Submission to Senate Economics References Committee

Inquiry into personal choice and community impacts: Classification of publications, films and computer games (term e)

Australian Psychological Society

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Senate Economics References Committee
Inquiry into personal choice and community impacts:

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes this additional opportunity to respond to the Senate Economics References Committee Inquiry into personal choice and community impacts, with specific regards to the Classification of publications, films and computer games (term e).We also refer the Committee to our previous submission to the current Inquiry.

A key goal of the APS is to actively contribute psychological knowledge for the promotion and enhancement of community wellbeing. Psychology in the Public Interest is the section of the APS dedicated to the communication and application of psychological knowledge to enhance community wellbeing and promote equitable and just treatment of all segments of society.

The APS believes that the discipline and profession of Psychology has contributions to offer in striking an evidence-based balance between notions of individual liberty, responsibility, 'personal choice' and 'nanny state' concerns, the related risks of 'blaming the victim' by expecting people to bear the health care costs of those choices, and of direct or indirect harm to others, versus adopting a whole of community approach to prevention and health promotion.

Summary and recommendations

While there has long been debate over finding the appropriate balance between control of media (with censorship being an extreme end of control), and people's rights to freedom of expression and choice as media consumers, the APS believes that the classification of publications, films and computer games is one area that government intervention is warranted for the protection of individuals, particularly those who are vulnerable such as children.

The APS recommends that policy makers and regulatory bodies recognise that, despite their ability to engage with media, children and young people still need protection from content that exploits their immaturity and could harm their development. Further, violent actions by individuals have negative economic and social impacts for the whole community. Such actions may be influenced by condoned and unlimited exposure to and interaction with violent media and gaming.

Some restriction of personal choice is always required to ensure both individuals and the broader community are protected from harmful material, for example material that is overly sexualised and/or violent. Such material has been linked to unhealthy relationship expectations, desensitisation to violence and broader social expectations about the use of violence in everyday situations.

Therefore, it is recommended that the Government:

- keep up to date with the research literature, and use it to frame policy and regulation, including the National Classification Scheme
- keep abreast of the content of the internet, gaming and new technological developments that facilitate distribution of materials in new and changing ways
- in evaluating calls for regulatory controls on programming and development, acknowledge that freedom of speech is not an absolute value but must be balanced against other community values
- ensure that violent content of media (films, gaming, television) aligns with the community desire for a safe environment
- ensure consumer input into the content of children's television and video games, particularly in terms of the values and attitudes presented to children
- develop and police effective regulations to apply to advertising directed to children
- ensure that classification systems are based on the research evidence, and are effectively applied, monitored and enforced. In particular, it is recommended that the NCS prioritise protecting children from harm and enhancing the healthy development of young people.

A public health approach to addressing the premature and overtly sexualisation of women and girls, and exposure to violence through publications such as film, advertising, literature and the media is recommended, which could involve a combination of public education, legislation (including classification) and targeted interventions that facilitate cultural change, while protecting individuals and communities from harm.

Individual (personal) choice in the context of public (good) health

To summarise, as stated in our previous submission to the current Inquiry, the APS believes the following need to be carefully considered in determining the right balance between individual personal choice and responsibility and the public good.

- The personal freedom to make decisions is an essential requirement for individual health and wellbeing. But personal choices and associated behaviours are shaped and influenced by a wide range of biological, social, environmental and economic factors (social determinants of health). Given the multitude of potential influences on individual behaviour, any measures to restrict or enhance personal choice should be supported by a sound evidence base.

- A distinction should be drawn between those (very few) actions that have consequences for the individual 'chooser' only, and those that may impact on others financially and socially, directly or indirectly (the 'harm principle'). Such harm might well extend to increased stressors for families, strain on health systems, services and costs from behaviours that jeopardise individual and community health. Classification of films, literature and other documents is an example where individual choice has a broader community impact. For example, viewing overly sexualised material has been linked to the objectification of women and in extreme cases linked to sexual violence whereas violent material is linked to desensitisation of violence, particularly among young people.

- Consideration needs to be made to the impact of laws about personal choice as they relate to children, young people and those with cognitive vulnerability who have limited capacities to make informed decisions to protect themselves or others. This is particularly the case with classification of films, literature and other documents in regards to violent and overtly sexual material.

- It is important to highlight the many, often covert, influences on choice and expose their effects. This enables policies to be developed that address harmful impacts. For example, the advertising industry increasingly exerts influence on personal choice through product placement within films and games directed at children.

- Individual actions impact on others within society. Individuals do not always have the motivation and the required resources to weigh up all the relevant costs, risks and benefits to make an informed and socially responsible decision.

Classification of publications, films and computer games (term e)

The remainder of the submission will address TOR e *Classification of publications, films and computer games.*

We refer to the committee to the [Australian Psychological Society's Media representations and responsibilities: Psychological Perspectives Paper,](#) which is a response to community concern about the impact of the media on individuals and society. This paper examines several psychological theories as to how the media influence changes in values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, as well as the impact of advertising on children.

The media play an indispensable role in modern life, providing information, education and entertainment. It is now widely acknowledged that the media are not a simple mirror of society. Rather, active decisions are made at every stage of media production as to what should be included, omitted, and when and how to present the material. The media thus play an active part in shaping our perception of the world, and our behaviour.

Debate has raged about the nature and extent of the negative impact of some aspects of media on individuals' values, beliefs attitudes and behaviour. At the same time, there is also debate over the ongoing struggle to find the appropriate balance between control of media (with censorship being an extreme end of control), and people's rights to freedom of expression and choice as media consumers.

Historically, the vast majority of psychological research on the media focussed on television. More recently there has been a surge of research in response to concerns regarding the effects of violent video games, and exposure to the internet. This research is based on understandings that there is a symbiotic relationship between media and our values, attitudes and behaviours. Most experts agree that exposure to and engagement with content that is highly sexualized, pornographic, violent, consumption-promoting, or perpetuating of negative stereotypes influences individuals' values, attitudes and behaviours. Further, the impersonal impact hypothesis highlights that many people believe that they themselves are immune from the influence of media, yet believe that others are susceptible.

Clearly, children need protection from content that exploits their immaturity and could harm their psychological development and mental health (Biggins & Handsley, 2000). Moreover, there is increasing evidence that adolescents' and young adults' viewing of highly sexualized images of women, pornography and violent material potentially skews their perspectives of normality and respectful interpersonal interaction whilst their brain continues to develop (a process that is not complete

until mid-20s). Adults too are subject to desensitisation effects from over exposure to violence and pornographic images.

Below is a discussion of several content areas considered to constitute an exposure risk for adults, young people and/or children.

The effects of violent media

Research consistently reports very high levels of exposure to violence through electronic media. Concerns about violent media exposure have traditionally focused on television violence, but more recently consumption of violent media in the format of video games has become increasingly prominent (APS, 2013). There has also been some limited attention paid to the effects of violent song lyrics (Anderson, Carnagey, & Eubanks, 2003).

It is therefore not surprising that there is widespread concern about the effects of violent media on individual and societal attitudes, values, and behaviour. Social learning theory suggests that individuals will imitate behaviour observed in the media and develop mental 'primes' and 'scripts' from material that is viewed. These implicit scripts then guide their later behaviour. These effects have been extensively researched and found to be consistent across age and culture (APS, 2013).

Repeated exposure to violence through television, movies, internet and gaming may lead to desensitisation to violence and to its normalisation. Thus, adults are prone to follow the 'script' in a situation which they find confronting and violence as a response to social situations becomes seen as 'normal'.

A fundamental concern for the APS is the harmful impact of pornography, specifically the predominance (and increase) of violence depicted, the overwhelming majority of which is against women. Research has found that almost 90 per cent of scenes in pornographic videos portrayed physical aggression, while nearly half contained verbal aggression and that almost all (94 per cent) of it was perpetrated against women (Wosnitzer & Bridges, 2007). Of equal concern is the response to violence by women, with most (nine in 10 in this study) of those acts of aggression being met with a neutral or a positive response by women (Wosnitzer & Bridges, 2007).

At an individual level, this violence impacts directly on relationship and sex expectations and norms, and in extreme examples has been linked to direct violence and sexual assault, with research pointing to associations between viewing pornography and committing sexually aggressive acts.

The depiction of violence leads to a social acceptance of violence and the shifting expectations of what is considered normal and healthy within a relationship,

especially for young people. More broadly, media, literature and films, including pornography, are a vehicle for which cultural norms are transmitted and embedded in our social, sexual and personal relations, strongly influencing what sort of behaviour we consider appropriate and the types of relationships that we consider healthy. These normalised ideals compress and constrain the conditions of possibility for women and girls lives and for fair and ethical gender relations .

The effects of violent media on children
Much psychological research has centred on the effects of violent media on children, for whom a range of undesirable consequences are feared. These encompass increased levels of aggressive behaviour, increased acceptance of violence as a normal part of life and as an effective way to achieve one's ends, and at the other extreme, the induction of fear and anxiety and the belief that the world is a 'mean and scary place' (APS, 2013).

Despite methodological complexities, most reviewers reach convergent conclusions with sufficient consistency to justify attention by parents, educators, legislators and the industry. Such effects can be summarised as follows:
- Children who watch violence on television or are exposed to violence via video games have a higher likelihood of behaving aggressively in the short term
- Persistent consumption of violent media is related to an increased likelihood of behaving aggressively in the long term and in some cases this may include serious criminal violence
- Consumption of violent media is just one of a number of factors that contribute to the tendency to violence and aggression, and its contribution is small to moderate (as is the case for all other measured antecedents of violence)
- Some children enjoy, and develop an appetite for, viewing violent material
- Viewing violence on television leads to immediate distress and fear in many children
- Many children retain long-term recurrent disturbing memories from viewed violence
- High levels of violence viewing are associated with heightened general fearfulness about life. These effects are consistent across cultures
- Beside increased aggression and fearfulness, effects include decreased empathy, and reduced pro-sociality
- Continual exposure to media violence increases the likelihood that children will be desensitised to real violence
- Age and gender are important influences on the nature of the effects
- Boys tend to be more directly affected than girls
- Negative effects of violent media are more consistently observed in younger than older children
- Most children's preferences are for exciting and humorous media, and violence is generally unwelcome except for its association with high levels of action

- Widespread community concern, particularly amongst parents and teachers, is based in part on direct experience of the effects of violent media on children.

It is generally agreed therefore, that prolonged exposure to media violence is one of the many interacting factors which lead to children being more likely to display aggressive behaviour in the long term. It is also agreed that the social context is important in determining the effects of exposure to violent media; for example, if an adult helps the child interpret and critique the viewed material, the negative effects are lessened.

The effects of sexualised media

Sexualization occurs when (among other things), a person's only ascribed value comes from his or her sexual appeal and behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics, a person is sexually objectified, and rather than being seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making, is made into a thing for others' sexual use; and/or sexuality is inappropriately and prematurely imposed upon a person such as a child (APA, 2010).

All forms of media provide examples of sexualized images of girls and women. Research shows that women more often than men are portrayed in a sexual manner (e.g., dressed in revealing clothing, with bodily postures or facial expressions that imply sexual readiness) and are objectified (e.g., used as a decorative object, or as body parts rather than a whole person).

Sexualization has been shown to have negative effects in a variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs. For example, cognitively, self-objectification has been repeatedly shown to detract from the ability to concentrate and focus one's attention, thus leading to impaired performance on mental activities such as mathematical computations or logical reasoning. Psychological research links sexualization with three of the most common mental health problems of girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression or depressed mood (APA, 2010).

As discussed above, pornography exposure also influences the perceptions and expectations of sexual normalcy for both men and women; this is particularly the case for on young people who are exploring and establishing their own values and belief systems.

Self-objectification has also been linked directly with diminished sexual health among adolescent girls (e.g., as measured by decreased condom use and diminished sexual assertiveness), and girls and young women who more frequently

consume or engage with mainstream media content offer stronger endorsement of sexual stereotypes that depict women as sexual objects (APA, 2010).

Such changes to values, attitudes and behaviours have significant economic and social impacts, representing not only a health system burden but also community burden of dysfunctional interpersonal relationships.

Sexualisation of children
The sexualisation of children is a particularly harmful effect of various media. The APS is concerned about the increased use of sexualised images of children and young people in all forms of media and advertising. Images which portray children in clothing and posed in ways designed to draw attention to adult sexual features that children do not yet possess and that imply physical appearance and beauty are intrinsic to self-esteem and social worth, are harmful to the healthy development of children and young people.

Classification systems should reflect mitigation of this risk in the guidance of content that can be displayed at what times on free to air television. In addition to content classifications of other media such as films and games. This includes advertising which is not only shown during programing directed at children, but also at times when children are likely to be watching (e.g., during sporting matches).

Video Gaming

Video Games are accessible, affordable and anonymous. They are played on computers, consoles and mobile phones or tablets by an ever-increasing number of people for longer periods of time (Arriago et al., 2014). Video gaming is not inherently good or bad; rather, it can be an effective learning tool and it is the content that determines what is learned by the player (Anderson et al., 2010).

The General Learning Model would also suggest that the typical gaming rewards, such as experience points, provide a motivation by reinforcing the desired behaviour to be learnt (Sherry, 1999). This great learning potential has long been harnessed by military institutions such as the US Armed Forces. Gaming is now a standard part of all US Army training, from flight simulation to first person shooter games which simulate hand to hand combat operations (Strachan, 2014). Equally, playing pro-social games for as little as eight minutes has been shown to lead to greater pro-social behaviour across all ages (Greitemer & Osswald, 2004).

The research evidence demonstrates that interactive violence in gaming primes aggressive thoughts in the short term (Bensley & Van Eenwyk, 2001), as well as activating affective and arousal states (Bartholow, Sesitr &

Davis, 2005). In the long term there is evidence of changes to cognitions and beliefs related to the use of violence and aggression (Bensley & Van Eenwyk, 2001). Further evidence is provided by a recent meta-analysis that examined six outcome variables within 136 research trials incorporating 130,000 participants. This analysis concluded that the playing of violent video games is strongly suggested as a 'causal' risk factor for increased aggressive behaviour, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect and decreased empathy and decreased prosocial behaviour. These findings were robust for age, gender and across both individuated and collective cultures - specifically the U.S. and Japan (Anderson et. al, 2010).

It is therefore the content of gaming, rather than the medium itself, which is concerning. Many games contain extreme violence and players often engage in gaming for many hours at a time, maximising their exposure. Violence and sexualisation are often presented together in video gaming. Content that involves sexualisation of women and often violence against women has led to the "R" classification of some games. Games may also promote racism and negative stereotypes.

Aside from content of games, they have the potential to become psychologically addictive. A new 'Internet Gaming Disorder' has recently been added to the DSM V.

Effects of gaming on children
Children are particularly susceptible as gaming is very appealing and is often sanctioned by parents as a safe activity. Without sufficient boundaries children find it difficult to recognise signs that they have been playing for too long or that the time they are spending playing is taking away from other activities in their lives. Thus they are very susceptible to developing unhealthy usage habits.

Another concerning issue is the level of gambling embedded within gaming. Distinguishing between luck and effort for reward can be developmentally difficult for children. Research suggests children are much less able to make this distinction and thus less able to perceive risks associated with gambling-type mechanisms within games

Cumulatively, the violence, addiction and gambling risks of electronic gaming suggest that the health and wellbeing of children and young adolescents would benefit from some exposure protection.

Advertising and children

Parents commonly express concern over advertising directed at children, perceiving it as a source of conflict with their children who demand advertised products that parents may feel are inappropriate, and also fearing that it may lead them to adopt overly materialistic values. In understanding the potential effects of commercial advertising on children, special concerns arise because of cognitive developmental

issues that affect message comprehension. Children are particularly vulnerable to being deceived and exploited by advertising because they lack the cognitive skills to defend themselves against persuasive advertisements. Without these abilities, children's attitudes and desires, and ultimately their behaviours, are likely to be readily moulded by the content of television advertising.

The 2004 Task Force report commissioned by the American Psychological Association found clear evidence that advertising exerts substantial influence on children's attitudes and behaviours, and that these effects go well beyond moving product desire from one brand to another. More specifically, the task force concluded that "the evidence points directly to one fundamental concern: that advertising targeting children below the ages of 7–8 years is inherently unfair because it capitalizes on younger children's inability to attribute persuasive intent to advertising. As a result of this limitation, children below 7 years of age comprehend the information contained in television commercials uncritically, accepting most advertising claims and appeals as truthful, accurate, and unbiased" (APA, 2010, p.7). Further, the inclusion within many advertisements on children's programs of products and product-related characters drawn from the programs themselves create "branded environments" that blur the traditional demarcation between advertisements and program content (APA, 2010).

There is thus strong evidence that children are particularly affected by advertisements and that regulation of the nature and timing of advertisements directed at children is warranted in order to meet parental and community expectations.

A role for classification: Sharing the responsibility for protecting children

It is clear that exposure to violence and sexualisation through the media may be harmful to adults. Developmentally, children and young people (both adolescent and adult) are even more vulnerable to such exposure. Psychological evidence that children are affected by exposure to violence on television and through gaming, by advertisements in the media and by material that sexualises children demonstrates that media regulation is warranted. Children and young people need protection from content that exploits their immaturity and could harm their development.

While concerns about the impact of media content on children's wellbeing are often relegated to 'parental responsibility', parents' choices can be supported or made more difficult by the systems put in place to regulate the type and timing of content shown. Parents don't parent in a vacuum, and the way children are raised impacts on the broader community; therefore it is in the community's interests to ensure that children are not exposed to harmful media that may have detrimental impacts on their wellbeing now and into adulthood.

Government legislation and regulation therefore, plays an essential role in setting standards for children's media experiences and in protecting children from harm. The National Classification Scheme provides protection for those most vulnerable in society and aims to protect the rights of consumers, especially children.

The NCS also plays an essential educative function, in providing information to parents and carers to help them to choose material for their children. It is important to recognise the strong role that this system plays in informing personal choice. It is a valuable source of consumer advice. Guidelines about what time programs can be shown and the type of material that will be broadcast provide parents with a 'short cut' to decision making that protects their children from potential harm.

Supporting and strengthening the National Classification System

The APS supports the current organising principles of the National Classification System (NCS), that:
(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
(d) there is a need to take account of community concerns about:
    (i) depictions that condone or incite violence, particularly sexual violence;
    (ii) content that promotes racism and negative stereotypes and
    (iii) the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner.

The APS also supports the list of prohibited material (which can be found in the Guidelines for the 'Refused Classification' category of content), noting however the limited amount of actual coercion in the NCS, at least as to restricting the material that individuals can legally see or play (for example, prohibited violence only includes violence with a very high degree of impact or acts which are excessively frequent, prolonged or detailed, cruelty or real violence which are very detailed or which have a high impact, and sexual violence).

The APS is concerned about the recent changes to the Free TV (the Association of Commercial TV stations of Australia) Code of Practice. These changes include:
- All G time zones have been replaced by PG time zones
- The M time zone has been expanded and now starts at 7.30pm
- The MA15+ time zone has been moved forward to 8.30pm (from 9m)
- The AV time zone has been combined with the MA15+ zone and can screen from 8.30pm (formerly 9.30pm)
- Alcohol advertisements can be shown in live sporting programs whenever shown, and can be shown in "sports programs" on weekends and on weekdays from 7.30pm

- Betting advertisements can be shown in any PG classified program (and that includes sport), and in any program shown after 7pm
- Program promotions and trailers are permitted for higher classified programs and movies than that of the current program.

The APS echoes the concerns expressed by the Australian Council for Children and the Media ACCM, that despite a trend towards streaming of television programs outside regular screening times:
- there is a valid connection between protection of children and time zone interventions
- parents have long relied on TV programs shown at certain times of the day being safe for children
- many families still view television programs together in the early evening, and assume programs will be suitable for families with children at this time of night
- time zones have an educative value about what is age-appropriate viewing
- there is community support for time zones - ACMA Survey 2013 showed 75% strongly agreed and a further 15% agreed that time zones were useful.

While these changes are not part of the NCS, they signal a move towards lessened protection for the most vulnerable. Rather, the APS supports the call by ACCM for a more evidence-based approach to reviewing classifiable elements and guidelines. In particular, ACCM has expressed concern with the operation of the NCS at the lower end, and especially how distinctions are drawn between the G, PG and M categories, and has advocated an overhaul of these categories to make them more age-specific and the criteria better aligned with the evidence about child development. Specifically:
- The present systems for film, DVD, games and TV revolve around the age of 15 years
- The system is based on concepts of community standards and offence, not child development
- These systems are not very effective in providing parents of children under 15 years with information that might support their choices of age-appropriate media, eg for children aged 4-5, or 9-10.
- There is a reliable body of research that identifies the types of content that can disturb, scare, or in other ways cause harm to children, at different stages of their lives.
- The fact that the M category does not have legal force means that young children have easy access to age-inappropriate content.

The APS recommends that policy makers and regulatory bodies recognise that, despite their ability to engage with media, children and young people still need protection from content that exploits their immaturity and could harm their development. Further, violent actions by individuals have negative economic and

social impacts for the whole community. Such actions may be influenced by condoned and unlimited exposure to and interaction with violent media and gaming.

Some restriction of personal choice is always required to ensure both individuals and the broader community are protected from harmful material, for example material that is overly sexualised and/or violent. Such material has been linked to unhealthy relationship expectations, desensitisation to violence and broader social expectations about the use of violence in everyday situations.

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