

Media portrayal of women

Christina Spurgeon discusses regulation of media portrayals of women

Media images of women seem to have diversified in the last two decades, but are these changes keeping pace with the experiences of women in contemporary Australian society? How does media portrayal of women influence the wider status of women in society, and vice versa? Can the media be encouraged to positively represent women, and if so, how? How will the "blue skies" policy for new services, embodied in the Broadcasting Services Bill, affect women?

These are some of the questions being considered by the National Working Party II on the Portrayal of Women in the Media.

The Working Party was established in 1988 to bring together industry, government and community representatives to work towards a more realistic, positive portrayal of women in the media. It reports to the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, Wendy Fatin, and makes recommendations on these matters.

Women in advertising

The portrayal of women in advertising was identified as a priority area of Working Party activity following extensive consultations in 1986. In May 1991 the Working Party released its *Portraying Women in Advertising Advisory Notes*. These were produced with agreement from advertising industry bodies. They aim to encourage advertisers to be more thoughtful and creative in the way they represent women.

The *Advisory Notes* were also used as the basis of a comprehensive multi-media resource package now being used in tertiary and advertising courses.

These sorts of "pro-social" approaches to the problems of media portrayal of women have so far prevailed in most of the Working Party's initiatives. Regulatory, censorial intervention has not been pursued for a number of reasons. These include the composition of the Working Party itself, whose membership covers a broad range of philosophical views on the role of government in regulating the media.

There are also serious difficulties associated with relying only on a censorial approach to media portrayal of women. For example, a matter such as offensive

stereotyping depends on subjective and therefore varying judgments. Furthermore, a single ad in isolation may not cause offence but the cumulative effect of repetition may contribute to limited and unrealistic images of women being built up over time. So how then, can offence be avoided? One strategy is to encourage advertisers to consciously look for new ways of selling goods and services.

The conciliatory nature of the Working Party's terms of reference might also provide a further explanation of why it generally seeks change through information dissemination rather than direct regulatory intervention. For example, the Working Party is charged with identifying possible improvements to the capacity of systems of media self-regulation to deal with complaints about sexist media.

In fulfilling this part of its brief the Working Party has so far only been able to agree to produce a pamphlet which outlines the various media complaints mechanisms. Working Party members who advocate change to the codes and processes of the Media Council and the Press Council, so that they more effectively deal with allegations of sexism, have made little progress.

Broadcasting services

More recently the Working Party has turned its attention to the prospect of new, self-regulated, broadcasting-like services, promised by the Broadcasting Services Bill.

A new service provider with a small programming budget will probably rely on programs with low informational and/or production values. The Working Party is concerned that new services will come to rely on old program stocks, such as situation comedies, which often reflect dated values and are not likely to contribute greatly to the goal of more positive media portrayal of women.

Similarly, pornography could become an increasingly more attractive form of programming because it will probably be cheap to produce and acquire, and because it will probably sell well.

A direct, causal link between media portrayal of violence against women, and violence actually experienced by women, may be difficult if not impossible to establish with certainty. However there are growing concerns that the media can

contribute to a process of "normalising" cultures of violence and hatred directed at women.

Taste and decency

The Broadcasting Services Bill does include taste and decency program requirements. However this inherently conservative concept deals only with a limited way with images of women and does not address the need for positive portrayal of the diverse images of women. Furthermore, as already mentioned, there clearly are limits on regulating media "attitudes" to women.

This reasoning has prompted the Working Party to endorse a proposal that issues of programming costs and sources be taken into account in the planning processes for new broadcasting-like services.

This proposal is likely to attract two main criticisms: it favours incumbent commercial television licensees, and smacks of social engineering.

The proposal will only favour existing licensees if it is applied as a viability test, similar to the one which exists in current broadcasting licence grant criteria. A planning process which looks at quality as well as technical service indicators does not have to be complicated or contentious. Such indicators could include the programming philosophy of a new service and the likely application of revenues to overall programming budgets.

As for the criticism of social engineering, it is clear that the broadcast media have powerful capacity to influence, and that broadcasting, like broadcasting policy, has social consequences. To dismiss the social consequences of broadcasting as "too judgmental" or "irrelevant" to broadcasting policy and legislation is, at best, naive. At worst, this response results in less accountable forms of social engineering than the approach endorsed by the Working Party.

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