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Presbyter  
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Email to Broadcasting Inquiry, Productivity Commission  
broadcasting@pc.gov.au  
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The accompanying submission is from the Social Issues Committee of the PWA and is sent with the support of the State Council consisting of some 50 representatives of women in more than 200 branches throughout New South Wales. Our continuing interest and participation in Community Standards is a matter of record.

Thank you for your invitation to take part in this discussion.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Marion Smith'.

Mrs Marion Smith, Convener

## SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION ON BROADCASTING

Our interest in this subject is from the social and cultural impact of broadcasting on the people who use the services. All forms of media impact on society one way or another and should be quality controlled.

### . The Public Interest and the objectives of broadcasting policy.

The objectives be addressed if there was no Government legislation. Self regulation where it operates is a significant failure from the public point of view. Unfortunately present legislation has not ensured either diversity or Australian culture. Even Australian programs have resorted to the form and language of the US programs and the amount of actual Australian history or background is negligible. Too few programs are high quality or innovative. The ABC is good at some things but very selective in their choices. Too many programs are inane and reinforce permissive behaviours and attitudes. Their idea of community standards are not what most parents regard as minimal moral requirements for health. Radio commentators, especially on youth oriented stations are uncouth and deliberately anti-social. Advertising is very strident and too often targeted at children.

### Regulatory policy under clause 4 of the BSA

The degree of influence of television is most evident on the young in disadvantaged groups without the background or adult guidance to make judgments on the message. High degree of influence is exerted through serial shows because the viewer gets deeply involved with the characters and identifies with them. The views then expressed by these fictitious characters is absorbed and accepted as valid and truthful. The immature viewer would seldom check on such views to see if they are valid - it is just entertainment. This is most evident in the treatment of casual sexual relationships.

The other area of influence is in interviews with famous or political people where loaded questions are designed to sway opinions. No background to situations is supplied so no judgment is fair. Probably an example of this is the way the Media made Pauline Hanson and then destroyed her. Her original speech in Parliament has little controversial in it. Media commentators made the image and orchestrated the impact on all other players, even the Parliament.

The use of the Media in all its forms to make acceptable the destructive lifestyles which cause the most intractable health and social problems in the community has been evident to all. There is a constant pressure for tolerance of what is intolerable. Time of course will fix all these things.

**It is said that one cannot prove that immoral or violent information causes harm. It cannot be proved that violent and/or immoral information does not cause harm.** At a Seminar on Violence Against Women in 1994 an Aboriginal woman elder from the Mutitjulu Community (Ayers Rock), was in no doubt that there was a correlation between the regular arrival of violent and/or pornographic videos to their community and the abuse of women and children in what was in earlier times, a relatively non-violent group. She had listened to the Speakers on "Violence against Women". Her words were "You've got trouble and we've got trouble".

There is evidence in court transcripts that certain videos, books and other media have triggered a "copy cat" crime. The recent School Massacre in the US and the reports of our own tragedies from Anita Cobby to Port Arthur, deal with people who have a predilection for unsavoury entertainment. Such susceptible members of the community should be considered when the decision is made whether to refuse classification to any material. We believe the mounting destruction of Australia's once strong family culture is due, at least in part to the influence of the media at all levels, now into the second generation. The behaviours promoted in entertainment are part of this value vacuum.

There is ample evidence in the Parliamentary Inquiry into Video Material 1989 and the Committee on the more recent Report on Community Standards Relevant to New Technologies, to show that people are influenced to accept some behaviours after repeated viewing. Our own experience confirms this opinion. There is concern

that people should have a choice of what programs they watch. Those who were killed at Port Arthur did not choose that fate, they were the victims of an unbalanced and dangerous person well over 18 years of age. He was able to buy, not only guns, but a whole library of violent and pornographic films which he played endlessly. This may not be the only cause, but it is one about which something can be done. Obsessive behaviour is known to be reinforced by this material.

Classification has been ineffective, because those who are offended are not the problem. Self regulation is a failure. The limits have been continually stretched in humour and violence, as well as immoral themes. The ABC and SBS are a law unto themselves. Any complaint there gets the reply that it must supply a service to all sections of the public.

**Standards should be “technology neutral” and should apply to all new technologies.** We see delivery platforms as irrelevant. The fact that providers view their services as a separate entity from broadcast services does not alter the fact that all will have an impact on individuals and on the home and can be accessed easily. PIN numbers should be required for any adult themes. However children are not the only worry. The continuing deterioration in personal relationships and the much reported increase in abuse of women and children is an indication that the perpetrators of such behaviour have a warped view of women and children. This view of women as promiscuous and/or available and consenting to anything, is one which is created and/or reinforced by pornography (expert evidence in the Inquiries mentioned earlier). For twenty years Australia has been open to increasing numbers of US porn films and now we even have our own. This awful trade is more lucrative than all the other entertainment media in the US. Australia should have the courage to show by legislation that it is not an acceptable treatment of women in the media.

### **Australian Content**

We took part in the Australian Content Inquiry of the ABA and listened to the public hearings. We believe Australian Content is important, not only for the cultural necessity, but to ensure that we have an industry of our own to produce films into the future. The end of a strong clothing and textile industries has been the result of unfair competition from countries whose costs in wages and conditions are much lower than ours. Not incompetence as often repeated. We should be very concerned to ensure that our writers and producers of programs are not priced out of a living which according to all reports is pretty meagre already. Our cultural resources are not shoes or TV sets. No one else can make this contribution to society.

One effect of competition on the world market has been that the language and themes of Australian films has become increasingly like the US films. The actual Australian cultural content is therefore less, however, there will be fewer films if we have a less reliable market at home. Diversity which is hard to find now, would be stifled as only the big operators would survive. Quality does not assure sales when there are cheap foreign films or US subsidised NZ films. These films will only be cheap till we no longer have film producing capacity.

The ABC and SBS are not sufficient alone to supply cultural values. SBS is mostly catering for other ethnic groups and has minimal Australian culture. In fact it could be assumed there was no culture before 1950. Unfortunately commercial stations are watched exclusively by a wide section of the community who may then see even less Australian material. The world view of many people is governed by the commercial stations. What people listen to certainly influences what they do or there would be no point in advertising. It is nonsense to imply that material has little influence just because it is entertainment or humour.

Page 12 1.(j) The high priority on protection of children is not at all evident. Many times the content of programs is undesirable and the very high percentage of cartoon type presentations gradually substitutes fantasy for reality. There is very little celebration of “life” or the youthful endeavour of peers, for example the Duke of Edinburgh scheme, Scouting or magazine type programs which cover items of interest or careers and real life adventure. Most programs seem to be oriented to commercial gain or some company other than the TV or radio station - advertising included.

School teachers report that children who watch violent cartoon material are more likely to be violent at school. While the educated and advantaged say they are quite able to decide for themselves which programs they wish to select, there are many others in the community who may be harmed by unsuitable information. Parents are hard put to guide their children without removing the television. We believe that control of the content of all broadcast information is essential. It is proven necessary for food products to have standards set down and enforced, as it is in most other areas of consumer service.

The plethora of advertisements for gambling - lotteries etc - in the late afternoon and evening ensures that the young or immature of any age will come to believe that they will win truckloads of cash. These advertisements should be, if screened at all, left to after 9.30pm. They should not be deliberately child oriented as many are with "cute" mascots. Targeting of ads is very obviously to the immature.

### **Regulation of Political material**

We were interested to read that there might be some regulation. The freedom of commentators to decide the slant (bias) of what is broadcast as political comment and the propensity for the most inflammatory opposite opinion to be broadcast as the last word on any new policy direction is very destructive and does influence public opinion and destroy confidence for some people - the ABC does this continually. Certain politicians are either ignored, denigrated or their motives impugned, because the media does not approve - this is censorship and has proved an effective process to influence the uninformed.

We should all be concerned that the Parliament, and indeed the Government will succeed in their proposed policies and that any changes to the law decided upon in that place, not by the media, will promote good government. If their policies do not work, there is always the next election. It seems to us that the media is determined to cause dissension and controversy before the fact, and in that way influence the outcome or create the some future News opportunities. Perhaps News programs are too numerous or too lengthy.

### **General Agreement on Trade in Services**

**Australia should continue to claim exemptions under this and other Treaties in order to maintain its Standards and quota of Australian content and control of the Services.** Our stand could also encourage other small nations so that they are not swamped by unsuitable and anti-cultural matter. Violent and immoral films etc will do to the Pacific Islands and other less developed nations much the same as it is doing with our own vulnerable people. However, Australia has a responsibility to her own people first.

Last year the US Congress passed a law which required a PIN number for all people accessing porn sites on the Internet. In December, Australia signed an agreement with the US on Freedom of Information. In January the American High Court ruled that the US Congress Anti-Porn Law was unconstitutional - it infringed "freedom of speech" so was not upheld. This seems to us an extraordinary decision in these days of Anti-discrimination law. However, we are concerned that because Australia has signed this Agreement, then any decisions made to control or refuse to circulate pornography will be circumvented by this International Agreement.

**We consider it a matter of some urgency that Australia revisit this International Agreement and put reservations on this section.**

### **Complaints**

It is virtually impossible to get a reasonable response to complaints. The Codes are broad enough to cover most things. Individual people will not take the matter any further. Committees are seen as irrelevant. The suggestion in the recent Senate Inquiry that the ABA should be the first contact for complaints would have to be more effective than the present system. Then the overview of what is happening in the industry would be more apparent to the ABA and also be a gauge of public opinion. The complaint, if justified may then be

acted upon - not necessarily as a legal matter but as guidance in the first place - a suitable high penalty for inaction.

To rely only on complaints alone is useless because those who seek such information do not complain. Parents are very often unaware of what is available and particularly with the Internet, children are much more adept at using it. There must be legislation requiring Providers to monitor the material which is circulating on their service. Providers should also know there will be monitoring by an independent Agency - ABA or other. Prevention is always better than cure.

Our opinion is that self-regulation is not effective, perhaps akin to a verbal agreement. For all the hard work by FACTS and FARB with its Codes, it seems not to have "stopped the rot" because there is no monitoring system - "no teeth" - and it would be investigating its own members.

### Conclusion.

If there is no political determination developed to do something about the violent and anti-social forces which are overtaking even otherwise peaceful communities, then we are all on a "slippery slope" indeed. Various forms of media dictate what is true or trendy or acceptable for new generations who will know no better. It is truly said "it is sufficient for evil to triumph that good men (or women) do nothing."

In the case of the Internet, many say it cannot be controlled. This argument is specious. Singapore has been somewhat successful. One only needs some significant charges to be laid and succeed, for people get the message. Like murder, unacceptable material cannot be entirely stopped, however, it can be made much more difficult to find and to disseminate. In the midst of letters saying that it can't be done was this:

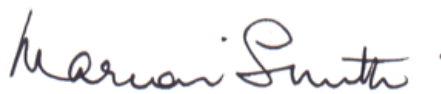
"It is an obligation of Government to take whatever practical means possible to tackle the real problem of pornographic content reaching the eyes of our children. Having worked as a programmer for nearly 20 years, I know full well that no system is foolproof, but having dealt with hackers and other pests on Web sites I have managed, I also know that some things are reasonable to expect of ISPs. If one of its clients breaches a rule of netiquette by spamming, an ISP generally suspends the offender's account. Likewise, if inappropriate content is reported on a site it is hosting, it will generally give a warning and, if nothing is fixed, close down the site. These are standard ISP sign-on conditions. This is not too much to ask. Most ISPs do it already, so what's all the fuss about?" SMH Icon letter May 8. Concord West.

This is the action which we have advocated. Medical programs should be obviously not "porn" and would not be included. Programs which advise about sex should be required to state a warning: that promiscuity and oral and anal sex are positive health risks and to be avoided for personal cleanliness and preventing infection.

The industry also claims that all the "porn" material would have to be classified at great expense. This is quite unnecessary. It should all be refused - pornography is easily identified. Classification is superfluous. The Refusal of Pornography was a promise of the Liberal Party when elected in 1996 when it won with a big majority. NVE is not an acceptable compromise.

Any Internet businesses which distribute pornography can be done without, this is not a competition matter, no matter how much the "industry" is worth. If there are films advocating or teaching racism or child abuse they would be refused - women are no less important.

Mrs Marion Smith, Convener



May 10, 1999