[GB] BBC World News breached Ofcom rules by allowing current affairs programmes to be sponsored

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Julian Wilkins
Wordley Partnership

BBC World News (BBCWN) is a 24 hour international news and information channel owned by BBC Global News Limited (BBCGTV), a commercial subsidiary of the BBC, and funded through advertising and subscription. BBCGTV holds an Ofcom Licence. Ofcom investigated BBCWN for possible breaches of funding rules resulting from broadcasting documentaries without cost or at a nominal cost, as low as £1. Ofcom initially investigated 75 programmes broadcast on BBCWN, narrowing it to 14 programmes.

Each programme lasted around 30 minutes and was funded by not-for-profit organisations operating largely in the areas of developing-world issues and environmental concerns. Ofcom applied Section 320 (1)(b) Communications Act 2003 (2003 Act) to ensure programmes maintain impartiality, especially in matters of political and industrial controversy, as stated in Section 320 (2) of the 2003 Act.

Ofcom also applied a number of Rules in the Ofcom Code from the 2008 - 2011 editions of the code, including: (a) Rule 5.5 which provides that “due impartiality on matters of political or industrial controversy and matters relating to current public policy must be reserved on the part of any person providing a service. This may be achieved within a programme or over a series of programmes taken as a whole”; (b) Rule 9.1 that “news and current affairs programmes on television” may not be sponsored; (c) Rule 9.5 prohibiting “promotional reference to the sponsor, its name, trademark, image, activities, services or products or to any of its other references. Non promotional references are permitted only where they are editorially justified and incidental”; (d) Rule 9.19 stating, “sponsorship must be clearly identified by means of sponsorship credits. These must make clear the identity of the sponsor by reference to its name or trademark; and the association between the sponsor and the sponsor content”; and (e) Rule 9.20 that for sponsored programmes, credits must be broadcast at the beginning and/or during and/or end of programme.

Ofcom considered the 14 programmes were each in breach of certain applicable rules, depending upon date of broadcast. Some of the programmes included were “Taking the Credit” (23 October 2009); “Earth Report Burning Bush” (28 October 2009); and “Earth Report REDD Alert” (4 November 2009). All breached Rule 9.1

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(October 2008 Code) as current affairs programme and sponsorship was forbidden.

Moreover, “Kill or Cure - Bittersweet” (12 January 2010) breached the rules for being a sponsored current affairs programme promoting its sponsor, International Diabetes Federation; “Stealing the Past” (26 March 2011) breached the rules for being a current affairs programme sponsored by UNESCO; “Nature Inc - Hard Rain” 1 (16 April 2011) breached the rules because it was a current affairs programme funded by UNDP and there had been insufficient clarity to show it was sponsored; and “Nature Inc 21 Gigatonne Time Bomb” (4 June 2011) breached the rules for being a current affairs programme about policy on the effect of hydrocarbons on global warming yet had a sponsor, OzonAction and United Nations Environment Programme.

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http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb285/Issue_285.pdf

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