



## Peter Popoff Ministries

<b>Type of case</b>	Broadcast Standards
<b>Outcome</b>	In Breach
<b>Service</b>	The Word Network
<b>Date &amp; time</b>	9 May 2023 23:00, 10 May 2023 07:00
<b>Category</b>	Harm, religious programmes, and promotion of products and services
<b>Summary</b>	The programmes contained potentially harmful claims that contacting the presenter’s ministry and/or ordering its “Miracle Spring Water” could improve serious health conditions and/or financial situations. In breach of Rules 2.1, 4.6 and 9.4.

## Introduction

The Word Network is a religious channel aimed at the Christian community and available on satellite subscription services. The licence for the service is held by Word Network Operating Company Inc (“The Word Network” or “the Licensee”).

Peter Popoff is a televangelist who presents the *Peter Popoff Ministries* series of programmes with his wife Elizabeth Popoff. These programmes include footage from Mr Popoff’s religious services, held at various locations in the United States, and occasions when Peter Popoff and his wife Liz Popoff address viewers directly from a studio.

During monitoring, Ofcom identified two episodes of *Peter Popoff Ministries* that contained frequent oral and visual invitations to order the ministry’s “Miracle Spring Water”. This could be done by calling a US or UK telephone number or scanning a QR Code. The numbers and QR Code were displayed on screen for the majority of the programme, alongside the text “CALL OR TEXT FOR YOUR FREE MIRACLE SPRING WATER”, and details of Peter Popoff’s website and Facebook page were also shown. Towards the end of each episode the ministry’s postal address also appeared on screen alongside this information.

When inviting viewers to order the Miracle Spring Water, Peter Popoff made several claims about its efficacy. For example:

### 9 May 2023 programme

*“I want you to know when you anoint your hands with the Miracle Spring Water, I want you to anoint both sides of your hands. You're going to see that everything that you touch is going to prosper, grow and be blessed. Blessed in such a way that you will be awed, that you'll be shocked, that you will be amazed. God will bless the works of your hands. Bless your business. Bless whatever you touch. And Liz, we're just going to see miracle after miracle after miracle”.*

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*“Sickness is going to disappear. Supernatural miracle money is going to come to you from unexpected sources. Get ready”.*

### 10 May 2023 programme

*“I told you to anoint both sides of your hands with the Miracle Spring Water. Everything you touch is going to be healed, blessed, yes the blessing of God is going to rest upon your hands. And God is going to move. I believe the last few months of this year are going to be so amazing. The people of God are going to be astonished to see how literally the windows of heaven are open and miracles take place in their lives and their situations and their families”.*

Additionally, the programmes featured a pre-recorded instructional video that invited viewers to place an order:

### 9 May 2023 programme

*“Call the number on your screen for your free packet of the Miracle Spring Water. Open the package and pour the water onto both of your hands, top and bottom. Then place your hands on your bills, legal papers, credit cards and loved ones. Whatever the needs are in your life”.*

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*“Call the number on your screen for your free packet of the Miracle Spring Water. Open the package and pour the water onto both of your hands, top and bottom and God will restore, renew and prosper. Whatever you anoint, get your free packet of Miracle Spring Water today”.*

### 10 May 2023 programme

*“Have you been settling on ‘not enough’? Have you settled on pain or despair in your life? God doesn't want you to settle, he wants you to receive. That's why Reverend Peter Popoff wants to send you the Miracle Spring Water absolutely free because when you receive the Miracle Spring Water and follow the instructions, your life will supernaturally improve in ways you can hardly imagine. What God has done for others, he'll do for you. Release God's miracle working*

*power where you need it the most. Call the number on your screen to receive your free packet of the Miracle Spring Water. It's time for your deliverance, for your breakthrough. It's time for your miracle. Call now".*

Both programmes included several testimonies both from members of Mr Popoff's congregation and viewers about their experiences when seeking his help. For example:

### 9 May 2023 programme

Man 1: [to Peter Popoff] *"You told me that miracle money was coming, and they blessed me with \$64,000"*

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Woman 1: *"My daughter was sick. No, the doctor couldn't figure out. We took her to so many hospitals. Her intestine. There was something wrong with her intestine. She would eat and nothing would stay down in her stomach. And you sent the Miracle Spring Water and she's healed".*

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Presenter: *"He was addicted to drugs since he was 14 and he had been smoking for 44 years. And what happened?"*

Man 2: *"I got delivered. I had a debt cancellation of a student loan since I had when I was 20 years old. \$9,000. I got delivered from them, you know, cancelled it. I've smoked drugs since I was 14. I got delivered, I haven't had, touched drugs since last year of May".*

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Woman 2: [to Peter Popoff] *"As we agreed together, you sent me the spring water and I don't have diabetes, cholesterol, high blood pressure and I got the surgery and I got a cheque for \$30,000 to fix my house and I opened my business".*

Peter Popoff: *"Did you hear that? What a testimony!"*.

### 10 May 2023 programme

Liz Popoff: *(to the congregation) "And her grandmother was very sick. What was that?"*

Woman 3: *"Yeah she was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer in January".*

Peter Popoff: *"Stage four lung cancer?"*

Woman 3: *"Yeah".*

Liz Popoff: *"And she was wasting..."*.

Woman 3: *"The worst kind of lung cancer".*

Liz Popoff: *"And she was wasting away".*

Woman 3: *"Yeah she only weighed about 100 pounds after radiation and so I started writing to you, we were writing since June and all type of things have happened but this is the most important. Now, she's at 126. Before she was bed-ridden. She couldn't operate her limbs, she couldn't move she couldn't do nothing for herself. Now she's home, she like a 126 pounds. She's dancing, she's running up and down. She's playing bingo again".*

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Liz Popoff: *"Peter, this lady used the Miracle Spring Water. She was broke, she was destitute, she had nothing. But after using the Miracle Spring Water, what did God do?"*

Woman 3: *"God gave me a home, a job, money over-flowing, a car. I just love him so much..."*

Peter Popoff: *"What did he do, Liz?"*

Liz Popoff: *"He gave her money, a home, a car and she's blessed".*

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Peter Popoff: *"Come on up here, sister, what happened to you?"*

Woman 4: *"I used your miracle water and I was three months behind on my mortgage and I went to bed Sunday night and I said God, I put it in your hands 'cause I'm tired. I got a call Monday evening saying I got the money to pay your mortgage, clean up until December".*

Peter Popoff: *"You mean God took care..."*

Woman 4: *"God took care of it".*

Peter Popoff: *"After you used the Miracle Spring Water?"*

Woman 4: *"After I used that Miracle Spring Water, yes he did".*

Ofcom considered the material raised potential issues under the following rules of the Code:

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

Rule 4.6: *"Religious programmes must not improperly exploit any susceptibilities of the audience".*

We also considered that the references to the Miracle Spring Water in the programmes raised potential issues under Rule 9.4 of the Code:

Rule 9.4: “Products, services and trademarks must not be promoted in programming”.

We therefore sought comments from the Licensee as to how the programmes complied with Rules 2.1, 4.6 and 9.4 of the Code.

## Response

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The Licensee did not respond to Ofcom’s initial request for comments, but it provided formal representations after receiving Ofcom’s Preliminary View that the content had breached Rules 2.1, 4.6 and 9.4 of the Code.

The Licensee said that it did not agree with Ofcom’s Preliminary View. It argued that Peter Popoff had been broadcasting his “Miracle Spring Water shows” for many years without any problems, and it was “abusive” of Ofcom to “all of a sudden raise an issue”.

The Licensee accused Ofcom of having double standards with US and other TV networks, stating that nudity and pornography is allowed “with no problem”. It added that The Word Network is a “wholesome religious channel” that gave people “all over the world comfort and spiritual guidance to help them through life” and that Ofcom was “attacking one of the only networks in the world helping people not just entertainment”.

## Decision

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Reflecting our duties under the Communications Act 2003<sup>1</sup>, Section Two of the Code requires that generally accepted standards are applied to the content of television services to provide adequate protection for members of the public from the inclusion of harmful and/or offensive material. Section Four requires broadcasters to exercise a proper degree of responsibility when making and broadcasting religious programmes. Section Nine of the Code limits the extent to which commercial references can feature within editorial content to help ensure a distinction between advertising and programming is maintained.

In reaching this Decision, Ofcom took account of the right to freedom of expression, as set out in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (“ECHR”). Article 10 provides that everyone has the right to freedom of expression including the right to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without unnecessary interference.

Ofcom also had regard to Article 9 of the ECHR which states that everyone “has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”. This Article goes on to make clear that freedom to “manifest one’s religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of...health...or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others”. When considering this case, Ofcom had due regard to Article 9 and has taken into account that many people find comfort and solace from prayer or a belief in faith healing when ill or encountering personal difficulties. Prayer and faith have also been reported by some to be materially important factors when recovering from illnesses.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/section/319>

Our investigation under Rules 2.1 and 4.6 of the Code did not question the validity of religious belief. In accordance with our duties, we considered whether the Licensee provided adequate protection for viewers from harm and whether the programme improperly exploited their susceptibilities.

## Rule 2.1

Rule 2.1 of the Code requires that generally accepted standards must be applied to the contents of television and radio services to provide adequate protection for members of the public. Context is an important factor when applying this rule. 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 and/or offence likely to be caused, the likely expectations of the audience and the effect of the material on viewers who may come across it unaware.

Ofcom examined the programme to assess its potential for harm. Presenter Peter Popoff advised viewers that after using the “Miracle Spring Water”, they would “*see that everything that [they] touch is going to prosper*”. He continued: “*sickness is going to disappear...supernatural miracle money is going to come to you from unexpected sources*”. The short pre-recorded instructional video advised viewers to pour the water over their hands before placing their hands on “*bills, legal papers, credit cards and loved ones*” and “*God will restore, renew and prosper*”.

The programme also included testimonies which comprised people explaining how through contact with Peter Popoff or through pouring the “Miracle Spring Water” over their hands, they brought about:

- their loved ones’ recovery from illnesses (such as lung cancer, diabetes and intestinal disease);
- improvement to their financial situation (such as the receipt a new home or employment opportunity or large sum or money – \$64,000 in one instance); or
- their recovery from an addiction to drugs.

Ofcom considered that these claims related to viewers’ health and wealth. In 2017, Ofcom commissioned a qualitative research report<sup>2</sup> into audience attitudes towards health and wealth claims in programmes, and the potential harms that may arise from them. The research indicated that there is a hierarchy of factors that affect the level of harm arising from such claims. Ofcom subsequently issued guidance<sup>3</sup> (“the Health and Wealth Guidance”) to broadcasters in this area which drew on the findings of the research. This guidance highlights the severity of the situation (e.g. a life-threatening illness or extreme financial hardship), the level of targeted exploitation (i.e. the vulnerability of the audience) and the authority of the speaker as primary factors that would influence the level of harm that could arise from health or wealth claims. The guidance also highlights how the inclusion of an alternative perspective or a warning (e.g. one that advises audience members to consult a qualified doctor before making decisions about their health based on a programme) can be used by broadcasters to protect viewers from potential harm.

In this case, the illnesses discussed in the programme, namely lung cancer and diabetes, are serious health conditions. Audience members may be considered vulnerable when they are suffering from serious health issues or experiencing financial difficulties, and the severity of the situation may

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/attitudes-to-potential-harm>

<sup>3</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)

increase this vulnerability. In the case of cancer, this is reflected in section four of the Cancer Act 1939, where Parliament has considered it appropriate to prohibit advertising which offers to treat cancer.

In Ofcom's view, viewers were likely to have understood from the testimonies broadcast in the programme that serious medical and financial problems could be resolved by direct contact with Peter Popoff's ministry or by using the "Miracle Spring Water" as directed in the programmes. Furthermore, the testimonials were provided in the context of a religious programme and presented by Peter and Elizabeth Popoff, religious preachers who were likely to be perceived by the audience as having authority.

Ofcom therefore considered that such claims had the potential to cause harm because members of the audience may have been led to believe that contact with Peter Popoff's ministry or using the "Miracle Spring Water" alone was sufficient to resolve serious health or financial difficulties, and in the case of health issues, it was unnecessary to rely on, or continue receiving, conventional medical treatment. This could have a damaging effect on vulnerable viewers targeted by the presenter's invitations. While the references to "*supernatural miracle money*" and the testimonies from people who said they had received money did not present the possibility of physical harm, Ofcom considered these claims may have resonated with a significant number of vulnerable viewers, particularly in light of the current rise in the cost of living. In Ofcom's view, the combination of testimonies and Peter Popoff's promise of money from using the "Miracle Spring Water" may have resulted in financial detriment as it could have led viewers to believe that their financial difficulties could be resolved by the Miracle Spring Water alone, preventing them from taking other steps to address those difficulties.

We took into account that all primary factors affecting the level of harm listed in the Health and Wealth Guidance were present in this programme. As a result, Ofcom considered the risk of harm to viewers was high.

Ofcom therefore examined whether the Licensee had taken steps to provide adequate protection for viewers who could have understood the content to be demonstrating that faith (e.g. using "Miracle Spring Water") alone could resolve the health and wealth issues identified in the programmes. Neither programme contained any information about the importance of viewers seeking health advice from qualified medical professionals, and there was no challenge or any other form of context provided to the significant claims of efficacy made about the "Miracle Spring Water".

Taking into account the above factors, Ofcom did not consider that the Licensee had provided adequate protection for viewers from the potentially harmful content in this programme. Therefore, our Decision is that the material breached Rule 2.1 of the Code.

## Rule 4.6

Rule 4.6 of the Code requires that religious programmes must not improperly exploit any susceptibilities of the audience. Ofcom's guidance<sup>4</sup> to Rule 4.6 makes clear that when broadcasters are soliciting a response from their audience, they need to take care and recognise possible risks to audience members, particularly those who may be vulnerable. The guidance to Rule 4.6 notes that

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0023/24881/section4.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0023/24881/section4.pdf)

“improper exploitation” includes seeking to convince a person to subscribe to a particular set of beliefs “on the grounds that if they don’t, some negative outcome might result”.

The programme contained repeated statements and testimonials that improvements to people’s health or wealth had occurred, or would take place, as a result of ordering and using the “Miracle Spring Water”, or contacting Peter Popoff Ministries directly, without offering any objectively verifiable evidence. Ofcom considered that viewers were likely to infer from such statements that negative outcomes would result if they did not order the water or contact Peter Popoff Ministries, i.e. their health and financial problems would continue.

Given the religious nature of the programme and the status of the presenters, Ofcom considered that vulnerable viewers in particular were less likely to question the content and, as such, were susceptible to the unchallenged claims made in the programme.

Taking into account the above factors, Ofcom concluded that the programme specifically targeted susceptible viewers and that there was a material risk that these members of the audience had been improperly exploited. Therefore, Ofcom’s Decision is that the material breached Rule 4.6 of the Code.

## Rule 9.4

Rule 9.4 of the Code requires that products, services and trademarks must not be promoted in programming. Ofcom’s Guidance<sup>5</sup> on Rule 9.4 explains: “where a reference to a product or service features in a programme...the extent to which a reference will be considered promotional will be judged by the context in which it appears”.

Rule 9.4 prohibits the promotion of products, services and trademarks within programmes irrespective of whether they are offered in return for payment or not.

The programme contained frequent on-screen and oral invitations to viewers to order “Miracle Spring Water” from Peter Popoff Ministries. Additionally, the testimonials featured during the programme (as set out above) and the language used to describe the water’s effectiveness (e.g. “*everything that you touch is going to prosper*”) served to encourage viewers to place an order.

Ofcom’s Decision is that the programme therefore promoted a product – the “Miracle Spring Water” – in breach of Rule 9.4 of the Code.

In its representations, The Word Network asserted that Ofcom was “attacking” it and argued that Peter Popoff had been presenting these programmes from many years without issue. However, Ofcom has previously published Decisions finding a number of broadcasters in breach of the Code for transmitting programmes featuring Peter Popoff promoting Miracle Spring Water or “Miracle Manna”.<sup>6</sup> These programmes were broadcast in 2007, 2008 and 2018. In 2019, Ofcom imposed a financial penalty on another broadcaster<sup>7</sup> for the transmission of content similar to the material investigated in this case. Ofcom reminds The Word Network that its Ofcom broadcasting licence contains a number of conditions, one of which is that its broadcast content complies with the Code.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0014/33611/section9\\_may16.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/33611/section9_may16.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [Broadcast Bulletin Issue number 113 \(ofcom.org.uk\)](#), [Broadcast Bulletin Issue number 117 \(ofcom.org.uk\)](#), [Issue-367-of-Ofcoms-Broadcast-and-On-Demand-Bulletin.pdf](#)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0023/171734/sanction-decision-greener-technology.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/171734/sanction-decision-greener-technology.pdf)



**In view of the seriousness of these breaches, Ofcom puts the Licensee on notice that it is considering this case for the imposition of a statutory sanction.**

**Breaches of Rules 2,1, 4.6 and 9.4**