[GB] Two Compliance Investigations into 'Newsnight' Find Serious Problems at the BBC

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Inquiries into the handling of two separate investigations into alleged child abuse by the BBC's flagship programme Newsnight have found serious compliance and cultural problems. As a result of the second problem, the BBC's Director-General was forced to resign.

The first issue concerned the decision to drop an investigation into alleged child abuse by Jimmy Saville, a former disc jockey who had died on 29 October 2011. Newsnight commenced an investigation based on allegations by victims, including that the police had dropped their own investigation because of Saville's age. However, the story was taken off the BBC's Managed Risk Programmes List, the mechanism for flagging risk in potential programmes to senior management. It later became apparent that the police investigation had been discontinued because of lack of evidence, though this did not invalidate other allegations, and the proposed programme was withdrawn with no further investigation after December 2011. In late 2012 ITV, the commercial broadcaster, prepared and broadcast a programme with convincing evidence of child abuse by Saville. The BBC gave 'flawed' and 'chaotic' reasons for not pursuing its own investigation. The BBC Trust asked Nick Pollard, the former head of Sky News, to investigate the management of the proposed programme. He concluded that the decision to drop the programme was done in good faith and had not been due to pressure to protect tribute programmes to Saville planned by the BBC. However, it had been flawed and the BBC had been completely unable to deal with the events which followed; there had been 'chaos and confusion' and crucial information about the basic facts of the case had not been shared. The Pollard report made a number of recommendations, including that news and editorial management be reviewed, that the role of the Director-General of the BBC as editor-in-chief was of questionable utility, that full information be shared and that the Managed Risk Programmes List be made more effective. The Report was also highly critical of the BBC internal culture.

In the second case, on 2 November 2012 Newsnight broadcast a report that 'a leading Conservative politician from the Thatcher years' had been involved in child abuse. The alleged perpetrator was not identified in the programme; however it was possible to work out his identity as being Lord McAlpine, former treasurer of the Conservative Party, and his name was widely circulated on the internet. The following week the source of the allegation stated that he had

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wrongly identified his abuser; Newsnight issued an apology and settled a libel claim. The Director-General of the BBC, who is also the editor-in-chief, resigned after only 54 days in the role. The BBC Trust's Editorial Standards Committee found that basic journalistic checks had not been applied to the story and that the Newsnight team had not made adequate attempts to seek validation for it. Management of the story was also inadequate. There had been a serious breach of the Editorial Guidelines relating to accuracy; the broadcast allegations had not been based on sound evidence and the audience had been misled. There had been a grave breach which had been costly to all concerned.

BBC, 'The Pollard Review' and 'The Pollard Review - BBC Response' (2012)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2012/pollard_review.html

BBC, 'Finding of the Editiorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust - Newsnight, BBC Two, 2 November 2012'

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2012/newsnight_2nov.html

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