[GB] CGTN breached Ofcom’s impartiality rules over its coverage of the Hong Kong protests

IRIS 2020-8:1/17

Julian Wilkins
Wordley Partnership

Chinese news service CGTN was held by Ofcom to have breached rules 5.1, 5.11 and 5.12 relating to impartiality in respect of the Hong Kong protests in response to the Hong Kong Government’s Extradition Law Amendment Bill. The bill would allow criminal suspects in Hong Kong to be sent to mainland China for trial. Ofcom deemed that various CGTN news items about the Hong Kong protests had not been duly impartial on a matter of major political controversy and relating to current public policy. Ofcom considers that these breaches merit the imposition of a statutory sanction.

CGTN is the international English-language news channel of China Media Group, China’s public service television and radio broadcaster; in the United Kingdom, the programme is broadcast via satellite.The licence for the CGTN service is held by Star China Media Limited.

The CGTN programmes held to have been in breach were *The World Today*, 11 August 2019, 17:00; *The World Today*, 26 August 2019, 08:00; *The World Today*, 31 August 2019, 07:00; *The World Today*, 2 September 2019, 16:00; and *China 24* , 21 November 2019, 12:15.

Section 319 of the Communications Act 2003 requires that news in television and radio services be presented with due impartiality, whilst Section 320 sets out special impartiality requirements, which include the preservation in the case of every television service of due impartiality on matters of political or industrial controversy and matters relating to current public policy.

Ofcom’s Code of Conduct on impartiality includes Rule 5.1., which establishes that “[n]ews, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality”; Rule 5.11, which states that “[d]ue impartiality must be preserved on matters of major political and industrial controversy and major matters relating to current public policy”; and Rule 5.12, which states that “[i]n dealing with matters of major political and industrial controversy and major matters relating to current public policy an appropriately wide range of significant views must be included and given due weight in each programme or in clearly linked and timely programmes. Views and facts must not be misrepresented.”

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

Ofcom's criticism of CGTN's coverage was that it failed to give alternative views or an explanation regarding the protesters, but instead presented a one-sided perspective on the violence and other issues currently facing Hong Kong. There was no attempt to acknowledge or explore any alternative view at any point during the items, for example that the Hong Kong police may have played a part in escalating tensions between themselves and the protestors or that violence may have occurred on both sides. Furthermore, Ofcom was critical of the fact that CGTN's coverage had asserted that non-Chinese news broadcasters were not reporting matters accurately or fairly.

CGTN's response to the complaints included the argument that whilst they acknowledged the requirements of due impartiality, their audiences expected them to present the news items from a Chinese perspective and deal with matters unreported by international media outlets. Also, the complaints against CGTN were initiated by Ofcom's monitoring rather than by viewers. CGTN asserted that those who viewed their broadcasts did not expect the same level of impartiality as offered by other broadcasters.

Ofcom's Guidance to the Code makes clear that the broadcasting of comments either criticising or supporting the policies and actions of any political organisation or elected politician is not, in itself, a breach of the due impartiality rules. Any broadcaster may do this, provided it complies with the Code. However, depending on the specific circumstances of each case, it may be necessary to reflect alternative viewpoints or provide context in an appropriate way in order to ensure compliance with Section Five of the Code.

The Code makes clear that the approach to due impartiality may vary according to the nature of the subject, the type of programme and channel, the likely expectation of the audience and the extent to which the content and approach is signalled to the audience. In addition, context, as set out in Section Two (Harm and Offence) of the Code, is important in preserving due impartiality. Context includes factors such as the editorial content of the programme, the service on which the material is broadcast, and audience expectations.

Ofcom considered that, overall, CGTN coverage had not provided due impartiality nor placed the subjects covered in context. Therefore, it considered the five breaches in respect of the news programmes broadcast in the period from 11 August 2019 to 21 November 2019, taken together, to be a serious failure of compliance and is minded to impose a statutory sanction. Before doing so, CGTN was invited to submit its representations.

Issue 403 of Ofcom's Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/195781/The-World-Today-and China-24,-CGTN.pdf

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026