[GB] Regulator Fines the Islam Channel for Breach of Ban on Election Candidates Presenting Programmes

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The UK communications regulator, the Office of Communications (Ofcom) has fined the Islam Channel GBP 30,000 for a number of breaches of its Broadcasting Code. The Code prohibits candidates in UK elections from acting as news presenters, interviewers, or presenters of any type of programme during the election period. It also requires that due impartiality be observed and that a range of significant views be included in programmes relating to matters of major political controversy.

The Islam Channel is a specialist religious channel broadcasting on the Sky platform and it is directed at a largely Muslim audience in Britain and elsewhere. During the period of local elections in 2006, two current affairs series ("The Agenda" and "Politics and the Media") were presented by candidates standing for election, one as a local councillor and one as a mayor. Ofcom regarded the breaches of the rule against candidates acting as presenters as particularly serious, as it was designed to help secure the integrity of the democratic process through avoiding electoral advantage to any particular candidate. The rule was clear and unambiguous, but in the first case the presenter had been allowed to continue for three weeks during the election period, and in the second case three programmes had been broadcast by the candidate. The breaches were a direct result of management and compliance failures, and Ofcom concluded that they represented very serious breaches of the Code. In determining the penalty, Ofcom took into account the fact that the broadcaster is a small organisation with limited resources and faces particular compliance pressures as a religious channel; GBP 30,000 was the appropriate amount to cause some financial pain whilst not stifling diversity and debate in the channel's programmes.

The Islam Channel had also broadcast a programme entitled "Jerusalem: A Promise of Heaven" examining the position of the city from a Palestinian perspective. Ofcom considered that this breached the rules on due impartiality and failed to present a wide range of significant views. However, Ofcom considered that this breach was not in itself sufficiently serious to warrant the imposition of a statutory sanction such as a fine.

Ofcom, "Adjudication of Ofcom Content Sanctions Committee - Islam Channel Ltd in Respect of its Service The Islam Channel", 31 July 2007

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http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/obb/ocsc_adjud/islamchannel.pdf

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