leads to greater problems later. Conversely, delivering truth without care can cause harm now and later. The balance is achievable: e.g., report sensitive facts with clear explanation, give all sides a fair hearing, and acknowledge the human stories behind the facts. That approach can satisfy both the mind (accuracy) and the heart (empathy).

## **7 Recommendations for Community News Providers**

Smaller and community-based news organisations face particular pressures – they are close to their audiences and subjects, and any misstep can directly strain local relationships. The following recommendations are offered to help community news providers uphold accuracy and empathy in contentious reporting, thereby strengthening their role as trusted local information sources:

### **1.10 Adhere Rigorously to Editorial Standards**

Ensure that your newsroom is well-versed in the Ofcom Broadcasting Code and (if applicable) the BBC Editorial Guidelines principles. Implement internal checks for due accuracy and due impartiality on all sensitive stories. For example, before publishing a contentious piece, ask: Are all factual claims verified and attributed? Have we included relevant context to avoid misleading? If a mistake is made, correct it openly and quickly (as Ofcom Rule 5.2 requires for significant errors)<sup>[5]</sup>. This transparency will signal to your community that accuracy is your priority.

### **1.11 Provide Context to Balance Empathy and Facts**

When reporting facts that could be controversial or offensive, include explanatory context rather than omitting them. For instance, if reporting on a local crime trend that implicates a particular ethnic group, it is better to state the facts alongside context (such as proportional population data, quotes from community leaders, and a reminder that criminality is a small minority's doing) than to say nothing about ethnicity. Contextualising allows you to be truthful and fair, reducing the chance of misinterpretation. As Baroness Casey noted, “ignoring the issues... allows [them] to be used to marginalise whole communities”, whereas frank discussion with context can pre-empt extremist narratives<sup>[26]</sup>.

### **1.12 Engage with Community Voices**

Use the advantage of being a local outlet to engage directly with those affected by the issue. This might mean interviewing community representatives, victims, local officials, and even advocates on multiple sides. By including these voices, you demonstrate empathy and allow the story to be told with human nuance, all while preserving factual accuracy. For example, in a story about a local transgender policy debate, you might include an interview with a trans resident (to understand their perspective and ensure respectful portrayal) and one with a woman who voices concerns about the policy. Presenting their viewpoints in their own words can humanise the facts and avoid the outlet

itself having to euphemise or take a side. It also aligns with impartiality – reflecting “all significant strands of thought” in the community<sup>[4]</sup>.

### **1.13 Develop Clear Language Guidelines**

Create internal guidelines for terminology that reconcile accuracy and empathy. This could involve, for example, a policy on how to refer to individuals in gender-identity stories (perhaps following their preferred pronoun but also noting biological sex where relevant – e.g., “Jane Doe, who is a transgender woman (i.e. male at birth)...”) or guidelines on reporting race/ethnicity in crime (report if statistically or contextually relevant, and if reported, provide accurate data and avoid generalisations). By deciding on these standards ahead of time (in consultation with editorial staff and community stakeholders), your reporters will have a consistent framework to follow, reducing ad-hoc decisions under pressure. Make sure these guidelines are in line with national standards and the law (e.g., avoid any language that could constitute “hate speech” or discrimination as per Ofcom Section Three)<sup>[46]</sup>.

### **1.14 Foster a Culture of Editorial Independence**

Community outlets can be prone to pressure from local interest groups or authorities (“don’t report that, it will make us look bad” or “use our preferred wording on this issue”). It is crucial to maintain independence in pursuit of truth. Politely but firmly communicate to stakeholders that your role is to inform the public objectively. At the same time, reassure them that you will handle stories with sensitivity and fairness. One practical step is establishing an editorial board or ethic committee that can review contentious pieces and advise on potential harms and how to mitigate them without compromising facts. This shows that you weigh empathy considerations seriously, but ultimately the facts that matter will be published in the public interest.

### **1.15 Train and Support Journalists**

Provide training for your reporters on both investigative rigour and compassionate interviewing. They should know how to fact-check thoroughly, but also how to talk to traumatised victims or deal with diversity issues appropriately. Encourage them to use precise language – neither misleading euphemisms nor needlessly inflammatory terms. Role-play scenarios (e.g., reporting on a racial incident) to practice striking the right tone. Additionally, back up your journalists when they face backlash for accurate reporting; if you’ve followed your guidelines and acted in good faith, stand by

the story and explain it to any critics. Conversely, if a piece genuinely caused unintended offense, engage with the concerned community and discuss how the story could be reported with better balance in the future – without deleting the facts.

### **1.16 Promote Media Literacy in Your Audience**

Finally, help your local audience understand what your journalistic standards are. Consider publishing a short reader’s guide or having a Q&A section explaining why accuracy and impartiality are vital, and how empathy is applied in your storytelling. When audiences know that you strive to “provide adequate protection” from offense by justified context<sup>[6]</sup>, but will not lie or omit truths, they are more likely to trust your content. Encourage feedback and be responsive to concerns. Over time, this cultivates a well-informed readership that values both truth and humanity in the news.

By following these recommendations, community news providers can navigate controversial topics in a way that informs rather than inflames. The goal is to be a reliable narrator of local realities – good or bad – while maintaining compassion for the people in those stories and those reading them. This dual commitment will build a stronger bond of trust with the community.

## **8 Conclusion**

In the debate between “accuracy” and “empathy” in media and news reporting, this analysis finds that accuracy must ultimately take precedence – not to reject empathy, but to ensure that empathy does not come at the cost of truth. Accuracy is the foundation of credible journalism and democratic discourse. Without accurate information, the public cannot tackle controversial issues or hold powers accountable. Empathy, however, remains an essential complement to accuracy: it guides us to report truth with care, context, and respect for human dignity. The failures highlighted by the Casey Report 2025 demonstrate that when institutions and media shy away from factual reality (even for seemingly kind reasons), the repercussions are severe – mistrust, injustice, and empowerment of bad actors<sup>[16][25]</sup>. Likewise, the pronoun conflict in the Sandie Peggie tribunal shows the intense friction that arises when truth and courtesy appear to collide in language<sup>[27][29]</sup>. The way forward is not to abandon kindness, but to remember that kindness devoid of honesty is not true kindness at all in the long run.



Media regulators like Ofcom and the BBC have set out clear expectations: be truthful, be fair, and do not unwittingly become an agent of any agenda – whether out of malice or out of excessive sympathy<sup>[39][45]</sup>. The public expects nothing less. In a time of societal divisions and rampant misinformation, journalistic accuracy and impartiality are bulwarks against chaos. Empathy will always have a place in good journalism – in the storytelling, in giving voice to the voiceless, in avoiding gratuitous harm – but facts are sacrosanct. As this briefing has argued, the path to resolving contentious social issues lies in informed, factual, and non-partisan discussions, not in comforting illusions or one-sided crusades.

Community and national media alike must ground their work in reality and reason, tempered by understanding, to truly serve the public interest. Only by doing so can they retain the public's trust and contribute to positive change.

## 9 Sources

This briefing draws upon the Ofcom Broadcasting Code and BBC Editorial Guidelines, and references public reports and discussions including the Casey Report (2025)<sup>[18][43]</sup>, coverage of the Sandie Peggie tribunal<sup>[27][29]</sup>, and commentary from media watchdogs like Seen in Journalism<sup>[38][39]</sup>, among other sources, as cited throughout. The evidence consistently underscores that accuracy, delivered with empathy but never overshadowed by it, is paramount for responsible media and an informed society.

<sup>[1][5]</sup> Section five: Due impartiality and due accuracy - Ofcom

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-standards/section-five-due-impartiality-accuracy>

<sup>[2][3]</sup> Microsoft Word - Section 03 - Accuracy

[http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/pdfs/Section\\_03\\_Accuracy.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/pdfs/Section_03_Accuracy.pdf)

<sup>[4]</sup> False Balance in Climate Reporting Reveals BBC's Sensitivity to Political Pressure - Media@LSE

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2014/04/02/false-balance-in-climate-reporting-reveals-bbcs-sensitivity-to-political-pressure/>

<sup>[6][46]</sup> Codes – Trans Media Watch

<https://transmediawatch.org/complaining-to-the-press/broadcast/codes>

<sup>[7]</sup> BBC Editorial Guidelines: Full text - Journo

<https://journo.com.tr/bbc-editorial-guidelines-full-text>

<sup>[8]</sup> <sup>[9]</sup> <sup>[11]</sup> <sup>[12]</sup> <sup>[18]</sup> <sup>[19]</sup> <sup>[26]</sup> Grooming gangs in UK thrived in ‘culture of ignorance’, Casey report says | Children | The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jun/16/grooming-gangs-in-uk-thrived-in-culture-of-ignorance-casey-report-says>

<sup>[10]</sup> <sup>[17]</sup> <sup>[20]</sup> <sup>[21]</sup> <sup>[22]</sup> <sup>[25]</sup> <sup>[43]</sup> UK failed to identify disproportionate number of Asian men in 'grooming gangs', report says | Reuters

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-failed-identify-disproportionate-number-asian-men-grooming-gangs-report-says-2025-06-16/>

<sup>[13]</sup> <sup>[14]</sup> <sup>[15]</sup> <sup>[16]</sup> Grooming gangs report author says ‘Pakistani’ was ‘tippexed out’ of a child’s file | The Independent

<https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/politics/louise-casey-grooming-gangs-cooper-b2771307.html>

<sup>[23]</sup> <sup>[24]</sup> What is the Casey report on UK ‘grooming gangs’, and why did Labour U-turn? | Sexual Assault News | Al Jazeera

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/17/what-is-the-casey-report-on-uk-grooming-gangs-and-why-did-labour-u-turn>

<sup>[27]</sup> <sup>[28]</sup> <sup>[29]</sup> <sup>[30]</sup> <sup>[31]</sup> <sup>[32]</sup> <sup>[33]</sup> <sup>[34]</sup> <sup>[35]</sup> War over pronouns breaks out at Sandie Peggie v Dr Beth Upton trans changing room tribunal

<https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/war-over-pronouns-breaks-out-at-sandie-peggie-v-dr-beth-upton-trans-changing-room-tribunal-5240720>

<sup>[36]</sup> <sup>[37]</sup> <sup>[38]</sup> <sup>[39]</sup> <sup>[41]</sup> <sup>[42]</sup> <sup>[45]</sup> Philosophical Belief, Ideological Activism, and Media Impartiality – Lessons from Smith and Wilkins – Decentered Media

<https://decentered.co.uk/philosophical-belief-ideological-activism-and-media-impartiality-lessons-from-smith-and-wilkins/>

<sup>[40]</sup> [PDF] Drivers of perceptions of due impartiality: The BBC and the wider ...

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/consultations/category-2-6-weeks/222191-how-ofcom-regulates-the-bbc/associated-documents/4-drivers-of-perceptions-of-due-impartiality-the-bbc-and-the-wider-news-landscape.pdf?v=328092>

<sup>[44]</sup> 'Keep calm': Casey warns against misinterpreting data on ethnicity of grooming gangs – video | Louise Casey | The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/video/2025/jun/17/casey-tells-public-to-keep-calm-over-ethnicity-of-offenders-after-grooming-gangs-report-video>