Australia must get a new system of classification for films and games. Here's how!

The federal government has announced the next stage of the long running (since 2011) review of the National Classification Scheme.

This stage canvasses views on 3 key issues -
- clarifying the scope and purpose of the scheme, including the types of content that should be subject to classification
- ensuring the classification guidelines continue to be aligned with, and responsive to, evolving community standards, expectations and evidence
- establishing fit-for-purpose governance and regulatory arrangements for the scheme, under a single national regulator responsible for media classification.

Submission are called for by May 30.

CMA has been arguing for a reformed classification system for years. We believe that the present system is not fit for purpose and must be changed.

In this short paper below, we summarise the main issues that need fixing.

Children worldwide are growing up in a world where highly attractive, well produced, and often age-inappropriate content is easily accessible, and, all too often, actively marketed to them.

The potential impact of such content on children is not insignificant. Depending on the developmental stage of a child, such impacts can include sleep disturbances, the development of unnecessary fears and anxieties, poorer academic performance, an increased risk of desensitisation to the use of violence, and a willingness to use aggression to solve conflict. These impacts may be short term or last a lifetime.

Australian children have the right to be protected from exposure to age-inappropriate content and its associated harms. Their parents have a right to legislated support to assist them in providing such protection.

Australia's National Classification Scheme (NCS) is supposed to provide this protection for children, as well as to provide consumer information about films and games. But it's not!

This is because -
- it is based on concepts of "community standards", and of "offence", rather than a genuine and evidence-based concept of age-appropriateness to support child development
- the classifications of G, PG, M and MA15+ revolve around the age of 15 years, which has no real relevance to children's developmental stages
- parents Australia-wide say these classifications are not useful to them, especially in assessing suitability for children under 12
- the classification criteria used require subjective judgements by assessors about impact and context

- there is demonstrated public confusion about the meaning of the M and MA15+ classifications
- the use of the NCS to determine appropriate classifications for advertising for films or games (and consequent times and venues to screen or display) has resulted in too frequent exposure of children to potential harm.

CMA recommends a completely new approach:
- the implementation of a new set of classification categories, ie G, 5+, 9+, 12+ 16+, 18+, X18+ and RC, where each category indicates the age from which the content is likely to be appropriate
- associated classification criteria which would reflect research evidence on impacts at each developmental stage
- the categories from 12+ up to have legal force
- the addition of symbols to indicate the nature of the content (eg violence, scariness, drug use etc).

Presently, Australia has a range of codes and guides for classification used by national and commercial broadcasters, pay TV, Clearads (for commercials), Netflix, IARC, Apple store to name but a few. CMA's proposed new age-based system would replace all such classification codes, including those for the advertising of film and game material. To support public recognition, these categories should be used for all professionally produced content, **across all platforms, and for all media formats**.

However, the elements and criteria to determine the classification categories for films as compared to those for games should be different. Games can have content that incorporates interactivity or online connectivity, and this creates additional risks such as privacy invasion; involvement in gambling-like behaviour; in-app purchasing; the development of dependence; and online interaction with strangers.

To ensure accurate, objective, timely assessments of classifications, the above principles should be embedded in automated classification tools, one for films and another for games. These tools would use research-based questions and criteria to assess suitability for each age-category, and be able to be used objectively by trained classifiers.

For such a system to work effectively and expeditiously, there should be just one body (ie an Australian Classification Commission, ACC) which administers all classification matters in Australia.
Its functions should include -
- **the development of the national classification tools**
- **the training of industry assessors**
- **assistance with complex classification issues**
- **public education**
- **direct receipt and resolution of all classification-related complaints**
- **ongoing reviews of the usefulness of the system**
- **the incorporation of new research and updates.**

CMA's proposals represent a major change in thinking and commitment. They require a big shift away from long standing processes, and from a familiar (but deficient) set of classification categories. But such a shift will significantly improve relevance for parents, provide better protection for children, and increase confidence of the general public.

Other countries, such as [The Netherlands](), have been using similar systems with a research and child-development focus for many years. These have a much better record of public and parental use, and far greater levels of satisfaction than is the case with the current classification system in Australia.

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CMA will be making a well-informed, full submission on these issues.

CMA is also preparing a Position Paper on the National Classification Scheme for submission to the federal government. Those of you who would like to consider adding your support are welcome to request a copy by contacting [info@childrenandmedia.org]() with "Position Paper" in subject line.

The present government [Classification Reform paper]() is available for comment by May 30.

For further background to this issue, refer to

[This recent podcast]()

and

CMA's [2020 full submission]() to the Review of National Classification Regulation.