



**FreeTV**  
Australia

**Submission by  
Free TV Australia Limited**

Australian Communications and Media  
Authority

Reality Television Review 2007 -  
Research on Consumer Attitudes to  
Reality Television

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## 1 Introduction

Free TV Australia (**Free TV**) commissioned research company, Crosby Textor to undertake research on

- consumer attitudes toward the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice and
- the regulation of reality television.

The research was conducted in late January and February 2007 and included qualitative and quantitative polling in metropolitan and regional Australia. It provides strong recognition and support for the Code of practice as a means of regulating television content and shows there is little support for significantly more onerous regulation of reality television.

We are pleased to provide this summary as part of the commercial television industry's response to the Australian Communication and Media Authority's (**ACMA**) review of reality television.

## 2 RESEARCH ON CONSUMER ATTITUDES TO REALITY TELEVISION

### 2.1 Summary of Research Findings – Reality Television

- 2.1.1 There is an extremely high awareness of the Commercial Television Code of Practice and respondents have faith that if they file a complaint it will be heard.
- 2.1.2 Controlling the content of media is not a top of mind concern for respondents and unprompted they do not cite media content as an issue which concerns them. Even when prompted, respondents do not name reality television content as an issue.
- 2.1.3 The majority believe that the Code of Practice should deal with reality television on the same basis as other television programs on commercial television.
- 2.1.4 Ensuring content remains acceptable is seen to be more the responsibility of producers, parents and television networks than Government agencies.
- 2.1.5 Unlike other industries where the Government is expected to have an active regulatory role, the majority of respondents do not advocate unnecessary interference of the Government in the media.
- 2.1.6 On the whole, viewers consider Reality Television, like all forms of television, to be about choice. Viewers have the choice to switch Reality Television off.
- 2.1.7 Although many viewers may not like and/or choose not to watch Reality Television, they do not find it offensive. Most people who hold a negative view dislike Reality Television because they regard it as childish, boring or fake.
- 2.1.8 Respondents agreed there should be some parameters for ensuring that the content of Reality Television is still acceptable to protect contestants as well as viewers.

- 2.1.9 The content that would most concern respondents in reality television is racism, drug abuse, and high level violence. Respondents generally accept that some sexual content and nudity can be shown in Reality Television, provided it is accompanied by appropriate warnings and shown in a later timeslot.
- 2.1.10 While controversy and debate is almost always acceptable, context is considered the key for determining the acceptability of low level activities.

## **2.2 Summary of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Findings**

A qualitative study was conducted in first instance to canvas the views of Australians and ascertain why they think the way they do. This research was not designed to quantitatively define the population. Rather, it was conducted because of the insight it gives into the underlying reasons for people's perceptions and behaviours.

Four focus groups, each containing 7-10 participants, were moderated in Melbourne and Lismore on January 23 and January 24 respectively. One group in each city contained an even mix of 18-25 year-olds and 26-49 year-olds. The remaining two groups contained a sample of viewers aged 45 years old and over.

A quantitative study was then conducted among voters (aged 18 years and over) between February 6 and February 8. Using Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing methodology, a sample of 600 was surveyed. The data was stratified by gender, age and postcode area.

## **2.3 Awareness and Confidence in the Code of Practice**

- Ninety-four percent (94%) of respondents are aware of the Commercial Television Industry Code of practice – 77% definitely aware.
- Qualitatively, most participants recall seeing advertisements for the Code.
- Only a small number of respondents (6%) are not aware of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice.
- Seventy-three percent (73%) of respondents are satisfied with the Commercial Industry Code of Practice as a means of regulating television content, 30% are very satisfied.
- Qualitatively, participants have faith in the integrity of this system and believe if they file a complaint it will be heard.
- Qualitatively, dissatisfaction relates mainly to repeat advertisements and variety – particularly during non-ratings periods.

## **2.4 Treatment of Reality TV under the Code of Practice**

- Just 18% of respondents believe that restrictions issued through the Code of Practice on Reality Television should be a lot more onerous than those governing other television programs on commercial television.
- 51 per cent agree that reality TV covers a wide variety of television programs. It would be impossible to come up with a special code to cover all these programs.

## 2.5 Responsibility for what is shown

- Controlling the content of the media is not a top of mind concern that respondents consider the Federal Government should be addressing. Quantitatively it was not raised as an issue of concern.
- Qualitatively, once prompted for concerns relating to the media that the Federal Government should be addressing, participants express some concern over the display of disturbing graphic images such as Saddam Hussein's hanging. Reality Television was not mentioned.
- Unlike other industries, such as essential services, health and education, where the Government is expected to have an active role in regulating what is and is not appropriate, the media industry is slightly different.
- Although participants believe some controls should exist, in the interests of preserving free speech and creativity they are very hesitant to say the Government should further intervene in controlling media content.
- On the whole, viewers consider that watching reality television is a choice. Qualitatively, participants commented "It's about choice – you don't have to watch it, you can choose to turn it off."
- Quantitatively, an overwhelming majority of respondents (90%) agree and 71% strongly agree that "Television viewing is about choice. If you don't want to watch a certain program, you can switch the television off or change the channel."
- Qualitatively, participants consider there are a number of groups and individuals who carry a responsibility to ensure Reality Television does not showcase offensive or unacceptable activities. These include producers, parents and the television network.

## 2.6 Attitudes towards reality television content

- The majority of respondents (52%) consider that commercial and reality television content should be governed by the same rules. Just 18% of respondents believe that reality television should be subject to a lot more onerous rules through the Code of Practice on Reality Television than other television programs on commercial television.
- Qualitatively, respondents consider the concept of Reality Television to be quite acceptable – it is acceptable to use real people, to offer prizes, and to place people in testing situations.
- Quantitatively, for those respondents who had a negative view of Reality Television the principle reasons were that it was "fake, unreal, scripted" (28%), "boring, not interesting" (28%), "don't like it, don't watch it, not to my taste" (20%).
- Just 10% of respondents who had a negative view of Reality Television considered it "offensive, disgusting".

- Respondents agreed there should be some parameters for ensuring that the content of Reality Television is still acceptable to protect contestants as well as viewers.
- Controversy and debate are considered to be 'always acceptable' by 41% of respondents.
- Activities deemed to be 'acceptable with warnings, appropriate classifications and appearing in a later timeslot' include:
  - Frequent nudity – 48% of respondents
  - High level sexual references – 47% of respondents
  - High level sexual behaviour – 46% of respondents
  - Occasional nudity – 42% of respondents
  - Course language – 30% of respondents.
- Activities deemed to be 'never acceptable' include:
  - Racism – 63% of respondents
  - Drug abuse – 50% of respondents
  - High level violence – 48% of respondents
  - Excessive alcohol consumption – 43% of respondents
  - Verbal harassment – 37% of respondents.
- Qualitatively, respondents considered context was the key in determining the acceptability of many of these activities.