



Director, News and Current Affairs

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Secretary UKMA
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11 February 2014

Dear Mr Pollard

Thank you for your letter of January 13th, 2014 raising concerns about the BBC News website style guidance on weights and measures,
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/journalism/article/art20130702112133606>.

The BBC refers to a number of sources in compiling its guidance for writers, but is not beholden to any of them. I realise this will disappoint you but I think that the style guide for the website sets out our position very well. Despite your claim to the contrary, the UK is not a metric nation, otherwise we would have road signs in kilometres.

We aim to use common sense when providing information. We use kilometres when reporting on metric countries (converted to imperial). Our science coverage generally uses metric, as that is the preferred option in that discipline. When writing largely for a younger audience, we will use metric. However, it would be presumptuous to expect everyone in the UK to be conversant with metric measurements, and readers and viewers are quick to tell us when we are not giving them sufficient information. The audience, above all other sources, plays a key role in determining the language we use; if they do not understand, we are not doing our job.

On a specific point, print journalism involves the maximum use of the space available. Our headlines have only a limited number of characters, so to insert a gap into "25km" would plainly be counter-intuitive.

We have to say that the amount of correspondence we receive from people who find our output difficult to understand because it does not conform precisely to the SI system is tiny. It is vastly outweighed by those who would prefer us to continue to give measurements in the terms they do understand - imperial. We do not contend that our guidance is perfect, but as explained, it has the key aim of providing content that can be easily understood by all our audiences.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'James Harding'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'J'.

James Harding