

# Alex Salmond's RT show did breach the rules says Ofcom

Ofcom has issued its findings in a complaint against the Alex Salmond Show on RT the state funded Russian news and current affairs channel, and has found that there was a breach of Ofcom rules.

A complaint was made to Ofcom about the first episode of a new series which featured an interview with Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont and during which the content of tweets was read out to the audience.

*Ofcom received a complaint about the first episode of the new series alleging that the programme "invented tweets presented as real from viewers of the show to direct the debate on his views and terms". The complainant suggested that this enabled Alex Salmond "to pretend that he was merely answering questions from concerned viewers about Brexit rather than trying to control the debate..."*

In its Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin published today the regulatory body states that four of six tweets referred to in the first episode were sent by people connected directly or indirectly to the show.

In its defence the Licensee TV Novosti which is a non-profit organisation, stated that the audience was not misled and that it flagged up that the new series would 'give ordinary people with something to say a platform to say it'.



Alex Salmond on the set of his Fringe show last August

This was a pre-recorded programme and so there was no scope to comment on earlier programmes or even interact with live viewers. The licensee said this would have been obvious to the audience, and that the questions had been chosen for content not their origin. They also claimed that the identity of the individuals putting the questions was not relevant.

This led to the programme format being altered in later episodes by the production company Slàinte Media, so that the actual tweet was featured as an image, ensuring that the identity of the person asking the question or making a comment would be known.

Slàinte Media said that none of the four tweets was fake. They were all genuine responses to the press launch, although one had been inadvertently carried over from rehearsal as it was from the programme director. But as in the preliminary finding issued in April the regulatory body found that although from real people, they were not actually from members of the audience.

Ofcom said that it applies 'generally accepted standards' to protect the public from harmful and offensive material, while

also taking into account the rights to freedom of expression of both the audience and the broadcaster.

As it is a current affairs programme they believe that the matter of audience trust is particularly high, even in the case of this first episode. Although it was conceded that the contributions were from genuine individuals, viewers would be under the impression that the tweets had originated from members of the public unconnected with the programme.

This was not the case and Ofcom believe it was materially misleading and in breach of Rule 2.2 of the Code which states : "Factual programmes or items or portrayals of factual matters must not materially mislead the audience".



Former First Minister Alex Salmond during filming for his show in New York in April

A spokesperson for Slàinte Media told The Edinburgh Reporter :  
“We are pleased that Ofcom in its ruling has rejected the basis of the sole complaint made against the programme and the inaccurate press coverage which provoked it.

“We also acknowledged that the questions read out by Mr Salmond were not ‘invented’ as alleged by the complainant and that only one of the six tweets and emails referred to Brexit,

the matter raised by the complainant in this case.

"Thus it seems extraordinary that, having dismissed the basis of the only complaint which they actually received Ofcom then finds a different reason for an "in breach" finding, even if it is one which carries no sanction.

"For the very first programme of a recorded series there were obviously no existing viewers or live tweets to draw on in order to illustrate the audience participation section. Thus we used comment from a variety of sources for the six questions.

"Ofcom suggests that in these circumstances the inclusion of three questions from people with even remote connections to the Show is enough for an "in breach" finding; not because their questions were included but because it was not specifically mentioned that they were from a freelance hairdresser, a friend of a camera man and someone who knew Mr Salmond!

"This ruling is despite the fact that the content of the questions were basically light hearted (eg the English meaning of the Scots Gaelic word Slàinte) and clearly pursued no particular agenda nor could possibly have caused any offence. In other words this ruling, even one with no proposed sanction, is out of all proportion to this very minor matter.

"It is worth noting that since this very first Alex Salmond Show was broadcast, last November, and the audience established, we have produced no less than 34 shows featuring this particular section on viewers' questions with no difficulty or complaint whatsoever."

Taking a different view on the matter is LibDem MSP for Edinburgh Western, Alex Cole-Hamilton, who said: "Although it has been obvious to most of us for quite some time, finally the official verdict is in – Alex Salmond's RT show has been dishonest and misleading.

"Turns out this Emperor isn't wearing any clothes after all, he has to get his own production staff to write fan tweets. It undermines the last shed of credibility he might have carried.

"For all his claims of editorial control it's now clear he just provided the figurehead for another Russian propaganda

programme. It's absolutely staggering he has chosen to stick by RT while chemical weapons have been released on British soil by Russian agents.

"Salmond was irresponsible and categorically wrong to lend the authority of his old office to this corrupt and crooked TV channel. He needs to immediately end his relationship with Russia Today."

The decision is included in the report issued today from page 19 onwards



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