[GB] Ofcom clears Sky news of “fake news” accusation and UK Parliamentary committee investigates the effect of “fake news”

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A Sky News report broadcast on 7 August 2016 showing an interview with alleged gun dealers in Romania was determined by Ofcom not to have been staged or faked, nor lacking in impartiality. As a consequence Ofcom found the report had not breached Rule 5.1 of Ofcom’s Broadcasting Code. The Sky studio introduction to the report said that “A Romanian Gang has told Sky News it’s prepared to sell automatic weapons to anyone, including terrorists ... Our chief correspondent Stuart Ramsey has travelled to Romania to meet the gun dealers who claim to have thousands of weapons.” The two alleged gun dealers wear hoods to hide their identity and show the news crew various weapons including hunting guns and an AK 47 available for sale. The package includes footage from the Charlie Hebdo attack and reference in the commentary to the AK 47 being the terrorist’s “weapon of choice”.

Ofcom received over 190 complaints following the report, and the Directorate for Investigating Organised Crime and Terrorism in Romania issued a statement on the report. Sky rebutted the complaints that the news report was fake and that the alleged terrorist had been paid by the news organisation. The interview had taken some time to organise and had been arranged through an experienced UK-based “media fixer”, who had introduced a Romanian fixer/interpreter. Sky had worked with the UK fixer before and he had worked for other media organisations too. Both fixers had been paid by Sky for their services, but Sky had not paid money to the arms dealers. Sky produced documentation of the payments and to whom they had been paid. The news organisation admitted some of the weapons shown were hunting weapons. Both Stuart Ramsey and the Sky Head of Security, also present at the interview, had extensive experience of conflict zones and believed that many of the weapons they inspected were of military grade, in particular the AK-47.

Ofcom accepted that nowhere in the broadcast report do Sky state weapons had been sold to terrorists, but the dealers do say they are “willing” to sell to anyone. Ofcom applied Rule 5.1 of the Code, stating that “News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality”. The Code makes clear that “due” means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. Ofcom restated that due impartiality may be preserved in a

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number of ways and it is an editorial decision as to how to present a news story with due impartiality. As such Ofcom found, taking consideration of the report itself, Sky's representations, including disclosed evidence, that there was no breach of Rule 5.1 and that due impartiality had been preserved.

Separate from and not a consequence of the Sky News report and Ofcom's decision, on 30 January 2017 the UK Parliament's Culture, Media, and Sport Committee launched an inquiry into "fake news", particularly through social media and the Internet, whereby stories of uncertain provenance and accuracy were being accepted by some public members as true.

The Committee would investigate various issues including what "fake news" was; what impact "fake news" has on public understanding of the world, and also the public response to traditional journalism; whether different demographic groups are more effected by or susceptible to "fake news" than others; whether changes in the selling and advertising placement have encouraged "fake news" to promote greater web traffic; the responsibilities of search engine and social media platforms including the viability to use computer-generated algorithms to identify genuine reporting from fake news. Written submissions had to be submitted by 3 March 2017 and the Committee is expected to report later this year. The Committee's chairman Damian Green MP said at the inquiry's launch; "the growing phenomenon of fake news is a threat to democracy and undermines confidence in the media in general."

Ofcom Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin, Issue number 322, 6 February 2017, p.39

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0032/97259/Issue-322-of-Ofcoms-Broadcast-and-On-Demand-Bulletin.pdf

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 'Fake news' inquiry, 30 January 2017

https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/inquiry2/

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