

CI 2475 C Roper
17 November 2011

In contemplating the development of a new National Classification Scheme, it is vital that children are protected from exposure to adult material. The current scheme recognizes that “children should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them”. The safety of children must be prioritized.

While some people may suggest that protecting children from media is simply the parents’ responsibility, many parents realize that this is made difficult without support from the wider community. Parents are unable to supervise their children at all times, as in many families both parents work outside of the home. Parents may not always be present when their children watch movies or play video games, and parents do not have any control over what their child might watch or be exposed to at a friend’s house. It is essential that the government support the efforts of parents in setting boundaries and to protect children by restricting certain inappropriate material to mature audiences, or to adults over the age of eighteen, and in more extreme cases, to refuse classification.

The government must also consider the best interest of children whose parents fail to protect them. Families from lower socio-economic backgrounds; drug addicts or other ‘dysfunctional’ families may be less able or less inclined to keep harmful material from their children. Having restrictions for adult content is also necessary for these children who cannot speak for themselves.

This year, UK Prime Minister David Cameron commissioned a report into the sexualisation of children entitled “Letting Children be Children”. The report recommended very specific actions to be taken not just by parents, but also by the government, advertisers, marketers and media providers along with other corporations, encouraging them to act in the best interest of children. These included:

- Ensuring that magazines and newspapers with sexualised images on their covers are not in easy sight of children
- Reducing the amount of on-street advertising containing sexualized imagery in locations where children are likely to see it
- Ensuring the content of pre-watershed television programming better meets parents’ expectations
- Introducing an age rating on music videos
- Making it easier for parents to block adult and age restricted material from the Internet.

A new Classification Scheme must be developed with community needs and expectations in mind. Therefore, community standards must be gauged through research regularly, possibly each year. The introduction of Letting Children Be Children suggests, “Because of the responsibilities that parents have for their

children, we believe that their views need to be given extra consideration in this regard, more than perhaps any other section of society.”

The current National Classification Code includes the principle “Adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want”. Proposed changes now read: “Australians should be able to read, hear, see and participate in media of their choice.” While adults generally are able to view material of their choosing, certain media for adults is in no way appropriate for children. Pornography and extreme violence must not be available to minors, and some hardcore pornography or depictions of sexual violence should not be made available at all.

It has been suggested that regulation might become the responsibility of the industry, which presents a significant conflict of interest. The industry itself has a vested financial interest in having films being accessible to more people, as restricting films could reduce potential profits. Therefore, there must be an independent regulatory body in place to classify all publications, to represent the community. Instead of the suggested ‘Authorised Industry Classifiers’, this expert group should have no Industry involvement, and should include child health professionals and advocates who represent children.

When a member of the public feels a publication has received an inappropriate classification, there needs to be a clear complaints process. For those who fail to comply with the codes, there must be penalties in place, such as fines, to act as a deterrent.

A reformed Classification scheme must be in the best interest of the community and consumers, particularly children who are vulnerable, and not simply intended to relieve the burden on the industry. The current classification code includes the following principles:

- adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want
- minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them
- everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material they find offensive, and
- the need to take account of community concerns about:
 - depictions that condone or incite violence, particularly sexual violence, and
 - the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner

However, the proposed changes no longer include principles relating specifically to protection from unsolicited offensive material, violence or sexual violence, or portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner. Instead the principles appear to be based around benefiting the industry.

“The classification regulatory framework should not impede competition and innovation”

“and not disadvantage Australian media content and service providers in international markets”

“classification regulation should be kept to the minimum”

Another problematic proposal is that media content likely to be classified G, PG or M does not need to be submitted for classification, except on a voluntary basis. This is beneficial for those who are selling such material, but not for the wider community. Perhaps a magazine or video game would correctly be classified as MA and therefore restricted, but the distributor could argue that the he interpreted the content as likely receiving an M rating- unrestricted. Proposals like this reduce the burden of responsibility on the industry, but can only harm the community by allowing adult material to be unrestricted and available to young people.

To conclude, the reformed National Classification Code must serve the best interests of the community, especially those who require special care, such as children. The code needs to be strengthened to protect those who are vulnerable, not relaxed to help increase industry profits. Parents must have the support of the government to protect and raise their children.