[GB] Regulator Finds Broadcaster Breached Code by Promotion of Commercial Website

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Tony Prosser
University of Bristol Law School

Scottish Television, a commercial public service broadcaster, was found to be in breach of the Broadcasting Code by Ofcom, the UK communications regulator. The Code prohibits the promotion in programmes of products and services (with the exception of programme-related material), and the giving of undue prominence to products and services. Undue prominence may arise through reference to a product where there is no editorial justification, or through the manner in which a product appears in a programme.

Scottish Television is owned by the Scottish Media Group (SMG). Its news programme included an item on “a new SMG website, Peopleschampion.com”. Close-up shots of the website were shown, including its address and logo, and a voiceover stated that it would permit users to choose the best financial deals such as mortgages and insurance. An SMG spokesman stated that “with the strength of our brand in Scotland and the cross-promotion we can give this site, we will see Peopleschampion become a very important part of the consumer language out there when they’re looking for value for money”. The news presenter wrapped up the item by simply repeating the name “Peopleschampion.com”.

A complaint was made that this was, in effect, an advertisement for the website. Scottish Television said that the website was not yet active at the time of the broadcast, and that the item was justified by widespread business and consumer interest in Scotland. However, Ofcom noted that the more commercial the product and the more prominent the references to it in a programme, the more likely it will be that the Code provisions will be breached. In this case the manner in which the website was described gave detailed and favourable information about it, and the close-ups of the name and logo were unduly prominent for a news item. Although free to users, the website was a commercial offering. If the item was a promotional piece for the website, that would also breach the Code as the website was not programme-related. Thus, the regulator concluded that the item promoted the website in an unacceptable manner and also gave it undue prominence.

“Scotland Today, STV, 07 August 2006, 18.00”, in Ofcom Broadcasting Bulletin Issue 80, 12 March 2007

http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/obb/prog_cb/obb80/

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