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United Kingdom

## OPEN LETTER

8<sup>th</sup> July 2019

Dear Lord Hall,

### **RE: BBC HORIZON PROGRAMME, “BRITAIN’S NEXT AIR DISASTER? DRONES”**

Further to the programme ‘**Britain’s Next Air Disaster? Drones**’ which first aired on Monday 1st July 2019, I write to express our extreme disappointment at the lack of editorial balance in the programme, the flagrant disregard of the BBC’s own impartiality guidelines, and the creative licence given to the filmmakers in what is meant to be a *documentary*.

We believe this programme failed to meet the BBC’s own editorial guidelines<sup>1</sup> and failed to meet the standards expected of the BBC by viewers of the *Horizon* programme. From the start, it clearly seeks to position drone technology as a threat. To clarify, *any* technology has the *potential* to be a threat. To vilify this one, which has delivered vaccines to sick children in Vanuatu<sup>2</sup> (work supported by UNICEF), helped the police to find vulnerable missing persons<sup>3,4</sup>, and might one day play an extremely significant part in helping to transform lives and revolutionise businesses, is anything *but* impartial.

In general, and at best, this programme paid lip-service to both the safety record of drone use and drone pilots, as well as the efforts drone manufacturers, drone pilots, airports and air navigation service providers are going to in order to keep our skies safe while managing the introduction of drones.

Further, this programme is damaging to the UK’s economic interests because it affects viewers’ perception of drone technology, which in turn could very well affect how quickly drone technology will be accepted into everyday life. PwC estimate the UK drone industry has the potential to increase to £42 billion by 2030<sup>5</sup>. In the current political climate, the UK’s economy needs the investments (and cost savings offered by drones) of drone companies.

Much of the programme presented anecdotal accounts, incidents and ‘reported near-misses’ as fact or evidence drones had come close to causing an incident but the programme’s researchers make liberal use of UK Airprox Board (UKAB) reports about drone sightings to

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<sup>1</sup> [BBC’s own guidelines on editorial values and impartiality](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/child-given-worlds-first-drone-delivered-vaccine-vanuatu-unicef>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-norfolk-44535998/drone-finds-missing-man-stuck-in-marshes-in-titchwell>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.scotsman.com/news/crime/police-scotland-to-deploy-drones-to-search-for-missing-people-1-4913704>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pwc.co.uk/press-room/press-releases/pwc-uk-drones-report.html>

back up the 'dangerous drones' undertone, and neglect to mention any pilot can file a report, or that a recent Freedom of Information Request revealed that 80% of airprox reports as misclassified by the UKAB<sup>6</sup>, according to Airprox Reality Check.

As a company, we generally do not involve ourselves in the politics of drones, but this serious failing of the BBC's obligations (as we view them, and have set out below) has the potential to bias important regulatory work now being undertaken not just here, in the United Kingdom, but across the world. In addition, we feel it is important to add our voice in representing our 150,000 UK drone pilots who we know are conscientious and pioneering in their early adoption, a good percentage of whom feel badly let down by this piece, too. It is for these reasons we felt compelled to write to you, and why we will be filing official complaints through both Ofcom and the BBC's official channels.

We set out below our primary objections and welcome your feedback, which shall be published on our website.

Yours sincerely,

*S. Farmer*

Stephen Farmer  
Head of Corporate Communications, Altitude Angel

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.airproxrealitycheck.org/files/Airprox-Reality-Check-Press%20Release-14062019.pdf>

## **Who are we?**

Altitude Angel works with the drone-flying community (both commercial and recreational) in the United Kingdom and worldwide. In the UK, our apps are used by over 150,000 people to understand where they can fly their drones safely and legally. The people who use our apps, and services like ours, care deeply about the safety of their aerial work and fly diligently, within the law, on a regular basis.

We work in an area of the emerging drone industry called 'unmanned traffic management', which is broadly analogous to 'air traffic management' in that it seeks to find technical solutions to safely enable more people to use drones in a range of market verticals, increasingly in an automated fashion as capability is increased over time. We focus, therefore, on technologies which can help countries embrace drone technology safely, and we spend significant time developing full solutions which caters to the detection of drones (including the detection of those who unlawfully and/or recklessly operate drones in restricted airspace) and encourage and nurture legitimate drone use (including supporting pilots who fly in accordance with the law and who use apps, like ours, to connect with airspace managers and access important safety information).

In addition to the above, we work with drone manufacturers around the world – including DJI, whose drones featured heavily in this programme, and who is the world's #1 drone manufacturer – to supply them with the right data so that high-risk areas, such as airports are 'geofenced', mitigating much of the risk of the types of 'air disaster' we are routinely reminded is waiting to happen in documentaries such as yours.

**We highlight below some of the more serious editorial problems with this programme and ask that you consider taking appropriate measures to ensure that the British public are presented with a much more balanced view of emerging technologies in future.**

Further context and detail will be provided in our formal complaints.

## 1. Within the first two minutes, the undertone has been set.

Positive messaging about drones appeared to feature for no more than about 30 seconds at the very start of the programme, and presenter Aldo Kane sets up the undertone of the programme's bias no more than 1:09 in, with the quotes "that is an air disaster waiting to happen" and "it's not if this happens, it's when this happens".

It is clear that the programme makers began production with a clear agenda and narrative; which was to say it was only a matter of time before a drone (or drones) will be flown, either unwittingly or deliberately, at a commercial aircraft resulting in a catastrophic outcome.

This point is repeatedly enforced through the dramatic imagery being used.

## 2. This is not a documentary.

The BBC presents this programme as a *Documentary* on its iPlayer website:

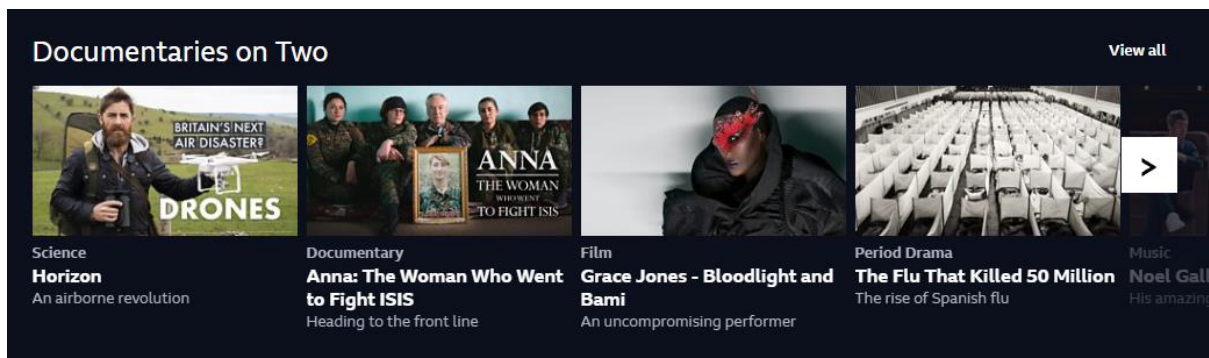


Figure 1: Screenshot from the BBC's iPlayer website, taken 8th July 2019

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word *documentary* apparently quite differently to the BBC and its editors:

***“Consisting of or based on official documents” and “Using pictures or interviews with people involved in real events to provide a factual report on a particular subject”. As a noun, “a film or television or radio programme that provides a factual report on a particular subject”.***

## 3. Impact testing appears to be un-scientific, and apparently features parts not typically present in the model of drone being ‘assessed’.

We were concerned with the section of the programme filmed at a ‘little known impact-testing facility’ in what was presented as an impact test.

We aren't physicists or aeronautical impact assessors. However, we – as we are sure any competent and reasonably knowledgeable person would do - contest the aerodynamic properties of any object which has been ‘reconfigured’ to remove mostly all of its internal space and compartments into a single combined mass, which is then glued together, and therefore unlikely to be representative of the original object when testing for damage.

While Aldo Kane does point out that the wing being tested is from an “old aircraft”, it is **not** from a commercial airliner which, of course, is the subject of the primary undertone of the entire programme. Would it not have been better to test against the wing of an aircraft that is central to the premise of the programme? As a ‘documentary’, *Horizon* had an opportunity to provide some actual scientific data to the aviation industry, rather than this, which would at least have some entertainment value, if it were not aimed at harming the reputation of this industry.

Finally, as can be seen clearly in the image below, there appear to be a number of ‘rods’ which wouldn’t typically be found in this make or model of drone. To be clear, we are apparently observing the addition of foreign objects to the ‘payload’.



Figure 2: Frame from 10:14 into the programme showing components not found in the make and model of drone being destroyed



Figure 3: Frame showing the collision, with the unidentified rods clearly at the forefront of the impact.

We contacted DJI for comment (as the drone Aldo Kane appears to be demolishing is a DJI model Phantom) and a source has confirmed that “we don’t have carbon rods [or metal] rods anywhere in our drones”.

If these are not part of the drone, then somebody should be held to account for their inclusion in this segment of the programme and separately, we would like to see comment from Dr Ian Horsfall, the researcher running this test facility, about his methodology and any possible explanation for the ‘rods’. It is possible this detail was provided but was cut from the final edit of the film, which would add further to the bias.

The reputational harm not only to drone manufacturers, but the entire drone-flying community and the wider, still emerging drone industry, is as significant as it is incalculable.

It is also an apparent breach of the BBC’s own guidelines as the introduction of foreign objects clearly designed to cause additional or further damage in this segment is highly misleading and not at all based in fact, which it really ought to be given this is a supposed *documentary*.