

SOME CONTENT MAY OFFEND

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO CONTENT CLASSIFICATIONS
AND WARNINGS ON FREE-TO-AIR AND PAY TV

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NGĀ WAIARO TŪMATANUI KI NGĀ
KŌMAKATANGA KAI PĀPĀHOTANGA ME NGĀ
WHAKATŪPATO, ME TE POUAKA WHAKAATA
KORE-UTU KI TE KĀINGA, UTU HOKI

BSA

Broadcasting Standards Authority
Te Mana Whanonga Kaipāho

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FOREWORD

This research explored public awareness of, and satisfaction with, classifications and warnings used on New Zealand free-to-air and pay television.

The Broadcasting Act 1989 sets out the classification and warning system for television programmes broadcast here. It stipulates the 'presentation of appropriate warnings in respect of programmes that have been classified as suitable only for particular audiences' (s.21(1)(e)). A programme's classification is its audience 'grading' (eg G or AO).

With a few exceptions (notably news and current affairs), all television programmes must be classified. As well, classifications are to be appropriately displayed. The rules on free-to-air and pay television differ but the intention behind both is ensuring viewers have ample opportunity to see the information. Warnings – visual and/or verbal – are to be used where content is likely to upset or disturb a significant number of viewers.

88 people took part in this study, predominantly parents and caregivers of children aged between five and 17, since this group makes most use of classifications and warnings to guide what their families watch. We were pleased to learn that those taking part generally feel well-served by broadcasters. This supports our own view that broadcasters, on the whole, take seriously their responsibility of providing viewers with consumer information.

Broadcasters were made aware of our findings and recommendations before this report was published so they could begin considering how to improve classification and warnings communication. We will continue to talk to broadcasters about these issues and work through some of the other specific recommendations from the report with them.

On behalf of the members of the BSA – Tapu Misa, Paul France and Mary Anne Shanahan – I thank Michelle Irving and Stuart Jeffcoat from Mobius Research, and Strategy Ltd for conducting the research and providing this report.

We also thank the broadcasters that reviewed the proposal, findings and report, in particular Rick Friesen of the Television Broadcasters' Council and Tony O'Brien of SKY Television Ltd.

Most of all, we thank those who participated in focus groups and interviews for giving us their time and opinions.



Joanne Morris, **Chair**
December 2009

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Objective

The research aimed for a better understanding of public awareness and expectations of, and satisfaction with, content classifications and warnings currently used by free-to-air and pay TV broadcasters.

Methodology

Our findings are based on focus group sessions and interviews with 88 parents or guardians of children aged between five and 17 years. They took place in Auckland.

Key research findings

Parents use a range of tools and criteria (often trial and error) to decide on viewing suitability. Nevertheless, they see classifications and warnings as important guidelines in deciding what their children watch.

'I'll tell you what we're looking for as parents these days We want to be validated, so we want to be able to say, "No, that's not okay," and I want to be able to say "This is why," so that the kids can understand it.'

Parents emphasise that while they don't want to be told what they should be doing, they do want to be informed enough to make decisions affecting their households. Information, therefore, is the key role of classifications and warnings from the perspective of parents.

Alongside this is an expectation that classifications and warnings will be effectively communicated (so they can be understood and used). Communication of classifications and warnings to the New Zealand viewing public is not currently as clear as it could be; this is particularly the case with pay TV.

Main issues

Parents make passive use of classifications and warnings. Besides communication issues, several other factors impact on how parents use classifications and warnings:

- *credibility issues*: inconsistent application of classifications; inadequate warnings; parents feeling caught out by unexpected content;
- *PGR/PG classifications*: lack of awareness of and confusion over meanings;
- *pay TV's M classification*: it covers such a broad range of content as to be almost meaningless, and;
- *pay TV's warning symbols*: parents don't recognise or interpret them correctly – mainly the C warning but also V, L and S;
- *perceived gaps in classification*: parents believe the wide gap they see between PGR and AO on free-to-air TV, and between PG and M or 16 on pay TV, needs filling;
- *timing*: parents tend to use warnings and classifications on the point of watching a programme, making communication at this time most important.

Free-to-air TV's PGR classification

The research identified three key PGR issues.

1. Parents see the PGR classification as filling a very wide area between G and AO, which often means confusion over its actual meaning and interpretation. This is particularly significant for PGR programmes screened before 8.30pm, when children who parents consider the most at-risk age are likely to be watching television.
2. PGR is used as a blanket classification, but many parents say they sometimes find PGR programme content either more adult-oriented than expected (eg *Two and a Half Men*) or having definite AO-level content (eg *Shortland Street*). Many parents feel that if a programme has AO content some of the time, it should be classified as an AO programme all the time.
3. Parents are not interpreting PGR as intended; that is, that parental guidance is recommended. Parents might need to be reminded that PGR covers a range of content (that is not necessarily G or AO), that they need to be aware of this and make informed decisions about what they do and don't want their children to watch.

A subsidiary point is that parents tend to see PGR as interchangeable with PG (pay TV's equivalent), which may or may not be an issue when communicating warning and classification messages.

Free-to-air TV vs pay TV

Free-to-air classifications and warnings are considered to work better than pay TV classifications and warnings because of how they are communicated.

Parents consider that the TV One, TV2 and TV3 pre-programme advisories work well, and are highly recognisable. But they prefer an amalgam of the warnings these three channels use so each verbal warning is uncluttered by music or busy images, and includes the classification symbol.

The style of pre-programme advisory pay TV uses (examples shown were used by The Box channel and movie channels) is considered less effective. This is because these advisories carry no verbal warning, and they are too similar to station-branding advertisements.

Pay TV's classifications and warnings

Parents' attitudes to the range of pay TV classifications and warnings shown are generally consistent. They find the level of detail unnecessary, and are confused over which letters represent classifications and which warnings.

Parents consider two pay TV symbols to be particularly useless in helping them decide viewing suitability: the M classification and the C warning. M is seen as too open to interpretation to be meaningful; C, too broad to be useful.

When combined with pay TV classifications (eg MVL or 16C), the level of detail does nothing to enhance the system's meaning or effectiveness. While pay TV includes small print for each classification, parents say they don't read it because the print is too small and on screen too fleetingly.

Parents did, however, find the age based classifications used in pay TV (eg. 16, 18) useful.

Warnings in news and current affairs

Parents are generally satisfied with the warnings presenters give before news and current affairs items. None could recall any news items they felt should have had a warning but did not.

Many parents expect news to inevitably contain disturbing content. However, none specifically stopped their children watching the early evening news or from being in the room while it was on.

Given a verbal warning before a news or current affairs item, parents may, depending on the item, change channel. But many say they are more likely to watch then take action (changing channel or pressing mute) if they begin to feel uncomfortable. A number of parents believe it is important for children to be exposed to local and world events and that cocooning them from reality is not sensible.

TV on demand and online

Agreement was unanimous that, if television programmes are to be screened on demand via the internet, they should carry the same classification as they do when screened on television.

Recommendations

1. *Consider the rationale behind two separate free-to-air and pay TV systems.*
2. *Given the above, consider modeling any revised system on the current free-to-air approach.* Awareness and understanding of it is relatively strong, and its use of verbal and visual communications works well.
3. *Consider how an age-based system may add value for parents.* It could include the addition of a 13 classification, and adding to or possibly replacing AO with 16 (note, however, that AO is seen to work well and is well understood).
4. *Ensure clear differentiation between the symbols used for classifications and those used for warnings, whether only one system is applied across the board or not.* Pay TV is confusing in this regard because it uses some single letter symbols for both classifications and warnings (eg. G, M and C, V, L, S).
5. *Use visual and verbal communication as a matter of course, especially when a content warning is desirable.* The two together are more effective than the visual-only classifications and warnings currently used most of the time by pay TV.
6. *Consider dispensing with classifications and warnings, such as M and C, which have no clear meaning and are too open to interpretation.*
7. *Consider a wider communications approach focusing on the role of classifications and warnings.* If an additional age-based classification, such as 13, is not used, parents need to be reminded of the purpose behind PGR and PG; that is, of their own responsibilities. Communication of available sources of classification information (including printed listings, online and on screen eg digital TV guides) could also be considered.
8. *Consider an alternative to the term 'watershed' (the time from which AO programmes are shown on free-to-air TV) as this one is not widely known.*

2. PROJECT BACKGROUND

Broadcasting standards in New Zealand

The Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA) is an independent crown entity empowered by the Broadcasting Act 1989:

[t]o receive and determine complaints ... to publicise procedures in relation to complaints ... to encourage the development and observance by broadcasters of codes of broadcasting practice ... and to conduct and publish findings on matters relating to standards in broadcasting.

The Act and its Codes of Broadcasting Practice impose a responsibility on broadcasters to maintain standards. These including observance of good taste and decency, maintenance of law and order, the privacy of the individual, the protection of children, the requirement for broadcasts to be accurate, fair, and balanced, and for broadcasters to safeguard against portrayal of people that encourages denigration or discrimination. The free-to-air and pay TV codes also include standards on violence, programme classification and timebands.

If the standards set out in the codes of broadcasting practice are to work as intended, the viewing public must, firstly, be aware of them, and, secondly, understand their meaning and purpose. Programme classifications, timebands and warnings exist to help the viewing public decide on the suitability of programmes and other broadcasts for their households.

Almost all New Zealand households have access to free-to-air TV, and around 50% subscribe to pay TV. As free-to-air and pay TV have each developed their own classification and warning systems, households with access to pay TV are exposed to both.

This research

The BSA commissioned this research to better understand public awareness of, and attitudes to, systems of classification and warnings used on free-to-air and pay TV, and particularly to discover whether they are relevant and useful. The research was also designed to explore attitudes to warnings during current affairs and news programmes, as well as the relevance or otherwise of classification systems used by TV on demand from local broadcasters.

This report presents the results of that research.

Note that the Codes of Broadcasting Practice define a 'child' as 'a boy or girl under the age of 14 years', except in the case of the Privacy Principles where a child is under 16 years. However, parents in this study tended to use the term 'child' to describe anyone up to the age of 18 years. Therefore, the term 'child' or 'children' in this report will refer to a person 18 years or younger.

Current codes of broadcasting practice and classifications

Free-to-air television

The following is taken from the *Free-to-air Television Codes of Broadcasting Practice* in force at the time of the research. A revised free-to-air code came into force on 1 July 2009. The wording in Standard 1 and its guidelines have been modified but expectations on broadcasters remain unchanged. Classifications have not changed.

STANDARD 1 – Good Taste and Decency

In the preparation and presentation of programmes, broadcasters are responsible for maintaining standards which are consistent with the observance of good taste and decency.

Guidelines

- 1a** Broadcasters must take into consideration current norms of decency and taste in language and behaviour bearing in mind the context in which any language or behaviour occurs. Examples of context are the time of the broadcast, the type of programme, the target audience, the use of warnings and the programme's classification (see Appendix 1). The examples are not exhaustive.
- 1b** Broadcasters should consider – and if appropriate require – the use of on-air visual and verbal warnings when programmes contain violent material, material of a sexual nature, coarse language or other content likely to disturb children or offend a significant number of adult viewers. Warnings should be specific in nature, while avoiding detail which may itself distress or offend viewers.

STANDARD 7 – Programme Classification

Broadcasters are responsible for ensuring that programmes are appropriately classified; adequately display programme classification information; and adhere to time-bands in accordance with Appendix 1.

Guidelines

- 7a** Broadcasters should ensure that appropriate classification codes are established and observed (Appendix 1). Classification symbols should be displayed at the beginning of each programme and after each advertising break.
- 7b** Broadcasters should ensure that all promos (including promos for news and current affairs) are classified to comply with the programme in which they screen ('host programme'). For example:
- (i)** promos for AO programmes shown outside AO time must comply with the classification of their host programme
 - (ii)** promos shown in G or PGR programmes screening in AO time must comply with the G or PGR classification of their host programme.
- 7c** Where a promo screens in an unclassified host programme outside AO time (including news and current affairs), the promo must be classified G or PGR and broadcasters must pay particular regard to Standard 9 (Children's Interests).
- 7d** Where a promo screens adjacent to an unclassified host programme outside AO time (including news and current affairs), the promo must comply with the underlying timeband.
- 7e** Broadcasters should consider the use of warnings where content is likely to offend or disturb a significant proportion of the audience.
- 7f** News flashes prepared for screening outside regular news bulletins, particularly during children's viewing hours, should avoid unnecessary distress or alarm. If news flashes contain distressing footage, prior warning should be given. This guideline is not intended to prevent the broadcast of material which is of overriding public interest.

APPENDIX 1

Free-To-Air Television Programme Classifications

Definition:

A child means a boy or girl under the age of 14 years (Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989).

G – General

Programmes which exclude material likely to be unsuitable for children. Programmes may not necessarily be designed for child viewers but should not contain material likely to alarm or distress them.

G programmes may be screened at any time.

PGR – Parental Guidance Recommended

Programmes containing material more suited for mature audiences but not necessarily unsuitable for child viewers when subject to the guidance of a parent or an adult.

PGR programmes may be screened between 9am and 4pm, and after 7pm until 6am.

AO – Adults Only

Programmes containing adult themes and directed primarily at mature audiences.

AO programmes may be screened between midday and 3pm on weekdays (except during school and public holidays as designated by the Ministry of Education) and after 8.30pm until 5am.

AO - 9.30pm – Adults Only 9.30pm - 5am

Programmes containing stronger material or special elements which fall outside the AO classification. These programmes may contain a greater degree of sexual activity, potentially offensive language, realistic violence, sexual violence, or horrific encounters.

Unclassified Programming

- (i) News and current affairs programmes, which may be scheduled at any time and may, on occasion, pre-empt other scheduled broadcasts, are not, because of their distinct nature, subject to censorship or to the strictures of the classification system.
- (ii) However, producers are required to be mindful that young people may be among viewers of news and current affairs programmes during morning, daytime and early evening hours and should give consideration to including warnings where appropriate.
- (iii) Sports and live programming cannot be classified due to the 'live' nature of the broadcast. The broadcaster must take all reasonable steps to ensure that the content of the programme conforms with the underlying timeband in which the programme is broadcast.

Pay television

Taken from the *Pay TV Broadcasting Code of Broadcasting Practice*.

STANDARD P1 – Content classification and warning filtering

Viewers should be informed by regular and consistent advice about programme content (including classifications and warnings) and, where available, filtering technology.

'Filtering technology' means electronic technology that gives subscribers the ability to set a classification threshold beyond which programmes can only be accessed by using a PIN or other key which the subscriber can keep confidential.

Guidelines

Classifications and warnings

(a) These classifications should be broadcast on all content except for news and current affairs and live content:

- G** – Approved for General viewing
- PG** – Parental Guidance recommended for young viewers
- M** – Suitable for Mature audiences 16 years and over
- 16** – People under 16 years should not view
- 18** – People under 18 years should not view

(b) Classifications should screen at the beginning of programmes, be included in all electronic programme guides and accompany printed guides where possible.

(c) News, current affairs and live content is not, because of its distinct nature, subject to classification. However broadcasters must be mindful of children's interests and other broadcasting standards and include warnings where appropriate.

(d) Visual warning labels should be broadcast immediately prior to content which is likely to distress or offend a substantial number of viewers, particularly where it is likely that viewers would not anticipate this effect due to the context or the nature of the content.

(e) Visual warning labels will include:

- C** – Content may offend
- L** – Language may offend
- V** – Contains violence
- VL** – Violence and language may offend
- S** – Sexual content may offend

(f) Visual warning labels should also be included in electronic programme guides and in all relevant promotional material.

(g) Verbal warnings should also be used when content is particularly likely to distress or offend a substantial number of viewers. When used, verbal warnings should screen at the start of the programme, with accompanying text if necessary.

(h) Visual and verbal warnings are not required for live content on foreign 'pass through' channels with no local editorial intervention.

Barriers to accessing content

(i) Where filtering technology is not automatically made available in accordance with Guideline (j) below, content classified 18 may screen only between 8pm - 6am, or 9am - 3pm (other than weekend days, school holidays and public holidays when it may screen only between 8pm - 6am).

(j) If filtering technology is automatically made available to subscribers free of charge, and regularly promoted by the broadcaster for subscriber use, content classified 18 may screen at any time provided other applicable broadcasting standards are adhered to.

(k) The filtering technology may be made available on the basis that subscribers elect to use it, provided that a subscriber is easily able to initiate use at any time through the television remote or similar device.

(l) Content classified 18 may screen at any time on premium channels (those where a separate and additional fee is payable by subscribers), provided other applicable broadcasting standards are adhered to.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this research was to better understand public awareness and expectations of, and satisfaction with content classification and the warning systems currently being utilised for free-to-air and pay TV broadcasts. Specific objectives included the following:

- Identifying public understanding and expectations of the content classification and warning systems for traditional broadcast media – this includes visual and verbal warnings before programmes, classifications screened during programmes, classifications and warning information contained in electronic programme guides, and printed classification material.
 - Are some classifications and warnings easier to understand than others?
 - Are there any areas of specific confusion evident?
 - Are some classifications and warnings more effective than others (i.e. in terms of likelihood to see/hear/react to)?
- Exploring public satisfaction with the content classification and warning systems for traditional broadcast media:
 - Do people consider the current classification and warning systems to accurately reflect programme content?
 - Have there been any instances where the current classification and warning systems have not met expectations?
 - Do people see any need to evolve the current classification and warning systems – and in what respect?
 - Are there any differences in satisfaction between different groups (e.g. based on ethnicity, gender, age, life-stage, household structure, socio-demographic profile)?
- Identifying awareness of, and attitudes towards the free-to-air television timeband system
 - Are people aware of the definition of a ‘child’ under the current system?
 - Are people aware of what the different classification timebands are (i.e. for PGR, for AO, for AO 9.30pm etc.)?
 - Are these timebands considered to accurately reflect programme content?
 - Do people consider these timebands to be relevant – i.e. in terms of the structure of their day-to-day lives and current viewing habits?
 - Are there differences in effectiveness and preferred means of communication between different groups (e.g. based on ethnicity, gender, age, life-stage, household structure, socio-demographic profile)?
- Identifying public awareness, understanding and usage of watersheds:
 - Are people aware of and do they understand the difference between an AO watershed (from 8.30 pm) and AO 9.30 pm?
 - Do people relate watersheds to specific timebands?
- Understanding how the public would prefer to be communicated with about programme content in relation to disturbing material or adult themes, or suitability for specific audiences:
 - Do people understand the meanings of these descriptions?
 - How do people currently learn about programme content and the suitability of that content?
 - Do people know where they can get further information if they require it?
 - How effective are current communications and/or communications channels in relation to disturbing material or adult themes, or audience suitability?
 - Do people understand the meaning of ‘disturbing material’ and so on?
 - Are there differences in effectiveness and preferred means of communication between different groups (e.g. based on ethnicity, gender, age, life-stage, household structure, socio-demographic profile)?
- Understanding expectations and experiences of classification warnings for broadcast-like content received via the internet.

4. PROJECT METHODOLOGY

This qualitative project was based on focus group sessions and in-depth interviews with 88 participants. Tables below outline the sample structure.

Focus groups

<p>Group 1 Parents of children aged 5-12</p>	<p>Group 5 Parents with free-to-air access only, children aged 13-17</p>
<p>Group 2 Parents of children aged 13-17 years</p>	<p>Group 6 Grandparents, sometime caregivers, grandchildren children aged 5-14 years</p>
<p>Group 3 Parents considering themselves highly involved in their children's media choices, children aged 13-17</p>	<p>Group 7 Indian-Asian parents, including newer migrants, children aged 5-17</p>
<p>Group 4 Parents considering themselves highly involved in their children's media choices, children aged 13-17</p>	

Interviews

<p>8 interviews Parents: Chinese-Asian, including newer migrants, with children aged 5-17 years</p>	<p>6 interviews Parents: Maori, with children 5 and 12</p>
<p>6 interviews Parents: Pacifica, with children aged 5-12</p>	<p>6 interviews Parents: Maori, with children aged 13-17</p>
<p>6 interviews Parents: Pacifica, with children aged 13-17</p>	

Recruitment criteria

Research focused on families with children aged five to 17, and was conducted mainly with parents or guardians. A group of grandparent caregivers was also recruited, and included grandparents sometimes responsible for looking after grandchildren, either in their own home or their grandchild's.

Groups were divided according to children's ages (5-12 years; 13-17). In some cases, participating parents or guardians were responsible for children of various ages, including those ranging across the two age groups.

Various ethnicities were also represented. No quotas were set for focus groups, but each showed a degree of ethnic diversity.

All participants were given a small payment for taking part.

Access to pay TV

Most participants were selected because their households subscribed to or regularly watched pay TV. Given that the objective was to explore attitudes towards existing classification and warning systems, it was important to ensure most participants were aware of or had been exposed to them. Not everyone in the grandparent group had access to pay TV, however, and one group was specifically selected as free-to-air only.

Participants were not asked about their access to Freeview (because of the statistically small number with a Freeview decoder) and none indicated they had it.

Research location

Research was conducted in Auckland. All focus groups were held at Mobius' central Auckland premises and ran for two hours.

Interviews were conducted either at Mobius' premises or at a venue nominated by participants, generally their own home. Interviews ran for one to one-and-a-half hours.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

TV-viewing behaviour

Participants were either parents, guardians or (in the case of grandparents) sometime-caregivers of five to 17 year olds. Note that the remainder of this report refers to 'parents and guardians' as 'parents'.

Viewing behaviours, patterns and habits vary across household structures. In households with children, viewing depends on factors including but not limited to:

- children's ages
- number of children in the household and how old they are
- the extent to which parents work full- or part-time outside the home
- what time parents get up in the morning
- how many and what kind of extracurricular activities children have
- how many televisions there are in the house
- parents' attitudes to television viewing in general.

Parental attitudes to how often their children are allowed to watch television, and to what extent their viewing needs monitoring and/or controlling, vary with children's ages.

Those with children 12 or younger exercise more control over how often children watch than those with older children. Parents say younger children want to and habitually do watch television more than older children. Older ones are more likely to have a range of other interests, particularly the internet, and are therefore less likely to insist on turning the TV on, for example, first thing in the morning or as soon as they get in from school.

Most participating parents have at least two televisions (many have more) in their homes, and in some cases children have a TV in their own room (usually older rather than younger children).

Some households are significantly more flexible about viewing patterns for younger children; others rigidly control when children turn on the television and how long they watch for.

Although this was not a quantitative study, we note that many parents allow their children to watch TV before going to school. This viewing is often unsupervised, although parents indicate that at this time of day children generally watch harmless cartoons.

'Yeah, they turn it on first thing in the morning for about half an hour, usually some Disney channel.'

'In the mornings we watch the news until 6.30 and then they're allowed to watch, Hi-Five until seven, just to give them their little bit.'

'The first thing they do is turn the TV on It suits us to be honest, gives me a chance to get things sorted out and on the weekends I get more of a lie in.'

'I haven't got a problem with TV in the morning, there's nothing on at that time I need to worry about They just watch their cartoons anyway.'

'Honestly, at that age, they're only interested in Disney They don't even think about looking at any of other the other channels.'

Other parents have consciously decided not to let their children watch television in the morning, although most of them had, at some point, allowed them to.

'The TV comes on in the morning, we usually watch the breakfast show, but we started a new rule where the kids aren't allowed to watch their own shows in the morning otherwise nothing gets done.'

'We've just gone through a regime where we've hijacked the TV back. They [four and five years olds] both know how to use the remote so they used to get up and switch it straight to the SKY kids' channels and they're surfers as well, so we basically said no TV in the morning.'

After school, younger children generally watch television for a while, then do their homework and have dinner. Most people turn the television on again (if it's not already on) at news time, and in most cases, younger children stay in the room (or nearby) during that half-hour or hour. Teenagers are more likely to be elsewhere.

Younger children are likely to watch television again during or after dinner; then, most are sent to bed (between 7.30 and 8.30pm). Older children's viewing habits are more varied/less habitual.

'Night-time, as long as myself or my partner aren't watching anything, they'll usually jump on it.'

'There's always something on they want to watch after dinner.'

'We usually have the television on all the time from around news time, and the kids are always around.'

Younger children's evening viewing patterns (after dinner, pre-bedtime) are significant for this research.

Most parents believe programmes screened on free-to-air TV up to 8.30pm, and definitely up to 7.30pm, should be suitable for unsupervised children. Parents seem confused, though, about the types of programmes screened before 8.30pm and their classifications. This is discussed in more detail later, but the key issues are:

- not all programmes screened before 8.30pm are necessarily suitable for children;
- parents consider the PGR classification sometimes inappropriate for programmes screened at this time.

Related to the PGR/PG classification is the fact that parents seem not to interpret it literally; that is, that parental guidance is recommended. Rather, many parents assume any programme classified PGR or PG is suitable for children, whether supervised or not. Note that parents use PGR and PG interchangeably and do not associate either specifically with free-to-air or pay TV.

Few, if any, demographic differences in viewing behaviour are evident. In fact, findings are highly consistent with respect to each topic under discussion, including how parents make decisions about viewing suitability and their perceptions of, and attitudes to, classifications and warnings.

The role of classifications and warnings in deciding suitability

Parents were asked how they decide what their children can and can't (or should and shouldn't) watch. They seem to judge programme suitability in a variety of ways, of which classifications and warnings are only one. In fact, when parents are asked to name all the ways they decide suitability, they tend to mention classifications and warnings later in the discussion or sometimes only as an afterthought.

Parents seem fairly passive about classifications and warnings. There is very little evidence to suggest they investigate them days or a week in advance of new programme screenings.

This has implications for the way classifications and warnings are communicated (discussed later in this report). Parents seem to make more use of classifications and warnings (mainly warnings) when they screen immediately before a programme starts. It is important, then, to ensure classifications and warnings aired at this point are visually strong, and the information clear and easily interpreted.

Furthermore, while most parents are to some extent cognisant of classifications and warnings for various programmes, when asked for examples of which classifications they use, they tend to default to the free-to-air AO and PGR classifications (or PG, since parents use these interchangeably, and most are unsure exactly which is used).

Classifications and warnings as a guide

Parents identify four other key issues impacting on the perceived importance of classifications and warnings in household viewing decisions:

- Parents don't always agree with particular programme classifications (although attitudes and opinions will always vary).

'Sometimes programmes have an M rating when they really should be R16 because of the sexual content I mean what is M supposed to mean anyway?'

'They're not always accurate.'

- There is a perception that classifications are sometimes inconsistently applied.
- Parents are sometimes caught out by classifications for particular episodes of a programme *usually* appropriate for children of a certain age. This is particularly so for programmes classified PGR and/or screened earlier in the evening (before 7.30 or 8.00pm). The perception that PGR covers a range of content means parents do not necessarily interpret it in the way it is intended.

'It just needs to be more episode-specific It's like The Simpsons the other day, somebody referred to someone as a 'whore' and a 'slut'.'

'I use that rating system as more of a guideline but then it can backfire as well ... like with those Asian cartoons where there's sometimes a lot of violence.'

'If anything now I use the ratings a bit more carefully.'

- The wording of (free-to-air) warnings can sometimes be vague and non-specific. This is particularly so for objectionable language and sexual content. Parents find it hard to determine the specific nature of the sexual content and the level of language used. They would much rather know how much of this type of content programmes contain. Parents feel classifications should reflect the amount, as well as specific nature, of sexual content and objectionable language. They indicate that, for example, a programme with a little sexual content should be classified differently to one with the same level of sexual content but appearing more frequently throughout.

'They're kind of vague They say, "Something might be something".'

'They say, "May contain coarse language", but that can be anything.'

'Sometimes the coarse language can be minor and sometimes not. They should use some kind of levels of coarse language from minor through to obscene, so that we know.'

Each of these issues impacts on the perceived credibility of existing classification and warning systems. Note that, at this stage of the discussion, parents had not been asked to identify specific classifications and warnings (or any differences between free-to-air and pay TV); rather discussion centred on parents' views, opinions and general use of classifications and warnings.

It became clear in later discussion that awareness, recognition and understanding of various classifications and warnings also has a significant impact on parents' use of them. Note also that many parents cannot always confidently identify the classification of programmes they watch regularly, including those screened before 8.30pm AO time on free-to-air.

'They are not always reliable I can think of a few times when something's been given a certain classification and it's been completely wrong.'

'There doesn't seem to be any logical pattern for how they do this Some programmes that should have stricter classifications don't and then there are other programmes where you get a warning and you think, "What was that for".'

'Sometimes they don't make sense, you can't always rely on them, I get a better idea from looking at what's happening.'

'It's random if you ask me.'

Attitudes to deciding viewing suitability vary, once again, with the age of the child. In general, children aged nine to 10, and 14 or 15, are considered most at risk from unsuitable broadcast content (ie those aged 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and possibly 15). Parents of younger children (aged five to eight) say their children are already in bed by the time any potentially unsuitable content is aired and/or that, if they are in the room, it usually 'goes right over their heads'.

Parents also mention this in relation to early evening news items preceded by warnings, when children are likely to be near the television, as well as to certain earlier PGR/PG programmes that may contain one or two sexual references, such as *Two and a Half Men*, which screens at 7.30pm. Parents believe younger children habitually watch their favourite programmes (often the Disney channel) and are uninterested in anything else, whether they are in the room or not.

'The kids always just go to the channels they know.'

'I've made a deal with her that she gets to watch some of her programmes if she watches some stuff I want her to watch like Animal Planet. But her first choice is Disney.'

'Usually I know what my kids are watching They're creatures of habit.'

Parents of older children (aged 15, 16 and 17) are much more flexible about what they let them watch; in fact, there seem to be few or often no restrictions at all on 16 and 17 year olds. Four key patterns emerge:

1. Some parents believe children this age need exposing to 'real life' content, which may involve objectionable language, violence and sexual content.
2. Some parents are unconcerned about the viewing behaviour of what they see as their almost-adult children, and have no problems with adult-targeted programmes such as *Desperate Housewives*.
3. Some parents indicate that older teenage children don't watch much TV anyway, spending more time instead listening to/downloading music and on various internet sites.
4. Some parents believe older children (ie. teenagers) are fully aware of their parents' expectations of what they can and cannot watch and don't require supervision.

'My kids know what I think is appropriate for them, and I trust them.'

Those who do decide what's appropriate for their children to watch take various approaches.

Most do not pre-plan; unless programme content is well known, they make a decision when programmes are about to air or after they have started. This reinforces the importance of visible, easy-to-understand communication of classifications and content warnings at the beginning of programmes. It has specific implications for the varying awareness and perceived usefulness of classifications and warnings used by free-to-air and by pay TV, discussed later in this report.

The number-one tool parents use to determine viewing suitability for children (predominantly those in the key nine/10 up to 13/14 age group) is trial and error. Most parents say they will watch the first part of a programme or film then decide whether the children may keep watching. Children were almost always present during these trial and error viewings.

'If it makes her uncomfortable having me sitting there then I usually know it's inappropriate.'

'If you look at it for five minutes, you know.'

'If I don't like, we don't watch it.'

Pre-screening warnings are also seen as important. However, parents' reactions to warnings depend on four key factors:

1. The nature of the warning: whether it concerns violence, objectionable language or sexual content. Some parents are more concerned about certain types of content, most often sexual then violent. Note, too, that parents consider sexual content and violence more likely to appear in programmes screened up to 7.30 or 8.30pm than objectionable language.
2. The clarity of the warning.
3. Parents' familiarity with the programme about to screen.
4. The age of the children in the room.

Parents spoke only of warnings screened on free-to-air; there was no mention of pay TV warnings at this stage.

Other tools parents use as guides to suitability

Parents use the following methods of deciding suitability:

- trial and error: by far the most common method, with parents saying they watch the beginning of a programme or movie (with their children) then decide;

- pay TV's pin lock system: used by around half of parents; the other half are unaware of it or don't consider it necessary;
- keeping 'an and ear open: whether in the room or not;
- gut feeling;
- viewing promos, reading the pay TV on-screen guide (eg digital synopsis or electronic programme guide).

Pay TV pin lock system

Approximately half the parents who have pay TV and younger children use the pin lock system to prevent children watching programmes with certain classifications. In most cases, they block programmes classified 16 or higher. As noted before, however, given parents' concerns about programmes being inappropriately classified, those using the pin lock system also use trial and error for other types of programmes. Parents of younger children who don't use the pin lock system, were not using it either because:

- they don't know about it: they only know about using a pin number for purchasing SKY Box Office movies, or
- they feel they don't need it: again, these tend to be parents who either more actively control what their (younger) children watch or who trust their (older, often early/mid-teens) children not to watch anything inappropriate.

Keeping an eye or ear open

Some parents say they simply keep an eye or ear open to check the channel hasn't been changed to something inappropriate or whether a programme they thought would be suitable, actually isn't.

'I cruise in quite often and just pass through.'

Gut feeling

Some parents believe they already have a good enough idea of many movies and programmes shown on television. This is particularly so for movies that have been recently screened in cinemas, whose content is relatively well known.

The pay TV synopsis

Many parents are aware of and read the pay TV synopsis available on screen, but it's not an important decision-making tool for them.

The general view is that the synopsis doesn't always give enough information on which to base a decision about viewing suitability. Few parents mention the pay TV synopsis as a source of classification information about certain programmes. It is mainly mentioned in terms of providing an outline of a programme's content or topic. Furthermore, as with many other tools parents use, trial and error is still seen as playing an important role in decision-making.

'[The SKY synopsis] gives me an idea ... but I will still often just watch.'

'Often the reviews in SKYwatch [magazine] are so brief, there's not enough detail there to decide whether it's okay or not.'

Promos for upcoming programmes

Some parents feel promos don't provide enough information to indicate whether or not an upcoming programme will be suitable for their children.

'I find you get enough from the ads, like there's shows that are on at seven or even earlier like Friday Night Lights – that's just about high school kids getting it on, and that's exactly the sort of [stuff] I don't want her to see.'

Some parents say they check classifications for specific upcoming programmes but mainly for movies. In fact, movies (especially those screened on Saturday nights) are the main reason parents check classifications in advance. When specifically seeking classification information, they count the SKY synopsis or SKYwatch magazine as important sources of information.

'I might have a look and see if a movie we were planning to watch as a family on a Saturday night is going to be okay for the kids.'

'Sometimes there's a movie they might want to watch and if I'm not sure about it, I will look up what its rating is.'

Themes evident in the use of classifications and warnings

Most parents base their final decisions on trial and error, but still regard classifications and warnings as playing a key role in supporting their decisions and offering guidance. Three factors, however, impact on the overall usefulness of existing classifications and warnings, and are probably contributing to parental passivity:

1. *classification application credibility;*
2. *classification meanings:* particularly PGR or PG, and M, which are seen as covering a very wide range of programmes and content (note also that many parents interpret PGR and PG loosely, rather than literally meaning 'guidance is required'). Furthermore, these particular classifications are most likely to be used pre-8.30pm, when younger children (those within the potentially at-risk age group, as previously discussed) are more likely to be around and watching television;
3. *communication issues:* pay TV classifications and warnings are not doing the job they were designed to do (this is discussed in more detail later), with consequent awareness and understanding issues.

Awareness of classifications and warnings and the differences between free-to-air and pay TV

Awareness of free-to-air classifications and warnings

Unprompted discussion of the use and usefulness of current classification and warning systems shows parents are more likely to default to the free-to-air system. Very few spontaneously mention pay TV classifications (other than during discussions about PGR and PG, which are used by free-to-air and pay TV respectively).

Overall, there is a high level of unprompted awareness of free-to-air classifications. Asked to write down all the free-to-air classifications they can think of, parents list G, PGR or PG, and AO (with a skew towards PG rather than PGR, although some parents note them as separate classifications).

Some parents also specifically mention verbal warnings alerting viewers to objectionable language, violence and sexual content. All parents taking part are aware that free-to-air TV issues verbal warnings about sexual, violence and language content just before programmes screen, and all have at some point seen them.

Awareness of the pay TV system and differences between it and free-to-air

Asked to write down the classifications and warnings pay TV uses, around a quarter of parents with access to pay TV indicate they believe these to be the same as the free-to-air classifications.

'I couldn't really differentiate between them to be honest Maybe I don't take much notice.'

'I thought they were the same.'

'I have absolutely no idea, aren't they the same as the other ones?'

'I can't write anything down, sorry, no idea I thought they all used the same ones.'

Most think pay TV doesn't issue verbal warnings. The majority of the rest mention the R16 and R18 classifications, as well as G and PG/PGR. Note that all these parents use the R in this context and generally associate the classifications with movies. A minority of parents also note the M classification, and most know pay TV does not use AO.

Only one parent noted the pay TV warning symbols V, L and S (although they identified these as classifications rather than warnings). None wrote down any of the classification and warning combinations pay TV uses, nor the C warning.

Most parents are aware of the free-to-air classifications, and can usually identify the 16 and 18 age-based classifications used by pay TV. What they cannot identify is pay TV's range of warnings and their use alongside pay TV classifications.

Free-to-air and pay TV – prompted awareness of classifications and warnings

Parents were shown on DVD the following examples of free-to-air and pay TV classifications and warnings:

Free-to-air warnings

TV One – AO with warning for language and violence

TV2 – AO with warning for sex

TV3 – AO with warning for violence, language and sex

TV3 – AO with warning for sex and language

Pay TV classifications and warnings

Box channel – G Box channel – MVLS

Box channel – PG Movie channel – 16C

Box channel – PGV Movie channel – 18

Box channel – M Movie channel – 18LS

Box channel – MV Movie channel – R20

Overall recognition of the visual and verbal warnings and classifications used by free-to-air is high. In contrast, recognition of most of pay TV's visual classifications and warnings is low.

Most parents have seen some pre-screening pay TV classifications (mainly M and 16), but the majority cannot remember having seen any warning information. Furthermore, very few parents can recall, even after prompting, having seen the warnings used with the classifications – for example, V, L or S used in conjunction with classifications like 16, 18 or M (eg 16S or MVL). Parents shown an example of how C might be used – 16C – say they haven't seen it before.

In addition to these low pay TV system recognition levels, parents are confused about what the symbols mean. (This is discussed in more detail later.)

It seems that, given low prompted and unprompted awareness of detailed pay TV classifications and warnings, they aren't working as well as they could to help parents determine programme suitability.

Attitudes to free-to-air and pay TV classifications and warnings communication

Free-to-air – visual and verbal communication of warnings

Parents consider free-to-air classifications are communicated more effectively than pay TV's. This finding is based on what parents say after they have seen both systems, and on the fact that their recall of the pay TV classifications and, particularly, warnings is much lower than for free-to-air TV.

Recall of free-to-air warnings may, of course, be higher because TV One, TV2 and TV3 are the most watched channels. Leaving aside recall, however, free-to-air warnings are considered very effective because:

- Warnings are both visual and verbal as a matter of course.

'It's right there before the show and you can't miss it.'

'It's good for your children because it's right there and you can say, "Well, that's what it says".'

- On the whole, verbal descriptions are easy to understand because they clearly communicate that the programme about to be screened has at least some level of either sexual, violence or objectionable language content.

Recall of the free-to-air channels' communication of classifications and warnings is similar, but parents identify strengths and weaknesses in both.

TV3's warning is thought visually superior because it uses a single plain background colour and dispenses with background music. TV One and TV2 warnings are found more distracting because of busier visuals and accompanying music.

'I think the TV One one needs to be more prominent ... so that you can pick it up because often you're talking after the ads are on.'

'It [TV One] feels like it's still part of the break.'

'It's [TV2] the same voice they use for all of their voice-overs They should have a different one just for warnings.'

'TV3 ... it's a bit more in your face.'

'TV3 ... he was serious instead of friendly ... so it's more noticeable.'

'I think you take more notice of the TV3 one because there's no background music and suddenly you've got this voice, that's all there is to listen to.'

TV One and TV2 warnings are, however, considered stronger in one respect: the onscreen classification symbol (on the TV3 warning shown, the classification is verbalised but not shown).

'The TV One warning is easier to understand, it has more detail and is more informative.'

'They're quite similar but there's more detail on TV One.'

'AO with a sexual content warning paints a clear picture.'

Parents find all free-to-air warning examples relatively easy to understand and interpret: frequent use of potentially offensive language, *graphic violence* or an *AO programme with sexual content*. Overall, though, they prefer a combination of all warnings styles: plainer, with no background music (as on TV3) but including visual representation of the programme classification for reinforcement (as with the TVNZ warnings) and good verbal detail of programme content.

Pay TV – communication of classifications and warnings

Most parents recall having seen the imagery pay TV uses to communicate classifications (in this case, The Box channel's 'rolling dice'). Although, as discussed, most cannot remember having ever seen most of specific warnings or warnings and classifications combined.

Two issues arise in respect of how pay TV communicates classifications and warnings:¹

- imagery isn't sufficiently distinctive from station branding;
- classifications and warnings (except 18 and 20, from the selection shown) are visual only and not verbal.

Imagery used to communicate classifications and warnings is sometimes the same as pay TV uses for branding purposes², so it has the same look and feel as station branding and promotional items. Some parents have seen this imagery, but most have not seen it in the context of classifications and warnings. This may be because they assume it's merely branding and not immediately relevant to them or the upcoming programme: they miss the key message.

¹ Note that the various SKY channels communicate classifications and warnings in a variety of ways. Some do use visual and verbal warnings. But, as noted earlier, parents assume this is not the case. They cannot recall visual and verbal warnings on pay TV, even when prompted.

² Parents also raised this issue – use of similar imagery for both station branding and warnings – in regard to TV One notices.

'That's what they used before all of their programmes and it just goes whooff [signal over peoples' heads].'

'I have seen that before, that dice and heard that noise and you just think it's what they always do before a new programme starts.'

'I know it but I don't pay any attention to it because they use it all the time.'

'It tells you when a new programme is going to start.'

'The problem is you hear that dice sound and you don't know it's anything important.'

'If they want us to hear it why do they use the same noise?'

Most classifications lack a verbal warning, and parents think this obscures communication.

'If you're going to put a warning out, it needs to stand out and you need to know that it's actually a warning.'

'There's no sound so you'd probably miss it, I know I have.'

'Sometimes you may not be paying attention or not watching properly or whatever, and you just miss it. But with the other one (free-to-air) there's a much bigger chance that you'll hear it even if you're not paying attention to what's on the screen.'

'If they want us to take notice of these things then it's up to them to make sure we know what they're saying and that there is a warning on, otherwise we'll just miss it.'

The low recall and recognition of many pay TV warnings, and combined classifications and warnings, can be attributed to how they are communicated. Changing communication style may change attitudes to the pay TV system and its usefulness, although, as discussed later, there may also be further opportunities to refine the pay TV system.

Parents respond far more positively to the free-to-air TV system because:

- warnings are verbal as well as visual;
- communication is clear: classifications and warnings look, feel and sound distinctive enough from station branding and other advertising (especially on TV3);
- verbal descriptions are, on the whole, easier to grasp.

Meanings of free-to-air classifications and warnings

Parents generally feel comfortable with the G and AO classifications on free-to-air, and particularly with AO when used in conjunction with a verbal warning. They see this as providing a relatively clear description of programme content.

Parents are most confused when confronted by the free-to-air PGR classification. They use PGR and PG interchangeably when discussing free-to-air and pay TV. Their general view is that any programme (or movie) classified PGR should be suitable for younger children, with or without parental supervision.

'If they want to watch something that's PG, I just know that I don't even have to worry about it There's not going to be any sex, no violence and not even any bad language.'

'I think PGR is okay for all teenagers.'

'I'd probably take less notice of it because I'd assume it's okay.'

'It says PG but you usually know it's okay for younger kids.'

'They call it PG when they know it's not quite a G, but it's nowhere near AO.'

'It's impossible because most PGR programmes are okay so you assume that they're all going to be okay.'

Three issues arise in connection with the PGR classification.

1. Parents see the PGR classification as filling a very wide gap between G and AO. This often results in confusion over the actual meaning of PGR and how to interpret it. This is particularly significant for PGR programmes screened before 8.30pm AO time – the time parents identify as when the most at-risk age group is likely to be watching television.
2. PGR is used as a blanket classification, but many parents say PGR-classified programmes confuse them. This is either because the content is more adult than they expect (eg *Two and a Half Men*) or because a programme classified as PGR sometimes has content they perceive as being AO (eg *Shortland Street*). In the latter situation, many parents feel a programme with AO content some of the time should be classified as an AO programme all of the time.
3. Parents are not interpreting PGR as intended. It means parental guidance is recommended. Parents need to be made aware of this true meaning and that it can cover a wide range of content (that's not necessarily G or AO). Only then can they make informed decisions about what they do and don't want their children to watch.

Many parents also suggest the free-to-air system would be improved by adding age-based classifications. They support the system used in cinemas, which they see as giving a better indication of content and, therefore, who it will and will not be appropriate for. R13 (or 13) is the example most commonly cited. They believe this would also fill the gap they perceive between PGR and AO. Almost all parents clearly understand the difference between these two, and that age guides are just that – a guide.

Meanings of pay TV classifications and warnings

Parents don't distinguish between pay TV classifications and warnings because these are mainly represented by alpha-numeric characters and create the impression that pay TV has a wide range of classifications but no actual warnings. This impacts on general attitudes to the pay TV system: they see it as overly complicated compared to the simpler free-to-air system.

Another pay TV system issue is the very low prompted and unprompted awareness of its classifications and warnings, particularly the low prompted awareness of the C, V, L and S warnings. This may be a result of the communication issues discussed earlier – lack of a verbal warning and little differentiation between classifications/warnings and station branding – or other factors may be having an effect.

Even after parents are shown the classifications and warnings pay TV issues (ie. those on The Box channel) they are still confused over their meanings and how to interpret them. Parents note that the fleeting classifications and warnings appearing on screen, along with the fact that some combinations of the symbols (eg. MLV, 16LS) seem complicated, impacts on their usefulness. Parents say they are looking for simple information they can interpret fast and then make a decision.

'It's all a bit much for me.'

'I just remember growing up and if you think about movies we had R16 and R18, and R13 ... and that wasn't hard to follow.'

'If we're going to have this airy fairy M15 or C4 or whatever ... I don't even know what they are ... I mean it's just ridiculous.'

'It's a mixed bag isn't it?'

'There's too many, there's no real theme to it.'

'Well, I was just really confused because I thought I had it and it was 16 or 18R, but all that other stuff, I just don't get it.'

'It's a nonsense.'

'It's all very well in theory but you know, honestly in the seconds it's on I am not going to pick it up.'

The letters used for pay TV warnings are explained in fine print underneath, but parents consider the print too small and on screen too briefly. Furthermore, they don't want (and are not going) to do a lot of reading in order to work out what's actually being communicated. Two points arise here: firstly, that perhaps there should be a form of wider communication to parents on pay TV classifications and warnings and how to use them; secondly and alternatively, that pay TV should consider wider use of visual and verbal warnings when appropriate.

Main areas of confusion are the M classification and the C, V, L and S warnings.

The meaning of M

Parents consider M one of the most meaningless classifications and the one most open to interpretation. They have no clear understanding between the meaning of M, and the meaning of:

- PGR or PG with some form of violent, objectionable language or sexual content;
- AO on free-to-air;
- 16 on pay TV.

This is why M fails to be a useful, usable classification.

'M is more of a problem It's a bit hard to gauge sometimes.'

'It means content for adults only ... but it's less helpful than the R ratings, because they give you an age as well.'

'You don't know what the content is.'

'R13, R16 and so on is a lot easier than saying "mature".'

'It means young adults with a mature outlook.'

'A lot of Disney films have been coming out with the letter M, like Harry Potter, so if it's a children thing then I assume M means scary stuff but why don't they just say PGR. Then when M is used on other programmes it must mean something different, so I really don't know.'

'If it's got sexual scenes why don't they just say R16?'

'It's just way too broad, it needs an age attached to it'

'Maybe have something like an M, but with a recommendation of 16 or over, so not actually R16 ... or they could warn you what's in it ... whether its graphic sex or violence.'

'I think M should be cut because it doesn't mean anything'

'For me I think M means the same as AO or R16.'

'MV ... mature violence ... what's that?'

'I see no difference between M and AO.'

'I think they just use M as a catch-all so it's pointless. I've become totally desensitised to classifications, I mean they give Wire in the Blood an M and it's got some horrific parts, and then they give M to One Foot in the Grave ... so it's no use.'

'Like on UK TV if you look, everything has an M beside it, I think it's just lazy broadcasters who couldn't be bothered classifying the programmes properly and they probably think we don't notice.'

Parents think that, like free-to-air, pay TV is missing a classification that bridges the gap between more child-friendly and adults-only content. They believe the gap is between PG and 16, and that, while M comes between them, it's not working for the reasons outlined above.

The meaning of C

Asked to interpret the classification and warning 16C (an example of how C is applied on pay TV), parents showed wide variation. No participating parents has ever seen this particular classification and warning combination, or seen C used at all.

Most parents cannot correctly supply any meaning for C. Others supply meanings that include:

- coarse language for 16+
- cultural content
- censored
- content may disturb
- content for anyone up to the age of 16.

When told that C stands for content (as in 'content may offend') and asked to interpret 16C, parents remain confused.

'It means content for people 16 years plus ... but what kind of content?'

'Does that mean it's got everything?'

'It's probably got the whole range between the V, the L and the S.'

The meaning of V, L and S

Parents are very supportive of highlighting the violence, objectionable language and sexual content of programmes. However, they consider the current free-to-air system of verbal warning plus description *alongside* a classification to be more useful than pay TV's non-verbal, multiple letter and age-based system.

Parents are confused when asked what these letters stand for. Most don't read the explanatory small print below the letter and age (or other) combinations.

L is the most confusing letter, while most parents correctly assume S stands for sexual. This may reflect parents' attitudes towards programme content and towards their teenagers, in that most parents of teenagers express more concern about programmes' sexual content than about language and violence content.

Meanings supplied for L include:

- lewd
- low
- low-level
- limited violence
- low violence

Meanings supplied for V include:

- very graphic violence
- very 'something'.

Furthermore, when these warnings are combined with classifications, as in MVLS or 16L parents see them as even more complex and confusing (even for the age based classifications which they found easy to understand on their own). This is particularly so when further details are added to the classification M, which is already open to wide interpretation.

'MVLS ... sounds like the name of a soccer team ... and it gets all confusing I think the old movie system used to work quite well, 13, 16 and 18.'

'They're trying too hard, why don't they just keep it simple?'

'I still think they need to have a verbal warning.'

In summary, while pay TV offers a good level of detail in its effort to help parents decide what's suitable for their children, that detail is actually undermining the system's effectiveness. It becomes too complicated, and isn't meaningful enough to be used in any practical way. As well, parents find pay TV's communication of classifications and warnings less than ideal.

Finally, while around three-quarters of parents with access to pay TV are at least to some extent aware of the differences in the free-to-air and pay TV systems, most can see no clear rationale for it.

Attitudes to programme-content descriptors

As discussed earlier, parents expressed a preference for a combination of a classification with a verbal description-of-content warning, screened immediately before programmes. Overall feedback on free-to-air's verbal descriptions is positive, but parents feel the following descriptors need re-wording:

May contain disturbing material/may contain material that may disturb some people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unnecessary if a verbal description of specific content has already been given, and too vague on its own – <i>'What kind of material?'</i>
Adult themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better to be more specific – <i>'Adult themes ... you'd think sexual, so why don't they just say that?'</i>
Content may offend	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unnecessary if a verbal description of specific content has already been given, and too vague on its own – <i>'What's the content?'; 'They need to say it contains sex scenes, graphic violence, language or whatever'; 'I think it's all too broad.'</i>
Sexual references	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better to be more specific – <i>'What does that mean? Better to link it to an age as well.'</i>

In summary, parents want verbal descriptors that:

- they don't have to interpret themselves – eg 'adult themes';
- make clear the type of content being warned of – eg sex, violence, drug use;
- are supplied in simple, plain language.

Awareness of free-to-air AO time

Parents are somewhat confused about the time when adults-only programmes begin screening on free-to-air television (sometimes known as the 'watershed') – whether it's 7.30 or 8.30pm. They do know that programmes screened after a set time are adults-only programmes. They also know that the later a programme screens, the more likely it is to include adult content (whether it be objectionable language, violence or sexual material). None of the parents taking part had heard of the term 'watershed'.

Some parents assume everything screened before 8.30pm will be suitable for their children. Others admit to confusion about how AO time actually applies, given that some programmes they consider to be distinctly adult are screened much earlier than 8.30pm (eg *Shortland Street* at 7.00pm).

'Shortland Street should be on at an AO time ... I won't let my children watch it.'

'I don't think you've got that high a risk actually ... because the majority played before 8.30pm is okay.'

'I put a great deal of store with this idea that before 8.30pm anything should be all right for my children to watch That might not be quite right, but that's what I believe and I would hate to see that slide.'

A number of younger children's parents say it would be useful to have a verbal reminder about the switch to AO programming – useful for them as parents, and useful as a credible reinforcement to their children that it's time to go to bed.

'They used to have that system at 7.30 or something where they said, "Right children, it's time to go to bed", and that's a good reminder for us.'

'It's just a good mental reminder for parents.'

'It sets the boundaries a bit.'

'So the kids will go "Oh, okay, so it's not just coming from the parents" Somebody else is telling them to go to bed.'

Awareness of, and attitudes to, AO time generally reflect parents' earlier comments on the inconsistency of how classifications are applied, the fact that they are sometimes caught out by unexpected content, and confusion over the way the PGR classification is used earlier in the evening (between 7.00 and 8.30pm).

With respect to time bands, parents do not mention (and are apparently unaware of) the classification AO 9.30pm. Parents assume the later a programme screens, the more likely it is to have AO content. Therefore there may be no need for viewers to be reminded of any difference between AO content screened between 8.30 and 9.30pm, and AO content screened later.

News and current affairs warnings

Most parents say their children either watch early the evening news (at 5.30 or 6.00pm) or are in the room when it's on. All parents are aware of the verbal warnings sometimes given before news items (and that newsreaders give them), and believe they work well enough. Children are far more likely to be exposed to early evening news than to other current affairs programmes. Most parents acknowledge that the news holds little interest for children under 14.

None of the parents recall seeing any news items that should have been preceded by a warning and were not. Overall, they are very satisfied with existing current affairs and news warnings.

Very few parents say they have changed channel or turned off the television on hearing a warning before a news item, although this can depend on the item's content, and is often more to do with what the parent doesn't want to see or hear rather than whether any children are around. Items about animal cruelty or child abuse were the most likely to result in a change of channels.

'If I don't want to see it, then I don't want them to see it either.'

None of the grandparents taking part (all 60 or older) say they have ever changed channel after a news item warning, either on behalf of children or because of their own feelings.

Some parents say they have changed channel, pressed the mute button or used some other form of censorship on behalf of their children, but in most cases this was on the basis of trial and error rather than because a warning was given.

'I usually wait a bit and see what they're actually showing, unless it's something like a child abuse story and then I don't want to see it at all.'

'I turn it off straight away because I can see where it's going.'

'I just say, "Put your head down, close your eyes".'

Many parents of younger children (under nine) tend to ignore such warnings because their children are usually paying no attention; if the item disturbs the adults once they start watching, they will switch channels then. Parents also indicate they would be more concerned with visual than verbal content, particularly for younger children; the general view is that disturbing verbal content goes over the heads of younger children.

The overwhelming attitude to early evening news (when children may be around) is that the news is the news and it's important for children to see it even if items are disturbing. Parents want their children to be exposed to real-world issues and don't want to pretend problems don't exist. These parents say they use such items educationally with their children and are much more tolerant of disturbing content in news than in other kinds of broadcasts.

'Depending on what it is, we generally let our kids watch it.'

Some parents believe news doesn't need any form of warning – again, because it is about factual, real-life situations. Most, however, are satisfied with the current warning system for news items screened at 5.30 or 6.00pm, and most think warnings unnecessary for items screened later in the evening.

Attitudes to warnings for specific news items

In the course of the research, parents watched five news items, although not all items were shown to all groups. They watched one item at a time and, before any group discussion, each wrote down whether the item needed a warning or not.

The five items, chosen because each was the subject of a complaint to the BSA, concerned:

- child abuse, with graphic images of a dead, bruised child;
- a hostage situation involving a male prisoner and a female prison guard;
- a horse-racing accident, seen from a distance, in which the jockey is thrown from the horse and dies;
- a massacre of African children;
- the 'Boobs on Bikes' parade.

Child abuse item

This item about child abuse in New Zealand included autopsy photographs of a child who had been beaten to death (see Kiro and TVNZ – BSA decision 2007-111). This was preceded by a warning, and the general view was that it was justified by graphic images of the dead child. One issue raised was that the warning preceded a long item and the images in question didn't appear until some way in. Parents felt they needed to know when the images would appear and/or a reminder warning just before they did appear.

'It was almost a bit too drawn out that the images were at the end so I almost forgot about it ... so if I was watching that I probably would have forgotten about the warning.'

'If you flicked over to another channel, because it was so drawn out and then you flicked back, there's a chance that you'd still see it.'

Hostage item

This item looked at the trial of a prison inmate charged with taking a female prison officer hostage and sexually assaulting her. It showed the Crown prosecutor telling the court that the inmate had shown the officer a note which referred to oral sex and had sniffed a sanitary disposal unit (see Rogerson and TVWorks Ltd – BSA decision 2008-057). This was not preceded by a warning. Opinions on whether it should have had a warning were divided, with more women believing it should. The general view was that the item's detail was unnecessary and inappropriate for a 6.00pm news slot.

Opinion skewed in favour of it not requiring a warning, a key reason being that the offensive component was verbal rather than visual. Parents believe it is more important to warn against visual content than verbal when younger children may be around. The general view is that younger children would be unaware of any disturbing content but slightly older children (eg 11 to 13 or 14 years old) would. For this reason parents prefer items of this nature to be edited for news earlier in the evening then shown in full, if necessary, in later newscasts.

'For my kids it would have been over their head.'

'I think it's worse when you see things rather than just hear them as part of the story.'

Horse-racing item

This item concerned the death of a jockey resulting from a fall. It showed images of the fall but from some distance away (see Millar and TVNZ – BSA decision 2005 -042). This was not preceded by a warning. No issues were raised, and parents did not believe it required a warning. They said most children were not interested in horse racing and would not be paying attention, and that the actual fall was difficult to see because it was so far from the camera.

'It's too far away, you can't tell what's happening anyway.'

'It'd be more disturbing if you saw the horse get injured or killed.'

'They are not in the least bit interested in horse racing and wouldn't even be paying attention.'

Massacre item

This item concerned a massacre of 80 people in Kenya, including around 22 children. There was a partial image of a man's body and some bloodstains on the ground shown (see Viewers for Television Excellence and TVNZ – BSA decision 2005-116). This was not preceded by a warning. There was general agreement that war stories don't need warnings and that by their very nature act as a de facto warning. They are thought to reflect real-world events, which children need to be exposed to. The item was seen as containing little disturbing visual content, and there were no images of dead children (which might have changed views on the need for a warning).

'You kind of know that those BBC items might be a bit serious, but you know kids need to know what's going on in the world.'

'I'd be worried about hearing the word "massacre" but at the end of the day, this stuff is happening right now around the world.'

'I think the problem is that we've just become desensitised to war stories, and so have our kids.'

'Boobs on Bikes' item

This item featured a parade promoting the Erotica exhibition in Auckland. It included bare-breasted women riding as pillion passengers on motorcycles (see Harang and TVNZ – BSA decision 2006-098). This was preceded by a warning. None of the parents (or grandparents) taking part felt it needed a warning. However, they generally acknowledged the images might offend some, and that therefore a warning should be given.

'If they didn't, I suppose there'd be all sorts of complaints.'

In summary, parents appreciate the practice of giving warnings before news and current affairs items, and broadcasters seem to meet their expectations.

TV on demand

Asked if TV on demand delivered via the internet should carry the same classifications and warnings as programmes screened on television, parents unanimously agree they should, especially when advertised as 'catch-up' or 'second-chance' viewing. They feel broadcasters are using another medium to broadcast the same content, and the same rules should apply.

'Because it is just another medium for TV shows.'

'If they're promoting it as TV, as your second chance to watch it, it needs to have the same regulations.'

'It's just a different medium for watching it, it's still the same show.'

'It shouldn't make any difference whether it's on TV or you watch the same thing over the internet ... same rating should apply.'

'It's not the same as watching other stuff on the internet This is TV and they're just using the internet to screen it.'

6. KEY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Despite employing a range of tools and criteria when deciding on viewing suitability, parents believe classifications and warnings provide important and helpful information and guidelines. They expect classifications and warning to continue supporting them in their family viewing decisions.

'I'll tell you what we're looking for as parents these days ... we want to be validated, so we want to be able to say, "No, that's not okay", and I want to be able to say, "This is why", so that the kids can understand it.'

Parents emphasise that they don't want to be told what they should be doing, but do want enough information to make decisions themselves.

The key role of classifications and warnings is to inform, which entails a responsibility to ensure they are communicated effectively. Classifications and warnings are not currently relayed to the New Zealand viewing public as effectively as they could be, particularly in the case with pay TV.

Besides communication issues, several other factors (for both free-to-air and pay TV) impact on the degree to which parents rely on classifications and warnings:

- *credibility issues*: inconsistent application of classifications; inadequate warnings; parents feeling caught out by unexpected content;
- *PGR/PG classifications*: lack of awareness of and confusion over their meanings;
- *pay TV's M classification*: it covers such a broad range of content as to be almost meaningless, and is not useful;
- *pay TV's warning symbols*: parents don't recognise or interpret them correctly – mainly C, but also V, L and S;
- *perceived gaps in classification*: parents believe the wide gap they see between PGR and AO on free-to-air TV, and between PG and M or 16 on pay TV, needs filling;
- *timing*: parents tend to use warnings and classifications on the point of watching a programme, making communication at this time most important.

Many participating parents express surprise and disappointment about how unaware of and uninformed they are on current classifications and warnings. This may indicate a need for wider communication about the different systems' purpose and meaning (and possibly the rationale for having two).

'I think up to now I can say that we've managed our own household fine because we generally know what's in the programmes. But now that we've had this discussion it's going to be a major help to have useful classifications ... and well, we'll pay more attention to it.'

'Everything they give us is a guide, to help us through ... but we have to understand it for that to happen.'

'Whatever you put in has got to be aimed at the adults first, so they can understand it.'

'I think it's very useful but I think it should be consistent across all channels, which I wasn't even aware that it wasn't until today.'

'I think they should be the same across the whole board There's no point having something for SKY and something different for free TV It just confuses people.'

Recommendations

1. *Consider the rationale behind two separate free-to-air and pay TV systems.* This is particularly relevant given concerns about how warnings and classifications are communicated. The differences between the two systems are not well known, but greater awareness of the pay TV system might mean even more viewer confusion and questioning of the need for two systems.
2. *Given the above, consider modelling any revised system on the current free-to-air approach.* Awareness and understanding of it is relatively strong, and its use of verbal and visual communications works well.
3. *Consider how an age-based system may add value for parents.* It could include the addition of a 13 classification, and adding to or possibly replacing AO with 16 (note, however, that AO is seen to work well and is well understood).
4. *Ensure clear differentiation between classifications and warnings,* whether only one system is applied across the board or not. Pay TV is confusing in this regard.
5. *Use visual and verbal communication as a matter of course,* especially when a content warning is desirable. Using the two together is more effective than the visual-only classifications and warnings currently used most of the time by wwpay TV.
6. *Consider dispensing with classifications and warnings* such as M and C that have no clear meaning and are too open to interpretation.
7. *Consider a wider communications approach* focusing on the role of classifications and warnings. If an additional age-based classification, such as 13, is not used, parents need to be reminded of the purpose behind PGR and PG; that is, of their own responsibilities. Communication of available sources of classification information (including printed listings, online and on screen eg digital TV guides) could also be considered.
8. *Consider an alternative to the term 'watershed'* (the time from which AO programmes are shown on free-to-air TV) as this one is not widely known.

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