The Times publishes apology to Sultan Choudhury OBE and agrees to pay damages for libellous imputation on its free site

Friday 24 July, 2020

The Times Newspaper has today published an apology, amended its article and agreed to pay libel damages and legal costs to the former CEO of Al Rayan Bank, Mr Sultan Choudhury OBE for wrongly suggesting that he held extremist views. The apology is published both online and in print.

Mr Choudhury is highly regarded in the banking industry internationally for his pioneering style, charitable work and impeccable character. He was awarded an OBE by Her Majesty the Queen in 2017.

On 5 August 2019, *The Times* published an article online and in print under the headline *"Female Circumcision is like clipping a nail, claimed speaker".* The abbreviated version published on *The Times*' unrestricted website included a photograph of Mr Choudhury and his name. The positioning of his name and picture alongside the headline was misleading and libellous. This abbreviated version of the article was made available worldwide via the Internet and was also published by *The Times* on its Twitter feed.

The wholly false inference was that Mr Choudhury had made comments about Female Genital Mutilation. He has never made these comments and personally finds them abhorrent.

Mr Choudhury complained to IPSO and pursued a defamation claim against *The Times*. He contended that a publisher was not entitled to rely on a link to a full article which the ordinary Internet user was prevented from accessing because it was behind a paywall.

As a result of the publication, Mr Choudhury has been subjected to public censure including numerous hateful online comments. This has caused Mr Choudhury and his family huge distress, particularly as his wife, is a GP who deals with the everyday consequences of illegal FGM in her work.

Following The Times publishing the apology, Sultan Choudhury OBE commented:

"*I was utterly shocked by The Times article. It presented me in a way which was completely wrong. The story broke without warning whilst I was on holiday causing my family and I great personal distress. By unjustly associating me with extremist views such as the repulsive quote on female circumcision (an illegal practice my wife deals with as part of her work as a GP) we were all devastated. As a result of that article, I suffered graphic personal abuse from all over the world, which was incredibly hurtful and upsetting to all of us. Thankfully, The Times has now publicly apologised after a long and difficult process.*

I would like to thank my family and friends that stood by me throughout this. I would also like to thank my legal team for everything that they have done."

Mr Sultan Choudhury was represented by Abtin Yeganeh & Nishtar Saleem of Saracens Solicitors and Mr Mark Henderson of Doughty Street Chambers.

Nishtar Saleem commented on the settlement and its implications:

'This is another example of irresponsible journalism. Publishing sensational excerpts on a 'free site' whilst concealing the full article behind a paywall is a dangerous game. By taking this stand, Mr Choudhury has shown publishers that they cannot avoid responsibility for libellous material, paywall or no paywall. I am glad The Times has recognised its errors and apologised for what it has done. Going forward, greater accuracy and transparency is needed or others will suffer the same fate as Sultan Choudhury. Lessons must be learned."

The Times Newspaper's apology was published on page 30 of the print edition of The Times on 21 July 2020 and is published online here.

An extract appears here:

"…we reported that a speaker at the Institute, Mr Assim al-Hakim had expressed views on female genital mutilation (Female circumcision is like clipping a nail, claimed speaker, 5 August 2019). This headline appeared above a picture of Mr Sultan Choudhury in the online edition. Any impression that those views

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were his was not intended. Mr Choudhury did not say that “Female circumcision is like clipping a nail” (as explained in the full version of the article published in print and online). The article explained that he did not support any alleged extremist views. We apologise for any distressed caused to Mr Choudhury and have agreed to pay him compensation and legal costs.”

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