

In October 1997, the ABA commissioned a national survey to determine what Australians think about the content of television and radio programs. These results are from the radio component of the study—the results of the television component were published in the October 1998 issue of ABA Update.

What turns listeners off? Community views about radio

In October 1997, the ABA commissioned a national survey which found that 80 per cent of listeners were not concerned about, or offended by, material they heard on the radio. The 18 per cent who were concerned about something they had heard on the radio in the previous ten months, were most concerned about offensive material and issues such as accuracy and biased reporting.

Community views about radio content were examined for the first time in the 1997 survey. Similar surveys have been conducted annually since 1994 to determine the views of Australians about television content.

The ABA conducts this research in order to monitor the effectiveness of codes of practice that apply to the television and radio industries.¹ These results of the radio component of the study have been considered by the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters (FARB) as part of its current review of the Commercial Radio Codes of Practice.

Listening patterns

Eighty-eight per cent of the survey respondents said they had listened to the radio either at home or elsewhere in the seven days before the survey. Almost all (99 per cent) had listened to the radio in the ten months from January to October 1997.

1 The ABA's code monitoring responsibilities relate only to commercial, community and subscription services and not to ABC and SBS 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.

The radio services that were mostly listened to were FM commercial (50 per cent), AM commercial (37 per cent), ABC stations—excluding Triple J—(25 per cent), Triple J (14 per cent), community stations (4 per cent), and SBS (less than one per cent). Six per cent said they listened to 'other' radio services.

Overall level of concern

Survey respondents reported whether they had heard anything on radio that concerned or offended them. Concerns were identified with regard to the previous seven days, and if there was nothing in that period, then with regard to the ten months since January 1997. The results from these two questions have been combined to provide a total picture of the level and nature of concerns expressed by the Australian public.

Most of the radio listeners (80 per cent) in the study did not mention any concern about radio content. Approximately two per cent said they didn't know and 18 per cent said they had heard something between January and October 1997 that caused them concern or offence (table 1).

Reasons for concern

The 18 per cent of respondents who had heard something on radio that concerned or offended them identified a range of issues. They did this by means of a series of responses that were not prompted by the interviewer. Each respondent could mention up to three concerns.

Most of the categories of concern related to the way information was presented on radio and therefore are relevant to a review of the codes of practice. The top six areas of concern were language, talk-back personalities, jokes, humour and humiliating pranks, radio presenters' behaviour, Princess Diana, and music (table 2).

Categories of concern not relevant to issues covered by codes of practice were: discussion and news topics, politics and politicians, and nursing homes/elderly. Most of these concerns were about events happening in the world that were reported on radio rather than the way they were reported.

Language

Of the 21 per cent of people who were concerned about language, most

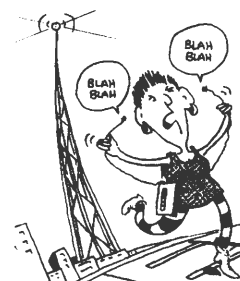


Table 1:
Proportion of people who were concerned about radio,
by gender and age, Jan–Oct 1997

| Have you heard anything on radio that caused you concern or offended you? | Total n=1046 | Gender | | Age in years | | | | |
|---|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| | | Male n=506 | Female n=540 | 14-17 n=46 | 18-24 n=151 | 25-39 n=302 | 40-54 n=264 | 55+ n=283 |
| In the past 7 days | 10 | 11 | 9 | 2 | 11 | 11 | 11 | 8 |
| In past 10 months (excludes last 7 days) | 8 | 7 | 10 | 7 | 5 | 9 | 12 | 8 |
| Total between January & October | 18 | 18 | 19 | 9 | 16 | 20 | 23 | 16 |

Table 2: Main reasons for concern or offence nominated by radio listeners, Jan–Oct 1997

| What was it that caused you concern or that offended you? | Number of people | % people with concerns (n=193) | % of total listeners (n=1046) |
|---|------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Language | 41 | 21 | 4 |
| Talk-back personalities | 27 | 14 | 3 |
| Discussion and news topics | 21 | 11 | 2 |
| Jokes, humour & humiliating pranks | 17 | 9 | 2 |
| Radio presenter's behaviour | 10 | 5 | 1 |
| Princess Diana | 10 | 5 | 1 |
| Music played | 8 | 4 | 1 |
| News & current affairs style | 8 | 4 | 1 |
| Advertising | 7 | 4 | 1 |
| Biased views | 6 | 3 | <1 |
| Pauline Hanson | 5 | 3 | <1 |
| Politics & politicians | 6 | 3 | <1 |
| Sex | 6 | 3 | <1 |
| Nursing homes/ elderly | 4 | 2 | <1 |
| Other content | 22 | 11 | 2 |
| No specific concern mentioned | 4 | 2 | <1 |

described these concerns as swearing; offensive, smutty, crude, vulgar, generally bad, inappropriate or suggestive language; or innuendo or sexual references. Ten people said they heard language that was not appropriate for the timeslot when young people could be listening.

Talk-back personalities

Most of the concerned respondents gave the names of talk-back presenters or personalities and some radio programs. The specific aspect of concern can not be directly clarified from the data.

Jokes, humour and humiliating pranks

Nine per cent of the people with concerns nominated offensive comments made under the guise of humour, humiliating pranks, jokes, toilet humour, and ringing people for a gag and telling them something terrible had happened.

Radio presenters' behaviour

Offending material included behaviour that was rude or crude, derogatory or offensive, and picking on different groups of people.

Princess Diana

Five per cent of concerned respondents mentioned the coverage of Princess

Diana's death. Specific concerns included jokes about her death and excess coverage or 'overkill'.

Music played

Some survey respondents identified bad language as a concern in song lyrics. Other concerns referred to negative song lyrics and included references to drugs or suicide.

Stations that caused most concern

When specific concerns are matched to the radio stations that people mostly listened to, language was the prominent concern across all station types (table 3). Some differences stand out between the different station types: AM commercial radio listeners were almost equally concerned about language and talk-back personalities. Triple J listeners identified presenter's behaviour as the top concern.

Overall, most people with concerns were offended by material heard on FM commercial radio (55 per cent of concerned listeners), followed by AM commercial radio (42 per cent), ABC radio—excluding Triple J—(30 per cent), Triple J (15 per cent) and community radio (9 per cent).

Specific issues about radio programs and presenters

All the people who took part in the survey were asked to respond to six statements that covered specific issues (table 4). These statements addressed the following programming issues: subject matter and the time it is broadcast; swearing and bad language, smutty jokes and talk about sex; and talk-back presenters. Respondents

Table 3: Main reasons for concern by station mostly listened to, Jan—Oct 1997

| Issue of concern | Percentage of concerned people | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|------------------|-------------------|
| | FM commercial n=104 | AM commercial n=80 | ABC n=56 | Triple J n=28 | Community n=17 |
| Language | 27 | 18 | 21 | 14 | 41 |
| Talk-back personalities | 10 | 19 | 14 | 14 | 0 |
| Discussion & news topics | 10 | 13 | 16 | 11 | 6 |
| Jokes, humour & humiliating pranks | 13 | 5 | 9 | 4 | 6 |
| Presenter's behaviour | 5 | 5 | 4 | 18 | 6 |
| Princess Diana | 7 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 6 |
| Music | 6 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 0 |
| News & current affairs style | 4 | 4 | 9 | 7 | 6 |
| Advertising | 4 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 0 |
| Biased views | 6 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 0 |
| Pauline Hanson | 3 | 3 | 7 | 4 | 12 |
| Politics & politicians | 1 | 4 | 7 | 0 | 6 |
| Sex | 2 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Nursing homes/elderly | 0 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Other | 13 | 15 | 14 | 14 | 6 |
| Don't know | 7 | 9 | 7 | 4 | 6 |
| TOTAL (n=193) | 55 | 42 | 30 | 15 | 9 |

indicated whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements.

These statements were developed from information about ABA investigations into unresolved complaints about radio services and the nature of complaints received by radio service providers. Radio complaints data are compiled on a quarterly basis each year by the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters (see p.19).

Subject matter and talk about sex

Most respondents (78 per cent) agreed that the subject matter covered by radio presenters was usually suitable for the time of day it was broadcast (statement a). Although, 36 per cent agreed there were too many smutty jokes and too much talk about sex, almost the same number of people disagreed with this statement (statement d).

Swearing and bad language

There was low tolerance for swearing and bad language on radio. Fifty percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that swearing and bad language is acceptable on certain types of radio stations. Just under one-third agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (statement e).

One-third of the sample held the view that there was too much swearing and

bad language on radio at times of the day when children could be listening, whereas, 42 per cent disagreed with this statement (statement b).

Talk-back presenters' behaviour

While 44 per cent agreed that talk-back presenters usually gave callers a fair go by allowing them to express their point of view (statement c), there was also wide-spread recognition (49 per cent) that talk-back presenters were only interested in pushing their own point of view (statement f).

Summary

Between 15.5 and 20.5 per cent² of Australians aged 14 years and over who listened to radio between January and October 1997 were concerned or offended by something they had heard on radio.

The primary area of community concern was offensive material and included language, song lyrics, the behaviour of presenters, humour and sexual references.

A secondary theme running through these results relates to concern about inaccurate information, biased views and a lack of fair play. Concerns of this nature were nominated within the categories of news and current affairs

The survey

The survey took place in all Australian States and Territories and covered a representative sample of households. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with people aged 14 years and over on the weekend 24 to 26 October 1997.

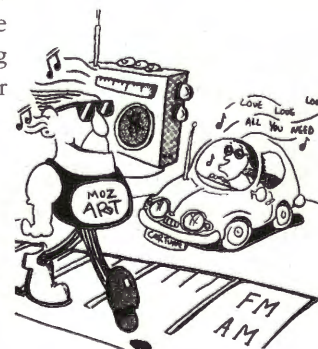
A total of 1062 people (550 females and 512 males) were asked whether they had heard anything on radio that had concerned or offended them, and to describe their concerns.

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 specific questions.

style, biased views, Princess Diana and Pauline Hanson.

The above findings about community concern in relation to language of an offensive nature was reinforced by the prompted responses to the statements about language, smutty jokes and talk about sex. This is where between one-third and one-half of all survey respondents believed that:

- swearing and bad language was unacceptable on radio stations (50 per cent);
- there were too many smutty jokes and too much talk about sex on radio these days (36 per cent); and
- there was too much swearing and bad language at times of the day when children could be listening (33 per cent).



² A confidence interval of 2.5 has been applied to the 18 per cent of the sample who identified some concern or offence about radio.

Table 4:
Statements about radio programs and presenters

| Statement | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither/ Nor | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Don't know |
|---|----------------|-------|-----------------|----------|-------------------|------------|
| n=1062 | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| a The subject matter covered by radio presenters is usually suitable for the time of day it is broadcast | 7 | 71 | 9 | 6 | 1 | 6 |
| b There is too much swearing and bad language on radio at times of the day when children could be listening | 9 | 24 | 17 | 37 | 5 | 8 |
| c Talk-back presenters usually give callers a fair go by allowing them to express their point of view | 3 | 41 | 20 | 21 | 8 | 7 |
| d There are too many smutty jokes and too much talk about sex on radio these days | 9 | 27 | 20 | 33 | 4 | 8 |
| e Swearing and bad language is acceptable on certain types of radio stations | 4 | 27 | 13 | 36 | 14 | 6 |
| f Talk-back presenters are only interested in pushing their own point of view | 13 | 36 | 22 | 21 | 2 | 7 |