[GB] Regulator Reviews Programmes Sponsored by the Scottish Government

IRIS 2010-9:1/28

Tony Prosser
University of Bristol Law School

Ofcom, the UK communications regulator, has examined 57 programmes broadcast on STV (Scottish commercial television) sponsored by the Scottish Government after press allegations that the Government had influenced the content of programming. The allegations made reference to three programmes (the "Homecoming programmes") sponsored by a Scottish newspaper and Homecoming Scotland. The latter was an initiative of the Scottish Government to get Scots at home and abroad to reconnect with Scotland and consisted of events, festivals and celebrations. The press reports had quoted letters from SCV's Chief Executive referring to the need to "incorporate our innovative thinking around television exposure for the benefit of the Government" and to "forge a closer partnership with the Government". Ofcom expanded its investigation to cover all programmes sponsored by the Scottish Government, including 12 homecoming programmes and 45 others, mainly one-minute public information films.

The Communications Act 2003 does not prohibit sponsorship of programmes by a government body. However, the Broadcasting Code requires that a sponsor must not influence the content of a programme so as to undermine the broadcaster's independence; there must be no promotional reference to the sponsor; sponsorship must be clearly identified; and the relationship between sponsor and programme must be transparent.

Ofcom found that 39 of the programmes did not breach the Code; these included all of the Homecoming programmes. However, 18 of the short programmes were in breach of the Code, mainly through editorial content being too closely linked to the sponsor and, in one series, due to a lack of transparency in relation to the sponsorship arrangements. For example, programmes promoting attendance at adult education courses promoted the services of the sponsor, Learn Direct Scotland. A programme on care for the elderly was considered by Ofcom to reassure viewers that the Scottish Government's National Care Standards work in favour of elderly citizens and so was akin to an advertisement for the sponsor. The programme "The Great Scottish Meal" identified "Specially Selected Pork" as the sponsor whilst not making it clear that the overall sponsor was Quality Meat Scotland, a government agency.

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

Ofcom, "Scottish Government Sponsorship of Programmes", Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin 163, 2 August 2010, 31-55

http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb163/issue163.pdf

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026