

Platforms and Channels

A report undertaken for

the Broadcasting Standards Commission
the British Broadcasting Corporation
and the Independent Television Commission

Report written by RC Towler

December 2001

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Summary

Background

The research was commissioned to address what had been thought comparatively straightforward questions. Given the range of channels now available in the United Kingdom, the BBC, the BSC and the ITC wanted to know what expectations from regulation viewers brought to their viewing of the various channels. Are some subjects and some programmes more acceptable to viewers if dealt with on minority channels than on the 'mainstream' channels? Are the conventional timing restrictions that apply to the mainstream channels equally necessary for certain more minority channels? These questions are important, for example, to the BBC in determining whether the rules which guide the programming and the scheduling of BBC1 should apply, without modification, to BBC2 and to the BBC's present and projected digital channels, to Channel Four and E4, and to ITV1 and ITV2.

The research reported here was undertaken in the autumn of 2000. Television is evolving rapidly, and there have been significant changes in the 12 months since the research was done. The report, therefore, speaks of the changes that participants thought had occurred in the two or three years leading up to the fieldwork period. It is envisaged that further work will be undertaken and if the findings are confirmed, the shifts in attitudes which appear to have taken place in the late 1990s are important. Therefore, it is useful to publish these preliminary findings from qualitative research as work in progress.

Summary

- Participants had a range of different expectations of the many channels available in the UK. The research did, however, find a hierarchy of expectations in terms of standards that apply to different channels, which ranges from BBC1, of which participants had the highest expectations, through other terrestrial channels, to niche channels and to other subscription channels.
- These participants had a diminished assessment of the role of television as an important element in the cultural life of the nation.
- 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 etc.).
- There was a feeling among participants that they themselves had to take greater responsibility for what they watch on television. The role of the broadcasters is to signpost clearly the content of programmes, while external regulation would be increasingly difficult in the fragmented market. The 9 o'clock Watershed, however, was key in the deliberations of participants.

- 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.
- There was evidence that these participants felt they had been 'disempowered', as viewers, and were resigned to a deterioration of standards. They put this down largely to the proliferation of channels available.
- Participants expressed themselves cynical about what they saw as the increasing commercialisation of television.
- At the same time, participants showed an awareness of the commercial pressures on broadcasters to attract large audiences, although they resented feeling that, on occasions, they were subjected to what they saw as 'tricks' of scheduling.

Introduction

The broadcasters and the broadcast regulators (the Independent Television Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission) receive strikingly different numbers of complaints from viewers about different channels. It seems that viewers have contrasting expectations of what they will find on BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel Four and Channel 5, and on the various channels available only via cable or satellite, or via digital terrestrial services. (Terrestrial transmission, and transmission by satellite and by cable are referred to as transmission via three different ‘platforms’.) This is confirmed by the findings of audience research conducted over recent years, which have suggested that viewers have distinct and contrasting perceptions of the various channels that are available, and different expectations of them¹.

And yet broadly the same rules about programme content, carried in the BSC’s Codes of Guidance, the ITC’s Programme Code and the BBC’s Producers’ Guidelines, apply across all channels, regardless of the delivery platform (i.e. whether delivered by analogue or by digital transmission, and via cable, satellite or terrestrial transmission). The only variations in the regulations are determined by time of transmission.

Viewing of the five main terrestrial channels currently accounts for about 80 per cent, a diminishing proportion of all television viewing. Faced with this situation, the broadcasters and the broadcast regulators felt it was important to know in more detail just what expectations the public bring to their viewing of the various channels. This information would allow them to review the current position, in which a single set of rules about appropriate content is applied uniformly across all channels, and would inform any decisions about differential rules to apply to different channels and platforms.

The BBC, the BSC and the ITC therefore commissioned a research project. It was decided to opt initially for the more open-ended approach of qualitative research to begin to look in detail at audience perceptions about these issues. The preliminary findings presented here are based on this research, which should be seen as work in progress. Further research would require a more structured, quantified approach to investigate particular aspects of these findings.

The objectives set for the work, commissioned from Counterpoint Research, were:

- To understand the way in which different groups of viewers consider distinctions can be made between channels and delivery platforms, and have different expectations of what they will encounter if they view different channels; and
- To understand the conventions being developed in the programmes that push at the boundaries of taste and decency, and aspects of such material that define innovation in what is acceptable.

[1] *Likely to Complain? Free-to-Air versus subscription channels*; Pam Hanley and Linda Free; Millward Brown International, 1998.

These objectives required the research to address a number of issues:

- What attitudes are displayed as the audience (and groups within the audience) approach different programmes, based on scheduling, channel identity and delivery platforms?
- What difference does each of these criteria make if the same programme is available on different channels?
- How do people view the Off switch? Do they feel resentment that they have to use it, or do they feel it gives them a sense of personal responsibility? Do views differ by channel or platform?
- In expressing concerns for children, how do viewers imagine regulation should deal differentially with different platforms, if at all? What happens currently in homes with access to different systems?
- Are there differences within issues depending on platform? Are people more tolerant of swearing and other offensive language than they are of violence on free-to-air channels? Or is the issue irrelevant, with the important factor being whether a channel is free-to-air or available only on subscription?

Research method

A series of 18 groups was convened among people broadly representative of the general population. The total number of participants in the study amounted to about 150. Those who subscribe to multi-channel television and those with access only to the main terrestrial channels were separated, and single-gender groups were used with younger viewers aged 16-18. Groups were recruited to be representative of age, social group, and life stage (younger people with no children, people in homes containing children under 10 years and in homes with children aged 10 years and over, and people whose children had left home). No groups of older and elderly people were recruited, since experience suggests that their views do not differ significantly from those of people whose children have left home. Groups were recruited across the United Kingdom; in Inner London, Outer London, Birmingham, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Hove and Cardiff, and were convened between 12 October and 2 November 2000. Appendix I gives further details of the groups.

Clips from a range of programmes were shown to groups, and a list of the programmes from which the clips came is given in Appendix II.

Channels

Participants, even those receiving channels other than terrestrial television, could talk in detail about only a few of the many channels available in the UK. There were just too many, of such diverse types, for people to have a clearly defined perception of each. To compound the problem, many channels are launched and re-launched, changed or re-branded, merged and split up, or dropped, so participants felt they had no defined image or set expectations of each individually.

'Some of them are only on for four hours a day. That's not what I'd call a real TV channel.'

Young family, C2D, multi-channel

As a result, they tended to group channels together in order to make sense of them and articulate their expectations.

There were niche channels, which carried a single kind of programme all the time, whether sport or films, religion or cartoons; there were stranded entertainment channels, which had different types of programming, but with the same type at the same time each day, seven days of the week, be it nature programmes, films, quizzes, or whatever; and there were channels with the more traditional mixed schedules, varying from day to day, and from weekday and weekend, in which there was something for everyone, but scheduled according to when each target audience was deemed to be most available to view.

(i) BBC1

The exception was BBC1, which most participants agreed was a 'special case'. They had difficulty in explaining why it was different, but people in most groups agreed that they had unique perceptions and expectations of BBC1. Generally, they felt that it epitomised a certain kind of standard, a standard defined by more than its role as a public service channel. In the first instance, participants felt that BBC1 could still be relied upon to deliver a high level of quality – in terms of both production values and content.

'If that was on BBC1 I'd think, "What on earth is the world coming to?", but on Channel 5 at that time, it doesn't matter [Sex & Shopping].'

Young family, C2D, multi-channel

As one of the few channels to carry 'properly' scheduled programmes, BBC1 was valuable to any household with children, and particularly those with younger children. This meant that when viewers felt the scheduling 'rules' had been broken by BBC1, particularly before the Watershed, they became upset.

'That Sonia thing [EastEnders] came out of nowhere. She [her daughter] was at my mother's, and I happened to be watching it, and I thought, "Oh, my God", and I rang my mother right away and said, "She's not watching that, is she?"'

Young family, C2D, terrestrial only

However, there was also a general feeling that BBC1 now had to compete in a commercial environment which, many felt, it was well-placed to do. They felt that, being a quality channel, whatever BBC1 made or broadcast was done with a seriousness of purpose and to a high quality. *Soldiers To Be*, one of the clips used in the research, was cited as an example.

'It's a serious documentary. Normally I'm offended by that kind of language, but you can't be here. It's showing life as it is.'

Young family, BC1, terrestrial only

(ii) Established terrestrial channels

In thinking about different platforms and channels, participants did not feel that BBC2 was subject to the same 'standards' requirement expected of the family channel, BBC1. Whilst BBC2 is clearly BBC, and, as such, has that same high standard of programmes to aim for, it was seen as being more of a minority channel, with a widely varied output. This meant that the viewer needed to look more closely at what the channel was offering, programme by programme, and make a choice - and thus it had more in common with their approach to commercial channels than to BBC1.

Participants felt that ITV was definitely family oriented. As such, it was a channel which should be – and indeed was – comparable with BBC1. However, it had become, out of sheer necessity, more aggressive and more adventurous, both with its programme content and with its marketing of itself.

'It's like when they put on Who Wants to be a Millionaire? against EastEnders, or whatever BBC's big audience programme is at that time.'

Older family, BC1, multi-channel

'Channel 5 have a film every night... it's shaken ITV up a bit.'

Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, terrestrial only

ITV was seen as now fighting a tough battle with other commercial channels to survive.

'It's not just Channel 5, it's all the movie channels on Sky [they have to compete with].'

Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, terrestrial only

Participants seemed to accept that ITV had had to become more willing to include challenging material, and to include it earlier. They felt that this would mean there would be more explicit sex in dramas and films. It meant also that there would be more explicit violence in both drama and news. Interestingly, many felt that ITV did not have the same requirements of quality as did BBC1, and that, given the commercial nature of the channel, viewers should not be as sensitive about such an increase in explicitness.

One area with which there was discomfort, however, was strong or offensive language. Its inclusion in ITV's dramas was felt to be a ratings-getting device and to make them of lower quality than those on BBC1. (Objectively, there may be little difference between BBC1 and ITV, but participants' perceptions differed.) Here, the feeling was that strong language was being employed even when it was not really necessary, and when it could not be justified by the argument that high production standards demanded that degree of 'realism'. Viewers felt that such dramas had more in common with those shown on the non-terrestrial channels, and that, given ITV's tradition of family values, this was unacceptable.

'It's the language that gets me. Even on [drama series] like that new one with Robson Green, you just think, "Here we go again. Is it strictly necessary?"'
Young family, BC1, multi-channel

'I get annoyed when they start including unnecessary language. I just don't want to hear it, it ruins my enjoyment of a programme.'
Older family, C2D, terrestrial only

This was an area in which participants contradicted themselves: there was a dislike of the way in which the established channels were considered to be becoming more aggressive and lowering their standards to compete in the commercial context but, because they were essentially and obviously British, viewers felt also that they deserved the audience's support. Along with BBC1, they were felt to show the superiority of British broadcasting and to be the viewer's best defence against a perceived creeping Americanisation.

'Everything's bloody American now... I get annoyed.'
Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, terrestrial only

'All those new channels, most of them are rubbish and they're all American. [Moderator cites Sky One, Sky News]... well, they look American... you don't know where they're made.'
Older family, BC1, terrestrial only

These channels, BBC2 and ITV, raised a number of issues which participants found difficult to resolve. On the one hand, they were concerned at what they saw as the unacceptable changes in such channels resulting from increasing competition and commercialisation, and various examples of these changes were cited, such as the repeated use of particular formats and formulae.

'I get really fed up with that, it's not just too many repeats... the new programmes they have are all recycled versions of what's been on before.'
Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, terrestrial only

And participants expressed anger at changes they said had made them feel manipulated, particularly if the changes had come as a surprise. Thus, the move of ITV's *News at Ten* for what were seen as 'purely commercial' reasons was a topic on which they could speak loud and long (when the fieldwork was undertaken the changed pattern of news programmes on ITV was still comparatively recent, and the move of BBC1's news from 9 o'clock to 10 o'clock actually occurred during the fieldwork period).

On the other hand, in common with BBC1, BBC2 and ITV were clearly valued for the mixed schedules they provided, and viewers were sensitive about changes to them, particularly in relation to programmes targeted at children or families. The use of offensive language before the Watershed was of concern, as was anything seen as a lowering of standards, because such changes were judged to be aimed solely at 'getting the ratings up'. Most of these criticisms and sensitivities related to what was scheduled before the Watershed, however, and there was a general feeling that, after the Watershed, BBC2 and ITV should be allowed to compete freely and fully, particularly in relation to films². These participants tended to feel that BBC1 had a duty to edit films to make them suitable for a general audience at virtually all times, but what was perceived as the over-scrupulous editing of programmes on BBC2 and ITV met with impatience.

'Why do they do that, when you can watch any of those films on the film channels? It's nonsense.'

Young people, 19-30 years, C2D, multi-channel

(iii) 'Younger' terrestrial channels

The category of 'younger' terrestrial channels comprised Channel Four and Channel 5. Although Channel Four came on air nearly twenty years ago and Channel 5 fifteen years later, in 1997, they were felt to be alike, existing in order to provide alternatives to the other three terrestrial channels. As such, participants thought their schedules should contain not just a diversity of programmes but different programmes, some of which, at some points, certainly will be unsuitable for some viewers.

'They've got a little bit of everything. That [Jam] is not my kind of thing, but then I'd never watch Channel Four at that time of night... Of course you know what to expect.'

Older family, BC1, terrestrial only

As relative newcomers, both channels were expected to try to challenge boundaries and include more controversial programming, although almost all participants felt that Channel Four had become much less of an 'enfant terrible' than when it was first launched. Certainly, it was felt still to be innovative, but viewers thought that the 'shock for shock's sake' element had been taken over by Channel 5.

[2] *Delete Expletives?*; Andrea Millwood Hargrave; Advertising Standards Authority, British Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission, 2000.

The attitude to Channel 5 voiced by participants epitomised the changed attitude to television in general. Channel 5 was felt to be a lightweight, fun channel, whose output could not – and should not – be taken seriously. This was not seen as something to criticise, however.

'I knew it had that kind of stuff on late at night... I didn't realise quite how near the knuckle it [Sex and Shopping] was, but there are four other channels.'

Older family, BC1, terrestrial only

Although importantly different in this last respect, both Channel Four and Channel 5 were judged by most to place themselves, deliberately, outside mainstream expectations. Given that each channel tended to be very clear about its intentions, most participants felt they could not object to the programming when the intention was plainly – in their view – to shock, to sensationalise or to titillate.

There were, however, a few concerns raised in relation to these channels. First, and most important, was the issue of scheduling. Just as with BBC2 and ITV, and with BBC1, participants felt justified in being upset by more 'alternative' attitudes and behaviours transmitted before the Watershed, where 'alternative' meant poking fun and 'wacky' humour and characters. This was particularly true if the attitudes or behaviours involved homosexuality, which was an issue in relation to Channel Four. Some participants had not seen Channel 5, and so had little idea of the channel or its typical output and schedule. When shown the clip from *Sex and Shopping* a few participants became concerned that they had not been stopping their children, some of whom were quite young, from watching it later on at night³.

For parents, in particular, perhaps the most important issue was what was seen as broadcasters playing 'ratings games', whereby an inappropriate audience was 'kept over' from one programme, deemed to be innocent – such as *Friends* – to a much more controversial programme – such as *Eurotrash*. Parents complained that this behaviour on the part of the broadcaster had placed them in the uncomfortable position of having to censor their children's viewing, purely because of the way the programmes had been scheduled. They recognised that both programmes were scheduled after the Watershed (in the case of *Eurotrash*, well after the Watershed, when most programming is more suitable for adults). But they were shown after the weekend had begun, and, in any case, what parents objected to was what they perceived as a strategy designed to lure young people into watching a programme suitable for a somewhat older audience. (In fact, *Eurotrash* was transmitted at 10.34 p.m. in 2000, most commonly following either *Sex in the City* or *Frazier*, but never *Friends*, although participants seemed convinced otherwise.)

Finally, there was some concern that both channels – but particularly Channel 5 – bought in too much American programming, sometimes scheduling it too early.

[3] *Viewers and Family Viewing Policy*; British Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission, 2001.

(iv) Mainstream cable and satellite channels

Only Sky One was defined by participants as ‘a mainstream cable and satellite channel’ and it appeared to raise a particular set of issues. Few participants described themselves as Sky One viewers, or seemed to have a sense of the shape of the channel’s schedule. More commonly, people named one or two particular programmes watched regularly on Sky One. It was perceived as a channel which ‘had programmes first’, programmes that, having established themselves on Sky One, were then shown on terrestrial television. Programmes such as *The X-Files*, *The Simpsons* and *South Park* were cited.

‘You see all the new ones on Sky.’

Young people, 19-30 years, C2D, multi-channel

Thus, it was discussed as ‘a cable/satellite/digital channel’ rather than compared with BBC1 or ITV, and it was not seen as general family viewing. Again, it was criticised by some participants for having too much American programming, but only when being treated as a mainstream, ‘British’ channel which, by most participants, it was not.

Participants struggled with the idea of a Watershed on Sky One. In fact, in common with every channel, on every platform, except dedicated film channels, it is subject to the nine o’clock Watershed. Participants, however, felt less sure. On the one hand, they felt that Sky One did have some family viewing and, for this reason, should have a Watershed, and that, if there was to be a Watershed, it should be the same as for BBC1 and ITV.

‘I think they should all be the same.’

Teenage boys, 16-18 years, C2D, terrestrial only

On the other hand, they felt that Sky One was not like terrestrial television and, therefore, should not have to conform to the same rules.

‘They don’t seem to play by the same rules. It doesn’t seem shocking when you see something on satellite TV.’

Teenage girls, 16-18 years, C2D, multi-channel

Thus, participants found it difficult to decide whether there should be a Watershed for such a channel and resolved that, as long as whatever was programmed was clearly labelled, some flexibility should be offered – although they were uncomfortable with the idea of different rules⁴.

[4] *Regulating for Changing Values*; Institute of Communication Studies; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

(v) Specialist channels

This category of *'specialist channels'* was what was seen by participants themselves to have redefined choice and responsibility, with the viewer required to make active choices, rather than relying on established and familiar schedules. Participants could talk about these channels more easily than they could about Sky One, for example, but they were able to talk about only a few of them. These channels were perceived as being clearly commercial, driven by profit. Most were known to carry advertising, and were seen as carrying more repetitive advertising than that carried by the terrestrial commercial channels. Advertising apart, participants commented on the commercial strategies employed by specialist channels to win more subscribers and boost their audiences. Thus, viewers knew they had to exercise caution in making viewing decisions involving these channels.

News channels

The general feeling amongst both those participants who were and those who were not especially interested in news was that 'news junkies' want to see news covered as it is breaking, and that they would use a number of channels to satisfy their interest. News-interested viewers were adamant that there should be nothing they might construe as censorship of the specialist news channels carried on multi-channel packages, and that they should concentrate on 'raw' news rather than on interpretation and commentary. It should be taken for granted that those tuning in are doing so with specific expectations, expectations which cannot be compared with the scheduled news carried on the mainstream channels – particularly BBC1 and ITV.

'If you want news you want the news, not some sanitised version. That's why I like CNN, they give it to you as it's coming.'

Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, multi-channel

Participants did not detect political bias on specialist news channels. The only bias they commented on was described as 'American' or 'British' rather than in party political terms.

Sports channels

The discussion amongst those interested in, and knowledgeable about, sports channels was the issue of commercialism, most often summed up as follows:

'I think like most other people I know I had to get the Sky because of the sports.'

Older family, BC1, multi-channel

'They forced us to get Sky, there wasn't anything left on the normal telly.'

Young people, 19-30 years, C2D, multi-channel

There was a strong and shared perception that specialist sports channels would continue to extract more and more money from subscribers, as less and less sports coverage would be available on the free-to-air channels. Participants thought specialist sports channels, and also events available on a pay-per-view basis, were being used by broadcasters and sports organisations to spearhead new strategies which were regarded as punitive and profit-oriented.

'Soon anything that's decent we'll have to pay for.'

Older family, C2D, multi-channel

'It's disgusting really. How can BBC compete with the sums they're talking about?'

Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, terrestrial only

There was a strong feeling that it would be both impossible – and indeed wrong – for the BBC to spend on sports rights the percentage of the licence fee that would be necessary if it was to beat other suppliers, such as Sky, in the battle for rights.

Generally, participants felt some kind of 'pay back' from Sky (seen as the main provider of sports programming) was required to help justify this situation. Input into training for young players and better coverage of junior leagues were both mentioned. Regardless of whether they could identify possible specific 'duties', however, most participants felt that there should be some kind of obligation to use a proportion of the profits so obtained for the good of the game and of viewers.

Nonetheless, it was striking that when participants said that these sports channels were 'milking' the audience, they seemed resigned. They acknowledged that, no matter how much they might complain about it privately, they had no option other than to accept the inevitable, and pay the subscription or the pay-per-view fee, or visit a pub which had done so, in order to see matches of interest. It was interesting also that this was one of the main points of contact which non-subscribers had with multi-channel packages, and perhaps this is the reason for the sense that television generally is becoming increasingly profit-oriented. If they are having to pay to see matches on television (by going to friends who had organised a group for pay-per-view, or to a pub), this brings into sharp focus the changed nature of the contract people feel they have with television.

A few participants voiced a suspicion that 'they', by which they meant those responsible for determining the make-up of packages, sometimes include a more 'adult' channel in premium sports packages as an incentive or sweetener for the male in the family. Although mentioned by only a few, this imagined practice (and it is wholly mythical) was cited to illustrate yet again how programme providers manipulate the audience.

Entertainment channels

A wide variety of channels were included in the Entertainment category, including all those that provide a second chance to view programmes previously seen elsewhere. It included chat show channels, shopping channels and even some channels not aimed at providing entertainment, but which, because of their perceived poor quality, were regarded as ‘*mere entertainment*’ – American wrestling on a sports channel was given as such an example.

Participants believed that entertainment channels were designed to be taken quite ‘lightly’, and accepted them as such. They were used as ‘background’ television, rather like most radio channels, which are there to be dipped in and out of at will.

‘I watch all the soaps on all the different channels, and the chat shows... I suppose it’s not good for me, but I enjoy it, it’s company.’

Older family, BC1, multi-channel

Even though they might be showing programmes that originally had been broadcast as part of a peak-time evening schedule - e.g. *Morse*, *The Bill* and even *EastEnders* – participants did not perceive the entertainment channels as having a coherent schedule. As such, participants did not consider whether or not these channels observe the nine o’clock Watershed. This was not generally a source of concern. It was felt that most of the programmes on these channels were so well known – including programmes such as *The Jerry Springer Show* – that anyone who sat down to watch them had decided to do so and could not really find the content offensive.

‘There can’t be anyone left in England who doesn’t know what that show’s like!

[Jerry Springer].’

Older family, C2D, multi-channel

There were however, some points at which most participants felt that offence could be caused – particularly by the more ‘sensationalist’ American channels. Poor quality programmes, made to win ratings at any price, were seen as examples of viewers, and sometimes programme participants, being exploited. The clip of *Psychic Char* from *The Maury Povich Show*, used in the research, almost always evoked this response⁵.

‘That’s disgusting, I find that really disgusting. That woman’s lost her husband and they’re showing her for our entertainment... It’s just really bad.’

Older family, C2D, multi-channel

Serious matters treated in a sensationalist way for ‘mere entertainment’ were a significant cause of offence.

[5] *Beyond Entertainment?: Research into the acceptability of alternative beliefs, psychic and occult phenomena on television*; Independent Television Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission. To be published November 2001.

'It's when they all try and get more and more sensationalist, just for the ratings, that's when I start to get fed up. They use the same formats, they don't think up anything new, they just find more and more bizarre people, or go into people's lives more and more nosily.'

Older family, C2D, terrestrial only

There was some disquiet, also, at the way in which certain of these programmes were *'spreading everywhere'*, by which participants meant spreading from entertainment channels on cable and satellite to free-to-air terrestrial television – Jerry Springer was given as an example. This concern appeared to be two-fold. First, there was a worry that such *'outrageous'* and *'bizarre'* perspectives were infiltrating British culture by this route, and, second, there was annoyance at the perceived hypocrisy of censoring language used in programmes that were themselves offensive. Those who argued the latter point were concerned about broadcasting discussions of bizarre interests and activities on UK television. They believed that the act of broadcasting these things was to condone them, and to condone, also, the prurience of those who had made the programme. Rather than sanitise the language to make a programme appear acceptable, it should be shown unedited, including the offensive language, so that viewers can make up their own minds. They argued that censoring the language was irrelevant, if not positively misguided, because the issue, for them, was the programme's inclusion in broadcast output at all. Most others argued that the programme was so inconsequential that the debate was not worth having.

Shopping channels

Shopping channels were also included in the category of 'entertainment', but since they represent a special category it seems sensible to treat them under their own heading. They were regarded by virtually all participants as uncontroversial. They were not easily compared with commercials on terrestrial television, and those participants who had viewed them could readily point out what were, for them, key differences. In the first instance, and probably most importantly, fans and detractors of shopping channels alike argued that the viewer has to make an active choice to watch them since they are clearly labelled. Second, the length of time spent promoting each item meant that the viewer, the potential buyer, had more than enough information – visual as well as 'the chat' – to make up his or her own mind, as was made clear by remarks in a Birmingham group of BC1 participants with younger children, in homes with multi-channel access.

'I think it's very clever, yes, I do... because you don't very often see it now, it's going back 10, 15, 20 years ago when you used to walk round Birmingham or you go into Redditch or whatever, and you used to get the street boys who would demonstrate brushes and choppers and cutters, and there was always a huge crowd around because people want to see what things do.'

'It's less of a sell . . .'

'It's less slick, you see.'

'It doesn't hit you in the same way that an advertisement does.'

Third, it was argued that such channels were not to be taken seriously.

'I know my son-in-law keeps sending off for things. He can't stop watching this channel where they sell things. He has sent off for two or three things. I think it's ridiculous the way they advertise them. They go on and on about some silly little thing... They'll have some Wellington boots on there or something, and they just carry on talking about it for so long. It's silly little details. It's just something basic.'

Empty nesters, 50-65 years, BC1, terrestrial only

That said, a few participants in two of the groups said they had been very satisfied with purchases from QVC and so felt that, having seen for themselves the quality of what the channel offered, they would take the channel more seriously in the future. Finally, participants struggled to compare such channels with anything other than high street stores. As with a high street store, it is clear what kind of goods are on offer, and if you then walk into the store you cannot complain if you see something you do not like. It is your responsibility to check everything you buy, and the only valid reason to complain is if the goods are not fit for the intended purpose.

Lifestyle channels

Channels dealing with cooking, DIY, gardening, decorating, home crafts and so on were grouped together by participants as lifestyle channels, and they tended to polarise people. The detractors called it *'airhead television'*, but a small group of participants enjoyed such programming, finding it both informative and inspirational. In neither case were the channels seen as controversial.

Education/Knowledge channels

A further category was Education/Knowledge channels. Like the lifestyle channels, there was nothing participants found controversial about them. Rather, they felt that such channels provided a public service. Even when they show something, such as animals having sex, very explicitly, participants felt the explicitness to be justified because it was in the context of a serious documentary.

Adult Channels

Adult channels broadcasting explicit but soft pornography constituted a category on its own about which there was general agreement. Almost without exception, participants maintained that adult channels were not the kind of channels they themselves would subscribe to, but that no one could object to their being available. They compared such channels to the 18-rated films in the video shop and argued that similar material had been available for years. Provided the subscriber knew what he or she was choosing, and had to pay extra for it, then there could be few objections⁶. Indeed, participants generally saw no particular objection to 'hard porn' being available, as long as it was available only on a pay-per-view basis so that subscribers had actively and knowingly to choose each film they watched.

[6] *British Social Attitudes*; National Centre for Social Research, 1999.

Film channels

Film channels were seen as comparable to going to the cinema, and were not felt to be at all controversial. Subscribers had actively to choose to subscribe and were able to inform themselves about the content of each film and, therefore, had no 'right' to complain if a film included explicit violence or sex. There were mixed opinions about restricting the times that films containing strong material could be shown. Some participants believed that Watersheds were necessary, but others with experience of films shown on a pay-per-view basis, were unconvinced. Again, offensive language in films aimed at families or children was raised as an issue – *'it's not necessary'* – but in general there was a strong plea that films be shown completely uncut, whatever platform or channel carries them.

Children's channels

Children's channels were seen by participants as forming a distinct group, comprising only those channels aimed at younger children. People saw the music channels, which appeal to older children, and other channels targeted at teenagers as entirely different.

Children's channels proved to be a difficult area for participants to discuss. In citing reasons for subscribing to a multi-channel package, children were often identified as a key factor in the decision, and it is possible that parents had unrealistic expectations of what children's channels in multi-channel packages had to offer. In general, the perception among parents was that a huge number of channels were available, but that they tended to be of poor quality. Because of the perceived number of such channels, and because of their children's agility at 'zapping' between them, parents argued that their children knew much more about what was available than they did. Some parents expressed disquiet about the content of some of the channels, but many more mentioned the Internet as a powerful new medium about which they understood little.

'I don't worry about television, I worry about the Internet, and about games. Television's actually very tame in comparison to them.'

Younger family, BC1, multi-channel

'You've got absolutely no control over what they do on the PlayStation, and they tell me you're going to be able to get on the Internet with the new PlayStations. That's a lot more worrying than television if you ask me.'

Younger family, BC1, multi-channel

A degree of resignation was clear in the groups held with parents. Their view tended to be that there are forces which they have no hope of controlling and which their children will have to grow up with, and that, inevitably, all that any parent will be able to do is try to instil a sense of responsibility in their children, and then *'just hope'*. When compared with the Internet and games consoles, television in general was praised for providing information about the programmes carried, and satellite and cable for providing control mechanisms such as the parental lock. Few participants within the groups said they used the lock – or

indeed raised the subject without prompting – but for virtually everyone it provided considerable reassurance. It made people feel that the multi-channel package providers had some sense of responsibility, and were trying to think about parents' point of view.

Apocryphal channels

Other channels were mentioned, and even described, particularly by younger participants in the research, where it was clear that the participants were not really sure of their existence.

'There are these European porn channels you hear about.'

Teenage boys, 16-18 years, C2D, terrestrial only

'There's probably a channel for tractor pulling if you wanted.'

Teenage boys, 16-18 years, C2D, terrestrial only

'You've got 500 channels in America.'

Teenage girls, 16-18 years, BC1, terrestrial only

These putative channels and their multiplicity seemed to wield an influence on general perceptions of television and to mark the parameters of the multi-channel television landscape. Perhaps more significantly, they seemed to presage the way in which television was likely to develop in the future. When discussing such channels, participants tended to accept their existence without question and to have a strong sense that the proliferation of ever more trivial channels was an inevitable part of the future. Few people expressed a view about whether or not that was a good thing.

Life stages

The stage of life participants had reached was a significant factor in accounting for the range of different attitudes and reported behaviour apparent from the research.

Teenagers

Of all the participants included in the research sample, it was teenagers who seemed the most 'adjusted' to the new landscape. All had access to multi-channel television - those who did not have satellite, cable or digital terrestrial television in their own homes, having access via friends and in pubs and clubs. The issue for people in this age group was that they felt they had only restricted access to the best of what interested them, and they strongly suspected that there were many more channels, which would provide more entertainment, more music, more films, and so on, than they themselves could access. They had terrestrial television, and often games consoles, in their bedrooms, to which they had unrestricted access. What they wanted was similarly unrestricted access to multi-channel packages and the Internet, which were usually available only under parental supervision, or in friends' homes, under the supervision of their friends' parents.

These teenagers had very little sense of a 'heritage' of terrestrial television channels as they have evolved down the years, and this was true even for those living in homes that still had access to only the terrestrial channels. Compared with adults, teenagers tended not to think of channels as falling into different types, and the concept of public service broadcasting, with channels having a duty to include programming for a variety of interests, was hazy. They made judgements about individual programmes, and about types of programming, in an immediate and localised way. About issues such as taste and decency, impartiality and privacy, they were generally rather blasé, seeing themselves as unshockable, and were disinclined to make arguments for other people.

Standards, rules, Watersheds, schedules, and concepts of 'responsibility' were of little interest to these teenagers. The issue for them was access, and thus it was difficult getting them to discuss what should and should not be shown, at what time of day. They resented anything that, to them, smacked of paternalism, and when pushed to discuss standards they repeated the mantra of individual responsibility.

A few teenagers, however, particularly girls, suspected that they might have something different to say if they were asked the same questions when they had become the parents of young children. In research conducted by Counterpoint two years earlier⁷, teenagers were able to discuss that hypothetical situation, and even to discuss what was acceptable in relation to younger brothers or sisters. In this research, participants of the same age were reluctant to put forward any view other than 'tolerance' and individual responsibility.

[7] *Language of Complaint*; Annette Hill; Media, Culture and Society, vol.22(2) p.233-236; 2000.

Young adults, 19-30 years

Those aged 19 to 30 were watching more television than were the teenagers, but had less exposure to multi-media sources. They displayed extremely liberal attitudes towards standards in television, and had little sympathy with the idea of censorship. This liberalism extended to the quality of programmes as well as to standards and they seemed to revel in what they called '*trash*', enjoying it as much as they enjoyed what they called '*good quality*' programming.

This group was less laissez-faire than were the teenagers. They felt they had to press for change and they saw themselves as being in the vanguard of changes in television. They felt there was very little made especially for them and that most programming was aimed at either middle-aged people or at families. They shared with other participants a disapproval of the increasing commercialisation and Americanisation of television, but argued that because there was little available for them, they should be allowed more 'corners' of the schedule – such as late night Channel Four.

They could be protective of terrestrial channels, particularly of the BBC, although they did not see BBC1 as for themselves.

'I always think of BBC1 as for old people.'

Younger people, 19-30 years, C2D, multi-channel

In principle, however, they saw it being 'a good thing' that such channels are there.

'I'd want them to keep the BBC the way my mum would expect it to be.

People need that. It wouldn't be fair on her.'

Younger people, 19-30 years, C2D, multi-channel

Adults with young children

Parents with young families, whose eldest child was under 10 years, were more conscious than were people at other life stages of the need to monitor viewing for young children and this did not apply only to the viewing of non-terrestrial channels. The general view was that while the viewing of young children had to be monitored, it was the reactions of a particular child to particular programmes that were being monitored, rather than the programmes themselves. Many parents of younger children argued that the same programme that caused distress to one child might delight another. When discussing *Buff*y, *The Vampire Slayer*, for instance, these parents said that each individual child's likes and anxieties had to be taken into account. They maintained that, ultimately, it was only a child's own parents who could know what would upset him or her and, therefore, that responsibility lay with them.

Again, BBC1 was treated as a special case in that parents expected it be a safe zone, a channel that could be relied on to provide programming they did not need to supervise, especially before the Watershed.

Parents who subscribed to multi-channel packages were well aware of the child-minding benefits offered by television and they welcomed the greater choice available during the relatively short period in the late afternoon and early evening when younger children can watch television on their own. These parents tended to feel that their children had become used to the format of multi-channel packages. It was in relation to programmes on BBC1 and ITV that they talked about standards and the issue they raised was almost always that of accidental viewing, that is, viewing of unsuitable material that had ‘slipped into’ a programme or a section of the schedule they expected to be able to trust. Whilst the channels carried by multi-channel packages might be more ‘single minded’, or be criticised for not providing the same range of programmes as BBC1 and ITV, their advantage to parents of younger children was that they tended to be predictable. The key issue for this group, therefore, was that they could predict programme content and that broadcasters should not play ‘ratings tricks’ with programmes their children were regularly watching. The teenage pregnancy story that participants said had appeared ‘out of the blue’ in *EastEnders* was mentioned more than once in this context by parents of younger children. Parents of older children, however, are often grateful that difficult subjects are raised and discussed in such programmes made for family viewing⁸.

Adults with older children

Parents felt that having at least one child aged 10 or over represented a complicated stage in life, bringing, as it does, numerous dilemmas – about television viewing, as about so much else. On the one hand, children are at an age when they try to negotiate, cajole, or nag their parents into allowing them to see the programmes they want to watch; on the other hand parents have continuing doubts about their children’s ability to regulate their own viewing responsibly.

‘I try to keep an eye on what he’s watching, but to be honest you have to trust them. You can’t run up the stairs and check what he and his mates are watching every five minutes.’

Older family, BC1, multi-channel

As has been said, the main concern for parents of older children was that there were many sources of information and entertainment that were far less controllable than television, especially the Internet and games, including games accessed over the Internet. Such activities were felt to be anti-social and detrimental to family life. Unlike the PC or games console, watching television was at least something a family could do together. While television may have represented the least of a number of potential dangers, it was nevertheless a source of

[8] *Viewers and Family Viewing Policy*; British Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission, 2001.

some concern. And yet, almost without exception, the parents of older children studied in this research were resigned to the inevitability of their children seeing whatever they wanted, elsewhere than in their own homes if necessary. They argued that children are growing up more quickly nowadays, that adults cannot really know what their life is like and thus cannot always help as they might want, and that their children therefore have to be allowed to make their own mistakes. All a parent can do is prepare them, and then let them get on with it.

Empty nesters

'Empty nesters' is the term employed to describe people who are old enough to have children who have left home. In earlier research, people in this life stage have tended to hold clear and entrenched views on appropriate standards to be applied to television. In this research, however, the extent to which the empty nesters interviewed were actively stepping away from making judgements was striking. Further research will have to replicate this finding before we can be sure, but there would appear to have been a significant change. Most of these older participants were markedly liberal in their attitudes, regardless of sex or class, and seemed to have accepted change as inevitable, if not actually desirable. Their greatest concern was what they perceived to have been a deterioration in the quality of programmes available on the main terrestrial channels. They felt that they were no longer 'key players' in this world, and accepted that the changes they had seen in television output had been inevitable, and, indeed, probably desirable. They felt it important that there be programmes and channels aimed at people at other stages of life – particularly young people – and whilst they themselves might find a programme such as *Jam* pointless, they felt they could no longer judge or comment on its intrinsic value or on the harm it might do to other audiences. Generally, their attitude was extremely tolerant, and they felt that each responsible individual must make his or her own viewing choices, and not judge the choices of others.

Discussion

From the first groups of this project, it was clear that participants felt uneasy at being asked to talk about what types of programmes were appropriate, and what inappropriate, on different channels, and about their expectations of various channels and platforms. They felt that the moderators were raising issues which could not be resolved easily in a brief discussion. On the one hand, they felt they had to argue that it is all a matter of personal choice and yet on the other hand they became animated about specific issues from specific programmes.

Changes in attitudes to television

The findings of this research suggest that certain significant changes may be taking place in people's attitudes to television. It would be unwise to make major claims on the basis of a single piece of qualitative research conducted among 150 adults, and therefore the findings will have to be replicated across a broader sample, but it does seem possible that some kind of sea change in viewers' attitudes has begun in Britain⁹.

Perhaps the most important change is that these participants suggest they do not take television as seriously as once they did. This was particularly striking among younger participants and among participants with multi-channel television. It is these two groups who are likely to be in the vanguard of changing attitudes.

The findings suggest that, while in the past television was important, it is less so now. Then, people expected programmes to be of a high standard in many respects. High production values were expected, but much more than that was involved. People expected programming to be made with responsibility and a seriousness of intent, whether it was drama or children's programming, comedy or sport, documentary or religious programming. Within this research, however, most participants seem to regard much programming as trivial and lightweight, driven by the need for large ratings or simple profit. The changes highlighted here are not changes in television, but changes in the attitudes these participants brought to television, including the channels for which public service intentions are still mandated. On the one hand, people feel they have greater freedom to choose what they want to watch on television than ever before, and in that sense they have more power. On the other hand they feel they have been disempowered, in that they feel treated now as consumers, rather than as an audience which is served by broadcasters.

A second change has been the simple numerical proliferation of channels and the consequences of this increase. It has had a knock-on effect on the way viewers feel about the range of programmes available and their ability to navigate round them. In the past, people seem to have had a sense of the predictability of content. In part, this was because of the greater familiarity people had of the few individual channels. In part it was because, when schedules were comparatively stable and seemed to follow certain 'rules', viewers felt more confident of their ability to 'surf' knowledgeably and to be able to identify a programme. This appears no longer to be the case, and even those who see only the main terrestrial channels have lost that sense of familiarity.

[9] *Reflecting Community Values; Public Attitudes to Broadcasting Regulations*; Stefaan Verhulst, Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001.

'It used to be that you could have an idea of what was on so you could make a decision; now there's so much, even if you've got just the main four, you haven't a clue, so you do see the odd thing [that disturbs you].'

Young family, BC1, terrestrial only

The increase in the number of channels has had an effect out of all proportion to the hours spent watching the new channels. The greatly extended choice afforded to viewers, and the fierce competition for viewers that has accompanied it, seem to these participants to have encouraged the schedulers of the BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel Four and Channel 5 to become innovative and unpredictable, and to play what was referred to again and again as 'ratings games'.

'You used to have an idea about the main channels at least, but now I must say I haven't a clue what all these are like. I don't watch as much television as I used to... because I don't tend to just have a look to see what's on any more.'

Older family, C2D, multi- channel

The third key change was the perception that, nowadays, television was mostly a matter of money, of buying and selling audiences, and this affected people in terrestrial-only households as well as those with multi-channel television. As particular examples of this, participants cited the re-packaging of Sky-delivered channels, the introduction of pay-per-view, the loss of premier division football to subscription channels, and the promotion of Sky Digital and of ONdigital (now ITV Digital) with their free boxes for subscription to interactive services – participants felt the last to have been a mainstream commercial opportunity. The only sympathy participants expressed in this research was reserved for the BBC, for having lost so many mainstream sports to commercial channels. People felt that the BBC simply had inadequate coffers when competing with a commercial giant such as Sky.

'It's going to be the case soon that any worthwhile match is going to be pay-per-view. In fact it's going to be the case that any decent sports event – like even the Olympics – will be pay-per-view. That's already the case with the films now, the decent ones you pay extra for.'

Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, multi-channel

The fourth change in attitude that these participants bring to television was an acceptance that broadcasting was a global market, with European and American programmes and channels readily available to British viewers, and British programmes and channels exported abroad. They understood that British television was made in a market that was framed, not by public service broadcasting values, but largely by the profit motive that was an unavoidable part of a market place. Thus, because ITV was now felt to have to compete with the channels carried by multi-channel packages rather than simply with BBC1, it was inevitable that it would take on increasingly the values of multi-channel package providers. It was seen as competing in a global market, rather than in a domestic one.

'It's like they're selling Who Wants to be a Millionaire around the world now. They did that with Big Brother too, they find a formula and then flog it.'

Older family, C2D, terrestrial only

For participants in multi-channel households, the same perceptions applied, accentuated by their experience of being able to watch what suited their own interests, whenever they wanted.

'Since we got Sky, it's always on sports.'

Young people, 19-30 years, C2D, multi-channel

'I usually only have it on the music channels.'

Teenage boys, BC1, 16-18 years, multi-channel

The fifth change was in how people decide what to watch. The experience of viewing seemed to have changed, and this was especially true for participants in multi-channel homes. They now had so much choice that they had to put more effort into finding out what they wanted to watch.

'Because there's so many channels you're just flicking through them, and all the time, just going on and off. If you come across a channel that you don't know that well... whether you stay for that programme that's interested you, you don't tend to think it's a certain channel. It's not like that. You're just flicking through.'

Young people, 19-30 years, BC1, multi-channel

'I've given up. Television isn't that important to me, and I know roughly where the programmes I want are, but [her husband] flicks through them for hours and hours. It drives me crazy.'

Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, multi-channel

Participants felt that because television provided so much programming for extremes (fanatical sports fans, fanatical movie watchers, or fanatical shoppers, as much as viewers who wanted niche programming such as Playboy TV) the onus had shifted, and viewers – or consumers – must make sure that they are properly informed before making their choices. The experience of the 'passive' viewer was something they hankered after, but they recognised that it could apply to their viewing no longer.

'You've got 200 channels now. Nobody can have any idea what's on more than, what, two or three of them? So you've got to make an effort, otherwise you just end up watching 20 seconds of 50 programmes in an evening.'

Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, multi-channel

The providers of multi-channel packages were thought to be responding to this difficulty with the provision of electronic programme guides, and by supporting full listings magazines. In this research almost all the participants felt that there were many means available to viewers who wanted to control their viewing, to ensure that they would only see what they wanted to see.

'I've started to use that programme guide. It's the only way I can cut through the crap, so I haven't a clue what's on, I just try to find what I want to watch.'

Young people, 19-30 years, C2D, multi-channel

'Also on digital you've got something to press and it tells you what is on the present programme and what is coming on after that. So you can flick that on and run through that, so you know what's coming up.'

Young people, 19-30 years, C2D, multi-channel

These participants felt that the whole context of television had changed – and this feeling was shared both by those who subscribed to multi-channel packages and those who did not. They felt that no-one really had any chance of knowing the schedules in the way they had in the past, and they cited changes such as the gradual erosion of shared junctions, the pitching of very similar programmes against one another 'to win the ratings battle' and the movement of 'even' the news as a 'ratings getter' as examples of this.

'It's all ratings nowadays. We haven't a clue what's on when. The whole evening's changed too much.'

Older family, BC1, terrestrial only

'When they were allowed to move News at Ten that was it for me. I thought that's it, they can do what they want now, it doesn't matter a damn what the viewers think.'

Older family, C2D, terrestrial only

Most participants supported the continued regulation of television content, in principle at least, but their experience of 'television nowadays' made it hard for them to see a manner in which rules of regulation could be applied consistently. They felt that the underlying motive in all television nowadays was profit, and that even public service broadcasters had to compete in this commercial context. Participants felt that, because there were so many small channels of poor quality, rather than because of a decline in the quality of the mainstream channels such as BBC1 and ITV, the quality of the total broadcast output had declined significantly. As members of the audience, they felt more and more manipulated by 'ratings games' as well as by slick marketing. When they tried to bring traditional concepts and language to the debate about standards they struggled to make them fit this new context. But they were uncomfortable with the idea of evolving a new set of rules for a multi-channel environment, and their sense of fairness left them feeling that they should be able to apply to all channels the rules which already applied to the terrestrial channels.

'Clearly it should be the same Watershed that applies to all channels, but if you've paid for a movie channel then you've decided that's what you want. I'm not making much sense am I?'

Older family, BC1, terrestrial only

'It's a good question, and one I haven't thought about before... You shouldn't have some channels having different rules to others, but it's nonsense for Playboy to have the same rules as BBC1.'

Empty nesters, 50-65 years, C1C2, multi-channel

'If you're paying for something then that's your choice... but I suppose you can't always make sure that parents will take care.'

Young family, BC1, terrestrial only

Almost all these participants seemed to feel that tolerance was more important today than ever. With so many channels, it is possible for each person to find something suited to his or her own tastes and interests, and therefore anyone who 'gets upset' must have 'chosen' to get upset or be offended. This belief in tolerance was married to what they called 'being practical about it', by which they meant they expected anyone seeing anything they found offensive simply to change channels or turn off. In the context of these beliefs in tolerance and pragmatism, offence was defined in terms of a viewer having been given the wrong expectations, rather than in terms of the transmission of 'offensive' or challenging material. Further, so much of what was broadcast now was regarded as 'not targeted at us', and much was so American, that participants felt viewers should generally have lower expectations and a higher 'offence' threshold. Finally, all of this was overlaid with cynicism: many of the participants argued that no-one takes television seriously enough to find anything particularly offensive, and certainly not offensive enough to justify complaining about it.

Re-defining responsibility

It was clear that, in this changed environment, participants were more comfortable with the idea of personal responsibility. If television in general was defined by commercial concerns, and if part of that is the proliferation of 'special interest' channels (including Channel 5), then individuals had to research and decide for themselves what was appropriate. This is not to say that support for the nine o'clock Watershed has vanished, or even declined, but that in the radically changed television environment there was a need for viewers to take responsibility for their viewing, and their children's, after that time¹⁰.

[10] *Viewers and Family Viewing Policy*; British Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission, 2001.

There were certain circumstances, however, under which participants were much happier to talk about overall standards. These were, first, programmes they watched regularly, felt attached to (usually they were British), and felt they knew about. As a rule, they were part of a varied schedule, and on a mainstream, national, channel. Second, there were programmes aimed at children, and programmes explicitly billed as ‘family viewing’. And third, and cited as a special case, was strong or offensive language in mainstream programming.

Overall, however, the ‘responsible’ viewer nowadays was portrayed as a much more active viewer than in the past. Viewers must choose if they want a multi-channel package, and if they decide they do not, this was a conscious decision: the ‘offer’ had been made and rejected. Those who chose to subscribe had necessarily to learn about channels, actively to move them to the top of their ‘zapping’, or remember their channel number.

Responsibility for children’s viewing, particularly on non-BBC channels and outside the Watershed, was assigned primarily to parents by the participants in this research. It is the duty of ‘reasonable and responsible’ viewers to know their own taste, and the likes and dislikes of those on whose behalf they choose programmes, and to make appropriate choices. The corollary of this is that if they should ‘stumble’ into programming which they have not actively chosen, and find that it offends or displeases, they should simply opt out by switching off or changing channel, unless they had been positively misled by the broadcaster, in which case there is cause for complaint. Thus responsible programming and scheduling were important in this equation: in order to accept personal responsibility for viewing, the viewer needed to be able to rely on the consistency of a channel or a slot, on clarity in the way it is presented, and on predictability.

‘A lot of these [multi-channel package channels] say what they are in the title, so you know what you’re getting.’

Older family, BC1, multi-channel

Fundamental values in television

Whilst participants had to struggle with the traditional concepts of standards they did try to express some fundamental values they felt should apply across the board. They could not express those values in terms of standards and 'rules', and therefore they worked long and hard to express the sources of their discomfort and the terms in which they wanted to discuss global issues of broadcasting. The clips helped prompt these expressions of fundamentals, as did a great deal of moderator prompting, rehearsing with the groups some possible or actual views of broadcasters.

Given the importance of the increasing commercialisation of broadcasting that participants perceived, it was not surprising that one of the most frequently, and clearly, stated fundamentals, was that programme participants should not be felt to be exploited for profit¹¹. The clip of *Psychic Char* from *The Maury Povich Show* was the one that excited highest emotion. Participants argued this was poor quality television featuring someone who had recently suffered a tragedy, who clearly had no idea of what being on television was going to be like, and who therefore was being exploited simply to boost ratings.

Another criticism that was raised concerned programmes which were considered to use inappropriate and misleading formats in order to disguise their true purposes. In the case of *Psychic Char*, the chat show format was criticised as being dishonest, trying to make the show look both more professional and benign than was actually the case.

The third principle outlined was that broadcasters should not be allowed to play scheduling games with viewers, encouraging them into thinking they had made a decision about one programme when in fact it involved others. The scheduling of *Eurotrash* after *Friends* was the most frequently cited example of this, although the move of *News at Ten* was given also. What this had meant, in practice, was that viewers no longer had the opportunity to see the ITV main news programme at a time that suited them (or they had become used to), but without themselves having decided to stop viewing that programme at that time.

The next principle was an important one: if viewers are to assume individual responsibility for what they watch, it is crucial to viewers' ability to make an informed choice that channels and schedules, where they exist, as well as programmes, should be predictable, clearly presented, and consistent.

Finally, although participants could find no way to express the idea of global boundaries for television, they were uncomfortable with the idea of not having such boundaries, fearing this would take television into the realm of the Internet, whose lack of regulation made them feel uncomfortable¹².

[11] *Consenting Adults?* Stirling Media Research Institute; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2000.

[12] *Regulation: The Way Forward*; Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission, 1999.

Appendix 1

Note on method

Eighteen groups were held. Groups were recruited by family or household type (recruiters were given a rough guide to ages appropriate to each type), by socio-economic group and by whether or not they had access to multi-channel television at home. The groups of teenagers were single gender and the remainder mixed gender.

	Age	Household type	Social group	Channels received
1	16-18	Teenagers	BC1	Terrestrial only
2	16-18	Teenagers	BC1	Subscription channels
3	16-18	Teenagers	C2D	Terrestrial only
4	16-18	Teenagers	C2D	Subscription channels
5	19-30	Young, single/cohabiting	BC1	Terrestrial only
6	19-30	Young, single/cohabiting	BC1	Subscription channels
7	19-30	Young, single/cohabiting	C2D	Terrestrial only
8	19-30	Young, single/cohabiting	C2D	Subscription channels
9	25-40	Young family, eldest child less than 10	BC1	Terrestrial only
10	25-40	Young family, eldest child less than 10	BC1	Subscription channels
11	25-40	Young family, eldest child less than 10	C2D	Terrestrial only
12	25-40	Young family, eldest child less than 10	C2D	Subscription channels
13	35-50	Older family, eldest child 10+	BC1	Terrestrial only
14	35-50	Older family, eldest child 10+	BC1	Subscription channels
15	35-50	Older family, eldest child 10+	C2D	Terrestrial only
16	35-50	Older family, eldest child 10+	C2D	Subscription channels
17	50+	Empty nesters	C1C2	Terrestrial only
18	50+	Empty nesters	C1C2	Subscription channels

To provide a degree of national and regional representation, groups were convened in Camden (Inner London), Edgware (Outer London), Ripley (Surrey), Birmingham, Leeds, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Hove and Cardiff.

Groups were held between 12 October and 2 November 2000 and were moderated by either Alison Lyon or James Lang of Counterpoint Research.

Appendix 2

Clips used in the research

A selection of programme clips was shown to each group and they were presented in a different order each time. The clips were introduced by the moderator with words along the lines, *'I'd now like to show you some excerpts from programmes to see what you think. We're not looking so much at what you think of the programme itself, more at whether the channel it's on makes a difference to what the "rules" are for showing this kind of thing.'*

WWF (Sky One)

Jam (Channel Four)

Attachments (BBC2)

QVC

The Psychic Char item from *The Maury Povich Show* (Granada Breeze)

South Park (Sky One)

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BBC2)

Tinsel Town (BBC2)

Adult Lives (BBC2)

Soldiers To Be (BBC1)

Sex and Shopping (Channel 5)

The Jerry Springer Show (ITV)

The 11 O'Clock Show (Channel Four)

Lily Savage (ITV)

Angel (Channel Four)

Big Brother (Channel Four)

£10.00

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