Ninety-five per cent of characters killed in films and television entertainment shows are men. In action movies, horror movies and westerns, most of these males are dispatched without any mourning, according to American men's movement academic Warren Farrell.

On the other hand, after nearly 40 years of modern feminism, more than 30 per cent of advertising still portrays women as slim, blond bimbos less than 30 years old. A different standard applies to men. At least half the men were allowed to be over 30, according to a survey by the Broadcasting Standards Council in Britain. Male actors are frequently dark haired, in contrast to the typical blond female. In advertising, only 11 per cent are slim and muscular himbos, the remainder being a variety of body weights. While a male ideal definitely exists, men are allowed a greater range of body types. And in an interesting tradition, according to the Broadcasting Standards Council, women are almost never shown in the driving seat when men and women travel together.

It is not only gender analysts who are crying foul over characterisation in the media. Members of commonly portrayed professions are also irritated. Whereas 20 per cent of television males are involved in law enforcement, only 1 per cent of real-life males are. Police officers say the result is that the media often give the public unrealistic expectations.

The media do not present reality — they represent it by offering a selection of reality. In the case of television, the scriptwriter, camera operator, editor and producer all make selections and changes. Newspaper stories go through a similar process of selection involving the journalist, the subeditor and the editor.

Media products, consisting of only a selection of manufactured ideas, are not the same as lived experience. This manufactured version is based on the values of the producers and, in turn, the values of the larger society and culture. The media version is said to be not a presentation, but a re-presentation.

A media representation is a depiction, a likeness or a constructed image. A representation can be of individual people (such as the American president in the film Independence Day, 1996), social groups (such as age groups, gender groups, racial groups), ideas (such as law and order, unemployment), or events (such as European settlement of Australia or the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001).

A representation can be a single image, a sequence of images or a whole program, written words, spoken words or song lyrics.
How representations work

Representations invite audiences to understand them and agree with them in certain preferred ways. However, depending on the audience, different interpretations are to some extent possible.

Representations work in the following ways:

- **A representation consists of repeated elements.** The more we see these elements repeated, the more the representation will appear to be natural or normal.

- **We are invited either to identify with or to recognise the representation.** Producers of the media representation may have a view of the world that is similar to our own. If their representation fits in with our view of who we are, we may choose to identify with it. This happens, for example, when a movie invites us to imagine ourselves in the role of an appealing character. On the other hand, the producers may see a person, idea or event as somehow foreign or different from them. We will be invited to recognise the representation from our own experience. A program might invite us to identify with the lawyer hero, for example, but will ask us only to recognise the lawbreaking young thugs.

- **The media make categories of people, events or ideas.** Categories include labels such as ‘the unemployed’, ‘the aged’ or ‘businessman’. The war in Iraq, for example, becomes ‘another Vietnam’. Representations are generalisations about categories and why events, ideas or people belong in them. These categories then become part of our thinking processes.

- **Representations contain a point of view.** The meaning in a representation will be selected and constructed, already containing built-in value judgements. All representations contain the point of view of the people who made them.

- **Representations have a mode of address.** Hidden behind the apparent naturalness of the representation will be some assumptions about who you are. For example, a news item about youth may address you in a manner that assumes you are a middle-aged businessperson rather than a young person.

Questioning representations

To be more critically aware of a representation, the following questions need to be asked:

- Who made it?
- When was it made?
- What are its purposes?
- Who benefits from the representation or whose point of view does it support?
• Who does not benefit or whose point of view is not considered?
• Who or what is not shown?

These are: presentations, according to sociologist Eoin Devereux.

There are at least four main ways of analysing representations, according to sociologist Eoin Devereux. These are:

- **Codes and conventions.** Representations can be understood by analysing the technical and symbolic codes that are used to communicate (see page 5). For instance, the representation of women in the ‘girl power’ phenomenon of the early 2000s can be analysed by looking at the symbolic codes of costume and also the technical codes of shot angle and shot size.

- **Discourses.** Understanding the discourse that a representation is part of can help explain how it works (see discourses, page 192). For instance, it is easier to analyse representations of race or religion if you understand the discourse of such political issues as immigration or the ‘war on terror’.

- **Framing.** A representation can be framed within a certain viewpoint or it can be shown only within a certain context. For example, in Australian commercial television poverty is usually framed as an individual problem or perhaps just ‘bad luck’.

- **Narrative analysis.** Often a person or an event can be packaged as belonging to a certain kind of familiar story or pattern. In this way, for instance, whole nations can be represented as ‘bad guys’ or ‘good guys’ because it fits the pattern of many Hollywood movies.

**Stereotypes**

A stereotype is an oversimplified, clichéd image, repeated so many times that it seems to have established a pattern. It is a highly judgemental type of representation.

One well-known female stereotype is the dumb blonde, and a common male one is the foolish, incompetent father. The history of the media provides a long list of stereotypes, including the housewife, the nuclear family and the action hero.

The word *stereotype* comes from the printing trade. Stereotyping was the creation of a solid metal printing plate that exactly duplicated a tray of movable type, the letters of which had to be placed one by one. Until the invention of the stereotype, this movable type had to be reset if a second printing was needed. The stereotype revolutionised printing, allowing cheap editions of books to be made. In the same way that the image on the metal printing plate is fixed and repeated from the original, so the modern stereotype is often applied whatever the circumstances.

Stereotypes are an extreme form of representation. They are constructed by a process of selection. Certain aspects are focused on and then exaggerated. At the same time, an evaluation is made and the audience is invited to make a judgement, which is often based on prejudice. Repetition establishes stereotypes and over time allows them to appear ‘natural’.

In the extreme, stereotypes can become caricatures resembling cartoons. In fact, jokes, cartoons and comedies rely on stereotypes because they are instantly recognisable — a kind of shorthand that everyone understands.

Many groups in society have stereotypes associated with them. These contain limited and distorted views. For example, in a study of the image of scientists, Dr Roslynn Haynes came up with six stereotypes that have existed since the 1500s. These are: the evil scientist or alchemist (e.g. Dr Strangelove), the noble scientist (Einstein-like characters — common in 1950s films), the absent-minded scientist (Professor Brainard in *Flubber*), the inhuman researcher (Rotwang in *Metropolis*), the adventurer (Dr Grant in *Jurassic Park*) and the crazed scientist whose projects get out of control (Dr Frankenstein and Dr Jekyll).

Stereotyping is often evident when there is a power imbalance between members of society. Relations between men and women, for example, can encourage the development of stereotypes on both sides. In the same way, disadvantaged minority groups often have stereotypes associated with them.
Counter-stereotypes

Many groups of people suffer from negative portrayal in the media. Since the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, certain groups have been able to demand more of a voice and a more positive portrayal. First among these were women, followed in the United States by African Americans, gays and Latinos. In Australia various ethnic groups and, to some extent, Aboriginal people have met with some success in demands for more positive portrayal.

A counter-stereotype is a portrayal that deliberately sets out to change an earlier representation or seeks to portray a group in a positive light. There is debate about whether counter-stereotypes are a good or bad thing. Some argue that they can empower or help minority groups. Others have argued that counter-stereotypes hinder the progress of minority groups because the positive portrayals often hide the real difficulties that these groups encounter.

Counter-stereotypes can also encounter audience resistance and work to uphold the traditional portrayal. The humour of the South Park character Token is partly based on this factor.

Factors affecting representations

We need to keep four things in mind when we think about representations in the media, says Professor Julie D’Acci.

Production

Just who is employed to produce media affects the nature of the representations. In the 1950s and 1960s it was rare to find women working in the media industries except as secretaries. Naturally, if nearly all the representations of women were produced by men, there would be an unbalanced view. Similarly, it was not until the early 1990s that even small numbers of African Americans were employed as writers in the American television and film industries. The composition of the workforce affects the representation.

Reception

Audiences do not automatically accept a representation or even view it in the way the producer might hope (see page 148). We know audience interpretation is variable. That was just as true in 1950 as it is today. It is very difficult for a modern audience to really understand how audiences in the past interpreted the media of the time. Watching I Love Lucy in the twenty-first century can never be the same as watching it in 1950.

Media landscape

A representation cannot be understood by itself, but must be analysed as part of a whole system. In television, for instance, the representation of people and ideas happens within a programming system of genres, narratives, codes and conventions. The representation of women may be affected by a single image of the type of woman shown or by the reduced number of women as central characters across the whole schedule. Or it can be affected by the small number of female voices used in advertising voice-overs.

Social/historical context

Whatever is happening in society can affect representations. Members of society live their lives in response to the value systems and ways of thinking around them. This equally affects those who work in the media. Representations are a product of their social and cultural environment (see texts and contexts, page 186).
Activities

1. Images, ideas and representations have a history. Search through old television programs on DVD or old magazine advertisements to find representations that no longer fit today’s cultural and social context.

2. Modern representations may come to look as dated in the future as 1950s representations do today. Question some modern representations using the six questions on pages 36–7.

3. Analyse some representations (e.g. images of youth) across different media and compare the results. Representations could be chosen from table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Suggested media representations for analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation category</th>
<th>Specific examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Politicians, movie or rock stars, sports personalities, historical characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>Occupations, families, youth groups, political groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places</td>
<td>Tourist destinations, city versus country, local regions, overseas countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas</td>
<td>Law and order, the future, political points of view, the environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Select a theme and explore its representation across several different media or over time. Themes could include age, gender, race or social class.

5. Look through the magazines in the library and find examples of stereotypes. Discuss the way they express their point of view through various features. For example, a five o’clock shadow (darkly stubbled cheeks) on a cartoon character suggests criminal associations.

6. Review the current cast of television characters across a range of programs and evaluate whether any of them is a counter-stereotype. Support your evaluation with an explanation.

PRODUCTION TASK

7. Select one of the following topics, and then create an advertisement in a medium of your choice (e.g. a magazine or radio advertisement).
   (a) Create an advertisement based on a selective, positive representation of a group that mainstream culture has failed to represent fairly. A model for this could be the recent development of some positive advertising representations of women in positions of power or with successful careers. Try this for another underrepresented group.
   (b) Create an advertisement for a magazine of your choice based on a selective negative representation of a group that has always enjoyed safe, positive representation from mainstream culture. For example, doctors are often represented as wise, concerned, self-sacrificing care givers. Businesspeople have also tended to enjoy positive representation, as have teachers. Note that your advertisement does not have to be for a product directly related to the representation. For example, a television advertisement for chocolate bars used a rowdy classroom of primary schoolers sneaking chocolate under the desk while a kindly but incompetent teacher attempted to begin the lesson. In this example, a negative representation of a teacher was used to sell a totally unrelated product.

8. Dress as a well-known stereotype and photograph yourself. Repeat the process for several other stereotypes until you have a folio of five or six images. Explain each stereotype and indicate its defining features. Point out where you have seen the stereotype before.

WRITTEN TASK

Choose one of the following assignments and write a 500-word response.

9. Imagine you have been hired as a media consultant by a community leader from a particular group, such as a gender-based professional or ethnic group. Research the representation of the group and give them a broad idea of how it is presented over a range of media. Critically analyse and evaluate your findings. Suggest action the group might take to improve its representation.

10. Select two or three politicians or media stars with image problems and propose a solution for them to consider. In a written report, outline the problems as you see them, and then suggest ways of changing the representations in the media. Conclude the report with a description of each person’s new image.

SPEAKING TASK

11. Prepare a five-minute oral presentation for the following task: research the development and changes in a particular representation over several stages in a historical period. Present your findings to the class in the form of a lecture or seminar. Speculate about the social and cultural contexts that created the representations. Critically analyse and evaluate the representation at each stage over the time period, discussing the viewpoints and ideologies they contain. You might like to include television or film excerpts to illustrate points as you make them.
Changes in gender portrayal

The breadth and depth of the various media make it difficult to generalise about gender portrayal, but content analysis (see page 156) does provide a guide. Content analysis has been applied most widely to television, but has also yielded some results for other media. Below are some of the findings, together with some of the opinions of media analysts.

Pre-feminist era

According to Andrea Press, active and courageous women were portrayed in the media of the pre-feminist era. Many had careers or were portrayed as independently wealthy. However, the difference was that their world was limited because they were women, and stories often focused on how difficult they found the injustice of that.

1930s–1940s

‘Women in films of the 1930s and 1940s seldom ventured outside of their socially prescribed roles as sweethearts, wives or mothers to the male hero. By providing a romantic interest for the hero, the woman served the function traditionally assigned to her gender (particularly in film) while allowing the male character to play out his own pre-ordained role.’

John Blaser, No Place for a Woman: The Family in Film Noir

Figure 3.4: The James Bond films, which span decades, provide an opportunity to study changes in gender representation. The representation of the male hardly changes across 19 films, but the female portrayal is another matter. By the 1990s Bond’s boss is a woman and his love interests have included a martial arts expert and a nuclear scientist.
Before World War II (1939–45) a great deal of film and magazine representation focused on women’s role in the home. As the first celebrities of the golden era of Hollywood, women were also glamorised as fashion icons or sex sirens. Many of these women, such as Mae West, were very assertive, however. There were also exceptions to these common representations. Screwball comedy films were popular during the Great Depression (1929–33). They featured independent, somewhat madcap and often wealthy women who had encountered a working-class male. However, the ‘battle of the sexes’ that followed usually ended in the woman being tamed by marriage. Examples include *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *His Girl Friday* (1940).

During World War II women entered the workforce in large numbers to support the war effort. Hollywood depicted women as ‘keeping the home fires burning’. But they were also depicted in factories and as combat nurses overseas. An example is the American wartime propaganda poster *Rosie the Riveter* (1944) publicising women working in heavy engineering factories.

**1950s–1960s**

‘Television has represented the American woman as a stupid, unattractive, insecure little household drudge who spends her martyred, mindless, boring days dreaming of love — and plotting nasty revenge against her husband.’

*Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique*

The coming of television created a different representation of women, although the representation of men remained relatively constant. Advertising demanded that television appeal to the dreams of the moneyed middle class. Advertisers also didn’t want anyone offended lest they decide not to buy their products.

Hollywood was forced to fight television for audiences. In the movies, the glamour of actresses such as Marilyn Monroe helped attract the crowds. Says Annette Kuhn, ‘Representations of women became the commodities [that] film producers were able to exchange for money.’

*Figure 3.5: The pin-up girl of the feminist movement, Rosie the wartime factory worker from *Rosie the Riveter* (1944). She is rated the 28th most influential representation ever created, in the book *101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived* by Allan Lazer and Jeremy Salter. The authors suggest Rosie helped jump-start the women’s liberation movement.*

After the war, says Nina Leibman, the media became ‘obsessed with returning women to their “proper place” in the home and converting men from adventurous soldiers to reliable breadwinners’. The *femmes fatales* and amoral males of *film noir* called this effort into question (see *film noir*, page 254).

*Figure 3.6: Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) helped Hollywood attract audiences back from television. But in the 1950s and 1960s the portrayal of women was possibly more limiting than earlier representations.*

In the 1950s and 1960s only about 20 per cent of prime-time television characters were women, content analysis shows. Few women on television were shown to be independent. Their existence was mostly bound up with their children and their husbands. They are most often pictured in the private space of the family home and are rarely involved in public affairs. An example is the television show *I Love Lucy* (1951–57). Try as she might to escape her housewife role, the sassy Lucy always ended up being humbled.
Popular films of the era included the westerns *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953). Television programs included *Bonanza* (1959–73) and *77 Sunset Strip* (1958–64). All of them focused on male heroes who were confident and in control. While women had important roles, they were often portrayed as frightened or in need of protection.

Little changed on television and in film during the 1960s, despite the changes happening in society and the rise of second-wave feminism (see the gender representation timeline, page 44). One content analysis study of television advertising found that 75 per cent of all ads showing a woman were for products used in either the kitchen or the bathroom.

**The feminist era**

**1970s–1980s**

Cultural lag meant that for much of the 1970s little changed in the representation of women, despite feminism. For instance, in the movie *Superman* (1978) Lois Lane had a career as a reporter but the focus was still on the male hero. According to Marjorie Rosen, ‘The representation of women as sex objects varied in style but remained constant throughout.’ Nevertheless, the actual numbers of women on prime-time television did increase. Content analysis studies showed that women were more than twice as likely as men to be shown in the home. The launch of the magazines *Cleo* (1972) and *Cosmopolitan* (1973) took women away from the housewife images of most other magazines.

By the early 1980s things had begun to change. On television, *Cagney and Lacey* (1982–88) cast two women as the central characters in a crime drama. In film, the character Ripley set a new standard for a female science fiction hero in *Aliens* (1986). Meanwhile a 1985 content analysis of television ads showed that men and women were appearing as central figures about an equal amount of the time. Women were appearing in work roles and men were beginning to appear in family roles.

**Table 3.2:** Upward trend in women’s share of prime-time TV characters in 1970s and 1980s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Men’s representations also began to change after nearly 60 years of very narrowly limited depictions. The film *Three Men and a Baby* (1985) showed men in nurturing roles. Some action movie heroes seemed to show greater sensitivity as well. But hyper-masculine action heroes such as Rambo also appeared in the 1980s.

**Figure 3.7:** The character of Ripley in *Aliens* (1986) marked a turning point for the representation of women in film. As the protagonist (see page 141) of the film, and a fearless warrior, Sigourney Weaver’s character battled on an equal basis with the males. Ripley set a trend for female characters in all science fiction films that followed.

**1990s–2000s**

‘It could be said that in the 1990s, to a certain extent, program makers arrived at comfortable, not-particularly-offensive models of masculinity and femininity, which a majority of the public seemed to think were acceptable.’

David Gauntlett, Professor of Media and Communications, University of Westminster

In the past 20 years there have been big changes in the media depictions of both men and women. A post-modern kind of feminism called third-wave feminism is a strong influence.

*Thelma and Louise* (1991) cast two women in the leading roles as fugitives in the traditional road-trip
movie genre, the villain in the story being sexism. This had not been seen before. From the 1990s, films such as The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996) and Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001) cast women in leading roles in action movies. On television, crime dramas such as Law & Order (1990–) and CSI (2000–) have both male and female leads.

A content analysis of magazines has found that women’s bodies are still more often objectified than men’s and more often shown as body parts. An analysis of prime-time television has found only 3 per cent of women were portrayed as housewives during prime time. Direct comparisons are not available, but in the 1970s, 30 per cent of women were housewives in daytime television.

In a 1995 content analysis of British television ads by Guy Cumberbatch, men were shown for the first time cooking more often than women. Following a backlash from female consumers, advertisers were reluctant to show women doing housework. Only 7 per cent of ads showed women cleaning. However, many other aspects of gender representation were unchanged. Women were nearly always young and attractive. Only 10 per cent were aged over 40. Men were still more likely to be in paid employment.

A study by Jim Macnamara of the University of Western Sydney has found that in the 2000s, 69 per cent of representations of males were unfavourable compared with just 12 per cent being favourable. When men were represented positively, it was often because they had ‘embraced their feminine side’, says Dr Macnamara.

**Male and female stereotypes**

**Male stereotypes**
The following male stereotypes were identified in a report called Boys to Men: Media Messages about Masculinity by the Children Now organisation:

- **The joker.** This type can be seen in movies such as Ghostbusters (1984) or Back to the Future (1985).
- **The jock.** Often seen in horror movies as among the first to die, the jock demonstrates his power and strength to impress women.
- **The strong silent type.** This character is in charge, acts decisively, doesn’t show emotion and always gets the girl. He is commonly seen in older action movies.
- **The big shot.** Seen in gangster movies but also in movies about business and the law, he is defined by his professional status.
- **The action hero.** Since the 1980s the action hero has become a hyper-masculine caricature. He is aggressive and uses violence to achieve his goals.
- **The buffoon.** This figure appears as a bungling father figure in television ads and sitcoms.

**Female stereotypes**
The main female stereotypes are:

- **The dumb blonde.** The blonde has a long history in the film and television industries, and there are various theories as to how the stereotype developed. She is seen as coming out of the myth that women can have beauty or brains but not both. The bimbo is a variation of the stereotype.
- **The femme fatale.** This deadly woman uses her sexuality to destroy men in order to further her own ends; it is not usually love she is after (see film noir, page 254).
- **The girl next door.** This is the stereotype of the sweet and trusting young woman who is portrayed as the ideal marriage prospect.
- **Gold diggers and trophy wives.** These stereotypes perpetuate the myth that women marry for money and are reliant on men to support them.
- **The career woman.** Since the 1980s the stereotype of the career woman has become increasingly common. She is successful but she can also be ruthless.
- **The housewife.** Long the favoured stereotype on television, the housewife exists only to support her husband and children.
- **The soccer mum.** This is a newer stereotype of the housewife. She has an overpowering desire for her children to succeed. She drives them everywhere and still has time to go to the gym.
- **The super mum.** This woman fits everything into her life: kids, career, husband, commuting and personal development.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Media Industry</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1880–1920</strong></td>
<td>First-wave feminism [e.g. Suffragettes]</td>
<td></td>
<td>1914–1918 World War I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1920–1980s</strong></td>
<td>Restricted to traditional role in 85% of depictions</td>
<td>1930s–1940</td>
<td>Screwbald comedies feature independent, ‘kooky’ women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commanding, independent, competitive. In control of self and others</td>
<td>1939–1945 World War II</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Action oriented; hero focus on skill and decisiveness</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>His Girl Friday (screwball independent woman eventually tamed by marriage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involved in aggression and violence either as protector or perpetrator. Much more likely to die or suffer bodily wounds</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Double Indemnity (noir femme fatale and virtuous stepdaughter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breadwinner/workforce role; little family involvement</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Network TV begins (US).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1950s–1960s</strong></td>
<td>Women depicted as temptresses or housewives. Only 30% of television characters are female.</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Sunset Boulevard (noir femme fatale and good-hearted marriage prospect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1970s</strong></td>
<td>Second-wave feminism. Turning point in gender representation</td>
<td>1951–1957</td>
<td>I Love Lucy (TV, madcap housewife and sensible husband; show seen as gently resisting social gender norms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1975–1995</strong></td>
<td>More media outlets [e.g. TV channels]</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Bewitched (TV, housewife uses spells to outwit husband)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rise of pay TV and targeting of audience demographics leads to slightly wider representation.</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Charlie’s Angels (TV, women in action role, but based on sex appeal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1990s–2000s</strong></td>
<td>Portrayal of men as sex objects in ads (now both sexes)</td>
<td>1982–1988</td>
<td>Cagney and Lacey (TV, starring policewomen, a turning point in TV drama)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greater family involvement. Increased sensivity of male hero, but also hyper-masculine action heroes focus on brute power and violence</td>
<td>1982, 1985, 1988</td>
<td>Rambo (hyper-masculinity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Three Men and a Baby (men in nurturing role)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third-wave feminism. Professional women depicted working alongside men.</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Aliens (another turning point in women’s representation, with ‘macho’ Ripley victorious in battle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000s</strong></td>
<td>Many prime-time shows have female leads. Drop in housewife ads, but female still portrayed as sex object.</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Thelma and Louise (first female outlaws on the run, escaping from sexism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Digital media enable marketing to smaller audiences and still wider representation.</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Sex in the City (TV, third-wave feminism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Fight Club (R-rated, examines masculinity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Billy Elliot (working-class boy hero wants to study ballet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (among first female action hero movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>The Pacifier (macho male in nurturing role)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Conduct your own brief content analysis of magazines to determine the most popular images of masculinity and femininity. To do this, select a magazine and note the imagery used in each picture of a man and a woman. Use headings for the various representation categories you are investigating. Once you have reached the end of the magazine, total the results and report to the class.

2. Make a collage charting the changes in either the male action hero in films or the representation of the housewife/mother figure in advertising. You will need samples from each of the key eras of media development: the pre-feminist, feminist and post-feminist eras.

3. Choose one of these topics and discuss it as a class. Has the advertising industry overreacted in its portrayal of men? Consider representations of men in the kitchen, men as sex objects and men portrayed in beer ads. To what extent has the exploitation of women’s bodies in advertising decreased since the pre-feminist era? Or has it become worse?

WRITTEN TASK

4. Write a report on the representation of gender in a specific medium of your choice such as film, television or new media. You will need to support your findings with examples of common representations and some analysis of how they operate and what audience they are designed to appeal to. Collect some real-world statistics to compare real people with the media representation.

PRODUCTION TASK

5. Make a collage or an edited montage of the representation of males and females over time, using imagery from a collection of movies. Scan DVD covers, create movie stills using a capture program or download images from the internet to build the production.

Representation in television comedy

Homer Simpson is not well loved in the American nuclear power industry. In the cartoon sitcom The Simpsons, Homer is the incompetent, clock-watching employee of Springfield’s leaky nuclear power station. His carelessness with lumps of glowing material has reached a world audience of millions. Each episode of The Simpsons helps to erode the carefully fostered public relations image of the nuclear industry and provides a boon for the anti-nuclear movement.

Whatever the message, if you want to get it across to people, an effective way is to get them laughing. Because of the humour element, the representations in comedies may well be more powerful than those in other fictional genres. This can work to support those already in power, or it can work to support the powerless.

Comedy and social change

Something is funny only if it strikes a chord with the way we live our lives or if it makes a comment on events we are experiencing, so comedy writers go out of their way to be relevant to the audience. This means that every major social change of the past 60 years of television has been documented in comedy. While the formats of situation comedy and sketch comedy have changed little since the early days of television, the content certainly has.

Situation comedy is heavily concerned with families or family-like situations. As a result, the politics of the family has received the most attention. Changes in power relationships within the family and changes in family structure are clearly reflected in situation comedies from different time periods (see the sitcom timeline on page 350, and changes in sitcoms over time on page 352). ‘The situation comedy has been the television genre most consistently associated with feminist heroines and with advocating a progressive politics of feminism,’ says Lauren Rabinovitz.

Sketch comedy is freer to criticise on a wide range of topics because it has a looser structure. Sketches are often tied to very recent political or social events, so they are much closer to recent change than situation comedy is (see the sketch comedy timeline on page 355).

Sketch comedy stereotypes

Comedy relies on stereotypes. The need to get quick laughs in a 30-minute program may also mean that the views of dominant groups, big business interests
and audience prejudices are reinforced. However, there can still be room for stereotypes that work in opposition. Greedy business leaders, corrupt politicians and ignorant bigots can also be the targets of comedy, as often occurs in The Simpsons. In one episode, Mr Burns, the owner of the nuclear power plant, runs for Governor to halt an inquiry into why Bart has caught a three-eyed fish in the local river.

Sketch comedy is often satirical, seeking to criticise established authority. However, sketch comedy must appeal to a mass audience, especially on the commercial networks. The targets of its satire are therefore the usual approved targets that most people like to see criticised. Perhaps fortunately, the number one target is television itself. Many sketch comedies devote much of their time to parodifying advertisements and television personalities. In a diverse society, often the only target that will unite the audience is television, since everyone has some experience of it.

Representation and the sitcom narrative

In the sitcom format it is common to set up a comic problem that has an angle on some current issue or social concern. As the narrative progresses, the problem is explored. By the end of the episode the problem has been resolved and everything returns to normal. The way the problem is resolved can cue the audience to accept a certain message or point of view about the topic.

In addition to entertaining, American situation comedies often try to provide their viewers with lessons in commonsense morality. The values appeal to most people and are unlikely to cause offence to anyone. Such sitcoms regularly give lessons in honesty, personal responsibility, trust, the value of hard-earned money, the importance of family, peer group pressure, the need for independence and the usefulness of education.

A world of personal problems

In sitcoms the focus on the small world of the comic trap (see page 348) means that problems tend to be caused by oddities of personality. Larger social causes are not dealt with directly, but rather are looked at only as they affect members of the comic trap.

In the sitcom family, alienation, domestic violence, emotional abuse and financial difficulty are ignored. Divorce does appear, but primarily as a device for establishing the comic trap. When these issues do surface, they are presented as temporary plot complications, resolved at the end of the program. Only rarely are problems shown as disruptions that may originate in social pressures from outside the comic situation.

Representation of groups

‘Beverly Hills is so clean because they don’t throw their garbage away — they turn it into television shows.’

Woody Allen, in Annie Hall (1977)

Situation comedies, rather than sketch comedies, have received criticism from many media academics for a variety of reasons. One reason for this is that sitcoms are long-running and can be studied and carefully analysed over time.

Fathers

‘In the world according to sitcoms, the air is thick with self-congratulation as the kids all blink and stare and roll their eyes in unison behind the back of some uptight neo-Dad. And every easy put-down touches off a noisy little riot of predictable applause.

‘Today’s good Dad will sometimes have a big reconciliation scene with his son (although seldom with his daughter), hugging the boy after some misunderstanding. But this is always presented as healthy weakness on Dad’s part. Even his moments of unrestrained affection demonstrate that Dad is at his best when giving in.’

Mark Crispin Miller, Professor of Media Studies, New York University

In contrast with the dads of 1950s television shows such as Father Knows Best, Homer Simpson is a sitcom father with no idea what is best for his family or even himself.

Some critics say Homer promotes a prejudiced view of blue-collar fathers. There is evidence that most sitcoms tend to portray blue-collar fathers as foolish, and the writers give the power to the females in the family. A study in the year 2000 showed that working-class fathers were the butt of the jokes in comedy shows 63 per cent of the time, compared with 42 per cent of the time for middle-class fathers and 19 per cent for upper-class fathers. Nevertheless, it is also primarily in sitcoms (and soap operas) that men are shown as caring and being concerned for family.
Nowadays women are an audience that television is eager to please. Women, especially younger women, are the advertisers’ most sought-after target group. They have the most control over spending and they watch the most television. Representations of women became much more favourable when their purchasing power was recognised from the 1990s onwards. Some researchers have suggested that sitcoms are targeting women much more keenly because they are losing men to new media communications channels and to pay TV sports and news.

A 2001 study found that women made up approximately half the lead characters in the situation comedies studied. However, there are still areas of concern to feminist critics. These include:

- **Age barriers.** Among television characters, women in their early twenties outnumber men of similar age by three to one. This was the finding of Professor George Gerbner following a massive study of all television characters. However, after this age their numbers fall away to almost nothing. Older women are rare in television sitcoms. When they do appear, they almost never look their age. Mothers and daughters appear more like sisters.

- **The beauty myth.** In situation comedies, women are invariably slim and attractive. Women are five times more likely than men to have red or blond hair. They are also usually portrayed as obsessed with the way they look and are much more likely to dress provocatively.

### Table 3.3: The combined results of three content analysis studies into the representation of women in the 1970s. The studies into dominance looked at how many statements males made compared with females. They also looked at who was seen to be in control most of the time. A content analysis study in 2001 showed there had been little change in the overall proportions. Most of the changes were found to have happened in the 1970s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of men and women</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of dominant characters</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of equal characters</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of dominated characters</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Minority groups
In the past, television did not try to woo ethnic minorities. The reason for this was simple. Ethnic minorities have been among society's most disadvantaged groups, so they have never had the spending power to attract advertisers. After all, the foremost aim of television is to attract wealthy consumers. But times have changed. In the United States, African Americans have come to represent a profitable market. According to Vance Packard, they spend more on consumer goods than Anglo Americans and also watch more television. African Americans now appear on American television roughly in proportion to their percentage of the total population. In contrast, Asian Americans and Latinos appear much less often.

Television representation of African Americans does not recognize the history of slavery, the years of racial discrimination and the present-day realities of the ghettos. Instead, programs focus on a glorified, wealthy black upper class. As in most situation comedies, the larger social causes of problems are ignored, and the focus is on personal issues. People who succeed are shown to do so because of their individual abilities rather than through luck or privilege. Upper-class African Americans are rarely shown interacting with the outside world or having to confront racism. They seem to have miraculously worked their way up through organizations without having encountered the obstacles most other African Americans do.

Presenting this perfect sitcom world, argues communications academic Herman Gray, has led many Americans to comfortably believe racial disadvantage is no longer a problem.

Changes in sitcoms over time
In the years since the 1950s the biggest change in representation in sitcoms has been in the portrayal of gender relations. There have also been minor changes in the portrayal of family harmony (or the lack of it) and relationships between brothers and sisters.

Gender basis for humour
Many studies have plotted the progress of the sitcom father from wise in the 1950s to foolish in the 2000s. In the 1950s the all-knowing father seemed to be above criticism and was much less likely to be the butt of the humour. Husbands and fathers governed the family in the 1960s. They gained their power in two ways: they were good decision makers and they had kindly wisdom. The father’s progression from wise to foolish has paralleled the decline of the single-income family with the male as sole breadwinner. Having a crucial economic role exempted the male from ridicule, suggests Erica Scharrer. In 60 years he has moved from joke teller to joke target.

There is some evidence from cross-cultural studies that this power shift in comedy has occurred in many western countries apart from English-speaking ones. However, making males the butt of television humour is less acceptable in countries such as Korea or Thailand, where the male economic role is stronger and the power distance greater.

Table 3.4: In 60 years there has been a reversal of power relations between the genders in sitcoms. There has also been an increase in spouses making fun of each other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Father jokes at mother’s expense</th>
<th>Mother jokes at father’s expense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Changes in family
Television families have always been unrepresentative. For instance, it was not until the 1970s that a divorced couple first appeared on American television. Divorce had become acceptable on television after the changes to American family law in 1969, but it had existed in society long before that. However, by 1994, 32 per cent of television characters were divorced, 8 per cent were separated and 5 per cent had never married. This is again a distortion.

Table 3.5: Television families have never really mirrored real-life families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Television two-parent nuclear families (%)</th>
<th>Two-parent nuclear family data from US census (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sitcom families tend to present a happier and more harmonious view of family relationships than might be usual in real-life families. Across all decades, studies show television families exhibit more cooperative and affectionate behaviours than hostile or withdrawing behaviours. Since the 1950s family relationships in sitcoms have exhibited much more conflict and a lot less stability. Husbands and wives fight more in modern sitcoms, but they are also more affectionate. Content analysis shows modern sitcom couples are more open about their relationship problems but, on balance, they seem as satisfied as they did in the past. Husbands and wives now seek support and give advice
equally, whereas in the past husbands had a stronger role in supporting and advising the family. Power relations between husbands and wives are shown to be much more equal in modern sitcoms.

While brothers and sisters in the 1950s and 1960s did fight, the issues were resolved quite quickly and were often refereed by wise and non-judgemental parents. However, a 2001 study has found things have gone downhill for the modern sitcom family. Most sibling interaction is still friendly, but sibling conflict has increased since the days of Leave It to Beaver. The children of the family are seen to be motivated more by concern for themselves or their friends than for their siblings.

People in older sitcoms seemed to cope better with the daily routines of family life than the characters in modern sitcoms do. In one study, which compared 1950s comedies such as Father Knows Best with 1990s comedies such as Home Improvement, the 1990s family was found to be much less competent, more disorganised and generally worse at coping.

Activities

1. Watch a television sketch comedy and list the stereotypes used. What point of view does each stereotype seem to suggest? Try to isolate any trend in viewpoint across the whole program. Evaluate the overall stance of the program. Does it support powerful institutions or groups in society, or does it seek to undermine them?

2. Examine a sitcom’s portrayal of a selected group, such as fathers, mothers, minority groups, males or females. Suggest ways these representations could be altered.

3. There has been little study of the representation of minority groups in Australian comedy. Perform a content analysis of a sketch comedy to gather data on the use of non-Anglo-Celtic characters.

4. Conduct a class debate on the topic of whether situation comedies have improved the community’s understanding of the experience of minority groups.

5. Make a comparison of sitcoms from different time periods since the 1950s. Watch at least one episode of a sitcom from each decade. As points of comparison, examine the treatment of family and spousal relationships and the role of the father across the different time periods.

Representation in news and current affairs

Why is the news always bad?

So many people have asked why we only ever hear bad news that some television stations are promoting ‘good news’ programs. Most of these programs are not accepted as real news. It seems most people expect the news to be negative. The reasons for this are complex. Media experts have some ideas on it, including:

- **Negative is more visible than positive.** Negative news appears more often than good news because it is easier to see. It can take seconds to kill a human being, but that same human being may have had years of nurturing and care that were not regarded as newsworthy. A house may take several months to build and yet it can be razed to the ground in minutes in an accidental fire. A negative event can easily happen between two issues of a newspaper, so it can easily be slotted into the front page.

- **Negative is undeniable.** Negative news cannot be argued with. It is negative to everybody. For example, the building of a dam may be regarded by some conservationists as a serious problem, while developers may see it as a great benefit. However, the bursting of a dam wall and the subsequent flooding of a town would be understood by all as a disaster.
• **Negative is unexpected.** The negative is more unexpected than the positive. Negative events are both rarer and less predictable than the more stable positive news.

![Image 1](image1.png)

**Figure 3.12:** Media experts say there are at least three reasons why we only ever hear bad news: it is easier to see, it cannot be argued with and it is unexpected.

**News values**

A large metropolitan newspaper receives around one million words of news copy every day, so the selection process is massive. Little more than 10 per cent of this avalanche ever appears in the paper. Media analysts say there are certain requirements that stories must meet before they will be accepted by the newspapers or television news. These requirements fall under the following headings:

• **Frequency.** The news event must occur within a time frame similar to that of the newspaper. For example, a weekly newspaper may be able to focus better on long-term projects than a daily newspaper. This is why murders are commonly covered in daily newspapers. They occur in a short space of time between two daily issues of the paper. Correspondingly, the building of a dam will not make a daily newspaper because the time frame is wrong. The start of construction or the official opening of the dam will make the paper, however.

• **Threshold.** The news event must be of sufficient size to be considered newsworthy.

• **Social acceptability.** The news event must fit in with what the majority of people in a society believe is important.

• **Simplicity.** The news event must be simple and easy to understand. Black and white issues are the best stories for newspapers. Anything too complex will often be rejected.

• **Conflict.** The story should contain conflict. The conflict can be between personalities, ideas or nations. A conflict involving violence is even more newsworthy.

• **Impact.** The news event must have a big impact on people. Journalists often ask themselves: ‘Who will be affected by this story?’ The story must be of some consequence to the audience.

• **Familiarity.** The news has to be familiar. Nothing too different or ‘way out’ will be included. In this sense, all news is actually a collection of ‘olds’. It always consists of wars, murders, politics, earthquakes and so on. It is an endlessly repeated drama whose stories are familiar and very well understood.

**Processes of representation**

In television news, current affairs and documentaries, issues of representation can be treated as by-products of the basic processes of news gathering: agenda setting, gatekeeping, selection, language, visuals, time and sequence.

![Image 2](image2.png)

**Figure 3.13:** Bias is the favouring of certain points of view over others. All representations contain bias since they are all selections of reality.
Agenda setting

News programs set the agenda for community discussion by deciding what news will be included and what will be left out. In making judgements for audiences about what is important, news programs are creating a representation of the world based on their own chosen discourses (see page 192 on discourse). This process is explained in agenda-setting theory (page 158).

Instances of agenda setting by news agencies are easy to find. For example, commercial news agencies run lots of stories on violent crime. According to agenda-setting theory, the outcome of this is that the community starts to consider violent crime a problem, whether it is or not. Similarly, current affairs programs often place stories about welfare cheats on the agenda. As a result, cracking down on welfare cheats may become a political issue. The actual size of the problem compared with, say, tax cheating by wealthier sections of the community is not examined because it is not on the agenda.

Gatekeeping

Agenda setting occurs through a process called gatekeeping. In the newsroom, the news editor decides which stories will appear in the news bulletin and in which order. Often this is a personal decision based on what the news editor thinks the targeted audience will want to see.

Gatekeeping prevents many smaller community groups from making contact with a larger audience. In the meantime, the established discourses flow through without interruption. For instance, until the early 1980s gatekeeping kept environmental issues off the agenda for most of mainstream Australia. In contrast, pro-development points of view supporting business interests made it to air much more easily.

Selection processes

As the clock ticks away the minutes to the opening broadcast, news and current affairs editors work frantically, sifting and selecting stories for broadcast. It is a process so habitual and speedy that it is almost instinctive. Material is selected using the following four main institutional processes:

- **Routines of newsgathering** mean some news is selected and other news ignored. A story breaking at 5:00 pm has a greater chance of appearing than one breaking at 9:00 pm. A story with easy vehicle or helicopter access, a story close by or an email story may be preferred over other stories. Reporters also have regular places they visit to gather news. These are called rounds or beats, and they include police stations, law courts and Parliament.

- **Traditional news values** decide what is news and what is not news. This tradition carries on from newspaper values and is part of the institutional culture of media organisations (see newspaper representation issues, page 479). Selection procedures are often institutional. Commercial television may choose differently from a public service broadcaster.

- **Visual selection** is necessary because television is a visual medium. A story with no pictures/footage may be passed over for a lesser story with strong pictures/footage.

- **Cultural selection** is probably the most powerful filter. Some things can be said publicly and other things can’t. This is culturally decided. The ‘ordinary’ citizen is the target of news and current affairs, and his or her presumed viewpoint is the one used to select the stories. Other, more unusual viewpoints are rarely selected.

Language

The Glasgow University Group conducted exhaustive research into the language used on British television news. They found that the language itself can lead to significant bias. Their study concentrated on the reporting of industrial news such as strikes. The who, what, when and where structure of stories was found to neglect the causes of strikes. Stories focused on strikers as the group causing disputes, yet all industrial action involves two sides. Industrial news always
sees unions ‘demanding’ and employers ‘offering’. The Glasgow analysts point out that to talk of employers demanding and unions offering seems absurd. Repetition has normalised the bias.

Putting the news first in a sentence also creates a distortion. The focus is mainly on the what in each story. Television news stories in particular never seem to get to the why.

**Visually**

The Glasgow University Media Group study found that the written story is still the major factor in television news, current affairs and documentaries. While television is undoubtedly a visual medium, the visuals are usually a secondary element. Pictures tend to be shot to suit the story. While the camera records the truth, it selects the truth it records. Not everything can be included in the frame and this can lead to bias.

One study of industrial news has shown that bosses tend to be filmed as individuals in close-up, whereas workers tend to be filmed in groups on site in medium shot or long shot. The effect of this is possibly that greater importance and ‘truth’ is attached to what the managers say, while workers appear as unruly troublemakers. Camera angle can also indicate a point of view (see television and film language, page 15).

Editing adds to the process of selection. The picture sequence shown on the television screen may be a rearrangement of the original footage. Editors may have changed the order of the pictures to suit the story.

**Time and space**

The short time span of a news story creates a ‘bias against understanding’, according to some analysts. Typical news bulletins, with a large number of stories in a short time, work against a deep understanding.

A famine in Ethiopia is shown as a group of starving people, because the general problem of world food resources is too complex for the time allowed.

Certain viewpoints may be given more time than others. The Glasgow group reported that ‘[In Britain] in the first four months of our survey, there were 17 occasions when the news showed viewpoints against the government’s policy of wage restraint. There were 287 occasions when views supporting these policies were broadcast.’

In newspapers, the space given to a story determines its relative importance. Newspapers may give more space to news and opinion that agrees with their own opinions. Opposing news may be given less space.

**Story placement**

The position of a story can cause bias. For example, the following two introductions appeared one after another in a commercial news program.

**Story 1**

‘And now that controversial government grant of $10 000 to a group of feminist surfers for the design of a women’s surfboard.’

**Story 2**

‘Today, a handicapped boy goes without a wheelchair because the government says there is no more money available.’

The impact of one story on the other is considerable. Together they make a powerful statement that could not be said to be objective or unbiased.

**Opinion**

Editorials always support particular points of view, and other opinions have no chance of being supported in the newspaper. For example, newspaper editorials never support strikes or protest demonstrations.

---

**Activities**

1. News and current affairs directors select stories in response to their own cultural background and that of their audience.
   (a) Suggest some unusual backgrounds that might change a news director’s view of what makes news and current affairs.
   (b) Suggest some of the stories you would include if you were an editor with an atypical background broadcasting to an audience of similar background to your own.

2. Look at figure 3.15 and consider the selection the camera operator has made. Suggest a reason for this, and say what you think the point of the cartoon is.
3. Suggest some story pairs that could have an impact on each other’s meaning. For example, a story on alcohol advertising followed by a story on a drink driving accident might change viewers’ ideas on alcohol advertising.

4. Compare the evening news bulletins on different television stations. To do this you will need to allocate different class members or groups to each of the competing programs. As you watch the news, fill in a table similar to the one below. (A row has been completed to give you an example of the information you will need.)

Collate your findings, documenting the following: overall number of stories; degree of similarity between stations; differences in the order of priority given to the same story; and the differences in the amount of time devoted to stories. Consider the needs of several audience groups, then recommend the best television news for each that is available in your area.

**PRODUCTION TASK**

5. From the pages of a newspaper, find a story with two possible viewpoints in it. Using selection, sequencing and space, create two biased, 200-word stories from the original. Write a brief explanation of your methods, attach it to the original and also attach the two biased stories.

---

**Table 3.6: Comparison of evening news bulletins on different television stations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of news</th>
<th>Story title</th>
<th>Was the story of foreign or national interest or both?</th>
<th>Position of story in bulletin</th>
<th>Time taken to report the story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and the economy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial relations (unions and management)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign affairs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National affairs</td>
<td>Hole in the ozone</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>30 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human interest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disasters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Docudrama and truth**

‘The challenge of film to history, of the visual culture to the written culture may be like the challenge of written history to the oral tradition. Before writing, there was myth, which was a perfectly adequate way of dealing with the past of a tribe, or a city of people. It was adequate in terms of providing a meaningful world in which to live and relate to one’s past. In a post-literate world, it is possible a visual culture will once again change the nature of our relationship with the past.’

*Robert A. Rosenstone*, Professor of History, California Institute of Technology

A docudrama is a television or film narrative based on real people and actual events. Docudramas could well be called nonfiction drama. For a fuller definition of docudrama, see page 205.

The arguments for and against the use of docudrama are based on differing ideas of what is truth and what is accuracy.

**Criticism**

According to media historian Jerry Kuehl, people are mistaken if they believe a docudrama has any real claim to truth. Dramas are not capable of causal accounts of the real world, says Kuehl. If an event has already been recorded on film, a docudrama would have to mimic it exactly to be in any way truthful. There is no point in this. Therefore any change to the portrayal of an event reduces its truthfulness.

If an event was not filmed, then dramatic artists are at even more of a disadvantage. Even if the language used in the re-creation is authentic and based on court records, for example, drama still alters the truth. Accents may be different; inflection, volume,
New ways and meanings

gestures, stance and so on could all have their meaning changed.

Docudramas about non-English-speaking people are doubly false, says Kuehl. Himmler speaking English with a heavy German accent or Krushchev speaking American English with a Russian accent removes us further from the truth. Actors speaking the lines, directors who orchestrate them, scriptwriters, camera operators and editors all selectively construct a version that moves further and further from the truth, says Kuehl.

At the heart of traditional documentaries lie truth claims, according to Kuehl. These claims are based on argument and evidence, assembled from research, interviews and film footage. Kuehl asks: How can we tell if Krushchev ever lost his temper in public? Footage of him banging his shoe on a desk at the United Nations Assembly will not persuade everyone, but it is very strong evidence. A movie starring Telly Savalas dressed as Krushchev and banging on a desk somewhere in Hollywood is evidence of nothing and will convince no-one.

According to Leslie Woodhead, much of the heat in the docudrama debate is generated by arguments over accuracy versus absolute truth. Absolute truth is impossible to achieve. Accuracy, on the other hand, suggests a version of the truth that is based heavily on research and factual evidence. Woodhead’s docudramas have been regarded as authoritative enough to be tendered as court evidence. His 1979 production Collision Course contains a second-by-second reconstruction of the last few minutes before the world’s worst mid-air collision. It was used as evidence in an inquiry into air safety.

Representing history

The great stories of history have always captivated filmmakers. Producers are now starting to engage historians as consultants to productions. Using the experience gained through their involvement with films, some historians are speaking out about the role of history on the screen.

‘The moving image conveys a poor information load. History does not consist of a descriptive narrative of what happened. It consists of debates between historians about just what exactly did happen, why it happened and what would be an adequate account of its significance.’

Ian Jarvie, historian

‘Getting it right does have validity in journalistic terms. Not against the standards of an elusive absolute truth, but against the standards of evidence as they might be understood in a court of law.’

Leslie Woodhead, docudrama pioneer

Figure 3.16: Denzel Washington in a scene from Spike Lee’s film Malcolm X (1992). Screen biographies are a form of docudrama that has always been popular with feature filmmakers. Issues of truth are further complicated when a hugely popular actor appears in a filmed interpretation of someone else’s life.
‘Traditional written history is too narrow in focus to render the fullness of the complex, multidimensional world in which humans live. Only film, with its quick cuts to new sequences, dissolves, fades, speed-ups and slow motion, can ever hope to approximate real life. Only film can provide empathetic reconstruction to convey how historical people witnessed, understood and lived their lives.’

R. J. Raack, historian

Films cannot fulfil the basic demands for truth and verification that historians demand, argues Robert Rosenstone. Films insert fictions to improve the story. They also tend to confuse memory with history — if someone remembers something, then it must be true. This means they ignore the possibility of faulty memory, exaggeration or even lies. Films, Rosenstone claims, also create a closed world with a single linear story, thus denying alternative points of view and banishing all complexity. For most people, however, the emphasis in history is on the story. Academic historians are few in number and they are in danger of becoming even fewer.

Film is capable of dealing with the past and can attract huge audiences. Despite its limitations, film is a medium historians can use to create narrative histories that will touch large numbers of people and give meaning to the past, says Rosenstone. Not all historians agree. The great danger of film, said David Herlihy, is that it makes the viewer an eyewitness. In order to accept the dramatisation of the film, the viewer must also suspend disbelief. In history, this is a dangerous thing.

‘Doubt is not visual. Warnings of any sort, appeals to maintain critical detachment, cannot be easily photographed. Warnings require a retreat from the visual to the written word.’

(The late) David Herlihy, historian

Figure 3.17: Warren Beatty as John Reed and Diane Keaton as Louise Bryant in Reds (1981). Biographical docudramas can alter the truth for the sake of the story. In the film, John Reed makes a train journey through war-torn France and Germany to Petrograd in late 1917 — a trip that would have been impossible at the time.

Activities

1. Can drama be used to present real-life material? Discuss the docudrama’s claim on truth.
2. From a history book, find graphical or tabular evidence of some causes of historical events; for example, statistics on famine, unemployment or overpopulation. Think of a way of transposing this information into a scene in a film. Discuss the effectiveness of film as a means of communicating this information.
3. Analyse the use of mise-en-scène (see page 17) in a sequence from a historical docudrama from any period. Count up the meaningful objects included in the scenes, such as landscape, period architecture, costumes and means of transport. Evaluate the effectiveness of these elements in conveying information about the period.
4. How can an audience be encouraged to critically evaluate evidence presented within a docudrama? One historian has suggested displaying subtitles on the screen outlining other points of view. Suggest other ways of solving the problem.

Written Task

5. Make a comparison of two docudramas dealing with the same topic. Analyse the variations in viewpoints they contain and illustrate your comments with excerpts from the films. Suggest reasons for the differences. Some suggested films are: historical docudramas made in different eras; film versions of Shakespearean historical plays such as *Henry V*; biographies such as *Malcolm X* (1972 and 1992); *Shadowlands* (1985 and 1993); and docudramas relating to the Jewish Holocaust of World War II.
Law and order on television

Crime shows deal with law and order. The law is also the concern of politics. Unlike many other television topics, the portrayal of crime and law and order means that programs are unavoidably involved in politics. From the early days of television, programs have always played it safe by supporting the status quo.

The point of view

The handsome hero is brave and tough but also kind. The audience naturally identifies with him in his quest against crime. The hero represents the law and becomes the law. To the audience, the hero and the law are one and the same. Criminals are stereotyped as bad characters. No-one mourns their bad end. As a result, only one point of view is favoured. The world is viewed through the eyes of the law enforcers.

The television crime wave

Crime on television is much more brutal and violent than actual crime is, notwithstanding some sensational real-life cases. Television crime is also much more likely to be directed against a person than at property.

One study showed that simple theft accounted for nearly two-thirds of actual police work but only 6 per cent of television police work. On the other hand, murder made up one-third of television crime but in the United States accounts for less than one-sixth of 1 per cent of FBI investigations.

Human rights

A neat, bloodless bullet hole in the villain’s heart is a common sort of television justice. The criminal is always shown to pull his gun first, so the law enforcer’s gun is only ever used in self-defence in life-and-death situations. When the law enforcers are shown to be so brave and honourable, the viewer rarely questions their right to dispense capital punishment. Certainly the law enforcer never seems to feel guilty. In one episode of a crime show, a criminal is cornered against a heap of old cartons and rubbish. He fires at the cop and the cop calmly shoots him dead. The streetwise detective simply looks at the body and says: ‘Now all the city has to do is pick him up with the garbage.’

Figure 3.18: Part of the Law & Order team. According to Professor Elayne Rapping, Law & Order attorneys have tended to be less concerned with ‘politically correct’ moral issues and more concerned with getting a conviction.

The right to life is not the only human right that the law enforcers violate. A University of Massachusetts study of crime programs showed law officers routinely breaking and entering. They were also shown failing to inform suspects of their legal rights and committing bribery. The research professors commented that police shows seem to reduce the ordinary person’s awareness of their rights and responsibilities. Many people did not even notice blatant police-state tactics, as they were so engrossed in the violence and action of the show.
The personal is never political

In one episode of a British police show, the streetwise cop asks himself why a childhood friend has turned to armed robbery. 'I just don't understand it,' he comments. His hardboiled partner replies, 'Don't even try, George — it's just human nature.'

Because they deal with crime, crime dramas cannot avoid dealing with political, social and economic issues. There are differences between the traditional and the newer crime dramas in their approach to social problems. However, most programs play it safe when it comes to social criticism. Few traditional crime dramas analyse the reasons for crime very deeply. Problems in society that breed crime, such as unemployment or the divisions between rich and poor, are rarely mentioned. Traditional crime dramas offer little understanding of the overall situation. There is a tendency for the traditional television crime drama to suggest that lawbreakers are born, not made.

Soap opera–influenced programs such as *The Bill* do tackle social issues and do not always resolve them neatly. However, shows that do analyse the reasons for crime still rarely lead the viewer to think that anything could or should be done about significantly changing society. They are even less likely to suggest that the viewers themselves could take personal political action. This is partly explained by the fact that commercial programs must make sure that advertisers or other powerful groups are not offended. As well, the studios are themselves major multinational corporations with commercial interests to protect.

Computer crime, white-collar crime and the corporate crimes of big businesses are also rarely mentioned on crime shows, despite the fact that they are perhaps a much greater threat to society and certainly cost the community vast sums of money. But these stories lack action and stereotypical victims. The television crime drama series concentrates almost exclusively on murders, assaults, drug abuse and robberies.

### Activities

1. The following crimes against human rights — all committed by law enforcers — often appear on crime shows, according to the University of Massachusetts study:
   - breaking and entering
   - failure to inform suspects of their rights
   - torturing
   - bribery.

   Count how many of these (if any) occur in one episode of an American crime drama.

2. Look at the comparison in table 3.7 of real crime frequency and the frequency of television crime, and then answer the questions that follow.

#### Table 3.7: Comparison of frequency of real crimes and television crimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Real crimes, ranked in order of frequency, from FBI index of crimes</th>
<th>Television crimes, ranked in order of frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Burglary</td>
<td>Murder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Larceny*</td>
<td>Assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Auto theft</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Robbery</td>
<td>Auto theft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Assault</td>
<td>Burglary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Rape</td>
<td>Larceny*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Murder</td>
<td>Rape</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Larceny is an American term referring to the theft of personal property. The term is rarely used in Australia. Burglary is the crime of breaking in with the intent to steal.*

(a) To what extent does the television crime rate reflect the real world?
(b) Suggest reasons for the differences between the two rankings.

3. Look at the comparison of real American criminals and criminals on American television in table 3.8, and then answer the questions that follow.

#### Table 3.8: Comparison of real and television criminals in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Real criminals (%)</th>
<th>Television criminals (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36–50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51–65</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 65</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) What differences are there between the real criminal and the television criminal? Can you suggest any reason for this?
(b) Can you think of any programs now showing that offer a different focus from the survey results?
Advertising and stereotypes

Have you ever thought how much an advertiser could save by using real-life characters instead of professional models? For a much smaller fee, a real-life nurse could be persuaded to appear in a hospital scene. Advertising agencies have actually tried this approach, but with very unsatisfactory results.

Real-life workers do not make good stereotypes. The actual nurse, for example, would probably not be convincing on television. It is quite likely that the real-life professional would not be recognised as a proper nurse by viewers who have become accustomed to the stereotype. Instead, advertisers believe it works much better to have models who fit the stereotype to pose in completely make-believe scenes.

Stereotypes (see page 37) allow a commercial to communicate instantly and nonverbally. Since most advertisements last only 30 seconds, the viewers must immediately recognise and accept the stereotyped image as ‘believable’. Like comedy, advertising as we now know it could not exist without the use of stereotypes, which harness the cultural knowledge of the viewer. A person’s cultural knowledge may include all the comics, television shows and books, and each prejudice and belief he or she has ever encountered. Tapping into this knowledge, stereotypes often include the most extreme and exaggerated characteristics of groups, ideas or events.

The views of the dominant and most powerful groups in society tend to be reinforced by stereotypes in television advertising. This is because non-dominant groups (who also are stereotyped) usually do not have spending power.

Advertising representations

Women

Getting the representation of women right has been one of the most difficult balancing acts advertising agencies have had to face. Women are the most lucrative audience for television advertising, but they also make up 65 per cent of all complainants about advertising.

Statisticians became aware of greatly increased numbers of women in the workforce as early as 1966. However, until the 1980s the typical woman in television commercials was still presented as a housewife. She was usually young, with an executive-type husband and two children. The meaning in her life derived from discussions about the benefits of miracle washing powders, oven cleaners and modern appliances. She won her husband’s approval through good household management, lots of cosmetics and impeccable grooming.

In the mid 1980s came the new stereotype of the super-mum. She managed all the tasks of the traditional stereotype as well as holding down a high-powered career. Feminists were strongly critical. Gillian Dyer, for example, said that the new stereotype still did not question the basic power structures or the continuing male dominance of the workplace and the family.

By the mid 1990s the super-mum stereotype had been partly replaced by the busy career mother. The new super-stressed mum was desperate for a product to provide relief from the hectic demands of the double shift. Advertisers seemed keen to sympathise with women’s increasing stress levels as they tried to juggle their dual roles in the workforce and the home. However, a recent survey of 150 advertisements found the representation of women was still out of touch with reality. Nearly 60 per cent of women portrayed were young and beautiful, 26 per cent were obsessed with body image and 18 per cent were housewives.

Men

Men are shown as weak and pathetic in nearly 11 per cent of advertisements, according to an advertising industry survey. The same survey found muscle-men (himbos) were the representations of men shown in 27 per cent of advertisements. Other common stereotypes of men included Mr Fix-its (in 9 per cent of commercials), sensitive new age guys (17 per cent) and powerful businessmen (18 per cent).

Until recently, few men have complained about the depiction of males on television advertising. The main reason for recent complaint has been the broadcasting of a number of advertisements seen as demeaning to men. Most complainants have argued that, if the gender roles were reversed in the commercial, the depiction would be banned. Advertisers would not dare treat women in such a demeaning manner. So far none of these complaints has been upheld. Authorities argue that what the community sees as acceptable in the portrayal of women is currently very different from what is acceptable for men.

Ethnic minorities

Whereas women have made significant gains in advertising representations in the past two decades, the representation of minority ethnic groups has hardly changed. This is despite a focus on multiculturalism in the broader community. When ethnic minorities appear in television advertising, it is usually to
promote food products such as curries and sauces. Part of the reason for the stereotyped portrayal of ethnic groups is that, unlike women, advertisers have not so far identified them as separate, big-spending target audiences.

**Aborigines**

Advertisers almost never choose an Aboriginal person to promote their products. In this, the actors Ernie Dingo and Deborah Mailman and athlete Cathy Freeman are the sole exceptions. When Aborigines do appear, it is usually to promote community services or Indigenous festivals and so on. Representations of Indigenous Australians are often used to promote tourism, but they are always romanticised tribal Aborigines, says director and actor Wesley Enoch of Brisbane’s Kooemba Jdarra theatre group. He points out that when advertisement producers do choose to portray Aborigines, they have a stereotyped image in mind. They never choose to show urban Aborigines, nor do they give Aborigines central roles in the advertisement.

**The African-American experience**

Reviewing the experience of African Americans can be useful for understanding the representation of ethnic minority groups in Australia. Following the mass civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s, African-American organisations pressured the US government and corporations into using more African-American models in their advertisements. Content analysis surveys in the 1990s showed the battle had been won. Their representation in television commercials is now just slightly higher than their percentage share of the population. However, research shows African Americans are usually seen endorsing products of lower value than those endorsed by white Americans. The African-American model is usually male and is less likely than white models to be portrayed holding a highly skilled occupation. African Americans are three times more likely to be portrayed as sports stars, but only half as likely to be shown in business roles.

**Occupations**

Nearly everyone in television advertisements has a high-paying professional job. Following a content analysis study of almost 320 commercials, an American survey revealed that 87 per cent of people are shown as having highly skilled occupations. Only 13 per cent of advertisements feature people in low-income or unskilled occupations.

**Reflecting or shaping reality?**

Should the representations of advertising simply reflect the real world or should they influence it? Many social groups, such as feminists and consumer organisations, believe today’s advertising relies on outmoded stereotypes and is socially irresponsible.

Advertising professionals disagree. They see the industry as a business, the aim of which is to communicate messages that sell their clients’ products. Advertisers say that their marketing simply reflects the world as it is. Otherwise consumers would not buy the advertised products. Since advertisers aim to make money, they only ever present safe images that follow, rather than lead, public opinion. More than anything, they fear a consumer backlash against their images, which could lead to a drop in product sales. Their clients’ reaction would be to cancel the account.

**Representation and society**

The representations of advertising interact with society in two ways. The first is by drawing in something desirable from the wider culture and attaching it to a product. For example, love can be attached to chocolates or the power of feminism can be attached to insurance products. The second interaction advertising has with society is in an outward direction — it is the spin-off effect of advertising. The commercialism of advertisements may be extended to a greater commercialism in other walks of life. Advertising is now attaching itself outwards to all kinds of aspects of society. For instance, sporting events, cultural events, even early childhood education in some countries, all attract advertising. John Corner of the University of Liverpool refers to these two effects as the centripetal and centrifugal forces of advertising representations.

The American literary critic Wayne Booth calls advertising representations pornographic. Advertising seeks to arouse appetite and desire, he says. Booth outlines a number of properties of advertising representation that he says make advertising a depressing cultural event:

- Advertisements do not permit other ways of thinking, and they suggest moral values that are taken as normal.
- Advertisements link the noblest human emotions with greedy demand for products.
- Advertisements depend on stereotypes.
- Advertising shows that the only goal in life is success — there are no losers in Adland.

**Discourses**

For more on discourses in advertising see television advertising, page 369.
1. A content analysis counts the occurrence of certain representations in an advertisement. Analyse the content of a selection of commercials to check the incidence of various stereotypes of different groups. Calculate this incidence as a percentage of the total number of advertisements containing the target group.

2. Research the historical development of the representation of a selected group in television advertising.

3. Create a commercial based on a ‘reverse stereotype’ of a selected group. A reverse stereotype changes the common depictions of a group into their opposites or takes on the stereotypical elements of more powerful groups. A reverse stereotype, for example, could be of a powerful Aboriginal businesswoman.

Representation in soap operas

‘Our soaps and serials reaffirm values and ideals that are generally held in the community. Loyalty, friendship, cooperation, trust, wisdom, love, beauty, youth. Audiences switch on Home and Away to be reassured that basically ours is a good society, even though it has ups and downs and dramatic moments. Summer Bay is somewhere audiences go to experience the sense that although there are rough times in life, in the end things will be okay. On the occasions we as a story department tried to be provocative, tried to change those values, tried to change community standards, we lost our audience. Home and Away exists to reaffirm social values, not query them.’

Greg Haddrick, former story editor on Home and Away

Soap operas aim for a feeling that their world is similar to real life and lived experience. Family-centred, humdrum domestic settings and plots add to this feeling. The audience is encouraged to believe they are watching a parallel world — similar to their own, but separate.

Soaps also deal with typical social issues and concerns. With the real world and the soap world dealing with similar issues, the apparent realism of the program is further confirmed.

‘The world of Neighbours is the world of the detergent commercial; everything from the kitchen worktops to the S-bend is squeaky clean. Everyone’s hair and underwear is freshly laundered. No-one is shabby or eccentric; no-one is poor or any colour but white. Neighbours is the Australian version of the American dream, owner-occupied, White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant paradise.’

Germaine Greer, feminist writer and commentator

What sort of ‘real’ world?

Critics and analysts who study the representation of the world offered by soap operas focus on a variety of areas. These include:

- **Strong women.** Soap operas frequently represent women as strong characters. Women’s roles range from the professional and career oriented to the domestic.

- **SNAG males.** Males in soap operas tend to be represented as sensitive new age guys. Strong males are often villains.

‘The men are turned into whining idiots while the women run amok. You can’t write scenes where the men say, “Why don’t you love me? What can I do to help you?” It’s horrible. We’re working on scripts where the men can demonstrate commitment without necessarily talking about it.’

Hogan Sheffer, head writer on As the World Turns (US)

- **Distorted world.** According to American critic Ruth Rosen, soap characters rarely eat except at restaurants; motherhood is glorified but no-one is ever glimpsed caring for the offspring; family life is praised but divorces occur at twice the real frequency; amnesia is a common disease; lots of people have split personalities; and once a woman spent 17 days in a revolving door having flashbacks!

- **Problems are personal.** No attempt is made to link the problems that characters have to larger social causes. For example, in one episode of Neighbours, Brad was a happy-go-lucky surfer. He was also unemployed, but unemployment as a social issue was presented only as a matter of Brad’s personality. Unemployment is also usually seen as a male problem only.
• **Conflict is resolved.** The inner circle of the family is seen as the solution to all problems. Quite difficult social problems are resolved through family love, courage and tolerance.

• **Lead from behind.** It could never be said that soap operas are important catalysts for social change. They follow from a safe distance rather than lead. They do not commit themselves to progressive solutions to problems, but aim for the middle ground or the consensus viewpoint. The pressure for high ratings means that most soaps never go beyond mild reformism.

**Activities**

1. List some difficult social problems you have witnessed in soap operas recently. How would you rate their stance — ahead of public opinion, with it or safely behind?
2. Can you work out the overall moral standpoint of a particular soap opera? Start by listing the stands it has taken recently. Does an overall philosophy or point of view emerge? Write your answer in a paragraph.
3. Soap operas can express their morality as much by what is left out as by what is shown. Make a list of taboo areas a soap opera could discourage by never allowing them to appear.
4. What moral values do you think would have been promoted in the radio soap operas of the 1930s? Contrast these with today’s values.
5. Many media academics say soaps concentrate on the personal instead of the larger social meanings of problems. Find examples to either support or refute this criticism. Where you agree with the criticism, list examples and explain how the program could have dealt with the issue differently. Where you disagree, show why.

**Representation in video games**

Game designers are typically white, middle-class American males. This same demographic also represents the largest portion of the video game market. As a result, the most commonly cited representation issues for games concern gender, cultural issues and violence.

**Gender portrayal**

Critics believe video games impart unrealistic ideas about gender roles, encourage violent behaviour and are aimed only towards males. Writer and gamer Aleah Tierney believes that male video game characters represent what men desire to be, while female characters represent the fantasy women that men want.

Games written for girls often take a heavy-handed approach to morality. The morality is saccharine and preachy — you win if you always make the ‘nice’ decision. Some well-known attempts at marketing to girls include ‘girl games’ such as Purple Moon’s *Rockett’s New School* in which the main concern was mixing with the right crowd and making a good impression. In another game, *Tricky Decision*, Rockett gets to choose between ‘two cool parties, same night’. These types of games are criticised for their narrow representation of females. Mattel, in its push to capture the female market, developed a number of very popular *Barbie* games. Attempts to market to girls so far have been based on stereotypical notions of girls’ interests.

‘Most computer games are created by males, for males. Traditionally, when females did appear it was typically in sexist or overtly misogynistic ways: as damsels in distress needing rescue, rewards for successful completion of a game level, victims of violence, and/or sexual objects. Recently, video game companies have started to include more female characters in games, but a good percentage of these female characters continue to be created according to traditional gender stereotypes: the virtuous but passive woman who motivates game action; the evil, sexualised woman who must be overthrown by the male protagonist; the objectified female with huge breasts and lips and an impossibly small waist.’

*Dr Kathryn Wright, Gamasutra columnist*
‘Boys get to drive Formula One race cars, fly F-15s, build cities, battle dragons, conquer the galaxy, save the universe. Girls get to ... become queen of the prom? Is that really the best we can do for them?’

Ernest Adams, columnist and game designer

Game marketing can accentuate the issue. Characters such as Lara Croft are strong and independent, even if they do have disproportionate bodies. As the game Tomb Raider began to become successful, Lara started wearing less clothing, grew bigger breasts, and was splashed across the covers of books, magazines and calendars.

‘Characters like Tomb Raider’s Lara Croft allow women gamers to get tough and “play the lead”. While their presence is a positive step toward female inclusion, there’s something about the gargantuan breasts and the tiny clothes that leave real women cold. Believe me, women gamers feel frustrated and excluded,’ says writer and gamer Aleah Tierney.

By playing video games, many boys are able to familiarise themselves with computers in a non-threatening way. Some analysts argue that game programmers who continue to ignore females are denying girls the opportunity to develop computer skills. In games that offer numerous characters, an increasing variety of female as well as ethnic characters are being offered as options. But where there is only one main character, it is almost always going to be an action-hero white male.

Women are not the only ones critical of game representations. ‘Action-hero’ types are often the only successful male characters. They are musclebound with model good looks, and they almost always speak in American accents.

Rockstar Entertainment’s bullying game, Canis Canem Edit (Latin for ‘Dog Eat Dog’), allows the traditional white male lead character to explore his sexuality, but cynics believe this was mostly for the publicity rather than a genuine desire to expand the range of video game characters available. Other games, such as The Sims, allow homosexual relationships.

Characters are greater than their visual representation. Characterisation plays a crucial part of persona believability and leads to greater player/character engagement. Characterisation includes a character’s full range of verbal and nonverbal communication. Language used in conversations with other characters can add depth to characters, extending them beyond simple stereotypes. ‘The choice of words can really establish a character’s identity. Key words or phrases, diction, accent, slang, code phrases, sentence structure, profanity, even the amount of dialogue —

all of these can tell the audience a great deal about the persona of the character you’re creating,’ suggests game writer Rafael Chandler.

The move towards massively multiplayer online games in which players create their own characters could lead to a wider variety of character evolution.

**Violence as problem solving**

Video games have always been based on violence. Even games such as Space Invaders and Pac-Man required the destruction of opponents to succeed. Violence in games happens outside the normal moral universe. What you see on screen is not a depiction of what death is. There is no remorse, no pain and sorrow, and the player is not punished for killing; in fact, violence and killing are rewarded with success.

In many games the player is faced with challenges in which the only solution is to blast their way out. Critics say this effectively rewards violent behaviour and demonstrates there are no other solutions. Some critics want games to offer multiple solutions or more complex and engaging narratives so that the player has to rely more on intuition and intelligence. This may serve to show that violence is not the only solution. However, a game where all the players sit around a conference table and diplomatically discuss nonviolent solutions would probably never be a hit!
‘Every art form, every storytelling tradition needs the ability to represent violence, because aggression, trauma and loss are a fundamental aspect of the human condition. The idea that game violence is in and of itself bad is an absurdity … I am not opposed to game violence per se but I would like to see game designers make more meaningful choices about how they represent violence through their games. There is too much repetitive, banal, thoughtless violence which exists simply because people think it will sell more units.’

Professor Henry Jenkins, Director of Comparative Studies, MIT

The representation of video games in their own marketing is often misleading. Gamers often seek out provocative content, and marketers are all too willing to target this desire.

**Cultural and racial issues**

Australia has very few locally made games in comparison with the large number of imported titles. With thousands of new titles released each year, most of them American, our culture is in danger of being swamped by imported cultural ideals.

The representation of non-white, middle-class characters in games has traditionally been poor, and many racist and stereotypical characters have been used. Dr Kathryn Wright, feature writer at Womengamers.com, believes that minority characters in games are often designed to be laughed at, such as black American characters with huge afro hairstyles using stereotypical street slang.

‘There are often violently negative portrayals of African Americans, Latinos and women in some of the most popular games on the market,’ writes Carrie Kilman, writer for Tolerance.org. ‘If blacks are always portrayed as the villains, or as the victims who get killed often and easily, that is code for powerlessness,’ says psychologist John Murray from the Kansas State University.

‘These aren’t just kids’ toys; these are representative of our society and they teach us,’ writes Canadian researcher Robert Parungao.

Some games even have a racist message built into them. Steve Brown from PC Gamer magazine writes that *Soldier of Fortune* had a ‘discriminatory and racist message woven into the very fabric of the game, which attributes different values to Iraqi and American citizens’ lives’. In the game, a group of Americans is being held hostage. If you kill a hostage, you are punished; if you kill an American tramp on the subway, you are punished; if you kill an innocent Iraqi civilian, you are not.

‘Clearly, games are taking the route that television did for years in its portrayal of race. Game developers make games out of their own perceptions, attitudes, and experiences — and that is part of the problem … once more minority and female game developers get into the field, games will naturally change for the better in this respect.’

Dr Kathryn Wright, game audience researcher, Womengamers.com

Unlike many other media forms, gaming is not exclusively dominated by American titles. Japanese games and characters also have had a strong cultural influence: from ninjas and samurai warriors to anime characters, wide-eyed talking animals and the massive cross-media hit *Pokemon*. Many American games have adopted Japanese styling, and some have been influenced by Japanese narrative.

**Figure 3.20:** The eerie atmosphere of the *Silent Hill* series is influenced by the Japanese horror styling of *The Ring* and *The Grudge*. This series focused heavily on its atmospheric environment. While this method of storytelling worked for the game version, the environment alone wasn’t enough to make the movie version (shown above) a success.
Activities

1. Discuss whether you believe game makers have been responsible in marketing towards all players. Has their focus been too narrow, as critics suggest? (a) What are the effects of targeting most games at a single audience? (b) Is it easier to market the same type of proven games to the same audience? If so, how can regulators encourage game makers to create good products for a wide variety of potential players? (c) Write a short letter to a game company setting out an argument for a greater diversity of games targeted at a range of different players.

2. Would you agree that almost all games are based on violence and that they reward violence through success? Explain. What nonviolent aspects could be incorporated into games to make them more enjoyable? Make a list.

3. From your experience, what do you estimate is the ratio of foreign to locally made games?

4. Ernest Adams, a columnist at Gamasutra, wrote: ‘History is full of heroic women whose achievements went far beyond “making new friends”! Why not track chimpanzees through the jungle with Jane Goodall or help slaves to freedom with Harriet Tubman, or fly the world with Amelia Earhart or even, yes, battle the Romans with Queen Boudicca? The problem with the clothes-and-makeup theme isn’t just that it’s stereotypical — it’s that it’s feeble.’ Research a famous historical female figure and develop a treatment for a game based on her life or adventures.

5. Games researcher Dr Kathryn Wright believes ‘male gamers see that most male characters are portrayed as unrealistic, muscle-bound Rambo-types, but they simply are not that affected by this. Many female gamers, on the other hand, are irritated when they cannot identify with their female character’. Discuss this finding. Do you think male game players are unaffected? Do females identify differently in your opinion?

Representation and the internet

‘In the minds of its detractors, the internet is still a world inhabited by spotty youths who sit in the dark staring at a computer screen and searching for arcane sites where Eastern European pornography and advice on how to build a nuclear bomb are freely available.’

Bruce Elder, technology columnist

The ‘truth’ — information versus data

‘ “The Web is the Great Equaliser”, as one of my test users once said. Anybody can put up a site and, increasingly, anybody does. As a result, users don’t quite know what to make of information retrieved from the web. It can be the deep truth, or it can be the ramblings of a nut. There is no easy way of telling whether a website is reliable. In the physical world, you typically know that certain sources like The New York Times are reliable, and you know that if you walk into a Toyota dealership, they will have the specifications of the latest model as released by Toyota headquarters.’

Jakob Nielsen, authority on web usability

The traditional media have always regulated who is published and who is not. While this has restricted the diversity of opinion and information available, it has ensured that published information is normally well researched, well structured, accurate, and free from plagiarism.

In contrast, internet providers do not filter the information on their systems in the same way that a publisher filters the content in books. Information is often not checked for accuracy and not copyright cleared. It has no guarantee of being well researched, and may not be accurate at all — it might simply be someone’s opinion.

Google CEO Eric Schmidt thinks the internet might work against those who purposely propagate misinformation through archiving the truth in the public domain. He believes that the internet ‘has broken down the barriers that exist between people and information, effectively democratising access to human knowledge. This has made us much more powerful as individuals’.

Only 49 per cent of 3600 American students surveyed were able to correctly evaluate a set of websites for objectivity, authority and timeliness. ‘They’re very good at typing in and using the internet, but they don’t always understand what they get back,’ says Linda Goff, head of instructional services for the California State University library. ‘They take at face value whatever shows up at the top of the list as the best stuff.’
Online shopping sites that require personal financial and billing details strive to appear trustworthy. Questions that consumers can use to determine whether the site is safe to send credit card details to include:
1. Does the site explain what measures have been taken to ensure the safety of your transaction?
2. Does the site use secure means of transmitting personal and financial information?
3. Does the site have a privacy policy?
4. Is the site’s country of origin apparent? International regulation can be a problem with sites that are located in countries with weak consumer and fraud laws.
5. Are there clear feedback and help mechanisms to assist you if any problems arise with any purchased products or services?
6. Does the site appear professional?

Hate sites

‘Online hate is as much a part of the web as e-commerce, porn sites and portals. From neo-Nazis and skinheads to the Ku Klux Klan, almost every hate group in America has its own website.’

Lakshmi Chaudhry, Wired magazine

What is termed ‘hate’ literature represents a growing presence on the internet, whether it appears in anti-Muslim or anti-Semitic websites, the Ku Klux Klan site, or other racist, sexist or homophobic sites. However, the presence of hate sites on the internet has been shown not to have increased membership of racist organisations. Jordan Kessler from the Anti-Defamation League says the internet ‘has been extremely bad for hate groups. They’ve been exposed, scrutinised, and poked at’. Hate groups have traditionally been secretive, and exposing their propaganda online has left them open to public exposure and condemnation.

Author Michael Jay Tucker maintains that ‘there is no poison on earth more potent, nor half so deadly, as a partial truth mixed with passion’. But Alan Dershowitz has suggested a solution: ‘The best answer to bad speech is good speech.’ His proposition is strengthened by the many counter-responses to hateful or other inaccurate information posted online. There are now many anti-hate sites on the internet.

Membership may not be the only measure of the influence of racist organisations. Rabbi Abraham Cooper, an Associate Dean at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, is concerned that ‘at risk’ individuals could find validation for their hate on the web.

Cyberstalking and bullying

Cyberstalking is the act of repeatedly threatening or harassing someone over the internet via email or other electronic communication device. This phenomenon is similar to offline stalking.
The difference with cyberstalking is that the offence can be carried out in the same room as the victim, or from the other side of the world. The technology makes it easier for stalkers to mask their identity and disguise their location. Sex crime prosecutor Linda Fairstein says that ‘the rate of cyberstalking has escalated enormously in the past few years with the spread of the internet. It provides a new method of committing the same kind of crime’.

An Australian survey of 13,000 girls found that 42 per cent had experienced some form of online bullying. Adolescence psychologist and National Coalition Against Bullying spokesman Dr Michael Carr-Gregg believes that a ‘whole new lexicon’ of bullying has developed through the internet. Masquerading (where users impersonate someone else to send out inflammatory messages) and flaming (where torrents of abuse are levelled against others) are common online.

Sexism and sexual harassment

‘When the laws against sexual discrimination were being put in place, the kind of things that people were doing was putting Playboy posters up or leaving magazines open in full view. Now it is electronic, so it is a little less obvious but it is no less offensive or difficult for women.’

Martha Burk, Cult of Power: Sex Discrimination in Corporate America and What Can Be Done About It

Cultural imperialism

‘Traditionally, Third World countries have been concerned that the free flow will actually lead to a one-way flow of information from western organisations like news media, which dominate the international flow of information.’

Madanmohan Rao, Communications Director, United Nations Inter Press Service

Figure 3.22: The number of internet hosts per country. Australia is one of the heaviest users of the internet.
The internet was an American invention, and it continues to be dominated by American culture. The 2006 CIA World Factbook shows that the United States has the most internet host computers, with 195 million, followed by the European Union (22 million) and Japan (21 million). These figures demonstrate the overwhelming concentration of American internet control.

In most countries, traditional media are governed by regulations that control how much content must be locally produced. ‘Information on the internet is not restricted by national borders, like publications,’ points out the Electronic Frontier Foundation of Australia. ‘It flows freely in and out of every nation on Earth, like the sea.’ The global nature of the internet makes it difficult to monitor where content is sourced. Existing local content laws have proved to be unenforceable by any nation that has attempted to apply them. This has contributed to what researchers have termed the ‘internationalism of culture’.

In the book The Electronic Colonialism of the Pacific, the authors speculate that the internet also provides a perfect opportunity for minorities to project a global presence. For example, the websites for the Cape York Land Council in north-eastern Australia and the Centre for World Indigenous Studies in Washington can share the experiences of indigenous people with the world.

The internet is also extensively used by political groups in countries with dictatorial governments. Most recently the internet has been used by both sides involved in the second Iraq War and in Israel’s invasion of Lebanon. News websites, such as CNN and Al Jazeera, have contributed to reporting from both sides of the conflict, while blogs tell of the first-hand experiences of those caught up in the conflict.

Journalist David Amis writes that, in the traditional media, ‘nearly everything we read, viewed or heard about the [Iraq] war was filtered, assessed and interpreted by the journalist’. He believes that the internet shifts this ‘balance of power’. Judith Shulevitz, New York editor of online magazine Slate, believes that the internet is very democratising, making it harder to demonise the enemy because alternative viewpoints in the conflict are so accessible. Firsthand reports and personalised contributions on the internet add local flavour by indicating the strength of feeling on both sides of the conflict. Amis believes that these reports are often the only way we can get a true picture of the impact of a war.

The internet has made a significant difference to how the Iraq War has been debated. Amis writes that the internet ‘has allowed discussion to take place across a wide range of forums, bringing together people who would never have met in any other circumstance. More

Figure 3.23: Al Jazeera provides a non-western perspective on events in the Middle East. It launched its English language edition in 2006, offering a local viewpoint in the region. Meanwhile American news outlets such as CNN can be accessed in non-western countries.
Importantly, it has allowed for the growth of forums where people from both sides can participate. While the traditional media are still a major source of news and comment, the potential of the internet to offer alternative viewpoints and interpretations of the war has been demonstrated.

However, language barriers are still a significant obstacle to internet use, particularly in cultures that do not use Roman characters in their writing. Journalist Kieren McCarthy from *The Guardian* writes that “if your first language is Chinese, Arabic, Hindi or Tamil, you will be scrabbling to find a link to a translated version in your language on most websites. Even finding a website in the first place requires that you master the western alphabet — have you ever tried to type “.com” in Chinese?’ Internet domain names are managed by the US government-controlled company ICANN (the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), but many countries are offended by the need to apply to a US organisation to have their languages accepted as legitimate online.

**Activities**

1. How would you go about ensuring that information you find on the internet is suitable for use in your assignments? Is there any information you have rejected or would reject? Why? If you have a system for finding good information, or know of a number of reliable information sources, share them with the class.

2. Women view computers with ‘critical distance and ambivalence’ in contrast to the typical ‘male techno-evangelism’, says Dr Zoe Sofoulis. In your experience, do you believe this to be true? Define how you think women view and use computers, and compare it with how you think males view and use computers. Is there a technology gap between the sexes and, if so, do you believe it is diminishing? Discuss this with other members of the class.

3. Feminist author Dale Spender once wrote that the internet was a new forum for sexual harassment and male domination. This statement was made in the early years of the internet. Do you think that the internet has changed significantly since Spender wrote this? Have any members of the class been harassed on the internet — for example, sent unwanted sexist email or pornographic images, or verbally harassed while engaged in online conversations? Discuss strategies for dealing with such situations.

4. It is often stated that ‘global culture is American culture’. How do you think that the internet either contributes to this situation or alleviates it? Provide examples of American cultural domination on the internet, and find contrasting examples of minority cultures using the net to publish information from their cultural perspective.