

Investigation Report No. 2307

File no.	ACMA2009/2044
Licensee	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
Station	ABC TV
Type of service	National Broadcasting Service
Name of program	<i>Sesame Street</i>
Date/s of broadcast	2 June 2009
Relevant legislation/code	ABC Code of Practice 2007: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clause 6.2 (Classification of television programs – G – general (suitable for all ages))

Investigation conclusion

The episode of *Sesame Street* broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (the ABC) on 2 June 2009 contained themes with a very low sense of threat or menace, which were justified by context. Therefore, it is considered that the broadcast did not breach clause 6.2 (Classification of television programs) of the ABC Code of Practice 2007.

The complaint

On 7 August 2009 the Australian Communications and Media Authority (the ACMA) received a written complaint about an episode of *Sesame Street* broadcast on 2 June 2009.

The complainant alleged that the G-classified program contained “witchcraft [which] is totally inappropriate for the target age group”. Not satisfied with the written response provided by the ABC, the complainant forwarded the matter to the ACMA for investigation.

The program

Sesame Street is a long-running American children's television series which uses a combination of animation, puppets, and live actors to present educational material to pre-schoolers. This includes letter and word recognition, basic arithmetic, geometric forms and socialisation taught through songs, stories and games.

The episode of *Sesame Street* broadcast on 2 June 2009 included a hat wearing competition between puppet characters, Elmo and Zoe. The characters compete to see who can wear the most hats on their head. When they run out of hats, Abby Cadabby, another puppet character, casts a spell using her magic wand to make more hats appear.

Assessment

In assessing compliance with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Code of Practice 2007 (the ABC Code), a copy of the program, the licensee's submission and comments from the complainant were considered.

When considering whether the licensee breached the ABC Code, the program was assessed against clause 6.2 (Classification of Television Programs).

Relevant code provisions

The ABC Code contains the following provisions that are relevant in the matters raised by the complainants:

SECTION 6: TELEVISION PROGRAM CLASSIFICATIONS

...

6.2 Classification of television programs

G – General (suitable for all ages)

G programs may be shown at any time. This category is considered suitable for all viewers, and includes programs designed for pre-school and school age children. The G classification symbol does not necessarily indicate that the program is one that children will enjoy. Some G programs contain themes or story-lines that are not of interest to children.

Parents should feel confident that children can watch material in this classification without supervision. Whether or not the program is intended for children, the treatment of themes and other classifiable elements will be careful and discreet.

Themes: The treatment of themes should have a very low sense of threat or menace, and be justified by context. The presentation of dangerous, imitable behaviour is not permitted except in those circumstances where it is justified by context. Any depiction of such behaviour must not encourage dangerous imitation.

Complainant's submissions

In an email to the licensee, dated 5 June 2009, the complainant submitted that, "one of the episodes of [Sesame] Street this week the puppet Abby Cadabby was casting spells ... [I] think witchcraft is totally inappropriate for the target age group". In a further email to the licensee, dated 7 August 2009, the complainant stated, "The Australian children's TV standards define material unsuitable if "depicts unsafe use of a product, or unsafe situations which may encourage children to engage in activities dangerous to them". Whether you believe it or not witchcraft is a very real practice and a very dangerous activity for adults and children..."

In the complainant's email to the ACMA, received on 7 August 2009, the complainant added that they were "unhappy with the invalidation of [their] complaint".

Licensee's submissions

In correspondence to the complainant dated 2 July 2009, the licensee submitted:

- As with all children's programs broadcast on the ABC, care is taken to ensure each episode complies with the classification guidelines set out in the ABC's Code of Practice.
- Sesame Street is classified G, which requires the treatment of themes and other classifiable elements be careful and discreet, and have a very low sense of threat or menace. The ABC Children's Television Department note that Sesame Street is a highly respected creator of children's television and has extremely rigorous educational, psychological and editorial procedures.
- [The ABC] do not believe Abby's use of her magic wand in this context was an inappropriate theme for the program. Instead, having reviewed the episode, we are satisfied the program was in keeping with the G classification guidelines outlined in the ABC's Code of Practice.

Reasons for the decision

Themes

The program contains several scenes which contain very mild themes:

- At 10 minutes, puppet character, Abby Caddaby appears waving her magical wand. She casts a spell to try and create more hats, but it backfires, and bats with hats appear on Elmo and Zoe's heads instead.
- At 11 minutes Count von Count, a vampire puppet character appears to help count the hats.
- At 13 minutes Abby Caddaby calls her mother on her phone to ask for help, saying, "I need a spell".

The character of Abby Cadabby, who is described as a “three year old muppet fairy in training” is depicted in the program as a fairy, and has fairy-type wings on her back, and carries a pink fairy wand, which she uses to cast spells. In this episode Abby’s spells are shown to backfire to comic effect. The casting of spells in this context is not considered to constitute a depiction of witchcraft. The treatment of Abby’s magic is considered to be careful and discreet. While young children may mimic Abby’s use of a wand, and wear fairy wings, this is not considered to be dangerous behaviour.

It is therefore considered that the program does not exceed the G classification requirements for themes.