Dear Alex Mahon, CEO of Channel 4 and Melanie Dawes, Chief Executive of Ofcom,

**Re: Channel 4 Dispatches “The Truth about Traveller Crime” shown at 9pm on 16th April 2020**

We write to you to express our anger and disappointment that on Thursday 16th April 2020, Channel 4 chose to air a show titled “Dispatches: The Truth About Traveller Crime”.

It is not a whole community that commits a crime, it is an individual. We are deeply concerned that a channel which describes itself as a “trailblazer in diversity, with an emphasis on achieving greater inclusion” finds it acceptable to conduct a trial by press of the whole Traveller community. Below we have listed the relevant rules in the Ofcom Broadcasting Code which we believe have been breached by Channel 4:

* Rule 2.2 ‘Factual programmes or items or portrayals of factual matters must not materially mislead the audience.’
* Rule 3.1 ‘Material likely to encourage or incite the commission of crime or to lead to disorder must not be included in television or radio services or BBC ODPS.’
* Rule 3.3 ‘Material which contains abusive or derogatory treatment of individuals, groups, religions or communities, must not be included in television and radio services or BBC ODPS except where it is justified by the context.’
* Rule 5.1 ‘News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality.’
* Rule 5.7 ‘Views and facts must not be misrepresented.’

Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers are recognised ethnic groups, protected under the Equality Act 2010 and each with their own distinct histories, cultures and languages. We believe that the show is in breach of Rules 3.1 and 3.3 of the Broadcasting Code in that it has led to a proliferation of hate crime and hate speech on social media and in that it contains abusive and derogatory treatment of Gypsy and Traveller communities, with no justification by the context.

We note that Ofcom guidance notes state, *“Broadcasters should take particular care in their portrayal of culturally diverse matters and should avoid stereotyping unless editorially justified. When considering such matters, broadcasters should take into account the possible effects programmes may have on particular sections of the community.”*

Whilst the title “The Truth about Traveller Crime” caused hurt and harm to community members before the show even aired, the programme itself compounded the impression that Travellers overall are inclined to commit more crime than other sections of society. We hope you would agree that it is unacceptable to frame a television show around a whole ethnic group as supposed perpetrators of crime, ultimately essentialising and naturalising crime as inherent to the ethnic group. We believe that the producers took little or no care to avoid stereotyping of Gypsies and Travellers. Comments online and elsewhere bear out the hurt and outrage felt by many which they see as tantamount to abuse of a whole community.

Below are examples of just some of the statements we have seen from members of the public in response to the documentary:

* *“Sterilisation plan should be introduced for all at an early age. Soon sort the problem.”*
* *“I feel no shame in saying if we were rid of them our country would be a better place.”*
* *“I would do time to get rid of them.”*
* *“The traveller community are a bloody nuisance, setting up where they like, not contributing to anything, no rules & regulations – should be exterminated”*
* *“Gypsies are scumbags”*
* *“One and only gripe? Sick fucks setting dogs on each other for money. Hope covid hits them hard to honest.”*
* *“Just round them all up and lock them up in a field somewhere. They love camping so!! Thieving twats the lot of them.”*
* *“The truth about travellers crime… basically the pikeys are a crime wave”*
* *“Traveller sites are full of thieves #Dispatches”*
* *“#Dispatches shut all the traveller sites & send em back to Ireland. these people are just nomadic thieves & murders that deserve to be in just 1 place… prison”*
* *“I absolutely despise travellers. May be a sweeping statement but most are animal abusing scumbags. I fucking hate the thick twats. #Dispatches”*
* *“Why can’t some of these low life travellers get covid?”*

We have heard countless stories of people from Gypsy and Traveller communities who are afraid to go into work out of fear of what others might think, of businesses who have lost customers and of many parents who are afraid to send their children back to school when the time comes because of fears of racist bullying. You can find below just a handful of stories we have heard in recent weeks:

 *“The C4 programme literally said that we’re [Travellers] people who do crime. After the programme went up I had gorja (settled) friends and family ringing asking whether it was true. Some of them knew better, but other people were judging me for it. I work in a nice place, but my work don’t know that I’m a Traveller, I don’t tell them because of programmes like this. If people knew that I was a Traveller, things would be completely different. That’s the kind of thing we have to do because of programmes like this. In a job I had before, I told them after a while that I’m a Traveller and they took responsibilities away from me, they wouldn’t let me do things on my own anymore. That’s what programmes like this do to us. I was on the team that produced the flowers for Harry and Meghan’s wedding, but I never thought I could tell people who I was.”*

Kerry

*“People who we used to call neighbours and friends have asked us how we got the money to set up our business – is it that we’ve been robbing ATMs or breaking into people’s houses? It’s hard to answer, I want to be polite, but I’m angry, it’s upsetting. I’m 62. I don’t rob or steal. There’s good and bad in everybody. I don’t think Channel 4 can make up for this. It takes so much to win back people’s trust.”*

Maureen

*“We receive enough racism as it is. This program is going to make things worse. I live with my husband and children on the same property as my parents and brother. In the last five years, we’ve received death threats and hate mail. We live on a farm/smallholding. We’ve had nothing but struggles since we moved here. Neighbours have told people coming to visit us to stay away. When electricians and builders came to work on my dad’s property, our neighbours stopped them to tell them we wouldn’t pay them. People we’ve known and worked with for years. We always pay our way and we all work! One neighbour stopped our children from playing together when she found out I was a Gypsy. She worked in my daughter’s school, in her classroom. She started to ignore my daughter. Her education was damaged a lot because of her. The school didn’t do anything about it, so I removed her from school and put her into a new one. Finally she’s getting the education she needs. We don’t know what it’ll be like when she goes back after this though. We just have to wait.”*

Gemma

*“The backlash I’m seeing at the moment is mostly on social media. I can see settled people really attacking Pavee and Irish Traveller. I’ve jumped on some posts (as a Horsedrawn Traveller Showman) because I want to stick up for more vulnerable people, people I know Irish Travellers are really taking the hit on Facebook... I’m frightened for my family. My wife and my kids are usually on the road with me, but they’re staying in bricks and mortar at the moment. They won’t be going back on the road for a while.”*

Dave

You will be aware that we have collected and submitted a dossier of over 7000 individual complaints which people have asked us to submit on their behalf. To give an indication of the level of hurt felt within the Gypsy and Traveller communities at this time, the website page on which this complaint form was has received more views in a day than any page in the history of our website has.

According to research conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, 44% of British adults openly express ‘negative’ attitudes toward Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, the most of any protected characteristic group in England. According to research by the Traveller Movement and GATE Herts, police officers consider hate crime to be the most common issue Gypsies, Roma and Travellers report to them, but less than 15% of hate incidences are reported to police. In airing the show, we believe Channel 4 did not fully take into account the possible effects the programme will have on Gypsy and Traveller communities who are already victims of discrimination and hate crime. As evidenced by a simple browse on social media, the content and the delivery of the show has already led to higher levels of prejudice and hate crime against Gypsy and Traveller communities in the UK.

We also note that the Broadcasting Code indicates that there are various editorial approaches a broadcaster can take to provide context for such potentially damaging content. It states that there is less potential for a breach of Section 3.1 “if opposing viewpoints and sufficient challenge are provided [to viewers] where the programme seeks to provide examination or commentary on criminal activity in the public interest.” In their quest for “the truth” the producers gave the bulk of the content over to criminal activity, leaving little space for material which would challenge or balance such information in a wider context. In particular, there was insufficient challenge to the research included in the show which we believe to be flawed.

We were approached in the research phase of the show, but were reluctant to engage because of the production company’s historic involvement in the creation of sensationalist drama “Gypsy Wars” which we felt was irresponsible and damaging to community integration. Given the history of Hardcash Production’s coverage of Gypsy and Traveller communities, we had no confidence that any show they produced would be fair and therefore did not want to engage as we felt this would make us complicit. In addition to this, even if we wanted to input, the short time spans given by the production crew would have made this difficult or impossible for us as a small organisation.

Next, we would like to focus on breaches of Rule 2.2, Rule 5.1 and Rule 5.7. We believe the research and evidence used was misleading to the extent that it materially misled the audience, that it was not presented with due impartiality and that views and facts were misrepresented.

In the programme, Anja Popp, presented two pieces of research. The first piece of research identified the postcodes of 30 Traveller sites “where issues with crime and anti-social behaviour have been reported”, then examined the recorded crime figures within a one-mile radius over a 12-month period. The conclusion was that “crime was a significant problem around a significant number of Traveller and Gypsy sites”.

However, we believe that neither the methodology nor the conclusion have any scientific or statistical rigor. Firstly, by focussing on Traveller sites where there were already reports of crime, rather than 30 randomly selected Traveller sites, there is an inherent bias in the sample data. Secondly, the sample size of 30 was not large enough to inform claims about all Traveller sites across the country. Finally, the assumption that any crime within a one-mile radius of a Traveller site has been committed by residents of that site is misleading, inaccurate and insulting. This assumption fails to account for the fact that the residents of the site may also be victims of crime and would therefore be included in the crime statistics used.

In the second piece of research presented in the programme, the researchers focus on a random sample of 237 sites across England where it is reported that 56% sites have a crime rate below the national average, 30% sites have a crime rate at least a third below national average, and 27% of sites have a crime rate at least a third above the national average. This led the presenter to the selective conclusion that “in simple terms, serious crime problems were associated with over a quarter of sites”. In fact, the research findings revealed the very opposite – there is no conclusive link between existence of a Traveller site and a higher crime rate. If anything, in the majority of places (56%), the existence of a Traveller site correlates with a lower crime rate.

Concluding that Traveller sites lead to higher crime rates by focusing on the minority of sites with a crime rate above a national average highlights the entrenched ‘confirmation bias’ present in the Dispatches investigation. This degree of cognitive bias sought to favour information supporting the approach that the producers adopted, rather than drawing reliable conclusions from the full range of data available. Worryingly, no attempt was made to correct for known determinants of crime such as poverty, social exclusion, wage and income inequality, level of education and more. The research findings which are presented are intended to uncover “The Truth about Traveller Crime”, however, they lack the basic validity and reliability needed to answer the research question.

Further to this, we are concerned that the producers chose to include a video clip of Andrew Selous MP apparently backing up some of their research findings with dubious musings of his own. He says, “Some of the large supermarkets are badly affected by very high levels of shoplifting where you can talk about sometimes tens of thousands of pounds per month”. Mr Selous has every right to say what he likes but his claim is presented as fact and appears to be unsubstantiated. There is no counter argument or challenge provided by the presenter.

Overall the use of research and data appears weak. We believe the interpretation of the research is in breach of Rule 2.2 of the Broadcasting Code as it misleads the audience whilst the lack of impartiality of the research and misrepresentation of the facts is in breach of Rules 5.1 and 5.7 of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

We request evidence of the research methodology on which the documentary’s content was based, particularly ethical considerations, objectivity and the selection process for Traveller sites that featured on the show.

We ask that:

* Channel 4, Dispatches and Hardcash Productions make an official apology with positive actions identified to prevent any similar event in the future;
* Channel 4 and Hardcash Productions publish information evidencing the validity of their “research”;
* The programme be removed from 4OD, All 4 and cancel any scheduled repeats;
* An investigation is commissioned by Ofcom into discrimination against Gypsies and Travellers at Channel 4.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Mann

Director

Friends, Families and Travellers

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