



ADJUDICATION NO: 36/A/2026

NAME OF PROGRAMME: JOANNE JOSEPH
DATE AND TIME OF BROADCAST: 8 SEPTEMBER 2026 AT 09:15
BROADCASTER: SABC SAFM
COMPLAINANT: SABA

COMPLAINT

Complaint is that the presenter framed claims associated with the current hype around artificial intelligence as fact.

APPLICABLE CLAUSES

FREE-TO-AIR CODE

Clause 12- COMMENT

- (2) Comment must be an honest expression of opinion and must be presented in such manner that it appears clearly to be comment, and must be made on facts truly stated or fairly indicated and referred to.

Clause 13 – CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

- (1) In presenting a programme in which a controversial issue of public importance is discussed, a broadcaster must make reasonable efforts to fairly present opposing points of view either in the same programme or in a subsequent programme forming part of the same series of programmes presented within a reasonable period of time of the original broadcast and within substantially the same time slot.
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ADJUDICATION

- [1] A complaint was lodged with the BCCSA against a SAFM programme broadcast on the 8th September. The complaint concerns comments by the presenter that current artificial intelligence systems develop human-like agencies.

- [2] **The complaint reads as follows:**

“FORMAL COMPLAINT AGAINST SAfm – BROADCAST OF 8 SEPTEMBER 2026

Broadcaster: South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), **Channel:** SAfm,
Programme: 9am – 12, **Presenter:** Joanne Joseph, **Date of broadcast:** 8 September 2026,
Time of broadcast: 9:15

I confirm that I personally listened to the programme and the content that forms the basis of this complaint.

I am submitting this complaint in writing within 30 days of the date of broadcast.

Nature of the complaint

My complaint concerns the presentation of claims about current artificial intelligence systems developing human-like agency, thinking for themselves or beginning to make their own decisions. My complaint is that the presenter framed claims associated with the current hype around artificial intelligence as factual explanations of what these systems are and how they behave, without adequately distinguishing between established evidence and speculation.

During her introduction, Joanne Joseph described AI machines in human developmental terms. Among the explanations she gave was that they are like children: you begin with a blank slate, input good and bad values and eventually the child grows up and begins making its own decisions. She said that the machines are like this. The problem is the factual claim underpinning the analogy in that current AI systems are at a point where they independently think or make decisions in a human-like sense.

There is no established evidence that current AI systems are conscious or sentient, or that alleged ‘autonomous behaviour’ means that they have developed a mind or independent human-like agency. AI systems are engineered systems. Their architecture, training, objectives, system instructions, permissions, access to tools and deployment environments are created by people and organisations. They can generate unexpected outputs and exhibit behaviour that developers did not individually anticipate. That is not the same thing as evidence that a machine has become conscious, sentient or begun thinking for itself. This is big tech hype and it has a very dangerous societal outcome if supported by such big broadcasters.

There is extensive scientific and academic work warning against anthropomorphising AI systems precisely because human-like language and behaviour can cause people to attribute understanding, intention, consciousness and agency to systems without evidence that these qualities exist. This was not made clear in the framing of the discussion.

Why this matters

This is more than a technical disagreement about terminology. There is an enormous amount of hype surrounding artificial intelligence, including claims about machines becoming human-like, developing minds, acting autonomously or escaping human control.

Journalism should interrogate those claims. It should not reproduce them as established descriptions of the technology. That responsibility is particularly important for a public broadcaster. When journalists tell audiences that AI systems are beginning to make their "own decisions", the framing gives the machine agency. It can also obscure the human and corporate accountability behind these systems.

AI systems do not deploy themselves. People and companies decide how they are trained, what systems they are connected to, what permissions they receive, what safeguards are imposed and under what circumstances they are released to the public. If an AI system subsequently produces harmful or unexpected behaviour, describing the machine as having begun to think or decide for itself risks shifting the public's understanding of responsibility away from those human and corporate decisions.

There is a fundamental difference between reporting: "Some researchers and technology companies argue that increasingly capable AI systems may develop forms of agency or consciousness" and presenting human-like agency as an explanation of what current AI systems are already doing.

The first attributes a claim and allows the audience to assess it. The second presents speculation as fact. That is the basis of my complaint.

BCCSA Code provisions I believe may have been contravened

Clause 12(2) provides:

"Comment must be an honest expression of opinion and must be presented in such manner that it appears clearly to be comment, and must be made on facts truly stated or fairly indicated and referred to."

My concern is that the statements described above were not clearly framed as the presenter's opinion, a prediction, an industry claim or a disputed hypothesis.

They were used as the factual foundation from which the subject was explained to listeners. I therefore ask the BCCSA to consider whether the factual basis underlying the presenter's comment was truly stated or fairly indicated and referred to, as required by Clause 12.

Clause 13 – Controversial issues of public importance

Clause 13(1) requires a broadcaster, when presenting a programme discussing a controversial issue of public importance, to make reasonable efforts to fairly present opposing points of view. Artificial intelligence and claims concerning AI consciousness, agency and autonomy are plainly subjects on which there are significant differences between Big Tech companies claims, scientific evidence and public understanding.

I therefore ask the BCCSA to examine whether the programme as a whole adequately presented the evidence challenging the proposition that current AI systems are developing consciousness or independent human-like agency. If the experts subsequently corrected the presenter's framing clearly and substantively, that should of course form part of the BCCSA's assessment of the programme in its full context.

What I am asking the BCCSA to consider

I ask the BCCSA to obtain and listen to the full relevant broadcast, particularly Joanne Joseph's introduction to the segment and the expert discussion that followed it.

I ask the Commission to consider whether SAfm presented claims about current AI systems thinking independently, developing human-like agency or making their own decisions as factual descriptions without an adequate factual basis or qualification.

This complaint is not an attempt to prevent SAfm from discussing AI consciousness, sentience, autonomous systems or the future development of artificial intelligence. Quite the opposite.

These are important subjects that journalists should interrogate vigorously. But when broadcasters discuss technology that much of the public does not have the technical expertise to independently assess, there is an especially important distinction between evidence, prediction, marketing, speculation and fact.

At precisely the moment when critical thinking about artificial intelligence is most necessary, journalists should be interrogating the extraordinary claims being made about these systems by the same people benefitting billions from this system rather than normalising those claims through anthropomorphic language and presenting them as explanations of how the technology works.

A public broadcaster should not reproduce AI industry hype as technological fact.

I respectfully request that the BCCSA assess whether this broadcast complied with Clauses 12 and 13 of the Free-to-Air Code of Conduct."

[3] The Broadcaster responded as follows:

"...BCCSA COMPLAINT: ATHANDIWE SABA - SAFM - DAILY DISCOURSE - 08.09.2026 - 09:00

With regard to the above-mentioned complaints, please find our comments as follows:

1. Following a review of the complete broadcast, SAfm respectfully submits that the complaint does not establish a contravention of Clauses 12 or 13 of the Free-to-Air Code.
2. The statements highlighted by the complainant were not presented as a standalone factual news report. Instead, they formed part of the presenter's introduction to an insightful discussion focused on the rapid developments in artificial intelligence; its capabilities, limitations, and the potential societal risks it poses.
3. The introduction posed pertinent questions and concerns, which were thoughtfully explored during the ensuing interview. Significantly, the expert guest did not simply affirm the presenter's framing; rather, he provided nuanced qualifications on key aspects of the discussion, specifically regarding concepts like machine consciousness and self-awareness. He elaborated on the complexities inherent in defining or measuring consciousness itself.
4. Thus, the broadcast adeptly differentiated between established technological capabilities, valid concerns articulated by experts, and topics that remain uncertain or speculative. It is important to note that while some language in the introduction was more assertive and designed to engage the audience on a matter of substantial public significance, it should be interpreted within the broader context of the broadcast. It was clear that this was introductory

commentary meant to set the stage for the ensuing discourse, rather than a definitive assertion of contested claims related to AI consciousness or established scientific fact.

5. The subsequent discussion with the expert offered meaningful context, qualified viewpoints, and, when necessary, challenges to the presenter's assertions. As a result, the programme did not deliver a singular, uncontested version of the facts to the audience.
6. In summary, we believe that, when evaluated in its entirety and with proper context, the broadcast constituted permissible commentary and discussion on a controversial issue of significant public importance, thereby adhering to the standards outlined in Clauses 12 and 13 of the Code."

[4] The Complainant replied as follows:

"Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the matter.

I acknowledge SAfm's response, but I do not agree that the broadcast, when taken as a whole, adequately answers the concerns raised in my complaint.

My concern is not that the programme discussed artificial intelligence, nor that it explored risks, uncertainty or public concern. AI is clearly a matter of public importance and should be discussed robustly. My concern is that the presenter's introduction factually asserted that AI is sentient and asserted her comments as facts on matters that are scientifically contested and uncertain, particularly around AI consciousness, self-awareness and capability. These were not framed clearly enough as questions, possibilities or contested claims. They were presented in a way that could lead ordinary listeners to understand them as established facts.

SAfm argues that the statements formed part of an introduction rather than a standalone factual news report. I do not believe this resolves the issue. A presenter's introduction is not separate from the broadcast. It sets the frame for the audience. If that frame contains claims that are overstated, speculative or insufficiently qualified, the fact that the discussion later becomes more nuanced does not fully undo the initial impression created for listeners.

This speaks directly to Clause 12. I accept that presenters are allowed to comment, question and frame a discussion. My concern is that comment must still be clearly presented as comment and must be based on facts that are truly stated, fairly indicated or properly referred to. In this case, the introduction blurred the line between comment and factual assertion.

SAfm also states that the expert guest provided qualifications and did not simply affirm the presenter's framing. This is precisely why the complaint remains important. If the guest had to qualify, correct or soften aspects of the framing, that suggests the introduction itself was too assertive. The issue is not whether the guest later added nuance. The issue is whether the audience was first given a fair, accurate and properly contextualised account of what is known, what is uncertain, and what remains speculative.

This also speaks to Clause 13. AI is plainly a controversial issue of public importance. It affects work, education, journalism, privacy, children, regulation, the economy and public trust. Where a broadcaster discusses such an issue, it should make reasonable efforts to fairly present different points of view. My concern is that the framing of the introduction leaned too strongly toward a particular interpretation of AI.

I also do not agree that the broadcast "adeptly differentiated" between established technological capabilities, expert concern and speculative topics. That distinction may have emerged during parts of the interview, but it was not sufficiently clear in the opening framing. In a topic as

technically complex and socially sensitive as AI, especially where public fear and misunderstanding are already high, the broadcaster has a responsibility to be careful from the beginning.

Introductory commentary can be engaging without being misleading. It can raise concern without presenting uncertainty as fact. It can ask serious questions about AI without implying that contested concepts such as machine consciousness or self-awareness are settled or already demonstrated. My complaint is about accuracy, context and the broadcaster's responsibility when dealing with a controversial issue of public importance.

For these reasons, I maintain that the complaint raises legitimate concerns under Clauses 12 and 13. Under Clause 12, the concern is that the presenter's commentary was not clearly enough separated from factual assertion and was not sufficiently grounded in properly qualified facts. Under Clause 13, the concern is that the programme did not make adequate reasonable efforts, particularly in its opening framing, to fairly reflect the range of views and uncertainty around contested AI claims.

I respectfully request that the BCCSA consider whether the broadcast, particularly the presenter's introductory framing, met the required standard for comment and for discussion of a controversial issue of public importance. I look forward to hearing the outcome."

EVALUATION

[5] I have reviewed the broadcast and share the transcript of Joanne Joseph's Introduction, which the complainant refers to.

[6] Transcript of a part of the impugned broadcast (Transcript A), with a focus on the opening segment:

Joseph: Twenty-five minutes to 11 on the Daily Discourse, and, of course, you know those movies where humans invent robots and invite them into their world, and the robots eventually take over that world, entirely conquering humankind. We really do associate that with science fiction. But in the last few months we've seen real-life warnings about artificial intelligence that's gone rogue in various contexts.

Recently, several tech companies like Meta, OpenAI, and Anthropic have admitted that their AI systems have done unpredictable things during trials, overcoming security barriers and accessing systems they shouldn't have been able to reach.

Bruce Watson, who's a professor of information science in the department of arts and social sciences at Stellenbosch University, joins us to unpack this a little further. Prof, good morning to you and thanks for your time on the Daily Discourse. Is it true, first of all, that many tech companies working with AI are finding that AI systems are breaching the barriers that have been set for them?

Prof Watson: Yes, it is true actually. It depends a little on what we call the barriers, because there are various ways in which these AI systems are displaying emergent and new behaviour that was unexpected, and, in some cases, they are breaching barriers that we would have expected they'd stay within.

Joseph: So, could you please give me examples in layman's terms of how these AI systems have actually done this?

Prof Watson: Well, they are displaying a remarkable level of creativity. Now the creativity emerges actually from the training data that they've been given in the first place. So it's something that we've actually fed initially and created completely. But the emergent behaviour means that they're coming up with ways of combining things in unforeseen mechanisms.

And one of the best examples is where they've been given the task of breaking into other systems or breaking out of the sandbox that they've been put in. And they then actually are able to go to the internet, are able to find ways of hacking into other systems, and there are several cases that have been in the news of systems going and breaking into other companies either to get information or to get further knowledge about how to break into systems further than that.

Joseph: What would you say, in some human terms, is the difference between them being able to perform remote tasks that they've been assigned and them being able to cross over into critical thinking, so to speak?

Prof Watson: It certainly starts to look like critical thinking. I don't believe that we are very close to having sort of a consciousness that's sitting within there, although they're able to keep the illusion of consciousness. They're able to work much, much faster than humans, and they are able to come up with combinations that humans can't even foresee. So this, in a sense, is rather threatening because of these different combinations – and the efficiency with which they can break into other systems is a certain power that is very difficult to put back in the bottle once it gets out.

[7] After the segment reflected in the transcript, the discussion turned to broader considerations. Below is a transcript (Transcript B) reflecting *all* the further remarks made by the presenter:

- i) American senator Bernie Sanders has just announced the Ban Artificial Super Intelligence Act. What is that act actually about, Prof.?*
- ii) Would you say this is a real fear among the companies building these machines that they could lose control of them once they've reached a certain level of independent thought?*
- iii) Is it the kind of control that could prevent these, I suppose, networked AI machines from combining thought and acting against their creators who try to put in these controls?*
- iv) Prof, are we being paranoid by suggesting that it's possible for non-human thinking to radically disrupt human life as we know it?*
- v) You know the world is really hungry for AI process. It's evolving very fast, I imagine, because of the insatiable appetite out there for it that the the creators of this AI technology do want to move forward and they do want to do so at pace. Do you have a sense that they'd be prepared to play ball in terms of the kind of controls that they would need to put on their AI software for it not to to radically disrupt human life?*
- vi) There is also the fear that the people who own and develop this technology are ethically compromised oligarchs. How worried should we be that such extensive power lies in their hands?*

- vii) *Yeah, but it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility – given the personalities they are, the power they're holding and the funding they have – for one of them to possibly go rogue and start a private project on the side and, you know, out of the glare of governance that allows them to breach some of the barriers we are speaking about.*
- viii) *You just reminded me of something, and that's the issue of data centres. We even had applications for one or two of those to Be books just outside of Cape Town because the space is there you know; presumably there is access to water and of all the other resources when replies to boost data centers, But when I'm curious to know, Do do you see that movement with where you see people are moving into territories like ours that that don't have the requisite AI legislation they to to exercise the requisite control over project Like this and and. you know, we might see a situation with the developed world moves into these locations so that it is given free rein to do almost whatever please.*
- ix) *Prof, I'd like to take a call from one of the listeners. [Listener asks a question followed by an answer from the interviewee]*
- x) *It's so good speaking to Professor Bruce Lawson. Then thank you so much for your time on the Daily Discourse and I'm just going to make a correction there: he is an AI expert from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. So thank you so much -- lovely to have your insight.*

[8] The complainant states the following: “During her introduction, Joanne Joseph described AI machines in human developmental terms. Among the explanations she gave was that they are like children: you begin with a blank slate, input good and bad values and eventually the child grows up and begins making its own decisions. She said that the machines are like this.” Examining the above text, this claim is not supported. The introduction does not refer to the analogy mentioned. Furthermore, the presenter makes no such remarks elsewhere in the broadcast. I cannot apply Clause 12 (2) to comments that were not made.

[9] In the interview, Joseph raises the question of whether a mechanical entity can "cross over into critical thinking" (See Transcript A). However, she poses this as a question, asking about the difference between a system performing assigned remote tasks and one making that transition into critical thinking. The interviewee further disputes the possibility that such a change is or has taken place: He asserts that – although it “starts to look like critical thinking” and there is the “illusion of consciousness”: “I don't believe that we are very close to having sort of a consciousness that's sitting within there”. These are two views in the debate. The one view raises a question (of a possible capability on the part of AI systems), the other repudiates the possibility. In this debate, the claim is not

made that, in the words of the complainant, “they [AI systems] independently think or make decisions in a human-like sense.” In this instance, where the presenter asks what the difference would be between crossing over into critical thinking and “being able to perform remote tasks that they've been assigned”, the presenter has not breached Clause 12(2), which allows for comment but which also stipulates that comment be “made on facts truly stated or fairly indicated and referred to.” Indeed, Clause 12(2) should not, without more, be interpreted in a manner that constrains a presenter from asking probing questions on issues of technological development.

- [10] In outlining his complaint, the complainant makes this request: “I ask the Commission to consider whether SAfm presented claims about current AI systems thinking independently, developing human-like agency or making their own decisions as factual descriptions without an adequate factual basis or qualification.” In the light of the transcript, there is insufficient substantiation to suggest that “SAFM presented claims about current AI systems thinking independently, developing human-like agency.” In addition, the interviewee, Professor Watson, clearly scotched the idea that current AI systems have capacities “very close” to displaying critical thinking and that any such was an illusion.
- [11] The presenter refers, with reference to Transcript B, to “thought” and “thinking” in relation to IA systems and at one stage even refers to “non-human thinking.” The question arises: Is it fair or acceptable to use terms like “thinking” or “thought” for artificial intelligence? The answer largely depends on how one views language? True thought traditionally implies subjective experience, self-awareness, and intentionality—qualities AI completely lacks, as the expert in the programme clarifies. In this sense, using words like thinking and thought in relation to AI in such a way that it conveys (depending on the context and how language is understood to be used) that AI systems have human-type reasoning

would be misleading. On the other hand, in our language words have often extend beyond their limited meaning – thus we say airplanes “fly” and computers have “memory”. Thus, in everyday conversation, thinking is often used to describe calculation, processing, analysing or solving a complex problem. Taking the overall programme into account, there is no conclusive evidence that Joseph was using “thinking” to imply that machine processes were the same as human reasoning and no indisputable facts given that show the programme was trying to mislead.

- [12] As context, both the broadcaster and the complainant affirm the necessity of vigorous debate on AI systems. In its response, the broadcaster refers to the interview conducted by Joseph as “commentary and discussion on a controversial issue of significant public importance.” The complainant observes that “AI is clearly a matter of public importance and should be discussed robustly.”
- [13] The BCCSA’s code is certainly relevant to ensuring such discussions, characterised as “robust” and “controversial”, take place responsibly. The complainant bases his complaint specifically on the Code’s provisions regarding Comment and Clauses 12(2) and 13. In terms of the former, comment “must be presented in such manner that it appears clearly to be comment” and “must be made on facts truly stated or fairly indicated and referred to.” In the second instance, the complainant invokes Clause 13. Clause 13 focuses on the issue of balance and the need for opposing points of view when controversial matters are broadcast.
- [14] Clause 13(1) stipulates that, in discussions of controversial public issues, broadcasters must make reasonable efforts to present opposing viewpoints fairly, either in the same programme or in a subsequent programme within a reasonable time frame and in a similar time slot. In *Lorgat v SAFM*, Case

16/2025, it was stated that the requirement (with respect to Clause 13 (1) is that the broadcaster should make reasonable efforts to present opposing views fairly. In *South African Jewish Board of Deputies vs SABC News*, Case 27A 2024, it was emphasised that, in assessing compliance with Clause 13(1), regard must be had to broadcasters' "freedom of expression and editorial control, and the freedom to choose the focus of a programme."

[15] With respect to Clause 13(1), neither the complainant nor the broadcaster addressed whether differing perspectives on the issue were presented in an earlier broadcast or in a subsequent programme that forms part of the same series.

[16] Additionally, there is a measure of agreement from both parties that the broadcast presented opposing points of view. The broadcaster, in its response, stated: "Significantly, the expert guest did not simply affirm the presenter's framing; rather, he provided nuanced qualifications on key aspects of the discussion." In his reply, the complainant does not challenge this assertion, and appears to concede that the guest did "qualify, correct or soften" what he viewed as the "assertive" remarks made by the presenter in the introduction.

[17] Upon examination of these submissions, the complainant has failed to establish a persuasive case that the broadcaster did not meet the balance requirement set out in Clause 13. Rather, the complainant returns to the separate issue of compliance with Clause 12, a matter already addressed earlier in this evaluation.

No contravention of the BCCSA Code of Conduct was found; accordingly, the complaint is dismissed.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'FM' followed by a stylized flourish.

DR F MEINTJIES
COMMISSIONER: BROADCASTING COMPLAINTS COMMISSION