

Broadcasting Standards Regulation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

1. The Broadcasting Standards Commission (the BSC), the Independent Television Commission (the ITC) and the Radio Authority consulted with viewers and listeners to explore the relevance of the way in which the regulatory codes governing broadcast content currently operate and to explore particular elements relating specifically to content and editorial impartiality.
2. The format selected for this project was a series of three one-day participative forums, each consisting of 20 participants and led by The Fuse Group. Two of the forums were held in England, the third in Scotland in July and August 2003.

KEY FINDINGS

Desire for regulation

3. Participants were in favour of regulation. They thought it necessary to ensure that content standards on television and radio were acceptable to the majority of the audience and that children were protected from exposure to offensive or harmful material.
4. The strength with which this belief was held reflects the perceived power of the media. Television in particular, was felt to be a dominant and influential medium and it was considered essential that its output should be regulated. There was a concern expressed that, without regulation, broadcasters would show ‘what they liked when they liked’, and that – as a consequence – children may be subject to a range of unsuitable material.
5. Radio caused fewer concerns in terms of content standards than did television, but still provoked an instinctive response that it should be subject to a similar or equivalent regulatory framework. This was especially true of national radio stations. Arguments put forward in favour of regulating radio were different however, from those relating to television. There was a sense that radio regulation was as important in providing an overall ‘safe zone’ for all listeners as much as to protect children.
6. Participants had the sense that the regulation of broadcast content was something which contributed to ‘the general good’; that it was important for society as a whole. This perspective was based on the view that television plays an integral role in our lives as a medium which both mirrors and influences society and, as such, should be highly responsible. Thus there was a sense, for example, among a minority of participants, that as society breaks up and becomes more fragmented, it grows increasingly important to set boundaries – primarily, though not exclusively, with the interests of children in mind.
7. Despite the desire for regulation to be maintained, debate in the forums suggested that participants could see arguments both for and against relaxing the current regulatory regime.

8. While participants' primary focus was on programme content, a significant minority also felt that it was important that advertisers should be subject to regulation.

Does current regulation work?

9. The aspect of the current regulatory framework that most participants were aware of was the 9pm Watershed on television. It was thought of primarily as a cut-off point between programming which is 'safe' for younger children to view and programming which is not, and provides:
 - a relatively safe zone where children can watch television unsupervised – a tool for responsible parents, and
 - some degree of protection for those whose parents do not actively monitor or take an interest in what their young children might be viewing.
10. Most participants were in favour of the television Watershed. It was seen as an unspoken contract between parents (or other adults) and broadcasters, with parents depending on the broadcasters to fulfil their part of the bargain for it to work for them. However, that contract was not always thought to be working as well as it should. Many participants felt there were instances of the Watershed being flouted by broadcasters. They included:
 - Programming or advertising in which the content was perceived as inappropriate for the time it was on – by and large, but not exclusively, programming aired pre-Watershed. The programme genre mentioned most often in this respect was soap operas and, to a lesser extent, some children's programming. Advertising with a sexual content or using sexual innuendo was also mentioned.
 - In addition, participants were occasionally shocked or offended by programming which was not transmitted before the Watershed, but which still exceeded their expectations. This could apply equally to radio, which participants recognised as having no Watershed.
11. When asked in greater detail about content that had offended or shocked, outside those issues concerned with the Watershed, it was clear that the context in which the material is set was all-important. Judgements were made based on criteria such as the programme genre, the channel of transmission, expectations of the programme and the specific context as well as time of transmission.
12. Most participants said they were concerned primarily with violence, with sexual content and language following some way behind. There was less consensus on what was acceptable in terms of language and violence than there was for the amount or context of depictions in which nudity might occur.
13. Many participants talked of the concern they had that some material might encourage imitative behaviour. For example, the concern about swearing in broadcasting among some (especially parents) was based on the belief that offensive language is potentially more readily imitated than either violence or sexual behaviour. Concerns were also expressed about content which featured promiscuous or casual sex, drug-taking or aggressive or disrespectful behaviour.

14. Participants were generally more tolerant of swearing and sexual content in films than in television dramas, accepting the nature of the genre and considering that much of the content in film was intrinsically more 'necessary'.
15. In terms of radio there was concern expressed about some of the talk shows that were on and the language and innuendo in those programmes.
16. Participants said they did not have a clear idea as to where to go if they wanted to complain, but this is largely because they had not thought of doing so. Most said they would contact the channel or station which had offended them by telephone. Once focused on this subject, many agreed that there needed to be more avenues to encourage complainants or at least a more transparent system of complaint.

Editorial integrity, fairness, impartiality and accuracy

17. This area of questioning was very much news-focused, but it was also the area that saw the greatest number of apparent contradictions. For example, there was a strongly held principle that news should be impartial; yet there was a clear feeling, expressed by many, that the news should not be impartial during a war. Underlying this appeared to be a conviction that you can be both impartial and yet speak from a particular (British) perspective at the same time.
18. It is clear from the research that, when asked to define the concepts of impartiality and accuracy, most thought of them as the same thing, meaning 'a lack of bias'. Accuracy was a synonym for factual, or factually correct.
19. News consumers wanted opinion clearly distinguishable from facts. While some participants felt more tolerance for opinionated news on local radio, they did not feel the same way about national radio.
20. There were also differences in the way participants viewed British news, compared with news on foreign channels.
21. Overall, a clear majority of participants thought that the news – by which they meant news transmitted on British channels – was trustworthy for most of the time. It should be borne in mind that the research was conducted in July-August 2003, when issues surrounding the country's part in the war in Iraq and allegations of media spin were high on the public's agenda. Nonetheless there was a sense that the news was fundamentally trustworthy.
22. The question of trustworthiness was closely connected to whether participants accepted the version of events offered by broadcasters. By and large, they did, some justifying their stance by pointing to the existence of multiple television news outlets; for many, these competitive sources not only provide the individual with the opportunity to check and compare news bulletins, but act as a counterbalance to each other.
23. For the majority, the BBC was thought to be the most trustworthy channel for news in the United Kingdom. This is, in part, because it is still thought of as the 'traditional' voice of news in the country and one which people turn to at times of key news events, such as war.
24. There was little specific comment about individual news bulletins on the

commercial terrestrial channels, although a few participants argued that commercial pressures might mean these channels put more emphasis on getting a story first rather than in checking all the facts.

25. There were varying opinions about cable and satellite based news channels, with some participants arguing they were less trustworthy than terrestrial channels. Others, often younger male participants from multichannel homes, argued that they got a more rounded or global sense of what is going on in the world from channels such as CNN. This ‘big-picture’ type of coverage, with less of a United Kingdom emphasis, was commended.
26. News on the radio was felt also to be trustworthy and there was not a sense that radio news had been harmed by events over the summer in the way that television news had been. Radio news was commended for being factual and for being local. Some participants argued that the coverage on different radio stations could vary, feeling that there was opportunity for less balanced or more opinionated debate on late night programmes or on niche channels.

Advertising, teleshopping and sponsorship

27. There was little concern expressed about advertising content in comparison with programming. When prompted, participants talked exclusively about television advertising and had few concerns about radio advertising. The chief issues for the minority who did have concerns were:
 - The use of sexual content or innuendo to sell unrelated products. By this was meant the use of semi-naked or sexually provocative models to sell products where there was no relationship between the sexual content and the product itself
 - Advertising on daytime television thought to target the elderly or vulnerable. This concern was chiefly about financial advertisements, such as companies advertising debt consolidation services or those offering elderly people equity release from their homes
 - Some concern was expressed about the impact of advertising to children.
28. Despite this, most participants felt that advertising should be regulated as strictly as, or even more strictly than, programming. This was partly because commercials are unplanned viewing, but also because the commercial imperative behind advertising is more direct.
29. When asked, most participants could not see any arguments for allowing teleshopping more latitude than spot advertising, and many thought it should be even stricter.

30. Participants were asked to consider how sponsorship might impact on editorial integrity, outside news programming. Few expressed real concerns about the current level of sponsorship on television or radio, although most argued against there being any dramatic expansion of sponsored programming, particularly on terrestrial television. The research showed that:
- Most participants were fairly tolerant of sponsorship overall, accepting it as a useful form of revenue
 - For most, their experience suggested that sponsorship impacted little on the editorial integrity of the programme primarily because the sponsor and the content of the programme were not obviously linked
 - A more problematic type of sponsor-programme relationship would be one where there was a direct relationship between the sponsor and the content of the programme. This – it was felt – may certainly be expected to influence the editorial integrity of the programme
 - Participants would not expect to see any sponsorship of genres such as news or current affairs or investigative programming as, it was thought, this would impact too much on their editorial integrity
 - A minority expressed concern about product placement in programming, with some not wanting to see any
 - While current levels of television sponsorship did not seem to have bothered participants, radio sponsorship was felt by some to be far more intrusive. It is both harder to screen out an on-air sponsored announcement than it is an advertisement on television, and sponsored messages on radio are often interwoven with the programming in a way that does not happen with television sponsorship.

Should all television channels and radio stations be treated the same?

31. At first, most participants said they expected all channels to conform to the same regulations. However, over the course of the forums, most shifted from this position to one in which they could conceive of a multi-layered approach to regulating channels. This approach was one which would equate the basic tier or most popular Sky channels, such as Sky One, with terrestrial channels, and then make a distinction for some of the smaller, niche channels.
32. There was considerable uncertainty among many as to whether satellite channels are currently subject to the same regulation as terrestrial channels. The different Watershed time on some satellite channels, the existence of adult channels (available with a PIN number) and the presence of 24-hour News channels all contributed to this uncertainty.

Arguments against regulation

33. While the majority argued strongly in favour of regulation and spoke to its importance, there was a significant minority who had reservations about the regulation of broadcast content. Their default position remained in favour of the regulatory status quo, but – across the period of the forum and with the views put forward to them – they began to question aspects of current regulation. Many of those who were engaged in such questioning used their views about societal changes to underpin their argument in much the same way as those on the other side of the debate had. The key difference was that, while those in favour of regulation pointed to some elements of disintegration in society as a justification for rules, those against argued that such trends demonstrated that there was no point to regulation. There were three main lines of thought put forward by this latter group:
- The increased and/or changing levels of tolerance for material which might have once been hidden, unacceptable or embarrassing, meant regulation was not as necessary
 - There were more loosely structured codes of behaviour, leading, for example, to changed bedtimes for children and more personal freedom
 - A belief, among some, that modern society is less tolerant as a whole of ‘rules’ and that broadcast regulation was an aspect of this.

Other regulatory possibilities

34. Besides the Watershed, ideas put forward by participants to modify or complement the current regulatory system included pre-transmission warnings or other on-screen warnings about programme content. These devices were generally perceived to help people make an informed opinion about programme content.
35. Those with access to Sky said they felt more in control of their viewing because of the variety of devices they could use to monitor and regulate viewing, including locks and PIN numbers. Mention was also made of the facility to look at programming coming up and set the television to switch channels at that point.
36. A feeling began to emerge during the forums that television regulation could be more flexible than it now is, but participants were not clear about how that might work or what alternatives were available.
37. When participants were asked to consider whether all television channels and all radio stations should be subject to the same regulatory framework, their immediate response was to say that they should. As the forums progressed, participants started to move to a position where they thought some digital, cable or satellite channels could be regulated differently from the terrestrial channels.

INTRODUCTION

The BSC, the ITC and the Radio Authority, with Ofcom and the Radio Communications Agency, will be replaced by Ofcom at the end of 2003. As part of its duties, Ofcom will undertake to apply standards to broadcast content and be responsible for striking a balance between freedom of expression and protection of the vulnerable. It is envisaged that some of the existing statutory programme codes will be retained, but that there may be a shift towards lighter-touch regulation.

In anticipation of this change, the BSC and the ITC, in conjunction with the Radio Authority, wished to consult with viewers and listeners to explore the relevance of the way in which the regulatory codes governing broadcast content currently operate, and to explore particular elements of the codes relating specifically to content and editorial impartiality.

The commissioning bodies have conducted considerable research in recent years on regulation and regulatory policy. These demonstrate that there is still an appetite for regulation, primarily to protect children. Moreover, policies such as the Watershed are considered an invaluable tool which can assist parents and non-parents alike in the task of regulating the viewing of children and young people. The recent study carried out on behalf of the BSC/ ITC/ BBC by The Fuse Group on the relevance of the Watershed¹ confirmed this view and illustrated that, by and large, the default position for most of the population is to support the regulatory status quo.

With that in mind, one of the aims of the present study was to examine whether – through a more detailed and informed debate – people could be encouraged to think beyond that status quo, with the mindset of those making regulatory decisions. To that end, a deliberative methodology (forums) was chosen. As such, the research findings reported here offer not simply a snapshot of how viewers and listeners think about particular issues at this point in time, but an insight into how – when informed, challenged and stimulated – those viewers and listeners reveal themselves to be open to new ideas and options. Participants attending the forums did not shift their views fundamentally, or even permanently, from where they started but the very act of participating in this type of research did, in itself, affect the way they were able to think about a number of topics as they moved through the day-long exercise.

There were a number of key objectives to this study:

- to explore public attitudes and expectations of the regulatory structure and its operation in respect of content standards
- to establish levels of tolerance for different types of content on television channels and radio stations at different times of the day
- to consider issues of editorial integrity and accuracy in News programming and the impact of sponsorship on editorial impartiality.

¹The Watershed: Providing a Safe Viewing Zone; Gillian Ramsay; British Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission, 2003.

It should be noted that the context within which this research took place was particularly turbulent. The forums were held at the end of July and in early August 2003. The weeks leading up to this saw an increasing level of news coverage about the nature of a government dossier prepared in 2002 to demonstrate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein; the exposure of MOD weapons adviser Dr. Kelly as the ‘source’ of BBC reports that the dossier had been ‘sexed up’ by Downing Street; Dr. Kelly’s appearance in front of the Foreign Affairs Committee and his subsequent suicide. At the heart of this story lay a report by Andrew Gilligan, a correspondent on Radio 4’s *Today* programme, subsequently backed controversially by the BBC Governors – and the government’s denial of the truth of this report. Inevitably these events – and the war in Iraq which precipitated them – dominated some of the discussions in the forums and coloured the debate, specifically that part focusing on impartiality of news coverage.

Methodology and format

Given the desire not simply to replicate ‘top-of-mind’ responses to well researched issues, the choice of methodology for this study was crucial. The format selected was a series of three one-day participative forums, each consisting of 20 participants and led by The Fuse Group. The format draws on methods developed for citizen’s juries and on those used in industry for seminars and other workshop-type events. It is a highly structured and focused means of allowing informed debate on a wide range of topics.

The participants were recruited to yield a mix of age, gender and social grade and to include working and non-working people. Two of the forums were composed of those with access to multi-channel television and one of those with access only to terrestrial television. All listened to several radio stations per week, with a mix of local, national, commercial and BBC. The recruitment schedule appears in Appendix A.

The goal was to challenge and stimulate participants in their debates. To that end, each forum began with an in-person presentation (in England, from a leading member of the BSC and, in Scotland, from the Scottish member of the ITC). The presentation outlined the elements of the current regulatory framework. Following this the day was divided into three sessions:

- How important is regulation in a multimedia world?
- Content restrictions: Setting a framework – what should and should not be broadcast
- Editorial integrity, fairness, impartiality and accuracy

Each session started with participants watching a number of videotaped interviews from a selection of people from within the broadcasting industry or with a particular view of its activities. The list of those who generously contributed in this way appears in Appendix B. These interviews were prepared with the specific purpose of the forum in mind and were selected to offer a range of views on the topics discussed.

After viewing the ‘expert witness’ statements, participants were asked to consider a number of issues in small unmoderated group discussions. This was followed by a longer moderated session in which the moderators listened to and probed the participants’ views on the subjects debated, and focused in more detail on a

number of the issues raised. After each session, the participants formed new groups; this ensured that the groupings remained fresh and that participants were not able to stick with those of similar age or same gender.

Key considerations

Qualitative findings are always, to some extent, a matter of interpretation and synthesis, and in this methodology, a large portion of time was spent in debate with the same participants. As with all research there are both strengths and weaknesses inherent in the methodology. The findings should be read in this light, bearing in mind the following:

- The methodology encouraged debate and exploration of opinions which revealed a far greater range of views than might have been garnered from a less deliberative technique. It looked for consensus where one was easily reached, but never sought to force participants where there were clear differences of opinion.
- The views heard were often contradictory. For example, in the session dealing with impartiality, participants both lauded the principle of impartial news coverage and yet wanted (at one level) war reports to be partial. Such contradictions are not only inevitable in this type of research, but it is often within these contradictions that the start of a shift in attitude can be detected.
- The methodology has implications for future research – for example, in the present climate, and possibly for some time to come, quantitative research is likely to return an overwhelming vote in favour of the current regulatory status quo, because when asked to vote on one side or another, most participants err on the side of conservatism. This is reflected in the self-completion questionnaires administered, as part of this research, the results of which came down comprehensively on the side of a society with *'rules and regulations'*, despite the fact that many within the groups expressed the view that this is too much a *'nanny state'*. Equally, the fact that discussions were held among groups of diverse individuals facilitated a more challenging debate resulting in richer insights than those traditionally generated among the more usual, homogeneous group discussion environment.
- Finally, while some of the expert 'witnesses' did challenge the notion of external regulation of broadcasting, there were no alternative scenarios placed in front of participants to provide them with a view of what it might be like. The hypothesis here is that alternative scenarios make it easier for people to conceptualise how else it might work or to speak out against the regulatory status quo. So it is interesting, that, in the light of an absence of 'alternative scenarios', the discussions and debates did, nevertheless, reveal some (considerable in some instances) elasticity in the opinions that people hold.

1 HOW IMPORTANT IS REGULATION IN A MULTIMEDIA WORLD?

Overview

In the first session of the forums, participants were invited to consider the purpose and value of broadcast regulation. Within this overarching objective they were asked, specifically, to debate their views on achieving a balance between protection of the vulnerable and freedom of expression, and to consider whether content regulation should be a blanket policy across all channels and stations or whether there should be differences. There was also a discussion to gauge what participants felt about current channels of complaint and how satisfied they felt with the means of redress available to them.

It was unsurprising that most people started this debate in favour of the regulatory framework they had just heard described: for most, the default position. However, even where individuals began by stating their overall conviction that regulation was a good thing and entirely necessary, the tendency was in each group for people to start finding arguments against regulation – or at least to find in favour of relaxing it – once the topic was aired and other perspectives and points of view had been expressed. Some of these arguments emerged as people cited examples where broadcasters had ‘*broken faith*’ or ‘*flouted*’ their expectations of the Watershed. But there was also a vocal minority who consistently put forward the view that regulation is, by and large, a matter of individual responsibility.

Despite the apparently overwhelming desire for regulation to be maintained – and to be maintained much as it is at the moment – these debates suggest that there is a degree of flexibility in this view. Given a **choice**, people choose to keep regulation as it is. Given a **debate**, however, they can see arguments both for and against relaxing the current regulatory regime. The difficulties they have in maintaining this position largely lie with people’s inability to conceive of self-regulated broadcast media, responsible enough to protect the vulnerable and the young in society.

What is the purpose of regulation of television and radio content?

At the beginning of these forums it was clear that most participants thought that some regulation was important in order to ensure that content standards on television and radio were acceptable to the majority and that children were protected from exposure to offensive or harmful material. The strength with which this belief was held reflects the perceived power of the media. Television, in particular, was felt to be such a dominant and penetrating medium and with such a huge influence on people’s lives that it was felt essential that its output should be regulated and it was equally hard to conceive of what it might be like were it not to be.

‘I think television is like wide open because it’s a medium that’s so massive and there’s so much...you get TV at home going into the kid’s room, one in the older kid’s room, one in your sitting room. It’s such a huge medium, I think it has to be controlled.’

(Female, Glasgow)

'We thought that television and radio had a dual role as an entertaining and an informing sort of situation and because it was there to entertain and inform, the regulation was vital.'

(Male, Birmingham)

'I mean if it wasn't regulated then any old rubbish would be put on to TV and obviously quality would be affected by that.'

(Male, Birmingham)

Radio, by and large, causes far less concern in terms of content standards than does television, but still provokes an instinctive response that it should be subject to a similar or equivalent regulatory framework to television.

'It should be regulated as well. I don't see why that should be any different from TV.'

(Female, Slough)

There is certainly recognition that radio is a less intrusive, more personal and, therefore, possibly less influential medium. This view became particularly significant as the debates moved on to discuss whether there was a case for treating different radio stations differently. Some people (a minority) expressed the opposite view that radio is, in some ways, an even more public medium than television, often listened to by greater numbers of people together in environments such as factories, waiting rooms or shops.

'I think you need more regulations on radio, because it's in factories. There are thousands of people working in these factories.'

(Male, Glasgow)

The key arguments put forward in support of regulation are somewhat different for television and radio. For television, the main thrust of the debate is that without regulation the broadcasters would show *'what they liked when they liked'*, and that – as a consequence – children would be subject to a range of unsuitable material. These two themes – one relating to the trustworthiness and responsibility of broadcasters and the other to do with the protection of children's interests – were repeated throughout the forums. In line with previous research, the majority express some scepticism about television broadcasters' ability to adhere to reasonable standards without some kind of regulation. In particular, they felt that broadcasters would not be mindful of the needs or vulnerabilities of children in their programming and scheduling decisions. Non-parents as well as parents took this view:

'If there was no regulations, you could have a porn movie at nine o'clock in the morning followed by cartoons, followed by something else.'

(Female, Birmingham)

'Yes, you can turn it off or you don't have to watch it, but I don't think that self-regulation will work. I think they're [broadcasters] in there for the money and they're in there to get the viewing figures and how they do that would be [through] sensationalism.'

(Male, Slough)

In addition to their concerns about the potentially harmful material that may be shown at times when children are watching television, there were concerns that the overall standard of television would suffer if broadcasters were to be given free rein. These views tended to be articulated more by the older participants and spoken of in the context of the plethora of reality and chat show programmes currently on air.

Participants also had a sense, not easily articulated, that regulation of broadcast content was something which contributed to *'the general good'*; that it was for society as a whole. This perspective was based on the view that television plays an integral role in our lives as a medium which both mirrors and influences society and, as such, should be highly responsible. The fear was that left to its own devices, it would continue to push at the boundaries of what is acceptable. The obverse of this view was also put forward: a sense that as society breaks up and becomes more fragmented, it grows increasingly important to set boundaries – again, primarily, though not exclusively – with the interests of children in mind.

'I think it's just a moral responsibility to society that we live in, that we all take on some kind of responsibility.'

(Female, Slough)

Throughout this part of the discussion, the focus tended to be on programming and programme-makers and broadcasters. A few participants did single out – even at this early stage of the discussion – advertisers as a group who they felt were also important to regulate.

'You can look at something and make your own truth out of a programme, but when you see an advert, it's on for that split second, you expect if it says, "It's good for you, good bacteria tops up the bad bacteria", you think that's the truth.'

(Male, Glasgow)

Arguments put forward in favour of regulating radio are subtly different from those relating to television. The principal difference is that there is a clear sense that radio regulation is at least as important in providing an overall *'safe zone'* for a range of listeners as to protect children. Regulated radio stations provided (adult) participants with a degree of comfort which they might not otherwise have had, and allowed them to make choices in the knowledge that they were not going to be confronted with material which might be shocking or offensive.

'You know what sort of programme's going to come on (on a regulated station). If there's other radio stations that you know are offensive, that always push out the limits...if you choose to listen to that talk show [on those stations] then it's your choice... But as long as people are aware that certain radio channels are regulated...but there's other ones that are not regulated, then you sort of know what you're getting into.'

(Male, Slough)

Inherent in this argument, there was a suggestion that if expectations for different radio stations were different, then so, perhaps, is the requirement for regulation. This theme was returned to throughout the forums.

Who needs to be protected?

The majority of those endorsing broadcast regulation did so with the needs of children in mind, though as has been stated, this appeared to be less of a concern with regard to radio. As far as television was concerned, it was children under 10 years of age who are thought to be most vulnerable and most in need of protection from offensive or harmful material which might affect or influence them. Older children (aged between 10 and 14) are still thought to need protection, but since many (if not most) will often be up later than the 9pm Watershed, it was thought that their viewing choices needed to be guided more by parents and the children's own growing sense of what is suitable viewing. This is a familiar perspective.

'I assume it's basically to protect children. Maybe it's for adults as well, but I think it's mainly for protecting young ones.'

(Male, Glasgow)

'Some parents don't really care what their children watch, that's why I think you need to have that.'

(Female, Slough)

Many confessed themselves surprised by the statistic which was quoted to them at the beginning of the forum about the relatively small percentage of households in the United Kingdom that contain children (fewer than 30% of homes in the UK have children living in them). This fact was raised again in the groups and often prompted a shift in emphasis. Arguments in favour of regulation were often countered at this point by those who used the information to question whether it was really fair to expect all broadcast output to be governed by the interests of a minority.

'Bob comes from a household where there's no kids, so he doesn't need so much regulation and why should he? Why should he have to wait until 9 o'clock to watch a good film? He might be on shift work.'

(Male, Slough)

'I live by myself, so I can watch television whenever I want to...and the bottom line is I respect the Watershed... I think it should be there...and it doesn't bother me that at, say, seven o'clock in the evening, I can't watch a programme that wouldn't be on until half past nine, ten o'clock. If I want to watch a programme badly enough, I'll watch it or I'll record it.'

(Male, Birmingham)

That is not to say that their original views were abandoned – despite arguments to the contrary, most continued to support a regulatory framework which would protect children even if the participants themselves lived in a child-free household.

Apart from children, some participants did mention other vulnerable groups in society such as homosexuals or minority ethnic groups whom, it was felt, should be protected from misrepresentation. However, in comparison with children, these groups were mentioned only occasionally and were not necessarily thought to be so much in need of protection.

There were also a small number of participants who felt that regulation was useful in the sense that it provided an embarrassment-free zone on television. This was the counterpart to the arguments for radio cited above; the difference being that for radio it appeared to be a more significant reason for supporting regulation, while for television it was only a supporting or secondary reason.

'I wouldn't like to be sitting with my mum and there's somebody on the telly effing and blinding and every second word you heard was a curse.'
(Female, Glasgow)

'If I was with my friends or my boyfriend and it had nudity or sexual activity in, I'd probably just watch it, but as I was saying in the group, if I was sitting there with my mum and dad and something came on I would be embarrassed.'
(Female, Slough)

The balance between protection and freedom of expression

Participants were asked to consider the balance that they thought should be struck between protection of the vulnerable and allowing freedom of expression. This was not an easy task. There was certainly a minority who thought that, as a society, we veer too often on the side of protecting the vulnerable; this was seen as impacting on people's individual rights to choose what they wanted and smacked, for some, of being *'politically correct'*. Moreover, there was a feeling that this type of protection could only be effective to a point:

'Certain people aren't responsible. It's like, if that was the case then you'd just stop selling cigarettes because some people might smoke.'
(Male, Birmingham)

By contrast, few argued in favour of broadcasters' rights to freedom of expression. It could be that one reason for this was that participants were not easily able to determine what type of 'freedom of expression' regulation might inhibit – other than pornography or extreme violence, for example, which few wanted to see on television in any case. Their natural conclusion, therefore, was to assume that the balance was about right.

'We don't want to be nannied but we really did agree as a group that children do need protection and...you know, the boundaries have been pushed too much, so the regulation really does need to be adhered to.'
(Male, Birmingham)

'You don't want to see things that will incite racism or crime, those sort of things have to be regulated otherwise society would just slide into despair.'
(Female, Slough)

Does current regulation work?

It would be surprising if, given the positive endorsement of broadcast regulation described above, people take the view that the current regulatory framework does not work well. The task was not simply to garner plaudits or criticisms for the current system, but to learn whether, and where, there might be room for change or evolution of the current system.

The aspect of the current regulatory framework that most participants were aware of is the Watershed on television, widely understood to come into operation (on terrestrial channels) at 9pm. It is thought of primarily as a cut-off point between programming which is ‘safe’ for younger children to view and programming which is not. It should provide:

- a relatively safe zone where children can watch television unsupervised – a tool for responsible parents, and
- some degree of protection for those whose parents do not actively monitor or take an interest in what their young children might be viewing.

‘At the end of the day there is a Watershed – they are warning us, it’s 9 o’clock, you have the choice to either let your kid stay up and watch it or go to bed, basically.’

(Male, Slough)

‘Once there’s a Watershed, then I fully expect that, yes, as a parent, I have to be responsible. I have to realise that then there could be things on television that I might not want them to see but before that there has to be some responsibility from the other side.’

(Female, Slough)

The idea and implementation of the Watershed was one which most favoured. It was seen as an unspoken contract with the broadcasters, with parents depending on the broadcasters to fulfil their part of the bargain for it to work for them. That contract was not always thought to be working as well as it should. Many participants mentioned instances of the Watershed being flouted by broadcasters. These are described in more detail in the second section of this report, but was often programming or advertising in which the content was perceived as inappropriate to the time it was on – by and large, but not exclusively, programming aired pre-Watershed. The programme genre mentioned most often in this respect was soap operas, and to a lesser extent, some children’s programming. Advertising with a sexual content or using sexual innuendo was also mentioned.

In addition, participants said they were occasionally shocked or offended by programming which was not scheduled before the Watershed, but which still exceeded their expectations. This also applied to radio content, to which people listen without thinking in terms of a Watershed.

Arguments against regulation

While the majority argued strongly in favour of regulation and spoke to its importance, there was a significant minority in all the groups – and this appeared to be somewhat stronger in Glasgow than in the English locations – who spoke out against regulation of broadcast content. Their default position might have remained in favour of the regulatory status quo, but they were beginning to view the issues as more complex than they had done at the beginning of the forums. Many contradicted themselves and arguments in favour and against regulation were sometimes put forward by the same people. Quite simply, participants were struggling with issues which are not subject to easy resolution. This suggests that the challenging nature of the discussion-format encouraged people to re-examine their position and allowed them to set aside their default position in so doing. They may not have changed their minds, but they certainly started to demonstrate an understanding that there might be a case for doing so at some point.

Interestingly, many of those putting forward such anti-regulatory views used societal changes to underpin their argument in much the same way as those on the other side of the debate did. The key difference was that while those in favour of regulation pointed to some elements of disintegration in society as a justification for such rules, those against spoke to the fact that such trends demonstrated that there was no need and no point in such regulation. There were three main lines of thought put forward:

The increased and/or changing levels of tolerance for material which might have once been hidden, unacceptable or embarrassing.

'We hid things away 20 years ago. We didn't show violence against women or we didn't show paedophilia but that is part of society unfortunately.'
(Male, Glasgow)

More loosely structured codes of behaviour leading, for example, to changed bedtimes for children and more personal freedom. For these participants (many of them older viewers and listeners), the existence of a range of content (CDs, DVDs, Internet etc) which is often less tightly regulated than broadcast output, in combination with societal changes (children staying up later, individual television sets in children's rooms etc) meant that a key element of the current regulatory framework – the Watershed – became futile or irrelevant.

'How do you apply the Watershed? I mean my understanding of modern society is that any child worth his salt can watch anything he wants on television, he just goes upstairs.'
(Male, Birmingham)

A belief that a modern society is less tolerant as a whole of 'rules' or being 'nannied' and that broadcast regulation is another aspect of this. While this view was not echoed in the self-completion questionnaires, filled in by participants at the end of the sessions, it was clearly and strongly expressed within the sessions themselves by this minority and reflects an antipathy among at least some, towards rule-setting and political correctness.

'Nowadays you can lock things so kids can't view the channels...that's my point, it becomes self-regulating if you go down that route.'
(Male, Slough)

Finally, despite a widespread belief that broadcasters need to be restrained by regulation, there were a number of participants in each forum who took the opposite view. For these people, broadcasters were not likely to change their output greatly if regulation were relaxed or removed altogether. Although this view was a minority one, it might provide comfort for the broadcasters that the cynicism expressed by the majority is not universal.

'If you did just remove all of the regulations then they're not going to change the content...all of the people who watch BBC1 now will still watch BBC1 because it's going to show the same kind of programmes. Just because they can go more outrageous doesn't mean they necessarily will.'
(Male, Birmingham)

Once again, listeners' attitudes towards radio and regulation were somewhat different. While few cited specific arguments against regulation, many in practice expressed a far more laissez-faire attitude towards radio broadcasts, citing the importance and the efficacy of the off-button. For example, there were those who pointed to the falling ratings of a show on a national radio station to underline this point – an argument that was used far less frequently for television.

'Let them get on with it. I think, you know, you turn that off in the car, go onto another station.'

(Female, Slough)

How else could regulation work?

Without offering participants examples of alternative scenarios to the regulatory framework currently in place in the United Kingdom, they struggled to imagine how else the system might work. For those (often parents) who had difficulties in utilising the Watershed – the most familiar aspect of the regulatory code – the tendency was to suggest modifications which are more restrictive. For example, some suggested pushing the Watershed later (to 10pm in the evening) while others suggested a two-tier system, with an early and a mid-evening Watershed. These suggestions seemed to speak primarily to a strong concern about some of the material broadcast between 6pm and 8pm in the evening, but it also suggested that there was a sense in which participants recognised that the framework as it operates might need a degree of modification.

Other ideas put forward to modify or complement the current system included pre-transmission warnings or on-screen warnings about programme content. These devices were generally perceived to help people make an informed opinion about programme content. Others pointed out that on-screen warnings alone might not be sufficient for people who might channel 'flick' and come into a programme half-way through.

Those with Sky said they felt more in control because of the variety of devices which they could use to monitor and regulate viewing, including locks and PIN numbers. There was also the facility to look at the programming coming up (using the electronic programme guide) and set the television to switch channels at that point:

'At least with Sky and on The Children's Channel, you can actually scroll across so you can see the TV scheduling, you know what's coming up and then you can also set it up to change channel at a particular time, so if there's something of an inappropriate content on one channel, the programme kicks in and it will change it to that channel.'

(Male, Slough)

Throughout these discussions, a sense began to emerge that television regulation could be more flexible than it now is, but it was not clear how that might work or what alternatives were possible:

'But we don't know what the alternatives are. We don't know what it's like. We don't have anything to compare it to but also I think it [regulation] should be wider on other things as well, not just broadcasting and those sort of thing.'

(Male, Slough)

Few knew of, or were familiar with, unregulated or even a self-regulated broadcast environment, nor were they specifically encouraged to envisage how that might work. There was some discussion (mainly in multichannel groups) about the way in which other regulatory regimes were perceived to work – for example, in the United States or in Japan. Both were thought to be more liberal than the United Kingdom, but these were perceptions built on hearsay or the viewing of selected clips which showed, for example, the worst of that country's television output. The lack of hard facts made it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about these different regimes, although some felt that what they perceived of as the poor quality of programme content in these countries might, in some respects, be a result of a less regulated broadcast environment.

It is interesting then that despite the deliberate lack of input about how else regulation might be implemented for broadcasters, there was – alongside the familiar endorsement of the current system – a willingness to consider how else it might work and a clear interest in evaluating alternatives to the present framework.

Within this context, most participants felt that it was up to individuals and, more pertinently, to parents, to take responsibility for their own viewing or that of their children. This was a strongly held view, echoed throughout all groups.

'The bottom line is it's down to you and I to see what we're going to watch or let the children watch.'

(Male, Glasgow)

'If you're watching with children and you decided you didn't want to watch it, you have the choice to switch over or turn it off...but for those people who do want to watch it, they go into it knowing what to expect, so they've got the freedom but you are still protecting people.'

(Male, Birmingham)

Means of redress

A few of the participants claimed to have made a complaint, but while they seemed to be somewhat dissatisfied by the response they got, they were not very clear about why or what would have been a better answer:

'I did complain a long time ago on a scheduling issue...and I got a letter back from the scheduling department which annoyed me because it was like a page and a half of how scheduling works and it didn't really answer my complaint.'

(Male, Slough)

Generally, within the context of these discussions on regulation, most participants did not feel very strongly about the channels of complaint which viewers and channels have, nor about the means of redress when they do have a complaint. Most said that they would not have a clear idea where to go if they wanted to complain, but this was largely because they had not thought of doing so. Most said they would contact the channel or station which offended them by telephone (only one younger male said he would email in his complaint) although a few remembered seeing television advertisements for the ITC.

'I've never known where to complain to. It's as simple as that.'
(Female, Birmingham)

'If there were a lot of people, and I mean like 20, 30, 40 per cent of viewers, wanting to complain and they couldn't...that would be in the public domain by now...the fact is, I believe they're non-existent. They're insignificant [numbers of complainants].'
(Male, Birmingham)

Once focused on this subject, many participants agreed that there do need to be more avenues to encourage complainants or at least a more transparent system of complaint. Suggestions include: more notices at the end of programmes containing violence; use of the interactive red button and advertisements in the television and radio listings magazines. In addition, programmes such as *Points of View*, or Radio 4's *Feedback* were endorsed positively as providing some sort of forum where debate about programming can be aired.

'There should be a longer programme actually on the telly to let people hear what other people, what viewers' own opinions are.'
(Female, Slough)

Finally, there was little sense of what effect (other than a personal letter) a complainant might ideally hope for.

'Unless you have some sort of strong sanction, as opposed to a slap on the wrist or the BBC publishing an apology, the regulation can be flaunted and ignored. So we all felt that was a weakness.'
(Male, Birmingham)

'I think it needs changing. If you're going to have regulation or self-regulation then you've got to have some form of painful sanction. Else the regulations become pointless.'
(Female, Birmingham)

Should all channels/stations be treated the same?

The last question which participants were asked to consider in this first session asked whether all channels and all stations should be subject to the same regulatory framework. The immediate response was often to say that they should – the level-playing field approach – an instinctive response which speaks to people's sense of fair play as much as anything. As the day moved on, however, and discussions moved into a more detailed examination of content issues, other views emerged, and participants started to move to a position where channels and stations should be treated differently. Those that took this view thought that there were arguments in favour of treating some digital, cable or satellite channels differently from the terrestrial channels. While there was no overall consensus on how this issue should be resolved, there were some common themes which emerged across all the group discussions, these are summarised in Section 4 of this report.

2 CONTENT RESTRICTIONS: SETTING A FRAMEWORK – WHAT SHOULD AND SHOULD NOT BE BROADCAST

The second session of the forums was spent trying to elicit a more detailed understanding of the types of programming and advertising content that viewers find unacceptable, and to examine the different levels of tolerance for content at different times of the day and on different channels. The discursive nature of the forums and the high-level agenda which had been established in the introductory sessions fostered an environment where participants were able easily to address the general principles of content and issues of taste and decency. However, it was more difficult to elicit a detailed collation of content guidelines – for example, when particular swear words are acceptable, in what context, at what time and on which channel. However, a lot of top-of-mind feedback across all three content areas – depictions of sexual activity, swearing and violence – was collected from a relatively large number of participants.

This section begins by reporting the more general views that participants expressed and then summarises in the form of a grid the detailed discussions, where a narrative explanation would add little.

What content has shocked or offended you?

When asked this question at the outset of the discussions on content most participants were able to cite an example of something they had seen that shocked or offended them. However, they did not have long lists and, in many cases, they spoke about issues which were *distasteful* rather than *shocking*. These examples generally fell into one of two groups:

1. Programmes in which the content was perceived as inappropriate to the time it was on – by and large, but not exclusively, programming aired pre-Watershed. This included soap operas, Saturday morning wrestling and some children's programming (e.g. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Byker Grove*, *The X-Files* on Sky at 11am):

'At five o'clock when you're sitting eating your dinner and you're finished and maybe your kids go through while you're finishing off your dinner and put on Byker Grove and there's someone getting slapped about or maybe a lesbian kiss...maybe you do not want to have your child exposed to that at that point.'

(Female, Glasgow)

'If you've got a six or seven-year-old watching EastEnders when Janine is being a prostitute and selling herself for sex, that's quite a heavy subject for a six or seven-year-old to understand...I think it's quite worrying.'

(Female, Slough)

2. Programmes which were offensive or shocked because they flouted the audience's expectations from that programme type or genre; the example mentioned was the edition of *Brass Eye* which satirised media treatment of paedophilia. (It is unclear whether any of the participants saw the programme.)

General content issues

- Context is all – participants made judgements based on the programme genre, the channel a programme is on, the time of the broadcast, expectations of the programme and the specific context.
- Most said they were primarily concerned about violence, with lesser concerns expressed about sexual content and language.
- There was less consensus on what was acceptable in terms of language and violence than there was for depictions of nudity.
- Many of the issues which concerned participants were based on a concern that they might foster imitative behaviour. The high degree of concern among some (especially parents) about language might well be because language is more readily imitated and certainly more readily observed than either violence or sexual behaviour. But there were also real concerns about content which features promiscuous or casual sex, drug-taking or aggressive or disrespectful behaviour – all of these were thought to be of concern because of the influence which television is thought to have over attitudes and behaviour.
- Some were concerned about intrusive media coverage (this is dealt with further in the section on Editorial Integrity).
- Content which participants put into the ‘*never acceptable*’ bracket was, by and large, material which is proscribed by law in any case (such as bestiality, pornography, ‘snuff’ movies).

Violence

- The portrayal of violence in fiction was a concern to many. A sizeable minority argued that in fiction, realistic representation of violence and its effects was potentially less harmful than showing ‘*cartoon style violence*’. For others, however, it was exactly the realistic type of depiction which they found unacceptable.

‘If I was a kid I’d be more likely to go out and try and have a fight after watching James Bond than after watching them beating each other badly and them getting blood everywhere. Because you see an effect of that.’

(Male, Birmingham)

- Portrayals of the effect of violence – for example, showing the effects of war or acts of terrorism – were also controversial. For many, ‘*the News is the news*’ and should be shown, however unpleasant or distasteful. For the majority, however, there were boundaries. Most were against showing dead bodies or mutilated bodies in news coverage, particularly in close-up and always if victims could be identified by relatives from the shot. A particular example considered to exceed the bounds of acceptability by many was the coverage (several years ago) of the ambush and murder of two off-duty British soldiers in Northern Ireland. Broadcasters were also criticised for ‘*exploiting coverage*’ unnecessarily – the example cited was of a footballer collapsing and dying on the football pitch. While the original transmission of the coverage was deemed acceptable, it was not thought appropriate to continue showing it in subsequent bulletins.

- Overall, most agreed there should be differences between earlier news bulletins and later ones. Importantly, this was to protect those adults who did not want to be exposed to horrific or shocking material as well as to protect children.

'Not just the children. A lot of people would find that quite disturbing and you wouldn't have to be under 16.'

(Male, Glasgow)

In addition, it was felt that pre-bulletin warnings should alert the viewer if violent or potentially shocking scenes are going to be shown.

- Most felt that it was acceptable to deal with a certain number of 'issues' in soap operas, including domestic violence, but there was a sense that broadcasters have pushed the boundaries too far, too fast. It was also felt that these issues should not be represented in 'graphic detail' and that they should always be presented in the broadest context, with sufficient information:

'I think there are issues that do need to be explored...you know, around domestic violence, around incest, around child abuse, around arranged marriages where girls are then set on fire. I sometimes worry about broadcasting in a drama when it's just in isolation – without that debate and ongoing discussion.'

(Female, Birmingham)

Sexual Content

- In talking about sexual content, an important concern was the perceived trivialisation of sex or the portrayal of sex in a way (either in drama or reality shows) which promotes regular, promiscuous, unthinking sexual relations as normal.

'It's the trivialisation of the sexual relationship that I find objectionable... the trivialisation of sex and the advocacy of casual sex.'

(Female, Birmingham)

- Some felt that when soap operas tackle issues such as AIDs, unmarried mothers or teenage pregnancies, it could be a useful way of discussing these issues with children and could even be considered 'educational'. Others thought they forced parents to confront issues that they might feel their children are not ready to face. There was also a body of opinion that the producers and makers of these programmes used such issues in a cynical way to get ratings.

'The trouble with the soaps is they hide behind the fact that they are portraying life and always their argument is well, it's life, 15-year-olds, you know, talk about sex and all the rest of it and that's very true and it's probably quite a good argument, except for the fact that at 6 o'clock in the evening, whether it's life or not...'

(Female, Slough)

'The thing is, there's certain things that maybe you don't want to discuss with your children until you feel that they're ready. And these programmes... it's pre-empting these issues.'

(Female, Glasgow)

- As previous research studies have revealed, there are strong reactions to portrayal of homosexuality on television. Most of the men interviewed said they found any portrayal of a physical relationship between homosexual men unacceptable at any time on television. The women in the study were in general more tolerant, but the majority of them still felt that a close-up kiss between homosexual men should not be shown until after 9pm.

Language

- Language was an issue which illustrates the large gulf between groups of people. Some participants were relaxed about the use of swearing on television, while others, largely but not exclusively parents, were not. Parents admitted that children were far more influenced by what they heard in the playground than on television, but still they did not want their children to be exposed to such material on television.
- Older people also were often sensitive to swearing on television and saw ‘no need’ for it.
- There was a growing tolerance for some ‘soft’ swear words such as ‘crap’, ‘bugger’, or ‘piss off’ to be allowed in the early part of the evening (7.30pm to 9pm) at least by most participants, but most did not want them to be heard regularly or frequently.
- The word which provokes most discussion was ‘fuck’. Overall, participants were resistant to hearing this word at all before 9pm. However, some felt that there was leeway for some use of the word at 10pm or later, or in reality programming where it is used accidentally and without aggressive intent.

Imitative behaviour

- A sizeable minority made reference to the depiction of certain types of behaviour and role models which they found disturbing. These spoke to fears about the breakdown of society and young people being influenced by the glamorisation of casual sex, drug taking and drug dealing, gang culture, stealing and crime. There was a feeling that there was an increasing amount of this type of content on television, especially in contemporary dramas and in soap operas.
- For others, role models were a concern, especially pop stars shown wearing skimpy clothes which young girls were likely to copy or other influential role models who exhibited disrespectful behaviour or were seen to be swearing.

Films

- There appeared to be a somewhat greater tolerance for swearing and sexual content in films than in television dramas.

‘I must admit I’ve heard films with the F word in before 9 o’clock...and while I don’t particularly like it I know youngsters hear it more and more.’
(Female, Slough)

- For many, particularly younger, participants, there was a sense that films such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs* and so on should be allowed to be shown on terrestrial television, uncut, after 10pm. This issue was most hotly debated in Glasgow among terrestrial viewers, but did not appear to provoke much debate in multichannel households, many of whom have access to a wider range of channels, including film channels where they can see uncut versions of films.

'I don't think they should be edited. It just ruins it. What's the point of showing it?'

(Female, Glasgow)

Individual responses

At the start of each forum participants filled in a self-completion questionnaire so that their opinions about regulation and broadcast content could be collected at an individual level. The findings are consistent with those voiced in the discussion groups.

'Which of the following types of material or content on television or radio do you feel most concerned about in programming?'

(Mean scores from a scale of 1 to 5)

	Programming	Advertising
Violence	3.3	3.1
Swearing and offensive language	3.1	3.2
Impartiality in news	2.9	n/a
Sexual content	2.8	3.0
Nudity	2.6	2.7
Violent scenes in news programmes	2.5	n/a
Adult topics	2.5	2.3
Sexual innuendo	2.4	2.6
Portrayal of minority groups in society	2.3	2.2

Content specifics – some viewer guidelines

Participants were asked to give examples of broadcast content which was felt to be unacceptable, to state when that content might be tolerated and to indicate if their opinion would vary according to the channel airing the material. This was an exercise participants found difficult, one on which it is almost impossible to achieve consensus when it came to specific times and channels. While this proved frustrating at times, it does highlight the considerable reserves of tolerance which most viewers have. It was common for participants to point out, repeatedly, that their views were 'personal' and that someone else might see it differently. The following tables concentrate, therefore, on the examples which illustrate some areas of consensus. While these are fairly broad recommendations, they encapsulate the *attitudes* towards each type of content example, and by so doing,

explain how and why such material was regarded as unacceptable. The examples have not been categorised by genre as some examples cross genres. However, fiction or non-fiction programming is indicated. Finally, it is worth mentioning that, yet again, despite being asked to evaluate each example as if they had a completely free hand and without taking into account the current regulatory framework, participants referred to current regulation and used the Watershed as their benchmark for acceptable or unacceptable viewing most of the time.

Violence

Had seen content offended/concerned by	Other comments	Suggested viewer guidelines
Storyline when someone has a gun	<i>'Not too bad because they showed him sweating, unable to sleep – the effects.'</i>	Most did not want guns featured in storylines before 9pm. When they are featured, participants wanted to see 'evil punished'
CCTV footage – often worse than fictional violence	<i>'On a film you know they're going to walk away...on the [CCTV] you don't know whether the person has died...or what's happened to them.'</i>	Particularly of concern to women. This type of content should seek to reassure viewers of outcomes, especially if they see someone being injured.
Crimes – how murders have been committed, specifically if there is graphic detail e.g. if someone is shot in the head and you see the back of his head blown off or a knife pushed into a body; or other examples of violent crimes such as joy-riding	<i>'I know there's blokes out there that hold guns. But I don't want to see what it does when it shoots someone.'</i>	There was a concern that this type of content will lead to copycat crimes; should be on after 9pm at night or later
Weapons		For some, no weapons should be featured before 9pm even those in children's cartoons. The <i>Ninja Turtles</i> was described as ' <i>very violent</i> '.

Violence (continued)

Had seen content offended/concerned by	Other comments	Suggested viewer guidelines
Rape scenes	Few want anything more than <i>'a suggestion'</i> unless a) after 9pm and b) is not perceived as <i>'gratuitous'</i>	The 'rape' scene in <i>EastEnders</i> was not depicted in detail, but some still thought it was an issue which should not have been on before 9pm.
Reconstructions of crime	Acceptable after 9pm, provided suitable permissions have been granted by families	Similar to CCTV footage – often more frightening for women. Late night (after 10pm) for some
Dead or mutilated bodies/in news programming	Some footage offends because it is shown repeatedly. One example was the recent collapse and subsequent death of a footballer during a game. <i>'You'd got it for the next couple of days on the television. Doing it all from different angles and him on the ground and he's shaking and stuff because he died and they were showing you that.'</i>	Pre-bulletin warnings were appreciated. There was a majority who thought that this type of material is not suitable for early evening and daytime bulletins.
Depictions of drug-taking, self-injection etc/ glorification of drug culture		This material should never be shown early in the evening. However documentaries (e.g. on drugs) might be shown earlier than a film such as <i>Trainspotting</i>
Glorification of gangsta or gang culture	Examples mentioned were mainly gangsta rap lyrics but also a programme on satellite television	Because of a concern about the potential influence of such material on children, this should be shown late at night

Sexual content/Nudity

Had seen content offended/concerned by	Other comments	Suggested viewer guidelines
<i>'The sex act. Homosexuality and all the rest of it.'</i>	To include homosexuality in the storyline is acceptable; to see acts of homosexuality is not.	This includes female homosexuality – an instance of female kissing on <i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i> was mentioned as being inappropriate for early evening
Sexual acts such as kissing with clothing on Sexually explicit acts with clothing removed	Acceptable to most before Watershed if heterosexual For some these are not acceptable at all, for others only after 10pm.	Some did not want too much even before 9pm. <i>'I think it's quite distasteful before the Watershed.'</i>
Showing kissing and drunkenness on a promotional trailer during the afternoon		Trailers featuring promiscuous lifestyles or 'post-Watershed' material should not be shown until mid-evening
Nudity	Generally acceptable, even before Watershed for some, if it is not in a sexual content e.g. many found the Andrex (bare bottoms) advertisement acceptable even during the day	Women often claimed they want male nudity to be subject to the same rules as female nudity
Nudity in a sexual context	Should be after 9pm for most	

Sexual content/Nudity (continued)

Had seen content offended/concerned by	Other comments	Suggested viewer guidelines
<p>Trivialisation of sex/ promiscuous or casual sexual encounters, even where sexual contact is not necessarily shown in great detail, e.g. <i>Big Brother</i></p>	<p><i>‘Things before the Watershed showing a couple in bed, going from one to another, almost like prostitution kind of a character... but my fear is always it’s going to have an influence on children.’</i></p>	<p>Should be limited – this is a view expressed more often by women, men were not so bothered.</p>
<p>People shown downloading pornography from the internet</p>	<p>Should not be too explicit, i.e. showing how it’s done, giving people ideas</p>	
<p>“Top-shelf” soft porn</p>		<p>Should be available on channels but only after 11pm.</p>
<p>Using sexual content to sell unrelated products</p>	<p>One example given is an advertisement for a drink containing juice and vodka featuring scantily dressed women with juice running all over their bodies; there are also shots of women kissing</p>	<p>One or two thought they saw this before the Watershed and felt it was not appropriate</p>

Language

Had seen content offended/concerned by	Other comments	Suggested viewer guidelines
<i>Crap, bugger, sod, bloody, piss off</i>	Acceptable before 9pm on occasional basis by many, but probably not before 8pm.	
<i>Bloody hell, God, Jesus Christ, shit</i>	Some thought occasional use close to 9pm is acceptable, but others did not	These words comprise the grey area – they offended some but others thought they were acceptable pre 9pm
<i>Arse, arsehole, prick, dick, bollocks, bastard, shag</i>	For most these should be 9pm or later	
Slang words which denote ethnicity or sexual preference e.g. <i>Batty boy, fags, paddy, wog, Paki</i>	Most found these unacceptable at all times, but this was counterbalanced by a view that we should not become hidebound by political correctness	Occasional use (e.g. Ali G's use of 'batty boy' was seen as humorous by some); mutual use of such terms in a humorous way (e.g. as in <i>Love thy Neighbour</i>) was also seen as acceptable by some; <i>Goodness Gracious Me</i> was cited as an example of 'black-on-black' humour which is also acceptable
Most sexual swear words	Not acceptable before 9pm and even after 9pm only occasionally	
Sexual innuendo, such as on <i>Graham Norton</i>	Acceptable in the time slot, but not at an earlier time e.g. 7pm or 8pm on a Saturday evening	
'Fuck' in dramas	Most did not want to hear this word at all. It was also often said in an aggressive way which people disliked	Possibly more acceptable in films than in made for television dramas. 9.30pm or 10pm onwards

Language (continued)

Had seen content offended/concerned by	Other comments	Suggested viewer guidelines
'Fuck' in sports/news programming	Thought to be less acceptable. Greg Rusedski swearing at the umpire – should not have been repeated on the news	Sportsmen are seen as role models. While there was a degree of tolerance about them swearing occasionally, what was disliked here was that the swearing was a) directed against an official and b) repeated on the News
'Fuck' in reality programming	Casual swearing in a programme like <i>Big Brother</i> or <i>I'm a Celebrity</i> was disliked by many but not thought as bad as 'aggressive' swearing.	Not acceptable before 9pm.

Imitative behaviour

Had seen content offended/concerned by	Other comments	Suggested viewer guidelines
Depictions of drug-taking, self-injection etc/glorification of drug culture		This material should never be shown early in the evening. However documentaries (e.g. on drugs) might be shown earlier than a film such as <i>Trainspotting</i>
Glorification of gangsta or gang culture	Examples mentioned were mainly gangsta rap lyrics	As before, a concern about their potential influence on children
Trivialisation of sex/promiscuous or casual sexual encounters, even where sexual contact is not necessarily shown in great detail, e.g. <i>Big Brother</i>	<i>'Things before the Watershed showing a couple in bed, going from one to another, almost like prostitution kind of a character... but my fear is always it's going to have an influence on children.'</i>	Should be limited
Depictions of role models behaving/singing or using language in a provocative or disrespectful way	<i>'Pop stars wearing G strings and risqué dress.'</i>	This should definitely not be on television during the day and should not be on until after 9pm.

Specific programmes identified by viewers

Had seen content offended/concerned by	Other comments	Suggested viewer guidelines
<i>Jerry Springer</i>	<i>'It's the mannerism and the structure of the whole programme... physical aggressiveness ...and it's quite heavy content.'</i>	Too much swearing. Only acceptable for some on satellite channels – e.g. Living TV – more acceptable there because you have 'freedom of choice'.
<i>The X-Files</i>	Unacceptable (to some) is the repeat showing on Sky at 11am. Rated for video release as 12-15 and generally aired late night. Others think that people should use their 'lock', however.	Might be more acceptable on a themed satellite channel during the day, e.g. Sci-Fi channel because they are there specifically to satisfy an interest in that type of programming.
<i>Home & Away</i>	A character finds a condom: <i>'For me that programme's giving a message that kids at that age, 15, are thinking about sex and they are considering using a condom.'</i>	Some thought raising of issues like this was good – others said the transmission time was far too early, especially with a daytime repeat at 1.30 pm.
<i>Hollyoaks</i>	<i>'You've got sexual content, you know, the whole homosexual thing; you've got parents getting beat up, you've got a killer on the loose, you've got...just sex between the couples.'</i>	Too many issues raised in this programme for the time it was aired, a number of participants said.
<i>Byker Grove</i>	<i>'your kids go through while you're finishing off your dinner and put on Byker Grove and there's someone getting slapped about, or maybe a lesbian kiss, maybe you do not want to have your child exposed to that'</i>	

Radio

Language is radio's medium – either spoken or sung – and, as such, it is language which is the key content issue for radio. Considerable time was devoted to discussing participants' views on language on radio in the sessions:

'I think it's physically impossible to compare it to TV. I mean...nudity or anything like that cannot really be portrayed on radio, so it's not quite the same, but stop swearing, I definitely agree with that.'

(Male, Slough)

As with television, expectations defined what made something shocking.

'I was listening to (...) and that's a bit more sort of directed at my age group and they ran a competition and the guy 'phoned in...and couldn't think of the answer and said, "Oh, fuck," and they didn't cut it and I'm not a prude or anything but it caught me on the hop and I thought, "Now that's not what I expect of (...)" and I was really surprised.'

(Female, Slough)

Talk shows

Many participants mentioned talk shows which they had found offensive or shocking. Comments were made either about the presenter's behaviour or about the guests invited on to the show, who sometimes go beyond what was considered acceptable – particularly for the time of day the programme is broadcast.

'I thought this is a bit blue for this time of the day...it just didn't equate with a 9 o'clock Watershed on TV...but maybe the regulators or the people that make the programme know that that won't affect kids because as you say probably they won't be in the audience, or if they are, they maybe can't understand what they're talking about.'

(Male, Glasgow)

In Birmingham, some mentioned being shocked by a presenter on a local radio station, but by and large this was not a problem, in part because of the on-air warnings which preceded this sometimes controversial show.

'There used to be like pre- warnings about swearing and I thought that's good, 'cause at least you know.'

(Female, Birmingham)

Music lyrics

Probably of more concern to most were the lyrics in music, particularly certain types of music such as 'gangsta' rap. This was acknowledged to be a difficult issue and some time was spent in trying to tease out the implications of regulating such music. Several participants thought that the issue was more than just about editing individual words in songs – it was the messages of those lyrics, sometimes homophobic or misogynistic in tone, that were disliked as much as individual words.

'Take for example, Eminem's Slim Shady, in that he's talking about Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera giving somebody head, you can't have that. You can't have kids singing along to that, can you?'

(Male, Slough)

Others thought that to go further than editing out individual words would be moving too far along the road of censorship. For these (mainly younger listeners), both music and lyrics were regarded as important parts of a particular culture:

"I think the people that are getting offended by the rap music and stuff like that, they don't listen to rap music. Rock music is similar, but people have stopped complaining about rock music. Rock music is still as explicit as rap music, it's just...people as a whole understanding the music.'

(Male, Slough)

Older listeners were more distant from this type of music and so tended to argue from a different standpoint. For them, the media needs to take responsibility for disseminating language or cultural influences which may have harmful effects.

'And one of the basic questions is...is it just because you're offended by it, or is it going to have an effect on the number of individuals...going to turn them into nastier people than they were to start with. And I think that's very relevant. If it's just because it's offensive...okay...fine...but if it's going to turn one man into a rapist then it must be bad.'

(Male, Birmingham)

Not all older people agreed with this, however. They pointed out that parents could be lulled into a sense of false security by hearing the edited lyrics, leading them to buy or endorse the purchase of this music, which is unedited when bought in shops. Moreover, they feared that censorship or editing might only encourage young people's appetite for this type of music.

'It's the same [as] saying to kids you can't have sweets and the minute you say to kids, "You can't have sweets," they're just hell-bent on finding sweets somewhere and getting them.'

(Female, Slough)

It was not possible to reach consensus on this subject, though most participants agreed they would not expect to hear those lyrics thought to encourage aggression during the daytime on national radio stations.

Advertising

There was less concern expressed about the content of advertising, despite the clear desire to see advertising regulated. Advertising content appeared to be far less top-of-mind than programming and though participants were prompted for their concerns, relatively few emerged. They were almost all about advertising on television, with little mention made of radio advertising.

The chief issues for the minority who did have concerns were:

The use of sexual content or innuendo to sell unrelated products. For example, the use of semi-naked or sexually provocative models to sell any type of product – ranging from a drink to a car – where there was no relationship between the sexual content and the product itself. In this regard, a shampoo or shower gel which features a naked or semi-naked person would be far more acceptable than an advertisement for a drink or a mobile phone company.

The amount of advertising featured on daytime television, thought to target the elderly or vulnerable. This concern was chiefly about financial advertisements, such as companies advertising debt consolidation services or those offering elderly people equity release from their homes.

‘These ones that are on during the day and they are clearly marketing towards older people, where they are saying, “You can free up some of your equity on your house...”’

(Female, Glasgow)

Of less importance, but still of concern were:

- Advertising aimed at children
- Celebrity advertising

‘Where you’ve got Carol Vorderman advertising a particular, like, credit card and people believe if Carol Vorderman’s actually advertising this, then it must be okay.’

(Male, Slough)

- Advertising for sanitary products (tampons) or personal hygiene (ear wax removal) which some found tasteless.

Overall, most participants had quite a high regard for television advertising. Despite this, most felt that advertising should be regulated as strictly as, or even more, strictly as programming. This was partly because television commercials were unplanned viewing, but also because the commercial imperative behind advertising is more obvious.

‘The total motive in the advertising world was for money. But with programmes ...they either wanted to entertain you or inform you...but with advertising they purely wanted your money...so the regulators should come down heavy on them when they use sex or violence because they were just out to sell a product.’

(Female, Birmingham)

Teleshopping

Participants were shown a short clip from a teleshopping programme and asked to consider whether they thought this type of content should be subject to the same rules as spot advertising. The regulation governing advertising was not described to them in detail, although the current framework was outlined at the beginning of each forum. A majority felt strongly that teleshopping should be subject to the same rules as spot advertising.

'It should be the same. The same rules should apply, because people are spending money, thinking that they can do all these weird and wonderful things and they can't.'

(Female, Birmingham)

Most could not see any arguments for allowing teleshopping more latitude than spot advertising and many thought it should be even stricter. The main issues about teleshopping advertisements which concerned participants were that:

- The length of the teleshopping spots makes them more persuasive and able to manipulate viewers than spot advertising, despite the fact that several participants conceded that the claims made in the teleshopping advertisements were ridiculous.

"They shouldn't say that if you're buying a pair of scissors you'll be able to cut hair like this. I mean it's nonsense...it's not the scissors, it's the hairdresser styling your hair, it's not the scissors."

(Female, Glasgow)

'And the presenters...they're persuasive...they're attractive. People sit at home... They're sat there, they become addicted to buying off the TV. So they've got a captive audience. And yeah...they're very persuasive.'

(Female, Birmingham)

- The fact that goods are bought directly from the screen – and therefore cannot be handled – means the strictest regulation should apply. The 30-day money back guarantee did not moderate people's views since, they argued, it is a lot easier to pick up the telephone to buy an item than to package it up and send it back.
- Several participants pointed out that teleshopping was not really different from catalogue shopping. However, others argued that, in catalogue shopping, the language used is far more descriptive and factual than that used in teleshopping advertisements.
- Finally, there were particular fears for teleshopping advertisements featuring medical or quasi-medical products:

'Because you don't know what you are buying. It may affect you medically.'

(Male, Birmingham)

3 EDITORIAL INTEGRITY, FAIRNESS, IMPARTIALITY AND ACCURACY

The third session of the forum considered a number of issues relating to editorial integrity, impartiality and accuracy, specifically in relation to news coverage. The key questions debated by participants were ‘*How trustworthy is news?*’, ‘*What do ‘impartial’, ‘fair’ and ‘accurate’ mean in relation to news?*’, and ‘*Should we have access to opinionated news?*’ The scope of the discussion was widened to talk briefly about editorial integrity as it relates to non-news programming, specifically sponsored content.

This was the session that saw the greatest number of apparent contradictions. For example, there was a strongly held principle that news should be impartial; on the other, there was a clear feeling, expressed by many, that the news should not be impartial during a war. Underlying this was a conviction that the news could be both impartial and yet speak from a particular (British) perspective at the same time. There were also differences between the way participants viewed news on British television channels in comparison with news on foreign channels. Once again, these contradictions should be seen as useful indicators of areas where people’s views are not as rigid as might have been thought if only questionnaire data were considered.

Opinions of the news

Although the group discussions started with an examination of the concept of how trustworthy the news is perceived to be, there were a number of other views held about the news:

- Many participants had not thought about the fact that there could be different types of news or that a different editorial approach might yield a different bulletin. There was an underlying trust in British broadcasters to produce a news agenda which is factually accurate – a view which discussions supported.
- Within the forums which were comprised of people from multichannel homes, it was probably a minority (though a sizeable one) who reported watching 24-hour news channels on a regular basis. However, for those that did watch these channels, it seems to have changed the way in which they consumed news – they were far less likely to make an appointment to view main news bulletins, because they knew they could pick up a news bulletin at any time. They also watch a wide variety of news channels, including CNN, Fox News, Al Jazeera, BBC24, as well as other channels such as dedicated Asian channels which include news programming.

‘If I miss BBC I watch ITV and if I miss that I just turn it onto Sky, get the gist and then turn it off, simple.’

(Female, Slough)

- The first Gulf War, and the more recent war in Iraq, have stimulated people to experiment with other news channels.

'I did experiment and watched a lot of different channels, particularly the American ones...but this time, and I'm surprised with myself...I actually found that I quite liked a lot of the Sky 24 News...it was the first time that I had actually thought they're actually doing this really quite well... I'm getting lots of facts and information here.'

(Female, Birmingham)

- Many of the younger participants said that they were simply not interested in the news. Others felt that the news is too dominated by a political, or government-centric agenda. For these people even the 24-hour news channels had not fundamentally changed that agenda and, therefore, had failed to capture their interest:

'If you actually watch 24-hour News, they just, it's just all repeated constantly through the day...and they've got this wonderful opportunity to be a lot more diverse.'

(Female, Birmingham)

- Radio news was an important source of news for many, but often it was listened to by default – because the radio is on – rather than being the place that participants turned to for their main news information.

How trustworthy is the News?

TELEVISION NEWS

Overall, a clear majority of forum participants thought that the news – by which they meant British news – was trustworthy. However, the time this research was conducted (July-August 2003) needs to be taken into account. The war in Iraq and the subsequent furore about the government dossier arguing the case for war had led to weeks of investigation into that report and its preparation, culminating in the Hutton enquiry. It was not surprising that these events affected views; what is more surprising, perhaps, was the extent to which participants still claimed that the news is trustworthy – at least for most of the time.

'Is all news always trustworthy all of the time? The answer is patently, "No". Is it trustworthy most of the time? Well, most news is trustworthy for most of the time, so the answer is probably, "Yes".'

(Male, Birmingham)

The question of trustworthiness was closely connected to whether participants believed in the version of events given by broadcasters. And, by and large, people appeared still to do so. While some continued to trust what they were told without questioning it, others justified their stance by pointing to the existence of multiple television news outlets; for many, these competitive sources not only provide the individual with the opportunity to check and compare news bulletins, but act as a counterbalance to each other.

'I think the safeguard is that there are numbers of them, rather than just a special view. It's the amount of them that control each other. So that one can't get away with a lie – the others will expose it.'

(Male, Birmingham)

‘If somebody like Trevor Macdonald or John Simpson or whatever was reading the news you may well say, “Oh I believe what I’m hearing because that has been a reputable broadcaster for so many years.” So very much it’s not always the content that you’re hearing that you think is trustworthy or not, it’s the reputation, integrity of the presenter.’

(Female, Birmingham)

For others who had not previously been encouraged to question the trustworthiness of their news sources, it was a conundrum; they simply felt that they did not have the evidence or knowledge to judge whether the news was trustworthy (with the implication being that they would continue to trust it until it was demonstrated that there was a reason not to).

It would not be fair to suggest that everyone was united in considering the news to be trustworthy. Even without the recent coverage of the Iraq war and its aftermath, there was certainly a minority across all regions and demographics (though tending to be younger participants) who were cynical about news coverage and who controls it.

‘You can’t say they’re untrustworthy but...not giving all the information. I think BBC, both radio and TV...the news is coming from the pretty much the same people anyway, it’s all controlled by the BBC so...and I just think it is partly government controlled.’

(Male, Birmingham)

There were clear differences in perceptions about which television channels are more trustworthy than others.

BBC

For a clear majority, the BBC is thought to be the most trustworthy channel for news in the United Kingdom. This is, in part, a position that viewers have inherited – it is the ‘traditional’ voice of news in the country and one which people turn to particularly at times of key news events, crises and war. However, that belief had been dented for some following the Iraq war, and there was perhaps a greater sense of confusion now with regard to the BBC:

‘There’s a natural tendency to believe the BBC. It’s the best or the most honest or the most trustworthy, because we grew up with that sort of belief. We now think there’s some doubt whether that’s true, but that’s what we’ve traditionally believed.’

(Male, Birmingham)

ITV AND OTHER COMMERCIAL TERRESTRIAL CHANNELS

There was little specific comment about individual news bulletins on the commercial terrestrial channels. However, some participants felt that the pressures which commercial channels are under to get audiences meant that they might put more emphasis on getting a story first than in checking all the facts; as a consequence, not all the facts may be in place which could lead to partial or inaccurate reporting.

'Well, I think the pressure's there, isn't it? The pressure is there to be the first with the news – they're all in this race to get this in front of your face first and so they take whatever snippet of information they can get, whether it's speculation or not and then may not necessarily say, "This is a fact," but they feed it to you for you to think that way.'

(Male, Slough)

SKY NEWS

Sky News was thought potentially to be less trustworthy than some:

'Sometimes with Sky News they would say, "X amount of missiles have been launched", and that would be their breaking news and you'd switch over to BBC1 and they haven't reported it. The BBC would wait, whereas Sky is always the same, exaggerating slightly...towards the American style.'

(Male, Slough)

CNN

Some male, younger viewers from multichannel homes considered they got a more rounded, or a global picture of what is going on in the world from channels such as CNN. This 'big-picture' type of coverage, with less of a United Kingdom emphasis, made them feel that such news was more trustworthy because it included events happening worldwide:

'A) It's international, b) they're reporting for everyone's needs, not just one particular country...most of it is on live, on the spot, showing everything, anything, not always showing what you just want to see. That's a big difference.'

(Male, Slough)

RADIO NEWS

News on the radio was felt to be trustworthy on the whole. It was liked for being factual and for being local and participants had a high regard for local radio news bulletins which are often short and highly relevant.

Others made a distinction between different radio stations, feeling that there was more room for a less balanced, or more opinionated, debate late night or on more niche channels:

'I think generally with the proper news channels like Radio 4 in the morning and Radio 5, if there is an argument they generally do have two people representing both sides of the argument. If you've got a chat show, perhaps later on in the evening, then it's different...so a lot depends on the type of programme, the type of show it is.'

(Male, Slough)

THE PRESS

If television and radio news were perceived generally as trustworthy, newspapers were not. Participants offered reasons for this:

- Newspapers have clear editorial positions which participants were aware of, which in turn means they are biased. In addition, although the political leaning of a paper might be well known, it was not always clear what the interests are which might influence that stance or shape its agenda. This made people doubly wary of trusting them.
- The press – in particular, tabloids – were regarded cynically because of their reputation for ‘building up’ and ‘knocking down’ celebrities. For example, in the forums there was mention of the way in which a television presenter was felt to have been ‘*tried by the media*’, as had a US marine who had run away disappeared with a British schoolgirl. In both cases, it was felt that the press coverage militated against these people getting a fair trial.
- It should be noted that both these cases were also cited by some participants as examples of television intrusiveness and ‘unfair’ coverage. So while television’s reputation as a news provider was higher than that of the press in this respect, it was not unsullied.
- The press is not subject to an external regulator, as is television. This was only known by a few and it is unclear whether they were merely repeating what they heard in the expert witness statements or whether it was something they already knew:

‘Well, they haven’t got as strict guidelines have they, as the [tv] news.’
(Female, Slough)

‘One thing you notice about the newspapers is when they do an article, when they do a full spread sheet and all that, and then if they’ve made an error you notice how it’s only very small, it’s about three lines and it’s like in the bottom corner saying, “We made a mistake, we apologise”. They’re not actually blowing it up saying, “We were wrong,” just in the small print.’
(Male, Slough)

What do ‘impartial’, ‘fair’ and ‘accurate’ mean in relation to news coverage?

Following their initial evaluation of how ‘trustworthy’ the news was perceived to be, groups were asked to consider what they understood by the terms ‘*impartial*’, ‘*fair*’ and ‘*accurate*’ and to comment on how they expected such principles to be applied to news coverage. The first task was inevitably easier than the second. The majority defined ‘impartial’ and ‘fair’ as the same thing, meaning ‘*a lack of bias*’ and ‘accurate’ was simply taken as a synonym for *factual* or *factually correct*.

‘Impartial is unbiased and correct.’
(Female, Slough)

‘Impartial is not one-sided.’
(Female, Glasgow)

‘Accurate...just as it is. So it’s factual. I think, really, you’re kind of splitting hairs, especially with impartial and fair.’
(Male, Birmingham)

Participants found it difficult to consider what steps broadcasters should take to ensure they were *'fair'* in their representation of diverse views. Most claimed that the news should be *'fact'*, not *'opinion'*, while others thought the idea of ensuring a balanced range of opinions smacked of political correctness.

'You know, just because that particular group isn't getting represented or that particular group, everyone's up in arms, you know...there has to be some kind of sense behind it.'

(Female, Slough)

So while *'impartiality'* was seen as an admirable goal, a principle which news programming should clearly adhere to, it became less easy for people to maintain this view as the discussion edged towards considerations of representing difficult and complicated issues where there might be different opinions. On balance, many felt that it was best *'left to the broadcasters'* to make these decisions. Others, however, were more forthcoming in pointing out their preference for news reporting that did not seek to be *'politically correct'* in its approach:

'...should represent the views of the people and they shouldn't really worry about this political correctness – who's being upset by it. Because the majority of people want our news to tell our side of events that's happening abroad or whatever.'

(Female, Slough)

Bias, partial news and the 'British' perspective

The recency of the war in Iraq meant that its coverage on television news was top-of-mind for many participants. The topic proved a useful springboard to discuss in more depth many of the issues concerning impartiality and bias and provided a way of testing participants' assertion that they were in favour of impartial news coverage.

On balance, most thought that there was some partiality television news coverage of the war in the United Kingdom. The principal difference of opinion was between those who felt that this partiality was appropriate and those who did not. Those who did not approve of the British coverage argued, for example, that *'atrocities'* carried out by United States troops were not necessarily reported and that the anti-war movement was not fully represented, particularly after the war had started. For these participants, the war coverage appeared to be government-led and called into question the independence of the news broadcasters:

'They tell you that our boys are being killed, they don't tell you, you know, there's 10,000 Iraqis being killed, you know, they'll make a point of saying three of our soldiers.'

(Female, Slough)

By contrast, others – and these were probably the majority – felt that if there was a bias in the war coverage, it was fully justifiable and appropriate. Their argument was that a war is a crisis situation which requires a different response from broadcasters. These people often felt, moreover, that the news broadcasters were not, in this respect, always partial enough.

'The BBC seemed to me to be a politically motivated thing against Tony Blair.'

(Male, Glasgow)

'In the build-up to it [the war] of course the debate was there and the issue was should we or shouldn't we – once it's happened, that debate is finished with. We are now in a situation where we were at war. We don't want to carry on having the debate that's old because we've moved on from that, so now they report on the fact that, well, we're at war, this is what's happening.'

(Female, Slough)

Should we have access to opinionated news?

People's views on war coverage should not be taken as predictive of their overall views on opinionated news. Participants were asked to consider whether they should have access to more opinionated news; expert witnesses had given a number of illustrations of what this might mean – for example, a news channel such as Fox News might reflect a particular editorial stance in its news output.

Participants were not ready to consider this issue before arguing that there was already too much opinionated news. There was even disagreement as to what constitutes '*opinionated*' news in the first place. For a significant minority, much of the current news output already relies heavily on speculation and comment, rather than hard facts.

'That's my problem with a lot of the news that's on, which I don't watch these days myself anyway because I think a lot of it is opinion rather than fact.'

(Male, Slough)

Many, and possibly the majority, did not agree. They accepted that there was a degree of opinion within most bulletins, but this was seen as an important part of extending the debate.

'I think it's important that you get people's opinions. You've got to have a debate. If we're going to be grown up and think...we've got to be actually stimulated to think...so we can actually sit down and work our way through that ourselves, to come to our own conclusions and help to form our own opinions.'

(Female, Birmingham)

At the heart of this argument was a clear message: news consumers want opinion to be clearly distinguishable from fact.

'I think there needs to be clarification of what is...opinion, or what's fact.'

(Female, Slough)

'[An opinion based programme is] fine as an entertainment, but I think the danger is you can convince people what the presenter thinks is true, which is not necessarily the case.'

(Male, Birmingham)

Most preferred to separate opinion from the news. Examples were news discussion programme such as *Newsnight* on the BBC or *Hard Talk*, where the format encourages debate or a probing interview with one specific person. Sky News was praised for having opinion programmes clearly separated from the news.

'They have the hourly news bulletin and then in between time they'll bring in the experts and talk about, discuss the issues and that sort of thing. I always think Sky news seems to be fairly well balanced in that respect.'

(Female, Slough)

Whether or not the opinion comes within the news broadcast or outside it, there was a consensus view in favour of having a balance of views within a single programme. The danger of presenting alternate views across a number of programmes was felt to be a real one, because viewers would not necessarily hear or see the opposing view. A recent documentary in which Martin Bashir interviewed Michael Jackson was cited as an example of an opinionated programme which gave a single view. Although there was a follow-up documentary made by Jackson himself, many did not see it or might not have been able to see it. Those watching only one documentary might have been left with a particular, unbalanced view. And while participants did not necessarily expect documentary makers to demonstrate balance within each programme, there was a sense that news programmes, in particular, needed to adhere to this principle closely:

'No, they'd have to be in the same programme, because you might not get a chance to watch any of the other ones, so you'd only get one view.'

(Female, Birmingham)

Radio

Many participants were more tolerant of opinionated news on radio, and specifically local radio, than on television. Several referred to a programme on a national talk-based radio station where the presenter raises a topic and invites listeners to telephone in with their views. This type of programme was thought to attract a natural balance and most participants were satisfied with this sort of opinionated discussion. By contrast, it was felt that presenters airing their own opinions (unless part of a balanced discussion) should be subject to specific regulation in order to ensure a range of opinions.

'I don't think they should have carte blanche just to say what they like on the air. That's not their remit, if you like. They're not there to, you know, let out opinions.'

(Female, Glasgow)

'Especially daily programmes, five days a week. I think that would be bad. I think there's got to be an editorial policy about balance. I'm not so sure they should be allowed to be putting across personal points of view.'

(Male, Glasgow)

Others made a distinction between different radio stations in this regard, feeling that there was more room for more opinionated debate late at night or on niche channels.

Access to foreign television news channels

The majority did not think that 'foreign' television news channels transmitting into this country are regulated. Indeed, many had doubts about whether such channels could be regulated, for technical reasons. There were mixed views as to whether such channels should be regulated or not, over and above any international regulation which they are subject to. Despite a strong tendency to support regulation overall, many felt that they should not be, although a minority did echo the views of this participant from Birmingham:

'Why should they be different? They're still being shown in Britain, so why should they be different to any of the programmes that we have?'

(Male, Birmingham)

Access to such channels, from different countries, was felt by many to be an important element in the range of news sources they used – part of the plurality of views which many said they value. One or two participants had more specific reasons for wanting such channels to be unregulated; they came from minority ethnic groups and wanted to understand how other countries might view events in Britain and abroad and, in particular, to understand news which might affect their relatives in those other countries:

'We do subscribe to (...) digital because that comes from the heart of Pakistan. I have a concern there, I have family there, I want to know where they fit in with the US and what their attitudes are. For me to get a generalised picture and to make my own opinion I need to have that. Now that's not going to come on BBC1 or ITV or Channel 4, so it's important to me to be able to view and to make my decision about how I feel. I have to make that [decision] for myself and the only way you can do it is by having access to all the channels worldwide and then deciding what you feel is right.'

(Female, Slough)

Moreover, participants felt they were able to interpret news output and did not feel they needed to be 'protected' from such foreign news channels:

'I think you take them at face value. If you want to watch the Chinese news broadcast about the war in Iraq...they've got a different agenda, communist race, different culture and so you take that on board when they're putting their views forward.'

(Male, Slough)

There was a very small core of conservative opinion, however, which was fearful about the effects that unregulated foreign news broadcasts might have on citizens of this country. Most of those expressing such views were pacified by the thought that a 'minimum' level of regulation would still apply to such channels, however; so that viewers would not be exposed to incitement to crime or violence:

'Provided that it's not of any detriment to the country that we're living in.'

(Female, Glasgow)

The majority felt that regulation of British news channels should not be relaxed simply because viewers also have access to overseas news channels.

Issues of editorial integrity and sponsorship

Outside news programming, participants were asked to consider how sponsorship might impact on editorial integrity. Few participants had real concerns about the current level of sponsorship on television or radio, although most would argue against there being any dramatic expansion of sponsored programming, particularly on terrestrial television or radio. There were a few key issues that emerged:

- Most people were fairly tolerant of sponsorship overall – being familiar with its connection with football, for example, and accepting it as a useful form of revenue:

‘TV companies [other than the BBC] have to work for their money. They need advertising and stuff like that.’

(Male, Glasgow)

- For most, there were a number of sponsored television programmes which are top-of-mind, most notably Cadbury’s sponsorship of *Coronation Street*. This type of sponsorship was felt by most to impact little on the editorial integrity of the programme, for a number of reasons:

– the sponsor and the content of the programme are not obviously linked;

– viewers are more concerned with plot lines in drama and, therefore, participants were not overly concerned about the possible influence that sponsors could have.

‘Yeah, but if Rover cars sponsored a programme that had nothing involving cars, or a company sponsored a programme that had nothing to do with their product, I would see no problem with that.’

(Male, Birmingham)

- However, a minority expressed more concern about undue prominence in programming, although it is unclear that they had seen any. Some participants said such material would be unacceptable. Others, however, said they would not feel it particularly intrusive and could understand the commercial benefits that such a relationship might bring:

‘If they’d shot it like with maybe Dot Cotton doing something over there... well, that’s been changed so that she’s facing that way because she’s got a box of soap powder – that’s a different thing and I don’t think it should be shown – product placements on television programmes. There’s enough influence...’

(Female, Glasgow)

‘It wouldn’t be a problem. Not unless it’s really rubbing it in your face.’

(Female, Birmingham)

- A more problematic type of sponsor/programme relationship would be one where there was a direct relationship between the sponsor and the content of the programme. This, it was felt, may influence the editorial integrity of the programme.

‘If you were watching a finance programme, for example, that was sponsored by HSBC and one day they’re doing a programme on High Street banks...you know, the bias is then going to be towards HSBC and if that’s the case then that’s dangerous because there’s people out there, they’re going to watch that programme and think, well, obviously HSBC is where I should put my money.’
(Female, Slough)

‘It’s like if Top Gear were sponsored by Toyota, they’re not going to say that Toyota cars are crap.’
(Male, Slough)

- Certain programmes, i.e. news/documentary or investigative programming, were thought completely unsuited to sponsorship which, it was thought, would impact too much on their editorial integrity:

‘News programmes I don’t think could have sponsors because how could they be impartial when they’re investigating or reporting on a certain product which they have been sponsored by.’
(Female, Slough)

- There was fairly widespread feeling that, while most would be unhappy to see less regulated sponsored programming on terrestrial channels, there was more leeway on satellite/digital/cable channels. So, for example, a car magazine programme sponsored by a petrol company might be unacceptable on the terrestrial channels, but might be acceptable on a niche channel – for example, *Men and Motors*. There was an understanding that many satellite channels target niche audiences and do so on a low budget – in that sense, such sponsored programmes would be no different from advertising and would have the benefit of funding additional programme content.
- Although few were concerned with the impact that sponsorship might have on editorial integrity, it should be noted that there were some concerns about the subtlety of some current sponsorship, its role, with advertising, as ‘hidden persuaders’.

‘We’ve got, ultimately, the discrimination to decide whether or not we want to watch them. But I wouldn’t like generally creeping commercialism influencing content.’
(Female, Birmingham)

While current levels of television sponsorship did not seem to bother participants, radio sponsorship was felt by some to be far more intrusive. First, it is harder to screen out an on-air sponsored announcement than it is on television and, second, the sponsored messages are interwoven with the programming in the way that does not happen with television sponsorship.

‘I feel it starts to muddy the water, there’s not a clearly defined boundary. If it was just an advert, but when it starts to become part of the radio programme itself, sort of seems to be seeping in a bit, it’s that feeling of things being taken over.’
(Male, Birmingham)

4 SHOULD ALL TELEVISION CHANNELS AND RADIO STATIONS BE TREATED THE SAME?

Television

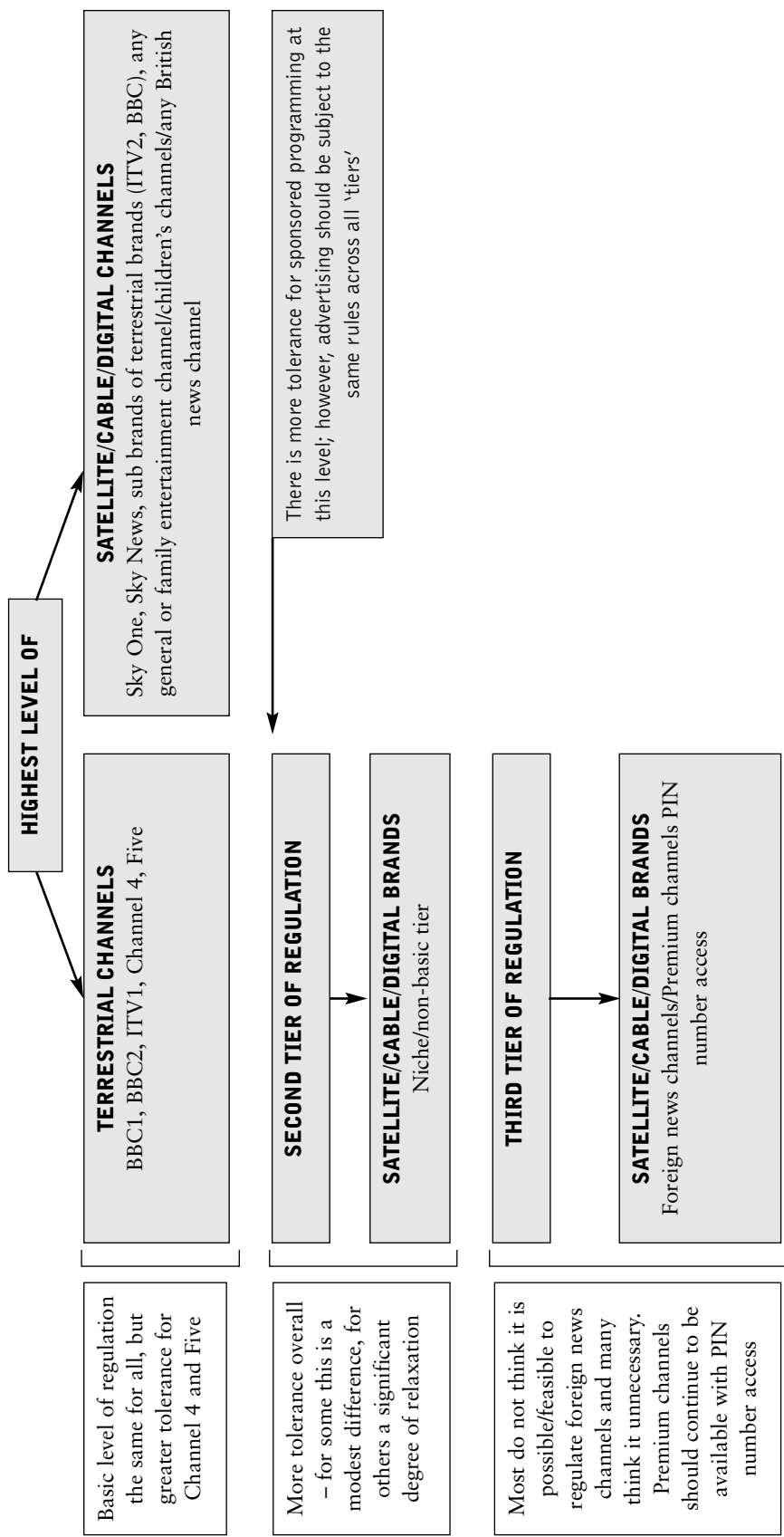
Throughout the forum sessions, the issue of whether – and how – different channels and radio stations might be treated differently from a regulatory viewpoint was returned to. This was a clear example of shifting opinion and was sometimes contradictory. The starting point among participants was that a level-playing field for all channels and stations should apply. People’s innate sense of what was ‘fair’ supported this view and some retained this opinion throughout. Others, however, moved as different arguments were put forward to support a position where there should be some difference between television channels and radio stations – even if they were not always certain how this could be implemented in practice. The main arguments for treating channels and stations ‘differently’ were discussed across all aspects of regulation:

- Most considered the terrestrial channels to be the more ‘*responsible*’ overall; with Sky (as it is usually described) or digital channels being thought of as the ‘*wild children*’ of broadcasting. This in part affects expectations from these channels:

‘Terrestrial television, I think, and especially the BBC, is more regulated and responds to that with a sense of responsibility. Satellite television seemed to be a loose and baggy monster and didn’t seem to have the same kind of sense of responsibility to the viewer.’

(Female, Birmingham)

- There was considerable uncertainty as to whether satellite channels are currently subject to the same regulations. The different Watershed time on some satellite channels, the existence of adult channels (available with a PIN number) and the presence of 24- hour news channels all contributed to this view.
- The initial impulse was to expect all channels to conform to the same regulations. However, most shifted from this position to one in which they could conceive of a multi-layered approach to regulating channels. This approach was one which would equate the basic tier or most popular Sky channels, such as Sky One, with terrestrial channels and then make a distinction for some of the smaller, niche channels. For example:



- The most compelling arguments underpinning this approach were:
 - Basic tier digital/satellite/cable channels, especially general entertainment channels, have mass audiences and are widely viewed and should conform to the same basic regulatory framework as terrestrial channels;

‘Sky One, it’s like one of your terrestrial channels.’
(Male, Glasgow)

‘I think the Freeview channels should be regulated under the same guidelines as the terrestrial channels.’
(Female, Glasgow)

- Other satellite channels are selected by their audiences: they are subscribed to and it is the viewer’s responsibility to choose programmes they (or their children) will not be offended by;

‘You’re paying for it, you’re paying for something – why can’t you have a channel with movies with all 18 all day? I think you should be able to have the option to watch an 18 film through the day if you’ve got Sky because we pay a lot of money for it. So there’s that argument as well.’
(Female, Slough)

- Many smaller niche channels target audiences, whose expectations are different from those of mainstream mass entertainment channels. There should be some flexibility for channels to appeal to these audiences;

‘The target audience of MTV isn’t the same as BBC1 or E4, or something like that, therefore, I don’t think they should be treated the same.’
(Male, Birmingham)

- Foreign news channels are thought difficult (maybe impossible) to regulate fully and most people felt it was inappropriate to try and do so;

- Premium channels already demonstrate a different approach to regulation and these should continue to exist.

‘Not the majority of the channels like Sky 1 and things that are general, but like the individual channels that maybe you have to pay extra for, like the film channels or something like that, I mean they can’t be regulated by the same rules.’
(Female, Slough)

- There was less agreement about how content regulation might alter vis-à-vis these different channels. As already noted, context, time, programme genre and expectation all contribute to what is acceptable on certain channels. While there was certainly some evidence that people might accept a relaxation of content regulation on some niche channels, this study was too limited to be more than illustrative about exactly how that might work.

Radio

With regard to radio stations, the area of greatest uncertainty or difficulty was the playing of music with offensive language in its lyrics, especially on national radio. There were clear divisions among younger and older people in this respect. By and large, older participants understood and even expected stations appealing to a younger audience to have a different outlook, to play a variety of music and even to be occasionally shocking. However, many of these older people were parents, and as parents, were concerned about their children listening to this music. On balance, most felt more severe editing is not called for, but that such music should not be played during parts of the day when children are most likely to be available to listen.

Unscripted swearing – either by callers or by presenters – was also disliked, especially on national radio, but few saw it as a cause for heavier regulation. Most felt listeners would simply switch off. Indeed, participants did not talk of relaxing regulations for niche or local radio stations but, instead, of their expectations of higher standards on national radio stations.

APPENDIX A: AUDIENCE CONSULTATION FORUM STRUCTURE

20 participants per session

DATE	TIME	VENUE	TYPE
<i>Forum 1</i> Thursday, 31 July	9am – 5.30 pm	Birmingham Aston Business School Management Development Centre Aston University Birmingham B4 7ET 3011	All to have multichannel television (digital, cable or Freeview) All to listen to two or three radio stations at least once a week (aiming for a mix of BBC/commercial and national /regional/local) 60% non-working
<i>Forum 2</i> Saturday, 2 August	9am – 5.30pm	Slough The Centre Farnham Road Slough SL1 4UT	All to have multichannel television (digital, cable or Freeview) All to listen to two or three radio stations at least once a week (aiming for a mix of BBC/commercial and national /regional/local) 60% working
<i>Forum 3</i> Saturday, 9 August	9am – 5.30pm	Glasgow Novotel Glasgow Central 181 Pitt Street Glasgow G2 4DT	All to have terrestrial television only All to listen to two or three radio stations at least once a week (aiming for a mix of BBC/commercial and national /regional/local) 60% working

APPENDIX B: EXPERT STATEMENTS

The following experts gave their time generously and extracts of their video-taped interviews were used in one or more of the sessions as appropriate.

John Beyer, Mediawatch
Humera Khan, al-Nisa Society
Martin Lowde, Granada Enterprises
Chris Shaw, Five
Mark Storey, Kiss FM
Jan Tomalin, Channel 4
Stephen Whittle, BBC