

## “Strong Language”

**I** know I am far from alone in my reaction to the obscene language content of television programmes. The common reaction of too many people is, “You can always switch it off.” Well, yes, I can and I do, but why should I have to given that it costs me £142.50 (at the time of writing) for the alleged privilege of being able to switch my television on in the first place? (And don’t get me started on the injustice of the licence fee.)

**I** get particularly incensed by television companies endlessly trailing programmes for days or even weeks beforehand which, on the surface, promise to be entertaining. And so you wait all evening for some much-vaunted epic to begin only to be informed just before it starts, “This programme contains strong language” - the word “strong” being, of course, a euphemism for “obscene and offensive”. This tactic smacks to me of deliberate deceit.

**W**hy aren’t we told about the “strong language” component during the trails for the programmes? Clearly it can only be because broadcasters are afraid of losing viewers. By duping us into sitting all evening waiting for the programme to begin, they clearly hope we will cut our losses and put up with the offensive content. Why can’t broadcasters be made to include a ratings system for their post-watershed programmes, as some TV magazines do for films, those little blacked in dots that indicate on a scale of one-to-four the level of sex, violence and language so viewers can make informed decisions ahead of time concerning the suitability of programmes?

**B**ut even more basic than that, why are TV companies allowed to broadcast filth and obscenity into our homes in the first place? It’s a little like the salt content of food: it’s easy enough to add salt when you come to eat a meal, but if the salt is already in there, there’s not a lot you can do about it. There are plenty of cable or satellite channels available (so I’m told) for people who don’t mind, or even want, that sort of content in the programmes they choose to watch (and they are free to subscribe to such programming if that’s what they want), but if it is already included in terrestrial channel (post-watershed) broadcasts, then you can’t avoid it other than by changing channels or switching off completely. But why should we have to?

**T**he BBC’s response to a letter on the subject of a programme content ratings system was that I should make my suggestions directly to the *Radio Times*. But the *Radio Times* is the mouthpiece of the BBC so it is surely up to them to do that? In any case it isn’t the only TV magazine in the country and such a ratings system ought to be a requirement in all such publications. But typically, also, in the BBC’s response, there seemed to be a basic principle that after the 9pm watershed, anything goes. “It is inevitable” they said “that programmes which

are acceptable to some will occasionally strike others as distasteful and the only realistic and fair approach is to ensure that the range of our output is broad enough for everyone to feel that they are catered for.” In other words, they feel they have license (not pun intended) to broadcast filth and obscenity at will, and more regard is clearly given to the wants of those who don’t mind such content than to those of us (weirdos) who do.

The use of the word “realistic” in that sentence points to a further defence as they see it.

“The main difficulty is that people have different personal definitions of acceptable language (and) our public service role requires us to reflect the world as it really is.” Note that the BBC feels that its public service role requires it to risk offending people by including obscene language in their programmes because that’s how it is in the real world? Reality is one thing - obscenity is another. The argument that personal definitions differ as to what is acceptable and what isn’t is specious at best. The fact that many people tolerate bad language or happily use it themselves doesn’t make it acceptable - it is only acceptable to them but that gives them no right to inflict it on others and that goes for our broadcasters too.

And if I want to experience “the world as it really is”, I can simply sit outside on my doorstep – and I can do that for free. When I’ve been forced in law to pay £142.50 to watch my television then I expect better because now I am a paying customer and a whole new set of trading standards concerning service and product quality comes into play. There’s enough foul language on our streets already without having it piped into our homes through our televisions - an instrument that can, and should, be used for the much nobler purposes of educating and entertaining.

While it is not the only culprit, perhaps the BBC – as a public broadcaster, financed by the public, and operating according to a charter - needs to lead from the front, returning to its roots. There is an inscription that was added to the entrance hall of Broadcasting House when it was first opened in 1932: *This Temple of the Arts and Muses is dedicated to Almighty God. It is (the governors’) prayer that good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest, that all things hostile to peace or purity may be banished from this house...* or has this, along with the principles it espouses, been removed as part of more recent redevelopments? How do those who now run this “temple...dedicated to Almighty God”, in what is still nominally at least a Christian country, justify broadcasting programme content that is clearly offensive to God? It should matter that it offended Mary Whitehouse as a tax-paying, licence-paying citizen; it should matter that it offends countless numbers of people who would like to be able to watch their televisions without being grossly offended; and it certainly

should matter that it offends God (by whatever other name he may also be known).

**H**ow to influence change for the better is not an encouraging process. Writing to individual broadcasters is an exercise in frustration and futility. They all have a defence that any premiership football club would be proud of.

**C**ertainly as far as the BBC is concerned, as and when they finally get round to replying to letters, they simply trot out the usual platitudes (I was going to write “pious platitudes” but there is very little that is pious about this) which mean nothing and change nothing. My experience of emailing the BBC’s official complaints website is even more of a waste of time. Again they make all the usual and expected noises but quite clearly no one is actually listening; people’s concerns and opinions count for nothing - and we are the ones who are paying their bills and their salaries remember. Even when the traditional and moribund Governors of the BBC were replaced by a Trust the purpose of which was “to get the best out of the BBC for licence fee payers” nothing changed. “We are your voice within the BBC” they say. “We have considerable power to wield on your behalf.” Really? I can’t say that I’ve noticed.

**P**ersonal experience has shown that so-called media watchdogs such as the Broadcasting Standards Council and Ofcom are also useless and will back-heel responsibility to anyone other than themselves; everything is always someone else’s problem to deal with and so, as a result, no one deals with anything. And while the Mediawatch-uk website provides useful contact information for registering complaints, I fear the organisation itself is treated with the same disdain as its founder, the late Mary Whitehouse, was and yet one shudders to think how much worse our broadcasting standards might have been by now without her many years of courageous campaigning.

**I** am convinced that a persistent voice of protest is the only hope and that simply switching off - figuratively or literally - is not the answer. As Mediawatch says: “Don’t just grumble, make your voice heard!” Maybe we have to become enough of an irritant to our broadcasters, and to the BBC in particular as a public corporation, that them to finally take some notice of us if only to get some relief. The question is: are we prepared not to let up in our efforts until they do?

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2a Southwark Road  
London SE1 9HA

Comments about programmes can also be sent to

The Contact Centre: [contact@ofcom.org.uk](mailto:contact@ofcom.org.uk)

BBC Complaints

PO Box 1922

Glasgow G2 3WT

[www.bbc.co.uk/complaints](http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints)

BBC Television Centre

Wood Lane

London W12 7RJ

BBC Broadcasting House

Portland Place

London W1A 1AA

ITV Viewer Services

Gas Street

Birmingham B1 2JT

[viewerservices@itv.com](mailto:viewerservices@itv.com)

Channel 4 TV

PO Box 1058

Belfast BT1 9DU

(on-line complaints form on the Channel 4 website – “contact us”)

Five TV

22 Long Acre

London WC2E 9LY

[customerservices@five.tv](mailto:customerservices@five.tv)

Sky TV

PO Box 43

Livingston

West Lothian EH54 7DD

(on-line form for complaints on the Sky website)

(Your MP)

The House of Commons

Westminster

London SW1A 0AA

Mediawatch-uk

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