

Live Test Cricket: South Africa v England

Type of case	Broadcast Standards
Outcome	Resolved
Service	Sky Sports Main Event
Date & time	7 January 2020, 14:20 and 24 January 2020, 12:00
Category	Offensive language
Summary	Two live broadcasts of cricket matches contained the most offensive language. Given the on-air apologies, we considered both matters resolved.

Introduction

Sky Sports Main Event is a subscription sports channel. The licence for the service is held by Sky UK Limited (“Sky” or “the Licensee”).

Ofcom received complaints about the broadcast of offensive language during two international cricket matches between England and South Africa in January 2020.

In a broadcast on 7 January 2020, during live play the stump microphone picked up the England player Jos Buttler saying the following to the South African player, Vernon Philander:

“Get out my fucking way, fucking move. Fucking knobhead, fucking get past the line”.

Approximately three minutes later, the commentator said the following:

“Apologies if you just heard a little bit of foul language an over or two or so ago, but obviously things getting a little heated out there at the moment”.

During a broadcast on 24 January 2020, footage was shown of England player Ben Stokes walking up the stairs to the pavilion from the field of play after being dismissed in the match. As he walked through the spectators, he could be heard saying the following to one of the spectators:

“Fucking four-eyed cunt”.

Approximately four minutes later, the commentator said the following:

“Well, apologies for any foul language that you may have heard there with the Ben Stokes dismissal a few moments ago”.

We considered these incidents raised potential issues under the following Code rule:

Rule 1.14: “The most offensive language must not be broadcast before the watershed (in the case of television)...”.

Response

Ofcom did not consider it necessary to request comments from the Licensee before reaching its Preliminary View.

However, Sky provided background information on the two broadcasts, in which it said that the matches in question were part of a “world feed” which had its own commentary. The Licensee added that, in both cases, it relied on the South African host broadcaster’s local commentary for match play, with occasional additional commentary from Sky to fill time during breaks of play. It also said:

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The Licensee explained that the delay in getting an apology to air in this case was the result of waiting to see if the South African host broadcaster’s commentary team had apologised for the offensive language. On realising this had not occurred, Sky’s studio presenter then found a “suitable break in play” to overlay the local commentary from the world feed and deliver the apology “as soon as was technically possible”.

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The Licensee said that the moment when Ben Stokes left the field of play was followed by a commercial break, which was inserted by all broadcasters taking the world feed. It added that, as its commercial break was shorter than that of the South African host broadcaster, Sky re-joined the broadcast early and it was at this time that “human error on the part of the local broadcaster” meant that audio of the Ben Stokes incident was put to air. Subsequently, both the video and audio were also put to air.

The Licensee added that “clearly neither of these actions were intentional”, yet were a “serious failing in reviewing the material live via the worldwide stream whilst they were still in a commercial break”.

The Licensee added that immediately following the incident, it “ensured a local commentator was arranged”, and an apology was broadcast over the world feed within four minutes of the language being broadcast.

Ofcom sent the Licensee its Preliminary View, which was that both cases were Resolved. The Licensee had no further comments on the Preliminary View.

Decision

Reflecting our duties under the Communications Act, Rule 1.14 prohibits the broadcast of the most offensive language on television before the watershed. In these cases, the most offensive language was broadcast at 14:20 and 12:00 respectively.

[Ofcom's 2016 research on offensive language](#) makes clear that the words “fuck” and “cunt” are among the most offensive language. However, our 2016 research also indicated that apologies following the use of offensive language help to increase acceptability before the watershed, especially in the case of accidental uses. Participants in the research also recognised the limits of broadcaster control and the challenges of live broadcasting.

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Ofcom took into account that the language in this case had been broadcast live in error, as well as the Licensee's explanation of the specific technical restrictions which were in place for this broadcast (i.e. that Sky was taking a world feed from the South African host broadcaster). We also took into account that, although an on-air apology was broadcast approximately three minutes after the offensive language was broadcast, this took place at the earliest opportunity for technical reasons.

Ofcom's Decision therefore is that this matter is resolved.

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In our [2016 research on offensive language](#), participants' reactions to the word “cunt” were particularly strong. Our 2016 research also showed that an aggressive or angry tone heightened the impact of language for participants.

Ofcom took into account that, in this case, the most offensive language was delivered in a highly aggressive manner and appeared to be directed at an individual spectator in the crowd.

In this case the Licensee arranged for an apology to be broadcast within four minutes of the offensive language being broadcast (*“Well, apologies for any foul language that you may have heard there with the Ben Stokes dismissal a few moments ago”*). However, given the strength of the offensive language and the manner in which it was used, and the fact that an immediate apology was not possible, we considered that a stronger broadcast apology would have been helpful.

However, Ofcom took into account that the language had been broadcast live in error, as well as the Licensee's explanation of the specific technical restrictions which were in place for this broadcast (i.e. that Sky was taking a world feed from the South African host broadcaster). We also took into account that, although an on-air apology was broadcast within four minutes of the offensive language, this took place at the earliest opportunity for technical reasons.

Ofcom's Decision therefore is that this matter is also resolved.

Resolved