

How to Steal Pigs and Influence People

Type of case	Broadcast Standards Complaint Assessment
Outcome	Not Pursued
Service	Channel 4
Date & time	14 January 2020, 22:00
Category	Crime and Disorder
Summary	Ofcom received 388 complaints about this programme, of which 377 objected it contained material which condoned, encouraged and was likely to incite crime. Ofcom has decided not to pursue these complaints further.

Summary

How to Steal Pigs and Influence People followed vegan and ex-vegan “influencers” who used social media to spread their message to a mass online audience. One of the people featured in the programme was shown stealing pigs from farms and then uploading self-shot video footage to his social media channels.

Ofcom received 388 viewer complaints about this programme – 377 of which objected it condoned criminal activity and had the potential to encourage crime and disorder¹. Several complainants specifically objected to the title of the programme and its pre-broadcast publicity, describing it as “glamorising illegal activity”². We assessed these complaints against the rules set out in the

¹ Ofcom also received nine complaints about the portrayal of farming during this programme, one complaint about the graphic footage of people eating raw meat and one complaint about the inclusion of a warning of “meat eating” prior to the broadcast of this programme.

² Ofcom acknowledges that the title of this documentary may have prompted a strong reaction. However, it is common practice for broadcasters to use provocative or controversial titles for their programmes to prompt debate before broadcast. It is important to emphasise that Ofcom is a post-transmission regulator and we consider the context of the entire programme during our assessments, not the title in isolation.

Broadcasting Code (“the Code”), taking into account the broadcaster’s and the audience’s right to freedom of expression without undue interference.

While the programme showed scenes which contained criminal activity, we considered its overall narrative neither glamorised nor condoned this activity. In our view, the actions taken by those featured and their motivations were not portrayed positively. In our view, their behaviour was challenged by the narrator, or by the inclusion of other points of view, and the programme depicted the negative consequences of the criminal activity. We therefore considered the portrayal of criminal activity was editorially justified by the context of this programme. For these and for the other reasons set out in detail below, we have concluded that the complaints do not warrant further investigation.

Given the strong public interest in this case and the risk of harm involved in cases which may engage Rule 3.1, we have decided exceptionally to publish our reasons for this assessment decision.

Introduction

The broadcast content³

The following warning preceded the programme:

“Vegan and ex-vegan influencers. Into their world now on Channel 4, with some daring farmyard heists along the way. How to Steal Pigs and Influence People contains strong language, criminal activity and scenes of a graphic nature, involving meat eating, which some viewers may find upsetting”.

The programme started with footage of a man – later identified as Wes – driving along a road:

Wes: *“Obviously there’s a risk getting caught by the police, obviously we’ve got to look out for dogs, we’ll be looking out for security as well – the cameras, CCTV. The reason I am getting changed and putting on new clothes is because I want to stay within the dark going inside”.*

Wes was shown walking off in the direction of a farm and later he returned holding a piglet.

Narrator: *“Meet Wesley Omar, aka the pig napper, he is a vegan who steals pigs from Britain’s farms before they go to slaughter. Wes films each robbery then shares his footage online with a growing number of followers. He is part of a new breed of vegan influencer making a name for themselves online...by pushing for a meat free world. But when promoting your cause, means promoting yourself... I wanted to find out what’s more important, making change or finding fame”.*

Later, Wes was interviewed at his home about the first time he stole a pig:

³ Given the length of the programme, we have only summarised the content which was relevant to our assessment.

Narrator: *"Wes what made you steal that pig?"*

Wes: *"At the time I was working as an estate agent. So, I was driving on my way home from work and I'd go past this farm like every so often. And then I was driving back, and I thought nah this is it – I am just going on, and I am going to film it".*

Archive news footage was shown detailing Wes' previous arrest and subsequent 12-month community sentence for stealing a pig.

Narrator: *"Having tasted fame with his first video, Wes left his job and is now setting out to make a living as a vegan influencer...Wes is hoping that his affinity for animals can help establish him as an influencer. But he needs to be posting regular content. So tonight, he is planning to steal another pig".*

Wes: *"Obviously I am trying to get more donations".*

Wes was then shown on his way to steal another pig. As before, Wes was seen walking off in the direction of fields. Footage shot by Wes showed him inside the pig-shed and picking up the pig. The narrator joined Wes when he was editing his footage to upload to social media:

Narrator: *"Sort of uploading evidence of the crime, aren't you?"*

Wes: *"Through my perception there's no crime, apart from what is being subjected on to those pigs".*

Footage of a "mass action" organised by Wes was then shown, whereby hundreds of activists occupied a pig farm. An interview with the farmer, the victim of the mass action, was included:

Farmer: *"They caused extreme suffering, it's heart-breaking, it's upsetting, and you call yourselves animal lovers. The only deaths of any piglets today were due to the amount of people who are in that firing house. It's not the sort of thing that normal humans do is it? About 200 people suddenly invade somebody's house and land – it's not normal. People eat meat, I am sorry, but we do eat meat. What you going to do without animals, how long can we eat nuts for?"*

Another influencer, Prem, a former vegan who only eats raw meat, was shown footage of the activists occupying the pig farm. Later there were several scenes which showed Prem and his friends eating raw meat.

Prem: *"The vegan cult...this is mental illness. Yeah, that's them in the multigeneration pig farm, basically small-scale terrorism that's called virtuous. You know like virtue signalling to a ridiculous extent – with them sort of crying like [mimics someone crying in an exaggerated way] holding the pigs. And they have no connection with nature. I've actually been vegan and*

progressively my health went downhill, what then occurred is – how long can you live off salad?”.

Later the programme returned to Wes and the narrator explained that other vegan influencers had been *“copying his tactics”* by stealing animals from farms. Footage, apparently from social media channels, showed other activists holding animals which they had stolen.

Narrator: *“With so much competition, Wes is finding it harder and harder to stand out, and with just a few hundred quid on his crowd funder, he is nowhere near his £10,000 a month target. But Wes has a new plan to get back on track. This time he will take a pig, then keep it and raise it himself, vlogging its progress every day...To up the ante even further, Wes is going to take a piglet that’s just days old”.*

The programme then showed more self-shot footage of Wes stealing another pig from a farm:

Narrator: *“Wesley, what gives you the right to take this baby away from his mum?”*

Wes: *“What gives the farmer the right to take these babies and put them in the positions they’re in? So, I think if they have the right to kill them, I think morally, I have the right to free one”.*

The narrator returned the following morning but there was no sign of Wes or the piglet and Wes’ social media channels had been deleted. When the narrator went online to *“search for clues”* he discovered the consequence of other pig thefts. Social media videos showed piglets had died after being stolen from farms by other activists. In one example an unidentified farmer, is shown saying to some activists:

Unidentified farmer: *“You cannot look after that [pointing to a piglet] without the sow, it will die in six months...how you going to look after that without the sow?”*

In another example, a photograph was shown of a dead piglet in a grave and the narrator wondered if Wes’ pig *“has met the same fate”*. When the narrator eventually caught up with Wes five months later, Wes said that the pig had been *“rehomed...and given the second chance of life”*. But the narrator seemed unsure: *“I don’t know what to think about Wes’ explanation”*.

The final scenes showed Wes on his way to another pig theft but this time, he was not filming it for social media:

Narrator: *“Online anyone can take their message to a mass audience, but I realise that not everyone can keep up with their followers’ escalating demands”.*

Wes: *“When I obviously was sharing stuff...and it was sort of, gone from nothing to like I have a whole load of people watching and listening to me, and I felt dragged and drawn in. Like sucked in*

by this, and it demands so much social interaction. It drains me to be honest”.

Our assessment

We assessed whether this programme raised issues warranting investigation under the following Code rules:

- Rule 3.1: “Material likely to encourage or incite the commission of crime or to lead to disorder must not be included in television or radio services”.
- Rule 2.4: “Programmes must not include material...which, taking into account the context, condones or glamorises violent, dangerous or seriously antisocial behaviour and is likely to encourage others to copy such behaviour”.

Rule 3.1

When assessing whether a programme raises potential issues under Rule 3.1, we assess the likelihood of it encouraging or inciting the commission of crime or leading to disorder. We consider all relevant factors, including the nature and purpose of the content, its editorial context and its likely effects.

While criminal activity was shown during this programme, we considered the overall narrative was to explore the possible motivations of the “influencers”, rather than focusing on the criminal activity itself. The programme highlighted these individuals’ desire to gain wealth or online fame from their activism. For example, Wes was shown attempting to earn a living from being an influencer and motivated by a desire to get donations. The programme also made clear that, to achieve fame online, influencers had to generate increasingly controversial content. When Wes decided to steal a newborn piglet, the narrator explained it was *“to up the ante”*. These actions were presented negatively and portrayed to be escalating in extremity to increase “likes” or “followers” on social media, rather than solely being motivated by their beliefs or to further their cause.

In our view, there were also several instances where the individual’s criminal activity was challenged or portrayed as antisocial either by the narrator or through the inclusion of other points of view. For example, the narrator challenged Wes immediately after his theft of a piglet: *“What gives you the right to take this baby away from its mum?”* Prem, the former vegan, also strongly criticised the activists’ behaviour.

The programme also depicted the negative potential consequences of carrying out these crimes, particularly on the animals, through the inclusion of several videos which showed piglets had died as a direct result of being removed from farms. The programme raised the prospect that the piglet Wes stole might have also died as a result of being removed from his mother. This was reinforced by the unidentified farmer who pointed out the piglet would die *“in six months”* without its mother. Similarly, the farmer who was the victim of the activists’ criminal activity, robustly challenged and condemned the activists’ behaviour, explaining they had caused the animals significant distress. We considered the inclusion of this narrative highlighted the stark reality of the potential consequences associated with these criminal activities and the negative impact on both the people and animals involved. As such, we did not consider the programme raised issues which warranted investigation under Rule 3.1.

Rule 2.4

For all the reasons outlined above, in our view, the overall narrative and context of the programme did not condone, glamorise or encourage the crimes which were shown. Given the programme sought to explore and to question the motivations of activists who believe their criminal acts are justified on moral and public interest grounds, we considered there was a strong editorial justification for showing these people carrying out their criminal activity.

While the programme showed Wes successfully stealing pigs, the fact that this behaviour was antisocial and criminal was made clear throughout. There was a warning that the programme contained “*criminal activity*” and the offence of stealing pigs was referred to as a “*crime*” throughout the programme. The inclusion of archive news footage also showed the activist had previously been convicted and served a community sentence for similar offences.

We acknowledged the programme suggested the actions taken by Wes had inspired other activists to undertake similar offences, but it was made clear this had been prompted specifically by Wes’ social media activity. As the programme showed other pigs had died after being stolen, we considered it reiterated the potential negative consequences of copying these offences and did not describe them in a way which condoned them. Therefore, we did not consider the programme raised issues warranting investigation under Rule 2.4.

Assessment outcome: Not pursued