

In October 1997, the ABA commissioned the fourth in an annual series of national surveys to determine the views of Australians about television content.

Community views about television

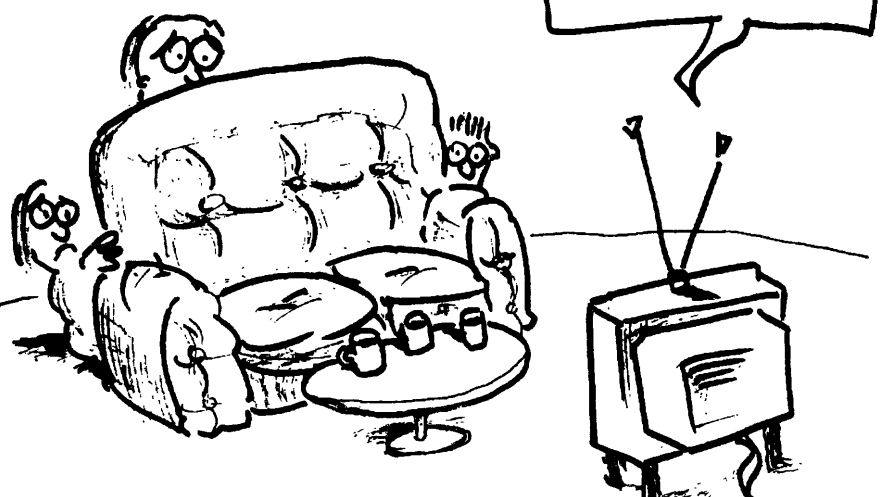
In October 1997, the ABA commissioned the fourth in an annual series of national surveys to determine the views of Australians about television content. In addition to television, the 1997 study examined community views about radio content for the first time. The results of the radio component of the study will be published in the November 1998 issue of *ABA Update*.

The ABA conducts this research in order to monitor the effectiveness of codes of practice that apply to the television and radio industries¹. The results of the television component of the study given below have been considered by the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) as part of its current review of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice.

Results of the 1994 and 1995 annual studies were published in the 1995 and 1996 editions of *Your say: a review of audience concerns about Australia's broadcast media*. The 1996 results were published in *Views on viewing: community views about commercial television, 1994-1996* (Trends & Issues, No 5). Some of the data from these studies have been included in this article for comparative purposes.

The survey

The survey took place in all states and territories of Australia covering a



representative sample of households. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with people aged 14 years and over on the weekend of 24 to 26 October 1997.

A total of 1062 people (550 females and 512 males) were asked whether they had seen anything on television that they disliked or that caused them concern. They were also asked to describe their concerns, the programs in which they occurred and the stations.

The results for the survey sample provide reliable estimates of the distribution of responses for the population aged 14 years and older. For any particular question, the actual result for the population is likely to fall within a confidence interval - a range of results either side of the sample result. The size of the confidence interval will vary

according to the distribution of responses and the size of the sample for the question.

General viewing patterns

Ninety-eight per cent of people in the survey said they watched television in the last seven days. Most people had watched commercial television (92 per cent) or the ABC (69 per cent). Thirty-three per cent said they had watched SBS, followed by pay TV (12 per cent) and other stations (1 per cent).

SBS television was watched by more people living in metropolitan areas (37 per cent) compared to country areas (25 per cent), reflecting a lower level of access to SBS in country areas. Pay TV viewers were mostly located in the major metropolitan cities of Sydney,

Melbourne and Brisbane, each with 19 per cent of people watching these services in the previous week.

Overall level of concern

Respondents in the survey reported whether they had seen anything on television that they disliked or which concerned them. Concerns were identified with regard to the previous seven days, and if nothing in that period, then with regard to the past ten months (since January 1997).

Fifty-eight per cent of people said they had not seen anything on television that they disliked or caused them concern. Thirty-eight per cent said they had seen something on television of concern. The proportion of people who expressed concern has remained stable for each year since 1995 with minor variation depending on whether respondents were referring to the seven

tent on commercial channels might be expected because the community spends more time watching those channels compared to others. In 1997, commercial television networks in the five mainland state capital cities in Australia had an 83 per cent share of the market. ABC television had 14 per cent and SBS had a two per cent share².

Program types and main issues of concern

The 38 per cent of people in the study (403 people) who were concerned about something seen on television during 1997 were asked what they had seen and the type of program they had seen it in. Each respondent could nominate up to three responses and mentioned a total of 518 concerns and associated programs type.

The highest level of concern was expressed about news and current affairs

programs. Thirty-six per cent of the people who mentioned a concern were referring to material seen in news and current affairs programs (Table 3). Therefore, about 14 per cent of all television viewers in the sample said they disliked or were concerned about material seen in this program category.

Fewer people mentioned concerns about other program types. Advertisements and program promotions, and movies were mentioned by 16 per cent of concerned respondents. When the results from the 1996 survey are compared to 1997, a similar proportion of people mentioned concerns about each of the program types.

News and current affairs

More than one-third of concerned respondents expressed concern about content seen in news and current affairs programs. Table 4 shows that these concerns were either about their style of presentation (20 per cent of people with concerns) or the issues covered in these programs (14 per cent).

Concerns about style included journalists pushing their view or bias, footage of people being harmed or injured, sensationalism, poor reporting techniques used in interviews, portrayals of grief stricken families, misrepresentation of facts, lack of warnings on graphic stories that may upset children, inaccuracy of reporting, invasion of privacy, animal injuries being shown, the beating up of health issues, and invasion of privacy. The category of news and current affairs style also includes concerns about the presentation of specific stories such as the Thredbo landslide.

Table 1: Percentage of people who saw something of concern on television, 1994-1997

<i>Have you seen anything on TV that you disliked or were concerned about?</i>	1994	1995	1996	1997
	% n=1225	% n=1159	% n=1157	% n=1062
In the past seven days	24	20	22	20
In the past nine* months (excluding the last seven days)	#	18	16	18
Total in the past nine* months.	-	38	38	38

* In 1995 and 1996, respondents were asked about their concerns over the previous nine months (January-September. In 1997 they were asked the same question with regard to the last ten months (January-October).

This question was not asked in 1994.

days or the nine or ten months prior to the date of the survey (Table 1).

Stations that caused most concern

Most people in the sample (68 per cent) who had concerns about television content saw that content on free-to-air commercial stations. These include the Seven, Nine and Ten networks in metropolitan areas and their affiliate stations in regional areas. The proportion of people with concerns about content seen on commercial television stations was spread relatively evenly across the three major commercial networks (Table 2).

Higher levels of concern about con-

Table 2: Level of concern by station type, Jan-Oct 1997

Station type	People	Responses
	n=403	n=518
	%	%
Network 7 and regional affiliates	34	32
Network 9 and regional affiliates	40	37
Network 10 and regional affiliates	30	27
ABC	16	14
SBS	7	7
Pay TV	2	2
Other	6	5
Don't know	16	17

Table 3: Concerns by program type, Jan-Oct 1997

Program type	Number of people	% People with concerns	% of total sample
		n=403	n=1048
News and current affairs	144	36	14
Advertising and program promotions	66	16	6
Movies	63	16	6
Lifestyle	41	10	4
Drama/soap operas	29	7	3
Comedy	27	7	3
Cartoons	18	4	2
Sports shows	13	3	1
Children's	7	2	<1
Talk shows	7	2	<1
Quiz/game shows	2	0	<1
Other	37	9	4
Don't know/ not stated	31	8	3

Concerns about news and current affairs issues included stories about death, disasters or destruction, murder and killing, child abuse, youth, unemployment and drugs, and migrants/racism. These concerns were about events happening in the world as opposed to the way they were presented. Specific issues of concern included stories about nursing homes and the elderly, and politics and politicians.

Three major news stories of 1997 were mentioned by survey respondents. These were about Pauline Hanson, the Thredbo landslide and Princess Diana. Specific concerns about the coverage of the death of Princess Diana (7 per cent of concerned respondents) related mostly to the way the stories were presented. Concerns about this story included excess coverage or overkill, that she should be left in peace, and about too much media hype.

Crime and justice concerns mainly related to news and current affairs programs, but also to movies, drama and lifestyle programs. Besides issues of concern about assault and the prison system, respondents specifically mentioned violent, threatening or disturbing material and the reality of some events depicted.

Advertising and program promotions

Community concern about advertising and program promotions was the

programs, children's programs, movies, and some other program types.

Suitability of programs for children

The suitability of programs for children and the times they are broadcast was an issue of concern that spanned a range of program types. Most concern about suitability was expressed with regard to programs dealing with sexual preferences. Other concerns were about advertising, the portrayal of violence, the use of language, cartoons, and some content in movies and news programs.

Sex and nudity

Seventeen per cent of concerned respondents identified sex and nudity on television as a concern. People were mostly concerned about programs dealing with sexual preferences at times

Table 4: Main areas of concern about television content, Jan-Oct 1997

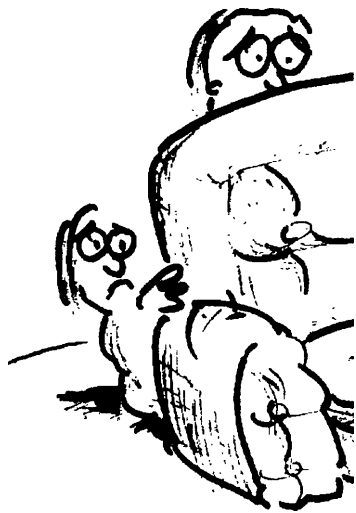
What was it that you disliked or that caused you concern?	Number	% people with concerns	% of total samples
	of people	n=403	n=1048
News and current affairs style	82	20	8
Suitability of programs for children at the time broadcast	77	19	7
Sex and nudity	67	17	6
Violence	67	17	6
News and current affairs issues	58	14	6
Advertising	43	11	4
Language	31	8	3
Princess Diana	30	7	3
Program promotions	28	7	3
Cartoons	23	6	2
American programs	14	4	1
Crime and justice	14	4	1
Other	26	7	2

second highest for a particular program type (16 per cent of concerned respondents). Within this category concerns about advertising (11 per cent) were more prominent than concerns about program promotions (7 per cent). The two main concerns about advertisements were the amount of advertising and advertising content considered to be unsuitable for children to watch. Some people held a general dislike for advertisements or thought they were poorly conceived, sexist or scary (ie. scary advertising campaigns). The people who mentioned concern about program promotions referred to promotions for news and current affairs

when children were still viewing (primarily lifestyle programs and some movies, but also some drama/soap operas and comedy programs). Specific concerns included the unnecessary depiction of sex on television and in movies, nudity and brief clothing, sexual material that is too explicit, the lack of moral standards in sexual relationships and material considered to be offensive.

Violence

Seventeen per cent of concerned respondents were concerned about the portrayal of violence on television. Violence was mostly of concern in



movies, but also in news and current affairs programs, and drama/soap operas. The specific concerns were about too much violence in society, bad influences on children, disturbing and distressing material, the encouragement of violence, and that too much violent material was shown at times when children were watching.

Other concerns

Language was of most concern to the survey respondents when contained in movies. It was also mentioned in relation to drama/soap operas, comedy programs and, to a lesser extent, in other program types.

Concern about cartoons was associated with the teaching of bad morals, behaviour and values as well as the

portrayal of violence. Some were also considered to be unsuitable for young audiences, and offensive or crude. Cartoon material in children's programs and comedy programs were also identified as causing some concern.

The concerns expressed about American programs mostly fell with the drama/soap opera and comedy program categories identified in Table 3. Specific concerns included American situation comedies, soaps and talk shows, and some concern about the suitability of American programs for children and the perception of them status as junk or rubbish.


Summary

The majority of Australians aged 14 years and older did not mention any concern about, or dislike for, television content (between 55 and 61 per cent of people³).

Between 35 and 41 per cent⁴ of Australians aged 14 years and over who watched television were concerned about or disliked something they had seen on television between January and October 1997.

Most of the categories of community concern deal with the way information is presented on television and are therefore relevant to the ongoing development of codes of practice for television. There are however some categories that are not relevant to issues that can be covered in codes of practice. Most of

these non-codes related concerns were mentioned under the 'news and current affairs issues' and 'crime and justice' categories. These concerns were about events happening in the world that were reported on television as opposed to the way they were reported.

Hence, the top five concerns about television content that can be considered as relevant to codes of practice monitoring are news and current affairs style, advertising and program promotions, the suitability of programs for young people, sex and nudity, and violence. 

Endnotes

¹ The ABA's code monitoring responsibilities relate only to commercial, community and subscription services and not to ABC and SBS television and radio services. However, the ABA is required to investigate unresolved complaints about issues covered in all codes of practice, including the national ABC and SBS services.

² ACNielsen Australia 1998 TV trends *B&T Weekly*, Sydney.

³ A confidence interval of ± 3 has been applied to the 58 per cent of the sample who were not concerned about television content.

⁴ A confidence interval of ± 3 has been applied to the 38 per cent of the sample who identified some concern or dislike about television content.

Programs granted C or P classification

Programs granted P or C classification between 4 August and 3 September 1998. Producers interested in submitting programs for classification should contact Liz Gilchrist, Manager ABA Children's television.

<i>Program Title</i>	<i>Origin</i>	<i>Class</i>	<i>New/ Renewal</i>	<i>Decision Date</i>	<i>Applicant</i>
KETCHUP (SERIES 2)	Australia	CAD	new	10-8-98	Southern Star Entertainment Pty Ltd
ROGUE STALLION, THE	Australia	CAD	renewal	17-8-98	Grundy Television Pty Ltd

C - children's program, CAD - C Australian drama, P - preschool, PRC - provisional C 