

## **COMMENTARY ON THE EXECUTIVE'S REPORT "TASTE, STANDARDS AND THE BBC: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO MORALITY, VALUES AND BEHAVIOUR IN UK BROADCASTING."**

The audience expects the highest standards from the BBC and at the same time expects the BBC to bring them creative and exciting programmes and content. The BBC Trust, which represents the licence fee payer, has commissioned a full scale review of the BBC's Editorial Guidelines to ensure that content producers are supported by an editorial framework which promotes first rate, innovative work. The Taste and Standards report that the BBC Executive publishes today will contribute to this review process.

### Background

The Taste and Standards report was commissioned by the Trust in response to the 18 and 25 October 2008 broadcasts of the *Russell Brand Show* on Radio 2<sup>1</sup>. The Editorial Standards Committee (ESC) requested that the Director-General "*consider how the BBC should deal with issues at the boundaries of generally accepted standards in its output and report to the Trust.*". It further asked that the use of the most offensive language post watershed on BBC One should be considered within the report following concerns expressed by the ESC in the summer of 2008. Last month (May 2009) the Executive submitted its resulting report - "Taste, Standards and the BBC: Public attitudes to morality, values and behaviour in UK broadcasting" - to the Trust. This details audience research carried out by the Executive and the conclusions drawn and recommendations made by the Executive as a result. The Trust considered this report at its meeting on 21 May and its views on it are set out below.

### The Executive's report

The Trust welcomes the contribution made by the Executive's report and the fact that it has served as a prompt to some immediate action, as set out in the report recommendations. The Trust also welcomes the changes that have already taken place within the BBC's output as a response to the decisions by the ESC in November 2008. The report is valuable input into the Trust's drive to seek to secure the highest editorial standards at the BBC and to champion creativity and innovation. It acts as a useful precursor to the review of the Editorial Guidelines put in place by the Trust. As the report notes, the public shares the Trust's expectation that broadcasters should set standards as well as reflect them. Both the Trust and the public also expect the BBC to have higher standards than other broadcasters.

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<sup>1</sup> Following the broadcasts of the *Russell Brand Show* on 18 and 26 October 2008 the Trust's Editorial Standards Committee (ESC) held an extraordinary meeting with the Director-General. At this meeting the ESC requested that the Director-General "*consider how the BBC should deal with issues at the boundaries of generally accepted standards in its output and report to the Trust.*" (Editorial Standards Committee, Summary Report from the extraordinary meeting held on 30 October 2008).

The Trust views this research as an opportunity for debate and change. It believes that it must be used by the Executive to strengthen editorial standards within the BBC and support content producers in making considered decisions and delivering high quality, creative material.

### The Editorial Guidelines

The Trust requires clear changes in the Editorial Guidelines in order to meet public expectations on standards and address the issues identified in the audience research carried out by the Executive. The current review of the Editorial Guidelines will play a key role in the Trust's drive to uphold standards. In addition to the recommendations put forward by the Executive in its report, the Trust has asked the Executive to consider the following propositions for the Editorial Guidelines prior to Trust approval. These propositions reflect the Trust's views on standards in BBC output as well as those of licence fee payers, as demonstrated by the Executive's audience research.

- a. The Trust recognises the concern felt by licence fee payers about offensive language on television. In particular it understands the concern about offensive language featuring in programmes on BBC One, given that this is a mainstream channel aimed at a general audience. The Trust concurs with the opinion coming out of the Executive's audience research that the change in content before and after the Watershed at 9pm should be gradual. It strongly supports the current BBC policy that the post Watershed transition to more adult material should not be abrupt. With all this in mind, the Trust has asked the Executive to consider altering the BBC Editorial Guidelines or online guidance to the effect that the most offensive language should only be used in exceptional circumstances on BBC One between 9 and 10 pm.
- b. The Trust also recognises the offence caused by humiliating individuals in programme content; offence that the research shows is worsened if strong language is used. The Trust recognises that licence fee payers can distinguish between comedy and satire, which they appreciate, and unjustified humiliation, of which they disapprove. The BBC should not make programmes that celebrate or condone gratuitous, aggressive, intrusive, and humiliating behaviour. The Trust has challenged the Executive to clearly address this issue in the Editorial Guidelines.
- c. Content producers must feel free to make creative programming even if it is challenging. The research demonstrates that the licence fee payer wants this and the Trust supports this: creativity is a crucial part of the BBC's role. This creative, challenging content must be made to the highest standards, as must all BBC content. The Trust looks to the Executive to aid programme makers in producing content that achieves both the high standards and the creativity expected of the BBC, through its Editorial Guidelines, day to day editorial support and staff training.

- d. One aspect of this editorial support is clarity regarding the relationship between on air talent and producers. The Executive must empower producers so that they are able to manage on air talent effectively. To this end, controllers and editors must make it clear to both producers and talent that it is the producer who takes the editorial decisions, and that they are supported in this by their manager.

The BBC Editorial Guidelines set out the standards that all BBC content must meet, and best practice for content producers. The draft revised Editorial Guidelines will be submitted to the Trust in July this year. The audience research carried out by the Executive for its report will contribute to the Trust's assessment of the draft Editorial Guidelines, as will public feedback and debate on the report itself following publication. The Trust expects to undertake its own research which will also feed into this assessment prior to the approval and publication of the new Editorial Guidelines in early summer 2010.