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20 August 2012

Dear Lord Burns,

Re Breach of National and International Guidelines on Suicide portrayal and Ofcom Rules on impartiality

I am writing to ask you, as Chairman of Channel 4, that you carry out an urgent investigation into the way Channel 4 reported on the recent High Court Ruling of the 'Tony Nicklinson' and 'Martin' Cases.

I am concerned that the coverage along with the use of social media by news presenter Cathy Newman, (tweeting in her official capacity as an employee of Channel 4) breached rules on impartiality and national and international guidelines on the media portrayal of issues around suicide. These rules have been designed to ensure that coverage of issues around suicide do not encourage, a phenomenon known as suicide contagion.

Both the International Association for Suicide Prevention in partnership with the World Health Organisation,^[1] and the Samaritans,^[2] have, in the last few years, updated their own resource or guidelines for media professionals.

In March 2009, the PCC's Editors' Code of Practice ^[3] was further amended in the aftermath of the series of deaths of young people in and around Bridgend, South Wales. This guidance reiterates the need to avoid 'excessive detail', stresses the risks of glorification of suicide and cautions about republication of photographs of previous individuals who have taken their lives.

Additionally Section 5 of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code sets out rules designed to ensure impartiality.^[4]

The WHO international guidelines on suicide portrayal are based on the well established fact that media reporting of suicide can lead to imitative suicidal behaviours. This phenomenon is variably termed suicide contagion, copycat suicide, suicide cluster or the Werther effect. The nature of the portrayal determines the level of the risk to impressionable or vulnerable people.

The WHO recommendations to media professionals include the following:



- Avoid language which sensationalizes or normalizes suicide, or presents it as a solution to problems
- Avoid prominent placement and undue repetition of stories about suicide
- Avoid explicit description of the method used in a completed or attempted suicide
- Avoid providing detailed information about the site of a completed or attempted suicide
- Exercise caution in using photographs or video footage
- Take particular care in reporting celebrity suicides'

The one sided nature of the coverage may well have breached international and national guidelines on the broad issue of suicide portrayal. As such it could pose a significant risk to vulnerable people, the young, disabled and elderly and, on the basis of extensive international evidence could fuel suicide contagion.

In particular I am concerned that the news coverage along with a series of tweets on Thursday 16th August, including criticising the High Court for their decision saying, “Just finished interviewing @tonynicklinson after high court passes buck to parliament. He says MPs won’t decide because they’re cowards”, “He also told me he’d consider refusing food and drink to starve himself to death but only as ‘a last resort’ if he loses at supreme court” and “Says he’s almost relieved his physical deterioration means he may be nearing an end but fears it will ‘bloody painful’” also runs completely contrary to Section Five of Ofcom’s Broadcasting Code, published in 2011, in so far as it appears deeply partisan and fails to explore the views of those who oppose a change in the law on assisted suicide and euthanasia, these include, every major doctors organisation, every mainstream religion and every major disability rights organisation.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that suicides in England rose from 3,993 in 2007 to 4,390 in 2009 – an overall increase of 10% and the greatest two year rise in over a decade. Amongst males aged 45-74, the rise has been 16% from 1,174 to 1370. The latter figure is the highest in over 20 years and constant pro assisted suicide pro euthanasia may well be fuelling some of this increase.

It is noteworthy that the national suicide prevention strategy for England, launched in 2002, is failing dismally to reach its targets. In addition no annual reports seem to be available since 2008.

This partisan and pro assisted suicide and euthanasia stance taken by Channel 4 is not the first time that concerns about the way coverage on both has been raised. Reporting of the Debbie Purdy Case, other assisted suicides and the rigged Falconer Report have portrayed assisted suicide in a positive light and have failed to give similar weight to the opposite perspective.



Contrary views were either not expressed in the coverage including tweets, or were given significantly less time and prominence. This creates the false impression that the small minority these cases constitute are somehow representative of all disabled people, or those facing a terminal disease. Worse still the coverage creates the impression that the termination of the lives of these people should be seen as a) normal, b) desirable and c) elected and non elected Parliamentarians are wrong to consistently vote against changes to both legislation covering suicide and euthanasia. Therefore Channel 4's coverage failed to meet Ofcom's rules on impartiality and the internationally and nationally recognised recommendations on the portrayal of suicide.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely

Alistair Thompson

CC Ofcom

[1] http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/resource_media.pdf

[2] <http://www.samaritans.org/pdf/SamaritansMediaGuidelines-UK2005.pdf>

[3] <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>

[4] <http://www.samaritans.org/pdf/SamaritansMediaGuidelines-UK2005.pdf>