[GB] Channel 4 News breaches accuracy rules during Shoreham air crash report

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Ofcom has determined that the Channel 4 News report on 25 August 2015 concerning the aftermath of the Shoreham air show crash two days earlier was in breach of Rule 5.1 of the Ofcom code, as it did not report facts concerning the circumstances of two of the crash victims with due accuracy.

Channel 4 News is produced by Independent Television News (ITN) for Channel 4, a terrestrial public service TV station in the UK. On 23 August 2015 a vintage aircraft crashed onto a main road at Shoreham, West Sussex, England, during a display at an air show, killing 11 people. On 25 August 2015 Channel 4 News held a live piece whereby the reporter, Cordelia Lynch, spoke to the studio news presenter Cathy Newman at the crash scene.

The report, which lasted about three minutes 45 seconds, included pre-recorded footage of the crash scene and also a report about one of the victims, Matt Jones, who was a member of a local football team. This was followed by a still image of Daniele Polito for about four seconds and then an image of Mark Trussler for a further four seconds. These images were accompanied by commentary by Ms Lynch: “By the afternoon Daniele Polito, who was in the car with him [Matt Jones], was also named among the dead. So too was motorcyclist Mark Trussler”.

At the time of this broadcast report both Daniele Polito and Mark Trussler had not been formally declared dead. Sussex Police had left it to families whether or not to publicly confirm the death of a victim. By 24 August 2015 some family members had given confirmation that a relative had died, but others had not issued such a confirmation as some hoped their relative might still be alive.

Channel 4 noted that at the time of the broadcast various news media had said Mr Polito and Mr Trussler were “missing feared dead”. ITN’s editorial team had spoken to a colleague of victim Matt Jones, saying Mr Polito had died. A family member of Mark Trussler asked that they were not to be contacted by the media, and via a note circulated by the Press Standards Organisation stated that “Mr Trussler had been presumed killed”. Online news sites made references to Mr Trussler being dead alongside an image of him but the body of the articles stated he remained missing.

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Channel 4 said that it was difficult to acquire information from Sussex Police to confirm whether a victim was dead. Channel 4 conceded that there was no direct confirmation as to the deaths of Daniele Polito and Mark Trussler and that there had not been compliance with their editorial procedures. Channel 4 said they had immediately removed references to the deaths from their online site and gave unreserved apologies.

Under the Communications Act 2003 Ofcom has a statutory duty to set standards for broadcast content, including for radio and television news to report with due accuracy and impartiality. These objectives are embodied in section five of the Broadcasting Code. Rule 5.1 contains the requirement for broadcasters to report with “due accuracy”. The notes accompanying the rules indicate the term “due” means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. Ofcom stated that it was important for broadcasters to maintain the trust of their viewers.

Ofcom accepted that it was appropriate for Channel 4 to refer to the two victims during the report, but the broadcast description was not accurate, and there was potential for the viewing audience to have been misled to believe both Mr Polito and Mr Trussler had been officially declared dead, whereas there status was still that of missing. Also, the reporting had the effect of causing distress to the victims’ family and friends. Ofcom also noted that the inaccurate piece was pre-recorded and so the error should have been identified before broadcast.

Ofcom considered the broadcast of a statement in a news item that two people had died without appropriate confirmation to be a significant lapse in editorial judgment that breached Rule 5.1. Further, Ofcom noted that this was Channel 4 News’ third recent breach of Rule 5.1 (see IRIS 2015-7/17 and IRIS 2015-5/16) and requested that they attend a meeting to discuss compliance in this area.

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