

Ofcom Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin

20 April 2020

This Morning

Type of case Broadcast Standards Complaint Assessment

Outcome Guidance Issued

Service ITV

Date & time 13 April 2020, 10:00

Category Harm

Summary This programme contained potentially harmful material about an alleged link between the Coronavirus and 5G technology. We concluded that overall there was adequate protection for the audience. However Ofcom has issued guidance to ITV.

Introduction

This Morning is a daytime magazine programme broadcast live on weekday mornings on ITV. The programme is compiled by ITV Broadcasting Limited (“ITV”) on behalf of the licensee, ITV Breakfast Broadcasting Limited.

Ofcom received 755 complaints that the programme contained potentially harmful comments about an alleged link between the Coronavirus and 5G technology.

Ofcom is prioritising cases related to the Coronavirus which could cause harm to audiences. This could include:

- health claims related to the virus which may be harmful;
- medical advice which may be harmful; and,
- accuracy or materially misleadingness in programmes in relation to the virus or public policy regarding it.

The comments in this case appeared in a discussion about Coronavirus scams and fake news. In the course of that discussion the programme’s Consumer Editor, Alice Beer, said:

“The fake news that is travelling around at the moment is just ridiculous. Do you remember, first of all of this, you cannot ignore the 5G conspiracy theory. What is that all about? So what various celebrities

and some influencers are saying is that 5G is a main link to the coronavirus. The coronavirus is man-made, some are saying, it is designed to cull the population, and the lock down is actually just a device for the roll out of 5G. That we are being manipulated. And this rumour has been spread so far and wide and has been so convincing to so many people that there have been some 30 acts of vandalism and arson around the UK, damaging essential telephone equipment, which is just worrying, this infrastructure is so needed at the moment, that people are going round and damaging it because of some rumour that is circulating – it is not true and it is incredibly stupid”.

Presenter Eamonn Holmes then said:

“The only thing I would say, I totally agree with everything you are saying but what I don’t accept is mainstream media immediately slapping that down as not true when they do not know it’s not true. No-one should attack or damage or do anything like that. But it is very easy to say it is not true because it suits the state narrative. That’s all I would say as someone with an enquiring mind”.

Alice Beer replied:

“Absolutely, and I am all for questioning and enquiring. That is absolutely right Eamonn, we should be doing that. But we shouldn’t be react – we just have to look at how we react to things. That’s the most important thing. We all have enquiring minds at the moment. Twitter had 12 million more users for the first three months of this year than the same time last year. We are all on these platforms looking for things, trying to find information and we just have to be more questioning. Maybe there is some huge conspiracy about 5G, maybe there is going to be something that comes out in the future, but that does not mean we have to react with violence or arson. We just have to question”.

There was no other reference to the Coronavirus and 5G technology in this programme.

In the following day’s edition of *This Morning*, Eamonn Holmes made the following statement about the comments he had made in the programme the day before, as laid out above:

“I want to clarify some comments that some of you may have misinterpreted from me yesterday around conspiracy theories and coronavirus and this involved the roll out of 5G. Both Alice Beer and myself agreed in a discussion on this very programme on fake news that it’s not true and there is no connection between the present national health emergency and 5G and to suggest otherwise would be wrong and indeed it could be possibly dangerous. Every theory relating to such a connection has been proven to be false and we would like to emphasise

that. However, many people are rightly concerned and are looking for answers, and that's simply what I was trying to do, to impart yesterday, but for the avoidance of any doubt I want to make it clear there's no scientific evidence to substantiate any of those 5G theories. I hope that clears that up".

We assessed the complaints about this programme under the following Code rule:

Rule 2.1: "Generally accepted standards must be applied to the contents of television and radio services... so as to provide adequate protection for members of the public from the inclusion in such services of harmful and/or offensive material".

Ofcom sought background information from ITV to assist with our assessment of these complaints.

ITV's information

ITV said that "as a public service broadcaster" it treated its obligation to provide viewers with duly accurate information about the Coronavirus pandemic "very seriously indeed".

ITV said that during the discussion, a caption read: "*Coronavirus: Spotting Fake News*". It added that Alice Beer "made it clear that the links that had been made between 5G and coronavirus were "*fake news*" and a "*conspiracy theory*" which was "*ridiculous*", "*not true*" and "*incredibly stupid*". It added that she also highlighted the criminal behaviour of those who had damaged essential equipment as a result of believing the false claims made in relation to this conspiracy theory. ITV emphasised that Alice Beer "reiterated the theme of the earlier discussion, namely that people should be more questioning of what they read online" and "was not suggesting that she thought it possible that in fact there was a "*huge conspiracy about 5G*". ITV said that later the same day Alice Beer tweeted: "*Do keep sending me your 'scientific proof' but I am afraid I am still very much of the opinion that the 5G conspiracy theory is nonsense and should be quashed*".

ITV added that Eamonn Holmes said that he "agreed with what Alice was saying, namely that the conspiracy theory was not true, and that people should not be reacting to this theory by committing criminal acts".

ITV said that "taken as a whole, the programme did not materially mislead the viewer about the coronavirus, or suggest that there was in fact any link between coronavirus and 5G. Rather, the programme clearly conveyed that recent online stories about a purported link, that had been circulated by some influencers and celebrities, were in fact untrue and a ridiculous conspiracy theory, which had unfortunate consequences in inspiring criminal acts by those taken in by them".

However, ITV added that "on reflection, and given that [Eamonn Holmes'] comments were widely reported...out of their full context by the press" it "wished to make it clear to viewers that neither ITV or the programme in any way gave credence to this conspiracy theory, nor did [Eamonn Holmes] intend by his comments to do so". In order to achieve this, a clarificatory statement made by Eamonn Holmes was broadcast at the start of the programme the following day.

Ofcom's approach

Reflecting our duties under the Communications Act 2003, Section Two of the Code provides protection for members of the public from the inclusion of harmful and/or offensive material in programmes.

Ofcom takes account of the audience's and the broadcaster's right to freedom of expression, set out in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, when considering whether a broadcaster has provided its audience with adequate protection from potentially harmful material in a programme.

Rule 2.1

This rule requires that broadcasters apply generally accepted standards so as to provide adequate protection for the audience from the inclusion of harmful material in programmes. It is for the broadcaster to decide how to secure such protection where necessary. Ofcom must assess the nature of the material and whether there is a reasonable likelihood of it causing members of the public potential or actual harm. Context is important and the extent of any protection required will depend on all the circumstances, including the service on which the material is broadcast, the degree of harm likely to be caused, and the likely expectation of the audience.

We recognise that during the Coronavirus crisis, Ofcom licensees would want to broadcast content about the crisis and that dissemination of accurate and up-to-date information to audiences is essential. This may include making audiences aware of, and debunking, disinformation that may be circulating.

However, broadcasters should be alert to the potential for significant harm to audiences related to the Coronavirus, which could include harmful health claims; harmful medical advice; and misleading statements about the virus or public policy regarding it. Consistent with the right to freedom of expression, broadcasters must have the editorial freedom to analyse, discuss and challenge the approach being taken by public authorities in relation to the Coronavirus. However, in doing so they must ensure they provide adequate protection for the audience from the inclusion of potentially harmful material.

Our assessment

In this case, we considered first whether Eamonn Holmes' comments had the potential to cause harm to the audience. Then we considered whether adequate protection had been provided to the audience, taking into account the programme as a whole, and in particular, the comments made by Alice Beer.

When considering whether a programme contains potentially harmful content, Ofcom takes into account a number of factors, such as: the severity of the situation; whether the material was targeted at a particularly vulnerable audience; and whether the claims were made by a speaker who is portrayed as having authority¹.

Eamonn Holmes' comments were made at a particularly sensitive time given the seriousness of the current global Coronavirus health crisis. Therefore we considered that viewers would have been particularly vulnerable to any claims that could be potentially harmful, at a time when they were highly likely to be seeking information and explanations about the current crisis. His comments were also highly sensitive because in the preceding days a number of attacks had been committed on mobile phone masts in the UK as a result of the claim that 5G technology had caused, or was in some way linked to, the virus. These attacks have caused serious and in some cases ongoing damage to communications links, and therefore significant harm to the public at a time of national crisis.

There is no reputable scientific evidence to corroborate the contentious claim that there is a link between 5G technology and the Coronavirus, which runs contrary to all official advice, both in the UK

¹ Ofcom has published research [Health and wealth claims in programming: audience attitudes to potential harm](#), setting out audience views on the potential harm arising from programmes involving health or wealth claims.

and internationally, about the Coronavirus. For example, the World Health Organisation has [stated](#) that “5G mobile networks DO NOT spread COVID-19”.

In our view, Eamonn Holmes’ comments were ambiguous. He began by saying to Alice Beer “*I totally agree with everything you are saying*” before going on to issue what could have been interpreted as a rebuke of the “*mainstream media*” for “*immediately slapping...down*” without questioning any suggestion of a link between 5G technology and the Coronavirus because “*it suits the state narrative*”.

As a result, we were concerned that, after Alice Beer had strongly rejected the alleged link between 5G technology and the Coronavirus, Eamonn Holmes appeared to challenge this – not on the basis of scientific evidence but simply because it was the stated view of the UK authorities that there is no such link.

We considered that his statement had the potential to cause harm because it could have undermined people’s trust in the views being expressed by the authorities on the Coronavirus and the advice of mainstream sources of public health information. In assessing the potential degree of harm, we took into account that Eamonn Holmes did also state that “*No-one should attack or damage*” mobile phone masts. However, we considered that his statement overall potentially risked fuelling a volatile situation surrounding the 5G claims.

An exacerbating factor in this case was that Eamonn Holmes is a very well-known presenter who in this case was an authoritative figure as one of the main editorial voices of this programme. Therefore the potentially harmful statement he made was likely to have been afforded greater weight by viewers. In Ofcom’s view, Eamonn Holmes’ intervention was therefore particularly ill-judged.

Ofcom went on to consider whether there was adequate protection for viewers from this potentially harmful material. We took into account that this content appeared in a live magazine discussion programme on a public service broadcast channel, covering issues of public debate and consumer interest. In our view, it was unlikely to have exceeded viewers’ expectations for the programme to explore the issue of disinformation and the Coronavirus. Throughout the discussion a caption was broadcast highlighting the discussion was about “*Coronavirus: Spotting fake news*”.

Further, as set out above, Alice Beer clearly and firmly rejected the claim linking 5G technology and the Coronavirus. She said: “*The fake news that is travelling around at the moment is just ridiculous. Do you remember, first of all of this, you cannot ignore the 5G conspiracy theory. What is that all about? So what various celebrities and some influencers are saying is that 5G is a main link to the Coronavirus. The Coronavirus is man-made, some are saying, it is designed to cull the population, and the lock down is actually just a device for the roll out of 5G. That we are being manipulated. And this rumour has been spread so far and wide and has been so convincing to so many people that there have been some 30 acts of vandalism and arson around the UK, damaging essential telephone equipment, which is just worrying, this infrastructure is so needed at the moment, that people are going round and damaging it because of some rumour that is circulating – it is not true and it is incredibly stupid*”.

Alice Beer did subsequently briefly appear to suggest the possibility of some future event confirming the conspiracy. However, in our view, considering the programme in full and the complete exchange between the presenters, viewers would have understood Alice Beer to be clearly rejecting the conspiracy theory, which was significant given her well-known role as Consumer Editor on the programme.

Ofcom considered that, when Eamonn Holmes’ comments were taken in their full context and particularly taking into account Alice Beer’s strong rejection of the 5G conspiracy theory, there was adequate protection for viewers from the potentially harmful material.

In reaching this view, we also took account of the fact that Eamonn Holmes made a statement in the following day's edition of *This Morning* to explain his comment in the previous day's programme. In particular, the presenter clarified that his view, in line with that set out by Alice Beer, was that *"there is no connection between the present national health emergency and 5G and to suggest otherwise would be wrong and indeed it could be possibly dangerous"*.

Ofcom therefore concluded overall that this programme did not warrant investigation under Rule 2.1 of the Code. However we were concerned that this case raised a significant potential issue about the care with which presenters approach discussions on the Coronavirus in programmes, and we are therefore issuing ITV and its presenters with guidance.

Guidance

At a time of serious public health crisis, and reflecting the fundamental importance of freedom of expression in our democratic society, it is clearly legitimate for broadcasters to analyse, discuss and challenge the approach being taken by public authorities.

Ofcom reminds ITV and its presenters that:

- Unproven claims and theories can be included and discussed in programmes, but if these carry the risk of potential harm to the audience – which they are highly likely to do at such a sensitive time – broadcasters must ensure they provide adequate protection for the audience. This could include, for example, significant challenge or further context.
- Presenters should take particular care and must act responsibly – and take full account of the impact of their role on viewers – when articulating views which could undermine the audience's trust in any official public health information during a time of national health crisis, such as the Coronavirus pandemic.
- The presenter's role is especially important in a live programme, at a time when ongoing events – such as the attacks on mobile phone masts in the UK in this case – raise risks of significant harm to the public.

Assessment Outcome: Guidance Issued