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Talking more, or less, about massacres?

The Australian Council on Children and the Media suggest the time is right for a public debate about the relentless mass media coverage of horrific massacres and murders.

ACCM President Elizabeth Handsley said today

"The mass media provide mass coverage of these horrific events: we all want to know how and why they happened. But do we need the relentless focus on such acts of madness? Do we want to be giving publicity to these crimes and the criminals who committed them?"

She asked whether such practices were counterproductive, and whether it played into the fantasies of other disturbed individuals.

Child psychologist and Council spokesman Dr Wayne Warburton said

"Research shows that when children see repeated images of violence, death and destruction in the mass media it can change the way they view the world, including the 'mean world' syndrome' whereby the world is seen as more scary and dangerous than it really is. In an ideal world, children should feel secure and able to trust others".

When asked about media coverage of massacres Dr Warburton noted:

"It is important to remember that there are always many factors that come together to cause a person to be violent. However, research shows that for a small number of individuals, mass coverage of murders and massacres may be one factor that can increase the risk of copycat crimes. For example, in 1999, a group of Australian and NZ researchers (Cantor and colleagues) examined the role of media coverage in 7 mass homicides in Australia, NZ and Scotland and concluded that some may have 'occurred through a modelling process' and a 'ripple effect'.

"Apart from providing a script that can be modelled, it is possible that media coverage of mass killings maybe itself be an important motivator for some killers. Only last week, the perpetrator of the Orlando massacre took time out during his 3 hour killing spree to search Facebook for news about it.

"In the wake of the Orlando shootings, the US Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) released an Open Letter about the psychological factors that prompt otherwise unremarkable individuals to carry out unspeakable atrocities.

*It said "in this, as in other cases of violent extremism, the perpetrator radically deviates from widely accepted norms of conduct" and that **the quest for personal significance, in one's own eyes, and in the eyes of relevant others is an important driving force**... The quest for significance may be spurred by a threat [real or perceived], such as personal failure and humiliation ...violence is the most primordial means to dominance and a sense of power. By causing others to suffer, someone might feel consequential and capable of making others recognise their significance".*

Dr. Douglas Gentile, a US expert on the effects of media on children, noted, *"The current style of reporting provides a 'high score' for the next perpetrator to try to beat. How we report on atrocities can make a difference in whether it encourages or discourages more atrocities."*

Prof. Handsley and Dr. Warburton agree that the time is right to seriously examine whether current levels of media attention and publicity for such perpetrators and their atrocities are

Promoting healthy choices and stronger voices in children's media

Australian Council on Children and the Media (incorporating Young Media Australia)

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helping or hindering in the face of a growing number of mass homicides. They are asking whether such images act as a catalyst to other alienated and disturbed individuals to choose extreme violence as a route to personal significance.

They note that this and other issues related to the depiction of violence on our screens will be discussed at the *Violence in the media: the stories and the science* in Sydney on July 18. This conference program offers a unique opportunity to hear highly respected international researchers into media violence and its social impacts, such as L Rowell Huesmann, Craig Anderson, Barbara Krahé and Douglas Gentile.

<http://childrenandmedia.org.au/events/accm-conference>

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The Australian Council on Children and the Media is the peak national not for profit organisation representing the interests of children and families in relation to the media. It supports healthy choices and stronger voices in children's media.

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