

**FROM:**

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**TO:**

The Secretary,  
Senate of Australia  
Standing Committee on the Environment, Communications and the Arts.

**A submission to the Inquiry into the effectiveness of the broadcasting codes of practice on behalf of the Church and Nation Committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.**

We present the following submission to the Inquiry, expressing as it does, the opinion widely held in the Church on the matters addressed.

In forwarding this submission, we advise that our comments are in the nature of generalised principles rather than referring to the effectiveness of specific sections and sub-sections of the various codes.

We offer the following general comments.

**1. The Need for "codes of practice".**

As a Church we hold to the view that responsible governments and their agencies have a moral obligation to enforce consistent standards that protect vulnerable persons in the community, especially children, from pornographic, violent and exploitative material in the mass media.

Those who advocate a libertarian approach to free-speech still sometimes argue that unfettered self-regulation would be preferable to any regulation whatsoever. The "turn it off if you don't like it" argument.

This Church wishes to go on record as being supportive of artistic freedom and freedom of expression. However, we believe that clearly defined regulations should be set and enforced for the influential electronic media.

We believe that there is a world of difference between exercising personal choice/preference / responsibility as to which programmes we might choose to 'consume' and the social responsibility which broadcasters need to be encouraged to exercise as they air programmes which have the potential to influence their audience. If the media were not influential, then little commercially-funded broadcasting would occur.

2. The Nature of offensive language is demeaning. Swearing is most commonly done by misusing God's Name, some form of blasphemy – offensive to many people in the community, - or by referring to a sexual function of the body or some other aspect of body-function – something intended to be shocking. It is meant to demean its object but also

demeans the one using the language. We believe this to be true of offensive language even when it is meant to be humorous.

Christians have as our standard the teaching of Paul the Apostle who said, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ... Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving." (Ephesians 4:29,5:4). We realistically recognise that not all programming will embrace such a standard.

**3. The Need to Exclude Specific 'language'.** Following on from the previous statement, we also recognise that community expectation/usage changes over time. Notwithstanding that fact, we believe that it is never appropriate to air certain language such as the well-known 4-letter words and other similarly shock-value words, especially when used in a repeated, gratuitous manner.

**4. Personal Regulating.** Whilst self-regulation is a worthy ideal for all bodies to aspire to, we believe that there is a danger that media professionals can become hardened to the offensive nature of instances of such language, complained about by the public.

Accordingly, we would favour members from a cross-section of community groups being appointed to such regulatory bodies.

**5. Warnings are no Substitute for Removal.** Whilst it continues to be appropriate to place warnings before programmes where features are likely to offend we believe that this should not be seen as a cure-all, absolving and excusing broadcasters from any additional responsibility for properly vetting/producing their programmes.

### **RADIO CODES:**

We are generally content with the operation of the current radio codes of practice and the overall content of radio programmes we hear. However, those programmes aimed at the teenage and young-twenties demographic on certain FM stations do seem to have similar issues of concern as do television programmes in general.

### **TELEVISION CODES**

Television programming contains genres which Christians would not normally view. There have been a number of particular series' such as "Big Brother" "Californication" and recently "Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares" which have attracted significant media criticism. We are concerned to see standards for all programmes lifted but where complaints are made, we wish to see the complaints mechanism made more responsive to viewers than we believe it now is.

The process which needs to be gone through when lodging a complaint seems weighted against a citizen having a complaint promptly investigated by an independent body. This is due to the need to first lodge one's complaint with the offending station, then awaiting their reply before being able to lodge one's complaint with ACMA.

**A Final Word.** As a Church, it is obvious that blasphemy is a concern to us anywhere, anytime.

We make no objection to non-Christian and anti-Christian material being aired, material expressing what may be to us blasphemy, but we do object to the gratuitous use of the names of God (including Jesus Christ, of course) in a blasphemous way without such language adding any value to the programme.

We ask the committee to recommend the re-introduction of the “bleep” system for deleting the airing of such language.

At a time when we are asked to be sensitive to other religions’ sensibilities, for example, Islamic concerns , why are things precious to Christianity targeted as a medium for offence in the media?

Yours Faithfully,

Rev. S. Slucki

Rt. Rev. R. Benn