

BEFORE THE BROADCASTING STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Decision No: 122/93

Dated the 29th day of September 1993

IN THE MATTER of the Broadcasting Act 1989

AND

IN THE MATTER of a complaint by

KATE GLENDORRAN

of Nelson

Broadcaster

TELEVISION NEW ZEALAND
LIMITED

I.W. Gallaway Chairperson

J.R. Morris

R.A. Barraclough

L.M. Dawson

DECISION

Introduction

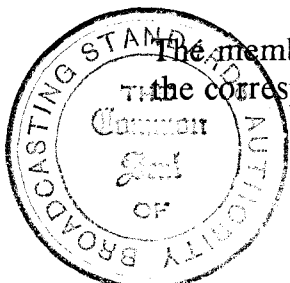
The New Zealand United Nations' troop contingent has a "ringside seat" during an attack on Mogadishu reported an item on *One Network News* broadcast on 17 June 1993.

Ms Glendorran complained to Television New Zealand Ltd, as the broadcaster, that the use of the term "ringside seat" was in breach of the standard requiring good taste and decency. She objected to the description of a weapons attack as if it were a circus show or rugby match.

Agreeing with Ms Glendorran that acts of war and savagery should never be trivialised, TVNZ nevertheless defended its use of the term "ringside seat" explaining that although it had its derivation in the arena of pugilism, it also had a much wider meaning which was supported by dictionary definitions. Dissatisfied with TVNZ's decision not to uphold her complaint, Ms Glendorran referred it to the Broadcasting Standards Authority under s.8(1)(a) of the Broadcasting Act 1989.

Decision

The members of the Authority have viewed the item complained about and have read the correspondence (summarised in the Appendix). As is its practice, the Authority has



determined the complaint without a formal hearing.

An item included on *One Network News* broadcast by TV1 on 17 June 1993 between 6.00 - 6.30pm described New Zealand's UN troops as having a "ringside seat" during a weapons attack in Mogadishu. Ms Kate Glendorran reacted "angrily" to the description of an incident in which people were killed, maimed and left homeless as though it were a circus show or a rugby match. She considered it was indecent to consider killing and destruction as if it were some kind of spectator activity.

TVNZ considered the complaint under standard G2 of the Television Code of Broadcasting Practice which requires broadcasters:

- G2 To take into consideration currently accepted norms of decency and taste in language and behaviour, bearing in mind the context in which any language or behaviour occurs.

While agreeing with Ms Glendorran that acts of war should not be trivialised, it denied that this was the consequence of using the phrase "ringside seat". Although it acknowledged that the phrase derived from the arena of pugilism, TVNZ maintained that the present meaning was much wider, citing dictionary definitions in support of this claim. It argued that language was constantly changing and evolving and this was an example of how a previously precise meaning was changed to a much broader one. It also noted that this was an example of the "short hand" employed by journalists because of the need for economy of words in a news programme. It believed that the relevant information - that the troops were in close proximity but not directly involved - was conveyed by the term. Declining to uphold the complaint, TVNZ nevertheless apologised for causing offence to Ms Glendorran.

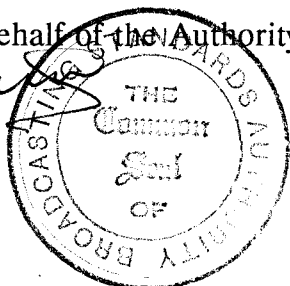
The Authority could understand Ms Glendorran's anger at the insensitive use of the words "ringside seat" to describe the proximity of New Zealand troops to acts of violence perpetrated against citizens in Mogadishu. Although it accepted TVNZ's argument that language was constantly evolving, it noted in this instance TVNZ's reliance on the Concise Oxford Dictionary (7th ed, 1987) might have been misplaced, since the Authority's 8th edition, 1991 reprint of the Concise Oxford confines the definition to spectator activities such as the circus or boxing. Nevertheless the Authority accepted that other dictionaries supported TVNZ's contention that a broader meaning was possible. It also accepted that economy of words was an important consideration in presenting news broadcasts. However, it believed that the scripted introductory remarks made by the news presenters required more careful crafting than the live comments made by reporters at the scene of news events. A phrase such as this could have been avoided.

In declining to uphold the complaint, the Authority decided that the remark was not altogether appropriate in the context, but any suggestion that it trivialised the seriousness of the event was dispelled by the rest of the item.

For the reasons set forth above, the Authority declines to uphold the complaint.

Signed for and on behalf of the Authority

Iain Gallaway
Iain Gallaway
Chairperson
29 September 1993



Appendix

Ms Kate Glendorran's Complaint to Television New Zealand Limited

In a letter dated 30 June 1993, Ms Kate Glendorran of Nelson complained to Television New Zealand Ltd about an item on *One Network News* which was broadcast on TV1 on 17 June 1993 between 6.00 - 6.30pm.

She angrily objected to the use of the words "ringside seat" to describe the position of New Zealand's UN troops stationed in Mogadishu during a weapons attack, arguing that it was indecent and offensive to describe an incident where people were killed, maimed and left homeless as though it were a circus show or a rugby match. She claimed that the words spoken were in breach of the code which requires broadcasters to maintain standards of good taste and decency, commenting that she considered it indecent to consider killing and destruction as though they were some kind of show.

Concluding, she wrote:

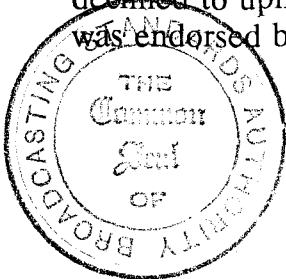
I wish NEVER again to hear any killings, murders, wars, riots described as though they are a circus show or sports match when such a description is far from the truth of such horrendous and indecent acts.

TVNZ's Response to the Formal Complaint

TVNZ advised Ms Glendorran of its Complaints Committee's decision in a letter dated 29 July 1993. It reported that it had considered the complaint under standard G2 of the Television Code of Broadcasting Practice which requires broadcasters to maintain standards of good taste and decency.

While agreeing with Ms Glendorran that acts of war should not be trivialised, it denied that such was the consequence of using the phrase "ringside seat". Acknowledging that the phrase undoubtedly had its origins in the arena of pugilism, TVNZ asserted that its present meaning was much wider and cited the Concise Oxford Dictionary definition as "close to the scene of action" and the Collins Concise English Dictionary as including "any place affording a close, uninterrupted view".

TVNZ argued that the term provided a good illustration of the way in which language changed and evolved. Apologising for the offence caused by the phrase, TVNZ declined to uphold the complaint, asserting that the use of the phrase in the context was endorsed by reputable dictionaries.



Ms Glendorran's Complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority

Dissatisfied with TVNZ's response, in a letter dated 9 August 1993, Ms Glendorran referred her complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority under s.8(1)(a) of the Broadcasting Act 1989.

Pointing out that her Concise Oxford Dictionary did not give such a meaning as TVNZ's she noted that the meaning for "ring" included "circular enclosure or space for circus-riding, prize-fighting" which she maintained supported her view that it referred to a spectator sport. And, she continued, the use of such a phrase was inappropriate for death, destruction, mutilation, homelessness and wrecked families. While she accepted that word usage changes, she maintained that the use of "ringside seat" in this case was totally inappropriate and indecent where tragedy is a likely result.

TVNZ's Response to the Authority

As is its practice, the Authority sought the broadcaster's response to the complaint. Its letter is dated 12 August and TVNZ's reply, 30 August 1993.

Enclosing three dictionary definitions in support of its contention that "ringside" means close to the scene of the action, TVNZ maintained that the word was neither inaccurate nor a breach of taste and decency. It explained that it was an example of the short hand that was used in a news programme, where economy of words was important. It argued that "ringside" in this case conveyed two important facts to listeners - first that the New Zealanders were close to the incident and second, that they were not themselves involved. It apologised to Ms Glendorran that she considered it to be a breach of standards.

Ms Glendorran's Final Comment to the Authority

When asked to comment on TVNZ's response, in a letter dated 7 September 1993, Ms Glendorran repeated her contention that users of words had a responsibility to choose them carefully. She wrote:

Because of the associations of "ringside seat" with "circus", "boxing", "fighting", it is inappropriate to use these words to describe tragedies.

She commented that she doubted broadcasters would find the terms appropriate were the victims members of their own families.

