[IE] Recent Broadcasting Complaints Decisions

IRIS 2014-2:1/23

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On 20 December 2013, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) released recent decisions on six broadcasting complaints. At its meeting held in November 2013, the Compliance Committee upheld (in part) one complaint and rejected four. A further complaint had been resolved by the Executive Complaint Forum at its October 2013 meeting.

Under section 48 of the Broadcasting Act 2009, viewers and listeners can complain about broadcasting content that they believe is not in keeping with broadcasting codes and rules. All six of the complaints dealt either in whole or in part, with fairness, objectivity and impartiality in current affairs programmes. With respect to the complaint that was upheld, the Compliance Committee found that a segment of a current affairs television broadcast that dealt with the issue of abortion, lacked fairness.

The segment featured an interview between the programme presenter and a journalist from an Irish newspaper, and discussed the results of an opinion poll on the proposed Protection of Life during Pregnancy Bill (Abortion Bill) that was published in the newspaper. During the segment, the journalist described the criticism of the poll as ‘nonsense’, ‘absurd’ and ‘regrettable’. These remarks were not challenged by the presenter. The Compliance Committee decided that in the absence of an alternative voice, there was an onus on the presenter to challenge the comments of the journalist. Therefore, the presenter’s failure to challenge the journalist’s remarks resulted in this segment of the programme lacking the necessary fairness.

A further three complaints considered in the period also related to RTÉ, the national public service broadcaster’s handling of the Abortion Bill, in three successive weekly editions of the current affairs programme, ‘The Week in Politics’, broadcast in July 2013, as the bill progressed through the legislative process in the Irish parliament. In each case, the programmes included both a pre-recorded report and a panel debate moderated by the programme presenter. The focus of the panel debates was predominantly on party political issues arising from the passage of the bill through parliament. The complaint claimed that as the programmes featured a total of nine, of what he describes as ‘pro-legislation’ panellists and no ‘anti-legislation’ panellists, it lacked fairness, objectivity and impartiality.

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The Compliance Committee decided that the handling of the debates during the programmes and the range of views evident in relation to the bill, in the pre-recorded items broadcast, meant that the broadcasts were not contrary to the requirements for fairness, objectivity and impartiality in news and current affairs. Finally, it should be noted that the new Code of Fairness, Objectivity and Impartiality in News and Current Affairs (see IRIS 2013-5/32) entered into force on 1 July 2013.

Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, Broadcasting Complaints Decisions, December 2013

http://www.bai.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/BAI_ComplaintDecisions_Dec13_vFinal.pdf

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