

# Community attitudes to the presentation of factual material and viewpoints in commercial current affairs programs

## 02: Qualitative research report

REPORT OF RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY BLUE MOON RESEARCH & PLANNING PTY LTD  
MAY 2008





# COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TO THE PRESENTATION OF FACTUAL MATERIAL AND VIEWPOINTS IN COMMERCIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMS

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT

Prepared for the Australian Communications and Media Authority

May 2008

## Notes on Research

Qualitative research deals with relatively small numbers of consumers and explores their in-depth motivations, attitudes, feelings and behaviour. The exchange of views and experiences among participants is relatively free flowing and open, and as a result often provides very rich data that can be broadly representative of the population at large.

The findings however are not based on statistics: they are interpretive in nature, and are based on the experience and expertise of the researchers as they analyse the discussions.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1	Background to the Research.....	6
1.2	Research Overview .....	6
1.3	Key Findings: Community's Expectations of Factual Accuracy and Fair Representation of Viewpoints in CCA Programs .....	7
1.4	Key Findings: Scale of Seriousness of Errors .....	7
1.5	Key Findings: Role of a Remedy.....	8
1.6	Key Findings: Appropriate Remedies for Errors.....	9
1.7	Key Findings: Expectations of the Regulator .....	9
<b>2</b>	<b>BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>RESEARCH OBJECTIVES .....</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1	Research Outcomes.....	13
<b>4</b>	<b>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>14</b>
4.1	Overview and Rationale for the Methodology .....	14
4.2	The Sample .....	14
4.3	Definitions used for 'Viewing Frequency' .....	15
4.4	Definitions used for 'Level of Concern' .....	15
4.5	Recruitment of Respondents.....	16
4.6	Homework DVDs .....	16
4.7	Group Size and Duration .....	16
4.8	Discussion Coverage .....	16
4.9	Case Study Clips.....	17
4.10	Self-Complete Exercise.....	19
4.11	Qualitative Analysis and Reporting .....	19
4.12	English proficiency.....	19
4.13	Timing of Fieldwork .....	20
4.14	The Quantitative Phase.....	20
<b>5</b>	<b>VIEWING PATTERNS AND BEHAVIOURS.....</b>	<b>22</b>
5.1	Viewing Patterns and Behaviours .....	22
<b>6</b>	<b>COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS OF COMMERCIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMS .....</b>	<b>24</b>
6.1	Differences between News and Current Affairs Programs.....	24
6.2	Format and Content of News and Current Affairs Programs .....	24
6.3	Personal Impact of News and Current Affairs Programs .....	25
6.4	Style of Reporting of News and Current Affairs Programs.....	27
6.5	Emotive Reporting of CCA programs .....	27
6.6	Expectations of Bias on CCA Programs.....	28
6.7	Emotive Reporting.....	29
<b>7</b>	<b>EXPECTATIONS OF ACCURACY AND REPRESENTATION OF VIEWPOINTS .....</b>	<b>30</b>
7.1	Perceptions of the Code of Practice.....	30
<b>8</b>	<b>ATTITUDES TOWARDS A FAILURE TO PRESENT FACTUAL MATERIAL ACCURATELY OR VIEWPOINTS FAIRLY .....</b>	<b>34</b>
8.1	Expectation of Broadcasting Factually Accurate Material .....	34
8.2	The Scale of Inaccuracy.....	37

8.3	Expectations of Broadcasting Representative Viewpoints .....	38
8.4	Accepted Level of Exaggeration.....	40
<b>9</b>	<b>SERIOUSNESS IN FAILURES TO MAINTAIN ACCURACY .....</b>	<b>41</b>
9.1	Three Levels of Errors.....	43
9.2	Level 1 Errors – the ‘Absolute Nots’ .....	43
9.3	Level 2 Errors – Errors or Unfairness due to Sensationalist Journalism.....	44
9.4	Level 3 Errors – Errors due to ‘Poor Journalism’ .....	45
<b>10</b>	<b>REMEDIES .....</b>	<b>47</b>
10.1	Role of the Remedy.....	47
10.2	Types of Remedies.....	48
10.3	‘Entertainment’ Viewers’ Reactions to Remedies .....	48
10.4	‘News / Information’ Viewers’ Reactions to Remedies.....	49
10.5	Differentiating Remedies for Different Breaches.....	50
10.6	Remedies for Level 3 Errors.....	50
10.7	Remedies for Level 2 Errors.....	51
10.8	Remedies for Level 1 Errors.....	52
10.9	The Regulatory Environment.....	53
<b>11</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>55</b>
	<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>57</b>
	<b>APPENDIX A – RECRUITMENT SCREENER .....</b>	<b>57</b>
	<b>ACMA RECRUITMENT SCREENER.....</b>	<b>58</b>
	<b>APPENDIX B - HOMEWORK EXERCISE .....</b>	<b>62</b>
	<b>APPENDIX C - DISCUSSION GUIDE.....</b>	<b>67</b>
	<b>APPENDIX D - SELF-COMPLETE EXERCISE .....</b>	<b>73</b>
	<b>APPENDIX E – USING THIS RESEARCH .....</b>	<b>76</b>

## TABLE OF FIGURES

TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	3
Table 1 : Group Sample .....	15
Figure 1: Attitudinal Statements used to Gauge Respondents' Attitudes and Levels of Concern of CCA Programs .....	16
Telstra Lindeman Island Event (12 October 2005) .....	17
King – Child Support Agency .....	18
Balson - Fiji homestay .....	18
Australian Chicken Meat Federation (ACMF) .....	18
Figure 2: News and Current Affairs Programs Watched by the Community .....	22
Reactions to 'Presenting Factual Material Accurately' .....	30
Reactions to 'Represent Viewpoints Fairly' .....	31
Clause 4.3.11 of the Code .....	32
Efficacy of Clause 4.3.11 .....	32
Community Reactions to the Case Studies: Telstra – Lindeman Island .....	35
Case Study: Chicken Meat .....	36
Case Study: King – Child Support .....	37
Figure 3 – Expectations of the Fiji – Homestay Case Study Clip .....	39
Figure 4 – Expectations of the Chicken Meat and Telstra Case Study Clips .....	39
Figure 5: Self- Complete Exercise – List of Circumstances Leading to Inaccurate Presentation .....	41
Possible Remedies Viewers had to Match to the Hypothetical Case Studies .....	42
Figure 6- Appropriate remedies for the varying errors .....	50

# 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 1.1 Background to the Research

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) is currently undertaking a review of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice (the Code). This Code, introduced in September 1993, regulates the content of programs on commercial free-to-air television. The Code has been reviewed twice with revised Codes introduced in April 1999 and July 2004, and amended most recently in September 2006. It is now a requirement that the Code is updated every three years. The stations that must abide by the Code include Seven Network, Nine Network, Network Ten, Prime TV, WIN TV, Nine Perth, NBN and Imparja TV. The broadcasters are responsible for enacting and abiding by the Code in a self-regulatory manner.

As part of the current review of the Code, there is a need to investigate levels of concern among the community with the broadcasting of commercial current affairs (CCA) programs. Since the Code was introduced, complaints to broadcasters and ACMA, as well as previous research, indicate there has been concern within the community about the manner in which the requirements for the presentation of factual information and viewpoints in current affairs programs have been applied by licensees. ACMA recognises the need for current research to complement and inform the current review of the Code on the topic of current affairs programs.

Blue Moon was commissioned to undertake a qualitative study which explores community attitudes toward the presentation of factual material and representative viewpoints on commercial current affairs programs. A quantitative national survey will follow the qualitative phase of research.

## 1.2 Research Overview

The research program consisted of nine group discussions with primary viewers of current affairs programs. Groups were segmented according to age bands, as well as viewing frequency and level of concern of information presented on commercial current affairs programs. The research was conducted in metropolitan and regional areas in New South Wales and Queensland.

Prior to attending the groups, respondents were sent homework DVDs containing excerpts from commercial current affairs programs which looked at issues surrounding factual accuracy and fair viewpoints. These excerpts were used in

group discussions, alongside a self-complete exercise using hypothetical case study examples which they had to match with appropriate remedies.

### **1.3 Key Findings: Community's Expectations of Factual Accuracy and Fair Representation of Viewpoints in CCA Programs**

Viewers expect that CCA programs will take some liberties with the presentation of factual information and, in particular, with the representation of viewpoints. However, they do not expect facts to be consciously omitted (or ignored), distorted or misused, or for them to be entirely fabricated. Respondents expressed shock when such errors were shown to them in the group discussions using case study material. Prior to attending the discussion groups, viewers thought that if inaccurate facts were presented, it is due to a lack of research into both sides of the story or by a lack of the right questions being asked, rather than by any conscious decision on behalf of the program.

The fair representation of viewpoints in CCA programs is more of a grey area. It is generally understood that CCA programs have a purpose or an agenda for their stories and as a result they may be one-sided or biased. Viewers are more likely to spontaneously express concern about whether viewpoints are being expressed fairly on CCA programs than to doubt the factual accuracy of what viewpoints are presented. However, they believe they can spot the necessary truths and leave the bias behind and thus, the existence of bias can be accepted to some extent. Thus, viewers expect that it is the unfair representation of viewpoints that sometimes skews the presentation of information on CCA programs, rather than a conscious omission, distortion or fabrication of facts.

Many viewers, particularly those who watch CCA programs for news and information, see the programs as having some value and a role to play in society, particularly for members of the general public. They regard these programs as highlighting social and community issues that would otherwise go unnoticed; standing up for the 'everyday person'; and giving the everyday people a voice against those with more power such as large corporations and government.

### **1.4 Key Findings: Scale of Seriousness of Errors**

Viewers feel that failure to correct inaccuracies on CCA programs by a broadcaster can be judged on a scale of seriousness. From the analysis, three levels of 'errors' defined in terms of seriousness emerged. Level 3 errors are perceived as occurring mainly due to poor journalism and viewers claimed to understand that these may

happen from time to time. These can include incorrect names, mispronunciation, incorrect spelling / typographical errors or reliance on an authorised spokesperson without asking for clarification of any ambiguity. They are seen as being more serious if there is any negative impact on everyday people from the inaccuracy.

Level 2 errors can be described as those inaccuracies or unfair representations that are due to the reporting techniques of sensationalist journalism. Level 2 errors are caused by scripted footage, hidden cameras, file footage, re-enactments, interview techniques such as aggressive questioning, surprising interviewees and not asking all the questions as well as not using credible sources. Again, they are seen as more serious if these techniques have a negative impact on everyday people.

Lastly, Level 1 errors are the 'Absolute Nots' and are seen as those conscious omissions or distortions of key facts as well as the fabrication of any fact. These are considered to be the most serious and are perceived as 'unforgivable' by the public.

## 1.5 Key Findings: Role of a Remedy

The primary role of a remedy is perceived as being to deter the broadcaster from allowing inaccuracies or unfair representation to occur in the first place. This is due to the fact that the community has an expectation that CCA programs will always ensure that what is being presented is based on fact, and the everyday people are not unduly harmed, either directly by the story, or as members of the general public. The level of seriousness of the error impacts on viewers' expectations of the remedy that should be implemented.

It is recognised that there are a number of other roles for remedies to fulfil if this is to be achieved. Firstly, respondents feel that a remedy should make viewers aware that an error has been made as this will identify inaccuracies that they may not be aware of. In doing this, they also feel the role of a remedy should be to improve the awareness of viewers that errors do occur in these programs, which may prompt viewers to change their expectations of these programs and the role they have for the community. Thirdly, viewers regard the role of a remedy as being to rectify the potential harm, whether that be personal or financial, caused to an individual(s) or a company due to an inaccuracy.

It is through these various roles that a remedy should have that viewers feel the broadcaster may be deterred from making these errors in the first place, as it would ultimately lead to financial implications for the broadcaster. Viewers perceive that if people are made aware when an error has been made, they may begin to question the credibility of these shows and the role they fulfil, and in turn may stop watching. This would ultimately impact on ratings and, thus, financial gains for the broadcaster.

Whether this cycle works, however, is dependent on whether people will stop watching these shows if they are aware of the inaccuracies.

## 1.6 Key Findings: Appropriate Remedies for Errors

Viewers believe that inaccuracies need to be rectified by strong remedies if broadcasters are to be deterred from making these errors in the first place. However, expectations of remedies differ according to the level of seriousness of the error. Thus, for Level 3 errors viewers feel that a minimum of some correction is required. If the error has some impact on the story this should be made publicly on air, otherwise it could be done privately through a letter. For Level 2 errors, people feel that there should be an on air correction, apology and some restitution to parties that are harmed by the inaccuracy or unfair representation. Level 1 errors were the hardest errors for the community to accept and they felt these should not be committed at all. When these errors are committed, viewers feel the remedy should include some 'punishment', and could include making a public apology stating their conscious error, handing out fines, giving 'demerit points' or a loss of their license.

Whatever the level of error, it is expected that a remedy involving a correction (other than at Level 3, where individuals are not harmed in any way) and an apology should be broadcast during the program because this is the medium used when the inaccuracy occurs. Viewers feel using this medium maximises the chances of reaching the same people who saw the inaccuracy. At the very least, they feel it should be carried out in the program's 'normal' public environment in which it operates as it would force the program to own up to the error in this same environment.

All viewers feel remedial action should occur as soon as the inaccuracy is proved. They recognise that this may be some time after the inaccuracy; however, it is better than no action at all.

## 1.7 Key Findings: Expectations of the Regulator

Viewers believe that the regulator should play a more active role in ensuring that broadcasters are deterred from presenting factual inaccuracies and unfair representations of viewpoints, particularly those Level 1 errors. Currently the public feels that broadcasters are not regulating their own behaviour as well as they should be and would welcome giving more power to the regulator to prevent these errors from ever happening.

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

## 2 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) is currently undertaking a review of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice (the Code). This Code, introduced in September 1993, regulates the content of programs on commercial free-to-air television. The Code has been reviewed twice with revised Codes introduced in April 1999 and July 2004 and amended most recently in September 2006. It is now a requirement that the Code is updated every three years. The stations that must abide by the Code include Seven Network, Nine Network, Network Ten, Prime TV, WIN TV, Nine Perth, NBN and Imparja TV. It should be noted that ABC, SBS and Pay TV channels are covered by their own Codes of Practice<sup>1</sup>. The broadcasters are responsible for enacting and abiding by the Code in a self-regulatory manner.

The Code sets out community standard benchmarking on:

- program classification;
- accuracy, fairness and respect for privacy in news and current affairs coverage;
- non-program time on television; and
- placement of commercials and program promotions.

As part of the current review of the Code, there is a need to investigate levels of concern among the community with the broadcasting of commercial current affairs (CCA) programs. Since the Code was introduced, complaints to broadcasters and ACMA, as well as previous research, indicate there has been concern within the community about the manner in which the requirements for the presentation of factual information and viewpoints in current affairs programs have been applied by licensees. ACMA recognises the need for current research to complement and inform the current review of the Code on the topic of current affairs programs.

Of specific consideration for this research is section 4 of the Code which sets out the requirements for news and current affairs programs. As described in Clause 4.2 a 'current affairs program refers to a program focussing on social, economic or political issues of current relevance to the community'<sup>2</sup>. Of particular interest are the issues associated with clauses 4.3.1 and 4.3.11 which state that:

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.freetv.com.au/Content\\_Common/pg-Code-of-Practice.seo](http://www.freetv.com.au/Content_Common/pg-Code-of-Practice.seo)

<sup>2</sup> Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice, July 2004, Free TV Australia

4.3 In broadcasting news and current affairs programs, licenses:...

4.3.1 must present factual material accurately and represent viewpoints fairly, having regard to the circumstances at the time of preparing and broadcasting the program

4.3.11 must make reasonable efforts to correct significant errors of fact at the earliest opportunity.

This qualitative study explores community attitudes toward the presentation of factual material and viewpoints in current affairs programs. A quantitative national survey will follow this phase of research.

### 3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives were to explore community attitudes toward the presentation of factual material and viewpoints in current affairs programs on commercial television services.

The research was required to specifically:

- determine the nature of community needs, interests and expectations relating to factual material and viewpoints presented in current affairs programs;
- explore community attitudes and expectations about possible remedies that could apply when requirements for accuracy are not met by a program; and
- understand the extent to which certain circumstances may mitigate any of the concerns and remedial options identified.

#### 3.1 Research Outcomes

Throughout the set up of the project, a series of research outcomes were decided upon in conjunction with ACMA. These were:

- to understand how the community regards current affairs programs;
- to explore community expectations with regard to the factual accuracy and fair representation of viewpoints of current affairs programs;
- to establish broad definitions of the types of errors / failures; and
- to examine expectations on the appropriate remedy for different errors / failures in terms of the:
  - action / response the broadcaster should take
  - action / response ACMA should take
  - most appropriate medium
  - most appropriate timescale.

## 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Overview and Rationale for the Methodology

A program of qualitative research was devised comprising 9 focus group discussions among primary viewers of current affairs programs. The use of group discussions allowed the opportunity to explore attitudes, behaviours and expectations in depth and provide an environment in which the exchange of information and views was dynamic and involved. Because of the shared focus and the comparisons of attitudes and expectations, it was possible to get an understanding of how typical these perceptions are across the community. The flexible nature of the focus group format allowed the respondents to influence the direction of the discussions to some extent, so that more time and emphasis was spent upon the topic areas they felt were most significant, something which is particularly important when exploring attitudes and expectations. It was a suitable forum to discuss case study material and gain their reactions to this footage from CCA programs.

### 4.2 The Sample

The table below describes the sample used for the research. All groups were comprised of the primary target audience of viewers of current affairs programs. A number of factors were taken into consideration when determining the group sample to ensure the group homogeneity that is necessary for effective focus group discussions, as well as wide coverage of the population. Groups were segmented according to:

- age bands (25-39, 40-54 and 55+);
- location and state – spread across regional and metro areas in NSW and Queensland;
- viewing frequency; and
- level of concern.

Table 1 : Group Sample

GRP	AGE	VIEWING FREQUENCY	LEVEL OF CONCERN	LOCATION	STATE
1	25-39	Regular	No concern	Metro, Parramatta	NSW
2	40-54	Occasional	Concern	Metro, Parramatta	NSW
3	55+	Regular	No concern	Metro, St Leonards	NSW
4	25-39	Occasional	Concern	Metro, St Leonards	NSW
5	55+	Occasional	Concern	Metro, Brisbane	QLD
6	40-54	Regular	No concern	Metro, Brisbane	QLD
7	25-39	Regular / Occasional	No concern	Regional, Sunshine Coast	QLD
8	40-54	Regular / Occasional	Concern	Regional, Wagga	NSW
9	55+	Regular / Occasional	Concern	Regional, Sunshine Coast	QLD

#### 4.3 Definitions used for 'Viewing Frequency'

Groups were divided according to levels of viewing frequency of CCA programs. This ensured a relative consistency of knowledge levels in regards to the types of topics and reporting styles used in current affairs programs among the respondents in each specific group.

A 'regular' viewer was defined as someone who:

- watches one of the CCA programs, *Today Tonight* or *A Current Affair*, at least three times a week.

An 'occasional' viewer was defined as someone who:

- watches one of the CCA programs, *Today Tonight* or *A Current Affair*, at least once every two weeks through to those who watch them a maximum of twice a week.

At least 2 to 3 respondents in each group also watched programs on national public broadcast stations at least once a fortnight.

#### 4.4 Definitions used for 'Level of Concern'

The sample was also segmented according to levels of concern about CCA programs to ensure that groups were homogenous and productive. To achieve group segmentation by this variable, during recruitment respondents were asked a series of broad attitudinal statements on their general attitudes and levels of concern regarding the information presented on current affairs shows (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Attitudinal Statements used to Gauge Respondents' Attitudes and Levels of Concern of CCA Programs**

<i>Current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) is a valuable source of current news and information.	Recruit to 'No Concern'
I think that sometimes <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) can stretch the truth in some stories, but it doesn't bother me at all.	
It doesn't matter whether sometimes shows like <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) stretch the truth because they are just a bit of entertainment that people don't take seriously anyway.	
I sometimes worry that shows like <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) don't have all the facts in their stories.	Recruit to 'Concerned'
I often get concerned that shows like <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) do not always show the full facts in a story.	
I really worries me that shows like <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) selectively present facts to make a good story.	

#### 4.5 Recruitment of Respondents

Recruitment for all audiences was from commercial lists by specialist Interviewer Quality Control Australia (IQCA) accredited recruitment companies, according to the described characteristics. The full recruitment screeners can be found in Appendix A.

#### 4.6 Homework DVDs

Respondents were sent homework DVDs containing excerpts from current affairs programs which looked at issues surrounding factual accuracy and fair viewpoints. They were asked to write down their thoughts on each excerpt which allowed respondents to express their own opinion prior to any influence by the group and also enabled detailed responses. The homework questions can be found in Appendix B.

#### 4.7 Group Size and Duration

Each of the discussion groups included between six to eight respondents. Each was 2 hours in duration.

#### 4.8 Discussion Coverage

A semi-structured discussion guide was used which allows the respondents themselves to dictate the flow of discussions with guidance from the moderator, rather than the questions being administered in the question/response format

common in quantitative research. The discussion guide is appended (Appendix B) and was approved by ACMA prior to use.

The areas of discussion included:

- exploration of perceptions of current affairs programs in general:
  - in particular on *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair*;
- views on factual accuracy and fair representation of viewpoints within current affairs programs;
- an understanding of perceptions of errors / inaccuracies;
- reactions to particular case studies (clips from *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair*); and
- an exploration of community attitudes towards, and expectations of, remedies in different circumstances:
  - using the case study clips
  - using a self-complete case study exercise (see Appendix D).

#### 4.9 Case Study Clips

The case study clips were taken from *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair* and were provided by ACMA. Complaints had been made about all these clips and ACMA had investigated all circumstances. These clips were used to gain respondents' initial reactions to the way the material was presented.

Subsequently, the moderator explained which parts of the clip were factually inaccurate or which information had been consciously omitted (Telstra; King, Child Support; Chicken Meat Federation). In the case of the Fiji homestay clip the complaint that had been made was that *Today Tonight* did not investigate the woman's allegations of illness and scabies and ignored the complainant's counter claims, but the program was not in fact found to breach the Code. See Appendix C for the discussion guide and the specific questions which were asked by the moderator. A brief description of each clip is provided below.

##### **Telstra Lindeman Island Event (12 October 2005)**

This clip combined footage of a story explaining that Telstra staff were rewarded a holiday on Lindeman Island for providing good customer service, together with footage about members of the public complaining about Telstra's services. *Today*

*Tonight* failed to present factual material accurately with regard to the numbers attending and the cost of the Lindeman Island event. However, it was not regarded a breach of 4.3.1 because it was due to reasonable reliance on information supplied by another person (Telstra spokesman) and considered a reasonable mistake. However, as the licensee did not remedy the failure to comply with the Code (i.e. broadcast the facts, knowing they were inaccurate), the licensee breached 1.6 of the Code.

### **King – Child Support Agency**

This clip from *A Current Affair* covered a story about a man [King] who was having to pay child support for two children to whom he was proven not to be the biological father. A concluding statement by the presenter said: 'The Child Support Agency says [King] is in no position to complain about paying support for the children that are not his, because he hasn't paid enough to cover his own biological child.' This was found to be a breach of 4.3.1 as the program did not represent King's viewpoint fairly as the concluding statement raises a new allegation against King about a matter not previously mentioned. The presenter's statement was also inaccurate as it was 'sufficiently different' to what was said.

### **Balson - Fiji homestay**

This clip from *Today Tonight* covered a story about a Fiji homestay that several people had experienced. They were complaining that either they or their family had become ill due to the conditions of the homestay. The footage also included, what could be classed as, subjective interview techniques being used with the owner of the homestay business. These clips were also interspersed with footage about the importance of having travel insurance. The complainant (the women who had been on the homestay) alleged that *Today Tonight* did not investigate the complainant's counter claims, but no breach was found because the statements conveyed the personal opinions of these women and could not be categorised as factual content.

### **Australian Chicken Meat Federation (ACMF)**

This clip presented material about green chicken meat that a member of the public (known as 'T') had discovered. It contained a re-enactment of the fluorescent meat, a discussion of the safety of cooking meat, as well as a laboratory analysis of T's meat. The Australian Chicken Meat Federation (ACMF) were asked their viewpoint on the green meat. *A Current Affair* was found to be in breach of 4.3.1 because the program did not represent the ACMF spokesman's point of view fairly. At the time of broadcast, the program had been told by the ACMF that the green chicken was due

to green muscle syndrome, but these facts were omitted. In addition, the salient fact that the lab test did not show a significant level of bacteria in T's meat was also omitted and the whole segment gave the impression that T's meat did contain bacteria.

#### 4.10 Self-Complete Exercise

A self-complete case study exercise was used in the groups to explore individual attitudes towards, and expectations of, remedies in different circumstances. These case studies were fictional and were provided by ACMA. For each of the 6 case studies, people had to match one or more remedies from the list provided (see Appendix D).

#### 4.11 Qualitative Analysis and Reporting

Qualitative research deals with relatively small numbers of consumers, and explores their in-depth motivations, attitudes, feelings and behaviour. The exchange of views and experiences among participants is relatively free flowing and open, and as a result often provides very rich data that can be broadly representative of the population at large.

Analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis model, whereby participant accounts were analysed to find common themes and patterns, particularly in regards to participant perceptions of error and remedy. A model in regards to perceptions of error, and types of remedy that should apply was then derived from the evidence collected from the focus group discussions.

In qualitative research, the findings are not based on statistics. The research findings are interpretive in nature and are based on the experience and expertise of the researchers in analysing the discussions using a thematic model.

#### 4.12 English proficiency

Respondents in the qualitative groups were required to have a certain degree of proficiency in English in order to participate in group discussions. Respondents from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) were recruited as they fell naturally in recruitment as viewers of the programs. That is, quotas were not established for their inclusion. This is not considered to have impacted on the research findings. As the qualitative research was focussed specifically on perceptions of members of the

community who had viewed the programs, the majority of focus group participants would speak English as either a first or second language.

#### 4.13 **Timing of Fieldwork**

All fieldwork was conducted between 4 February and 7 February 2008.

#### 4.14 **The Quantitative Phase**

The subsequent quantitative phase is to quantify the key research issues found in the qualitative research. A representative cross-section of the Australian public will be surveyed using the Newspoll omnibus in March 2008.

## DETAILED FINDINGS

## 5 VIEWING PATTERNS AND BEHAVIOURS

### 5.1 Viewing Patterns and Behaviours

Community members recognise that CCA programs are part of a repertoire of news and current affairs shows. They watch both news and current affairs programs on both commercial and *public* stations, though they tend to watch more CCA programs Figure 2 shows the broad range of news and current affairs shows that the community are watching.

Figure 2: News and Current Affairs Programs Watched by the Community

NEWS		CURRENT AFFAIRS	
PUBLIC	COMMERCIAL	PUBLIC	COMMERCIAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ABC News</li> <li>• SBS News</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7 News</li> <li>• 9 News</li> <li>• 10 News</li> <li>• Nightline</li> <li>• Late News</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7.30 Report</li> <li>• Four Corners</li> <li>• Dateline</li> <li>• Meet the Press</li> <li>• Landline</li> <li>• Foreign Correspondent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 60 Minutes</li> <li>• Sunday</li> <li>• Today Tonight (TT)</li> <li>• A Current Affair (ACA)</li> </ul>

Many respondents watch programs such as *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair* that are aired after the six o'clock news as these are broadcast at a convenient time for them.

*"Between 6-7 is a good time for news. It's the catch up on the day."*

*"I watch the news and then one of the 6.30 programs ... try and keep up with what's happening in the world."*

Very few claimed to have a preference between *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair*, and indeed, most make a choice on which program to watch based on advertising for upcoming stories:

*"I flick ... depending on what stories they are showing."*

*"If I see something on an ad that interests me, then I'll watch that one."*

However, a minority claim a preference between the two shows and this can be due to a favourite host or even preference of station:

*"I used to watch Today Tonight, but since Naomi Robson's left it's lost its edge."*

*"Because I watch Channel 7 News, I just leave it on."*

There was a minority that explained they view these CCA programs due to a lack of alternative shows aired at 6:30pm, both on public and commercial stations.

*"It can be interesting and quite informative, but I really watch it because there is nothing else on."*

## 6 COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS OF COMMERCIAL CURRENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMS

### 6.1 Differences between News and Current Affairs Programs

As an overall category, news and current affairs programs are seen as keeping people abreast of 'what's happening in the world' and keeping people 'up to date' with topical news. However, clear differences between news and current affairs are perceived in terms of the

- format and content;
- personal impact on individuals; and
- reporting style.

### 6.2 Format and Content of News and Current Affairs Programs

The community clearly sees a distinction between the format and content of news programs and CCA programs. News programs are seen to show short stories, containing topline information about significant events that have just occurred. They follow a familiar, set format showing stories covering anything from overseas news, political events, crime and law to accidents, finance, sport and weather.

Whereas CCA programs are seen to include more detailed stories covering issues of ongoing or social interest. These may include social injustices, issues of consumer interest, celebrity news or scandals as well as scams. These do not necessarily follow a set format and may vary according to the story. For example, a full program covering Heath Ledger's life, which was aired after his death, was reported on in the preceding news programs.

The community regards the current affairs shows on public broadcasters as somewhere in between these two categories. They will often have a set format and content (like the news programs), but often the issues are covered in greater depth (like current affairs).

In terms of content, there is an expectation among viewers that both news and CCA programs will provide a mix of news, information and entertainment, albeit in very different proportions. News programs are regarded primarily as a source of news *and* information (i.e. sport results, finance and weather), with just a small proportion of air time providing entertainment, usually comprising a 'feel good story at the end'.

Whereas, CCA programs are primarily seen to be providing information on issues of community interest *and* entertainment in terms of covering 'easy watching' stories. Providing news is only seen to be a minute part of CCA programs for the majority of people. The quotes below provide some examples of how viewers regarded the content of CCA programs.

*"It gives us a better understanding of the world we live in."*

*"It's a mix of crap, space fillers and the odd insight."*

*"It's entertaining, it's real, and it's real life."*

*"Like a soap opera".*

*"It's a bit of entertainment...like reality TV."*

### 6.3 Personal Impact of News and Current Affairs Programs

Viewers feel that news programs have little immediate personal impact as they often cover stories that are far-reaching and broad, such as the war in Iraq, US elections, weather overseas and technological breakthroughs. In contrast, stories on CCA programs are regarded to be particularly relevant to the everyday person and, therefore, have more of a personal impact on viewers.

Viewers of CCA programs are particularly interested in hearing about community issues and feel these impact on them positively, especially where tips and advice are provided, such as stories on interest rates and bank fees.

*"They're a source of information and give you ideas, such as budgets, but it's not life shattering."*

*"These programs let you know about community issues which is great."*

Stories covering warnings about traps or scams for consumers are also well received as they are perceived to be useful and relevant to them, as these quotes illustrate:

*"It's really informative, it deals with real issues, daily issues that confront us."*

*"At least it reminded people about the warnings that come with cooking chicken, but they did it in a sensationalised way."*

The community also believes that CCA programs give 'everyday people' a voice which they feel is important and they can often relate to the issues themselves. These include stories involving the unfair treatment of individuals by corporations and often these programs are seen to help correct imbalances of power such as DOCS stories, billing practices (e.g. Telstra), banks and access to medication.

While often the stories may be about specific individuals, the broadcasters often position the program as 'protecting the little person', which once again the community can relate to, as the following quotes illustrate:

*"They can help people get a fair go."*

*"They expose what certain companies do to everyday consumers."*

*"..they can help the consumer be aware of things that the big companies do to rip us off."*

It is clear that viewers prefer stories which can directly impact on their own lives. That said, many viewers of CCA programs also welcome the 'entertainment' element of these shows as it provides 'easy viewing' and is often felt to be light-hearted, as these quotes illustrate:

*"A bit of brain dead viewing."*

*"You don't have to think."*

*"It's funny ... we have a laugh at it."*

*"They like to bring down tall poppies."*

*"You tend not to take it too seriously ... sometimes you just watch it to have a laugh."*

They also enjoy the glamour and entertainment of celebrity news or scandals (e.g. Jennifer Hawkins in New York), as well as insights into the lives of everyday people which can cause outrage and disbelief. This latter category was commonly described as 'tut-tut' stories which were regarded as those stories covering trivial actions of others which often cause outrage. These included stories such as 'Corey Delaney' and other neighbourhood disputes.

## 6.4 Style of Reporting of News and Current Affairs Programs

News and CCA programs are perceived to be very different in terms of the style of reporting. Viewers perceive the reporting style of news programs to be rational and objective, as opposed to CCA programs where reporting is seen to be rather more emotional and subjective.

The community saw news programs as using rational techniques such as:

- Reporters in location / news anchor speaking directly to the camera:
  - on location or with a still shot behind;
- Interviews which are planned media pieces or statements (in most cases); and
- Interviewed subjects who are 'experts' – police, scientists, lawyers, judges.

Whereas, on CCA programs, more emotive, subjective actions are taken:

- A range of interview techniques are used:
  - confrontational
  - edited interviews
  - voice overs;
- The language used can be emotive – for example the phrase 'heart wrenching' was used by the presenter in the King - Child Support clip); and
- 'Tricks' are used in gathering footage.

## 6.5 Emotive Reporting of CCA programs

The community actually expects this emotive style of reporting in CCA programs and it is perceived to be deliberate. Viewers feel the shows are deliberately attempting to elicit emotion from them, through the way they report the stories. Indeed in many instances the programs achieve this successfully, as the following quotes illustrate:

*They want you to react... that's why they do it."*

*"They try to stir you up, to make you angry ... there will always be a villain and a victim."*

*"They're emotive, they want you to feel for the people or to get angry..."*

*They let you have a good scream at the TV anyway..."*

*"It can make you angry seeing people being ripped off."*

In fact, the reporting style of CCA programs is seen as integral in shaping the story and eliciting the desired emotions from the viewers. They understand that differing interviewing techniques help shape their opinions on the subject. For example,

- a person refusing to comment / running from the camera is seen to have something to hide (such as the natural father (King) – in the Child Support clip);
- aggressive interviewing techniques are seen to provoke differences and emotion (as seen when interviewing the business owner in the Balson – Fiji homestay clip); and
- edited interview footage can be used out of context (Telstra, Chicken Meat).

The community are aware of footage being used subjectively to add emphasis or sensationalise a story. For example, this includes the use of re-enactments to 'create' a scene, as seen with the glowing chicken in the Chicken Meat clip, or the nursing home resident seen 'chained' to her bed on an episode of Today Tonight in February 2007.

*"What concerns me is a lot of the times the reporters are in on it [wrong doings], like when that resident chained herself up, and that was proved to be a load of rubbish."*

Using hidden cameras or file footage to elaborate on a point is also classified as a subjective action that broadcasters use. Viewers felt that file footage was used in the Telstra clip:

*"It didn't look like the people on camera were Telstra staff, there were lots of kids around."*

## 6.6 Expectations of Bias on CCA Programs

It is generally understood that CCA programs have a purpose or an agenda for their stories and as a result they may be one-sided or biased. Viewers believe they can spot the necessary truths and leave the bias behind and thus, the existence of bias can be accepted to some extent. It is the use of bias that viewers sometimes question in terms of the accuracy in the presentation of materials. That is, they are more likely to spontaneously express concern about whether viewpoints are being expressed fairly on CCA program than to doubt the factual accuracy of what viewpoints are presented.

This bias is often forgiven by viewers because of their interest in the story and often the program is seen to be biased towards helping the 'little person' or the everyday consumer as opposed to the large corporation. These quotes below illustrate the points made above:

*"The issues are relevant, it's how they sell it that is false."*

*"Some of it is true, some of it is not ... you take out what you want ..."*

*"You know they are pushing a particular point ... you just take the bits that are relevant to you."*

*"You don't expect it to be factual or balanced ... it's not like the BBC is it?"*

*"Some of the stories are pretty one-sided ..."*

## 6.7 Emotive Reporting

However, this emotive reporting and a certain level of bias can confuse viewers at times. The case study that we presented involving the Australian Chicken Meat Federation illustrated that with some CCA stories viewers are confused as to the extent to which they should take them seriously. At the beginning, the viewers regarded the re-enactment as entertainment, given the extreme pictures of the glowing chicken and the use of the science fiction style soundtrack.

Yet when the 'factual' information about bacteria and antibiotics was presented this changed the tone of the story and it appeared to be a more serious issue. Viewers seemed to be unsure as to how they should regard the story and were left feeling confused after viewing a story blending 'entertainment' with 'information'.

## 7 EXPECTATIONS OF ACCURACY AND REPRESENTATION OF VIEWPOINTS

### 7.1 Perceptions of the Code of Practice

Prior to a discussion on factual accuracy and the representation of viewpoints of CCA programs, respondents were shown relevant sections of the Code and were asked for their interpretation. Section 4.3 and 4.3.1 of the Code were shown to viewers:

4.3 *"In broadcasting news and current affairs programs, licensees: ...*

*4.3.1 must present factual material accurately and represent viewpoints fairly, having regard to the circumstances at the time of preparing and broadcasting the program"; (...)*

#### Reactions to 'Presenting Factual Material Accurately'

Viewers interpret the meaning of 'presenting factual material accurately' in a number of ways. In essence they believe this means telling 'the truth', whether it is numbers, statistics or other factual information. They feel it means both sides of a story should be presented so that all the facts are presented accurately and are not omitted. They also believe factual information should have supporting evidence, or come from a reputable source, such as an official agency, an appointed spokesperson or an expert. These quotes below illustrate people's interpretations:

*"This means telling the truth."*

*"This is being non-biased when reporting facts."*

*"When it's been researched, when there is evidence ... a piece of paper, a scientific expert."*

*"It's truth, not rumours ... something tangible like voicemail messages or interviewing scientists."*

In terms of CCA programs presenting factual material 'accurately', viewers did not doubt that this is done. For the most part, the accuracy of the actual facts being presented in these shows is rarely questioned. The main concern which was raised spontaneously by viewers was whether the factual material of both sides of a story is presented:

*"It's quite often inflated news."*

*"It's definitely a one sided argument a lot of the time."*

Generally it is perceived that these programs are one-sided as they omit facts from the story. Viewers feel this is often because the broadcaster has not conducted the same amount of research into all facets of the story or they have not asked both parties key questions that will get to the bottom of the story, as they want to create a more interesting story.

*"They don't tell lies, but they don't tell all the truth."*

*"They just don't ask, then they don't have to report on it."*

### **Reactions to 'Represent Viewpoints Fairly'**

Respondents have differing opinions on the meaning of 'representing viewpoints fairly' which is found in clause 4.3.1 of the Code. Most feel that it means presenting both sides of a story and some people take that one step further and regard it as allowing both sides of the story the opportunity to personally have their say. Some also feel that the interviewing techniques come into consideration and aggressive or subjective interviewing techniques, such as the use of leading questions, should not be used if viewpoints are to be represented fairly. The community also feel it means not using edited interview clips to intentionally leave out relevant sections. The quotes below express viewers' opinions on their interpretation of 'representing viewpoints fairly'.

*"You've got to have two sides of the story."*

*"It's not being chased by cameraman, it's genuinely trying to get both sides of the story."*

At this stage in the group discussions, the way viewpoints were represented was typically of greater concern than factual accuracy simply because they did not doubt the facts to be anything but correct. There were a few people, however, who accept that this is the way CCA programs operate and these individuals expressed very little concern. These quotes below show individuals' concerns surrounding CCA programs 'representing viewpoints fairly':

*"They say they tried to contact the other person ... but you don't really know what happened."*

*"They're always one-sided – but maybe they're not able to show both sides."*

*"They're quite often biased and they don't seem to care who they hurt."*

*"It gets a bit much when the stories are really one sided ... or when they make someone out to be much worse than they really are."*

*"They are obviously allowed to do whatever they want to a certain extent."*

#### **Clause 4.3.11 of the Code**

In order to establish and inform respondents about the correct context about errors and remedies, people were also shown clause 4.3.11 of the Code and asked to comment on this. Clause 4.3.11 states:

*"In broadcasting news and current affairs programs, licensees must make reasonable efforts to correct significant errors of fact at the earliest opportunity."*

They were asked their views on their interpretation of 'reasonable efforts to correct at the earliest opportunity'. Many people take this to mean preventing the 'error' from being broadcast in the first place. Viewers also feel it means licensees should make a correction and / or an apology on the next program after the error has been discovered.

The terminology 'significant errors' is perceived to have many possible meanings by the community. For some it is interpreted as broadcasting incorrect factual information (such as dates, times or financial information), but it is also interpreted as those errors which have a subsequent impact. These include errors such as untrue accusations that impact on a person's/ company's reputation, termed as 'defamation' and 'slander' by some community members, or statements that create or change the meaning of the story that have no basis in fact. People's views on the definition of 'significant error' are illustrated through the quotes below:

*"Misrepresenting or misleading ... providing incorrect facts."*

*"It's defaming one's character ... presenting hearsay, not real facts."*

*"This would be when they make mistakes, when important messages aren't passed on ... although it could be quite innocent at the time."*

#### **Efficacy of Clause 4.3.11**

While the majority of respondents accept 4.3.11 as a reasonable clause in the Code, some people question its efficacy. Firstly, it is recognised that this clause requires someone at the broadcaster to spot or point out the error, but the community are sceptical about this happening if all sides of the story are not researched thoroughly. Secondly, some queried the effectiveness of correcting and apologising after the program has aired and felt that this is in some cases too late:

*"The damage is already done ... so many people that saw the show wouldn't see the apology."*

*"People have already made up their minds."*

Other people were extremely sceptical of the clause itself due to its ambiguity, as one respondent commented:

*"It sounds like it's worded so that they can get around it."*

## 8 ATTITUDES TOWARDS A FAILURE TO PRESENT FACTUAL MATERIAL ACCURATELY OR VIEWPOINTS FAIRLY

### 8.1 Expectation of Broadcasting Factually Accurate Material

In order to gauge community attitudes towards a failure of CCA programs to present material accurately or viewpoints fairly, the case study clips from the homework DVD were used in the groups, as well as an additional clip (Balson – Fiji Homestay).

There is no doubt that the expectation among the community is that what is shown on CCA programs is factually accurate, in terms of:

- the numbers;
- expert opinions;
- reports from relevant agencies; and
- the opinions of interested parties / groups and authorities with interests or views on the issue.

When the moderator explained each of the factual inaccuracies in the case study clips, viewers were appalled and shocked at this, because while they expect and can accept bias of facts, they do not expect or accept 'conscious lies'.

Prior to attending the groups, viewers felt that the incorrect presentation of facts was usually due to poor or sensationalistic journalism. Very few had considered that the programs deliberately do not use all the facts they are provided (such as in the Telstra or Chicken Meat case studies) or that they would claim that an untrue statement was made by an authority (as in the King – Child Support Agency). This resulted in such strong reactions which was indicative of their disbelief. Some of these reactions to the case studies are shown below.

## Community Reactions to the Case Studies: Telstra – Lindeman Island

1. The moderator explained that the facts surrounding the number of Telstra staff attending the Lindeman Island event and, therefore, the costs were factually inaccurate and Telstra was portrayed as spending more on the event than they actually did.
2. The moderator then explained that the program was told before the broadcast that the numbers were inaccurate by Telstra but they didn't change the broadcast.

These quotes are illustrative of people's reactions.

*"Are you saying this story is sensationalising the program deliberately?"*

*"That's blatant – it's clearly wrong, it's morally wrong. They've made no reasonable attempt to correct the facts."*

*"That's wrong, that's much worse because they knew they were wrong but they still went ahead ... it's pretty low."*

*"Oh that's pretty bad as they just couldn't be bothered to change the story."*

*"Ah that's bad as it's misrepresenting the information."*

*"But that means they knowingly mislead the public."*

*"It doesn't change things much it's just a bit annoying that they've been misrepresented."*

*"It wouldn't have made any difference to the Telstra bashing in the story anyway...why would they do that? It's just wrong."*

### Case Study: Chicken Meat

The moderator explained that the Australian Chicken Meat Federation sent a letter to *A Current Affair* saying that the green meat was due to green muscle syndrome – a condition that occurs in some chickens, and was not due to bacteria. This information was provided to *A Current Affair* before the show aired but the program did not acknowledge receiving any information from the chicken meat federation. In addition, the meat was tested and no bacteria were found. This information was available to the broadcaster before the show aired but it was consciously left out.

These quotes below show a range of people's remarks:

*"Oh my god! That's really bad."*

*"Well they sensationalised it more by omitting these facts."*

*"I don't think I'm going to be able to watch these programs again now."*

*"That's unforgivable – it's so dishonest ... it's not a bit of fun – it has an impact on a whole industry."*

*"I find it all really shocking because I don't know what to believe anymore ... if you can't trust the facts they present you with ..."*

*"I still wouldn't want to eat the chicken...but it should have been included."*

### Case Study: King – Child Support

The moderator explained that the statement that King had not paid adequate child support for his biological child was factually inaccurate and the Child Support Agency had made no such comment.

People's responses are illustrated below.

*"That just shows the program is crap."*

*"I feel really angry that the program can manipulate our emotions like that."*

*"They had no right to say that."*

*"That's shocking – where did they get it from and why did they have to say it?"*

*"That sucks, it's disgusting ... it is so defamatory for that person."*

*"That's so unjust...the show, the presenter should be taken to court."*

## 8.2 The Scale of Inaccuracy

Interestingly, the scale of the inaccuracy did not seem to change the strength of viewers' reactions. They regarded the situation as just as serious whether the inaccuracy changed the intent of the story (such as in the King - Child Support Agency case study), or if it was peripheral and did not have such an effect. For example, in the Telstra case study where the intent of the story could have been achieved if the figure was \$200,000 rather than \$1.5 million. In this case, the dollar figure being spent was not the issue, but instead the money being spent in the first place.

Ultimately, this is because the real concern to viewers is that in some instances the programs are consciously using inaccurate information and programs currently feel they can get away with it. Furthermore, the implications of the programs consciously presenting inaccuracies can be frightening for viewers as they begin to question whether they can still separate fact from fiction. Prior to attending the groups, people believed they were able to do this, but the case studies began to make them question whether they can still do this. They also wondered whether they had accepted other inaccuracies on CCA programs. These quotes illustrate some of the viewers' concerns:

*"What can we believe on the show then?"*

*"So everything you're saying about each clip is true? Oh I didn't realise that."*

*"It just worries me about the dishonesty of it."*

Additionally, conscious inaccuracies also cause viewers to question the value they place on these programs. Many viewers see the programs as having some value and a role to play in society, particularly for members of the general public. These programs:

- highlight social and community issues that would otherwise go unnoticed;
- stand up for the 'everyday person'; and
- give everyday people a voice against those with more power (large corporations and government).

While they may question the slant on what is shown, a 'conscious error', which viewers regard as a lie, is unacceptable to them as it is a betrayal of the 'everyday people' and is an attack on those people that the program is supposed to give a voice to. Viewers who watch CCA programs primarily for a source of news and entertainment feel particularly let down by the programs committing 'conscious' errors as they begin to question which information to trust.

### 8.3 Expectations of Broadcasting Representative Viewpoints

As was previously mentioned, the community expects CCA programs to have an agenda for the story and viewpoints expressed by interviewees are perceived to be skewed to enhance the story. Viewers expect that the reporting techniques will be used in a manner that results in viewpoints being 'twisted', such as:

- aggressive reporting and leading questions with one party and not the other (Balson - Fiji homestay clip);
- the use of unrelated pieces of information to create the story (Telstra case study); and
- edited interviews so one side does not get the opportunity to provide all information (e.g. perceived to have occurred in the Fiji homestay clip).

*"You know it's biased ... you take everything with a pinch of salt."*

*"The issues are relevant, it's how they sell them that is questionable."*

However, it is also expected that all viewpoints shown will have some basis in fact, even if it is nominal. For example, in all our case study examples, viewers believed that there were underlying facts forming the story, but they recognised that different techniques were used to exaggerate the story. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the expectations among viewers:

Figure 3 – Expectations of the Fiji – Homestay Case Study Clip

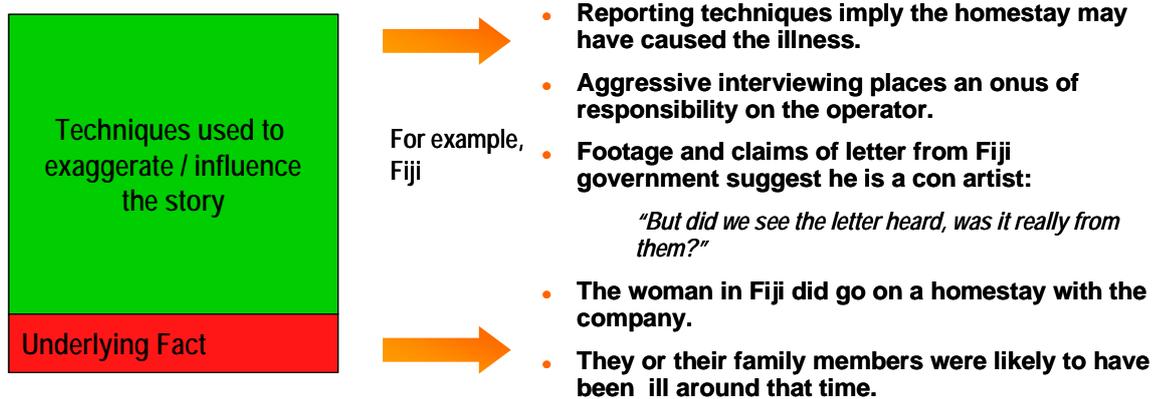
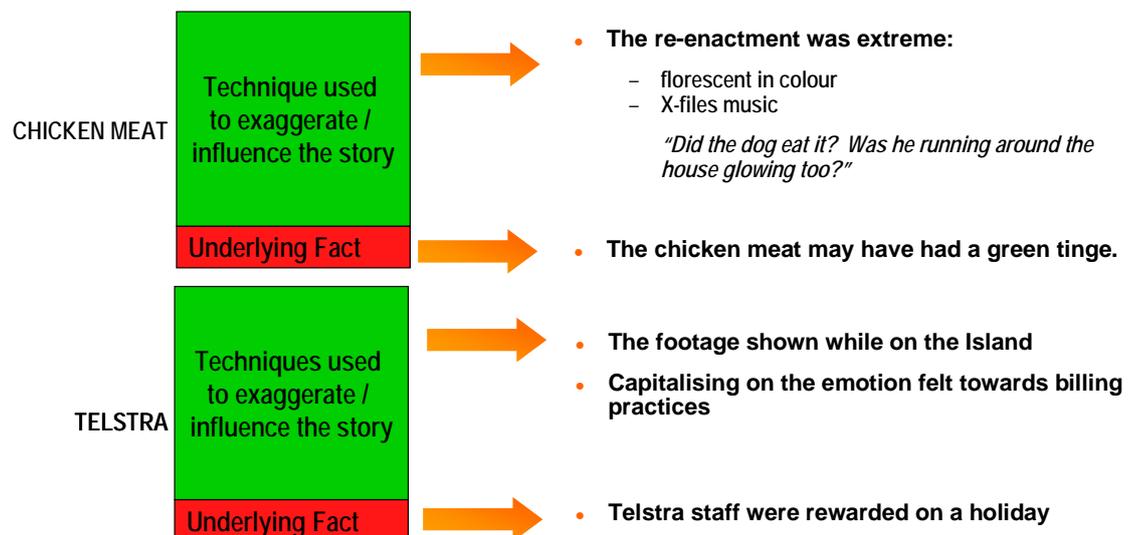


Figure 4 – Expectations of the Chicken Meat and Telstra Case Study Clips



## 8.4 Accepted Level of Exaggeration

Whether the level of 'exaggeration' used is acceptable to viewers appears to be based on the 'type' of story. The more a story is perceived as being of community or social interest, the more 'responsible' it is expected to be. Examples of stories like these include consumer alerts which may influence the community's purchasing decisions and stories where the reputation of individuals and companies are affected.

In these instances the stories should:

- have a greater 'base' of facts and show more of these rather than exaggerated reporting techniques;
- attempt to learn and portray both sides of the story; and
- show both sides / views of opposing parties with equal fairness and in the same reporting style.

There is less of an expectation of balance when the story is of little consequence to the broader community, such as celebrity stories or stories that cause little harm to individuals such as neighbourhood disputes. However, there is still the expectation that these will have some factual basis.

## 9 SERIOUSNESS IN FAILURES TO MAINTAIN ACCURACY

An important objective of the research was to assess how the community views different levels of seriousness of errors in CCA programs. The following analysis was drawn from the community's reactions when inaccuracies were pointed out in the case studies and the self-complete exercise which asked them to match different remedies to different inaccuracies, using hypothetical case studies (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Self- Complete Exercise – List of Circumstances Leading to Inaccurate Presentation**

CASE STUDIES	REMEDY THAT SHOULD APPLY
<p>1) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included footage of a room in a filthy state. The reporter describes the footage as an example of "the squalid living conditions residents put up with". What if you learnt that the filthy room had not been occupied for six months and would be cleaned and refurbished before being occupied?</p>	
<p>2) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included a statement by a resident that she had been verbally abused by staff. The nursing home manager was interviewed for the report but this allegation was not put to him during the interview. What if the resident was involved in an unrelated dispute with management and her allegation was unsubstantiated?</p>	
<p>3) A) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included a copy of a nursing home budget (given to the reporter by a former employee) which showed that the home spent only \$5 per person per day on meals. The budget was not shown to the nursing home management for comment prior to broadcast. What if \$5 was a typographical error and the budget was actually \$25 per day? The error was only discovered after the broadcast.</p> <p>3 B) The reporter showed the food budget to the nursing home manager during an interview but the manager was unable to tell the reporter what the nursing home spends on food. What if the manager had contacted the reporter prior to the broadcast with evidence that the nursing home spends \$25 per day on food but this was not included in the story?</p>	

<p>3 C) The reporter showed the food budget to the nursing home manager during an interview. The program showed the manager saying, "You can't feed anyone on \$5 a day," then cut away. What if the manager had actually said, "You can't feed anyone of \$5 a day. We spend at least \$25 a day."?</p>	
<p>4) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included footage of an attempt to interview the nursing home manager as he was getting into his car. The manager drove off without answering the reporter's questions. The reporter said that the nursing home management refused to comment on the issues raised in the report. What if the manager had offered to be interviewed prior to broadcast but his offer was rejected?</p>	
<p>5) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included an interview with the nursing home manager, during which he was shown photos of an elderly man's bruises and was told the bruising occurred as a result of rough handling by his staff. The manager said, "That's terrible." The reporter then accused the manager of being unaware of the actions of his staff. What if the bruising in the photos occurred as a result of a fall, and not rough handling?</p>	
<p>6) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home mistakenly identified the manager of the nursing home as Mr Smith when in fact his name was Mr Smitts.</p>	

### Possible Remedies Viewers had to Match to the Hypothetical Case Studies

1. nothing needs to be done
2. letter sent to the complainant only
3. apology online
4. correction online
5. apology on air
6. correction on air

## 9.1 Three Levels of Errors

From analysis, three levels of 'errors' in terms of seriousness emerged. These will be discussed in turn:

- Level 1 – the 'Absolute Nots' - are considered the most serious;
- Level 2 – errors due to sensationalist journalism; and
- Level 3 – errors from poor journalism.

## 9.2 Level 1 Errors – the 'Absolute Nots'

These are errors that in the eyes of the community should never happen and which should be corrected without question. They include the errors that undermine the critical difference between 'Current Affairs' and fictional television. The act of consciously lying was perceived as undermining all ethical and moral standards attached to journalism, however 'bad' that journalism may be. Moreover, it was perceived to be in breach of the social obligation that CCA programs have to have a basis in truth.

The 'Absolute Not' errors encompass instances where key information is consciously ignored or omitted and is often in order to maintain the theme or viewpoint the story is biased towards. The public regarded the Telstra and the Chicken Meat case studies to be classic examples of Level 1 errors as true facts were omitted, even though these were provided to the program prior to the broadcast. In terms of the hypothetical case studies, the community felt examples 3B and 3C to be Level 1 errors as facts were left out consciously.

Level 1 errors also include instances where key information is deliberately distorted or misused in order to change viewers' perceptions. Examples include:

- the use of footage or interviews out of context to create a distorted perception of the facts;
- deliberately leading viewers to a false conclusion; and
- situations which had been 'created' which did not previously exist.

From the case study material, the community felt that hypothetical case study 3A fitted this category as key information about the room was misused. Some respondents also recalled the story on *Today Tonight* (February 2007) about a nursing home resident that was made to look like she was chained to her bed, but in

actual fact the broadcaster brought the chains along themselves to create a distorted story and felt this to be classified a Level 1 error.

Lastly, Level 1 errors also include instances when *any* information is entirely fabricated and not based on the truth, whether that is presented as a viewpoint or a fact. Respondents classed the King – Child Support case study as an example of this error since the information stated at the end of the clip from the Child Support Agency was entirely fabricated.

Different types of Level 1 errors are perceived to be just as severe as each other. It does not seem to matter whether the information is integral to the intent or purpose of the story or if it changes the impact of the story on an individual *or* the community. This is due to the fact that viewers have difficulty in accepting an act whereby the broadcaster consciously changes the information through omission, misrepresentation or fabrication. The quotes below portray viewers' thoughts:

*"I find this dumfounding. I take what they say as facts ... it means I probably won't watch it anymore." (King - Child Support)*

*"You feel cheated – it was blatantly wrong because people believe what they say on the program." (Telstra- Lindeman Island)*

*"They should be made to say we deceived you ... it's not a mistake if it's an intentional deception."*

### 9.3 Level 2 Errors – Errors or Unfairness due to Sensationalist Journalism

Viewers regard Level 2 errors as those that largely occur due to sensationalist journalist techniques. Level 2 errors are caused by:

- scripted footage, hidden camera, file footage, re-enactments
- interview techniques and leading interviewing such as:
  - aggressive questioning
  - surprising interviewees
  - not asking all the questions on the issues, so the story becomes skewed
- not using credible sources.

Viewers recognise that these techniques are used on CCA programs and that these errors occur. The seriousness of these errors is judged on the impact it has on individuals or the broader community. When these techniques result in inaccuracies

that have a high impact on people, they are seen to be more serious, such as hypothetical case study 2. This was a report of a nursing home manager which included a statement by a resident that she had been verbally abused by staff, and while the manager had been interviewed, he was not asked about the allegation. Viewers feel this is serious as it has an impact on the individuals involved, including the business owners of the nursing home and on members of the broader public, especially those who may be considering, or have, family members in a nursing home.

For Level 2 errors, viewers question the way footage is used in some instances to misrepresent people and places in stories. Reporting techniques used include: hidden cameras, file footage, re-enactments and scripted 'set-up' footage. Interview techniques are perceived to provide the most scope for inaccurate presentation. Interview reporting techniques include aggressive and leading questioning, interviews whereby the interviewee is surprised or unprepared for the interviews and not asking relevant questions.

Using dubious sources is also perceived to result in inaccuracies or unfair representation. Broadly speaking, stories are accepted if the source is 'authorised' or from an 'appointed spokesperson' for an organisation. For example, viewers considered the reliance on the Telstra spokesperson for numbers of staff attending the event to be reasonable as he was the 'official' spokesperson. However, viewers feel that where the source is unauthorised, it is not considered reasonable for a program to rely on their information and present it as fact. For example, using material from a former employee (who may be disgruntled), a whistle blower or an undisclosed friend should not be taken as fact and should be backed by other evidence.

#### 9.4 Level 3 Errors – Errors due to 'Poor Journalism'

The third category of errors include those that are considered to be a result of 'poor journalism', rather than any attempt to sensationalise or deliberate mislead the viewer. These inaccuracies include those, such as:

- incorrect names;
- mispronunciation;
- incorrect spelling; and
- typographical / clerical errors reliance on an authorised spokesperson without asking for clarification of any ambiguity.

Within the category of Level 3 errors, viewers see these differing in degrees of seriousness, depending on the impact of the error on others. For example, a less serious error was seen in hypothetical case study 6, which was a report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home which mistakenly identified the manager of the nursing home as Mr Smith when in fact his name was Mr Smitts. Unless there was damage to this man's reputation, this is not regarded to be serious. Whereas, a typo in hypothetical case study 3A is seen to be more serious because poor journalism could potentially damage the nursing home's reputation. This was a report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home which included a copy of a nursing home budget (given to the reporter by a former employee). This budget showed that the home spent only \$5 per person per day on meals but this budget was not shown to the nursing home management for comment prior to broadcast. The \$5 was a typographical error and the budget was actually \$25 per day. This error was only discovered after the broadcast.

## 10 REMEDIES

### 10.1 Role of the Remedy

The community feels that the primary role of a remedy is prevention and a deterrent for CCA programs for allowing these errors to occur in the first place. The underlying rationale is that viewers feel that the broadcaster has a responsibility to do this and the imposition of a remedy will assist in ensuring that this occurs. The following quotes express viewers' thoughts on the role of remedies:

*"It's to stop them doing it again."*

*"The punishment should be sufficient to stop them from doing it again ... allow them to be sued if necessary."*

*The role of any action should be to make them think twice about doing it again ... and to make the public aware that this kind of thing goes on."*

*"They would lose credibility if they had to keep doing this all the time."*

It is recognised that there are a number of other roles for remedies to fulfil if this is to be achieved. Firstly, respondents feel that a remedy should make viewers aware that an error has been made as this will identify inaccuracies that they may not be aware of. In doing this, they also feel the role of a remedy should be to improve the awareness of viewers that errors do occur in these programs, which may prompt viewers to change their expectations of these programs and the role they have for the community. As one viewer explained:

*"I guess if they are apologising all the time, people would begin to think their show is rubbish."*

Thirdly, viewers regard the role of a remedy to rectify the potential harm, whether that be personal or financial, done to an individual(s) or a company due to an inaccuracy.

It is through these various roles that a remedy should have that viewers feel the broadcaster may be deterred from making these errors in the first place, as it would ultimately lead to financial implications for the broadcaster. Viewers perceive that if people are made aware when an error has been made, they may begin to question the credibility of these shows and the role they fulfil, and in turn may stop watching. This would ultimately impact on ratings and, thus, financial gains for the broadcaster.

Whether this cycle works, however, is dependent on whether people will stop watching these shows if they are aware of the inaccuracies.

## 10.2 Types of Remedies

Respondents were asked about the remedies or actions that could be implemented by broadcasters. Viewers' opinions tend towards the extreme which reflects the strength of the outrage and disbelief that the community feels towards inaccuracies being allowed to occur on CCA shows. Spontaneous responses to the types of remedies that could be implemented included:

- fines;
- corrections;
- retractions;
- apologies;
- compensation paid to individuals;
- disclaimers prior to the program saying that it may not be factually accurate;
- demerit points applied to licenses (a '3 strikes and you are out' rule);
- programs being taken off air either permanently or for a punishment period (like a suspension); and
- loss of licence.

This extreme reaction is consistent across almost all viewers because people feel these programs have an ethical and moral obligation to avoid inaccuracies, however they arise. Slight variations occur depending on whether viewers primarily watch CCA programs for entertainment or for news or information.

## 10.3 'Entertainment' Viewers' Reactions to Remedies

Mostly 'Entertainment' viewers' reactions to appropriate remedies are based on their concern of the impact of the inaccuracies and unfairness on the broader community. While they themselves might question some of the accuracy or fairness of the material used in the programs, they believe that other members of the community may be oblivious to it. They express concern as to how the general public may react to such stories and what the result might be. It is thought that inaccuracies could

result in direct harm to members of the general public, such as making decisions in their own lives, based on information they receive (e.g. changing banks and mortgage options). As one viewer explained:

*“My concern is how many people look at it and think it’s true – I think some people do take it as gospel.”*

‘Entertainment’ viewers’ reactions can also be attributed to the fact that they feel these stories may harm those involved in the story through the actions of the general public. This may be due to damage of people’s reputations, businesses and / or livelihoods. For example, in the Balson - Fiji case study the travel operator could have potentially been put out of business from the way he, and his business, was portrayed on the show as it was made to look like customers became sick as a direct result of the homestay. In the Chicken Meat case study, the clip may have resulted in people not eating chicken which could have potentially affected the economic livelihood of many chicken producers. Lastly, in the King – Child Support case study, viewers feel the personal reputation of King would have been affected as comments on the show could have potentially hurt him emotionally and mentally.

#### 10.4 ‘News / Information’ Viewers’ Reactions to Remedies

The reaction of viewers that watch mainly for ‘news and information’ to inaccuracies and unfairness are more personal than ‘entertainment’ viewers’ reactions. These people are more likely to value CCA programs for their community and social role. They place value on these stories and may discuss the topics with other people. They admit that sometimes the programs may have a direct, personal impact on them (such as stopping eating chicken, having seen the Chicken Meat clip).

When told that inaccuracies occur on these programs, whether they be conscious or otherwise, people expressed strong emotions and as a result, they too recommended strong remedies. People feel betrayed and feel these programs are treating them as the ‘ignorant public’. They also feel frightened as they feel they can no longer identify ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’ on these shows.

There was a very small minority of viewers who did not share these reactions of mostly ‘entertainment’ viewers or those that watch primarily for ‘news/ information’. and did not suggest strong remedies. For this small group, the programs are meant to be purely entertainment where nothing is to be believed and everything that is presented is highly exaggerated to the point of fiction. These respondents tend to feel that no one should, or could rely on, or make decisions based on the stories anyway, and did not see a need for such strong remedial action. As one respondent explained:

*"Hell, it's just TV – turn it off if you don't like it."*

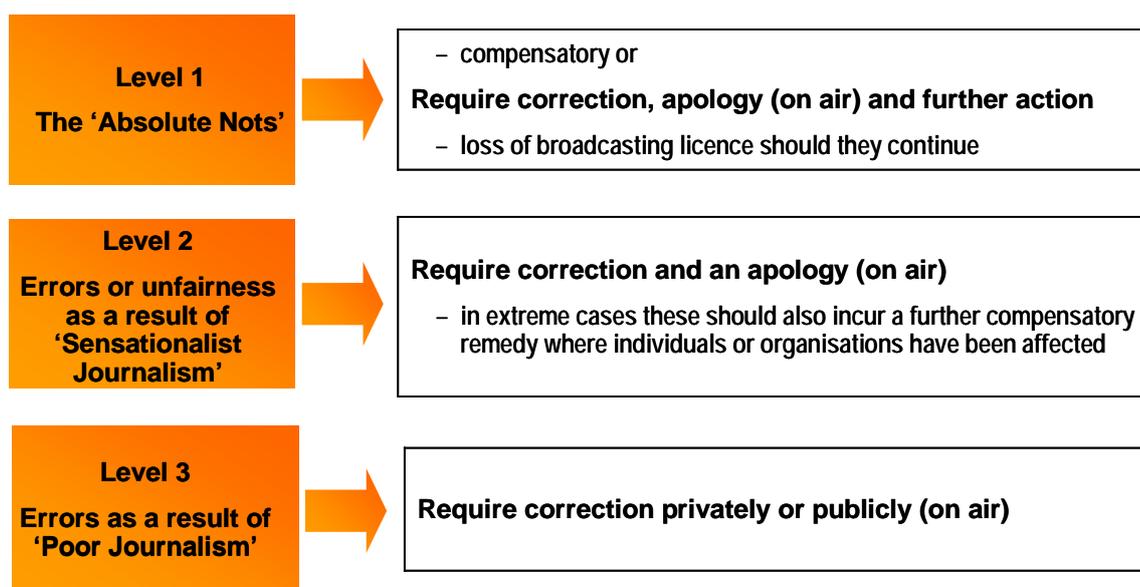
## 10.5 Differentiating Remedies for Different Breaches

Having established viewers' thoughts on remedies and gaining spontaneous reactions to what types of remedies should apply, it was also crucial to understand their thoughts on the different types of remedies that should apply, depending on the type of breach. In order to do this, respondents were asked to fill in a self-complete exercise using hypothetical situations and were asked what the appropriate remedy should be (see Figure 5). Their decisions were then discussed within the group.

Respondents were asked for their views as to which was the most appropriate remedy for each of the case study clips (i.e. Telstra, King – Child Support, Balson – Fiji homestay and Chicken Meat) and these responses were also drawn on in this analysis.

It was evident that appropriate remedies were selected according to the perceived severity of the action. Different remedies were appropriate, depending on whether viewers regarded them as Level 1 errors, the 'Absolute Nots'; Level 2 errors, which are those resulting from 'sensationalist' journalism and Level 3 errors, resulting from 'poor journalism'. Figure 6 outlines the appropriate remedies, which will be discussed in turn.

Figure 6- Appropriate remedies for the varying errors



## 10.6 Remedies for Level 3 Errors

Viewers perceive Level 3 errors typically to be those inaccuracies which are the result of 'honest' mistakes and, as a result, the least severe remedies are considered appropriate. The chosen remedy reflects how the community perceive the severity of the impact to be on the parties involved. For example, the clerical error in hypothetical case study 6 which was a typo of an individual's name was seen to have little impact on the intent of the story or the individuals involved, and so a letter sent to the complainant was seen to be the appropriate remedy.

When a Level 3 error is made due to a lack of research, or reliance on an authorised source, and it has high relevance to the intent of the story or impacted on the parties involved in the clip, it is seen to be slightly more serious. In these instances a correction on air was deemed the most appropriate remedy. This was the case in hypothetical case study 3A, where there was a typo explaining the nursing home spent \$5 a day on food rather than \$25 and in the Telstra case study where the program relied on a Telstra spokesman for information.

## 10.7 Remedies for Level 2 Errors

For Level 2 errors caused by 'sensationalist journalism' a correction and an apology on air is seen as the most appropriate remedy to rectify the situation. This was seen to be the case in hypothetical case study 2 where 'sensationalist' journalism was seen to have been applied. Further remedies are also considered applicable when the inaccuracy or unfairness causes harm to individual people or small businesses, whether it be their reputation, finances or a person's mental or physical health. In these cases, it was thought that compensatory action should also be undertaken by the program such as showing a segment on the positives of a business or giving individuals or small businesses financial restitution for any loss due to the story.

Interestingly, the same compensatory action is not seen as necessary when the 'victim' is a large company, such as a bank or a major telecommunications company. Viewers feel these companies are able to look after themselves, and the program's actions would have had little impact on their high profile reputation. Viewers perceive it as entirely different when the 'victim' is 'an average Joe', or a small business because the damage done to their reputation would be more extreme and indeed these are the people and businesses the programs are supposed to champion.

*"It's different because this was really deliberate – it's character assassination ... it hurts people at lot more than the Telstra one."*

Despite this, respondents still feel a correction and an apology on air would be required for the large companies.

## 10.8 Remedies for Level 1 Errors

Level 1 errors – the ‘Absolute Nots’ draw the most severe suggestions for appropriate remedies. They are seen as requiring a correction and an apology on air to the general public for deliberately making the error as well as a private apology to the individual(s) involved. In instances where damage is done to an individual or small business, some compensatory action is also considered appropriate by viewers. For example, viewers felt this would be appropriate in the Chicken Meat clip and the King- Child Support agency clip, as these quotes suggest:

*“I think they should definitely correct it and send out an apology ... or run another story with the truth at the beginning of the show.”  
(King – Child Support)*

*“They should compensate him.. didn’t they say he had suffered from depression? That could have really sent him over the edge.” (King – Child Support)*

*“They should put his face back on TV and show that he was OK – clear his name.” (King – Child Support)*

*“They should champion his cause, do something for him rather than kick him in the teeth when he’s down.” (King – Child Support)*

Further to this, viewers felt that it is also necessary for programs to be punished if they present ‘Absolute Not’ inaccuracies as these are committed consciously and undermine the faith that viewers place in CCA programs. In these instances, the conscious presentation of an inaccuracy is considered to not only have an impact on the individuals directly involved but also on the community. Viewers perceive that a punishment would be the only deterrent.

*“I don’t think a simple apology is enough because they obviously keep doing it.”*

This was consistent whether the inaccuracy had an impact on individuals, such as in the King – Child Support case study, or on large companies, such as in the Telstra clip.

The punishments that respondents think are suitable for conscious inaccuracies are described in the viewers’ quotes below:

*“If you whacked them with a half million dollar fine they’d probably think twice about it.” (Telstra case study)*

*"They should be made to correct the injustice, to set the records straight."*

*"They should have penalty points – like demerit points, and when they receive a certain number their license is up."*

*"If they do it often enough then they should have three days off the air – make it like school ... you're suspended."*

*"When it's morally wrong there should be some punishment."*

*"In the apology they should have to say 'we knew the truth but we lied'."*

*"It would be humiliating if they had to say 'we deliberately did this'."*

Whatever the level of error, it is expected that a remedy involving a correction and an apology should be broadcast during the program because this is the medium used when the inaccuracy occurs. Viewers feel using this medium maximises the chances of reaching the same people who saw the inaccuracy. At the very least, they feel it should be carried out in the program's 'normal' public environment in which it operates as it would force the program to own up to the error in this same environment.

All viewers feel remedial action should occur as soon as the inaccuracy is proved. They recognise that this may be some time after the inaccuracy; however, it is better than no action at all if an error is unable to be prevented before broadcasting.

## 10.9 The Regulatory Environment

When viewers were reminded that commercial broadcasters operate within a self-regulatory environment they questioned whether this should be the case. They feel that CCA programs have a social obligation to the community, are influential in shaping the general public's opinions, views and actions and, therefore, it is considered ethical and moral that information presented is based in verifiable fact. Thus, when inaccuracies are presented, whether they are deliberate or created through sensationalist or poor journalism, they are considered to be wrong.

Viewers feel that programs are not always adhering to this obligation of self-regulation and abidance by the Code and in these instances, particularly when Level 1 errors occur, a regulatory body should step in.

*"I don't understand how they [commercial broadcasters] could get away with it...why doesn't someone stop them?"*

*"If they continue to get away with this kind of thing why can't someone bring them into line ... they've been allowed to be like this for decades."*

They expect the regulator to play a role in deterring broadcasters from consciously presenting factual inaccuracies or unfair viewpoints. Viewers feel that broadcasters need a deterrent in the form of a strong remedial action, particularly if they commit Level 1 errors. They feel the regulator should be able to impose actions that act as deterrents or impose punishments after a Level 1 error occurs, which is not possible at present.

*"If it keeps happening they should have to go beyond apologies because it obviously hasn't changed their philosophy."*

*"These companies have a loophole – it's called lots of money."*

Some of the punishments they suggest are:

- making a public apology stating what they had done and that they had done it deliberately;
- being fined;
- be given 'demerit points' (a three strikes and you are out rule); and
- loss of their licence.

## 11 CONCLUSIONS

From this qualitative research study, it is apparent that viewers expect that CCA programs will take some liberties with the presentation of factual information and, in particular, in the representation of viewpoints. However, when they were shown the case study material they are shocked that some of the errors could have happened. Specifically, they do not expect facts to be deliberately omitted (or ignored), distorted or misused, or for them to be entirely fabricated. Prior to attending the discussion groups, viewers thought that if inaccurate facts are presented, it is due to a lack of research into both sides of the story or by the right questions being asked.

Viewers feel that failure to correct inaccuracies on CCA programs by a broadcaster can be judged on a scale of seriousness. Level 3 errors largely occur due to poor journalism and they understand that these may happen from time to time. They are seen as being more serious if there is any negative impact on everyday people from the inaccuracy. Level 2 errors can be described as those inaccuracies or unfair representations that are due to the reporting techniques of sensationalist journalism. Again, they are seen as more serious if these techniques have a negative impact on everyday people. Lastly, Level 1 errors are the 'Absolute Nots' and are seen as those conscious omissions or distortions of key facts as well as the fabrication of any fact. These are considered to be the most serious and are perceived as 'unforgivable' by the public.

The level of seriousness of the error impacts on viewers' expectations of the remedy that should be implemented. The primary role of a remedy is perceived as being to deter the broadcaster from allowing inaccuracies or unfair representation to occur in the first place. This is due to the fact that the community has an expectation that CCA programs will always ensure that what is being presented is based on fact and the everyday people are not unduly harmed, either directly by the story, or as members of the general public.

Viewers believe that inaccuracies need to be rectified by strong remedies if this is to be achieved. However, expectations of remedies differ according to the level of seriousness of the error. Thus, for Level 3 errors viewers feel that at a minimum of some correction is required. If the error has some impact on the story this should be made publicly on air, otherwise it could be done privately through a letter. For Level 2 errors people feel that there should be an on air correction, apology and some restitution to parties that are harmed by the inaccuracy or unfair representation. Level 1 were the hardest errors for the community to accept and they felt these errors should not be committed at all. When these errors are committed, viewers feel the remedy should include some 'punishment', and could include making a public

apology stating their conscious error, handing out fines, giving 'demerit points' or a loss of their license.

Viewers believe that the regulator should play a more active role in ensuring that broadcasters are deterred from presenting factual inaccuracies and unfair representations of viewpoints, particularly those Level 1 errors. Currently the public feels that broadcasters are not regulating their own behaviour as well as they should be. They would welcome giving more power to the regulator to prevent these errors from ever happening.

**APPENDICES**  
**APPENDIX A – RECRUITMENT SCREENER**

## ACMA RECRUITMENT SCREENER

Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I work for \_\_\_\_\_, a market research company. I am looking for people to take part in a market research study for the Government about the broadcasting of current affairs programs. We are interested in talking to people about their views on current affairs programs on TV. There are no right or wrong answers, and all points of view are welcome.

We need people to take part in a group discussion / in-depth interview on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

We will be talking to people within two states in Australia and will focus on individuals with particular characteristics in each area. We therefore need to ask some questions to ascertain whether you are eligible to take part in a discussion in this area.

1. Do you or any of your close relations, work in any of the following industries?

Market research	1	<b>TERMINATE</b>
Advertising, marketing, public relations	2	
Media and journalism	3	
Australian Communications and Media Authority	4	

2. When was the last time you took part in a group discussion or depth interview? (Write in)

**TERMINATE IF LESS THAN 6 MONTHS AGO**

3. Which of the following age ranges do you fall into:

24 or under	1	THANK & CLOSE
25 – 39	2	SEE QUOTAS
40-54	3	
55+	4	

4. Which of the following current affairs programs do you currently watch?

None	1	None	Thank and close
Today Tonight (Commercial)	2	Continue to Q5	
A Current Affair	3		
60 Minutes	4		
Sunday	5		
Meet the Press	6		
Dateline (Public)	7		
Insight	8		
7.30 Report	9		
Difference of opinion	10		
Australian Story	11		
Lateline	12		
Stateline	13		
Insiders	14		
Four Corners	15		

5. For each of the programs mentioned above, do you watch them:

	At least three times a week	At least twice a week	At least once a week	At least once a fortnight	Less often
Today Tonight					Thank and close if watch both of these program less often
A Current Affair					
60 Minutes					
Sunday					
Meet the Press					
7.30 Report (Public)					
Difference of opinion					
Australian Story					
Lateline					
Stateline					
Insiders					

Note to recruiter:

A 'regular viewer' is one that must watch *Today Tonight* or *A Current Affair* at least three times a week. They can also be watching programs aired on a weekly basis such as *60 Minutes*.

- An 'occasional' viewer must watch *Today Tonight* or *A Current Affair*, at least once every two weeks through to those who watch them a maximum of twice a week. Respondents in this category may also watch other programs aired weekly.

Please ensure that in each of the nine groups, 2-3 respondents are also watching program(s) on national public broadcast stations at least once a fortnight or more often (i.e. SBS and ABC shows such as 7.30 Report and Insight).

6. Please say whether you agree or disagree to the following statements:

<i>Current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) is a valuable source of current news and information.	1	Recruit to 'No Concern'
I think that sometimes <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) can stretch the truth in some stories, but it doesn't bother me at all.	2	Recruit to 'No Concern'
It doesn't matter whether sometimes shows like <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) stretch the truth because they are just a bit of entertainment that people don't take seriously anyway.	3	Recruit to 'No Concern'
I sometimes worry that shows like <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) don't have all the facts in their stories.	4	Recruit to 'Concerned'
I often get concerned that shows like <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) do not always show the full facts in a story.	5	Recruit to 'Concerned'
I really worries me that shows like <i>current affairs show X</i> (insert name of program most commonly watched) selectively present facts to make a good story.	6	Recruit to 'Concerned'

## QUOTAS

### Exclude:

- those who work in the usual industries as well as government departments
- anyone who has taken part in a group discussion in the last 6 months
- exclude anyone who does not watch current affairs programs (at least be watching *Today Tonight* or *A Current Affair* at least once every fortnight)

Exclude those 24 yrs and under

Within each group:

- ensure relatively even distribution within the defined age bands

- ensure an even distribution between males and females within each group
- ensure that 2-3 people in each group are viewers of current affairs programs on public broadcasting services (ABC, SBS) at least once a fortnight as well as current affairs shows on commercial channels (Seven Network, Nine Network, Network Ten, Prime TV, Nine Perth, NBN and Imparja)

Within each regional group (Groups 7-9):

- also ensure that there is an even distribution of viewing regularity from respondents who view 'every night' to those who watch 'once or twice' a fortnight.

Regular viewers:

- must watch one nightly program, such as Today Tonight or A Current Affair at least three times a week. They can also be watching programs aired on a weekly basis such as 60 Minutes.

Occasional viewers:

- must watch one of the nightly current affairs programs, Today Tonight or A Current Affair, at least once every two weeks through to those who watch them twice a week. Respondents in this category may also watch programs aired weekly.

Ensure the full range of occasional viewers are represented in the groups – from 'twice a week' to 'once or twice a fortnight'.

Locations to be confirmed with ACMA

NSW Metro: Groups 1-2 in Parramatta

NSW Metro: Groups 3-4 St Leonards

Queensland Metro: Groups 5-6 Brisbane

Queensland regional: Groups 7, 9 Sunshine Coast

NSW Regional Group 8: Wagga Wagga

## APPENDIX B - HOMEWORK EXERCISE

22 January 2008

Dear respondent,

Thanks for agreeing to participate in our research study! Prior to coming along to our group discussion there are just a couple of things we need you to do:

1. Complete a few short questions about yourself (Exercise 1)
2. Watch the DVD enclosed which shows clips from current affairs programs and answer a few questions (Exercise 2)
3. Watch at least one show of either *Today Tonight* or *A Current Affair* before attending the group and answer a few questions (Exercise 3)

### Exercise 1

Firstly, a little bit about yourself...

1 Name: \_\_\_\_\_ 2  
Age: \_\_\_\_\_

3 Other household members: eg. husband and 6 year old son

4 On average how many hours of TV would you watch per week?

\_\_\_\_\_

5 When do you typically watch TV? E.g. weekday mornings, weekday evenings, Sunday afternoon

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6 What are your favourite programs at the moment? (list at least 3)

7. Why do you watch current affairs programs?

8. What do you especially like about current affairs programs?

9. What do you dislike about current affairs programs?

## Exercise 2

The next exercise involves you watching the DVD we have sent you and completing the short questionnaire about the excerpts sometime between now and when you attend the group discussion. Please ensure you watch each clip through to the end.

1. What are your thoughts on each of the following excerpts? Is there anything you particularly liked, disliked or noticed?

### Clip 1 – Chicken Meat

### Clip 2 – Neighbourhood dispute

### Clip 3 - Telstra

**Clip 4 - Child Support story**

2. Is there anything you particularly liked/disliked about the style of reporting or way the topics were reported on the show? For any examples, please tell us which clip it was in. Please write as much as you like.

**LIKED:**

**DISLIKED:**

### Exercise 3

This exercise involves watching one episode of either *Today Tonight* or *A Current Affair* before you come to the group discussion and answering the questions below.

- 1 Record the name and date of the current affairs program watched:

---

---

- 2 What were your overall thoughts about the program you watched? Any particular likes or dislikes?

3. What did you particularly like/dislike about the style of reporting or the way the topics were reported on the show?

LIKE:	DISLIKE:
-------	----------

We will collect your homework from you when we conduct the interview so it is important that you remember to bring it with you.

Thanks and see you soon!

Blue Moon Research

**Thank you for completing the 'homework' task. Don't forget to hand it in to us on the day!**

## APPENDIX C - DISCUSSION GUIDE

## 2769\_DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Introduction (10 mins)

Respondents to introduce themselves:

- Name, age, occupation
- Household, family members and so on.
- Number of TVs, whether Pay TV or not
- What news and current affairs programs they watch? How often, which ones, why

### Perceptions of current affairs programs in general? (15 mins)

- How do current affairs programs differ from news programs?
- What do current affairs programs provide / have / make you feel that other programs don't?
- How important is the information they provide?
- What does the information on current affairs shows provide that others don't?
- What current affairs programs are they aware of?
- Are they all the same? How do they differ?

### Focus upon TT and ACA

- Who watches TT and ACA (show of hands if not already clear) .
- Why watch one and not the other?
- What type of stories do you expect to see on shows like TT and ACA?
- For each - How would you describe this show?
- (Prompt with news? Entertainment? Something else?)
- What motivates you to watch TT/ACA?
- What are the barriers to watching these programs?
- Do you ever have any concerns about either of them? (MODERATOR NOTE: Important to understand whether each concern is about the individual program or about the genre?)
  - Probe out fully on what are concerns and why?

**Introduce the code of practice here and ask for views on what is factual accuracy and fairness of viewpoints. (10 mins)**

**Do not allow a discussion of whether or not the code is appropriate or not, rather ensure people understand this is how programs are 'judged' and is a bench mark for the clips that follow.**

- Probe for whether factual accuracy is only about facts and figures?
- What about viewpoints ? What is fair?

- Show them 4.3.11: In broadcasting news and current affairs programs, licensees must make reasonable efforts to correct significant errors of fact at the earliest opportunity
- What does this mean?
- What is a significant error?
- What do you think 'the earliest opportunity' means?
- When this is not done, what do you think should happen then?

Moderator: You should also know that the broadcasting companies follow a Code of Practice. They are required to investigate matters when a complaint is made. If the issue is not resolved between a broadcaster and a complainant, then the matter is taken to an independent regulatory body. This body must then investigate and decide the matter. This process takes time. I want you to bear this in mind.

We will now show you some clips that will help to understand what steps should be taken or different types of errors and mistakes.

### Perceptions of Facts (20mins)

SHOW TELSTRA EXAMPLE (Clip 1) IF NECESSARY

- How do you feel about the content and the persons/issues presented?
- What is it about the way that the facts, information and viewpoints were presented that makes you feel that way?

**Tell Respondents** - What if I told you that the event was for about 200 staff, some of whom were taking partners, not 800, and Club Med could not even host 800 people and that this means the event did not cost the \$1.5 Million as was stated in the broadcast?

- Does this change your views on how you feel about issues in the program? How? Why not?

**Tell Respondents** - The broadcaster originally relied on a Telstra spokesperson for the information about number of people attending.

- Do you think it was reasonable for them to do so?
- Is there anything else they could have done to check the facts on the numbers attending and how much the event would cost? What else could they have done?

**Tell Respondents** - What if I then told you that they were told before the broadcast that the numbers were inaccurate by Telstra and they didn't change the broadcast.

- What do you think they should have done? Why? Why not?
- What about when they do not correct a mistake that has been pointed out to them before broadcast?
  - How does that make you feel, now you know a licensee is obliged to correct a mistake at the earliest opportunity?
- What action should TT take in regards to this now it's clear the story is not accurate?
  - how should this correction happen?

- What if the program did not correct it?

### Perceptions of Viewpoints (15 minutes)

This one wasn't included in your homework exercise..... SHOW FIJI EXCERPT (Clip 2)

Note to moderator: spend less time on this case as there was no breach – and limit its use to cover difference.

Note to moderator: the broadcasters of current affairs programs – are not required to present all viewpoints. But the ones that are presented should be presented fairly

- What did you think of the story? What was it about the way the information was presented that made you feel like that?
- Do you think the program showed both sides of the story? How?
  - (probe on whether the owner of the homestay had enough time to put forward his views?)
- What about the bit where they said 'the parents were sick because of where they were staying'? **Did you take that as an opinion or a fact? Why?**
- When shows are presenting facts, how is that different to when they are presenting opinions?
  - (Probe how should facts/opinions be presented?)
  - (Should the program have said it was the woman's opinion and not a fact that her parents were sick as a result of the place they stayed)
- Would you expect the reporter to have checked the facts of the story?

### Scale of errors and remedies (35 minutes)

SHOW CHILD SUPPORT CLIP (ESPECIALLY THE END) IF NECESSARY

- Do you remember the clip?
- How do you feel about the persons / issues presented?
- **What is about the way that the facts, information and viewpoints were presented that makes you feel that way? SHOW CLIP**
- What did that statement at the end make you think towards Mr M?
- How did it make you feel about the legitimacy of his claim in regards to the other children?

**Tell respondents** - What if I told you that the child support agency made no such comment and that the statement that Mr M had not paid adequate child support for his biological child was factually inaccurate.

- Does knowing this change your feelings on how you think of Mr M? What about if you found out he actually had paid child support for that child? Does that change your views? why / why not?
- How would you feel if you were the man involved?

- What should be done about this?
- What is the appropriate remedy?

#### SHOW CHICKEN MEAT IF NECESSARY

Show excerpt (depends on timing can stop soon after the ACMF representative says his bit about what the heck is that)

- How do you feel about the content, the persons / issues presented?
- **What is about the way that the facts, information and viewpoints were presented that makes you feel that way?**
- What do you think was the impact of this program? How would you feel if you were a chicken producer?
- Would people stop eating chicken meat? What about any impact on people's health? On the economy?

**Tell Respondents** - What if I told you that the man from the chicken meat federation sent a letter to ACA saying that the green meat was due to green muscle syndrome – a condition that occurs in some chickens, and was not bacteria. This information was provided to ACA before the show aired. But the program did not acknowledge receiving any information from the chicken meat federation. Also the meat was tested and no bacteria was found. This information was available to the broadcaster before the show aired but it was left out.

- Do you think that it should have been incorporated?
- How would this have impacted your opinion if you had had the information?
- So, you're saying you think the story wasn't completely accurate and they didn't correct it, so what do you think should have happened?

Based on what you've seen so far...

- Are all the errors/ inaccuracies the same?
- Are some more serious than others? Why?
- Out of the clips you have seen (Telstra, Child Support, Chicken), which would you class as the most severe error, down to the least? (NB gauge an order)
- What other things do you think would be classed as a serious error?
- What would be a small error? Why?

#### **Attitudes towards and expectations of remedies that should apply under different circumstances (25 mins)**

- **What is the role of the remedy?** Gain spontaneous responses. Then prompt. (Key question)
  - To deter broadcaster from making same sort of errors

- To remedy the potential harm done to one person / one company?
  - To make viewers aware that an error had been made?
  - To improve the awareness of ordinary viewers on the possibility of errors in these programs?
- How should remedies differ depending on the seriousness of the error? To what extent do they feel there is a hierarchy of errors and to what extent do they see them of equal seriousness?
  - What remedies or actions could be implemented? (Spontaneous list)
  - Since it's the job of the broadcaster to correct the significant errors of fact first, which action do you think they can/ will take up front when they acknowledge there has been an error?
  - And which actions are most appropriate after a complaint has been investigated by a regulator?

#### SHOW LIST OF POSSIBILITIES - ON A BOARD

- First thoughts on these? (Split into 6)

HAND OUT SELF COMPLETE with cases of different mitigating circumstances on it and ask respondent to write the number of the remedy or action they feel should apply next to each, then discuss each in turn.

- What action or remedy do you think should apply here?
- Why that one? Why is it appropriate in that situation?  
(Prompt with why more severe or less severe remedies if needed).

#### Summary on Remedies

- How quickly after the show should these remedies be applied?
- If the correction on air / apology / other remedy has been done by broadcaster as a self-regulatory measure, would this give closure? Is that enough?
- Get respondents to imagine what it would be like if the Current Affairs programs were regularly required to make apologies and corrections on air. How would it affect their perceptions of these programs? Are consumers aware of the financial impact it would have on the broadcasters (loss of advertising revenue because of more time spent apologising...)

Note to moderators – when participants use words like 'retractions' – could you probe their understanding of the word eg is it similar to a correction- where do they expect to see it online / on air?...

## APPENDIX D - SELF-COMPLETE EXERCISE

**SELF COMPLETE 1 - LIST OF CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO INACCURATE PRESENTATION**

CASE STUDIES	REMEDY THAT SHOULD APPLY
<p>1) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included footage of a room in a filthy state. The reporter describes the footage as an example of “the squalid living conditions residents put up with”. What if you learnt that the filthy room had not been occupied for six months and would be cleaned and refurbished before being occupied?</p>	
<p>2) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included a statement by a resident that she had been verbally abused by staff. The nursing home manager was interviewed for the report but this allegation was not put to him during the interview. What if the resident was involved in an unrelated dispute with management and her allegation was unsubstantiated?</p>	
<p>3) A) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included a copy of a nursing home budget (given to the reporter by a former employee) which showed that the home spent only \$5 per person per day on meals. The budget was not shown to the nursing home management for comment prior to broadcast. What if \$5 was a typographical error and the budget was actually \$25 per day? The error was only discovered after the broadcast.</p> <p>B) The reporter showed the food budget to the nursing home manager during an interview but the manager was unable to tell the reporter what the nursing home spends on food. What if the manager had contacted the reporter prior to the broadcast with evidence that the nursing home spends \$25 per day on food but this was not included in the story?</p> <p>C) The reporter showed the food budget to the nursing home manager during an interview. The program showed the manager saying, “You can’t feed anyone on \$5 a day,” then cut away. What if the manager had actually said, “You can’t feed anyone of \$5 a day. We spend at least \$25 a day.”?</p>	
<p>4) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included footage of an attempt to interview the nursing home manager as he was getting into his car. The manager drove off without answering the reporter’s questions. The reporter said that the nursing home management refused to comment on the issues raised in the report. What if the manager had offered to be interviewed prior to broadcast but his offer was rejected?</p>	
<p>5) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home included an interview with the nursing home manager, during</p>	

<p>which he was shown photos of an elderly man's bruises and was told the bruising occurred as a result of rough handling by his staff. The manager said, "That's terrible." The reporter then accused the manager of being unaware of the actions of his staff. What if the bruising in the photos occurred as a result of a fall, and not rough handling?</p>	
<p>6) A report about the treatment of residents of a nursing home mistakenly identified the manager of the nursing home as Mr Smith when in fact his name was Mr Smitts.</p>	

**POSSIBLE REMEDIES TO MATCH TO THE HYPOTHETICAL CASE STUDIES**

1. nothing needs to be done
2. letter sent to the complainant only
3. apology online
4. correction online
5. apology on air
6. correction on air

## APPENDIX E – USING THIS RESEARCH

It is important that clients should be aware of the limitations of survey research.

### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research deals with relatively small numbers of group participants and attempts to explore in-depth motivations, attitudes and feelings. This places a considerable interpretative burden on the researcher. For example, often what group participants do not say is as important as what they do. Similarly, body language and tone of voice can be important contributors to understanding group participants' deeper feelings.

Client should therefore recognise:

that despite the efforts made in recruitment, group participants may not always be totally representative of the target audience concerned

that findings are interpretative in nature, based on the experience and expertise of the researchers concerned

### **Quantitative Research**

Even though quantitative research typically deals with larger numbers of group participants, users of survey results should be conscious of the limitations of all sample survey techniques.

Sampling techniques, the level of refusals, and problems with non-contacts all impact on the statistical reliability that can be attached to results.

Similarly quantitative research is often limited in the number of variables it covers, with important variables beyond the scope of the survey.

Hence the results of sample surveys are usually best treated as a means of looking at the relative merits of different approaches as opposed to absolute measures of expected outcomes.

## **The Role of Researcher and Client**

Blue Moon believes that the researchers' task is not only to present the findings of the research but also to utilise our experience and expertise to interpret these findings for clients and to make our recommendations (based on that interpretation and our knowledge of the market) as to what we believe to be the optimum actions to be taken in the circumstances: indeed this is what we believe clients seek when they hire our services. Such interpretations and recommendations are presented in good faith, but we make no claim to be infallible.

Clients should, therefore, review the findings and recommendations in the light of their own experience and knowledge of the market and base their actions accordingly.