

BBC Trust rejects Opus Dei appeal

The BBC Trust has rejected a complaint by Opus Dei that episodes of *Waking the Dead* portrayed a "negative and false" view of the Catholic organisation.

24/08/2007

The Opus Dei Information Office in London received a letter from the BBC on 22 August, stating that they would not uphold the complaint. For a copy of the letter and enclosures in 'pdf' format press the link below:

https://multimedia.opusdei.org/pdf/en/070820_bbc_trust.pdf

Comment:

We are grateful to the BBC for the time it has taken in assessing whether *Waking the Dead* violated the BBC's editorial guidelines. However, we are surprised that the BBC Trust has dismissed Opus Dei's complaint principally on the grounds that individuals cannot be taken to be representative of organisations and because *Waking the Dead* is clearly fictional in nature.

The Trust is the final authority within the BBC competent to adjudicate whether programmes are in breach of its editorial guidelines which commit programme makers to fairness and accuracy, even in fiction. But after careful scrutiny of the Trust's findings, it is clear to us that if the programme did not violate the BBC's guidelines, it is hard to

imagine what purpose the guidelines serve and whom they are designed to protect. In consequence, the Trust's finding that *Waking the Dead* did not violate the BBC's guidelines must raise questions about their fitness for purpose. Because we believe this wider issue is at stake we now plan to take the matter forward to the industry watchdog Ofcom.

The BBC's guidelines state that in dramas "the same standards of fairness which apply to factual programmes should generally be observed" and makes clear the broadcaster's obligation to "ensure the drama does not unduly distort the known facts". Yet *Waking the Dead* reproduces the *Da Vinci Code* myths of Opus Dei as a conniving, murderous, corrupt organisation as if this were commonplace fact; links Opus Dei with responsibility for the (real) murder of Roberto Calvi despite those allegations having no

foundation; portrays all three members of Opus Dei in the programme as criminal or immoral; and while it protects the reputations of banks and other organisations by giving them fictional names, it fails to do so in the case of Opus Dei. The Trust's finding that the three fictionalised members of Opus Dei cannot be considered representative of it is disingenuous, given that there is no countervailing portrayal of the organisation. Meanwhile, its defence of the programme as fiction ignores both the deliberate mixing of fact and fiction in the programme, as well as the Guidelines' clear position that fiction is not a fig leaf for damagingly misleading portrayals of real organisations.

Opus Dei supports Catholics in the workplace in their struggle to be holy and to live out the Gospel. The nation's broadcaster has an important responsibility not to allow

dramas to defame both the organisation and its members in this way. We believe a further review of the issue is in the interests of the licence payer.

Links to the BBC:

<https://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6960339.stm> (for the news)

https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/appeals/esc_bulletins/jul07.pdf (for the appeal results)

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