[GB] Bangladeshi Satellite Broadcaster CHSTV in Breach of Ofcom Impartiality Rules

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On 3 June 2013, the free-to-air satellite and cable broadcaster CHSTV, which provides general news and entertainment services aimed at the Bangladeshi community in the UK, was held by Ofcom to be in breach of Rule 5.1 of the Broadcasting Code, which requires due impartiality in broadcast news. The item in question was broadcast on 12 February 2013 and concerned disturbances surrounding the 'Shahbag' protests, which were organised by the Bangladeshi opposition party Jamaat, in protest against various actions of the International Criminal Court (ICT) in Bangladesh, particularly the decision to sentence the Jamaat leader Kader Molla to life in prison.

Ofcom received two complaints regarding the CHSTV coverage, specifically related to the perceived bias or lack of impartiality in the news segment. The Ofcom report quotes the item extensively pointing out a number of statements critical of the Jamaat organisation and associated groups, and notes that despite this, during the course of the 17 minute segment, no explicit or even implicit representation of the Jamaat point of view was given.

The ICT was established in the country to investigate and try war crimes connected to the 1971 war of independence in Bangladesh. The topic of the war, the continued tensions and the work of the tribunal is a very emotive topic for Bangladeshis and provokes strong reactions from all factions. In this light the CHSTV submission protested the difficulty of representing all points of view and made the specific point that its coverage reflected the tone of the reporting of the disturbances on local Bangladeshi TV. The licensee made further representations regarding the constraints of the budget they worked within and that they were reliant upon the terrestrial Bangladeshi stations and news organisations for much of their material.

Despite recognising these constraints, Ofcom deemed that it would not have been difficult to garner the views of Jamaat or a linked representative, as would be required when the piece was so openly critical of that organisation. The Ofcom report was at pains to emphasise that impartiality is not a single stationary concept, but that the standard is rather due impartiality judged in the context of the story and the report.

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This breach once again brings to light the issue of impartiality required of non-PSB (public service broadcasters) in reporting the news. There is scepticism as to how the concept can be correctly judged in differing circumstances, and a recent House of Lords Communications Committee report envisaged a time when this requirement could be relaxed or removed to bring non-PSB news closer to the mode of the printed press, which has no such impartiality requirement.

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http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb231/obb231.pdf

House of Lords Communications Committee Report on Media Convergence

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldselect/ldcomuni/154/15402.htm

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