

Sex and sensibility

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Foreword

It has been six years since the Broadcasting Standards Commission looked in detail at public attitudes towards the on-screen depiction of sexual activity. Other research has suggested that views have changed considerably in that time and the Commission's revised Codes of Guidance have reflected this.

The research undertaken on behalf of the Commission is designed to assist Members in coming to their conclusions about radio and television programming and to reflect the dynamic nature of public attitudes in issues of taste. It acts as a barometer of current public debate, and is offered to broadcasters, regulators and other interested parties in that spirit.

Lady Howe, Chairman
January 1999

Executive summary

- It is clear from this research that attitudes towards sex, and its depiction, have changed considerably since the previous study in 1992.
- Respondents understood that this change had occurred. They themselves argued that there was a greater acceptance of the portrayal and discussion of sexual matters. This did not mean that they approved of it, it was simply a fact of life.
- The media were seen to reflect this change, and in some cases, to have added to it.
- Respondents did not suggest that broadcasting alone was responsible for this change; indeed some respondents suggested that broadcasting had become less explicit in recent years.
- The written media, in particular newspapers, were thought by many more respondents to contain ‘too much’ sex in comparison with broadcasting (49% of respondents said there was ‘too much sex’ in newspapers, 42% said the same about magazines).
- One-third of the sample (36%) still said there was ‘too much’ sex on television and age and gender were key determinants in this view. For many the definition of on-screen sex was a depiction of intercourse and the events around it. However, it was apparent that ‘talk about sex’ was also included (70% of respondents said there was more talk about sex than actual sex depicted on television).
- For many of the older respondents, there was a concern that an act that was intrinsically private was being made public. There was a feeling that they were being asked to be ‘voyeurs’ and that the way in which sexual activity was depicted suggested it was a necessary part of a relationship. There was a feeling that this might influence children and young people in some negative way.
- Parents were not as concerned about their children being influenced in terms of their sexual development (43% of parents disagreed that on-screen depictions encourage early experimentation). However, there was a dislike of the daytime confessional talk shows, which were thought to be preoccupied with sexual matters (47% of respondents said there was ‘too much’ sex in talk shows).
- The talk show format was accepted as part of daytime television (54% of respondents said such programming could be shown before the Watershed), while depictions of sexual activity were seen generally to belong in post-Watershed slots.
- A considerable proportion of respondents (37%) thought there was ‘too much’ sex used in advertising and, in qualitative research, there was considerable comment made about the use of sex to sell products. Respondents particularly disliked the idea that relationships and gender were being used as commodities. The way in which advertisements were scheduled also meant that they could not be easily avoided.

- Respondents set limits on how explicit they thought portrayals should be. Of most importance was the context - many respondents (78%) were insistent that the depiction of sexual activity should be seen if it were part of the storyline. If this were the case, there was far greater acceptance of sexual depictions.
- Alongside this was cynicism that sex was ‘used’ by broadcasters to increase ratings in an increasingly competitive broadcasting environment (72% of respondents agreed with a statement reflecting this sentiment).
- Respondents generally thought sexual activity should be seen to be within a consensual relationship. Any suggestion that this was not the case led to considerable resistance to programming content.
- Most respondents (71%) said they did not mind watching occasional scenes of sexual activity within a programme. Negative comments were made if the scenes were considered to last ‘too long’ (75% said they did not like scenes that went on for too long) and of ‘noisy’ sex.
- For many respondents nudity was not offensive, although if it were to be seen in a pre-Watershed transmission slot, there was little justification for it if purely ‘entertaining’.
- The importance of the context in which one viewed was very important. Women were generally less comfortable than men watching scenes depicting sexual activity with other people, and - at times - on their own. In most cases, adults said they would be less comfortable watching such depictions with children, particularly younger children.
- There was considerable uncertainty expressed about the amount of regulation that governed the depiction of sex (59% of respondents agreed that they did not know ‘how far broadcasters are allowed to go’ when showing sex on television).
- There was felt to be less regulation of cable and satellite television channels - respondents generally thought these could show more explicit material than terrestrial television channels (49% of all respondents said this, 70% of those with access to these additional channels).
- The vast majority of respondents (93%) said people who do not like to watch sex on television could switch the television off or turn away from material they found offensive. It was understood that forewarning the audience, either through appropriate scheduling or the use of pre-transmission information, could lessen substantially the possibility of such offence.
- However, many of the respondents who saw programming clips seemed uncertain whether or not they would have carried pre-transmission warnings and having such advance information was felt to be useful in making viewing decisions.

- Over half the sample (54%) knew someone who was homosexual and this had an effect on how positively the depiction of gay relationships were seen.
- Attitudes towards the depiction of homosexual relationships have changed considerably since 1992. Then, 46% of the sample said it was acceptable to show homosexual relationships on screen. In 1998 nearly three in five respondents (58%) said this.

Introduction

They make more sex scenes on TV now. More goes on. Some people might disagree with it because they have families. I don't think a lot of people want to watch sex if they can do it themselves.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)¹

This study is an update of a project conducted in 1992², designed to see how much attitudes towards the depiction of sexual activity on television have changed. There would seem to have been a downward shift, as evidenced by other research findings, in the level of concern about such portrayals in broadcasting while complaints in this area have decreased for some genres and increased for others.

This project sought to see if, indeed, attitudes had altered, how great the shift was and what changes respondents thought had taken place. Were gender differences as apparent as they had been in 1992? Was age still a key differentiator of attitude or had the teenagers and young of the sixties carried their views through into the nineties so that they were more liberal than the fifty year olds of six years ago? Did the young feel that they 'knew it all' or did they feel pressured by the depictions of sex among young people? This respondent said:

It is more acceptable. Sex is more open now. It's not a taboo any more. Older people have reservations about sex, but younger people are more liberal and have a healthier attitude. Females and males have the same attitude towards sex.

(VR: male, aged 45-54)

The research aimed to discover if attitudes towards homosexuality had changed - many of the soap operas contain long-running storylines which include gay people. Some of the soaps have dealt also with issues such as incest and abortion. The Commission's Annual Review³ noted:

'... some parents welcome the introduction of difficult subjects in the soaps, as a means of initiating talks with and educating their children. For others, the depiction of some sexual or social issues as a 'normal' part of daily life is a real concern ... particularly when audiences younger than the age group for which the programme has been devised are likely to be viewing ... The Commission understands the importance of soaps to scheduling and their use in attracting an audience with the hope of keeping the viewer for the rest of the evening ... but it is concerned, along with many viewers, that sensationalism is creeping into storylines which flouts audience expectations of both characters and setting.'

[1] Verbatim responses (VR) from the quantitative research (telephone survey) are used in this report, in addition to quotes from the qualitative research.

[2] Sex and Sexuality in Broadcasting; A. Millwood Hargrave; Brad Ltd, 1992.

[3] Annual Review; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1998.

And what of the rise of the confessional talk show, which was not part of the broadcasting environment when the previous research was conducted in 1992? In particular, what about those imported from the US which have a strong dependence on sexual themes? The Annual Review drew attention to these studio discussion programmes and the time at which they were broadcast:

'The programmes also appear from time to time to be challenging scheduling conventions in their discussions of sexual topics.'

Would respondents agree that these programmes were pushing at established parameters and were they happy with the material available on daytime television? And what of satellite television with its 'adult' encrypted premium services?

The project used three methods⁴ to provide answers to these questions:

- qualitative discussion groups and family interviews
- a quantitative survey of 732 adults with a boosted sample of 83 young people aged between 13 and 15 (permission to conduct these interviews was sought from their parents)
- and a further sample of 261 adults who completed a multi-media interview within a hall test, watching and commenting on clips from programmes.

Background

The 1992 study, commissioned by the former Broadcasting Standards Council, had looked at attitudes towards the depiction of sex and issues of sexuality in broadcasting. The research methodology then had included qualitative interviews with families and with homosexuals, a large-scale quantified survey with a nationally representative sample of adults, plus a boosted sample of young people (aged 13-17 years). The study found:

- a tension between the desire of most respondents to be open and tolerant of sexual matters and the embarrassment or offence felt when watching such material, particularly when viewing with others
- this embarrassment increased if the viewing occurred with children present, and many parents did not want to have to explain to their children what was happening on screen; this was in contrast to the finding that television programmes, specifically soap operas, could help a family initiate a discussion of issues they may have found otherwise difficult to broach
- the well-established broadcasting conventions of scheduling and timing were employed to lessen the possibility of discomfort, and if these conventions were 'breached', the offence was increased

[4] Appendix 1.

- the depiction of sexual activity was more acceptable if it was relevant to the storyline and respondents set boundaries for the types of scene that could be shown
- there was discomfort with the portrayal of homosexuality but it was not generally condemned by respondents, particularly if it was central to the plot or storyline of a programme.

In addition to this project, for eight years the Commission has tracked attitudes to the perceived amount of sexual activity depicted on television. The data have shown a downward trend in the proportion of those saying there is 'too much' sex shown on television and a commensurate increase in those saying there is 'the right amount'. Simultaneously, audience monitoring in 1997 found⁵:

- fewer incidents of sexual explicitness noted than in previous years
- nonetheless, a relatively high proportion of significant incidents of sexual explicitness was noted before the Watershed.

The Commission has found also that complaints about the depiction of sexual activity are changing - more concern has been expressed about 'talk about sex', particularly in the American confessional talk shows which have been gaining in airtime and popularity in this country. Complaints about homosexuality have continued but they have been somewhat tempered by a greater acceptance of its portrayal.

A revision of the Commission's Codes of Guidance noted these shifts. It was decided that further work should be undertaken to explore current boundaries for the portrayal of sex and the depiction of sexuality on television. In addition to updating the previous work, the objectives of the research were defined as needing:

1. to explore the importance of the viewing and listening context when watching depictions of sexual activity
2. to consider the expectations of the audience with regard to the scheduling of such material
3. to investigate those variables which caused particular offence
4. to consider 'new' programme genres, such as confessional talk shows
5. to consider the specific requirements made of terrestrial as opposed to non-terrestrial services.

[5] Monitoring Report 6; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

The media

If the markets are flooded with something then your level of acceptance will increase. People accept stuff on TV now that they wouldn't twenty-five years ago.
 (VR: female, aged 55-64)

Respondents to both the qualitative and quantitative stages of this study agreed that there was a greater tolerance of the portrayal of sexual activity and some of this, they argued, came from media depictions.

I think it's not just TV that has brought about that change, all the other types of media e.g. newspapers and magazines have as well. I think what's happened is that things like chat shows have made it more acceptable to talk about sex because there is so much more about it.
 (VR: male, aged 16-24)

Within the telephone survey respondents were asked about the amount of sexual material they perceived each medium to contain. The table shows that a substantial proportion (nearly half the sample) thought that the print media - in particular, the newspapers - contained too much sexual content.

Table 1: Perceptions of levels of sexual depictions in all media⁶

	<i>Too much</i>	<i>Right amount</i>	<i>Too little</i>
	%	%	%
On television	36	57	7
On radio	6	75	18
In newspapers	49	47	4
In magazines	42	55	3

Base: All respondents

At the time of the research, the President Clinton/Monica Lewinsky story was breaking in the British media. The story was being reported on in some detail and explicit and intimate information about the sexual lives of real people was being brought to the public's attention.

There appear to be no boundaries, people will go as far as they want to, irrespective of what the general opinion is at the time. Sex is pervading every area of life, and that includes TV news as well. Everybody is doing it, but that doesn't make it right.
 (VR: female, aged 45-54)

[6] Unless otherwise specified, all tables exclude those saying 'don't know'.

I think often with the media, it tends to be something exploitative for the sake of engaging people's attention. I think generally with news it tends to focus on scandal rather than world issues ... I can't speak [with] a long-term insight because I'm only 18. I think perhaps generally on television, there's a lack of subtlety and instead a portrayal of something more explicit.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)

Radio, by contrast, was thought by three quarters of the sample to contain the 'right amount' of sexual portrayal. This finding would be supported by a study into attitudes towards radio content which found that few respondents found anything offensive on the radio⁷. This was mainly because of the particularly personal nature of the relationship formed with the medium and because it did not rely on a visual image, often more embarrassing to the respondent.

The same study (conducted in 1994) had found that parents were unconcerned about what their children heard on the radio - one in three (31%) admitted they did not know what their children were listening to, but most (63%) assumed they were listening to music. They did not express any particular concerns about disc jockeys who presented the music shows or the lyrics of songs. It does not seem likely, from the data above, that parents today would question their children's listening habits any more carefully than they did then. This was not the perception of adolescents themselves, however. When questioned⁸, nearly half the sample of adolescents (49%) said that adults were quite often shocked by what they heard on the radio.

There was more awareness among adults, and some concern, about the explicit content of some magazines, particularly those aimed at the young.

Children read a lot in magazines, more about sex. They see it so much and think there is a very short time span between seeing somebody and going all the way - it kind of glamorises it and, therefore, it's seen as a thing to do.

(VR: female, aged 45-54)

Things such as soap operas and Neighbours convey too much; children nowadays know too much, more than they should. You get little ten year olds coming up to you and saying things. A lot is in magazines.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)

However, the study of adolescents referred to above showed that magazines were seen to be important to this group, precisely because they allowed discussion and a window on to a world that they were curious to know about, but did not necessarily wish to experience.

[7] Radio and Audience Attitudes; A. Millwood Hargrave; Brad Ltd, 1994.

[8] Young People and the Media; A. Millwood Hargrave, Professor J. Halloran, P. Gray, 1996.

Regulation

I don't think they should show the full-blown thing. I think just a couple in bed and ten to fifteen seconds of passionate kissing gives you a good idea of what they're up to.
(Mother, family interview)

The qualitative research had suggested that, when they were asked to think about the depiction of sex on television, many respondents felt that broadcasters were seeking to push at the boundaries of what had been the norm, either in the explicitness of what was shown or by challenging the known conventions of scheduling. This was accompanied by a cynicism about the broadcasters' motives. Respondents seemed aware of the increasingly competitive broadcasting environment and a battle for audiences.

Too much earlier on in dramas, trying to spice up the early soaps in the evening. Too much talk about it - take Coronation Street - not necessary to bring that sort of thing into it.
(VR: male, aged 35-44)

A series of questions was asked in the telephone interview to see how far-reaching this feeling was:

Table 2: Attitudes towards broadcasters and the depiction of sex

	<i>Sex on television is shown purely because the broadcasters want to increase programme ratings</i>		<i>Uncertain how far broadcasters are allowed to go when showing sex on television</i>	
	%	%	%	%
Total agree		72		59
Agree strongly	51		28	
Agree a little	21		31	
Neither/nor		3		10
Total disagree		26		31
Disagree a little	14		18	
Disagree strongly	12		13	

Base: All respondents

As the table shows, when asked, nearly three quarters of the sample felt that broadcasters included depictions of sexual activity in programmes to boost ratings. Half of the sample agreed 'strongly' with this statement. There was also some uncertainty about the amount of regulation applied to the depiction of sexual activity.

Sometimes [sex is] unnecessary - it's added in just to get people to watch it. The programme's [not] standing on its own merits.
(VR: female, aged 55-64)

The regulation of non-terrestrial services

Table 3: Agreement with statement: You can show more explicit sex scenes on cable and satellite television than on regular TV.

	%	%
Total agree		49
Agree strongly	32	
Agree a little	17	
Neither/nor		32
Total disagree		18
Disagree a little	8	
Disagree strongly	10	

Base: All respondents

The quantitative data, and findings from qualitative research, showed there was some agreement that satellite and cable channels could show more explicit scenes of sexual activity. Those receiving such services were far more likely to agree with this (70% of those with additional television services agreed with this in comparison with 37% of those with access only to terrestrial channels). One-third of respondents however, could not make up their minds, pointing to the confusion about regulation and how far it went.

I don't think they have a Watershed on cable. The advertising is very explicit - they can advertise adult channels, maybe 9.00-10.00 p.m., when my children are up - quite a long explicit advert and phone lines.

(VR: female, aged 35-44)

The overall trend of these particular data mirrors those found in a recent survey of viewers of non-terrestrial services⁹. This showed that subscribers felt their greater financial control over the services they received gave them an ability to 'regulate' by stopping that subscription. This option was not present for the free-to-air services. Respondents to the telephone survey in this project also agreed that paying for a television service gave the viewer more power.

If people are prepared to pay, cable and satellite will provide the necessary programmes including sex scenes.

(VR: male, aged 35-44)

[9] Free to air vs. subscription channels; ITC, 1998.

They get away with more than normal TV because they are paying for it, the people who want it can have it.

(VR: male, aged 45-54)

Further respondents in this survey, and those in the ITC study, felt that the targeted nature of many channels, with the additional security measures on offer such as PIN codes and additional encryption devices, meant that services that were not wanted (such as the so-called 'adult' channels) could be avoided.

You can put some programmes in - have personal codes on satellite which is good, as opposed to terrestrial TV where there are no codes and anyone can access the programmes.

(VR: female, aged 25-34)

They're showing a lot more sex and it's too strong for TV. I don't think it's necessary. If you want to watch those sorts of things you can pay for it on Sky.

(VR: male, aged 45-54)

When respondents in the telephone survey were asked specifically if there were different rules for the depiction of sex on cable and satellite television compared with terrestrial television, nearly two in five (39%) did not know while the majority (52%) thought there were.

Cable is more explicit. Their teenage programmes go further sexual wise than on ordinary TV. They don't go as far as the cable.

(VR: female, aged 25-34)

Those who thought different rules did apply were more likely to have access to satellite or cable television (75% of subscribers to additional services, compared with 40% of those receiving only terrestrial television).

I think they tend to take more liberties. It's true of all the channels; it's just been an open sesame for whatever they want to broadcast. They don't seem to have any restraint.

(VR: male, aged 45-54)

When those who thought different rules did apply to the non-terrestrial services were asked how they differed, one in five thought more sex was shown and that it was more explicit (19%). Sixteen per cent thought there was less overall regulation, while thirteen per cent said 'you get what you pay for'.

Table 4: Ways in which cable/satellite rules differ

	<i>Highest mentions %</i>
More sex shown	20
More explicit	19
Less regulated, get away with more	16
You get what you pay for	13
Adult channels	10
Different Watershed	9
More liberal, more open	8
Less censorship, more freedom	7
Foreign channels/programmes	7
Catering for minorities	7

Because with satellite and cable you're basically renting what you would like to watch but with TV it's a different story because it's there.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)

As far as I can determine cable and satellite can show what they like but the BBC and regular TV are sort of restrained. They also have different rules of times of the day they can show the sex programmes on TV. On the adult oriented channels they can show what they like when they like.

(VR: male, aged 45-54)

Issues of Scheduling

Well, nobody seems to care what they put on anymore. It just seems for ratings, popularity isn't it? Ratings is the most important thing. Well, they started putting them on at late times didn't they? And now they just don't give a toss when they put them on. They don't care about the Watershed.

(VR: male, aged 25-34)

The audience monitoring study has consistently shown that respondents are concerned about the nature of the material shown on television, particularly in the hour before the Watershed¹⁰. Certainly, within this study, a number of respondents expressed concern about pre-Watershed material:

Too much before 9.00 p.m. - early afternoon soap operas that could be construed by children as the norm ... everything seems to be related to sex.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)

Some of soaps shown early in evenings is too much for children. For that time of evening it's too much - films can be over the top in sexual content - there's more sex on TV than ten years ago.

(VR: female, aged 35-44)

Respondents to the telephone questionnaire were asked to consider how acceptable certain types of sexual depictions were before the 9.00 p.m. Watershed:

Table 5: Acceptability of programme types before 9.00 p.m.

	<i>Discussion/ talk show</i> %	<i>Innuendo</i> %	<i>Heterosexual sex scene</i> %
Very acceptable	12	9	3
Fairly acceptable	42	45	20
Not very acceptable	18	21	26
Not at all acceptable	27	24	50
Should not be on TV	*	*	1

As the data show, a depiction of the sex act was not considered acceptable before the Watershed by most of the sample (76%). The most acceptable pre-Watershed material was sexual innuendo within programmes and - to a slightly lesser extent - the confessional talk show.

Respondents who had thought those types of sexual depiction were not acceptable before the Watershed, were asked again about their acceptability, if shown immediately after the Watershed:

[10] Monitoring Report 6: Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

Table 6: Acceptability of programme types immediately after 9.00 p.m.

	<i>Discussion/ talk show</i> %	<i>Innuendo</i> %	<i>Heterosexual sex scene</i> %
Very acceptable	8	6	13
Fairly acceptable	27	27	43
Not very acceptable	4	4	6
Not at all acceptable	6	7	13
Should not be on TV	-	-	*
Respondents already saying programme type acceptable before 9.00 p.m.	56	56	25

Most respondents now said the content or type of programme was acceptable. That small group of respondents who still did not agree were asked if the material would be acceptable after 10.00 p.m.

Table 7: Acceptability of programme types after 10.00 p.m.

	<i>Discussion/ talk show</i> %	<i>Innuendo</i> %	<i>Heterosexual sex scene</i> %
Very acceptable	*	*	*
Fairly acceptable	4	4	6
Not very acceptable	2	2	3
Not at all acceptable	3	4	9
Should not be on TV	-	*	-
Respondents already saying programme type acceptable before 9.00 p.m.	90	90	81

As the table shows, a very small percentage of respondents remained unconvinced that sexual content should be shown or mentioned, even after 10.00 p.m.

Viewing context

In the 1992 survey, many respondents had commented on the fact that they felt embarrassed when watching sex scenes on television with other people, particularly across generations. This was found still to be true.

It's embarrassing for our generation to watch it with our parents. I don't like it but mum doesn't mind it.

(VR: female, aged 13-15)

You could watch kissing with your granny.

(Male, aged 21-30)

In order to examine, quantitatively, how respondents in this study might approach their regular television fare, they were asked about the people with whom they watched most often. The majority of adult respondents said they watched television with their spouses or partners (58%). The oldest group of respondents were the most likely to say they watched on their own (41% of the 55+ age group said they viewed alone compared with 24% of the sample as a whole). Young teens, on the other hand, were most likely to watch television with their parents or siblings.

Table 8: Who do you watch television with?

	Total sample %	13-15 years %	16-24 years %	25-34 years %	35-44 years %	45-54 years %	55-64 years %	65+ years %
Spouse/partner	52	*	30	65	68	76	62	46
Parent: mother	13	64	38	5	4	4	1	-
Parent: father	10	46	31	4	3	4	-	*
Child: daughter	13	-	3	22	30	21	5	4
Child: son	13	*	5	20	30	16	6	7
Sibling: female	6	29	17	2	4	-	-	1
Sibling: male	6	25	16	2	2	1	1	1
Friend: own sex	5	9	16	6	3	-	-	1
Friend: opposite sex	2	3	12	1	2	-	-	1
Watch alone	24	15	14	19	15	18	35	45

Base: All respondents

This communal viewing among the young is supported by findings from the Himmelweit II project¹¹ which showed that the majority (68%) of young people (aged between 7 and 17 years) watched their favourite television programmes with their families. This was true even if they had television sets in their bedrooms (61% watched their favourite programmes with their families; 28% watched these programmes on their own).

[11] Young People, New Media; Sonia Livingstone, Moira Bovill; London School of Economics & Political Science; to be published.

*I'm like a lot of single mums - where I treat her really like another adult.
So she gets to watch a lot of programmes with me.*
(Mother, family interview)

How explicit the sexual material was considered to be was key to its acceptability when viewing with others. This was explored further using clips shown to respondents in hall tests. Their reactions to each clip is described in subsequent sections.

Too much talk about [sex] - I think they put it in things they don't need to put it in; it can be embarrassing when you've got your neighbours in.
(VR female, aged 65+)

Well, I think you can get the same idea without actually portraying the same. Suggesting is far better, especially if you are watching with a child in school who's there with you, it's a bit awkward.
(VR: female, aged 45-54)

In the group discussions too, respondents admitted they could be embarrassed watching sex, even with their partners.

I'd try and distract him with a cup of tea or a biscuit when the sex bits come on.
(Female, aged 60+)

Respondents to the telephone survey were asked if they generally felt embarrassed watching the depiction of sexual activity on television.

Table 9: Agreement with statement: I get embarrassed watching sex on television

	%	%
Total agree		27
Agree strongly	15	
Agree a little	12	
Neither/nor		4
Total disagree		68
Disagree a little	29	
Disagree strongly	39	
Base: All respondents		

About a quarter of the sample said they did get embarrassed. Older respondents were significantly more likely to agree 'strongly' with the statement (32% of those aged 65 and over), as did those who regularly attended religious services (24% compared with 13% of those who did not regularly attend such events).

Sometimes it makes me cringe. But I wouldn't necessarily turn it off because it's getting embarrassing.

(Family interview)

Some respondents in the qualitative research said they could imagine watching sex scenes with friends of the same sex most easily:

I don't get embarrassed with my girl friends, we just have a laugh.

(Female, aged 16-24)

And the reactions of respondents to the clips seen in the hall tests also showed that, particularly for women, viewing with children or members of the opposite sex could create the most discomfort.

Levels of sexual activity on television

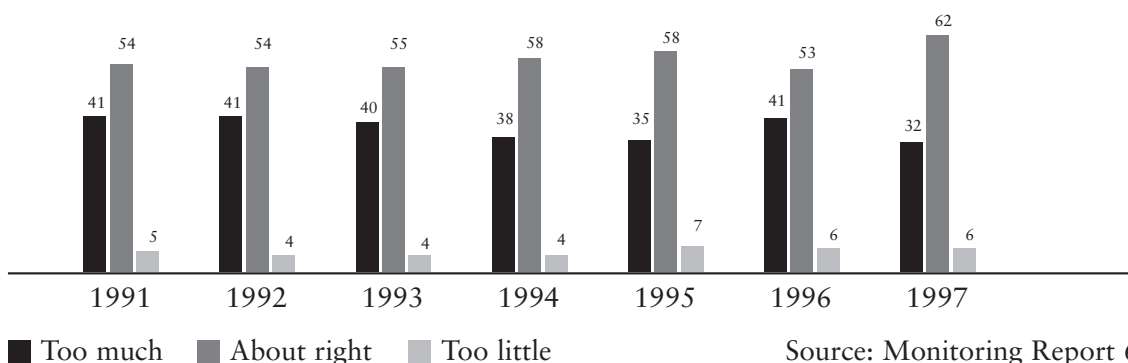
Everyone's portrayed as being at it all the time. I don't think it's changed; it's just that people are portrayed as very promiscuous and not everyone is like that.
(VR: female, aged 16-24)

There must be better topics than sex to talk about. There must be better things to talk about. It's got worse, hasn't it - well it's just got like everything. Things on TV nowadays would never be shown years ago - it's all sort of sexual innuendoes - it's all to do with the ratings stakes.
(VR: male, aged 25-34)

Respondents in the qualitative research did not mention the on-screen depiction of sexual activity as a major concern or preoccupation. It was largely accepted as part of everyday life, and most respondents in the group discussions and family interviews agreed that both they, and society in general, had become more tolerant of such depictions. Parents in particular, showed themselves willing to discuss the issues raised by such portrayals and were less likely, in many cases, than the sample as a whole, to express concern about sexual material.

This greater acceptance of the levels of on-screen sexual activity is supported by trend data collected by the Commission since 1991. Respondents have been asked in an annual survey whether or not they thought there was too much sex on television (Figure 1). As the data show there has been a general decrease in the percentage of respondents saying there was 'too much' sex on television and a corresponding increase in those saying there was 'the right amount'.

Figure 1: Amount of sex



I think it seems to be stricter now, you just don't see more sex on TV at all, and if there is, it seems to be mild. I don't mind because I'm not bothered about it.
(VR: male, aged 35-44)

They are beginning to realise that all is not necessary. Perhaps they are calming down and thinking beforehand. Thinking more about it than five years ago.
(VR: female, aged 55-64)

The sample in this quantitative telephone survey were asked the same question. As we can see, of those respondents who expressed an opinion, most thought that there was the right amount of sexual activity displayed, while over a third said there was ‘too much’. It is to be seen if this increase will be reflected in the 1998 trend data.

Table 10: Levels of sex on television

	%
Too much	36
The right amount	57
Too little	7

Base: All respondents

Both age and gender have been found consistently to be key determinants of the way respondents react to this question.

My generation doesn't care but the older generation does. Some people really dislike it and some people go over the top about wanting to watch it. The boys in my generation want to watch it a lot more than the girls and the older generation.

(VR: female, aged 13-15)

The oldest group of respondents in the telephone survey were the most likely to think there was too much sex on television (73% of those aged 65 and over compared with 36% of the sample as a whole) and women were also more likely to say this than men (42% of women compared with 30% of men).

It is private and comes out in life. Biology is different from sex.

(VR: male, aged 65+)

When respondents were asked in what way they thought there was too much sex on television, most spontaneous comments were based around the perceived levels of explicitness (23% of the sample said ‘nothing was left to the imagination’) and also that sex always seemed to be present in programmes: 23% said there was too much talk about it, while 21% complained they felt they could not turn on the television without seeing some depiction.

There are no limits any more. Everything is discussed on TV ... It's probably healthier.

(Mother, family interview)

A further 11% felt that sex was used to boost ratings.

It's the innuendoes. If they are ever short of plots it has to involve innuendoes - just trying to fill story lines.

(VR: male, aged 25-34)

There was also a sense among some respondents that the way in which sexual activity was depicted had changed - one in five (19%) said this was a negative change. A respondent described the change thus:

It (the depiction of sexual activity) seems more acceptable on TV. It's a regular occurrence on TV, there are no emotions involved.

(VR: female, aged 45-54)

Five per cent commented that erstwhile taboo areas were now widely portrayed.

I think sex is tolerated now. Now there are no boundaries. I think they'll show anything at 9.00 p.m. in the next five years. We are being spoon-fed lesbian sex, incest. They have certainly pushed back the boundaries of decency. I don't think it's done for the right reasons, just to push up ratings.

(VR: female, aged 25-34)

Some respondents still thought there were no-go areas however, particularly on terrestrial television. For this young man it was actual sexual intercourse:

If I saw penetration, that would be too explicit.

(Male, aged 16-17)

Programme genre

Respondents in the telephone survey were able also to make a distinction between the depiction of the sexual act and talk about sex. Most agreed there was more talk; men, in particular, agreed 'strongly' with this (42% compared with 32% of women).

Table 11: Agreement with statement: Nowadays there is more talk about sex than actual sex on television.

	%	%
Total agree		70
Agree strongly	37	
Agree a little	33	
Neither/nor		9
Total disagree		21
Disagree a little	15	
Disagree strongly	6	

Base: All respondents

It's gratuitous, not necessary for the plot of the programme - both too much talk of sex and sex shown. I think that too much is shown altogether and it's thrown into programmes unnecessarily - more sex shown in films and television than there was, say, 20 years ago. I don't think it's a change for the better.
(VR: female, aged 55-64)

Research projects in the past have shown that respondents made distinctions about the acceptability of content based on a number of criteria - for example, the broadcast time, the amount and nature of the pre-transmission information given, the actors and the programme genre¹². Respondents here showed, both in the qualitative and in the quantitative studies, that they distinguished between the physical depiction of sexual activity and talk. The telephone research sought to understand if the different programme genres were considered to contain differing amounts of sexual portrayals.

Table 12: There is too much sex in:

	%
Confessional talk shows	47
Television advertising	37
Films on television	33
Television drama	29
Soap operas	29
Comedies	21
Documentaries	13
The News	10

Base: All respondents

Older respondents, in particular, were more likely to think that there was too much sex depicted in advertising (51% of those aged 65 and over compared with 37% of the entire sample), in film (53%) and in television drama (42%). Women too, were more likely to say that there was 'too much' sex shown in film (43%), drama (32%) and comedy (27%) than men. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to disagree (28% of men said there was not 'too much sex' in any of these genres compared with 15% of all women).

Just show more of it and people are more in tune with it these days. X-rated things they showed years ago they'd now show on TV, for example Saturday Night Fever.
(VR: male, aged 25-34)

All of a sudden I am a keen watcher of Emmerdale and Coronation Street and it all seems to be about sex these days ... to titillate people.
(VR: male, aged 65+)

[12] The Scheduling Game; A. Millwood Hargrave; Brad Ltd, 1995.

Confessional talk shows

As the data show, the relatively recent introduction of confessional talk shows have made their mark on the consciousness of the public - nearly half of all respondents thought there was 'too much' sex in talk shows.

I think it's a bit over the top - and it's just like a normal thing when it's not. It's like a Marks and Spencer sandwich - an everyday thing. I think there's too much talk about it - in particular shows like Jerry Springer. It's usually about sex - some shows are shown when children are about. I think there's been more shown than when I was younger - I think it's growing.

(VR: female, aged 13-15)

Because the majority of times you turn the TV on, you can guarantee that it [sex] will come up in the programme; there are a lot of other things the early evening talk shows could talk about.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)

Some parents, discussing the daytime scheduling of these programmes, felt that many of the topics would be beyond the understanding of their children. So they were less concerned about their impact. In fact the research suggested that many children did understand what was being talked about, despite their parents' views of them:

The kids either don't understand or just laugh because the audience is laughing.

(Mother, family interview)

In one of the groups, comments were made about the exploitative nature of these confessional talk shows, and a concern expressed about the negative portrayal of society and relationships.

It's always bad relationships to get good TV, to get people watching.

I feel that they exploit it.

(Female, aged 31-40)

One respondent in a group discussion said that the audience was always forewarned about the nature of the programme and so could avoid it.

There's always a title so you know what to expect.

(Female, aged 16-24)

The importance of a warning was underlined throughout the research. As this father said:

They should stick a warning at the beginning of the programmes. That way it gives parents a lot of choice on whether they let their kids watch it or not.

(Father, family interview)

Within the hall test, using multi-media techniques, a segment was played from a British talk show, *Vanessa*, and respondents were asked for their reactions to it. As the data show, many thought the clip acceptable and entertaining. A significant minority thought it was 'degrading' to the people involved and a higher than average number of respondents said it was 'disgusting'. A number of respondents considered the material should not have been shown at all, while quite a high proportion of those who saw the clip thought that its time of transmission (this was a programme broadcast mid-afternoon) was unsuitable.

Vanessa

(Channel and transmission time: ITV, 2.30 p.m.)

Images seen: A couple are being interviewed by the programme's presenter about their relationship which admits multiple partners.

Forty six per cent of respondents said they recognised the clip or the presenter, those aged under 34 being the most likely to say this. Respondents were asked then for their reactions to the piece.

Table 13: Reactions to *Vanessa*

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen¹³</i>
There's nothing wrong with showing that	34	89
Realistic	30	101
Entertaining	25	155
OK if it's part of the story	23	68
Degrading	22	142
I'd like to switch off	20	139
Boring	18	117
Disgusting	16	156
Too explicit	14	74
I would have liked a warning	14	102
It's really offensive	13	127
How embarrassing	13	114
I enjoyed that	6	136
Base: 261 respondents		All responses over 5%

One third of respondents thought there was nothing wrong with the clip and nearly the same proportion said that it was realistic. One quarter of the sample said it was 'entertaining', while context was important to another one in five. However, one in five respondents also called the clip 'degrading' and 20% said they would switch off.

Respondents understood that this type of programme would not be transmitted during peak viewing hours or late at night, but was a daytime programme - most respondents (57%) thought it would have been transmitted between 2.00-5.00 p.m. In fact the programme was transmitted at 2.30 p.m. A significant number of respondents (three in five) thought this an unsuitable transmission time for such material, with older respondents expressing the most concern (46% of this group said this was not a suitable time 'at all' compared with 31% of the sample as a whole). When these respondents were asked what time would have been more acceptable, one in five (21%) said the clip should not have been shown at all. Most (66%) however, said it should have been transmitted after the Watershed.

[13] For all the clips played as part of the multi-media interviews within the hall tests, an average score has been worked out for each of the possible reactions to the clip. This average has been given an index score of 100. The data here, and for all subsequent clips, show the index score for each reaction to the clip. If the score is over 100, a higher than average proportion of respondents reacted in a particular way to the clip. If the index is below 100, fewer than average respondents made any comment.

The majority of respondents (61%) knew this was an ITV programme, while sixteen per cent thought it might be shown on Channel 4. The data show that one in five did not know if a pre-transmission warning would have been given, and a further two in three (64%) thought not.

Respondents were asked how comfortable they would feel watching the clip either on their own or in the company of others. The qualitative research had shown that viewing context was particularly important in influencing how people felt about watching a particular clip. This question also helps indicate (in a projective, indirect way) for whom the respondent considered the clip was suitable.

Table 14: Viewing context: *Vanessa*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	86	73
Alone	85	72
Older women	74	61
Younger women	75	68
Older men	77	49
Younger men	75	50
Teenagers	66	43
Children 10-12 years	23	17
Children 1-9 years	22	9
None of these	11	20

Base: Sample seeing clip

Unlike much of the fiction that they commented upon, men were less likely than women to say they would be comfortable watching this clip with others, particularly young women or with children. Age too, was a discriminator, with older respondents far less likely to be comfortable with the material at all.

Advertising

Advertising was felt by many respondents to use sex too much to sell products (mentioned by almost two in five respondents).

In car adverts with people simulating sex - they can't sell cars without sex - big bunch of adverts based on sex - there don't seem too many intelligent adverts - it's wall to wall adverts on sex nowadays - it seems that way.

(VR: female, aged 35-44)

It is usually over the top - car ads and suntan lotion. Yes, a lot of people think they can sell anything if it is to do with sex.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)

Respondents in the qualitative research were shown a well-known car advertisement, playing at the time of the research, which featured a supermodel stripping off her clothes to drive away in the car. The women interviewed felt strongly that this was not acceptable because it was gratuitous in its use of a woman and did not sell any of the benefits of the car:

You see her in her bra and pants ... no big deal but it's the way they used it.

(VR: female, aged 25-34)

Some comment was made also about the fact that respondents could not anticipate the content of an advertisement. There was no mechanism to avoid it if one wished to, unlike television programmes which generally followed established conventions of scheduling, or which had a system of pre-broadcast information:

It is there and you can't avoid it. With a film you can choose to avoid it.

You see sex on a train platform and on TV ... Advertisements you cannot switch off.

It is right there in front of you.

(VR: female, aged 55-64)

Respondents in the hall tests were shown two advertisements. One was for the *Sunday Mirror* and was advertising a feature on holidays while the other, for the *Daily Mirror*, advertised a survey on the sex lives of the British.

Sunday Mirror clip

(Channel and transmission time: ITV, before 9.00 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: The clip you are about to see is an advert.

Images seen: A scantily clad couple are seen in an embrace. The edition of the paper being advertised contained a sex survey.

One in five respondents could recall the advertisement. Nearly one third of the sample thought it was acceptable while almost the same proportion felt that it was boring. Over a quarter of respondents also said it was ‘too explicit’.

Table 15: Reactions to the *Sunday Mirror* holiday advertisement

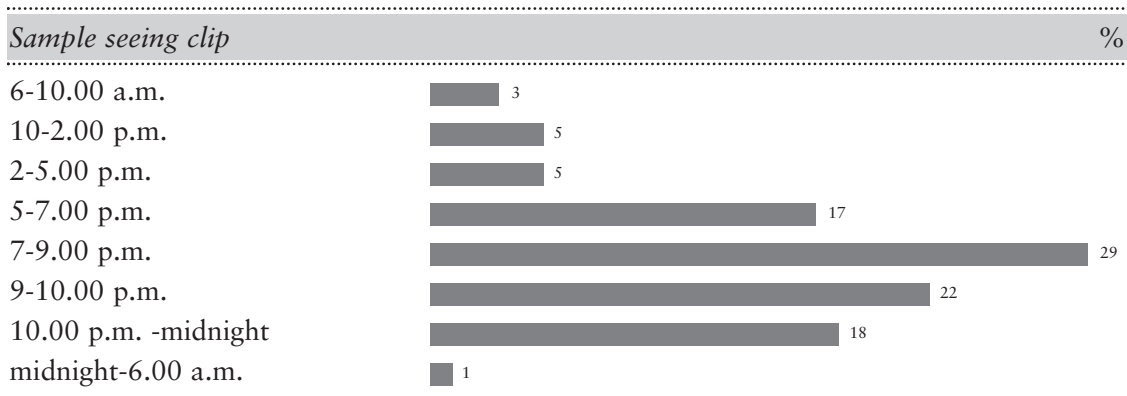
	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
There’s nothing wrong with showing that	31	81
Boring	29	188
Too explicit	28	149
Degrading	17	110
I’d like to switch off	15	104
Erotic	13	131
Realistic	10	34
Entertaining	10	62
I enjoyed that	8	181
It looked good	8	114
Too long	7	125
How embarrassing	7	61
OK if it’s part of the story	7	21
Disgusting	6	59
Offensive	6	59

Base: 97 respondents¹⁴ All responses over 5%

Although the advertisement had been considered ‘explicit’ by a greater number of respondents than those who saw the commercial for the *Daily Mirror*, those who saw this thought it would have been broadcast outside children’s programming but possibly before the Watershed.

[14] NB sample sizes. Data should be used as indicative.

Figure 2: Expected transmission time of the *Sunday Mirror* holiday advertisement



When told this was the case, respondents were fairly evenly split between those who thought the transmission time suitable for the content shown (51%) and those who disagreed (50%). As with the *Daily Mirror* advertisement, most of those who thought the transmission time unsuitable felt it should only be shown after the Watershed (69%), with a core group (27%) saying it should not be on television at all.

Table 16: Viewing context: the *Sunday Mirror* holiday advertisement

Comfortable watching with:	Men	Women
	%	%
People like self	90	75
Alone	90	76
Older women	75	69
Younger women	85	72
Older men	87	55
Younger men	84	53
Teenagers	75	57
Children 10-12 years	43	27
Children 1-9 years	36	12
None of these	10	22

Base: Sample seeing clip

In general men were more comfortable to watch this advertisement with a variety of other people than were women.

Daily Mirror clip

(Channel and transmission time: ITV, before 9.00 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: The clip you are about to see is an advert.

Images seen: A couple are sitting at a table and the question ‘where were you last night?’ is asked.

About one in ten respondents (11%) had seen the advertisement.

Table 17: Reactions to the *Daily Mirror* advertisement

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
There’s nothing wrong with showing that	38	100
Boring	29	188
Realistic	21	71
Degrading	16	103
I’d like to switch off	15	104
Too explicit	15	80
I would have liked a warning	13	95
OK if it’s part of the story	12	35
Entertaining	11	68
Offensive	7	68
How embarrassing	7	61
Erotic	6	61
Too long	5	90
Disgusting	5	49

Base: 164 respondents

All responses over 5%

Nearly two in five respondents thought the commercial was acceptable, while almost a third said they thought it was ‘boring’. Indeed, against the average index of 100, nearly twice as many respondents thought the advertisement ‘boring’: significantly more respondents than average also said it was ‘too explicit’. There were few key demographic differences between respondents (sample sizes are small and can be used as indicative only). However, younger respondents (those aged between 16 and 34) were most likely to say there was ‘nothing wrong’ with the advertisement (47%).

Respondents said they would not have expected to see the advertisement until later in the evening, outside children’s programmes. Three in ten said it would be shown between 7.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. and a further one in three said it would be shown after the Watershed but before 10.00 p.m. Ten per cent thought it would be shown even later.

Respondents were told that the advertisement had been transmitted at various times outside children’s programming. As the data show respondents were fairly evenly split between those who thought the transmission time suitable for the content shown and those who did not. Twice as many respondents thought it was ‘not at all’ suitable compared with those who said it was ‘very’ suitable:

Table 18: Suitability of actual transmission time: *Daily Mirror* advertisement

	<i>Sample seeing clip</i> %
Very suitable	10)
Fairly suitable	38) 48
Not really suitable	32)
Not at all suitable	20) 52

Those who had thought the transmission time unsuitable were asked what time would have been acceptable. Most (73%) said the advertisement should only be shown after the Watershed, with a quarter (23%) of this group feeling it should not have been shown at all. (NB small sample sizes). There was an understanding that no pre-transmission warning would have been given (80% of the sample said this).

Table 19: Viewing context: *Daily Mirror* advertisement

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	92	71
Alone	89	74
Older women	82	65
Younger women	73	62
Older men	86	46
Younger men	81	50
Teenagers	73	53
Children 10-12 years	45	27
Children 1-9 years	36	13
None of these	6	20

Base: All seeing clip

Men were far more relaxed about who they might watch the advertisement with than women, who were less likely to want to watch it at all. However neither men nor women were comfortable about watching with children, particularly those aged nine and under. While the sample sizes are small and so should be used as an indication only, the data also show that older respondents (those aged over 55) were more likely not to want to see the advertisement at all.

The advertisement was also used as stimulus material in many of the group discussions. One man questioned its content thus:

Doesn't bother me but it's not what the paper's about.
(Male, aged 21-30)

Film and drama

One in three respondents said that they thought there was too much sex depicted in both film and drama, with a slightly higher proportion (33%) mentioning film. In the Commission's monitoring reports too, film was often felt to contain the highest levels of unjustified incidents of all three measures taken: explicit sex, bad language and violence¹⁵.

When I watch TV films with my wife, I feel the sex scenes go on for far too long ... Years ago ... sex rarely was shown. Now it's shown in almost everything.
(VR: male, aged 45-54)

Recent research conducted by the ITC¹⁶ showed that respondents found themselves more easily 'shocked' by drama. It was usually British in origin and more recognisable and familiar to the viewer. Films on the other hand, were often associated with the US and were seen to represent an unreal world. However, where the depiction of sexual activity was concerned, respondents suggested that, in the past, they had expected drama to be less explicit than film. This was thought to be changing, with respondents citing drama as containing the most graphic portrayals of sex in recent times.

Respondents to the hall tests in this project were shown clips from three dramas - one was a period drama (*Tom Jones*) and the other two were contemporary (*The Final Cut* and *The Lakes*). As the data show, the clip from *Tom Jones* was the most acceptable, particularly if the scene shown was contextually justified. As it was obviously a period drama, respondents appeared to feel more certain (than average) that it would be. Respondents were one and a half times more likely than average to say the clip looked 'romantic'.

Of the two clips from dramas set in contemporary times, *The Final Cut* seemed to be the one that was considered by significantly more respondents than average as both more erotic and romantic. However, twice as many respondents as average also thought it went on for 'too long' and that it was 'noisy'.

Reactions to the clip from *The Lakes* were less positive, with more respondents than average saying it was 'too explicit', that it went on for 'too long' and that it was 'noisy'.

[15] Monitoring Report 6; The Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

[16] Film Versus Drama: Relative acceptability of the two genres on television; ITC, 1998.

Over 50% more respondents than average also found it offensive. It could be that they thought the act depicted was non-consensual, this was certainly a concern noted in qualitative research.

Tom Jones

(Channel and transmission time: BBC1, 9.00 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: The next scene is taken from a period drama. The young man is talking to his mistress.

Images seen: The clip shows *Tom Jones* talking to his mistress in the bedroom.

A third of the sample (33%) recognised the clip or the characters in this scene. As the table below shows, the majority (55%) thought it acceptable if it was in context and nearly half (47%) said they could see nothing wrong with it. A quarter of the sample said that they thought the scene looked ‘realistic’.

Table 20: Reactions to *Tom Jones*

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
OK if it's part of the story	55	162
There's nothing wrong with showing that	47	123
Realistic	26	87
Entertaining	18	111
Too explicit	16	85
Boring	15	97
I would have liked a warning	9	66
Romantic	9	148
That looks good	8	114
Degrading	8	52
How embarrassing	8	70
Erotic	7	71
I enjoyed that	5	113
Base: 261 respondents		All responses over 5%

Respondents in the qualitative research also were shown this clip. It was generally accepted by both men and women.

The nude bit is great, bringing period drama into the 20th century.
(Female, aged 18-19)

Most respondents in the hall tests clearly saw the programme as a post-Watershed drama. Nearly two in three said they thought it would be transmitted between 9.00 p.m. and 10.00 p.m., while 22% thought it would be shown after 10.00 p.m. The majority of respondents (73%) thought the actual transmission time of 9.00 p.m. suitable. Of those who disagreed, most (75%) thought it should have been played between 10.00 p.m. and midnight.

Many respondents (38%) thought this would be a BBC1 programme while a further 20% thought it would be on BBC2.

The discomfort, particularly among women, noted in other clips was not seen here and respondents - male and female - were equally likely to say they would be comfortable watching this with other people. Women were far less likely than men to say they would be comfortable watching this scene with either men or teenagers. Few respondents said they would be comfortable watching with children.

Table 21: Viewing context: *Tom Jones*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	90	87
Alone	87	91
Older women	82	80
Younger women	79	79
Older men	83	65
Younger men	81	56
Teenagers	74	62
Children 10-12 years	30	24
Children 1-9 years	22	14
None of these	7	6

Base: Sample seeing clip

One in five said they did not know if a warning would have been transmitted before the start of the programme, while one in three (30%) thought it would have been. Nearly half the sample (49%) thought no warning would have been given.

The Final Cut

(Channel and transmission time: BBC1, 9.00 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: The clip you are about to see is taken from a television drama. The couple have been involved in their relationship for quite some time.

Images seen: The scene is of a middle-aged couple having sex, with the woman on top.

Seventeen per cent of the sample said they had either seen this clip or recognised the characters. For many there was nothing wrong with the clip, particularly if it was justified by the storyline (48%).

Table 22: Reactions to *The Final Cut*

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
OK if it's part of the story	48	142
There's nothing wrong with showing that	34	89
Realistic	32	108
Too explicit	26	138
Erotic	22	222
How embarrassing	16	140
Entertaining	16	99
I'd like to switch off	15	104
Too noisy	13	205
Too long	13	233
Romantic	12	197
I would have liked a warning	12	88
Degrading	10	65
Offensive	10	98
Boring	9	58
Looks good	9	129
Disgusting	6	59

Base: 125 respondents

All responses over 5%

A third of the sample thought it looked realistic and a quarter said it was explicit, while over one in five respondents thought the scene erotic.

Within the qualitative research, where this clip was also shown, there was some comment about the noisiness of this scene. A number of respondents also commented on the age of the participants.

Older people, you just don't want to think about it.
(Female, aged 18-19)

Nice to see an older couple, sex doesn't stop when you reach a certain age.
(Female, aged 60+)

Most respondents thought the programme would have been shown after 9.00 p.m., with over half the sample (55%) suggesting it would be transmitted in the hour after the Watershed. The majority of respondents (62%) thought this time suitable, although nearly two in five disagreed. Of those who thought that the scheduled time was not suitable, most (81%) said that it would be a post-10.00 p.m. programme.

Respondents were less sure about the channel this would have been transmitted on: one quarter suggested it would be BBC1 (25%) while 23% thought it was probably a Channel 4 programme. A further one in five (20%) thought it would have been on Channel 3.

When asked if they thought a pre-transmission warning would have been given, one in three respondents (33%) thought so, while over two in five (43%) thought not. The remaining thirty per cent of respondents said they did not know.

Women were less likely than men to be happy to watch this clip either on their own or in company. Significantly more women than men suggested that none of the viewing contexts they were presented with were suitable. The clip was not considered suitable for children.

Table 23: Viewing context: *The Final Cut*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	88	61
Alone	90	71
Older women	71	51
Younger women	63	61
Older men	77	41
Younger men	71	37
Teenagers	53	36
Children 10-12 years	7	8
Children 1-9 years	4	4
None of these	10	29

Base: Sample seeing clip

The Lakes

(Channel and transmission time: BBC1, 10.00 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on screen to respondents: The clip you are about to see is taken from a television drama. The couple have been involved in their relationship for quite some time.

Images seen: The scene is of a couple having sex where he takes her from behind.

Seventeen per cent of the sample said they recognised the clip or the characters. Context was key to the scene's acceptability for many respondents (43%), although three in 10 thought it too explicit. Nearly the same percentages said it was realistic or that there was nothing wrong with it. One in five said it would have needed a warning, and a similar proportion thought it degrading.

Table 24: Reactions to *The Lakes*

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
OK if it's part of the story	43	127
Too explicit	30	159
Realistic	28	94
There's nothing wrong with showing that	27	71
I would have liked a warning	22	161
Degrading	21	135
How embarrassing	17	149
I'd like to switch off	17	118
Disgusting	17	166
Offensive	16	156
Entertaining	15	93
Erotic	15	151
Too long	10	179
Too noisy	10	158
Looks good	6	86

Base: 136 respondents

All responses over 5%

Within the qualitative research, it had become clear that some respondents were uncertain if the sexual act being depicted, shot in dim light and with quite a lot of sound, was rape or buggery, while it was in fact consensual. This (female) respondent voiced the uncertainty felt by many:

Very violent, not at all nice.

(Female, aged 60+)

Most respondents in the hall tests (94%) placed the programme at its scheduled time after 9.00 p.m., with the sample evenly split between those who said it would be transmitted in the hour after the Watershed (43%) and those who said it would be shown after 10.00p.m (43%).

The vast majority of respondents (80%) thought the actual time of transmission was suitable, with over half the sample (53%) saying it was ‘very suitable’. Of these who thought the scheduled time was unsuitable, most (70%) thought the scene should not have been shown at all.

Nearly half the sample (46%) thought there would have been a pre-transmission warning, while 27% said they thought not. The same proportion (27%) said they were unsure.

A third of respondents (34%) thought this would be a Channel 4 drama while one in five thought it would have been shown on ITV. Nearly the same proportion (18%) said it would have been shown on a non-terrestrial service. One quarter of the sample thought it may have been on one of the two BBC television channels.

Table 25: Viewing context: *The Lakes*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	86	59
Alone	84	62
Older women	68	51
Younger women	73	49
Older men	72	34
Younger men	78	34
Teenagers	55	23
Children 10-12 years	8	-
Children 1-9 years	8	-
None of these	14	33

Base: Sample seeing clip

Virtually no respondents thought they would be comfortable watching this scene with children, and women were generally less comfortable with it than the male respondents.

Soap operas

Soap operas were also considered by three in 10 respondents to contain 'too much sex'.

Certainly, many respondents expressed their cynicism in their verbatim responses and in the qualitative research - about broadcasters using depictions of sex in soap operas to boost ratings. On the other hand, parents had said that such portrayals often helped them to address difficult issues with their children.¹⁷

Respondents in the hall tests were shown a clip from a soap opera aimed at a teenage audience, *Heartbreak High*. As the data show, five times as many respondents thought this clip 'romantic' compared with the average across all the clips seen. Many respondents also thought the sexual activity seen was acceptable if it was within context. However, over half of all respondents, on seeing the transmission time, felt this was not a suitable scene to be broadcast so early and many thought it should have been shown after the Watershed.

Heartbreak High

(Channel and transmission time: BBC2, 6.00 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: The clip you are about to see shows a teenage couple who are about to have sex for the first time. In previous episodes the couple in this scene have been going out together.

Images seen: The couple kiss and then are seen in bed later, having made love.

Fourteen per cent of respondents recognised the clip or the characters, a high proportion of these were younger respondents, aged between 16 and 34.

[17] Sex and Sexuality in Broadcasting; A. Millwood Hargrave; Brad Ltd, 1992.

Table 26: Reactions to *Heartbreak High*

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
OK if it's part of the story	55	162
There's nothing wrong with showing that	51	134
Realistic	38	128
Romantic	32	526
Too noisy	19	300
Boring	18	117
Entertaining	11	68
Looks good	8	114
Erotic	8	81
I'd like to switch off	7	49
I would have liked a warning	6	44
Too long	6	107
I enjoyed that	5	113
Base: 261 respondents		All responses over 5%

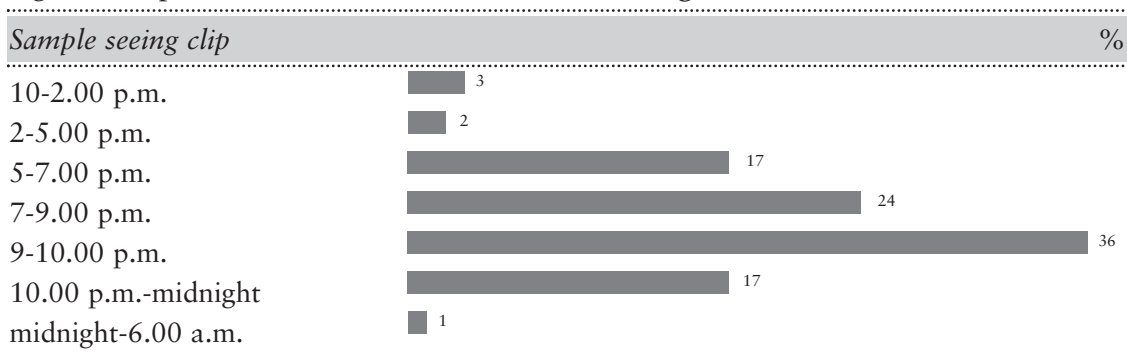
Over half the sample (55%) thought the clip would be acceptable if it were shown to be within context and a similar proportion (51%) thought there was nothing wrong with it. Nearly two in five respondents (in particular, respondents aged 54 and under) thought that the scene was realistic while one third said that it was romantic.

In the qualitative research however, this female respondent, while recognising the romanticism of the scene, was concerned about its effect on its target audience, teenagers:

The scene in Heartbreak High is quite tender, but it is encouraging them to have sex.
(Female, aged 31-40)

As the Figure shows, respondents expected the programme to be transmitted later in the evening (after 7.00 p.m.), and nearly two in five thought it would be a post-Watershed programme. The younger respondents (many of whom had recognised the clip or characters) were significantly more likely to place the programme before the Watershed.

Figure 3: Expected transmission time of *Heartbreak High*



Under half the sample (46%) said the actual transmission time of 6.00 p.m. was ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ suitable. The younger the respondent, the more likely he or she was to think this was an appropriate time and the men were far more likely than the women in the sample to agree it was ‘very suitable’.

Fifty four per cent of respondents felt the clip was not suitable for the time it had been shown. They were more likely to place it after the Watershed, although very few thought it was not suitable for television at all.

Table 27: Acceptable transmission time of *Heartbreak High* clip

	%
5-7.00 p.m.	1
7-9.00 p.m.	13
9-10.00 p.m.	45
10.00 p.m.-midnight	27
midnight-6.00 a.m.	6
Should not have been shown at all	7

Base: Those saying actual transmission time not suitable

The qualitative research had shown that mothers, in particular, were upset by this depiction of sex between teenagers:

*I had no idea this sort of thing was shown on children’s TV.
It’s really hypocritical to then focus on the news about teenage pregnancy figures.
(Mother, family interview)*

In many of the groups, a scene from *Grange Hill* was also shown. This had included a discussion about the use of a condom between the young characters. Respondents reacted less well to that clip than to this one from *Heartbreak High*. In *Grange Hill*, they felt that underage sex was being condoned as the characters wore school uniforms and that ‘sex was acceptable, as long as a condom was used’. Further, the concern that had been expressed about the scheduling of *Heartbreak High* was magnified for *Grange Hill*, which is transmitted at 5.10 p.m.:

At half past five, that's too strong.
(Male, aged 41-55)

A relatively high proportion (34%) of respondents expected *Heartbreak High* to have been shown on Channel 4, with a fairly even split among the remainder of the sample for the other terrestrial services. In fact it was transmitted on BBC2. Nearly one in three respondents (27%) did not know if a warning would have been transmitted before the start of the programme, and a further two in three (61%) thought not.

Table 28: Viewing context: *Heartbreak High*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	92	79
Alone	93	81
Older women	81	73
Younger women	81	74
Older men	88	56
Younger men	82	59
Teenagers	76	64
Children 10-12 years	40	31
Children 1-9 years	23	16
None of these	5	14

Base: Sample seeing clip

Once again men were far more likely than women to say that they did not mind who they watched with, except where children under 12 were concerned. Age was also a key differentiator with older respondents less comfortable about watching the scene at all.

The depiction of sex

Attitudes to sex scenes

The qualitative interviews probed to see what it was that respondents meant when they talked about the depiction of sexual activity - it was clear that 'sex' was perceived by most to be a depiction of the sex act or events leading directly to it, rather than scenes of kissing or general fondling. The only exception to this was, for some respondents, the depiction of any overt homosexual act - even kissing.

Some programmes like to shock people - they think it makes a good programme, which is not necessarily true. It can upset people. If it's tasteful and done correctly it's fine, not for sensationalism. Things that were taboo years ago are now widely shown - it's part of everyday life.

(VR: male, aged 65+)

In the telephone survey, respondents were asked some general questions about their attitudes towards the portrayal of sex on television. About a third of respondents agreed that they enjoyed watching sex on television - men were more likely than women to agree (48% of men compared with 23% of women). Older respondents, on the other hand, were far more likely to disagree (65%).

It is just too explicit; you watch a good film and a graphic scene comes on which is uncalled for. In real life, you go into a room and close the door, they should do the same on screen.

(VR: female, aged 55-64)

Table 29: Reactions to the depiction of sex on television

	<i>Enjoy watching sex</i>		<i>Offensive to see</i>	
	%	%	%	%
Total agree		36		24
Agree strongly	8		14	
Agree a little	28		10	
Neither/nor		10		4
Total disagree		54		72
Disagree a little	22		30	
Disagree strongly	32		42	

Base: All respondents

Most respondents (72%) disagreed, however, that the depiction of sex was offensive to see. Here, too, older respondents went against the trend. They were more likely to agree strongly that they found it offensive to see such material (40% of those aged 65 and over compared with 14% of the general sample). Twenty per cent of women also agreed 'strongly' with this statement compared with just 8% of men.

People are a lot more into it. It's not a taboo subject anymore. People talk about it in everyday life. People know a lot more about it, especially kids.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)

Many respondents accepted that, to reflect real situations, television needed to show sexual material. The table below shows that just over half the sample (54%) did not agree with the statement: 'It is not necessary to depict sex on television'. Older respondents, on the other hand, were significantly more likely to agree with this - the percentage of those aged 65+ agreeing 'strongly' (53%) was more than twice that of the sample as a whole.

Table 30: Agreement with statements about the depiction of sex

	<i>It's just not necessary to show sex on TV</i>		<i>Sex is part of everyday life but I don't want to see it on TV</i>	
	%	%	%	%
Total agree		41		58
Agree strongly	25		34	
Agree a little	16		24	
Neither/nor		4		6
Total disagree		54		37
Disagree a little	30		24	
Disagree strongly	24		13	

Base: All respondents

It's [television's] got to reflect life, I think. Compared to twenty years ago, one foot had to be on the ground, so to speak. I think attitudes have just changed. It's part and parcel of everyday life, so it shouldn't be just closeted away. Well, you know, people have sex in life and I think if you are going to show a true representation of life, be it a comedy or what have you, I think you've got to put it across. Especially if you're aiming at a younger audience, otherwise it doesn't ring true.

(VR: male, aged 35-44)

Everyone's opened their eyes, TV has to show what is in the real world, society and real life. The next generation is in charge of programming and it has become more acceptable to show it.

(VR: male, aged 25-34)

Nevertheless, as the reactions to particular clips have illustrated, the manner in which the sexual content was displayed was important. It was not enough to say that because television reflected reality, it should always be portrayed. Older respondents, and female respondents, particularly agreed with the statement: 'Sex is part of everyday life but I don't want to watch it on TV'. Sixty three per cent of respondents aged over 65 agreed strongly, as did 42% of women compared with 25% of men.

There are not the standards there were years ago. We just didn't see sex on TV. We never saw them actually get into bed. It was just using your imagination, and I think that's how it should be.

(VR: female, aged 35-44)

Most respondents in the qualitative research agreed that sex was a part of life and so should be portrayed. Again, it was the level of explicitness that concerned them:

I think it's all right to show sex on TV as it's real life but I don't like it if it's explicit.

(Female, aged 31-40)

Far more agreement was found across the sample when respondents were asked for their attitudes to the statement 'People who don't like watching sex can always turn off'. Eighty one per cent of the sample agreed strongly with this and a further 12% agreed a little.

Table 31: Agreement with the statement: People who don't like watching sex can always switch off

	%	%
Total agree		93
Agree strongly	81	
Agree a little	12	
Neither/nor		1
Total disagree		7
Disagree a little	2	
Disagree strongly	5	

Base: All respondents

It is worth noting at this point that this strong vote to 'switch off' is a significant shift from the finding in the 1992 study when the same question was asked. Then, a total of 88% of the sample agreed that people could turn off the television; 65% agreeing 'strongly'. Here, four out of five respondents (81%) agreed strongly with the statement. The verbatim responses suggest that respondents thought there was a mixture of issues at play: the depiction of sexual activity was more acceptable, people had become used to it or they simply avoided it.

My parents' generation would want to turn it off or over. People of my age would like to continue watching because they are saddos.

(VR: male, aged 13-15)

People are a lot more open-minded, and it's the older people who disagree with it being on TV. We've learned to accept things more than the older people, whereas the older people would turn it off or complain about it.

(VR: female, aged 25-34)

The monitoring reports have noted that panel members who felt there was ‘too much’ sex, violence or bad language depicted on television tended to report fewer incidents of these. It is possible that, like this respondent, they avoid programming that may cause them offence.

I think people who wouldn't have accepted it before accept it now without saying anything about it, or they just don't watch. I don't watch certain programmes because of sex and language.

(VR: female, aged 55-64)

Some respondents in the qualitative research felt that they had a greater opportunity to ‘switch off’ if the portrayal of sex was within the context of the story and they could anticipate it:

I usually switch off before it goes further, that is the beauty of it - you can switch off.

(Female, aged 60+)

Criteria for judging the depiction of sex

People accept it more due to the fact that it's shoved down their throats. People have virtually been bombarded with it so that they're immune to it now.

(VR: female, aged 45-54)

Table 32: Agreement with statements about criteria of acceptability

	<i>I don't mind watching sex scenes on TV as long as they don't go on for too long</i>		<i>It's OK to show one sex scene, but not if it's all the way through a programme</i>	
	%	%	%	%
Total agree		75		71
Agree strongly	36		41	
Agree a little	39		30	
Neither/nor		4		4
Total disagree		21		26
Disagree a little	9		13	
Disagree strongly	12		13	

Base: All respondents

The majority of respondents agreed that the perceived length of time a sex scene lasted was crucial to how comfortable they were with it. This respondent in the qualitative research had described his unease thus:

When it does drag on, you just want them to get on with it.
(Son, 16, family interview)

Older respondents in the quantitative study were more likely to disagree that sex scenes were acceptable, even within certain parameters.

Too much actual sex and talking about it; it's getting more explicit. It used to be a kiss and a cuddle - it's gone too far - showing bodies; nothing is left to the imagination - the grunts and groans.
(VR: female, aged 65+)

Some of the respondents in the group discussions also mentioned 'noisy' sex and thought it made the depictions more explicit and, in some cases, more offensive:

When they start with the noises, it's worse.
(Female, aged 18-19)

Most respondents agreed that the depiction of sex should not be the reason behind the programme, i.e. that it should not be gratuitous. Indeed the great majority of respondents (78%) to the telephone questionnaire agreed it was important to portray sex if it was necessary to the story.

Table 33: Agreement with statement: It's important to show sex scenes if they're necessary to the story

	%	%
Total agree		78
Agree strongly	43	
Agree a little	35	
Neither/nor		1
Total disagree		21
Disagree a little	9	
Disagree strongly	12	

Base: All respondents

Well, a lot of films seemed to be based around it. Seem to have it in the story line ... Yes, just more of it, with it being good and bad - good due to the fact it happens and makes the film more realistic, but bad because it can cause offence to people.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)

I think they show it quite often; it's not pertinent to the story - not relevant to the story. I get agitated and say 'let's get on with it'. I think it's quite graphic. It seems to me what I don't like is sometimes people meet and within half a minute they're already eating each other and I say 'it doesn't happen like this'.

(VR: female, aged 65+)

There was less general agreement with statements which suggested that the depiction of sex was acceptable because it was acting (48% of the sample agreed with this). However, the importance of depicting sex within a loving relationship was seen to be important by nearly two thirds of respondents to the telephone questionnaire. Certainly, the annual monitoring conducted by the Commission¹⁸ suggested that an established relationship was the context in which most scenes of sexual activity were set (48% of all scenes of sexual activity monitored during 1997).

Table 34: Agreement with statements about the context of the depiction

	<i>It's OK to show sex on television because you know the couple are only acting</i>		<i>OK to show sex on television as long as it's in a loving relationship</i>	
	%	%	%	%
Total agree		48		63
Agree strongly	20		30	
Agree a little	28		33	
Neither/nor		6		3
Total disagree		45		34
Disagree a little	19		18	
Disagree strongly	26		16	

Base: All respondents

Even quite young respondents in the qualitative research felt it was acceptable to show certain material because it was only acting:

On A Fish Called Wanda, it showed her with her legs sticking out the end of the bed and he was bobbing up and down. You know they're not actually doing anything so you don't think anything.

(Daughter, aged 11, family interview)

[18] Monitoring Report 6; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

They're not doing it for real so there's nothing in it, even though one of them does look a bit bent.

(Daughter, aged 11, family interview)

Many of the older respondents to the telephone questionnaire expressed, in their verbatim responses, a concern about the way in which sexual activity was depicted. They felt it was not generally seen within a loving or, more accurately, a caring relationship:

The way it's cheapened is in showing the full act happening. It takes away the glamour; sex is given too high a profile; sex has assumed a greater prominence in life. It's the be all and end all - sex has just grown on TV.

(VR: male, aged 65+)

This concern was not confined just to the older respondents, however, as these comments show:

They are talking about it but not educating about it, otherwise there wouldn't need to be the need for safe-sex campaigns. I feel that there is a lack of responsibility and lack of passion and romance. For me those are the key things.

(VR: male, aged 35-44)

I saw a drama with a husband raping his wife. I wouldn't want my kids to watch a rape ... it's much more acceptable if it's tasteful and in a loving relationship.

(Female, aged 31-40)

Nudity on television

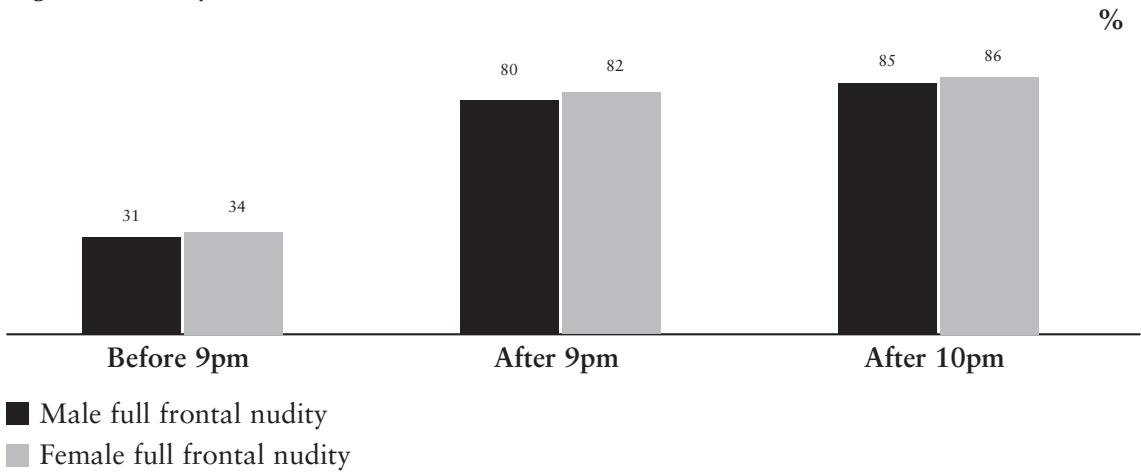
It's freer now. Years ago if you saw someone nude it was shocking, nowadays if you see someone nude no one takes any notice. Now we're unshockable.

(VR: male, aged 55-64)

Respondents to the telephone questionnaire were asked about the acceptability of scenes of nudity transmitted around the Watershed and in two different categories of programming - film and documentaries.

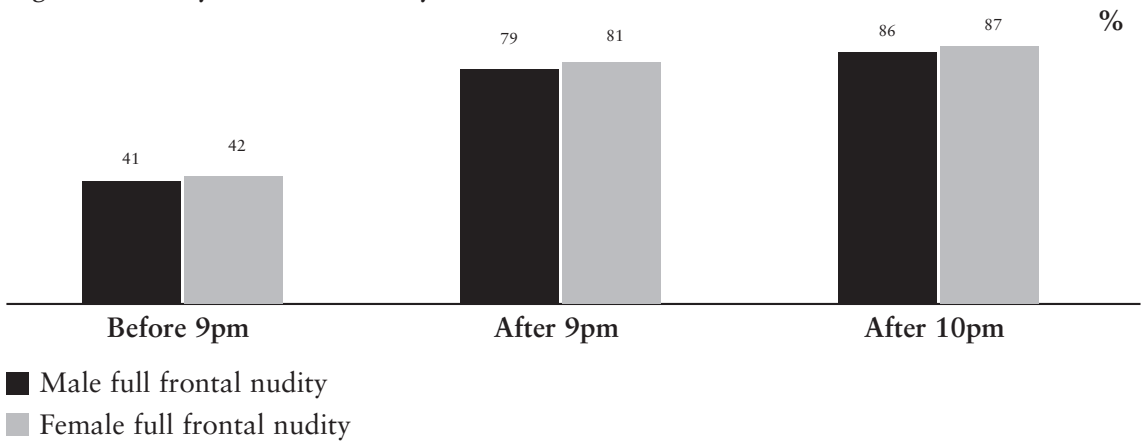
As the figure shows, pre-Watershed nudity in a film was generally decried, with less than a third of respondents saying it was acceptable 'at all' and only 6% of the sample saying it was 'very acceptable' at that time and in that genre. This changed after the Watershed when most respondents (80+%) thought such depictions acceptable.

Figure 4: Nudity in a film on television



There was less resistance to nudity in documentary programming (Figure 5). Two in five respondents said such material would be acceptable before the Watershed, and more than four in five said the same after the Watershed.

Figure 5: Nudity in a documentary on television



A little bit of clothing makes all the difference.
(Female, aged 60+)

Respondents in the hall tests, and in some of the group discussions, were shown clips from three documentaries which included significant amounts of nudity. Two dealt with strippers, while the third was categorised as educational. The data show that the more sexual the context within which the nudity was set the more it was disliked, although many respondents did not have a great objection to the subject matter, if it was clearly labelled.

I think sex on TV is tolerated more. A full-frontal is no big deal nowadays.
 (VR: male, aged 55-64)

Nonetheless, the clip with a female stripper was most likely to be thought, of all the clips seen, to be ‘degrading’ - possibly because the stripper performed overtly sexual acts with the audience. On the other hand, it also rated the highest index score for being ‘erotic’. More respondents than average also said that they ‘enjoyed’ both the clips with the strippers.

The Real Monty

(Channel and transmission time: Channel 5, 9.50 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: The scene is of male strippers performing in a night-club.

Images seen: A male stripper performing in a club dances with female members of the audience.

Most respondents (83%) had not seen this clip while 16% said they recognised it.

Table 35: Reactions to *The Real Monty*

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
There’s nothing wrong with showing that	31	81
Entertaining	30	186
Realistic	27	91
Too explicit	23	122
OK if it’s part of the story	23	68
Boring	20	130
I would have liked a warning	20	146
Degrading	19	123
Too noisy	18	284
How embarrassing	16	140
Disgusting	13	127
Offensive	10	98
I’d like to switch off	8	55
Looks good	8	114
I enjoyed that	7	158
Erotic	7	71

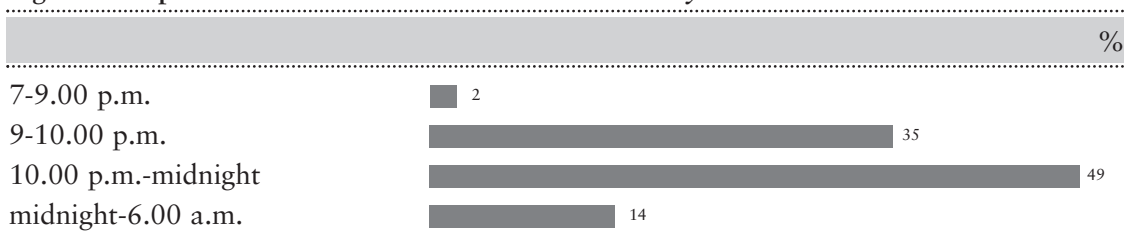
Base: 142 respondents

All responses over 5%

One in three respondents felt the clip was acceptable and entertaining. Nearly the same proportion said it was realistic. Almost one quarter felt it was too explicit, while the same percentage argued that it was acceptable if within context. One in five respondents thought the scene ‘boring’ and the same proportion said it would be all right if there was a warning given beforehand. Over a quarter of respondents (26%) said they did not know if a pre-transmission warning would have been transmitted, although two in five thought it would have been (42%).

Most respondents expected the programme to be transmitted after the Watershed, with nearly two thirds (63%) saying it would be shown after 10.00 p.m.

Figure 6: Expected transmission time of *The Real Monty*



When told the actual transmission time, 10.00 p.m., most respondents (70%) thought this was appropriate, although 17% of the sample thought it was ‘not at all suitable’. Of those who felt it was unsuitable, one half thought the programme should only be shown after midnight. A quarter said it should not have been shown at all.

Table 36: Suitability of actual transmission time: *The Real Monty*

	Sample seeing clip %
Very suitable	30)
Fairly suitable	40) 70
Not really suitable	13)
Not at all suitable	17) 30

The majority of respondents thought this would be an ITV programme (45%), while 17% said it may have been broadcast on Channel 5 where it was, in fact, shown. A further 12% thought it could have been transmitted on BBC2.

Table 37: Viewing context: *The Real Monty*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	71	74
Alone	70	78
Older women	63	58
Younger women	60	69
Older men	65	36
Younger men	59	37
Teenagers	55	42
Children 10-12 years	9	10
Children 1-9 years	6	4
None of these	23	16

Base: Sample seeing clip

This programme was clearly not perceived to be one to watch with children; very few respondents said they would be comfortable watching with those aged 12 and under. Women were also less likely to feel comfortable watching with men.

Friday Night Fever

(Channel and transmission time: ITV, 11.00 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: The scene is of a female stripper performing in a club.

Images seen: A female stripper performing in a club dances with, and sits on top of, a man in the audience.

The majority of respondents (89%) had not seen this programme.

Table 38: Reactions to *Friday Night Fever*

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
Degrading	34	219
There's nothing wrong with showing that	31	81
Erotic	30	303
Realistic	30	101
Too explicit	29	154
Entertaining	26	161
I would have liked a warning	24	176
Offensive	22	215
OK if it's part of the story	19	56
I'd like to switch off	19	132
How embarrassing	18	158
Disgusting	18	176
Boring	11	71
Looks good	10	143
I enjoyed that	8	181
Too noisy	8	126

Base: 119 respondents All responses over 5%

A third of the sample thought the scene was 'degrading'. This clip achieved the highest index score for this particular reaction compared with all the other clips seen in the research. One in three respondents thought it acceptable while the same proportion said it was 'erotic' or 'realistic'. Sample sizes are too small to note any demographic differences of significance.

Many women in the group discussions who saw this clip, and the one from *The Real Monty*, also thought this scene more degrading than the one with the male stripper. In part, this was due to the more sexual nature of the female stripper's performance, although many women resisted the idea of seeing women strip at all.

I'd prefer it if it was a man but it never is. They'll show every bit of a woman's body but with a man, they're more careful. It's really meant for men, these stripping scenes.

(Mother, family interview)

It's tacky and cheap to see women stripping.

(Female, aged 31-40)

Most respondents thought the programme would be transmitted well after the Watershed, with nearly four out of five (82%) saying it would be transmitted after 10.00 p.m. The majority of respondents (65%) thought the actual transmission time of 11.00 p.m. was suitable, although 17% of the sample thought it was 'not at all suitable'. Of those who thought it unsuitable for its time of transmission, over two in five (44%) thought it should not have been shown at all while 38% said it should only have been shown after midnight.

Nearly half of all respondents (45%) thought it would be broadcast on Channel 4. A further 15% thought it could have been transmitted on satellite television and 14% on Channel 5. A female respondent in the group discussions also said it was quite clearly not a programme for a mainstream channel.

I'd be shocked to see it (Friday Night Fever) on BBC or ITV, but not offended.

(Female, aged 31-40)

One in five respondents said they did not know if a pre-transmission warning would have been transmitted, but over half the sample (58%) expected one would have been.

Table 39: Viewing context: *Friday Night Fever*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	81	57
Alone	83	54
Older women	66	41
Younger women	55	55
Older men	71	27
Younger men	66	27
Teenagers	51	27
Children 10-12 years	8	5
Children 1-9 years	6	2
None of these	15	35

Base: Sample seeing clip

The programme was clearly not seen as one to watch with children. Women were generally less likely than men to say they would feel comfortable watching the clip with anyone, and over one third said they would not want to.

The reactions to these clips from documentaries were in marked contrast to those from the ‘educational’ documentary, charting the ageing process of the human body. Respondents generally thought the programme looked good and the clip achieved the highest index score across all the clips for respondents saying they could see ‘nothing wrong’ with it.

The Human Body

(Channel and transmission time: BBC1, 10.00 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: You are about to see the opening scene of a popular science documentary.

Images seen: The opening shot is a nude crowd scene encompassing people of all ages and both sexes, including children.

Forty four per cent of the sample said they recognised the clip shown. Nearly two out of three said that they saw nothing wrong in this scene from the opening sequence of the series. A further 46% said it was ‘realistic’. A third of respondents said it was acceptable if contextually justified.

Table 40: Reactions to *The Human Body*

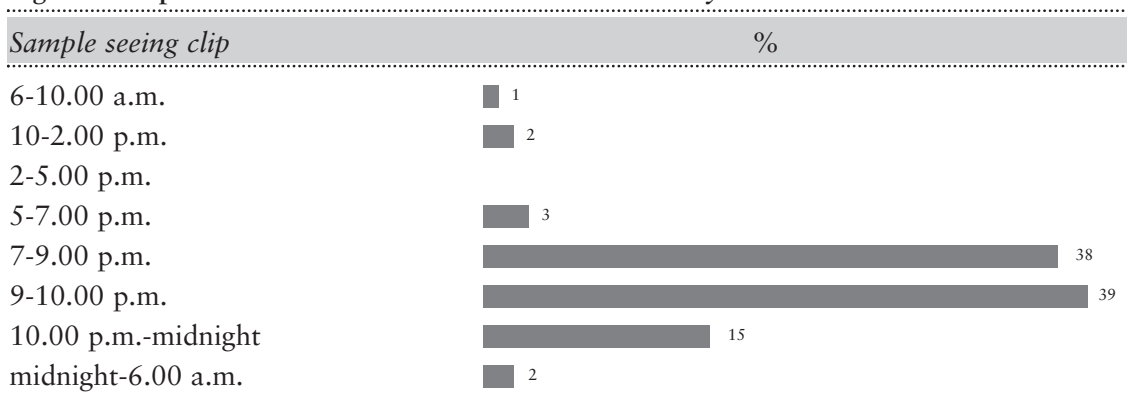
	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
There’s nothing wrong with showing that	64	168
Realistic	46	155
OK if it’s part of the story	33	97
Entertaining	15	93
Looks good	13	186
I’d would have liked a warning	13	95
Degrading	12	77
Too explicit	9	48
Boring	7	45
I’d like to switch off	7	49
How embarrassing	6	53
Too long	5	90

Base: 261 respondents

All responses over 5%

Most respondents thought the programme would be transmitted in the evening, from 7.00 p.m. onwards.

Figure 7: Expected transmission time of *The Human Body*



Therefore, the vast majority of respondents (94%) thought the actual transmission time for this programme, 10.00 p.m., was suitable.

Many thought the programme would be transmitted either on BBC1 (37%) or BBC2 (30%). Nearly two in five (18%) thought it could be on Channel 4. Once again, about one in five (22%) said they did not know if a warning would have been transmitted before the programme started, while one half (50%) thought not.

Women suggested that they would be less comfortable watching the scene with men, while men were not worried about watching it with women. The programme was also thought quite suitable for teenagers (in particular) and older children.

Table 41: Viewing context: *The Human Body*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	93	82
Alone	93	87
Older women	82	81
Younger women	81	79
Older men	84	71
Younger men	83	66
Teenagers	78	70
Children 10-12 years	50	58
Children 1-9 years	38	39
None of these	6	11

Base: Sample seeing clip

A number of respondents in the group discussions had seen the series, or parts of it, often with their families. They all commended the programme.

I sat down and watched it with my family, it was tastefully done from conception through to death.

(Female, aged 31-40)

It didn't hide anything, like it showed ejaculation, but it was done tastefully. There was no embarrassment.

(Female, aged 31-40)

Homosexuality on television

Over half the respondents (54%) to the telephone questionnaire said they knew a homosexual, although only 16% of the teen sample said they knew anyone who was gay. This variable was included to examine how much this knowledge might affect responses to questions about the depiction of homosexuality on television - the data showed that it did have a positive effect on attitudes towards such portrayals.

The qualitative research had found that the issue of homosexual depiction was the most contentious of all. Some respondents argued that the depiction of affection or love could not be wrong:

I do think affection between two people can't be thought of as being bad.

(Parents, family interview)

while others set limits for what could be shown on television:

Gay affection is all right but not physical things.

(Female, aged 31-40)

Some respondents thought that any display of physical affection between members of the same sex was unacceptable:

It's disgusting [gay kiss in EastEnders] ... It shouldn't have been shown on television at all.

(Man, aged 40+)

The quantitative telephone survey results showed that the majority of respondents (58%) accepted some depiction of homosexual sex could be shown on television because such relationships were reality. Those most likely to disagree were the older respondents (51% of those aged 55 and over said they disagreed 'strongly' compared with 30% of the entire sample).

Table 42: Agreement with attitudes towards depictions of homosexuality

	<i>It is OK to show homosexual sex because it's something that happens in real life</i>		<i>OK to show homosexual sex as long as it's in a meaningful relationship</i>	
	%	%	%	%
Total agree		58		38
Agree strongly	25		14	
Agree a little	33		24	
Neither/nor		2		4
Total disagree		40		58
Disagree a little	10		14	
Disagree strongly	30		44	

Base: All respondents

There was less general agreement however, that the depiction of homosexuality was acceptable as long as it was portrayed in a meaningful relationship. Older respondents were far less likely to agree that homosexual sex in a meaningful relationship was acceptable (64% of those aged 55 and over disagreed).

Knowing a homosexual person (as did 54% of the sample) made respondents more likely to say they agreed 'strongly' that a depiction within a meaningful relationship would be acceptable (17% of those who knew someone who was gay agreed with this 'strongly' compared with 11% of the sample as a whole).

The qualitative research would suggest that those respondents who reacted less positively to the statement about a depiction within 'a meaningful relationship' felt that homosexual relationships should be treated no differently from heterosexual sex. Certainly, some of the younger respondents in the qualitative research argued there was no justification for treating homosexuals differently from heterosexuals on television, although they might not choose to watch such material themselves.

I'm not personally interested in watching it, but it should be on TV. You can't say one thing about straight sex and then say it's different for gays.

(Male, aged 20-30)

I don't think there's anything wrong in showing it, although I personally wouldn't want to watch it.

(Male, aged 16)

There were some respondents who argued that there was a tacit broadcasting policy which meant that homosexuality should be promoted. This perception played to the popular stereotype of homosexuals in the arts and media:

Well, they [homosexuals] can be quite clever. They don't have jobs like us and they get into the media and push these things on you.

(Male, aged 40+)

Respondents to the telephone survey were asked how acceptable it would be to show scenes portraying a gay relationship (kissing and a gay sex scene) at different times around the Watershed. It should be noted there have been long-running homosexual relationships depicted in the pre-Watershed soap operas. Just under half the sample thought a scene of kissing would be acceptable before the Watershed, while this increased to seven in ten respondents who said it would be acceptable after the Watershed. The proportion increased still further (76%) after 10.00 p.m.

Table 43: Acceptability of scenes of men kissing and the Watershed

	<i>Pre 9.00pm</i>	<i>After 9.00pm</i>	<i>After 10.00pm</i>
	%	%	%
Very acceptable	9	4	*
Fairly acceptable	34	24	4
Not very acceptable	18	8	6
Not at all acceptable	38	20	17
Should not be on TV	1	*	1
Acceptable at earlier time	N/A	44	72

Base: All respondents

Table 44: Acceptability of scenes of women kissing and the Watershed

	<i>Pre 9.00pm</i>	<i>After 9.00pm</i>	<i>After 10.00pm</i>
	%	%	%
Very acceptable	10	3	*
Fairly acceptable	40	23	4
Not very acceptable	16	7	5
Not at all acceptable	34	16	14
Should not be on TV	1	*	*
Acceptable at earlier time	N/A	51	77

Base: All respondents

It might be noted that a scene of kissing involving lesbians was always considered more acceptable to the telephone survey respondents than a scene involving male homosexuals. This was echoed by some of the men in the qualitative research groups:

I'd feel less uncomfortable watching two women than two men.
(Male, aged 21-30)

When a similar question was asked about a homosexual sex scene, respondents to the telephone survey were clear that the Watershed should be enforced. Just 11% said such a scene could be shown before the Watershed. After 9.00 p.m. this number increased to two thirds of the sample (65%) and by 10.00 p.m., 72% of the entire sample said such a scene would be acceptable.

Table 45: Acceptability of gay sex scene and the Watershed

	Pre 9.00pm %	After 9.00pm %	After 10.00pm %
Very acceptable	2	8	*
Fairly acceptable	9	43	7
Not very acceptable	23	9	5
Not at all acceptable	63	26	21
Should not be on TV	2	*	*
Acceptable at earlier time	N/A	14	65

Base: All respondents

Within the hall tests, respondents were required to watch a scene of men kissing briefly from a pre-Watershed soap opera, *EastEnders*, and a more explicit scene with lesbians from a drama serial, *Close Relations*. The data from these multi-media interviews very much reflect the reactions of respondents both in the telephone survey and in the qualitative research. For each of the two clips, higher than average responses were noted for respondents saying they would 'switch off', thereby showing their personal discomfort with the material, although many accepted it if it was relevant to the storyline. Higher than average proportions of respondents also said they found each of the clips 'offensive' or 'disgusting'. Against this was the finding that nearly two-thirds more respondents than average thought the clip from *Close Relations* 'romantic'. The later placing of this drama series was also thought suitable by a slightly higher proportion of respondents than said this for *EastEnders*.

EastEnders

(Channel and transmission time: BBC1, 7.30 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: The clip you are about to see shows a homosexual couple kissing. The scenes leading up to this have outlined the affection that the characters feel towards each other.

Images seen: Two male characters kiss briefly.

Nearly three quarters of the sample (72%) either recognised the scene, or the characters.

We know them so well; it's like watching someone you know doing it.

(Mother, family interview)

Table 46: Reactions to *EastEnders*

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>	<i>Index against all programmes seen</i>
OK if it's part of the story	47	139
Realistic	40	134
There's nothing wrong with showing that	36	94
I'd like to switch off	22	153
Disgusting	16	156
Offensive	15	146
How embarrassing	12	105
Boring	11	71
Too explicit	10	53
Entertaining	9	56
I would have liked a warning	8	59
Degrading	8	52

Base: 114 respondents All responses over 5%

About half the sample thought the kiss was acceptable if it was relevant to the storyline, while two in five said it was realistic. Almost the same proportion (36%) thought there was nothing wrong with the scene, although one in five respondents said they would switch off the television. However, this percentage is far smaller than the percentage of those respondents in the telephone surveys who had said that homosexual sex should not be shown, even if it reflected reality (40%), or if it were in a meaningful relationship (58%). This suggests that the context of the scene is very important. Further the actual kiss was neither explicit nor prolonged.

They've had gays in EastEnders since the 80's. Nothing's really changed.
 (Male, aged 21-30)

Most respondents placed the programme at its scheduled time before the Watershed (76% said the clip would be seen between 7.00-9.00 p.m.) This was thought a suitable time by nearly half the respondents. Over one-third (36%) said this was 'not really suitable', while a further 17% of the sample said it was 'not at all' suitable.

Table 47: Suitability of actual transmission time: *EastEnders*

	Sample seeing clip %
Very suitable	16)
Fairly suitable	31) 47
Not really suitable	36)
Not at all suitable	17) 53

These data marry well with those noted earlier where two in five respondents (43%) had said that a scene of two men kissing would be acceptable before the Watershed.

Many of the respondents in the hall tests who thought the scene was transmitted at an unsuitable time, said it should have been shown after the Watershed: three in 10 said it should have been shown between 9.00 p.m. and 10.00 p.m. and a similar proportion said it should have been shown later.

Table 48: Acceptable transmission time of clip from *EastEnders*

	%
7-9.00 p.m.	7
9-10.00 p.m.	32
10.00 p.m.-midnight	29
midnight-6.00 a.m.	14
Should not have been shown at all	19

Base: Those saying actual transmission time not suitable

Most respondents (79%) knew this was a BBC1 programme, although 10% said it might have been broadcast on Channel 4. The majority of respondents (70%) did not think a warning would have been transmitted, while 16% said they did not know.

The established nature of this soap opera, and the recognition afforded to it by respondents, meant there was relatively little discomfort in terms of being able to watch the programme with others. Older respondents remained more likely to say that they would not be comfortable watching the scene at all.

Table 49: Viewing context: *EastEnders*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	85	82
Alone	78	74
Older women	77	73
Younger women	73	81
Older men	71	62
Younger men	73	57
Teenagers	61	62
Children 10-12 years	36	35
Children 1-9 years	28	22
None of these	14	14

Base: Sample seeing clip

This respondent in a group discussion summed up many of the attitudes expressed in both the qualitative and quantitative research about this scene:

*It's a topic they should feel they can cover if they feel it's part of the storyline.
But I feel it shouldn't be done in a sensationalist or exploitative way just to
bring the viewing figures in.*
(Male, aged 41-55)

Close Relations

(Channel and transmission time: BBC1, 9.00 p.m.)

Written descriptor given on-screen to respondents: The clip you are about to see shows a homosexual couple kissing. The scenes leading up to this have outlined the affection that the characters feel towards each other.

Images seen: Two female characters kiss passionately and then have sex.

Most of the sample (90%) had neither seen this clip from the drama series, nor recognised the characters. However, the more explicit nature of the clip (compared with *EastEnders*) did not make respondents react more negatively. The importance of the context was - in both cases - seen to be key.

Table 50: Reactions to *Close Relations*

	Sample seeing clip %	Index against all programmes seen
OK if it's part of the story	42	124
There's nothing wrong with showing that	34	89
Realistic	29	97
I'd like to switch off	24	166
Too explicit	22	117
I would have liked a warning	20	146
Disgusting	17	166
Boring	17	110
Offensive	16	156
Degrading	15	97
How embarrassing	13	114
Romantic	10	164
Too long	9	161
Entertaining	8	49
Erotic	6	61

Base: 147 respondents

All responses over 5%

One in five respondents said it was too explicit and a similar proportion said it needed to have a pre-transmission warning. When asked if they thought such a warning would have been given, one in three (30%) thought so, while nearly two in five (39%) thought not. The remaining 31% of respondents said they did not know.

The clip was played in some of the group discussions as well and many respondents in that more public forum said they found the scenes distasteful and that they went beyond the boundaries of acceptability.

It's not natural, it's the kind of thing you'd see in a porn mag - it's not natural.
(Female, aged 60+)

I was surprised to see oral sex, I wouldn't want to see it on TV and it didn't leave much to the imagination.
(Female, aged 31-40)

Most respondents (44%) in the hall tests placed the programme at its scheduled time (9.00 p.m.), although the same proportion (44%) suggested the scene would be shown after 10.00 p.m. Nearly three in five respondents thought the actual time of transmission was suitable for the sexual content seen.

Table 51: Suitability of actual transmission time: *Close Relations*

	<i>Sample seeing clip %</i>
Very suitable	23)
Fairly suitable	35) 58
Not really suitable	21)
Not at all suitable	21) 42

Of those who thought the scheduled time unsuitable, over a third (37%) thought the scene should not have been shown at all and nearly three in five (56%) said it was only suitable for transmission after 10.00 p.m.

Two in five respondents (42%) thought this would be a Channel 4 programme, while one in five (19%) thought it would be on BBC1.

While those who had seen the *EastEnders* clip were likely to say that they would not mind watching it with others, nearly one in three respondents (31%) who saw this clip said they would not feel comfortable watching it. Women were more likely to express discomfort, particularly if they were watching the scene with older men.

Table 52: Viewing context: *Close Relations*

<i>Comfortable watching with:</i>	<i>Men</i> %	<i>Women</i> %
People like self	63	60
Alone	62	59
Older women	61	50
Younger women	53	56
Older men	62	39
Younger men	55	43
Teenagers	48	45
Children 10-12 years	20	22
Children 1-9 years	13	9
None of these	27	34

Base: Sample seeing clip

It can be inferred from these and other findings that the more explicit nature of the scene and the length of time the sexual activity lasted created greater embarrassment in a social context than did the *EastEnders* clip.

I'd even be embarrassed watching it with the dog.
(Female, aged 60+)

Younger audiences

The most healthy reaction I want from her is that she's bored. That's all sex should be for her at her age.

(Mother, family interview)

They don't really know about sex now anyway. Now, they think we all 'go to bed' and that's all it is. At the moment, if they see animals mating, they go, 'Ooh that zebra's giving him a piggy back' and I just take no notice. When they're 15 and they know about it and it comes on the telly, I don't know what will happen then.

(Mother, family interview)

The qualitative research showed that the one area where respondents were in general agreement about regulation was when they discussed children's access to sexual material. Parents were 'confused' about how far they should go in allowing their children to see or know about sex. Many said they did not want to stop their children viewing material that all their peer group might be watching, while others were concerned about the way in which they could control their children's viewing when outside the home. Nonetheless, parents often were more confident of the positive role that television could play in their children's lives.

About one in ten respondents (13%) to the telephone survey spontaneously mentioned a concern that children might be influenced negatively by depictions of sexual activity, but these were most likely to be older respondents and not those with young children living at home.

Some of the young respondents, like those who did not have children at home, also expressed their concerns about children younger than themselves and what they might learn from television.

There could be young people watching and young people may copy what they see.

(VR: male, aged 13-15)

You've got 11 year olds getting pregnant, TV must have something to do with it, they just introduce sex too early on - at half past six!

(Female, aged 16-24)

This concern among the young about other young people has been noted before. In a study of adolescents and their use of, and attitudes towards the media, the Commission found that respondents were particularly concerned about imitative behaviour, not for themselves, but for younger siblings and children¹⁹.

[19] Young People and the Media; A. Millwood Hargrave, Professor J. Halloran, 1996.

To examine attitudes towards television's perceived influence in this area, respondents to the telephone interview were asked if they thought television could affect behaviour. Those respondents who were parents were not inclined to agree with statements which suggested either that depictions of sex on television would encourage early experimentation among children (43% of parents disagreed with this) or immoral behaviour in general (62% disagreed with this statement). Both these comments were more likely to be made by older respondents, without children living at home (60% of those aged over 55 said sexual depictions encouraged experimentation and the same proportion of those aged over 65 said they promoted immoral behaviour).

Women were far more likely than men to agree that sex on television encouraged experimentation (43% of women agreed 'strongly' compared with 35% of men) and immoral behaviour (33% of women compared with 22% of men). Many respondents therefore expressed their concern about children 'learning' from television - that televisual depictions could legitimise early sexual behaviour²⁰:

Table 53: Agreement with statements about the influence of television:

	<i>Showing sex on television encourages children to experiment too soon</i>		<i>Showing sex on television encourages immoral behaviour</i>	
	%	%	%	%
Total agree		56		44
Agree strongly	39		28	
Agree a little	17		16	
Neither/nor		8		6
Total disagree		36		50
Disagree a little	16		21	
Disagree strongly	20		29	

Base: All respondents

In the verbatim comments, some respondents had expressed a concern about children having a distorted view about the way in which relationships should develop, and the place sex should play in them:

Maybe there should be more about the other aspects of the relationship as well. For young kids I think that it confuses them because they think this is what it's about - leads them to thinking it's the most important thing in a relationship, first instance.
(VR: female, aged 45-54)

[20] The argument that television depictions of different forms of behaviour could condone that behaviour has been noted in other research, most recently reported in *Bad Language - What are the Limits?*; A. Millwood Hargrave, 1998.

The qualitative research had shown that there was some discrepancy between parents' perceptions of what their child notices and the child's experiences. Many parents thought children under ten, in particular, were less likely to notice sexual material, but the family interviews found this was not always so:

I hate snogging.

(Daughter, aged 8, family interview)

I like Amy in Neighbours, the way she looks and does things. She has a boyfriend and she sleeps with him and things.

(Daughter, aged 8, family interview)

Parents thought the most difficult age for them and their children was between 11 and 14. It certainly seemed to be the age at which there was most embarrassment when it came to viewing any sexual activity together or talking about sexual issues.

I think that our generation are a lot more relaxed about it. The older generation have a bigger problem with it. I think the older generation get more embarrassed about it.

(VR: female, aged 13-15)

The qualitative research also found that respondents wanted to be forewarned about sexually explicit material, and they did not expect to see it before the Watershed at 9.00 p.m. The telephone survey explored similar areas. There was strong agreement that, if the audience were forewarned about the sexual content of a programme, its subsequent depiction would be more acceptable. Over three quarters of respondents also agreed that the Watershed was vital.

Table 54: Agreement with statements about pre-transmission information

	<i>OK to show sex on television as long as there is a warning beforehand</i>		<i>OK as long as it's after 9.00pm</i>	
	%	%	%	%
Total agree		83		77
Agree strongly	61		52	
Agree a little	22		25	
Neither/nor		2		3
Total disagree		15		20
Disagree a little	7		8	
Disagree strongly	8		12	

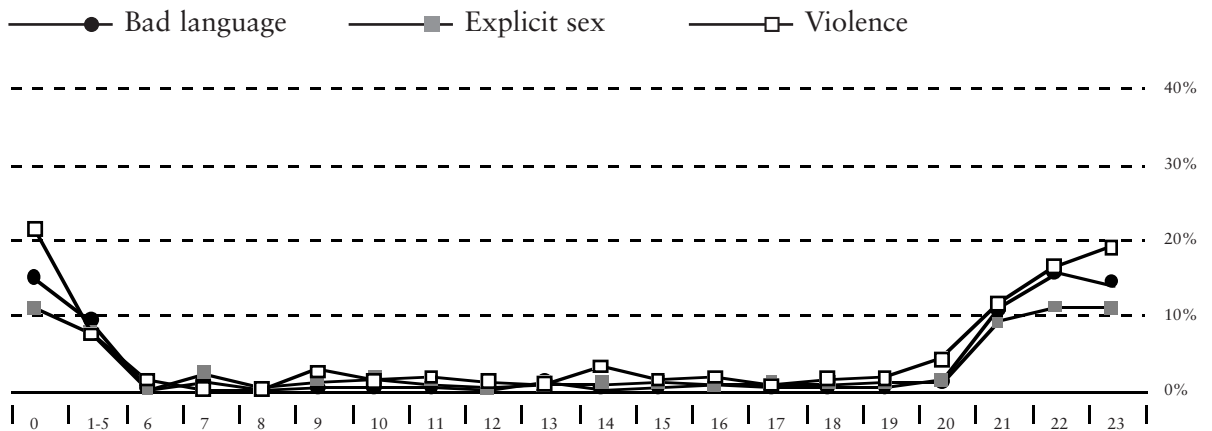
Base: All respondents

Too much talk and innuendo, you're not sure which way it's going to go, especially when you have your kids sitting with you. If you are watching Men Behaving Badly, then you know, but with EastEnders you never know or the 'fat slags advert' you just do not know.

(VR: female, aged 25-34)

The annual audience monitoring study²¹ had shown that respondents noted an increase in the number of explicit sexual depictions considered to be unjustified in the schedule in the hour before the Watershed, along with an increase in such incidents of bad language and violence.

Figure 8: Concerns by hour of programme start



Source: Monitoring Report 6

By the age of 15, most children were considered too old to have their viewing regulated by their parents. The data also show that the older the child, the more likely he or she is to have use of a personal television set. Parents of these adolescents considered generally that their children were able to make judgements for themselves, particularly in this area. The research commissioned among adolescents²² also suggested that, by this age, young people had a sense of autonomy and felt that their needs were quite different from those of ‘children’.

[21] Monitoring Report 6; The Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1997.

[22] Young People and the Media; A. Millwood Hargrave, Professor J. Halloran, 1996.

Sex education

Showing something in a sex education programme is more justifiable than in other programmes.

(Male, aged 21-30)

Few respondents to the telephone study had ever seen a sex education programme (7% of the whole sample, 15% of those with young children at home). All those who had seen such a programme however, rated it as either 'good' or 'very good'.

The entire sample was asked about the perceived benefits of such material on television. As the data show, attitudes were divided.

Table 55: Agreement with statements about sex education programming

	<i>Sex education programmes on TV are the best way of educating children in the facts of life</i>		<i>Sex education programmes on TV cause children to know too much, too soon</i>	
	%	%	%	%
Total agree		47		42
Agree strongly	24		24	
Agree a little	23		18	
Neither/nor		5		8
Total disagree		49		50
Disagree a little	19		22	
Disagree strongly	30		28	

Base: All respondents

Parents with children aged under fifteen living at home were more likely to agree strongly that such programming was good (33% of parents agreed 'strongly' compared with 23% of those without children living with them). Parents were less likely to agree, on the other hand, that such material taught children about sex at too young an age - only 12% of parents agreed strongly with this compared with 25% of those without young children at home.

The qualitative research supported the general view that sex education programmes were worthwhile, but it very much depended on the way in which the programme was presented.

(Re. Love Bites) It's doing a good job on the one hand and putting it into their heads on the other.

(Male, aged 21-30)

Both the parents and the children interviewed claimed to prefer the approach of a documentary such as *The Human Body* rather than the excerpts they saw from the series aimed at teenagers, *Love Bites*.

Well, before they didn't have too much on it - now that they do a lot of people might learn from it, I guess - documentary-wise it's good for explaining.
(VR: female, aged 16-24)

Love Bites was blatant, just going on ... I'd have switched it off.
(Daughter, aged 13, family interview)

Not everyone agreed with this respondent though, and some respondents talked about the importance of the humour in programmes:

It's all right as it's explained in a funny way.
(VR: male, aged 16-17)

Many respondents in the qualitative discussions thought the broadcaster had a responsibility to educate children responsibly and not to trivialise sex or to expect equal levels of maturity from their young viewers:

On TV, it seems you meet someone and have sex straight away and it gives the impression to young people that that's what you do ... It's the end of the world if you don't have a boyfriend ... you don't want children pressurised.
(Female, aged 31-40)

They all seem to take the same sort of vein - gays on EastEnders, Coronation Street and Home and Away - same sort of story line. All they seem to do is how it is for them - they just fetch it in like I'm gay and that's it. I don't think that they give enough information for younger viewers about their own sexuality.
(VR: female, aged 45-54)

Yet many respondents welcomed the way in which issues concerning sex were discussed, particularly the references to 'safe sex' and the other potential consequences of entering into a sexual relationship:

I think it wasn't discussed five years ago as it is now, in chat shows and documentaries. There are more of them dealing with sex, there is also more about contraception and safe sex on TV than there was then.
(VR: female, aged 25-34)

The younger age group is much more open-minded and they make their own minds up, as opposed to listening to the moral minority. With AIDS people have to understand and accept sexual practices to educate.

(VR: male, aged 25-34)

This was seen as a positive change.

One of the respondents commented on the fact that discussing a condom would not have been acceptable some years ago:

You can now say the word 'condom' on TV. You couldn't do that a few years ago.

(Male, aged 21-30)

Changes in attitude

Well as I say, I am an old person, we didn't talk about it when we were young. So to me, there's a lot of unnecessary talk about it. I don't think it needs to be talked about quite so much really. But then again as I say, I'm an old person so I definitely think so. I suppose people, the young ones now, they're definitely more open in the way they talk about sex. So I suppose it has changed, it's just the way we live now, isn't it? You have to go along with it.
 (VR: female, aged 65+)

The data have already shown that respondents have become more accepting of the levels of sexual activity depicted on television. When asked why they thought there was too much sex on television, nearly 20% of respondents to the telephone questionnaire spontaneously said it had simply become more liberal and five per cent said that taboo areas were now widely portrayed. When asked directly if they thought that attitudes towards the depiction of sex had changed, 87% of the sample agreed that they had. Those with children at home were more likely to say so (95% of parents compared with 86% of those without children living with them).

Respondents to the telephone survey were asked to say how they thought attitudes had changed: one third said that they were more liberal or relaxed, while one in five said there was less left to the imagination or simply that there was more sexual activity depicted.

Table 56: How have attitudes changed?

	%
Have become more liberal	32
Less left to the imagination	22
More sexual activity depicted	20
People are used to sex scenes on TV	16
People are less embarrassed	9
Children/teens more used to it	9
You can't avoid watching it	6

Base: All respondents

Responses over 5%

We're much more broad-minded. I think it's a good thing, we are not in the dark ages.
 (VR: male, aged 55-64)

It seems that is the only subject that seems to be discussed on talk shows. I tend to watch Kilroy; it used to be news and topical interests and now it's about adultery. People are more honest - people didn't discuss it on TV; it's in much more detail now.
 (VR: female, aged 35-44)

It's a more liberal world. People grow up faster and it's more accepted. It's something that the more there is, the more they accept it.

(VR: male, aged 25-34)

Sixteen per cent of respondents talked of a desensitisation process:

Balance isn't too bad. Yes, I can remember when you couldn't show your knee - more open than it ever was and that's a good thing; [but] they go over the top altogether instead of subtlety, either f... ing or crude.

(VR: male, aged 55-64)

There were a few respondents who thought the broadcasters had become more restrained in recent years.

I think they have become more conservative, Thatcher's children making their voice heard. It's just that a conservative generation seems to have sprung up, people seem to be less tolerant than they were maybe ten years ago.

(VR: male, aged 25-34)

As I remember it, it went through a very bad period, it was sex, sex, sex. Somebody stepped in and laid down a few rules and things got better. Instead of sex we now have rubbish.

(VR: female, aged 65+)

Others argued that producers had to reflect the changes in public attitude:

People are a lot more open than a while ago. It's not looked at as bad to have sex outside marriage. Producers get away with it more because of changing attitudes.

(VR: female, aged 16-24)

Some respondents in the qualitative research felt that the change would continue, with more and more explicit material shown on television.

If that's on now [scene from Close Relations] imagine what will be on in five years' time.

(Female, aged 31-40)

Comparisons with the 1992 study

As the trend data have shown, attitudes towards the amount of sexual activity depicted on television have changed since 1992, with increasingly smaller percentages of respondents saying that there is 'too much' sex on television. Indeed, this study has shown that some respondents - in the qualitative research - genuinely felt there was less sexual activity portrayed on television than there had been some years ago.

To counter this, what was apparent was that the sort of sexual activity depicted was perceived to have changed. It was considered more open and explicit now, although respondents still set limits on what could be shown.

Within this continuum lie two variables which are key to the sort of attitudes expressed - age and gender²³. These variables were of prime importance in the 1992 study as well. It is clear that the older the respondent group, the more offended it demonstrated itself to be by the depiction of sexual activity. The younger the respondent, the less likely he or she was to express discomfort with watching the depiction of sex on television, except in an intergenerational viewing context. This too, had been a finding in the 1992 study - the context in which viewing occurred was an important consideration in how uncomfortable or offended the respondent was made by a sexual depiction.

Similarly, if the sample was divided by gender then there were clear attitudinal differences towards the portrayal of sex. Significantly larger proportions of women were more likely to say that they would feel uncomfortable watching many of the depictions they were shown with other people, or even by themselves.

Nevertheless, in 1998 significantly fewer respondents agreed with the statement, 'I find it offensive to see sex scenes on television' than in 1992 (24% and 39% respectively). This level of change was to be found across the sample as a whole.

Many respondents in the 1992 study had suggested that television had some influence on children and young people, and expressed a concern that this might encourage early experimentation (mentioned by 56% of respondents then), or lead to an increase in immoral behaviour (48%)²⁴. Similar questions were asked in this study. The results show that these concerns have changed little - exactly the same proportion of respondents in 1998 said they thought such material could lead to early experimentation (56%) and 44% mentioned that such material could lead to immoral behaviour. However, it is important to bear in mind that the 1998 project found that parents were far less likely to agree with either of these statements than those without children living at home. Parents, in fact, thought that such television could have an educative effect on their children, and other work has shown that many parents use television material as a springboard for discussion.²⁵

[23] See also, for example, British Social Attitudes Survey; SCPR, 1995.

[24] Sex and Sexuality in Broadcasting; A. Millwood Hargrave; Brad Ltd, 1992.

[25] The Scheduling Game; A. Millwood Hargrave; Brad Ltd, 1995.

The increase in satellite and cable penetration between 1992 and 1998 had an impact on the findings as well. More respondents felt that greater latitude was shown towards the non-terrestrial services and many were aware that they showed more explicit material, in regulatory terms, and carried 'adult' channels.

There did appear to be confusion about how much regulation there was, both of these services and of mainstream television broadcasts, particularly where sexual depictions were concerned. This was most clearly expressed in the fact that respondents often were uncertain if pre-transmission warnings would be transmitted before the clips they viewed in the hall tests.

The two main areas of difference between the 1998 and the 1992 study are in the increase in 'talk about sex'²⁶ and in attitudes towards the depiction of homosexual relationships.

Talk about sex

At the time of the 1992 study there were no confessional talk shows of the Ricki Lake or Jerry Springer type reaching a wide audience. These programmes have now been shown on mainstream television and have received considerable publicity. The data from this latest study show that respondents - in both qualitative and quantitative research - were disturbed by the amount of sex in these programmes. Scheduling did not seem to be the main focus of concern - it may be that these programmes have been understood to be daytime television in the way other domestically-produced talk shows are. What caused concern was the nature of the material discussed. Some parents mentioned a worry that their children may develop a distorted view of the world and how relationships operate. Other respondents, who saw a clip from a (British) show, accepted it was entertaining, but nearly a quarter said it was 'degrading'.

Homosexuality

Over one half of the sample in 1998 knew someone who was homosexual. Certainly these data showed that knowing a person who is gay affects the way in which depictions of homosexual relationships were viewed.

However, the data show that attitudes towards homosexuality have changed across the board. In 1992, 46% of the sample said it was acceptable to show homosexual relationships because they were part of life. In 1998 58% of the sample agreed with that statement.

In 1992, 79% of respondents had said that homosexual scenes, of any sort, should only be shown after 10.00 p.m. In 1998 nearly half the sample (43%) thought a scene of two men

[26] A genre also being studied in the US where many talk shows which are centred on sexual matters originate; see for example the work of Professor Dale Kunkel, UCSB.

kissing was acceptable at 9.00 p.m. while nearly another three in ten (28%) said it was acceptable immediately after the Watershed. Only four per cent of respondents said such material should only be shown after 10.00 p.m.

Many respondents - in the qualitative research - continued to say that they did not want to see such material, but they accepted its place in programmes.

Appendix 1

Methodology and sample

Three different methodologies were used in this research:

Qualitative research

Six focus groups:

Group	Sex	Age	SEG	Lifestage	Location
1	Male	16-17	C1C2	Single	Leeds
2	Female	18-19	C1C2	Single	Midlands
3	Male	21-30	ABC1	Single/married - no children	London
4	Female	31-40	C2D	Married - young children	London
5	Male	41-55	C2D	Married - with teenagers	Leeds
6	Female	60	ABC1	Empty nesters	Midlands

Each group participant was given a questionnaire when recruited which asked them to think about their television viewing.

Groups were recruited to include at least two participants who had access to satellite or cable television services.

Six family interviews:

Family Interview sample structure

Children 6-9 years	Children 10-15 years	Children 16-18 years
ABC1 (1)	ABC1 (3)	ABC1 (5)
C2D (2)	C2D (4)	C2D (6)

The locations included: London, Surrey, Warks.

Each family was given a questionnaire when recruited which asked them to think about their television viewing.

The interviews included:

- two families with access to satellite or cable television services
- three families with television sets in their children's bedrooms
- two single parent households
- two families with one child only; four families with two or more children

Quantitative research

Telephone interviews

Conducted with 732 respondents aged 16 and over; 83 interviews conducted with respondents aged 13-15.

CAPI interviews

The interview was in the form of a script on a lap top computer, which showed clips from various TV programmes. The clips were shown in random order and had all been edited to 45 seconds or less. The integrity of the clips was left intact, i.e. any editing took place to crop the beginning and the end of the clip, no frames were cut from within the clip.

Respondents then answered questions on the computer.

261 face to face CAPI interviews were carried out among adults aged 16 and over. The interviews took place in:

- Wakefield
- Bradford
- Andover
- Maidstone
- Huddersfield

Notes on the contributors

Teresa Edleston graduated with a BA Honours from Exeter University in Psychology and European Studies (Spanish) in July 1997. She joined Network Research as a Research Executive in October of the same year, after having spent the summer working for Market Research & Services GmbH in Frankfurt, working mainly on qualitative projects.

Petra van der Heijden is a Director of Network Research & Marketing Limited, having joined the company in 1995. She has over 15 years research experience and is responsible for running the annual Audience Monitoring and Trend Data projects for the Broadcasting Standards Commission. Previously she worked at Harris Research, The Research Business International and MVA.

Jill Hillier has been working in research for the past 12 years and has worked across a variety of sectors. She has frequently spoken at industry events both in the UK and internationally.

Andrea Millwood Hargrave joined the former Broadcasting Standards Council as Research Director in 1991. Previously Director of Planning (Marketing) for British Satellite Broadcasting, she was Premier's Director of Sales and Marketing and Head of Research for Thorn EMI Cable Programmes and Grampian Television. She graduated from the University of Durham with a Degree in Psychology.

Francisco Pinedo graduated from St Catherine's College, Oxford in modern languages in 1986. His early years in market research were spent working on both qualitative and quantitative ad hoc projects in the main business to business markets. He then spent some time working on consumer orientated research before setting up Sweeney Pinedo with Anne-Marie Sweeney. He is a full member of the Market Research Society.

Anne-Marie Sweeney graduated in Business Studies after which she spent some time as a system analyst before switching to market research in 1985. Although familiar with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, Anne-Marie has a special interest in qualitative techniques. She set up Sweeney Pinedo in 1995, working across a variety of market sectors including media. She is a full member of the Market Research Society.

Elisabeth Sweeney is a psychology graduate who began her career in social work where she specialised in child and family casework; she was also an authorised mental welfare officer. She then joined a specialist child and youth research company, of which she became Managing Director. She established her own consultancy in 1991 and has maintained her specialism in child and youth studies. She has written many articles and spoken at conferences on related subjects.

The Broadcasting Standards Commission

The Broadcasting Standards Commission is the statutory body for both standards and fairness in broadcasting. It is the only organisation within the regulatory framework of UK broadcasting to cover all television and radio. This includes BBC and commercial broadcasters as well as text, cable, satellite and digital services.

As an independent organisation representing the interests of the consumer, the Broadcasting Standards Commission considers the portrayal of violence, sexual conduct and matters of taste and decency. As an alternative to a court of law, it provides redress for people who believe they have been unfairly treated or subjected to unwarranted infringement of privacy. The Commission has three main tasks which are set out in the 1996 Broadcasting Act:

- to produce codes of practice relating to standards and fairness;
- to consider and adjudicate on complaints;
- to monitor, research and report on standards and fairness in broadcasting.

This research working paper is published as part of a programme of research into attitudes towards standards and fairness in broadcasting.

The research, which was carried out by independent experts, is not a statement of Commission policy. Its role is to offer guidance and practical information to Commissioners and broadcasters in their work.

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