

7 December 2021

For the attention of:

Timothy Davie CBE
Director-General, BBC

Richard Sharp
Chairman, BBC

Francesca Unsworth
Director, BBC News

BBC Broadcasting House
Portland Place
London W1A 1AA

To Mr Davie, Mr Sharp and Ms Unsworth,

BBC REPORT OF ANTISEMITIC INCIDENT ON OXFORD STREET

We refer to a report by the BBC¹ on 1 December 2021 on your News website, as well as a report on a BBC London television broadcast, in which a number of harmful framings and allegations were made that we condemn in the strongest possible terms.

1. Your report of the incident refers to the obvious antisemitic acts as mere “allegations” while reporting an unsubstantiated allegation of “racial slurs about Muslims” as fact.

The video footage that your report is based on – captured by the victims who are deeply distressed by your resultant reporting – clearly shows a group of men making Hitler salutes, spitting, attempting to smash windows, chasing, and threatening a bus-load of Jewish children. By reducing this obvious antisemitic incident to a mere “allegation”, your report has the effect of casting doubt on the attackers’ antisemitic motivations. Does the BBC reporting team believe making Nazi salutes at Jewish children could have any other interpretation?

By referring to it as an “allegation” your reporting has the effect of prejudicing societal understanding of antisemitism and obscuring the facts. Jewish children and their minders were targeted because they were Jews. The fact of the matter is, what these Jewish people experienced and what we all witnessed via video was a clear and indisputable display of antisemitic harassment, abuse and threats less than a kilometre away from Broadcasting House. It is the duty of any responsible news organisation to report this clearly and without ambiguity. It is even more so when it comes to the BBC, which is mandated by the state and funded by the public purse

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-59495842>

to: *“to act in the public interest, serving all audiences through the provision of impartial, high-quality and distinctive output and services which inform, educate and entertain.”*

By casting doubt on this clear antisemitic incident, your report does not inform, nor does it educate. It certainly doesn't serve the public interest. In fact, it causes harm. It harms Jews directly, and it also harms societal understanding of antisemitism.

2. Your report treats racisms differently.

Worse still, while reporting the clear antisemitic threats and abuse as “allegations”, your news article and broadcast was unequivocal about alleged “anti-Muslim slurs” coming from the victims on the bus. Before we go into detail about this dubious but grievous accusation, how does the Corporation justify the obvious differential treatment between its reporting here? Why is doubt cast on the antisemitism of the perpetrators while the alleged racist remarks of the victims reported unequivocally?

We took the allegations of “anti-Muslim slurs” made in the report very seriously and investigated them in great detail. We note that two days after your article was published, and the resultant outcry from ourselves, other Jewish groups, Jewish media and the wider public, your article was amended from “racial slurs about Muslims could be heard inside the bus” to “a slur about Muslims could be heard.”

3. Your video news segment goes as far as to suggest the Jewish victims may have been responsible for instigating the attacks.

Perhaps the most egregious of all, in your television broadcast segment your BBC London reporter outrageously states, as if fact, that “you can hear some racial slurs about Muslim people... from the bus”, and then proceeds to suggest that there is a possibility that the Jewish victims may have been responsible for instigating the attack.² This is a horrendous allegation, completely bereft of any evidence, and a deeply incendiary insinuation that is tantamount to victim blaming.

4. The allegations made against the Jewish victims are wholly without substance or merit.

Our own thorough investigation into this aspect finds your allegation baseless in fact and wholly without merit. We investigated every second of footage and we contend that the BBC is mischaracterising a Hebrew cry for help by a distressed Jewish man as a slur in English.

We have evidenced this with our own re-enactment of the precise phrasing, cadence, and context of the audio segment in dispute and are fully convinced that the BBC has gotten this spectacularly wrong.³ Dangerously so. The victims of

² <https://twitter.com/jonnygouldpod/status/1467439531699884034?s=20>

³ <https://twitter.com/BoardofDeputies/status/1467241977188171792>

antisemitic abuse are now being smeared as racists and therefore somehow less deserving of sympathy or, in the worst case, deserving of the abuse they received. This is deeply irresponsible journalism.

The facts of the matter are that the bus was full of Hebrew speaking Jews under attack by a threatening group of men who spat at them, made fascist salutes, tried to smash the windows of the bus and gave chase when they were trying to flee. The majority of the victims were Jewish children. They were there to celebrate the Jewish festival of Chanukah. Some were dressed as *dreidels* and dancing in the street moments before. They were handing out doughnuts to passers-by and, as members of the Chabad movement – widely known for their charitable activities and outreach work – were there to spread joy and light and openly exercise their religious freedom in our nation’s capital.

Given this context, we investigated the footage of the incident thoroughly and with the aid of our staff team and a community of native Hebrew speakers, we found no evidence to support your parlous claims. What you thought to be an “anti-Muslim slur” in English, was actually a cry for help in Hebrew by a distressed young Jewish man. In fact, most of the footage contains Hebrew phrases like “come, come, come”, “close the door”, “let’s go”, and the central quote in question which is actually the Hebrew for “Call someone, it’s urgent!”

We note too that follow-up reporting in the Jewish media, and individual eyewitness statements by people who were there on the bus, all completely reject the accusation made in your reports and all fully confirm that the phrases uttered were in Hebrew.⁴ We have been in contact with multiple people directly who all corroborate this.

5. The BBC’s refusal to retract and apologise to the victims has caused further distress and compounded the harm.

Antisemitic incidents in this country are at a record high.⁵ It is therefore deeply disturbing that the reporting from our national broadcaster should be so careless in its coverage so cavalier in its response to the outrage it has generated from the Jewish community and the wider public, and so obdurate in its refusal to retract and apologise to the victims.

We have raised our concerns and provided ample evidence that clearly shows the BBC has made an error in its reporting. Mistakes happen. But when such mistakes are pointed out and the evidence provided, the BBC’s institutional recalcitrance on this matter leaves us aghast. The wagon-circling of your organisation is not only disdainful of our community’s concerns, it perpetuates and compounds the harm and distress of the Jewish victims. This arrogant intransigence by the BBC will only serve

⁴ <https://www.thejc.com/news/news/bbc-demonised-our-children-parents-of-oxford-street-victims-say-6J1fclI11AR0ykO5ZN3e6Y>

⁵ <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2021/08/05/antisemitic-incidents-report-january-june-2021>

to deepen that harm.

We believe that the BBC needs to take immediate action to repair the damage done, discipline those responsible and work with us to undergo training to improve the BBC's ability to cover our community with due care for accuracy, understanding and respect. Most importantly, it is imperative that you correct your report to mitigate any further damage, and issue an apology to the victims for all the distress that has been caused.

Sincerely,

Marie van der Zyl

Marie van der Zyl
President

cc: Rt Hon Nadine Dorries, Minister for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport