

**THE SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNICATION AND THE ARTS  
INQUIRY INTO THE SEXUALISATION  
OF CHILDREN IN THE  
CONTEMPORARY MEDIA  
ENVIRONMENT**

**SUBMISSION BY**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1. Despite public concerns, there are currently no representations in the mainstream media environment that a reasonable adult would perceive as 'sexualisation of children'.
2. A robust network of Federal, State and Territory Laws works to prevent the sexualisation of children, making it illegal to produce, distribute or possess images of: 'material that depicts a person ... who is ... under 18 years of age, and who ... appears to be engaged in a sexual pose, or sexual activity'.
3. Public concerns about the sexualisation of children in the media are due to the confusion of a number of distinct issues.
4. Some commentators are concerned that children are now being targeted as a market by consumer capitalism. This is a separate issue from the sexual abuse of children or the production and distribution of child pornography, and must not be confused with them.
5. There is a concern that children in twenty first century Australia are becoming sexual at an earlier age than those in previous generations. In fact, Australian children are currently protected from sexual information and contact until a significantly higher age than children at most periods in Western history.
6. There exists a concern that levels of sexual abuse of children in Australia are increasing. This is not the case. As we are only now discovering, levels of sexual abuse of children in Australia in previous decades were appallingly high, but they were not reported because the children were not believed. This is now changing - which is a positive step.
7. Some Australians are concerned about the sexual behaviour of young adults over the age of consent. However the majority of Australians believe that pre-marital sex is acceptable. The correct government response to this issue is nationally consistent, age-appropriate, values-based sexuality education that ensures that any sexual practice is safe and consensual.

8. Some Australians are concerned that non-explicit sexualised images of adults in the media that might be seen by children. However, the current classification system ensures that only 'discreetly implied' images of sexuality that are not of 'high impact' may be seen by children under the age of 15, and research shows that the majority of Australians support this system.
9. Some Australians are concerned by the fact that post-pubescent adolescents are exploring their sexuality. However, this is a normal part of healthy development. Again, the correct government response to this issue is nationally consistent, age-appropriate, values-based sexuality education that ensures that any sexual practice is safe and consensual.
10. There is a general concern about body-image disorders in girls and young women, particularly anorexia. However, research shows that this is not caused by exposure to media representations. The best predictors are a middle class background; having a perfectionist personality; and parents who tend to be controlling.
11. There is a general abhorrence in Australia towards the production of sexually explicit images of children (child pornography/child abuse materials). This is dealt with by a robust network of Federal, State and Territory laws.
12. We must fight against attempts by special interest groups to hijack the fight against child sexual abuse and the production and distribution of child pornography by using the inaccurate label of 'sexualisation of children in the media' to make their agendas seem more important, and to steal attention and resources from the real problems.

## INTRODUCTION

I am an Associate Professor in Film and Television at Queensland University of Technology. I have a particular expertise on sexuality and the media, an area in which I have been researching and publishing for over ten years (McKee, 1996; McKee, 2000; McKee, 2005). This includes research on the effects on young people of exposure to sexualised materials (McKee, 2000b; McKee, 2007).

I have recently completed a three year project funded by the Australian Research Council studying sexually explicit media in Australia. The report emerging from this research included a chapter that addressed the issue of protecting children from pornography (McKee, Albury and Lumby, 2008).

The Committee on the Environment, Communication and the Arts has been tasked to examine:

the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment, including radio and television, children's magazines, other print and advertising material and the Internet.

In order to address this point, I first examined the examples that are commonly given in public debates about this issue as demonstrating the sexualisation of children in the media: Bratz dolls; *Total Girl* magazine; *Disney Girl* magazine; *Barbie Girl* magazine; *Home and Away*; and the David Jones catalogue (Rush and La Nauze, 2006).

My finding is that I do not believe that a 'reasonable adult' would see any sexualisation in these examples.

This legal term comes from the robust network of legislation around Australia which prevents the representation of children in a sexualised way (discussed in detail below). For example, under the Northern Territory Criminal Code Act it is illegal to produce:

material that depicts, describes or represents, in a manner that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult, a person who is a child or who

appears to be a child... engaging in sexual activity ... or in a sexual, offensive or demeaning context (s125A).

From my expert analysis, *Disney Girl*, *Total Girl* and *Barbie Girl*, and the David Jones catalogue do not feature images of children which would be perceived as sexual by a 'reasonable adult'.

It is clear that some commentators are very concerned about these publications, and we should explore those concerns and see how they might be addressed. But those concerns are currently being described in the wrong language. These are not sexualised images of children. As Caroline Overington notes of the David Jones images that have been attacked by some commentators: 'The children in its catalogue were not scantily clad; they were dressed as children often are these days, in smart, designer clothes' (Overington, 2007: 13). And as commentator Duncan Fine says:

I looked at the pictures and I thought, if you were to look at that and see something even vaguely pornographic, there's got to be something wrong with you... It's the same with kids in bikinis. If you think a seven-year-old running across Bronte Beach is a sexual image, well, you have a major problem (Fine, quoted in Overington, 2007: 13).

As Rush and La Nauze note in the report *Corporate Paedophilia*, 'The issue of viewer interpretation is of particular importance for the sexualisation of children' (2006: 6). The key figure here is that used in the relevant legislation – the 'reasonable adult'. Having examined the adverts that Rush and La Nauze discuss, it is clear that a reasonable adult would not see in them any sexual content.

Recent debates about a fourteen year old Polish model at Fashion Week may seem to be related to this inquiry, but discussion about this issue has largely been around whether fourteen year old children should be working in an adult industry. This is a general issue that applies to children working in television, film – and indeed, could be seen to raise the question of whether any child under the age of sixteen should be allowed to do any paid work, or should rather be

required to stay in school and focus on study. It is therefore not directly related to the issues raised by this inquiry. It is true that some writers claim that images of a fourteen year old model are the same as child pornography: 'What's the distinction between kiddie porn and the photographs depicting the Polish child in her sultry poses? ... I don't see one at all' (Adams, 2008: 12). However, based on my extensive experience of studying sexually explicit images, I would disagree strongly with this assessment.

The fact that a reasonable adult would be unable to find images of sexualised children in the mainstream media is not surprising. As mentioned above, there is a robust network of Federal, State and Territory Laws in Australia which explicitly make it illegal to produce or distribute images of children which are sexualised in any way, which includes putting children into sexual poses or contexts as well as showing them engaged in actual sexual acts. I explore this legislation in detail below.

Given that this is the case, how do we explain public concern about the issue of the sexualisation of children in the media? In order to answer this question, I performed a textual analysis (McKee, 2003) of public comments made by concerned commentators on this issue.

It appears that a 2006 report issued by the Australia Institute, *Corporate Paedophilia* (Rush and La Nauze, 2006), has to a large extent set the terms for the debate. It turns out that in doing so, the report and subsequent public debate have taken eight quite distinct issues – none of which directly concern the sexualisation of children in the media – and collapsed these together under that heading. I have explored these eight issues in detail in this submission.

The sexual exploitation of children, and the production and distribution of child pornography, are abhorrent crimes. The Australian community is united in its determination that they must be stamped out. It is a worrying tendency that some commentators are attempting to distract us from fighting these problems by hijacking

the label of child sexualisation and applying it to other issues in order to make those issues seem more pressing. For example, Rush and La Nauze claim that:

The metaphor of corporate paedophilia ... draws on a parallel between actual paedophilia ... and corporate use of children for the financial benefit of adults (2006: 1)

The argument that any marketing of products to children is just as bad as sexually abusing them would be offensive to many Australians. It trivialises the real issue of child abuse by equating it with other practices that the majority of Australians believe are nowhere near as abhorrent. We must fight any attempt to distract us from the real issues of child sexual abuse and the production and distribution of child pornography, and keep our energy and attention firmly focussed on stamping out these horrendous crimes.

#### **LEGISLATION PREVENTING THE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN IN THE MEDIA**

As noted above, an analysis of the examples which are commonly given in these debates shows that they do not, in fact, represent children in a sexual way. This is not surprising, given that a robust network of Federal, State and Territory legislation prevents the sexualisation of children in the media. It may be that the commentators who have complained about *Total Girl*, *Disney Girl* and so on are not aware of this legislation, and so it is worth reviewing the legislation and its scope.

Under the Federal Criminal Code Act 1995, it is illegal to use a carriage service (including the Internet) to distribute or access (s474.19):

material that depicts a person, or a representation of a person, who is, or appears to be, under 18 years of age, and who ... is engaged in, or appears to be engaged in, a sexual pose, or sexual activity (s472.1).

Under the Victorian Crimes Act 1958, it is illegal to produce (s68) or possess (s70):

a film, photograph, publication or computer game that describes or depicts a person who is, or appears to be, a minor engaging in sexual activity or depicted in an indecent sexual manner or context (s67A).

Under the New South Wales Crimes Act 1900, it is illegal to:

produce material that depicts or describes, in a manner that would in all the circumstances cause offence to reasonable persons, a person under (or apparently under) the age of 16 years ... engaged in sexual activity, or ... in a sexual context (s91H).

Under the Western Australian Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Enforcement Act 1996, it is illegal to produce, distribute or possess (s60):

an article that describes or depicts, in a manner that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult, a person who is, or who looks like, a child under 16 years of age (whether the person is engaged in sexual activity or not) (s3).

Under the Queensland Classification of Publications Act 1991, it is illegal to possess (s13), produce (s17) or distribute in any way (s12, 15, 16) any:

photograph or any other image or material (however produced or reproduced) that ... depicts or describes in pictorial or other form a person who is, or who looks like, a child under 16 years (whether the person is engaged in sexual activity or not) in a way that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult person (s3).

Under the South Australian Criminal Law Consolidation Act (1935), it is illegal to produce, disseminate (s63) or possess (s63A): 'Material ... that ... describes or depicts a child engaging in sexual activity' (s62).

Under the Tasmanian Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Enforcement Act 1995, it is illegal to produce (s72), distribute (s73A) or possess (s74):



material that describes or depicts, in a way that a reasonable person would regard as being, in all the circumstances, offensive, a person who is or who appears to be under the age of 18 years ... engaged in sexual activity ... or in a sexual context (s71).

Under the Australian Capital Territory Crimes Act 1900 it is illegal to produce images of a child 'engaged in an activity of a sexual nature' (s64).

Under the Northern Territory Criminal Code Act it is illegal to produce:

material that depicts, describes or represents, in a manner that is likely to cause offence to a reasonable adult, a person who is a child or who appears to be a child... engaging in sexual activity ... or in a sexual, offensive or demeaning context (s125A).

This robust network of legislation is strongly enforced around Australia. My analysis of the examples which are often cited in public debates about sexualisation of children in the Australian media found that they did not in fact present sexualised images. It seems that the legislation is successful in keeping sexualised images of children out of the mainstream media.

This should not be taken as grounds for relaxing vigilance, however. We must all support the relevant legislation. Any member of the public who sees any image that they believe sexualises a child should immediately contact the police, who will investigate and prosecute the crime. It is vital that this legislation be kept in place, and that police forces in Australia are funded at an appropriate level to address this abhorrent crime.

**WHY IS THERE PUBLIC CONCERN ABOUT SEXUALISED IMAGES OF CHILDREN IN THE MEDIA?**

Given that the current legislative framework is proving successful in keeping sexualised images of children out of the mainstream media in Australia, why is there public concern about this issue?

My textual analysis suggests that a number of distinct concerns are being confused in these public debates, including the Australia Institute report *Corporate Paedophilia*. These include concerns:

1. that children are being targeted as a market by consumer capitalism.
2. that children in twenty first century Australia are becoming sexual at an earlier age than previous generations.
3. that levels of sexual abuse of children in Australia are increasing.
4. about the sexual behaviour of young adults over the age of consent.
5. about non-explicit sexualised images of adults in the media that might be seen by children.
6. about the exploration of sexual identities by post-pubescent adolescents.
7. about body-image disorders in girls and young women.
8. about the production of sexually explicit images of children (child pornography/child abuse materials).

The last of these is of vital concern to governments and must be addressed, as discussed above.

Some of the other concerns are very real and must be addressed, but there is a misunderstanding about their causes. Others are based on incorrect information. And some concern individual taste or morality. Each is discussed below.

**A CONCERN THAT CHILDREN ARE BEING TARGETED AS A MARKET BY CONSUMER CAPITALISM.**

Some commentators are concerned that children are now being targeted by consumer capitalism in a way that was not the case in previous generations. This is particularly the argument of The Australia Institute's report *Corporate Paedophilia*, and is repeated by many other commentators. As Phillip Adams states:

The age of consent for commerce has certainly been lowered. You still cannot physically seduce a child under the age of sixteen, but [retailers and advertisers] can seduce them any other way.... Mighty corporations hire all the smart-arses to find ways to turns kids into purchasers of crap ... It's that seduction of the innocent that is objectionable (Adams, quoted in Overington, 2007: 13).

In addressing this concern, two points are worth making.

Firstly, this is not the same thing as the sexualisation of children in the media – although some commentators have confused the issues.

Secondly, as in the previous points, there is a lack of historical understanding behind such comments. They rely on the idea that in previous generations children were not targeted by advertisers, or the material they were sold was more worthwhile. Historically speaking, this is not the case. In previous generations children were targeted in just the same way by advertising for products related to the media – such as the Davy Crockett merchandising 'craze' in the 1950s, which saw adverts for such 'crap' products as: '[Davy Crockett] dolls the height of eight year olds that girls could square dance with' (Griffin, 1999: 116).

There is still a valid question to be asked, however. Is such marketing acceptable? Should children be allowed to live in a capitalist society, or must they be protected from it? This is an important philosophical question with which any government must engage. However, it must not be confused with the sexualisation of children. Sexual abuse of children and the production of child pornography are serious issues,

and they should not be trivialised by confusing them with quite separate issues about economic philosophy.

### **A CONCERN THAT CHILDREN IN TWENTY FIRST CENTURY AUSTRALIA ARE BECOMING SEXUAL AT AN EARLIER AGE THAN PREVIOUS GENERATIONS**

Many commentators in this debate are primarily concerned by the perception that children in twenty first century Australia are becoming sexually aware at an earlier age than was true for previous generations (Rush and La Nauze, 2006: 41) and that the age at which they are being 'push[ed] into adulthood' is being lowered ('Most of us', 2008: B01). For example, child psychologist Joe Tucci worries that: 'we're seeing increased problem sexual behaviour with children'; while Associate Professor Elizabeth Handley is concerned that 'it's not [just] dressing up anymore' ('Most of us', 2008: B01). They then blame the media for causing this (B01).

However, this assumption is based on a lack of historical information. Historically, in fact, children in the twenty-first century are held off from awareness of sexuality for a much longer period than were those in previous generations. In Australia, for example, in the first part of the twentieth century the age of consent for sex and marriage was twelve. In the nineteenth century it was ten (Office for Women, 2005). But in twenty first century Australia, the age of consent has been raised to sixteen in all Australian States and Territories except for South Australia and Tasmania (seventeen). It is clearly the case that the belief that children in previous generations were protected from sexual awareness until a later age than is currently the case is not based on historical evidence.

More generally, commentators are concerned that we should let 'our children be children', and that it is more difficult to do this in twenty first century Australia than was the case in the past (Critchley, 2007: W09). But again, as historians have shown, in previous generations

children were treated as basically small adults, and were not protected from the realities of adult life (Aries, 1996). Seven year old children in nineteenth century UK, for example, were working thirteen hour days six days a week in what we would now regard as intolerable working conditions (Grayling, 2007: 174).

A historical perspective thus makes clear that in fact our attitudes towards children in twenty first century Australia – including protecting them from sexual information until they are ready to deal with it – are much more enlightened than was the case in previous generations. We now keep children safe from the concerns of the adult world for much longer than was the case previously – including from sexual awareness.

#### **A CONCERN THAT LEVELS OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIA ARE INCREASING.**

Some Australians are deeply concerned that levels of sexual abuse of children in Australia are increasing, and that the media must be a causal factor in this, leading people to see children in a sexual way (Rush and La Nauze, 2006: 39). *The Canberra Times*, for examples, worries that: ‘While children might be being influenced at some level [by sexualised media]... more importantly, what sort of message does it send out to paedophiles?’ (‘Most of us, 2008: B01).

However, this concern is based on the false assumption that levels of sexual abuse are increasing.

All Australians are rightly concerned about the sexual abuse of children. Such abuse is very real and abhorrent, and we must do everything we can to stamp it out. In order to do so we must face the reality of the situation. One part of that reality is the fact that there is no evidence that levels of child abuse in Australia are increasing. There is, however, evidence, that levels of *awareness of, reporting of, and acknowledgement of*, child sexual abuse are increasing.

The evidence for this can be seen in the fact that although we now see many more news stories about child sexual abuse in Australia than was previously the case, the majority of these stories are reporting sexual abuse which took place in the past – often several decades in the past. For example, the Mullighan Report of the South Australian Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry heard from 792 people who said they had been sexually abused by 1733 alleged perpetrators from the 1930s to the present ('Foul abuse', 2008: 22).

The real change is that in the twenty first century, we are aware of the prevalence of child sexual abuse and willing to face up to it. Many of the stories about sexual abuse in the past explicitly make the point that when the children in previous generations tried to report sexual abuse, they were ignored, silenced or threatened. For example, Justice Mullighan notes that: 'Most of the people who said they disclosed the sexual abuse as children were not believed.... One lady disclosed it for the first time when she was 81' ('Foul abuse, 2008: 22).

When people claim that they never heard about the sexual abuse of children in the past, therefore, this is not a positive thing. It is evidence of the appalling situation where children were not only sexually abused, but society as a whole colluded in their abuse by refusing to believe them when they did speak up.

In previous decades, the primary assumption was that 'children should be seen and not heard'. Our attitudes towards children nowadays are much more positive. The fact that the vast majority of stories about child sexual abuse now emerging in the media relate to abuse that occurred in the past, and usually several decades in the past, makes it clear that the increasing visibility of child sexual abuse is a positive step. It is the result of a change in society to acknowledge the reality of this abhorrent crime; and to take seriously its eradication.

**THE SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR OF YOUNG ADULTS OVER THE AGE OF CONSENT.**

The age of consent for heterosexual intercourse is sixteen in all Australian States and Territories except for South Australia and Tasmania (seventeen).

Some commentators are deeply concerned that young adults of consenting age are sexually active, engaging in sexual acts including casual sex outside of committed relationships. They refer to this as 'raunch culture' (McInerney, 2008: 26), where young women are being more sexually active, and behaving in sexually forthright ways in public ('Girls just wanna', 2008: 20).

However, these commentators do not represent the wider Australian community. Research shows that the majority of Australians believe that premarital sex is acceptable (Smith et al, 2003: 188). And as author Emily Maguire has argued, many of the commentators who condemn the behaviour of 'sluts' are simply reproducing old forms of sexist prejudice which said that women should be asexual (in Keenan, 2008: 30). We can see this when commentators condemn young women for being 'modern day tart[s]' (Das, 2005: 15).

Governments should not be involved in trying to legislate for this particular view of morality. In particular, little useful can be taken from those commentators who accuse young women over the age of consent of being 'tart's - or synonyms such as 'common' or 'vulgar'. Australia has now matured as a nation to the point where such prejudicial insults about the behaviour of working class Australians can no longer be regarded as a useful contribution to public debate.

All Australians would agree that the sexual lives of all consenting adults should be safe and consensual. This should include aiming for lower rates of unplanned pregnancies, and lower rates of infections by sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. This should be the focus of education programs. Research has shown that the best way

to lower rates of unplanned pregnancies and STIs is through age-appropriate sex education. The simple promotion of abstinence does not work (Weiss, 2007: 452; Rodriguez and Clarke, 2008: 38).

#### **NON-EXPLICIT SEXUALISED IMAGES OF ADULTS IN THE MEDIA THAT MIGHT BE SEEN BY CHILDREN**

Many commentators are concerned not about sexualised images of children, but about non-explicit sexualised images of adults in the media that might be seen by their children. For example, *The Canberra Times* notes that: 'On any given Saturday morning, young children can view practically pornographic video clips on free-to-air TV, such as those of the Pussycat Dolls', and that: 'A series of letters already received by the [Senate] committee from members of the public detail the concerns of parents about their children's daily confrontation with sexual messages in advertising and media' ('Most of us, 2008: B01). This is one of the main concerns of the Australia Institute *Corporate Paedophilia* report.

This is obviously a very real concern for parents. However, it is not the same thing as sexualised images of children in the media. And, further, it is disingenuous to suggest that nothing is being done about this. Australia already has in place an extensive, well-tested and publicly-supported classification system which addresses exactly this issue – what should be available for children to view in the media.

The Australian classification system requires that explicit representations of sexuality be classified X and only be available for sale to adults, from the ACT and NT.

However, it does not require that all mentions or representations of sexuality be removed from general circulation.

The Guidelines for the Classification of Films and Computer Games (which are also used in the classification of broadcast television), state that for material to be rated as suitable for children, it can include



representations of sexuality and nudity, but the impact of these must be 'very mild' (G) or 'mild' (PG). In G rated material, 'Sexual activity should be very mild and very discreetly implied, and be justified by context'. In PG material, 'Sexual activity should be mild and discreetly implied, and be justified by context'. For both classifications: 'Nudity should be justified by context'.

The Guidelines for the Classification of Publications 2005 allow that for Unrestricted publications, 'Sexual activity involving consenting adults may be discreetly implied in realistic depictions. It should not be high in impact'. They similarly allow representations of sexualised nudity in Unrestricted publications, as long as they are not 'high in impact'.

It is therefore possible that children may see mild, discreet images of sexuality in the media.

It is clear that the parents who are complaining about programs such as *Video Hits* are unhappy with the functioning of the current classification system. However, research has shown that the community as a whole is happy with it. In 2004, the Office of Film and Literature Classification conducted a series of Community Assessment Panels to find out whether the Office's classification systems matched community standards. They discovered that most Australians are happy with the classification system (Urbis Keys Young, 2005: 34). Indeed, there was a general community feeling in the panels that the Board of Classification was too harsh in its classification of sexualised elements in the media, as the community members were more concerned about violence in the media and its possible effects on children (Urban Keys Young, 2005: iv).

Similarly, a 2007 representative survey of 1000 adults in Australia by the Australian Communication Media Authority found that 90% 'consider that they should be able to decide what they watch on commercial free-to-air television', 93,5% 'consider parents should be able to decide what their children watch' and 78.0% 'had seen no

content of concern on commercial free-to-air television in the last twelve months'. ACMA considers that: 'These results are indicative of a high level of acceptance of the current arrangements' (ACMA, 2007: 2)

It would be possible to completely change the Australian classification system in order to remove all references to or representations of any kind of sexuality, no matter how discreet, from the public sphere.

However, in order to overhaul the classification system in this way it would be necessary not only to ignore the views of the community, but also to overturn the entire basis of the current Australian classification system. As stated in the Guidelines for the Classification of Films and Computer Games, the system is based on the fine balance of three key principles:

- (a) adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want;
- (b) minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them;
- (c) everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive.

Some critics of the system want to focus only on the second two points, and ignore the first. This is not how the system currently operates.

Of course, if it could be proved scientifically that viewing non-explicit sexual content such as *Video Hits* causes psychological damage to children, this would override the fact that the majority of the community is not concerned about this content. However, this is not the case. It is true that some researchers claim to have discovered negative effects on children from exposure to non-explicit images of sexuality (Strasburger, 2005). But other researchers refute this research (Gauntlett, 1998). It remains a hugely contested area of research, and many of the researchers who claim such effects are, on analysis, clearly biased and not objective in their claims (as in the case of Strasburger, for example).

### **THE EXPLORATION OF SEXUAL IDENTITIES BY POST-PUBESCENT ADOLESCENTS.**

It is a necessary part of the healthy development of children that post-pubescent adolescents will explore their emerging sexual identities (Zabin and Hayward, 1993: 37-51, 55-60; Moore and Rosenthal, 2003: 1-21).

Some commentators wish that this were not the case, and that adolescents could remain asexual until the age of sixteen. They are particularly concerned that the kinds of sexuality that adolescents are exploring are too 'tarty' (Critchley, 2007: W09).

There is a long history of concern about adolescent sexuality, and a wish that it did not exist (Odem, 1995). However, this simply denies the reality of adolescent development. Once again, the correct response to concerns about adolescent sexuality is to ensure that age-appropriate sex education and support is made available (Bradley et al, 1999; Roker and Coleman, 1998). Again, we must reject the views of those commentators who accuse adolescents of being 'tarty', or synonyms such as 'common' or 'vulgar'. As noted above, such elitist insults contribute little to public debate on these issues.

### **BODY IMAGE DISORDERS IN GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN.**

There is public concern about rising rates of reporting of body-image disorders such as anorexia and purging among girls and young women in Australia. Many commentators, looking for an explanation for this, turn to the media. For example, a letter writer to the *Moreland Leader* claims that:

Youngsters from the age of 10 are reading magazines like *Dolly* and *Girlfriend*, which have content relating to sex, drugs, diet and alcohol, and being vile. They act on these issues... No wonder we have young girls becoming anorexic, and smoking at such a tender age (Bator, 2008: 14).

All Australians would agree that body image disorders are a very real concern. However, the research into the causes of these disorders does not suggest that the media is to blame.

There seem to be quite distinct pathologies for anorexia and for purging illnesses.

In the case of anorexia, the latest research by Professors Catharine Lumby (University of New South Wales) and Elspeth Probyn (University of Sydney) (not yet published), working with young women with anorexia, suggests that images of skinny women in the media – such as fashion models – do not contribute to anorexia in young women. Rather, their research suggests that one of the main differences in media consumption between women with anorexia and women without the illness is that there is a spike in consumption of food media – such as cooking shows - in the former group.

Their literature review also found that the best predictors of a young women becoming anorexic were not her media consumption, but a middle class background, the fact that the young women were high achievers and perfectionists, and parents who tended to be controlling.

In the case of purging illnesses, however, there appears to be a correlation between wanting to look physically attractive, and purging behaviour. The media is not causal in this process, despite the claims of some researchers (Field et al, 1999; Martinez-Gonzalez et al, 2000). Such research suffers from the common problems with ‘media effects’ research; it confuses correlation with causality; and it starts with the assumption of a causal link and then sets out to prove it, discovering only weak correlations in the process (McKee, 2007b; Gauntlett, 1998).

Further, there is an unconvincing assumption underlying much of this research that if media representations could be changed, ideals of physical beauty could be removed from a society. This belief is

misplaced and unconvincing, relying on the assumption that if it weren't for mass media cultures would exist without exclusive standards of physical beauty. We know historically and anthropologically that this is not the case. All cultures, including those that existed before mass media, have had unrealistic standards of physical beauty. In the case of Classical Greece, for example, standards of physical beauty were more stereotyped and unrealistic than those of contemporary Australia, without any mass media representations (Hawley, 1997).

Indeed, in much of the public discussion about these issues there is an underlying desire for a world in which nobody would care about physical appearance, valuing instead academic achievements (Rush and La Nauze, 2006: 36-38). I am not convinced that such a world is desirable, quite apart from the question of whether it is achievable.

#### **THE PRODUCTION OF CHILD PORNOGRAPHY.**

The production of sexualised images of children is abhorrent. As noted above, Australia has in place a robust network of legislation that criminalises the production, circulation and dissemination of such images. Police forces and government agencies around Australia and internationally are working together, and internationally, to target the producers and consumers of such material. This is having positive results, with several global paedophile rings being broken up in recent years (Dodd, 2008: 16; ABC, 2008).

This system is working effectively to prevent the production and circulation of such material in Australia. It is vitally important that this legislation remain in place, and that police forces around Australia are funded at an appropriate level to continue this work.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Several of the issues which are being confused in these debates are important in their own right, and are worthy of public discussion.

What is of concern, however, is that the language of 'sexualisation of children' is being hijacked and forced into service where it is not appropriate in order to make these debates seem more pressing.

Child sexual abuse and the production and distribution of child pornography are abhorrent crimes. Australia is now rightly paying attention to these crimes, and putting energy and resources into stopping them. It is unacceptable that commentators concerned with other debates are attempting to distract attention away from child sexual abuse by hijacking the terms of the debate for their own concerns. We must keep our attention, our energy and our resources squarely focussed on the real problems – child sexual abuse and the production and distribution of child pornography. These must be stopped.

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