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Digital broadcasting - a double edge sword in protecting children from disturbing news content

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Abstract

New technologies have the potential to both expose children to and protect them from television news footage likely to disturb or frighten.

The advent of cheap, portable and widely available digital technology has vastly increased the possibility of violent news events being captured and potentially broadcast. This material has the potential to be particularly disturbing and harmful to young children.

But on the flipside, available digital technology could be used to build in protection for young viewers especially when it comes to preserving scheduled television programming and guarding against violent content being broadcast during live crosses from known trouble spots.

Based on interviews with news directors, parents and a review of published material two recommendations are put forward:

1. Digital television technology should be employed to prevent news events "overtaking" scheduled children's programming and to protect safe harbours placed in the classifications zones to protect children.
2. Broadcasters should regain control of the images that go to air during "live" feeds from obviously volatile situations by building in short delays in G classification zones.

The alleged sexual misconduct in this year's Big Brother had two obvious ramifications. The first was that it brought the term "turkey slapping" into the public vocabulary (McWhirter, 2006). The second, and more interesting from a media research point of view, was that it raised the profile of the problem of controlling and regulating content which is broadcast live.

The sex antics of contestants on the reality TV show – which was screened live only on the internet and only at 4am – had Australian politicians falling over each other to demand tighter restrictions and regulations over the content of live video feeds.

But while demanding change is easy, legislating to bring about that change is far less straight forward. As Electronic Frontiers Australia head Irene Graham noted in the Sun Herald after the Big Brother incident: "Cameras are just providing live feeds, and you can't stop whatever the camera is going to show ("Net Industry urges calm in BB storm," 2006)." While Graham was referring to live streaming on the internet, this paper will argue that the problems apply equally to live content broadcast in television news. Using the events of September 11, 2001, as a case study, it will show that the CNN world in which we now live creates problems for both

broadcasters and parents when it comes to protecting the young child from disturbing news content.

But it will also argue that in fact new media technologies provide a double-edge sword when it comes to protecting children – the most vulnerable media audience – from disturbing media content.

It will explore how new technologies have the potential to both expose young children to and protect them from television news footage likely to disturb or frighten.

It will argue that the advent of cheap, portable and widely available digital technology has vastly increased the possibility of violent events being captured and potentially broadcast. The paper will show why this material has the potential to disturb and harm young children.

But on the flipside, it will use data collected as part of a Masters Research project to explore how available digital technology could be used to build in protection for young viewers especially when it comes to preserving scheduled television programming and guarding against violent content being broadcast during live crosses from known trouble spots.

Interviews with news directors, parents and a review of published material will be used to explore the issue.

Protecting children in the digital age

In the preface to *I, Journalist*, academic and journalist Professor John Herbert commented that journalists in the 21st century had to come to grips with issues not encountered by those who went before them. He noted that “the age of the citizen journalist is upon us, arising out of technology and the ease of communication” and also commented on the “inexorable rise of 24/7 broadcast news” (Herbert, 2006). His comments go to the core of the issue of the increasing problem of protecting young children from violent, disturbing and inappropriate television news material – journalists are now everywhere and the results of their work are broadcast around the clock.

Technology such as videophones and satellites in addition to the embedded reporter and 24-hour news feeds has ensured that every skirmish in the war on terror and from every other news hot spot is beamed direct into loungerooms across the globe in real time.

Media commentator Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institution, an independent research and policy institute based in Washington, D. C., also sees technology as being part of the driver of the change to what media audiences see. “One is technology: the possibilities now of covering violence faster, from more places, more vividly is difficult to resist (Hess, 1996).” He notes that: “Computers and satellites deliver instantaneous reporting. The public gets very brief but intense images of strange places and often violent events. Then the spotlight moves on” (1996:28).

Further, the reduction in costs and associated rapid increase in uptake of video and still image-enabled telephones has outfitted the average citizen with news gathering equipment which a decade ago was the privilege of only the networks. Television stations in Australia have been quick to cash in on the new media-equipped public clambering over each other to encourage citizen reporter to submit for broadcast his or her news footage (NineNewsWatch, ; Ten News Pics).

Journalism educator Lee Duffield noted that in the new media environment “audiences obtain communications skills an equipment as sophisticated as those available to the news media themselves” (Duffield, 2006).

While citizen-produced media services and round-the-clock news coverage creates the potential for a better informed public, having news crews on every corner of every street in addition to reporters with video phones reporting live from news hotspots has its consequences unless adequate safeguards exist.

Foremost is the possibility that violent footage will be captured in the first place and then often broadcast live and unedited.

"If Vietnam was the living room war on American television and the 1991 Desert Storm was the first satellite-fed real time war, this is the high-tech 21st century version," media correspondent and PBS Online Newshour senior producer Terence Smith's said of the war in Iraq (T. Smith, 2003).

Smith notes "technology makes the coverage more current, but when the sirens warn of a possible missile-born gas attack, the reporting gets muffled".

Coverage of the War on Terror since September 11 has revealed how vital a set of protocols for protecting viewers from violent news coverage is. In September 2004, Al-Arabiya journalist Mazen al-Tumeizi was killed while taping a report. Footage of a blood-splattered camera and the dying man's screams "I'm dying, I'm dying" was aired both on Al-Arabiya and on western news broadcasts including the BBC (IRAQ: Al-Arabiya reporter killed, two other journalists wounded in Baghdad fighting, 2004). The Iraq war is now the deadliest conflict ever for journalists. In announcing the death toll of journalists in Iraq in April, Freedom Forum's chairman and CEO Charles Overby noted "Journalists are increasingly targeted for kidnapping, torturing and murder"(Fitzgerald, 2006). Embedding journalists with satellite phones with the military may be in the position to deliver on the spot reports but that comes at a price. "Technology is no protection against the real dangers of war," notes Terence Smith (T. Smith, 2003). With journalists now more centre stage than ever in the past, the potential for graphic images to be broadcast is also greater than at any time in the past. As the US electronic parenting newsletter TWK notes: "These days, the talk of terrorist violence and war against Iraq is all around us in the media...Graphic footage and accounts of the latest happenings in the world are being delivered into our homes 24 hours a day. This constant flow of information can be overwhelming for adults, but it can be especially confusing and frightening for children" ("Talking to Kids about War and the News," 2003).

Why look at news violence and the preschool child?

Much has been written on the issue of media violence and its impact on children but there have been significant gaps in the literature one of which is that very little has been done in Australia. As Psychologist Associate Professor Michael Carr-Gregg commented of the 3000 different studies which have been done over 40 years into the impact of television violence on young people, not one is Australian (Family and Community Development Committee Parliament of Victoria, 2000).

Further the vast majority of the focus of researchers has been on fictional violence rather than violence in the context of news and current broadcasts. As Hoffner and Haefner summed up: "Research of children's emotional responses to mass media has focused on entertainment programming and even research with adults has rarely examined emotional reactions to news or documentaries (Hoffner, 1993). Smith and Wilson agreed. "Unfortunately there is very little research on the impact of graphic news images on children," they said in 2000. (S. L. W. Smith, Barbara J., 2000) Indeed, Jeff McIntyre of the American Psychological Association said that when American classification system was thrashed out there was a conscious decision to exclude

news and sports from the need to be classified. "It's not where the problem is," said McIntyre who was in the room when the debate took place. (Steinberg, 2000) Australia's regulators have also made the decision to exempt news and sport from this country's classifications. The Australian Media and Communications Authority Code of Practice does, however, require broadcasters to take special care in news and current affairs to ensure that programs that are likely to be watched by children will not cause alarm or distress.

But researchers are finding news violence to be of concern. Joanne Cantor, in a 1996 study of 300 parents, found that one in three said that their child had been frightened by something on the news (Joanne; Cantor & Nathanson, 1996). A separate study she conducted in 1984 found that parents listed television news in the top 10 television programs that scared their child (Joanne Cantor & Sparks, 1984). Her findings were echoed by van der Voort, van Lil and Vooijs who found that "there is evidence that children's emotional responses to television portrayals of real violence are stronger than to violent scenes in fictional programs (van der Voort, 1993). But almost none of the work that has been undertaken relating to children and news coverage relates to the preschool child.

In fact, the Australian Broadcasting Authority recognised this gap in the literature in its March 1998 report *Infants and Television* noting: "Research into children and television has mainly focussed on older age groups, particularly aged five years and over." (Cupitt et al., 1998) That study sought to redress the balance but focussed only on the infant aged between four and 30 months. Again the preschool child was overlooked. One of the very few studies that did concentrate on preschool children found that despite what their parents or teachers assumed, preschoolers did see and understand news broadcasts. The researchers found that television news reports read like picture books. They have a beginning, a middle and an end. The pictures and the text match perfectly. The reports were structured in simple succinct pieces. They were readily understood by children (Weddell & Copeland, 1998). Further, a review of the effects of television violence on children of different ages concluded that "there are a number of reasons that preschoolers may be an especially vulnerable audience" (Josephson, 1995) and the American Academy of Pediatrics said media violence was especially damaging to children aged under eight. (Some Things You Should Know About Media Violence and Media Literacy, 2004)

This project

The events of September 11, 2001 were described by then head of news and current affairs Max Uechritz described September 11 as "televised mass murder in front of a global audience on a scale the world has never seen before" (ABC News, 2002). As such, the coverage of the event provided an ideal case study for exploration into the issues regarding the impact of televised news violence on preschool aged children (defined for the purpose of the study as being aged 3-6 years). But as Joanne Cantor noted "We cannot randomly assign children to watch heavy doses of media violence" (Joanne Cantor, 2000). Thus the project asked parents to assess the impact of the coverage on their own children. It did this through a survey carried out through parenting magazine *Kids* in Brisbane in February 2002. (see appendix 1) The 135 valid responses were analysed and three follow-up focus groups were held in December 2002 to unpack the meanings behind some of the responses. (see appendix 2) In the third part of the project, eight news directors from the three major commercial networks and the ABC in Brisbane and Sydney were contacted by phone in November 2003. Follow up interviews with the six who agreed to take part in the project were conducted by phone, email and in person (depending on the subject's availability) during the following two months (See appendix 3)

The findings

The world was horrified by the events that unfolded in the United States on September 11, 2001. This research found that even young children – children whose parents genuinely believed they were too young to take in what they had seen were adversely affected by the coverage.

Almost half (45.2 per cent) of the parents whose children had seen the September 11 coverage said their children had been harmed or disturbed by what they saw. The signs of distress they reported included disturbed sleep and nightmares, constant questioning and tears and re-enacting the coverage in their play.

Linda, in Focus Group Two explained how the incident impacted on her child.

My daughter is quite a bright, sensitive girl. She had just turned three on September 11. In the morning I went to turn on the kids shows and of course they weren't on and then of course I was fairly distracted by what I saw on the TV and so didn't realise that my daughter D*** was also watching what was happening and witnessing the planes crashing into the buildings.

After that time her behaviour deteriorated substantially. She started to wet her pants and soil her pants and wet the bed. She had night terrors and regressed back to two-year-old tantrums. There was a marked change in behaviour which really concerned me. I was talking to a counsellor who suggested that I ask her if there was something bothering her.

I did and she turned to me and said "Mummy I'm really worried that a plane's going to crash into your building and I'll get left at kindy". I'd always talked to D*** about Mummy working in a big tall building in the city and she'd worked it out in her mind that a similar thing would happen to me. She went on to say "I'm scared that you're going to die" and I guess the only way I can describe reaction to it was that I was completely gobsmacked. I was really quite amazed that she had made that connection and was so disturbed by what she had seen on the TV.

The survey found that the coverage of the September 11 events raised many issues that went beyond those encountered in the normal news environment. Indeed, 68 per cent of parents surveyed thought that aspects of the September 11 coverage were more disturbing than regular news footage. One of the key concerns was that the coverage essentially took many viewers by surprise – that is it was screened outside the regular news time slots. Many felt strongly that there needed to be some mechanism for warning parents when news coverage replaced scheduled children's programs as it did on September 11.

As the mother of a four-year-old boy explained "They should give warning if it is on during a time of children's viewing. I only turned on the television in order to find some children's shows for my son and we were both in the room. I was unprepared for what I saw and unprepared for explaining it to my son."

Participants in the focus groups also expressed concern about children being exposed to content which would normally be prohibited.

Linda said she would not normally allow her child to watch the news. "When September 11 happened I was turning on for the kids' programs. What would help me is if they had some sort of warning. We need some sort of warning if they are going to show things like that."

When asked about what it was about the September 11 coverage that set it apart from regular news broadcasts several themes recurred. Parents felt that their children had a right to expect their normal programs to be aired even when significant news events occurred. It was an issue raised in both the focus groups and the surveys.

"They shouldn't all cancel normal screening TV shows especially children's shows," said survey recipient number 50, the mother of three children, one in target age group.

When asked whether there were any aspects of the September 11 coverage that concerned them, 10 parents listed the fact that children's programs had been replaced, 15 complained that there was days of coverage and 19 were concerned that there was nothing else on.

Disturbing television was widely considered inappropriate but so was the cancellation of children's television.

In the context of a discussion about the impact of the September 11 coverage and the Bali bombing footage Lisa in the second focus group explained that children were disturbed not only by what they saw but what they didn't see:

"Trying to explain to them why all their favourite children's shows weren't on," she said. The ABC was singled out for mention.

In the third of the three focus groups, Michelle said: "The television promotes us to condition our children to watch ABC kids for example so therefore I think they are morally and responsible to, if an event like this happens, to (keep the kids shows on), because that was a big thing 'where's ABC kids?'"

In the same focus group Elizabeth said: "Just think of all the children in Australia who were exposed to September 11 because they saw it on the ABC. That's really horrific."

The issue was also raised by Jo in the first focus group.

"We have the ABC on in the morning. The week of September 11 they didn't even put the kids' shows on."

The industry's response

One of the key cornerstones of the codes which cover both commercial and ABC coverage in Australia is the Both the Office of Film and Literature Classification principle that "minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them (Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2000)".

There can be little doubt that news directors take this responsibility seriously. As Fiona Crawford, the ABC's Queensland State Editor of News and Current Affairs, said: "We have a really strict set of checks and balances to make sure that distressing vision isn't shown to viewers" (Mitchell, 2002).

David Breen said Ten had to be particularly cautious because the network's main bulletin went to air at 5pm which was in the G classification zone.

"The industry code of practice, to which Ten is committed, requires broadcasters to exercise care in the selection and broadcast of news material shown in the G time zone. More detailed coverage is possible in Ten Late News," Breen said. (Breen, 2003)

Paul Fenn from Nine said: "It's not just children. It's people generally. We are very, very, very careful (Fenn, 2004)."

Rob Raschke from Seven said he pictured his own children when making a decision about what was and what was not appropriate to go to air.

"I think, yes, she's in that room and that TV is potentially on and how appropriate or inappropriate is this?"(Raschke, 2004)

Fiona Crawford also identified experience as a parent as a useful guide in making decisions about appropriate content.

"Most of the TV production team in Queensland are parents, and therefore are aware of how disturbing footage/inappropriate language can impact on young viewers." (Crawford, 2004)

She said the ABC was very careful about using "graphic" images in stories.

"We accept that many families view our news and current affairs shows, but particularly our 7pm news, and so we are mindful of the potential to upset younger viewers," Crawford said.

Raschke said that as a young reporter he would have believed that considering children when framing news would have equalled censorship.

There are those within the newsroom who still hold that position, he said.

"In fact at times it has become a point of conflict I suppose with some reporters 'you are trying to sanitise this'. It's 'no not trying to sanitise it. I don't want to sanitise it but in my household what you've just written would lead to a lot of awkward questions from a child to a parent'."

Raschke said, therefore, that a senior person should be making the decision about the use of images and choice of language.

"I was told that (there was a need for caution) a hundred times by news executives over the years when I was a 23, 24-year-old correspondent in Africa for the ABC," he said. "It would never have occurred to me that some of the images or things I was describing or writing to or choosing pictures for a particular story (might be a problem). Now I might be told a hundred times but it was not even in my frame of reference at all."

He agreed that in protecting children, adults could be denied access to material they might find interesting or useful. He gave the example of a court case where there was evidence that a person had been anally raped. The report that went to air said the person had been the victim of a vicious sexual assault.

"There was an argument that that was disguising the brutal reality," he acknowledged. "But if my child hears about anal rape they will ask what that means. I don't want to sit down and have that conversation."

"It's a compromise, no two ways about that. You know there's never a perfect solution."

The September 11 experience

While many of the issues faced by those manning newsrooms on the night of September 11 were not new, there was widespread agreement that delivering the coverage did present special issues.

"There was no benchmark for this story in my lifetime that I can compare it with," said Raschke who was executive producer of Seven News Sydney on September 12, 2001.

Paul Fenn said "the magnitude and the boldness" of the attacks made them different from events that had gone before. He said it was also quite possible that the terrorists had deliberately targeted New York as a way of using the news process as part of their weaponry.

"We'll never know that for sure but to aim at the two tallest buildings in New York City, it would suggest that that was what they were doing. All the television networks CBS, ABC, NBC, they are all based in New York. They know that CNN has a monstrous office in New York. It was always going to get live coverage," Fenn said.

One of the first questions the news producers had to deal with was whether to show the images of people jumping out of the towers.

Rob Raschke said after debate Seven decided that would be inappropriate.

"A very clear decision was taken early on that there was no way we would show pictures of people jumping out of buildings," he said. "That didn't mean we wouldn't talk about it...but there was no way that images were going to be shown of people hurtling off the 80th floor of the World Trade Centre. I know Channel 9 did make the decision. They talked about it long and hard. It wasn't just something that got through the system and they made a choice to show those pictures. That's not something I would have done."

Paul Fenn explained Nine's decision.

"I was harrowed over it but it was all part of the story," Fenn said. "There were different types of shots you could use. There were close-ups and there were wide distance shots and we chose the distance shots so that no-one could be identified and we also chose not to follow them all the way down."

He said he believed that those images were important in telling the story of September 11.

"My word. Because it happened. You can't deny that it happened."

Fenn also said that Nine was taking live feeds from US networks which lessened its control over what went to air.

"We were taking the American networks live for three days. We don't have any say then in what they are going to run. They run those pictures and we are caught. When it came to repacking for the news broadcasts, that's a different proposition."

He said, however, that Nine was taking feeds from trusted US networks but conceded that "there were some shots that during the live coverage, not many, where I thought gee I wish they hadn't run that. We wouldn't run that in our news bulletins".

Although Fenn said "live's live", Raschke argued that one of the main lessons he learned out of the September 11 coverage was the use of digital delays built into live coverage.

"There is technology available now, digital technology, that allows the incoming live pictures, you can set a delay on them of anywhere from one second to 30 seconds so effectively the pictures are coming in, there's a delay there of say 30 seconds and then it comes out the other end.

"You set that delay however long you want to and what you need to do is have a very senior person watching that and saying 'cut away from those pictures back to the presenter', they talk for a while and then go back again because there might have been something there that was terribly inappropriate."

Raschke agreed with Fenn that there would be times when an Australian network would take feeds live from other parts of the world.

"But it would have to come through a news organisation that you knew intimately in terms of what its standards were in terms of what is acceptable and what isn't acceptable," he said.

Crawford also talked about building a delay into coverage.

"If we are taking a 'live' feed, we have virtually no control over the images," said Crawford. "Often we use material in a one or two second delay but the reality is that we are at the mercy of the foreign network."

Other news directors talked of the importance of having people ready to break into live coverage.

"Ten editorial management does maintain control through direction of the news bulletins and the capacity to break into live feeds quickly," said Breen.

Walter Hamilton said transmission was always monitored via an editorial chain of control.

"The ABC does not surrender absolute control in any circumstances," he said (Hamilton, 2003).

Complaints about the coverage

The graphic nature of the events surrounding September 11 and the extent of coverage were bound to attract comment, but the news directors said there were relatively few complaints.

The ABC News and Current Affairs report into the coverage said there were more than 100 telephone calls and email contacts to news and current affairs programs in the first few days of the coverage. Some expressed concern at the 24-hour coverage, others urged that the most graphic images not be repeated.

While calls direct to the news and current affairs programs directly were low, the total number of calls logged by the ABC was much higher at 2230. (Crawford, 2004)

"The main complaint regarding content was about the actual footage of the planes colliding with the Twin Towers," said Crawford. "And we stopped broadcasting those images, as did our competitors, after 48 hours. They are very rarely used now because of the dramatic and confronting nature of the video. 977 calls were about the extent of the coverage and rescheduling of programs. There were also positive comments about the comprehensive nature of the coverage (138)."

Lee Anderson said Nine Brisbane received about 30 complaints about the coverage and a similar number regarding the suspension of normal programming (Anderson, 2004).

"These numbers are above average, but would not be considered excessive," Anderson said.

The footage of the aeroplanes crashing into the buildings appeared to be a focus of public attention.

"There was only a certain amount of time you could run the planes crashing into the two buildings," said Fenn. "I think we gave that up after about 12 hours. So did the Americans by the way."

Complaints about cancelling programs

While hundreds of thousands of people were captivated by the September 11 coverage, there is evidence that many people, especially parents, were disturbed by the lack of normal programming.

David Breen said Ten's decision to return to scheduled programming after less than 24 hours was welcomed.

"Ten was the first network to resume normal programming, we received a very large number of calls thanking us for providing normal programming (children's programs in particular) as an alternative to the continuous coverage of the attacks on the other networks," he said.

Rob Raschke said that for the first two days of coverage there was no objection to the lack of scheduled programming.

"There was very little of that because it was such an overwhelming issue. Certainly day three, day four day five there were people ringing saying can be just leave this alone?"

According to figures provided by Crawford, 43.8 per cent of the 2230 complaints logged by the ABC in the aftermath of September 11 were about the extent of the coverage and rescheduling of programs.

And Paul Fenn of the Nine Network also said that more callers were upset by what was not being shown than by what was.

"(Callers were asking) where's Friends? What about Burke's Backyard?"

Recommendations

Media researcher David Buckingham has commented that the "balance between the need for information and the need to avoid distress often presents a dilemma" (Buckingham, 1996). Indeed Dianne Levin, one of the key researchers in the area said: "We must accept the fact that children cannot be fully protected from violence in the news" (Levin, 1998). But while new technology can make the fight to protect children from violent coverage more difficult it can also provide vital new weapons in the war.

As Monroe Price and Stefaan Verhulst comment "Digital technology allows for the operation of technical devices that offer a much higher level of protection" (2002). There are two key areas where this could happen.

1. Digital television technology should be employed to prevent news events "overtaking" scheduled children's programming and to protect safe harbours placed in the classifications zones to protect children

One theme that emerged strongly from this research related to the replacement of scheduled programming with live news casts in this case the coverage of the September 11 attacks on the US. Parents saw this as creating dual problems. On one hand some mothers were concerned about the removal, without notice, of the scheduled children's programming. This programming - particularly on the ABC - was seen as a right by many parents. But there was also concern that parents turned on the television - or the children tuned in unsupervised - at what was meant to be a "safe" time of the day and children were exposed to content considered unsuitable as a result.

The ABC has recognised the importance parents place in the idea of ABC Kids as a "safe" harbour. Fiona Crawford, ABC Queensland News and Current Affair Editor outlined the importance parents placed on having content which they knew to be "safe" for their children to watch unsupervised. "Parents regard ABC Kids TV as being safe because there are no advertisements, and it's often the one time of the day when they can sit their children in front of the TV and not have to worry about inappropriate material being aired," she said (Crawford, 2004).

Digital broadcasting offers a real opportunity for networks to meet the competing needs of delivering scheduled programming, protecting children from unscheduled and inappropriate content and informing the public about important news events. Digital technology is already being recognised by broadcasters in other parts of the world as offering possibilities for granting greater protection for children. Simon Whittle, The BBC controller of editorial policy told the Daily Telegraph in 2003 that an on-screen warning was being developed which would flash up if viewers turned to a program containing violent content. The technology would only work with digital television, he said (Leonard, 2003).

Technology is now available that makes it possible - in the event of a significant international or national news event - to launch a second parallel channel dedicated to the special coverage. Existing programming would be protected - for both adults and children. Viewers could be notified of the special broadcast via carefully worded text messages thus guarding children too young to read from any potential harm. Such a system would satisfy competing needs of fulfilling the public's right to know while protecting children from material which may be unsuitable. As a minimum, the ABC as the national broadcaster should be equipped to ensure this could happen.

2. Broadcasters should regain control of the images that go to air during "live" feeds from obviously volatile situations by building in short delays in G classification zones.

"Live coverage is unpredictable when you have acts of terrorism," Nine Network News Director Paul Fenn noted (2004).

The Australian Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice (2004) lists as its first two objectives that it is intended to:

1.1.1 regulate the content of commercial television in accordance with current community standards

1.1.2 ensure that viewers are assisted in making informed choices about their own and their children's television viewing

News and current affairs have been granted special exemption with the code. There can be no doubt that this exemption is both sensible and necessary. News can demand immediacy to serve public interest, public benefit and, in some cases, public safety. But it is questionable whether the safeguards built into the classification system to protect children in these instances could be fully met.

The code, in section 2.7.1.1, says that news material broadcast in the G classification zone outside regular bulletins must be compiled with special care. It adds, in section 2.8, that news and current affairs may contain material that is likely to distress audiences if there is "an identifiable public interest" and provided "an adequate prior warning is given". There is no way that broadcasters could guarantee to meet those obligations when taking live feeds from overseas networks or when broadcasting live from potentially volatile news events.

By leaving the responsibility to overseas networks, Australia's broadcasters are effectively washing their hands of the issue and abdicating their responsibilities under the broadcasting act and their own codes. The situations where networks need to fall back on these measures would undoubtedly be rare but none-the-less they need to be incorporated into networks procedures and policies. Live radio routinely incorporates a 10-second delay to avoid inappropriate material going to air. Live television should offer the same protection.

In the CNN world in which we live, where the media-equipped citizen journalist is positioned in every street corner and video phones and satellites enable instantaneous reporting from global hotspots, the potential for violent and disturbing coverage to be beamed into our lounge room is intense. But while technology increases the possibility that our children will be exposed to disturbing television news material, it can also provide solutions. It is already contributing to the problem. Action now needs to be taken to use the available technology as part of the solution.

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Appendix 3 Industry input

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