Feminism has drawn attention to and fought against stereotypical and sexist portrayals of women in mass media, but new research shows that media portrayals of gender have largely done an about face in the past decade or so. There is a new “gender war” and the main target of discrimination is no longer women, according to research - it is men.

Gender studies have claimed that mass media portrayals and images are key influences that both reflect and shape society’s views of women and women’s self-identity. As well as attacking obvious sexist media portrayals such as page three girls and “girlie” magazines, feminists have challenged objectification, marginalisation, trivialisation and other negative portrayals of women in movies, advertising, TV drama and other media content. Their argument that such portrayals are damaging have won support from legislators and from many media professionals including film makers, advertising producers and editors. Research shows that, while sexism against women remains, representations of women have evolved with less stereotypical portrayals and more women shown in heroic, successful, independent and sexually liberated roles such as in Buffy and the Vampire Slayer, Sex and the City and even in aggressive roles such as Kill Bill.

A 1995-96 study reported in a 2002 book, Media, Gender and Identity by media researcher David Gauntlett, found 43 per cent of major characters in TV shows were women - up from 18 per cent in 1992-93. The study reported that, on a character-by-character basis, females and males were equal in all criteria studied. Analysis of newspapers and magazines also has found portrayals of women improving - albeit there is still a way to go in some areas according to feminist scholars.

Until recently, gender theorists and media researchers have argued or assumed that media representations of men are predominantly positive, or at least unproblematic. Men have allegedly been shown in mass media as powerful, dominant, heroic, successful, respected, independent and in other positive ways conducive to men and boys maintaining a healthy self-identity and self-esteem.

However, this view has come under challenge over the past few years. John Beynon, a Welsh cultural studies academic, examined how masculinity was portrayed in the British quality press including The Times, The Guardian and The Sunday Times over a three-year period from 1999-2001 and in books such as Susan Faludi’s 2000 best-seller Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man. Beynon concluded in his 2002 book, Masculinities and Culture, that men and masculinity were overwhelmingly presented negatively and as “something dangerous to be contained, attacked, denigrated or ridiculed, little else”.

Canadian authors, Paul Nathanson and Katherine Young in a controversial 2001 book, Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture reported widespread examples of “laughing at men, looking down on men, blaming men, de-humanising men, and demonising men” in modern mass media. They concluded: “… the worldview of our
society has become increasingly both gynocentric (focused on the needs and problems of women) and misandric (focused on the evils and inadequacies of men)”.

The role of mass media in creating and or reflecting identity has long been debated and the findings of some studies have been questioned. Nathanson and Young admitted in their foreword that their findings were based on a small sample. Also, most analysis of media content has focused on movies, TV drama and advertising: mass media genre which are fiction and, therefore, not representative of reality and ostensibly “taken with a grain of salt” by audiences.

However, an extensive content analysis of mass media portrayals of men and male identity undertaken for a PhD completed in 2005 through the University of Western Sydney focusing on news, features, current affairs, talk shows and lifestyle media found that men are widely demonised, marginalised, trivialised and objectified in non-fiction media content that allegedly presents facts, reality and “truth”.

The study involved collection of all editorial content referring to or portraying men from 650 newspaper editions (450 broadsheets and 200 tabloids), 130 magazines, 125 TV news bulletins, 147 TV current affairs programs, 125 talk show episodes, and 108 TV lifestyle program episodes from 20 of the highest circulation and rating newspapers, magazines and TV programs over a six-month period. Media articles were examined using in-depth quantitative and qualitative content analysis methodology.

The research found that, by volume, 69 per cent of mass media reporting and commentary on men was unfavourable compared with just 12 per cent favourable and 19 per cent neutral or balanced. Men were predominately reported or portrayed in mass media as villains, aggressors, perverts and philanderers, with more than 75 per cent of all mass media representations of men and male identities showing men in one of these four ways. More than 80 per cent of media mentions of men, in total, were negative, compared with 18.4 per cent of mentions which showed men in a positive role.

The overwhelmingly negative reporting and portrayals of men in mass media news, current affairs, talk shows and lifestyle media was mainly in relation to violence and aggression. Violent crime, including murder, assault, armed robberies and attacks such as bashings, accounted for almost 40 per cent of all media reporting of male violence and aggression, followed by sexual abuse (20.5 per cent), general crime (18.6 per cent) and domestic violence (7.3 per cent).

Other major topics of media coverage of men were fatherhood and family, male sexuality, work and career, and men’s social behaviour. In all of these categories, men were predominantly reported and portrayed mostly negatively.

Fatherhood was also a prominent subject in relation to men, discussed in 361 media articles and features during the period of the study. Some media coverage positively discussed men as fathers, pointing to increasing recognition of the importance of fathers in children’s lives. However, along with recognition of the importance of fathers and the depth of many men’s emotional connection with their children, discussion contained an almost equal number of
criticisms of men as “deadbeat dads”, “commitment phobic” and as perpetrators of domestic violence and sexual abuse within families.

Despite evidence of violence and abuse committed by women, such as a National Family Violence Survey in the US which found women just as likely to commit violence against men as men are against women, and a US National Incidence of Child Abuse and Neglect report in 2000 that found “where maltreatment of children led to death, 78 per cent of the perpetrators were female”, men are almost exclusively portrayed as the perpetrators of domestic violence and child abuse.

As identified by Mary Hood in a 2001 book chapter, “Developing new kinds of relationships between men and children”, a “feminist construction of men as responsible for child abuse has had consequences for the relationship of non-abusive men [the vast majority] with children. A side-effect has been to cast a shadow over the interaction of all men with all children”.

One third of all media discussion of male sexuality examined in the study was in relation to pedophilia which demonstrates the distortion inherent in debate on men, given that a very small proportion of men are pedophiles.

Male homosexuality has become prominent in media representations of men, highlighted in TV shows such as Queer Eye for the Straight Guy and numerous press reviews that followed its international launch. Homosexuality is lightly and positively portrayed in Queer Eye. However, the program and media coverage generally continues to reflect gay stereotypes, and homosexuality is negatively portrayed in media discussion of gay marriages and social commentary reflecting homophobia.

Significantly, male heterosexuality was found to be equally negatively portrayed. Male heterosexuality is widely associated with what is termed “hegemonic masculinity” which is described as violent, aggressive and dominating. Traditional masculinity has become a target of ridicule in many forms of mass media from TV shows such as Men Behaving Badly to major newspaper opinion columns and cartoons.

The new idealised image of men presented in the media during the past three years has been the “metrosexual”, a term reportedly coined by British author Mark Simpson and made popular by New York trend-spotter Marian Salzman, referring to men who are fashion-conscious and well-groomed - often to the point of becoming effeminate such as wearing make-up and waxing to remove body hair.

Recent research has shown “metrosexuals” to be mostly a fabrication of mass media - and not just advertising and TV drama. International current affairs show, 60 Minutes, devoted a major segment to “Metro Man” (August 24, 2003) and Australia’s other top-rating current affairs program, A Current Affair, devoted two programs to metrosexuals (September 19, 2003 and December 2, 2003). Men’s magazine Ralph (October 2003) published a quiz headed “Are you a metrosexual” in a tongue-in-cheek tone. But the underlying message was that, if a man is not a metrosexual, he is a sexist, football-loving, beer-drinking slob.
The research found that men are also objectified in women’s magazines and popular media in the same ways that women were in male-orientated media for several generations, but which is now regarded as blatantly sexist and “politically incorrect”. For instance, *Cosmopolitan* magazine’s “Guy without a shirt” section features male pin-ups such as David Beckham - for example, “Want to see Becks take a free kick - naked” (October 2003). The top-rating TV program, *Sex and the City* has extensively portrayed men as little more than sex objects and “handbags” for women’s amusement and pleasure.

In relation to work and career, men are mostly reported as power-obsessed “Atlas Syndrome” workaholics, neglecting their families and forming discriminatory “boy’s clubs” to prevent women progressing beyond the “glass ceiling”, despite many men claiming that this image is far from reality. Recent research such as Barbara Pocock’s 2003 book, *The Work/Life Collision*, reveals that, far from enjoying power and privilege at work, many men are suffering alienation from their families and even shortening of their lives through the stress of post-industrial work culture.

With the exception of a small minority of positive media portrayals of male heroes such as war veterans, fire fighters and rescuers, and an equally small percentage of portrayals of men as good fathers, husbands and citizens, the only males presented positively are men and boys who have been “feminised” and who exhibit their “feminine side”. The latter term highlights the gender bias against men in popular discourse.

Descriptions of male sensitivity, emotion and other positive attributes as men’s and boy’s “feminine side” lays claim to any good in men and boys as female. The implication and the message extensively communicated in popular culture is that maleness is innately and culturally evil and the characteristics of masculinity are undesirable and anachronistic. Some try to dismiss concerns over negative representations of men arguing that they are simply reporting the facts; men are abusers, pedophiles, deadbeat dads and so on. Some men, yes. But, proportionately, only a relatively small number of men personify these negative stereotypes. Data from the Australian Bureau of Crime Statistics and international studies on violence and child abuse show these are substantially misrepresentations of men and male identity.

There are signs that men are concerned and conflicted by the shifting kaleidoscope of identities presented in mass media. During the period of research, a letter to the editor from a young man under the headline “Men in need of direction” stated: “The increasing trend towards this portrayal of men in advertising is a representation of the indeterminate role of males in modern society … men are less secure in the part they have to play in the social structure … for the young male, there is a great deal of confusion about the contribution they have to make to society and in relationships…”. The letter concluded by appealing against “lauding one gender and denigrating the other” (*The Daily Telegraph*, July 7, 2003). The Australian Advertising Standards Bureau reported in 2005 that TV commercials drew a record number of complaints from men during 2004 and that the number of complaints by men is increasing while those from women are decreasing. The Australian Federal Government’s advertising campaign against domestic violence which targeted only men as perpetrators of domestic violence was labelled “propaganda against men” with many men criticising its “stereotypical portrayals” (*The Age*, January 3, 2005).
As they seek their identity and role in society, men and boys today are being plunged into a vortex of social, political and economic change; feminist philosophy that dominates thinking about gender, and mass media images and discussions that condemn traditional male attributes and masculinities and promote confusing new identities such as “metrosexuals”. To the extent that the negative views of men and masculinity in mass media reflect social attitudes, these findings have alarming implications for men and boys and for societies generally. Just as women have struggled against misogyny, men today face an increasingly misandric world that devalues and demonises them and gives them little basis for self-esteem.

Boys face education systems that inadequately cater to their needs and lack positive role models to help them grow up as healthy men. By propagating negative views of men and male identity, mass media are perpetuating them and giving them social and political traction. Widespread views on men as violent, sexually abusive, unable to be trusted with children, “deadbeat dads” and in need of “reconstruction” have the potential to and strong likelihood of shaping future policy making and political decisions. Ultimately, negative public and media discourse on men and boys could have major social and financial costs for societies in areas such as male health, rising suicide rates, and family disintegration.

In a book reporting this research released in September 2006 by Palgrave Macmillan, it is argued that the negative portrayal of men and male identity in contemporary societies is not only a matter of concern for men, but also for women. What is happening to men has an impact on women who live and work with them and who care about the health, welfare and happiness of their husbands, partners, brothers, male friends and their sons growing up and seeking their role and identity in a changing world.

This article is based on research findings from a PhD research thesis completed in 2005 through the University of Western Sydney and published in Media & Male Identity: The Making and Remaking of Men released by Palgrave Macmillan, London in September 2006.