

17 December 2013

BSA releases decisions on *Seven Sharp*

The Broadcasting Standards Authority has recently released decisions on two complaints about *Seven Sharp*. One was partly upheld and the other was declined.

In the decision that was upheld, the BSA found that an item about Colin Craig, the leader of the Conservative Party contained comments that were “personal abuse masquerading as satire” and breached the fairness standard.

The Authority received a range of complaints about the broadcast on 24 April, as well as an earlier item (17 April) which related to Mr Craig’s opposition to the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Bill.

The item on the 24th was a short skit lampooning Mr Craig in reference to his threat of defamation against a satirical website. While recognising the value of satire and free speech, the BSA found that the comments about his personal character and attributes went too far and “turned the item into a sustained personal attack against Colin Craig that was childish and unfair, in circumstances where he had no chance to defend himself.”

The BSA did not uphold complaints relating to the 17 April broadcast which it said discussed a topical and political issue and while it might not have been to everyone’s taste, it did not breach any broadcasting standards.

TVNZ has been ordered to broadcast an apology to Mr Craig for unfair treatment and pay \$1500 costs to the Crown.

In another decision relating to *Seven Sharp*, the majority of the authority declined to uphold a complaint that an item about the predictions of a climate scientist breached the balance standard.

The complainant alleged that the item, broadcast in March this year, was misleading and unbalanced because the claims were presented as fact and inevitable rather than as extreme projections.

The balance standard states that when controversial issues of public importance are discussed in news and current affairs programmes broadcasters should make reasonable efforts or give

reasonable opportunities to present significant points of view, either in the same programme or in other programmes.

The majority view was that although there was no internal balance in the item, most people well understood from other information that there are wide ranging different views on climate change and that these other views did not need to be referred to in the item.

The majority view also looked at the requirement for balance within the current day context.

“The worlds of broadcasting and information dissemination have changed dramatically since 1989. What we have now is a proliferation of broadcast media, and indeed media which is consciously delivered from a political perspective, and a more discriminating viewing public.

“If a programme presents itself as, and claims to be, a balanced discussion then viewers would expect a level of balance to be achieved in the programme. We do not think that viewers would expect balance in an item such as this, which is obviously focused on one perspective.”

This majority view represents an evolution of the balance standard, recognising the wide range of information now available to audiences and from which balance can be achieved. It also acknowledged the new direction taken by *Seven Sharp* in its treatment of news and current affairs, applying comedy and entertainment techniques to serious issues.

However the minority decision found differently saying that recent research shows that 61 per cent of New Zealanders continue to depend on traditional news media sources accessed offline, and viewers are entitled to expect that there will be balance in news, current affairs and factual programmes. *Seven Sharp* made no effort to provide balance within the item, the minority said.

The BSA unanimously declined to uphold complaints alleging breaches of accuracy and responsible programming standards.

The full reports are available at www.bsa.govt.nz

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