[GB] Regulator Rejects Police Complaint on Coverage of Islamic Extremism

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Ofcom, the UK communications regulator, has rejected a complaint from the West Midlands Police about the Dispatches programme broadcast by Channel 4 on 15 January 2007 reporting the observations of an undercover reporter who had visited a number of mosques and Islamic organisations in Britain and had found examples of extremist speech. The programme had claimed to find "…an ideology of bigotry and intolerance spreading through Britain with its roots in Saudi Arabia". The programme included secretly filmed footage and recordings of speeches, which it claimed to be homophobic, anti-Semitic, sexist and condemnatory of non-Muslims, as well as excerpts from books and websites connected with the mosques.

Ofcom received 364 complaints from viewers (it noted that these appeared to be part of a campaign). It was particularly unusual that one complaint was from the West Midlands Police, who had launched an investigation immediately after the programme into whether criminal offences had been committed by those preaching in the mosques or connected with them. It was concluded that there was insufficient evidence to bring criminal charges against anyone featured in the programme. The police then complained to Ofcom that the programme had been subject to such an intensity of editing that those featured had been misrepresented; that the broadcast footage had been so edited as to be "sufficient to undermine community cohesion" and that the programme was "likely to undermine feelings of public reassurance and safety of those communities in the West Midlands for which the Chief Constable has a responsibility". The police also claimed that there had been a number of more specific distortions due to editing, that the narrative provided pre-conceived ideas of what a speaker was trying to convey, and that the programme might not have accurately reflected daily life in one of the mosques covered. The broadcaster responded robustly, claiming that the police allegations were "utterly without foundation", showed "staggering naivety" and amounted to a fundamental misunderstanding of the editing process by which television programmes are made.

Ofcom rejected the viewer and police complaints on all grounds. It noted that investigative journalism plays an essential role in public service broadcasting and is clearly in the public interest. The vast majority of the audience understands that documentaries are edited down from hours of footage and, provided those

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featured in the programmes are not treated unfairly and that viewers are not materially misled, this is an acceptable practice. The programme had not implied that the extreme views are held by all Muslims, and had included contributions from more mainstream Muslim organisations that had condemned the extreme views. The views of the speakers reported had not been misrepresented in editing. The choice of what material to include was an editorial decision for the broadcaster with which Ofcom should not intervene unless there had been a breach of the Broadcast Code. There was nothing in the programme that gave the impression that it set out to show daily life in the mosque. Thus the programme represented a legitimate investigation uncovering matters of important public interest, and there was no evidence that the broadcaster had misled the audience or that the programme was likely to encourage or incite criminal activity. Separately, Ofcom also rejected complaints about the programme from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Culture Centre and the London Central Mosque.

Dispatches: 'Undercover Mosque', Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin, Issue 97, 19 November 2007, pp. 9-20, 44-67

http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/obb/prog_cb/obb97/issue97.pdf

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