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16th April 2013

Dear Lord Hunt,

Daily Mail, 5th April 2013 – Breach of Article 1

I write to complain regarding a story printed on the front page of the Daily Mail on 5th April 2013. Amongst the various half-truths and misleading remarks in the article, it made the astonishing claim that:

“MILLIONS of tons of household rubbish painstakingly sorted by families for recycling is being dumped abroad. Whitehall has admitted that waste from recycling bins is being shipped to countries including China, India and Indonesia, where much of it ends up in landfill.”

The [online version](#) was more specific, claiming that “12 million tons” of waste are being sent to landfill overseas.

These claims are not supported by evidence, and are demonstrably untrue – which the Mail should have known given the information to which it appears to have made reference to in preparing the article.

I believe that this article therefore clearly breached Clause 1 of the Editors’ Code of Practice, in that the editor failed to:

- take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures
- distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact

In doing so, the Daily Mail has risked doing damage to the recycling industry and undermining the efforts of Government to encourage the public and business to recycle. To quote a previous Mail article, the article risked ‘fuelling public cynicism about the value of recycling’ It would therefore be appropriate for the Daily Mail to make an apology and to publish a suitably prominent correction to set the record straight.

Any reasonable reader would interpret the opening paragraph of the article, quoted above, to mean that at least two million tonnes (“millions”) of recycling collected from households is being shipped overseas and deposited in landfill sites. The Mail does not give a statistical source for its claim, and does not indicate that this is conjecture.

There are no regularly published government statistics on waste and recycling exports, and those that are published do not distinguish between material from household and other sources. The last set of figures on non-notifiable waste exports published by the Environment Agency date from 2006, and the Agency’s [website](#) states:

“it is estimated that England exported around 12.5 million tonnes and imported about 1.3 million tonnes of waste in 2006, giving a net export of around 11.2 million tonnes”

This appears to be the most likely source for the Mail Online’s “12 million tons” claim. However, this figure relates to all waste, not just that deriving from households. The Agency also makes clear on that same page that:

“Metallic and paper/board wastes account for the greatest proportions of non-notifiable waste exports (63 per cent and 31 per cent respectively)”

Household waste includes relatively little metallic waste, so it is clear that relatively little of this exported tonnage derived from households. Indeed, in the last year for which statistics are available, only 10.7m tonnes of household recycling was collected in total. The Mail is plainly aware of these statistics, having referred to a 43% household recycling rate elsewhere in the article, a figure which derives from the same Defra [source](#).

Since no adequate statistics are maintained centrally on the export of waste that can be related back to its producer, the fact is that no-one knows how much household waste is exported. The Mail’s claim is pure speculation, and a highly improbable one at that.

Of the 10.7m tonnes of household recycling, by no means all is sent overseas for reprocessing. The UK has substantial reprocessing capacity to turn recycling back into useable material. In a [recent report](#), the Resource Association states that it represents reprocessors with capacity of 3m tonnes per year, and estimates that this is around 50% of total UK capacity. Perhaps not all of this is used for waste from domestic sources, but let us assume generously that only 50% is. That leaves only 7.7m tonnes of household recycling for export in an unprocessed state. This material must be sorted before it can be legally exported, so the key issue is the level of contamination within the resulting separated material.

The maximum contamination found by Resource Association members ranged from 8% to 23%, with average contamination rates between 2.5% and 12.2%, depending on the type of material. If all of the 7.7m tonnes of recycling I have assumed to be exported was contaminated at the maximum level of 23% (and this is highly unlikely given that there is no automatic link between recycling quality and whether it is exported), we would find that 1.77m tonnes might possibly be landfilled overseas. A more plausible estimate, using a contamination rate of 10% would give a total of less than 1m tonnes.

It is therefore highly implausible to speculate that “millions of tonnes”, let alone “12 million tonnes” of “painstakingly sorted” waste is being landfilled. Indeed, the waste that yields the highest levels of contamination is not that which householders “painstakingly” sort into different bins, but that which is collected “commingled” within a single recycling bin.

The Mail’s story is therefore highly misleading, and entirely mis-states the reasons why some recycling is rejected by overseas reprocessors. An accurate re-wording of the paragraph quoted at the start of this letter would be:

“An unknown amount (which can tentatively be quantified at around 1 million tonnes) of household recycling, especially that which is not very carefully sorted by families for recycling, is (as a result of being further processed when it arrives overseas), being identified as contamination and dumped in landfill – in much the same way that this contamination would be dealt with if separated out in the UK – so that the great majority of the recycling exported can be reprocessed back into raw materials.”

While the inaccurate statement I have highlighted in this letter is just one of many misleading points in the Mail's article, I believe it is the most important one and justifies the Mail issuing a prominent apology and correction. I should be happy to draft such a correction for the paper. I look forward to hearing the Press Complaints Commission's view on this matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Jones". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and "J".

Peter Jones