The Limits of Public Engagement: Can of Worms

Anthony McCosker > On the website of Can of Worms, Channel Ten’s new late-night discussion program, we are told the show takes aim at political correctness, offering a space for uncompromising commentary that reveals ‘what we really think about the real stuff of life’. Despite its apparent superficiality, Can of Worms does present an ambitious platform for public discussion. It deliberately promotes its production pedigree (Zapruder’s Other Films also produces The Gruen Transfer and Enough Rope), with the obvious intention of invoking some of the critical legitimacy that the more serious ABC programs have generated.

Nonetheless, the show may go the way of several other recent programs and disappear at the first signs of ratings trouble. Alternatively, with the right guests and topics, Can of Worms may achieve some traction with the viewing public and survive its teething phase. In either case, it is clear there are two key limitations facing this kind of public debate television: the risks inherent in tackling the murky ethical field known as political correctness, and the unwillingness of commercial stations to experiment with serious audience involvement.

Television thrives on public controversy, so it is easy to be cynical when the sensitive topic of political correctness becomes fodder for a talk show. Cynicism aside, however, the attempt to deliberately confront political correctness at least has the effect of rendering private beliefs public, and encourages us to consider our cultural politics and question the tendency to reflexively deride political correctness as an attack on free speech.

Any attempt to lay into politically correct subject matter is bound to cause some offence, but watching Can of Worms it becomes more obvious who can safely be offended in public. For example, the question of whether it is okay to call someone a ‘bogan’, and even whether the burqa is out of place in Australia, can pass by with little fuss.
Any attempt to lay into politically correct subject matter is bound to cause some offence, but watching *Can of Worms* it becomes more obvious who can safely be offended in public.

Endnotes


Dr Anthony McCosker lectures in media and communications at Swinburne University of Technology.

But unintended offence was caused when a photo of a fifteen-year-old boy who had committed suicide after being bullied online was paired with comments from football player Jason Akermanis referring to suicide as ‘cowardly’. In this case, Channel Ten took the action of removing the segment from their website after complaints from the boy’s father; the economics of political correctness should be apparent.

While all of this might leave plenty of space for positive public engagement, *Can of Worms* will remain hamstrung without proper audience integration. It is a show that cries out for experimentation in audience interactivity but does not deliver. Where *Can of Worms* shies away, the ABC’s Q&A and Adam Hills in Gordon St Tonight have experimented with the risk of more complete audience participation. Q&A closely incorporates audience members’ questions and a rolling social media ticker, while on Gordon St the stories and experiences of audience members are masterfully integrated into the program, even allowing for improvisation. *Can of Worms* on the other hand gives us only the thoughts of public personalities, carefully chosen vox pops and polls. Ultimately, along with its polling work, the show’s more interactive website may prove to be its most effective asset – indicating that in future this kind of show may best take place entirely online.

Dr Anthony McCosker lectures in media and communications at Swinburne University of Technology.