

MEDIA INFLUENCE: HOW AND WHY WE REGULATE THE MEDIA

WHY REGULATE THE MEDIA?

1 Copycat behaviour. Both the Free TV Australia and the Advertising Standards Bureau have guidelines for the advertising of food and beverages to children which state that they should not promote an 'inactive lifestyle'. Free TV Australia and Commercial Radio Australia have guidelines relating to the portrayal of suicide which arises from this concern about copycat behaviour.

2 Protecting children. In Australia films and publications are classified on a scale from G to R18+. These age recommendations and restrictions aim to protect children from material likely to upset or disturb. Likewise there are restrictions on what can be broadcast on television in the morning and in the early afternoon when children get home from school.

3 Protecting adults. In addition to protecting children, the classification of media texts helps to protect adults from material that is likely to offend. A classification system with consumer advice - which warns consumers when a program might contain violence or strong language - means that adults can make informed decisions about the material they watch.

4 Protecting cultural identity. In Australia, minimum requirements for the amount of Australian content on television and radio reflect the belief that overseas content may erode our cultural identity. The Australian Content Standard (2005) mandates a 55% quota of Australian content on television. Commercial radio must broadcast minimum quotas of Australian music.

5 Media ownership. In Australia, we have laws governing foreign media and cross media ownership to prevent media organisations having too much power. According to cross media ownership laws, there should be no fewer than five independent media groups in metropolitan markets. There are also controls on foreign investment in Australian media organisations.

HOW DO WE REGULATE THE MEDIA?

ACMA

The Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) is a government body responsible for regulating broadcasting and online content in Australia. Its responsibilities include promoting industry self-regulation and managing the television and radio spectrums. The ACMA has also developed codes of practice for television and radio in conjunction with the industry bodies Free TV Australia and Commercial Radio Australia. These codes govern the content of television and radio in Australia. The ACMA also helps to regulate the ownership of commercial media organisations in Australia, maintaining a register of media ownership and control. This is to avoid unacceptable changes to media diversity in Australia. Under current media ownership laws cross media ownership is allowed providing that there are no fewer than five independent media groups in metropolitan markets. Foreign investment is permitted but the media is considered a 'sensitive sector'.

National Classification Scheme

The classification of films, video games and publications in Australia is the responsibility of the Attorney General's Department. A Classification Board and Classification Review Board make decisions about the classification of films, video games and publications which are available for sale and hire in Australia. Classification decisions are made according to a number of principles. First, it is believed that adults should be able to "read, hear and see what they want". Second, that minors should be protected from material that might upset or disturb them. Classification should also protect adults from unsolicited material likely to offend and take into account community concerns about the depiction of violence. In Australia, there are a number of classification categories, including: G, PG, M15+, MA15+, R and X. If a film, computer game or publication is deemed inappropriate by the Classification Board, it is refused classification and prohibited from sale or hire in Australia.

Advertising Standards Bureau

The Advertising Standards Bureau oversees a national system of advertising self-regulation. The Advertising Standards Board is a free service to handle consumer complaints about advertising. According to the ASB website, these issues might include "the use of language, the discriminatory portrayal of people, concern for children, portrayals of violence, sex, sexuality and nudity, health and safety, and marketing of food and beverages to children." The Advertising Standards Bureau has a number of codes which govern the content of advertisements. The Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Code of Practice aims to ensure that "advertisements are legal, decent, honest and truthful and that they have been prepared with a sense of obligation to the consumer and society and fair sense of responsibility to competitors." People concerned about the content of an advertisement can register a complaint using their website.

Code of Conduct on Body Image

The Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image was introduced in 2009 to help influence the representation of body image, particularly in beauty magazines. The code states that the "media and advertising industries play a significant role in shaping the cultural ideals of society". The code outlines principles to guide the representation of body image in the media and encourages media organisations to adopt more "body friendly practices". It encourages the representation of positive and healthy body images, a range of body types and ethnicities and realistic images of people. In 2010, Youth Minister Kate Ellis announced that companies that complied with the code would receive a body image tick of approval. The voluntary code has been criticised by some, including writer Mia Freedman who chaired the advisory group which helped to develop the code. She maintains that the code has virtually been ignored by many media organisations.

Industry self regulation

Many news organisations have codes of conduct for their journalists and charters that aim to protect editorial independence. The Herald and Weekly Times, which publishes the Herald Sun, has a code of conduct which states that their journalists must report news impartially and accurately, respect privacy, correct serious errors and only engage in surreptitious activities when a story genuinely important and in the public interest. This is typical of type of rules that many news organisations have regarding the conduct of their journalists. The difficulty with these codes is that journalists are only accountable to their employers and not any third party. There are many news organisations that do not have such standards and often engage in questionable behaviour when reporting on and publishing stories. Likewise, the code of ethics for journalists managed by the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) only applies its members.