

unhealthy control over the minds of modern citizens. As Jerry Mander indicates above, mass media also can separate people from direct interaction with normal family and friendship interactions and have reduced the desire in many citizens to participate in the political process.

The essays in this chapter examine both the negative effects, as well as the potentially positive impact of media on the political beliefs and actions of citizens. Pratkanis and Aronson in "Pictures in Our Heads" from *The Age of Propaganda* demonstrate how citizens who are heavy television viewers and readers of sensational news stories are likely to display racial and gender prejudice and fear of violence in their communities. Furthermore, because of the limited range of story types reported by television and print journalists, elected political leaders find their positions and policies placed uppermost in the minds of citizens through extensive media coverage.

Next, the essays by Patricia Williams and Cathleen Cleaver focus on the anger and frustration that many citizens feel when confronted by offensive media content over which they have no control. Patricia Williams, an African-American lawyer and professor, writes in her essay "Hate Radio" of her feelings of outrage at talk radio programs which feature negative and abusive portrayals of blacks, women, and gays. Cathleen Cleaver in "The Internet: A Clear and Present Danger?" argues that the excessive amount of hard-core pornography on the Internet is easily available to children and must be controlled.

The next essay emphasizes the power of mainstream commercial media over the social views and actions of citizens. Jeffrey Scheuer in "Media Literacy and Democratic Citizenship" offers a proposal to help citizens gain power over and understanding of the impact of media on their beliefs and daily lives by becoming more media literate and entering into a culture of critical thinking and viewing.

Feeling that mainstream media are inherently limited by commercial and corporate control, David Barsamian in his essay "Independent Media Alternatives" focuses on ways that alternative media, including public radio stations and the Internet, are changing the face of grassroots democracy by engaging citizens in active community participation. In our final essay, "Re-Thinking Virtual Communities: The Prospects for the Public Sphere," Howard Rheingold considers both the possibility that the Internet could have an important influence on grassroots democracy, as well as

the dangers involved in the misuse of the medium for commercial and propaganda ends.

Pictures in Our Heads

ANTHONY PRATKANIS AND ELLIOT ARONSON

Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson are professors of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Pratkanis has taught courses in consumerism and advertising at Carnegie Mellon. He has written many articles for both popular and scholarly journals and is co-author with Aronson of *Social Psychology* (1993). Aronson is one of the world's most highly regarded social psychologists and the author of many books, including *The Jigsaw Classroom* (1978, 1997). The following article is from Pratkanis and Aronson's *The Age of Propaganda* (1992), which focuses on the ways people's views of the world are influenced and molded by the constant barrage of media propaganda.

In *Public Opinion*, the distinguished political analyst Walter Lippmann tells the story of a young girl, brought up in a small mining town, who one day went from cheerfulness into a deep spasm of grief. A gust of wind had suddenly cracked a kitchen windowpane. The young girl was inconsolable and spoke incomprehensibly for hours. When she finally was able to speak intelligibly, she explained that a broken pane of glass meant that a close relative had died. She was therefore mourning her father, whom she felt certain had just passed away. The young girl remained disconsolate until, days later, a telegram arrived verifying that her father was still alive. It appears that the girl had constructed a complete fiction based on a simple external fact (a broken window), a superstition (broken window means death), fear, and love for her father.

The point of Lippmann's story was not to explore the inner workings of abnormal personality, but to ask a question about ourselves: To what extent do we, like the young girl, let our fictions guide our thoughts and actions? Lippmann believed that we are much more similar to that young girl than we might readily

admit. He contended that the mass media paint an imagined world and that the "pictures in our heads" derived from the media influence what men and women will do and say at any particular moment. Lippmann made these observations in 1922. Seven decades later, we can ask: What is the evidence for his claim? To what extent do the pictures we see on television and in other mass media influence how we see the world and set the agenda for what we view as most important in our lives?

Let's look at the world we see on television. George Gerbner and his associates have conducted the most extensive analysis of television to date. Since the late 1960s, these researchers have been videotaping and carefully analyzing thousands of prime-time television programs and characters. Their findings, taken as a whole, indicate that the world portrayed on television is grossly misleading as a representation of reality. Their research further suggests that, to a surprising extent, we take what we see on television as a reflection of reality.

In prime-time programming, males outnumber females by 3 to 1, and the women portrayed are younger than the men they encounter. Nonwhites (especially Hispanics), young children, and the elderly are underrepresented; and members of minority groups are disproportionately cast in minor roles. Moreover, most prime-time characters are portrayed as professional and managerial workers: Although 67 percent of the work force in the United States are employed in blue-collar or service jobs, only 25 percent of TV characters hold such jobs. Finally, crime on television is ten times more prevalent than it is in real life. The average 15-year-old has viewed more than 13,000 TV killings. Over half of TV's characters are involved in a violent confrontation each week; in reality, fewer than 1 percent of people in the nation are victims of criminal violence in any given year, according to FBI statistics. David Rintels, a television writer and former president of the Writers' Guild of America, summed it up best when he said, "From 8 to 11 o'clock each night, television is one long lie."

To gain an understanding of the relationship between watching television and the pictures in our heads, Gerbner and his colleagues compared the attitudes and beliefs of heavy viewers (those who watch more than four hours a day) and light viewers (those who watch less than two hours a day). They found that heavy viewers (1) express more racially prejudiced attitudes; (2) overestimate the number of people employed as physicians, lawyers, and athletes; (3) perceive women as having more limited

abilities and interests than men; (4) hold exaggerated views of the prevalence of violence in society; and (5) believe old people are fewer in number and less healthy today than they were twenty years ago, even though the opposite is true. What is more, heavy viewers tend to see the world as a more sinister place than do light viewers; they are more likely to agree that most people are just looking out for themselves and would take advantage of you if they had a chance. Gerbner and his colleagues conclude that these attitudes and beliefs reflect the inaccurate portrayals of American life provided to us by television.

Let's look at the relationship between watching television and images of the world by looking more closely at how we picture criminal activity. In an analysis of "television criminology," Craig Haney and John Manzolati point out that crime shows dispense remarkably consistent images of both the police and criminals. For example, they found that television policemen are amazingly effective, solving almost every crime, and are absolutely infallible in one regard: The wrong person is never in jail at the end of a show. Television fosters an illusion of certainty in crime-fighting. Television criminals generally turn to crime because of psychopathology or insatiable (and unnecessary) greed. Television emphasizes criminals' personal responsibility for their actions and largely ignores situational pressures correlated with crime, such as poverty and unemployment.

Haney and Manzolati go on to suggest that this portrayal has important social consequences. People who watch a lot of television tend to share this belief system, which affects their expectations and can cause them to take a hard-line stance when serving on juries. Heavy viewers are likely to reverse the presumption of innocence, believing that defendants must be guilty of something, otherwise they wouldn't be brought to trial.

A similar tale can be told about other "pictures painted in our heads." For example, heavy readers of newspaper accounts of sensational and random crimes report higher levels of fear of crime. Repeated viewing of R-rated violent "slasher" films is associated with less sympathy and empathy for victims of rape. When television is introduced into an area, the incidence of theft increases, perhaps due partly to television's promotion of consumerism, which may frustrate and anger economically deprived viewers who compare their life-styles with those portrayed on television.

It should be noted, however, that the research just described—that done by Gerbner and colleagues and by others—is

correlational; that is, it shows merely an association, not a causal relation, between television viewing and beliefs. It is therefore impossible to determine from this research whether heavy viewing actually causes prejudiced attitudes and inaccurate beliefs or whether people already holding such attitudes and beliefs simply tend to watch more television. In order to be certain that watching TV causes such attitudes and beliefs, it would be necessary to perform a controlled experiment in which people are randomly assigned to conditions. Fortunately, some recent experiments do allow us to be fairly certain that heavy viewing does indeed determine the pictures we form of the world.

In a set of ingenious experiments, the political psychologists Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder varied the contents of evening news shows watched by their research participants. In their studies, Iyengar and Kinder edited the evening news so that participants received a steady dose of news about a specific problem facing the United States. For example, in one of their experiments, some participants heard about the weaknesses of U.S. defense capabilities; a second group watched shows emphasizing pollution concerns; a third group heard about inflation and economic matters.

The results were clear. After a week of viewing the specially edited programs, participants emerged from the study more convinced than they were before viewing the shows that the target problem—the one receiving extensive coverage in the shows they had watched—was a more important one for the country to solve. What is more, the participants acted on their newfound perceptions, evaluating the current president's performance on the basis of how he handled the target issue and evaluating more positively than their competitors those candidates who took strong positions on those problems.

Iyengar and Kinder's findings are not a fluke. Communications researchers repeatedly find a link between what stories the mass media cover and what viewers consider to be the most important issues of the day. The content of the mass media sets the public's political and social agenda. As just one example, in a pioneering study of an election in North Carolina, researchers found that the issues that voters came to consider to be most important in the campaign coincided with the amount of coverage those issues received in the local media. Similarly, the problems of drug abuse, NASA incompetence, and nuclear energy were catapulted into the nation's consciousness by the coverage of dramatic

events such as the drug-related death of basketball star Len Bias, the *Challenger* explosion, and the nuclear-reactor accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger clearly understood the power of the news media in setting agendas. He once noted that he never watched the content of the evening news but was only interested in "what they covered and for what length of time, to learn what the country was getting."

Of course, each of us has had extensive personal contact with many people in a myriad of social contexts; the media are just one source of our knowledge about political affairs and different ethnic, gender, and occupational groups. The information and impressions we receive through the media are relatively less influential when we can also rely on firsthand experience. Thus those of us who have been in close contact with several women who work outside the home are probably less susceptible to the stereotypes of women portrayed on television. On the other hand, regarding issues with which most of us have had limited or no personal experience, such as crime and violence, television and the other mass media are virtually the only vivid source of information for constructing our image of the world.

The propaganda value of the mass media in painting a picture of the world has not been overlooked by would-be leaders. Such social policy as a "get tough on crime" program, for example, can be easily sold by relating it to the prime-time picture of crime as acts committed by the psychopathic and the greedy, rather than dealing with situational determinants such as poverty and unemployment. In a similar vein, it is easier to sell a "war on drugs" after the drug-related death of a prominent basketball star or to promote an end to nuclear power after a fatal tragedy at a nuclear reactor.

It is even more important for a would-be leader to propagate his or her own picture of the world. The political scientist Rodrick Hart notes that since the early 1960s, U.S. presidents have averaged over twenty-five speeches per month—a large amount of public speaking. Indeed, during 1976, Gerald Ford spoke in public once every six hours, on average. By speaking frequently on certain issues (and gaining access to the nightly news), a president can create a political agenda—a picture of the world that is favorable to his or her social policies. Indeed, one of President Bush's key advisors is Robert Teeter, a pollster who informs the president on what Americans think and what issues should be the

topic of his speeches. This can be of great importance in maintaining power. According to Jeffery Pfeffer, an expert on business organizations, one of the most important sources of power for a chief executive officer is the ability to set the organization's agenda by determining what issues will be discussed and when, what criteria will be used to resolve disputes, who will sit on what committees, and, perhaps most importantly, which information will be widely disseminated and which will be selectively ignored.

Why are the pictures of the world painted by the mass media so persuasive? For one thing, we rarely question the picture that is shown. We seldom ask ourselves, for example, "Why are they showing me this story on the evening news rather than some other one? Do the police really operate in this manner? Is the world really this violent and crime-ridden?" The pictures that television beams into our homes are almost always simply taken for granted as representing reality.

Once accepted, the pictures we form in our heads serve as fictions to guide our thoughts and actions. The images serve as primitive social theories—providing us with the "facts" of the matter, determining which issues are most pressing, and decreeing the terms in which we think about our social world. As the political scientist Bernard Cohen observed, the mass media

may not be successful much of the time in telling people *what to think*, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers *what to think about*. . . . The world will look different to different people, depending . . . on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the "pictures in our heads" that the authors comment on? How do these pictures both resemble and differ from dreams and fantasies? How do they influence our political behavior and beliefs?
2. What conclusions can be drawn from George Gerbner's television program analysis? How have the experiments of Iyengar and Kinder on evening news shows and their viewers helped to correct and support Gerbner's research?
3. How are criminals usually portrayed on television? What impact does this portrayal have on our attitudes and beliefs? How have politicians used stereotypical portrayals of criminals and crime to "sell" their programs to the public?

4. Explain Bernard Cohen's distinction between the media's telling us what to think as opposed to telling us "what to think about." What does Cohen consider the media's most stunning success? What examples does he provide?

Ideas for Writing

1. Do some research into recent intensive media coverage of a political event or a controversial issue such as the U.S.-Iraq war and its aftermath. Write an essay in which you discuss the media's impact on the public's perceptions of the reality of the situation. You might take a look at some public opinion polls that were taken during the period you are discussing and examine typical stories aired on television and in the newspapers. How do you think the media shaped citizens' political beliefs on this issue?
2. Write about your attitudes toward a political issue covered extensively by the mass media; explain to what degree the media, as opposed to direct experience and conversation influenced your political views and social outlook. Were the media an accurate source of information?

Hate Radio

PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS

Patricia Williams (b. 1951), an outspoken critic of racial inequality and gender discrimination, is a lawyer and Professor of American Law at Columbia University. Williams received her J.D. from Harvard Law School in 1975. She has been a contributor to many publications and writes a regular column for *The Nation*. "Diary of a Mad Law Professor." Her books include *The Rooster's Egg: On the Persistence of Prejudice* (1995) and *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (1997). In the following essay that first appeared in *Ms Magazine*, Williams argues that right-wing talk radio is a degrading and socially dangerous media phenomenon.

Three years ago I stood at my sink, washing the dishes and listening to the radio. I was tuned to rock and roll so I could