

# TELEVISION TODAY

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## Must sense the changing mood on standards

THAMES duly chastised Bill Grundy last week for the way his Today interview with Sex Pistols was conducted. An error of judgement was made and whatever good intentions lay at the root of it, it will take a long time for it to be forgotten. For a while last week television as a whole sat in the mantle that some people believe is its appropriate garb: a degenerator of social conduct and morality, an instrument that needs stricter supervision and censorship regardless of the dangers to freedom of expression and artistic honesty. It is surprising how one unfortunate interview can disproportionately mar the good work of a company and of the IBA and can bring out the hypocrisy in people. There seems no shortage of those who want to take the rare opportunities television lets slip to express righteous indignation. It is a pity more publicity and concern has not been expressed about other aspects of television and a public debate of some substance been generated that would have been helpful to the Annan committee.

Of sex, violence and bad language, it is the latter we are told that offends viewers most. There is undeniably concern about the way children and grown-ups swear in public, and this some see as an indication of the decline of standards: a failure to employ words to say what has to be said in a telling way. Among the many things that television is blamed for is turning people into monosyllabic voyeurs and corrupting the language. We should be concerned about our standards of literacy and the language of our children (could producers not be more punctilious in reminding guests not to swear when in the studio for children's programmes?) But let us not get carried away by one bad mistake. Swearing in public by all classes has always taken place. Four letter words appear regularly in daily newspapers and no one complains and they are heard on radio. Television seems to attract those who want to show off, to outrage if they can, to emulate the Alf Garnetts they see on television getting away with it in comedy and drama. What is on television makes the greatest impact and therefore the medium is vulnerable to abuse. Thames's unfortunate experience will have put the industry on its guard even more than it already is.

Swearing on television — and in recent years there has been an increase in the use of four letter words particularly in drama — is just part of the problem of how television is honestly to conduct itself when it is part of a world which seems to have adopted a far more liberal attitude to sex, where violence receives great publicity, and where swearing is a concomitant of both. We go along with codes, guidelines, and individual decisions and tread for the most part an enlightened and sensible path, considering the many roles television plays. But television has to be — and is — sensitive to public mood and the mood at the moment, one senses, is that many incidents are showing that ultra-liberalism could tip the scales in favour of a society without recognisable good public standards, a society reflecting a nation in decline. Anything that shows insensitivity to that mood is damaging.