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# **Arguing with Aunty**

**How the ABC avoided correcting misinformation  
on the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations**

Overview and Compendium of Correspondence

20 June 2024



## **About this document**

On four occasions during 2021 and 2022, Tom Nankivell attempted to have the ABC remedy several misleading reports on the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations. The ABC made some minor corrections but did not address the main problems with its reports, nor take effective action to counter the misinformation it had (and continued to) spread.

The first part of this document is a 5 page overview of the exchanges with the ABC.

For those readers seeking more detail and evidence, the second part reproduces the key correspondence exchanged between the parties, as well as a related submission to the Independent Review of ABC Complaints Handling.

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## **About Gander Research**

Gander Research aims to produce rigorous research on selected gender issues. We have extensive experience in public policy research and analysis. We intend to interact with other researchers, make submissions to relevant government bodies, and publish our work. We also encourage others to collaborate with us and use our research. To read more Gander Research, provide feedback or join our mailing list, visit [www.ganderresearch.org](http://www.ganderresearch.org).

# Arguing with Aunty

## How the ABC avoided correcting misinformation on the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations

Tom Nankivell

### Background

During 2021, the ABC published several articles about sexual assault, its prevalence, community attitudes to it, its impact on victims, and how police deal with it.

Several of these articles claimed that research shows that sexual assault allegations are "almost always" or "overwhelmingly" true and that false allegations are "extremely rare".<sup>1</sup> The estimated prevalence rate of false allegations was reported to be 5 per cent, although the remarks of some experts interviewed by the ABC suggested that the true prevalence rate is probably lower still.

The ABC also said that the low prevalence rate means that males — who are the main perpetrators of sexual violence — need not worry about false rape allegations.

And the ABC contrasted its finding that "allegations of sexual assault are almost always true" with the results of a question from its "Australia Talks" survey that asked respondents whether they agreed with the proposition. The survey found that "just" 40 per cent of men did agree, compared to 70 per cent of women (many of whom agreed "strongly").

When I investigated the sources of the ABC's claims about the prevalence rate, I found that there is no sound basis for them. Among other problems, the underlying empirical studies counted only false sexual assault reports that could be "confirmed" to be false, and did not make allowance for the potentially many more false reports that were suspicious or ambiguous, but for which there was insufficient evidence to conclude with sufficient certainty that they were false. I also found that many of the experts in the field, including in some key women's safety organisations, either did not understand this or simply ignored it and used the estimates of confirmed false reports as if they were estimates of all false reports. (The companion documents referenced in footnote 1 explain these matters in detail).



1 Except where separately noted, references for statements and quotes in this overview can be found in the attached compendium of correspondence and/or in three companion documents available on the Gander Research website, namely: Nankivell, T. & Papadimitriou, J. 2023, 'True or false, or somewhere between?' A review of the high-quality studies on the prevalence of false sexual assault reports, Research Paper, [www.ganderresearch.org](http://www.ganderresearch.org); Nankivell, T. 2022, 'Keeping mum: How the AIFS and ANROWS avoided correcting statements on the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations', Overview and Compendium of Correspondence, [ganderresearch.org](http://ganderresearch.org); and Papadimitriou, J. & Nankivell, T. forthcoming, 'A false consensus: Submission to the ALRC inquiry on Justice Responses to Sexual Violence', Public Submission, [www.ganderresearch.org](http://www.ganderresearch.org).

## My initial complaint and the ABC's response

Accordingly, in June 2021, I wrote to the ABC's complaints unit asking it to issue corrections, clarifications and retractions to the offending articles. My formal complaint was detailed. It quoted the misleading statements from the ABC's articles and the sources on which its statements relied, and carefully explained why the latter did not justify the former. (The essence of my complaint is outlined in box 1, immediately below. The full, detailed complaint is reproduced further below, as attachment 1).

### The essence of my complaint to the ABC 1

My complaint referred to the following statements from three ABC Online articles:

"Extensive research shows allegations of sexual assault are overwhelmingly true"

"Guys, you can stop worrying about false rape allegations. They're extremely rare"

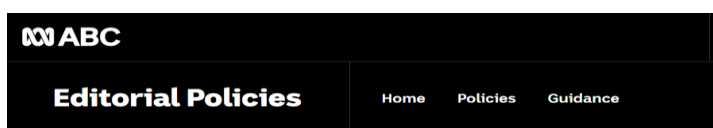
"In reality, the overwhelming majority of sexual offence reports are true"

The complaint then pointed out that:

- these statements/articles relied on a 2017 AIFS report, *Challenging conceptions on sexual offending*, which cited a prevalence estimate of 5 per cent for false sexual assault allegations
- the AIFS report sourced that estimate from a 2016 meta-analysis by Ferguson and Malouff
- in their meta-analysis, Ferguson and Malouff **explicitly cautioned** that their prevalence estimate covered only "confirmed" false reports; and that the conservative definition of false reports adopted "is not intended to imply that all other cases are true reports"
- the total of all false reports (confirmed plus unconfirmed) is potentially multiple times higher than the 5 per cent figure used in the ABC's articles.

The complaint also made several other points as to why the ABC's statements were misleading.

The ABC's response (attachment 2) entailed issuing some subtle corrections to the on-line articles (several months after their publication), and a small and ambiguous entry on the ABC's non-prominent 'Corrections & Clarifications' webpage (below).



### Corrections & Clarifications

#### Sexual Assaults Data

Australia Talks: Two related stories concerning community perceptions of the frequency of false allegations of sexual assault have been edited to clarify that academic research into sexual assault allegations referred to false allegations made to police and was not a conclusion about the overall truthfulness of sexual assault allegations.

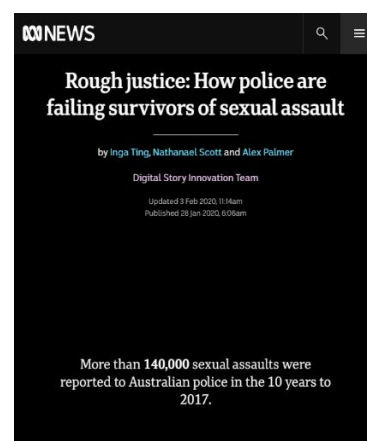
9 Sep 2021

While I appreciated the ABC acknowledging aspects of its errors, the ABC's edits and explanations did not clearly address the main problem I had identified with its reports. They would have left its audience little wiser about the substantial misinformation the broadcaster had spread, even if some audience members had happened to stumble across the corrections.

Moreover, based on my experience of having managed a (small) government complaints office, the way the ABC complaints unit handled my complaint was also poor. For example, it took three months (and a reminder from me) for the complaints unit to respond and aspects of the response seemed disingenuous — it failed to directly engage with the key arguments I had made. As subsequently became evident, the ABC also failed to adequately alert its staff to the limitations of the empirical estimates its articles had relied on, thus leading them to continue to disseminate falsehoods about the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations (see further below).

I thus wrote back to the ABC complaints unit (attachment 3) seeking a more substantial and forthright response and corrective action. Among other things, my 'rejoinder' observed that, during 2021, the ABC had made marked efforts (in the form of publishing several articles, including the one to the right) designed to ensure that its readers were not misled by technical classifications of sexual assault reports that could cause them to overstate the number of false allegations. I argued that to be accurate and unbiased, the ABC should have taken the same care to ensure that its reporting did not cause people to understate that number.

However, I received only a short reply saying that the ABC would not be taking any further action (attachment 4). That reply exhibited some of the same flaws as the first ABC response.



## My input to the review of ABC complaints handling

I subsequently drew on this experience to make a submission (in December 2021) to the Independent Review of ABC Complaints Handling (attachment 5). In that submission, I wondered aloud whether some gender politics may have been at play in the ABC's reluctance to fully acknowledge and remedy the false information about false reports that it had spread. I suggested that a more independent ABC complaints mechanism should be considered.

## Further misleading commentary

Although doing so less frequently recently, the ABC has continued from time-to-time since 2021 to promote the narrative that false rape allegations have been shown to be rare. For example:

- in May 2022, following the Johnny-Depp/Amber Heard trial in the United States, *ABC Online* published an article that cited prevalence rate estimates of 2-10% using statistics that exhibited similar problems as the earlier estimates the ABC had relied on.
- in October 2022, following the Brittany Higgins/Bruce Lehrmann trial in Canberra, ABC Radio hosted a segment where an academic was allowed to claim — unchallenged by the presenter — that all the evidence suggests that lying is rarely the reason complaints don't proceed through the criminal justice system.<sup>3</sup>
- around the same time, a high-profile ABC reporter delivered a speech which reportedly included comments similar in direction to earlier positions on the false sexual assault prevalence issue promulgated by the ABC.<sup>4</sup>
- in August 2023, an ABC presenter on *The Drum* stated that "when you look into the data ... the number of false claims which are made is fractional".<sup>5</sup>

## My final attempts to ask Aunty to properly correct the record

Following the May 2022 article, I wrote again to the ABC seeking a correction to the offending article (attachment 6). My letter included a copy of a correction that the BBC has issued to one of its articles that had made a similar error. However, despite an acknowledgement from the ABC indicating that the matter would be reviewed, I did not hear back and the article remains, uncorrected, on the ABC website.

Following the ABC radio segment and the speech by the ABC reporter in October 2022, I wrote once more to the ABC, this time to ascertain how to submit a complaint to the then newly created ABC Ombudsman. My hope was that the new Ombudsman, created following to Independent Review of ABC Complaints Handling, would be more responsive and open to acknowledging and correcting the errors in the ABC's reporting than I had experienced to that point. However, before I had the opportunity to put my case to the Ombudsman, I received a pre-emptive response that indicated an intention to not revisit the matter.<sup>5</sup>

Given the nature of the response and my other, earlier, disheartening experiences in seeking corrections to misinformation from the ABC, I decided not to expend effort to engage further.

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- 2 Associate Professor Julia Quilter (University of Wollongong) speaking (from 4.45-5.10) with Sam Hawley in 'Brittany Higgins, Bruce Lehrmann and the complexity of rape trials', ABC Radio, 28 October 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/abc-news-daily/higgins-lehrmann-complexity-of-rape-trials/101585404> (accessed 30 October 2022). (Note that I do not blame the interviewer for not challenging this view, or even the academic who indicated to me that she was merely repeating the then accepted academic wisdom. However, had the ABC taken more robust action to correct its earlier misreporting on the prevalence issue, including for example by publishing articles that explicitly addressed it, as I had suggested, repeat errors of this type could have been avoided).
  - 3 On 21 October 2022, Louise Milligan gave a speech to the Women Lawyers Association of the ACT. Accounts of exactly what Ms Milligan said differ. Writing in *The Australian* newspaper on 1 November 2022, Janet Albrechtsen reported accounts said to have come from some of the lawyers present that, among other things, Ms Milligan had said words to the effect that "women would never lie about sexual violence". On Twitter, Ms Milligan denied this specific claim (and others), and released a copy of her "speech notes". These notes include a criticism of "men's protectors" in the legal system and the following statement: "It's just surprising and, to victims, hurtful, that there are still a significant minority of people who continue to, automatically, assume ... that there are multitudes of false accusers spending years going through police investigations, being subjected to terrible scrutiny, having to discuss their most intimate lives, having their integrity smashed by defence counsel in law courts." (quoted in James Madden & Sophie Elsworth, 'Milligan defends her humiliating speech', *The Australian*, 11 November 2022). While without a recording we cannot know exactly what Ms Milligan said in her live delivery, I simply note that the above statements are at least similar in direction to the ABC's earlier claims that men need not worry about false sexual assault reports because they are extremely rare.
  - 4 Julia Baird (ABC presenter) speaking (from at 29.50 to 30.28) on *The Drum*, ABC TV, 14 August 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/programs/the-drum/2023-08-14/the-drum-monday-august-14/102729108> (accessed 16 August 2023). (Note that the presenter was drawing on some recent ANROWS reports that, as well as wrongly stating that it is a fact that false reports are extremely rare, also contain more robust data on people's beliefs about the prevalence of false reports. While I believe her statement "when you look into the data" was probably meant to apply to both of these elements, it is possible that she only meant it to apply to the data about people's beliefs. Even if this was the case, her comment that "the number of false claims which are made is fractional" would still have misled her audience. Again, I do not blame the presenter herself for this.)
  - 5 The Ombudsman's (16 November 2022) letter stated that "We have reviewed your correspondence from June and August last year and we are satisfied that your complaint was handled appropriately". I do not know whether the Ombudsman herself had any involvement in reviewing the issue or relied solely or mainly on advice from existing ABC staff (although I suspect the latter). It is noteworthy that the Ombudsman later acknowledged a need for ABC staff to be less defensive when dealing with complaints (Fiona Cameron speaking (from 7.25–7.55 and 10.35–11.00) on *Mornings with Virginia Trioli*, ABC Radio Melbourne, <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/melbourne-mornings/abc-complaints-process-ombudsman-report/102730580> (accessed 1 September 2023)).

## Concluding comment

While one cannot be certain of motivations within the national broadcaster, a question that arises from this saga is whether some of its staff have been comfortable with hoodwinking its audience about the prevalence of false allegations or, at least, have failed to properly investigate, acknowledge and remedy important misinformation in the ABC's reporting after it had been pointed out.

In recent years the ABC has been active in promoting sexual assault issues, including the #MeToo movement and its calls for people to believe, by default, women who allege rape and sexual assault. It seems likely that some ABC staff would have realised that correcting the record in the way I had suggested could be used to challenge those calls.

The ABC's approach also fits into a pattern observed with some other governmental organisations concerned with women's safety<sup>6</sup>, and some sexual violence academics. After initially engaging with me on this matter, several appeared to "go to ground" or in other ways avoid engaging genuinely when they realised that I was probing and had probably uncovered a major flaw in the empirical basis for the consensus that false sexual assault allegations are rare.

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<sup>6</sup> For an account of my experience seeking similar corrections to publications issued by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Australia's National Research Organisation on Women's Safety, see the companion paper, 'Keeping mum', referenced in footnote 1.

## Attachment

## Compendium of correspondence

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As noted earlier, this attachment reproduces my correspondence with the ABC, as well as my submission to the Independent Review of ABC Complaints Handling. The documents are listed in the table below. Note that some of the attachments mentioned in the original documents have been omitted, mainly to avoid duplication where these were copies of prior correspondence.

Attachment	Date	Page
1 Initial complaint to the ABC complaints unit, ACA	17 June 2021	7
2 The ACA's initial response	14 September 2021	12
3 Rejoinder to ACA	28 September 2021	14
4 ACA's short response	8 October 2021	21
5 Submission to the review of ABC complaints handling	17 December 2021	22
6 Letter to ABC re another misleading article, and ABC receipt	31 May 2022	26

ABC stands for Australian Broadcasting Corporation. ACA stands for Audience and Consumer Affairs, which was the ABC's complaints unit in 2021 and much of 2022.



## 1) Initial complaint to the ABC complaints unit (June 2021)

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**From:** Tom Nankivell

**Sent:** 17 June 2021

Dear ABC Audience and Consumer Affairs staff,

ABC Online has recently published a series of articles that state or imply, wrongly in my submission, that credible research demonstrates that sexual assault allegations are “almost always true”, as Australia Talks puts it. Three statements from those articles are:

- “Extensive research shows allegations of sexual assault are overwhelmingly true.” (Lucy Sweeney)<sup>7</sup>
- “Guys, you can stop worrying about false rape allegations. They’re extremely rare.” (Maddy King)<sup>8</sup>
- “In reality, the overwhelming majority of sexual offence reports are true.” (Australia Talks)<sup>9</sup>

These statements, or the articles and webpages in which they appear, have hyperlinks to other ABC webpages or external research documents that purportedly justify the statements, but the research reported in those linked webpages and documents does not provide that justification.

One of the problems with the ABC’s statements is that, as academic literature on the rate of false sexual assault<sup>10</sup> allegations points out, it is inherently difficult to determine the rate with much certainty. The statements and articles listed above do not reflect this uncertainty.

Another problem is that, in interpreting the relevant research statistics, the ABC appears to have overlooked sexual assault allegations that are potentially false but whose falsity has not been confirmed, which study results show can be multiple times the estimated rate of (confirmed) false reports on which the ABC’s statements are based.

The upshot, I submit, is that the statements and articles contravene your editorial policies in relation to accuracy (Item 2 in your Editorial Policies: <https://edpols.abc.net.au/policies/>).

Please note that, as suggested on your website ([abc.net.au/contact/complain.htm](http://abc.net.au/contact/complain.htm)), I tried to engage on this matter directly with Lucy Sweeney, the author of the first of the statements listed above. My note to her, which I sent last Thursday, is copied at attachment A for information. [NB: attachment not included in this document] In the absence of a response or receipt, I have decided to elevate this matter to a formal complaint.

The following sections elaborate on the above points and suggest some corrective actions, for consideration if you accept the substance of this complaint.

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7 Lucy Sweeney (with added reporting by Sally Sara), ‘Grace Tame says change is a marathon effort. But Australia Talks data shows our perception of sexual assault is changing’, *ABC News Online*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-10/grace-tame-australia-talks-believing-sexual-assault-allegations/100155474> (accessed 10.50pm, 11 June 2021).

8 Maddy King, ‘Guys, you can stop worry about false rape allegations. They’re extremely rare’, *Triple J Hack*, <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/false-rape-allegations-myths/13281852> (accessed 10 June 2021).

9 ‘More than 1 in 3 men say sexual assault claims are usually believable’, *Australia Talks interactive tool results page*, <https://australiatalks.abc.net.au/results> (accessed 9.20pm, 11 June 2021).

10 Like the literature, the ABC articles use a range of terms for different sexually-related offences or classes of offences, including ‘sexual assault’, ‘sexual offences’ and ‘rape’, sometimes interchangeably. I have generally used the term sexual assault for the matters covered.

## What is the supporting basis for the ABC statements?

### *The Lucy Sweeney article*

Ms Sweeney's article does not itself cite any research on the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations. Rather, the relevant statement in her article – that “extensive research shows allegations of sexual assault are overwhelmingly true” – is also a hyperlink that, when clicked, takes one to a different ABC Online story, entitled “Rough justice: How police are failing survivors of sexual assault.”<sup>11</sup>

That article looks at data on how the police handle sexual assault allegations and the meaning of the different terms used to classify what eventuated from those allegations – “rejected”, “unfounded”, “cleared”, “withdrawn”, “unsolved” and so on. Among other things, the article clarifies that the classification of ‘unfounded’ is potentially misleading, as there may well be allegations within this category that are actually true, just not pursued or substantiated. However, this point does not support the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of sexual assault allegations are true. Nor does any of the other data presented or cited in the article.

The only comment in the article that might refer to the rate of false allegations is a later statement attributed to Karen Willis, executive officer at Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia, who is quoted as saying: “Research tells us that between 2 and 5 per cent of reports are of a crime that did not occur.” No actual research is presented or referred to in the article to support this view; it is just her characterisation (and, as set out below, it is one that I submit cannot be justified).

### *The Maddy King article and the Australia Talks results page*

Ms King's article also does not itself cite any specific research on the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations. Rather, to justify the statements that false allegations are rare, it uses a characterisation of the research by a criminology academic, Bianca Fileborn – who states that “the most commonly cited figure is that around 5 per cent of reports are false”<sup>12</sup> – together with a hyperlink to a 2017 Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) report entitled “Challenging misconceptions about sexual offending.”<sup>13</sup>

Like the King article, the Australia Talks interactive tool results page for the issue “Allegations of sexual assault are almost always true” does not itself cite any specific research but simply includes a link to the same 2017 AIFS report.

That AIFS report also does not contain any original research but rather draws on the academic research on various aspects of sexual offending. In discussing “Sexual crime: false allegations” (p. 9), the report refers to a finding of a 2016 meta-analysis of studies in Western countries by Ferguson and Malouff.<sup>14</sup> It also references a 2013 research paper by Wall and Tarczon on “the contested terrain of false allegations”.<sup>15</sup> As discussed in the next section, neither of those studies supports Ms King's statement that false reports are extremely rare, or the Australia Talks statement that the overwhelming majority of sexual offence reports are true.

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11 Inga Ting, Nathanael Scott and Alex Palmer, ‘Rough Justice: How police are failing survivors of sexual assault’, *ABC News Online*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-28/how-police-are-failing-survivors-of-sexual-assault/11871364?nw=0> (accessed 10 June 2021).

12 Note that Dr Fileborn's statement is technically correct insofar as “(around) 5 per cent” is the most commonly stated figure for (confirmed) false reports. But it is also, I submit, a misleading figure if it is taken to mean all false reports, missing potentially many more unconfirmed false reports, for the reasons set out below in this complaint.

13 AIFS, ‘Challenging misconceptions about sexual offending: Creating an evidence-based resource for police and legal practitioners’, [https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-09/apo-nid107216\\_1.pdf](https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-09/apo-nid107216_1.pdf) (accessed 10 June 2021).

14 Claire Ferguson and John Malouff, ‘Assessing police classifications of sexual assault reports: A meta-analysis of false reporting rates.’ *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(5), 1185–1193. (Page references in this document refer to PDF version downloaded via SSRN-id2924906%20(3) on 10 June 2021).

15 Liz Wall and Cindy Tarczon, ‘True or false? The contested terrain of false allegations’, AIFS, <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/true-or-false-contested-terrain-false-allegations>.

## What does the research actually show?

The two research papers cited in the AIFS study to which the ABC has referred to justify its statements make several relevant points.

### *The true rate of false sexual assault allegations is not known*

The Ferguson and Malouff paper explains that the literature provides a very wide range of estimates of the prevalence rate of false allegations of sexual assault, reflecting differences in methodologies, terminology, samples and so forth, and the many inherent difficulties in determining whether sexual assault allegations are true or false. The authors (p. 8) state:

Given the serious difficulties with studying false rape allegations, many of the reported false report rates, both high and low, cannot be relied upon for an accurate assessment of how often false allegations occur.

The authors (p. 4) also caution about the risk that different commentators could select prevalence estimates to suit their own agendas:

This broad range in estimates has allowed proponents to argue, ostensibly, for any conclusion desired. Depending on their specific agenda, some commentators report that false allegations of rape are basically non-existent ... Others maintain that large portions of sexual assault reports are false ...

The Wall and Tarczon paper focuses on the definition of false allegations and the contextual factors surrounding them, rather than on estimates of the rate of false accusations. Nevertheless, the authors are consistent with Ferguson and Malouff in noting that “there is no definitive answer to the prevalence question” (p. 2).

### *Many studies use a conservative definition of false allegations*

Ferguson and Mallouf point out that many studies – including those in their meta-analysis, from which the 5 per cent prevalence estimate relied on by the ABC is drawn – use a range of techniques to narrow down the number of allegations that are confirmed as ‘false’. While the studies vary in their details, those techniques include:

- considering only sexual assault allegations reported to police (noting that allegations made to others may be more likely to be false)
- classifying an allegation as false only if it is thoroughly investigated and can be confirmed (noting that allegations cannot be deemed false simply because the evidence fails to prove an assault took place)
- only counting false allegations that the complainant knows to be untrue (noting that there is a range of reasons why complainants may in good faith make allegations that are in fact false, including lack of awareness of the law, the influence of drug or alcohol use, mental health issues and cases of mistaken identity).

In commenting on the ramifications, Ferguson and Malouff (pp. 6-7) state:

Although limiting the sample, this is a necessary step as it prevents opening the floodgates to many equivocal cases that are **suspected but not demonstrably false**. It errs on the side of caution by not including cases in doubt, mistaken cases, or those claims made to anyone other than police. **Use of such a conservative definition is not meant to imply that all other cases are true reports, but just that they cannot responsibly be deemed confirmed false.** (emphasis added).

Unfortunately, the ABC appears to have fallen into this trap: that is, it has wrongly assumed that the low prevalence estimates of (confirmed) false allegations cover the full field of false allegations, and thus that sexual assault allegations are “almost always” or “overwhelmingly” true or that false allegations are “extremely rare”, when those estimates do not and cannot show this.

## *The total rate of false allegations may be several times the 'confirmed' rate*

Ferguson and Mallouf's meta-analysis included four studies in which the researchers had provided data on the number of potentially false but unconfirmed allegations of sexual assault, in addition to the data on the confirmed false cases. Drawing on the information in the Ferguson and Mallouf paper, I have calculated the ratio of all potentially false allegations (confirmed plus equivocal/unconfirmed) to confirmed false allegations in each of those studies, as identified by their authors. The ratios are:

- Heenan and Murray, Victorian study – 5.5 to 1
- McCahill et al., Philadelphia study – 4.6 to 1
- Spohn et al, Los Angeles study – 1.6 to 1
- Clark and Lewis, Toronto study – 6.2 to 1

While it is not possible to determine what proportion of the equivocal/unconfirmed cases are actually false, these results indicate that the number is potentially significant. Together with the issues and uncertainties attaching to the definition and determination of false allegations generally, this reinforces that there is no basis in the research to conclude that the prevalence of false reports is extremely rare or that almost all allegations are true.

## **Other problems with the King article**

Ms King's Hack article gives the impression that the number of false allegations may be even less than the 5 per cent estimate. The relevant extract of the article says:

The estimates vary a little across studies, but the most commonly cited figure is that around 5 per cent of reports are false, according to criminologist Dr Bianca Fileborn, from the University of Melbourne. And that 5 per cent needs to be looked at critically, Dr Fileborn told Hack. "It doesn't necessarily mean that 5 per cent of survivors who have reported, have maliciously made up false reports," she said. Reports can be labelled false for a huge range of reasons, said Dr Fileborn. That includes situations where there's not enough evidence to support the report, or when police have decided the person isn't credible (decisions that can be problematic), or if a report has been made on behalf of a victim – and then the victim doesn't want to pursue it in the criminal justice system.

As noted, the 5 per cent estimate being spoken of links back to a report that cites the Ferguson and Malouff research paper.

Contrary to the implications of the extract, the research approach underlying the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis was *not* to rely on police assessments of complainant credibility or to include cases where there is simply insufficient evidence to prove an allegation. Nor was it to rely on cases or where complainants unintentionally made a false report. So, allegations that were not substantiated for those reasons should not have been included in the 5 per cent prevalence estimate. (Note that I put these points to Dr Fileborn to provide an opportunity for her to clarify her comments and/or correct my interpretation before lodging this complaint, but she declined to do so – see correspondence at attachment B). [NB: attachment not included in document]

A further problem with the article is that the title tells "Guys" (which the article points out are the perpetrators of 97 per cent of reported cases of sexual violence) that they can "stop worrying about false allegations". Ferguson and Malouff (pp. 18-19) point to several destructive consequences that false reports can have on their victims, which need not require prosecution or conviction:

Unfortunately, false reports wreak havoc on the innocent people involved, and often losses to their reputation, livelihood, and mental health are not recoverable even when the falsity of the claim is uncovered.

Against these potential consequences, it is of little relevance to a person falsely accused of sexual violence as to whether the accusation is knowingly or unknowingly false, or who initiates it. Thus, the point attributed to Dr Fileborn on these aspects would provide little basis for people to not worry about being falsely accused.

Likewise, that researchers might not classify false allegations as 'false' for other reasons (that is, for reasons other than that they are true) is of limited comfort to people subject to them. The fact that the prevalence rate for false allegations, even as the term is otherwise restricted in the research, could be much higher than 5 per cent – itself not a trivial number – shows that there is indeed a reasonable basis for men (and women who care about them) to worry about false allegations.

## Closing comments

The public's views on the prevalence of false allegations are important for victims of sexual assault and for victims of false allegations of sexual assault. Statements aired on the public broadcaster may also influence the perceptions of police, judges, potential jurors, academics and others who deal with sexual assault issues. It is important that such statements be accurate.

If my analysis is correct, the ABC has published articles that misrepresent the findings of the relevant research, falsely indicating that the research is more definitive than it is, and that it demonstrates that sexual assault allegations are almost always true.

The ABC's dissemination of this position may have helped misinform community views. For example, the Australia Talks survey tells us that an increasing number of respondents – 40 per cent of men and 69 per cent of women (many women 'strongly') – agree with the proposition that "Allegations of sexual assault are almost always true"<sup>16</sup>, when this proposition is not supported by the research and is most probably wrong.

It is therefore important, I believe, that the ABC correct the record. I thus request that you consider:

- retracting the King article, which I submit is particularly misleading
- issuing corrections or clarifications to the relevant parts of the Sweeney article and the Australia Talks results page
- adding a notice to the ABC Corrections and Clarifications page.

In making this complaint, I acknowledge that the ABC and its researchers/journalists are not solely to blame for the mistaken statements, as some of the experts and source research documentation referenced by the ABC also appear to have not properly understood or distinguished between estimates of (confirmed) false allegations and all false allegations. That said, a more questioning mindset and/or more thorough fact checking might have averted some of the mistakes, and could now help safeguard against recurrences.

## Next steps?

If you require further information or explanation on any of the points I have made, or if you believe I have misconstrued some of the research, please feel free to get in touch for the purposes of clarification. I have gone to some lengths to check my analysis, including by reaching out to relevant academics. However, if my work proves to be wrong, I will readily stand corrected.

I hope the information in this complaint is sufficient and look forward to your response,

Tom Nankivell  
17 June 2021

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<sup>16</sup> Annabel Crabb, 'What divides men and women? The Australia Talks survey reveals quite a list', *ABC News Online*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-10/australia-talks-reveals-what-divides-men-and-women/100195244> (accessed 9.30pm, 12 June 2021).

## 2) The ABC complaints unit's response to the initial complaint (Sept 2021)

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**From:** ABC Corporate Affairs

**Sent:** 14 September 2021

Dear Mr Nankivell,

I write in response to your 17 June 2021 complaint (C13958-21) regarding three items published online: an ABC News Online story, 'Grace Tame says change is a marathon effort. But Australia Talks data shows our perception of sexual assault is changing'; text presented following completion of the *Australia Talks* survey; and the triple j *Hack* story, 'Guys, you can stop worrying about false rape allegations. They're extremely rare'. Please accept my sincere apologies for the time taken to provide this response.

As you are aware, your complaint has been considered by Audience and Consumer Affairs, a unit which is separate to and independent of content areas within the ABC. Our role is to review and, where appropriate, investigate complaints alleging that ABC content has breached the ABC's editorial standards. These standards are explained in our Editorial Policies which are available here - <https://edpols.abc.net.au/policies/>. Standard 2.1 requires *reasonable efforts* to be made to ensure that material facts are accurate and presented in context.

Your complaint about the ABC News Online story and *Australia Talks* survey results relates to an identical statement presented in both: '*Extensive research shows allegations of sexual assault are overwhelmingly true*'. We have reviewed these items and sought and considered comments from ABC News.

ABC News has advised that in preparing the News Online story, as well as interviewing criminologist Dr Bianca Fileborn who specialises in researching sexual violence and harassment, *[t]he editorial team also reviewed a wide range of research material ... most particularly the following report on misconceptions about sexual offending from the Australian Government's Australian Institute of Family Studies - [https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-09/apo-nid107216\\_1.pdf](https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-09/apo-nid107216_1.pdf)*. Audience and Consumer Affairs note that this resource, titled 'Challenging misconceptions about sexual offending: Creating an evidence-based resource for police and legal practitioners', states:

- » *The rate of false allegations of sexual offences is very low.*
- » *Studies estimate 5% of rape allegations are false (meta-analysis of seven studies in Western countries: Ferguson & Malouff, 2016). **Therefore, the overwhelming majority of sexual offence reports are true.** (emphasis added)*

Since receiving your complaint, the ABC has further examined the source material cited in this document as well as other primary research (in particular, Lisak et al's study, '[False Allegations of Sexual Assault: An Analysis of Ten Years of Reported Cases](#)'). On consideration of this material, ABC News has amended both the ABC News Online story and the text presented following completion of the *Australia Talks* survey to state '*Extensive research shows that the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations reported to police is very low*'. We are satisfied that this wording accurately reflects the research which underpins it. An Editor's Note has been added to both items to acknowledge and explain the clarification made.

ABC News has published an entry on the [ABC's Corrections and Clarifications](#) page which states: '*Australia Talks: Two related stories concerning community perceptions of the frequency of false allegations of sexual assault have been edited to clarify that academic research into sexual assault allegations referred to false allegations made to police and was not a conclusion about the overall*

*truthfulness of sexual assault allegations.* Audience and Consumer Affairs is satisfied that this action by ABC News resolves this aspect of your complaint.

The triple j *Hack* story, 'Guys, you can stop worrying about false rape allegations. They're extremely rare', was published on 30 March 2021. Unless special circumstances exist, Audience and Consumer Affairs will generally not accept for investigation complaints lodged more than six weeks after an item was broadcast or published. Your complaint does not indicate that special circumstances apply in this instance. In any case, it will be clear from the paragraph above that we are satisfied that describing '*false rape allegations*' as '*extremely rare*' accurately reflects research in this field. While noting your comments about Dr Fileborn's remarks, she has specific expertise in this field and her remarks are clearly attributed to her. The principles which accompany the ABC's accuracy standards note that sources with relevant expertise may be relied on more heavily than those without. In the circumstances, we decline to further investigate this aspect of your complaint.

Thank you for giving the ABC the opportunity to respond to your concerns.

Yours sincerely,  
Head, Audience and Consumer Affairs

### 3) Rejoinder to the ABC complaints unit's response (Sept 2021)

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**From:** Tom Nankivell

**Sent:** 28 September 2021

Dear Head of ABC Audience and Consumer Affairs,

On 17 June I lodged a six-page complaint (ref C13958-21) that argued that three articles on ABC Online wrongly state or imply that credible research demonstrates that sexual assault allegations are almost always true. My complaint made the case that statements in the ABC articles were inaccurate and/or misleading principally by drawing directly on the source of the prevalence estimates on which the articles relied.

Thank you for your response of 14 September ..., which included an explanation of the process you followed, references to some sources ABC News has reviewed, and some discussion around your decisions.

I appreciate the edits and clarifications ABC has made that explain that the academic research on the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations relates to only those reports made *to police*. This deals with one matter covered in my complaint, albeit a minor one.

The other aspect of your edits to the wording of the articles involves a subtle shift in emphasis *from* the question of what proportion of sexual assault allegations are true to the question of what proportion of sexual assault allegations are false. So, for example, where the News Online article<sup>17</sup> originally said:

“Extensive research shows allegations of sexual assault are overwhelmingly true.”

the recently updated version says:

“Extensive research shows that the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations ... is very low.”

I understand fully why you have done this, but that change does not correct the fundamental problem my complaint identified with those statements – namely that the estimate of false allegations on which the ABC articles rely omits the potentially significant number of false allegations that researchers could not confirm as such.

However, to understand what the subtle changes you made do and do not mean, and why they are misleading, a reader would need to be familiar with the underlying research literature and understand the artificially-constrained definitions many researchers use for classifying allegations as “false” – which in effect imply, among other oddities, that a false allegation only becomes false once it has been demonstrated to be such!

ABC News has recently made marked efforts to ensure that its readers are not misled by technical classifications of sexual assault reports that use terms such as “unfounded”, given that the common understanding of such terms can differ from their meaning when used in police reports and associated research.<sup>18</sup> In making these efforts, your concern was partly to ensure that people do not perceive that the number of false allegations is *greater* than the reality.

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17 REF: Lucy Sweeney (with added reporting by Sally Sara), *ABC News Online*, ‘Grace Tame says change is a marathon effort. But Australia Talks data shows our perception of sexual assault is changing’, *ABC News Online*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-10/grace-tame-australia-talks-believing-sexual-assault-allegations/100155474> (accessed 10.50pm, 11 June 2021; updated version accessed 25 September 2021).

18 REF: Inga Ting, Nathanael Scott and Alex Palmer, ‘Rough Justice: How police are failing survivors of sexual assault’, *ABC News Online*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-28/how-police-are-failing-survivors-of-sexual-assault/11871364?nw=0> (accessed 10 June 2021); and Inga Ting and Lauren Roberts, ‘Unpursued in the Top End’, *ABC News Online*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-20/sexual-assaults-reported-to-nt-police-least-likely-to-be-pursued/11917478?nw=0&r=HtmlFragment> (accessed 27 September 2021)



To be accurate and unbiased, it is incumbent on the ABC to take the same care to ensure that your reporting does not cause people to perceive that the number of false allegations is *less* than the reality (or that the research on this matter is more certain than it is). This means that you should avoid relying on definitive-sounding statements about “false” reports drawn from the research literature, without appropriate context and explanation, that leave your readers with an incorrect impression about the prevalence of what those readers would understand to be false reports. The corrections and clarifications you have made do not achieve this.

I believe your reluctance to make the necessary, substantive corrections and clarifications in response to my complaint stems from the way you engaged with it. As I elaborate below, while your response makes a range of points, it does not directly or rigorously address the evidence and arguments in my complaint. Nor do those points rebut the case I made.

The upshot is that ABC Online continues to misrepresent the research on the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations. As Australia’s most trusted news source, misreporting by the ABC has the potential to seriously mislead the community. Indeed, as my complaint pointed out, the results of the Australia Talks survey show that a large proportion of your respondents have already formed views that, while aligned with your reporting about the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations, are not supported by the research and are most probably wrong.

I therefore believe you should reconsider my complaint with a view to fully correcting the record. The ABC Complaint Handling Procedure<sup>19</sup> does not appear to countenance reconsideration by ABC Audience and Consumer Affairs. If reconsideration is not an option, please let me know. However, in the first instance I would prefer to see if it is possible to resolve the matter satisfactorily with you, ahead of pursuing it through other channels.

With that in mind, below I have recapped some relevant points from my complaint and then set out what I see as the main problems in your response, and why major corrections are still needed.

## Recapping some points from the complaint

My complaint highlighted the following statements from three ABC Online articles:

“Extensive research shows allegations of sexual assault are overwhelmingly true.”  
(Lucy Sweeney/News Online)

“Guys, you can stop worrying about false rape allegations. They’re extremely rare.”  
(Maddy King/Hack)<sup>20</sup>

“In reality, the overwhelming majority of sexual offence reports are true.”  
(Australia Talks online results page)<sup>21</sup>

(While the first and third statements have now been edited to look at the prevalence of false allegations, as mentioned that does not address the fundamental problem with them.)

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19 REF: *ABC Complaint Handling Procedures*, <https://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ABC-Complaint-Handling-Procedures-final-no-EECA-020817.pdf> (accessed 25 September 2021)

20 REF: Maddy King, ‘Guys, you can stop worry about false rape allegations. They’re extremely rare’, *Triple J Hack*, <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/false-rape-allegations-myths/13281852> (accessed 10 June 2021).

21 REF: ‘More than 1 in 3 men say sexual assault claims are usually believable’, *Australia Talks interactive tool results page*, <https://australiatalks.abc.net.au/results> (accessed 9.20pm, 11 June 2021).

The complaint then pointed out that:

- these statements/articles rely on a 2017 AIFS report, *Challenging conceptions on sexual offending*<sup>22</sup>, which cited a prevalence estimate (of 5 per cent) for false sexual assault allegations.<sup>23</sup>
- the AIFS report sourced that estimate from a 2016 meta-analysis by Ferguson and Malouff<sup>24</sup>
- Ferguson and Malouff **explicitly cautioned** that its prevalence estimate covered only “confirmed” false reports; and that the conservative definition of false reports adopted “is not intended to imply that all other cases are true reports.”
- the total of all false reports (confirmed plus unconfirmed) is potentially multiple times higher than the 5 per cent figure used in the ABC’s articles.

Importantly, my complaint also said:

... the ABC and its researchers/journalists are not solely to blame for the mistaken statements, as some of the experts and source research documentation referenced by the ABC also appear to have not properly understood or distinguished between estimates of (confirmed) false allegations and all false allegations.

In other words, I was both acknowledging and indicating to you that relying solely on the words in the sources originally referenced by the ABC— ie the AIFS report (and Dr Bianca Fileborn) – is insufficient to gain an accurate understanding of the matter.

## Rejoinders to your response

Your response stated that, in preparing the News Online story, the ABC News editorial team had interviewed criminologist Dr Fileborn and reviewed a wide range of research material, including “most particularly” the 2017 AIFS report, *Challenging misconceptions on sexual offending*. (I will discuss ... Dr Fileborn’s comments later).

Your response then noted that the AIFS report states:

The rate of false allegations of sexual assault is very low.

Studies estimate 5% of rape allegations are false (meta-analysis of seven studies in Western countries: Ferguson & Malouff, 2016). **Therefore, the overwhelming majority of sexual offence reports are true.** (your emphasis added)

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22 REF: AIFS (Australian Institute of Family Studies), ‘Challenging misconceptions about sexual offending: Creating an evidence-based resource for police and legal practitioners’, [https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-09/apo-nid107216\\_1.pdf](https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-09/apo-nid107216_1.pdf) (accessed 10 June 2021).

23 The second and third of these ABC articles stated and/or hyperlinked to a prevalence estimate (of 5 per cent) for false sexual assault allegations contained in a 2017 AIFS report.

When published, the News Online article hyperlinked to a separate ABC article that did not include any research on the prevalence rates of false sexual assaults. I note that, in making the recent edits to that sentence in that article to capture the point about the sexual offence reports studied being those made *to police*, the original hyperlink has also been deleted. As a consequence, the only support for the original statement in the News Online article is the material added later in the article which says “The figure varies across studies, but on average, around 5 per cent of reports made to police are deemed false”. As the article then discusses Dr Fileborn’s views about that 5 per cent figure, presumably it too is a reference to the figure from the AIFS and Ferguson and Malouff studies (given that, in the Hack article, Dr Fileborn’s very similar discussion of the 5 per cent estimate is hyperlinked to the AIFS 2017 study).

24 REF: Claire Ferguson and John Malouff, ‘Assessing police classifications of sexual assault reports: A meta-analysis of false reporting rates.’ *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(5), 1185–1193.

## Why the ABC is wrong to rely on the words in the AIFS study

However, as indicated above, my complaint explained that the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis relied upon by the AIFS document does not support the conclusion drawn. To repeat, Ferguson and Malouff made clear that the 5 per cent figure related only to “confirmed” cases of false sexual assault allegations, and that there are potentially many other cases that are also false but whose falsity or veracity cannot be determined. I included calculations from the relevant studies in the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis to show that the actual rate of false allegations (confirmed and unconfirmed) could be many times higher than 5 per cent. Thus, **the AIFS report was wrong** to conclude from the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis that the overwhelming majority of sexual offence reports are true, or that the rate of false allegations is very low – which is the phrasing you adopted for your recent edits.

Given that my complaint (a) pointed out that the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis cited in the AIFS study does not support the conclusion drawn by the AIFS, and (b) warned you of the unreliability of the source (AIFS) documentation referenced by the ABC, I submit that it is not an adequate response for you to simply quote the AIFS conclusion as if that shows that the ABC’s statements are correct.

You might respond that it was a “reasonable effort” for ABC journalists to rely on the AIFS’s words without further investigation. Even if that argument were initially valid<sup>25</sup>, I submit that it was not valid to continue to rely on the AIFS’s words, as your response did, once you had been alerted that they are problematic.

## What lessons should the ABC take from the Lisak et al study?

Your response also says that, since receiving my complaint, the ABC has examined other primary research, “in particular, the Lisak et al’s study”.<sup>26</sup>

The response does not explain exactly what ABC drew from Lisak et al. It is possible that all you drew was confirmation of the point that the research covers only sexual offence reports *to police*, rather than all allegations. That would be a reasonable point to take from the study.

However, if your response is suggesting that the Lisak et al study provides support for the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of sexual assault reports is true or that the number of false reports is very low, this would not be a reasonable conclusion. This is because:

- the Lisak et al study was one of the studies included in the Ferguson and Malouff 2016 meta-study, and so its results are also counted in the “5 per cent” estimate of confirmed false allegations
- while the Lisak et al study found that 6 per cent of sexual assault allegations in its sample could be confirmed as false, it found that a further 45 per cent of allegations “did not proceed to any prosecution or disciplinary action” (and another 14 per cent contained insufficient information for the researchers to code).<sup>27</sup> This again demonstrates that the total number of false allegations is potentially several times the number of “confirmed” false allegations.

It is true that Lisak et al (p. 1318) state that their results together with those of other studies “indicate that the prevalence of false allegations is between 2% and 10%.” However, these figures relate only to confirmed false allegations; they do not include unconfirmed false allegations.

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<sup>25</sup> That said, on reading the statements in the ABC articles, their implausibly definitive nature immediately prompted me to investigate the veracity of the sources. As I mentioned in my complaint, a more questioning mindset and/or more thorough fact checking by your journalists/researchers might have averted some of the mistakes, and could now help safeguard against recurrences.

<sup>26</sup> REF: Lisak, D., Gardinier, L., Nicksa, S. C., and Cote, A. M. (2010), ‘False allegations of sexual assault: an analysis of ten years of reported cases’, *Violence Against Women*, 16(2), 1318-1334.

<sup>27</sup> To avoid any doubt, I am not implying that all complaints in these two categories were false; just that we do not know whether they were true or false. Note that Lisak et al (p. 1328) explain that “cases [that] did not proceed” captures cases where there was insufficient evidence to proceed, cases where the victim withdrew from the process or was unable to identify the perpetrator, and cases where the victim mislabelled the incident (that is, the incident did not meet the legal elements of the crime of sexual assault).

Thus, the Lisak et al study does not provide anything additional to the Ferguson and Malouff study that would save the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of sexual offence reports (to police) are true or that the prevalence of false reports is very low.

### *Dr Fileborn's comments and appeals to authority*

If my analysis is correct, there are two main problems with the words and views attributed to Dr Fileborn in the Hack (and News Online) articles.

The first and most important problem is that, like the AIFS report, Dr Fileborn seems to have mistakenly interpreted the 5 per cent prevalence estimate that emanated from the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis as if it were intended to be an estimate of all false sexual assault allegations ...

Second, Dr Fileborn's comments would likely give readers the impression that there are a number of factors that would reduce the actual rate of false allegations below the 5 per cent estimate. However, the research approach underlying the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis was in fact designed to take into account several of the matters mentioned by Dr Fileborn.

Your response did not address the substance of my arguments but instead said:

While noting your comments about Dr Fileborn's remarks, she has specific expertise in this field and her remarks are clearly attributed to her. The principles which accompany the ABC's accuracy standards note that sources with relevant expertise may be relied on more heavily than those without.

As with relying on AIFS report, I accept that in the first instance it can be reasonable to rely on the words of independent and objective experts. While I do have some expertise,<sup>28</sup> I accept that, were you faced simply with a "my word versus hers" choice on this matter, it would have been reasonable for you to favour Dr Fileborn's views.

One caveat is that it is also important that the ABC consider whether the experts it relies on are able to provide balanced views of research on a particularly-politicalised issue. It is clear from some of her writings that Dr Fileborn is not only an academic but also an advocate on gender and sexual assault issues. ...

The more important point is that you had, available for your consideration, not just my and Dr Fileborn's words but also the words in the research studies I cited and referenced. My complaint presented careful and detailed arguments, drawing on the source literature, to show why the points attributed to Dr Fileborn were wrong or potentially misleading. Your staff should have been able to check my arguments, in the first instance by reading the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis from which the 5 per cent estimate about which Dr Fileborn spoke comes. They could then, of course, have also tested my arguments with Dr Fileborn and other experts as necessary.

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<sup>28</sup> For the record, indicators of my own expertise include that I have academic qualifications in economics and public policy, and around 35 years experience as a researcher and government policy adviser. Over this time I have worked on, or interpreted and evaluated, many statistical reports and government or academic research papers. I have also run an independent complaint handling unit for a government agency.

Thus, while I do not have the same credentials as Dr Fileborn in the areas of criminology, and sexual violence and harassment, I submit that I do have reasonable expertise to be able to interpret the Ferguson and Malouff paper, from which the 5 per cent estimate relied on by the ABC and Dr Fileborn is drawn, and to challenge and critique Dr Fileborn's comments in relation to that estimate. Note that I also checked my understanding of the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis with Professor Malouff before lodging my complaint.

That said, as I mentioned in my complaint, I will readily stand corrected should my work or conclusions prove to be mistaken.

## Timing issues

Your response also pointed out that the Hack article was published on 30 March 2021, which is more than six weeks before I lodged my complaint (the normal time window for consideration of complaints), and that I failed to indicate what special circumstances might apply to warrant its review. I accept this point of technicality.

What I would say now is that the Hack article is one of several ABC articles that together have promoted a particular narrative around the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations. Further, a link to the Hack article appeared at the bottom of the News Online article when it was published on the ABC website, so it effectively remained “live”, and something that your audience might readily read, at that time. My thought is that if you are to correct one of these articles, it would be sensible to correct all of the set.

## What further changes are needed?

If my analysis is correct, and I submit that your response provides no firm grounds to think otherwise, the ABC has published articles that materially misrepresent the findings of the relevant research, falsely indicating that the research is more definitive than it is, and that it demonstrates that false sexual assault allegations (to police) are very low (and/or, as in the earlier formulation, that such allegations are almost always true). This has likely misinformed the general public and may have added to “women’s anger” and the prevalence of the view that complainants should be automatically believed. In turn it may have harmed the credibility and wellbeing of people who have been falsely accused of sexual assault. The longer the delay in addressing these widespread misconceptions, the longer the harm they cause will persist.

While an aspect of the edits and clarifications you made recently (to narrow the scope of your statements to reports to police) is a small step in the right direction, your changes do not address the fundamental problems with the statements and articles highlighted in my complaint.

Accordingly, unless you can demonstrate material errors in my analysis that the actual rate of false sexual assault allegations (to police) is potentially much higher than the 5 per cent estimate your articles have relied on, I request that you:

- retract the Hack article – whose title tells Guys not to worry because false rape allegations are extremely rare – as the premise is clearly baseless
- issue corrections and clarifications to the relevant parts of the News Online article and the Australia Talks results page, pointing out that the prevalence rate of false sexual assault allegations (whether restricted to police reports or more generally) cannot be determined but is potentially multiple times higher than the 5 per cent estimate previously reported by the ABC
- add a further notice to the ABC Corrections and Clarifications page, that reflects the material in the first two dot-points in this list.

Given the heightened attention currently being given to the issue of the veracity of sexual assault allegations, I also request that ABC publish articles on this matter on News Online and Hack (and potentially items on other ABC platforms). These could cover my complaint and confess to the errors in the ABC’s earlier reports, to give these matters a higher-profile with your audience.

## Closing comments and next steps

I recognise that the veracity of sexual assault allegations is a sensitive topic for many people: those who have been sexually assaulted; those who have been accused of sexual assault; the community generally; and, in light of recent controversies, the ABC. Further, the issue's politicisation has created an obvious risk that some people, potentially including some journalists and even academics, will struggle to fully separate what the evidence shows from their own beliefs and agendas.

While I do not know what internal discussions were had in the framing of your response, the risk is that it could be seen more as an attempt to fob off my complaint, in order to protect a particular narrative favoured by some people within the ABC, than as a genuine attempt to seek the truth and ensure that it is reported accurately and understandably.

As mentioned earlier, in the first instance I would prefer it if this matter could be resolved satisfactorily with you. However, because of the extended period your initial investigation took (almost thrice your standard 30-day window) and the limited nature of your response, I would like some assurances about how ABC will deal with this request for reconsideration.

I thus ask that you reply reasonably promptly to say whether you are willing to formally reconsider my complaint. If you are, can you also commit to engage directly and rigorously with the evidence and arguments I have provided? In view of this matter's seriousness and the substantial time that your investigation has already absorbed, I also ask that you commit to provide at least a preliminary response to the substance of my complaint within a fortnight from now, that is by Tuesday, 12 October. If you are not able to commit to this, please let me know.

Yours sincerely,  
Tom Nankivell  
28 September 2021

## 4) The ABC complaint unit's short response to the rejoinder (Oct 2021)

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**From:** ABC Corporate Affairs

**Sent:** Friday, 8 October 2021

Dear Mr Nankivell,

I have now had the opportunity to read the document you provided and advise that the ABC will not be reinvestigating this matter.

The wording used in the ABC's stories accurately reflects the research which underpins it - for example, the Lisak et al research concludes that *'the prevalence of false allegations is between 2% and 10%'*.

The corrective action already taken is sufficient and the ABC will not be retracting or further amending the stories in the way you suggest.

Yours sincerely,

[Head, Audience and Consumer Affairs]

## 5) Submission to the Independent Review (Dec 2021)

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### Submission to the Independent Review of ABC Complaints Handling

Tom Nankivell, 17 December 2021

#### About this submission

Earlier this year I lodged a complaint with the ABC's Audience and Consumer Affairs (ACA) about the ABC's representation of evidence on the frequency of false sexual assault allegations. My complaint was partially accepted by ACA, and some minor corrections were made. However, in my view, there were several deficiencies in the way ACA dealt with the complaint.

This episode may make a useful case study for the Independent Review. Accordingly, this submission outlines the process and the problems I saw with the ABC's response, and suggests some possible fixes. I have attached my complaint(s) and the ABC's responses to the submission.

Note that as well as being an ABC audience member, a taxpayer and a complainant, I have also worked in an independent complaints handling body. Specifically, I worked for several years in the Australian competitive neutrality complaints office – running the office in 2019. I have drawn on this experience in suggesting some reforms the Independent Review could consider.

#### Timeline of my complaint and ACA's response

In early 2021, ABC Online published a series of articles that said that sexual assault allegations are “almost always true” and that false allegations are “extremely rare”. As these statements struck me as dubious, I followed the links and references contained in the articles to the underlying literature. On reading that literature, I concluded that the ABC's statements were indeed incorrect.

After consulting the ABC guidelines on complaints, on 10 June I emailed Lucy Sweeney, the author of one of the articles, seeking a correction.

As I did not receive a reply to my email, on 17 June I submitted a formal complaint to the ABC's Audience and Consumer Affairs. The body of my complaint was detailed (6 pages long), carefully argued and fully referenced. The complaint is outlined in Box 1 and reproduced as Appendix A.

While I received acknowledgement that my complaint would be considered by ACA, I did not hear anything further for a couple of months.

After I sent a follow-up email on 27 August, ACA responded on 14 September, indicating that the ABC had made some minor corrections/clarifications to address some points in my submission. That response is at Appendix B.

While I appreciated the corrections and clarifications made, in my view the ACA response did not rigorously or transparently address the main concerns in my complaint. Thus, on 28 September I submitted a 'rejoinder', explaining the problems I saw with the ACA response and seeking reconsideration. My rejoinder is at Appendix C.

The head of ACA wrote back on 8 October rejecting my request for reconsideration. That reply is at Attachment D.



## The essence of my complaint

My complaint referred to the following statements from three ABC Online articles:

"Extensive research shows allegations of sexual assault are overwhelmingly true"

"Guys, you can stop worrying about false rape allegations. They're extremely rare"

"In reality, the overwhelming majority of sexual offence reports are true"

The complaint then pointed out that:

- these statements/articles relied on a 2017 AIFS report, *Challenging conceptions on sexual offending*, which cited a prevalence estimate (of 5 per cent) for false sexual assault allegations
- the AIFS report sourced that estimate from a 2016 meta-analysis by Ferguson and Malouff
- Ferguson and Malouff **explicitly cautioned** that its prevalence estimate covered only "confirmed" false reports; and that the conservative definition of false reports adopted "is not intended to imply that all other cases are true reports"
- the total of all false reports (confirmed plus unconfirmed) is potentially multiple times higher than the 5 per cent figure used in the ABC's articles.

The complaint also made several other points as to why the ABC's statements were misleading.

## Some deficiencies in the way ACA handled my complaint

### *Lengthy timeframe*

From lodgement, it took almost three months for ACA to provide a response. I understand that the ABC has resource constraints and that, had it addressed my complaint fully and rigorously, the complaint may have taken longer to consider than some others. Nonetheless, it appears that my complaint may have been 'parked' and then 'forgotten' for a while – perhaps after being sent to the ABC News area for comment – and was only acted upon after I sent a follow-up email in late August.

Slip-ups of this nature can occasionally happen in even the best-run organisation. However, if the Independent Review finds that my experience is not a rare one, it could investigate possible improvements to ACA's administrative processes.

### *Limited explanations in ACA's response*

ACA's response (Appendix B) to my complaint was quite brief, running to about a page. It:

- outlined my complaint
- briefly explained ACA's role
- mentioned that ACA had consulted the relevant program area and some other sources (without explaining, for the most part, what it had taken from those sources)
- set out the minor corrections the ABC had made to the articles and on the corrections page
- provided one or two observations (including a quote from the AIFS 2017 paper) that were apparently to be taken as counterpoints to points I had made in my original complaint.

However, the ACA response did not engage directly or transparently with the substance of my complaint to any significant extent. In essence, the ACA response said "thank you for your complaint, we have considered the merits of your arguments and we agree with X but not with Y". As such, I was expected to 'trust' that ACA had properly considered my complaint and that its determination was well based.

This is quite different from the approach taken by the competitive neutrality complaints body, where once a complaint was accepted, the complaints office would respond to the arguments in the original complaint in a much more direct, thorough and transparent manner. The office would also often engage with the complainant and, in effect, issue draft decisions and invite the complainant (and complained-about body) to respond or make further input. This did not happen with my complaint to the ABC. Once I submitted my complaint, I was not included in the process nor invited to make any comment before ACA issued its decision.

If the complaints functions is to remain within the ABC, the Independent Review could consider recommending that ACA provide more open, transparent and rigorous responses when it responds to complaints it has 'accepted' for investigation.

### *Weak arguments used by ACA*

While the ACA response provided limited information to help explain the reasons for its decisions, the information it did provide was generally underwhelming.

For example, in its response to my original complaint, ACA quoted the 2017 AIFS report as if the quoted material justified the statements in the ABC articles. Yet, my original complaint had in effect already pointed out why the AIFS statement could not be relied upon to support the statements in the ABC articles. As I said in my rejoinder:

Given that my complaint (a) pointed out that the Ferguson and Malouff meta-analysis cited in the AIFS study does not support the conclusion drawn by the AIFS, and (b) warned you of the unreliability of the source (AIFS) documentation referenced by the ABC, I submit that it is not an adequate response for you to simply quote the AIFS conclusion as if that shows that the ABC's statements are correct.

ACA repeated this approach in its reply to my rejoinder. In that case, my rejoinder explained why material from another study mentioned by ACA – by *Lisak et al* – could not be relied on to support the statements in the ABC articles. Yet, without addressing my point, the ACA response to my rejoinder simply quoted the material from *Lisak et al*!

The ACA response also relied on appeals to authority and technicalities to avoid addressing the substance of my complaint and making more substantive changes to the ABC articles. (My rejoinder – Appendix C – explains these points in more detail).

## **Was there some politics at play in the ACA response?**

The Independent Review's public consultation paper mentions three high-profile complaints around which there has been a concern, at least in some quarters, that the (conscious or unconscious) political biases of ABC staff may have played a role in the initial reporting that led to the complaint. One of these, the *Ms Represented* complaint, relates to a program about gender politics.

This is also potentially relevant to the subject matter of my complaint, given that most sexual assaults are committed by males and most victims are female. The ABC has been heavily involved in breaking and reporting sexual assault issues recently, as well as stories emphasising gender discrimination against women. Accurate and balanced news reporting on such issues is always to be welcomed. However, rightly or wrongly, the ABC has been under fire in recent years for its reporting on sexual assault allegations affecting some high-profile Australians, including George Pell and Christian Porter. A former ABC Board Member has also accused the ABC of having a feminist bias.<sup>29</sup> In this context, while I submitted my complaint in good faith, I did wonder whether the ABC and its complaint unit would feel more pressure than it might otherwise to 'hold the line' on the statements that were the subject of my complaint.

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<sup>29</sup> Janet Albrechtsen, "In Aunty's playground, the Squad runs riot", *The Australian*, 1 September 2021.

While I do not know what discussions within the ABC were had in framing of the ACA response, to me the nature of the response – including its reliance on limited and weak arguments and the minimal (and arguably almost token) changes it made – seems to at least be consistent with the view that some gender politics had been at play.

Of course, I recognise that it is beyond the scope of the Independent Review to make any general determination about whether the ABC or its staff have a political bias that interferes with either its reporting or how ACA responds to complaints.

Rather, the relevant point for the Independent Review is that there may be value in the complaints body being separate and thus more undoubtedly independent from the ABC. This would remove any question of ABC bias (genuine or perceived) affecting the outcome of complaints.

## 6) Letter to ABC about another misleading article (May 2022)

Joanna Robin & Peter Jones  
ABC Washington Bureau

31 May 2022 (AEST)

### Misleading statistics in article on sexual assault allegations

Dear Ms Robin and Mr Jones,

I write regarding statements about the prevalence of false sexual assault allegations, made in your article "Johnny Depp v Amber Heard is a defamation case. But it could have a chilling effect on domestic violence survivors", published on ABC News Online on Sunday (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-29/johnny-depp-amber-heard-domestic-violence/101093294>).<sup>30</sup>

For background, I have previously complained to the ABC – firstly to one of the relevant article authors and then to Audience and Consumer Affairs – about previous reporting on this subject, which led to the ABC issuing a correction.

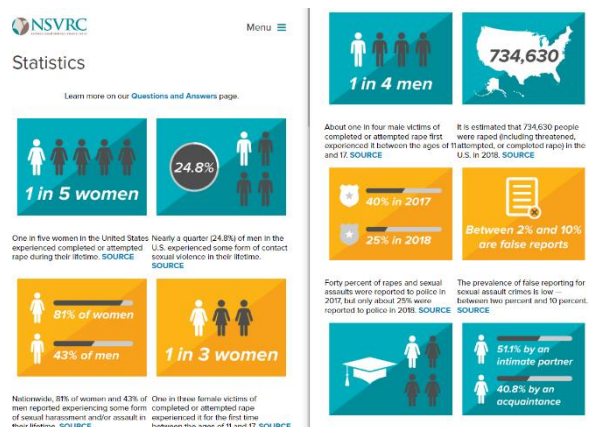
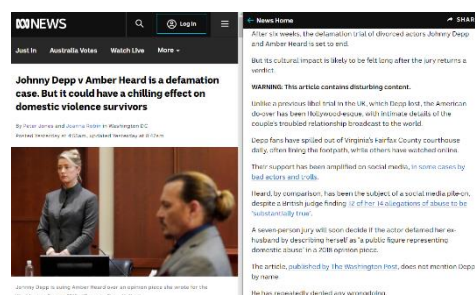
The problematic statement in your article is:

While many survivors of sexual assault don't report it, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) estimates only between two and 10 per cent of allegations are fabricated.

This statement is used to set-up and support the sentiment, expressed immediately afterwards in your article, that victims of sexual assault are mostly telling the truth and that complainants should be supported when they come forward. (For the record, I do not necessarily disagree with these viewpoints, but the estimates in the problematic statement are not a sound basis for making the case).

The prevalence estimates on the NSVRC webpage to which your statement links (<https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>) are sourced via a further hyperlink from a study by David Lisak, Lori Gardinier, Sarah Nicksa and Ashley Cote entitled 'False allegations of sexual assault: An analysis of ten years of reported cases'. It was published in the journal *Violence Against Women* in 2010.

Thus, the first point to note is that the estimates were not the work of the NSVRC.



<sup>30</sup> Article also published under the heading 'Domestic violence advocates warn the Depp-Heard case has amplified 'the myth of the perfect victim''. (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/joanna-robin/13602424>)

The bigger problem is the interpretation given to the estimates in the Lisak et al. study, which I have commented on in previous correspondence with the ABC. Lisak et al. draw their 2–10 per cent prevalence estimates from a small range of studies – which the authors deem ‘credible’ – but those studies generally constrain the prevalence estimates in a variety of ways, including by:

- considering only sexual assault allegations reported to police
- classifying an allegation as false only if it is thoroughly investigated and can be confirmed
- only counting false allegations that the complainant knows to be untrue.

In a subsequent (2016) meta-analysis of such ‘credible’ prevalence studies that included the Lisak et al. study, Claire Ferguson & John Malouff explained the ramifications as follows:

Although limiting the sample, this is a necessary step as it prevents opening the floodgates to many equivocal cases that are suspected but not demonstrably false. It errs on the side of caution by not including cases in doubt, mistaken cases, or those claims made to anyone other than police. **Use of such a conservative definition is not meant to imply that all other cases are true reports**, but just that they cannot responsibly be deemed confirmed false. (emphasis added).

Note that the meta-analysis by Ferguson & Malouff has been cited by a range of institutions in Australia, including the Institute of Criminology, Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety and the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Unfortunately, like the NSVRC, some of these institutions have also presented the raw statistics in a way that is easy to misinterpret.

Please note that you will not be the first reporters to have been misled on these points. The BBC published an article back in September 2018 (around the time of the Brett Kavanaugh hearings) that relied on the Lisak et al. estimates, and later had to publish a correction (see here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45565684>, and attached screen capture).

The simple truth is that the academic studies are unable to tell us what proportion of sexual assault allegations are true or untrue.

Given that, I ask that you make a correction to your article to reflect these points. I am happy to discuss this matter with you to clarify any points if that would be helpful. Also, as I don’t have your direct email addresses and need to lodge this via the ABC website, can you also get back to me to confirm that you have personally received this letter?

yours sincerely,  
Tom Nankivell



## Corrections & Clarifications

### Sexual Assaults Data

Australia Talks: Two related stories concerning community perceptions of the frequency of false allegations of sexual assault have been edited to clarify that academic research into sexual assault allegations referred to false allegations made to police and was not a conclusion about the overall truthfulness of sexual assault allegations.

9 Sep 2021



### Assessing police classifications of sexual assault reports: A meta-analysis of false reporting rates

*Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45 (5), pp. 1185-1193.

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) – Law & Justice Legal Studies  
Research Paper No. 17-02

Claire Ferguson

QUT, Faculty of Law, School of Justice

John Malouff

University of New England

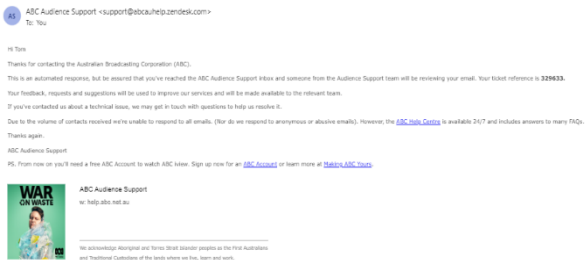
# The truth about false assault accusations by women

**Katty Kay**  
Presenter, BBC World News  
@KattyKayBBC

🕒 18 September 2018



*CORRECTION: This article was updated on 26 September 2018 to clarify that false accusations in the 2010 report are defined as those investigated by police and proven to be false. We have also made clear that a conclusion about the numbers of men going to prison because they had been falsely accused of rape was based on a British study. We have added links to some of the research cited.*



[Note: I received an acknowledgement from the ABC website (Ticket # 329633, 31 May 2022) that my letter had been received and would be reviewed by the ABC's Audience Support team, but I heard nothing further on this matter.]