

DOMINIC SHEEHAN: NEW CHIEF EXECUTIVE BROADCASTING STANDARDS AUTHORITY

In a frank and lengthy interview, Mr Sheehan talked to VoTE president, John Terris about his values and attitudes, his aspirations for his organization, and about the digital future which lies ahead. He is approachable, personable, and enthusiastic about his new brief. He is perfectly comfortable with his sexuality (he is gay and has a Civil Union partner), and does not believe that this will be a barrier to his understanding family values and the needs of parents and children in the media age.

The following is an edited transcript.

VoTE: What are you working on at the moment?

DS: *We want to know what children are watching and what they're doing; but more precisely what media they are watching and how does that affect them...how they've been affected by mobile devices, and games, and the Internet. In terms of video games, violence is a real issue.*

VoTE: Since your previous job was as an advocate for scriptwriters, how do you feel about moving from being on the side of the performer to policing standards?

DS: *I come from being a lawyer as well, and of course, the complaints process is quasi-judicial. I come with the view that content is content, no matter what platform it's on.*

VoTE: The people who make programmes are committed to stretching the envelope, whereas, standards run counter to that.

DS: *I wouldn't have taken this job if protecting bottom line standards was not something I was really*

passionate about. My personal belief is that in order to have a civilisation, you have to have somebody saying, "the bottom line is, you can't put that on radio or television."



VoTE: How do we go about the standard-setting process when clearly the BSA's set of rules, now 20 years old, are totally out of keeping with the present environment?

DS: *As far as the new technologies, the Internet and mobile devices are concerned, we don't know what the public wants, and neither do we know what the industry wants, and they're pretty opinionated too. To put any sort of standard on the Internet, when its been a little bit like the Wild, Wild West since it began (may prove difficult).*

VoTE: But your organization has built up a body of knowledge since it began, which points in a certain direction. It's one thing to reformulate standards in the light of new technologies. It's another thing to say that "we throw up our hands, we're not going to try to apply standards anymore".

DS: *We're working in a situation where our standards are now out of date, and in five years time the BSA's current standards will no longer be applicable because*

traditional broadcasting will be disappearing. There are sufficient examples overseas where different platforms have been subjected to different types of regulation. You can't regulate the Internet in the same way as you do TV, but that doesn't mean you can't have regulation of the Internet at all. In the UK, for instance, there is self regulation, but if they don't, then OfCom (The UK Office of Communications) steps in and regulates them.

VoTE: Are you a person of faith?

DS: *I was raised a Catholic but I do not practice. Some of my eight brothers and sisters are. It has given me a world view which I value. I don't have children.*

VoTE: A lot of your job is to do with protecting children and having a parental perspective, so how do you do that?

DS: *I have 13 nephews and nieces, and I think they will tell you I understand their perspective. My brothers and sisters would say the same.*

VoTE: Many of our members who are parents are concerned that in most western countries the Watershed is 8.30 or 9.00 pm, whereas in NZ it is 8.30 pm. What does your family tell you about that?

DS: *Well they certainly tell me that they are unhappy with certain kinds of content. But I can't actually say to broadcasters, "Well you can't put that (bad language, sex, violence) on early in the evening." The job of the BSA is to investigate complaints.*

I would encourage people to make as many complaints as possible, to use the system and not be put off. -V