MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES

Psychological Perspectives

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Executive Summary

This paper is a response to community concern about the impact of the media on individuals and society. It takes as a premise that media representations are not simply a mirror of society but rather that they are highly selective and constructed portrayals. It is the capacity of these portrayals to shape and frame our perception of the world which is under consideration here. While acknowledging that the media can have many positive roles, our focus here is on four aspects of media that have raised concern:

- the portrayal of violence in children’s media;
- advertising, especially when it is directed at children;
- the portrayal of crime; and
- representations of ethnic diversity and conflict between ethnic groups.

Given that the vast majority of psychological research on the media has concerned television, that too is our focus, although all forms of media are mentioned. The paper attempts to summarise the research evidence in these areas, and then offers a series of recommendations about ways of responding to the issues raised.

To provide a framework for interpreting the research, the paper starts with a review of psychological theories that attempt to explain how exposure to television might lead to changes in values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. These include:

- Cultivation theory: the theory that television tends to cultivate acceptance of the beliefs, values and perspectives it portrays, at a broad cultural level.
- Social learning theory and social-cognitive models: these address how individuals come to imitate behaviour observed on television, and to develop mental ‘primes’ and ‘scripts’ from material viewed on television, which can then guide their later behaviour. These models also address the ways in which exposure to violent material can lead to people becoming desensitised to violence and disinhibited from behaving aggressively.
- Models of persuasion: these describe the processes by which viewers can be ‘persuaded’ by television advertising.
Impersonal impact hypothesis and third-person effect: these theories are aimed at explaining why many people believe that they themselves are immune from the influence of television, while others are susceptible.

The first two issues which are reviewed concern the media’s effects on children. The first of these is violence on the media. By far the greatest amount of psychological research on the media has concerned the impact of televised violence on children. Since literally thousands of studies have been conducted, we attempt to make sense of this vast literature by drawing together the conclusions made by existing authoritative reviews of the literature. The complexity of the questions involved in this area make it difficult to reach clear-cut conclusions, but there is reasonable consensus on some central issues. For instance, it is generally agreed that prolonged exposure to television violence is one of the many interacting factors which lead to children being more likely to display aggressive behaviour in the long term. It is also agreed that the social context is important in determining the effects of exposure to violent television; e.g., if an adult helps the child interpret and critique the viewed material, the negative effects are lessened.

The second area reviewed concerns advertising. Parents commonly express concern over advertising directed at children, perceiving it as a source of conflict with their children who demand advertised products that parents may feel are inappropriate, and also fearing that it may lead them to adopt overly materialistic values. We review the literature on whether and when children can distinguish advertising from other forms of programming, and the extent to which it affects their desire for products and their buying behaviour. It appears that, although very young children can discriminate advertisements from programs, it is not until school age that children are aware of advertising’s specifically persuasive intent. It also appears that advertisements can affect product choices, although as with most media effects, there is a range of moderating factors. The research on other concerns, such as the potential of advertising of unhealthy food products to contribute to obesity, is also reviewed. It is concluded that, despite gaps in the research literature, there is evidence that children are affected by advertisements and that regulation of the nature and timing of advertisements directed at children is warranted.

The concerns in the last two areas reviewed are not limited to effects on children but refer to effects on people of any age and on society at large. Research on media portrayals
of crime has shown that in general people overestimate the level of crime in their community, and media representations of crime are often thought to be partly responsible for this. Analyses clearly document that the media over-represent the level of some sorts of crime, and the level of involvement in crime of particular groups in society. For example, crimes by youth and people with a mental illness are over-reported. There has been less high-quality research on how this misrepresentation of crime affects people’s attitudes and behaviour, but there is some evidence that exposure to media crime reports is related to an overestimation of the dangerousness of society and general fearfulness.

Further, the selectivity of media reports, with a tendency for sensationalist reporting and little coverage of underlying causes for crime, tends to promote acceptance of police-focused and law-and-order responses to crime, rather than a broader, more comprehensive approach that incorporates a preventative, public health perspective.

The final area reviewed is representations of ethnic groups in the media. Analysis of the representation of minority and disadvantaged groups in the media could consider a range of groups, such as people with disabilities, or particular religious groups. We chose to focus on the portrayal of ethnic groups, since issues of racism and discrimination are currently high-profile issues in Australia. Early television portrayed largely a white middle-class world. Recently there has been some shift towards appearances by members of other groups, although these are still rarely at rates which are proportional to the population. What is more, the roles in which minority group members are portrayed tend to reinforce stereotypes about them. There has been surprisingly little research on the effect of such biased representations on members of either minority groups or the majority group. However, there is evidence that programs which intentionally attempt an unbiased portrayal of ethnic diversity (e.g., Sesame Street) succeed in reducing prejudices about other groups.

Another facet of representations of ethnic diversity is how conflict between ethnic groups is presented. It is common for the media to present simplistic unidimensional analyses of conflict, where ethnic difference is in itself given as a cause of conflict. More even-handed analyses that consider underlying issues such as the fears and concerns of both sides, and explore a range of possible solutions, are rare.
All of us are consumers of the media. On the basis of the evidence reviewed here, we present a series of recommendations directed to groups with different roles in society. These are designed to promote more active efforts to address the problems that have been identified with current media representations. Even though some recommendations may appear obvious, and some have been raised by others, the extent of continuing concerns renders it important to articulate and reiterate them.

Recommendations
Consumers – In order to take an active role in affecting the media diet they are offered, we recommend that consumers of the media:

• monitor and audit programs (e.g., for the level of violence portrayed, how crime is presented, the portrayal of different ethnic groups, and the timing and nature of advertisements);

• make their views known to regulating bodies and the media industry by complaining about material or policies they disapprove of, and praising those they like;

• boycott certain programs or media outlets (and inform the outlets of their actions); and

• join or support lobby groups.

Parents – Children may be particularly susceptible to negative influences from the media. We therefore recommend that parents:

• assume responsibility for controlling their children’s viewing habits;

• ensure that they know what their children are watching, and set and enforce clear rules about the amount and nature of TV programming they watch;

• when their children are watching TV or other media, attempt to watch with their children as much as possible, and encourage them to evaluate critically what they watch; and

• help their children to find attractive, exciting and non-violent alternative activities to TV-watching, including activities with parents and other family members.
Education policy-makers and educators – Since research shows that the effects of the media on attitudes and behaviour are mediated by the way viewers interpret and construct what they view, we recommend that:

- all children receive media education as part of their primary and secondary school curricula. Key elements of such curricula should be provision of skills in monitoring and analysing media content, and in communicating opinions effectively to media regulators and the media industry;
- professional development courses on media education be widely available for teachers;
- teachers use media as a teaching tool, and model and promote critical reflective viewing;
- teachers draw the attention of children and parents to exciting, non-violent, non-stereotyping media, and express their own enthusiasm over them; and
- media education be widely available for parents as well as for children.

Psychologists - Since exposure to media affects attitudes and behaviour, psychologists in research settings, clinical practice, and with public advocacy roles have key contributions to make. We therefore recommend that psychologists:

- identify areas of research that have been neglected, and conduct research to address them;
- alert psychologists in training to the research potential of the area;
- be alert to recognising the influence of the media in the ideation and emotionality of clients, particularly the young;
- stay abreast of the research; and
- recognising the complexity of the issues, avoid simplistic global assertions when asked to make authoritative comment on media effects.
Journalists and journalism educators - This review has highlighted ways in which the media’s presentation of issues such as violence, crime, and ethnic diversity has the potential to have detrimental effects, and has suggested that more sophisticated and complex presentation of issues is needed to avoid this. We therefore recommend that:

- as a step towards improved education of journalists, a collection of best-practice examples of coverage of important social issues be made and used in journalism education;
- training courses for journalists should include components on minority groups and cultural issues, particularly regarding Indigenous issues; and
- professional development courses addressing the issues raised above should be available and promoted for currently practising journalists.

Media policy makers and regulatory bodies - We recommend that policy makers and regulatory bodies:

- become familiar with the research literature, and use it to frame policy;
- in evaluating calls for regulatory controls on programming, acknowledge that freedom of speech is not an absolute value but must be balanced against other community values;
- ensure there is consumer input into the content of children’s television, particularly in terms of the values and attitudes it presents to children;
- develop and police effective regulations to apply to advertising directed to children; and
- ensure that classification systems are based on the research evidence, and are effectively applied, monitored and enforced.

Media producers and media industry - In terms of news reporting and current affairs, probably the most salient factor is the policy adopted by media producers and proprietors. We recommend that producers and the industry:

- encourage a shift in emphasis from simplistic ideas of ‘newsworthiness’ (focusing on speed, visual appeal, simplicity, etc.) to a commitment to increased coverage of social contextual factors so that viewers can more accurately ‘make sense’ of news stories;
- ensure that portrayals of ethnic and cultural groups reflect their diversity and strengths, and avoid stereotyped or demeaning depictions;
• study examples of the use of the media to elicit positive changes in social attitudes and
  use these as guides for their own future programming; and
• respond to the community’s concern about TV violence, hear the preferences actually
  expressed by children, and use their resources to produce exciting media material that
  does not rely on violence.
1. Introduction

It is now widely acknowledged that the media are not a simple mirror of society, reflecting ‘the world out there.’ If this were so, journalists would simply need to point their camera or tape recorder in a random direction and let the tape roll. Rather, active decisions are taken at every stage of the process of producing and transmitting media material, regarding what should be included and what should be omitted, and how and when the content should be presented. It can therefore be argued that the media have the potential to play an active part in shaping and framing our perception of the world, and indeed in affecting the nature of that world.

The media play an indispensable role in modern life, providing information, education and entertainment. It is not our intention to review the nature or extent of these positive influences. Rather, the focus of this paper is on potential negative impacts. Debate has raged about the nature and the extent of the negative impact of some aspects of the media on individuals’ values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, and on society in general. Further, there is increasing concern over the role of the media in affecting the course of public events, such as international disputes and criminal court cases. At the same time, debate reflects the ongoing struggle to find the appropriate balance between control of media (with censorship as the extreme form of control) and rights to freedom of expression and of choice.

Research into effects of the media is multidisciplinary, with contributions from diverse disciplines such as communications studies, semiotics, sociology, and politics. However, many of the core questions about media effects are psychological in nature. Despite the wealth of psychological and other research on various facets of media effects, no single clear picture has yet emerged about how and when the media does impact on the individual or society. Nevertheless, in view of the continuing debate about appropriate responses to the ‘media problem’, it appears timely to review the psychological research literature with a view to providing research-based recommendations to the various parties involved. These parties include consumers (parents and others), educators, regulatory bodies, producers and broadcasters. As psychologists, we are also in the implications of the existing research for psychological research and practice.
The term ‘the media’ covers both print (newspaper, magazine) and electronic (TV, film and radio) media and more recent variants such as video, videogames, the Internet, etc. There is a large body of research relating to most of these forms of media, but the largest subset relates to TV, and this is where public concern has also most centred. TV represents the first medium which ‘entered our living rooms’ with great immediacy and impact. Therefore in this paper we focus on TV, but mention other forms of media where particular issues are raised. Although the field has been dominated by US research, we review relevant recent research from Australia and elsewhere wherever possible.

Newer forms of media, involving videogames and the Internet, are becoming more and more interactive. They require the active engagement of the viewer (who, for example, uses a handheld electronic ‘gun’ to ‘kill’ characters on the screen and may be praised by the program for doing so). From available studies, it appears that the effects of engagement with violent interactive media are similar to those of previously available media, but we identify a need for more research on these new forms of media.

In this paper, we start by reviewing theoretical frameworks that have been used to predict and explain media effects in general, in order to orient the reader to ways of interpreting the research data. Here we rely principally on theoretical explanations for how TV violence might impact on aggressive behaviour, since this is the area that has received most research attention. We then move to an examination of the actual research on the effects of violence in the media, with a particular emphasis on its effects on children; this is the aspect of media effects which has raised the greatest fears about detrimental long-term consequences, and also the most heated debate. The next section also focuses on children, but here we review evidence of the effects of advertising on children’s values, attitudes and behaviour, another commonly raised area of concern. The next two sections cover facets of media reporting which are often suspected of distorting perceptions of society, strengthening unjustified prejudices, fears and biases. Here the focus moves from children to people of all ages, and emphasises the effects of the media on social values, beliefs and attitudes in general. We discuss how criminal acts are represented in the media, and review the evidence of the impact of these representations. This is followed by a discussion of how ethnic minority groups are represented. These review sections lead to a concluding section that includes a series of recommendations directed to
various sections of the community, with the goals of minimising the negative effects that have been identified, and maximising the positive potential of the media. A list of organisations and further resources is appended to the paper for those who want to explore these issues further.

2. Theoretical explanations for the impact of the media: The example of TV violence

Television is clearly not the only, nor the most important, contributor to human social behaviour, but it is unquestionably an important source of social influence. Although the relationship between exposure and effects is neither simple nor direct, more than 30 years of research has indicated that television can and does influence our feelings, attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Wartella, Olivarez, & Jennings, 1998). In both the long- and the short-term, our experience of media images contributes in significant ways to the way we think, act, and feel, and to our broader beliefs about the world and social reality.

A number of theoretical models and approaches help to explain the complex links between media exposure and its effects. Many of these have been concerned principally with the impact of TV violence on children. Theoretical explanations have increasingly emphasised a range of contextual factors including features of the message, the viewer, and the broader social setting that influence audience reactions. In particular, contemporary theories have argued for a more ‘receiver-centred’ approach in which the viewer is seen as an active participant who constructs meaning from viewing. Increasingly, such accounts accept that selectivity and intentional choice, attention and involvement are forms of activity that facilitate media effects (Kim & Rubin, 1997). Thus, psychological models of media influence predict variability between individuals in its effects, whilst still allowing for common patterns to emerge (Hawkins & Pingree, 1986).

2.1 Cultivation theory

One major theoretical approach, cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; 1986; 1994; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990), is an attempt to understand and explain the influence of television as a source of broadly shared images and messages about the world and its people. It concentrates on the enduring and common consequences of growing up and living with television. Gerbner and his colleagues argue that, to the extent
that television dominates children’s sources of entertainment and information, continued 
cumulative exposure to its messages is likely to reiterate, confirm and nourish--that is, 
cultivate--the beliefs, agenda, values, and perspectives that it portrays (Signorielli & 
Morgan, 1990). From this standpoint, television is a powerful cultural force that produces 
stable, resistant and widely shared assumptions, images, values and concepts. It cultivates 
a mainstream view of what issues are important (e.g., crime, the environment, body image) 
and what the world is like (e.g., dangerous). Moreover, it cultivates specific value 
systems, ideologies, and perspectives (e.g., materialism, consumerism, ethnocentrism, 
individualism, capitalism, social responsibility).

The importance of media cultivation is underlined by the fact that there are many 
critical discrepancies between ‘the world’ and ‘the world as portrayed on television’. For 
instance, because there is more crime on television than in real life, television can cultivate a 
view of the world as a mean and scary place (see Section 5). This is especially likely 
among those who live in high crime urban areas and among those minorities whose fictional 
counterparts are frequently victimised on television. The TV message is thought to 
resonate most strongly with such viewers.

Television also provides a major source of information about racial, ethnic and 
gender groups (Graves, 1980; Greenberg & Brand, 1994; see Section 6). If, for instance, 
women, the elderly and racial minorities are underrepresented in television and/or 
portrayed in a relatively narrow and stereotyped range of roles and activities, exposure to 
television is likely to cultivate gender, minority and age-role stereotypes. According to 
cultivation theory, television even cultivates the ‘meanings’ of social, personal and cultural 
contexts (Gerbner et al., 1994). For instance, a viewer’s age, gender and class make a 
difference to their perspective, but television viewing may also help define what it means 
to be a particular age, gender and class (for example, an adolescent middle class girl). In 
short, television information about social groups is argued to shape viewers’ conceptions 
of their own as well as others’ identities (Abeles, 1980).

Some (e.g., Comstock & Paik, 1991; Potter, 1993; Wilson, 1995) have argued that 
cultivation theory is simplistic and that not enough emphasis is given to the mediating 
factors that affect cultivation. Further, Gunter (1994) argues that the cultivation effect 
may be program-specific rather than the result of total television viewing, and may be
dependent on selective attention to programs that reinforce one’s view of the world. However, recent revisions of the theory (e.g., Gerbner et al., 1994) have sought to redress such criticisms and to place an increasing emphasis on the interaction between the viewer and the medium.

2.2 Social learning theory and social-cognitive accounts

While cultivation theory tries to explain media effects on society in general, other psychological theories have been concerned with understanding the long- and short-term effects of media exposure, especially televised violence, on the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, particularly children.

Perhaps the most widely accepted account of the way in which televised content affects the attitudes and behaviours of the developing child is Bandura’s social learning theory (1971, 1986). Bandura argues that people learn behavioural responses such as aggression either by direct experience in which their own aggressive behaviour is reinforced, or by observing that such behaviour brings rewards to others (that is, through vicarious reinforcement). Further, media characters are—along with parents, peers and others—the sources that provide the text for modelling specific attitudes and behaviour, and attitudes and behaviours that are learned at a young age through habitual exposure to such models are argued to be relatively resistant to change (also see Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984). For instance, through observing the behaviour of televised models, children come to learn which attitudes and behaviours are accepted and rewarded and which are punished, and they will be motivated to imitate media models whose behaviour is rewarded.

In this way, social learning theory emphasises both the imitative and disinhibitive effects of media violence. Repeated exposure to televised aggression can teach children novel aggressive behaviours that become part of their cognitive structure and behavioural repertoire. It can also reduce viewers’ inhibitions against aggression. For instance, children may imitate specific aggressive behaviours that are effective in achieving desired outcomes for others (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). They may also learn that if others can behave aggressively without being caught and punished, then it is all right for them to behave
aggressively too. That is, they may learn that aggression is a typical and permissible way
of solving problems or attaining goals (Bandura, 1973; see Section 3).

Moreover, in its most recent revision (Bandura, 1986, 1994), social learning theory
argues that a viewer’s interpretation of a televised message mediates imitation and learning.
For instance, Bandura argues that interpretations are a function of contextual cues like the
type of model who engages in violence and the consequences delivered to the model.

More recent models involve cognitive priming (e.g., Berkowitz, 1984; 1990;
Berkowitz & Rogers, 1986; Jo & Berkowitz, 1994; also see Bushman, 1998). These
augment social learning theory by emphasising the immediate and short-term effects of
media exposure. They focus on the way in which televised content activates or ‘primes’
related thoughts and behavioural responses. For instance, watching televised aggression
may trigger negative feelings (such as anger or fear) which, in turn, prime other aggressive
feelings, thoughts, memories and behavioural tendencies. Once this cognitive associative
network is triggered or activated, how the individual perceives the situation (cognitive
appraisals), what they say to themselves (self-statements), and other higher-order
cognitions determine whether or not aggression occurs. That is, these variables affect the
link between media-activated thoughts and actual behaviour (see Jo & Berkowitz, 1994).

One important factor affecting the relationship between televised events and the
viewer’s subsequent behaviour is the communication’s meaning for the audience.
Aggression-related thoughts will not be activated unless the depicted scenes, for example,
of contact sports such as football, are considered aggressive by the viewers. Aggressive
thoughts and inclinations activated by the portrayal might also be restrained if the viewer
thinks that the observed aggression is unjustified and risky behaviour that is likely to have
negative consequences. Finally, viewers who identify with the TV aggression or who see
the aggression as realistic are especially apt to have aggression-related thoughts activated
by viewing it.

Thus, cognitive priming accounts locate the effects of televised violence in
information processing and the priming of semantically-related thoughts. Moreover,
although they focus on the immediate or short-term effects of exposure, cognitive priming
accounts also assume that repeated exposure to media violence leads to a greater
probability that aggressive ideas and inclinations will be activated because of the effects of prior learning.

2.3 Social-developmental model

Both modelling and cognitive priming accounts are essentially one-directional. Media content is believed to influence individuals in the audience. More recently, Huesmann (1986; Huesmann & Miller, 1994) has argued for a social developmental model that describes the cognitive basis of learned patterns of social behaviour and that places greater emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between the viewer and the medium.

As in social learning theory, Huesmann argues that social behaviour is controlled by programs or scripts that are acquired in childhood, stored in memory, and used at some later time as a guide for behaviour. He also assumes that television content has an important impact on the formation, development and maintenance of cognitive scripts for how to behave in a variety of circumstances (for example, in response to a violent event, or in an effort to resolve an interpersonal conflict). A script is essentially a sequence of vignettes - it might be one person hitting another in anger over something the other person has done. A script suggests what events are likely to happen in the environment, how the person should behave in response to these events, and what the likely outcome of those behaviours would be (Huesmann & Miller, 1994). When confronted with a social situation, the person may select a script from memory to represent the situation and then assume a role in the script. Moreover, a script is more likely to be retrieved as a guide for behaviour if the current situation closely resembles the encoded situation. For instance, acts of televised aggression that are seen as realistic may also be seen as more relevant to the solving of future conflicts than less realistic ones.

Huesmann further emphasises the importance of personal and interpersonal factors as intervening variables that link media exposure and subsequent behaviour of the viewer and his or her interests in particular media content. For instance, he proposes that a heavy diet of viewing television violence sets in motion a sequence of processes based on these personal and interpersonal factors that results in many viewers not only becoming more aggressive but also developing an increased interest in seeing more violent content. Factors such as poor academic skills, low social popularity, identification with TV characters,
belief in the realism of the content shown on TV, and rehearsal of or fantasising about TV content may be important to maintaining the violence viewing–aggression relationship in children. Thus, aggressive viewers are more likely to watch more violent TV, to have a large network of aggressive associations that are primed by viewing, and to retrieve aggressive scripts when confronted with real-life situations that involve conflict.

Implicit in this account is the assumption that young children, especially those under the age of 7 or 8 years, may be particularly susceptible to learning from TV because of the way in which they make sense of televised scripts. Based on their level of development and maturity, younger children can be expected to interpret television in a somewhat different way than will older children or adults. There are no precise age differences associated with these changes because children vary considerably in how and when they develop various skills. However, there are marked differences with age in the strategies that children use to make sense of new information and in memory limits that constrain the amount of information that can be considered (Kail, 1990; Siegler, 1991). Thus, young children may have more difficulty connecting scenes and drawing conclusions about whether behaviour was rewarded or punished (Wilson, Kunkel, Linz, Potter, Donnerstein, Smith, Blumenthal, & Gray, 1996). Young children may also have more difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy and may have a greater tendency to identify with and imitate television characters.

Children may also be more susceptible to imitation of televised portrayals if the material viewed is consistent with experiences that they encounter in their home or social environment and if parental or sibling coviewing provides tacit approval of the content as important, useful and worthy of attention (see Nathanson, 1999). By contrast, active input from parents or others who provide a negative commentary on violent content and set rules about viewing violent content may communicate the view that such content is unrealistic, morally dubious, unimportant and/or not worthy of sustained attention and, in turn, reduce TV-induced aggressive inclinations (see Desmond, Singer, & Singer, 1990; Nathanson, 1999; Singer, Singer, Desmond, Hirsch, & Nicol, 1988). Media education which teaches children critical viewing skills such as the ability to recognise that incidents are fabricated, and that programs are broadcast to make money, also allows children to evaluate better the content that they view (Dorr, Graves, & Phelps, 1980).
2.4 Desensitisation

In understanding the effects of televised content on attitudes and behaviour--and particularly the effects of televised violence and aggression--an additional theoretical approach has drawn attention to the potential role of emotion. According to the desensitisation hypothesis, repeated viewing of TV violence leads to a reduction in emotional responsiveness to violence on the screen and to an increased acceptance of violence in real life. For instance, although young children may initially exhibit intense fright and fear reactions to violent program content (e.g., Cantor, 1994), they may become increasingly accustomed to violence in programs and may desire increasingly violent content as they become habituated or desensitised (Drabman & Thomas, 1974). Prolonged viewing of TV violence by children and adults alike may lead to a reduction in emotional responsiveness to real world violence, to an increased acceptance of violence in everyday life, and to the development of callous attitudes toward victims of violence.

2.5 Models of persuasion

The theoretical models above seek to explain the effects of entertainment and current affairs programming on viewers’ feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Some literature has also concentrated on the effects of televised messages or media campaigns that are explicitly intended to alter attitudes and behaviour. In some cases, the intentions of television commercials can be regarded as socially desirable, such as those promoting healthy lifestyles. However, the intentions and likely outcomes of others, like product advertising, are more debatable.

Classic models of persuasion (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) combine characteristics of the source (e.g., attractiveness and credibility), incentives of the message appeal (e.g., fear, social acceptance, correct knowledge), and repetition and placement of the message to explain likely changes in attitudes and behaviour. Social learning theory (e.g., Bandura, 1973) also predicts that viewers are likely to exhibit behaviour similar to role models who are credible, who explicitly model intended behaviour and who receive appropriate reinforcement. More recent models of persuasion (e.g., the elaboration-likelihood model, Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) have also been used to predict the long-term effects of persuasive messages according to variations in the motivation to process the message content.
In understanding the potential effects of commercial advertising on children, special concerns arise because of cognitive developmental issues that affect message comprehension. For instance, young children up to kindergarten age are likely to have little or no appreciation of the self-serving and selling intent of product commercials (see Section 4).

2.6 The impersonal impact hypothesis and third-person effect

Finally, in understanding the effects of the media, attention has been drawn to the so-called impersonal impact hypothesis (Mutz, 1989; Tyler & Cook, 1994) which argues that the links between television viewing and perceptions are generally clearer for societal level judgements (such as estimates of the crime rate) than for personal level judgements (such as estimates of the personal risk of victimisation). In a related vein, it has been argued that people assume and act on the premise that others will be influenced by mass media messages while they themselves will remain immune or relatively untouched (the third-person effect, Davison, 1983; Duck & Mullin, 1995; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Perloff, 1993). This may stem from a tendency for individuals to both overestimate message effects on others and underestimate message impact on themselves--tendencies that result from a combination of cognitive and motivational biases (see Perloff, 1993). For instance, people like to feel that they are in control of their own attitudes and behaviour although they may possess an acquired script about the gullibility of the mass audience (e.g., Smith, 1986).

Accordingly, it has been suggested that a significant part of the apprehension about the effects of ‘harmful’ media content such as violence and commercial advertising results from beliefs about media influence on others (Lasorsa, 1992; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996). In forming policy, this needs to be recognised. An emphasis must be put on measuring and reporting actual media effects and not perceived media effects, and on considering the implications of ‘third-person’ perceptions on calls for media censorship to protect others as well as for personal media use.
2.7 Summary

A range of explanations has been put forward for how the media impact upon individuals and society at large. These all involve aspects of the message, the viewer, and the context in which the message is viewed. The theoretical understanding which is gained from these accounts helps to interpret the research evidence on the effects of the media, which is reviewed below.

3. ‘It frightends me’: Research on the effects of violent media on children

3.1 What are the concerns?

Despite variations in methodology, research consistently reports very high levels of exposure to violence through electronic media (Dietz & Strasburger, 1991; Mediascope, 1995, 1996, 1997). It is therefore not surprising that there is widespread concern about the effects of this television diet on individual and societal attitudes, values and behaviour. The concern has centred on the effects on children, for whom a range of undesirable consequences are feared. These encompass increased levels of aggressive behaviour, increased acceptance of violence as a normal part of life and as an effective way to achieve one’s ends, and at the other extreme, the induction of fear and anxiety and the belief that the world is a ‘mean and scary place’. The following quotes, given by children in a study by Cupit (1986), illustrate some of these reactions. ‘I really hated it when the guys were out in the boat and all of a sudden the shark comes out of the water. I hate it and can’t get it out of my mind.’ ‘I can’t forget the Part where a man is laying on a bed and a long knife came through the bed and goes through the man’s neck I always look under my bed now’.

3.2 What is the evidence?

Difficulties in research in this area Research aiming to document whether such concerns are warranted is fraught with difficulties. Researchers must decide what ‘effects’ to talk about: e.g., aggressive play; psychopathic violence; anxiety; disturbing memories; desensitisation; or enjoyment of violence. In what context should these effects be measured? Which media should be examined: broadcast television; videos; computer games; particular genres; specific programs, single episodes or events? What counts as ‘media
violence’: only physical attack or also verbal abuse; accidental injury or only intentional acts? What factors should be studied because they might strengthen or weaken the influence of the material?

Because researchers have come to different decisions on these and related questions, it is no surprise that findings vary from study to study. This creates a healthy academic debate about the interpretation of the research (Cook, Kendziersky, & Thomas 1983; Freedman, 1984, 1994; Friedrich-Cofer & Huston, 1986; Murray, 1994). For instance, Hodge (1992) concludes: ‘...since an international research effort on a massive scale for more than a decade has been unable to demonstrate consistent and precise effects of television violence, it is unlikely that these effects exist.’ (p.73). Others would argue that failure to find ‘consistent and precise’ effects does not mean that they do not exist, only that they are complex. The argument is similar to that about whether the wealth of studies demonstrating higher rates of cancer among smokers does or does not demonstrate a ‘causal’ relationship.

Given that each study considers only some aspects of television violence, in relation to a specific set of effects, amongst a particular sub-group of children, and in a particular context, variability in findings is almost guaranteed. While many existing studies can be criticised on methodological grounds, there is also a wealth of well-conducted research, from many countries and disciplines, which tends to reveal convergent trends which are described below.

Overview of reviews of research studies There have been literally thousands of studies on the effects of media violence on children. It is therefore unrealistic for us to attempt to review individual studies. Instead we attempt to draw out the conclusions emerging from the many competent evaluative summaries of the research. None of these is fully comprehensive in itself, but together they do allow us to identify what have emerged as important findings and trends. These conclusions are based on 43 review papers; 11 predate 1980, 19 were published in the 1980s, and 13 come from the first half of the 1990s (see Appendix A). While the reviews predominantly cover U.S. research, they also draw from research in many parts of Europe as well as Japan and New Zealand. Australian studies also featured in these reviews (e.g., Cupit, 1987; Knowles & Nixon, 1990; Palmer, 1986; Sanson & DiMuccio, 1993; Sheehan, 1986). Most research emphasis has been on
television but occasional studies address video (e.g., Barlow & Hill, 1985; Cupit, 1986) and video/computer games (e.g., Ledingham, Ledingham, & Richardson, 1993; Sneed & Runco, 1992).

Though differing in focus, most reviews are remarkably consistent in their interpretation of the disparate studies they consider. The following conclusions are endorsed universally by these reviews:

- most children are exposed to significant levels of viewing of violent media over long durations, and some children’s level of exposure is extreme;
- the issues are very complex, and we do not yet understand them clearly enough to support dogmatic simplistic assertions;
- children differ in how they are affected by violence on television;
- different types of violent and aggressive materials have different effects; and
- all effects are strongly context dependent and affected by mediating factors such as parental attitudes and media education.

Despite these complexities, most reviewers also share the conviction that convergent generalisations do emerge with sufficient consistency to justify attention by parents, educators, legislators and the industry. Such effects can be summarised as follows:

- children who watch violence on television have a higher likelihood of behaving aggressively in the short term;
- persistent viewing of violence on television is related to an increased likelihood of behaving aggressively in the long term and, in some cases, this may include serious criminal violence;
- television is only one of a number of factors which contribute to the tendency to violence and aggression, and its contribution is small to moderate (as is the case for all other measured antecedents of violence);
- some children enjoy, and develop an appetite for, viewing violent material;
- viewing violence on television leads to immediate distress and fear in many children;
- many children retain longer-term recurrent disturbing memories from viewed violence;
- high levels of violence viewing are associated with heightened general fearfulness about life;
• continual exposure to media violence increases the likelihood that children will be
desensitised to real violence;
• age and gender are important influences on the nature of the effects;
• most children’s preferences are for exciting and humorous programs, and violence is
generally unwelcome except for its association with high levels of action; and
• there is widespread community concern, particularly amongst parents and teachers,
  based at least partly on direct experience with children.

A small number of discordant findings contradict particular trends. Freedman (1984,
1994) disputes whether research findings of an association between TV violence viewing
and later aggressive behaviour demonstrate causal effects, and also emphasises the
difficulty of controlling the many other influential variables, which is undeniable. Hodge
and Tripp (1986) suggest children may be little affected by media violence because they
have a sophisticated understanding of the ‘reality’ of television. However, most general
theories of cognitive development, and many specific research studies, suggest that
children find it quite difficult to separate televised fantasy from life reality (e.g., Brown,
Skeen, & Osborn, 1979; Flavell, 1986; Wright, Huston, Reitz, & Piemyat, 1994).

There is no general agreement on the psychological processes that underlie these
influences though all of the frameworks described in Section 2 are commonly adopted.
Over time emphasis has slowly shifted from more mechanistic explanations, with the child
as passive learner, to more cognitive formulations, with the child seen as playing an active
part in drawing meaning and values from media.

Violent videogames  Newer forms of media, including those involving videogames
and the Internet, give the child an increasingly active role. Many of these have violence as
a central theme, and the child often needs to perform violent acts to achieve the end goal of
the game (e.g., use a handheld electronic ‘gun’ to ‘kill’ characters on the screen). Since the
child is actively encouraged to identify with the aggressive ‘hero’, and to rehearse
aggressive acts, and is rewarded for doing so, it seems likely the processes identified in
social learning theory and in models involving ‘priming’ and ‘scripts’ will be even more
salient. Research is starting to document that play with violent videogames does result in
higher levels of aggressive behaviour (Irwin & Gross, 1995), physiological arousal (Fleming
& Rickwood, 1999; Segal & Dietz, 1991) and aggressive mood (Fleming & Rickwood,
It may be that the effects of engagement with such media differ in strength, and sometimes in kind, to those of previously available media. There is a clear need for more research studies addressing these forms of media.

Do the documented effects of media violence matter in real terms? As noted, any relationship found between media exposure and attitudes or behaviours is bound to be small because of the number of other variables involved. This has led some reviewers to suggest that they are of little practical consequence. This issue was directly addressed by Rosenthal (1986) who clarified the relationship between small statistical effects and the actual numbers of people affected. Rosenthal reworked the small effects found by Huesmann et al. (1984) to demonstrate that their measured relationships between child aggression and adult criminality (centering about a correlation of 0.12) meant that ‘For every 100 children below average in childhood aggression, only 44 will be above the median in adult criminality compared to the 56 we would find among the 100 children above average in childhood aggression’ (p.148). He commented: ‘That difference of 12 per 100 can translate into enormous social, economic, and human differences’ (p.148). He then applied the same analysis to relationships between exposure to media violence and aggressive behaviour in 32 samples of children from four countries to conclude ‘...we can increase the accuracy of selection of high- vs low-aggressive children from a knowledge of high vs low exposure to media violence, most of the time from 16 to 30%’ (p.149).

3.3 Conclusion

For at least 20 years there has been a consensus amongst most of the psychological research community actively involved in media research that violence on television contributes to aggressive behaviour, to anxiety about becoming a victim and to callousness with respect to the impact of violence on others (Pearl, Bouthilet, & Lazar, 1982). Studies have predominantly, but not exclusively, focused on children. The evidence for these links is as strong as that for the contribution of any other studied contributor to community violence. The task of psychologists is no longer to demonstrate an effect, but to tease out its complexities and develop processes of amelioration and remediation.
4. Television advertising and children

4.1 What are the concerns?

Concern over the effect of advertising on children is based on the assumption that children are particularly vulnerable to being deceived and exploited by advertising because they lack the cognitive skills to defend themselves against persuasive advertisements. Young children are thought to have difficulty distinguishing television advertising from other program content, recognising the persuasive intent of advertising, and understanding the language of advertising (Dickinson, 1997). Without these abilities, children’s attitudes and desires, and ultimately their behaviour, are assumed to be readily molded by the content of television advertising. This can lead to family conflict when children pressure parents to purchase products like toys that parents may consider to be unnecessary or too expensive, or food products that parents may consider to be unhealthy. There is added concern, particularly for older children and adolescents, that cumulative exposure to advertising will affect children’s general values by socialising them into over-materialistic ways (Gunter & McAleer, 1997) and by encouraging them to adopt values that may be in conflict with those of their parents (see Section 2.1).

4.2 What is the evidence?

Are children aware of television advertising? In order to evaluate critically television advertising, children must be aware of when they are being exposed to advertising messages. Research indicates that children are generally able to differentiate advertisements from programs by 5 years of age. For example, Dorr (1986) reported that a majority of 5-7 year olds could raise their hand or shout out when a commercial appeared during a broadcast. A few studies have reported similar results for some children in even younger age groups (3-4 year olds) (Levin, Petros, & Petrella, 1982; Wartella & Ettema, 1974; Zuckerman & Gianinno, 1981). Of course, just because children are able to discriminate advertisements from program material, it does not necessarily follow that they are aware of the persuasive intent of advertising. Instead, for many young children, their ability to identify advertisements depends simply on an awareness of the perceptual features common to many advertisements, like shorter length, frequent repetition, louder
volume, music, a large number of visual images, and fast-paced production features (Cupitt, Jenkinson, Ungerer, & Waters, 1998; Gunter & Furnham, 1998).

While the results of research to date on children’s awareness of television advertising are reasonably consistent, they are being challenged by recent changes in the ‘standard’ format of advertising and program material that make the task of discriminating advertising and program content for children even harder. A genre of what have been called ‘program-length commercials’ has been produced that contain objects or characters that are central to the program content and that are also marketed as toys. When advertisements for such toys are shown concurrently with the associated programs, young children have difficulty distinguishing the program and commercial material (Wilson & Weiss, 1992). In addition, there are ‘host-selling’ children’s programs where products like toys, sports equipment, and fast foods are specifically promoted (ABA, 1996). Conversely, program formats are infiltrating advertisements, which now include elements of soap opera, documentary, and skit-based comedy (Dickinson, 1997). Thus, the task of discriminating advertising and program material is becoming more difficult, and this raises concerns about the potential for an increase in the impact of advertising on children.

Do children understanding the intent of television advertising? The most important difference between advertising and most other program content is the persuasive intent of advertising. Advertising exists to sell products, and there is a concern that children who do not understand this intent may be more vulnerable to advertising claims since they are less likely to adopt a critical approach to their processing of advertising content. Research indicates that most children 6-7 years of age understand the selling function of advertisements, while most 8-year-olds understand their specifically persuasive intent (Dickinson, 1997). As in other domains, studies using more qualitative research methods and/or non-verbal response formats have reported these competencies in somewhat younger age groups (Buckingham, 1993; Donohue, Hencke, & Donohue, 1980). When children understand the persuasive intent of advertising, they are more likely to think critically about advertising and to question the truthfulness of advertising claims. In contrast, children who lack this understanding are likely to believe that television advertisements always tell the truth (Gunter & McAleer, 1997).
Given the limited ability of young children to evaluate the credibility of advertising claims, many commentators believe that advertisers have a special responsibility not to include deceptive content in advertising directed at children. In this context, deceptive content should be broadly defined to include not only misinformation, but also the presentation of information in ways that can be confusing for young children, for example, using special effects that suggest products (especially toys) have characteristics they do not possess (Gunter & Furnham, 1998; Van Evra, 1998), presenting more information than a child can process in the limited time of the advertisement, or using language, for example, in disclaimers, that is too sophisticated for young children to understand (e.g., ‘some assembly required’, Gunter & Furnham, 1998).

How do children respond to television advertising? Advertising has the potential to have a range of effects on children, like increasing their product awareness, their positive attitudes towards a product, their inclination or actual buying behaviour, and for younger children, their tendency to request purchase from parents (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). However, attempts to document specific effects of advertising on children have yielded mixed results.

With respect to attitudes toward products, Riecken and Yavas (1990) reported that the 8-12 year old children they surveyed generally held negative opinions about advertisements and questioned their truthfulness, but their attitudes toward specific products were more varied. Attitudes toward toy advertisements were less negative than those toward cereal or over-the-counter drug advertisements. These results suggest that children are active viewers and interpreters of television and that their own interests and motivations mediate their more discriminating responses to advertising (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). In addition, it is clear that the interests of children are targeted and, thereby, exploited by advertisers. Surveys of the content of advertising directed to children consistently demonstrate that it is dominated by advertisements for foods high in sugar, fat, and salt and by advertisements for toys. There is considerable concern among consumer watchdogs, health care professionals, and parent groups in Australia about the long-term negative impact of such advertising on children’s health and consumer behaviour (Parliament of Victoria, 1998; Young Media Australia, 1997). For example, the Royal Australian College of Physicians (1999) has attempted to increase public awareness about
the strong link between time spent viewing television and obesity in children. They note that television viewing is associated with an increase in children’s snacking behaviour and in requests for food advertised on television, and with decreased participation in sporting activities.

Since the goal of advertising is to sell products, what evidence is there that children’s actual choice or purchase behaviour is influenced by advertising? Young children generally do not have the means to actually buy products, but they can and do act as consumers by asking parents to purchase specific products. For example, a British study (Greenberg, Fazal, & Wober, 1986) reported that 85% of a sample of 4-13 year olds acknowledged that they had asked their parents to buy advertised products, and 66% claimed that their parents had met their request (Gunter & McAleer, 1997).

When children have the option to choose products themselves or are old enough to buy them, do advertising effects still hold? Research here presents a more complex picture and emphasises the role of social context in influencing children’s behaviour. Gorn and Goldberg (1982) reported that they were able to influence 5-8 year old children’s immediate snack food preferences for either fruit or sugary products by exposing them to advertisements for the different foods over a two week period. In other complementary research, the effect of food advertising was shown to be enhanced when children were exposed to reinforcing input from adults or peers concurrently with exposure to the advertisement (Galst, 1980; Stoneman & Brody, 1981). While co-viewing with adults is a potentially important mediator of advertising effects, it is important to note that some Australian research indicates that co-viewing with young children is least likely to occur when children are watching programs (and advertisements) specifically designed for young age groups (Cupitt et al., 1998). Therefore, for much of children’s television viewing, the important mediating influence of adults is likely to be absent.

Methodological issues for research A more complete understanding of the effects of advertising will require some advances in research design. The impact of advertising has often been assessed in laboratory contexts and/or after short-term exposure. There is a need for more ‘ecologically valid’ research that mirrors the real-life conditions of exposure for children, which typically involve a family context and repeated viewing over long periods of time. Most studies look only at short-term effects of advertising. These may
not be sustained over longer periods, while other effects may only become apparent in the longer term. Most studies to date are correlational, so it is difficult to determine whether advertisements influence children’s attitudes and behaviour, or whether attitudes and behaviour determine what television programming will be viewed. A further issue revolves around evaluations of the validity of research conducted and financed by financial stakeholders (e.g., toy companies) that does not go through the normal peer review process. Finally, there is some dissatisfaction with narrowly-based ‘effects’ research; more qualitative approaches that attempt to understand children’s experience of television and the meanings they make of it are likely to provide further insight into children’s relationship with television advertising and how it impacts upon their development. However, while these methodological concerns are relevant to researchers in the field, the general findings of research on children and advertising using a variety of paradigms do appear to be more consistent than contradictory.

4.3 Conclusions

Television advertising is a significant influence in children’s lives and has been shown to influence their attitudes and consumption behaviour. While young children may be especially vulnerable because they have difficulty discriminating advertising and program content and do not understand advertising’s persuasive intent, the more discriminating and critical attitude of older children does not necessarily protect them from the persuasive influence of advertising any more than it does adults (see Section 2.5). Further research is necessary to understand the processes of advertising influence. The establishment of appropriate standards for children’s advertising and the provision of media education for children and parents will be important in reducing the potential for negative advertising effects.

We turn now from the impact of the media on children, to the role of the media in society more generally. The two issues to be analysed are how crime and ethnicity are represented in the media.
5. Media representations of crime

5.1 What are the concerns?

It is widely assumed that the media, especially television, are primary sources of our knowledge and understanding of crime issues (Fields & Jerin, 1996). Regular surveys of Australia-wide samples indicate that television is considered the best and favorite source of what is regarded as accurate and reliable news (Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations, 1992). However, there is widespread concern that the level and type of crime reported in the media presents a distorted view of the real level of crime in the community (Fields & Jerin, 1996; Windshuttle, 1988). Windshuttle (1988) points to the brevity of TV news reports, the focus on visual images, and the resulting high degree of selectivity in what is reported as reasons for this.

The concern is that such misrepresentations may shape public attitudes about the following questions:

- what is the extent and nature of crime and ‘dangerousness’ in society;
- who are the perpetrators of crime; and
- what are the necessary and effective responses to crime?

For example, if media reporting leads the public to believe that crime is ‘out of control’ and perpetrated largely by a particular segment of society, this may lead to negative stereotypes about that group, and to support for draconian measures against it. Further, if people wrongly believe that they are living in a high-crime, high-violence society or neighbourhood, they may respond by becoming isolated from their community, reducing personal well-being as well as the strength of civil society. Below we provide a brief overview of the evidence on whether the media accurately report real-life crime, and the possible consequences of misrepresentation of crime. Of course, crime is also prominent in fictional programs, e.g., in the host of police dramas and thrillers. However, due to space constraints and the very limited research that has addressed the impact of fictional portrayals of crime, we do not address this genre of media here.
5.2 What is the evidence?

Do the media give an accurate representation of the amount and type of crime? Studies of the relationship between media coverage of crime and official crime data demonstrate that crime news coverage ‘provides a map of the world of criminal events that differs in many ways from the one provided by official statistics’ (Sacco, 1995, p.143). Skogan and Maxfield (1981) suggest that changes in the amount of crime news coverage seem to bear little relationship to variations in the actual volume of crime between places or over time. Whereas official crime statistics indicate that most crime is non-violent, media reports in many instances suggest the opposite (Garofalo, 1981). Some studies focusing on media treatment of crime news have documented that they tend to over-represent crimes of violence and give exaggerated assessments of risk and dangerousness. This research has included an examination of local print media (Humphries, 1981; Marsh, 1991; Windhauser, Seiter & Winfree, 1990), as well as analyses of television crime news reports (Surette,1992).

Weatherburn, Matka and Land (1996) reported that there is a substantial difference between the actual levels of violent crime in the community and community perceptions about the nature of this crime. For example, Schwartz (1999) notes that portrayals of violent crimes in schools in the US have created the perception that schools are dangerous places, but, when considered in relation to the 114 million children in US schools, the rates of violence are actually very low. In Australia, homicide statistics have remained remarkably stable over the last 20 years (Chappell, 1994; Indermaur, 1996), despite the public’s perception of there having been an increase. In an Australian survey of 82 television news bulletins conducted by Rendell (1997), the amount and type of crime reporting presented was compared with data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Report of Crime statistics. This study found there were several discrepancies between television-reported crime and real crime. Very serious crimes such as homicides, armed robbery, abductions and sieges were over-represented in the news bulletins. Children and the elderly were over-represented as victims of crime compared to actual statistics. Rendell (1997) also found that youth were over-represented as perpetrators of crime. Despite increasing media focus on youth crime, over the last 10 years juvenile crime is
estimated to have increased only by around 3% (N.S.W. Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 1996).

Findings such as these suggest that if viewers believe that television news accurately reflects the ‘real world’, they are highly likely to make incorrect estimates about various aspects of the real level and types of crime in their community. For most of us, the media is the major information source available.

The role of the media in shaping public constructions of crime and criminality

There is ongoing debate about how the public constructs meaning from media portrayals of crime (Barlow, Barlow, & Chirosus, 1995). Research evidence indicates that the media do exert a critical influence on our perception of the level of crime in the community (Hans & Dee, 1991; Schlesinger, Tumber, & Murdoch, 1991), although knowledge and understanding of crime are also connected to personal attitudes and demographic variables such as age, sex, and ethnicity, as well as being derived from a variety of other sources including family and friends (Rountree & Land, 1996). When the experiences of individuals as victims or offenders signal a larger social issue, media representations play a crucial role in the construction and transformation of private concerns into public issues. Consistent with cultivation theory (see Section 2.1) which suggests that television is a primary source of values, agendas and perspectives, television helps construct and shape the meaning of crime and criminality for the public.

Sacco (1995) suggests that particular crime problems are often framed to imply particular needs, e.g., for increased police patrols, better investigation, more effective prosecution, or tougher sentences. Alternative frames which might imply needs such as for better gun control, greater social equity, or a focus on rehabilitation, are less frequently aired in the media. The consequences of this kind of framing process upon the construction of crime have been understood in the past using the notion of ‘moral panic’ and more recently by the ‘superpredator’ script.

The notion of moral panic was introduced in the 1970s to describe the anger or outrage directed at certain groups in the community, largely created by negative representations and images of those groups in the media (Cohen, 1972). Simpson (1997) argues that the media continue to play a crucial role in the creation of moral panic by depicting crime in a sensationalist format and presenting news in a manner that gives
priority to attracting viewers rather than accurate reporting of events. Moral panic, in
scapegoating certain groups (e.g., youth, or particular ethnic groups) serves to divert
attention from wider, more inclusive causes of social problems like crime, and narrows the
possibility for meaningful debate in the community in which it occurs.

The notion of a ‘superpredator’ frame or script has more recently been proposed
by Gilliam and Iyengar (1998) as an outcome of increasing levels of media attention on
crime. In this process, reporting of crime news affects perceptions of the prevalence of
crime committed by various groups in the community. In a controlled study, Gilliam and
Iyengar (1998) found that the inclusion of close-up photographs of suspects of particular
ethnicity increased the level of fear in viewers of crime stories. The researchers also found
that the increased fear of crime translated into increased endorsement of harsher penalties
among whites and decreased support for this solution among the other pictured ethnic
groups. This study strongly suggests the importance of media portrayals of crime in the
formation of public opinion about crime and the impact this has upon those groups in the
community that become the focus of a superpredator script.

‘Newsworthiness’ Sercombe (1997) argues that crime stories meet several of the
criteria for economy in news production and of newsworthiness. The reporting of crime
has the appeal of human drama and can usually be assimilated by viewers into pre-existing
personal stereotypes. Media reporting often highlights random and unexpected crimes,
with the consequence that individuals are able to identify themselves as potential victims
and believe that they are exposed to a similar threat. This contributes to the perceived
relevance of the crime, enhancing the appeal of crime stories. Sercombe (1997) also argues
that the time-limited nature of crime stories adds to their newsworthiness, since the
material can easily be slotted into the news presenting format. Investigative reporting that
involves intensive gathering and formulating of information and the seeking of authoritative
discourse is less likely to be adopted than the gathering of news from institutional sources
such as the police.

The attention of researchers has begun to turn towards developing theoretical
models which explain the selective nature of the journalistic decision making process about
crime reporting. Pritchard and Hughes (1997) have attempted to develop such a model,
defining four forms of deviance that are thought to account for much of the variation in
decisions about which crimes to report. In a large-scale study of 100 homicides in one US State, they found that the most consistent predictor of newsworthiness was whether the victim was under the age of 18 or over the age of 62. Homicides that involved white suspects or victims, and those with female victims, were also found to be most newsworthy. A homicide with a female suspect diminished its newsworthiness. Pritchard and Hughes (1997) concluded that journalists evaluate a crime story using readily available information, such as race, gender and age, that is combined to determine the status and cultural deviance of the crime, and it is these forms of deviance that most clearly determine newsworthiness.

Does media reporting affect fear of crime? Research findings regarding the strength of the relationship between exposure to media reports of crime and fear of crime are inconclusive (Sparks, 1992). A relationship between television viewing and fear of crime has been reported for televised crime news but not for crime drama or total television viewing (O’Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987). Heath and Petraitis (1987) and Coleman (1993) found that crime news increased viewers’ level of fear for the world at large but not for their immediate locality. Findings from other studies have failed to establish a relationship between TV crime coverage and fear of crime, when various confounding variables such as age, education and income are controlled (Doob & Macdonald, 1979; Gomme, 1986). Several studies have reported no relationship between exposure to newspaper crime coverage and fear (Gomme, 1986; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981), whereas others have established a significant relationship between them (e.g., Schlesinger, et al., 1991; Williams & Dickinson, 1993). Heath and Gilbert (1996) concluded that the relationship between media exposure and fear of crime is stronger when societal rather than personal or local fear is measured, and when the fear of violence is measured rather than the probability of personal victimisation.

Many factors may contribute to these equivocal research findings. Weiten (1992) suggests that fear of crime derives from individual perceptions about crime that have emotional, behavioural and cognitive components. Since consumers of media are actively engaged in constructing their own meaning from the crime coverage available to them, many individual differences in meanings are likely. Williams and Dickinson (1993) have suggested that a person’s fear of victimisation is influenced by factors that include concern
about personal safety, prior experience with crime or violence, the credibility of the media source and information gained from significant others. Viano (1995) notes that controlled studies are difficult to design because there are few population groups not exposed to media with which to make comparisons. Variations in research methodologies also make findings across studies difficult to compare.

How do the media represent victims of crime? In recent years there has been an increased concern for the rights of crime victims, together with the development of many victim support services and programs. One consequence of this has been an increased focus on the tension between victims’ interests, their advocates and the media. The important issue arising from this increased media attention is how to reconcile responsible and accurate journalism with the need for privacy, dignity and respect for the victims and their families (Viano, 1995).

There is considerable debate between the news media and victims and their advocates about the appropriateness of media coverage of certain crimes. In reviewing and evaluating the portrayal and treatment of crime victims in the print and electronic media, Viano (1995) cites several concerns including publishing of information on victimisation prior to notification of the victim’s family, providing detailed profiles of victims, interviewing victims and/or relatives at inappropriate times, presenting graphic depictions of grief and distress, inaccuracy when describing victims, reporting unconfirmed innuendoes, intimidating or misleading victims, and untimely reports on the progress of investigations.

How is crime by mentally ill persons represented? The mentally ill are consistently portrayed in the media as violent, unpredictable and dangerous (Day & Page, 1986). A study by Thornton and Wahl (1996) suggested that negative media reports contributed to negative attitudes towards those with a mental illness. Interestingly, they also found that the inclusion of corrective information concerning the relative infrequency of violent crime among the mentally ill mitigated these negative effects. In contrast, Wahl and Lefkowits (1989) found a corrective trailer preceding a film made no difference to the attitudes of viewers.

Recently, the question of whether those with a mental illness are in fact more likely to commit violent crime than those without has become the focus of research, and this has
most frequently been examined in relation to those with schizophrenia. A review by Levey and Howells (1994) notes that the relatively low number of people with schizophrenia means that various other, more numerous sub-groups, particularly substance and alcohol abusers, are more common perpetrators of violent crime. Mullen (1998) concluded that the offending rates of male schizophrenics who are not substance abusers is about the same as the general offending rate for young men with no history of substance abuse. The over-representation of people with schizophrenia in media crime reports may be partly due to their involvement in more unusual or bizarre crimes which are more likely to be reported by the media, hence reinforcing the public stereotype that people with schizophrenia are dangerous.

**The media and ‘copycat’ behaviour** Many have expressed concern that the reports of suicides, homicides and other criminal acts will result in imitation or ‘copycat’ behaviour by others. Although some studies have found no significant relationship between suicide behaviour and the reporting of suicide, others have shown that the number of recorded suicide deaths have increased after media reports of suicide, particularly where the reports detailed the modus operandi (Hassan, 1996). Phillips and Carstensen (1986) found that peaks in suicide rates occurred only after media reports of suicide and that the size of the effect was proportional to the publicity generated. Some research has suggested that imitative suicides occur only after the suicide of a celebrity (Wasserman, 1984).

Research concerning the link between homicide and media violence is limited. Cantor and Sheehan (1996) point to the difficulty in isolating effects for homicide media reports because they are relatively common. Cantor and Sheehan (1996) noted several similarities between the homicides in Clifton Hill, Melbourne and in Hungerford, UK, which were proximal in time, and argued that media reports may allow a potential perpetrator to identify with a model, and that this identification may influence or trigger later similar anti-social behaviour. Similar copycat hypotheses have been formulated linking the events at Port Arthur in 1996 with the murders at Dunblane in Scotland only weeks before (Brown, 1996).

Research in this area is complex and it is difficult to establish to what extent exposure to media violence contributes to criminal activity in adults. There are many
variables that can impact upon this relationship. No firm predictions about such a relationship can be made without longitudinal studies.

What is missing from media coverage of crime? Most media reports of crime give little attention to the social factors that may lie behind the commission of criminal acts and the maintenance of crime, or to the possibilities for prevention that might follow a public health perspective on crime. Explanations of crime that focus on the irrationality and pathology of individual offenders, or on their membership of a particular group, distort the social reality of crime and divert attention away from the social structural forces impacting on crime and criminality. The use of police sources as the primary informants on crime also means that the police perspective on crime is given priority and a policing solution is more likely to be offered (Fishman, 1981). Traditional law and order responses tend to be reaffirmed as the most efficient way to manage crime problems (Sacco, 1995). This police-focused coverage restricts the parameters of discussion and debate about the crime problem and alternative strategies to control it (Ericson, 1991). The growth of the entertainment value of crime reporting and the constraints placed upon investigative journalism also result in extremely limited space in news bulletins for the presentation of etiological or social factors connected to the reported crimes.

Over the last two decades there has been increasing research attention given to violence as a public health issue, much like any other health issue such as cancer or heart disease. This approach investigates the interactions between the victim, the agent of injury or death, and the environment to help define risk factors and develop methods to prevent the behaviour (Stevens, 1998). A public health approach would thus change the emphasis from law enforcement to one that concerns itself with violent crime as predictable and preventable.

In a study by Dorfman, Woodruff, Chaver and Wallack (1997), only one of almost 1800 television news stories (214 hours of local television news) in the United States used an explicit public health frame. Dorfman et al. (1997) suggest that if the most popular source of news continues to report on violence and crime primarily in isolation from their social context, then the opportunities for widespread support for public health solutions is severely reduced. Stevens (1998) also considers a shift in the manner in which journalists
report crime to be crucial in shifting towards a greater emphasis on a preventative, public health perspective.

Stevens, Dorfman, Thorson and Houston (1998) have proposed a U.S Violence Reporting Project which provides journalists with suggestions about how to present violent incidents in the context of a public health approach. These suggestions include data collection from several disciplines, which would allow crime reports to include the contexts of violent crime, risk factors, and follow-up reporting on the consequences of the crime, including costs to the community.

5.3 Conclusions

Despite the scarcity of Australian research on this topic, the concern that the media give a distorted view of the amount and type of crime in the community appears to be well-founded. It is clear that both the amount of crime, and the amount of violence involved, is greatly exaggerated. The media also give a distorted picture of who are likely to be perpetrators and victims. The media are the primary source of public information on these matters, so it is likely that these misrepresentations are responsible for the clear misperceptions in the community about the level and nature of crime, as would be predicted by cultivation theory (see Section 2.1).

It is more difficult to research the direct impact of the media on public attitudes such as fear of crime, and appropriate responses to it. However, the usual framing of crime stories tends to give priority to some interpretations over others. Adopting narrow criteria of ‘newsworthiness’ leads not only to a highly selective process of deciding on what to cover and what not to, but also to scant attention being given to causal factors in the social context or to a range of options for responding to the problem. A broader, more comprehensive approach which gave more priority to such coverage might facilitate consideration of possible preventative or public health responses to crime.
6. Media representations of diversity: The example of ethnic groups

6.1 What are the concerns?

The concerns about how the media represent diverse groups within a society basically reflect concerns about whether their effect is to support or undermine the values of justice, equity and democracy in a pluralist society. While discussion of this issue could focus on any minority or disadvantaged group (such as particular religious groups, people with disabilities, older people, or even women), the emphasis adopted for this paper is on ethnic minority groups, particularly in the light of recent and ongoing discussions about racism in Australian society (see Sanson, Augoustinos, Gridley, Kyrios, Reser, & Turner, 1998).

The concerns specifically about media representations of ethnic groups, then, revolve around the potential for misrepresentations to support and reinforce racism and prejudice, and to strengthen narrow and often negative stereotypes about ethnic groups. As Stein and Friedrich (1975) expressed the problem, TV ‘is not a mirror of society; it is a prism that selects and focuses attention on the values of the dominant culture’ (p.241). Further, there is concern that the media can exacerbate tensions between ethnic groups, or between an ethnic group and the mainstream. When conflicts occur, it is feared that the presentation of oversimplified, two-dimensional ‘black and white’ analyses of the conflict hinder the creation of a just solution that recognises the legitimate interests of all sides.

6.2 What is the evidence?

How are minority ethnic groups represented in the media? The early years of TV were characterised by the predominance of white middle class characters and personalities on screen, and the absence of minority group members. In the last decade or so, there has been change in levels of representation so that now the most obvious minority groups tend to be represented at close to proportional rates. For example, in the US, the number of African Americans appearing overall on TV is reasonably proportional to population rates (Greenberg & Brand, 1994), but analyses indicate that other ethnic minorities (Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Native Americans) still rarely appear. Langton (1993) reported that in 1992 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were still virtually invisible on
commercial TV in Australia, illustrating this with *Bony*, a drama series then screening, which had substituted a European actor for the original Aboriginal character.

Research on how minority groups are represented in the media has now generally moved from simple ‘head counts’ to an analysis of the nature of the portrayals involved. Most of this research has involved fiction programs, although some also considers news and current affairs. Liebert and Wicks Poulos (1974) argued that, even though African Americans and other minorities may have increased recognition in the media, they do not necessarily get accorded the same respect as white Americans. Further, the range of roles in which they are presented on the media tends to be narrow, thus supporting limited stereotypes. Weigel and Howes (1982) used prime-time TV programs to conduct an analysis of content variables that reflect determinants of interracial friendliness (e.g., members of different groups shown to be of equal status, to engage in cooperative activities, and to have close relationships). They found that only 2% of human appearance time involved cross-racial interactions of any sort. These few interactions between African American and White characters involved less shared decision-making, more formal relationships, and less intimate personal relationships than White-White interactions, and occurred only in job-related contexts. Greenberg and Brand (1994) concluded that the fact that African Americans now have noticeable presence in terms of ‘head counts’ is confounded by their concentration in very few shows, and with very little cross-race interaction. Further, Hispanics and Native-Americans were rarely visible at all.

Stereotyping of other minority groups has also been documented. For example, Taylor and Stern (1997) analysed 1300 advertisements and showed that Asian-Americans were actually overrepresented in advertisements, but were generally given background roles, with an over-emphasis on the work context. They argued that this limitation in representations served to reinforce the narrow and incomplete stereotype of Asian-Americans.

Ethnic issues are also relevant to coverage of crime. It was noted in Section 5 that certain population groups are overrepresented in the media as perpetrators of crime. Corea (1995) provided an analysis of an example of differential media treatment on the basis of race. This contrasted media treatment of the murder of a white woman by a white man (in which much was made of the possible extenuating circumstances) and the rape of a white
girl by several black men (where no mention was made of extenuating circumstances or possible causal factors such as the poverty of the accused). Similarly, Asian Australians are often invisible to the media unless and until there is violence. Rodd and Leber (1998) analysed the coverage of so-called ‘Asian youth gangs’ in newspapers in Melbourne in 1996. They noted a variety of mechanisms that created and reinforced negative images of Vietnamese youth. These included the use of statistics to create a sense of fear (e.g., quoting arrest rates, which do not coincide with conviction rates, and may instead reflect particular police targeting of Asians); the use of visual cues and symbols that play on community fears (e.g., images of syringes); and sensationalism. They reported that ‘The effect of such sensationalist, simplistic styles of reporting has been far-reaching, devastating and divisive for Vietnamese young people and the wider Vietnamese community, as well as the general community who live in the Inner West. The representations they saw in the media were far from the reality they lived’ (p.84).

Both underrepresentation and misrepresentation of minority groups are apparent in children’s programming. An analysis of children’s shows in the US in 1992 (Greenberg & Brand, 1993) revealed strong trends for limited portrayal of minority groups by the commercial networks. Racial minority characters appeared regularly in only three of 20 shows, and all of these were African American. Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans were virtually invisible. Advertisements had much greater representation of African Americans, but included very few or no appearances by members of other ethnic groups. Even for the African Americans, there was clear stereotyping. All adult African American males shown were in service occupations, and African American and white American girls were never shown playing together.

This same analysis showed that representation of minority groups was much better on public TV programs, which regularly and frequently showed people of various backgrounds (varying on ethnicity, class, sex, disability, etc.) and showed interactions between them. Examples include Barney & Friends and Sesame Street. In both these programs, the rich and broad array of cultural variability which is deliberately shown emphasises that all kinds of people exist, belong and are enfranchised in a pluralist society.

There has been relatively little comparable Australian research. However, Hawthorne (1998) conducted an interesting analysis of two popular long-running ‘soap
operas’ on Australian TV, *Home and Away* and *Heartbreak High*. *Home and Away* featured a homogeneous Anglo-Australian cast, with very few stories centred on non-Anglo Australians. Fostered children were sometimes acknowledged as being of non-Australian descent, but since they were separated from their families they were ‘free to identify as 100 per cent Australian’ (p.101). In contrast, the cast of the first series of episodes of *Heartbreak High* reflected the ethnic diversity of present-day Sydney. However, Hawthorne reported on the ‘none too subtle process of ‘ethnic cleansing’’ (p.101) that was progressively carried out in later series. Adolescents and teachers of ethnic origin were replaced with Anglo-Australians, leaving a ‘representation of an ‘acceptable’ cultural diversity, delivered by Greek- or Italian-origin actors unstigmatised by significant differences related to race, accent or style.’ (p.102). She argued that this process, caused by producers bowing to ratings pressure, carries ‘powerful subliminal messages for teenage Australians’ (p.103).

Does misrepresentation of ethnic groups affect attitudes and behaviour? Surprisingly little systematic research has attempted to determine the effects of biased ethnic representations on either majority or minority group members’ attitudes or behaviour. Little is known about how images of characters from various ethnic groups are perceived by viewers from each of these groups, or about how these might translate into behavioural orientations towards other groups (Greenberg & Brand, 1994). Some studies have provided some suggestive evidence of effects. For instance, McDermott and Greenberg (1984) found that the self esteem of African American children was related to the regularity with which they watched African American shows, although it should be noted that it is difficult to discern cause and effect here. It has also been shown that programs specifically designed to attack stereotypes and to catalyse more favorable affect towards minorities, e.g., *Sesame Street*, can be successful in achieving these aims (Gorn, Goldberg, & Kanungo, 1976).

It is likely that here, as with other aspects of media effects, relationships are complex. Gunter and McAleer (1990) concluded that TV portrayal of other racial groups simply reinforces prior dispositions. They found that less prejudiced viewers interpreted racial slurs made by a bigoted character as satire, whereas this comic critique was ignored.
by authoritarian viewers who shared the prejudiced attitudes, and took the racial slurs at face value.

How are conflicts between ethnic groups portrayed by the media? In the 1990s, considerable media attention has been directed at a large number of international armed conflicts involving different ethnic groups, as well as more local conflicts with racist elements at the community level. By presenting a conflict in a certain way, the media sets up a framework for perceiving the conflict that may act to either facilitate or sabotage constructive resolution of the conflict. The presence of journalists and their reporting of the conflict affect the story they are covering. Rubinstein, Botes, Dukes and Stephens (1994) note that virtually every technical and editorial decision made by journalists in presenting a conflict has potential consequences for the conflict itself.

In a conflict situation, information is often not easily accessible. Especially in the context of time and cost pressures, it is easy to accept uncritically what is presented as factual information by ‘official’ sources. These official sources often reduce a conflict to a simple two-party division of right and wrong, aggressor and victim. Journalism that follows this line often demonises the ‘opposing’ side, presenting a unidimensional and stereotyped image of ‘the enemy’. Although we are unaware of any systematic research, anecdotal reports suggest that the presentation of ‘enemy images’ of this sort results in prejudice and hatred which can generalise to all members of the ethnic or national group involved. Examples over recent years include the reported stigmatisation and bullying at school of Iraqi (and other Arab or Muslim) children during the Gulf War, and of children from various parts of ex-Yugoslavia during the conflict there.

Conflict between ethnic groups is often presented as if ethnic difference is enough in itself to explain the existence of conflict. This ignores the fact that groups have often been living in harmony for some time preceding the outbreak of hostilities. Bretherton (1998) notes that this was the case with the Rwandan conflict, which was represented by most of the media simply as an ‘ethnic conflict’, thus foreclosing an analysis of the political and economic factors involved and precluding us from gaining any real understanding of the conflict.

Another example of the media’s concentration on ethnicity in relation to conflict comes from a very different level of conflict. Quilty (1998) analysed media coverage of
‘mail-order’ or Filipina brides over the period from the 1970s to the present. While coverage was initially positive, by the mid-1980s the focus had turned to domestic abuse, violence and conflict. Much of the coverage was demeaning, sensationalist, stereotyping and negative, and failed to give Filipina-Australians their own voice. She noted that marital conflict between two white Australians is generally regarded as a private affair and is not newsworthy but ‘marital discord between a Filipina and an Australian came to embody the larger issues of racism, sexism and immigration’ (p.125).

Often conflict is the sole or predominant reason for a particular group to receive coverage by the media. Dodson (1998) described the relation of the media to Aboriginal people thus: ‘Thirty years ago our presence in the media was characterised by invisibility. We didn’t have a presence… There but not seen. Speaking but not heard….. Thirty years on and you’ll often see us on TV, read about us in the papers and hear our voices on the radio. Not as journalists, reporters or broadcasters but as images, interviewees, sound bites. On the surface, this is encouraging. But the media’s hunger, its obsession with ‘news values’ rooted in conflict has pushed us into the limelight. … For many Australians our presence in the media has become synonymous with conflict’ (p.75).

6.3 Conclusion

Overall, despite a shift towards more appropriate levels of representation of the most obvious ethnic minority groups, the nature of that representation remains narrow and stereotyping. Little research has explicitly examined the effects of such misrepresentation on either minority or dominant groups. However, evidence that the explicit and intentional portrayal of diversity in programs like Sesame Street leads to more positive attitudes towards minority groups suggests that misrepresentation and underrepresentation are also likely to have effects, but in this case to enhance prejudices and stereotypes. Certainly, both social learning theory and cultivation theory would predict such effects.

In terms of conflict involving ethnic groups, the media’s treatment tends to support simple ‘them-and-us’ responses to the conflict, rather than treating both sides with respect, encouraging understanding of both sides’ needs and perspectives, or promoting a creative search for solutions. Such treatment not only supports prejudice and
discrimination, but also works against the creation of long-lasting solutions to conflicts (Sanson & Bretherton, in press). When viewing media coverage of an existing or potential conflict, useful questions to ask might include: What assumptions are made about the nature and causes of the conflict? Is the conflict seen to be inherent in ethnic group difference in itself, or are other underlying issues explored? Who are recognised as legitimate parties to the conflict, who is listened to and who is silenced? How much time is given to alternative perspectives, and what space is given to covering a range of possible solutions for the conflict, beyond the official ‘line’? Are possible solutions evaluated in terms of all parties’ needs and interests?

7. Concluding comments

This analysis is not aimed at discrediting the media industry. Bone (1998) commented that ‘it is curious that many people who berate the media for stereotyping groups such as the disabled, Aboriginal people or ethnic groups don’t shrink at all from stereotyping the media’ (p.51). With the concentration of ownership of the major media outlets in Australia in relatively few hands, such stereotyping may indeed be somewhat understandable. Nevertheless, no assumption is being made here that all media producers or journalists are the same, nor that all fail to represent issues such as violence, crime and ethnic groups in a fair and accurate way. Rather the aim is to review existing psychological theory and research on how the media impact upon our lives.

Further, as noted at the outset, this paper has not sought to review evidence of the positive effects of the media in providing entertainment, information and education. These roles are indisputable. In choosing to review only some areas of concern regarding the media, we have been motivated to help shift the balance of media effects further towards these positive impacts, and away from the negative ones.

This review has demonstrated that, while it is relatively straightforward to document trends in media coverage which do or do not reflect ‘reality’, research on how such media representations affect individuals’ attitudes, values and behaviours is much more difficult. Understandably, parents and legislators want a simple answer to the impact of the media. Researchers cannot accommodate them because of the complexity of
the issues involved. It is not reasonable to expect one single study, or even one approach, to provide a definitive answer to the questions surrounding such complexity. It is clear that effects are multiply determined. Taking TV violence as an example, it is clearly not the case that everything that might be called television violence will have a significant negative effect; that every proposed deleterious impact will occur in each case; or that effects will occur irrespective of characteristics of the viewer or the wider context.

The review has also identified many areas where the research base is not yet adequate, especially in relation to the Australian context. In general, there is plenty of documentation of the mismatch between reality and its portrayal in the media. This is true across portrayals of violence, crime and ethnic diversity, and is also pertinent to the misleading nature of some advertisements. However, with the partial exception of media violence, there are substantial gaps in the research on the impact of these mismatches on viewers. There are probably several reasons for the paucity of research. As already noted, the many interacting factors that determine whether and how particular media exposure will affect an individual make the research task difficult.

Further, the media change faster than the research can accommodate, so there will always be new questions to consider. Of particular concern at the moment is the impact of interactive modes of media, which typically involve a high level of violence. Also under-researched is the phenomenon of ‘crazes’ for programs and characters such as Pokemon and TeleTubbies which often form the basis for lucrative marketing strategies, but also can create tensions between children and their parents, teachers and other children. We currently have no research insight into the seductive efficacy of such programs.

Despite the complexities of research in this area, we would argue that the media are such a central aspect of modern life that psychologists and others should not be deterred from engaging in high-quality research. Further, all media consumers should attempt to take an active interest in the product that they are consuming. Below we outline some suggestions to groups with different roles within society about the shape that such an active interest might take. Some of these recommendations may appear obvious, and few are entirely new. Nevertheless, they are not being acted at an adequate level or frequency. Since they are based upon and reflect the best of current psychological research, we believe it is important to articulate and reiterate them.
8. Recommendations

Virtually all members of society today are consumers of the media. Therefore the broadest set of recommendations is addressed to all of us in our role as consumers, suggesting ways in which we can take a more active role in influencing the media diet that is available to us. Some themes introduced here, such as monitoring, providing feedback, and lobbying, recur in the recommendations for specific groups. First parents, and then educators, are addressed, considering their particular concerns and responsibilities for children. Recommendations are then directed towards those with specific responsibilities or expertise regarding the media – media policy makers, regulators and psychologists. Finally we direct a series of recommendations to the media industry itself.

8.1 Consumers

There is a range of activities that media consumers can undertake – e.g., to monitor and audit programs; to complain to regulating bodies and the media industry about material or policies they disapprove of, and praise those they admire; to boycott certain programs or media outlets; and to join or support lobby groups.

1. Monitoring. Frequently, we view TV and other media without paying close attention to recurring patterns in the material presented. We have all potentially been affected by the processes outlined in Section 2 - reduced sensitivity to media violence through the process of desensitisation, and a tendency to regard the media as impacting on others, not ourselves, as suggested by the third person hypothesis. Problematic aspects of the material can then easily escape our attention. By keeping simple checklists of selected aspects of media programming, we can raise our awareness of these aspects, and collect valuable information to guide our future actions and decisions. We therefore recommend that consumers monitor all forms of programming they watch (including news, current affairs, drama, sport and advertisements) to determine:

- the number and nature of violent acts portrayed;
- how crime and criminals are portrayed, including whether a range of reasons for and solutions to crime are explored, whether particular types of crime and criminals are
overrepresented or underrepresented, and whether the overall nature of portrayals accurately reflects the level of crime in the community;

- how different ethnic groups are portrayed, including the frequency with which members of the group appear, the roles they appear in, and how conflict between groups is represented; and

- the timing and nature of advertisements, especially those directed at children, attending to whether they are misleading, or promote desirable or undesirable behaviours and values.

2. Providing feedback. The media and their regulatory bodies are responsive to consumer demand. We therefore recommend that consumers make their views known by directing complaints about any of the above aspects of programming, and praise for good programming, to regulatory authorities such as the Australian Broadcasting Authority as well as to the media outlet involved. Contact details for some relevant organisations are provided in Section 9.

3. Boycotting. The size of the viewing audience is a potent driving force in determining program content. We therefore recommend that consumers follow through with their objections to program material by boycotting the program involved and informing the relevant outlet of their action.

4. Lobbying. Groups can often achieve more than a number of individuals working independently; this also reduces the effort required of any one individual. We therefore recommend that consumers join lobby and/or support groups working for more accurate and beneficial media programming, such as those listed in Section 9; or form their own group.

8.2 Parents

Besides the activities in Section 8.1, there are some specific activities which parents can undertake to help ensure positive media experiences for their children.

1. Monitoring and setting limits. Given the evidence on the potential negative effects on children of viewing some media material, particularly material high in violence, parents need to assume responsibility for controlling their children’s viewing habits, as they would for any other potentially harmful activity (e.g., riding bicycles without helmets).
We therefore recommend that parents ensure that they know what their children are watching; and set and enforce clear rules about the amount and nature of TV programming they watch.

2. Share and discuss. One of the most important findings in the research on the effects of media on children is that negative effects can be prevented or greatly reduced if the child has the opportunity to share their viewing with an adult, and to critically discuss what is viewed. We recommend that, when their children are watching TV or videos, parents attempt to watch with them as much as possible, and encourage them to evaluate critically what they watch. Co-viewing with children is important even during children’s programming, when many advertisements are directed towards children.

3. Encourage alternative activities. While there is clearly an important place for TV viewing in a child’s life, there is currently a paucity of high quality programming for children, and TV viewing should not distract children from engaging in other more active and creative pursuits. Watching TV is often the ‘easy option’ when children cannot immediately think of something else to do. We therefore recommend that parents help their children to find attractive, exciting and non-violent alternative activities to TV-watching. Important among these will be engaging in pleasurable activities with parents and other family members. Provision of such alternatives is probably more efficacious than resorting to technological ‘fixes’ (such as the ‘V-chip’ which denies children access to Internet sites).

8.3 Educators

1. Media education. The media will clearly continue to play a prominent role in our lives. The research shows that the effects of the media on attitudes and behaviour are mediated by the way viewers interpret and construct what they view. It is therefore imperative that consumers are able to analyse and evaluate what they view. We therefore recommend that media education be an important part of every child’s education. Media education curricula should be developed and widely disseminated amongst primary and secondary schools. A key element of such curricula should be provision of skills in monitoring and analysing media content on the dimensions discussed here (i.e., recognising that the media portray a constructed rather than ‘real’
world, assessing the portrayal of violence, crime and ethnic diversity, and evaluating
the accuracy and implicit values behind advertisements). They should also promote
skills in communicating their views effectively to media regulators and the media
industry.

2. Professional development. In order to present media education to their students
(whether in formally designated media education courses or when integrated into other
courses), teachers need to have good media literacy skills themselves. We therefore
recommend that professional development seminars and courses be widely available for
teachers, and that teachers attend these to increase their own media literacy skills.

3. Modelling. Since modelling is an effective teaching technique, we recommend that
teachers use media as one of their teaching tools, and use this to model and promote
critical reflective viewing.

4. Directing attention. We recommend that teachers at all levels from kindergarten to
secondary school use their influence and example in drawing the attention of children
and parents to exciting, non-violent, non-stereotyping media, and expressing their own
enthusiasm over them.

5. Media education for parents. The importance of the social context on children’s
understanding of television advertising and its impact highlights the need for parents to
be able to help children to critically evaluate advertising material. A similar conclusion
holds for television violence. We therefore recommend that media education be widely
available for parents as well as for children.

8.4 Psychologists

1. Research. Since exposure to media affects attitudes and behaviour, psychologists have
a key role in researching the mechanisms by which these effects occur. As noted
throughout this paper, it is already clear that the effects are complex. Because of this
complexity, the political agendas involved, and the high level of public discussion of
any research findings, many psychologists have tended to shy away from undertaking
research in the area. Yet, as is also clear throughout this review, there are many
questions for which we do not yet have answers. Therefore we recommend that
psychologists in research settings:
• Alert psychologists in training to the research potential of the area
• Identify areas of research that have been neglected, and conduct research to address them. Besides those that have been identified throughout this review, others might include: What is the relationship between media violence and bullying? How does the media impact upon different age groups, e.g., the very old and very young? What kind of media education is most effective, for example, in developing critical attitudes toward TV advertising in different age groups or in changing patterns of TV viewing within families?
• Be prepared to present empirical evidence to refute non-supported assertions that the media do not have an influence.

2. Clinical practice. Theory and research suggest that the influence of the media is likely to be widespread (as suggested by cultivation theory) as well as varying considerably from one individual to the next. At times, the influence may result in nonadaptive cognitions, emotions and behaviours of individuals. We therefore recommend that psychologists engaged in clinical practice are alert to recognising the influence of the media in the ideation and emotionality of clients, particularly the young.

3. Public comment. In their clinical and community roles, psychologists are often asked for authoritative comment on questions such as whether TV is harmful to children. In order to fulfill this role responsibly, we recommend that psychologists:
• stay abreast of the research; and
• recognising the complexity of the issues, avoid simplistic global assertions.
8.5 Journalists and journalism educators

1. Best-practice examples. This review has highlighted ways in which the media’s presentation of issues such as violence, crime, and ethnic diversity has the potential to have detrimental effects, including: desensitisation to violence, unrealistic beliefs about crime, stereotyping and prejudice, and simplistic responses to social issues or conflicts.

We argue that a more sophisticated and complex presentation of issues is needed. We recognise that this often conflicts with the perceived need for short, highly visual and ‘punchy’ coverage of issues. However, we would argue that improved education would promote a positive shift in the typical reporting.

As a step towards such improved education, we therefore recommend that a collection of best-practice examples of coverage of important social issues be made and used in journalism education. Some of the characteristics of such examples would be: avoidance of excessive violence footage; avoidance of stereotyping of particular subgroups of society; presentation of varying viewpoints without setting one against the other; uncovering the legitimate underlying concerns of all parties involved without painting any as ‘the enemy’ or ‘villain’; attempts at analysing causal factors; and suggesting a range of potential solutions. Besides being used in initial training, we recommend that this collection is also used in professional development courses for practising journalists.

2. Training in Aboriginal affairs. The avoidance of racism and promotion of understanding is a particularly important issue in media coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The 1991 Report of Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found that racial stereotyping in the media was institutional rather than individual and resulted from news values, editorial policies and routines of news gathering. The report presented a series of recommendations on the role of media in creating, confirming and negating whites’ perceptions of indigenous people. In particular, it recommended that training courses for journalists should include components on Aboriginal affairs. We endorse this recommendation.
8.6 Media producers and media industry

1. Coverage of social context. In terms of news reporting and current affairs, probably the most salient factor is the policy adopted towards reporting by media producers and proprietors. We recommend a shift in emphasis from simplistic ideas of ‘newsworthiness’ (focusing on speed, visual appeal, simplicity, etc.) to a commitment to increased coverage of social contextual factors so that viewers can more accurately ‘make sense’ of news stories. For instance, stories on crime might incorporate coverage of potential underlying factors such as poverty, discrimination, racism, fear, and unemployment. Multiple perspectives should be presented, acknowledging that there is no one ‘truth’ to be validated over other perspectives.

2. Portrayals of diversity. This review has shown that there are continuing limitations in the portrayal of various ethnic and cultural groups in the media. We recommend that media producers ensure that portrayals of ethnic and cultural groups reflect their diversity and strengths, and avoid stereotyped or demeaning depictions. Program content should reflect the cultural diversity of Australian and international society, and show members of various cultural groups in a wide range of social and occupational roles.

3. Addressing social problems. As noted, this paper has focused on sources of concern regarding the media, and has not attempted to review its known and potential positive roles. However, there are some examples of the use of the media to remediate social problems that are directly relevant to the concerns addressed here, and that provide models of some ways forward. For example, in relation to ethnic relations, children’s programs such as *Sesame Street* that are specifically designed to attack stereotypes can be successful (Gorn, et al., 1976). More recently and locally, Donovan and Leivers (1993) report on a mass media campaign using TV advertisements in Kalgoorlie, WA, to encourage employers to give Aboriginal people a ‘fair go’. The campaign was shown to change community beliefs about the proportion of Aborigines in paid employment and remaining in work. Again, Masian (1998) gives an account of how community TV can counteract ethnic stereotypes. We recommend that media producers and the industry in general study such positive examples and use them as guides for their own future programming.
4. Responsiveness to the community. This review has documented that consumers, including children, tend to dislike the amount of violence on TV. It appears that violence is often used as an easy way to instill action and excitement in programs. We recommend that the industry, acknowledging its responsibility as a corporate citizen, should respond to the community’s concern about TV violence in fictional programming as well as news and current affairs, hear the preferences actually expressed by children, and use its vast resources of skill and intelligence to produce exciting media material that does not rely on violence.

8.7 Policy makers and regulatory bodies

1. Using research evidence to frame policy. Despite the complexity of research in this field and the varying philosophical positions that are adopted, we argue that there are consistent trends within a large body of good empirical research that can provide guidance to policy makers and regulatory bodies. We therefore recommend that policy makers and regulatory bodies become familiar with the research, and use it to frame policy.

2. Acknowledging community concerns. The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that it is appropriate for there to be controls on some aspects of the media, including media violence. There is always a tension between freedom of speech and of choice, on the one hand, and regulation in the community’s best interests on the other. We recommend that policy makers and regulatory bodies acknowledge that freedom of speech is not an absolute value but must be balanced against other community values. There is a particular responsibility to protect children, who are still in the process of forming their world-view, from potentially harmful media.

3. Consumer input. As noted in the review, parents express considerable concerns over the TV diet to which their children are exposed. We therefore recommend that there is consumer input into the content of television widely viewed by children, particularly in terms of the values and attitudes it presents to children.

4. Advertising policy regarding children. We recommend that effective regulations applying to advertising directed to children are developed and policed. Children’s advertising should not include deceptive content, content which is too complex for
young children to understand, or content that is detrimental to the health and well-being of children.

5. Classification and labeling. Policies guiding classification and labeling of media programs are an integral part of consumer protection. We recommend that these policies, as with others, are based upon research evidence and are effectively applied, monitored and enforced.
Further resources and relevant organisations

Organisations

Australian Broadcasting Authority, Level 15 Darling Park, 201 Sussex Street, Sydney ph 02 9334 7700, fax 02 9334 7799, email info@aba.gov.au

Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS), 44 Avenue Road, Mosman, NSW 2088. (This is one authority to send complaints or congratulations to, about programming and advertisements on commercial TV.)

Young Media Australia (provides information, advocacy and research on the effects of media on children and young people). 69 Hindmarsh Square, Adelaide SA 5000. Ph 08 8232 1577; email info@youngmedia.org.au
Available from Young Media Australia:
- *Does media violence hurt your children?* (pamphlet)
- *Talking back: Ready media reference* (booklet on rules and regulations governing media, and how to make comment)
- *Put me in the picture* (booklet on cultural diversity in children’s media)

Food Ads to Kids Action Group, Noarlunga Health Services, Alexander Kelly Drive, Noarlunga Centre SA 5168 (This group has produced a pamphlet on facts and advice entitled *Food advertising directed at children.*)

Further reading


UNESCO International Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen (produces a newsletter and yearbooks, as well as other publications and conferences) Nordicom, Goteborg University, Box 713, SE 405 30 Goteborg, Sweden. Ph 46 31 773 1000, fax 46 31 773 4655, email (Director) ulla.carlsson@nordicom.gu.se
## Appendix A: Reviews of the effects of media violence on children, by year and nation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<th>Country</th>
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