

Ofcom Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin

Issue 400
6 April 2020

Good Morning Britain

Type of case Broadcast Standards Complaint Assessment

Outcome Not Pursued

Service ITV

Date & time 21 January 2020, 06:30

Category Generally accepted standards

Summary During an item in the programme the presenter mimicked the Chinese language. This had the potential to be particularly offensive, but we concluded that overall there was sufficient challenge and context. We also took into account actions taken by ITV including a public apology. Not Pursued.

Introduction

Good Morning Britain (“GMB”) is a weekday morning news programme broadcast on ITV. The programme is compiled by ITV Broadcasting Limited (“ITV”) on behalf of the licensee, ITV Breakfast Broadcasting Limited.

At 06:30 on 21 January 2020, GMB featured a live discussion about the Queen’s grandson Peter Phillips endorsing Chinese state milk in a TV advertisement. This item was part of a wider discussion about members of the Royal Family using their status for possible commercial advantage.

Ofcom received more than 1,600 complaints about Piers Morgan’s mimicry of the Chinese language in this discussion, which complainants considered was offensive and racist.

The item began by playing the TV advertisement featuring Peter Phillips. In the advert he was shown drinking milk in a stately home. A narrator made various statements in Chinese promoting the milk. The final seconds of the advert showed a clip of Peter Phillips holding up a glass of the milk and saying in English “*This is what I drink*”.

Piers Morgan and his co-presenters went on to discuss the advert and whether it was appropriate for a member of the Royal Family to be endorsing commercial products. Throughout the discussion, clips of the advert were repeatedly shown. On three occasions, Piers Morgan (PM) mimicked the Chinese language, including mispronouncing it, and using the phrase “ching chang”, rather than Chinese words. His decision to do this was challenged by his co-presenter Susanna Reid (SR):

PM: *“Do you know what? Do you know what? When is the next big Royal event? Can you imagine on Christmas at Sandringham is like, “I’m sorry your majesty but I only drink “yeng yeng dong dong yong ming ming” milk... milk”.*

SR: [sighs] *“Piers!”*

PM: *“I don’t know the Chinese for “I only drink... what is it called?”*

SR: *“Well [laughs] what?”*

PM (to the gallery): *“Go on, let’s do it again”.*

The advert is repeated, as the Chinese-language narrator says “Peter Phillips” PM and SR laugh.

SR: *“You can say the Peter Phillips bit”.*

PM: *“Ching chang chojo. Okay. I got it. I got it. I got it”.*

SR: [laughs] *“God’s sake”.*

PM: *“You can say ching-”*

SR: *“Take- taking the mickey out of foreign languages [crosstalk] is rather 1970”.*

PM: *“I’m sorry you can take the mickey out of it. It is ching chang chong milk, right?”*

SR: [head in hand] *“You can’t”.*

PM: *“And the Chinese state-”*

SR: *“You can’t”.*

PM: *“Well that’s what they just said in the advert”.*

SR: *“No, they are speaking Chinese”.*

PM: *“I can’t repeat what they are saying in the ad”.*

SR: *“Well if you could speak [crosstalk] whichever dialect of Chinese it was”.*

PM: [crosstalk] *"I can't speak Chinese. I'm trying- I'm trying- I am trying to mimic the wording of that advertisement"*.

SR: *"Yes, mimicry"*.

PM: *"By the way, it's not me flogging the Chinese state milk"*.

SR: [laughs]

PM: *"Sorry, are people now going to be more annoyed at me trying to mimic-"*

SR: *"Yes"*.

Charlotte Hawkins: *"Yes"*.

SR: *"Yeah, cause that's- that's-"*

PM: *"- the Chinese state milk ad than they are about a member of the Royal family flogging Chinese state milk"?*

SR: *"Yes, Piers do you not realise the kind of woke times we're living in?"*

PM: *"Oh God"*.

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

Rule 2.3: *"In applying generally accepted standards, broadcasters must ensure that material which may cause offence is justified by the context. Such material may include, but is not limited to.. discriminatory treatment or language (for example on the grounds of... race...). Appropriate information should also be broadcast where it would assist in avoiding or minimising offence"*.

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

ITV's background information

ITV said *Good Morning Britain* is known for its lively and robust discussion of news stories and viewers were familiar with the "combative dynamic" between the programme's main presenters Piers Morgan and Susanna Reid. It added comments made by one presenter are frequently "challenged and counterbalanced" by comments from the other, and from other presenters and contributors.

Referring directly to the mimicry of the Chinese language by Piers Morgan ITV said the comments were intended to mock Peter Phillips, for appearing in an advert for Chinese state milk. ITV said the comments were not intended to mock or denigrate Chinese people, their language or accent. It said, "Piers Morgan does not speak Chinese and was trying to mimic the wording of the advert, in order to comically juxtapose the advert's Chinese language voiceover with Peter Phillips' claim in the advert, delivered incongruously in English, to drink this milk".

ITV told Ofcom Susanna Reid's contrasting comments during the discussion did provide "some challenge" to Piers Morgan's mimicry. It explained Susanna Reid immediately interrupted Piers Morgan saying "...taking the mickey out of foreign languages is rather 1970... you can't..." and pointed out that Piers was (by his own admission) unable to repeat accurately what had been said in the advert, since he did not speak the right dialect of Chinese. ITV added she pointedly asked her co-presenter if he realised "*the kind of woke times we're living in?*" which it said implied that he should appreciate that some viewers might be offended by mimicry of a foreign language for comic effect.

ITV argued this challenge and the "clear context" (i.e. criticism of Peter Phillips taking part in this advertisement in a live discussion), served to mitigate to some extent the potential for offence caused by Piers Morgan's comments. ITV said it believed that the overall discussion about the advertisement did not go beyond generally accepted standards, and the established audience expectations of "GMB's unique style of discussion and reporting".

ITV went on to say it fully accepted that in this case "the clumsy and spontaneous mimicry of a Chinese accent, and the use of the words "ching chang", which have been used in other contexts historically in a pejorative way about Chinese people, had potential to cause offence, particularly to viewers of Chinese heritage, and in this case did cause offence to the complainants"

It said that "ITV sincerely regrets and apologises for any offence caused to these complainants". ITV added senior editorial staff on the programme had discussed these complaints directly with Piers Morgan, and assured Ofcom that it would be mindful of these complaints in future when reporting on similar stories, in order to avoid repetition.

On 3 March 2020, ITV issued a [press statement](#) about the programme and Piers Morgan's comments. It described these as "a spontaneous reaction", which were intended to mock a member of the Royal Family and were not intended to mock or denigrate Chinese people, their language or accent. The statement said, "ITV regrets any offence Piers' comments may unintentionally have caused."

Our assessment

Reflecting our duties under the Communications Act 2003, Section Two of the Code requires that generally accepted standards are applied to provide adequate protection for members of the public from the inclusion of harmful or offensive material in programmes. Under Rule 2.3, broadcasters must ensure that where broadcast material may cause offence, it is justified by the context.

Ofcom must take account of the broadcaster's right to freedom of expression and the audience's right to receive information and ideas without undue interference, under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. These are fundamental rights, which enable the expression of views that may be irritating, contentious, eccentric, heretical, unwelcome or provocative.¹

Therefore when we consider content under Rule 2.3, we take into account the broadcaster's right to freedom of expression (including its freedom to express potentially offensive views), and the audience's right to receive such content. In doing so, we give careful consideration to the context of the broadcast and whether it justifies the inclusion of potentially offensive material. Context includes,

¹ See *Redmond-Bate v DPP* [1999] 7 BHRC, 375, [20], per Sedley LJ. Issue 400 of Ofcom's Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin 6 April 2020

for example, the nature of the content, the service in which the programme is broadcast, its editorial content and the likely audience expectations.

In this case, Ofcom considered that during a discussion about members of the Royal Family promoting commercial products, it was legitimate for Piers Morgan to question Peter Phillips' decision to appear in an advertisement for Chinese state milk and to use satire and ridicule in doing so.

However, part of Piers Morgan's mockery included three attempts to mimic the Chinese language, including using the phrase "*ching chang*". As ITV has itself acknowledged, [this phrase is recognised as a racist trope](#) aimed specifically at people of Chinese heritage. Our recently published research² indicates that audiences have a particular concern about content which is discriminatory. In our view, the use of the phrase and variations of it had the potential to be particularly offensive to viewers. We therefore considered whether there was sufficient context to justify its inclusion.

We took into account that this was a live and largely reactive discussion of a news story. We also acknowledged that *Good Morning Britain* has a robust approach to discussing topical stories which centres around what ITV described as a "combative dynamic" between its main presenters. Regular viewers have come to expect Piers Morgan to have strongly held views on a variety of issues which he often expresses uncompromisingly, and for those views to be routinely challenged by his co-presenter by Susanna Reid, and sometimes by other co-presenters and programme guests.

The degree of challenge and context given to the potentially offensive comments made by Piers Morgan was central to our assessment. Throughout the discussion Susanna Reid made several immediate attempts to challenge Piers Morgan when he imitated the Chinese language. At his second attempt to mimic, Susanna Reid interjected "... *taking the mickey out of foreign languages is rather 1970... you can't...*". When Piers Morgan argued he could "*take the mickey*" out of the language, Susanna Reid reiterated "*you can't*" twice more. In our view this gave some challenge to Piers Morgan's mimicry of the Chinese language and provided some mitigation to the potential offence.

Further, during the exchange Susanna Reid pointed out the difference between her co-host's mimicry and the narrator speaking the Chinese language correctly. When Piers Morgan asked "*are people now going to be more annoyed at me trying to mimic-*" she quickly interjected "*yes*" as did the news presenter Charlotte Hawkins. Susanna Reid then asked Piers Morgan whether he was aware of "*the kind of woke times we're living in?*" We accepted this was an attempt by Susanna Reid to point out that some viewers would find his imitation offensive.

We also took into account that the focus of Piers Morgan's ridicule was Peter Phillips' appearance in the advert, not Chinese people nor the Chinese language that he attempted to mimic.

Ofcom welcomed ITV's full acceptance that Piers Morgan's imitation of a Chinese accent in this case was "clumsy" and the use of the words "*ching chang*" had potential to cause offence, particularly to viewers of Chinese heritage. We welcomed ITV's representations to Ofcom and its subsequent press statement in which it apologised for any offence caused by Mr Morgan's comments. We also

² [Audience Expectations in a Digital World](#) published on 3 April 2020 (after the broadcast in question).
Issue 400 of Ofcom's Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin
6 April 2020

acknowledged the steps ITV said it had taken to reduce the likelihood of a recurrence, notably discussing these complaints directly with Piers Morgan.

This was a finely balanced decision in which Ofcom had to take careful account of the right to freedom of expression, and the degree to which these comments had the potential to cause offence, particularly to viewers of Chinese heritage. While our latest research shows that audiences have a particular concern about discriminatory content, it also shows they recognise the importance and value of freedom of expression in the regulation of potentially offensive content.

Having carefully considered the context within which the comments were broadcast and the action taken by ITV, including discussing these complaints with Piers Morgan and making a public apology, Ofcom concluded overall that this programme did not warrant further investigation under Rule 2.3 of the Code.

We remind ITV that there are compliance risks in relying on a “combative dynamic” between presenters as a way to provide challenge and context for the broadcast of content which may cause offence. This approach can provide significant context, as in this case. However, depending on the particular circumstances, this may not always provide sufficient context to comply with the Code.

Assessment outcome: Not pursued