



Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA
Tel 020 7219 6120 website www.parliament.uk/cms

Dame Melanie Dawes
Chief Executive of Ofcom
Riverside House
2a Southwark Bridge Road
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By email

6 April 2020

Dear Dame Melanie,

Misinformation about the COVID-19 crisis

I would first like to congratulate you on your appointment as Chief Executive of Ofcom. Our first inquiries as a Committee, looking at public service broadcasting, online harms and broadband and the road to 5G, all overlap with Ofcom's work and I look forward to working with you and Lord Burns over the coming years.

I am writing in this instance to raise concerns about the spread of disinformation and misinformation during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. As you know, we have recently put out a call for the public to send us examples of false narratives they see online. However, several recent reports have noted that Chinese state-backed news organisations, such as Global China Television Network, have contributed by disseminating false narratives,¹ such as disputing the place of origin of the novel coronavirus.² We are also concerned that conspiracy theories spread by Press TV can be spread through social media, circumventing the loss of its UK broadcasting licence.

This comes in the context of four investigations being launched into CGTN last year over allegations of breaches to the broadcasting code triggered by your monitoring team regarding coverage of the protests in Hong Kong.³ Ofcom was also fined RT £200,000 for serious and repeated failures to comply with broadcasting rules on impartiality and lost its appeal against the decision in the High Court last week.

As such, the Committee has several queries that it would appreciate your insight on:

1. What work is Ofcom doing to monitor and regulate particular broadcast media organisations and investigate instances where there may be failures to comply with broadcasting rules about the COVID-19 crisis?

¹ *The New York Times*, [How China is Reshaping the Coronavirus Narrative](#) (18 March 2020).

² *Foreign Policy*, [China Will Do Anything to Deflect Coronavirus Blame](#) (30 March 2020).

³ *The Financial Times*, [Ofcom launches four more investigations into China broadcaster](#) (23 September 2019).



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2. Could or would decisions to sanction broadcasters or remove broadcasting licences be expedited due to the nature of the crisis?
3. What role does Ofcom currently have in identifying organisations that might pose a risk in spreading or amplifying disinformation or misinformation about COVID-19, to ensure the public are aware of these risks?
4. Does Ofcom's regulation of broadcasting extend to broadcasts that may be amplified by social media, or that are using social media to subvert broadcasting licencing?
5. How has this work been impacted, if at all, by the crisis itself? Has this affected other aspects of Ofcom's remit?

Successfully tackling COVID-19 requires scientifically-robust health information to be trusted, and this requires clear, concise public messaging that is accessible to all. False narratives crowd out trusted sources and, as a consequence, increase the risk to us all.

I look forward to reading your response on this matter and to working with you in the coming years.

Yours sincerely,

Julian Knight MP
Chair, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee