



Laura Dodsworth

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Complaint to Ofcom

The partnership between Sky and the Behavioural Insights Team could affect impartiality in its pursuit of politically contentious Net Zero.



Laura Dodsworth

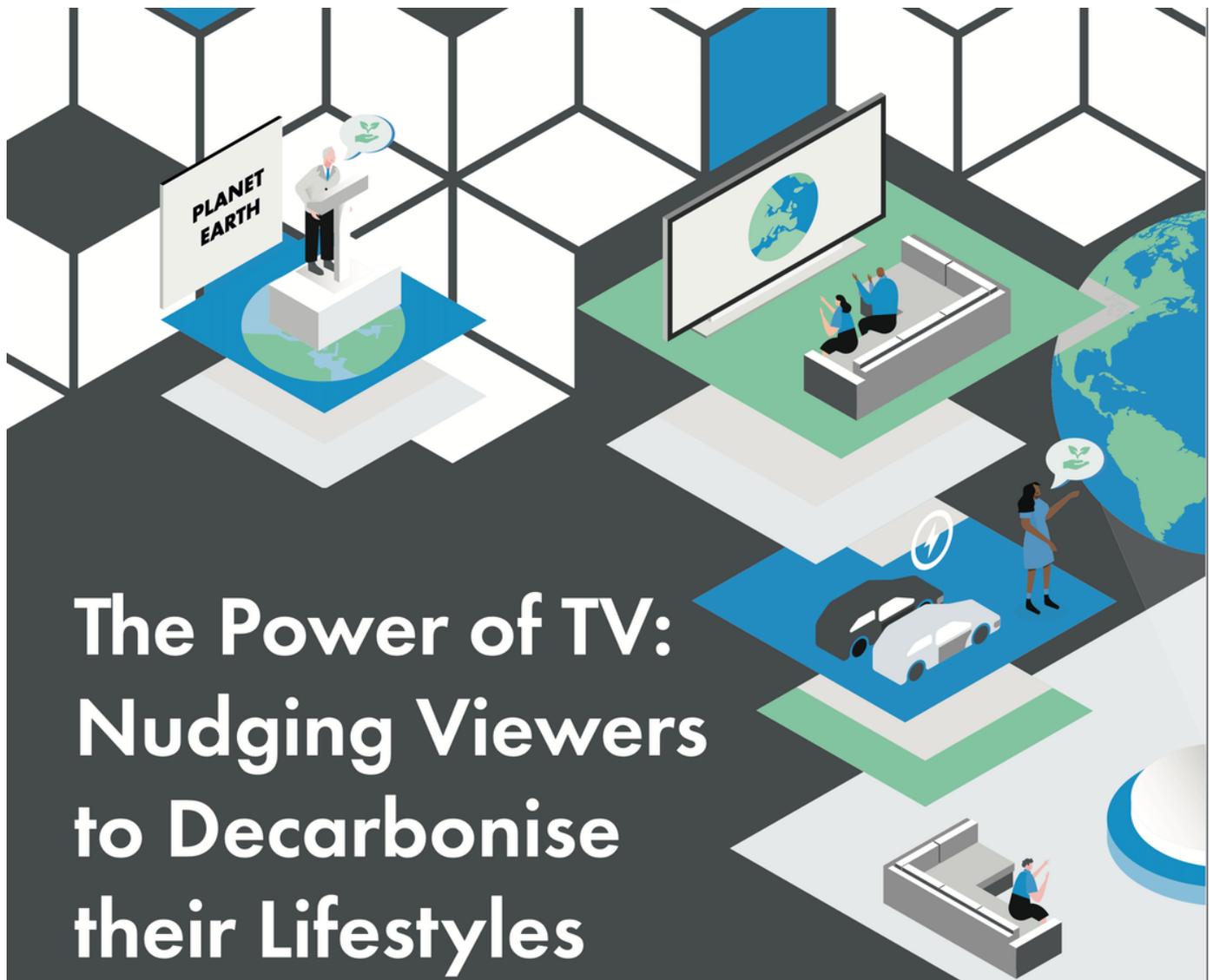
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A letter of complaint sent to Ofcom.



Source: [BIT](#)

21st December 2021

Dear Melanie Dawes,

We are writing to alert you to a broadcast license complaint we have made about Sky UK. Our complaint concerns a partnership between Sky and Behavioural Insights U.K., Known as the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), a limited company partly owned by the Government. We believe this partnership – and, in particular, Sky’s adoption of BIT’s recommendations about how to help the Conservative Government successfully implement one of its most political contentious policy, namely, Net Zero – contravenes the Broadcasting Code.

The partnership we’re referring to resulted in the publication of ‘The Power of TV: Nudging Viewers to Decarbonise their Lifestyles’ and the launch of Sky’s ‘Sky Zero’ campaign, which recommended that broadcasters make use of “behavioural science principles”, including subliminal messaging (“nudging” in the parlance of BIT, which is colloquially known as the Nudge Unit), to encourage viewers to endorse and comply with Conservative Government policy. Alarming, the report recommends broadcasters utilize sophisticated psychological techniques to change the behaviour of children “because of the important influence they have on the attitude and behaviours of their parents”.

Summary

We are concerned that this partnership and Sky’s adoption of BIT’s recommendations:

- Will affect the political impartiality of news and wider programming on Sky’s channels;
- Reveals an inappropriate relationship between a company which, when the report was published, was part owned by the U.K. Government, and a licensed U.K. broadcaster. Sky referred to BIT as “independent” in its video to promote this partnership, yet Sky will be aware that BIT was at the time part owned by the U.K. Cabinet Office. Until the Cabinet Office’s share was bought by NESTA earlier this month, the company was commonly referred to as “the Government’s Nudge Unit” and advised the Government on how to influence the public using sophisticated psychological techniques, particularly when it comes to getting people to comply with Government policies;
- Is an attempt to affect viewers’ attitudes and behaviour, including those of children, through the use of indirect, subliminal messaging (“nudging”) with a view to securing their support and compliance with one of the most politically contentious policy of the Conservative Government, namely, Net Zero.
- Reveals a historic relationship between behavioural scientists employed by the U.K. Government and broadcasters to promote Government policies: “behaviour change

via broadcasting and traditional media has historically been aimed at improving public health, boosting gender equality, and reducing violence. Imagine the potential for emissions reductions if the same methods were used to encourage sustainable behaviours!” This historic relationship warrants further investigation since it may include historic breaches of the Broadcasting Code by Sky and other broadcasters.

The Complaint

Below are the specific contraventions of Ofcom’s Broadcasting Code that we are concerned about:

2.11 Broadcasters must not use techniques which exploit the possibility of conveying a message to viewers or listeners, or of otherwise influencing their minds without their being aware, or fully aware, of what has occurred. [Section two: Harm and Offence, The Broadcasting Code.]

The jointly-published report by BIT and Sky reveals their intention to subtly influence viewers’ attitudes and behaviour in indirect, subliminal ways by using sophisticated psychological techniques based on behavioural science. The aim is to change viewers minds, including the minds of children, about a politically contentious issue by using these techniques so viewers aren’t fully aware that an attempt is being made to change their minds. The underlying assumption is that this subtle, indirect messaging is a more effective way of changing people’s attitudes and behaviour than more overt messaging since the messages will be absorbed semi-consciously – catching viewers off guard, as it were, and bypassing their critical faculties. The use of this “nudging” would be less objectionable if these techniques were being recommended to promote an apolitical, uncontentious agenda. But the recommendation of the joint report is that these sophisticated psychological techniques be used to persuade viewers to endorse one of the Conservative Government most politically contentious policies, namely, Net Zero.

The foreword to the report, authored by David Halpern, the CEO of BIT, says:

Societal-level behaviour change is needed to tackle climate change... From changing what we buy and what we eat, to changing the technologies we use to heat our homes and travel, reaching Net Zero is conditional on large numbers of people taking up green behaviours and products.

Broadcast organisations and content creators therefore have a unique opportunity to make a difference for the planet. Through the programs that they produce, the

characters that they create, the plot-lines that they develop, and the adverts that they broadcast, content creators have the potential to have a far-reaching impact on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of citizens, and to spark conversations in boardrooms and political arenas alike. They are also pivotally placed to help people sift through the maze of choices and claims, to adopt behaviours – and products – that can get us to a greener future.

The BIT report goes on to recommend a variety of subtle psychological techniques that broadcasters can use to promote this agenda, including using celebrities, on-screen presenters and dramatic characters as “role models”, e.g. advocates for the Net Zero policy, plot-lines, product placement, and editorially endorsing the Net Zero policy in news and current affairs programmes, as well as in drama programmes, travel programmes, DIY programmes and cookery programmes. Indeed, no area of Sky’s output across its various channels is to be left unaffected by this agenda.

Dana Strong, Group Chief Executive, Sky, agrees with this aim. She says in her foreword:

As Europe’s largest media and entertainment organisation, we also want to accelerate our industry’s efforts to drive global progress towards net zero.

However, it is now widely accepted that we must shift the behaviour of millions of people to deliver on our collective net zero goals...

We know that what we broadcast has the power to change how we as consumers feel and act. What we see on our screens can shock us, inspire us, educate us, and entertain us. [Our emphasis.]

5.1: News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality. [Section five: Due impartiality and due accuracy, The Broadcasting Code.]

The report suggests that, “Audiences’ knowledge on what to do and how can be improved by documentaries; DIY, travel, and cookery shows; and news coverage.”

This is an explicit call for broadcasters to encourage viewers to comply (“what to do and how”) with a controversial Conservative Government policy in news programmes, which is a breach of the Broadcasting Code’s “due impartiality” requirement.

In addition, the Climate Content Pledge (undertaken by 12 major U.K. media companies, including Sky) promises:

We will incorporate climate change considerations into all our editorial processes, informed by science and behavioural insight.

It is a breach of the “due impartiality” requirement for “climate change considerations”, e.g. promotion of the Government’s Net Zero policy, to be woven into all editorial processes, which include those in news and current affairs.

5.5: Due impartiality on matters of political or industrial controversy and matters relating to current public policy must be preserved on the part of any person providing a service (listed above). This may be achieved within a programme or over a series of programmes taken as a whole. [Section five: Due impartiality and due accuracy, The Broadcasting Code.]

As well as news and current affairs, other programming – such as DIY, travel and cookery programmes – must maintain “due impartiality on matters of political and industrial controversy and matters relating to current policy”. Yet the joint report by BIT and Sky encourages broadcasters to persuade viewers to comply with a controversial political (and industrial) policy, namely, Net Zero, which is a breach of this requirement. No balance of views and opinions or debate about this controversial Government policy is proposed, only suggestions as to how best to get viewers to change their attitudes and “behaviours” to align with the policy.

5.12: In dealing with matters of major political and industrial controversy and major matters relating to current public policy an appropriately wide range of significant views must be included and given due weight in each programme or in clearly linked and timely programmes. Views and facts must not be misrepresented. [Section five: Due impartiality and due accuracy, The Broadcasting Code.]

A commitment to promoting the Conservative Government’s goal of Net Zero will necessitate the exclusion of a wide range of alternative views, including those of numerous members of Parliament, other elected representatives, as well as distinguished climate scientists, experts on energy policy and environment correspondents. Excluding or marginalizing people who dissent from the Net Zero policy is surely a breach of this requirement. Broadcasters have an obligation to ensure viewers are exposed to a wide range of different viewpoints about this politically contentious policy.

9.1: Broadcasters must maintain independent editorial control over programming. [Section nine: Commercial references on TV, The Broadcasting Code.]

The report’s suggestion – that U.K. broadcasters incorporate the recommendations of a company partly owned by the U.K. Government, as it was at the time – implicitly undermines independent editorial integrity.

Product placement

The report recommends product placement to encourage people to support the Net Zero policy. Below are two examples:

Product placement directly impacts behaviour, it can influence key outcomes such as brand attention, knowledge, interest, recall, recognition, and purchase intent, which is encouraging for the potential impact that background green content could have on viewers. This can be explained by the "mere exposure effect", where people often develop preferences for things simply because they are familiar with them.

Use green product placement and model green actions in the background to improve familiarity, create positive attitudes and norms.

This contravenes Ofcom's rules which state that "product placement must not impair broadcasters' editorial independence and must always be editorially justified. This means that programmes cannot be created or distorted so that they become vehicles for the purposes of featuring product placement."

Conclusion

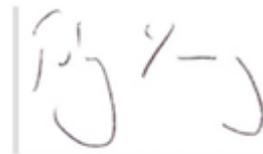
We find the collaboration between a major U.K. broadcaster and a company that was part-owned by the Cabinet Office until earlier this month to promote one of the most politically contentious policies of the current Conservative Government deeply alarming. The report jointly published by BIT and Sky seems to be unaware of the obligations imposed on broadcasters by the Broadcasting Code to maintain "due impartiality" across all their output, particularly news and current affairs, and the need to expose viewers to a wide range of views when it comes to "matters of major political and industrial controversy and major matters relating to current public policy". On the contrary, Sky recommends that all U.K. broadcasters adopt a hard editorial bias when it comes to the promotion of the Government's controversial Net Zero policy, and proudly boasts that it is adopting these recommendations itself.

We are particularly concerned about Sky's enthusiastic embrace of subtle and sophisticated psychological techniques, rooted in behavioural science, to promote endorsement of and compliance with the Net Zero policy, as well as its evangelism in trying to get other broadcasters to use these techniques. To take just one example, the use of product placement to try and influence viewers' attitudes and behaviour towards this controversial policy is a flagrant breach of Section Two of the Broadcasting Code, which explicitly prohibits the use of "techniques which exploit the possibility of conveying a message to viewers or listeners, or of otherwise influencing their minds without their being aware, or fully aware, of what has occurred". Far from being concerned that the use of product

placement may persuade viewers to endorse a politically controversial policy without their being fully aware of it, BIT and Sky appear to be recommending its use for precisely that reason. The recommendation in the report that such techniques are deployed to change the behaviour of children – and the implication that Sky is currently doing precisely that across all its channels – is unconscionable.

We hope you will investigate our complaint with the urgency we believe it merits.

Yours sincerely,



Laura Dodsworth

Toby Young

CC: The RT Hon Nadine Dorries MP, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; Lucy Powell MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

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Write a comment...



Steve Mellor 4 hr ago · edited 3 hr ago Liked by Laura Dodsworth

Orwell's Newspeak by another name - please, just stop the world, I want to get off.

And in the event that they won't investigate your erudite complaint, perhaps a petition along the lines of the Great Barrington Declaration would nudge them in the right direction. And even if it didn't, it would certainly raise public awareness.

♡ 6 Reply



Richard Jarman 4 hr ago Liked by [Laura Dodsworth](#)

Excellent letter Laura and Toby

♡ 8 Reply

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