[MT] Broadcasting during the Period Related to the Coronavirus Pandemic

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By means of a press release dated 13 March 2020, the Broadcasting Authority requested journalists and broadcasters to exercise caution as to how they report on developments connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Broadcasting Authority warned that the requirement that journalists and broadcasters stick only to facts remained paramount in this sensitive period. Apart from the fact that journalistic ethics requires that whatever journalists report be verified with official sources, ethical conduct demands that all reports be accurate and grounded on facts. In this way, the listener and viewer is informed of the evolving situation in a correct fashion and given the precise information that s/he is entitled to, both on Malta and the rest of the world. The Broadcasting Authority also appealed to the public to rely on official sources and statements so that no unwarranted or additional alarm is generated. In this respect, the public should be wary of cases of fake news, particularly on social media, and should choose diligently the sources wherefrom they obtain their information. It is only in this manner that cooperation and respect can be guaranteed in this extraordinary situation.

By means of a circular dated 17 March 2020 addressed to all broadcasting stations, the Broadcasting Authority, in the light of the directives issued by the competent medical authorities and in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19, disseminated a communication in relation to broadcasting during the period of the coronavirus pandemic.

Firstly, the Broadcasting Authority advocated that the practice to be adopted at this particular period was to record without studio audiences. In those programmes where guests are invited, producers are to ensure that the programme presenter/s and participant/s place themselves one metre apart from each other. Whilst the Broadcasting Authority understood that this could cause inconvenience and difficulty from the programme production perspective, it considered it imperative that the broadcasting media lead by example and comply with the health authorities' directives.

Secondly, in those cases where programmes had already been broadcast before the health authorities' directive was disseminated, broadcasting stations have to inform the viewers/listeners during the programme that the repeat programme was recorded prior to the issue of the health authorities' directives, lest the public

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be misguided.

Thirdly, the Broadcasting Authority noted that during this period, daily press conferences were being held by the health authorities to update the public on all the happenings in relation to COVID-19. Therefore, the Authority encouraged broadcasters, as far as possible, to broadcast these press conferences live as part of the station's programming schedule, in order to keep the public informed of the latest news.

Fourthly, the Authority also encouraged broadcasters to repeatedly and systematically air official notices on virus prevention and information on the COVID-19 helpline on their media in such a way that they are accessible to everybody.

Fifthly, the Authority encouraged broadcasters to offer specialised windows dedicated to children, such as children's games, crafts and book reading, in their daily programmes. In that way, the broadcasting media would contribute to offerng a service to the public, bearing in mind that the health authorities were advising children to remain as far as possible at home.

Finally, the Broadcasting Authority held that during this period, the media have a duty to inform and broadcast all the precautions required and not to alarm the public unduly so as not to create unwanted fear and panic.

By means of another circular dated 26 March 2020, the Broadcasting Authority reminded broadcasting stations of the measures they needed to take in relation to repeat programmes in these extraordinary circumstances. The Authority called for the cooperation of all station managers so that the broadcasting media could efficiently serve viewers and listeners at this particular time.

Although the Authority understood quite well that because of the spread of COVID-19, broadcasters had to have recourse to repeat programmes taken from past programme schedules which, at that time, did not comply with the directives recently issued by the health authorities, it was imperative that listeners and viewers should be informed of the fact that these programmes were recorded prior to the issue of such directives. As broadcasters are not using crawls for this purpose, this is leading to misguided information being given to the public, which might harm public health.

Hence, the Authority requested all television broadcasters to insert a caption before transmitting recorded programmes as well as a crawl throughout the whole repeat programme indicating that the programme in question was recorded prior to the health authorities' coronavirus directives. In the case of radio, this notice has to be read at the beginning of the radio programme and at intervals during its transmission. It was considered imperative that these measures be taken to avoid the broadcasting media conveying misleading information on the attitudes and

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behaviour expected of the public in these sensitive and extraordinary times.

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