[GB] Decision on Vox-Pop interviews about police not duly impartial or accurate

IRIS 2015-5:1/16

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Channel 4 News broadcast an item on 6 March 2014 concerning possible corruption in the London Metropolitan Police (MPS), as well as, in another situation, the role of undercover policing. The item involved, to a small extent, a reporter conducting “vox-pop” interviews with five individuals in an area of South London, defined as “recorded interviews with members of the public talking informally in public places about particular topics.”

The (London) Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) complained to Ofcom that the item was neither duly accurate nor duly impartial (the MPS, additionally, complained of unjust or unfair treatment in the programme as broadcast). The reporter asked five people the question: “Do you trust the police?” All the respondents answered in the negative.

The following week, Channel 4 broadcast an apology. It stated that the impression had been given that at least four of the interviewees had been chosen at random. However, this was not the case and Channel 4 stated: “We would like to make clear the individuals were all linked to a youth focused organisation based in Brixton and were not a random sample. This should have been made clear and it was not our intention to mislead in any way. We apologise for the impression given, which fell below our normal high standards”.

Rule 5.1 of the Broadcast Code requires that “[n]ews, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality”. In that regard, Ofcom decided that, taking the whole segment of the programme into account during which other non-critical opinions were broadcast, the item did not warrant investigation as failing to be duly impartial. However, Ofcom considered that the item warranted investigation under Rule 5.1 of the Code in relation to its requirement that news must be reported with due accuracy.

As to the vox-pop interviews, Ofcom addressed two issues: first, the manner in which these interviews were presented in the programme as to how they were selected; and second, whether they were representative of likely attitudes to the MPS amongst black people in Brixton.

As to the first issue: given that three of the interviewees were only identified by their names and interviewed in different street settings, there was potential for

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viewers to have been misled, as in fact they were from the same organisation with which the reporter had links (Livity). Thus, “the programme did not provide sufficient biographical details of these three interviewees, to make clear that they were not members of the public stopped at random for the purpose of taking part in an interview”. Ofcom decided that there had been an infringement of the Code and the reporter’s relative lack of experience was no excuse. Channel 4 had failed to properly select and present three of the vox-pop interviews.

As regards the second question of the representativeness as a whole of the views expressed vis-a-vis the people of the area: Ofcom accepted that whether including other interviewees would have produced a different overall impression is a matter of conjecture and that it is impossible to reach a “definitive conclusion” as to the extent of variation of views about the MPS in the area. However, Ofcom concluded that “if the reporter had used a genuinely random selection of people in the report, he may have received more varied responses” and so in this respect the news was not presented with due accuracy. This was found to hold true even though the vox-pop segment only took up a small amount of the overall item.

Ofcom considers that it is a “fundamental obligation” on, in particular, public service broadcasters, to “ensure that audiences are not misled by the manner in which news is presented” and that “[b]reaches of this nature are amongst the most serious that can be committed by a broadcaster”. The reason for this is because it is at “the heart of the relationship of trust between a broadcaster and its audience.”

Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin, “News report on Metropolitan Police Service and the Ellison Review”, Issue 273, 16 February 2015, 6-17

http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb273/Issue273.pdf

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