

From: bbc_complaints_website@bbc.co.uk
Subject: Meet the Izzards, ref: CAS-1957476-Y40YBR
Date: 15 March 2013 16:40
To: David Balding d.balding@ucl.ac.uk

Dear Professor Balding

Thank you for your comments about *Meet the Izzards*. I discussed your complaint with the programme-makers and would like to address the concerns you raise.

Meet The Izzards was an entertaining documentary series for BBC One, which introduced its audience to what genetics can reveal about our ancient journeys out of Africa and across the globe. We don't agree that the programme 'misled the public about the nature of individual genetic ancestry'. This was a personal journey, a travelogue, authored by the presenter and based on the accepted and published science on the nature of modern human migration. The programme consultant Dr Jim Wilson is a leading geneticist working at Edinburgh University and with his guidance the series reflected the standard, accepted interpretations as presented by many leading independent, non-commercial organisations such as the National Geographic Centre in Washington DC and in many other established scientific publications about the human journey. There is no controversy in the science presented.

On your second point, the programme in no way "promoted the company's service" because the programme did not mention Dr Wilson's company. In fact you acknowledge this when you say "although no business was named". No viewer could have been informed by watching the series that Dr Wilson had any relationship with a testing company. Many leading academics also have business relationships and many universities actually encourage this, however the BBC in no way promotes this commercial link.

When you say Eddie Izzard "shared nothing special" with those he met on his journey, in most cases he shared a common DNA "marker" that linked him to distant ancestors of those he was meeting. This may not be "special" for an expert geneticist but for many ordinary viewers this helped establish what for many is a "surprising" concept - that we all stem from the same modern-human family tree which originated in Africa approximately 200,000 years ago.

The Viking references, relate to specific common haplogroups still found extensively in Denmark which suggest that at some point in his mother's previous family line she may have had a common ancestor from the Viking era. Dr Wilson actually explains that Eddie's "mother's mother's mother's people were Vikings". The authored nature of the film allows some freedom for Eddie Izzard to respond to information in his own, often comical way. In the end, for him, it was a journey of discovery with a firmly established context of possibility, rather than certainty.

The BBC in no way "colluded" with the genetic industry "to dupe" the public, as you suggest. The production team met an extensive range of independent, academic experts from the National Geographic Project in Washington DC to the Sanger Institute in Cambridge in preparation and research for the series. The science elements of the series are supported by mainstream published views - as seen in the Sanger Institute website: <http://www.sanger.ac.uk/about/press/features/genomic-archaeology.html> - but as you know, DNA genetics is a fresh and evolving science that has new revelations almost monthly. The exciting news about the Y-chromosome you refer to is an illustration of this, but the information emerged months after the shooting of the series and just weeks before transmission.

Overall, while it is completely understandable that an expert like yourself may feel some elements of the science have been simplified for greater universal accessibility, the spirit of the series was to reflect accurately the complex, yet exciting information that DNA can tell us about our human ancestry and history. This was a popular programme, not an academic thesis, but accuracy was strived for throughout both episodes with appropriate scientific rigour, based on considered expert academic advice.

I hope this outlines our approach to this film and reassures you that in attempting to translate some of the complexities of genetics for a BBC One audience we consulted a range of academic opinion – the result being an authored, personalised film from actor and comedian, Eddie Izzard.

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Best wishes,
Paul Kettle
BBC Audience Services

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