

Chapter 3

Coarse Language in Television and Radio Programs

3.1 This chapter examines the frequency of coarse and foul language in programs and investigates how such language is dealt with by the broadcasting codes of practice.

3.2 While the terms 'coarse' and 'foul' were not defined over the term of the inquiry, many submissions made explicit reference to the words 'f***' and 'c***', or condemned the language used in *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* which initially prompted the inquiry.¹ These words, in particular, have therefore been defined as 'coarse' or 'foul' for current purposes.

Influence of the media on behaviour

3.3 While not a major focus of the inquiry, the Committee investigated available research on the effects that media consumption can have on attitudes and behaviour, particularly on children.

3.4 The Committee found little evidence in studies that indicated that exposure to coarse language in the media had any effect, positive or negative, on children. However, this was not true of violence. In a study on media and communications in Australian families, ACMA noted that:

[T]elevision violence can be linked to short-term increases in aggressive thoughts or behaviour. It is less clear whether these short-term influences translate into long-term violent behaviour and crime.²

3.5 Anderson and Bushman concurred with this statement, citing a conclusion by American professional groups:

Six major professional societies in the United States--the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Psychiatric Association--recently concluded that "the data point

1 See *Submissions 1-3, 6-7, 17-18, 22, 24, 26-30, 32-33, 35-37, 39, 42-43, 45, 47-48, 51, 53, 58, 60, 64-65, 74, 76, 80, 82 and 85.*

2 Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007: Report of the Media and Society Research Project*, December 2007. http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/assets/main/lib101058/maciaf2007_overview.pdf (accessed 30 May 2008).

overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children".³

3.6 Similarly, the Committee found sources which claim that increased television viewing is a risk factor for the onset of drug use in adolescents.⁴

3.7 ACMA claims that the media does also have a positive effect:

Academic research finds that children learn from television, and that children use various media and communication activities in the development of their identities and in providing an important platform for social activity.⁵

Acquiring coarse or foul language

3.8 Ruth Wajnryb, applied linguist and columnist for the Sydney Morning Herald, observes that learning to swear is a natural part of a child's development:

In fact, swear words can appear as early as twelve months. In *Why We Curse*, Timothy Jay says that child swearing follows a predictable pattern. The active lexicon grows from three or four words in the first two years of life, to about 20 by the end of pre-school. Growth continues until it reaches about 30 words at pre-adolescence. Then during the teen years cursing rates peak, especially in boys. What happens afterwards tends to follow socio-economic lines. The adult cursing lexicon ranges from 20 to 60 words used publicly-not necessarily all on the same occasion.⁶

3.9 In a survey of 663 parents, the Raising Children Network found that:

It's not surprising that so many kids are picking up a few choice words – more than 40% of parents say they swear every day. Interestingly, of the parents who never swear, 19% believe their children are learning to swear from parents, suggesting there are quite a few Australian families where one parent has more colourful language than the other.⁷

3.10 Professor Wajnryb agrees that this behaviour is often learnt at home:

3 Craig A. Anderson and Brad J. Bushman, *The Effects of Media Violence on Society*, *Science* 29 March 2002: Vol. 295. no. 5564, pp. 2377 – 2379 DOI: 10.1126/science.1070765. <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/295/5564/2377> (accessed 3 June 2008).

4 Office of Drug Control Policy, *National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign*, http://www.mediacampaign.org/publications/primetime/tv_rationale.html#go17 (accessed 3 June 2008).

5 Australian Communications and Media Authority, *Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007: Report of the Media and Society Research Project*, December 2007. http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/assets/main/lib101058/maciaf2007_overview.pdf (accessed 30 May 2008).

6 Ruth Wajnryb, *Language Most Foul*, 2004, p. 73.

7 Raising Children Network, http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/survey_results_swearing.html (accessed 2 June 2008).

Of course, parents like to blame their [the child's] foul language on 'bad influences' in the child's peer group. It's a fairly sure bet that the parents of those influences are probably at home identifying *your* child as the bad influence. The fact is that kids swear because they copy the modelled behaviours around them, usually in the home. You stub a toe; you swear. Your child overhears and learns how to react in similar circumstances.⁸

3.11 It would appear that the use of foul language in the broadcast media is more likely to reinforce or normalise already acquired habits rather than be a significant cause of its adoption in the first place. The Committee notes the sparsity of evidence that connects media usage to inappropriate behaviours, particularly in relation to using coarse or foul language, and would welcome further research into this phenomenon.

Attitudes to broadcasting coarse language

3.12 As with any subject that generates vigorous discussion, contributors to this inquiry have come from people and organisations strongly opposed to the broadcasting of coarse and foul language, people and organisations strongly in favour of its broadcast, and those that sit in between.

Complaints about coarse language

3.13 Evidence supplied to the Committee from industry bodies representing broadcasters indicates that the broadcasters use, to a degree, the number of complaints they receive as a gauge of the success and efficacy of their respective codes. According to the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), to date 'no formal complaints have been made about the use of language on SBS Radio.'⁹ With regards to television programming:

SBS considers that the Television Classification Code, in particular as it applies to language, is working effectively. This is evident in the low number of formal complaints SBS has received in relation to this category of complaints, with less than twenty being made in the last three years.¹⁰

3.14 Free TV Australia, the industry body representing the free-to-air commercial television stations, reports a similar situation, noting that:

There is also a very low level of complaints regarding the use of coarse language on television, with less than one complaint received by broadcasters on average each week over the last ten years. This is compared to the hundreds of hours programming broadcast each week and the millions of viewers watching commercial free-to-air television every day.¹¹

8 Ruth Wajnryb, *Language Most Foul*, 2004, p. 74.

9 Special Broadcasting Service, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

10 Special Broadcasting Service, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

11 Free TV Australia, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

3.15 Young Media Australia, whose role it is 'to stimulate and maintain public interest in the provision of suitable films and television programs for children'¹², states that:

YMA has not had high levels of complaint about language issues, but it may be an area where a closer monitoring study is needed to ascertain whether or not these codes are being observed, or need to be modified.¹³

3.16 Mr David Gyngell, Chief Executive of the Nine Network, has indicated that the word 'c***' will not be used by the station in the future:

That is not so much a comment on the operation of the classification system as an internal policy decision by Mr Gyngell as to what he believes is appropriate for us to be broadcasting.¹⁴

This action exceeds the current requirements of the code of practice for free-to-air television stations.

3.17 Several contributors to the inquiry made a connection between the increased suppression of certain language to increased censorship by the government:

I would urge the Committee to carefully consider the need to amend or tighten broadcasting codes of practice - I would not wish to see "over censorship" in our homeland which is meant to adopt free speech and expression as a fundamental freedom that we enjoy.¹⁵

3.18 While acknowledging the need to protect children by providing 'a system of program classifications, consumer advice text and broadcasting'¹⁶, the New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties 'reminds the Senate that freedom of expression is an important civil right in a free and democratic society and it should not be restricted lightly'.¹⁷

3.19 Similarly, Liberty Victoria stated that:

Whatever one's personal view of the program [*Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*] may be, Liberty Victoria believes that adults are entitled to determine for themselves what they will or will not watch. It is not the role of an individual Senator or a small minority of the public to dictate to the broader public what they can and cannot see.¹⁸

12 Young Media Australia, *Submission 79*, p. 1.

13 Young Media Australia, *Submission 79*, p. 3.

14 Mr David Coleman, Director of Strategy and Regulatory Affairs, PBL Media, *Committee Hansard*, 23 May 2008, p. 10.

15 Mr Barney Lee, *Submission 71*, p. 1.

16 New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties, *Submission 42*, p. 1.

17 New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties, *Submission 42*, p. 8.

18 Liberty Victoria, *Submission 78*, p. 2.

3.20 Many contributors presented the opposite view, indicating that it is the responsibility of the government to intervene. Mr Matthew Munn, for example, urges the Senate to 'please take some responsibility, raise the standards.'¹⁹ Reverend Jamie Long states that 'it is appropriate for government to provide boundaries for media.'²⁰

3.21 It should be noted that even those who expressed concern about the use of particular words generally stopped short of asking for an outright ban on such language. The Reverend Long, for example, sought more rigorous application of the classification standards and time zones to exclude 'foul' language from the pre-8.30 pm period.

3.22 The Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide, while believing that the *Ramsay* programs had been misclassified, commented that 'The occasional 'F word' in an emotional exchange is contextualised as emphasis. This is easily understood even by young children'.²¹ The submission was, however, deeply concerned by the desensitizing effect of 'gross repetition' and the message that '...violent and abusive bad language is necessary to get your own way'.²²

3.23 An interesting response came from a private citizen in Queensland, a mother of four girls, who found the underlying values of the *Ramsay* program to be more important than the language issue:

If my girls followed the example of Gordon Ramsay and swore like troupers but were hard working, devoted to their families, against drugs and alcohol and saw the best or the potential in people I would be extremely proud.²³

3.24 The writer, along with many others, saw a range of other issues, portrayals of 'unprotected promiscuous sex, binge drinking, drug use, violence and sexism', as matters of far greater concern with regard to media content.

3.25 A common theme of submissions seeking some tightening of standards was that the classification system did not offer sufficiently clear guidance as to the probable content of a program, regardless of whether the concern was language or other potential causes of offence, and that the early and mid-evening time zones, when children were most likely to be watching television needed to be policed more stringently.

19 Mr Matthew Munn, *Submission 6*, p. 1.

20 Reverend Jamie Long, *Submission 26*, p. 1.

21 Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide, *Submission 27*, p. 4.

22 Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide, *Submission 27*, p. 4.

23 Lisa Penridge, *Submission 76*, p. 1.

3.26 The Committee notes the polarisation between the many views of stakeholders in this inquiry. The pluralistic nature of Australian society is such that a consensus on the broadcast of coarse and foul language is unlikely to be reached.

Potential solutions

3.27 Submitters offered solutions to those who were offended by language on television. Mr Michael Brennan is one of several contributors who advocate parents taking a greater role in monitoring their children's media consumption:

Through carefully monitoring what they watch and showing an active interest in TV I am able to easily avoid shows that may feature coarse language, if by chance they are subjected to something that I don't want them repeating (not necessarily swearing).²⁴

3.28 A large number of contributors reflected that offence could be avoided if the television was turned off or the channel changed. YMA, however, are not supportive of this:

Sadly, however, the more concerned people do just switch off, the longer the unacceptable levels of offensive material continue unchecked, and uncommented upon. One cannot complain about something that one does not see.²⁵

3.29 It can be argued that, particularly for the commercial channels, the decline in ratings which would result from large numbers of people switching off would be a very effective way of changing the practices of broadcasters.

3.30 Others noted the impracticality or impossibility of continually monitoring children's access to broadcast media due to societal and economic pressures for children to be left unattended,²⁶ because of the reality that '[m]any kids of working parents come home to an empty house²⁷ and because of the dynamics of the ordinary domestic situation including busy parents, children of a range of ages with differing tastes, where older children may determine program choice for younger children, and increasingly, children with their own televisions.

3.31 Placing the burden of regulating children's viewing primarily on parents does require a recognition of these domestic realities and does emphasise the need for clarity in the classification system so that adults can have a high degree of confidence in the guidance they offer. An M classification permits the use of coarse language, '...appropriate to the story line or program context, infrequent and... not very

24 Mr Michael Brennan, *Submission 9*, p. 1.

25 Media Standards Australia, *Submission 48*, pp 6-7.

26 Ms Carol Smith, *Submission 13*, p. 1.

27 Peter Lavell, *Where do the children play?* Pulse ABC Broadcasting, 12 May 2005. <http://www.abc.net.au/health/thepulse/s1365080.htm> (accessed 3 June 2006)

aggressive'. Use that is 'more than infrequent' is only justified when it is '...particularly important to the ... program context'.²⁸

3.32 In the case of the Ramsay program, in which 'f***' was used eighty times in forty minutes, the Committee has some sympathy with the view that this was stretching the meaning of 'more than infrequent' to the limit. However the Committee notes that the advisory note broadcast at the start of the program did warn that it contained 'frequent very coarse language'. This is the strongest language advisory available under the code of practice.

3.33 In the absence of evidence of demonstrable harm to young people as a result of being exposed to bad language on television or that broadcasting plays a significant role in introducing the use of bad language among children and in the absence of an overwhelming community consensus that particular words be banned altogether, the Committee does not believe it is appropriate to make any recommendation with regard to imposing additional limits the use of the words 'f***' or 'c***' on Australian television beyond the requirements of the current classification system.

3.34 In Chapter 4 the Committee does consider some modifications to the rating system which may make the rating system a more accurate reflection of the content of programs and thus a more accurate guide to adults wishing to manage their children's and their own viewing so as to avoid offence.

3.35 The Committee notes that, with the advent of digital free-to-air television, it is possible to include parental lockout systems in the specification of the television.

Recommendation 2

3.36 The Committee recommends that the provision of parental lock-out become an industry standard for digital televisions sold in Australia. The Committee also recommends that the feasibility of using datacasting to provide a more detailed description of program content and the reasons for a program's rating which could be accessed by the viewer.

28 Free TV Australia, *Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice*, July 2004, p. 25. In rating a program other factors such as '...the merit of the production, the purpose of a sequence, the camera work, the relevance of the material and the treatment' can be taken into account. *Code*, p. 23. Taken together the imprecision of language – not very aggressive; more than infrequent – and the range of factors that can be considered, give the broadcaster very wide latitude in classifying a program. This is considered more fully in Chapter 4.

