

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the effectiveness of the broadcasting codes

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My submission to this Inquiry largely addresses points A (“the frequency and use of coarse and foul language (swearing) in programs”) B (“the effectiveness of the current classification standards as an accurate reflection of the content contained in the program”) and D (“any other related matters”) of the terms of references. I am married and have a 9 year old boy and I regularly teach a university undergraduate course titled ‘The Anthropology of Media’ at the University of Western Australia. The views expressed in this submission are my own and are not representative of the opinions held by the University of Western Australia or any of its staff members.

The frequency and use of coarse and foul language (swearing) in programs

I gather that this Inquiry has been instigated by swearing on television, particularly by Gordon Ramsay in a show titled *Kitchen Nightmares*. If Gordon Ramsay’s swearing is problematic it would, in my opinion, not be because he swears or because he often swears but because it is part of his aggressive demeanour. This raises the important issue (for the purposes of thinking through this matter) of context and the value of distinguishing between use of a word or phrase and the manner in which it is uttered. Not all swearing is the same, in some contexts it is trivial, boring or silly, in other contexts it is powerful and emotionally compelling. Television would be far less interesting without these qualities.

However repelled a viewer may be by Ramsay’s behaviour I do not think his swearing is any reason to impose further restrictions on swearing in television programs. To do so would seriously diminish the emotional and intellectual dimensions of television. Television should be allowed to present a wide range of human behaviour and not be overly concerned with what word is being uttered or how many times it is said. Being challenged by somebody swearing on television is not, in my opinion, a matter that should be of great concern. To make it enough of a concern as to overly legislate its use is to treat viewers as infants, a disturbing and regrettable direction in my opinion.

This issue could be posed as one that should be understood from the point of view of children who, in varying degrees, might be regarded as unable to distinguish the contexts that swearing occurs in the way adults do. I differ from those who regard swearing on television, in and of itself, as detrimental to children. A great deal of how viewers interact with television content derives from their own social environment and personal history. This makes television watching interactive rather than something that is uncritically absorbed and is the primary factor, in my opinion, in viewer responses to television. As an example of this, when I explained to my son, in as neutral terms as possible, that a government Inquiry was being conducted on swearing on television and what he thought about hearing swearing on television he replied that he did not like it but it was not something that concerned him much. I interpret this to mean that he was robust and independent enough to discern what he thought was the best response. His response is a combination of social environment

and personality and to treat him, and many other Australians, as unable to distinguish and interpret television content would show considerable lack of confidence in Australians and suggest a seriously impoverished opinion of Australian society as a whole.

Television should not be treated as a moral educational tool, it comes too close to propaganda if it is.

The effectiveness of the current classification standards as an accurate reflection of the content contained in the program

As I understand the classification codes, from RC through to G, they largely depend upon the criteria laid out in RC and X18+. Even though the classification groups R18+ - G are largely concerned with assessing whether programs are appropriate for the viewing of minors it is the RC and X18+ categories that lay out criteria that the others depend upon. In particular, the pivot of these two categories is the part played by the “reasonable adult”. I am heartened to see that the codes are founded upon a conception of a reasonable adult as being capable of discerning what might be acceptable or offensive in television content. I am heartened because this suggests great faith in Australians’ capacity to interact with television. It suggests a broad, robust and liberal view of Australian society that should not be diluted in any way.

Because a reasonable adult is not defined in the Classification Code it is possible to understand Australian society as being comprised of many different types of reasonable adults. By this I mean one person may find swearing offensive but another feel very comfortable with it. This may have to do with class differences, religious affiliations, personal propriety, ethnic identification, or some other socio-cultural reason. Whatever the case, it is incumbent on the Classification Board, or whoever assesses these things to not assume an ideal reasonable adult. It is also immensely important that an overly restrictive view of what constitutes a reasonable adult not be allowed to prevail. To do so would impose far too partial a vision of what Australian society is comprised of and reduce the ‘reasonable adult’ in the Classification Codes to a pious wowser, something I imagine many Australians would feel distinctly uncomfortable with. I know I certainly do.

Any other related matters

I would like to see less imposition on television content and more recognition that as a reasonable adult I can assess what I like and not like on television. Perhaps this Inquiry could move to consider how to grant the public the capacity to self-regulate. I would imagine this could be done by building into televisions the capacity for viewers to block out programs with particular ratings. Foxtel does this but it also controls the manufacture and distribution desktop box, unlike tv sets that are produced offshore. Is there scope for the new digital signals to embed this capacity in them?