



'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.

Wild children, websites and work

THROUGHOUT a sweltering holiday season, psychology has continued to be visible in various guises. Summer meant the World Cup, and psychologists were called upon to discuss England's performance and what prompted Zidane's headbutt; and *Big Brother*, which, with its catalogue of psychological topics – personality, managing conflict, teamworking, coping with rejection – continues to attract a loyal (albeit smaller) audience.

The impending school holidays may have prompted the scheduling of *Driving Mum and Dad Mad* (ITV1). A set of five families attempted to become competent parents, using the Triple P positive parenting programme (see Matt Sanders' article in last month's *Psychologist*). This had the direct involvement of psychologists, both behind the scenes and in running the intervention programme and supporting parents. The contents of the programme itself are familiar from the many others that address these issues (e.g. *House of Tiny Tearaways*; *Supernanny*) and are based on standard psychological principles of reward and punishment, clear boundaries and rules and consistent parental responses to bad behaviour. There is a relentless appetite for such programmes, now in the canon of regular 'makeover' formats. Not only do they provide opportunities for psychologists, they have the added advantage of chiming with policy initiatives – here, improving parenting skills.

In keeping with the increasing trend of making psychological support material available via the internet, there is an extensive web presence accompanying *Driving Mum and Dad Mad* (see www.itv.com/mumanddad). Such support material can undoubtedly be a useful source of information. In fact, looking through the documentation accompanying another programme that caught my eye (tinyurl.com/oooto), I wondered if it might replace my undergraduate teaching material for next year! Channel 4's *Mindshock* looked at two Ukrainian 'feral' children. Oxana Malaya (now 23) was discovered aged eight having lived with dogs for six years, and Edik now six, was found at five,

having been living with dogs for about two years.

The programme explored the complex issues surrounding what it is to be human, the development of language, and the nature of critical periods, together with the possible effects of extreme deprivation. Several psychologists were involved as experts and in the making of the programme, as well as specialists in language and linguistics, and it was both



Feral children – what is it to be human?

sympathetic and instructive. Pointing out the impossibility of carrying out ethical human experiments to examine nature and nurture, the potential of these 'natural' experiments was highlighted. Reference to classic material on feral children and deprivation included some detailed coverage of the case of Genie, Harry Harlow's experiments, and a dramatisation of Itard's work with the wild boy of Aveyron. The issues and the differential outcomes and place of language in development were clearly represented and mirrored on the website.

However, I spoke to one of the psychologists involved in the programme and she told me how hard it is to predict and control what happens after the programme. Lyn Fry said: 'There was a large spread in the *Telegraph* about it, which I thought was well written. Then I found the article was franchised and rewritten and appeared all over the world in a form I was less happy with. I then discovered that chunks from the article and the programme had been taken out of

context and were appearing on unpleasant websites with a high sexual content.

'I had a wonderful time with the film crew but ended up feeling used by a lot of people I didn't know. I didn't realise that the topic of feral children was one which would interest people outside the "normal range". Perhaps I was a bit naive. I am now very careful who I talk to.'

Finally, July saw the start of an orgy of programmes on memory on BBC Radio 4. Again there is an extensive website (www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/memory), another potential source of useful material for students. Many psychologists well known to the readers of *The Psychologist* and too numerous to list here are involved. The items that I have caught have been impressive, informative and interesting, though predictably there is some repetition (I foresee a rash of seahorse descriptions of the hippocampus appearing in next term's memory essays!) The links with literature have also been imaginative and thought-provoking. As with another site accompanying *Driving Mum and Dad Mad*, www.greatparentingexperiment.net, the website also allows the audience to participate directly in research and to share their own experiences.

Aside from the interest generated by the content of these various programmes, the plethora of information provided by their websites developed by psychologists raises some questions for me concerning psychology in the media more generally. For example, what is the role of this information in prompting people's concerns or reassuring them? How does the knowledge gained from such sites impact on how they expect to be treated if they encounter professionals? And for me as a researcher, is the nature of psychological research changing? Now that researchers can access thousands of people, what credibility for studies involving small samples? Given that the participants have freely given data, what (ethically) can be made of the opportunities for research – for example in an area I am interested in, pregnancy and memory (tinyurl.com/g9mxk). And how can I best make use of such material to in my teaching?

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