

## [GB] ITV's Good Morning programme given guidance by Ofcom after comments about Coronavirus and 5G technology

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Ofcom determined that it was not necessary to investigate further complaints against ITV's *Good Morning* programme pursuant to Rule 2.1, about remarks made by one of its presenters, Eamonn Holmes, concerning the causal link between the onset of coronavirus and 5G connectivity. However, Ofcom did issue guidance to ITV and its presenters on how they should rightfully challenge public authorities during the current serious health crisis.

*Good Morning* is a daily magazine programme covering topical issues produced by ITV Broadcasting Limited (ITV). On 13 April 2020, the programme's Consumer Editor, Alice Beer, was discussing fake news stories relating to coronavirus and their causal effect, including allegations that 5G is a main link to the pandemic. Anna Beer mentioned that endorsements of this false story by some celebrities and influencers had had the consequence of causing some 30 acts of vandalism to essential telephone equipment in the UK.

Anna Beer concluded by saying that the allegations linking 5G to coronavirus were not true and acts of vandalism were "incredibly stupid." Eamonn Holmes responded, saying, amongst other things: "No one should attack or damage or do anything like that. But it is very easy to say it is not true because it suits the state narrative. That's all I would say as someone with an enquiring mind." Alice Beer, whilst agreeing with Mr Holmes about enquiring minds, concluded by saying that there should not be the reaction of violence or arson.

The following day, Eamonn Holmes gave an on air statement clarifying his earlier remarks which may have been misinterpreted. He confirmed that there was no connection between 5G and coronavirus by stating: "there's no scientific evidence to substantiate any of those 5G theories."

Ofcom received 755 complaints asserting that Eamonn Holmes' original remarks were potentially harmful. The regulator had to decide whether to investigate pursuant to Section Two of its Code, which requires broadcasters to apply generally accepted standards in order to provide adequate protection for the audience from the inclusion of harmful material in programmes. Ofcom acknowledged that it was for the broadcaster to decide how to comply with this

rule. Furthermore, Ofcom took into account Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights allowing the right to freedom of expression, including editorial freedom to analyse, discuss and challenge the approach of public authorities in relation to coronavirus.

Ofcom said that relevant factors included context, the severity of the situation and whether the material was targeted at a particularly vulnerable audience, and if claims were made by a speaker with authority. ITV contended that several times during the conversation between Alice Beer and Eamonn Holmes it had been stated that there was no connection between 5G and coronavirus. Taking into account the whole programme, ITV had not misled their audience, and the following day, Mr Holmes' remarks were clarified.

Ofcom considered Mr Holmes' remarks ambiguous and stated: "his statement overall potentially risked fuelling a volatile situation surrounding 5G claims." It further commented that Mr Holmes was a very well known presenter and that his intervention was "particularly ill-judged." However, taking account of the overall programme, including Alice Beer's strong rejection of the 5G conspiracy theory, Ofcom concluded that the viewers had been adequately protected from potentially harmful material. Therefore, Ofcom determined that no further investigation was required but provided ITV and its presenters with three guidance points.

First, unproven claims and theories can be included and discussed, but they carry a high risk of potential harm to the audience in the current sensitive times. Therefore, broadcasters must ensure that they provide adequate protection for the audience, such as significant challenge and more context.

Secondly, presenters must take particular care and act responsibly, taking account of their impact upon viewers when articulating views which could undermine viewers' trust in official public health information given during a national health crisis.

Finally, the presenter's role is important during a live programme at a time when ongoing events, such as attacks on telephone equipment, are occurring, and what they say raises the risk of significant harm to the public.

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