



Peter Popoff Ministries

Type of case	Broadcast Standards
Decision	In Breach
Service	The Word Network
Date & time	6 December 2023, repeated on 8 December 2023 7 December 2023 11 December 2023 12 December 2023
Category	Harm, religious programmes, and promotion of products and services
Summary	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 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 four episodes¹ of *Peter Popoff Ministries* (“the programmes”) that contained frequent oral and visual invitations to order the ministry’s “Miracle Spring Water”. Viewers could order the “Miracle Spring Water” 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 each programme alongside the text “CALL OR SCAN FOR YOUR FREE MIRACLE SPRING WATER” and details of Peter Popoff’s website and Facebook page. 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:

6 December 2023 programme (repeated 8 December 2023)

“As you use the point of contact that I want to give you – the Miracle Spring Water, I’ll share the strategic plan with you that God gave me for your turnaround. You’ll use this simple faith tool, and your faith is going to defeat the enemy that lurks in the darkness. All around you. I’m talking about fear, sickness, poverty, stress, failure...I’ll tell you how to anoint the needs in your life to see success”.

7 December 2023 programme

“I want to send you the Miracle Spring Water. We have got to stand together and agree. It’s a powerful point of contact that you can use to see many, many mighty miracles in your life. We’ll get it to you”.

11 December 2023 programme

“Literally hundreds of thousands of people have used the Miracle Spring Water. If you’ve watched our telecast for a while, you’ve read and listened to hundreds of testimonies from people who have been saved, healed, delivered, set free, financially prospered as they used the Miracle Spring Water”.

12 December 2023 programme

“It just amazes me, Liz, how many people use the Miracle Spring Water and follow the instructions that I give them and see the miraculous in their lives. Isn’t it amazing?”

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

6 (and 8), 7, 11 and 12 December 2023 programmes

¹ One episode was broadcast on 6 December and repeated on 8 December.

“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 Miracle Spring Water. It's time for your deliverance, for your breakthrough. It's time for your miracle. Call now”.

11 December 2023 programme

“Call the number on your screen to receive the anointed Miracle Spring Water and a never-ending supply of prosperity for you and your loved ones”.

The programmes also included several testimonies both from members of Mr Popoff's congregation and viewers about their experiences when seeking his help (including the use of Miracle Spring Water). For example:

6 (and 8) December 2023 programme

Peter Popoff: *“And Liz, I'm just so amazed that month after month, year after year, the testimonies from all over just keep pouring in”.*

Liz Popoff: *“Isn't that the truth? Here's one from North Carolina, from Dunn, North Carolina: ‘You told me when you sent the Miracle Spring Water back to me after you prayed over it that something good is going to happen in my life. And that God was going to direct my steps into financial success that I had never dreamed I would have. I followed the instructions and placed my money in my wallet then carried it just like you told me to. God has blessed me with over \$70,000. I paid off all my bills and have much money left over’”.*

Woman 1: *“I was diagnosed with cancer, breast cancer and the doctors...they said I wasn't going to live but I had an encounter and I was crying out to God and I didn't...”*

Peter Popoff: *“The doctor said you wouldn't live?”*

Woman 1: *“I wouldn't live. The devil was attacking me and I was getting lumps everywhere on my head and my shoulder and everything and I wrote to you and you gave me a prayer cloth. And then I put it over me and when I went back in March, they couldn't find anything”.*

Peter Popoff: *“Cancer disappeared”.*

Man 1: *"Sister Carter had been addicted to crack cocaine. For how long?"*

Sister Carter: *"25 years"*

Man 1: *"And five years ago..."*

Sister Carter: *"And five years ago, I ran across your TV programme and you sent me some spring water and I've been clean for five years".*

7 December 2023 programme

Woman 2: *"I was diagnosed with colon cancer two years ago and I used your spring water and it healed".*

Peter Popoff: *"She was diagnosed with colon cancer two years ago, anointed herself with the spring water and she was healed. What did you doctor have to say about that?"*

Woman 2: *"He was amazed".*

Woman 3: *"I was on crack cocaine for six years and I was in hospital and I happened to see your show on TV and so I ordered the spring water. Three years I've been clean".*

Peter Popoff: *"Delivered".*

Woman 4: *"Just recently I got the Miracle Spring Water again. I'm sorry I got it twice, and this time, I think it was March, I received a \$35,000 debt cancellation".*

Woman 5: *"I had an accident with propane at work where it blew up in my eye and damaged my right eye. And I was about four or five months in complete pain, couldn't handle the lights. The doctor said that it would be permanent damage - like all the cells, the tear ducts, I couldn't cry, there'd be pain. I got the water, put it on my eye. And I have since had an eye exam for sure so I have, you know, the documented testimony. Complete cells all restored. My eye is totally fine. No evidence of ever being injured, completely healed".*

Peter Popoff: *"Did you hear that? Complete restoration of the cells. The doctor said permanent damage but how many of you know God reversed that verdict?"*

11 December 2023 programme

Woman 6: *"I wrote to you and I told you that I was having heart problems and I have Lupus. And you sent me the Miracle Spring Water and you told me to anoint my body with it, and I anointed my body. The heart problem, I was healed from heart problem. The day before Good Friday, I was healed from my heart problem. And you said that the week of the 22nd there would be a guaranteed money blessing, And the Lord blessed me with over \$11,000".*

Woman 7: *"I used the Miracle Spring Water and anoint my head and body, and I am excited about it. Everything. Even the letters that he sent me day after day has confirmed to what I've been praying for and thanking God for answering my prayer for my ship coming in for \$700,000 which he said would come to me. And it came just yesterday and I'm here to testify about it".*

12 December 2023 programme

Peter Popoff: *"Tell us, what did God do for you?"*

Man 2: *"Uh, touched the spring water and God had healed my blood pressure, but the enemy come back on me....I was 159 over 94 and God touched me and dropped it to 123 over 70. I've never seen it that low in my whole life".*

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

Man 2: *"Yes, yes".*

Peter Popoff: *"Blood pressure went from super high to super low".*

Woman 7: (to Peter Popoff) *"I was doing what you was telling me to do, and they wanted to give up on my mother. They wanted to take her off life support...For 10 months, I had been dealing with this. Now my mother is home. She don't even have to use her oxygen. But this you say some miracle money was going to come from an unlikely source. And on July the eighth, I received \$5000".*

Peter Popoff: *"Amen, miracle money... Mother, back home after you used the Miracle Spring Water. No more oxygen".*

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 trade marks 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

The Licensee did not respond to our request for comments or provide any representations on Ofcom’s Preliminary View.

Decision

Reflecting our duties under the Communications Act 2003,² 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”. In particular, Ofcom also took into account

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/section/319>

that many people find comfort and solace from prayer or a belief in faith healing when ill or encountering personal difficulties.

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 any harmful material and whether the programmes 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 programmes to assess whether they contained potentially harmful material. Presenter Peter Popoff advised viewers that after using the “Miracle Spring Water”, they would “see many, many mighty miracles in your [their] life”. He added that “literally hundreds of thousands” had used the “Miracle Spring Water” and that viewers who had watched his programme “for a while” would have “read and listened to hundreds of testimonies from people who have been saved, healed, delivered, set free, financially prospered” as a result. The short pre-recorded instructional video advised viewers the water would bring “a never-ending supply of prosperity”.

The programmes themselves included testimonies in which people explained how contact with Peter Popoff or the use of “Miracle Spring Water” had brought about:

- their or their loved ones’ full recovery from serious illnesses (such as breast and colon cancer and heart conditions);
- significant improvement to their financial situation (such as the receipt of a large sum of money – \$700,000 in one instance); or
- their complete recovery from an addiction to drugs.

Ofcom considered that these claims related to viewers’ health and wealth. In 2017, Ofcom commissioned a qualitative research report³ 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 potential harm arising from such claims. Ofcom subsequently issued guidance⁴ (“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 potential harm arising from health or wealth claims. The guidance also highlights how the inclusion of an alternative perspective or a warning (e.g. one that

³ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/attitudes-to-potential-harm>

⁴ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0023/104657/Section-2-Guidance-Notes.pdf

advises audience members to consult a qualified doctor before making decisions about their health based on information included in a programme) can be used by broadcasters to protect viewers from potential harm.

In this case, the illnesses discussed in the programmes, for example cancer and heart conditions, are clearly 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 increase this vulnerability. In the case of cancer, this is reflected in section 4 of the Cancer Act 1939, where Parliament has considered it appropriate to prohibit advertising which offers to treat cancer.

Ofcom considered that viewers were likely to have understood from the testimonies broadcast in the programmes 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 religious programmes 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, that it was unnecessary to rely on, or continue using, conventional medical treatment. This could have a damaging effect on vulnerable viewers targeted by the presenter's invitations. While the references to "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 as a result of 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 these programmes. As a result, Ofcom considered the risk of harm to viewers was high.

Ofcom therefore examined whether the Licensee had taken any 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.

We acknowledged the freedom of thought, conscience and religion afforded by Article 9 of the ECHR and that some people take comfort from a belief in faith-healing practices. We also took into account that *Peter Popoff Ministries* is a religious programme and that viewers are likely to expect it to contain content relating to faith healing and prayer. However, notwithstanding these factors, the Licensee is required provide adequate protection from potentially harmful material.

Ofcom considered that as the claims made in these programmes were about serious health conditions and financial problems, the risk of harm was especially high. Accordingly, Ofcom took the view that need for adequate protection in the case was significant.

None of the programmes contained any information about the importance of viewers seeking health advice from qualified medical professionals or financial advisers and there was no challenge or any other form of context provided to the claims of efficacy made about the “Miracle Spring Water”.

Taking into account these factors, Ofcom did not consider that the Licensee had provided adequate protection from broadcast content that presented a high risk of harm to viewers. 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 guidance⁵ to Rule 4.6 makes clear that when programmes are soliciting a response from their audience, broadcasters 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 “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”.

As set out above, the programmes 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. Ofcom considered that viewers were likely to infer from such statements that negative outcomes would result for them if they did not order the water or contact Peter Popoff Ministries, i.e. their health or financial problems would continue.

As set out above, Ofcom had regard to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion afforded by Article 9 of the ECHR and that some people take comfort from a belief in faith-healing practices. We also took into account that viewers of a religious programme are likely to expect it to contain content relating to faith healing and prayer. However, given the religious nature of the programmes and the status and authority of the presenters, Ofcom considered that vulnerable viewers – in particular those who were either suffering from serious health conditions or experiencing financial difficulties – were less likely to question the content and, as such, were susceptible to the numerous and repeated claims made in the programmes.

Taking the above factors into account, and given that no adequate protection was provided to viewers as set out under Rule 2.1 above, Ofcom considered that the programmes 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 trade marks must not be promoted in programming. Ofcom’s Guidance⁶ on Rule 9.4 explains: “where a reference to a product or service

⁵ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/24881/section4.pdf

⁶ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/33611/section9_may16.pdf

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 trade marks within programmes irrespective of whether they are offered in return for payment or not.

The programmes contained frequent on-screen and oral invitations to viewers to order “Miracle Spring Water” from Peter Popoff Ministries. Additionally, the testimonials featured during the programmes (as set out above) and the language used to describe the water’s effectiveness (e.g. “*your life will supernaturally improve in ways you can hardly imagine*”) served to encourage viewers to place an order.

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

Conclusion

In [Issue 487 of Ofcom’s Broadcast on Demand Bulletin](#),⁷ published on 4 December 2023, we recorded breaches of Rules 2.1, 4.6 and 9.4 against the Licensee for the broadcast of programmes by *Peter Popoff Ministries* on the same channel on 9 and 10 May 2023. The breaches concerned the promotion of the ministry’s “Miracle Spring Water” and the claims in the programmes that contact with Peter Popoff or using the “Miracle Spring Water” could cure serious health conditions and improve financial difficulties. Ofcom is currently considering these breaches for the imposition of a statutory sanction.

Ofcom is concerned that almost identical issues have been identified in content broadcast on the same service (including just two days after the publication of Ofcom’s previous decision) and that content identified in this investigation appears to represent serious and repeated breaches of Rules 2.1, 4.6 and 9.4 of the Code. In light of this, **Ofcom puts the Licensee on notice that it is minded to consider this second case for the imposition of a statutory sanction.**

Breaches of Rules 2.1, 4.6 and 9.4

⁷ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/272572/Peter-Popoff,-The-Word-Network,-9-and-10-May-Decision.pdf