[GB] Channel 4 News breaches Ofcom's accuracy rules by showing misleading archive footage during news report

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Julian Wilkins
Wordley Partnership

Ofcom determined that the Channel 4 News report on Russia's foreign and military policy in Eastern and Western Europe following President Putin's early exit from the G20 summit in Brisbane Australia contravened rule 5.1 of the code of conduct which states that "News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality".

Pursuant to the Communications Act 2003, Ofcom has a statutory duty to set standards for broadcast content, including that TV and radio news services are reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality. However, when implementing the requirement of accurate and impartial news reports, Ofcom has to balance that against a broadcaster's and its audience's right to freedom of expression pursuant to Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Channel 4 News is produced by Independent Television News (ITN) for Channel 4, a terrestrial public service TV station in the UK. On 17 November 2014, Channel 4 news broadcast a report about 5 minutes in length presented by their foreign correspondent, Cathy Newman. Behind Cathy Newman appeared an image of President Putin with the title "Russia roars".

The introductory lines of the news report stated the following: "Rebuked by world leaders, Russia's leader Vladimir Putin made an early exit from the G20 summit in Australia this weekend, warned by President Obama, 'you don't invade other countries and finance proxies'. The impact of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere has been felt across Eastern Europe - not least in Prague 25 years after it broke free from the former Soviet bloc".

The first 3 minutes of the report focused on Eastern Europe, including footage of protesters in Prague holding up red cards in protest against the President of the Czech Republic, Milos Zeman, for allegedly allowing Prague "to drift close to President Putin" on the 25th anniversary of the so-called Velvet Revolution, when in 1989 there was a non-violent transition from Communist rule in Czechoslovakia to a parliamentary republic.

The report proceeded to focus on the UK with the correspondent saying: "NATO says its aircraft have intercepted more than 100 Russian military planes over

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Northern Europe this year, three times as many as last year, and back to Cold War levels this year. They included several incursions into British air space".

At this point there was an audio clip of a Royal Air Force (RAF) pilot warning an aircraft in British airspace saying: "I'm instructed by Her Majesty's Government of the United Kingdom to warn you that if you do not respond immediately to my order you will be shot down". The plane depicted was a Latvian aircraft being intercepted by the RAF, but the Channel 4 report gave the impression it was a Russian piloted aircraft.

In response to the Ofcom complaint, Channel 4 News responded by saying that they apologised for the mistake. The 8-second clip formed only a fraction of the overall report and was not the main focus of the report.

On 29 October 2014, there had been an interception of a civilian Latvian Russian-made cargo plane and also there had been reports of two Russian aircrafts being intercepted by the RAF. Channel 4 said that the producer and presenter believed the audio clip related to an intervention of a Russian aircraft; further in mitigation, the report had been removed from the website and when reinstated the audio extract had been deleted, whilst a notice stated the original report wrongfully depicted the aircraft as a Russian controlled plane. Also, ITN had amended its internal system for archiving reports.

Ofcom took account of Channel 4 News representations and said that, when applying Rule 5.1 of the Code, due accuracy meant adequate or appropriate to the subject matter. It was vital viewers could trust news broadcasts as being accurate.

Whilst the clip did not give specific details of date and time of the incident, the purpose of the recording was to depict a recent intervention of a Russian military aircraft and as such it was misleading to viewers by showing a Latvian civilian aircraft. The broadcast was some three weeks after the incident and this gave Channel 4 sufficient time to ensure due accuracy in their reporting. Ofcom were also concerned that this complaint arose shortly after another breach of rule 5.1 by Channel 4 News concerning a lapse of impartiality towards London's Metropolitan Police when reporting on the Ellison Report about race relations (see IRIS 2015-5/16).

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http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb277/Issue277.pdf

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