
**CANADIAN BROADCAST STANDARDS COUNCIL
ONTARIO REGIONAL COUNCIL**

CITY-TV re Beavis and Butt-head

(CBSC Decision 93/94-0074)

Decided June 22, 1994

M. Barrie (Chair), S. Fish, P. Fockler, D. Luzzi, R. Stanbury

THE FACTS

The complainant association wrote to the Chairman of the CRTC on November 11, 1993 about the November 10, 1993 episode of *Beavis & Butt-head* on CITY-TV. The letter complained of the use of the word "slut" (which was used in reference to female characters from the television series *Beverly Hills 90210*) in an early scene of that episode. The spokesperson cited the following dialogue:

Butt-head: That's not Donna. Donna's the slut. This is Kelly.
Beavis: No way, dude. Donna's not a slut. She's a virgin. Kelly's the slut.
Butt-head: Does she look like a slut to you, Beavis?
Beavis: Yeah. That's why it's Donna.
Butt-head: Yeah, but you just said Donna's not a slut.
Beavis: Oh, yeah. That must be Kelly.

The complainant association argued, in its letter to the Chairman of the CRTC, that CITY-TV had decided "that it was okay to leave in degrading and insulting language directed at women." The association's correspondent continued:

And just in case kids missed the message that Donna is a slut, the word is repeated not twice, not three times, not four times, but five times - - just like in Sesame Street. Apparently, CITY-TV wants to make absolutely sure that kids know how to say slut.

Her conclusion regarding the use of the term "slut" was as follows:

Referring to women as sluts constitutes more than just bad manners Mr. Spicer. It constitutes using the public airwaves to promote hatred against an identified group - - women. We are therefore demanding that the CRTC direct CITY-TV to cease and desist.

In the ordinary course, this complaint was forwarded to the CBSC by the CRTC on November 23, 1993. The CBSC in turn forwarded the letter to the broadcaster. CITY-TV's Program Manager responded to the complainant on December 21.

As I am sure you are aware, Beavis and Butt-head is a cartoon - nothing more, nothing less. Cartoons have been a staple of North American life for decades. Most of them succeed because they are funny, over-the-top depictions of behaviour and actions that would not be regarded as acceptable in real life. So it is with Beavis and Butt-head.

We know that the show is controversial, and we know that some adults don't think it's especially funny. But it's important to remember that many cartoon and comedy shows over the years have depicted a brand of humour which does not have cross-generational appeal. For example, in the 60's we had "The Three Stooges" who did things to each other that was [*sic*] not to be copied. Recently, we've had Bart Simpson, who brought new meaning to the word brat. Beavis and Butt-head come out of this tradition. They are an exaggerated parody of two teenage misfits whose antics take place in a cartoon world - antics they know are obviously unacceptable and not to be emulated in real life. The show is not meant to appeal to everyone and like all generations, the current younger generation who enjoy this show has its own distinct music, language and humour shaped by the world in which they live. We believe that Beavis and Butt-head is in sync with this younger generation and poses no greater threat to them than did "The Three Stooges".

We believe that people do not take Beavis and Butt-head seriously, They are viewed as complete misfits and losers with no productive future. Therefore, what they say and what you have objected to is not considered appropriate language by anybody. It is also important to remember that the women that they were talking about are two fictional characters from a highly criticized show ("Beverly Hills 90210") among young adults and teenagers who view it as being totally unrepresentative of their experiences and environments and would never be caught watching it themselves. It is an "uncool" program and, therefore, perfect fodder for this show and their audience.

The response was not acceptable to the complainant association, whose representative requested that the complaint be taken to the Regional Council for adjudication. In her letter of February 14, she responded specifically to the explanation provided by CITY-TV's Program Manager.

The Program Manager believes CITY-TV can broadcast insults directed at identified groups of society - in this case women - as long as the insults come out of the mouths of cartoon characters. It therefore follows that CITY-TV would also broadcast insults directed at other identified groups. For example:

Kike, raghead, nigger, wagon burner, gearbox, squaw, spic, wop, paki...

[The Program Manager] also believes that "slut" is acceptable language to use in describing female television characters if the program has attracted criticism. Certain black sit-coms have attracted criticism because of the negative stereotypes the characters play. Following Ms. Baine's logic, it would be okay for these television characters to be called "niggers".

Obviously, insulting language - whether directed at a racial minority or at women - is not acceptable. It isn't acceptable coming out of the mouth of a human character, and it isn't acceptable coming out of the mouth of a cartoon nitwit, a talking frog, a plush pig puppet, a large purple dinosaur, or any of the other non-human figures who turn up on television.

I trust the CBSC will take into account Canadian Human Rights legislation when considering whether the public airwaves can be used to broadcast abusive language directed at any identified group.

THE DECISION

The CBSC considered the complaint under Article 2 of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters *Code of Ethics*, and Article 4 of the CAB *Sex-Role Portrayal Code*, the texts of which read as follows:

CAB Code of Ethics, Article 2

Recognizing that every person has a right to full and equal recognition and to enjoy certain fundamental rights and freedoms, broadcasters shall endeavour to ensure, to the best of their ability, that their programming contains no abusive or discriminatory material or comment which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, religion, age, sex, marital status or physical or mental handicap.

CAB Sex-Role Portrayal Code, Article 4 (in pertinent part)

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.

The Regional Council reviewed all the correspondence and watched the tape of the program in question. The Regional Council did not consider that the broadcast had breached either code. Furthermore, the Council considers it appropriate to note that the terms employed in Article 2 of the *CAB Code of Ethics* and those used in Article 15(1) of the *Charter* are substantially similar and that Canadians watching or listening to Canadian private broadcasters are appropriately protected by the language used in Article 2 against the “broadcast [of] abusive language directed at any identified group.”

In its consideration of the complaint, the Regional Council felt that the context of the segment was important. After a satirical look at Meredith Baxter Birney, the characters Beavis and Butt-head change the channel on the set they are watching to another, where they find a photo album format with an attractive young blond woman in various brief video clips. (Note that, despite the dialogue, the woman shown is *not* a character in *Beverly Hills 90210* or any other identifiable television show or known personality. ERRATUM: The woman is in fact pop star Debbie Gibson and the clip is of her music video for the song “Out of the Blue”.) The dialogue begins:

Butt-head: Check this out.
Beavis: Olivia Newton-John sucks.
Butt-head: That’s not Olivia Neuter-John [*sic*]. That’s that rich chick from 9-0-6, mmm-2-6-1.
Beavis: Oh, yeah, Donna.

It then continues with the dialogue cited in the complainant’s letter:

Butt-head: That’s not Donna. Donna’s the slut. This is Kelly.
Beavis: No way, dude. Donna’s not a slut. She’s a virgin. Kelly’s the slut.
Butt-head: Does she look like a slut to you, Beavis?

Beavis: Yeah. That's why it's Donna.
Butt-head: Yeah, but you just said Donna's not a slut.
Beavis: Oh, yeah. That must be Kelly.

Tone and context can be extremely material in any appreciation of comments made on air. A word or phrase which may be insulting or degrading when used in isolation may, when heard or read in context, may be interpreted otherwise. The Regional Council agreed with CITY-TV that *Beavis and Butt-head* are "an exaggerated parody of two teen-age misfits whose antics take place in a cartoon world." They are a constant send-up of themselves as much as other programs and aspects of society which they lampoon. They do not seek emulation. They may not, to the standards of many in society, even be in good taste. The question here is only whether their use of the term "slut" is negative or degrading regarding the role of women or an abusive or discriminatory comment based on sex.

The Regional Council did not consider that this short (47 seconds) segment of the *Beavis and Butt-head* show had anything to do with insulting women. It was a comment about a *specific* person in a *specific* program. The word "slut" was not generically applied to women or even to women in the particular program. It did not incite hatred against any group or even against any individual person. It referred to Kelly; it may have meant to describe Kelly; but it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that it constituted "abusive or discriminatory ... comment ... which is based on ... sex." Indeed, anyone familiar with the program parodied (*Beverly Hills 90210*) will know that there is a difference between the sexual standards of the two women (Donna and Kelly) to whom reference is made by these crude characters.

Whether the use of the term is *precise* or not in assessing the character of Kelly is not in issue. It is a term which has been in use for more than five centuries to refer, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, to "a woman of a low or loose character; a bold or impudent girl; a hussy, jade" and "in playful use, or without serious imputation of bad qualities" since 1664. In the view of the Regional Council, this was a specific usage and utterly without the character necessary to render it a violation of either of the CAB codes.

The Council was also emphatic in its view that there was no equivalence between the word "slut", which is not by its nature a term of *generic* application, and the list of epithets included in the association's February 14 letter, which are, as a rule, *only* applied by their users as negative sweeping racial slurs. That "slut" and a list of other contemporary slang terms may not be generally appropriate language does not relegate it to the discriminatory scrap-heap of the complainant's ugly examples.

In addition to its review of the code provisions, the Regional Council considered the adequacy of the broadcaster's response to the complainant. The Council's reconciliation mandate, as established in the CBSC *Manual*, has been considered and reaffirmed on numerous occasions by the British Columbia and Ontario Regional Councils. See, for example, *CFOX-FM re the Larry and Willie Show* (CBSC Decision 92/93-0141, August 30,

1993), *CHTZ-FM re the Morning Show* (CBSC Decision 92/93-018, October 26, 1993), *CFTO-TV re Newscast (Pollution)* (CBSC Decision 92/93-0178, October 26, 1993) and *CIII-TV re Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (CBSC Decision 93/94-0270 and 0277, October 24, 1994), among others. In *CFOX-FM re the Larry and Willie Show*, the BC Regional Council stated:

The CBSC is equally conscious of the further responsibility which it has beyond the measurement of on-air programming against the standards established in the three voluntary CAB codes to encourage dialogue between the broadcasters and the members of their audiences.

Thus, in the course of complaint resolution, the CBSC considers that it is firmly within its mandate to evaluate not only the complaint itself against the standards established by the various Codes which it administers but also the responsiveness of the broadcaster in dealing with the viewer or listener.

The Council is conscious of the fact that viewers and listeners must make an effort to register a complaint in the first place. It takes more effort to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard than merely dialling a broadcaster, the CRTC or the CBSC itself. Broadcasters are aware of this, as is the CBSC. It is, therefore, encouraging that the vast majority of complaints which the CBSC refers to the broadcasters for response are satisfactorily resolved at that level between the broadcaster and the complainant. Of those few which remain unresolved at the "grass roots" level, it is often clear in the review of the correspondence that the territory staked out by some complainants is unlikely to permit reconciliation despite the care taken in the broadcaster response. In such cases, the Council is acutely conscious of the broadcaster's effort or lack of effort to be responsive to the issues raised in the complaint.

In the present case, the Regional Council considers the response of CITY-TV's Program Manager to the complainant to be a thoughtful and attentive answer to the issues raised by the complainant association, despite the strong negative reaction by the complainant to that response.

This decision is a public document upon its release by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council and 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.