[GB] Regulator decides that popular BBC programme included racially offensive material

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Ofcom, the UK Communications Regulator, received two complaints about a racial reference in the very popular BBC programme 'Top Gear', a magazine series on motoring. The BBC is covered by the Ofcom Programme Code, rule 2.3 of which states that '[i]n applying generally accepted standards broadcasters must ensure that material which causes offence is justified by the context'. Such offensive material may include 'discriminatory treatment or language' (for example, on the grounds of race).

The episode of 'Top Gear' was filmed in Burma, and involved the presenters building a makeshift bridge over the River Kwai. When it was completed, Jeremy Clarkson, the main presenter, said 'that is a proud moment ... but ... there is a slope on it' and an Asian man was seen crossing the bridge. Clarkson then stated 'we decide to ignore the slope and move onto the opening ceremony'. As well as its ordinary meaning of an irregularity, 'slope' is an offensive and pejorative term for a person of East Asian descent, which originated during the Vietnam War.

The BBC stated that the remarks had been pre-scripted and were intended as an inoffensive play on words and that the programme makers were unaware of its potential to cause offence. On realising that it could cause offence, the BBC had issued an apology.

Ofcom decided that that word 'slope' is a pejorative racial term, which has the potential to be offensive to Asian people specifically, as well as to viewers more generally. 'Top Gear' is an irreverent programme with outspoken humour and in the past had used national stereotypes for comic effect. The regular audience adjusts its expectations accordingly. However, this term was deliberately used to refer to the Asian person crossing the bridge; as it was scripted in advance, there had been an opportunity to research the word and its effect during filming and post-production. Ofcom noted that the BBC now accepted that the word was capable of causing offence and had apologised. There was insufficient context to justify the broadcast of the word and the BBC had not applied generally accepted standards to protect members of the public from offensive material. It therefore found a breach of rule 2.3.

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'Top Gear Burma Special', Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin, Issue 259, 28 July 2014, 8-10

http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb259/obb259.pdf

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