

An inquiry into our classification scheme

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Christians always have an edgy time of it in discussions of media that includes explicit sex, violence and abuse, or when we hear ads on the radio for a sex exhibition while driving the kids to school, or watch a movie depicting realistic violence that we weren't expecting. On the one hand, we've become convinced that as superficially attractive as these things are, they corrode us at a deeper level. It seems obvious to Christians that we become easily addicted and shaped by whatever we fill our eyes and heads with. The apostle Peter once spoke of people becoming 'slaves' to whatever masters them (2 Peter 2:19), and that when Christians separate themselves from these inputs, others 'are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery,' (1 Pet. 4:4). This kind of conflict seems to keep repeating itself in every society Christians participate in.

But on the other hand, censorship and classification schemes will always be fraught with difficulty. We know that to curtail free expression in a free society could very easily be co-opted to shut down expressions of the gospel. So we find ourselves in a society that prides itself on being liberal, progressive and democratic, yet that is riddled with tensions and contradictions in this area. An extreme case is represented by the many who want the freedom and latitude, as adults, to view and listen to whatever they choose, even if it might be seen as offensive by others. Yet Australian society does draw the line at images of child pornography, or of extreme violence. So a broad consensus about our current system of classification has arisen, in order to protect our children from harm and to provide everyone with the ability to make informed decisions about what they watch.

Classification schemes can be difficult to understand and hard to find. Yet they are important because they have such a significant impact on the issues we have raised above. They affect the content that we and our children see on TV, at the movies, and use on the internet and our mobile phones. They are necessary in order to help us make informed decisions about what shows and movies to watch by giving us information about the levels of violence, sex and nudity that will be seen.

Details of the Senate inquiry into the classification scheme

Why are we talking about these things?

The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee is having an inquiry into the Australian film and literature classification scheme, and anyone can make a submission. You can find out more about the inquiry (at http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_ctte/classification_board/index.htm), and a copy of the Terms of Reference is attached at the end of this email. This inquiry provides us with a great opportunity to speak into this debate, and remind those who are making decisions about the importance of a comprehensive and robust scheme to provide protection for our children (and ourselves) from viewing offensive content.

The Terms of Reference are, frankly, a bit daunting. But we don't want you to be fazed. At very least, we suggest that you respectfully share with the

Senators any experiences where you think the classification system has failed you, exposing your or your children to something that you did not want to see (or – less likely! – preventing access to something you think important). If you are clever, you can link this to one of the points of the terms of reference (below). If you are not, just say that you are addressing ‘any other matter’ (point ‘o’) – or that you find it all a bit complex but that you still want to say something. For it is important that our Senators have people’s real experiences to work with, and these often have some clout. It is then up to them to determine how laws and bureaucracies need to be adapted to address them.

If you do want to go into it in more detail, you don’t have to address every point. You can even just discuss one of the points raised that you have a particular concern about. Here are some of the Terms of Reference that may be of particular interest (and that you could address with a personal story of your experience):

- (g) the classification of films, including explicit sex or scenes of torture and degradation, sexual violence and nudity as R18+;*
- (i) the application of the National Classification Scheme to music videos;*
- (k) the effectiveness of the National Classification Scheme in preventing the sexualisation of children and the objectification of women in all media, including advertising;*
- (m) the effectiveness of the National Classification Scheme in dealing with new technologies and new media, including mobile phone applications, which have the capacity to deliver content to children, young people and adults;*
- (o) any other matter, with the exception of the introduction of a R18+ classification for computer games which has been the subject of a current consultation with the Attorney-General’s Department.*

You will note that many of the Terms of Reference refer to the National Classification Scheme. Information about this Scheme is available at [http://www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/agd.nsf/Page/Classificationpolicy National ClassificationScheme](http://www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/agd.nsf/Page/Classificationpolicy%20National%20ClassificationScheme).

Even though the wording of the inquiry is very technical, a submission could be as simple as a brief paragraph explaining about an experience you have had with our classification system, such as:

- Describing a time where the given classification was inappropriate (for example, a movie rated PG that was not appropriate for your child to watch with you);
- Describing a situation where you were uncomfortable with the content that could be viewed in a particular context (for example, an inappropriate ad on the radio at a time school-aged children would be listening, or a billboard on the side of a busy road near a school, or clothing lines sold in stores); or
- Outlining your concerns over new technologies that are not being adequately covered by the classification scheme (for example, being able to easily access pornographic games and material on mobile phone handsets).
- Outlining any concerns over how easy or clear it is the challenge or question the content of public media.

Bear in mind that our society has a preoccupation with 'evidence based policy'. The principle of basing policies on evidence is very important. But in this case, it is notoriously hard to decide what constitutes 'evidence of harm'. In the absence of any clear evidence of harm, policy tends to drift in the most liberal direction possible. It might be worth challenging this cavalier attitude. Perhaps 'wisdom' is as important as clear 'evidence': if we have a hunch that some explicit messages are corrosive, they are hunches worth listening to. This kind of approach amplifies the need for you to send the Senators your own experiences.

How to make a submission

The committee has invited written submissions to the inquiry by **4 March 2011**. Submissions can be emailed to legcon.sec@aph.gov.au, or sent to:

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

All submissions must include the author's full name, phone number and postal address on a separate covering letter or email. As always, it's important to be polite, factual and brief.

While writing a submission like this can often be time consuming and feel pointless, submissions from concerned community members hold a lot of weight, and will always be properly considered by the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee (a committee of the Senate responsible for the inquiry).

- **Andrew Cameron and Rebecca Belzer**
(for the Social Issues Executive,
Anglican Diocese of Sydney)

Classification inquiry - Terms of Reference

The Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee is inquiring into the Australian film and literature classification scheme, with particular reference to:

- a) the use of serial classifications for publications;
- b) the desirability of national standards for the display of restricted publications and films;
- c) the enforcement system, including call-in notices, referrals to state and territory law enforcement agencies and follow-up of such referrals;
- d) the interaction between the National Classification Scheme and customs regulations;
- e) the application of the National Classification Scheme to works of art and the role or artistic merit in classification decisions;
- f) the impact of X18+ films, including their role in the sexual abuse of children;
- g) the classification of films, including explicit sex or scenes of torture and degradation, sexual violence and nudity as R18+;

- h) the possibility of including outdoor advertising, such as billboards, in the National Classification Scheme;
- i) the application of the National Classification Scheme to music videos;
- j) the effectiveness of the 'ARIA/AMRA Labelling Code of Practice for Recorded Music Product Containing Potentially Offensive Lyrics and/or Themes';
- k) the effectiveness of the National Classification Scheme in preventing the sexualisation of children and the objectification of women in all media, including advertising;
- l) the interaction between the National Classification Scheme and the role of the Australian Communications and Media Authority in supervising broadcast standards for television and Internet content;
- m) the effectiveness of the National Classification Scheme in dealing with new technologies and new media, including mobile phone applications, which have the capacity to deliver content to children, young people and adults;
- n) the Government's reviews of the Refused Classification (RC) category; and
- o) any other matter, with the exception of the introduction of a R18+ classification for computer games which has been the subject of a current consultation with the Attorney-General's Department.

Note: This paper is intended to assist discussion and may be corrected or revised in future. Short responses to social.issues@moore.edu.au are very welcome, but the SIE cannot guarantee a reply. To access this occasional free briefing, use RSS at www.sie.org.au; or to receive it by email, ask us at social.issues@moore.edu.au or do it yourself at: <http://lists.moore.edu.au/mailman/listinfo/social-issues>.

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