

[NL] Public broadcaster's interview using false pretences seriously violated journalistic standards

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On 12 July 2024, the Ombudsman of the Dutch Public Broadcasting Foundation (*Stichting Nederlandse Publieke Omroep*) issued a significant decision on a recent controversial interview conducted by the public broadcaster PowNed. Notably, the Ombudsman held that the interview violated the Journalistic Code of Conduct and could be “damaging to the trust in journalism as a whole, and in public broadcasting in particular”. The case garnered considerable public debate, with the broadcaster admitting it was a “tasteless item” and was “completely disrespectful to women in general”. At the same time the Dutch Media Authority also issued a notice that the interview “did not meet the high journalistic and professional quality requirements that may be expected of a national public broadcaster”.

The case involved a reporter from PowNed, a Dutch public broadcaster, who sought to interview several young women attending a concert in Amsterdam by the well-known musician Taylor Swift. The reporter sought to see “how far Swift's fans would go for a meet-and-greet with the artist”, and interviewed a number of women by falsely promising he could arrange a meet-and-greet with Swift. The reporter asked the women “How far would you go, what is the craziest thing you would do, now on camera, to go to a meet-and-greet with Taylor?” In response, and with the reporter’s “encouragement”, one young woman kissed an unknown fan, and another woman showed her bare breasts on camera. The reporter then disclosed the promise of the meet-and-greet was a lie, with one of the women asking that the video not be published. However, PowNed published the interviews, with the women’s faces recognisable, on the broadcaster’s website and YouTube channel, under the tile “Screaming girls become sluts for Taylor Swift”.

Following the publication of the video report, a “storm of criticism” broke out in the media, and the Ombudsman received hundreds of complaints. The Ombudsman is an independent and impartial body that can examine and investigate complaints made by the public about journalistic practices and products by Dutch Public Broadcasters under the Dutch Journalistic Code of Conduct. The complaints made included that PowNed had “lied to young women to get them to film their breasts,” dismissed the women as “sluts ”, and was “sexist, derogatory and distasteful”, and intentionally harmed the women in the

report.

In its decision, the Ombudsman stated that under the Journalistic Code of Conduct, broadcasters are free in what they produce, and editorial freedom gives journalists the freedom to choose what they report on and in what form. However, the Journalistic Code of Conduct is violated when the reporter “tells the interviewees something that is not true”, and under the Code, reporters must “make their identity known to potential interviewees and are clear to them about their intentions and the nature of the publication”. Turning to PowNed’s interview, the Ombudsman noted that it was “clearly a case of deception”, and the reporter “was not honest about what he was doing”, in violation of the Code. Further, the Ombudsman noted that in the case of the woman who showed her breasts, “an ethical boundary was also crossed”. Not only was she “lied to”, but when this became clear to her, instead of deleting the video, the video was published, and her face was not blurred or otherwise made unrecognisable; again, in violation of the Code. The Ombudsman also added that the use of the word “sluts” in the title on the broadcaster's website also shows “little respect for women in general and the women in this video in particular”.

Finally, the broadcaster accepted the Ombudsman decision, and issued a statement admitting that “[m]any mistakes were made in the production chain of the video in question. This should never have happened and has nothing to do with journalism. It was not only a tasteless item, but even worse: completely disrespectful to women in general”.

Ombudsman Nederlandse Publieke Omroep, PowNed, 12 juli 2024

<https://omroepombudsman.nl/uitspraken-en-columns/swifties-misleid-in-respectloze-video>

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