

Complaints,
The Sunday Times,
The News Building,
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

Complaint regarding article stating that it is tempting to tie piano wire across the road at neck height.

I write on behalf of Cycling UK, the national cycling charity, to register a formal complaint about the columnist Rod Liddle's article which was published in The Sunday Times on Sunday May 24 2020, page 14, referencing his views about people cycling in the lane near his home and how tempting it is to tie piano wire across the road at neck height.

I recognise that this complaint does not fall within the strict rules of the Editor's Code. Nevertheless, I would argue that the article in question is inflammatory, in seriously poor taste, and implies that a seriously dangerous and criminal act is somehow an acceptable course of conduct.

Within the opening paragraph Mr Liddle states that:

“Every day it's the same. Walk out of my front door with the dog to be swept aside, into a hedge, by a middle-class family from the city who think they're all Bradley bloody Wiggins. Daddy and Piers, 11, in the peloton. Mummy bringing up the rear with little Poppy, 6, and Oliver, 4. All in Lycra, all with their energy drinks and fatuous expressions on their faces, expressions of self-righteousness and irreproachable virtue. This is a local lane for local people – go back to your tenements, I shout at them. My wife has persuaded me that, strictly speaking, it is against the law to tie piano wire at neck height across the road. Oh, but it's tempting.”

The reference to this being “strictly speaking” an offence minimises both the gravity of the offence and the severity of the potential consequences.

This is not only a specific offence [under section 162 of the Highways Act 1980](#) , but potentially attempted grievous bodily harm with intent.

Police in West Yorkshire are currently investigating the latter offence following an incident last month when a man cycling with his son was injured after [wire was deliberately placed across a path with the aim of causing injury](#) . Similar incidents have left [other cyclists with potentially life threatening injuries](#) .

In December 2016, [Cycling UK complained to the Sunday Times](#) about a previous article written by Mr Liddle in which he praised the recently reported actions of the Transport Secretary, who had opened his car door in stationary traffic resulting in a cyclist being knocked off his bicycle.

Mr Liddle called this strict liability offence “a beautifully timed manoeuvre” and suggested he regularly repeats the same offence, claiming he is making “London a safer place for normal humans” in doing so.

The response Cycling UK received from the Sunday Times to that complaint indicated that no retraction or apology was necessary, because Mr Liddle was ridiculing the Transport Secretary with heavy irony, and that Mr Liddle's humour may not be to everyone's taste, but he is a commentator on human foibles, not a diplomat.

I have not referred to the previous complaint to re-open that matter, but to put in context Mr Liddle's recent article which, once again, makes light of a criminal act that can cause life threatening consequences for anyone cycling or riding a motorbike.

That is why I respectfully submit that it would be inappropriate to defend or justify Mr Liddle's words with the easy excuse that they were not intended to be taken seriously, or that irony or sarcasm were being employed.

Providing Mr Liddle with a platform to comment on people's foibles comes with certain responsibilities which I would hope that the Sunday Times is willing to accept.

One of those is to avoid inflammatory language which may encourage someone else, with all of their foibles, to commit a criminal offence.

Not for the first time, Mr Liddle has referred to everyone who cycles as a collective group, who he defines by what they wear, their chosen mode of transport and his perception of their social class.

His criticism and disdain is followed by an example of criminal behaviour which could harm anyone in that collective group, which he minimises and tacitly approves by stating that his wife has persuaded him that, strictly speaking, is against the law, but he is tempted to do it anyway.

I would conclude by asking whether this is an article which you, as the editor, are comfortable supporting?

Only two weeks ago, [a retired teacher and councillor were spoken to by the police after laying traps for cyclists on a woodland path](#). Irresponsible articles in a national paper such as Mr Liddle's on Sunday give the impression that behaviour such as this is fair game, because cyclists are annoying, however whilst humour, satire and irony have their place, I would politely suggest that a line has been crossed. I hope you agree, and look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Duncan Dollimore
Head of Campaigns
Cycling UK

