

[GB] Decision on portrayal of Leader of the Opposition in programme on UK/Russia relations

IRIS 2018-7:1/19

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On 10 May 2018 the BBC Executive Complaints Unit (ECU) delivered its decision on the portrayal of the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, in a current affairs programme on UK/Russian relations. Following an incident in the English town of Salisbury (an ex-Russian KGB officer had been allegedly attacked with a nerve agent) and a subsequent House of Commons appearance on the matter by Mr Corbyn, BBC's Newsnight programme presented a studio discussion about his position.

48 people complained to the ECU that the studio's backdrop had been deliberately contrived to convey an impression of pro-Russian sympathy on Mr Corbyn's part. Several grounds were advanced for this conclusion.

Firstly, it was claimed the image had been manipulated to make Mr Corbyn look more Russian than in the photograph from which it had been taken, particularly by altering the appearance of his hat. However, the BBC clarified that the photograph had not been photoshopped or manipulated. Some complainants understood this clarification to mean that it had been shown unaltered. However it was immediately apparent from the backdrop that the source images had been modified. In fact, the graphics team had increased the contrast to ensure enough definition on screen; moreover, they had given the whole backdrop a colour wash for a stylised effect. Newsnight's graphics team regularly treats images of politicians from all parties (and other people) in this way in order to create a strong studio backdrop for whichever story is being covered. As a result of this treatment, much of the detail of Mr Corbyn's hat that had been visible in the original photograph was lost, and the hat appeared in silhouette. This was the effect which suggested to some complainants a likeness to a Russian-style fur hat.

Secondly, it was claimed that the superimposition of the image against a Moscow skyline had compounded this effect. The BBC responded that a visual montage is a device commonly used in television programmes in order to highlight a story or theme. The use of the technique in news programmes such as Newsnight is intended to epitomise the story rather than to express or invite a particular attitude to it, and the montage used in the item in question was no exception. As the focus of the 15 March item was on Mr Corbyn's reaction to the claim that

Russia was responsible for the nerve agent attack, it was entirely apt for the backdrop to combine his image with this backdrop (as had also been done on the previous evening's edition of the programme that had concerned an item on UK/Russia relations).

Thirdly, it was felt that the selection of a photograph in which Mr Corbyn was wearing (what some described as) a "Lenin-style cap" was also intended to suggest a Russian association. However, the BBC argued that the photograph was chosen because it was a typical and readily recognisable image of Mr Corbyn, which had been used many times across the media without remark. Complaints about its use on this occasion focused on the supposedly Russian associations of the Lenin-style cap that he was wearing in the photo shown. However, this objection conflicts with the objections of those who maintained that it was the alleged photoshopping of the hat that had given it a more Russian appearance. The BBC's position was that neither objection had any basis in fact.

Lastly, some complainants also complained that the programme's choice of focus constituted bias against Mr Corbyn. In introducing the item, the presenter made clear the rationale for the choice of focus. She asked: "Did Jeremy Corbyn misread the mood of his party in the Commons yesterday when he refused to point the finger at Russia?". She also said: "Today, Corbyn clarified, stressing his condemnation of the attack and saying the evidence pointed towards Russia. But he reiterated the need not to rush ahead of evidence in what he referred to as the fevered atmosphere of Westminster."

The ECU concluded that there were no grounds for regarding the contents of the item as less than impartial or fair to Mr Corbyn. The ECU decided not to uphold the complaints.

BBC Executive Complaints Unit, "Newsnight, BBC Two, 15 March 2018: Use of Jeremy Corbyn's image: Finding by the Executive Complaints Unit", 10 May 2018

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/comp-reports/ecu/newsnight15032018>

