

# **PUBLIC ATTITUDES, TASTES AND STANDARDS**

## **A Review of the Available Empirical Research**

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## **1. BACKGROUND**

The BBC's Editorial Guidelines on Harm and Offence state that "Different words cause different degrees of offence in different parts of the world. So a person's age, sex, education, employment, belief, nationality, and where they live, all impact on whether or not they might be offended." The Ofcom Broadcasting Code, incorporating the Cross-promotion Code, emphasises the role of 'context' in its guidelines. Context is taken to include editorial content, service and time of broadcast, adjacent programmes, the likely degree of harm and offence, audience composition and potential effects (Ofcom 2008). Both documents recognise the difficulty of understanding when, how and why audiences form particular, often divergent expectations and judgments of such fluid and relative matters as taste and standards.

Broadcasting and regulatory bodies in the UK have long investigated public perceptions of decency, standards and offence in the media, examining attitudes towards such issues as swearing, sexual content and stereotyping through their programmes of social research (Ofcom 2005; Millwood Hargrave 2000; Sancho and Wilson 2001; Sancho 2003). In 2009, following a year of intense public debate around issues of taste and decency on television, a review of available research on audience perceptions of tastes and standards is called for to guide new empirical research and to inform policy recommendations. This literature review asks:

- What does research tell us about audience attitudes on matters of tastes and standards?

It draws both on the broadcaster and regulator research noted above and also on academic research covering a range of platforms and genres, mainly published in the UK and primarily in academic publications. The review especially focuses on selected studies since overall there is relatively little available empirical research on audience attitudes to taste and standards. Notably, despite a sustained body of textual analyses of media content (some of which are noted in what follows), few researchers have directly investigated audience perspectives. Thus the conclusions of this review are indicative rather than definitive, aiming also to identify gaps in the evidence base and productive directions for future empirical research.

To gather the evidence, this review has encompassed research in media and communications, sociology, anthropology, marketing and consumer studies. It thus includes studies employing diverse methods. The literature has been located following bibliographic searches of the ISI Web of Science database, citation indices for the social sciences and humanities, search engines focused on scholarly publications, the catalogue of holdings at the University of London Union List of Serials and the electronic catalogue at the British Library of Economic and Political Science. Non-academic sources draw from reports generated through the Office of Communications, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Independent Television Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority.

The review was conducted between December 2008 and January 2009.

## **2. SUMMARY**

### **Aims**

- To provide an up to date review of available UK audience research on tastes and standards.
- To include empirical research investigating audience attitudes towards appropriateness of language, sexual content and stereotypes in media content across a range of genres and media.
- To account for divergences in audience attitudes according to gender, class, age, ethnicity, disability and so forth.
- To flag important issues to direct future empirical research.

### **Scope**

- The review examines audience attitudes and preferences regarding the appropriateness of content.
- It focuses on rigorous, publicly available research (articles and reports), most of it published in the current decade, while contextualising this within the broader tradition of audience research.<sup>1</sup>
- It largely focuses on British research (typically that in which the programmes studied or audience members interviewed have been British).<sup>2</sup>
- It does not consider the possible harmful consequences of viewing certain contents (see Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone, in press), though it is worth noting that one reason why audiences take offence at certain representations (such as stereotypes of their own social group) is because they believe they will influence others.

### **Main Findings**

- **Limitations on Empirical Research:**
  1. Although there has been a sustained academic interest in media content, resulting in a studies originating from a range of critical positions - for instance, studies that offer critiques of humour (e.g. Lockyer and Pickering 2008), most of these do not directly include audience responses to such content. Such evidence as exists tends to derive from projects mainly focused on other, albeit related questions;
  2. There has been more qualitative research, providing in-depth analyses of why people respond to content as they do, than quantitative research with large-scale samples or research using mixed methods;
  3. There is little comparative research that contextualises attitudes towards offence, decency and standards or that compares findings across a range of social groups or media platforms;

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<sup>1</sup> Media and communications research has long investigated audiences' reception of media content. This has revealed the active, selective and engaged nature of media use. Audiences have often, though not always, been shown to be critical and even resistant to media content, and to be self-directed in their media use (see Livingstone 1998; Abercrombie and Longhurst, 2005; and Barker, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Instances of research from other countries are drawn on occasionally but note that media environments differ hugely, as do programming practices, content patterns and audience contexts; therefore not all comparisons may be useful.

- **Insights from Academic Audience Research:**

1. Audience expectations diverge across genres, channels and media;
2. Much research focuses on the audiences of specific genres (soap opera, news);
3. There is little research available for non-factual programmes on television including comedy and reality shows, or for newer genres, platforms and formats; this paucity of research holds both for content and audience research.
4. Audiences vary in what they find acceptable according to their social context of viewing;
5. Ethnicity and gender are by far the most researched attributes of audiences;
6. Adults' tastes and expectations are far more researched than those of young people.

- **Insights from Non-Academic Research:**

1. Programming context (i.e. the watershed, timeslots, adjacent programmes, genre) is important, with family programmes, factual genres and family hours receiving the greatest amount of public concern;
2. Viewing context (i.e. social locations of viewers, single person or family viewing situations) also greatly affects definitions of offence and attitudes to content;
3. Certain terms and certain stereotypes (usually to do with racism and sexual acts) appear most likely to cause offence across most demographic groups;
4. Audience expectations vary across media brands, with the highest expectations for factual genres, mainstream brands and broad-based channels;
5. Multi-platform and multi-generic research is hard to find, especially at the level of large-scale and/or triangulated projects.

### **Implications for Future Research**

1. Empirical research must engage with two distinct definitions of 'context', the first being the context of the programme and the second the context of viewing, in order to understand not just why some content may be more offensive on some programmes/genres than others, but also why it may be more offensive to some people/groups more than others;
2. More mixed methods research is desirable in order to aid generalisability and comparability of findings without compromising on in-depth contextualisation.
3. Age, generation and other divisions among audiences need greater amounts of focused research;
4. Young people and child audiences should be included in future research provided that research recognizes the differences in expectations and experiences across the stages of childhood, and indeed between children and young people;
5. Research on the expectations of widely researched televisual genres (such as soaps) must now be complemented by research on the reception of highly popular genres such as comedy and lifestyle as it can be these that offend;
6. Research needs to be geared towards a multi-platform and multi-generic media environment, including online genres.

### **3. AUDIENCE ATTITUDES TOWARDS TASTE AND STANDARDS**

#### **Review of the Empirical Evidence**

##### What Causes Offence?

Academic studies provide only limited findings regarding audience judgements of offence, these tending to emerge from studies primarily concerned with other issues. However, repeated surveys of audiences, generally conducted by media/regulatory organizations, reveal that audiences diverge considerably in what qualifies as offensive language. As a BBC host writes,

“Some of the most striking things are the continuing support for the watershed, the different responses of older and younger correspondents and the extraordinarily wide range of potentially offensive words... And the audience seems to have different expectations of different channels.” (Bolton 2006: 48)

The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) conducted extensive research on public attitudes towards offensive content while revising its guidelines in 2000. This was followed up by further research in 2005 which revealed the degrees of importance attached to various issues often found offensive in films (BBFC, 2005)

- Drugs and drug taking – 75%
- Violence – 65%
- Sexual activity – 56%
- Swearing and offensive language – 49%
- Racial references – 46%
- Religious references – 34%

Further research, as summarised in Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone (in press), reveals the following:

- Ofcom’s 2006 ‘Communications Market Report’ shows that 75% have never found anything on radio to be offensive, and that of those who had been offended, half (53%) felt the offensive material should not have been broadcast, while one in three felt that it should have been; those offended generally turned off the radio (44%) or tuned to a different channel (29%).
- However, the Listening 2000 survey found that 40% of commercial radio listeners had been offended by radio content, particularly the treatment of callers by presenters (19%), swearing/offensive language (14%) and racism (14%) (Millwood Hargrave, 2000b).
- Less common causes of offence include insensitivity (10%), disrespect for moral/religious beliefs (9%), sexual innuendo (6%), song lyrics (5%) and sexual explicitness (5%).
- As a consequence, 31% of those offended had turned off the radio, 31% had changed the channel, and 6% had taken some other action (Advertising Standards Authority, n.d.).<sup>3</sup>

A Dutch study on audience responses to offensive content on screen offers an instance of academic research focused specifically on attitudes towards tastes and

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<sup>3</sup> Note that broadcast versions of music generally lack the explicit lyrics of that bought over the counter.

standards (Heuvelman, Peeters et al. 2005). Based on a survey of 495 people it presents a quantitative (factor) analysis of negative reactions classifying them as:

- Reactions concerning programme contents that conflict with viewers' values and norms of what should be permitted on television and which lead to the judgment 'intolerable'
- Reactions concerning programme contents that conflict with viewers' values and, amplified by negative emotions, lead to 'irritation'
- Reactions concerning programme contents that conflict with viewers' values and, amplified by strong negative emotions, lead to a state of 'being shocked';
- Results reveal that within the factor 'offensive behaviour', Dutch viewers especially worry about strong language, cursing, and blasphemy, and far less about sex and nudity.

Audiences vary amongst themselves. Further analysis of Heuvelman, Peeters et al's (2005: 335) findings shows interesting relations among content types and audience characteristics:

- Being shocked by programs correlates significantly with the viewer's sex (women are often more shocked than men)
- Considering a program intolerable with the viewer's age (older viewers are more likely to find programs intolerable than younger ones)
- Being irritated with the viewer's level of education (higher educated viewers are more inclined to being irritated than lower educated viewers)
- Being shocked by programs correlates significantly with a viewer's religion: Viewers who attach more importance to religion are more easily shocked by television, especially Roman Catholics and Protestants.

Extending this differentiation within audiences, we note the recent survey results from a sample of 2062 people from the UK YouGov report (2008). This reveals that:

- Graphic violence, sick jokes, aggressive behaviour and swearing are all found offensive more by women and older people above the age of 55 than by men or by younger audiences.
- While there is overall disagreement that television content is too violent, more men (60%) and young people disagree that it is too violent, while more women (53%) and older audiences (above the age of 55) agree that television content is indeed too violent.
- These findings match the Dutch study cited above as this also found that women and older viewers are more likely to find a programme more offensive and/or intolerable.
- The YouGov survey also reports findings across diverse geographical regions in the UK but the figures do not vary substantially; however, graphic violence, swearing and sick jokes seem to offend a greater number of people in the rest of the South than in other parts of the country.

## Key Findings

- Audiences diverge considerably in what counts as offensive content. Research within and outside the academy has repeatedly produced results that demonstrate this divergence.
- Research reveals the importance of demographic factors in what is found offensive by whom. Age, gender, generation, parenthood are some of the most important factors in terms of what affects audience perceptions of offensive content.
- Women and older audiences are usually more likely to find strong content more offensive than men or younger viewers.
- Drugs, violence, sex, racist content or content that discriminates on the basis of religion are some of the things that offend most often.

## **4. AUDIENCE ATTITUDES TOWARDS INAPPROPRIATE LANGUAGE**

### **Review of the Empirical Evidence**

#### **The Textual Analysis and the Implied Audience**<sup>4</sup>

Academic research dealing with language has generally addressed swearing, verbal abuse and use of profanity in the media. Much of this is textual analysis<sup>5</sup> exploring the number of swear words uttered by television characters or characters in advertisements, quantitative counts of the number of terms deemed offensive in programmes broadcast on specific channels at specific times in the day, and similar work on provocative advertising and other media content (Kaye and Sapolsky 2001; Sapolsky and Kaye 2005; Fitzgerald 2007).

In the USA, content analysis shows that the use of 'offensive language' has increased across all programmes in the four years since the introduction of age and content ratings in 1997 (Kaye and Sapolsky, 2004). But textual studies,<sup>6</sup> while valuable, do not necessarily reveal audience responses to content and may even make misleading assumptions about how media content is received by its viewers.

#### **Findings from Audience Research**

Hanley (2000: 4) reported a national survey conducted in 2000 designed to inform revisions of BBFC guidelines. It investigated public attitudes towards a range of issues, including bad language and sexual content (see below), finding that:

- 56% of the national sample agreed that "young people use bad language because of what they hear in films and videos"
- 48% of the national sample thought that the language guidelines were "about right"
- Both sets of juries were concerned about bad language, especially in the junior categories
- 46% of the national sample agreed that "people over 18 have a right to see graphic portrayals of real sex in films and videos"
- 54% of the sample thought that the guidelines for sex were "about right".

Using a mixed methods approach that focused on a range of issues to do with sexual content across a wide selection of media, Millwood Hargrave (2000) found that

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<sup>4</sup> See Livingstone (1998) for a discussion of the 'implied audience', namely those assumptions about the interests, views and knowledge of audiences that is built, sometimes explicitly but more often tacitly or inadvertently, into media production, content and scheduling. The relation between the implicit audience and actual audiences can only be tested empirically, because "it has been established that audiences are plural in their decodings, that their cultural context matters and that they do not always agree with textual analysis" (p.195).

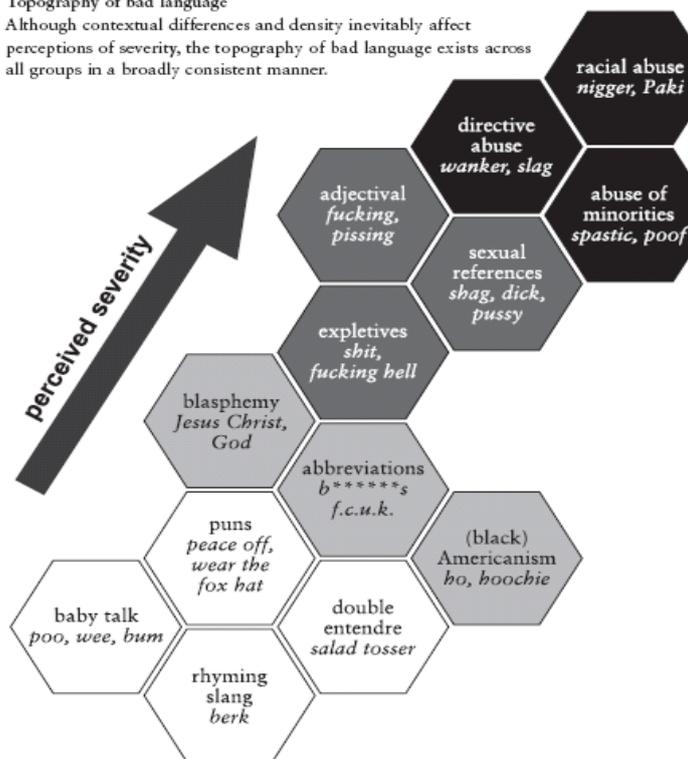
<sup>5</sup> Generally, media content is analysed in the academy through content analysis (see Rosengren, 1981; Kepplinger, 1989) or discourse analysis (see Fairclough, 1992; Wodak and Meyer, 2001). While the former involves the quantitative analysis of media content, the latter is qualitative. Neither addresses the process of audience reception of media content or how audiences diverge in their interpretations.

<sup>6</sup> These studies are often concerned with the timing of slots during which offensive words occur; hence much research is directed at analysing the content of school-run programmes, family hour television, breakfast programmes, the lyrics of songs on offer on radio channels and so on. Kaye and Sapolsky's content analyses of offensive words spoken on television programmes conclude that situation comedies and reality television were more likely to contain offensive words and that main characters were often the sources of crude words (Kaye and Sapolsky, 2005) While content analysis provides valuable results, only audience research reveals how audiences receive content considered offensive.

certain words are far more offensive than others; her topography of what is considered bad language is reproduced below.

#### Topography of bad language

Although contextual differences and density inevitably affect perceptions of severity, the topography of bad language exists across all groups in a broadly consistent manner.



Millwood Hargrave's report also makes clear that expectations vary across channels, the highest expectations being placed on the BBC (as a 'mainstream' channel) while expectations are lower (and the acceptability of sexual content and/or swearing somewhat higher) for channels targeted towards the adult population or other non-BBC channels (see later section on genres and channels).

These findings are confirmed by a subsequent report by Ofcom (2005) on language and sexual content. Qualitative research sought audience responses to offensive language, revealing that attitudes towards what counts as offensive change over time, repeated and unnecessary verbal abuse was undesirable, bleeping does not necessarily reduce offence, family programmes and viewing times should be given more care with regard to offence, verbal abuse in society is perhaps more acceptable than being highlighted in the media. Findings are summarised below (p. 24):

- For the majority, strong language on television is an issue;
- Broadcasters are thought to have a duty to set standards, rather than just reflect society;
- A small minority said that there is little or no language on television which offends them or is inappropriately timed;
- Some put forward the view that television has improved with regard to the use of language, particularly with regard to racial terms;
- The strongest reason given for concern over strong or offensive language was the influence it is believed to have on children and the possibility that they may imitate it;

- There was also a concern, expressed by all ages but especially among British Asian women, about offensive language in family settings.

Interestingly, research with audiences reveals that words may be considered most offensive if they are used about groups of which the speaker is not a member (Ofcom 2005). For example, Celious (2003) found that black women interpret hip hop lyrics as complex texts if they believe the artist to be female but that if they believe the artist to be male they 'hear' the same lyrics as offensive to women.

#### Language in Context: Age, Generation, Family Roles, Ethnic Origin

"The strength of response to stereotyping often seemed to be influenced by the extent to which the viewer felt a sense of personal identification with the stereotype. But membership of a 'vulnerable' group did not always sensitise viewers to depictions of stereotypes. For example, disabled viewers were not especially sensitive to images of disability that other respondents predicted would cause offence." (Sancho and Wilson 2001:18)

Not all words offend everyone. Research suggests that audience concern most often focusing on terms that stereotype or marginalize. Instances include the discontent with the over use of open categories like 'terrorist', especially when associated with religion. This is reported to cause discontent amongst a significant minority of the population, leading to a reported loss of trust and faith in British media sources, especially following significant world events (Ahmad 2006; Harb and Bessaiso 2006).

Similarly, Millwood Hargrave's study (2000, see above) found distinct gradations in what language is considered offensive according to audience age, gender, ethnicity, domestic situations. Ofcom (2005) confirmed this, also finding that parents of children, especially younger children and sometimes girls, are more likely to be concerned about music lyrics on the radio, especially during family viewing times or the school run (though some parents are more concerned than others). Unsurprisingly, research consistently finds strong support for the watershed. The recent YouGov survey shows that most people (59%) believe that the watershed at 9 pm is just right (there is little support for it being moved earlier; YouGov 2008).

Overall, Ofcom's report concludes that certain groups (parents of young children or members of minority groups, for instance) are more likely to find certain content more offensive than other groups, often out of a concern for others (e.g. the fear of children picking up swear words). The report also reveals that content can offend personal sensibilities; hence the concern (for instance amongst some British Asian women) about viewing inappropriate content with family elders.

A Spanish study with audience attitudes towards sexual language and other offensive words revealed that viewing contexts were most important for words being considered offensive (Santaemilia, Rice et al. 2008). Attitudes towards offensive language are related to concerns about representation (languages and images), for instance stereotypes, and other forms of discrimination (Sancho and Wilson 2001).

#### **Key Findings**

- There is relatively little academic research in the UK on audience attitudes to strong language. There is a substantial amount of textual analyses in and beyond the UK.

- The context in which offensive language is used: for instance if the character or the situation requires it; and the context in which it is heard: for instance if the programme is being watched with friends or with young children are important in defining when something becomes offensive to the audience.
- The word sort task undertaken by Ofcom (2005) reveals a list of particularly offensive words. These largely relate to religion, disability, body parts and sexual acts.
- Non-academic research reveals that the demand is often that family programmes (for instance soaps) receive careful attention with regard to language. In the academy questions of inappropriate language (in particular, issues of stereotyping) have been the subject of a number of research projects, usually to do with news and stereotyping.
- Language is considered to be crucial especially by parents, older generations and people viewing in the presence of family members. Therefore what qualifies as offensive when viewing with grandparents, parents, in traditional families and at work is different from when viewing with friends.

## **5. AUDIENCE ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUAL CONTENT**

### **Review of the Empirical Evidence**

#### **Setting the Context: Sex, Texts and Effects**

As with language, sexual content in terms of verbal or graphical representations of sexual acts, sexual innuendos and so forth has been the subject of matter of a large number of textual analyses. Studies have long explored pornographic allusions in mainstream print and audiovisual media (Eysenck and Nias 1978; Matacin and Burger 1987; Gunter 2002) and there is a huge amount of research on the effects of sexual content on viewers, especially on the sexual practices of adolescents and teens (which is beyond the scope of this review). Despite the considerable volume of textual analyses on print and televisual media, little textual analysis exists for online media (Livingstone 2003) making it difficult to define what qualifies as harmful or offensive on new and emerging platforms.

Cumberbatch, Gauntlett and Littlejohns (2003) found that while 21% of UK television programmes contain some form of sexual activity, they are infrequent and mild, with 60 per cent involving kissing. The 9 pm watershed was effective in terms of restricting more explicit portrayals of sexual activity, and the portrayals shown were most often within established relationships. However, references to sex showed an increase over the ten-year period monitored (a period in which the number of available channels increased significantly), and they occurred twice as often after the watershed as before it. Significantly, given current concern over content that links sex with violence, almost none of these portrayals included violence.

#### **Differentiated Judgements of the Acceptability of Sexual Content**

Academic research spans audience responses to sexual content in film, television, advertising and print, with the greatest amount of research being devoted to audiovisual media. Partly because of the fraught history of moral panics (Drotner 1999), little research has extended audience studies from mass media to interactive media. Such research as does address attitudes towards sexual content (on any platform) generally skirts questions of taste for the study (itself valuable) of the potentially harmful effects of exposure.

Ofcom (2005) found that 48% of adults consider there is the 'right amount' of sexual activity depicted on television, while 42% said there is 'too much' (while 59% believe there is too much violence). In 2006, a follow up study by Ofcom found only 36% consider there is too much sex on television, suggesting increasing tolerance.<sup>7</sup>

Cumberbatch (2002) asked what is considered acceptable in films to a sample of 277 video renters. He found that a significant proportion of people felt that being above the age of 18 meant that the viewing of sexual content was permissible. The study also showed that older people and women tend to be less 'liberal' in terms of finding sexual content acceptable.

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<sup>7</sup> As noted in Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone (in press), Ofcom's 2005 tracking study also found that most respondents (75%) think that people should be allowed to pay more to watch 'particularly sexually explicit programmes not available on other channels'. This more accepting attitude towards the depiction of sexual material was underscored by other research which showed that participants in qualitative research in the United Kingdom were more concerned about the use of swearing and offensive language than they were about sexual activity on-screen (Ofcom, 2005). There was some concern that the media might add to the premature sexualisation of children but many participants talked of the positive benefits of a more 'open' attitude towards issues around sexual matters.

Audience reception studies have continuously shown strong connections between the acceptability of sexual content and the social resources of the viewer for instance: age, generation, viewing contexts, ethnicity amongst other factors, as is demonstrated by a study on British Asian girls' responses to soap opera in groups without an adult presence (Barker 1998). Their responses to themes of 'morality' showed strong ties with both femininity and ethnicity.

An earlier study of audience responses to overt sexuality in commercial advertising in the UK had revealed that sexual content offended women the most in role stereotyping and objectifying women. However, sexuality was considered acceptable when related to romance (Elliott, Jones et al. 1995). Somewhat similar results were obtained in a US-based study that found that acceptability of sexual content changes with time, that acceptability has strong relations with being legally adult, and also that sexual content is increasingly found acceptable (Winick and Evans 1994).

Responses to female nudity in commercial advertising also reveals the importance of audiences' own sexuality in understanding what content is found acceptable: it seems that people perceive representations of sexuality, questions of appropriateness, taste and so forth in relation to their own sexual preferences (Beetles and Harris 2005).<sup>8</sup>

As yet there is very little audience research on that interrogates audience responses to content where sexuality (including overt sexuality) is intersected with other social variables such as class, ethnic origin and so forth. This is significant because often people's responses to sexuality and sexual content in the media may tie in with attitudes towards stereotyping and offensive language.

### Sexual Media as Perceived by Children and Young People

It is evident from the available audience research that references to or allusions to sexual activity, especially in family viewing segments often offend, and also that older people, children and people viewing with parents or grandparents and sometimes children are uncomfortable with overt sexual content on screen (Ofcom 2005). Indeed, the greatest public concern is to do with risks and fears around inappropriate sexual experiences of children online (Livingstone 2003).

Verhulst's (2002) survey for the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) showed that the public's main concern is protection for children rather than a wider concern to protect values and morals in society more generally – with the exception of sexual violence, where regulation remains expected. Given the empirical research that reflects adults' concern around children being exposed to sexual content on family television or during the school run, it is perhaps surprising that there is little empirical research to find out what children themselves say.

Recent UK-based projects sought out children's expectations of old and new media. The 'UK Children Go Online' found that online pornography is generally considered

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<sup>8</sup> More research exists in relation to audiences' personal experiences of violence. Schlesinger et al's research (1992) examined the attitudes of women who had experienced violence, and those who had not, to a variety of scenes of violence on television and film, showing that women who have experienced violence were slightly more able than those who had not to relate to the rape victim. Further, as noted in Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone (in press), Barker (2005) reports on empirical research with audiences regarding what it means to watch a rape scene. He identifies viewers' interpretations and judgements not so much focused on 'the message' of the film but on attempting to puzzle out complex layers of meaning in the film and the wider society. Thus his respondents enjoyed and admired the film, particularly the men, but this did not lead them to conclude that women enjoy being raped; indeed, many of their responses were highly moral, and most found the rape scene disturbing or shocking.

undesirable, even upsetting, by a significant minority of children, though a larger number claim it to be either funny or irrelevant (Livingstone and Bober 2004). On the other hand, for young people, discussions of privacy, intimacy, sexual health etc are difficult to conduct, especially at home or with parents – hence the value of confidential or anonymous online spaces (Livingstone 2003).<sup>9</sup>

For the more commonplace sexual material broadcast on television, Buckingham (2005) found that children may adopt their taste judgements from adults, including finding swearing, sex or violence distasteful or embarrassing. On the other hand, they also consider that such content in reality TV, game shows and soap operas has value in offering them a kind of a projected adult future. Thus Buckingham and Bragg (2003, 2004) found that children may value sexual material as a means of gaining information otherwise difficult to obtain or as providing pretext for discussing difficult issues in the family.

### Key Findings

- Considerable academic research focuses on textual analysis of content (mostly audiovisual, little online), but this cannot provide insights about audience expectations.
- As well as representations of sexual acts, sexually suggestive words or actions are widely considered offensive by audiences, though people recognise the right of others to view a wide variety of content.
- Thus the audience is divided between those who consider the balance about right and those who think there is too much sexual content on television.
- Expectations vary, with the social location of audiences and audience age, gender and ethnicity all being important determinants of what's considered offensive.
- Public concern is the highest over the exposure of children to sexual content on the media.
- However, although the tastes of children and young people with regard to sexual content have been little researched, they reveal some advantages as well as disadvantages of children being exposed to representations of sexual issues.

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<sup>9</sup> Social networking sites and their implications for issues of privacy and intimacy have been the focus for much academic research (Jones and Soltren 2005; Boyd 2006; Dwyer, Hiltz et al. 2007; Rosenblum 2007; Livingstone 2008). In-depth qualitative research in the UK reveals that while young people are often accidentally exposed to sexual content, they are generally aware of the sexual nature of encounters, especially with unknown people on interactive sites. Usually they do not desire such contact, and nor do they tend to discard any sense of privacy as they engage with online media; they may struggle, however, with the online interface and its safety features (Livingstone 2003, 2008).

## **6. AUDIENCE ATTITUDES ACROSS GENRES AND PLATFORMS**

### **Review of the Empirical Evidence**

#### **Genres and Formats – Old and New**

“Television formats are a principal factor in directing audience choice and influencing audience expectations.” (Jones 2003: 416)

Audience reception studies show that audience expectations and experiences diverge across media and across genres.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, research conducted by regulators finds that programmes intended for family viewing (Ofcom 2005) are expected to be more careful about language, factual genres have higher expectations on them (Ahmad 2006). This reveals a series of useful findings:

- Research with new genres such as reality television shows that audiences devise new definitions of fact and reality to engage with non-factual, semi-factual and staged programming (Hill 2007). Hill suggests that audiences have to search for ‘realism’ in factual programming because expectations are beginning to blur across the lines between factual and non factual styles as genres increasingly become hybrid.
- A single media product is now consumed across a range of platforms, including theatre screenings through posters, film merchandise and so on (Barker and Mathijs 2007), with different expectations applying to each. On the one hand, audiences relish gaining expertise in consuming a single media text across multiple platforms; but on the other, they are still developing new competencies for new genres.
- Research with UK fans of Big Brother reveals how audience expectations of this genre bear many resemblances to their expectations of the soap opera genre (Jones 2003), findings revealing that an element of realism is common to audience expectations of both genres. The study also indicates that there is a soap-to-reality TV migration going on, most clearly for young audiences.
- A comparative project of multi-platform and multi-genre viewing habits in the UK and Sweden reinforces the high value attached to factual programming, with lifestyle, makeover and reality television being accorded the status of light genres by comparison (Hill 2007).
- Although this explains why the higher expectations are held of the news than reality television, reality television can also offend: a recent study found that Dutch audiences have been seriously offended by some of the content on Big Brother (Heuvelman, Peeters et al. 2005).
- Ofcom’s (2005) project on ‘Language and Sexual Imagery in Broadcasting’ found that audience expectations depend both on the social contexts of viewing and also on genre. Non-factual programmes, especially reality shows, receive a higher permissibility for sexual content, as do soap operas which sometimes carry references to sexual acts.

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<sup>10</sup> The tradition of reception studies has shown that audiences appreciate and understand a genre making use of the inherent structure that the genre represents and that the audience develops literacies in. Soap opera reception studies showed for instance that the twists in the plot, the realism and the problem-solving aspects are all features used by audiences in interpreting soap operas the way they do (Livingstone 1998). Thus the empirical study of genres as diverse as soaps (Livingstone 1998), talk shows (Livingstone and Lunt 1994), reality television (Hill 2002; Jones 2003), news and increasingly the producer-audiences of user generated content (Thumim, 2006) have demonstrated that people expect different things from different genres.

- However, the largest concerns are with young children being exposed to sexual content (therefore family programmes such as soap operas are particularly crucial) and with the contexts of viewing (especially, mixed generations viewing together makes 'acceptability' highly complicated). Largely permissible things such as innuendos or indications of a forthcoming sexual encounter may not be permissible for people who watch with older generations who have more 'traditional' belief systems.

### Brands, Channels and Expectations

Research with multi-channel audiences makes it clear that people expect different content from different channels and also that their views on what is acceptable in terms of inappropriate content (language or imagery) differs across channels and brands.

Mainstream platforms such as the BBC have the highest public expectations (Millwood Hargrave 2000). Indeed, three important factors in this regard seem to be associations with the brand itself (high expectations being held of the BBC especially), the purpose of the channel (e.g. for news, family viewing or films) and its intended audience (e.g. a broad audience base or a minority/niche channel).

Towler's (2001: 1-2) research on channels and platforms undertaken for the BSC, reports from a qualitative study with 150 people including young people, all of whom were multi-channel viewers. His findings reveal:

- Participants had a range of different expectations of the many channels available in the UK.
- Participants thought that the quality of a programme (i.e. its production values, editorial content) was more important than its compliance with defined standards (e.g. standards concerning taste and decency)
- Although accepting increased explicitness in programme content, participants were particularly uncomfortable about the use of offensive language or swearing before the nine o'clock watershed.

In all, expectations of BBC1 are the highest. It is perceived to be a safe channel usually by parents of young children, while young people often consider it to be one of the 'good' ones available. Minority channels and other brands have lesser expectations from them.

### The Role of Age in Generic Expectations

Compared with gender, class and ethnicity, age has been less researched although, age (i.e. position in life course and generation) strongly influences how certain genres are interpreted. However, recent findings from Ofcom's Report on Language and Sexual Imagery (2005) indicate the centrality of generation and age in perceptions of what is offensive.

A study of audience reception of crime media revealed that youth take a more negotiated and context-dependent, less absolutist approach to representations of morality while older generations apply more traditional moral frameworks (Livingstone, Allen and Reiner, 2001) This multi-generational focus group study also showed that each generation grounds its judgements in comparisons between present media and the media they experienced in their youth (i.e. when their preferences and judgments were first formed).

The importance of a person's position in the life stage in influencing their expectations from the media was also demonstrated by Towler's (2001) study. Teenagers seemed less concerned about the watershed and had less rigorous ideas about particular channels having particular duties or about public service broadcasting, instead making their judgements on a programme-by-programme basis. Adults with older children seemed to feel that it was hardly possible to monitor a child's viewing habits all the time while parents with young families were more concerned about what is shown on television. Empty nesters, according to the report, appeared more 'liberal' in their views than has been found in other research.

### **Key Findings**

- Audiences are critically aware of genre-specific expectations, altering their judgements of decency and acceptability of representations across factual and non-factual, traditional and hybrid, and broadcast and online genres.
- Audiences of non-factual programming still demand caution over potentially offensive content, especially if these are accessible to a broad segment of the population, and especially at family viewing times.
- In a multi-generic environment with increasing genre hybridity across factual and non-factual programming, audiences build new expectations of new genres though they also compare new genres with familiar ones.
- Channels with a broader audience base receive higher expectations than do those with a more niche base.
- More is known of audience responses to news and soaps than for reality television or comedy, which have not received as much attention from audience researchers as they have from textual critics.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

### **Summary of Findings**

- Empirical evidence clearly demonstrates that the context of viewing, which includes the time of media access, the broadcast base of the programme, the nature of the programme in terms of target audience and the presence of family members, all influence what is considered offensive.
- Women, older people, and certain ethnic groups are more likely to find particular media contents offensive. Further, parents of young children and/or girls, those watching with grandparents and those with conservative family values are more likely to expect a stringent watch on can be broadcast.
- Young people are shown, in the limited research available on their tastes, to be active and selective in their media use, often not finding sexual imagery tasteful, but often finding overtly sexual content intriguingly 'grown up'.
- The context of the programme is central to what is expected of it. On the one hand, the value of news genres is high and therefore expectations from the genre are high as well. Non factual programmes have higher thresholds of strong language but here again the fact that they are often viewed with family makes it necessary to exercise caution over content. Nonetheless, comedy, reality shows, soaps and online contents can all offend.

### **Key Areas For Future Research On Tastes And Standards**

#### *Audiences are plural and diverse*

- All segments of the population, and more possible divisions within audiences, need to be researched. Academic research has focused more on gender and ethnicity than on age and generation. Social research uses standard age/gender/socioeconomic categories. Little is known of audiences divided in other ways (sexuality, disability, life experiences, and so forth).
- Most research focuses on adults only. Yet for children and young people too, there is likely to be a high degree of diversity across age groups and across generic and viewing contexts. Age is also crucial within this group: a 13 year old girl's experiences and expectations of sexual imagery on television will differ considerably from a 17 year old boy.

#### *Genres and platforms are also diversifying*

- While work is already underway, a greater focus is needed on lesser researched televisual genres, especially new and upcoming genres but also genres such as reality, lifestyle and comedy which have seen comparatively lower amounts of audience research.
- Research needs to be geared towards a multi-platform context, since content is used increasingly across genres and platforms, rather than identifying particular contents with particular media or channels.
- Research on offensive content, generic styles, generic hybridity and the associated expectations of taste must encompass online media for which there is only limited research.

### *Multiple methods bring benefits*

- More research is needed using mixed methods designs to combine the generalisability of quantitative studies with the in-depth contextualization of qualitative approaches.
- Qualitative projects shows the value of grounding research in people's everyday lives, to understand how expectations, rules and attitudes are contextualised differently when engaging with media at home, work, alone, with family, etc.
- Quantitative findings provide a broad context within which in depth studies can be located. It is therefore as much a necessity to draw on diverse bodies of literature while reporting on one's own findings as it is a necessity for projects to creatively combine methods.

### *Two notions of 'context' matter*

- The first is programming (or genre) context, as stressed in Ofcom's (2008) guidelines. Research shows clearly that genre has a considerable influence on what is expected by audiences, with very different expectations of television for reality shows and news, for instance. Similarly, specific programme contexts matter: findings consistently reveal that words otherwise found offensive are not so offensive if justified by the context of their use.<sup>11</sup>
- The second notion of 'context' refers to the social location of audiences - the settings in which media content is interpreted. Millwood Hargrave's (2000) approach to this in the *Delete Expletives* report is useful, where she starts from everyday life as the context in which offensive words are used, as amongst friends or within the family.
- Both notions of context must be included if we are to understand why, for instance, a particular joke on a sitcom may be contextually acceptable to some audiences and yet may alienate and indeed offend others.

### *Two notions of offence also*

- In addressing attitudes to tastes and standards, one is also dealing with two kinds of possible offence. The first is when people are offended by what they perceive as inappropriate language and/or sexual imagery in the media because it offends their personal sensibilities.
- The second is when they may themselves not be offended by media content but may consider it to be unsuitable for others – note, for instance, the widespread worry that harmful representation of minorities may lead to stereotyping in society or that children may pick up offensive words from television programmes).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Sancho and Wilson's findings that entertainment value, good storylines and surreal styles may legitimise some otherwise offensive content, (Sancho and Wilson 2001).

<sup>12</sup> See Sancho and Wilson's (2001: 3) findings from their study on attitudes towards negative stereotyping in advertisements where they conclude that "Parents and older children were concerned about stereotypes in advertisements *that might lead to or condone bullying* (emphasis ours). They felt that portrayals, such as the one in *Tango Orange*, drew attention to *characteristics that children could pick on* (emphasis ours)". The two ways in which offence works is clear in the findings derived from audience reception of *Reed Employment*, an advertisement where the authors point out that "African Caribbean respondents, in particular, felt the advertisement *had the potential to increase racial tensions*(emphasis ours, offence out of a concern for potential effects on society, for instance increasing discriminatory practices). Many other respondents also regarded it as *offensive because of its blatant stereotyping* (emphasis ours, offence because it hurts personal sensibilities)" (p.9).

## Remaining Questions

Overall, this review has found rather little empirical research on audience attitudes towards tastes and standards. The research available from a broader and older tradition of audience reception studies provides a useful starting point for studying audience attitudes across diverse social groups as well as across diverse media platforms. The research from broadcasters and regulators is usefully focused on specific policy dilemmas. But there remain many unanswered questions:

- How do attitudes towards the permissibility and acceptability of language and imagery shift as genres become more hybrid and as products are shared across platforms?
- How does multi platform audience behaviour in changing media environments inform the definition of programme 'context' when media texts are increasingly in movement across a range of sources?
- Why has research on attitudes progressed almost singularly with adults with little research focusing on young peoples' tastes and expectations?
- How can audience research with expectations and tastes for televisual media take its task forward into online interactive media?
- What can be learnt from comparative research within the academy on issues of tastes and expectations, in addition to individual projects focusing solely on groups with a specific dominant attribute, i.e. class or ethnicity?

Clearly, further empirical research in this field is important.

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## **9. APPENDIX: Ten Selected Pieces on Attitudes, Tastes and Standards**

This appendix includes carries the topic, methods and findings from a piece of research. 'Selected Findings' are usually in the words of the original author. Additional comments from Livingstone and Das are provided as 'Notes'.

**Ahmad, F. (2006). British Muslim Perceptions and Opinions on News Coverage of September 11. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(6), 961-982.**

### **Summary:**

The project studied the attitudes of British Muslims towards news representations, using qualitative methods. The media spoken about by the participants spanned a very wide range and included almost all available platforms.

### **Methods:**

This was a qualitative study involving thirteen semi-structured interviews lasting between ninety minutes to two hours. Seventeen people from a broad range of age and ethnic groups participated, all British Muslims. The sample included seven women and ten men, mostly graduate professionals aged from early 20s to mid-50s.

### **Selected findings:**

- Many felt that the repetitive nature of rolling news coverage compromised in-depth analysis and did little to inform and educate viewers
- People felt that some sensitivity would be exercised in terms of language and the avoidance of offensive terms such as 'Islamic terrorist', but little emphasis was placed on 'news creation' or on analysing or questioning mainstream news
- A 'need' to seek alternative news sources was voiced by those not receiving satellite TV, who turned to non-Western print media and the internet.
- Many re-iterated the view that the freest reporting was found on the internet
- Members of minority communities, especially those who feel socially excluded, marginalised and under threat, or lack access to power structures that can influence public debates and set agendas, actively seek out alternative forms of information that may support alternative world views.
- Satellite TV in general was thought to represent poor-quality programmes, despite comments acknowledging its positive role in connecting diaspora communities.
- British-based satellite stations serving diasporic communities and broadcasting to 'home nations', such as ARY Digital, broadcasting from London to Pakistan, served as a point of connection for transnational families.

### **Notes:**

This is a useful study that looks at diasporic audiences' perceptions of stereotypes in mainstream news media. It is also useful for its broad focus on a wide selection of media and platforms.

**Cumberbatch, G. (2002). *Where do you draw the line? Attitudes and reactions of video renters to sexual violence in film*. Report prepared for the British Board of Film Classification, Birmingham: Communications Research Group.**

**Topic:**

This was a Midlands based study with 277 people on what is considered 'acceptable' in terms of sexual violence on films. The sample is of video renters in Midlands.

**Method:**

The methods used were qualitative as well as quantitative. The study involved a survey, the construction on viewing panels, follow-up telephone interviews and two focus groups constructed from the viewing panel.

**Selected findings:**

- A cross section of customers (N=277) revealed liberal attitudes where those believing there was 'too little' regulation of television, cinema and video were heavily outnumbered around four to one by those believing there was 'too much'.
- Almost twice as many respondents believed that people over the age of 18 had a right to see graphic portrayals of violence (74%), or real sex (67%) as said this about sexual violence (38%).
- There were large differences in attitudes to regulation due to gender (men were far more liberal) and age (older people were more conservative). The most liberal minded were heavy video renters and those with an interest in fantasy films especially horror.
- The main characteristics of the viewing panel members who held liberal attitudes to these films (i.e. recommending they be released as '18' uncut) were:
  - A 'risky' attitude to watching films (i.e. willing to watch films knowing nothing about them)
  - Interest in films with 'gritty' graphic violence
  - Being older (35+)
  - Being male
  - Not believing that film/video violence aggravate related problems in society

**Notes:**

A useful study because it provides insights about audience reception of video films, a category rarely taken up in audience research. It provides useful quantitative data about which groups of people are more likely to appreciate certain kinds of content and which groups may find it unacceptable.

**Elliott, R., A. Jones, et al. (1995). Overt sexuality in advertising: A discourse analysis of gender responses. *Journal of Consumer Policy* 18(2), 187-217.**

**Topic:**

This qualitative study explored women's perception of sexuality in commercial advertisements, then conducting a discourse analysis of their responses.

**Method:**

The subjects in the study were a judgement sample of 25 women and 20 men drawn from a city with a population of 100,000 in the north west of the United Kingdom, the sample being built by snowballing. The study involved qualitative methods such as focus group interviews and involved screenings of advertisements.

**Selected findings:**

- Analysis of the discourse identified four themes which were articulated across both sexes and both age groups.
- Two of these themes are negative, these concern the use of sex-role stereotypes in advertising and the objectification of women.
- Positive themes concern issues of equality in sexual representations and sexuality as art.
- One theme was expressed strongly by the younger groups of both sexes and concerns how romantic sexuality can add symbolic value to consumption
- For younger consumers of both sexes, when linked to romantic love, sexuality appears to have the ability to transfer the symbolic meaning to the brand.

**Notes:**

Although slightly dated now, this is a useful study for its focus on sexuality UK commercial advertising, something which is not too often the focus for audience research projects.

**Hanley, P. (2000). Sense and Sensibilities: Public Opinion and the BBFC Guidelines. London: British Board of Film Classification.<sup>13</sup>**

**Topic:**

The BBFC hosted a series of public meetings in London, Edinburgh, Londonderry, Swansea, Manchester, Birmingham, Norwich, Bristol and Newcastle. The audience, made up of members of the public who had responded to advertisements, were taken through the issues associated with classification and then invited to debate them with a panel of the Board's Examiners. Much of what was said was vivid and illuminating, but for the most representative view of public opinion the Board commissioned a nation-wide questionnaire survey and citizens' juries, each designed to explore in more detail the issues raised at the public meetings.

**Method:**

Several techniques were used to maximise the range of people consulted during the research programme and to combine quantitative and qualitative input:

- Citizens' juries
- National survey
- Roadshow/postal questionnaires
- Website questionnaires

**Selected Findings:**

Bad language

- 56% of the national sample agreed that "young people use bad language because of what they hear in films and videos".
- 48% of the national sample thought that the language Guidelines were "about right" (43% thought they were not strict enough, and only 5% thought they were too strict).
- Both sets of juries were concerned about bad language, especially in the junior categories. There was some concern about the use of "very strong language" at '15'.

Sex

- 46% of the national sample agreed that "people over 18 have a right to see graphic portrayals of real sex in films and videos".
- 54% of the national sample thought that the Guidelines for sex were "about right" (32% thought they were not strict enough, and 12% thought they were too strict).
- The consensus of both juries was that some relaxation in sex Guidelines was possible, especially at '15' and '18'.

**Notes:**

A useful piece of research. Especially relevant are the findings on language and sexual content, though the report also provides findings on violence and drugs.

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<sup>13</sup> This summary of findings was prepared by extracting selected sections from the original report.

**Heuvelman, A., A. Peeters, et al. (2005). Irritating, shocking, and intolerable TV programs: Norms, values, and concerns of viewers in The Netherlands. *Communications* 30(3), 325-342.**

**Topic:**

This study used quantitative data to investigate the negative reactions of Dutch viewers to the content of television programs.

**Method:**

The study involved a survey of 495 participants, who were administered a telephone questionnaire.

**Selected findings:**

- Games, quizzes, and related entertainment receive most of the negative reactions, with irritation scoring the highest.
- Reality programs such as Big Brother also provoke quite a few negative reactions.
- 'Intimidating behaviour' on the screen is what Dutch viewers worry about most, followed by 'violation of privacy' 'offensive behaviour', 'violence and fear', and 'deception'.
- Within the factor 'offensive behaviour', Dutch viewers especially worry about strong language, cursing, and blasphemy, and far less about sex and nudity.
- Within the factor 'violence and fear', Dutch viewers are most worried about the depiction of unhealthy behaviour (such as using drugs or alcohol), and violence in movies, and far less about violence in news, frightening pictures, and tough interviews.

**Notes:**

Although not a UK study the questions asked and the results derived are interesting and useful for the close attention paid to the different ways in which a reaction can be 'negative' and how quantitative methods can be as useful as qualitative ones in exploring attitudes and emotions reminding us again, as pointed out in this review, the utility of triangulated and mixed methods research.

**Hill, A. (2007). Public and Popular: British and Swedish Audience Trends in Factual and Reality Television. *Cultural Trends* 16(1), 17-41.**

**Topic:**

This study used survey data to compare audience reception of factual and non factual genres in Sweden and Britain.

**Method:**

The research methods included an analysis of media content, and a scheduling and ratings analysis of a range of factual and reality programmes. The British survey contained a representative sample of 4,500 people, conducted during November 2003, in association with Ipsos RSL. The Swedish survey was conducted with a random sample of 2,000 people. The sample included people aged 16–80 living in Sweden, including foreign citizens. The article reports only from the quantitative data.

**Selected findings:**

- In the UK, the level of education seems most decisive when it comes to watching politics programmes, a more popular genre among people with higher levels of education, regardless of age.
- Respondents consistently valued traditional factual genres more than popular genres.
- In both countries, there were strong views on the public value of news, and reflects the high status of the news genre in countries.
- It is notable that traditional factual genres, such as current affairs or political programmes, have a relatively average value when the statistics for 'very important' are isolated. Documentary also has a low value rating when 'very important' is isolated.
- British re-constructions are a slight exception as they are more associated with public service content, for example *Crimewatch* on BBC.
- Lifestyle also emerges as a genre with cultural variations, and this is also connected to the development of the genre in Britain where lifestyle has been dominated by makeover, and therefore associated with light entertainment.

**Notes:**

A very useful piece of research, this study provides comparative data from two countries, one of which is the UK, to provide comments on how non factual and factual genres are differentially received but also certain factual genres continue to appeal to the audience in both countries (for instance news).

**Millwood Hargrave, A. (2000). *Delete expletives?*" Research undertaken jointly by the Advertising Standards Authority, British Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission. Accessed at: [http://www.itc.org.uk/uploads/Deleted\\_Expletives.pdf](http://www.itc.org.uk/uploads/Deleted_Expletives.pdf) (May 14,'03)<sup>14</sup>**

**Topic:**

This research, commissioned as a joint project by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) and the Independent Television Commission (ITC), was designed to test people's attitudes to swearing and offensive language, and to examine the degree to which context played a role in their reactions.

**Method:**

Two interrelated studies were commissioned:

1. The first, a qualitative study, used a mixture of group discussions and depth interviews to elicit reactions, using television programming and advertising clips as prompts, as well as press and poster advertising. Those who took part in this study are referred to as 'participants'.
2. The second part of the project used an in-home questionnaire administered to 1,033 adults, referred to here as 'respondents'.

**Selected findings:**

- Participants say they have noticed an increase in the use of swearing and offensive language in daily life.
- The use of 'strong' language in the presence of children was especially frowned upon and, within their homes, participants sought to keep it at bay. Many talked of 'house rules' which forbade the use of such language at home.
- As a part of the home environment, television was expected to follow certain conventions which would conform to these 'house rules', especially when children were likely to be watching television.
- Key among these conventions was adherence to the principle of the Watershed at 9.00 p.m.
- Participants spoke of their concern that, in the hour before the Watershed, this convention was not always maintained and they were not able to prevent children from hearing language that they thought was inappropriate.
- A list of words tested among respondents showed little movement in those words considered 'very severe' between this study and the previous one, conducted two years ago. Greatest movement had occurred for terms of abuse. Many more respondents now say that racial abuse words are 'very severe' and there were greater concerns about transmitting 'strong' language that may offend others.
- The majority of respondents (92%) thought the current convention that television advertisements should not include any 'strong' language was appropriate.

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<sup>14</sup> This summary of findings was prepared by extracting selected sections from the original report.

- Over a third of respondents said that the rules for advertising on the Internet may need to be stricter than those for television, but this concern seemed driven by uncertainty about the Internet and a perception of its uncontrolled accessibility and widespread use.
- British re-constructions are a slight exception as they are more associated with public service content, for example Crimewatch on BBC.
- Lifestyle also emerges as a genre with cultural variations, and this is also connected to the development of the genre in Britain where lifestyle has been dominated by makeover, and therefore associated with light entertainment.

**Notes:**

This report presents in depth contextualised data on *why* some content is offensive for some and not others. It usefully starts from the everyday lives of its participants and respondents and therefore can make interesting connections between the social contexts of viewing and the interpretation of content. Also provides a useful topography of offensive words (p. 24).

**Ofcom (2005). *Language and Sexual Imagery in Broadcasting: A Contextual Investigation*. London: Office of Communications<sup>15</sup>**

**Topic:**

The independent research detailed in this report was commissioned by Ofcom from The Fuse Group. It was to assist in the consideration of points raised by the public consultation on the Ofcom Broadcasting Code which began in July 2004 and help broadcasters and the regulator understand changing public attitudes.

**Method:**

The research was qualitative in nature. This means it explored in some depth the views of respondents in order to give broadcasters and Ofcom directional steers.

**Selected findings:**

Attitudes About Offensive Language:

- Participants in the research felt that swearing and offensive language has increased and become more widespread over time.
- Participants' views were occasionally divided about which words were more or less offensive but what united almost all the groups, whatever their personal use of swearing or strong language, was a high level of concern about the type and use of language with regard to young people.
- This concern was two fold; firstly a dislike of hearing young people using such language as this was seen by most participants as denoting a lack of respect. Secondly, a dislike of hearing offensive language used in front of young people/children because of the bad example it sets.

Sexual Imagery on Television:

- Discussion from the focus groups indicated that sexual imagery is less of a concern than offensive language.
- Many participants thought there was more sexual imagery on television nowadays and that it started earlier in the evening.
- Parent respondents in particular expressed concerns about the degree of sexual imagery in life generally, and were concerned about the possible premature sexualisation of their children.
- Other participants were less concerned and more positive – and felt that the growth in sexual imagery in all walks of life indicated a more tolerant and liberal society.
- Regardless of people's concerns about sexual imagery, most participants felt that companies, advertisers and broadcasters used sexual imagery because 'sex sells'.
- Certain channels were thought to be more likely to broadcast programmes containing scenes of a sexual nature than others. Channel 4 and Five were mentioned in particular.

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<sup>15</sup> This summary of findings was prepared by extracting selected sections from the original report.

### Informed Viewing Choices:

- There was a broad consensus among these participants that responsibility for viewing choices is – and should be – largely an individual one.
- There was also a strong sense that parents should have the responsibility for ensuring that their children view appropriate material.
- It was however, also acknowledged by some that not all parents would act responsibly at all times and so there was a need for the broadcasters also to be responsible for providing a framework for viewing.
- The watershed was considered to be the single most useful tool in giving parents a clear indication of when programming is suitable or not.
- Newspaper listings were also considered to be a useful guide to whether programme content is suitable for children to watch.
- The participants' personal response to viewing offensive or inappropriate material is simply to switch off or turn over.
- Complaint procedures were not well known or understood among the research participants and were felt to be under-publicised.

### Issues for the regulation of television

- For most participants in the research, regulation is still considered relevant in a multi-channel world and is there to curb broadcasters and to provide a zone of 'safe' viewing for both children and parents.
- Given the choice, many of the participants claimed they would opt to keep the watershed – the best known aspect of regulatory codes for broadcast, though some said that they would like it later, particularly at weekends.
- BBC1 was expected by the majority to be the 'gold standard'. Participants said they expected BBC1 to deliver a high level of quality with regard to content and standards.
- Most thought that general entertainment satellite, cable and DTT channels should adhere to a similar regulatory code as the five terrestrial channels.

### **Notes:**

This report is a recent instance of an in-depth qualitative investigation into attitudes towards offensive content on the media. It provides useful ways of looking into speaking contexts and viewing contexts providing insights on how some words may offend more than others and how some groups may be particularly offended by some kinds of content.

**Sancho, J. and A. Wilson (2001). *Boxed In: Offence from Negative Stereotyping in Television Advertising*. London: Independent Television Commission.<sup>16</sup>**

**Topic:**

Qualitative research was commissioned amongst a range of different groups, including people with disabilities, various ethnic groups, women, older people, the over-weight, and children who differ from their peers in ways which sometimes prompt bullying.

**Method:**

The research methods included an analysis of media content, and a scheduling and ratings analysis of a range of factual and reality programmes. The British survey contained a representative sample of 4,500 people, conducted during November 2003, in association with Ipsos RSL. The Swedish survey was conducted with a random sample of 2,000 people. The sample included people aged 16–80 living in Sweden, including foreign citizens. The article reports only from the quantitative data.

**Selected findings:**

- The research indicated that mild comments or humour about certain characteristics can be harmless and acceptable even to people with those characteristics but that sensitivity is always needed in this area.
- The acceptability of a stereotype may depend on whether or not the characteristic is one which is a matter of personal choice and of relatively minor significance. (Hairstyles or hobbies, for example, lie at one end of this spectrum; disability, foreign or regional accent, nationality or skin colour lie at the other end, with characteristics such as occupations or attitudes falling in the middle.)
- Whether an issue has a high moral or social profile in society also affects its significance.
- For many respondents, stereotyping in advertising was not a major concern but the research highlighted a number of key areas.

**Notes:**

A very useful piece of research, this study draws insights from audience response to advertisement screenings. It distinguishes between the various kinds of offence that may be caused by a particular kind of content depending on an individual's group locations, ethnic identities, (dis)abilities and family roles.

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<sup>16</sup> This summary of findings was prepared by extracting selected sections from the original report.

**Santaemilia, J., L. Rice, et al. (2008). Gender, sex, and language in Valencia: attitudes toward sex-related language among Spanish and Catalan speakers. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 3-2008( 190), 5-26.**

**Topic:**

This study presents the results from a questionnaire that investigated student attitudes towards sex-related language on television.

**Method:**

Questionnaires were administered to two groups of undergraduate students at the University of Valencia whose native languages were, respectively, Spanish and Catalan.

**Selected findings:**

- The results reveal, among other things, the overwhelming presence of sexual language in their daily lives
- The undergraduates' willingness to discuss sex-related matters
- The virtual non-existence of "impoliteness" among close friends
- The existence of slightly different culture-specific attitudes towards sexual language.

**Notes:**

Although not a UK study, the study is useful in its demarcation of how listening/viewing contexts make some content offensive at certain times and not others. It shows that what qualifies as offensive with grandparents, parents, in traditional families and at work is different from when with friends. Similar results are evident in the support for the school run period to being free of 'offensive lyrics in some of the literature reviewed in this report.