



## MEDIA

'Media' is the page of the Society's Press Committee. This section of *The Psychologist* aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV programme or radio broadcast involving psychology, if you have tips for others based on recent experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the 'Media' page coordinating editor, Fiona Jones (Chair, Press Committee), on [fionaj@psychology.leeds.ac.uk](mailto:fionaj@psychology.leeds.ac.uk).

# Idiot box or window on the world?

**O**N *Panorama* (Monday 18 July), Jeremy Vine presented 'Is TV bad for my kids?', the results of a media 'experiment'. In what was described as the longest TV deprivation study, half a class of primary school children were deprived of television for two weeks. This involved all televisions and computer games in the household being removed, or fitted with locking devices. Since it was claimed that 84 per cent of children over the age of five in the UK have televisions in their bedrooms, this is indeed quite a drastic intervention.

For the two weeks of the study the families kept records of what went on in the home, and filming took place in the classroom. The expectation of the programme makers was that there would be improvements in children's performance at school rather than at home. However, interviews with both teachers and parents suggested that the opposite was the case. Assuming the programme showed a representative sample of reactions, the change in behaviour of the children at home was dramatic and unexpectedly positive. Rather than moaning and arguing, the children shown seemed to happily settle down to play traditional games with their siblings. However, in general, there was no significant evidence of change in concentration or application at school.

One little girl, Natasha, was an exception to this result and therefore a particular focus of attention. Before her

enforced cold turkey she watched television zombie-like, apparently difficult to distract even to come for meals. After watching television all evening she and her sister were in the habit of going to bed and watching a DVD in bed until they fell asleep. To her parents' surprise, the children went to sleep perfectly well

without television. Before the study Natasha was described as a 'daydreamer and chatterbox at school'; afterwards her teacher reported that her concentration and participation had improved.

Professor Barrie Gunter from the Department of Media and Communication, University of Leicester provided the psychology input into this programme. He commented: 'The study was never intended to be an examination of harmful effects of specific kinds of TV programmes or content. It was concerned with what happens when you take these technologies

away. The results of what was an exploratory and short-run study, conducted on a small scale, suggested that people felt they were now behaving as a family unit again, and the kids felt they were getting more and better attention from Mum and Dad. In many ways that calmed them down, because one of the reasons why kids often get excited is because they're attention seeking. If they're getting the attention they want they calm down.'

A particularly interesting result of the study was that once the televisions were returned, the children did not completely revert to their previous behaviour. In fact in the week following the study, the average viewing was down by 50 per cent. It was unclear whether this is attributable to a change in the children's own attitudes or to parental restrictions.

The programme ended with an invitation to the viewers to participate in a week-long 'TV switch off' study (see [tinyurl.com/2yxla8](http://tinyurl.com/2yxla8)). This aims to see how families find life without televisions, computers and video games, and will form the basis for a follow-up programme.

It is questionable whether this could be described as a serious experiment – no claim of random allocation to the deprivation group was made. Furthermore, it was hard to believe the overwhelmingly positive picture presented. The only truly negative reaction came from a TV-deprived boy who was incensed to find his father had locked himself in the bedroom to secretly watch the football on a computer.

The BBC has been accused of dumbing down and focusing on entertainment at the expense of information and education (see [tinyurl.com/2e5m4r](http://tinyurl.com/2e5m4r)). *Panorama* seems to have changed in tone since its move to an earlier and shorter slot, and could perhaps be seen as part of that trend. However, the programme was also engaging and thought-provoking and was perhaps more likely to reach the parents of young children than a more serious documentary approach would have been. The psychological input was authoritative and useful. However, the opportunity to consider existing psychological research evidence was missed – perhaps a downside of the new style *Panorama*.

Fiona Jones

**A**MONGST the array of *Big Brother* programming for 2007, Channel 4 premiered *Big Brother on the Couch* (BBOTC), a once weekly prime-time programme. It was billed as offering observations from some of 'Britain's leading psychologists', and I was invited to participate.

At the time I grabbed the opportunity of presenting critical psychology theory to understand power, gender and sexuality in the house. However, each week I watched defeated, realising yet again that my brand of psychological insight hadn't made the grade. It became clear that what was being presented as detailed psychological insight was being guided by the assumptions that we are all clinical psychologists and we can read minds; we have an obsessive interest in shrugs/nods and all manner of gesticulations; and that all human behaviour can in some way be traced to evolutionary origins. The country's 'leading' psychologists were, more often than not, ambiguously titled 'behaviour experts'.

Perhaps psychologists, like the housemates, are not immune from the celebrity culture/hype that surrounds reality game shows. However, unlike the housemates, we have a huge professional responsibility for the messages we communicate publicly. If the programme is being driven by a dominant ideology surrounding what psychology is, what are the implications for our involvement with it?

For more thoughts on this, see the online-only article with this month's issue at [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk).

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