[GB] Accuracy, Tony Blair and God

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Tony Prosser
University of Bristol Law School

The UK media regulator, Ofcom, has found ITV to be in breach of the Ofcom standards code in relation to its news reporting on 3 March 2006 of an interview with the Prime Minister concerning the role of God in his decision to go to war in Iraq. Rule 5.1 of the Broadcasting Code requires that news must be reported "with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality", and complaints had been made by ten viewers that this rule had been breached.

The Prime Minister had been interviewed by Michael Parkinson, a veteran chat show host, for the Parkinson programme. Clips from the interview were supplied in advance to ITV news. One of these included a question from Parkinson as to whether Mr Blair would pray to God before making a decision such as that of going to war. The answer was confused, with both the Prime Minister and the interviewer talking simultaneously, and was recorded as "but it's…yeah, I…you, you, but you…, of course…, it's … you, you struggle with your own conscience about it because people's lives are affected". This was interpreted by ITV news as meaning that the Prime Minister had linked his decision to go to war with God and that he had prayed before taking military action. The news broadcast did not refer to other possible interpretations of the answer, and stated that such a statement was provocative and inflammatory in the context of the Middle East; it used the terms "Holy War" and "Act of Faith". ITV accepted that some of its reporting should have been in less provocative terms, but argued that its analysis was within the terms of reasonable editorial discretion.

Ofcom considered that it is particularly important that a controversial issue such as the Iraq war is reported with due accuracy. It noted that other interpretations of the remarks, in the context of the rest of the interview were possible, for example, that the Prime Minister was stating that his decision would be judged by God and the people, and that he had struggled with his own conscience before taking it. There was no certainty that the words "yeah" and "of course" referred directly to Parkinson's question; they may only have been "punctuations in Mr Blair's thought process, as he considered how to answer the question". ITV News had not mentioned other possible interpretations, and so the statements made in the news broadcast had not been reported with "due accuracy". This was compounded by the strident presentation of the story.

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Ofcom also considered whether there had been a breach of Rule 3.1 prohibiting the broadcasting of material likely to encourage or incite crime or disorder. Although the reporting should have been less provocative and strident, Ofcom did not consider that ITV had breached this rule.

As ITV had voluntarily decided to carry a summary of Ofcom's finding, the regulator considered further formal sanctions to be unnecessary.

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