Men in the media:  
The manufacture of contempt

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Introduction

New research reported in this paper shows that mass media are engaged in an active campaign of manufacturing contempt for men and traditional male identities in modern societies through representations that they portray, in similar manner that mass media portrayals of women over several decades contributed negatively to societal attitudes towards women and women’s self-identity.

This campaign is not necessarily an intentional strategy or bias of the mass media and nor can they be blamed entirely as the cause to the extent that they reflect societal attitudes and viewpoints, as well as create and propagate attitudes and viewpoints. Notwithstanding, mass media are recognized as important sources of information and sites of discourse, and analysis of the under-researched field of representations of men and male identity shows that men are being demonized, marginalized, trivialized and objectified, with significant social implications.

Discourse as a constitutor of reality and identity

Structuralist and post-structuralist views both recognize the constitutive force of discourse in shaping social structures and identities – or subjectivities, as post-structuralist scholars prefer to say. Post-structuralist theory, in particular, has focused on how a person is subjected to and constituted by discourse. Whereas structuralist views held that people were socialized into the world by social structures such as policies, mores, worldviews, institutions and laws and other individuals and groups such as family, peers and work colleagues, post-structuralist thinking maintains that each person goes through a process of ‘subjectification’ in which, rather than having their identity or subjectivity imposed on them by social structures, or innate biological factors, they “take up the discourses through which they and others speak and write the world into existence” (Davies, 1993, p. 13).

Weatherall (2002) in discussing what she terms “the discursive turn” which moved humanities and social sciences away from earlier essentialist and structuralist approaches to focus on language and discourse (p. 75) says that, in a discursive psychology view:

... identities are produced and negotiated in the ongoing business of social interaction. In this view, identities do not have predefined, essential characteristics. Rather, identities emerge from the actions of local conversations ... Thus, identity is not viewed in essentialist terms as something that people ‘are’. Rather, identities are progressively and dynamically achieved through the discursive practices that individuals engage in (p. 138).

Fiske (1995) defines discourse as:

a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area. These meanings serve the interests of
that section of society within which the discourse originates and which works ideologically to naturalize meanings into common sense (p. 14).

Importantly, as Bilton et al. (1996) elaborate: “discourse is a body of ideas, concepts and beliefs which become established as knowledge or as an accepted world view. These ideas become a powerful framework for understanding and action in social life” (p. 657). Lull (2000) also points to this process of discourse becoming more than just talk but forming people’s worldview, saying “discourse is the way objects or ideas are talked about publicly that gives rise to widespread perceptions and understandings (p. 173).

Foucault made a major contribution to understanding of the importance of discourse in influencing and shaping identity with his concept of the “technologies of the self”. Foucault supported the view that identities were constructed from the materials available to people and proposed that one of the key ‘technologies of the self’ was popular discourse (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 133). Foucault's also identified the wider ‘power effects’ of discourses – i.e. the effects that they have in society in shaping social and political agendas and even government policy. The types of knowledge discourses produce and institutionalize “shape the creation and sustenance of political decisions, policies, social norms, practices and institutions”, Woods (1999) notes.

Constructionist views of gender cite discourse as a central element in the construction of gender identity. Weatherall says that gender identity is “a product of gender discourses” (p. 82). Particularly relevant to this study, Davies (1993) says:

"gender is constituted through the discourses with which we speak and write ourselves into existence … within post-structuralist theory, it is possible to see human subjects as not fixed but constantly in process, being constituted and reconstituted through the discursive practices they have access to in their daily lives. The tensions and instabilities in each person’s subjectivity become visible … through an examination of the discourses and practices through which our subjectivities are constituted (p. 11)."

Weatherall further notes that “discourse is not restricted to spoken language but also refers to written language” (p. 77).

**The role of mass media in discourse**

In modern societies, mass media play a key role in discourse. Media representations refer to more than the presentation of information to readers, viewers and listeners. According to media researchers Newbold et al. (2002), media representations refer to “the media’s construction of reality … the relationship between the ideological and the real” (p. 261).

Hall (1990) points to the importance of representations, saying identity is a “production” that is “always constituted within, not outside representation” (p. 222). Definitions of representation which explain its significance within discourse are provided by media researchers and feminist writers.

Representation refers to the process by which signs and symbols are made to convey certain meanings. Importantly, this term refers to the signs and symbols that claim to stand for, or represent, some aspect of ‘reality’, such as objects, people, groups, places, events, social norms, cultural identities and so on (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 260).
Butler (1999) says:

Representation … serves as the operative term within a political process to extend visibility and legitimacy … on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true (p. 3).

Mass media have been studied intensively since the 1920s and their impact on society in a number of areas has been examined in considerable detail. In public debate over racism, mass media were cited as “… a central means of creating, reproducing and sustaining racial ideologies … media representation of race – referring mainly to black people – draws attention to the ways in which for many years people who are not white remained largely invisible, marginalized to the point of insignificance, or were framed by specific and limited stereotypes” (Newbold et al., p. 311).

In *The Media Book*, Newbold et al. (2002) also comment:

Psychologists, criminologists and others continue to be concerned about such matters as the implications of exposure of children and adults to programmes containing scenes of violence; educationalists are concerned with the potential of the media for education; social anthropologists, who are most foremost among those staking out new questions in audience research, are interested in the ways in which people use, experience, relate to, live around and take meaning from the media, and how these factors are contextualized by particular cultures, communities, family structures and ideologies (p. 15).

Numerous researchers have identified the key role and effects of mass media in contemporary societies: Barr (2000) says “media remain central to most people’s lives … next to sleep and work, our next most time-consuming activity is attending to media” (p.16). Media researchers suggest that the influence of mass media may be increasing in contemporary developed societies with the breakdown of alternative sources of identity and discourse such as the family and religion. Gauntlett (2002) says that in modern societies, “inherited recipes for living and role stereotypes fail to function ... We have to make our own patterns of being and … it seems clear that the media plays an important role here” (p. 248 citing Beck, 2002, p. 26). Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998) comment “… in a contemporary society, the media are probably the most important producers of meaning, when they make claims about the way the world is they become powerful ideological institutions” (p. 182). They note specifically in relation to identity “the media’s ability to produce people’s social identities, in terms of both a sense of unity and difference [is] their most powerful and important effect” (p. 206).

Baudrillard claimed that mass media generate what he calls “hyper-reality” which dominates people’s primary consciousness. He says that in post-modern societies much of what audiences ‘experience’ is defined for them by mass media and what is “real life” is indistinguishable from its “simulation … some fictional simulacrum of the real conjured up by the media” (Windschuttle, 1998; 2000).

Gauntlett summarizes:

Today, popular media are obviously primary channels for the dissemination of prevailing discourses … The news and factual media inform us about the findings of lifestyle research and actual social change … Information and ideas from the media do not merely reflect the social world, then, but contribute to its shape, and are central to modern reflexivity (p. 98). Media are
key to “propagating modern lifestyles which are templates for narratives of the self” (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 103).

Feminist scholars have extensively cited the importance of mass media as a site of discourse on gender identity (e.g. Humm, 1997; Kaplan, 1983; Maio, 1991; O’Donnell, 1999; Tuchman, 1978; Weatherall (1996). Nathanson and Young (2001) observe: “Feminists have long pointed out that the way women are represented in movies or on television can have profound effects on the way men see women in real life and – even more important – on the way women see themselves in real life” (p. 18). They also comment: “Feminists … have made popular culture one of the chief battlegrounds in their struggle for women” (p. 244).

Why study media representations of men?

While there have been numerous studies of mass media representations of gender, as with gender studies generally these have focused predominantly on women. Mass media representations of men and male identities have been comparatively little studied. Seidler (1994) poses that “feminists have somehow set the agenda for men’s studies” (p. 112).

The book *Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture* by Nathanson and Young (2001) was a notable breakthrough in this area. The authors comment in their introduction: “By the 1980s, the word ‘gender’ was routinely used as a synonym for ‘women’. To study gender is still, by implication, to study women” (p. 8). They add:

... our society was androcentric until recently (focused on men), at least to the extent that it focussed on gender – although we do not agree with many feminists on how or why androcentrism came to prevail. But conditions have changed … by the 1990s, androcentrism was increasingly being replaced by gynocentrism in popular culture (p. 5).

A number of researchers have commented on the lack of attention to men in studies of gender. Katz (1995) notes the lack of scholarly attention to men and masculinities in the past is consistent with the “lack of attention paid to other dominant groups”. Newbold et al. (2002) note that this was the case in discussion of race which, for a long time, did not deal with whites and whiteness (p. 287). Winter and Robert (1980) observed that “ruling groups are often the last to be scientifically studied, and men appear to be no exception” (p. 250). An assumption is inherent in many public discourses that allegedly dominant or pre-eminent groups do not have issues worthy of consideration.

Brod (1987) makes the thought-provoking observation: “While women have been obscured from our vision by being too much in the background, men have been obscured by being too much in the foreground” (p.19).

However, Newbold et al. (2002) warn “… media representations of men and masculinity (or, more precisely, masculinities) should not be perceived as unproblematic … as might have been implied by early feminist writing” (p. 287).

Studying mass media representation of men and male identities

Content analysis is the primary methodology used to explore mass media content ( Neuendorf (2002, p. 9). Studies such as Rifé and Freitag (1997) and Yale and Gilly (1988) have
reported that “in the field of mass communication research, content analysis has been the fast-growing technique over the past 20 years or so”.

Sociologists have been interested in media content since the early 20th century, starting with Max Weber around 1910 who saw media content as a means of monitoring the ‘cultural temperature’ of society (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine & Newbold, 1998, p. 92). Media content analysis was introduced as a systematic method to study mass media by Harold Lasswell (1927), initially to study propaganda. The methods have been refined throughout the years.

Media content analysis became increasingly popular as a research methodology during the 1930s and 1940s for investigating the rapidly expanding communication content of movies and, in the 1950s, media content analysis proliferated as a research methodology in mass communication and social sciences with the arrival of television.

Berelson (1952) described five main purposes of content analysis as:

- To describe substance characteristics of message content – i.e. content characteristics;
- To describe form characteristics of message content;
- To make inferences to producers of content;
- To make inferences to audiences of content;
- To determine the effects of content on audiences.

Inferences concerning producers’ intent and audiences’ interpretation cannot be made from content analysis alone. As Neuendorf (2002) notes, an integrated approach is required involving content analysis as well as other research such as audience studies. However, content analysis as useful for “facilitating” inference even though it cannot directly prove it. Furthermore, content analysis has some predictive capabilities as well as other specialist uses (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 53).

Media content analysis can be conducted in a number of ways. One of the key criteria advocated by authorities on content analysis such as Neuendorf (2002), who focuses on quantitative content analysis, is that it should conform to the standards of ‘the scientific method’ of research. Researchers such as Neuendorf are critical of analyses which involve high levels of subjectivity and lack of reliability. These deficiencies are caused by lack of \textit{a priori} design, poor sampling, and lack of objectivity or \textit{intersubjectivity} as researchers prefer to say, noting that in post-modern and post-structuralist views, true objectivity is impossible (Grbich, 2004). In addition to representative sampling and good research design, techniques recommended for ensuring maximum reliability and validity include use of multiple coders to avoid what Tinsley and Weiss (1975, p. 275) term “the idiosyncratic results of one rater’s subjective judgement”, and intercoder reliability assessment and reporting of variance.

This study collected and analyzed news, editorials, feature articles, opinion columns, current affairs and lifestyle and talk show content from an extensive sample of high-circulation newspapers and magazines and top-rating television programs over a six months period.\footnote{Sample collected from July 1 – December 24, 2003 and analysed in 2004.} The study focused on editorial content rather than advertising or drama, noting that advertising representations have been “one of the most widely studied areas”, along with films and drama such as ‘soap operas’ (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 272). Van Zoonen, 1994) notes an “obsession” with advertising and gender. Media researchers point that, with allegedly factual
editorial media content, “it is more likely that audiences believe the information they are getting is ‘true’ and are less aware of these programmes being mediated” (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 262).

The sample yielded 650 newspaper editions (450 broadsheets and 200 tabloids), 130 magazines, and 332.5 hours of television news, current affairs, talk shows and lifestyle programming. Television content monitored included 125 TV news bulletins; 147 TV current affairs programs; 125 talk show episodes; and 108 TV lifestyle program episodes with gender and men’s themes. By any sampling criteria, this was a large study, designed to produce statistically reliable and valid findings as well as in-depth understanding from a secondary stage of qualitative analysis. A summary of media titles and hours of TV programming analyzed is provided in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEDIA</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>1 Jul - 24 Dec 2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newspapers:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>Daily Mon-Sat (6 per week)</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>Daily Mon-Sat (6 per week)</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>Daily Mon-Sat (6 per week)</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>Daily Mon-Sat (6 per week)</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Telegraph</td>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Age</td>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Newspapers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Magazines:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bulletin</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Women’s Weekly</td>
<td>Monthly (despite title)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmopolitan</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FHM</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Circle</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Weekend Magazine</td>
<td>In Sat SM Herald &amp; Age</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian Magazine</td>
<td>In Sat Australian</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Magazine</td>
<td>In Sunday Telegraph</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Magazines</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Television:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine News</td>
<td>Mon-Fri (5 x 30 mins pw)</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Current Affair</td>
<td>Mon-Fri (5 x 30 mins pw)</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 Minutes</td>
<td>Sunday (1 hour per week)</td>
<td>(Off air 1st week Dec)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oprah</td>
<td>Mon-Fri (5 x 1 hour pw)</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frasier</td>
<td>Mon-Fri (5 x 30 mins pw)</td>
<td>(Off air end Nov)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer Eye for a Straight Guy</td>
<td>Monday (1 hour per week)</td>
<td>(29 Sep - 30 Nov)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total TV (Hours)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>332.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Summary of media content collected for this study.*

Intercoder reliability was assessed using PRAM (Program for Reliability Assessment of Multiple coders), a software program developed in consultation with and tested by Neuendorf and her students at Cleveland State University Ohio (SkyMeg Software, 2003). The program calculates reliability statistics for six recommended indices as shown in Tables 2 and 3 and was used to conduct intercoder reliability assessment of coding of:

1. Messages – the primary unit of analysis (20 positive messages and 20 corresponding negative messages) coded as present or not in articles; and
2. The overall ‘favourability/unfavourability’ rating of articles towards men calculated using a specialist content analysis software program scoring method.

Neuendorf (2002) says that “most basic textbooks on research methods in the social sciences do not offer a specific criterion or cut-off figure and those that do report a criterion vary somewhat in their recommendations” (p. 143). However, Neuendorf cites Ellis (1994) who suggests that correlation coefficients exceeding 0.75 to 0.80 indicate high reliability (p. 91). In relation to specific statistics, Frey, Botan and Kreps (2000) declare 70% agreement (0.70) is considered reliable. Popping (1988) suggests 0.80 or greater is required for Cohen’s \( \kappa \) which he cites as the optimal (ie. strictest) measure, while Banerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney and Sinha (1999) propose that a 0.75 score for Cohen’s \( \kappa \) indicates excellent agreement beyond chance. Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998), without specifying the type of reliability coefficient, recommend high standards and report that content analysis studies typically report reliability in the 0.80 to 0.90 range.

Table 2 shows a summary of average intercoder reliability scores generated by PRAM for the 40 messages tracked and analyzed in this study (20 positive and their 20 corresponding negative forms) in a 100 article sub-sample selected for intercoder reliability assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Messages 1-20 (Positive and Negative)</th>
<th>Reliability Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent Agreement</td>
<td>0.997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holstl’s co-efficient of reliability</td>
<td>0.997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott’s ( \pi )</td>
<td>0.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen’s ( \kappa )</td>
<td>0.862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spearman’s rho</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson’s Correlations Co-efficient (r)</td>
<td>0.966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin’s Concordance Correlations Co-efficient (( r_c ))</td>
<td>0.894</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.** Summary of average intercoder reliability assessment of coding of 20 positive messages and 20 negative messages by two coders in sub-sample of 100 articles generated by PRAM (Program for Reliability Assessment of Multiple coders).

This shows reliability ratings in the high to very high range, with the lowest being 0.861 (where 1.0 is 100% agreement or covariance).

Table 3 shows intercoder reliability for the overall favourability rating of articles in this study generated by PRAM. This shows reliability ratings between 0.797 and 0.999 – equal to or well in excess of the acceptable reliability rates proposed by media researchers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Rating of Articles</th>
<th>Reliability Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent Agreement</td>
<td>0.860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holstl’s co-efficient of reliability</td>
<td>0.860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott’s ( \pi )</td>
<td>0.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen’s ( \kappa )</td>
<td>0.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spearman’s rho</td>
<td>0.944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson’s Correlations Co-efficient (r)</td>
<td>0.975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin’s Concordance Correlations Co-efficient (( r_c ))</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.** Summary of intercoder reliability assessment of overall ‘favourability/unfavourability’ rating coded by two coders in a sub-sample of 100 articles generated by PRAM (Program for Reliability Assessment of Multiple coders).
Full reports of intercoder reliability assessments generated by PRAM for each of the 40 messages analyzed (20 positive and 20 negative) and overall article ratings were reported in an appendix to the thesis in which this research was presented.

**What mass media say about men and male identities**

Analysis of the sample found representations of men and male identities appeared in 1,799 media reports, comprising 1,568 newspaper and magazine articles and 231 television reports or program segments. Figure 1 reports an overall breakdown of favourable, unfavourable and neutral media coverage. This shows that men are overwhelmingly represented negatively in mass media news, current affairs, talk shows and lifestyle media, with 69% of mass media reporting and commentary on men unfavourable compared with just 12% favourable and 19% neutral or balanced.

![Media Overview](image)

*Figure 1. Overview of proportions of favourable, unfavourable and neutral media coverage of men and men’s issues.*

**Leading male profiles**

Media representations of men were categorized into profiles or overall themes to identify the main subjects reported in relation to men. A total of 1,776 of the 1,799 media articles and program segments analyzed contained an identifiable profile or theme.

As shown in Figure 2, men are predominately portrayed in mass media as villains, aggressors, perverts and philanderers, with more than 75% of all mass media representations of men and male identities portraying men in one of these four ways. More than 80% of media profiles of men, in total, were negative, compared with 18.4% of content which showed positive profiles or themes.
Figure 2. Leading profiles/themes in mass media representations of men.

The main issues categories (topics) reported in relation to men that contributed to these profiles or themes are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Leading issue categories of media reporting on men.
Men are mostly reported in mass media news, current affairs, talk shows and lifestyle media in relation to violence and aggression with 1,178 articles out of 1,799 analyzed (65%) portraying men this way. This was followed, in terms of volume, by reporting and discussion of fatherhood and family, male sexuality, work and career, and men’s social behaviour.

Figures 4-14 provide a breakdown and a summary of findings for the main categories of media coverage shown in Figure 3.

**Men and violence**

![Leading Issues](chart.png)

*Figure 4. Leading issues in mass media reporting of violence and aggression by men.*

As shown in Figure 4 and supporting Table 4, violent crime, including murder, assault, armed robberies and attacks such as bashings, accounted for almost 40% of all media reporting of male violence and aggression. This was followed by sexual abuse (20.5%), general crime (18.6%) and domestic violence (7.3%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Favourable Articles</th>
<th>Neutral Articles</th>
<th>Unfavourable Articles</th>
<th>Total Articles</th>
<th>% in This Category</th>
<th>Average Favourability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violent Crime</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime General</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Violence</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy's Violence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk-Taking Behaviour</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fights/Brawls/Thugs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gangs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Militarism</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td><strong>105</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,054</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,178</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>40.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4. Leading issues in mass media reporting of violence and aggression by men broken down by favourable, unfavourable and neutral articles.*
During the period of this study, a number of major violent crimes drew national headlines and extensive media reporting including two tragic cases of fathers “slaughtering their children” reported by national TV news, current affairs and leading newspapers in one month; charges against a man for murdering 14-month old boy Jaidyn Leskie, at Moe in Victoria in 1998 (*The Age*, November 25, 2003, p. 1; *The Australian*, November 26, 2003, p. 3); the US sniper trial following 10 random murders in the Washington DC area by two men who cold-bloodedly shot their victims (National Nine News, October 21, 2003; *The Australian*, November 19, 2003, p. 11 and November 26, 2003, p. 9; *The Age*, November 19, 2003, p. 14); US reports of the discovery and release of home video footage of the Columbine school killers practising shooting at targets and boasting of the power of using automatic weapons (National Nine News, October 23, 2003); the disappearance and eventual gory discovery of murdered British schoolgirls, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman (*The Australian*, December 18, 2003, p. 10); and the arrest and trial of the man accused of murdering British tourist, Peter Falconio, in the Northern Territory, Bradley John Murdoch (*The Age*, November 11, 2003, p. 1; *The Weekend Australian* (November 15-16, 2003, p. 3; and *The Daily Telegraph* (November 15, 2003, p. 5).

Sexual abuse also figures prominently in portrayals of violence and aggression by men, with a large number of allegations headlined in mass media. Noteworthy cases which made headlines during the six months period of this study in 2003 included claims, and subsequently charges, against singer Michael Jackson for alleged sexual assault of and “lewd acts” with boys; allegations of ‘groping’ against movie star and California Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger; alleged sexual assault of a teenage girl by American basketballer Kobe Bryant, including allegations that a bodybuilder allegedly offered to kill the 19-year old woman making the allegations to “solve the problem” (*The Age*, September 20, 2003); gang-rape allegations against eight English premiership soccer stars (*The Daily Telegraph*, September 30, 2003, p. 21 and October 6, 2003, p. 9; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 6, 2003, p. 9); stalking and harassment claims against Australian Olympic swimming coach, Greg Hodge, by a former pupil, Emma Louise Fuller (*A Current Affair*, October 13, 14, 15 and 16, 2003; National Nine News, October 14, 2003; *The Age*, October 14, 2003, p. 3 and numerous other media); and allegations of “text sex” against high profile Australian cricket star, Shane Warne by a South African woman, Helen Cohen Alon who alleged he sent a series of sexually explicit text messages to her (*The Australian*, August 11, 2003, p. 1; *The Daily Telegraph*, August 11, 2003, pp. 1, 4). Shane Warne was also accused by a 16-year old girl of “tongue kissing” her during a Gold Coast night out (*The Age*, August 14, 2003, p. 1).

Sexual abuse and harassment claims were also reported during this period against 10 school teachers, a ballet teacher, the Australian Army, a magistrate, an Internet chat-room operator, and several workplaces. One national newspaper headline sensationally claimed “Pacific region warned of paedophile plague” (*The Australian*, October 16, 2003, p. 7).

Reading mass media, any woman or girl could be excused for believing men are marauding monsters. Some women state as much, not only privately, but in mass media contributing to a highly negative and inflammatory discourse on men and supporting a generalization that male sexual aggression is pervasive.

Significantly, a number of the claims and charges were subsequently dismissed, but this was not reported to anywhere near the same extent as the initial claims, and sometimes not at all.
Men and fatherhood

“Fatherhood is in fashion” was the headline of a Reuters-Associated Press story broadcast around the world in January 2004 reporting on an international fashion show in Milan with a photo of a male model on the catwalk clutching the hand of a small boy that was published in a number of newspapers and magazines (eg. The Australian (January 15, 2004, p. 3). Analysis of mass media content shows that, indeed, fatherhood is in fashion and a focus of public discourse. ‘Fatherhood and family’ was the second leading category of media reporting on men with some 361 media reports, 20% of media coverage on men collected during the study.

Quoted as a “fatherhood expert”, Adrienne Burgess, formerly a policy adviser to British Prime Minister Tony Blair on family issues, said in an interview “fathers are on the agenda”. Burgess told reporter and columnist Bettina Arndt “there has been a shift in public discourse”. She cited as examples Prime Minister Blair taking time off for the birth of his fourth child in 2000 and Chancellor of the British Treasury, Gordon Brown, taking a month’s paternity leave in 2003 (The Sydney Morning Herald, November 14, 2003, p. 9).

Figure 5. Leading issues in mass media reporting of men in relation to fatherhood and family.

In Australia, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Labor Opposition both announced policy initiatives directed at fostering involvement by fathers and male role models in children’s lives, echoing similar social and political initiatives in the UK and other countries.

Researcher from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Michael Flood was reported saying: “Fathers are important to the wellbeing of children and families, and supporting fathers positive involvement is a worthy goal” (The Sydney Morning Herald, December 5, 2003, p. 15).
Australia’s Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, stated in a leading newspaper column: “For too long, fatherhood has been ignored, taken for granted, seen as just about earning the money or laying down the law.” Goward acknowledged: “Men, too, have been disadvantaged by the imposition of gender roles on their lives … for men, the onerous task of being the breadwinner, working in an often thankless job – perhaps ill-paid, long hours, bad conditions – have always been considered proof of their love for their family” (The Age, August 26, 2003, p. 11).

However, along with recognition of the importance of father involvement and the depth of many men’s emotional connection with their children, discussion also contained an almost equal number of criticisms of men for lack of involvement with and commitment to their children. Under a headline “Dads who care and share are a small minority”, Farah Farouque and Adele Horin reported that fathers are involved in the day-to-day care of their children in only 5-10% of Australian families and share the physical care of their children in only 1-2% of families (The Age, December 1, 2003, p. 8).

Media also published a number of opinion columns highly critical of men as fathers. For example, an opinion article by Trish Bolton (credited as a tutor in media and communications at Swinburne and Monash Universities) appeared under the headline “When it comes to child access, many men just don’t want to know”. Bolton reported:

… but after less than three months, I knew it wouldn’t last. Somehow, in that short time, his love for them just seemed to evaporate. I would watch helplessly as my little boy sat on top of his suitcase waiting for his daddy to arrive, legs kicking back and forth with anticipation, for a father who often did not keep his promise … There’s a backlash against single mothers. It is being fuelled by commentators such as Arndt who never miss an opportunity to portray single mothers as manipulative and self-serving, a men’s movement that is deeply misogynous, and a Prime Minister who wants to drag women back into the kitchen where he thinks they belong (The Sydney Morning Herald, September 4, 2003, p. 15).

Bolton’s claims are in conflict with research data such as that of Hawthorne (2002) which shows that 56% of non-resident fathers want more time with their children.

An interesting finding from media research is that of the 10 most published and quoted expert sources and authorities on fatherhood, nine were women. Deleuze warns that “only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf” (Foucault, 1977, p. 209). Also, in rejecting views of men as primary and women as the ‘other’, feminism has argued for the superiority of “self-validating” rather than “other validating” (see Hearn, 1993). While recognizing a place for women’s observations and opinions on fatherhood, the dominance of women’s perspectives marginalizes men and contributes gender bias in debate on this issue.

Even more ironic and questionable on the grounds of subjectivity and experience is that Adrienne Burgess, author of Fatherhood Reclaimed: The Making of the Modern Father (Burgess, 1997), was quoted in several media articles as a “fatherhood expert” and a “fatherhood consultant”. Her gender, and childlessness at the time of writing the book, do not invalidate Burgess’ views on fatherhood nor her ability to contribute to debate through research. But, for whatever reason, men are largely silent or silenced on one of the issues which research (such as Hawthorne, 2002) shows is very important to them.

2 This is cited because the writer was published with her academic position listed, not as a reporter or a simply a member of the public, a factor which affects the semiotic efficacy of the article and shows mass media reflecting societal, in this case, academic discourse.
Men and sexuality
As in many issue categories (subject areas) studied, male sexuality was predominantly negatively portrayed. One third (33%) of all discussion of male sexuality was in relation to paedophilia, as shown in Figure 6.

![Figure 6. Leading issues in mass media reporting of male sexuality.](image)

Worldwide, mass media headlines followed the Michael Jackson case leading up to and including his arrest for alleged sexual offences against children (National Nine News, November 21, 2003 and numerous newspaper and magazines articles already cited under ‘Men and violence’). In Australia, claims of extensive paedophilia rocked both the Catholic and Anglican churches.

Male homosexuality has become prominent in media representations of men, highlighted in TV shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and numerous press reviews that followed its international launch. Homosexuality is lightly and positively portrayed in *Queer Eye*. However, media coverage continues to reflect gay stereotypes, and homosexuality was negatively portrayed in other media content with criticisms of gay marriages and social commentary reflecting homophobia.

Significantly, however, heterosexuality was equally negatively portrayed. Male heterosexuality was often associated with traditional (hegemonic) masculinity and seen as violent, aggressive and dominating. Often homosexual men were portrayed as more sophisticated and sensitive than heterosexual men.

Male sexuality faces a growing trend towards objectification in mass media strikingly similar or parallel to the objectification of women which has been widely documented. The top-rating TV show *Sex and the City* has been an exemplar in objectification of men as sex objects for the gratification of women. In a major feature published in *The Observer* in London and reprinted in *The Age, Sex and the City* scriptwriter, Cindy Chupack advises...
women to pass on boyfriends after they have finished with them which she terms “man-me-
downs” (*The Age*, August 9, 2003, A2, p. 2).

Women’s magazines take objectification of men to extremes in much the same way as men’s
magazines have treated women. For example, *Cosmopolitan* presents its “Guy without a
shirt” section, featuring a young man in a swimming costume or underwear only. Soccer star,
David Beckham was featured in the October 2003 issue with the sub-heading “Want to see
Becks take a free kick – naked?” Under the heading in the November 2003 issue the
magazine urged readers “Check out this month’s half-naked spunk”.

A key finding was that when any good in men is recognized – in a sexual, social, moral or
fashion sense – it is described as their ‘feminine side’, the implication being that there is
nothing positive about being male.

**Men and work**
Another prominent category of mass media reporting of men focussed on work and career.
The period of this study was one of relative economic stability and growth in a number of
western economies, particularly Australia. Therefore, job losses and redundancy were not as
prominent in mass media reporting as they have been in other periods such as that reported by
Faludi (2000).

A number of researchers have noted the centrality of work in men’s lives (eg. O’Connor,
success was the most prominently reported issue, Figure 7 shows that career success received
as much criticism as positive reporting. Work versus family and lifestyle was extensively
discussed, particularly in opinion columns and feature articles. This suggests that a major
social shift is underway with increased recognition (or at least discussion) of the importance
of family and lifestyle outside of work and career success.

**Leading Issues**

![Figure 7](image-url)

*Figure 7. Leading issues in mass media reporting of men in relation to work and career.*
Media cited a 2003 Relationships Australia survey which found 90% of Australian couples say that finding a balance between their work and lifestyle is straining their relationship (*The Sunday Telegraph*, December 14, 2003, p. 51).

A number of books on work and its effects were reported and reviewed during the period of this study, including Barbara Pocock’s *The Work/Life Collision* (Pocock, 2003) and a book by academics from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology who traced workplace transformations over the past 20 years (Watson, Buchanan, Campbell & Briggs, 2003).

Claims of workplaces being a “boys’ club” discriminating against women and allegations of a “backlash” to undermine women’s efforts were reported frequently. In a review of Anne Summers’ (2003) book, columnist, Emma-Kate Symons wrote: “As Summers shows, some powerful men are trying to take back women’s hard-earned gains of the 1970s and ‘80s through legal, political and social means” (*The Weekend Australian*, Books Extra, November 29-30, 2003, p. 6). The ‘glass ceiling’ was cited in 17 articles, particularly in relation to the law and senior management positions in large corporations.

Despite relative economic stability and low unemployment during the period of this study, Professor Sue Richardson from the National Institute of Labour Studies at Flinders University warned that Australia is creating a “dangerous” underclass of young unemployed unmarried men. Adele Horin reported Richardson speaking at a conference in Canberra where she said “35 per cent of Australian men aged 35-44 in 2003 were not married and did not have a full-time job. This compared with 20 per cent in 1978.” The headline of Horin’s report summarised young males’ plight as “Jobless, single and male: society’s forgotten outcasts” (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 2, 2003, p. 11).

Interestingly, as with fatherhood, the most prominent writers on men in relation to work in the mass media studied were women including Pru Goward, Bettina Arndt, Angela Shanahan, Susan Mitchell, Emma Tom, Barbara Popock, Adrienne Burgess and Adele Horin. No men appeared in the ‘top 10’ writers and commentators on men and work.

**Men’s social behaviour and body image – representations of masculinities**

‘Metrosexual’ is a new buzz word in mass media in relation to men. The term emerged as the most prominent male identity portrayed in mass media in relation to men’s social behaviour. Reportedly coined by British author Mark Simpson in 1994 and allegedly made popular by New York trend-spotter Marian Salzman (Barker, 2004), the term refers to men who are fashion-conscious and well-groomed, often to the point of wearing make-up and waxing to remove body hair.

Top-rating international current affairs show, *60 Minutes*, devoted a major segment to “Metro Man”. Reporter Charles Woolley reported: “They’re into makeovers, make-up and moisturizers, know everything there is to know about shirts and shoes and, for what it’s worth, they’re straight” (*60 Minutes*, August 24, 2003).

Australia’s other national TV current affairs program devoted two programs to metrosexuals. At least *A Current Affair* recognized the commercial motives behind the metrosexual trend in a report entitled “The boom industry that allows men to lie back and think of make-up” (*A Current Affair*, September 19, 2003). In the follow up program, reporter Brady Hall matched Charles Woolley’s alliteration describing “the body beautiful Botox world” (*A Current Affair*, December 2, 2003).
Men’s magazine *Ralph*, published a quiz headed “Are you a metrosexual” in a tongue-in-cheek tone. But the underlying message was that, if a man was not a metrosexual, he was a sexist, football-loving, beer-drinking slob (*Ralph*, October 2003, p. 125).

There are signs that men are concerned and conflicted by the shifting kaleidoscope of identities paraded in mass media. A letter to the editor from a young man under the headline “Men in need of direction” stated: “The increasing trend towards this portrayal of men in advertising is a representation of the indeterminate role of males in modern society … men are less secure in the part they have to play in the social structure … for the young male, there is a great deal of confusion about the contribution they have to make to society and in relationships…” The letter concluded by appealing against “lauding one gender and denigrating the other” (*The Daily Telegraph*, July 7, 2003, p. 10).

**Men’s physical health**

Men are portrayed as not taking care of their health. Leading issues reported and portrayed in relation to men’s health were alcohol and drug abuse. Disease generally was reported to be increasing and male health was cited as requiring attention. However, preventative treatment and programs to address men’s health problems such as prostate cancer were little reported in leading mass media. For example, prostate cancer, a major killer of men, was discussed in just 12 articles – 0.67% of reporting about men. One national weekend newspaper feature headlined “Killing me softly” pointed out that “prostate cancer is a threat to men, similar to breast cancer in women, but we’re not doing enough about it” (*The Australian*, December 20-21, 2003, p. 20).
Men’s mental health and suicide
Men’s mental health was mostly reported in relation to suicide. Key contributors to male suicides cited by mass media were relationship break-up, loss of access to children and sexual dysfunction (The Sydney Morning Herald, July 4, 2003, p. 13; Sunday Age, September 28, 2003, p. 11 and a multi-page feature entitled “Suicide: Men at Risk” in The Age, August 18, 2003, pp. 13-15).

Leading messages about men
The predominantly negative portrayal of men in mass media is clearly demonstrated by the leading messages about men appearing in mass media. Despite a number of heroic profiles of men presented in mass media such as fire fighters and men performing rescues, Table 7 shows unfavourable messages (1,082) outnumbered favourable messages (455) by 2.4 to one. More than 70% of messages were unfavourable, compared with just 29.5% favourable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message</th>
<th>Favourable</th>
<th>Unfavourable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criminals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abusers/predators</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment orientated and responsible</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chauvinists/pressors/misogynists</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protectors/carers/gentle/non-violent</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stupid or incompetent</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insensitive, out of touch with feelings</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law - abiding responsible citizens</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment phobic/lack commitment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snags/Metrosexuals/shows ‘feminine’ behaviour</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power focussed/obsessed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not committed to children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent and capable</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groomed/waxed/feminine appearance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal and care for children</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex, sports, cars, mates focussed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong active but non-aggressive</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t do their share/lazy domestically</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong, rugged, traditionally masculine</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appearance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Communicators</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not take care of their health/risk taking</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work focussed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor communicators/women are better</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well rounded/balanced</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance work/personal/family</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional men/male behaviour</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share power/rights/opportunities</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treat women equally/with respect</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do their share domestically</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers deserve equal child rights</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsiderate/ineffective lovers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t deserve/can’t be trusted with equal child rights</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care for their health</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexually responsible/considerate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7. Leading messages in mass media representation of men in order of occurrence.

**Gunmen, hitmen, conmen and man hunts – gender language continues (at least against men)**

Another noteworthy finding of this analysis was the number of times that gendered terms using “man” as a suffix or prefix appear in mass media headlines and stories – particularly in negative ways. Examples frequently cited include “gunman”, “conman”, “hitman” and “man hunt”. Prominent examples published during the period of this study included:

- A front-page headline in *The Age* proclaiming “Chaos as West Gate gunman holds police at bay” (*The Age*, September 17, 2003, p. 1);
- A full front page story in *The Daily Telegraph* headlined “Another day … another burst of gunfire” which began “A GUNMAN (the newspaper’s capitalization) fired up to three shots from a high-powered weapon yesterday …” (*The Daily Telegraph*, December 10, 2003, p. 1).
- “Gunmen flee on foot after home attacks” (*The Sunday Telegraph*, August 31, 2003, p. 3);
- “Ring of steel to shut down the drive-by gunmen” (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 23, 2003, p. 4);
- “Arrested gunmen linked to gangsters” (*The Australian*, December 23, 2003, p. 3);
- “Hitman clue in murders investigation” (*The Age*, September 3, 2003, p. 4); and

When Australian-born Peter Finlay, writing under the pseudonym D. B. C. Pierre won the Booker Prize for his book *Vernon God Little* in 2003, his gambling and criminal past were reported more than his literary achievements with headlines including:

- “Conman’s Booker hopes” (*The Daily Telegraph*, October 14, 2003, p. 6);
- “Dirty but clean Aussie conman wins Booker” (*The Australian*, October 16, 2003, p. 7);
- “Australian conman wins Booker Prize” (*The Daily Telegraph*, October 16, 2003, p. 15);

**Conclusions**

This extensive analysis of mass media news, current affairs, talk shows and lifestyle media found that these primary sources of what are claimed and widely seen as ‘fact’, ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ predominantly portray men negatively as violent and aggressive thieves, thugs,
murderers, wife and girlfriend bashers, sexual abusers, molesters, perverts, irresponsible deadbeat dads and philanderers, even though, in reality, only a small proportion of men act out these roles and behaviours.

Violence and aggression are overwhelmingly the most frequent representations associated with men and boys, portrayed in a daily barrage of reports of criminal acts including armed robberies, assaults, murder, sexual abuse and assaults on women; domestic violence, harassment, and discrimination in work. Men and boys are also widely represented as irresponsible, risk-taking, commitment phobic, insensitive, undomesticated, out of touch with their feelings and poor communicators.

With the exception of a small minority of positive media portrayals of male heroes such as war veterans, fire fighters and rescuers, and an equally small percentage of portrayals of men as good fathers, husbands and citizens, the only males presented positively are men and boys who have been ‘feminized’ such as ‘metrosexuals’ and males who exhibit “a feminine side”. In short, the only good in men, according to most discourse reflected and propagated in mass media, are traits alleged to be female. Maleness is widely represented as innately and culturally evil, and characteristics of masculinity are principally represented as undesirable and anachronistic – notably aggression, violence, sexual predaciousness and promiscuity, competitiveness and traditional body image.

As well as highly negative portrayals in mass media discussion of serious issues such as violence, family involvement and work, men are trivialized and objectified in populist media content such as “Hunk of the month” and “Man without his shirt” sections in women’s magazines, and treated as the butt of jokes in TV ‘sitcoms’ such as newspaper cartoons.

It can be concluded from this study that men are widely demonized, marginalized, trivialized and objectified in mass media and that, through this, mass media and the sources contributing such content are engaged in manufacturing contempt for men (with apologies to Herman and Chomsky, 1988). These findings support and expand those of Nathanson and Young (2001) and others who have reported “misandry” and denigration of men in modern societies.

A further important conclusion that can be deduced is that the most frequent and generalized representations of men identified in this study – men as violent aggressors frequently committing domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault and other violent crimes – are misrepresentations.

Woods (1998) and a number of other researchers challenge many of the so-called facts presented in relation to domestic violence and child abuse. Woods says that “using data from reputable sources such as the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, and major research studies, we find that the ‘demonizing’ of the male is certainly not justified”. He cites research conducted by Straus and Gelles in 1975 and in 1985, one of the largest studies of family violence undertaken, which found that women are just as likely to perpetrate violence on men as men on women. Further, they found that between 1975 and 1985 the rate of violence by men against women decreased, while the rate of violence by women against men increased (Straus and Gelles, 1986).

Authors of ‘Manufacturing Consent’, a book on how mass media create public consent for policies, governments and social movements.
Tomison (1996) has reported that most physical abuse of children is perpetrated by women, with the single largest group of child abusers being mothers. Other studies support this claim. A US National Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect report in 2000 found that “where maltreatment of children led to death, 78% of the perpetrators were female” (Hilton, 2000).

Clare (2000) reports that in 1981, 43% of children living in households with a mother only were abused, compared with 18% of children who were abused in the population overall. Abuse by single mothers’ male partners or casual acquaintances was not identifiable in this study, but it did suggest that single mothers living alone with children committed or were party to abuse more frequently than occurred in dual parent families.

Australian statistics show similar findings. In 2001-2002, there were 30,500 substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect in Australia, involving 25,600 children aged between 0 and 17 years. Physical abuse and emotional abuse or neglect each comprised 27% of these, while sexual abuse comprised 14% of cases. Information collected by community services authorities indicates that the incidence of abuse or neglect was higher among one-parent families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003, p. 52). Analysis shows that in more than 88% of 23,000 Australian one-parent families, children under 15 were under the care of their mother (20,300), compared with just 11% of children under 15 (2,700) in the care of their fathers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003, p. 28). If men were the predominant child abusers, sole-parent children in the care of women should have a lower rate of abuse than families where men were present. But, instead, the contrary is true.

These concerns and research contradicting claims of men being perpetrators of most or all child abuse and domestic violence are not cited to repudiate justifiable concerns of women over violence committed by men against them and children. Whatever level of violence against women and children is perpetrated by men, it is unacceptable and initiatives to reduce domestic violence are commendable. But men suffer in three ways in relation to discourse on domestic violence: (a) they are demonized as the perpetrators of most or even all violence; (b) all men are implicated and placed under a ‘cloud of suspicion’ by generalizations about male violence against women and children; and (c) it is assumed that violence is not done to men and little or no attention is paid to claims that it is.

**Implications of representations of men and male identity**

Understanding the implications of the negative representations of men and male identities reported in this study fully will require further research. In particular, identifying the effects of this negative discourse on men, boys, women and girls will require audience research such as surveys, interviews or focus groups to explore reactions to and effects of prevalent discourse. However, given the constitutive force of discourse recognized in post-modernist and post-structuralist thinking, and the significant role of mass media as reflectors and propagators of discourse, a number of implications can be identified.

**Implications for men and boys**

From both a humanist perspective in which mass media content provides a site of discourse in which one can examine reflected societal attitudes and culture, and from a behaviourist view which sees mass media as a major source of societal influence, this study suggests alarming implications for men and boys growing up.
A significant number of mass media articles contributed by writers external to the media on subjects such as domestic violence and fatherhood indicate that viewpoints propagated on these subjects are reflective of at least some elements of society. In particular, analysis of sources contributing the most negative discourse on men and male identity suggests that these views are reflective of intellectual and academic thinking. In this sense, mass media cannot be ‘blamed’ for the views expressed and one must consider the implications of these negative views of men being held in societies. That highly negative views of men are held within intellectual and academic fields is potentially of more concern than the potential for mass media communication of these views to influence society, as it indicates that these attitudes already exist and that they exist at an influential level. University lecturers, trainers, writers and senior political appointees frame education and social and political policy for future generations.

In addition, by their amplification of selected viewpoints and communication to large audiences, mass media simultaneously become involved in influencing social attitudes as well as reflecting social attitudes.

Looking through this lens or prism, men in Australia, and possibly other contemporary western societies, are presented with a misandric world that devalues and demonizes them. This is likely to have implications for men’s self-esteem and self-identity. Femiano and Nicherson (2002) argue that media propagated male stereotypes are powerful because:

… they affect our expectations of what men should and should not be like. They are damaging because they narrow our notions of what men can be and do. They affect women’s expectations of men in relationships and men’s expectations of other men in work settings or in friendships. Media stereotypes have extra impact because they create images based on these assumptions, helping to shape men’s own views about how they should act and how successful [or unsuccessful] they are as men.

In exploring the potential influence of mass media representations, it is important to also examine what they don’t say as well as what they say. From this perspective, mass media are not representing valued and respected new roles for men. The images of men reflected and refracted through mass media provide little positive material for men to construct strong ‘narratives of the self’.

As Costello (2000) says: “Our culture is just not doing what cultures are supposed to do, providing the myths and stories and beliefs and values that give people a sense of place, or purpose, or meaning, or belonging”.

This research supports what a number of other researchers have warned over the past few years. Woods (1999) says that “the hegemonic discourse of the ‘flawed male’ can only lead to the experience of social exclusion for many young men, an experience that is known to lead to disastrous consequences for the well-being of individuals and communities”. Macdonald et al. (2000) concluded from their studies in relation to health: “We would suggest that there is a strong element of negativity in our culture about men which cannot contribute to positive mental health and we must actively pursue cultural initiatives which promote in boys and men a positive sense of self”. Also, Nathanson and Young (2001) raise serious questions over the long-term impact on men of such mass media representations, commenting:
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What is happening to men as a result of this massive assault on their identity? How do men feel about being portrayed over and over again as psychotic or sinister thugs? What does it mean for a group of people to be identified as a class of victimizers? We will not know the full effect of all this misandry for many years … In the meantime, one thing is certain: attacking the identity of any group of human beings per se is an extremely dangerous experiment (p. 248).

Boys (men in the making) are potentially affected in two ways by mass media representations of male gender to the extent that they create or influence social attitudes and perceptions. Firstly, boys are directly represented in negative ways. John Marsden, author of The Boy You Brought Home (2002b), said in an interview during the period of this study:

Teenage boys are among the most maligned in society. The media portrays them as either drug-crazed, illiterate, unemployable, suicidal, failures at school, sex criminals or vandals. So adults tend to treat them more suspiciously and that causes them (unconsciously) to become angry or frustrated or alienated (Bock, 2003).

Secondly, social learning theory informs us that boys look for role models and benefit from positive role models as they grow up (see Bandura, 1977; Bandura and Walters, 1963; Brewer and Wann, 1998; Buckingham (1999; Gibbs, 1991; Sheehy, 1998; Wells-Wilbon and Holland, 2000 and West, 2002a). Ideally, role models and mentors should exist in the physical world, such as fathers, grandfathers, uncles and friends. But, in addition, mediated images of men serve as exemplars and role models for boys and mass media portrayals shape their perceptions of what it means to be a man. Edgar (1997) concludes in relation to mass media hero images “it’s unavoidable that our cultural self-definitions are forged against this shining crucible of glamorous masculinity (p. 54).

This study shows that there is comparatively little by way of positive representations of men in mass media for boys to use as role models. Furthermore, the representations of men that they see promise a future offering derision, marginalization, devaluation, demonization and confusing choices between social and sexual identities. A key question for women as well as men is whether they want their sons growing up in an environment of such criticism and misandry.

On a wider social scale, Bradford (1999) concluded in a report on boys in the UK:

The consequences of having large numbers of young men who are under-educated, unemployable and who hold little responsibility in society are potentially explosive – and a tragedy for the individuals concerned as well as the community in which they live.

Implications for women and girls
While these findings are most directly a matter of concern for men, there is a compelling argument that the issues raised also have major implications for women and girls. Men are the husbands, partners, lovers, fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, sons and friends of women. Every woman is connected to at least one man, and most women interact and have emotional links with a number of men. Rather than being contrary to the interests of women, addressing the needs and concerns of men and boys, and inequities they face, will arguably benefit women through creating healthier, happier, better socialized males who can interact with them and societies in constructive and positive ways.

However, this study shows that many of the ‘thought leaders’ of debate on men are women, particularly prominent women in academic, political and social positions as identified in
chapter five, and the attitudes of many such women, as reflected in mass media, are mostly negative towards men. These negative attitudes by women in positions of social and political influence are likely to affect policy making in areas such as education, health and family welfare in ways that are unsympathetic and even detrimental to men. In addition, such women are likely to be mentors for young women and, therefore, the highly negative viewpoints that they reflect and which mass media propagate are likely to negatively affect the attitudes of young women and girls towards men.

**Implications for societies**

As far as mass media content reflects or mirrors social attitudes, the overwhelmingly negative views of men and male identity identified in this study reveal highly gender biased societies where such media content is produced, with all the social equity issues that this entails. It may well be that gender bias against women also exists in these societies. But to the extent that mass media reflect societies, this study shows that gender bias is not a one-way street; it disaffects men as well. And the extent and nature of content analyzed shows that this gender bias against men is not trivial.

Furthermore, in ‘broadcasting’ predominantly negative images and identities of men, mass media simultaneously create or influence social attitudes among men and towards men. Nathanson and Young (2001) define ideology as “any systematic re-presentation of reality in order to achieve specific social, economic or political goals” (p. 200). If this view is accepted, mass media content is ideology creation. As such, it plays a key role in shaping and reshaping societies. Nathanson and Young warn that ideologies are “quasi-religious worldviews” (p. 209). When widely propagated, they take on the weight and emotional power of religious beliefs. As such, they gain considerable and sometimes unchallengeable influence in societies. The shift of focus and resources from boys to girls in education and national taxpayer funded campaigns against male domestic violence are examples of how gender discourse shapes social and political policies.

The implications of (a) highly negative representations of men in areas such as domestic violence and child abuse, and (b) an imbalance in discourse are likely to include an imbalance in data that informs policy-making. The result of such an imbalance is highly likely to be imbalanced policies. Hood (2001), in examining child abuse and professional intervention, reported that focus on men as the perpetrators of child abuse had influenced policy and legislation and noted that there were negative implications for all men. Hood commented: “Child-care centres and schools have designed programs to ensure lone men are supervised in the company of children and adolescents at all times.” She added: “the feminist construction of men as responsible for child abuse has had consequences for the relationship of non-abusive men with children. A side-effect has been to cast a shadow over the interaction of all men with all children” (p. 108).

In announcing the Australian Labor Party’s 2004 Federal election policy on women issues, Labor leader Mark Latham called for men to “own” what Summers (2004) called “the dreadful cycle of domestic violence”. During the same period, the Federal Liberal government was conducting a multi-million dollar publicly-funded advertising campaign against domestic violence targeting men exclusively as the perpetrators. These are clear examples of how popular and academic discourse shape political platforms, policy and ultimately even legislation.
In turn, imbalanced discourse, policies and legislation is likely to trigger resentment, frustration and anger among men. Nathanson and Young warn that the highly negative discourse on men, with its influential effects on individual men and social and political policy, will contribute to “the growing polarization between increasingly segregated communities of rage” (p. 63).

International implications
While this study focuses specifically on Australian mass media, a number of articles reported in Australian newspapers were sourced from international wire services including Reuters and Associated Press and international publications including The Times in London and the New York Times. Australian editions of magazines such as Cosmopolitan and FHM, while being edited to include local news and features, publish considerable content from their overseas editions. The TV programs Oprah, Frasier and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy are broadcast globally with exactly the same content. In addition, a high degree of similarity exists in the content of programs such as 60 Minutes with many stories broadcast internationally.

Cultural differences in audiences may result in different interpretations of media content in different societies. However, the global reach and high level of homogeneity in major western mass media content (i.e. shared programming) suggests that some or many of the findings of this study apply to other western societies – particularly the US, Canada, UK and western European countries. The magnitude of the bias against men in discourse as reflected in mass media identified in this study, and the increasingly global nature of mass media, suggest that further research internationally is warranted.

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Extract from:


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