[GB] Channel 4 News breached Ofcom's Code concerning its coverage of the Westminster Bridge Attack

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Channel 4 News has been found in breach of Ofcom's Broadcasting Code concerning their coverage of the Westminster Bridge attack on 22 March 2017 by wrongly identifying the terror attacker who murdered five people. Channel 4 News is produced by Independent Television News Limited (ITN). Rule 5.1 of the Code states "News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality".

The Channel 4 News Senior Home Affairs Correspondent, Simon Israel, named Abu Izzadeen as the terrorist shot dead in the grounds of the Palace of Westminster after the murder of five persons. Channel 4 News stated that the dead assailant had been known to the security services. However, during the transmission of the programme Abu Izzadeen's brother contacted ITN to say his brother was alive and serving a prison sentence. Towards the end of the bulletin, Channel 4 News announced there was doubt as to their earlier assertion about the attacker's identity. Subsequently, the story was withdrawn from the time shift edition shown on Four +1 and various persons, including Channel 4's News Editor and Simon Israel issued tweets retracting the allegation of Abu Izzadeen being the perpetrator. A further retraction appeared on the 23 March 2017 edition of Channel 4 News.

Ofcom acknowledged that the Channel 4 News production team were working under pressure to report a story of significant national importance. Also, Ofcom acknowledged that ITN and the Channel 4 News production staff had understood that running with a story with only one source of information and at the time no corroboration, was a substantial risk to take. ITN acknowledged that it was unusual to run with one source, but it was a person who was "authoritative and had a credible track record".

However, Ofcom determined that Channel 4 News had failed to comply with its own mandatory internal rules by not referring the decision to broadcast the story to the CEO of ITN. Channel 4 asserted in their representations to Ofcom that due to time pressures, contacting the CEO was "impracticable", but this argument was not accepted by Ofcom, given that the internal procedures envisaged referral to the CEO during broadcast. ITN acknowledged that, with hindsight, the story about

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the attacker's identity should have been given less prominence until the facts had been established and corroborated. Furthermore, the wrongful naming had influenced a significant part of the programme's content, with questioning of various interviewees being based around the named person being already known to the security services.

First, Ofcom determined that Channel 4 News had not breached Rule 5.2 which states "Significant mistakes in news should normally be acknowledged and corrected on air quickly ... Corrections should be appropriately scheduled." Ofcom accepted that Channel 4 News had acted quickly to correct a significant mistake. However, Ofcom determined that Rule 5.1 had been breached concerning accuracy. Ofcom "acknowledged that efforts had been made to corroborate the source, although they were ultimately unsuccessful. However, the use of a single source can carry a substantial risk of inaccuracy, which on this occasion was borne out." Ofcom appreciated that broadcasters were, on occasion, under intense pressure and fine judgement was at play when determining what to broadcast. Ofcom concluded "this inaccuracy was of such magnitude and given such prominence that it was not fully mitigated by the later steps taken in the programme to correct the error."

Ofcom observed that this was the fourth case in three years where the regulator had found Channel 4 News in breach of the requirement to report news with due accuracy (see IRIS 2015-7/17, IRIS 2016-1/101, and IRIS 2015-1/16). Channel 4 News will have to read an announcement setting out Ofcom's findings on a date and in words to be determined by the regulator.

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