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**CANADIAN BROADCAST STANDARDS COUNCIL  
PRAIRIE REGIONAL COUNCIL**

CFSK-TV (STV) re an episode of *Friends*

(CBSC Decision 95/96-0159)

Decided December 16, 1997

S. Hall (Chair), D. Braun (Vice-Chair), K. Christensen, D. Dobbie,  
V. Dubois and D. Ish

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**THE FACTS**

On March 14, 1996, at 7:00 p.m., CFSK-TV (popularly known as STV in Saskatoon) broadcast an episode of *Friends*, a situation comedy about a group of friends living in New York which airs weekly across Canada on the Global Television System.

In the episode in question, there were three subplots, each of which involved all of the series' main characters: Ross and Rachel admit their deeper feelings for each other, Chandler and Monica embark on a 'lose weight, get fit' campaign and Phoebe seeks relationship advice from Joey since the man she is dating has been reluctant to have sex with her. It is this last subplot which generated a complaint from a viewer.

Phoebe relates to her friends that she took the man she has been dating for a while, to a romantic restaurant and they ordered champagne, but, she complained, he still would not "give it up". In another scene in which she is alone with Joey, she states that she has figured out why her boyfriend won't sleep with her. She says it is because she is not sexy enough. Joey tries to cheer her up and says that when he first met her he said "excellent but, great rack". This makes Phoebe smile. She says: "Really? That's so sweet. I mean, I'm officially offended, but that's sweet." Joey suggests that if she wants to know "what the deal is" with her boyfriend, she is just going to have to ask him. Phoebe's ultimate success in seducing her boyfriend is discussed with Joey in the following terms:

**Phoebe:** I finally took your advice and asked him what was going on.

**Joey:** What did he say?

**Phoebe:** He said that he understands how sex can be a very emotional thing for a woman and he was just afraid that I was going to get all you know "is he going to call me the next day? Where is this going?, all you know *blaioiaboiu*." So he said he wanted to hold off until he was prepared to be really serious.

**Joey:** Wow.

**Phoebe:** Yeah, well, so I said "Relax please. You know, I mean, sex can be just about two people right there, in the moment; you know... If he wants, he can call, if not, that's ok too. So after a *lot* of talking, I convinced him. [Laugh]

**Joey:** [with a look of disbelief] So let me get this straight, he got you to beg to sleep with him, he got you to say he never has to call you again and he got you to thinking that this is a great idea?

**Phoebe:** Uh huh.

**Joey:** This man is my God.

## The Letter of Complaint

In a letter to the CBSC dated March 26, the complainant claimed that she was "horrified at the content of the show referring to the cast's promiscuous behaviour in very blatant terms." Her letter stated that

One of the female cast members was doing everything in her power to seduce the gentleman which [*sic*] she was currently dating. After each encounter with this gentleman, she would relay her failure or her success to one [of] her male friends. The entire episode of this show was based on seduction.

I called Regina's STV and spoke with the Station Manager with my concern. He basically said that because the show was being simulcast and his station would lose advertising dollars if it was moved to a later time, he would not consider this as an option. I asked him if he would allow his four or five year old to view this show and he said that of course he wouldn't allow it. I asked him if it was the dollar factor that he was making his decision as to adjust this program to an appropriate time slot. He then said that there was no point to this conversation because he was not about to make any changes to accommodate my suggestion and he hung up the telephone.

My children are closely monitored as to which programs they may view but there are households where the children are able to watch, at will, anything that is being aired until their bedtime.

I agree that parents or guardians should screen the programming that their children are allowed to watch but this is not always the case, as you are probably aware.

[The Station Manager] informed me that this show is quite popular; meaning that advertisers are being paid at a premium. As a responsible society, we must ensure that our next

generation's moral standards be based on solid ground. If we sacrifice these standards for a short-term monetary gain, we will all be losers in the end.

## **The Broadcaster's Response**

The General Manager of STV Regina replied to the complainant by letter dated April 15. This letter reads in part as follows:

I reviewed the "Friends" episode of March 14<sup>th</sup> which you refer to in your letter, and found no content that would contravene any existing broadcast code. "Friends" is a situation comedy featuring a group of young adults, in their 20's. They are all single, and many episodes focus on relationships, including dating etc. The program is geared to a young adult (18-49) audience.

"Friends" is currently in fact one of the most popular television programs in our schedule and is heavily viewed across Canada and the United States.

STV broadcasts a variety of entertaining and information programs having various ranges of demographic appeal. We sincerely hope that there are many other programs on our schedule that you would endorse.

Thank you for taking the time to share your opinion with us.

The complainant was unsatisfied with this response and requested, on May 10, that the CBSC refer the matter to the appropriate Regional Council for adjudication.

## **THE DECISION**

The CBSC's Prairie Regional Council considered the complaint under clauses 2(c) and 4 of the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code* of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters. These clauses read as follows:

(2) *Diversity*

(c) Television and radio programming shall respect the principles of intellectual and emotional equality of both sexes and the dignity of all individuals. Television and radio programming should portray women and men as equal beneficiaries of the positive attributes of family or single-person life. Women and men should perform in a range of occupations and function as intellectual and emotional equals in all types of thematic circumstances. This should be the case for both work and leisure activities requiring varying degrees of intellectual competence.

*Guidance:* Women and men should be portrayed as working toward a comfortable existence through mutual support, both economically and emotionally, and in both public and private spheres. Despite the problems of societal systemic discrimination, television and radio programming should reflect an awareness of the need to avoid and overcome discrimination on the basis of gender.

(4) *Exploitation:*

Television and radio programming shall refrain from the exploitation of women, men and children. Negative or degrading comments on the role and nature of women, men or children in society shall be avoided. Modes of dress, camera focus on areas of the body and similar modes of portrayal should not be degrading to either sex. The sexualization of children through dress or behaviour is not acceptable.

*Guidance:* "Sex-ploitation" through dress is one area in which the sexes have traditionally differed, with more women portrayed in scant clothing and alluring postures.

The Regional Council members viewed a tape of the program in question and reviewed the correspondence. Although CanWest Television held the logger tapes from its affiliate station CFRE-TV (Regina) rather than the station CFSK-TV, on which the viewer had seen the episode complained of, the Regional Council had no difficulty accepting the CFRE-TV logger tapes since the only difference between the two tapes would have been the commercials, which were not at issue here. The Council considers that the program in question does not violate the provisions of the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code*.

### **The Content of the Program**

The Council notes that during the entire program, no scenes of nudity or sexual contact of any kind were shown. Nor were there any explicit descriptions of sexual activity. The Council concluded that, while the subject matter of the episode in question could be described as "mature", the references to sexual activity did not amount to "promiscuous behaviour *in very blatant terms* [emphasis added]" as alleged by the complainant.

In the Council's view, the complainant appears to take issue with the lifestyle being led by the series' characters. The Council notes (and is not without sympathy regarding) the complainant's concern that "our next generation's moral standards be based on solid ground". The question to ask and answer relates to where the responsibility for ensuring that result must lie. For reasons explained in part at somewhat greater length immediately below, the CBSC does not believe that this show violates any of the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code* (or any other Code)'s provisions. There is no doubt that this episode of *Friends* is exploring mature issues but it is doing this in a thoughtful, amusing, tongue-in-cheek fashion. Even if the theme or the dialogue were inappropriate for some family viewing, neither was, in the Prairie Regional Council's view, exploitative or gratuitous. Moreover, without concluding that this is the case *here*, the Ontario Regional Council has even dealt with the issue of inappropriate role models in *CFMT-TV re an Episode of "The Simpsons"* (CBSC Decision 94/95-0082, August 18, 1995). In that case, chauvinistic comments were made by one of the characters who was also involved in inappropriate behaviour toward women. Because of the unattractive and unsupportive way in which the creators of the show dealt with the character, his presence and actions were not seen to be in violation of the Code.

In the portion of the episode in question, Moe, the bartender, is portrayed as a chauvinist, a particularly uncouth chauvinist at that. His dialogue regarding the waitress applicant's measurements is hardly role model material. Then again, much of the behaviour on the program could be characterized as unworthy of emulation. The program does not suggest that this dialogue is suitable. It does not, on that account, amount to exploitation. Nor are there negative or degrading comments on the role of the waitress. The fact that they are depicted in the same bed together within the half-hour show is not exploitation either. If anything, the tongue-in-cheek approach makes something of a mockery of *Moe's* behaviour. No approval is implied.

Overall, the Council concluded, the continued exaggeration of Moe's inappropriate behaviour emphasizes the unacceptable nature of such behaviour. The producers of the show have not made Moe a likeable character and thus, creatively, have not positively reinforced his actions. To the contrary, the program could be seen as reinforcing the precepts within the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code* regarding exploitation and degrading statements.

In the Council's view, this episode of *Friends*, like *The Simpsons* episode described above, has taken a very tongue-in-cheek approach to male/female interaction and sexual relationships. Joey's summary of Phoebe's behaviour (where he states: "So let me get this straight, he got you to beg to sleep with him, he got you to say he never has to call you again and he got you to thinking that this is a great idea?") emphasizes the superficiality of Phoebe's approach to physical relationships. While the morality of this approach will not be accepted by everyone, perhaps not even by the majority of viewers, its purpose is to amuse and, the Council assumes, to make people *think* about the issue. The ultimate responsibility for determining whether such mature themes should be viewed by everyone must be left to individual families.

The Council further notes, though, on another level, that the complainant seems to take issue with the fact that it is a *woman* who is seducing a *man*. In this regard, the Council notes clause 2(c) of the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code* which states that "Television and radio programming should portray women and men as *equal* beneficiaries of the positive attributes of family and *single-person* life. [Emphasis added.]" In the Council's view, by portraying Phoebe as the one eager to enter into a sexual relationship and her boyfriend as the one wanting "to hold off until he was prepared to be really serious", this episode reinforces the precept of equality enunciated in Clause 2(c) of the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code*. Whether one does or does not accept that pre-marital sex is appropriate for any family, the Council considers that it is extremely important to accept the idea that broadcasters have a responsibility to ensure that men and women, boys and girls, are presented as equals in society and social situations. Accordingly, the Council considers that the depiction of single-life in this episode of *Friends* is laudable rather than sanctionable.

## **Broadcaster Responsiveness**

The CBSC always recognizes the broadcaster's obligation, as a CBSC member, to be responsive to complaints. In this case, the Regional Council considers that the broadcaster's written response dealt fairly, albeit briefly, with the issues raised by the complainant. The Council makes no judgment, however, with respect to the telephone conversation between the complainant and the station manager described in the complainant's letter. The Council is not an evidence-gathering body and, in the absence of agreement as to the facts, has no means by which to assess what may have transpired between the broadcaster and the complainant.

*This decision is a public document upon its release by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council. It may be reported, announced or read by the station against which the complaint had originally been made; however, in the case of a favourable decision, the station is under no obligation to announce the result.*