

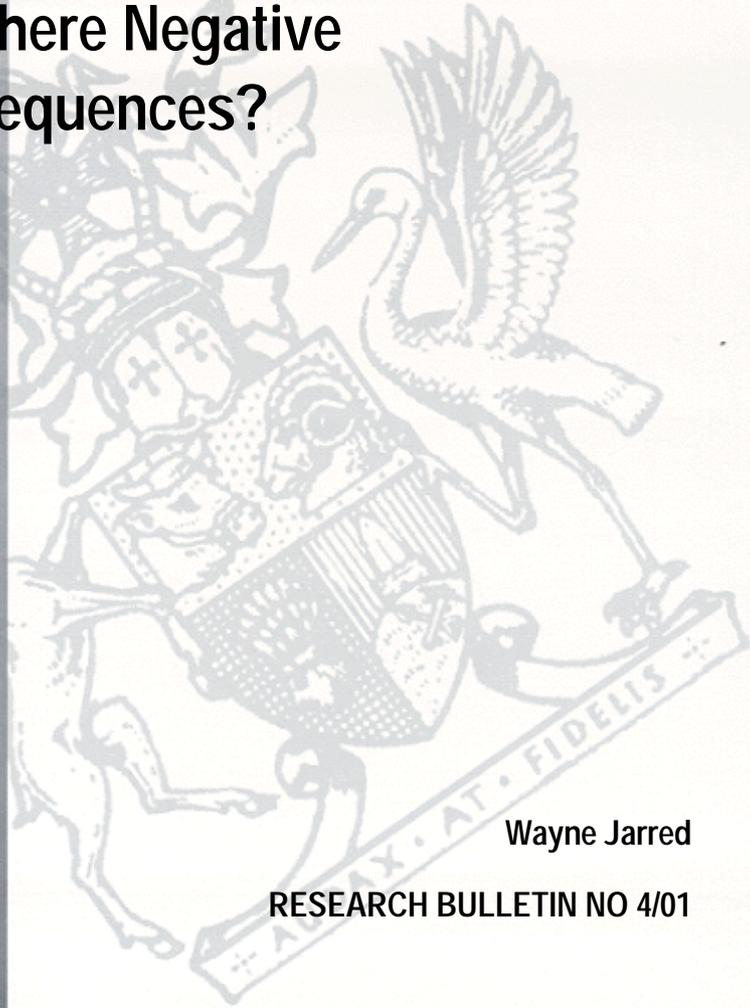


# Violence in the Mass Media: Are There Negative Consequences?

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RESEARCH BULLETIN NO 4/01



**VIOLENCE IN THE MASS MEDIA: ARE THERE  
NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES?**

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**WAYNE JARRED**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The question as to the extent of the influence of media violence on society has been a perennial one with advocates arguing strongly on both sides of the debate. Whilst many studies have been conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom there have also been a number of studies published in Australia.*

*The general consensus from studies conducted is that media violence is one factor in encouraging community violence but the extent of its contribution is not quantifiable.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The explicit depiction of violent acts has long had its critics concerned with the effect upon the viewing public. The United States Congress conducted hearings on the effects of television on juvenile delinquency as early as the mid 1950s. These were followed in the early 1960s with specific Congressional inquiries into the depiction of violence. In June 1999, President Clinton ordered a joint 18-month study by the United States Federal Trade Commission and the Justice Department into how the movie, video and music industries market violent products to children.<sup>1</sup>

In Australia, the graphic depiction of violence in the media became a topic for discussion at the Special Premier's Conference held in December 1987. Partly as a result of this Conference, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) in 1988 was given a term of reference by the Commonwealth Minister for Transport and Communications to hold an inquiry into the portrayal of violence on Australian television.

Some reports conducted in Australia in recent times are:

- 1987 - Report of the National Committee on Violence
- 1989 - Report of the Victorian Parliament's Social Development Committee
- 1990 - Australian Broadcasting Tribunal Inquiry
- 1995 - Report of the New South Wales Parliament's Standing Committee on Social Issues
- 1996 - Report of the Commonwealth Ministerial Committee into the Portrayal of Violence in the Electronic Media
- 1997 - Report of the Senate Committee on Community Standards
- 2000 - Report of the Victorian Parliament's Family and Community Development Committee

This Research Bulletin summarises the findings of these reports and a number of international studies or inquiries that have examined the issue of violence in the entertainment media.

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Hewett, 'Clinton acts to head off media violence', *The Age*, 3 June 1999.  
<http://www.theage.com.au>

## 2. AUSTRALIA

### 2.1. REPORT OF THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON VIOLENCE 1987

The National Committee on Violence was established under an agreement reached in December 1987 between the Commonwealth and the States. The establishment of the Committee (with its Secretariat being located within the Australian Institute of Criminology) was announced in October 1988.<sup>2</sup>

The National Committee published a report in 1990 that contained some 138 recommendations. Among its terms of reference the Committee was required to 'examine the impact of the mass media, including motion pictures and video tape recordings, on the incidence of violent behaviour.'<sup>3</sup> This was a somewhat wider brief than the ABT had in relation to its report in which only the role of television was examined.

There was very little to come out of the National Committee's report with respect to the influence of the media. Recommendation 95 of the Committee was that the ABT should require television broadcasters to implement a more stringent classification and program description regime to enable those responsible for children to exercise responsibility for children's viewing practices.

Whilst the federal government accepted the main thrust of the report in relation to many matters, it referred the matter of television programming to the inquiry being conducted by the ABT<sup>4</sup> (discussed below in section 2.3).

### 2.2. REPORT OF A COMMITTEE OF THE VICTORIAN PARLIAMENT 1989

In 1989 the Social Development Committee published a report of its *Inquiry into Strategies to Deal with the Issue of Community Violence*.<sup>5</sup> Term of reference No 2

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<sup>2</sup> JM Herlihy and A Scandia, *Progress Reports on Implementation of the National Committee on Violence Recommendations*, Violent Prevention Unit Australian Institute of Criminology, 1992. p ii.

<sup>3</sup> Herlihy & Scandia, p iii.

<sup>4</sup> Herlihy & Scandia, p 175.

<sup>5</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Social Development Committee, Third and Final Report upon the *Inquiry into Strategies to Deal with the Issue of Community Violence with Particular Reference to the Mass Media and Entertainment Industries*, Report No 63, 1989.

concerned the portrayal of violent behaviour in the mass media and entertainment industries. The Committee's third and final report specifically addressed this term of reference.

The Parliamentary Committee called for written submissions, held public hearings and conducted a survey of media organisations on the reporting of violent crime. The call for public submissions and the holding of public hearings enabled the Committee to ascertain a community perspective on the issue of violent behaviour in the mass media.

The Committee's report summed up overseas research from a community perspective in the following way:

*Wherever public inquiries have been held world-wide into the role of the mass media in people's lives, strong community concern about the depictions of violence and the impact of such material on the community have been voiced. Depending upon the specific interests of a particular group or organisation and the social and cultural context of the inquiry, there have been concerns expressed about, for example, specific audience segments which are nominated as being 'at risk' such as children, the unstable and disturbed. Other concerns have focused on cultural values, the likely detraction of human dignity of portrayals of gratuitous violence, the domination of an indigenous culture by imported material which has higher levels of acceptability of violent material than the cultures in which they are broadcast...<sup>6</sup>*

The Parliamentary Committee also found this to be the case in its own investigation. The Committee was not persuaded by the view that the presentation of violence in the mass media does not result in harmful social effects.<sup>7</sup>

One of the recommendations of the Committee was that the ABT be asked to establish a research agenda for the investigation of violence in the mass media and that this research agenda incorporate the issue of media-induced desensitisation to violence, particularly focusing on the role of television in the learning behaviour of children.

The Committee acknowledged the complexity of the issue by quoting from some of the submissions received:

*Whilst the relationship between media violence and violent behaviour is not a simple one and we cannot establish a direct 'causal' connection; the fact that there is a well- documented relationship which holds across different cultures and classes suggests that here we have some potential for reducing the level of aggression in the population.*

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<sup>6</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Social Development Committee, p 37.

<sup>7</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Social Development Committee, p 54.

*...there are strong reasons for reducing the level of violence in the media. Violence begets violence and it is likely that one could correlate the increase in community violence with the increase in media presentation of violence.*<sup>8</sup>

*...there are sufficient research results available throughout the world to suggest that levels of violence on television should be reduced.*<sup>9</sup>

### **2.3. AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING TRIBUNAL INQUIRY 1990**

The ABT published the findings of its study into television violence in Australia in 1990. The approach taken by the Tribunal was to ascertain the perceptions held by the community in relation to violence in television programs, an idea initially developed in the United Kingdom.

The terms of reference included:

- (a) the portrayal, presentation and reporting of violence on television including general entertainment programs, news and current affairs programs, cartoons, advertisements and other programs.

With respect to the influence of violence portrayed on television, the Tribunal was required to have regard to the following:

- (1) the concern on the part of the Australian community that recent incidents of extreme violence represent an erosion of human sensibilities and respect for life;
- (2) the role and influence of television with respect to that concern in the Australian community;
- (3) the particular susceptibility of children; and
- (4) the media's responsibility to report events faithfully and accurately.<sup>10</sup>

#### **2.3.1. Results of Submissions Received**

The Tribunal received over 1,000 submissions, the vast majority of which indicated a deep community concern with the portrayal, presentation and reporting of

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<sup>8</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Social Development Committee, pp 38-39.

<sup>9</sup> Victoria. Parliament Social Development Committee, p 39.

<sup>10</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT), *TV Violence in Australia*, Volume I: Decision and Reasons, Report to the Minister for Transport and Communications, 1990, p xxiii.

violence on television. The results of this submission stage were not regarded as absolute. Generally, public submissions fall short of proof that the depiction of violence has increased, or that it encourages a level of violence in society.

From the submissions received, the Tribunal's research team analysed 349 substantive responses. Some of the common themes were:

- the interests of children should be uppermost even if this means that adult programs are curtailed in their content;
- cartoons for children should not depict violence as the very young cannot always distinguish between actual and dramatically constructed violence;
- the reporting of violence in news and current affairs programs must be sensitive to the need for information but must also be sensitive as to its presentation as information provision must not be confused with sensational presentation; and
- programs often portray violence as a valid problem-solving strategy.<sup>11</sup>

The community concerns expressed in the public submissions are not surprising as criminologist Paul Wilson has pointed out that violent films have been around for a long time and so has strong public reaction against them.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.3.2. News and Current Affairs Programs

Many of the public submissions received contained criticisms of the reporting of violence in news and current affairs programs. Many submissions objected to the presentation of graphic pictures and images of violence in the 6 pm to 7.30 pm time-slot. Generally, the public submissions argued that news and current affairs programs containing violent segments should be re-scheduled for viewing after 9pm. The Tribunal's report quoted from one submission received:

*We find presentation of the news most offensive. Scenes every night of violent clashes and dead bodies...One doesn't have to see dead bodies, violent clashes or beatings to be informed that this is happening in the world.*<sup>13</sup>

Some respondents also regarded the unpredictability of news content as being inappropriate for viewing by children:

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<sup>11</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, p 14.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Wilson, 'Evil games', *The Courier-Mail*, 14 March 2000, p 13.

<sup>13</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, p 18.

*I am a concerned parent with two children, aged nine and seven, and I continually monitor what they watch on T.V., but when it comes to the news I cannot tell what sort of horrifying things they will see.<sup>14</sup>*

### **2.3.3. Public Submissions - Concerns about Possible Effects**

The Tribunal was not actually called upon in its terms of reference to determine the effects of television viewing. It did, however, acknowledge that numerous submissions had been received referring to a desensitising process which encouraged a lower level of sensitivity for the welfare of others. The Western Australian Branch of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists in its submission to the Inquiry stated:

*Psychiatrists are now seeing what they believe are two major effects on the community in consequence of exposure to violence on television. The first of these is the desensitisation to the violence, modelling of aggression, the arousal of the individual from seeing violence, all leading to an increase in aggression and violent acts by individuals, and not necessarily just in individuals already prone to violence...The second major effect is what is known as the 'mean world syndrome'. Individuals and the community develop a sense of mistrust and insecurity. There is a sense of living in a mean and dangerous world in which it is important to protect yourself and also to rely on strong people and measures for protection.<sup>15</sup>*

Those submissions that addressed the perceived negative effects of television violence did so with particular reference to children. For instance:

*I am concerned that children, seeing so much violence in home viewed programs will come to accept such behaviour as the normal way to behave towards others.*

*Viewing violent actions and listening to aggressive language on TV stimulates the same kind of activity in people, especially children.*

*The violence seen on TV, by children, is quite definitely absorbed by the children and then incorporated into their play.<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, p 19.

<sup>15</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, p 20.

<sup>16</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, p 21.

The depicting of violence in cartoons was referred to in a submission by the Western Australian Department of Community Services:

*Although some children may cope with the violence depicted in some of these cartoons, knowing they are drawings of a fantasy world, younger viewers cannot separate reality from fantasy so easily, neither do they understand some of the content and subtle themes of good and evil argued by some adults as justification for 'heroic' violent acts against individuals.<sup>17</sup>*

#### **2.3.4. Findings of the Commissioned Research**

Commissioned research was conducted by the Public Policy Research Centre and its affiliated Company Newspoll. The general opinion was that there was a high level of violence on television and that the perceived level was too high, but at the same time, many people were attracted to watching violence being portrayed.<sup>18</sup>

The group discussions revealed a variety of emotional responses from viewers. The feelings engendered included initial shock, a desire to protect children from the depicted violence, the feeling of tension when the victim could be identified with, and a fear of being a victim on the part of some viewers. However, the relevance of this latter point has been questioned in a subsequent federal government report.<sup>19</sup>

Older persons reported that they rejected violence on television by not watching such programs. On the other hand, some participants in the group discussions responded that they received some enjoyment out of watching a range of violent material. For violence on news segments and current affairs programs, feelings of sympathy for the victims were identified whilst some depicted violence in films was regarded as being in poor taste.<sup>20</sup>

The general feeling of the discussion groups was that adult viewers could easily turn away from programs that they find distasteful because they have the ability to be discriminate. This was not thought to be the case where young children were concerned.

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<sup>17</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, p 22.

<sup>18</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, *vol II: Research Findings*, p 19.

<sup>19</sup> Australia. Minister for Justice and Customs. *Fear of Crime*, National Crime Prevention Report No 2, Volume 1. Overview of the Report Findings, 1998. [http://ncp.gov.au/ncp/publications/pdf/no2\\_fullreport.pdf](http://ncp.gov.au/ncp/publications/pdf/no2_fullreport.pdf) downloaded 22 November 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, *vol II*, pp 18-19.

The discussion groups recorded a feeling that violent programs resulted in desensitisation to violence which in turn contributed to increasing violent behaviour, imitation of what is shown being at the extreme end of the spectrum. However, some members of the discussion groups also indicated that, through watching violent programs, they felt a relief of tension.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Relevance to real life***

The link between the violence shown and real life was found to be important. For many participants in the group discussions, news segments were regarded as more violent than comparable items in drama. This was despite the fact that news and current affairs programs often showed the consequences of violence rather than the violence itself:

*The news is the most upsetting because it is real. Like we hear about all the American shootings and that and we think oh, it doesn't happen here much. And then when it does, then it ...dramatises the event.*<sup>22</sup>

Fictitious programs were viewed as being typically less violent than news and current affairs programs reporting on actual violence. The personal circumstances of the viewer were also viewed as a determining factor in the viewer's response to violence. This was particularly so if the scenes raised real life concerns about the respondent's personal vulnerability (eg. the aged and single females).

### ***The level, explicitness and relevance of violence shown***

The number of violent acts and the ferocity of those acts were considered to be important factors. The explicitness of the violence was a major concern. The type of violence was irrelevant in this regard. Road accidents were regarded as violent when the scenes were graphically portrayed. This 'holding nothing back' approach was disturbing to many respondents in the group discussions and in the case of news and current affairs programs the authenticity was never in doubt, making it more disturbing.

A news story showing the scene at which a toddler had been killed was criticised as being too violent because of an emphasis on the scene. This style of reporting was criticised by many in the discussion groups as being too violent because it was unnecessary that it be shown to that extent. On the other hand, fictional drama was

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<sup>21</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, vol II, p 20.

<sup>22</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, vol II, pp 30-31.

criticised as containing excess violence when that violence did not relate to the story line.<sup>23</sup>

### ***The consequences of violence***

The degree of harm suffered by victims of violence, particularly when this was made explicit, was found to be of concern. There was a link between this and the issue of relevance to real life. The harm suffered by victims can be identified with. When this harm is graphically portrayed, it is 'lived' by many viewers because they perceive that it could so easily happen to them. Even if the chances of becoming a victim are perceived as being small, the consequences of that occurring were viewed as universal. The grief suffered, the disruption to life experienced and the lasting memories were all aspects that the viewer could identify with.<sup>24</sup>

#### **2.3.5. Survey of Community Attitudes**

Twenty-five percent of the 2,000 people surveyed indicated that the amount of violence on television was of a considerable concern to them. The aged, those who were parents and women generally were those most concerned with the level of violence in programs. The aged are more likely to believe that there is a causal link between television content and the level of violence in society. The aged as a group also feels the most threatened by violence in society.

Sixty percent of the respondents believed that there was too much violence on television. The remaining 40% regarded the amount as reasonable and this group mainly comprised males, the younger age group and those without children.<sup>25</sup>

Approximately 30% of the teenage respondents in the 13-16 years age group responded that their parents intervened to prevent them watching explicit violent or sexual material.

News and current affairs programs were seen in a different context to other programs containing violent material as they represented the world as it really is. However, over 60% of adult respondents agreed that news containing explicit violent material should only be broadcast late in the evening.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, vol II, pp 34-36.

<sup>24</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, vol II, p 34.

<sup>25</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, vol II, p 178.

<sup>26</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, vol II, p 184.

The Tribunal further reported that it had conducted a number of surveys between 1970 and 1989 for the purpose of estimating the proportion of the Australian adult population that believed that there was too much violence on television. Throughout these successive surveys this proportion rose steadily. The 1989 survey suggested that six out of 10 adult Australians regarded the amount of violence on television as excessive.<sup>27</sup>

### **2.3.6. Monitoring of Community Attitudes**

One of the objectives of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* is the encouragement of the providers of broadcasting services to provide program material respectful of community standards. Under the authority of the Act the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) conducts regular surveys for the purpose of ascertaining community attitudes towards television content. The last survey was completed in April / May 1999 and showed that approximately 50 percent of those surveyed felt that the quantity and the type of violence shown in television movies was unacceptable.

A senior researcher with the ABA indicated that the survey showed that people were of the opinion that they were being bombarded with violent material.<sup>28</sup> This finding is a recurring theme that goes back to the surveys that were conducted between 1970 and 1989 and mentioned earlier.

## **2.4. REPORT OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES 1995**

In September 1995 the Standing Committee on Social Issues of the New South Wales Parliament (a Committee of the Legislative Council) tabled its report into *Youth Violence in New South Wales*. The terms of reference for the inquiry included an examination of the media portrayal of violence.

The Standing Committee regarded the task of proving that violence in the media had negative effects on children as impossible because of the difficulty in isolating individual variables affecting behaviour.<sup>29</sup> However, evidence given to the

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<sup>27</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, vol II, pp 203-204.

<sup>28</sup> Melissa Fyfe, 'TV violence tops viewer concerns', *The Age*, 24 February 2000. <http://www.theage.com.au>

<sup>29</sup> New South Wales. Legislative Council. Standing Committee on Social Issues, *A Report into Youth Violence in New South Wales*, September 1995, p 167.

Committee suggested that the modelling of behaviour provided by television is in fact a contributing factor to aggression in young people.<sup>30</sup>

The influence of the media was accepted by the Standing Committee as one of many factors that may contribute to youth violence in the community and quoted from two submissions received:

*The media might be said to be an expression of a culture that is permeated with violence, that the media is just one of the many areas of our culture we have to look at in tackling the whole issue of violence.*

*There are no simple explanations for violent behaviour...The causes of violence are to be found in the culture and the shared values, history, economy, religion, political systems, and social conditions.*<sup>31</sup>

## **2.5. THE REPORT OF THE COMMONWEALTH MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE INTO THE PORTRAYAL OF VIOLENCE IN THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA 1996**

In May 1996 the Commonwealth established this Committee comprising six Federal Ministers.<sup>32</sup> Its establishment occurred in the wake of the deaths at Port Arthur in Tasmania, the preceding month. The Committee received over 700 submissions and its recommendations were taken to Federal Cabinet in June 1996.

The recommendations of the Ministerial Committee suggest that the Committee accepted the premise that the portrayal of violence in the electronic media was socially negative and saw it in terms of 'risk'. This is gleaned from the following recommendation of the Committee:

*Specific research should be commissioned to identify and investigate ways of assisting groups most at risk from the portrayal of violence.*<sup>33</sup>

Further recommendations concerned the introduction of mandatory blocking devices to be fitted to new television receivers and legal processes and enforcement.

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<sup>30</sup> New South Wales. Legislative Council. Standing Committee on Social Issues, p 175.

<sup>31</sup> New South Wales. Legislative Council. Standing Committee on Social Issues, p 175.

<sup>32</sup> Australia. House of Representatives. *Parliamentary Debates*, 6 May 1996, p 338.

<sup>33</sup> Australia. Minister for Communication, the Information Economy and the Arts, Hon Senator Richard Alston, 'Government to tighten controls on media violence' *Media Release*, 9 July 1996. [http://www.dcita.gov.au/nsapi-graphics/?MIval=dca\\_dispdoc&ID=208](http://www.dcita.gov.au/nsapi-graphics/?MIval=dca_dispdoc&ID=208) Downloaded 23 May 2001.

The Ministerial Committee felt that the introduction of blocking devices fitted to television sets would enable parents to more successfully monitor the viewing habits of their children. Despite the Federal Government's theoretical acceptance of blocking technology there remain technological difficulties with producing such a chip. The broadcasting format used in the United States makes that country's 'V-chip' technology unsuitable for Australia.<sup>34</sup>

The Ministerial Committee recommended greater policing of censorship classification categories in relation to violent material. This being specifically so with respect to ensuring the broadcasting of programs classified for 'Mature Audiences' between 9.30 pm and 5 am.

The introduction of a prohibition on the exporting of violent material that has been refused classification was also recommended by the Ministerial Committee the aim being consistency between export and import controls of violent material. Additionally, the Committee recommended the introduction of legislation to provide for the installation of computer systems in retail video library stores that respond to parental preferences on membership borrowing cards by not allowing the borrowing of video or computer game titles beyond the specified classification on the membership card.

Matters that were canvassed in submissions were subsequently referred to the Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies.

## **2.6. THE SUBSEQUENT INQUIRY BY THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY STANDARDS 1997**

In February 1997 the Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies (renamed the Senate Select Committee on Information Technologies in August 1997) released its *Report on the Portrayal of Violence in the Electronic Media*.

The Senate Committee sought verbal submissions from approximately 10% of those individuals and organisations that had previously made written submissions to the Ministerial Committee. Opinion polls taken after the Port Arthur tragedy showed that 68% of those surveyed wanted more restrictions on violent movies,

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<sup>34</sup> 'V-chip still no threat to TV violence', *Sunday Mail*, 12 April 1998, p 28.

videos and video games whilst 75% of those surveyed indicated their belief that the level of television violence was excessive.<sup>35</sup>

In reviewing the submissions received through a public seminar held in Canberra in November 1996, the Senate Committee reported the thrust of those submissions under the headings of classification and consumer advice, film production, television broadcasting, and video distribution.<sup>36</sup>

### **2.6.1. Classification and Consumer Advice**

There was a perception that the whole process of classification was in need of reform. This being particularly so for the very young between 8 and 15 years of age. It was thought that parents of children within this age group required more specific information on the content of television programs, videos and computer games.

Greater dialogue was perceived to be necessary between the Office of Film and Literature Classification and film producers by allowing producers to make a claim for the level of classification that they thought pertinent to their film.

The Senate Committee received submissions arguing that advice given to consumers on videos and television movies should contain sufficient information to indicate the level and frequency of violence portrayed. This could be done, for example, by a system similar to the star rating informally given by review critics.

### **2.6.2. Film Production**

Participants in the public seminar suggested that government could investigate the following issues in relation to film production:

Incentives could be given to film producers through taxation and awards for the production of non-violent films in which conflict is resolved in non-violent ways. The portrayal of ways of solving problems that arise in real life that do not include violence has for some time been regarded as a positive step by critics of the level of portrayed violence. In doing this, the film making industry could make a major contribution toward lessening the level of violent behaviour in real life.

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<sup>35</sup> Australia. Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies, *Report on the Portrayal of Violence in the Electronic Media*, February 1997, p 8.

<sup>36</sup> Australia. Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies, pp 13-15.

### 2.6.3. Television Broadcasting

It was recommended that sporting broadcasts containing violent occurrences be subject to the blurring image effect similar to statutory requirements for those charged with certain criminal offences.

Such an approach may be possible for a lot of sporting broadcasts but for boxing and wrestling and martial arts events this would not be possible. Recent research conducted by the British Broadcasting Standards Commission and Film Classification Board suggests that children are strongly influenced by television broadcasts of wrestling even though they know that much of the action is faked.<sup>37</sup> These types of programs could only be given a classification rating that results in them being broadcast at times not conducive to the viewing hours of children.

The Senate Committee was also urged to recommend the reintroduction of the discontinued telephone complaint service that was formerly operated by the ABT. This being for the purpose of allowing viewers of television programs to complain about the level of violence portrayed. Additionally, the Committee recommended that on the spot fines be introduced for television broadcasters found to be breaching their Codes of Practice.

### 2.6.4. Video Distribution

The Senate Committee was urged in a number of submissions to recommend that the hiring of violent videos be restricted to a maximum of 24 hours with stiff penalties for video hirers contravening such restrictions.

There were also submissions to the effect that video distributors should be required to pay a levy on all violent videos that would be passed onto the consumer. This would act as an economic disincentive to children from buying or hiring such material.

There was also support for the mandatory labelling of violent videos stating that they contain material that is potentially detrimental to the well-being of young people.

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<sup>37</sup> 'TV wrestling risk to kids', *The Sunday Mail*, 18 March 2001, p 37.

## 2.7. REPORT OF THE VICTORIAN PARLIAMENT 2000

The Family and Community Development Committee of the Parliament of Victoria produced a report for the parliament in October 2000.<sup>38</sup> The Committee reported that previous studies into television violence suggest that the portrayal of violence leads to the three negative consequences of aggression, desensitisation and fearfulness.<sup>39</sup>

The Committee made the following pertinent concluding remarks:

- There may be a positive relationship between the level of violence in the media and the level of violence in the community but media violence is not the single cause as there are numerous variables that contribute to violent behaviour.
- Television violence may be imitated by some people.
- Aggressive personalities may be reinforced by television violence.
- The context within violence is depicted is important as to its effects on viewers.
- Children and young adults are more at risk from negative effects.
- Males appear to be more at risk than females.
- The public has a genuine concern about the effects of television violence.
- Parents are the most important sensors of what their children view on television.<sup>40</sup>

The Committee recommended that a television and multimedia education and information strategy be devised and implemented to encourage children to use television and multimedia in a responsive way that will maximise the educational and entertainment benefits whilst avoiding the dangers.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Family and Community Development Committee, *The Effects of Television and Multimedia on Children and Families in Victoria*, October 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Family and Community Development Committee, p 86.

<sup>40</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Family and Community Development Committee, p 87.

<sup>41</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Family and Community Development Committee, p 90.

### 3. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

#### 3.1. THE UNITED STATES NATIONAL TELEVISION VIOLENCE STUDY 1994-1997

The Executive Summary of this report is available on the web site of the Australian Broadcasting Authority.<sup>42</sup> The study was conducted between 1994 and 1997. It represented a joint effort by researchers of 4 American Universities and was funded by the National Cable Television Association. The study contained the following components:

- A review of the research literature on media effects;
- A content analysis of programs on United States television;
- An analysis of ratings; and
- An evaluation of anti-violence media campaigns targeted on adolescents.

##### 3.1.1. Review of Research Literature

Secondary research of previous literature and studies revealed:

- That TV violence contributes to harmful effects on viewers by:
  - (i) Encouraging aggressive attitudes and behaviours;
  - (ii) Creating a general desensitisation toward violence; and
  - (iii) Creating a sense of increased fear of being a victim of violence.
- Not all violence poses the same degree of risk of harmful effects in (i)(ii)(iii) making the situation complicated; and
- Not all viewers are affected by violence in the same way.

##### 3.1.2. Content Analysis of Programs

For the three year period between 1994 and 1997, 23 television channels were randomly selected on a weekly basis for content analysis. Program content was analysed to ascertain the level and nature of violence portrayed. The main findings of the content analysis were:

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<sup>42</sup> United States of America. *National Television Violence Study (USA) Vol 3, Executive Summary*, April 1998. [http://www.aba.gov.au/what/research/fother\\_res.htm](http://www.aba.gov.au/what/research/fother_res.htm) Downloaded 5 October 2000.

- the portrayal of television violence poses risks to viewers;
- violence continues to pervade American television;
- aggression in cartoons is high risk to children under seven years of age; and
- current affairs and news programs contain less violence overall than general programming.

### **3.1.3. Portrayal of Violence**

The three-year study reported that television violence is glamorised and associated with attractive characters who are portrayed as role models. An additional factor was seen to be a lack of remorse, a lack of criticism or penalty for violence at the time that it is screened. It was said that this was found to be the case in approximately 70% of violent scenes that were screened. Less than 5% of violent programs were found to feature an anti-violence message suggesting that the visual media primarily views itself as a vehicle of entertainment and not a vehicle for reinforcing positive social messages.

Sixty percent of the programs were found to contain violence. In this respect, 90% of pay television programs contained violence. The typical violent program was reported to contain at least six violent incidents per hour of viewing.

Cartoons were found to contain violence that was portrayed as being justified and therefore went unpunished. Such violence seems realistic to the younger children who are under seven years of age because they have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy in the programs that they watch. Overall, the study categorised cartoons for the younger audience as being 'high risk' with respect to their violent content.

### **3.1.4. Using the Broadcasting Medium to Deliver Anti-violence Messages**

The study attempted to ascertain the effectiveness of screening anti-violence programs and public service announcements containing anti-violence messages. The study concluded that depicting negative consequences of violent behaviour is more effective at influencing the attitude of adolescents than the use of public service announcements included in public awareness campaigns.

Whilst the study's recommendation that the television broadcasting industry should ensure more responsible programming was nothing new, it reinforced the perception that television can be used to impart positive messages as well as

negative messages and that, in the final analysis, any assault on the negative effects must involve a reversal of the social messages that are being conveyed.

### **3.2. THE REPORT OF THE AMERICAN FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION 2000**

The Federal Trade Commission was given the brief by President Clinton in June 1999 to inquire into the marketing of violent entertainment to children by the motion picture, music recording and electronic game industries. The Commission released its report in September 2000.<sup>43</sup>

The report is critical of the industry for what is seen as routine targeting of children under the age of 17 for the marketing of products containing violence. The report firstly examined whether there was a link between media violence and community violence:

*Scholars and observers generally have agreed that exposure to violence in entertainment media alone does not cause a child to commit a violent act and that it is not the sole, or even necessarily the most important, factor contributing to youth aggression, anti-social attitudes and violence. Nonetheless, there is widespread agreement that it is a cause for concern. The Commission's literature review reveals that a majority of the investigations into the impact of media violence on children find that there is a high correlation between exposure to media violence and aggressive, and at times violent, behaviour.*<sup>44</sup>

The Commission then went on to be very critical of the behaviour of the industry with respect to its marketing practices toward children:

*...individual companies in each industry routinely market to children the very products that have the industries' own parental warnings or ratings with age restrictions due to their violent content. Indeed, for many of these products, the Commission found evidence of marketing and media plans that expressly target children under 17.*

*...of the 44 movies rated R for violence the Commission selected for its study, the Commission found that 35, or 80%, were targeted to children under 17. Marketing plans of 28 of those 44, or 64%, contained express statements that the film's target audience included children under 17. For example, one plan for a violent R-rated*

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<sup>43</sup> United States of America. Federal Trade Commission, *Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children: A Review of Self-Regulation and Industry Practices in the Motion Picture, Music Recording and Electronic Game Industries*. September 2000. <http://www.ftc.gov/reports/violence/vioreport.pdf> Downloaded 20 March 2001.

<sup>44</sup> United States of America. Federal Trade Commission, Executive Summary.

*film stated, 'Our goal was to find the elusive teen target audience and make sure everyone between the ages 12-18 was exposed to the film.'*

*Of the 118 electronic games with a Mature rating for violence the Commission selected for its study, 83, or 70%, targeted children under 17. The marketing plans for 60 of these, or 51%, expressly included children under 17 in their target audience. For example, one plan for a game rated Mature for its violent content described its 'target audience' as 'Males 12-17 – Primary, Males 18-34 – Secondary'.*

*Further, most retailers make little effort to restrict children's access to products with violent content. Survey conducted for the Commission...found that just over half the movie theatres admitted children ages 13 to 16 to R-rated films even when not accompanied by an adult.*

*These industries can and should do better than this report illustrates.*<sup>45</sup>

Despite its criticism of the industry, the Federal Trade Commission did not recommend that the government implement a regulatory approach and override the self-regulation of the industry. The report's findings suggest that, in the United States, industry self-regulation leaves a lot to be desired as one of the recommendations coming out of the report was that there should be greater effort made to increased compliance at the retail level.<sup>46</sup>

A synopsis of the most recent piece of research conducted in the United States was published in the March 2001 edition of the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. The researcher, who had conducted a review of research literature published within the previous 10 years, concluded:

*The primary effects of media exposure are increased violent and aggressive behaviour, increased high risk behaviours, including alcohol and tobacco use, and accelerated onset of sexual activity. The newer forms of media have not been adequately studied, but concern is warranted through the logical extension of earlier research on other media forms and the amount of time the average child spends with increasingly sophisticated media.*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> United States of America. Federal Trade Commission, Executive Summary.

<sup>46</sup> United States of America. Federal Trade Commission, Executive Summary.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Villani, 'Impact of Media on Children and Adolescents: A 10-year Review of the Research', *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40(4), April 2001, pp 392 – 401.

#### 4. VIOLENT COMPUTER GAMES

Violence depicted in video games may be a contributing factor. However, Glenn Cupit, Lecturer in Child Development at the University of South Australia, argues that the playing of violent video games will not result in all children developing violent personalities as each child is an individual case.<sup>48</sup>

Whilst arguing that there has been no firm research linking electronic games with the incidence of youthful violence, criminologist Paul Wilson believes that attention should be focused on violent electronic games that increasingly permeate the new digital media as they are hands-on and graphically explicit. Wilson further points to anecdotal evidence that suggests that recent shootings in the United States could have been contributed to by the prevalence of computer simulated violence.<sup>49</sup>

This is backed by a report of a recent United States study showing that violent video games can in fact make children more aggressive and that they are more harmful than violence on television and in films because the players are required to identify with the aggressor. The study reported an increase in aggressive behaviour for both males and females after they played violent video games. A co-author of the study concluded that violent video games provide a complete learning environment for aggression.<sup>50</sup>

Julie Duck, lecturer in Psychology at the University of Queensland, believes that whilst there is a limit as to their influence, violent computer games can not be ignored:

*You often find there's other violence in their backgrounds which supports the use of violent solutions to problems. But they're right. Playing interactive games means you are actually involved in the violence, you're perpetrating it. We know that aggressive stimuli of all sorts will prime or activate aggressive thoughts.*<sup>51</sup>

In February 2000 four national health organisations in the United States released a joint statement on the pathological effects of entertainment violence on children. The national organisations were the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association. The statement compared

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<sup>48</sup> Kris Olsson, 'Virtual psychopaths', *The Courier-Mail*, 4 May 2000, p 17.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, p 13.

<sup>50</sup> Olsson, p 17.

<sup>51</sup> Olsson, p 17.

the effects of video games with the impact of other media sources:

*While less research is available on the impact of violent interactive entertainment, preliminary studies indicate that the negative impact may be significantly more severe than that wrought by television, movies or music.*<sup>52</sup>

## 5. REGULATION OF VIOLENT MATERIAL

The regulation debate is a contrast between the belief that viewers should be allowed to see what they want to see on the one hand and a need to protect society from harm on the other.<sup>53</sup> Television programs are subject to classification and timing restrictions whilst films, videos and video games are subject to classification.

The general response to the problem has been regulation but there are varying degrees of regulation. The perceived success of television regulation in the United Kingdom was described by a member of the Broadcasting Standards Commission in the following way:

*...despite the heavily regulated environment in the UK, the public continues to express concern about levels of television violence.*<sup>54</sup>

Creating program classification by regulation is yet another qualitative element that intrudes into the debate. Imposed classifications of material tends to attract criticism from those who argue that the classification is too lenient as well as those who argue that it is too harsh.

The regulatory framework that exists in Australia places the responsibility for the formal classification of all films, videos and computer games with the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC). The Office does not have control over television programming. The television broadcasters are self-regulatory bodies

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<sup>52</sup> United States of America. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, *AACP Joins Health Organisations' Consensus on Entertainment Violence Danger*, [http://www.aacap.org/press\\_releases/2000/0802.htm](http://www.aacap.org/press_releases/2000/0802.htm) Downloaded 2 April 2001.

<sup>53</sup> Marlene Goldsmith MLC, 'Community, Consistency or Carte Blanche the Treatment of Media Violence', Paper presented at the Conference *Violence, Crime and the Entertainment Media*, held by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Office of Film and Literature Classification in Sydney 4-5 December 1997, p 2.

<sup>54</sup> Andrea Millwood Hargrave, 'Using Technology to Mitigate Risks', Paper presented at the Conference: *Violence, Crime and the Entertainment Media*, held by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Office of Film and Literature Classification in Sydney 4-5 December 1997, p 3.

making their own programming decisions by reference to a code that has been approved by the Australian Broadcasting Authority.

The issuing of classifications and censorship is a process that has been described as being subject to subjective labels such as mild, minimal, incidental, justifiable and acceptable.<sup>55</sup> Film and video guidelines fall within a classification system that was written after wide community consensus.<sup>56</sup>

An academic in the field of communications law indicated that there was a common misconception on the part of the community as to the role of members of the Commonwealth Classification Board and the Commonwealth Classification Review Board. Members of these bodies are not at liberty to give a subjective response to films brought before them. There is a requirement that they take into account community standards and a reasonable person's response to the film.<sup>57</sup>

Constitutionally, the Australian States can pass legislation relating to film and literature classification. The Queensland government did this in 1974 when it passed the *Films Review Act 1974* which provided for the establishment of the Films Board of Review. The Board had the authority to examine and review films for the purpose of prohibiting the distribution in Queensland of objectionable films. Under the Act the Board had the power to determine what was an objectionable film. The *Films Review Act 1974* was repealed in 1992 with Queensland reverting to the acceptance of classifications determined by the Commonwealth.

In Holland and in the United States there have been attempts to devise educational programs aimed at educating children about the effects of violence. In Holland, the educational series consisted of a series of six 20-minute television programs aimed at 10 to 12 year olds in schools. The tapes were accompanied by student work sheets and teacher notes. The program was funded by the Dutch Schools TV Corporation and was also used by the Devon County Council in England. The American program was along similar lines but was aimed at a wider age group.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Australia. Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies, *Portrayal of Violence in the Electronic Media*, Public Seminar, Canberra, 29 November 1996, p 23.

<sup>56</sup> Australia. Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies, p 24.

<sup>57</sup> Australia. Senate Standing Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies, p 32.

<sup>58</sup> Sara Bragg, 'Just What the Doctors Ordered?', in Martin Barker and Julian Petley (ed) *ILL Effects: The media/violence debate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Routledge, 2001, p 88.

The Dutch program is primarily concerned with the influence of television on attitudes and beliefs rather than behaviour and there is an emphasis on drawing the factual difference between film and real life.<sup>59</sup>

### **5.1.1. Blocking Technology**

The use of emerging technology such as the V-chip and PICS for the blocking out of violent programs from television and the Internet respectively, has now been introduced into the debate.

The V-chip has (since February 1998) become a mandatory component of all new television sets sold in the United States. The technology requires a rating system which television broadcasters in the United States recently introduced. The rating allocated to a program is transmitted with it in a coded format that can be read by the V-chip. On-screen menus enable viewers to select the ratings that they wish to exclude from their television sets. When a program with a designated violence rating goes to air, the V-chip will not allow the video and audio signals to pass to the screen and speaker.

The Canadian inventor of the V-chip said he developed the device with financial assistance from a Canadian cable television provider, Shaw Cable, after the murders of 14 Canadian engineering students in 1989. The additional cost by the addition of the V-chip to television sets is around \$5 US.

PICS stands for Platform for Internet Content Selection. In principle, it works similarly to the V-chip for television receivers. Internet users will be able to block out material that is labelled in code that PICS can read. The PICS system is currently incorporated into Microsoft's Browser and Explorer 3.0 with Netscape intending to incorporate it within its software package. For PICS to be successful, it will require an international rating system that is applicable through web-sites right around the world.

### **5.1.2. Additional Measures**

At the Senate Committee's public seminar, Dr Graycar, Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology, spoke of a need to discourage 'bad practice' whilst encouraging 'good practice'. Discouraging bad practice could be achieved by striking a tax on violent 'R' and 'X' rated movies and videos which would increase the price to an extent that consumer resistance would be encountered. The encouragement of good practice could be achieved by such things as industry or

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<sup>59</sup> Sara Bragg, p 92.

public awards that acknowledge artistic ways of producing real life situations that do not contain themes of violence. Such awards could assist in changing the cultural outlook of both producers and consumers.<sup>60</sup>

The possible options of direct financial funding and tax breaks as part of the government's arsenal to encourage the production of non violent material has also been raised.<sup>61</sup> Such proposals were not included in the *Film Licensed Investment Company Act 1998* (Cth) that provides for taxation concessions for the production of Australian films.

## 6. DOES THE LEVEL OF VIOLENCE INFLUENCE SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

The television and movie industries are as competitive and entrepreneurial as any other commercial enterprise. However, the television industry also represents an immense public and social good with its ability to educate, inform and entertain. In this way, it plays a cultural role like no other medium.<sup>62</sup>

The debate over whether there are negative social consequences to violence in the entertainment industry has become commonly known as the 'effects debate'. The research question is whether there is a 'cause and effect' relationship between violence in the media and violent behaviour in the community?

The community perception is that there is simply too much violence depicted in television, videos, movies and computer games to be ignored. However, is there sufficient evidence to suggest that violent behaviour in the community is a consequence of an unacceptable level of violence depicted in the media?

In 1994 the President of the New South Wales Teachers Federation entered the debate:

*...the proliferation of violence in the electronic media is an area where we must draw the line. My biggest fear is that we are producing a group of young people whose values about human life, pain, agony and sexism are getting structured in a*

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<sup>60</sup> Australia. Senate Standing Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies, p 66.

<sup>61</sup> Australia. Senate Standing Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies, p 67.

<sup>62</sup> Hargrave, 1997, p 3.

*way that is much harsher than ours, more tolerant of violence and less sensitive about anything.*<sup>63</sup>

Young Media Australia as an advocacy group for the needs of young children has argued that there are three well-supported risks with respect to children viewing violent material:

*...children who have heavy exposure to media violence are more likely to show increased aggression, develop increased callousness towards the use of violence by others, and develop a mean and scary view of the world...*<sup>64</sup>

However, there are those who are sceptical that there will ever be a direct correlation found between the level of violence depicted in the entertainment industry and the level of violence in society:

*It is very likely amidst the mass of competing and conflicting evidence that it is probably impossible to prove a causal link between what we see and do although there may be a non-quantifiable association. Rather than dismissing out of hand the issues of causality or correlation, perhaps a more appropriate question might be – to what degree does the media influence behaviour?*<sup>65</sup>

The American scriptwriter Robert Towne, attending the Annual Conference of the Screen Producers Association of Australia in Sydney on 16-18 November 2000, echoed the feeling of a number of social researchers. He argues that the most negative consequence of depicted violence is its lack of reality with respect to the human suffering both physical and emotional that ensues:

*Film-makers tend to rely on sex, violence and splashiness as a substitute for good storytelling, and I think that's never good.... you should never have violence without dire consequences.*<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Phil Cross, President of NSW Teachers Federation, quoted in Marlene Goldsmith MLC, 'Community, Consistency or Carte Blanche the Treatment of Media Violence', Paper presented at the Conference *Violence, Crime and the Entertainment Media*, held by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Office of Film and Literature Classification in Sydney 4-5 December 1997, p 3.

<sup>64</sup> Australia. Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies, p 40.

<sup>65</sup> Senator H Coonan, 'Are we really what we eat?', Paper presented at the Conference: *Violence, Crime and the Entertainment Media*, held by the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Office of Film and Literature Classification in Sydney 4-5 December 1997, p 3.

<sup>66</sup> Jane Albert, 'Film-making a simple story', *The Australian*, 17 November 2000, p 9.

Associate Professor Susan Sawyer of the Melbourne Centre for Adolescent Health has argued that negative effects do follow:

*If we look at the exposure of young people to violence, whether it's sexual or not, it's huge. There is strong evidence now that young people who experience more violence within the media, whether that is on TV or through the movies, believe that the world is a more violent place than those people who are not exposed to it...and are more prepared to use violence in particular situations.<sup>67</sup>*

### **6.1. THE POSSIBLE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA VIOLENCE ON SUICIDE**

At the 1997 Senate Committee's public seminar Professor Baume of the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention spoke of the need to recognise that violent behaviour did not always manifest itself in circumstances of violence toward others as there is also the problem of people doing harm to themselves:

*When we talk about young people and children, in particular, then their resilience is even lower than that of adults. They are very vulnerable to being affected by specific gruesome reporting of violent events, especially when the violence which is being depicted deals with violence which is turned inward – that is towards the self.*

*There is now a large body of evidence globally that suggests that these kinds of stories directly affect the rates of suicides following their depiction on television news and current affairs programs.<sup>68</sup>*

The media has a positive role to play in this regard by communicating the message that suicide is not the answer to problems encountered in life.

A perception as to what is the typical masculine role in society has been identified by researches as an element in male suicide rates.<sup>69</sup> Physical prowess or courage may play a part in the propensity on the part of males to use violent and definite means to suicide.<sup>70</sup> Entertainment containing violent scenes consistently communicates a message that violence is part and parcel of the masculine role. The ability to cope with life and be a 'winner' is a subliminal theme in movies. In real life, if this perception is not met and expectations not achieved, some individuals may turn to suicide.

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<sup>67</sup> Roy Eccleston, 'Crimes of passion', *The Australian*, 27 April 2000, p 9.

<sup>68</sup> Australia. Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the Supply of Services Utilising Electronic Technologies, p 49.

<sup>69</sup> Queensland Parliamentary Library. Linda Woodrow, *The Epidemic of Youth Suicide*, Research Bulletin No 1/96, p 30.

<sup>70</sup> Woodrow, p 31.

A general comment of the role of the media in youth suicide comes from Flinders University Professor Jim Barber:

*If we are trying to lower the rate of relative misery we should start by promoting realistic images of what it is to be a young person. Media images of young people often present unrealistic images of what being a young person is actually like.<sup>71</sup>*

In contrast, professionals working with the young argue that the reasons for youth suicide are many and varied and can not be attributed to a single cause such as the media.<sup>72</sup>

## **6.2. NEGATIVE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES**

In 1989 the Social Development Committee of the Victorian Parliament examined the process that has been highlighted by previous research as contributing to increased levels of community violence. The Committee heard evidence to the effect that violent television programs, movies and computer games engendered desensitisation and stereotyping on the part of viewers.

### **6.2.1. Increased Desensitisation to Violence**

It has been said that the frequency of the portrayal of violence in the entertainment industry has led to the desensitisation of viewers to violence, with this being particularly so with younger audiences. The Social Development Committee quoted from submissions received during its inquiry:

*There is mounting evidence that the frequent portrayal of violence in television and cinema has a desensitising effect. Its shock value is lessened and thus it may come to be regarded as an essential and therefore acceptable part of life, particularly so by children.*

*...acceptance of violent behaviour as an entertainment has a desensitising effect on viewers, young and old alike. It cannot be expected logically to have a peaceful community while the mass media delivers nightly the message that the resolutions of all problems and conflict can be found at the end of a gun.*

*The desensitisation of the community as such, greatly affects the child audience – not only because of the general situation of which children are a part, but also because adults are so desensitised themselves that they do not appreciate that*

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<sup>71</sup> Professor Barber, quoted in Melissa Stevens, 'Happiness contributes to suicide', *The Age*, 8 October 2000. <http://www.theage.com.au/cgi-bin/archive.pl>

<sup>72</sup> Melissa Stevens, 8 October 2000.

*children are more impressionable, have less experience of life on which to evaluate the violence which they see on television. Hence, children are likely to develop a greater insensitivity to violence by the time they are adults.*<sup>73</sup>

Whilst concluding that desensitisation could not be specifically substantiated, the Parliamentary Committee reported it was deeply concerned that such a process may in fact be under way.<sup>74</sup>

### **6.2.2. Stereotyping**

The media is fertile ground for the stereotyping of social groups within the community. It also reinforces models of sexual identity and personal behaviour.<sup>75</sup> As one submission to the Committee said:

*What people see will not 'explain' why they behave as they do, but it will indicate some of the socially constructed blinkers on how they may interpret the world outside and the meaning and value of their own more private family lives.*<sup>76</sup>

### **6.2.3. Other causal elements**

There are those who believe that violent programs contribute less to violence in society than do other recognised elements. The media in general has been identified as portraying lifestyles that are beyond the means of many people, particularly for those who are unemployed. Such lifestyle portrayals are seen by some as being more likely to encourage violence and crime than violent television programming by encouraging materialistic attitudes and a reduced intolerance to delays in attaining a desired lifestyle. Even media coverage of unemployment and homelessness is viewed as engendering feelings of hopelessness and bitterness that can result in anti-social behaviour.<sup>77</sup>

The recognition that such elements are part of the equation tends to weaken any complete argument that may exist that there is a direct correlation between media violence and community violence.

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<sup>73</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Social Development Committee, pp 42-43.

<sup>74</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Social Development Committee, p 44.

<sup>75</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Social Development Committee, p 47.

<sup>76</sup> Victoria. Parliament. Social Development Committee, p 46.

<sup>77</sup> New South Wales. Parliament, Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, 'Youth Violence', *Issues Paper*, No 1 September 1993, p 40.

Jane Andersen of the Abused Child Trust focuses on the issue of child abuse as an element in the equation:

*Low self-esteem, the inability to form appropriate and rewarding relationships, aggressive or withdrawn behaviour, a tendency towards crime, development delays, psychological problems, and even suicide, are just some of the lifetime symptoms of child abuse.*

*In 1992 the New South Wales Child Protection Council revealed that the odds for future delinquency, adult criminality and arrest for violent crime, increased by 40% for people abused and neglected as children.*

*Despite some popular beliefs that the source of violence against children is often images presented in the media, the evidence suggests that, mostly, families are to blame for the abuse.*

*As long as we continue to ignore the reality of child abuse, we will be constantly confronted with issues of teenage delinquency, drug abuse, vandalism, homelessness, domestic violence and other forms of crime and social disorder.<sup>78</sup>*

## 7. CONCLUSION

There is wide opinion amongst social researchers that it will probably never be shown that there is a direct correlation between the level of violence portrayed in the entertainment media and the level of recorded violence in the community. However, there is at the same time, a widely held opinion that media violence is at least a contributing factor to the level of community violence as it has raised violence to a level where it enjoys social acceptance.

The Australian Institute of Criminology acknowledges the qualifiable nature of the debate in saying:

*Numerous research studies identified an association between exposure to violence in entertainment and violent behaviour, but they do not prove that exposure causes violent behaviour. Rather there is a risk that exposure to media violence will increase the likelihood of subsequent aggressive behaviour. This risk can be increased or decreased by a large number of other factors.<sup>79</sup>*

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<sup>78</sup> Jane Andersen, 'Innocents betrayed', *The Courier-Mail*, 27 April 2000, p 19.

<sup>79</sup> Melanie Brown and Adam Graycar, 'The Portrayal of Violence in the Media: Impacts and Implications for Policy', *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No 55, Australian Institute of Criminology, June 1996, p 1.





**This Publication:**

**RB 4/01**      *Violence in the Mass Media: Are There Negative Consequences?*  
(QPL Jun 2001)

**Related Publications:**

**RB 7/98**      *Stalking Law Reforms* (QPL Nov 1998)

**RB 1/96**      *The Epidemic in Youth Suicide* (QPL Jan 1996)