

SAMARITANS

Response to consultation on Exemptions to the Video Recordings Act and on Advertising in Cinemas

SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Samaritans favours Part B Option 1 (to remove the exemptions from age rating for music, sports, religious and educational video works).

Samaritans urges the online industry and the government to work together to make progress of the wider development and use of age ratings and labelling schemes for online video content.

Samaritans recommends the tightening of the regulatory framework relating to the use of video content hosted by the websites of major publications, including where the actual content has been generated by a third party.

Samaritans have no comments to make regarding Part A of the consultation.

INTRODUCTION

Samaritans' vision is that fewer people die by suicide.

We work to achieve this vision by making it our mission to alleviate emotional distress and reduce the incidence of suicidal feelings and suicidal behaviour. We do this by:

- being available 24 hours a day to provide support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which may lead to suicide;
- reaching out to high risk groups and communities to reduce the risk of suicide;
- working in partnership with other organisations, agencies and experts;
- influencing public policy and raising awareness of the challenges of reducing suicide.

Samaritans is a registered charity.

Samaritans welcomes the publication of this consultation on exemptions to the Video Recording Act and on Advertising in Cinemas. We have no comments to submit regarding Part A of the consultation but we have several recommendations to make regarding Part B of the consultation.

EXEMPTIONS TO CLASSIFICATION IN THE VIDEO RECORDINGS ACT 1984

It has been proven through extensive research that certain types of media reporting of suicide can have a negative influence on the behaviour of people who are already vulnerable and put them at greater risk of suicide and self-harm through copycat behaviour. Consequently, the need to promote responsible reporting and portrayal of suicide, suicidal behaviour and self-harm in the media is a core part of the UK Government's suicide

prevention policy in England, as well as the suicide prevention strategies of the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Samaritans have developed and published Media Guidelines¹ for the reporting and portrayal of suicide and self-harm. These guidelines highlight potential risks relating to the dramatic portrayal of suicide. For example, a detailed depiction of a suicide method could be imitated by vulnerable viewers and if a viewer feels that they can closely identify with the suicidal character then the likelihood of imitative behaviour is increased.

In recent years concerning examples have emerged of music videos which include this kind of portrayal of suicide and self-harm. Recent examples include a music video by the singer *Pink* which includes graphic scenes of self-harm by cutting² and a music video by the band *Disturbed* which includes scenes of suicide by hanging³. At the present time, this type of material is eligible for exemption under the current regulatory system as it does not fall under the definitions of section 2(2) of the Video Recordings Act 1984. However, we believe that it would be beneficial for this type of material to be referred to the BBFC for classification as they have the experience and expertise to adjudicate on suicide and self-harm related content and the associated risk to vulnerable individuals. The BBFC make a valuable contribution with their work in this area consulting with Samaritans regarding our Media Guidelines when reviewing and updating their policies and working to ensure that their examiners are fully aware of the dangerous aspects of suicide and self-harm related material that they need to be looking out for when reviewing content.

We are concerned that the cases relating to the inappropriate portrayal of suicide would necessarily be easily picked up by a system involving lower thresholds due to the often complex nature of such cases and therefore may not always be referred to the BBFC. For this reason, we feel that Part B Option 2 would not be suitable.

It is also important to note that a self-regulatory 'parental advisory' system (as highlighted by Part B Option 3) would also not necessarily resolve this issue as some of the relevant scenes may be potentially harmful to vulnerable individuals who are *over* the age of 18. There have been cases in which the BBFC have found it necessary to entirely remove several seconds of footage from the final product on this basis. The issue is therefore not limited to age-certification and so a parental advisory system would not, on its own, succeed in addressing our concerns.

Of the options provided, **Samaritans therefore favours Part B Option 1** (to remove the exemptions from age rating for music, sports, religious and educational video works) meaning that all products would be referred to the BBFC for classification as they would be best qualified to make the necessary judgments.

ONLINE VIDEO CONTENT

We also note with interest the issues raised by paragraphs 5.15 to 5.16 and 5.20 to 5.22 of the consultation paper in respect of online video content. We welcome the introduction of age ratings and labelling schemes relating to online content as this content is currently less stringently regulated than the 'hard copy' products which fall under the remit of the BBFC.

Both of the music videos previously referred to that include explicit suicide/self-harm content are available on Youtube without any active age restrictions and with a combined total of over 50 million hits. We believe that the producers and digital service providers have a

1 http://www.samaritans.org/media_centre/media_guidelines.aspx

2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocDIOD1Hw9k>

3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxujAPhxlo0>

responsibility to adopt and use age rating and labelling schemes more widely where possible and that the government should do what it can to support the use of these with the aim of encouraging the application of standards that more closely resemble those already applied to 'hard copy' video content.

We are also concerned about the video content available on mainstream news websites which can often include footage that relates to a news story about suicide. This area currently falls under the remit of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) although the PCC makes clear that if the actual content of the footage was generated by a third party it is typically regarded as being outside of the editorial control of the publication and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the PCC. We believe that there is scope to tighten the regulatory framework relating to this issue, particularly with regards to suicide-related video content that is embedded within the page of a news story, and that publications must be accountable for the footage that they select and make available to a mass audience, even if the actual content was generated by a third party.

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