



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, Harriet Gross (Chair, Press Committee), on H.Gross@lboro.ac.uk.

Quality matters in TV websites

WEB SITES supporting TV channels offer great opportunities for psychology to be communicated to the public in more depth than the typical soundbite allows. But is this potential realised? A quick search for 'Psychology' on the BBC website yielded 1279 hits. Top of the list was an excellent 'Science and Nature: Human Body and Mind' page on 'What is Psychology?' (tinyurl.com/d5kbr). This gives an informative overview of different branches of psychology with many useful links, including one to the BPS website. A wealth of psychology-related information is available on this website, including contributions by academic psychologists, such as Matthew Saxton's (University of Westminster) page on the psychology of memory. There are also interactive opportunities to take part in psychology experiments: for example, a study on the intermingling of senses by the Synaesthesia Research Group at University College London.

Even a serious website of this nature, however, seems to tread a tightrope in an attempt to present information in a way which catches attention but which avoids leaving psychology open to ridicule. Informed visitors cognisant of BPS guidelines around the use of psychometric tests are left feeling a little uneasy about the many psychology questionnaires found on this website and elsewhere. One that caught the attention was a test to find out 'What makes you squirm and go yuck?' While perhaps intriguing, this does not inspire confidence that psychological research is a serious concern. In fact, the test was far more interesting than might be expected. Designed by Dr Val Curtis of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, it consisted of a somewhat revolting series of sets of pictures to rate on a scale of disgustingness. It aimed to test the hypothesis that disgust evolved to

protect us from disease, thus the closer the link to a disease threat the more disgusted we are. Undoubtedly this offers a good 10 minutes' worth or more of engagement and is likely to make the participant think about the psychology of disgust. Other tests on this website include one by Dave Perrett and Tony Little (University of St Andrews) on face perception: 'Can you guess someone's personality from their face?'

These and other questionnaires on this website offer links to academic websites and are clearly a useful way of making psychology interesting and accessible.

Elsewhere, inevitably, contributions are less serious in focus. For example, see the Discovery Channel's site for 'Peering inside the biker-brain' (tinyurl.com/9moxl), in which clinical psychologist and motorcycle enthusiast Dr Mark Barnes waxes lyrical about the relationship between rider and bike. The Discovery Channel also offers a site based on a series called *The Sex Files*, in which the words of evolutionary biologists Elaine Clark and Russell Hatfield are quoted to explain why college students engage in casual sex – apparently, it's all about getting one's genes into the next generation. If only it were that simple. As if to affirm the utility of evolutionary psychology, the Sex Files site includes the educational 'Testicles Quiz' which asks impertinent questions such as: 'How many sperm do the testes produce in 24 hours?' Answer: 150 million. Perhaps

this explains the male habit of falling asleep after coitus.

Channel 4, a fast-developing terrestrial TV channel, features its fair share of 'ologies' on its associated websites. A search yielded a top listing for 'Trolleyology: the Psychology of Supermarkets' (tinyurl.com/b6svw). While the application of psychology to marketing is likely to fascinate many, the opportunity is missed to provide links to websites offering more information (despite a very brief quote from UK psychologist Dr David Lewis). But as we are coming to expect from Channel 4, there is substance in much of its psychology on the web. For example, '4Health' features bullying in the workplace (tinyurl.com/9lqum). It considers UK psychologist Professor Cary Cooper's work on the subject and, in socially responsible manner at its end, lists support contacts and relevant self-help books. Bravo, Channel 4!

Channel 4 also propagates the feats of Derren Brown. For those of us wondering 'How does he do that?', one of the channel's microsites surprisingly gives away a few of Derren's tricks of the trade, which turn out to be highly psychological (tinyurl.com/bn9je). For example, he explains how to make unsuspecting participants who have picked up a ringing public phone fall asleep by first overloading them with a stream of confusing instructions, at the end of which comes the simple command to fall into the land of nod. According to Brown, so relieved are we that we can grasp something at last that is comprehensible, we do what we are asked.

Given the draw such psychologically minded TV shows have on the public imagination it is a pity that these sites do not routinely include links to relevant empirical evidence that could illustrate the nuances of the cognitive, biological and social processes which underpin them. There is an opportunity here for advocacy and consultancy by academic and applied psychologists to TV companies, an opportunity that would both disseminate contemporary psychology and protect its reputation.

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Editor's note: Write to the Letters page with your experiences of supporting TV websites. Is it a different challenge from other forms of work with the media?