

Monday 23rd September 2019

Dear Ms Barnes,

I have been passed your details by the team working on Relative Strangers who have indicated that you are the Executive Producer responsible for the recruitment strategy for this Channel 4 TV show. I wish to complain about how you have chosen to recruit to your show and raise serious ethical issues around your actions.

Some time ago, your team approached us to help in the recruitment for 'Relative Strangers'. We as a charity believe that shows purely based on reconciliation reinforce a stigma around family estrangement, that stigma being reconciliation is the most desirable and best outcome. When for many, the 'happy ending' is to be free and apart from often dangerous and dysfunctional family members. We only help with recruitment for overtly balanced shows that show both outcomes. So because of the editorial angle of Relative Strangers, we declined to work with you on the show.

We also outlined on the phone that the vast majority of our younger followers and media case studies had not simply lost touch and drifted apart with parents, but were surviving abuse or neglect. Therefore, I explained, that as we have a duty to safeguard our beneficiaries under charity law, we aren't able to suggest opportunities that may, in the end, at our judgement compromise our beneficiaries health, either physical or mental.

Despite us declining to work with you for these reasons, it seems you decided to try and bypass our safeguarding strategy, and target our followers online. Your team have called our contacts who work with vulnerable estranged young people or care leavers at university, sometimes persistently, to ask them to advertise your reconciliation show. You have trawled every media article we have

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done about estrangement, and targeted both the case studies who have spoken out (often about abuse) using their own name. You have also sought out the identities and Twitter handles of those who have had a name change in media articles. Despite not having anyone's permission to get in touch, you have sent them unsolicited messages, asking them if they want to take part in TV reconciliation and to pass on the message. Is this ethical? Have you checked the legality of your recruitment strategy in terms of GDPR?

Most worryingly, you seem to have conducted very little research into who you are targeting, or their background. In one instance, you have targeted a writer on Twitter who is estranged from her family due to honour-based violence and escaping forced marriage. If you read her media story, you would see that the police had to forcibly remove her from her home to prevent this. Is this really a safe case to approach for TV reconciliation? Or indeed is anyone a good case who has written about protecting their physical and mental health with a move towards estrangement?

The result of your actions over the last seven days, we have been approached by so many of our followers and supporters to express how distressed they are by these unsolicited and under-researched attempts to get them to take part in TV reconciliation. You can see this distress for yourself on our Twitter handles @UKstandalone @beccablandish, as much of it has been made public.

Here's some links:

<https://twitter.com/TartanTantrum/status/1175737982046887936?s=20>

https://twitter.com/chl0_lou/status/1175459596976173065?s=20

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<https://twitter.com/LauACrimterpol/status/1175509545189367810?s=20>

<https://twitter.com/LauACrimterpol/status/1175515527076360192?s=20>

<https://twitter.com/claricebailey/status/1175643292643536896?s=20>

I can well understand that it's a challenge to recruit to these kind of programmes. Mainly, as reconciling with a family member is a huge step, and a long, long road. Research shows that family estrangement is rarely a flippant decision, and to explore the roots of such dark matter on TV is a formidable step for both parties. I understand that every TV production company wants to make the next 'long lost family' and we have been approached by hundreds of shows similar to yours.

However, the place you are starting from here with Relative Strangers is not a sensitive, ethical or respectful. It has already damaged the wellbeing of those who you have prodded and poked online to try and take part.

I have no option but to take these concerns to Ofcom, Channel 4 and the committee for culture, digital media and sport, who are currently undertaking a review of these types of unethical strategies from programme makers. I will also encourage those young people who have had unsolicited communication from you about this socially sensitive issue to report these communications to the ICO.

Perhaps a lesson to learn, is that when expert charities say no to working on a show, it's not just because they are trying to be awkward, or don't have time, or indeed the capacity to take part. It's because they know their organisational audience and they know what types of shows and formats are appropriate and inappropriate, and have a duty to safeguard. It's a great shame that you chose not to respect that.

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All my best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Becca Bland", with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke and a diagonal line crossing it.

Dr Becca Bland
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