

The ABA has released the results of its fifth survey into what concerns people about what they have seen on television. In 1999, the portrayal of violence displaced news and current affairs as the source of greatest concern.

## Research on community views about television content

One third (33 per cent) of those surveyed about television content in 1999 said they were concerned or offended by some aspect of free-to-air television content in the previous three months.

The portrayal of violence displaced news and current affairs as the area of greatest concern in the 1999 survey.

Concern about sex scenes and nudity has consistently been ranked the third highest issue of concern, advertising was ranked fourth in 1999 and coarse language, which did not rank in the top five in the period 1994–1996, ranked fifth in both 1997 and 1999.

When prompted by questions about news and current affairs and M and MA rated movies, 52 per cent of people surveyed were concerned or offended about something on free-to-air television or had seen something in a movie on commercial television that should have been broadcast at a later time or not at all.

A small proportion of the survey sample had acted on their concerns by making a complaint (six per cent). Reasons for not complaining included the belief that a complaint would not change what is shown on television (58 per cent of the survey sample), and a general lack of knowledge about who to complain to (50 per cent of the survey sample).

The findings are contained in the ABA publication, *Community Views about Content on Free-to-air television 1999*.

'In a co-regulatory environment where the industry is responsible for develop-

ing its own codes of practice and administering a complaints process, it is a significant finding that there is a considerable lack of awareness, understanding and confidence in the complaints process,' said Mr Gareth Grainger, Acting ABA Chairman.

'The ABA believes more must be done to improve public awareness of the complaints process. It is raising the issue with the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations in order to strengthen the industry's performance in the handling of complaints and publicising of the complaints process.'

The research results are used to monitor the effectiveness of television codes of practice by ensuring they reflect community standards. The 1999 study specifically examined attitudes to news and current affairs programs, and movies classified M and MA on commercial television. In addition, it explored the extent of community awareness about the process of making a complaint.

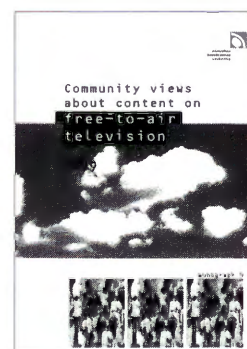
More than half the survey sample agreed that news and current affairs programs tend to show unnecessary graphic images of accidents and tragedies (58 per cent). Almost half of the people surveyed agreed that news and current affairs programs adopt intrusive reporting methods by lacking sensitivity to people involved in traumatic incidents (47 per cent).

While two-thirds of the people surveyed believed that M and MA movies shown on commercial television were classified appropriately, 45 per cent

said the amount or kind of violence was not acceptable. Seventy-eight per cent said they would not be comfortable with more violence being shown in movies on commercial television.

Findings from this research will also inform the ABA's research into sources of news and current affairs, particularly those relating to community concerns about biased content, intrusive reporting, sensationalised stories and inaccurate material.

The research results will provide a benchmark for the future assessment of two important changes that were made in April 1999 on the basis of survey findings in previous years. The changes to the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice were the inclusion of a new AV (adult violence) classification and broadcasters are now required to provide regular on-air information about the code of practice and complaints procedures.



*Community Views about Content on Free-to-air Television 1999* is available from the ABA, price \$20, by calling (02) 9334 7700.

## **Background to the research**

The ABA has conducted research into community attitudes on issues relating to television programs in 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997 and again in 1999. The research results are used to monitor the effectiveness of television codes of practice by ensuring they reflect community standards.

The 1999 study specifically examined attitudes to news and current affairs programs, and movies classified M and MA on commercial television. In addition, it explored the extent of community awareness about the process of making a complaint.

The results about M and MA classified movies shown on commercial television will contribute to a review to be conducted by the ABA. The review aims to ensure that provisions in codes of practice relating to the classification of movies, the times when movies are broadcast and consumer advice are in accordance with prevailing community standards.

The survey results will provide a benchmark for the future assessment of two important changes made to the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice in April 1999 in response to earlier surveys. A new AV (adult violence) classification was introduced and broadcasters are now required to provide regular on-air information about the code of practice and complaints procedures.

## **Television codes of practice**

The commercial television industry, the ABC and the SBS each have a code of practice that identifies their obligations relating to the content of programs and the complaints handling process.

The Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice specifies that M (mature audience) classified and MA (mature adult audience) classified movies should not commence before 8.30 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. respectively. The new AV (adult violence) classification requires that movies with strong levels of violence should not start until 9.30 p.m..

Codes of practice require that com-

plaints about codes matters be made in writing to the broadcaster. The commercial television industry must provide information about its code of practice and complaints procedures in 360 on-air spots each year across all viewing zones. Complaints can be directed to the ABA if the complainant is either dissatisfied with the station's response or the station does not answer the complaint within 60 days.

## **Research method**

A national survey took place in all States and Territories of Australia covering a representative sample of households. Telephone interviews were conducted with 1203 people aged 15 years in April 1999 and May 1999. The survey was commissioned from Keys Young Pty Ltd in Sydney. Prior to the national survey, staff from the ABA facilitated seven focus groups with 53 people in New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania.

## **Trends**

There has been a consistent level of concern about television content in the years 1995 to 1999. In 1995, 1996 and 1997, 38 per cent of people surveyed 'disliked' or were 'concerned' about something seen on television. In 1999, 33 per cent were 'concerned' or 'offended' by something seen on television. The following points reflect the main trends.

- News and current affairs programs were the top concern between 1994 and 1997.

- The portrayal of violence displaced news and current affairs as the top concern in 1999.

- Concern about sex scenes and nudity has consistently been ranked as the third highest concern.

- Concern about advertising has remained at a relatively constant but low level.

- Coarse language did not feature in the top five issues of concern in 1994, 1995 or 1996, but it ranked as the fifth concern in 1997 and 1999.

## **Current issues of concern**

In 1999, about half the survey respondents (52 per cent) said that in the three months prior to the survey, they had:

- been concerned or offended by something on television; or

- been concerned or offended by the way news and current affairs programs were presented on television; or

- seen something in a movie on commercial television that should have been broadcast at a later time or not shown at all.

Just over one third of survey respondents (35 per cent) agreed they had seen something on television that bothered them enough to complain, however most respondents did not actually make a complaint.

### **Issues of offence or concern about content on free-to-air television, 1999**

<b>Issues of concern or offence</b>	<b>Number of people (n=1203)</b>	<b>% people</b>
Violence	141	12
News and current affairs	129	11
Sex scenes or nudity	65	5
Advertising	62	5
Coarse language	55	5
Programming	35	3
Sexist, racist stereotyping	21	2
Content that provided bad role models for children	19	2
Promotion of adult programs during children's viewing times	17	1
Content that promoted antisocial/immoral values	15	1
Drug use	4	<1
Depictions of suicide	2	<1

The specific issues of concern that were mentioned spontaneously by survey respondents are given in the table.

The top concerns mentioned by survey respondents were the portrayal of violence and news and current affairs programs. Many focus group participants felt they were being 'bombarded' by too much violent material. They were concerned that unusual activities depicted on television could become normalised or accepted by society. These concerns were raised alongside the beliefs that an increasing amount of violent material is being shown, and that violent content could have negative long-term influences. While some said such material would affect people, many were uncertain about the nature of any future impact.

### **News and current affairs programs**

When survey respondents were asked specifically about the ways news and current affairs programs were presented, fewer than one third (30 per cent) were concerned or offended by something they had seen. An equal proportion of people surveyed mentioned concerns about the classification aspects of news and current affairs programs (14 per cent) and the treatment given to individual stories (14 per cent). Classification aspects included unnecessary graphic images of death and people in distress, excessive violent content, and material not suitable for children. Concerns about the treatment of individual stories included biased content, intrusive reporting and invasion of privacy, and sensationalised content.

Survey respondents were asked about certain aspects of news and current affairs programs, with the following results:

- 58 per cent agreed that news and current affairs programs tend to show unnecessary graphic images of accidents and tragedies;
- 51 per cent agreed that news and current affairs programs put unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics such as ethnic background, sexuality or disability;

- 47 per cent held the view that news and current affairs programs usually lacked sensitivity in showing images or interviews with relatives, survivors and witnesses of traumatic incidents; and
- there was strong evidence that the warnings currently used to prepare viewers for potentially distressing images are appropriate (83 per cent of survey respondents agreed with this).

### **M and MA movies on commercial television**

Slightly fewer than one in six survey respondents (16 per cent) believed that certain material in M and MA movies, on commercial television from 8.30 p.m., should have been broadcast at a later time or not shown at all. The material they objected to included the portrayal of violence, sex scenes or nudity, coarse language and inappropriate content for children.

When survey respondents were asked specifically about aspects of movie content, just under one half (45 per cent) said that both the amount and kind of violence shown in movies was not acceptable. After violent content, the depiction of drug use was least accepted, followed by coarse language, the portrayal of suicide, sex scenes and nudity. Almost four out of five survey respondents (78 per cent) said they would not be comfortable with more violence being shown in movies. Focus group participants widely believed that the use of coarse language in movies had increased over time.

More than half the survey respondents (59 per cent) agreed that violence in movies was presented in a way that did not show its true consequences, however, this was not always regarded negatively. Almost the same number (58 per cent) agreed that portrayals of violence were too close to real life. About half of the sample said they had seen violent content that was unnecessary in the context of a movie, and just less than half said violence was presented in a way that made it appear attractive. More than a third of respondents agreed that the violence they had seen in the previous three months was too graphic or explicit, or too frequent.

A majority of survey respondents (76 per cent) believed that MA movies should be shown on television only after a certain time in the evening. A little fewer than a third identified 9.00 p.m. as the earliest appropriate time, with almost the same proportion suggesting 9.30 p.m. A smaller number specified a start time earlier than 9.00 p.m. or later than 9.30 p.m.

About two thirds of survey respondents believed the content of M and MA movies was always or usually classified appropriately and shown at the appropriate time (67 per cent).

### **The complaints process**

Findings from the survey and focus groups revealed a low level of awareness of the process for making a complaint about television programs. A small proportion of survey respondents (six per cent) said they had made a formal complaint at some stage in the past. Just under two thirds of those who complained were not satisfied with the way their complaint had been handled compared with one quarter who were satisfied. Lack of satisfaction was due to no action being taken, the person contacted being uninterested or rude, no reply being received, or no one taking the complaint.

It is notable that more than half the survey respondents (58 per cent) believed that making a formal complaint would not change the kinds of things shown on television, and about half said they would not know who to complain to (50 per cent). More than half the respondents said they had not seen information on television in the last year about how to complain (57 per cent).

Even though the majority of survey respondents had not made a complaint, most acted on their concerns about television content in other ways (67 per cent). Such action included discussing the matter with someone else (39 per cent) or changing the channel (38 per cent). Fewer than a third had prevented a child from viewing certain material, and one quarter had turned the television off at some stage.

