[GB] Complaint Against Depiction of Arab Character in Wrestling Programme Upheld

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The UK regulator, Ofcom, has upheld complaints against the broadcast of a wrestling bout involving the depiction of an Arab by Sky Sports 1. Sky had broadcast `The Great American Bash', produced by World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., live from the USA at 1am on 25 July 2005. The programme had featured a wrestling bout between two characters who called themselves `The Undertaker' and `Mohammed Hassan'. The latter described himself as Arab-American and wore an Arab head-dress; his act included references to religious practices and the use of emotive language such as `martyr', `sacrifice' and `infidel'. He was accompanied by masked men in combat-style clothes who described themselves as his `sympathisers'. Footage of this character was set to a soundtrack of the Muslim call to prayer.

An earlier encounter between the two wrestlers due to have been broadcast on 8 July 2005 (the day after the London bombings) has not been broadcast by Sky, although material from it was broadcast in the build-up to the bout on 25 July. This included footage in which the `sympathisers' appeared to attack the opponent. Sky agreed that the promotional material from the earlier bout should not have been included, and it had since expressed its concerns to the organisers of the contest who had confirmed that the character would not re-appear.

Ofcom accepted that American professional wrestling programmes were comprised of contrived feuds and fake brawls, with ongoing storylines and characters. This programme had been appropriately scheduled and a clear warning given, thus it did not breach requirements relating to the protection of children (as one complaint had alleged). However, Ofcom decided that the broadcast breached Rule 2.3 of the Broadcasting Code, which provides that material which may cause offence must be justified by the context. The inclusion of the bout, given the current environment, and the use of religious and emotive references linked with militant activity, was a mistake. Given that this was a wrestling match for entertainment, there was no justification from the context, and Ofcom's concerns were heightened by the broadcast being shown so soon after the events in London on 7 and 21 July 2005.

Ofcom, Broadcast Bulletin 48, 21 November 2005, p. 3

http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/obb/prog_cb/pcb47/

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