[GB] Christian TV Network sanctioned by Ofcom for broadcasting “potentially harmful statements” about Coronavirus

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On 18 May 2020, the UK communications regulator Ofcom ruled that Loveworld Limited, which broadcasts the religious television service Loveworld, breached its Broadcasting Code after a news programme and a live sermon featured potentially harmful claims about the causes of and treatments for COVID-19.

The Ofcom investigation found that a report on *Loveworld News*, a programme featuring news from studios around the world, included a number of uncorroborated claims that the source of the risk to health was the effect of 5G Wi-Fi networks rather than the viral transmission of COVID-19. The report also contained several assertions that there was a “global cover-up” about the cause of the pandemic. Another report during the programme “repeatedly and unequivocally” presented the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine as a “cure” for the virus without clearly recognising that this was a clinically unproven claim about the effectiveness of the drug for coronavirus treatment and without acknowledging the drug’s potentially serious side effects.

In relation to both reports, the regulator found that Loveworld Limited had not preserved “due accuracy” (in breach of Rule 5.1 of the Code) and had failed to adequately protect viewers from potential harm (in breach of Rule 2.1) by presenting content of this nature as unequivocal facts rather than views placed in an appropriate context. Ofcom underlined that it did not seek to curb the broadcaster’s ability to present programmes covering current affairs from a religious perspective, but it did not consider that the religious nature of the channel justified a departure from the established application of these rules.

In addition, a sermon broadcast on *Your Loveworld* was also found to have included “unchallenged and unevidenced” claims casting doubt on the necessity and effectiveness of the social distancing policies adopted by governments (including the United Kingdom) as well as assertions questioning the motives behind official health advice in relation to the coronavirus and 5G technology. In particular, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome (the founder and president of the megachurch Christian denomination known as Christ Embassy) preached that the lockdown measures, the roll-out of 5G and potential future vaccines were part of a plan to reach “the final union between man and machines” because “Satan wants to

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create a new man". Ofcom considered that these statements risked "undermining viewers' confidence in the motives of public authorities and leading them to disregard current and future advice (including on any future vaccine) intended to protect public health." An exacerbating factor in this case was that these views were set out - without challenge - by a person who was portrayed to viewers as a figure of knowledge and particular authority.

The regulator held that the sermon broadcast provided "a platform for uncontextualized views" that had the potential to cause significant harm to viewers (in breach of Rule 2.1) and that Loveworld Limited had not taken any measures to provide its audience with adequate protection from such material, for example, by challenging the conspiracy theory or including the views of others and making it clear that other explanations could exist.

Ofcom recognised the Licensee's right to hold and broadcast controversial views which diverge from, or challenge, official authorities on public health information. However, the inclusion of unsubstantiated assertions in both programmes had not been sufficiently contextualised and risked undermining viewers' trust in official public health advice, with potentially serious consequences for their own and others' health. In light of the serious failings in these cases, Ofcom directed Loveworld Limited to broadcast summaries of its decisions and will consider imposing further sanctions.

Ofcom Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin, Loveworld Limited

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/195621/Loveworld-Sanction.pdf

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