

BSA RESEARCH 2018: LANGUAGE THAT MAY OFFEND IN BROADCASTING

Each year the Broadcasting Standards Authority receives complaints about strong language used in broadcasting on TV and radio. The complaints may raise issues under:

- » the good taste and decency standard, which protects audiences from viewing or listening to broadcasts that are likely to cause widespread undue offence or distress or undermine widely shared community views;
- » the children's interests standard, which is designed to enable audiences to protect children from content that may harm them; or
- » the discrimination and denigration standard, which is intended to protect sections of the community from verbal or other attacks and to foster a community commitment to equality.

From time to time, the BSA surveys the public to understand which words or expressions are considered most offensive in broadcasting and to what extent the level of acceptability is context-dependent. Our last survey was in 2013.

The BSA commissioned Nielsen to conduct the survey again this year and the results are in the survey report available on the BSA website. In the survey the BSA tested traditional swear words and blasphemies and also a selection of words and expressions that may be considered offensive from a cultural, or gender and/or sexual orientation point of view. The BSA consulted with Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Māori (Māori Language Commission), Human Rights Commission and Ministry for Women on the survey.

KEY FINDINGS

The results of an online survey of 1,514 members of the NZ public show that:

- » Traditional strong swear words continue to be the most unacceptable regardless of the context.
- » New racial/cultural insults included in the 2018 survey ranked in the 12 most offensive words.
- » There was a small but notable increase in the number of respondents who find gender-related words totally unacceptable.
- » The context in which a word is used is important and affects the level of acceptability. The use of offensive language may be more or less acceptable depending on who is using it, and who it is directed at.
- » Offensive language used in a fictional or scripted context is likely to be more acceptable than offensive language used in a real, factual or spontaneous context.
- » Time of day plays a significant role in the level of acceptability – offensive language used after 8.30pm is likely to be more acceptable.
- » Audience expectations are also important – people are less likely to be offended if they can reasonably expect offensive language to be used in a particular programme.

WHAT THIS MEANS

The results indicate that New Zealanders have heightened sensitivity to derogatory language and cultural and gendered language. This means that audience advisories for potentially offensive/strong language are important and the time of broadcast is relevant to broadcasters' programming decisions. Audiences are less likely to find offensive language unacceptable in contexts where it does not go beyond reasonable audience expectations.

The report is a reference for the broadcasting industry, the public and any agency or organisation interested in understanding what language New Zealanders find offensive. The findings may also be useful for organisations seeking to develop more inclusive and harmonious workplace cultures. The results provide a snapshot of contemporary NZ attitudes and what is viewed as acceptable and unacceptable.

The BSA undertakes this type of research to understand community views, so that these can be taken into account by broadcasters when making programming decisions, and by the Authority when determining complaints about language that may offend in broadcasting.