

**Taste, Standards and the BBC**  
**Key Findings from the Audience Research**

**June 2009**

**Contents**

Taste, Standards and the BBC.....1

Key Findings from the Audience Research .....1

1. Background to the BBC Taste and Standards research project.....3

2. Summary of the Literature Review .....4

3. Approach to the new BBC research .....6

4. Themes from the research .....10

## I. Background to the BBC Taste and Standards research project

In November 2008 the BBC Executive convened a pan-BBC Steering Group to consider the area of taste and standards in the media, and in particular to consider the BBC's role in this area within a fast-moving and diverse media landscape.

The Steering Group, led by Roly Keating (Director of Archive) and Alan Yentob (Creative Director) undertook to review the area of taste and standards, working towards delivering a report to the BBC Trust in May 2009. The review was sponsored by David Jordan (Director, Editorial Policy) and Jana Bennett (Director, Vision). The Steering Group agreed that the **scope of the review** would focus mainly around the following areas:

- Language – specifically the appropriateness and acceptability of language across a range of programme outlets
- Sexual content – including such things as imagery, tone and issue of candour, respect and personal privacy and the expectations and boundaries of personal privacy and sexual allusion.
- Generational question and expectations – how do the experiences of different generations and communities towards media usage impact on the role and expectations of the BBC?
- Expectations of genre, channel, station, slot and broadcast talent, particularly in the context of the BBC trying to provide appropriate content to meet the expectations and needs of an increasingly diverse audience.
- It was agreed that the review would not cover violence

The first piece of audience research the Steering Committee commissioned was a **review of existing literature** on the subject by Professor Sonia Livingstone at the LSE. A summary of Professor Livingstone's findings are set out in section 2 of this report. Subsequent to receiving this report, the Steering Group decided that the wider review would benefit from some newly commissioned research to fill some of the knowledge gaps:

Specifically:

- A large scale quantitative research study to look at views across a wide range of people, and to segment people in terms of their views on taste and standards beyond simple demographics
- Specific research into radio and online, which are relatively under-researched in this area
- More insight on the views of children and young people
- Research into the effect of the 'newer' TV genres e.g. factual entertainment and reality TV
- Research specifically about the BBC's role in this area and viewers' feelings and expectations around different channels and services

It was decided that these research needs would best be met by both a large quantitative study and a more in depth piece of qualitative research. More detail on the methodology of both these projects is summarised in section 4 of this report, and the key research findings from both studies form the basis for Section 4, 'Themes from the research'.

## 2. Summary of the Literature Review

The Steering Group commissioned **Professor Sonia Livingstone**<sup>1</sup> in December 2008 to review all existing literature in the area of taste and standards, both academic and non-academic.

The review, conducted between December 2008 and January 2009 by Professor Livingstone and Ranjana Das, drew mainly on published research from both broadcasters and regulators, as well as on academic research covering a range of platforms and genres. These research studies were mainly published in the UK and primarily in academic publications.

Some of the main themes of the review are summarised below:

- Audience expectations are influenced by a range of factors, including programme genre, channel and timeslot, as well as the social context of viewing e.g. whether with children or grandparents, or with friends
- People expect different content from different channels and views on what is acceptable differs across channels and brands
- People expect higher standards of the BBC, especially of BBC ONE
- The audience is still in the process of understanding some of the newer genres and this can affect their ability to accurately discern the nature of the content e.g. for hybrid genres like 'reality' programmes that combine some aspects of real life with entertainment
- Viewers expect broadcasters to set standards, and not just reflect those of society.
- Perceptions of what is or isn't 'offensive' varies by demographic group, particularly age, gender, generation and parenthood
- Women and older people are more inclined to have concerns in this area, as are those who attach more importance to religion and those with younger children
- Strong language on TV is a significant issue for a majority, particularly in the influence it is perceived to have on children
- Strong language causes most offence if it is used by a person about a group of which the speaker is not a member
- TV is seen to have improved with regard to the use of racial terms
- Concern about sexual content is not as widespread an issue as that of strong language, and there is some evidence of increasing tolerance. The key concern in this area is over the exposure of children to sexual content in the media
- There is overall a need for more research from the audience perspective in this area, particularly around 'newer' areas such as reality shows and online content, and amongst children and young people

---

<sup>1</sup> Sonia Livingstone is Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and author of a dozen books on audiences and new media, including *Harm and Offence in Media Content* (with Andrea Millwood Hargrave, 2nd Edition, 2009, Intellect Press)

## Taste, Standards and the BBC - Key Findings from the Audience Research

A full summary of the review is contained in a separate report.

### 3. Approach to the new BBC research

#### Filling the gaps

In designing the new audience research, we focused on some of the key areas in which Professor Livingstone's report highlighted a relative lack of evidence, and prepared a detailed research brief which we sent to selected qualitative and quantitative research agencies.

Specifically the overall research programme was designed to:

- Speak to both children and adults
- Gain an up-to-date understanding of the influence of viewing context in the case of television, particularly in terms of what platform and channel they are watching on
- Specifically cover the newer hybrid television genres and their potential propensity to offend
- Addressed some of the specific gaps around radio and online
- Use sophisticated analysis to develop a segmentation of the audience in terms of their views on taste and standards that goes beyond more usual demographics

In February 2009, after a detailed pitching process, we appointed Ipsos MORI to carry out the quantitative research and the BLINC partnership to carry out the qualitative research. Both of these agencies have previous experience in researching the area of taste and standards

#### A difficult area to research

This area is one where it can be particularly difficult to convey to the public the scope of the issues we are specifically interested in exploring. When talking to the audience about the issue of taste and standards it is difficult to separate out their views on this area specifically from their wider views on 'standards' around quality of execution or range of choice, or more broadly the answer to the question 'do I like it?'

The word 'offence' is similarly problematic – for example, we know from some research on our internal Pulse Survey that the definition of what constitutes 'offence' can be diverse, ranging from just not liking a particular person through to not liking a particular subject that is covered in the news or in a documentary, as well as the more familiar areas of strong language and sexual content. So, before embarking on the full scale research programme, we undertook a range of pre-testing exercises to make sure that the quantitative survey in particular was as effective and relevant as it could be, and was actually getting at the issues we wanted to cover

Ipsos MORI initially tested the quantitative questionnaire in a series of **cognitive interviews**, where an experienced research moderator took respondents through the questionnaire to assess clarity and comprehension of the language used. This highlighted a significant issue with the specific language used to describe the topic, namely 'taste and standards' in the media, which proved ambiguous to respondents.

After discussion, it was decided to use the phrase '**morality, values and standards of behaviour**' in the media, as this came closest to the area we were interested in exploring.

The cognitive interviews also highlighted problems with the use of the words 'offence', 'offensive' and 'being offended'. We discovered that offence is seen as a strong word (particularly in regards of being personally offended, which is a rarer event than just seeing something that can be deemed 'offensive') and that respondents rarely feel this strongly about content. We realised the importance of capturing the degree and frequency with which respondents may be offended or see something that is offensive, from just mildly perturbed through to being seriously concerned. This discovery in pre-testing ensured that the research not only reflected the relative minority who are seriously offended by content, but also captured a range of milder, but still significant, negative feelings about potentially harmful or offensive content.

As well as pre-testing the quantitative survey interviews, the Ipsos MORI team, members of the Taste and Standards Steering Group and the BBC research team all attended the first qualitative research session. This session was invaluable in raising some of the key issues and also in further demonstrating the language the audience used when talking about taste and standards. These insights helped develop the quantitative survey further.

### **How was the research carried out?**

#### **The Qualitative Research**

The first issue the Blinc Partnership addressed was the need for a wide-ranging and inclusive piece of research; the study had to talk to people with very different cultural and religious sensibilities, with very different media consumption habits, and across a range of ages, life stages and a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds.

To achieve this the research comprised a mixed approach aimed at speaking to people in as honest and realistic a way as possible, allowing their real views to emerge. The methods comprised:

##### Research Labs

These were 2.5 hour sessions with 20 or 30 people in 6 locations (London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Belfast, Leicester and Cardiff). The sessions began with a whole group discussion to set the topic within the context of other issues, and then broke into smaller focus groups to discuss tastes and standards in the media in more detail. The smaller groups also looked at 10 or more clips from TV and radio to illustrate potentially offensive content and stimulate discussion.

##### Household Depth interviews

These lasted 1 hour with the whole household present to understand the family dynamic around consumption of media, what is consumed by whom and how parents feel about what their children consume.

##### School sessions

These were discussions with groups of 6-8 children from the same year group in school

### Social Hubs

These were 30 minute spontaneous 'dips' into a range of real social environments. The moderator arrived unannounced in the pub or place of work to elicit a more informal discussion about the issues and to find respondents who may be rarely picked up by conventional research recruitment

### Community Leader Depth interviews

These were 45 minute one-to-one contacts with people in an influential role within their local community who can reflect the feelings of those they represent as well as their own views on the subject

### Stimulus

The main stimulus used in the qualitative research was a selection of clips from TV and radio which illustrated examples of content that some viewers might find offensive e.g. strong language in a panel show, in a drama and in a reality show; strong language on radio; mild sexual content on TV and radio at a time when children might be listening/ before the watershed; religious comedy; strong sexual innuendo on TV; stereotyping and portrayal of minorities

## The Quantitative Research

Ipsos MORI conducted two surveys across the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) between 7th and 25th March 2009, one among a quota sample of 2,206 adults aged 16 years and over, and the other among 237 young people aged 11-15 years old. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, in home, and the data were weighted to match the profile of the two populations.

The survey in brief covered:

- Contextual questions to see how much of an issue taste and standards in the media is compared to other areas of concern
- Detailed response to their more specific concerns in this area
- Regularity with which the audience has seen/heard content they disapproved of, the intensity of their disapproval, and the nature of the type of content they found offensive
- The audience's opinion of whose responsibility it is to ensure they, or a child, does not see content they may find offensive.
- The audience's perception of the BBC's specific role in terms of taste and standards, and whether it should be held to higher standards than other broadcasters.
- The audience's overall level of satisfaction with BBC TV and radio services compared with other TV and radio services in terms of their standards of morality, values and behaviour.
- The survey also captured extensive demographic data, media consumption data, and attitudes towards taste and standards generally to help in developing a sophisticated audience segmentation in the area of taste and standards (this is work in progress)

## Taste, Standards and the BBC - Key Findings from the Audience Research

Data tabulations and questionnaire are available on request

### **Desk Research**

As well as commissioning these new qualitative and quantitative studies, the BBC Research team also undertook some desk research in this area, including compiling the latest figures on children's **equipment use** and ownership (from Childwise), and establishing **patterns of viewing and listening** across the day, by age group (from BARB and RAJAR).

The **Pulse**, the BBC's own audience feedback survey, was also extensively analysed to gain a snapshot of the specific content on TV and radio that the audience has found offensive and to probe the reasons why.

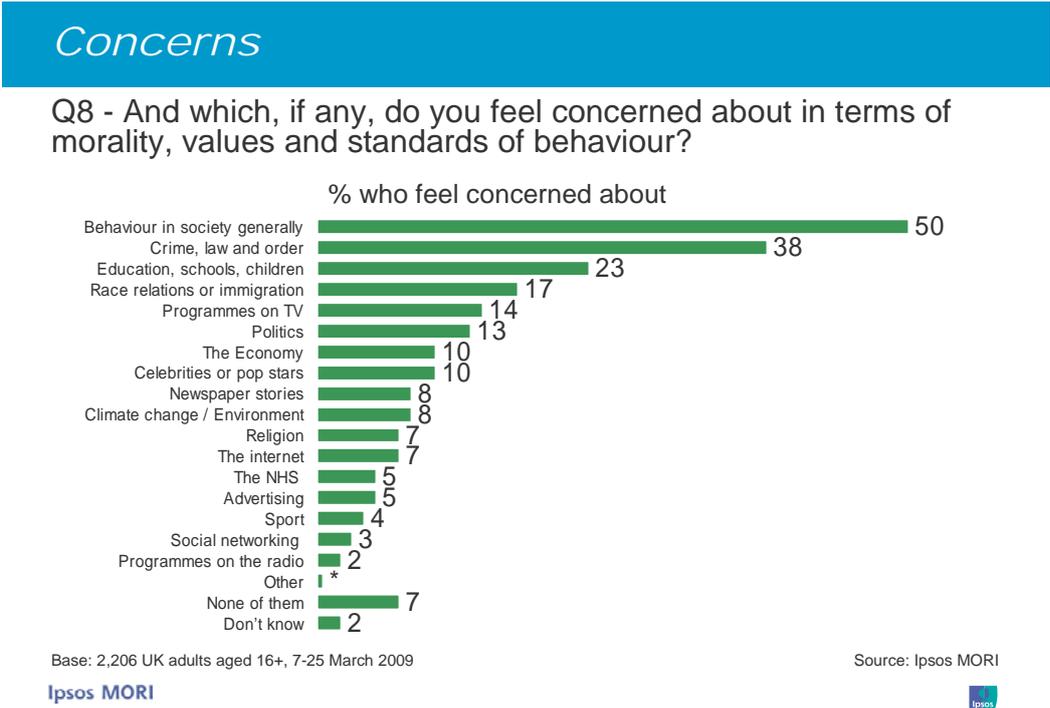
### 4. Themes from the research

Here are the main themes emerging from both strands of the fresh research, set in context where relevant with other research in this area. This section combines the key findings from the Ipsos MORI quantitative research and the Blinc qualitative research to provide an integrated picture across both projects.

**KEY THEME: Morality, values and standards of behaviour in the media in particular are not a top-of-mind concern for the majority of the audience, and the majority is satisfied with what they see and hear on TV and Radio in this area**

This was something that emerged in both the BLINC audience workshops and the Ipsos MORI survey. For example, in the quantitative research just 14% of the audience are concerned about standards of morality, values and behaviour on television (despite programmes on television being one of the subjects they talk most about), 7% on the internet and only 2% on radio, compared to half the audience who say they are concerned about behaviour ‘in society generally’

Figure 1 – Concerns about morality, values and standards of behaviour



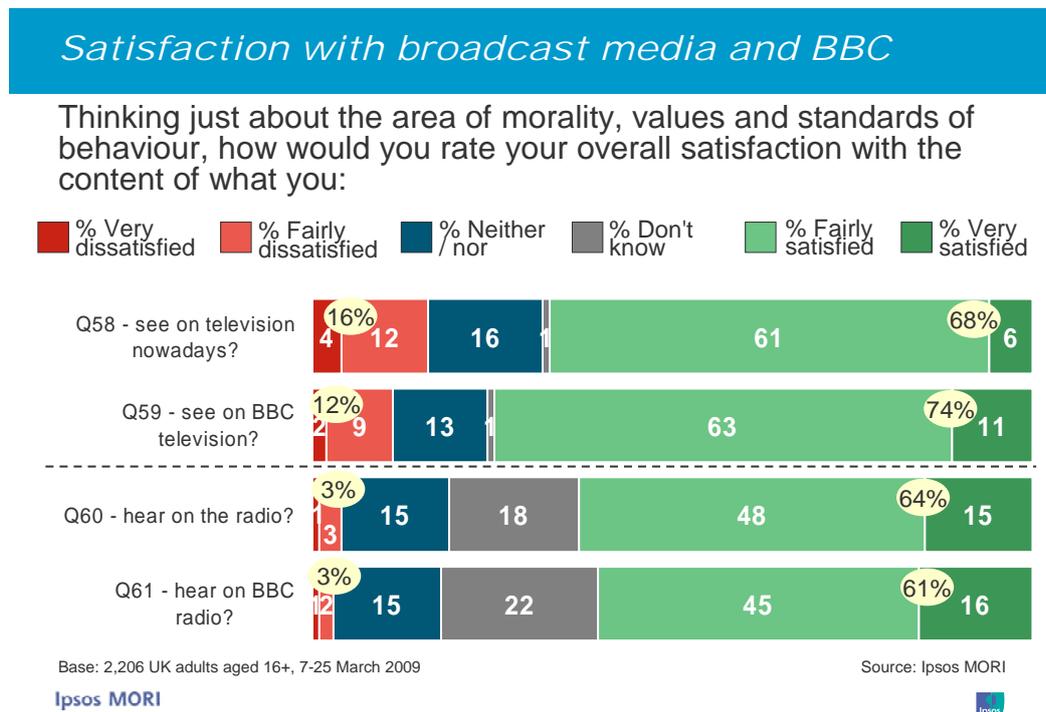
This widespread societal unease about behaviour also came out in the latest British Social Attitudes report published in January this year, where only 40% think that people generally treat each other with respect and consideration in public (Clery and Stockdale, BSA 25<sup>th</sup>), although they had more positive views about their own personal experience.

The quantitative survey reflected other areas where societal concern was fairly widespread - 78% agree that ‘young people today have too much freedom and not enough discipline’ (in BSA two-thirds said young people are the main perpetrators of disrespectful and inconsiderate behaviour) and 87% agreed that ‘nowadays you seem to hear a lot more strong language in public than you used to’.

Broader societal concern about taste and standards was also reflected in the qualitative research, where many expressed a concern that greed, self promotion, materialism and selfishness were taking over as dominant values in society. It's not just concern about the situation as it exists today that emerged – there was also a worry about where things will end up if present trends carry on unchecked.

The relatively low level of specific media concern was also reflected in reported satisfaction with television and radio as a whole in the area of morality, values and standards of behaviour – only 16% were dissatisfied with what they see on television nowadays (and only 4% of them were 'very' dissatisfied) and only 3% on radio. Levels of satisfaction were higher for BBC television than for television as a whole, and about on a par for BBC radio:

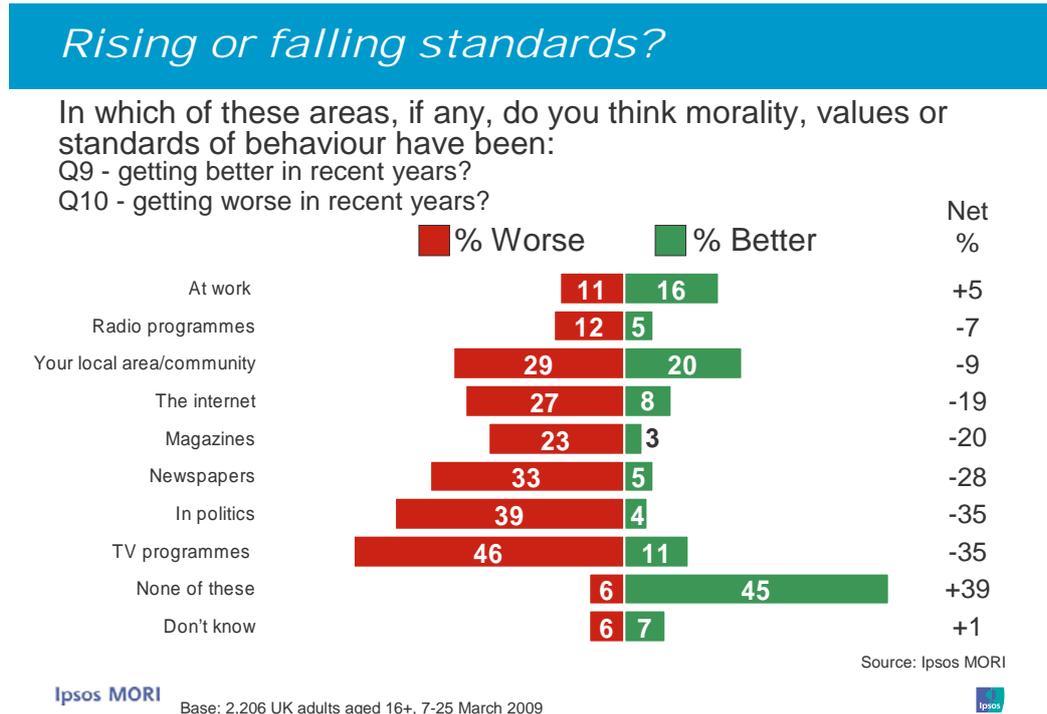
Figure 2 – Overall satisfaction with TV and Radio in area of morality, values and standards of behaviour



**KEY THEME: Where the audience are concerned about the area of morality, values and standards of behaviour on television, this concern often sits alongside wider concerns about falling standards in terms of quality and the over-reliance on reality formats**

In the Ipsos MORI survey nearly half the sample agreed that morality, values and standards of behaviour have been getting worse in TV programmes in recent years (compared to 27% feeling the same about the internet and 12% about radio programmes). However, if we just look at the ratio of those saying 'worse' to those saying 'better' the biggest gap is for newspapers and magazines at around 7 to 1, followed by internet or television at 4 to 1, and radio programmes at 3 to 1.

Figure 3 – Areas where standards are felt to be getting better/getting worse



However, there was strong evidence in the qualitative research that the audience find it hard to distinguish a perception of an *overall* general decline in standards in television programmes from those concerns which are more specifically about taste and morality. In the research discussions reality TV programmes (which in the audience’s mind covers a broad range of television beyond *Big Brother* and *I’m A Celebrity...*) were talked about as having ‘dominated’ television in recent years. Critics, of which there are many (reality shows like ‘Big Brother’ or ‘I’m a Celebrity’ were cited in the Ipsos MORI survey as a type of programme they prefer not to watch by 56% of the public, the highest proportion by far), accuse reality TV of being ‘cheap’ television, and promoting celebrity culture and negative values. There are also concerns that it risks encouraging more negative types of behaviour in society.

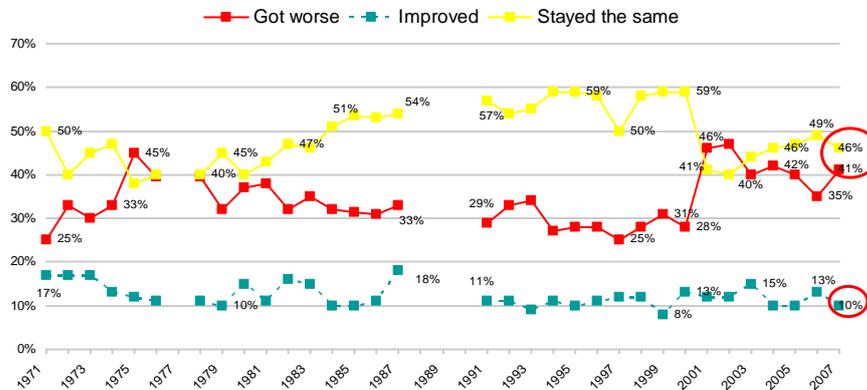
This sense by some that TV as a whole is getting worse nowadays, and not just in terms of its taste and morality, is not a new issue: we see it reflected in other surveys (both about television and other subjects) and in findings across many years of tracking surveys. For example, the OFCOM Residential Tracker shows that around 40% each year say television programmes have ‘got worse’, compared to just under half who say they have stayed the same and 10% say ‘got better’. This level of around 40% saying ‘worse’ has remained fairly consistent over the past few years, having ticked up from around 30% in 2001 with the debate around Brass Eye.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The spike in 2000 is what Ofcom termed ‘the brass eye effect’. In short the fieldwork fell in and around the Brass Eye programme on paedophilia which had a direct effect on the data. (It was after this that Ofcom decided to split the survey into two waves, one wave in spring and the other in autumn in order to try to avoid a repeat of this.)

Figure 4 – OFCOM Tracking on overall TV programme standards

**Trends in public view on overall TV programme standards**

Q. Do you feel that over the past year TV programmes have improved/got worse/stayed the same?



Base: 1,427 UK Adults (2007)

Source: OFCOM Residential Tracker/ITC, The Publics View

Another specific concern amongst some of the audience that emerged in the qualitative research is that with the rapid rise of multichannel television there is an increasing desire by programme makers and broadcasters to ‘turn up the volume’ to be noticed amongst the plethora of choice, which can also result in a greater risk of generating unnecessary offence:

*“It just makes me feel depressed that the people who make the programmes feel they need to do this (swear etc.) to keep their audience. It should be less about them and their audience figures and more about us watching at home” (Woman, 55 +, Cardiff)*

**KEY THEME : In general people value regulation but do not want more censorship of content: they value the creativity and freedom of speech that may sometimes lead to offending some people and, ultimately, feel that it is more their own responsibility than it is that of the broadcasters to ensure they do not see or hear a programme they find uncomfortable or offensive.**

Most do want regulation in the area of television– with 79% agreeing that regulation of what is and what is not allowed to be shown on television is a good thing.

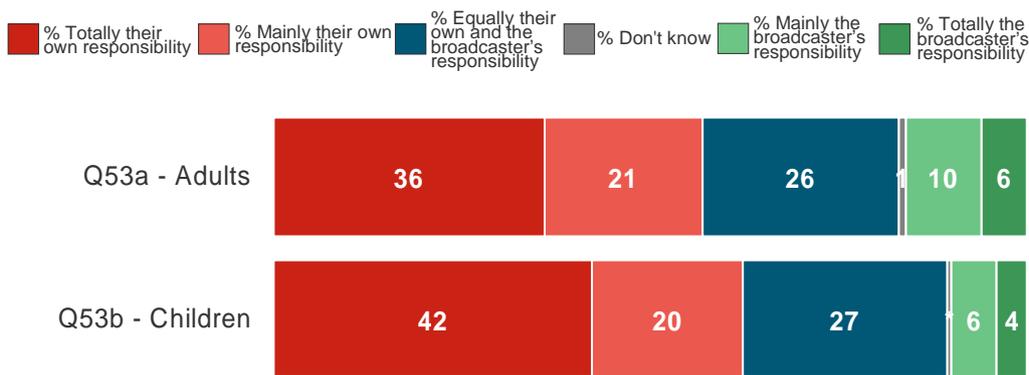
However, this appreciation of the need for regulation doesn’t translate to any strong appetite for censorship in this area – 70% of the population believe that ‘creativity, talent or innovative programmes should be encouraged even if some people might take offence’, and 61% feel the BBC shouldn’t be afraid to show material that some may find offensive. There is also concern about too much ‘political correctness’, with 73% agreeing that ‘people are too easily offended by what some people say’, and 65% agreeing that ‘it is more important to protect freedom of speech than to worry about causing offence to other people’. This raises the possibility that the BBC can upset as many people by being seen as going too far in meeting other people’s concerns as it can by being seen as not going far enough.

One of the reasons that people are fairly tolerant is that most feel it is more their own responsibility than it is that of the broadcasters to ensure they do not see or hear a programme they find uncomfortable or offensive. An even larger proportion feel responsibility for children’s viewing lies more with the parents than with the broadcasters

Figure 5 – Locus of responsibility for avoiding potential offence

*Where does the responsibility lie?*

Q53a/b - Where do you think the responsibility lies for making sure that an adult / a child does not see or hear a programme or content that they might find uncomfortable or offensive / might be unsuitable for someone of their age?



Base: 2,206 UK adults aged 16+, 7-25 March 2009

Source: Ipsos MORI

Ipsos MORI



To this end they generally appreciate warnings before a programme which helps them form their expectations and therefore can mitigate potential offence

**KEY THEME: When prompted, a significant proportion of the audience clearly do have concerns about standards of morality, values and behaviour in the media, including newspapers, magazines, broadcasting and online content**

Although relatively few people say they have concerns in general about morality, values and standards of behaviour in TV programmes (14%), the internet (7%), the radio (2%) or newspapers (8%)<sup>3</sup>, when they are asked about specific items it is clear that concerns exist.

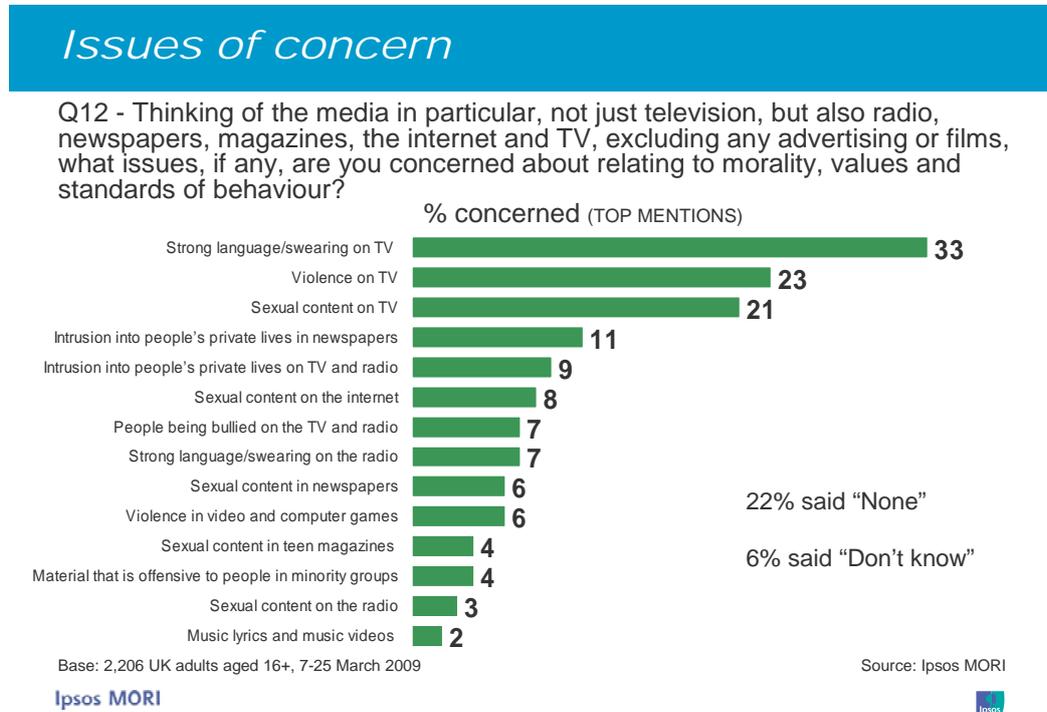
**Types of things that people are concerned about**

To gain a clear assessment of attitudes towards different aspects relating to morality, values and standards of behaviour in the media, and of the salience of these aspects, respondents were asked which issues they were concerned about in two different ways. First, to measure top-of-the-mind concerns and to ensure that their reactions were not being led by any preconceptions, they were asked to spontaneously cite issues that cause them concern (without being shown a list of possible answers or otherwise prompted towards giving any particular response). They were asked to think about the media in particular - not just television, but also to think about radio, newspapers, magazines and the internet and TV, though excluding advertising or films. Although the unprompted question specifically

<sup>3</sup> See Key Theme on p9

made clear that it was about “not just television, but also radio, newspapers, the internet and TV”, the most frequently cited issues by far were those related to television, with a third of the public (33%) concerned about the use of strong language or swearing on TV and almost a quarter mentioning violence on TV (23%), while a slightly lower number mentioned sexual content on TV (21%).

Figure 6 – Unprompted issues of concern in the media relating to morality, values and standards of behaviour



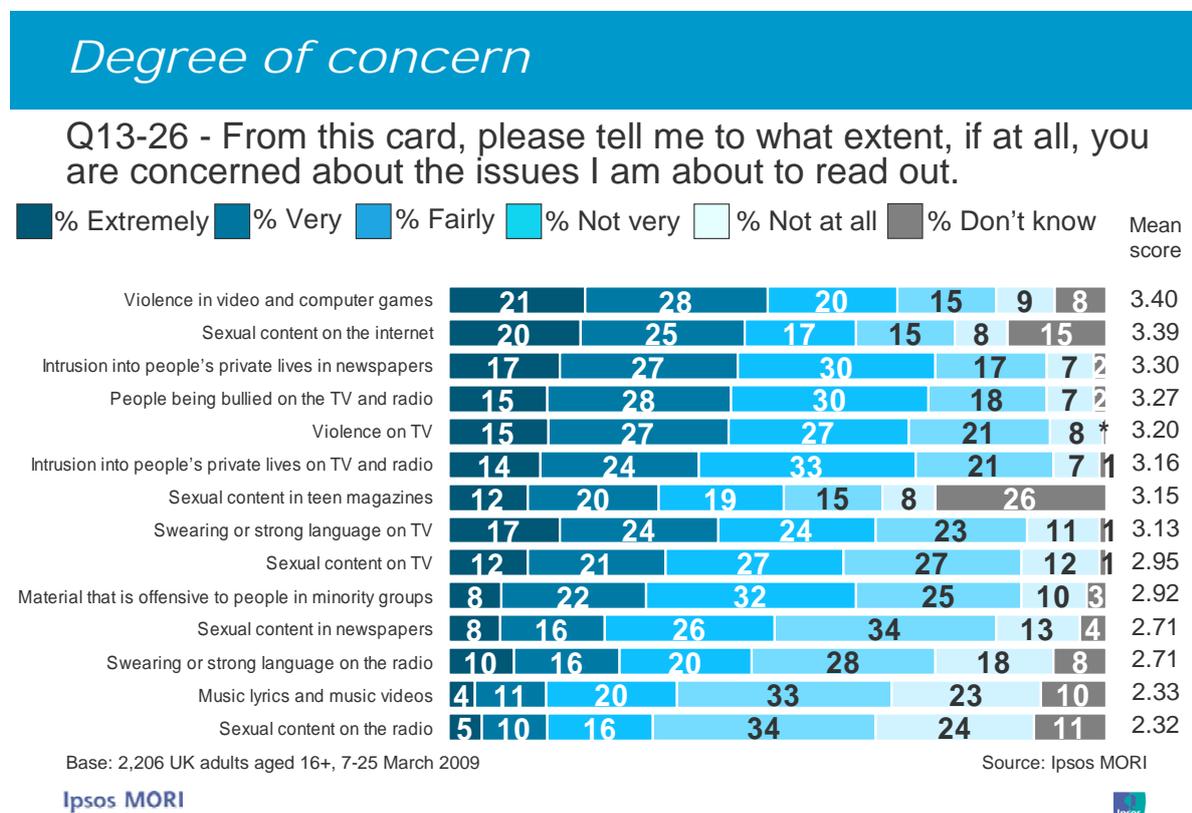
Having answered this open-ended unprompted question, respondents were then shown a list of fourteen issues, and asked to rate their concern about each on a five point scale ranging from “extremely concerned” to “not at all concerned”.

Two topics stand out, ranked as the top two by almost all, and the more noticeable because they scored only moderately as issues of concern using the unprompted question. These are “*violence in video and computer games*” and “*sexual content on the internet*”. These have the two highest mean scores, are the two most frequently named about which respondents are “extremely concerned” and are also in the top two if “extremely concerned” and “very concerned” are combined.

- Unprompted, only 6% cited violence in video and computer games (but when prompted 48% say they are very or extremely concerned) and unprompted only 8% mention sexual content on the internet (whereas with prompting 45% are very or extremely concerned)
- This variation between unprompted (low response) and prompted concern (high response) is true of most types of content on the following chart, with the exception of strong language, sexual content and violence on TV. This suggests that these three issues are most top of mind when people think about what concerns them (and that television in general tends to come most readily to mind when people think in terms of ‘the media’), but that they don’t give the full story in terms of the whole range of public concerns in this area.

- It is also worth noting that the issue of swearing on TV tends to polarise the audience more than violence on TV (there is a significant number who aren't concerned about swearing on TV despite a fairly high level who are concerned) and sex on TV (where there are more unconcerned than there are concerned about the issue).

Figure 7 – Issues of concern in the media relating to morality, values and standards of behaviour



### Focusing on TV and radio

For the purposes of this review we asked the audience some more specific questions around the overall level of offence and concern for television and radio. In the Ipsos MORI survey 50% said they 'personally see or hear things on television which you find offensive'<sup>4</sup> and 40% of the audience reported they had seen or heard something on TV in the last 12 months in this area that they felt should not have been broadcast.

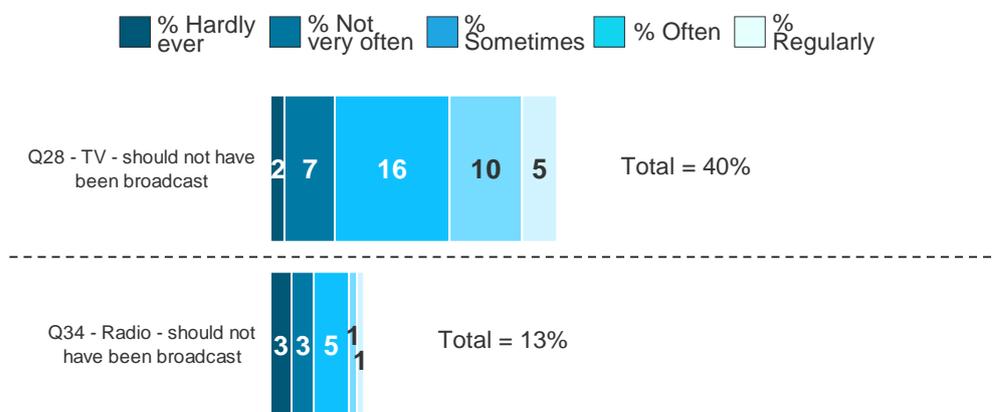
However, this fairly broad group who have seen or heard something they object to falls to 15% who say this has occurred 'regularly' or 'often' in the past 12 months

<sup>4</sup> \*this question is similar to one asked by OFCOM who get a lower level of around 32% - the higher level here could be because the issue has been 'hothouse'd by being asked after other questions about standards. Also, OFCOM's Residential Tracker shows the proportion of the audience who have been offended has remained steady at this level over the last 5 years, and in fact there has been a gradual downward trend over the last 10 years

Figure 8 – Frequency of content that audiences object to being broadcast

**Content that should not have been broadcast: Frequency**

Q28,34 - In the last 12 months how frequently have you seen or heard something on television/radio in the area of morality, values and standards of behaviour that you feel should not have been broadcast on television/radio?



Base: 2,206 UK adults aged 16+, 7-25 March 2009

Source: Ipsos MORI

Ipsos MORI



In the qualitative research discussions, people initially found it difficult to think of specific examples of when they were personally offended by a television or radio programme. However, the content clips we played helped those who were concerned express the types of content they found uncomfortable, unnecessary, or occasionally, offensive and unacceptable, when they are viewing at home.

The issue of what causes offence was also explored in a study on the BBC's own research panel, **The Pulse**, for the week of 9-15<sup>th</sup> February 2009. This research showed that, on average, 2% of any TV programme audience found some content in it offensive (this figure was slightly higher for Channel 4 programmes). It also clearly revealed that the definition of 'offence' in the audience's view is quite diverse, including such things as irritating presenters, political bias, toilet humour, and animals being hurt, as well as the more expected areas of strong language, violence and bullying, and racial, religious and minority stereotyping.

Radio received very little criticism or concern in the area of taste and standards in either of the research approaches. Only 2% were concerned about standards of morality, values and behaviour on the radio, and only 12% felt standards had been slipping in recent years. It emerged in the group discussions that radio listeners have a much more personal relationship with their favourite stations and are therefore more likely to be forgiving of a slip of taste from a familiar presenter.

Radio is also not seen to have the same impact as television in terms of its visibility and social currency and therefore is less likely to receive negative attention when it is felt to have crossed the line.

## Specific areas of Taste and Standards in more detail

Given the focus of this review we explored some of the areas in more specific detail in both parts of the research. These are covered below:

### Violence

Violence is unsurprisingly an area of high concern to the audience, illustrated by it emerging as high on the list of the concerns in the Ipsos MORI survey, and as readily mentioned with strong emotion in the qualitative research. However, to keep this project more focused on the more specific issues of taste and standards we have not included it as a focus in this research study, although we included it for context in the quantitative survey and it emerged spontaneously in the qualitative discussions.

### Aggressive behaviour

More within the scope of the research exercise was the issue of aggressive behaviour in the broadcast media. Although 'people being bullied on the TV and radio' didn't readily emerge as something they spontaneously mentioned in the Ipsos MORI survey (at 7% way behind strong language on TV (33%), violence on TV (23%), and sexual content on TV (21%)), it did emerge as one of the key concerns when prompted, with 43% saying they are extremely or very concerned about it.

Similarly in the qualitative research, although the word 'bullying' was not spontaneously raised as an issue, it became clear that after being prompted about the issue by some of the clips many in the audience do have concerns about the media portrayal of aggressive behaviour. This concern was felt across a range of lifestages). More specifically:

- Aggressive behaviour accompanied by strong language makes both potentially more offensive
- Aggressive behaviour in reality programmes that represent real people arguing to the point of when it can be seen as bullying one another were also considered uncomfortable viewing, and to be potentially promoting a negative view of society and what is acceptable behaviour
- There is particular concern if this type of aggressive behaviour is felt to be by a 'celebrity' who is likely to be seen as a role model by younger people

*'Swearing, nudity, you can explain away; but not bullying, not behaviour like that - what message does that send? Shouldn't be on, shouldn't be on.*

*' (Male, 30s, Leicester)*

A degree of gentle mocking is less seen differently, and providing it is done with humour and warmth that includes the audience, is more readily acceptable to them. Key signals that make this more acceptable are an absence of very strong language and aggression, and the personality of who is doing it.

## **Strong language/ swearing on TV**

This is a fairly large issue of concern for the audience and has also emerged as a key concern in previous research (e.g. OFCOM's Residential Tracker in 2007 showed 55% of viewers felt there was too much swearing on TV, just behind violence and intrusion and way ahead of sex). It also emerged most readily as an example of something they had seen in the past 12 months that they felt shouldn't have been shown on television. However, as noted previously it is also an issue that tends to polarise the audience more than any other.

There are clues in both the quantitative and qualitative research that the nature of how language is used and in what context is of particular concern to the audience and this can either mitigate or exacerbate the level of offence. For example, 62% said it is acceptable to include strong language in TV because 'it reflects how some people speak nowadays', and only 25% disagreed (and only 9% strongly disagreed). However, in both the Pulse and Blinc research the audience expressed a particular concern about 'excessive' swearing, suggesting that the over-use and ubiquity of swearing on TV is what is primarily causing offence rather than just the words per se. Viewers readily talk of 'unnecessary' swearing:

*'There's nothing wrong with the odd swear word, but you hear it all the time these days - everywhere, so when it's on the TV as well, and you think that was unnecessary - you don't think it's offensive, just...you know: why - because it's everywhere else'. (40+ male, South)*

There will be more detail about the effect of context on perceived offence in a later section, but is also worth mentioning here some other issues around the use of language which can also mitigate or exacerbate its use in the audience's view:

- Is it deemed to be editorially necessary?
- Is it part of a genuine emotional outburst and so authentic?
- Was it scripted or live?
- Who is uttering it and in what tone – it is more particularly unsettling for some when used in anger or aggression

*'It wasn't just the swearing, it was the way he said it - it was aggressive, it was nasty'. (Male, 50s, Leicester)*

## **Strong language/ swearing on radio**

As mentioned earlier, concern about swearing on the radio in the Ipsos MORI survey was at a relatively low level. In the qualitative research it emerged that live radio was considered to be less impactful because the medium is more one-on-one, i.e. it is more closely targeting its listeners. People also have a more forgiving, personal relationship with their favourite radio station; a swear word that slips out by mistake was seen to be more quickly overcome with an immediate apology.

*'If they slip up in the radio, they just say 'sorry' and move on.'*

Like the issue of scripting in TV, recorded radio programmes are more problematic, and they are judged more harshly if it is felt the programme could have been edited to remove offensive content. However, this is not a blanket judgement on behalf of the audience - an example of an archive recording of an interview with John Lennon, in which he repeatedly uses the 'f-word' at 9am on Radio 4, was seen as acceptable to most listeners as he clearly uses strong language to express his depth of feeling and those who are familiar with him are more likely to know what to expect.

### **Sexual Content**

Our survey echoed that of OFCOM's 2005 study which found that this isn't as much of a concern to the audience in terms of broadcast content as some of the other areas we explored. Twenty-one percent spontaneously mentioned sexual content on TV as something they were concerned about in the media, falling to 3% for radio. Even with prompting from a list the number who are extremely or very concerned about this was only 33% for TV (8<sup>th</sup> out of 14) and 15% for radio (13<sup>th</sup> out of 14).

Although this is much less of an issue overall the audience does expect such content to be governed by the watershed in regards to television. In the focus groups a clip from a pre-watershed drama which depicted a couple (one a policeman) undressing and having sex, was considered inappropriate viewing pre-watershed by some.

After the watershed, simulated sex and nudity is generally accepted although viewers would expect more explicit content to be later in the evening.

Sexual candour in comedy is largely a matter of taste and, providing it is after the watershed and targeted in its scheduling, does not tend to offend as readily.

Concern about sexual content on the internet is interesting. When initially asked what issues they were concerned about in the media in general in the area of taste and standards it was rarely mentioned spontaneously – by only 8%. However, this may be because it is not readily associated with being 'the media' and is less top of mind than television. When asked to say which from a list they were concerned about (see previous chart) it emerged as second only to violence in video and computer games. This echoes some of the concerns that parents expressed in the Byron Report where they feel ill equipped and not knowledgeable enough to help their child navigate safely and protect them from potential harm.

### **Material that could be offensive to minority groups**

Very few spontaneously mentioned this as a key concern in the media (4%), although this increased to 30% who are extremely or very concerned when prompted (and a further 32% who are fairly concerned) so it is not an insignificant issue. When asked to think of specific examples of what material they had objected to being broadcast on TV in the past 12 months material that is offensive to minority groups was mentioned by 16% (or 6% of all respondents, while 14% mentioned religious humour or treatment of religion (around 6% of respondents overall)).

In the main, the audience in the qualitative research felt that the media has improved in terms of its treatment of minority groups, which echoes the findings of the Literature Review. However, although incidents may be seen to be infrequent, when they do occur they are

likely to cause great offence to those being attacked, and great surprise amongst the wider audience.

### **Offensive humour**

Concern about the issue of 'offensive humour' more generally also emerged in the Ipsos MORI survey, and at a higher level than just in regard to minority groups. Of those who agreed that they had seen or heard something in the past 12 months on TV which they had objected to being broadcast, around one third of respondents mentioned 'offensive humour', which was second only to strong language and almost on a par with sexual content (this represents 13% of all respondents). The equivalent figure for radio was 31% of those who had heard something they objected to (representing 4% of all respondents).

### **Intrusion**

Given the nature of the Ross/Brand incident it is worth touching on how the audience feel about this area. It is one of significant concern to many in the audience – OFCOM figures show that as many as 59% say there is too much 'intrusion into other people's lives' on television, on a par with violence and swearing and a good way ahead of sex. In our survey too it emerged as an issue, and more so with newspapers than the broadcast media – intrusion into people's private lives in newspapers and TV/radio were the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> out of 14 most spontaneously mentioned in terms of concerns, and 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> when prompted.

**KEY THEME: Age and lifestage in particular go some way to describing who in the audience is more likely to have concerns, but it does not tell the whole story**

### **Age & Lifestage**

This research echoed previous findings in this area that age plays a key driver in a person's propensity to be offended in the area of taste and standards. For example, only three in ten 16-34s say they have seen something on TV that they found offensive, compared to over 70% of those aged 65 plus. The age divide is true across most of the measures in our survey, from views on swearing through to how they feel about whether standards on TV are getting better or worse.

Furthermore, the qualitative research particularly highlighted the greater propensity to be offended amongst those with children than those without. Of particular note was the fact that parents of young children (under 10) were more likely than parents of older children (under 16) to be sensitive to issues of tastes and standards.

### **Attitudes**

As well as looking at the usual demographics, the Ipsos MORI survey respondents were also asked about their key attitudes towards tastes and standards in the media to help in a later segmentation (this is work in progress, but early indications revealed both younger and older groups who have concerns about standards of morality, values and behaviour in the media, particularly in respect of television). This indication of attitudes transcending more usual demographic groups was echoed anecdotally in the qualitative research, where a woman in her 70s, interviewed in her hairdressers, had more in common in terms of her views on taste and standards in the media with her 32 year old hairdresser than with some of her older peers.

The qualitative research also found that there was a 'sensibility' that could transcend age and socio-economic differences and that affects how people felt about the issue of taste and standards in the media. This tended to centre around 'cultural horizons' – those whose horizons are broader and who are more likely to embrace new things and be inquisitive, and those who have somewhat narrower horizons and who are more distrustful of change.

### **Religious affiliation**

Another key differentiator that can transcend age and other demographic differences in determining views about taste and standards in the media is an individual's strength of religious belief. In the Ipsos MORI survey 23% of those who have a religion said that their religion or faith was 'very important' to them, and amongst this group, 21% are concerned about programmes on television and radio in terms of standards of morality, values and behaviour (compared to 14% of the public overall). They are also around twice as likely as the average to be 'extremely' concerned about strong language on television and radio and sexual content on television.

This lack of an overall consensus on what is and isn't offensive makes it more difficult to judge where the 'centre of gravity' of public opinion lies.

**KEY THEME: The context in which potentially offensive content is placed is of paramount importance, and can make the difference between taking offence and not.**

This clearly echoes the findings of other research in this area, in particular the OFCOM research in 2005. Most of the issues of context were derived from the qualitative research where this level of detail could be explored more easily.

### **Channels, brands and broadcasters**

#### **Television**

Although in the audience groups we spoke to much of the audience does retain a perception of BBC ONE as a broad, mainstream, family channel and BBC TWO as a more niche, serious adult channel, there is an emerging tendency for some to experience both channels as broadly mainstream entertainment channels. The sharing of programme brands between the two can support this perception (e.g. Catherine Tate, QI, Little Britain and The Apprentice moving from BBC Two to BBC One), and can also act as a signal to some that BBC One is going to become increasingly 'edgy'.

The audience also has fairly clear expectations of Channel 4 in this area i.e. it is seen as most likely to show programmes which contain stronger content targeting a younger audience. Channel 4 was also most likely to be picked out as the channel that needs to improve its content in terms of morality, values and standards of behaviour (by 29% of the population), and in the Pulse survey incidences of offensive material on Channel 4 were around twice the level of the other terrestrial channels.

However, a theme emerging in this research which may not have been as prevalent in the past, is that channel alone is becoming less of a signal to the type of content to expect. This is as a result of viewers increasingly consuming programme brands on several channels, or recording them on their PVR or watching them on demand which means they can watch them whenever they like, and do not have to be aware of the channel they were originally broadcast on.

### Radio

Radio stations, particularly when looking at just BBC Radios 1-5, remain more clearly defined and understood by their listeners:

Radio 1, amongst the listeners we spoke to, is considered a key station for a broad audience from aged 14-40; and listeners expect a degree of controversy and an occasionally gently mocking tone. Fans of Chris Moyles feel his controversial style usually fits their expectations. However, some parents are more concerned on behalf of their children, particularly on the school run

Radio 2, amongst the listeners we spoke to, is considered to have high standards of morality, values and behaviour.

Radio 4, amongst the listeners we spoke to, is also considered to have high standards of morality, values and behaviour, although its listeners are more likely to find the occasional use of strong language or sexual reference acceptable if the programme requires it.

### Time of day/ day of the week

The television watershed is well recognised and understood and considered the most effective tool in signalling to audiences about what content to expect (OFCOM research in 2008 found 92% are aware of the watershed, falling to around 81% who correctly know when it is).

Many people in the qualitative research, however, did comment on what they perceived when prompted to be a sometimes abrupt shift from pre-watershed content to post-watershed content at 9pm, and felt this could perhaps be done more subtly, by content slowly increasing in its adult themes leading up to 10pm. Saturday night on BBC1 was commented on as a place where they felt this was already happening (and some would like it even more so), when children and young people are more likely to stay up later and watch television with their parents.

Indeed, the BARB viewing figures show that there are clearly younger people watching beyond the 9pm watershed<sup>5</sup>. We also know from both Childwise and our own research amongst children that most children have a TV in their bedroom, and 43% have multichannel TV in there as well.

---

<sup>5</sup> there are around 600,000 6-11 year olds watching TV on a weeknight between 9 and 10pm (14%) and closer to 900,000 12-17 year olds (over 20%), and even more on a Saturday night (BARB)

Furthermore, time-shifted viewing is presenting an increasing issue in terms of the effectiveness of the watershed as a form of guidance. Many of our research sample expressed concern about the availability of post-watershed content via the i-player, and the parental controls, which might mitigate concern, are little understood. This finding chimes with the Byron Report which discovered only half of families with the internet at home have parental control software and that, in general, there is a high need for better understanding and awareness of these devices.

### **Genres and programme type**

Some programme titles and genres are felt to give the audience more clues than others that the content may include strong language or other content that may offend.

### **Comedy**

This is such a wide-reaching genre, from mainstream family comedy, to edgy, niche comedy, that it is difficult to make generalisations about the audience's expectations of content. Furthermore, opinions of 'offensiveness' in this area are often very subjective and a matter of personal taste, more than for other types of programmes, and most say comedy comes with 'it's own licence'. However, in the qualitative research there were some common themes that emerged:

Strong language can add to a joke's impact. It also has the potential to push away certain audience groups who may want to watch it.

Certain comedians and comic actors carry with them expectations of edgy content; those who like this know what to expect; those who don't know to avoid them

Less well established comedians or new series on mainstream channels are felt to have to earn the right to push the boundaries of tastes and standards, through gaining the audience's trust.

Panel shows are generally admired, particularly the wit and improvisational skill displayed by some of the key practitioners. However, some of the humour on comedy panel shows was perceived by a few to be based on a laddishness and 'dominated by point scoring males'.

### **Soaps**

Some in our qualitative research sample raised the issue of soaps in this area, as they are scheduled pre-watershed but are seen to often address post-watershed issues. This can lead to 'uncomfortable' viewing for some, who are uneasy about explaining these adult themes to children (although we know from other research that many also appreciate the opportunities that soaps give to help explain difficult issues to children).

## **Reality**

This genre is perceived by many to contribute to the sense that standards of behaviour in society are slipping; or, at the very least, by reflecting the more negative side of society, it does not help to improve it.

Strong or offensive language is more acceptable if the 'real life' presented is considered 'authentic'. If there is any suspicion of manipulation of the protagonists by the production team, viewers feel the use of strong language is gratuitous and cynical to gain attention.

## **Drama**

Like comedy, this is a very wide-reaching genre, but unlike comedy, it is less likely to be purely taste-driven. A drama on BBC ONE, in particular, is likely to attract a broad audience, and so increase the potential for unintentional offence.

As a rule, strong language or other potentially offensive content in a drama is acceptable if it is considered integral to a character or to drive the narrative. For example, a post-watershed crime drama is likely to depict criminals who are likely to use strong language and to engage in activities some might consider offensive e.g. drug taking or bullying.

## **Documentaries**

In some ways this is the genre that is least problematic for the audience. Although viewer's expectations depend on the subject matter of the documentary, strong language or other scenes which some may find offensive are considered acceptable if they are felt to be accurately reflecting the real life subject matter.

There is some concern that documentary subjects can sometimes focus on the extreme to attract audiences, and that in some cases the line between reality TV and documentaries is becoming blurred.

## **Other important factors governing audience expectations:**

### **Heritage**

Audiences are more forgiving and accepting about potentially offensive content if they perceive the programme to have 'earned the right'. For example, *Have I Got News for You* is a long running show for which the audience has great affection and therefore greater tolerance of the occasional stronger joke or swear word.

### **Talent**

Audiences have certain expectations of certain talent. This can be both positive, for fans, and negative, for detractors. People who enjoy watching them or listening to them, feel they know what to expect from them and forgive them the occasional joke in poor taste or strong language. Others can enjoy their programmes but sometimes feel pushed away by what is seen as their strong language or offensive comedy.

## Taste, Standards and the BBC - Key Findings from the Audience Research

Also, talent that is trusted and loved by the audience can usually push the boundaries a little more before causing offence than a new performer can.

*'I say I mind the swearing, but I'm not sure I do, when you say those names: I love like Paul Merton, I quite like Frankie Boyle – I like the show; Jonathan Ross is so fast, his wit – we SKY+ him when we're away.'*

*(Male, 75, south)*

This was best expressed by someone in the research that potentially questionable behaviour is more readily acceptable when someone has a 'twinkle in their eye' rather than any aggression.

### **Quality**

The audience make a clear distinction between a programme they perceive to be good quality and one that is not. Those programmes considered 'quality' are able to present potentially offensive content in a way that does not offend people. For example, an excerpt from the drama 'Fiona's Story' which contained the c-word, did not offend any of our research sample because the word was considered necessary to convey the drama and the drama overall was considered very high quality. For comedy, something that is deemed to be funny is given a lot more licence to potentially offend than something which is not seen to be very good

*'I know a lot of people would expect me to be shocked by bad language or sex on TV but I'm not really. It's a reflection of what real life is like now. I'm more concerned that the BBC might feel inhibited or stop making good quality programmes – it's the quality of the stuff on TV that bothers me more'* (Anglican priest, 32, London)

### **'Is it necessary?'**

In all cases of stronger content, the audience asks itself this question, either consciously (if the answer is likely to be 'no') or subconsciously (if the answer is likely to be 'yes')

Again and again in the qualitative research, the audience who were concerned used the phrase 'is it necessary?' when discussing potentially offensive content. They want to feel the programme makers have thought carefully about the inclusion of any strong content and considered whether it adds to the overall enjoyment of a programme; whether it is adding essential narrative or character detail to a drama, enhancing a joke in a comedy or panel show, or adding realism to a factual programme.

**KEY THEME: The audience tends to have higher expectations of the BBC and in general, the BBC performs well in the audience’s perceptions of standards of morality, values and behaviour, compared to other channels and broadcasters.**

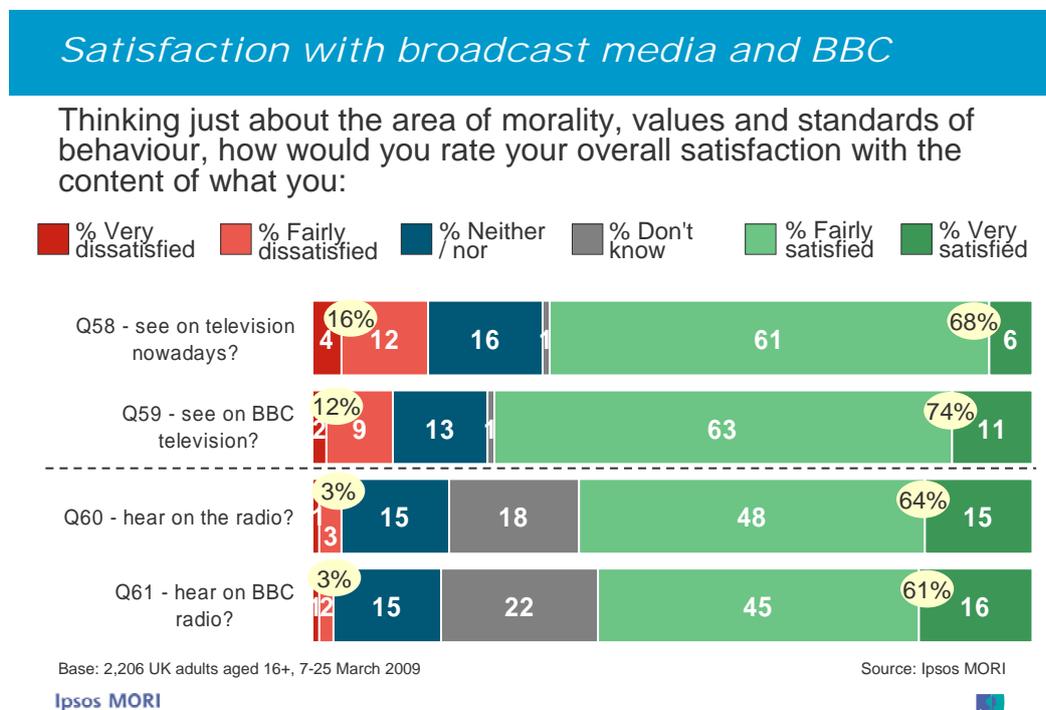
There is no question that the audience apply different criteria when judging the BBC in the area of taste and standards:

- a slight majority (55%) feel that the BBC should have higher standards than other broadcasters, and only one in four disagree
- even more (80%) feel the BBC should aim to reflect the positive side of British society (some in the qualitative research talked about it as a 'safe haven')
- there are higher quality expectations

*“I understand the BBC has to be competitive, but that doesn't mean it has to have the (lower) standards of the others - that doesn't follow (Male, 20s, Scotland)*

Despite being judged to this higher standard there is evidence that these higher expectations of the BBC are generally being met on both television and radio. In the Ipsos MORI survey a clear majority are satisfied with BBC TV and radio in this area - and only 12% are actively 'dissatisfied' with BBC TV. This is higher than satisfaction with TV as a whole:

Figure 2 – Overall satisfaction with TV and Radio in area of morality, values and standards of behaviour



BBC1 and BBC2 are seen by the majority of the audience to have high standards (way ahead of the other channels) – 61% for BBC1 and 56% for BBC2 – the next closest is 31% for ITV1.

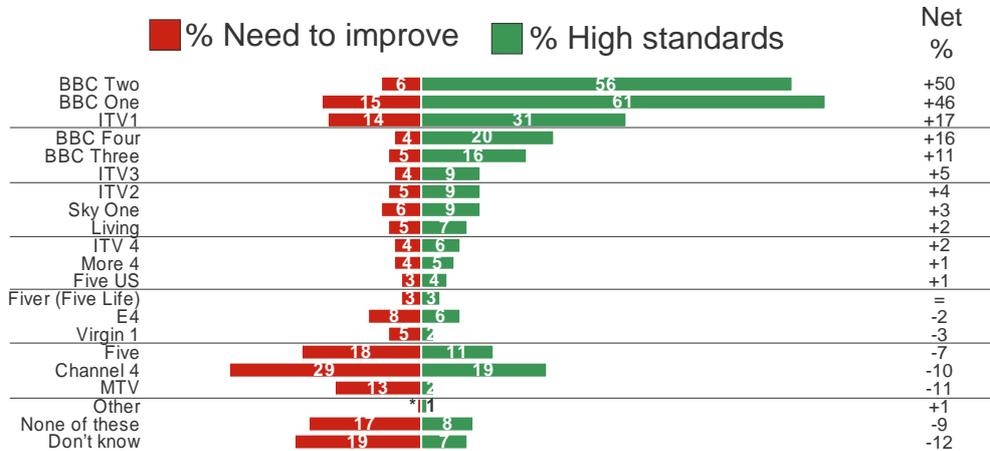
Figure 9 – Opinion of TV channels in the area of morality, values and standards of behaviour

## High or low standards?

Thinking of the different TV channels and the content of their programmes, which ones on this card, if any, do you think are:

Q41 - currently the most likely to have high standards in terms of morality, values and standards of behaviour?

Q42 - the ones which most need to improve their content in terms of morality, values and standards of behaviour?



Base: 2,206 UK adults aged 16+, 7-25 March 2009

Source: Ipsos MORI

Ipsos MORI



This was reflected in the qualitative research where the majority (particularly of the over 40s) felt that the BBC does have higher standards than the other broadcasters.

BBC radio also tends to get strong endorsement (particularly Radio 2 and Radio 4) although there is a significant number who think Radio 1 needs to improve in this area

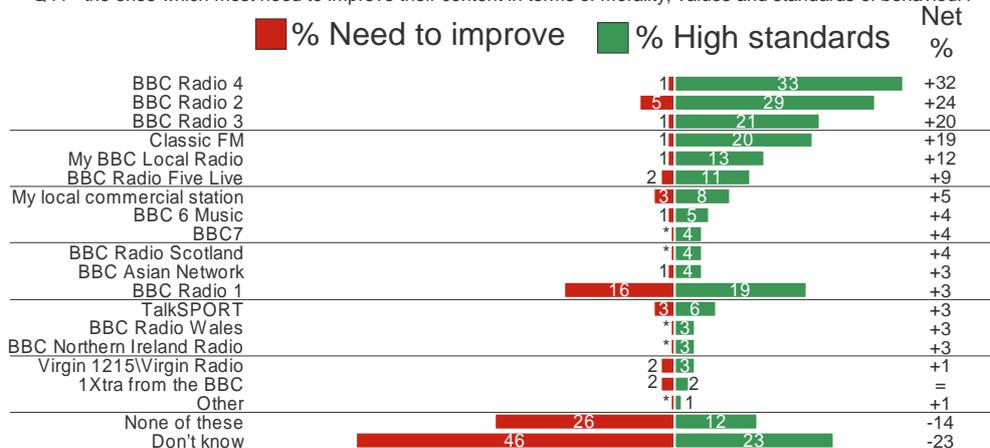
Figure 10 – Opinion of radio stations in the area of morality, values and standards of behaviour

## High or low standards?

Thinking of the different radio stations and the content of their programmes, which ones on this card, if any, do you think are:

Q43 - currently the most likely to have high standards in terms of morality, values and standards of behaviour?

Q44 - the ones which most need to improve their content in terms of morality, values and standards of behaviour?



Base: 2,206 UK adults aged 16+, 7-25 March 2009

Source: Ipsos MORI

Ipsos MORI



## Taste, Standards and the BBC - Key Findings from the Audience Research

The two main reasons cited by respondents for Radio 1 needing to improve in the area of standards of morality, values and behaviour (investigated in a separate follow-up BBC survey to the main fieldwork) were around 'Swearing/strong language' (cited by 17%) and 'Offensive humour' (cited by 12%).