



ABC  
Australian  
Broadcasting  
Corporation

# code of practice

MARCH 2007

This Code of Practice  
summarises the major  
principles which guide  
ABC content.



enter

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1** The ABC's place in the media industry is distinctive. The *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983*, gives the Corporation particular responsibilities such as the provision of an independent news service. The ABC Charter (section 6 of the Act) sets out the functions of the Corporation and can be found on the internet at <http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/charter.htm>.
- 1.2** The ABC Act guarantees the editorial independence of the Corporation's programs. The ABC holds the power to make programming decisions on behalf of the people of Australia. By law and convention neither the Government nor Parliament seeks to intervene in those decisions.
- 1.3** This Code of Practice applies to ABC Radio and Television, Online and other emerging media services. Some parts of the Code apply to a particular medium such as Section 6: Television Program Classifications. Where this is the case material is marked accordingly.
- 1.4** The word 'content' is generally used throughout the Code and covers material broadcast on ABC Radio and Television, provided on ABC Online and through emerging media services.
- 1.5** This Code of Practice sets out the major principles which apply to ABC content. The ABC distinguishes between four types of content:
- news and current affairs
  - opinion
  - topical and factual
  - performance.

- 1.6** All four content categories are covered by the general content codes below. In addition specific requirements apply to the content categories of news and current affairs, opinion, and topical and factual.
- 1.7** The *ABC Editorial Policies 2007* set out programming policies and guidelines in full and can be found at <http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/edpols.htm>.

## 2. General content codes

- 2.1** The guiding principle in the application of the following general content codes is context. What is unacceptable in one context may be appropriate and acceptable in another. However, the use of language, sound or images for no other purpose but to offend is not acceptable.
- 2.2** This Code is not intended to ban certain types of language or images from bona fide dramatic or literary treatments, nor is it intended to exclude such references from legitimate reportage, debate or documentaries.
- 2.3 Warnings.** From time to time the ABC presents content that it recognises may disturb or offend some of the audience. Where appropriate, the audience will be given advance notice about such content.
- 2.4 Violence.** There will be times when there are genuine reasons for using violent images and sounds to adequately illustrate a story. Particular care must be taken in the presentation or portrayal of violence. The ABC's decision to use such images or sounds should be based on editorial judgement, together with regard for the reasonable susceptibilities of audiences to the detail of what is broadcast or published. Such content should not put undue emphasis on the violent images or sounds, and where appropriate it should be preceded by a warning.
- 2.5 Language.** Variations of language favoured by different groups of Australians are valid and have their place in ABC content. On occasions, the language of one group may be distasteful to another. Use of such language is permitted provided it is not used gratuitously and can be justified in the context of, for example, news, current affairs, fiction, documentary, dramatisation, comedy or song lyrics.

**2.6 Sex and Sexuality.** Provided it is handled with integrity, any of the following treatments of sex and sexuality may be appropriate and necessary:

- it can be discussed and reported in the context of news, current affairs, information or documentary programs
- it can be referred to in drama, comedy, lyrics or fictional programs
- it can be depicted or implied.

**2.7 Discrimination and Stereotypes.** To avoid discrimination and stereotyping, content should not use language or images which:

- disparage or discriminate against any person or group on grounds such as race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, disability or sexual preference; marital, parental, social or occupational status; religious, cultural or political belief or activity
- are not representative and reinforce stereotypes, or convey stereotypic assumptions
- convey prejudice
- make demeaning or gratuitous references; for example to, people's physical characteristics, cultural practices or religious beliefs.

The above requirements are not intended to prevent content which is factual or the expression of genuinely-held opinion, or content presented in the legitimate context of a humorous, satirical or dramatic work.

**2.8 Privacy.** The rights to privacy of individuals should be respected in all ABC content. However, in order to provide information which relates to a person's performance of public duties or about other matters of public interest, intrusions upon privacy may, in some circumstances, be justified.

**2.9 Suicide.** Suicide is a legitimate subject in ABC content. The depiction or description of suicide must be handled with extreme sensitivity. Care must

be taken to ensure that events or methods depicted or described do not encourage others to copy these actions.

**2.10 Intrusion into Grief.** Sensitivity should be exercised in presenting images of, or interviews with, bereaved relatives and survivors or witnesses of traumatic events.

Except in special circumstances, children who have recently been victims of, or eyewitnesses to, a tragedy or traumatic experience should not be interviewed or featured.

**2.11 Program Promotions.** Program Promotions should be scheduled so as to be consistent with the nature of surrounding content.

**2.12 Content for Children.** In providing enjoyable and enriching content for children, the ABC does not wish to conceal the real world from them. It can be important for the media, especially television, to help children understand and deal with situations which may include violence and danger. Special care should be taken to ensure that content which children are likely to watch or access unsupervised should not be harmful or disturbing to them.

**2.13 Religious Content.** ABC religious content includes coverage of worship and devotion, explanation, analysis, debate and reports. This content may include major religious traditions, indigenous religions and new spiritual movements, as well as secular perspectives on religious issues. The ABC does not promote any particular belief system or form of religious expression.

**2.14 Indigenous Australian Content.** Significant cultural practices of Indigenous Australians should be observed in content and reporting.

**2.15 Television Programs: Closed Captioning on Domestic Television Services for People who are Hearing Impaired or Deaf.** Closed caption content will be clearly marked when information is provided to the press or when captioned programs are promoted. Where possible, open captioned advice will be provided if technical problems prevent scheduled closed captioning. Television programs broadcast between 6 pm and 10.30 pm and news and current affairs programs broadcast at any time are captioned in accordance with the *Broadcasting Service Act 1992*. Addresses to the nation and events of national significance will also be transmitted with closed captioning.

**2.16 Television Programs: Accessible Domestic Television Services for People who are Blind or Have a Visual Impairment or Limited Reading Comprehension.** Where material appears in text format on ABC Television, the ABC will endeavour to provide it in audio as well, subject to availability of resources and considerations of creativity, editorial integrity and immediacy.

**2.17 ABC Online.** The ABC aims to make its online services accessible to audience members who are blind or have a visual impairment. It should however, be recognised that it will not always be possible to achieve this while maintaining standards of creativity, editorial integrity and immediacy. There may also be cases where time or resources limit the ABC's ability to provide this service.

**2.18 Confidential Sources.** ABC staff will not be obliged to disclose confidential sources which they are entitled to protect at all times.

## 3. News and current affairs content

- 3.1** This section applies to content categorised by the ABC as news and current affairs in accordance with Section 5 of the *ABC Editorial Policies 2007*. This content will be accurate, impartial and objective and thereby avoid bias.
- 3.2** Every reasonable effort, in the circumstances, must be made to ensure that the factual content of news and current affairs is accurate and in context.
- 3.3** The ABC will correct a significant error when it is established that one has been made. When a correction is necessary, it will be made in an appropriate manner as soon as reasonably practicable.
- 3.4** Content will be impartial. Editorial judgements will be based on news values. One perspective will not be unduly favoured over others.
- 3.5** Balance will be sought but may not always be achieved within a single program or publication; it will be achieved as soon as reasonably practicable and in an appropriate manner. It is not essential to give all sides equal time. As far as possible, principal relevant views on matters of importance will be presented.
- 3.6** The ABC will serve the public interest by investigating issues affecting society and individuals.
- 3.7** Re-enactments of events will be clearly identified as such and presented in a way which will not mislead audiences.

**3.8 Television Programs: News Updates.** Care will be exercised in the selection of sounds and images used in television news updates and news promotions. Consideration must also be given to the likely composition of the audience.

**3.9 Television Programs: News Updates During Children’s Viewing Times.** Particular care should be taken with scheduled television news updates at those times when programming is directed at children. News updates at such times must not include any violent content.

**3.10 Television Programs: News Flashes.** Because the timing and content of news flashes on television are unpredictable, particular care should be exercised in the selection of sounds and images and consideration given to the likely composition of the audience. This should be done, notwithstanding the need to get a news flash to air as quickly as possible. Before any news flash during children’s and other G classified programs, a visual and audio announcement must be broadcast advising viewers that regular programming will be interrupted with a news flash.

## 4. Opinion content

**4.1** This section applies to content categorised by the ABC as opinion content in accordance with Section 6 of the *ABC Editorial Policies 2007*.

**4.2** Content must be signposted to audiences in advance.

**4.3** The ABC is committed to impartiality and must demonstrate this through the presentation of a diversity of perspectives across a network or platform in an appropriate timeframe.

**4.4** Reasonable steps will be taken to ensure factual content is accurate and that content does not misrepresent other viewpoints.

## 5. Topical and factual content

- 5.1** This section applies to content categorised by the ABC as topical and factual content in accordance with Section 7 of the *ABC Editorial Policies 2007*.
- 5.2** The ABC is committed to impartiality: where topical and factual content deals with matters of contention or public debate, a diversity of principal relevant perspectives should be demonstrated across a network or platform in an appropriate timeframe.
- 5.3** Every reasonable effort must be made to ensure that factual content is accurate and in context and that content does not misrepresent other viewpoints.
- 5.4** The ABC will correct a significant error when it is established that one has been made. When a correction is necessary, it will be made in an appropriate manner as soon as reasonably practicable.

## 6. Television program classifications

- 6.1** The ABC applies the classifications listed below to all its domestic television programs with the exception of news, current affairs and sporting events. The ABC classifications are based on the Guidelines for the Classification of Films and Computer Games issued by the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC), made under the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995*.

### 6.2 Classification of television programs

#### **G – General (suitable for all ages)**

G programs may be shown at any time. This category is considered suitable for all viewers, and includes programs designed for pre-school and school age children. The G classification symbol does not necessarily indicate that the program is one that children will enjoy. Some G programs contain themes or story-lines that are not of interest to children.

Parents should feel confident that children can watch material in this classification without supervision. Whether or not the program is intended for children, the treatment of themes and other classifiable elements will be careful and discreet.

**Themes:** The treatment of themes should have a very low sense of threat or menace, and be justified by context. The presentation of dangerous, imitable behaviour is not permitted except in those circumstances where it is justified by context. Any depiction of such behaviour must not encourage dangerous imitation.

**Violence:** Violence may be very discreetly implied, but should:

- have a light tone, or
- have a very low sense of threat or menace, and

- be infrequent, and
- not be gratuitous.

**Sex:** Sexual activity should:

- only be suggested in very discreet visual or verbal references, and
- be infrequent, and
- not be gratuitous.

Nudity in a sexual context is not permitted.

**Language:** Coarse language should:

- be very mild and infrequent, and
- not be gratuitous.

**Drug Use:** The depiction of the use of legal drugs should be handled with care. Illegal drug use should be implied only very discreetly and be justified by context.

**Nudity:** Nudity outside of a sexual context should be:

- infrequent, and
- not detailed, and
- not gratuitous.

### **PG – Parental Guidance (Parental Guidance recommended for people under 15 years)**

PG programs may be shown:

- on weekdays between 8.30 am and 4.00 pm and between 7.00 pm and 6.00 am
- on weekends at any time **except** between 6 am and 10 am.

PG programs may contain themes and concepts which, when viewed by those under 15 years, may require the guidance of an adult. The PG classification signals to parents that material in this category contains depictions or references which could be confusing or upsetting to children without adult guidance. Material classified PG will not be harmful or disturbing to children.

Parents may choose to preview the material for their children. Some may choose to watch the material with their children. Others might find it sufficient to be accessible during or after the viewing to discuss the content.

**Themes:** Supernatural or mild horror themes may be included. The treatment of themes should be discreet and mild in impact. More disturbing themes are not generally dealt with at PG level.

**Violence:** Violence may be discreetly implied or stylised and should also be:

- mild in impact, and
- not shown in detail.

**Sex:** Sexual activity and nudity in a sexual context may be suggested, but should:

- be discreet, and
- be infrequent, and
- not be gratuitous.

Verbal references to sexual activity should be discreet.

**Language:** Coarse language should be mild and infrequent.

**Drug Use:** Discreet verbal references and mild, incidental visuals of drug use may be included, but these should not promote or encourage drug use.

**Nudity:** Nudity outside of a sexual context should not be detailed or gratuitous.

### **M – Mature (recommended for people aged 15 years and over)**

M programs may be shown:

- on weekdays that are school days, between noon and 3.00 pm and
- on any day of the week between 8.30 pm and 5.00 am.



The M category is recommended for people aged over 15 years. Programs classified M contain material that is considered to be potentially harmful or disturbing to those under 15 years. Depictions and references to classifiable elements may contain detail. While most themes may be dealt with, the degree of explicitness and intensity of treatment will determine what can be accommodated in the M category - the less explicit or less intense material will be included in the M classification and the more explicit or more intense material, especially violent material, will be included in the MA15+ classification.

**Themes:** Most themes can be dealt with, but the treatment should be discreet and the impact should not be high.

**Violence:** Generally, depictions of violence should:

- not contain a lot of detail, and
- not be prolonged.

In realistic treatments, depictions of violence that contain detail should:

- be infrequent, and
- not have a high impact, and/or
- not be gratuitous.

In stylised treatments, depictions of violence may contain more detail and be more frequent if this does not increase the impact.

Verbal and indirect visual references to sexual violence may only be included if they are:

- discreet and infrequent, and
- strongly justified by the narrative or documentary context.

**Sex:** Sexual activity may be discreetly implied.

Nudity in a sexual context should not contain a lot of detail, or be prolonged.

Verbal references to sexual activity may be more detailed than depictions if this does not increase the impact.

**Language:** Coarse language may be used.

Generally, coarse language that is stronger, detailed or very aggressive should:

- be infrequent, and
- not be gratuitous.

**Drug Use:** Drug use may be discreetly shown.

Drug use should not be promoted or encouraged.

**Nudity:** Nudity outside of a sexual context may be shown but depictions that contain any detail should not be gratuitous.

### **MA15+ – Mature Audience (not suitable for people under 15 years)**

MA15+ programs may be shown between 9.30 pm and 5.00 am on any day of the week.

MA15+ programs, because of the matter they contain or because of the way it is treated, are not suitable for people aged under 15 years.

Material classified MA15+ deals with issues or contains depictions which require a more mature perspective. This is because the impact of individual elements or a combination of elements is considered likely to be harmful or disturbing to viewers under 15 years of age. While most themes may be dealt with, the degree of explicitness and intensity of treatment will determine what can be accommodated in the MA15+ category - the more explicit or more intense material, especially violent material, will be included in the MA15+ classification and the less explicit or less intense material will be included in the M classification.

**Themes:** The treatment of themes with a high degree of intensity should be discreet.

**Violence:** Generally, depictions of violence should not have a high impact. Depictions with a strong impact should be infrequent, and should not be prolonged or gratuitous.

Realistic treatments may contain detailed depictions, but these should not be prolonged.

Depictions of violence in stylised treatments may be more detailed and more frequent than depictions of violence in close to real situations or in realistic treatments if this does not increase the impact.

Visual suggestions of sexual violence are permitted only if they are not frequent, prolonged, gratuitous or exploitative.

**Sex:** Sexual activity may be implied.

Depictions of nudity in a sexual context which contain detail should not be exploitative.

Verbal references may be more detailed than depictions, if this does not increase the impact.

**Language:** Coarse language may be used.

Coarse language that is very strong, aggressive or detailed should not be gratuitous.

**Drug Use:** Drug use may be shown, but should not be promoted or encouraged.

More detailed depictions should not have a high degree of impact.

**Nudity:** Nudity should be justified by context.

**6.3 Implementation Guidelines.** The time zones for each program classification are guides to the most likely placement of programs within that classification. They are not hard and fast rules and there will be occasions on which programs or segments of programs appear in other time-slots. For example, a PG program or segment of a program designed for teenage viewers could appear before 7.00 pm on a week day if that is the time most suitable for the target audience.

There must be sound reasons for any departure from the time zone for a program classification.

Programs which are serious presentations of moral, social or cultural issues, may appear outside their normal classification time zone, provided that a clear indication of the nature of the content is given at the beginning of the program.

Programs, including those having a particular classification under the OFLC Guidelines, may be modified so that they are suitable for broadcast or suitable for broadcast at particular times.

Due to local scheduling arrangements, some programs will be broadcast to Broken Hill outside their classification time zone.

**6.4 Television Classification Symbols.** The classification symbol of the PG, M or MA15+ program (except for news, current affairs or sporting events) being shown will be displayed at the beginning of the program.

The classification symbol of the PG, M or MA15+ program (except for news, current affairs or sporting events) being promoted will be displayed during the promotion.

**6.5 Consumer Advice.** Audio and visual consumer advice on the reasons for an M or MA15+ classification will be given prior to the beginning of an M or MA15+ program.

## 7. Complaints

**7.1** This Code of Practice does not apply to any complaint concerning content which is or becomes the subject of legal proceedings or any complaint about a radio or television program which is made to the ABC more than six months after the broadcast to which it refers. However, please note the ABC cannot guarantee that it will have the necessary tapes to review complaints made more than six weeks after broadcast as this is the statutory period for which the ABC is required to retain radio and television tapes.

**7.2 ABC Audience and Consumer Affairs.** Complaints that the ABC has acted contrary to this Code of Practice should be directed to the ABC in the first instance. Phone complainants seeking a written response from the ABC will be asked to put their complaint in writing. All such written complaints are to be directed to ABC Audience and Consumer Affairs, GPO Box 9994, in the capital city of the complainant's State or Territory. The complainant will receive a response from the ABC within 60 days of receipt of their complaint.

The ABC makes considerable efforts to provide an adequate response to complaints about Code of Practice matters, except where a complaint is frivolous, vexatious or not made in good faith or the complainant is vexatious or not acting in good faith.

**7.3 ABC Complaints Review Executive.** If a complainant is dissatisfied with a response from Audience and Consumer Affairs, the complainant may request that the matter be reviewed by the Complaints Review Executive (CRE). The CRE is a senior ABC manager with editorial experience, who

is separate from Audience and Consumer Affairs and content areas, and who can consider the complaint afresh. Complainants can write to the CRE at GPO Box 9994, in the capital city of the complainant's State or Territory.

**7.4 Independent Complaints Review Panel.** The Independent Complaints Review Panel (ICRP) is appointed by the ABC Board to review written complaints which relate to allegations of serious cases of factual inaccuracy, bias, lack of balance or unfair treatment arising from ABC content.

A complaint of this nature may only be referred to the ICRP for review:

- if the ABC's normal complaints handling procedures (as described in 7.2 above) have been completed and the complainant is dissatisfied with the ABC's response; or
- the ABC has not responded within 60 days and the ABC has failed to provide an acceptable reason for the delay; and
- if in the case of a radio or television program, the complaint was originally lodged with the ABC within six weeks of the date of broadcast.

Further information can be obtained from the Convener, Independent Complaints Review Panel, GPO Box 688, Sydney, NSW 2001 or by phoning (02) 8333 5639.

If the Panel does not accept the complaint for review or if the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the review and the complaint is covered by the ABC Code of Practice, the complainant may make a complaint to the Australian Communications and Media Authority about the matter.

## 7.5 Australian Communications and Media

**Authority.** If a complainant:

- does not receive a response from the ABC within 60 days; or
- is dissatisfied with the ABC's response; or
- is dissatisfied with the outcome of the ICRP review (as mentioned above) and the complaint is covered by the ABC Code of Practice;

the complainant may make a complaint to the Australian Communications and Media Authority about the matter.

## 7.6 Contact Addresses

### Australian Broadcasting Corporation

**Audience and Consumer Affairs**  
GPO Box 9994, in the capital city  
of your State or Territory.

**Complaints Review Executive**  
GPO Box 9994, in the capital city  
of your State or Territory.

### Independent Complaints Review Panel

GPO Box 688, Sydney, NSW, 2001.

### Australian Communications and Media Authority

PO Box Q500, Queen Victoria Building,  
NSW, 1230.