
APPENDIX

CBSC Decision 06/07-0310 CFRQ-FM re a conversation about a concert

Initial Correspondence

On October 21, 2006, a listener sent a letter of complaint to the radio station:

I am writing concerning the content of performances on the evening of Sept. 23. After the Rolling Stones concert, performers returned to the studio. One remarked that the other was like “an excited schoolgirl” at which point the second responded “with my budding breasts and rock hard nipples”.

This is totally unacceptable – it ridicules and objectifies girls’ bodies, which fosters a climate of abuse. This is a very negative thing for girls of any age listening to Q104 to hear, as well as for boys and men. The more sexualization and ridicule that is focused on girls’ and young women’s bodies, the more negative environment we have to live in. When we see violence against “schoolgirls” for example, please know that it is not random – it is the logical outcome of the distorted attitudes and degradation aimed at girls and young women in our society. Unfortunately, remarks such as those of Sept. 23 contribute greatly to this atmosphere.

I would appreciate knowing what steps if any Q104 is going to take to make sure its performers are not fostering a climate of humiliation and abuse toward girls and young women.

The station responded to her with the following:

Thank you so much for your letter. It’s always helpful to be reminded of our responsibility to our listeners and the community, and I’ll share your thoughts with the Q104 announcers. Your insights and perspective are very much appreciated.

In an informal environment that thrives on rock ‘n’ roll “attitude”, the line of good taste and social responsibility can blur from time to time, but we at Q104 are committed to contributing positively to our community.

The listener then filed a complaint with the CRTC on November 10, which forwarded it to the CBSC in due course:

On the evening of Sept. 23, after the Rolling Stones concert, Q104 radio performers returned to the studio. One remarked that the other was like “an excited schoolgirl” at which point the second responded “with my budding breasts and rock hard nipples”. I complained to the station and received a form letter (correspondence attached).

I would like a statement from the station repudiating performances that ridicule adolescent girls’ bodies and breasts, as well as information regarding what their standards actually are regarding sexism, and how performers are accountable in any way.

Broadcaster's Response

CFRQ-FM sent a second response on December 11:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond again to your concerns regarding the statement you heard on Q104 on September 23rd. I assure you, my response to your letter of October 21st was not a form letter. I had held a meeting with the three announcers involved in the on-air conversation to listen to the tape of the program in question, and discuss your comments. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that it was I, myself, who had uttered the words in question. In the spirit and excitement of the moment, I didn't recall having said that phrase.

For the record, this was our original correspondence:

I am writing concerning the content of performances on the evening of Sept. 23. After the Rolling Stones concert, performers returned to the studio. One remarked that the other was like "an excited schoolgirl" at which point the second responded "with my budding breasts and rock hard nipples".

This is totally unacceptable - it ridicules and objectifies girls' bodies, which fosters a climate of abuse. This is a very negative thing for girls of any age listening to Q104 to hear, as well as for boys and men. The more sexualization and ridicule that is focused on girls' and young women's bodies, the more negative environment we have to live in. When we see violence against "schoolgirls" for example, please know that it is not random - it is the logical outcome of the distorted attitudes and degradation aimed at girls and young women in our society. Unfortunately, remarks such as those of Sept. 23 contribute greatly to this atmosphere.

I would appreciate knowing what steps if any Q104 is going to take to make sure its performers are not fostering a climate of humiliation and abuse toward girls and young women.

Thank you so much for your letter. It's always helpful to be reminded of our responsibility to our listeners and the community, and I'll share your thoughts with the Q104 announcers. Your insights and perspective are very much appreciated.

In an informal environment that thrives on rock 'n' roll "attitude", the line of good taste and social responsibility can blur from time to time, but we at Q104 are committed to contributing positively to our community.

Ms. [R.], I maintain that this previous letter explains our position. But I will attempt to provide further illumination on the specifics of this instance.

Given the listening audience that Q104 generally reaches (91% are 18 or older), the late hour of the broadcast (approximately 10:30 pm), and the context of the quote (a humorous take-off of a well known pop culture quotation which most of the Q104 audience would be likely to recognize), we feel that the on-air comments you have referenced do not contribute to the negative environment you've described.

The announcer who used the first phrase, commenting that I seemed like "an excited schoolgirl", was quoting a catch phrase made popular in the 1990's by actor Mike Myers, and used often by his character, Dieter, in the recurring "Sprockets" sketches on the TV show *Saturday Night Live*. In the sketch, Dieter would claim to be as "excited as a little girl", and pull the fabric of his shirt out from his chest, so as to suggest breasts. My retort, "With my budding breasts and rock hard nipples," was simply to address the previous comment and complete the mental image of Dieter's famous line. It was an attempt at humour meant to

spoof the level of excitement experienced by a grown man meeting a world famous rock band during their first appearance in Halifax (which was the topic of the conversation). In no way was this intended to ridicule or objectify girls' bodies. It's difficult to imagine that Q104's listening audience would interpret it as such, but we accepted your assertions in the spirit in which they were intended, and discussed them amongst the announce staff.

Prior to receiving your letter, I would not have seen any potential harm from the words in question. Your comments opened my eyes to an issue that I thought warranted the attention of my staff. Having considered your perspective, and being sensitive to the issues involved, it was a useful exercise to re-examine our use of potentially offensive language in such cases. However, I'm confident that while certain words and phrases used for comedic intent may inadvertently spark such misinterpretation on occasion, the station's performers are in no way fostering a climate of humiliation and abuse toward girls and young women. It has never been our intention, and never will, to contribute to a negative environment which would lead to the logical outcome of violence against women or girls.

Q104's on-air performers are accountable to the *RTNDA Code of (Journalistic) Ethics*, and the Canadian Association of Broadcasters' *Code of Ethics, Violence Code, and Sex-Role Portrayal Code for Television and Radio Programming*, as adjudicated by the CBSC through this process. One of the General Principles of the *Sex-Role Portrayal Code* prohibits the "sexualization" of children in programming. However, the context of the aforementioned comments of September 23rd was a humorous reference to a popular character and catch phrase from recent pop culture, and would not reasonably be interpreted by the adult audience listening at the time to be a sexualization of children.

Again, Ms. [R.], I appreciate the chance to clarify Q104's viewpoint. And primarily, I appreciate you bringing the importance of this issue to our attention.

Additional Correspondence

The complainant submitted her Ruling Request on December 11 with the following additional comments:

I would like to thank program director [Mr. D.] for their [*sic*] considered letter of Dec. 11, and the steps taken to discuss the matter with staff. The bottom line of that letter, however, asserts that in fact the station views the comments as acceptable, and for this reason I request a ruling from the CBSC as to whether the references to the "budding breasts and rock hard nipples" of "excited schoolgirls" are acceptable. There is no indication of where the station will draw the line in the future, or how it will avoid crossing that line. Accountability mechanisms are an issue particularly when it is the program director making such comments.

The station appears to think the comments are acceptable because they make reference to comedy routines of the 1990's which made jokes about men's excitement and young girls' breasts. With respect, this is hardly persuasive. Two wrongs don't make a right. I accept that the program manager's intention was humour, not to humiliate; unfortunately, regardless of the intention, many women and girls would find such comments humiliating. Humour can play a role in the humiliation of groups including women who may be discriminated against; in fact joke-telling that focuses attention on female body parts is a significant and insidious part of discriminatory behaviour. The station's program manager states that it is difficult to imagine that the comments could be interpreted as humiliating; however, that certainly was my experience as a female listener. I also shared the comments and correspondence with the approximately 80 university students I teach, and many of them found it offensive; not even one made the connection with the "cultural" reference the program manager uses to justify the use of these phrases. Mr. [D.] asserts that because the comments in question

were used to ridicule states of mind of the male announcers upon attending a concert that they are then somehow acceptable. However, if we examine this assertion carefully, it implies that such excitability is suitable for ridicule, by using stereotypes of girls' excitability connected to very sexual imagery to disparage the men involved. Despite the context of so-called humour regarding men's excited states of mind at concert attendance, these phrases focus in a sexualized way on young girls' body parts, and contravene the Exploitation provision "Negative or degrading comments on the role and nature of women, men or children in society shall be avoided."

Further, the Code provides that "Equality of the sexes must be recognized and reinforced through the proper use of language and terminology." While guidance is given to clarify that this refers to the use of gender inclusive terms, it is my view that the use of language that focuses specifically on sex characteristics exclusive to females (sexualized nipples and breasts) and stereotypes (schoolgirl "excitability") undermine equality.

Finally, the Code clearly states that the sexualization of children in particular is unacceptable. The station seems to believe that because the phrases occurred in the context of humour, no sexualization occurred when "schoolgirls" were described as having "budding breasts and rock hard nipples." More accurately, I believe the announcer sexualized children for a humorous purpose. I view this as unacceptable under the Code, regardless of the purpose of the sexualization, and would appreciate a ruling.