

Coarse or Offensive Language on Radio

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Status of Guidance Note

This Guidance Note, authorised by the Managing Director, is provided to assist interpretation of the Editorial Policies to which the Guidance Note relates. Guidance notes provide advice to assist in the interpretation of the Editorial Policies, which contain the standards enforceable under the ABC's internal management processes and under the ABC's complaints handling procedures.

It is expected that staff will normally act in accordance with the advice contained in Guidance Notes. In a given situation there may be good reasons to depart from the advice. This is permissible so long as the standards of the Editorial Policies are met. In such situations, the matter should ordinarily be referred upwards. Any mandatory referrals specified in Guidance Notes must be complied with.

Key Editorial Standards

Excerpts of key editorial standards relevant to this Guidance Note are set out below. Other editorial standards may also be relevant, depending on the specific circumstances applying in each case.

7 Harm and offence

- 7.1 Content that is likely to cause harm or offence must be justified by the editorial context.
- 7.2 Where content is likely to cause harm or offence, having regard to the context, make reasonable efforts to provide information about the nature of the content through the use of classification labels or other warnings or advice.
- 7.4 If inadvertent or unexpected actions, audio or images in live content are likely to cause harm or offence, take appropriate steps to mitigate.
- 7.7 Avoid the unjustified use of stereotypes or discriminatory content that could reasonably be interpreted as condoning or encouraging prejudice.

Scope

This Guidance Note covers the planned or unanticipated use of coarse, offensive, stereotyping or discriminatory language (language) in pre-recorded or live content, including commissioned or acquired artistic works and songs broadcast by ABC Radio and targeted at adult audiences aged 18 years or over. For the purposes of this Guidance Note, the term 'ABC Radio' includes Radio Australia.

Introduction

The media reflect and influence community standards and values through the use of language and images, and as the national broadcaster, the ABC has an obligation to maintain high standards in its content.

ABC Radio has a very public and obvious responsibility for upholding the ABC's editorial standards and integrity, and presenters should avoid using coarse, offensive or discriminatory language unless there is a clear, identifiable need justified by context.

ABC Radio recognises that questions of taste and decency are complex, that individuals and groups have widely differing standards which change over time, and that language which is acceptable to some may be distasteful to others.

Content which informs, entertains and/or educates very diverse audiences may also challenge or even offend those audiences from time to time. ABC Radio has the potential to reach the whole community, and content should be broadcast or published bearing in mind general community standards as well as the standards of specific target audiences, which may differ markedly.

The context in which language is used is an important factor in establishing whether it is acceptable. Coarse or offensive language may be a legitimate part of reportage, debate, documentaries, dramatic, humorous or other artistic work, both live and pre-recorded, but audiences should be given the chance to make informed choices about whether to listen to language which is deemed to be likely to cause harm or offence.

ABC Radio's standards relating to language aim to meet target audience expectations without impeding the legitimate use of language which reflects contemporary Australian society. The overriding principle is that coarse, offensive, stereotyping or discriminatory language must not be used gratuitously or for no other purpose but to offend.

Key terms

Language

Coarse or offensive language (language) can include swearing, slurs, terms of racist or religious or ethnic abuse and pejorative terms relating to illness or disabilities.

It can be strong, moderate or even mild, and its offensiveness will be invariably determined by context, including the known sensitivities of the target audience as well as general community standards.

Context

Context plays a vital role in determining the offensiveness of language. At times language which might otherwise be considered unacceptable is integral to content, whether it is reflecting the reality of highly emotive or traumatic events, representing a communication style used by a particular individual or group, or expressing the artistic works of a poet, writer, composer or performer. Use of coarse language in these circumstances can often be justified by context.

Considerations might include, but are not limited to surrounding editorial content, the time of the broadcast and the likely audience as well as the target audience (i.e., is it during a school run). These factors will not necessarily carry equal weight.

Consideration should be given to language and other content parameters during the commissioning and acquisition of new and existing programs, segments and other broadcast content.

Without sufficient editorial context, coarse, offensive, stereotyping or discriminatory language is unacceptable within ABC Radio content.

Stereotyping and discrimination

The ABC has a responsibility to treat all sections of society with respect. Language which disparages, demeans or reinforces stereotypes on the basis of, for example, race, religious or cultural beliefs, mental or physical characteristics, gender or sexual preference, should be avoided.

Additional information about the reporting and portrayal of people with mental illness can be found on the Commonwealth government website: www.mindframe-media.info.

These standards and guidelines are not intended to prevent the broadcast of content which is factual or the expression of genuinely-held opinion of guests, talkback callers, and other contributors to ABC Radio content. These standards and guidelines are also not intended to prevent content presented in the legitimate context of a humorous, satirical or dramatic work.

Target audience

ABC Radio content is targeted at particular audiences of adults with reasonably identifiable expectations about material we broadcast.

The expectations of a program or station's target audience forms the primary but not sole consideration in determining language which can reasonably be thought acceptable for broadcast.

Community standards

At the time of publication of this Guidance Note, limited research is available on contemporary Australian community standards in relation to coarse or offensive language. However, the ABC is often able to gauge what is likely to cause significant offence through audience interaction, including complaints.

International audiences

Content makers for Radio Australia output in particular need to be aware that target audiences outside Australia may have significantly different standards in relation to language that might cause offence.

Tone

The tone in which language is expressed has bearing on its acceptability to audiences. For example, strong coarse language delivered aggressively will

have greater negative impact than the same language used in a humorous, non-aggressive way. Similarly, mild coarse language expressed aggressively or directed pejoratively at an individual or group may be considered unacceptable.

Frequency

Unnecessary repetition may significantly decrease an audience's tolerance for even mild language, while increasing the likelihood that the language will be seen as gratuitous.

Warnings

On-air warnings are designed to alert audiences to the nature of content which ABC Radio considers is likely to cause harm or offence. They may indicate the nature and strength, if appropriate, of language, enabling audiences to decide whether to continue listening.

Where it is known in advance that content contains language which is likely to cause harm or offence, having regard to context and target audience, content makers and presenters must make reasonable efforts to provide information to the audience about the nature of the content.

Warnings should be clear, factual, and sufficiently detailed to enable the audience to decide whether to continue listening and should be expressed in a style and manner in keeping with the content, the program, and the target audience.

While some content may require a warning regardless of target audience due to its nature or extent, the necessity to warn will usually depend on the context and target audience.

For pre-recorded on-air content, a warning should be given as close to the potentially offensive material as reasonably practicable in all the circumstances, and in relation to online material, at the point of access.

For planned live performances, lyrics, scripts and any other relevant material should be checked for suitability for the target audience prior to going to air and a pre-emptive warning issued if appropriate. (See the section below on *Mitigating risk of harm and offence during live content*.)

Song lyrics and other artistic works

It is important to determine **before use** whether song lyrics, poems, book readings and the like contain potentially offensive language.

Language used in song lyrics and other artistic works can often be justified in the context of the work representing the artistic and cultural expression of the artist.

CDs are often supplied with labels indicating that one or more tracks contain offensive language. While this is helpful, content makers have a responsibility to assess whether material is suitable for the target audience and whether a warning is appropriate.

Songs containing coarse or offensive language should be clearly labelled on the hard copy itself (e.g. the CD) and tagged appropriately when uploaded to a playlist system. Labels and tags should identify the presence of coarse or offensive language and whether and what type of warning is required prior to broadcast.

Similarly, content which can be accessed and used by other ABC programs or services should be appropriately labelled and tagged.

Notwithstanding these precautions, final responsibility for ensuring content meets ABC Radio's standards rests with content maker(s) broadcasting the material.

All content broadcast by ABC Radio must be auditioned or checked for language prior to broadcast.

Mitigating risk of harm and offence during live content

It is often not possible to anticipate coarse or offensive language being aired during live broadcasts. ABC Radio therefore has a duty to minimise the risk of broadcasting inappropriate material, and to mitigate against any offence which might be caused as a result of such lapses.

For planned live performances, any available material – lyrics, text, scripts etc. – should be checked prior to broadcast, and participants – guests, talent and live audiences – should be appropriately briefed prior to going to air.

Any discussion and/or agreement with guests or performers relating to language should be noted prior to broadcast.

If it is considered likely that language or material could cause harm or offence to the target audience, an appropriate warning about that likelihood should be given at the beginning of the broadcast. Such warnings will of necessity be general in nature, but should outline where possible the nature of the risk in a manner in keeping with the broadcast and its target audience.

In the event that, despite cautionary measures, coarse or offensive language is broadcast live, presenters should apologise for the lapse in standards as soon as practicable, again in a manner in keeping with the broadcast and its target audience.

Studio etiquette requires all Radio staff and guests to operate on the assumption that microphones are on in order to prevent any 'off air' language or comments from inadvertent broadcast, and all studio guests should be briefed accordingly.

Delayed transmission

ABC Radio programs must operate in 'delayed transmission' (delay) during any segments including talkback to ensure unexpected offensive material can be 'dumped' before going to air.

Bleeping

Bleeping can be used to prevent coarse or offensive language being broadcast where editing is impracticable, but must adequately obscure the content considered to be potentially offensive.

