

of classmates, a poor body-image, athletic or romantic failures, unpopularity”—the consequences of their feelings sometimes can be explosive.

Let the troubled youths go, urges Toby. If they are too young to leave school, then get

them into alternative schools. If they are old enough, let them drop out. McDonald's may succeed where the high school failed. The dropouts can always finish high school later. "Formal education is not the only path to responsible adulthood," Toby notes.

Gender on the Bench

"Gender and Judicial Decisions: Do Female Judges Decide Cases Differently than Male Judges?" by Phyllis Coontz, in *Gender Issues* (Fall 2000), Transaction Periodicals Consortium, Rutgers Univ., 35 Berrue Cir., Piscataway, N.J. 08854-8042.

If men and women approach moral problems in different ways, as "difference" feminists maintain, then do male and female judges decide court decisions differently? Coontz, a sociologist at the University of Pittsburgh, conducted a survey of state trial judges in Pennsylvania to find out.

The state has 366 trial court judges, of whom 28 are women. All 28, along with 167 male jurists, answered Coontz's questions about how they would decide hypothetical cases involving self-defense homicide, personal injury, divorce, and assault. Coontz found significant male-female differences in almost half of the judges' hypothetical decisions.

In the homicide case, a female defendant claimed to have been abused by her boyfriend and to have killed him in self-defense. Twenty-seven percent of the female judges found her guilty, compared with 13 percent of the male judges. In the personal injury case, a plaintiff was left paralyzed from the waist down by an auto accident. The female judges awarded an average sum that was less than half that awarded by their male counterparts. But a woman being

divorced by her husband fared slightly better before the female judges. All of them awarded her alimony, while three percent of the male judges did not.

Both male and female jurists were more likely to find a male defendant guilty of assault, in a scuffle growing out of a basketball game bet, than they were a female defendant. But that inclination was stronger in the women on the bench. The female judges also were more likely to impose a longer sentence in such an assault case and to award higher damages (\$955, compared with \$353). The male jurists were twice as likely (22 percent, compared with 11 percent) to award civil damages.

Coontz concludes that the women on the bench in Pennsylvania do indeed speak with "a different voice" from their male counterparts. This may be because of their different "lived experiences," she says. "We, of course, expect judges to set aside personal viewpoints when deciding cases, yet beneath the robe of justice is an individual whose perceptions of the world have been influenced by [his or her] experiences in it."

PRESS & MEDIA

News You Can Lose

"Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy—And What News Outlets Can Do about It" by Thomas E. Patterson, in a Shorenstein Center Report (Dec. 2000), Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard Univ., 79 John F. Kennedy St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Struggling against increased competition for readers and viewers, news organizations have been steadily substituting entertaining "soft" news for reporting on public affairs. The

remaining coverage of politics and government has grown relentlessly more critical. In the long run, this approach may only drive more people away, argues Patterson, a

professor of government and the press at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

There's little doubt that "soft" news—a category in which Patterson includes routine crime, accident, and disaster stories, along with celebrity stories and other fluff—has mushroomed. After analyzing more than 5,000 TV, newspaper, and newsmagazine stories since 1980, he finds that the soft stuff has grown from less than 35 percent to about 50 percent of the total today.

News executives are acting on the basis of marketing and ratings studies, Patterson acknowledges. But the studies focus on the short term, he argues. Over the long term, he suggests, audiences may find that news outlets stuffed with fluff are outlets they can do without.

Americans today "are ambivalent at best" about the news they are being given, says Patterson. In a national survey of 511 adults last October, 84 percent said they found the news "informative," but 50 percent considered it "superficial," and 52 percent "not enjoyable." Sixty-three percent claimed to prefer "news that sticks mainly to stories about major events and issues affecting the community and the country"—and most of these folks said they would like to see less of the soft

stuff. Twenty-four percent of the respondents were soft-news fans. But they tended to think hard news was pretty good, too. And the remaining 13 percent liked hard and soft equally.

The people looking chiefly for hard news constitute the core audience for news, Patterson says. Forty percent of them regularly read a daily paper's news pages, for example, compared with only 26 percent of the soft-news types. And it's those in the core audience who are most discontented today, Patterson points out. "They are also more likely . . . to say they are paying less attention to the news than in the past."

Ninety-three percent of the folks paying less attention complain that the news is too "negative" in tone. Patterson agrees. Since 1976, press coverage of the presidency and the federal agencies has grown steadily more critical. America needs a watchdog press, Patterson believes, but one that can distinguish between "real abuse" and trivial offenses. As Americans have become more turned off by politics and government, more and more of them—not surprisingly—have been turning off the news.

"In the long run," concludes Patterson, "the best way to build an audience for news is through balanced public-affairs reporting."

TV Medicine

"Primetime Pushers" by Lisa Belkin, in *Mother Jones* (Mar.-Apr. 2001),
731 Market St., Ste. 600, San Francisco, Calif. 94103.

Turn on the TV these days, and you are almost sure to see an ad for Viagra, Prilosec, Lipitor, or a host of other drugs that you cannot buy without a doctor's permission. Critics contend that this isn't a healthy development, reports medical writer Belkin, author of *First, Do No Harm* (1993).

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) opened the floodgates four years ago, when it eased restrictions on prescription drug ads. Pharmaceutical companies last year



The maker of this drug for a painful stomach condition spent \$80 million on TV ads in 1999 and saw sales jump 27 percent.