

Dear Broadcaster,

27 March 2020

**Important guidance – broadcast content on the Coronavirus**

As you know, on 20 March 2020 we wrote<sup>1</sup> to all Ofcom licensed broadcasters to outline Ofcom’s approach to the Coronavirus pandemic. We said we were continuing to assess any complaints we receive about broadcast content during this time. We also laid out our approach to enforcing content relating to the Coronavirus (see below).

Following our assessment of recent complaints, in this letter we are issuing some important guidance to all broadcasters which we expect you to take into account in relevant programming.

**Ofcom’s approach to enforcing content on the Coronavirus**

Ofcom is prioritising cases relating to the Coronavirus which raise the risk of potential harm to audiences. This could include, for example:

- inaccurate or materially misleading content in programmes about the virus or public policy on it;
- health claims about the virus which may encourage the audience to respond in a way that would be harmful to themselves and others; and
- medical or other advice which may be harmful if followed, or discourages the audience from following official rules and guidance.

In these cases, it may be necessary for Ofcom to act quickly to determine the outcome in a proportionate and transparent manner, and broadcasters should be prepared to engage with Ofcom on short timescales.

Ofcom will consider any breach arising from harmful Coronavirus-related programming to be potentially serious and will consider taking appropriate regulatory action, which could include the imposition of a statutory sanction.

**Guidance**

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<sup>1</sup> We reproduced this letter as a [Note to Broadcasters](#) in Broadcast and On demand Bulletin 399 on 23 March 2020

We recognise that licensees will want to broadcast content about the Coronavirus and that dissemination of accurate and up-to-date information to audiences is essential during the current situation. However, we remind all broadcasters of the significant potential harm that can be caused by inaccurate or misleading material about the Coronavirus.

In light of the serious and rapidly developing nature of the Coronavirus pandemic and the associated significant risk to public health there is a particular need for factual statements about Coronavirus to be presented with appropriate care, given the ongoing significant national and international concern about the crisis.

In particular, we strongly advise you to take particular care when broadcasting, for example:

- unverified information about the Coronavirus. This may include, for instance, discussion of unverified theories for the causes of the Coronavirus and discussion of potential treatments or cures for the Coronavirus that do not align with advice of the NHS or other public health authorities; and
- 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 of information about the disease.

This kind of content can be broadcast with appropriate protections. However, given the very high levels of public concern about the Coronavirus at present and for the foreseeable future, broadcasters should take great care to ensure they provide adequate protection to their audience if this kind of potentially harmful content is broadcast in a programme (see Rule 2.1 of the Broadcasting Code)<sup>2</sup>.

It is for each broadcaster to make an editorial decision about how to provide adequate protection to their audience in the circumstances. It could be achieved in a number of ways, including by ensuring timely and robust challenge by programme presenters or other guests. Presenters should therefore be ready to intervene to provide sufficiently strong challenge and context in the event of programme contributors making potentially inaccurate or harmful comments about the Coronavirus.

For further information, please see Ofcom's research on health claims in programmes<sup>3</sup>, and our guidance accompanying Rule 2.1 of the Broadcasting Code<sup>4</sup>.

Depending on the content in question, other relevant rules to consider when complying content about the Coronavirus could include (but are not limited to): Rule 2.2, Rule 2.3 and (for news programming only) Rule 5.1.

If you have any queries about this guidance, please do not hesitate to contact us at:

[OfcomStandardsTeam@ofcom.org.uk](mailto:OfcomStandardsTeam@ofcom.org.uk).

Yours sincerely

**Ofcom Standards Team**

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/132073/Broadcast-Code-Full.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0016/132073/Broadcast-Code-Full.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/104650/Health-claims-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0016/104650/Health-claims-report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0023/104657/Section-2-Guidance-Notes.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0023/104657/Section-2-Guidance-Notes.pdf)