

[GB] Ofcom publishes its research on offensive language on TV and radio

IRIS 2021-10:1/10

Alexandros K. Antoniou
University of Essex

On 22 September 2021, Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, published its latest research into people's attitudes towards offensive language on scheduled TV and radio. The findings provide an insight into how audiences feel about language they might encounter in programmes they watch or listen to.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted for this research. A quantitative strand captured spontaneous responses on the acceptability of 186 words, whereas the qualitative survey comprised 37 online discussion groups and 25 depth interviews involving participants from a variety of locations and backgrounds. The research engaged, in particular, with a larger and more diverse selection of people than ever before (including Black African and Caribbean people, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi people, disabled people, as well as the LGBTQ+ and Gypsy and Traveller communities), and sought specific views towards offensive language of members of the Jewish and Chinese communities for the first time. The research also examined attitudes to other types of potentially offensive content such as blackface, mimicking of accents, misgendering and deadnaming.

Respondents indicated that they still want broadcasters to give careful consideration to how and when offensive language is used but many acknowledged the important role such language can play in programming depending on the given context (e.g., offensive language used for dramatic effect, for humour, to reflect real life or even to inform). Swift apologies were also deemed important where offensive language was accidentally broadcast.

Attitudes towards the use of swear words appeared to be somewhat more tolerant, so long as the strongest language was broadcast after the watershed and parents were given adequate warnings. However, some more serious concerns were expressed about discriminatory language on TV and radio, especially in relation to race. Participants stated that they expected broadcasters to take the utmost care to justify and carefully contextualise the strongest forms of such language so that audiences would be adequately protected.

Interestingly, mixed views were evident with respect to older programmes containing outdated views which could cause unnecessary offence and reinforce stereotypes. Participants pointed out that they did not wish to see older

programmes containing potentially problematic content disappear completely. Some concerns were expressed, in particular, about sanitising history or censoring older programmes. Nevertheless, participants highlighted that suitable warnings should be clear and specific, indicating the type of language or content that might cause offence.

It is anticipated that the research findings will support broadcasters, when planning their content, in better understanding audience expectations about problematic language. They will also assist the regulator in making decisions about potentially offensive language in programmes, while having regard to freedom of expression. Readers should be warned that the report contains highly offensive language, terminology and discussion of content that may cause offence.

Public attitudes towards offensive language on TV and Radio, Ipsos Mori Research for Ofcom

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/225336/offensive-language-summary-report.pdf

