[GB] Mark Steyn of GB News breaches Ofcom's Rule 2.2 by presenting official COVID vaccine data in a materially misleading way

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Ofcom has found that the Mark Steyn programme (aired on GB News), presented by Mark Steyn, breached the Regulator's rules about not materially misleading an audience when drawing conclusions based on data issued by the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA).

GB News is a television channel that primarily broadcasts current affairs programmes. It also has hourly news bulletins and describes itself as "Britain's News Channel". Mark Steyn was a presenter for GB News, which broadcast

four days a week between 20.00 and 21.00. During the show, Mr Steyn gave his views on various news stories and discussed them with guests.

On 21 April 2022, during the Mark Steyn programme, the presenter focussed on the UK government's roll out of the COVID-19 vaccines, and particularly the third booster dose, its efficacy and associated risks. A banner was displayed during the segment saying "Mark's take on the vaccine debate".

In a monologue, he said "and there is only one conclusion from those numbers which is that the booster shot..... has failed. And in fact, exposed to significantly greater risk to infection, hospitalisation and death".

He referred to the UKHSA data showing that roughly half the population had had only up to two doses or no dose and the other half had had the third dose. Referring to the UKHSA data

he said those who had had the third dose were more likely to get the COVID infection, be hospitalised or die.

During the programme he clarified the comments were his opinion, and GB News in its submission to Ofcom said the programme had not adopted an 'anti-vax' approach.

In reaction to the show, there were some social media comments that attempted to counterbalance Steyn's comments, he answered by saying that he was using official data and there was "only one conclusion": people who had had the third

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dose were more vulnerable than those who had not had it. Steyn repeatedly said that the third booster dose increased chances of infection, hospitalisation or death.

During the broadcast he did not refer to the UKHSA caveat: “This raw data should not be used to estimate vaccine effectiveness”, nor, that the majority who had taken the third dose were older and statistically stood a greater chance of hospitalisation or death in any event.

Steyn had not used any analysis to explain his conclusions on the UKHSA data. Further, he had not said that the data was open to alternative interpretation.

Ofcom Rule 2.2 states: “Factual programmes or items or portrayals of factual matters must not materially mislead the audience”. The Guidance to Rule 2.2 states: “… designed to deal with content that materially misleads the audience so as to cause harm or offence” and not with “.. issues of inaccuracy in non-news programmes”.

Ofcom had also issued guidelines about reporting COVID issues: “In particular, we strongly advise you to take particular care when broadcasting, for example .. statements that seek to question or undermine the advice of public health bodies on the Coronavirus, or otherwise undermine people’s trust in the advice of mainstream sources about the diseased”.

GB News argued that the COVID guidance was too restrictive and was designed to force broadcasters to support the government’s approach. Ofcom agreed with GB News that it was right for information and policies to be challenged or interrogated, but nevertheless compliance with Rule 2.2 should be ensured.

Although there had been some opposing opinion in the broadcast, it was rebuffed by Mr Steyn saying that there was only one conclusion. GB News contended that the following week’s programme had counterbalanced Mr Steyn’s comments but Ofcom considered the two broadcasts were not “linked and timely” ’to avoid the risk of the public being misled. Ofcom rejected GB News' contention it was a minority channel and any harm it could inflict was limited. Ofcom considered that, regardless of size or number of viewers, there was a requirement to comply with Rule 2.2.

Ofcom considered a number of people had been awaiting the third dose and Mr Steyn’s comments may have dissuaded them from doing so, especially as it was likely many of his viewers would trust what he said.

Ofcom concluded that the programme, as part of a news and current affairs service, may have resulted in viewers making important decisions about their health, and as such the programme was materially misleading and in breach of

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the Code Rule 2.2.

Ofcom finds the Mark Steyn programme on GB News in breach of broadcasting rules

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2023/ofcom-finds-the-mark-steyn-programme-on-gb-news-in-breach-of-broadcasting-rules

Ofcom Broadcasting Code

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/section-two-harm-offence

Ofcom Note to Broadcasters on Coronavirus

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0033/195873/Note-to-broadcasters-Coronavirus-update.pdf

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