[GB] Channel 5 News held in breach by Ofcom for newscaster inaccurately reporting facts and the broadcaster not correcting the error in a timely manner.

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Channel 5 News, produced by Independent Television News Limited (ITN), was found in breach of rules 5.1 and 5.2 by Ofcom when its newscaster incorrectly stated during its bulletin on the 6th September 2018 that former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia Skripal, who were victims of a Novichok (a nerve agent) attack which occurred in Salisbury, England on 4th March 2018, had died from their poisoning, when in fact they had survived. Furthermore, the news channel had failed to act quickly, taking over a week to broadcast a correction.

Rule 5.1 of the Ofcom Code states: “News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality.” Whilst Rule 5.2 says: “Significant mistakes in news should normally be acknowledged and corrected on air quickly [...] Corrections should be appropriately scheduled...”

According to Channel 5 News, they had prepared the script to be read from the autocue by its newscaster. The script correctly said: “Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov - believed to be from Russian military intelligence - were named as the main suspects that poisoned former spy Sergei Skripal in March using the deadly nerve agent Novichok...”

Instead, for some inexplicable reason, the presenter deviated from the agreed script stating: “Alexander Petrov and Rusian Boshirov were named as the main suspects that killed former spy Sergei Skripal and daughter Yulia in March.”

Channel 5 News did not realise their mistake nor did they receive any complaints from the public. It was only after receiving notification from Ofcom that Channel 5 corrected the inaccurate reporting and apologised during their 9 p.m. Channel 5 News Update broadcast on 13 September 2018.

Channel 5 explained to Ofcom that it had a rigourous compliance procedure for fact checking and ensuring regulatory compliance, including a duty editor and a duty solicitor as well as ITN running regular internal training.

Although Ofcom recognised that a mistake had occurred, they considered that it was vital for a news channel to ensure due accuracy. Due accuracy means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. The

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approach may vary according to the nature of the subject, the type of programme and channel, the likely expectation of the audience as to the content, and the extent to which the content and approach is signalled to the audience. Ofcom recognised the need for a news organisation to have freedom of expression pursuant to Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights as to how they presented a story and challenged participants in a story.

Section Five of the Code reflected Ofcom's duties under the Communications Act 2003 to ensure accuracy and impartiality in order to maintain the viewers' trust that the facts of the news, and the factual background to it, are reported with appropriate accuracy. Ofcom stated in their decision that these principles "go to the heart of the relationship of trust between a news broadcaster and its audience."

There was an underlying need to ensure accuracy and to correct mistakes quickly. ITN had failed on both these accounts on this occasion.

Ofcom appreciated that ITN had good editorial policies for Channel 5 News and that the editorial team, including the newscaster, had subsequently undergone additional training, including how one should not improvise scripts but adhere to the agreed autocue text. Nevertheless, Channel 5 News was held in breach of Rule 5.1 and Rule 5.2 for lack of due accuracy and failing to correct the error in a sufficiently timely manner.

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