

BBC Trust
180 Great Portland Street,
London W1W 5QZ

25 January 2010

Dear sir/madam

We are writing in relation to an item that appeared on the BBC news website on 17 December 'Jewish man jeered at SOAS university debate' (appendix 1). Along with many other people we contacted the BBC and a revised version appeared late the following day (appendix 2) While we were pleased that a revised version appeared, the BBC has never stated publically that the original version contained many serious errors it continues to circulate on the Internet. Without a clear BBC disavowal it is far more difficult to challenge those who continue to misuse the original as evidence of BBC endorsement of patently false allegations.

As joint organisers of the meeting we therefore ask the BBC to make a public statement that the original story contains multiple errors of fact and make unjustifiable claims and is a piece of journalism of which falls far short of their expected standards. This will enable us and the BBC to contest reproduction of the article or uncritical reference to it.

In response to our initial complaint we received a reply from Hugh Berlyn, Editor, BBC News and Sports Interactive (see appendix 3). We contacted Mr Berlyn to express our continuing concerns (see appendix 4). However Mr Berlyn replied on 20 January only to say, "Thank you for your email. I have nothing further to add to me earlier response." He gave us no further guidance on how to pursue our complaint. When we asked for details of the next step he directed us not to the trust not to the Editorial Complaints Unit at White City. Following advice from BBC Information we are writing to this address, we trust we are following the correct procedure to pursue our concerns.

There are many points, some of which we detail below, at which the article falls short of normal journalistic standards, let alone the higher standards to which the BBC aspires. However central to our concern is the entirely false allegation of anti-Semitic barracking, instanced by the title of the piece; the statement ' . . . a man being told he is "not welcome" after revealing his Jewish name'; and the claim 'Upon revealing his name there are boos and shouts of "Jewish!"'

The words "not welcome" are at no point audible on the videotape and no indication by whom they were supposed to have been said. There is a certain amount of barracking when Mr Hoffman gave his name, this was not because his name is 'Jewish' but because Mr Hoffman is well known for attending meetings critical of Israel and attempting to use

Please reply to: BRICUP, BM BRICUP, London WC1N3XX

the Q&A session to divert the meeting from its aim by asking, what many in the audiences feel are, questions irrelevant to the nature of the actions of the Israeli Government and its armed forces. Two of the speakers at the meeting, Steven Rose and Ronnie Kasrils are of Jewish origin as were many of the audience including the person who asked the question before Mr Hoffman's – none of these people were heckled despite their origins.

The shout of Jewish never occurred. We have been told that it was heard at 5'12" into the Q&A session. At that point Mr Hoffman had just asked 'Why do you interrupt me?' there was a response with the rhetorical question 'Do you really want to know?' The tape is not ambiguous on this and the journalist should not have believed the false account he was fed.

It is on these false precepts that the rest of the article is based and these initial errors are compounded.

1) *Footage has emerged*

The use of this term suggests the video had been suppressed and dragged into the open. A full, filmed report with text commentary was made available on the web by organisers of the event immediately after it took place on December 4.

This term is prejudicial and breach of guidelines on use of clear, precise language.

2) *Anti-racism campaigners called it "chilling".*

....

Raheem Kassam, of student anti-racism campaigners Student Rights, said: "The overpowering racist jeering as displayed by some audience members at the event is a stark and chilling revelation of what can happen when extremism is allowed to take root in universities."

Inaccurate, biased.

This formulation accepts without question the self-definition of a single, source – Raheem Kassam, and who, it appears was not present at the meeting. A brief check on his website (www.studentrights.org.uk) shows it makes no pretensions to be an 'anti-racism campaigning site'

By relying on such a source the BBC associates the organisers and audience at the SOAS meeting with 'extremism' as defined by Kassam. The BBC does not adduce any evidence of 'extremism' beyond the assertion of its presence by Mr Kassam.

This again is prejudicial and breach of guidelines on use of clear, precise language.

3) *Once boos have subsided the chairman of the debate, Tom Hickey, of the UCU, directs the speakers to "ignore" the question.*

Tom Hickey in fact calms the audience, ensures that Hoffman is free to read out his entire question and then notes that since it has nothing to do with the subject of the meeting neither the panellists nor the audience should respond.

This assertion is inaccurate and prejudicial

4) *Jewish man jeered at Soas university debate*

The event was not a SOAS university debate. It was a meeting organized by the SOAS Palestine Society and the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine to explore the contention that Israel's policies towards the Palestinian people represent a form of apartheid segregation and discrimination deserving a campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions inspired by the South African anti-apartheid struggle.

It is worth noting that there is no such place as 'Soas university' SOAS (always capitalised) is a School of the University of London.

The Case for Sanctions and Boycott [of the nation of Israel]

This was not the title of the meeting. It was "Israel, the Palestinians and apartheid – the case for sanctions and boycott"

These errors display the poor quality of even the most basic fact checking.

5) *The film shows Jonathan Hoffman ask why Soas university (sic) allowed a man condemned as an anti-semite by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHR)(sic) to talk.*

Hoffman cites a ruling of the SAHRC (not SAHR as in the article) against South African trade union activist Bongani Masuku for 'hate-speech'. The use of the words 'a man condemned as an anti-Semite' are not borne out by the SAHRC ruling, a ruling which has been strongly contested by SACTU on grounds of both process and substance.

Inaccurate and a use of language inconsistent with BBC guidelines on use of clear, precise language.

6) *Mr Hoffman has described himself as "cross" after the "anti-Semitic" meeting.*

This implies that Hoffman had identified his treatment at the meeting as racist. In fact Jonathan Hoffman placed his own report of the December 4 meeting on his blog <http://www.thejc.com/blogpost/antisemitic-meeting-soas> on December 13 making no mention of any anti-Jewish jibes against him. He has since used Raheem Kassam's allegations and made them his own. Prior to Kassam's intervention Hoffman describes the meeting as "anti-Semitic" because of its anti-Israeli stance. He routinely condemns criticism of Israel as "anti-Semitic" and is well-known for doing so. This is why many members of the audience, including the Jews present, were hostile towards him.

Uncritical reproduction of an inaccurate and prejudicial claim

7) *The spokesman refused to say whether the university condoned the appearance of Mr Masuku.*

The BBC questioning of the university spokesman focuses entirely on Hoffman and his hostile question about black South African trade unionist Bongani Masuku, ignoring the purpose and context of the meeting. Use of the words 'refused' and 'condoned' imply acceptance of the charges made by Kassam and Hoffman and suggest that the BBC regards the School as at fault.

Masuku's organization, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions, is the first national trade union body to have supported the boycott of Israel because of its abuse of the Palestinian people. Masuku said at the meeting: "every one of us has a right to coexist with everyone else in peace and justice and dignity". This clear expression of anti-racism reflected the tone of the whole meeting and was not reported by the BBC.

It is not reported that Mr Masuku categorically denies accusations of racism.

This assertion is inaccurate and prejudicial

8) *A spokesman for the London university said nobody broke hate speech rules*

At no point is there any suggestion, even in this inaccurate report, of 'hate speech'. There was sneering and booing but this cannot be construed as hate speech; it was merely a sign of disagreement with what Mr Hoffman had to say. It is also misleading since the only context of hate speech refers to the SAHRC ruling, not to any incident during the event.

Reporting the disclaimer by the School's representative in this form is of the form of 'have you stopped beating your wife?'

Uncritical reproduction of an inaccurate and prejudicial claim

9) *Mr Hoffman and the university's Palestinian Society were unavailable for comment.*

Without speaking to Jonathan Hoffman, the BBC inserted into its story quotes from his blog which reflect his partisan view of the meeting.

SOAS Palestinian Society was given less than an hour to produce a response to hostile questions about a meeting 13 days earlier – an impossible time scale for a voluntary student society on the last day of term. BRICUP, the co-organisers were not approached at all. One of the speakers at the meeting, Steven Rose, is a regular contributor to the BBC and his contact details are well known to the organisation, he also, was not approached for a comment.

10) *The incident follows recent rows about the appearance of controversial Islamist speakers at both Queen Mary, University of London, and University College London.*

There is no basis for citing unrelated incidents at other Colleges. There were no 'Islamists' speakers at the meeting. This statement can only be seen as an attempt to link the meeting to other events that are popularly condemned.

This statement is irrelevant and prejudicial

There is no attempt to provide any context from the rest of the two-hour-long meeting attended by 300 people including many of Jewish origin. It consisted of a sober discussion of the hopeless situation of the Palestinian people since the state of Israel was founded in 1948 - made refugees in their hundreds of thousands, discriminated against within Israel, subject to an illegal occupation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and victims of brutal aggression and siege in Gaza. The story made no reference at all to any of the issues discussed.

Mr Berlyn's comment 'After publication it quickly became clear that there was more to what had happened in the meeting than was apparent from the video and Mr Hoffman's allegations' is entirely inadequate. We have shown that any professional journalist,

following the most minimally correct procedures, would have been aware of the problematic nature of the version fed to him by Mr Kassam and would have identified Mr Kassam as highly partisan and that this account would need careful cross-checking. This was not a breaking news story with overwhelming time pressure; it referred to events two weeks previously and there was plenty of time for verification of the account.

We expect the BBC to make a public statement about the errors in the original report and to exercise far greater care in future in retelling unsubstantiated allegations of anti-Semitism. We are aware that claims of anti-Semitism are frequently made to delegitimise and marginalise criticism of Israel's actions. We fear this not only means that abuses by Israel go unchallenged but also that real incidents of anti-Semitic abuse or violence are given less credence than they should.

Mike Cushman

Elian Weizman

for BRICUP

for SOAS Palestine Society

Appendix 1 Original story

Jewish man jeered at Soas university debate

Page last updated at 21:28 GMT, Thursday, 17 December 2009

Footage has emerged of a man being told he is "not welcome" after revealing his Jewish name at a School of Oriental and African Studies debate on Palestine.

The film shows Jonathan Hoffman ask why Soas university allowed a man condemned as an anti-Semite by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHR) to talk.

Upon revealing his name there are boos and shouts of "Jewish!" Anti-racism campaigners called it "chilling".

A spokesman for the London university said nobody broke hate speech rules.

The event, entitled The Case for Sanctions and Boycott [of the nation of Israel] was organised by the School of Oriental and African Studies' [Soas] Palestinian Society.

They invited South African trade unionist Bongani Masuku to speak.

The SAHR has condemned Mr Masuku for "hate speech", saying his comments "are of an extreme nature that imply the Jewish community are to be despised, scorned and ridiculed".

The overpowering racist jeering as displayed by some audience members at the event is stark and chilling

Raheem Kassam, Student Rights

The film, posted on YouTube, shows Mr Hoffman ask: "Why does the University and College Union (UCU) invite somebody who practises hate speech?"

Once boos have subsided the chairman of the debate, Tom Hickey, of the UCU, directs the speakers to "ignore" the question.

Mr Hoffman has described himself as "cross" after the "anti-Semitic" meeting.

The name Hoffman is of German-Jewish origin.

Raheem Kassam, of student anti-racism campaigners Student Rights, said: "The overpowering racist jeering as displayed by some audience members at the event is a stark and chilling revelation of what can happen when extremism is allowed to take root in universities.

"This man was first shouted down, then ignored by the event chair and panellists.

"Why? From what we hear shouted when he is speaking, because he is, 'Jewish', and 'not welcome here'."

'No law breach'

A Soas University spokesman said: "Soas has strict guidelines against hate speech and incitement to violence at public events.

"Event chairs are authorised to stop proceedings if any speaker or audience member breaks the law or engages in speech or behaviour that violates that policy."

He added: "From what is shown in the clip in question, that appears not to have been the case at this event."

The spokesman refused to say whether the university condoned the appearance of Mr Masuku.

Mr Hoffman and the university's Palestinian Society were unavailable for comment.

Mr Masuku categorically denies accusations of racism.

The incident follows recent rows about the appearance of controversial Islamist speakers at both Queen Mary, University of London, and University College London.

Row breaks out over university meeting

Page last updated at 16:17 GMT, Friday, 18 December 2009

A row has broken out over a meeting about Israel at a University of London college that one man described as "anti-Semitic".

Jonathan Hoffman, vice-chairman of the Zionist Federation of Great Britain, made the claim in a blog relating to a meeting at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

But others have insisted the meeting was fair and there were no anti-Semitic undertones. Other Jewish audience members spoke without being heckled.

Mike Cushman, who was part of the audience, said: "It was an extremely serious and positive meeting.

'Very sensitive'

"The jeering was directed at Jonathan Hoffman because of his individual beliefs, not because of his religion.

"It is worth noting many of the audience were of Jewish origin."

Also in the audience was Naomi Wimborne Idressi. She said: "I am a Jew and I am very sensitive about anti-Semitism. There was no anti-Semitism at the meeting.

"It was a meeting which was fervent about human rights. There was a lot of learned discussion."

Mr Hoffman had criticised the appearance of South African trade unionist Bongani Masuku, who has been condemned for hate speech by the South African Human Rights Commission.

In a blog, he described the event as an "anti-Semitic meeting" and wrote: "There were many anti-Semitic statements about Israel as an apartheid state."

After viewing the footage of the meeting, which has been published on the internet, Raheem Kassam, of campaigners Student Rights, said the response to his question constituted racist jeering.

'Strict guidelines'

But Ms Wimborne Idressi said he was booed because he is a high-profile Zionist, well known for controversial views on the Palestinian territories.

A Soas University spokesman said: "Soas has strict guidelines against hate speech and incitement to violence at public events.

"Event chairs are authorised to stop proceedings if any speaker or audience member breaks the law or engages in speech or behaviour that violates that policy.

"From what is shown in the clip in question, that appears not to have been the case at this event."

Appendix 3

Initial reply from Mr Berlyn

Sent: Mon 21/12/2009 12:33

Dear Mr Cushman,

Thank you for your feedback to BBC News Online.

The background to the story about which you have complained is that the meeting at SOAS was highlighted to one of our journalists who was sent a video of the "incident", which was also reported on Mr Hoffman's blog.

The journalist contacted the Board of Deputies of British Jews who confirmed that they were aware of what had happened...indeed there had been a report in the Jewish Chronicle.

He also contacted the Zionist Federation and SOAS for comments. The SOAS press office confirmed that they were aware of the allegations of what had happened in the meeting.

The reporter also contact the SOAS Palestine Society, informing them of the accusations and emailing them links to Mr Hoffman's blog and the video. The society told the reporter they could not comment.

After publication it quickly became clear that there was more to what had happened in the meeting than was apparent from the video and Mr Hoffman's allegations. As soon as that became clear the story was amended to reflect the differing views of those who had been at the meeting.

It is regrettable that the original story did not reflect a wider range of views and the journalist concerned has been made well aware of the requirement to do so in the future.

n.b. Identical or very similar messages were received by other complainants

Appendix 4

Hugo Berlyn
Editor
BBC News and Sports Interactive

31 December 2009

Dear Mr Berlyn

We have received your reply to our complaints about the BBC News online report of 18 December of the meeting we, BRICUP and SOAS PalSoc, jointly organised in SOAS on 4 December. Your reply answers none of the many and serious criticisms we each made of the report.

At no time has anyone from the BBC contacted BRICUP about the meeting to ask for our comment and the request to SOAS PalSoc required an answer within 30 minutes – an impossible turnaround time for a student society, especially out of term time. There was no need for such pre-emptory demands as this was not a breaking news story that had to be filed within tight deadlines.

You refer to a report in the Jewish Chronicle, this is not a newspaper that neither is disinterested in this matter nor comes to it without a clearly articulated and public agenda. You also see the Board of Deputies and the Zionist Federation as interested parties but not the chair nor any of the speakers at the meeting.

You refer in your reply to amending the article to take account of the differing views of what had happened at the meeting but not to amending the article in view of what was clearly audible on the video of the meeting, made available immediately after the meeting on the internet by the meeting organisers.

As the BBC has not admitted publically that the first report contains glaring and serious errors, copies of that article are still circulating and being referred to as evidence of malfeasance by the organisers, causing serious harm and deflecting attention from the purpose of the meeting, Israel, the Palestinians and Apartheid: the case for boycott and sanctions – a purpose never referred to in either version of the story.

We therefore request you revisit our original complaints and address the points we made in detail. We therefore ask the BBC to make a public statement that the original story contains multiple errors of fact and make unjustifiable claims and is a piece of journalism of which falls far short of their expected standards. So that reproduction of the article or uncritical reference to it can be contested by ourselves and the BBC.