[GB] Ofcom imposes £150,000 penalty on Word Network for airing potentially harmful religious programming

IRIS 2025-4:1/16

Alexandros K. Antoniou
University of Essex

On 11 March 2025, the UK's communications regulator, Ofcom, imposed a financial penalty of £150,000 on Word Network Operating Company Inc. for serious breaches of the UK Broadcasting Code. The decision follows the broadcast of two episodes of Peter Popoff Ministries on The Word Network in May 2023, which included repeated claims that a product called "Miracle Spring Water" could cure serious illnesses and resolve financial problems. Ofcom concluded that these programmes breached rules relating to harm and offence, religious exploitation, and undue promotion. In addition to the fine, Ofcom directed The Word Network not to repeat the offending programmes and to broadcast a summary of Ofcom's findings.

The nature of the breach

The programmes in question, aired on 9 and 10 May 2023, featured televangelist Peter Popoff and included multiple direct invitations for viewers to request free "Miracle Spring Water". The broadcasts displayed prominent on-screen QR codes and contact numbers alongside testimonials from individuals claiming miraculous health recoveries and financial windfalls attributed to the water or Popoff's ministry. Ofcom identified these claims as potentially harmful and unsubstantiated. Among the more concerning statements were assertions that the water had cured lung cancer, diabetes, and brought about recovery from drug addiction, or led to unexpected financial gains. These messages were not challenged or qualified in any way, and no medical or financial disclaimers were provided.

Broadcasting Code violations

The broadcasts at issue breached three specific provisions of the Broadcasting Code: first, Rule 2.1 (Harm and Offence), namely that broadcasters must apply generally accepted standards to protect the public from harmful material. Ofcom found that the unqualified medical and financial claims presented a high risk of harm, particularly to vulnerable audiences. The implication that "Miracle Spring Water" could serve as an alternative to conventional treatment or financial planning was deemed especially problematic. Second, Rule 4.6 (Religious

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

Programming), namely that religious content must not improperly exploit the audience's susceptibilities. Given the religious framing of the messages and the authority attributed to Popoff as a religious figure, Ofcom found a significant risk that vulnerable viewers might be manipulated by unchallenged claims into taking ill-advised actions; and third, Rule 9.4 (Commercial References) which prohibits the promotion of products or services in programmes, irrespective of whether they are offered in return for payment or not. The programmes here clearly promoted the "Miracle Spring Water" through visual and verbal references, constituting undue promotion even though the product was ostensibly free.

The contraventions of Rules 2.1, 4.6 and 9.4 represented particularly serious failures of compliance. The regulator's decision is grounded in its duties under the Communications Act 2003, which requires the regulator to further citizens' interests in relation to communications matters and consumers' interests in relevant markets. The ruling also reflects Ofcom's responsibilities as a public authority under the Human Rights Act 1998, including balancing the broadcaster's rights to freedom of expression (Article 10) and religion (Article 9) with the imperative to protect public health and prevent exploitation. Ofcom found that the content in question went beyond protected religious expression, crossing into claims that could cause real-world harm to viewers' physical health or financial well-being.

Ofcom's responses to the licensee's representations

The Word Network, a US-based broadcaster holding a UK licence, submitted that its audience understands the "Miracle Spring Water" as symbolic, i.e., a spiritual tool, not a medical treatment or cure. It argued that viewers would not see the water as a substitute for professional advice. Ofcom rejected this view, underlining that the broadcasts presented the product in unequivocal, literal terms, often reinforced by Popoff himself, and offered no disclaimers or alternative viewpoints. Viewers, especially those facing health or financial hardship, could reasonably understand the claims as fact-based, not merely faith-based.

The Word Network also claimed it lacked creative or editorial control over the Popoff programmes and was unaware of past regulatory actions concerning similar content. Ofcom dismissed this argument, stating that as a licensee, The Word Network is fully responsible for content broadcast under its UK licence. Moreover, previous decisions involving Popoff's programming (with some involving similar claims) were publicly available and should have been considered by the Network.

Sanctions, remedial actions and cooperation

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

Ofcom imposed three separate sanctions: (a) a £150,000 financial penalty, determined to reflect the seriousness of the breaches, ensure deterrence, and incentivise future compliance; (b) a direction not to repeat the programmes to prevent future harm to viewers; and (c) a direction to broadcast Ofcom's findings to inform audiences and acknowledge the breach publicly.

Ofcom considered revoking the licence but opted against it, noting that although two programmes were in violation, these were The Word Network's first breaches of the Code and that the network had since taken steps to prevent recurrence.

The financial penalty was set with regard to Ofcom's Penalty Guidelines, the seriousness and nature of the breaches, the potential for viewer harm (actual or potential, incl. any increased cost incurred by consumers), and the licensee's failure to take adequate steps to prevent or mitigate the risk. While the financial gain from the broadcast was limited, Ofcom noted that the promotional nature of the content meant it could result in indirect financial benefits to Peter Popoff Ministries.

After the Breach Decision, The Word Network took several steps to improve compliance, including negotiating content changes with Peter Popoff Ministries; terminating the contract relating to the Ministries series; and implementing new broadcast software to prevent UK transmission of specific global content. However, Ofcom expressed concern over the broadcaster's initial unwillingness to provide requested contractual information and its limited understanding of UK regulatory standards. The broadcaster only submitted key documents after receiving a formal Direction from Ofcom.

Ofcom's ruling emphasises the regulator's strict approach to unsubstantiated claims in religious and health-related programming. It is particularly relevant for broadcasters that carry third-party religious content or operate from outside the UK jurisdiction but hold UK licences. The decision also reflects Ofcom's increased scrutiny of material that targets potentially vulnerable audiences (whether due to health, economic hardship, or religious belief) and the importance of applying due editorial oversight even to paid or externally-produced content. Broadcasters are reminded through this decision that religious expression does not override the requirement to protect audiences from harm or exploitation, and that promotional content must be clearly separated from editorial programming.

Overall, the ruling against The Word Network marks a significant enforcement action under the Broadcasting Code and reaffirms Ofcom's expectation that broadcasters take full responsibility for the content they transmit and ensure compliance, particularly when handling sensitive issues like health, faith, and personal finances.

Ofcom Decision on Word Network Operating Company Inc

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/about-ofcom/bulletins/content-sanctions-and-adjudications/sanction-decision-the-word-network-operating-company.pdf?v=392397

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026