

EU allowing for TV product placement

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From infomercials to product placements in soap operas, being pitched products while watching a television program is only to be expected among U.S. viewers.

Until now, however, European broadcasters have had to adhere to strict guidelines about how goods in a show are advertised, so that viewers were spared of watching a character taking a calculated sip from a carefully placed can, or admiring the car, rather than the hero, of a drama.

That may well all change if the European Union's latest proposal takes effect.

On Tuesday the EU proposed to "reduce the regulatory burden on Europe's providers of TV and TV-like services and to give more flexibility for financing audiovisual content by new forms of advertising."

"My aim is for Europe's audiovisual content industry to flourish under one of the most modern and flexible set of rules in the world," said Viviane Reding, the EU's information society and media commissioner.

"The new rules should open up multimedia opportunities, boosting competition and consumer choice, while promoting public interest objectives such as the protection of minors and cultural diversity. Existing rules, which have been made redundant by technological and market developments, must be abolished to take decisive steps towards

audiovisual media without frontiers in Europe's single market," she added, as she called for a sweeping reform of the 1989 regulations that continue to rule the broadcast industry.

Exceptions to the regulations include children's programs, as well as news programs and documentaries. In addition, tobacco and alcohol will not be allowed to be placed, among other products.

Whatever rules that are put forward by the EU will ultimately have to be accepted by each member country's respective governments, but once accepted, they will be universally applied across the union.

For all its world-renowned aggressive tabloid journalism, Britain's television industry actually has some of the strictest regulations when it comes to protecting viewers from subliminal marketing. Moreover, Britain's Office of Communications indicated that it may not be as willing to introduce changes.

"The case supporting the need for a full review of the entire market has not been made. The reasons for this include Ofcom has received no complaints regarding the operations of the television advertising sales market; there is no strong evidence of consumer detriment arising from the workings of the market as currently constituted; there have been no calls from either the advertising or the broadcasting industries for such a review," the agency said.

"The airtime sales market is complex, with multiple players," stated Ofcom Chief Executive Stephen Carter.

Any regulatory changes imposed by the EU, however, are not expected to affect the BBC, which is largely funded by television license fees from viewers, rather than from corporate sponsorships.

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