[AT] ORF Phone-In Programme Under the Spotlight

IRIS 2005-6:1/12

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Österreichische Rundfunk (the Austrian public service broadcaster - ORF) currently broadcasts the programme “Quiz Express” four times a week during its night-time schedule. Viewers can call a premium rate number to win money and other prizes if they get through to take part in the programme and correctly answer general knowledge questions. Callers are chosen at random to take part in the programme. Those who are not chosen still have to pay the cost of the phone call.

In March 2005, the Publikumsrat, the ORF body that is meant to protect the interests of viewers and listeners, submitted a recommendation to the ORF management. It asked for an explanation of the role that phone-in programmes would play in the ORF's future programming and business strategy and requested that the quality criteria applicable to these programmes be made public. The Publikumsrat also recommended that an international comparative study be conducted into the use of phone-in programmes by public service broadcasters and that the programme “Quiz Express” be made less financially-oriented.

The Director General of the ORF defended the programme by arguing that the broadcaster needed additional funds, since it could not finance itself purely through licence fees and its advertising potential was limited. She did not think any legal provisions had been breached. The German broadcaster RTL II, which can be received in Austria via cable, recently reinstated a similar programme following complaints from viewers.

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