

**AUDIOVISUAL  
CONTENT  
INFORMATION**

**GOOD  
PRACTICE  
PRINCIPLES**

**EMPOWERING USERS TO MAKE INFORMED CHOICES  
FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES**

18 February 2008 | [www.audiovisualcontent.org](http://www.audiovisualcontent.org)

# AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT INFORMATION

AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT HAS EVOLVED RAPIDLY IN RECENT YEARS, WITH MORE AND MORE FORMATS BEING DEVELOPED AND CONSUMED ACROSS AN INCREASING RANGE OF PLATFORMS

# GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

## Empowering users to make informed choices for themselves and their families

This good practice framework has been developed by a working group of key players in the audiovisual market in order to capture and promote current good practice and aims in the provision of content information<sup>1</sup>.

The aim is to demonstrate to users, politicians, regulators and the wider audiovisual content industry that although audiovisual content is evolving, providers' commitment to empower users remains.

It seeks to show that while a range of content information options exist, the growing audiovisual content industry (which now includes new media and mobile players as well as broadcasters), shares a common set of principles in its approach to this issue.

These principles promote common sense, simplicity and transparency to ensure that all users are empowered to make safe and informed choices about the content they consume.

## INTRODUCTION

1. In the linear television world, viewers are familiar with the tools that have been provided to enable them to make informed choices about what they and their families watch. The programme's scheduling (whether it is broadcast pre- or post-watershed), the announcement before the start of the programme (perhaps warning that it may contain scenes of violence), the programme's title, the viewers' previous knowledge of the programme and the brand reputation of the channel, all help them to decide whether a certain piece of content is suitable for viewing or not.
2. Audiovisual content has evolved rapidly in recent years, with more and more formats being developed and consumed across an increasing range of platforms. Viewers, or 'users', now also have the ability to 'pull' content, as well as watch the content that is 'pushed' to them by content providers. Crucially, however, the importance of providing information to ensure that users remain in control of the content they and their families consume remains high.
3. The framework is in two parts: the first outlines the broad principles that the members of the Audiovisual Content Information Group commonly hold in their approach to content information and which represent good practice. The second part explains the context in which these principles are applied. For although these are commonly shared principles, in order to ensure that the user is sufficiently informed, providers employ a mix of formats and editorial policies depending on the context in which the content is being delivered.

## PARAMETERS

4. These principles apply to audiovisual content that is 'commercially produced or acquired'. This means that they do not apply to user-generated content, to which a different set of tools apply to manage potentially harmful or offensive content.
5. The principles do not refer to advertising, to which a separate set of guidelines/principles, governed by the ASA applies, nor do they refer to other forms of regulated content such as financial services or gambling.
6. By definition, the good practice principles do not apply to unlawful material. In such cases providers work with recognised bodies, such as the IWF to remove images of child abuse, or deal with other potentially unlawful material posted by users in accordance with the due legal process.
7. The principles focus on content information. Some providers employ technical tools, such as age verification and access blocking, to ensure that children and young people are not exposed to inappropriate content. Technical tools are often used alongside content information in a complementary way. Where such tools are used, they also act as a form of signposting, as any customer that does not have appropriate access rights will not be able to access the content. Providers will use their discretion to make appropriate content information available<sup>2</sup>.

## GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

1. Providers are committed to promoting and enabling media literacy. Their respective approaches to providing content information reflect this commitment.
2. Providers offer content information in order to empower users and allow them to make informed choices about the content that they and their families access/consume/watch.
3. Providers offer information about content that may be harmful or offensive to the general public, and that may be unsuitable for children and young people. In particular, content information is designed to enable parents and carers to exercise supervision over the content viewed by those they are responsible for.
4. Providers employ editorial policies that reflect the context in which their content is delivered. These policies aim to guide users about the content that is available on a particular service so that they can make an informed choice about what to view or not view.
5. While the exact format of the information may vary from provider to provider according to context, providers aim to present it in a way that:
  - is easy to use and understand
  - gives adequate information to enable the user to make an informed choice about whether or not to access the content
  - uses plain and consistent language, practical for the medium in which it is made available.

**PROVIDERS OFFER  
CONTENT INFORMATION  
IN ORDER TO EMPOWER  
USERS AND ALLOW  
THEM TO MAKE INFORMED  
CHOICES ABOUT THE  
CONTENT THAT THEY  
AND THEIR FAMILIES  
ACCESS/CONSUME/WATCH**

<sup>2</sup> This could include setting standards by reference to an external body such as the Independent Mobile Classification Body ([www.imcb.org.uk](http://www.imcb.org.uk)) or the Association for Television On-Demand ([www.atvod.org.uk](http://www.atvod.org.uk))

# AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT INFORMATION

# GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

## BACKGROUND

8. The following section provides the context behind these principles in order to illustrate how they are applied in different situations.

### Why provide content information?

9. In a world where consumers access content from an increasingly wide range of sources, the importance of enabling users to use media effectively and safely by exercising informed choices is growing. It is the commitment to user empowerment that motivates providers to offer content information.
10. Content information is also made available as part of providers' overarching objective to protect children and young people from inappropriate content, and from a market-led motivation to ensure that content finds its target market. Being able to segment the market in this way allows providers to match the consumer experience to their brand attributes. For instance, some providers have built their brands around the notions of trust and safety and have therefore built extensive content information and protection tools into their products in order to deliver this brand experience. The approach to information provision across all platforms is therefore driven both by the needs of providers and consumers in a mutually beneficial way.
11. Above all, providing content information is about empowering users to make informed choices for themselves and their families. Increasingly, providers are encouraging users to contribute to content information through rating and review tools and direct feedback mechanisms to their editorial teams.
12. Provision of content information is only one aspect of user empowerment and the wider media literacy agenda. Providers have also invested heavily in educational activities to raise awareness of the information and tools available to users, parents and carers. They will continue to work with these and other key stakeholders, such as carers, teachers and governments, to raise consumer awareness.

### Which content requires information?

13. Providers focus on providing guidance on two categories of content in addition to providing promotional information about a piece of content:
  - a. content which is unsuitable for particular groups (e.g. all children and young people under 18)
  - b. content which may be harmful or offensive more generally.

IT IS THE COMMITMENT  
TO USER EMPOWERMENT  
THAT MOTIVATES  
PROVIDERS TO OFFER  
CONTENT INFORMATION

**Content unsuitable for particular age groups**

14. Ensuring that children and young people are not exposed to inappropriate content is a key driver for information provision and content regulation. As a result providers supply parents, carers and teachers, as well as children and young people themselves, with the information to manage their content consumption safely.

**Content which may cause harm or offence**

15. Subject to a provider having editorial control, they will also supply information about content that may cause harm or offence more generally. Information is typically provided if content contains the following:
- violence
  - sex
  - strong language
  - upsetting or disturbing themes (which could include drugs, horror, imitable techniques)
  - flashing images

**DECIDING WHEN TO PROVIDE CONTENT INFORMATION**

16. Providers use a range of processes to assess whether content requires guidance.
17. Providers establish their own editorial policies to reflect their brand values. These policies are determined according to the target audience, the subject matter, the time of delivery, the culture of the territory at which the content is aimed, and the image of the channel or brand. Providers may also draw on the results of market research. These policies apply to the company's own content, and may also apply to third party content that the provider licences and distributes.
18. Providers can use pre-existing codes (such as the Ofcom broadcasting code or the BBC Editorial Guidelines), norms or age rating systems (such as the BBFC ratings for films, the PEGI scheme for electronic games, and IMCB for mobile visual content), to inform their decision-making.
19. Providers may also be a member of an industry self-regulatory scheme (for example IMCB or ATVOD), whose code of conduct and/or guidelines includes guidance or requirements about content information.
20. As part of the decision process, providers also consider how best to provide content information in a way that respects consumers' right to access the content of their choice and content creators' right to freedom of expression.

ENSURING THAT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT EXPOSED TO INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT IS A KEY DRIVER FOR INFORMATION PROVISION AND CONTENT REGULATION

# AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT INFORMATION

AS THE NUMBER OF  
AUDIOVISUAL DELIVERY  
PLATFORMS GROWS,  
CONTENT PROVIDERS ARE  
EMPLOYING A VARIETY OF  
CONTENT INFORMATION  
FORMATS TO EMPOWER  
THEIR USERS

# GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

## DECIDING HOW TO DELIVER CONTENT INFORMATION

21. Decisions about how to deliver content information are based on:
  - the nature of individual pieces or categories of content
  - the platform (not all forms of information are suitable for all platforms)
  - the company's brand values
  - the legal and political environment of the market concerned
  - whether the piece of content is made available to users in multiple territories (meaning that the information format must be universally understood)
  - whether content is aggregated from many different sources (e.g. original, in-house production, user-generated content or licensed commercial content).
22. It is important to note that consumer expectations of content information are different across different platforms and audience segments, e.g. between traditional broadcasting and online services, which can develop niche audiences with specific needs and expectations regarding information. Providers aim to match these expectations with the type of information they provide.
23. As the number of audiovisual delivery platforms grows, content providers are employing a variety of content information formats to empower their users. The following (non-exhaustive), list shows some of the most commonly employed formats. It is important to bear in mind, however, that this list is based on approaches being used today. New tools may of course be deployed as technology advances:

**Labels:**

  - a. visual symbols
  - b. long form text information  
(labeling content descriptively according to its nature, strength and frequency)
  - c. short access codes
    - scheduling of the original linear transmission
    - marketing and promotion
    - conveying the context of original linear transmission (channel, time of broadcast etc)
    - classification or ratings<sup>3</sup>
    - visual or audio warnings
    - signposting: (categorising content into logical areas)
    - information where PIN protection is in place or other forms of access controls
24. The extent of the information contained in each format can also vary depending on context and medium. For example, information might include the title of the content (e.g Spooks), the genre of the content (serial drama), or the title of the content plus some supplementary information such as a brief description of the content.

25. While providers employ a rich mix of formats to provide content information, there are some basic principles that they will adhere to in order to ensure that content information is effective in achieving its objective, including making sure that it:
- is easy to use and understand
  - gives adequate information to enable the user to make an informed choice about whether or not to access the content
  - uses plain and consistent language
  - is practical for the medium in which it is being offered.
26. This good practice framework, and the principles and background context statements within it, are not intended to create any liability or legally binding obligation on any member of the working group who is listed at the end of this document or otherwise associated with it.

## SIGNATORIES

The following companies and organisations have been involved in the development and agreement of these principles. These organisations already employ this good practice in their approach to current or future content or are working towards doing so.

Content providers:

- AOL
- BBC
- Bebo
- BT
- Channel 4
- Five
- Google
- ITV
- Microsoft
- Mobile Broadband Group\*
- Teacher's TV
- Virgin Media
- Yahoo!

\* The Mobile Broadband Group represents Orange, O2, 3, T-Mobile, Vodafone and Virgin Mobile.

Other stakeholders:

- ATVOD (Association for Television On Demand)
- FOSI (Family Online Safety Institute)
- BBFC (British Board of Film Classification)

An updated list of signatories is available at; [www.audiovisualcontent.org](http://www.audiovisualcontent.org)

WHILE PROVIDERS EMPLOY  
A RICH MIX OF FORMATS  
TO PROVIDE CONTENT  
INFORMATION, THERE ARE  
SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES  
THAT THEY WILL ADHERE  
TO IN ORDER TO ENSURE  
THAT CONTENT  
INFORMATION IS EFFECTIVE



The development of these good practice principles has been facilitated by the Broadband Stakeholder Group (BSG).

The BSG is the UK government's leading advisory group on broadband.

It provides a neutral forum for organisations across the converging broadband value-chain to discuss and resolve key policy, regulatory and commercial issues, with the ultimate aim of helping to create a strong and competitive UK knowledge economy.

The BSG's diverse network includes telecoms operators, manufacturers, investors, ISPs, broadcasters, new media companies, mobile operators, content producers and rights holders, as well as government departments (BERR, DCMS), Ofcom, Regional Development Agencies, devolved administrations and others.

[www.broadbanduk.org](http://www.broadbanduk.org)