

27th August 2013

Dear PCC,

Reconsideration of Complaint 131881

Thank you for your e-mail today which set out a revised version of the Commission's decision in relation to my complaint. Naturally I am disappointed that the Commission decided to address only three of the inaccuracies I identified, to uphold only one aspect of my complaint, and to conclude that sufficient remedial action had been offered by the newspaper. However, in the interests of clarity I would like to focus on just a couple of key points that I believe may have been missed in reaching the decision, and which I feel ought to be considered before this complaint is concluded.

On reading the decision in detail I am concerned that in our lengthy correspondence I may not have sufficiently clearly set out my complaint in relation to the *Daily Mail's* claim that:

"Official figures say 43 per cent of all the household rubbish collected is recycled – but the ministry said that, in reality, processors reject most recyclable material, which then often ends up in landfill sites."

I chiefly wish to discuss the claim that "processors reject most recycled material", which was based upon the *Mail's* reading of the *MRF Output Material Quality Thresholds* survey commissioned by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP). In its decision, the Commission stated that:

"The newspaper was free under the Code to interpret the results of WRAP's survey and draw conclusions from that information. The Commission was satisfied that readers would not be significantly misled by the newspaper's summary of DEFRA's position and concluded that there was no breach of the Code on this point."

I would urge the Commission to reconsider this on the following grounds:

1. The Mail's conclusions are not supported by the survey evidence

While I wholly accept that newspapers are free to interpret information and draw their own conclusions, surely where it can be shown that the conclusions drawn are unsupported by the evidence relied upon this constitutes an inaccuracy that should be corrected.

The *Mail's* argument, so far as I can piece it together, is equivalent to the following:

- A survey shows that, of a dozen wine critics, 66% say that cheap supermarket wine does not meet their quality standards, therefore
- Wine critics reject 66% of cheap supermarket wine, therefore
- Most cheap supermarket wine is poured down the drain by wine critics.

The logic leading from the survey results to a conclusion regarding what happens to the UK's recycling is deeply flawed.

The *Mail* seems to assume that reprocessors share a single set of standards, and have no way to make sure that the material they buy is likely to satisfy them. In fact, reprocessors' input standards differ, they buy in the main from suppliers they trust, and at the right price there have typically been buyers even for quite contaminated recycling – if not in the UK, then in overseas markets.

To imagine that reprocessors continually buy material from sources they believe to be unsatisfactory, reject it, and then pay to send it to landfill is as absurd as to imagine connoisseurs indiscriminately buying bottles and just disposing of any whose taste they found unsatisfactory. However, just as there is a market for cheap wine, so there is a market for lower quality, higher contamination recycling. It doesn't just all get disposed of.

An argument so flawed, I suggest, is inaccurate or misleading – particularly when only the conclusion, and not the argument itself, is presented to the *Mail's* readers.

2. The WRAP survey relates only a minority of councils' recycling, and conclusions about "most recycled material" cannot be drawn from it.

Only a little more than 40% of authorities use a fully commingled recycling system. Almost 28% use a "two stream" system, where some materials (e.g. paper and card) are kept separate from others (e.g. plastics, cans, glass), which makes sorting easier and reduces contamination. 32% use the "kerbside sort" system, where materials are placed in different containers by operatives at the point of collection and need little if any subsequent sorting.

The WRAP survey only concerns commingled recycling, and makes it clear that it is not possible to generalise from findings regarding commingled MRF output to conclusions about other recycling systems. It states that 78% of reprocessors thought that the outputs of "two stream" and "kerbside sort" recycling were generally better quality than commingled recycling separated by a MRF.

Even if the *Mail's* illogical inference explained above is deemed unproblematic, it seems highly misleading to put it forward as a claim about "most" UK household recycling when it is based on evidence that relates to just 40% of councils.

3. It is misleading to attribute to Defra the view that "processors reject most recyclable material, which then often ends up in landfill sites".

During the correspondence on this complaint, the *Mail* has not produced any statement from Defra to this effect. The survey to which the *Mail* refers was commissioned by WRAP. According to its [website](#), WRAP is "an independent not-for-profit company limited by guarantee". Defra provides only part of WRAP's funding, and does not determine its work programme. Defra's name does not appear anywhere mentioned within the survey report. In Defra publications where it is [quoted](#) it is described as "a WRAP survey".

Attributing the view to Defra is misleading for readers because it implies that Defra officially endorses the claim that "processors reject most recyclable material", when in fact:

- Defra has not expressed this view;

- The view is a conclusion invalidly drawn by the *Mail*;
- The survey on which the *Mail* bases its conclusion was commissioned by WRAP; and
- The *Mail* has not indicated that WRAP has concurred with the newspaper's interpretation of its report; but even if WRAP had agreed, it is not Defra, and does not speak for Defra.

The fact that the Commission's decision describes the *Mail*'s claim as "DEFRA's position" might be taken to indicate that the article can mislead readers into thinking that it reports authoritative Government-backed findings, rather than illogical journalistic conjecture.

I believe that the Commission should reconsider its decision in relation to this aspect of my complaint in the light of the points made above and extend the scope of the amendments and retraction to be made on the part of the *Mail*.

One final point. With the *Mail*'s apparently unevidenced assertion that "millions of tonnes" of household recycling are being dumped overseas having been in circulation for almost five months, I am concerned that the form of words proposed as a correction by the Commission ("*...while 12m tons of household and business waste is sent overseas for recycling, the proportion which ends up in landfill is unknown*") being published alongside a lightly amended version of the article will tend to leave readers with the impression that a great deal of recycling is being dumped abroad, despite no evidence having been supplied for this claim.

I would urge the Commission to consider whether a form of words that will leave a more accurate impression would be appropriate, perhaps a drawing on the wording of Defra's [rebuttal](#) of the *Mail*'s story: "The vast majority of the millions of tonnes of waste that is legally exported for recycling is dealt with properly and recycled into other products." Defra's confident statement is not unwarranted. While that there is no detailed tracking of recycling shipments, we do know a good deal regarding the fate of material once it leaves our shores, and I would like to present one additional piece of evidence on this point.

In 2010 WRAP published a [survey](#) of over 100 recycling reprocessors in China – compared with the dozen or so UK reprocessors surveyed in the WRAP survey relied on by the *Mail*. To quote briefly from WRAP's [summary](#) of the findings:

*"Most paper reprocessors who were surveyed (73%) recycled old cardboard (OCC), followed by old newspapers and magazines (51%) and mixed papers (36%). The **vast majority of the materials are made into packaging** – such as cartons and corrugated boxes. The plastics reprocessors surveyed mostly reprocessed film (51%), as well as PET bottles (33%) and polypropylene (36%). **These get made into pellets** which are turned into plastic films, household and electrical goods, textiles and toys." [emphasis added]*

The word "landfill" is not mentioned in the report; had the reprocessors been sending such significant amounts of material for disposal as the *Mail* suggests, I imagine the topic might have come up. Instead, the report appears to describe a generally well-functioning market, with some discontent about contamination and quality, but a continuing willingness to buy and reprocess UK recycling.

I would be grateful if the Commission would take on board the points made above and reconsider whether additional remedial action by the *Mail* is required.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Jones