



The library
and information
association

Mr James Cleverly MP
Chairman, Conservative Party
4 Matthew Parker Street
London
SW1H 9HQ

cc. complaints@conservatives.com

20th November 2019

Dear Mr Cleverly,

Complaint concerning CCHQ misrepresentation on social media

I am writing on behalf of CILIP, the UK's library and information association, to complain in the strongest possible terms about the action taken last night by the Conservative Party in re-branding the @CCHQPress twitter account as 'fact checking UK' alongside the televised Leaders Debate.

Rarely has it been more important that all political parties respect the role of evidence and accountability in public life. Your Party's actions in misrepresenting itself as a legitimate fact checking service cross a line which ought never to be crossed – raising the spectre of state-sponsored misinformation and the deliberate undermining of truth and accountability which should have no place in British politics.

We should emphasise that our engagement on this issue is not a Party political matter. Since 2017, we have led a campaign called #FactsMatter calling on all Parties and holders of public office to make a clear commitment to evidence and accountability in our politics. As a profession and as a professional association, we believe that it is the right of every citizen to receive accurate and open information, and the responsibility of public authorities to ensure that they are providing it – including political Parties. We are committed to supporting citizens in finding and making use of accurate information as part of our work in combatting online harms.

We are therefore submitting this formal complaint on the basis that in taking this action, your Communications Team and any Party Leadership that sanctioned this action are in clear and material breach of your own Conservative Party Code of Conduct.

Specifically, the Communications Team and Party Leadership have failed to *“act with honesty and probity and in a manner which upholds the reputation and values of the Conservative Party. Such duty is fundamental. Conduct which the public may reasonably perceive as undermining a representative's honesty and probity is likely to diminish trust and confidence placed in them, and the Party, by the public;”*

[Quote taken from your Code of Conduct, accessed 10.30am, Wednesday 20th November].

Your Code of Conduct references the Nolan Principles of Public Life. We submit this complaint on the basis of the following:

- Selflessness – in taking the action you have, your Party has clearly failed to observe the requirement to “act solely in the public interest”. There is no legitimate interpretation of your actions which can be understood to serve the public interest, including your political campaigning in the 2019 General Election, which does not serve as grounds for ‘public interest’;
- Integrity – intentionally changing a social media handle, branding and communications to purport to be a legitimate fact-checking service cannot be interpreted as an act of integrity, in any sense, on the part of those that decided to do it;
- Objectivity – your action materially contravenes the mandate to “take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.” Mis-representing political messaging as ‘fact’ is clearly failing to use the best evidence and evidently discriminatory;
- Accountability – your quoted responses to concerns in the media today fail to address the legitimate concerns surrounding this action. To claim that retaining the underlying twitter ID while changing the handle of the account does not misrepresent the nature of the account is entirely insufficient as a justification for this action. We feel this is a failure of accountability on your part, which ought to be addressed through your Code of Conduct;
- Openness – to mis-represent the nature of a social media channel clearly contravenes the mandate to “take decisions in an open and transparent manner”;
- Honesty – to quote your Code of Conduct, “Holders of public office should be truthful”. There is nothing ‘truthful’ in seeking to mislead the public or to mis-represent Party communications as a legitimate fact-checking service;
- Leadership – this action, and the intent underlying it, manifestly represent a failure to provide moral leadership that is incumbent on all holders of public office.

On this basis, we therefore request that you initiate an investigation into the action taken and the complaint we have raised. We note that your Code of Conduct states that “the Investigating Officer may dismiss complaints that are obviously trivial, and/or lacking in merit and/or cannot fairly be investigated or cannot be investigated.”

We urge you in the strongest terms not to disregard this complaint on any of these grounds. The concerns raised by your actions are not trivial, not lacking in merit and can absolutely and reasonably be investigated. In the event that this complaint is disregarded on these or any other grounds, we will escalate the matter to the Electoral Commission for consideration and may take further action.

We hope that the investigation of this complaint will provide an opportunity for the Conservative Party to reflect on the fact that evidence and accountability matter in public life, and that the actions you have taken seriously undermine this principle.

Yours sincerely,

[BY EMAIL]

Nick Poole
Chief Executive, CILIP