

News Broadcasting Standards Authority

Order No 15 (2012)

Re:Telecast of programmes on CNN-IBN, Times Now and NDTV on the leakage of the letter addressed by the Chief of Army Staff to the Prime Minister, allegedly by a Joint Secretary rank officer in the Cabinet Secretariat – Complaint dated 15.5.12, filed by Ms. Neelam Kapur, Principal Director General (Media & Communication), Press Information Bureau (PIB).

O R D E R

1. A complaint dated 15.5.12 was filed by Ms. Neelam Kapur, Principal Director General (Media & Communication), Press Information Bureau (PIB), Government of India with the allegation that three of the member channels of NBA - viz.. CNN IBN, Times Now and NDTV - had carried news reports on the alleged “leak” of a top secret letter addressed by General V.K. Singh, the then Chief of the Army to the Prime Minister of India relating to the shortage of equipment and ammunition with the Indian army; and had reported that such leak had been made by a Joint Secretary level officer in the Cabinet Secretariat. The PIB had further complained that such reports were carried on the said news channels based solely upon a news-feed given by the Press Trust of India (PTI) inspite of a press release issued by the Government of India denying the correctness of such PTI news feed. It was further contended that even though the Cabinet Secretary himself spoke to one of the news channels denying the PTI news feed, such statement by the Cabinet Secretary had not deterred the news channels from continuing to air the same news. Furthermore the PIB alleged that while the Government’s denial was carried by most channels, the said three channels i.e. CNN IBN, Times Now and NDTV held panel discussions on this subject on 14.5.12 at prime time quoting extensively from the PTI news feed, without carrying the denial issued by the Government.
2. Finding a prima-facie case for consideration, the NBSA issued notices dated 21.5.12, to the three news channels seeking their responses.
3. The substance of the response received from two of the news channels – viz. CNN-IBN and Times Now - was that their news stories were based upon the news feed released by the PTI and that inspite of the denial made by the Government by way of its press release, PTI had stood by the story contained in its news feed. Further, the channels pointed-out that in the stories and in the panel discussions they conducted on the subject, the channels had also included the Government’s denial of the correctness of the PTI news feed; and the Government’s allegation that such denial was not telecast by them was factually incorrect. Insofar as NDTV was concerned, the channel confirmed that they had neither run any programme nor held any panel discussion on the leakage of the former Army Chiefs letter and that the matter was only reported by way of graphics run on the channel which also included the government’s denial of the correctness of the report regarding the leakage of the letter. Therefore, ex facie there was no substance in the PIB’s complaint as far as NDTV was concerned, and hence NDTV was not called for a hearing.
4. The PIB as well as CNN-IBN & Times Now news channels were called by the NBSA for a hearing which was held on 20.8.12.
5. After considering the matter carefully and hearing Ms. Neelam Kapur, Principal DG, PIB; Ms. Jyothi Suresh Kumar, DGM Legal & Company Secretary & Ms. Navika Kumar, Editor, Politics & Economy on behalf of Times Now and Ms. Manisha Ahuja, Sr. Manager, Legal on behalf of CNN IBN and upon viewing the broadcasts in

question, the NBSA is of the opinion that while the government is correct in pointing out that since the subject matter of the reporting was extremely sensitive and involved the question of India's military preparedness, it was required of news channels to conduct adequate verification of the information that they are carrying as part of the news report.

6. The Principal DG, PIB further asserted that the news channels had jeopardized the credibility and career prospects of the female officer belonging to the Indian Economic Service, who the government claims was not responsible for the leak since she had already moved out of the Cabinet Secretariat.
7. The NBA is therefore of the view that a panel discussion referring to the leak of the top secret letter addressed to the Prime Minister of India by the then Army Chief despite the government's denial at the highest level of the Cabinet Secretary was unjustified. Therefore, CNN IBN and Times Now had breached the NBA/NBSA Guidelines relating to fair, objective and balanced reporting, more so, because it tended to impinge on the credibility of a public functionary.
8. In the above circumstances, the NBSA opines that as a matter of highlighting journalistic standards, the news channels in question be advised that they should exercise extreme caution where news report impinge upon an individual's career and credibility, before imputing any culpable act or omission to them.
9. The NBSA decided as follows:
 - a) That both the channels i.e. Times Now & CNN IBN be warned that any future transgression of the NBA Guidelines would be viewed seriously.
 - b) Both the channels would carry the following text prior to their 9 o'clock news on 30.10.12:

“Times Now / CNN IBN had broadcast on certain dates in May’ 2012 panel discussions relating to the leak of the top secret letter of the former Army Chief to the Prime Minister of India regarding shortage of equipment and ammunition, which was based on a PTI news feed. We would like to inform our viewers that the Press Information Bureau (PIB) of the Government of India, had issued a press release which had stated that “the government denies that there is any truth in the PTI report on the alleged leak of Gen V.K. Singh’s letter to the Prime Minister. The story is completely baseless”

10. The NBSA further directs the NBA:
 - a) To send a copy of this order to the complainant and the news channels concerned;
 - b) To circulate this order to all Members & Editors of NBA.
 - c) NBA to also host a summary of this order on its website and to include such summary in its next Annual Report.

Sd/-
Justice J S Verma (Retd.)
Chairperson

Place : New Delhi
Dated : 25/10/2012