

FREE-TO-AIR TELEVISION PROGRAMME CODE

PREAMBLE

1. Television exerts a strong influence on the community. In Singapore, as a medium for entertainment, information and education, television reaches almost all homes and is easily accessible to all people, including the young. Because of its impact, programmes over free-to-air television must at all times maintain a standard that is acceptable to the community.

2. The Media Development Authority of Singapore (“MDA”) is empowered to issue, and from time to time, review codes of practice relating to the standards of broadcast programmes. This Free-To-Air Television Programme Code (the “Code”) seeks to ensure that nothing is included in the programmes of any free-to-air television service which is against public interest or order, national harmony, or which offends good taste or decency.

3. The Code outlines the general standards to be observed for free-to-air television broadcasting in the Republic of Singapore. It takes into consideration the greater influence of local productions, as viewers can more easily identify with the lifestyles and values portrayed in them. Broadcasters must therefore be especially mindful of the overall context and themes of local programmes, apart from specific scenes or sequences. The implications, influences, lasting impressions and cumulative impact of such programmes must also be considered.

4. It is the responsibility of broadcasters to ensure that their programmes and services (whether analogue or digital) comply fully with the Code. The provisions set out in this Code have to be applied in spirit and should be read in conjunction with applicable legislation and licence conditions. Under the Broadcasting Act (Cap 28), MDA has the power to impose sanctions, including fines, on broadcasters who contravene the Code.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- 1 Programmes should not undermine public security interest or public confidence in the law and its enforcement in Singapore.
- 2 Matters pertaining to race and religion should be handled sensitively. Programmes should not be of a proselytic nature.
- 3 Broadcasters should be vigilant against the likely effects of all television material on children. It is therefore necessary for broadcasters to exercise considered judgement on the capacity of children, in different age groups, to cope with the depiction and treatment of material which may not be suitable for them.

- 4 Children's programmes should be wide-ranging in genre and content, but should avoid gratuitous scenes of violence, horror or sex. There should be a balanced mix of programmes to cater to the needs of children of different age groups.
- 5 Programmes with horror and supernatural content should be broadcast in timeslots that are less accessible to children.
- 6 Broadcasters should provide advisory notices for programme content which may be potentially disturbing or upsetting so as to enable viewers to make an informed choice.
- 7 Programmes on crime and violence should not be treated in a cynical, frivolous or callous manner. Such programmes should not incite, glamorise or in any way promote violence or other types of anti-social behaviour.
- 8 Content pertaining to sex and nudity (including programmes on AIDS, sex education, childbirth, etc.) should be treated with discretion and due consideration so as not to offend against good taste and decency.
- 9 Factual programmes such as news, current affairs or documentary programmes should present information in an objective, accurate and balanced manner.

PART 1: NATIONAL INTEREST

- 1.1 Television programmes should not:
 - (a) promote values and attitudes which are contrary to national interest;
 - (b) present information or events in a manner likely to mislead or cause alarm to the public;
 - (c) contain propagandist and ideological messages on behalf of any foreign country, group or organisation;
 - (d) contain extremist or anarchic messages, including the incitement of violence for political ends or other purposes; or
 - (e) sensationalise the treatment of any issue whether local, nationalistic or foreign in nature.
- 1.2 Broadcasters must ensure that due impartiality is observed in programmes dealing with matters of public policy or controversial issues of public importance in Singapore. Due impartiality requires programme producers to deal even-handedly when opposing points of view are presented in a programme. On matters of public importance, balance should be sought through the presentation, as far as possible, of principal relevant viewpoints. Programmes should not be slanted by the exclusion of facts or by misleading emphasis. Every reasonable effort must be made to ensure that the factual content of programmes is accurate.

PART 2: RACIAL & RELIGIOUS HARMONY

2.1 Matters pertaining to race and religion are sensitive and capable of evoking strong passion and emotions. Broadcasters should exercise due caution when featuring the views, beliefs, practices, or activities of racial and religious groups.

2.2 For the purpose of this part, race includes dialect groups and ethnic groups.

Race & Religion

2.3 Television as a mass medium should be kept secular. Programmes of a proselytic nature should not be broadcast.

2.4 Programmes which denigrate or are likely to offend the sensitivities of any racial or religious group should not be broadcast.

2.5 Programmes which incite or are likely to incite racial and/or religious intolerance, or misunderstanding, should not be broadcast.

2.6 References to race and religion should be presented accurately and in a dignified and sensitive manner.

2.7 Broadcasters must bear in mind the main religious faiths practised in Singapore whenever they carry programmes which make reference to or touch upon religious views or beliefs. In featuring any religious view or belief, broadcasters should ensure such views do not in any way disparage or cast other faiths in poor light.

2.8 Racial and religious stereotyping must be avoided.

PART 3: FAMILY VIEWING POLICY

3.1 It is the Authority's aim to ensure that unsuitable material for children is not broadcast at times when there may be a large audience of young viewers.

Family Viewing Policies

3.2 All programmes broadcast between 6am and 10pm must be suitable for family audiences. The transition from family-oriented to more adult programming after the watershed time of 10pm should also be executed gradually.

3.3 Consumer advice like warnings, labelling, classification details and other information announcements should be sufficient and reliable and given prior to telecast of the programme or its trailer. However, this does not diminish the licensee's responsibility for sensitive scheduling of programmes to reduce the risk of causing offence.

Programmes requiring Parental Guidance (PG)

3.4 Programmes that require parental guidance (PG) usually contain adult themes or content which may be sensitive in nature. These programmes should be aired after 10pm and accompanied on screen before the start of the programme by a viewing advisory describing the principal elements which have contributed to the rating, including their intensity and/or frequency (e.g. "*Due to strong violence/frequent horror scenes etc, parental guidance is advised.*"). This description should be clearly worded and displayed in a readily legible typeface that should remain visible for at least 5 seconds.

- 3.5 For all PG-rated programmes, a PG warning indicator should be supered at the beginning of the programmes and after every commercial break for 10 seconds. The indicator must be of at least 32 television lines in height and in a readily legible typeface.
- 3.6 To provide more information to viewers, broadcasters are encouraged to include the following warnings beside programmes rated PG in publicity materials (like the TV page in newspapers and TV guides):

PG [Mature Themes]

PG [Horror]

PG [Language]

PG [Violence]

Trailers and Programme Promotions

- 3.7 Trailers of programmes should be prepared with care and sensitivity based on target audience and broadcast time. All trailers and promotional material shown before the watershed time must comply with Family Viewing Policy.
- 3.8 Trailers for programmes that require parental guidance are not to be broadcast before 10 p.m. However, PG-rated programmes can be listed in simple text-based programme listings before 10 p.m. with no excerpts both visually and aurally.

PART 4: CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMES

- 4.1 Children may not be able to distinguish real life from fiction, and are likely to be disturbed by the realistic portrayal of violence, horror etc. They are also more predisposed to imitative behaviour. As such, no advantage should be taken of children's natural credulity.
- 4.2 For the purpose of this section, "children" refers to persons aged 14 years and below.

Range and Quality of Children's Programmes

- 4.3 Children's programmes should be wholesome and in general designed to impart a broader knowledge of the world around them, and to promote appreciation of good social and moral values. Stories must generally reflect respect for law and order, parents, elders and fellow human beings. Stories should clearly portray good morals e.g. heroic and villainous characters must be distinguishable, and the lifestyles of gangs and gangsters should not be portrayed as desirable.
- 4.4 Programmes should not contain scenes depicting the consumption of liquor or tobacco products unless an educational point is being made, or in very exceptional cases if the dramatic context makes it absolutely necessary. Swear words should also not be used in such programmes.
- 4.5 The portrayal of any dangerous or harmful behaviour easily imitated by children should be avoided. Animated programmes must avoid excessive violence, especially those featuring humans and life-like characters and depicting realistic story lines. While it is accepted that stylised violence can be entertaining and often humorous in comedy and in animation, more serious representation, for

example, in children's drama, should always be editorially justified and should ensure that the consequences of violence are treated appropriately.

- 4.6 Programmes should not be presented in a manner which may be disturbing or distressing to children or which may in any way adversely affect their general well being.
- 4.7 Programmes for younger children require special care as they may find violence and horror scenes/programmes in both realistic and fantasy settings to be disturbing. For programmes which may be frightening to pre-schoolers, broadcasters should provide an advisory to alert parents.

PART 5: PUBLIC MORALS & SOCIAL VALUES

- 5.1 Broadcasters should bear in mind the importance of the family as the basic unit of society in Singapore. The sanctity of marriage should be respected, and divorce should not be treated casually or in a frivolous manner. Adultery, cohabitation and promiscuity should not be endorsed, glamorised or encouraged.
- 5.2 Information, themes or subplots on lifestyles such as homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexualism, transsexualism, transvestism, paedophilia and incest should be treated with utmost caution. Their treatment should not in any way promote, justify or glamorise such lifestyles. Explicit depictions of the above should not be broadcast.
- 5.3 Obscene or offensive jokes, words, gestures, songs, dialogues and subtitles should not be broadcast.
- 5.4 Programmes should not make careless references to any class or group of persons as being inherently inferior. Programmes should not encourage or in any way discriminate against any section of the community on account of gender, age, disability or occupational status.
- 5.5 Behaviour such as smoking and alcoholism should not be presented as glamorous or desirable, especially in local programmes.
- 5.6 Kissing in Malay programmes should be avoided.

PART 6: SEX & NUDITY

- 6.1 Television programmes deal with a variety of sexual themes and portrayals. Some are capable, if wrongly treated, of giving offence to viewers. It is, therefore, necessary for broadcasters to exercise due care in their treatment of sex and nudity. The need for sensitive scheduling and warnings for material of this kind should always be kept in mind.

Sex

- 6.2 Portrayals of sexual behaviour should be non-explicit. Sexual innuendoes or suggestiveness should not be crude or offensive.

- 6.3 Programmes on sex education should be mindful of the target audience. They should not be presented in a sensational or exploitative manner, nor should they encourage or promote sexual permissiveness, promiscuity or unnatural sex acts.
- 6.4 Subjects on incest and sexual abuse of children must be treated with extreme sensitivity and not be exploitative. Programmes containing material of this kind require sensitive scheduling and clear labelling of their contents.
- 6.5 Non-consenting sexual relations should not be presented as desirable. When a scene involves rape or indecent assault, strong consideration must be given to minimising the depiction of the details of the crime.

Nudity

- 6.6 As a general rule, there should be no frontal nudity in all programmes. Shots of bare breasts and the pubic area should not be shown. Bare buttocks can be shown in a non-sexual context, but should not be sexually suggestive or exploitative.
- 6.7 Top frontal nudity may be allowed only under exceptional circumstances. The considerations taken into account should include the nature of the programme and its relevance to the storyline and presentation. Scenes of nudity must not carry any intention to titillate viewers. For example, some nudity may be appropriate and may be shown in programmes which feature historical or dramatised events such as the World War II Holocaust, tribal ways of life, or health programmes on breast feeding and breast cancer.
- 6.8 Where exceptions are made for top frontal nudity, these programmes should be shown after family viewing hours.

PART 7: VIOLENCE & CRIME

- 7.1 Broadcasters must take into account the potential cumulative effect of programme content containing violence and crime, as regular and recurrent portrayals of such content may lead viewers to become less sensitive to violence or to overestimate the level of violence and crime in the real world.

Violence

- 7.2 Suggestions that justice can be achieved by violence, vigilante action or other means of taking law enforcement into one's own hands should be avoided. Any exceptions must take into account the context and redeeming values.
- 7.3 Violence must not be depicted solely for its own sake, or for the gratuitous exploitation of sadistic or other perverted practices. Scenes with excessive violence or suffering such as close-up shots of persons being brutally tortured and killed, and visual depictions of rape scenes should be minimised. Gratuitous and graphic portrayals of violence, such as cutting up body parts and spurting of blood, should be avoided.
- 7.4 Extreme caution must be exercised in handling themes, plots or scenes that depict sex and violence, including rape and other sexual assaults.
- 7.5 Suicide and euthanasia should be handled with discretion and care, and should not be glamorised. Detailed demonstration or description of the means or method of suicide or assisted-killing should be avoided.

- 7.6 The depiction and treatment of animals, while having to be consistent with plot and context, should conform to accepted standards of humane treatment.
- 7.7 Violence in all News material should take into account the likely target audience, and appropriate warning indicators should be given. Actual footage of executions or other scenes in which people are clearly seen being killed or about to die require exceptional justification.

Crime

- 7.8 Programmes should not glamorise or in any way promote persons (e.g. gangsters, vandals, delinquents etc.) groups or organisations who use or advocate the use of violence or engage in any criminal activity within Singapore or elsewhere.
- 7.9 Broadcasters should not broadcast any information from any source which could endanger lives or prejudice the success of attempts to deal with any crime such as hijacking or kidnapping.
- 7.10 In programmes dealing with criminal activities, whether in fiction or a documentary, there may be conflict between the demands of realism and the risk of unintentionally assisting the criminally inclined. Careful thought should be given and, where appropriate, advice taken from the police, before information is given about law-breaking or methods/techniques countering law enforcement or other security measures.
- 7.11 Care needs to be taken in programmes to avoid any impression that illegal drugs and substance abuse are socially acceptable, glamorous, or harmless. Detailed depiction of methods of illegal drug-taking should be avoided.

PART 8: GAMBLING & ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

- 8.1 Broadcasters must take into account the potential cumulative effect of programme content normalising anti-social behaviour or gambling, as regular and recurrent portrayals of such content may lead viewers to become more callous about anti-social behaviour or the ills of gambling.

Gambling

- 8.2 Programmes depicting gambling or the use of gambling devices should be presented with discretion and in a manner that does not encourage or offer instruction to viewers. Gambling programmes/segments are acceptable only if it is relevant to the development of the plot or as an appropriate background to the story.
- 8.3 The broadcast of all forms of gambling tips is strictly prohibited. No programme should encourage, promote or in any way offer instruction on gambling even with regard to legitimate forms of gambling.

Anti-Social Behaviour

- 8.4 Glorification of gangs and secret societies should be avoided.
- 8.5 Hooliganism, vandalism, juvenile delinquency and the lifestyle of deviant sub-cultures should not be glamorised or presented in a favourable light.

PART 9: HORROR, SUPERNATURAL, FORTUNE TELLING & OTHER BELIEFS

- 9.1 As programmes with horror and supernatural content may be frightening to children, they should be broadcast in timeslots that are less accessible to children. Broadcasters must ensure that such programmes are not too excessive and frequent. Edits should also be made to tone down the more horrifying sequences.
- 9.2 Belief in superstition should not be promoted.

Occult and 'Psychic' Practices

- 9.3 Programmes exploring occult or 'psychic' practices, particularly those with actual demonstrations of exorcisms and occult practices involving supposed contact with spirits or the dead, should be treated with caution.
- 9.4 Broadcasters should exercise caution when scheduling fiction programmes which focus on 'psychic' or supernatural phenomena. Programmes of this nature should be scheduled after 10pm, especially in instances where the treatment or presentation of such themes is dark and frightening for younger viewers.

Fortune Telling & Other Beliefs

- 9.5 Programmes based on or pertaining to fortune-telling, feng-shui, palm-reading, numerology, mind-reading, tarot reading, astrology, new age healing and the like should not give the impression that these practices are exact sciences.

PART 10: NEWS & OTHER FACTUAL PROGRAMMES

- 10.1 Due impartiality requires broadcasters to deal even-handedly with diverse viewpoints in any factual (especially forum-based) programmes. Balance should be sought through the presentation of different viewpoints. Programmes should not be slanted by the exclusion of facts or by misleading emphasis. Every reasonable effort must be made to ensure that the factual content of programmes is accurate.
- 10.2 A right of reply or an opportunity to respond shall be granted to the Government or its agencies, to correct mistakes, wrongful reporting or misrepresentations. For private individuals and groups, an opportunity to respond should be considered on the merits of each case. MDA may direct a broadcaster to give an aggrieved party the opportunity to respond over an appropriate medium.
- 10.3 Significant errors in factual programmes such as news, current affairs and documentary programmes should be corrected and broadcast at the earliest opportunity.

News

- 10.4 Presentation of news must observe the following guidelines:
- (a) News reports / bulletins should always be presented with due impartiality and without the interjection of personal views by presenters. They should also be clearly distinguished from commentary and analysis.

- (b) Morbid, sensational, or alarming details not essential to factual reporting should be avoided.
- (c) Particular care must be taken when reporting on sexual crimes. Reports must not carry information which could lead to the identification of such victims.
- (d) News reports must be sensitive to the use of materials or information relating to a person's personal or private affairs. The broadcast of such materials or information is acceptable only if there is an identifiable public interest for doing so.
- (e) Images that may seriously distress or offend should only be displayed when there is an identifiable public interest reason for doing so. In this regard, sensitivity must be exercised in broadcasting images of or interviews with bereaved relatives and survivors or witnesses of traumatic incidents.
- (f) Sexual or other sensational material should not be exploited as news items without justification.

10.5 Any simulation of a television news bulletin or news flash to be included in any programme should be clearly distinguishable from an actual news bulletin.

Personal View Programmes

10.6 Opinion should be clearly distinguished from fact in all factual programmes. Personal view programmes in which an individual is given the opportunity to put forward his or her own views, without necessarily referring to opposing views, are subject to the following guidelines:

- (a) The programme must be clearly identified as one which contains personal opinions/views, both in advance announcements and at the start of the programme.
- (b) Acknowledged or undisputed facts must be respected, and broadcasters have an obligation to do what they can to ensure that the opinions expressed, however partial, do not rest upon false or inaccurate facts.
- (c) A suitable opportunity for response to the programme should be provided to correct mistakes, factual errors or biased analyses.

Accuracy and Fairness in Dramatised 'Reconstructions'

10.7 Dramatised "reconstructions" in factual programmes or docu-dramas that seek to reconstruct actual events as a means of obtaining greater authenticity should not distort key reality issues and should be identified as such, so that the fictional elements are not misleadingly presented as fact.

10.8 The evidence on which a dramatic reconstruction is based should be tested with the same rigour required of a factual programme. Sequences that are based on extracts of court proceedings or other matters of public record must be fair and accurate. Where the creative realisation of some elements (such as characterisation, dialogue or atmosphere) may introduce a fictional dimension, this should not be allowed to distort the known facts.

PART 11: REALITY, MUSICAL & VARIETY PROGRAMMES

Reality TV

- 11.1 As Reality TV may involve the filming of ordinary individuals with or without their consent or in set-up situations, complaints about programme invasion of privacy can arise from the gathering of material or from the way an individual is treated in such programmes. Broadcasters shall only collect material for broadcast purpose by means which are lawful and fair in the circumstances of the case.

Musical & Variety Programmes

- 11.2 Films and music videos disallowed under the Films Act should generally not be broadcast. However, if suitable edits can be made, such content may be deemed passable for broadcast. Songs disallowed or otherwise prohibited under the applicable laws and regulations in Singapore must not be aired. Music associated with drugs, alternative lifestyles (e.g. homosexuality) or the worship of the occult or the devil should not be broadcast.
- 11.3 Broadcasters must exercise sensitivity and avoid humour which offends good taste and decency. Examples include jokes based on race, gender, disability, as such humour (even without malicious intent) can easily cause hurt or humiliation.
- 11.4 It is the responsibility of the broadcaster to ensure that choreographed dance sequences and the appearance of artists should be in good taste and not offend any religion, race or culture. Specifically, entertainment programmes involving children should not be exploitative or distasteful. Care must be taken to ensure that children performing in entertainment programmes are not made to behave inappropriately (e.g. stripping and wearing skimpy clothing).
- 11.5 Where a contest is included in a programme, references to prizes must not be made in such a way as to amount to advertising. Aural or visual references to prizes or acknowledgement of the source of prizes are allowed in contests provided that they are not excessive. The presentation of tobacco products as prizes or gifts for contests is not permitted.

PART 12: LANGUAGE

- 12.1 Programmes should maintain high standards of language and speech in the four official languages of Singapore.
- 12.2 Standard English, which is grammatically correct, should be used for programmes such as news, current affairs and info-educational programmes. Local English, which is also grammatically correct but pronounced with a Singaporean accent and which may include local terms and expressions, could be used for programmes like dramas, comedies and variety shows.
- 12.3 Singlish, which is ungrammatical local English, and includes dialect terms and sentence structures based on dialect, should not be encouraged and can only be permitted in interviews, where the interviewee speaks only Singlish. The interviewer himself, however, should not use Singlish.
- 12.4 All Chinese programmes, except operas or other programmes specifically approved by the Authority, must be in Mandarin. Dialects in dialogues and songs

may be allowed provided the context justifies usage and is sparingly used. Exceptions are given to:

- (a) News, current affairs and info-educational programmes where dialect interviews are given by older people or foreigners who can only converse in dialect. Subtitles or voice-overs should be provided for these interviews.
 - (b) Some dialect terms such as those used for food (e.g. *bak kut teh*, *char kway teow* and *ang gu kuey*) may also be used in local dramas.
 - (c) Dialect theme songs may also be played during the opening or closing programme credits of acquired Chinese dramas.
- 12.5 Sub-standard Mandarin (characterised by poor syntax or use of vocabulary, poorly pronounced Mandarin or mixed with many dialect terms) should be avoided in all Chinese programmes.
- 12.6 Dialects in dialogues and songs in English programmes may be allowed provided the context justifies usage and is sparingly used. (Exceptions as in Clause 12.4 (a) and (b) apply.)
- 12.7 The use of Bahasa Melayu Baku (standard pronunciation of Malay) is encouraged for all Malay programmes, particularly news, current affairs and information programmes. Specific guidelines as follows:
- (a) For local programmes, info-educational and current affairs programmes must be in Bahasa Melayu Baku. Some flexibility can be given to drama and variety shows.
 - (b) Foreign or acquired programmes that require dubbing should be in Bahasa Melayu Baku. However, acquired programmes that are already in Malay need not be re-dubbed into Bahasa Melayu Baku.

PART 13: INTERACTIVE SERVICES

Contests & Premium Charge Telephone Services

- 13.1 If, during a program or program promotion, viewers are invited to use a premium charge telephone service (including SMS) to obtain information, register a view on a matter or participate in a competition, the broadcaster must provide clearly readable information about the cost of the call. If the programme is one that has a substantial child audience, information about the cost of the call must be in a form which children can understand, and must be presented visually and orally. Children must be asked to seek parental permission before calling.

SMS, MMS & Other Interactive Services

- 13.2 Locally produced or packaged programmes which allow viewers to interact on-air via short messaging service (SMS) or multimedia messaging service (MMS) are subject to the guidelines in this Code and the following conditions:
- (a) All SMS/MMS should be screened and moderated before broadcast and be in accordance with the guidelines in this Code.
 - (b) The provision, promotion or facilitation of anonymous private chat services or options is not allowed. Even if the broadcaster does not offer an actual

private chat service or option, the moderator must screen out all SMS/MMS that solicit private chat among users (e.g., messages that provide users' personal contact details must be screened out). The programme should also not be used as a means for soliciting dates among users (e.g., strangers arranging to meet each other at an agreed public place).

PART 14: STIMULI BEYOND NORMAL PERCEPTUAL THRESHOLD

Subliminal Messages

- 14.1 Broadcasters should not employ the process known as “subliminal perception” or any other techniques or devices (e.g. by using images of very brief duration) which attempts to convey information to the viewer by transmitting messages beyond the normal threshold of awareness.

Flashing Images and Regular Patterns

- 14.2 Flashing lights and certain types of regular visual patterns can cause problems for some viewers who have photosensitive epilepsy. Care must be taken to minimise these risks in all programmes, but especially those where young people are likely to be watching as they could be more susceptible.

Hypnotism

- 14.3 For any broadcast on demonstration of hypnotism for entertainment, care must be taken to minimise the risk of hypnosis being induced in susceptible viewers. In particular, the hypnotist must not be shown performing straight into the camera.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME CODE

This Code shall come into effect on 23 February 2004, and replace the Code that took effect from 1 November 1996. MDA may from time to time revise or update the Code to maintain currency. The Code should also be read in conjunction with the TV Advertising Code and the TV Programme Sponsorship Code.