# Ofcom censorship fears put classic comedies at risk, say smaller TV channels



Ofcom has ignited a storm of controversy among television executives as accusations of censorship circulate, particularly concerning the airing of classic comedies. Smaller television channels have voiced concerns that the regulator’s stringent guidelines can disproportionately impact their operations. The fear is palpable; a single fine for an alleged breach could jeopardise their very existence, thus driving them towards a "safety-first" mentality, stifling their programming options.

The ongoing debate is further complicated by the inconsistent guidelines employed by Ofcom. Industry insiders have described these regulations as a 'lottery', particularly when it comes to revered old classics like the "Carry On" series. The lack of a definitive list of banned words or phrases exacerbates the confusion, leaving broadcasters navigating an unpredictable landscape. Jonathan Moore, chief executive of RewindTV—one of the channels affected—has articulated this concern, emphasising that many broadcasters are living in a climate of constant fear regarding compliance. He states that excessive caution leads to unnecessary censorship, eroding the authenticity of beloved shows.

Complicating matters further, there seems to be an inconsistency in what content is deemed acceptable. Moore has shared an illustrative example: a recent airing of the 1983 comedy "Brass" saw the term 'queer' omitted, while other outdated pejoratives remained in the final edit. According to Moore, the audience of niche channels like RewindTV possesses a clear understanding of the type of vintage content they are tuning in to, contrasting sharply with the broader programming of mainstream networks where more contemporary norms prevail.

Moreover, historical context plays a crucial role in this discourse. In statements from 2014, Ed Richards, then chief executive of Ofcom, suggested that many 1970s comedies resorting to racial stereotypes would not be acceptable on air today. His comments reflect a broader shift in societal attitudes towards race and representation, reinforcing that what was once deemed acceptable may no longer resonate with contemporary audiences.

In contrast, the BBC has taken steps to curtail its reliance on classic comedies in favour of original UK drama, as advised by Ofcom. This directive aims to ensure that broadcast content remains relevant to current societal values and interests. Yet this has raised questions about the preservation of cultural artefacts and the importance of historical context in comedy. The BBC has also acknowledged the need for accessibility, expanding its reach by making controversial classic comedies available for online purchase, albeit with disclaimers highlighting their politically incorrect nature.

For many advocates of vintage television, the idea proposed by RewindTV resonates: treating classic comedies like "classic cars" that deserve protection from overly restrictive regulations. This proposal urges that only genuinely offensive content be omitted, allowing audiences a glimpse into societal evolution through the lens of comedy. There exists a growing call for a more nuanced approach that balances the appreciation of cultural heritage with modern sensitivities.

The stakes in this ongoing dialogue are undeniably high for smaller broadcasters, who collectively enrich the television landscape with nostalgia. As they strive to retain their unique positions amid evolving taste and regulatory scrutiny, a thoughtful reassessment of the existing guidelines appears necessary, one that respects both artistic intent and contemporary sensibilities.

Ultimately, the question remains: should nostalgic comedies remain untouched by modern scrutiny, or are they relics of a bygone era in need of careful curation? As this debate unfolds, it is clear that the future of classic comedies on television hangs in the balance, influenced by both cultural evolution and regulatory oversight.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14767591/Ofcom-accused-censorship-row-old-TV-comedies.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.gbnews.com/celebrity/carry-on-censor-ofcom-nostalgic-tv-channels)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14767591/Ofcom-accused-censorship-row-old-TV-comedies.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/11316397/Racist-1970s-comedies-would-be-banned-now-says-head-of-Ofcom.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/13/ofcom-tells-bbc-stop-showing-many-old-films-daytime-repeats/), [[4]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/bbc/11975749/BBC-to-sell-downloads-of-un-PC-classic-comedies-it-banned-from-TV.html), [[6]](https://www.c21media.net/news/ofcom-urged-to-consider-exemption-from-outdated-language-rules-for-classic-comedy/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14767591/Ofcom-accused-censorship-row-old-TV-comedies.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/11316397/Racist-1970s-comedies-would-be-banned-now-says-head-of-Ofcom.html> - In December 2014, Ed Richards, then chief executive of Ofcom, stated that 1970s comedies with racist and offensive content, such as 'It Ain't Half Hot Mum', 'Love Thy Neighbour', and 'Mind Your Language', would be considered unacceptable for broadcast today. These shows have been criticised for racial stereotyping and offensive language, leading to their removal from television schedules. Richards emphasised that such content is 'unimaginable today' and would offend all viewers, not just those from black and ethnic minority communities.
3. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/13/ofcom-tells-bbc-stop-showing-many-old-films-daytime-repeats/> - In October 2017, Ofcom directed the BBC to reduce its reliance on repeating old films and daytime shows, urging the corporation to focus more on original UK drama and comedy. Ofcom's new guidelines aimed to encourage the BBC to produce more British-made programmes, ensuring that content reflects contemporary British life and interests, and to decrease the frequency of acquired content in the evening schedules.
4. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/bbc/11975749/BBC-to-sell-downloads-of-un-PC-classic-comedies-it-banned-from-TV.html> - In November 2015, the BBC announced plans to make 10,000 hours of its archive available for purchase online, including classic comedies like 'It Ain’t Half Hot Mum' and a controversial episode of 'Fawlty Towers'. These programmes, previously banned from television due to their politically incorrect content, were to be sold with a warning that they are 'an un-PC product of its time', allowing viewers to access them in their original form.
5. <https://www.gbnews.com/celebrity/carry-on-censor-ofcom-nostalgic-tv-channels> - In 2023, TV bosses accused Ofcom of censorship amid a row over the airing of old TV comedies, particularly the 'Carry On' films. Smaller TV channels argued that Ofcom's guidelines disproportionately affect them, as even a single fine for a breach could put them out of business. Campaigners criticised the 'lottery' of rules for old classics, noting that Ofcom does not have a list of banned words or phrases, but its guidelines change frequently without clear reasoning.
6. <https://www.c21media.net/news/ofcom-urged-to-consider-exemption-from-outdated-language-rules-for-classic-comedy/> - In April 2025, Rewind TV, a free-to-air channel specialising in vintage UK and US television series, urged Ofcom to treat classic TV comedies from the 1970s as 'classic cars' and exempt them from 'suffocating' broadcast rules around outdated language. The campaigners argued that such shows should be preserved and broadcast largely uncut, with only the most offensive content removed, to provide insight into societal changes and a window into a bygone era.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/05/little-britain-only-needs-one-iplayer-warning-awful-20-years-ago-and-no-better-now> - In November 2023, The Guardian's Barbara Ellen discussed the controversy surrounding the sketch show 'Little Britain', which faced criticism for its use of outdated and offensive content. The BBC had removed the show from iPlayer in 2020 due to changing societal attitudes, but it returned in 2022 with certain characters removed. Ellen argued that while the show is unfunny and offensive, it should not be censored but allowed to fade away due to its lack of relevance and quality.