DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE
ALCOHOL, DRUG ABUSE, AND MENTAL HEALTH ADMINISTRATION
5600 FISHERS LANE
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND 20857

Room 10C-09

19 March 1981

To : Members of the Ad Hoc Committee for the Update Project

Eli Rubinstein has sent me a draft for our Volume 1 chapter on implications (final chapter). This is a draft and I would appreciate getting your reactions and suggested modifications, if any. These may relate to wording, tone, emphasis, and other aspects that should be incorporated, etc. Please give this some priority and get your reactions back to me as soon as possible (with an emphasis on soon)!

Also, if you have not written an introductory and integrative section for those papers in volume 2 for which you are the lead committee member, please do so. Again, their submission to me as soon as possible.

Lorraine Bouthilet expects to have the next draft of the report completed by early next week. We will get a copy to you by the end of next week.

I'm enclosing a copy of a memo I sent to the chapter contributors for Volume 2 to indicate the operating framework regarding the editing of their papers.

Have a great Spring

Cordially,

Dave

David Pearl, Ph.D.
Chief
Behavioral & Social Sciences
Research Branch

Enclosures

DRAFT

March 15, 1981

Final Chapter: Implications for the 80's

Prepared for staff and Committe consideration by Eli A. Rubinstein

To appear in: Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the 80's

In this final chapter, we shall try to look broadly at the research findings of the past decade from the standpoint of what is implied for the future. An impressive body of scientific literature has been accumulated since 1971. And, as with the earlier work, the major emphasis remains on the young viewer. Of what significance is that research to the world of television and to the real world within which television operates?

Television Within the Cultural Context

When the Surgeon General's advisory committee completed its deliberations in 1971, the members collectively had the belief that their task was not quite finished. What had begun as a seemingly straightforward question of scientific evidence quickly developed extensive ramifications. While the original question on televised violence had been partially answered, the framework in which the question had been posed raised larger issues.

The committee tried to address some of these larger issues in a final chapter of its report called "The Unfinished Agenda." In that closing commentary the committee asked itself where television fits in the context of our national ethics. At that time, our nation was struggling with racial and social inequities. The committee members recognized that these real inequities made excessive televised violence part of a much larger problem of dehumanization and denigration of human values. They were concerned that simplistic and habitual televised violence might desensitize the viewer to these social problems.

scapegoat

In a complex way, television thus had become partially an anodyne for those real social issues.

The committee had no solution for this problem, except to urge that more attention be paid to these larger issues. And, on a positive note, the committee concluded its comments by urging that the industry and the government explore ways to increase the positive potential of television in addressing these social problems.

Now, ten years later, the committee's plea becomes even more urgent and timely. The research findings of the past decade have reaffirmed the extensive influence of television on the viewer. Almost all the evidence accumulated in the past decade testifies to television's role as a formidable educator whose effects are both pervasive and cumulative. It is, therefore, important to see television as part of our cultural context. Within this framework television can no longer be considered a casual part of our daily lives. While the learning it provides is ~~incidental~~ mostly unplanned (except for commercials and some documentaries) rather than formal, it is a significant part of the total acculturation process.

What are the implications for the future of this central role of television? Perhaps the most crucial issue involves ~~the search for ways to increase the positive potential of television.~~ Research findings have long since destroyed the illusion that television is simply innocuous entertainment. Furthermore, all indications for the future technological development in programming, in distribution and in usage increase even more television's potential influence on the viewer.

Controlling Program Content

At the same time, simplistic efforts to constrain or restrict certain categories of content have been of limited value. Indeed, in some instances these efforts have been counter-productive. Periodic public efforts against televised violence have achieved more publicity than progress. In the mid-1970's the American Medical Association and the Parent Teachers Association achieved a temporary decrease in violence levels, through pressure on advertisers. The American Medical Association abandoned its campaign after two years. The PTA continues, but at a much reduced level of effort. Similar public efforts at pressure on advertisers by various church groups are underway as of this writing.

This intent to reduce televised violence is laudable. Unfortunately, the process that has been used sets in motion pressures on television programming which inhibit creativity and diminish the likelihood of constructive change. What results is often "sanitized" violence, which research has shown may be even more likely to precipitate aggressive behavior than violence in which consequences are dramatically depicted.

Similar concerns are now being expressed about sexual content on television. The research demonstrates that while sexual content has increased during the late 1970's, there is no explicit sex portrayed on television. Public concern should more appropriately focus on the larger problem; human sexuality is being trivialized and made the target of innuendo and humor. Human sexuality should instead be treated as an

important and serious part of human behavior. Ironically, public pressure against the present sexual content on television will probably increase the frequency of innuendo and shallow humor and decrease the serious portrayal of human sexuality in its broader context.

How do ~~these~~ public concerns about ~~violence and sex on~~ television relate to the accumulation of research findings? Recent research documents the continued need for such concern. Unfortunately, the research does not guide us to the best policy for addressing those concerns, except to warn against simple solutions. It is not a matter of removing "impurities" from program content as one might filter impurities out of the air we breathe or the water we drink.

In this regard, it is illuminating ~~again~~ to reexamine the conclusions of the original Surgeon General's advisory committee. In their recommendations for future research they noted that exposure to televised violence does not exist in a vacuum. They called for a better understanding of the complex psychological and social influences leading to antisocial tendencies. It was clear then, and it is even more evident now, that television does not affect the viewer in either unitary or isolated ways.

Specifically on the issue of television's effect on aggressive behavior, the Surgeon General's committee noted that further exploration was needed to clarify how that relationship operated. The predispositional factors in the viewer had to be better understood. The relationship to age of the viewer

was still unclear. The ways in which labelling, contextual cues and other factors of program production might reduce adverse response to televised violence deserved more attention, according to the committee. They were also concerned about how little longitudinal research had been done. The gap in knowledge about long-term effects of repeated exposure to television made it difficult to assess television's effects on the personality development of the child. In essence, television had to be studied in the context of the total environment.

This need to look at the total context holds just as pivotally in recommending policy changes as it does in understanding the research itself. As this volume documents, a great deal has been learned in the past decade about television and its relationship to the viewer. Indeed, one central finding is that it is more precise to consider television as ~~"contributing to effects" on the viewer~~ rather than having "effects," ~~in some direct and independent fashion~~. This finding in no way lessens the responsibility of television toward the viewer, ~~nor does it necessarily diminish television's influence.~~ It does, however, mean that the implications of research findings for policy change are more ~~tangential and~~ difficult to address.

Implications for Policy Change

What are some of the research findings of the past decade that have implications for policy change? Overarching all other findings is the fact that television is so large a part of our daily lives. Within American society, television view-

ing is now a universal phenomenon. ~~About half our present~~ A shrinking portion of our population never knew a world without television. Television is, in short, an American social institution. It has changed or influenced most of our other social institutions, from family life in the home to the functioning of our government.

The organization of the television industry is a bureaucracy that probably will not change in any fundamental way in the foreseeable future. Despite the technological advances now underway and in the offing, the basic structure of the television industry seems secure. The three major networks dominate the industry and the advertisers pay for the audience that television delivers to their commercials.

Given the stability of the structure of television and the size and constancy of the audience, realistic policy change must have both the acceptance of that audience and the cooperation of the industry. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the audience is basically compliant, if not complacent, about what it sees on television. And the industry is quick to become defensive in response to criticism, ~~as it does during any campaign against televised violence~~.

Insofar as industry reaction to research findings is concerned, those findings, ironically, hold much more promise than threat. An apt analogy would be to compare the impact of research on the tobacco industry against the impact on the ethical drug Industry. Almost all research findings on tobacco emphasize the health hazards of smoking. The implication is clear; smoking has only adverse effects on health. By

contrast, basic research on ethical drugs has been the source of its growth. While such drugs do need careful testing and evaluation before being issued for general use, the health benefits far outweigh the minor dangers of adverse side effects.

While television does not, and should not, rely primarily on research findings, it is nontheless clear that the industry has much more to gain than to lose by using research findings constructively whenever possible. One obvious example is Sesame Street, where an ongoing collaboration between researchers and production people resulted in a series of children's programs more successful than any previously created. Sesame Street demonstrated that, through research, sharply defined educational goals could be achieved using an entertainment approach.

On a somewhat less extensive scale, researchers in recent years have demonstrated that preschool children are attracted to and attend to programming that is high in action. The importance of the research is that it tested whether young children would watch high action without violence. (High violence shows are almost always high in action). These children were found to be attending primarily to the action and not to the violence. Thus, Saturday morning programming which derives its action mainly from violence, could be modified to maintain high tempo, without violence, and still be popular with young children. Indeed, analyses of adult adventure programs on prime time have shown that violence was not central to the shows' ratings.

What much of the research helps to do is explode old beliefs about what makes a program popular. There are some beliefs about what makes a program "work", especially for children, which can be more adequately tested by research. Again, this is one of the strengths of Sesame Street.

On a larger scale, we now know that from watching television the viewer derives a frame of reference about the world as that viewer believes it to be. These findings put a greater responsibility on television to avoid as much as possible presentations of social reality which seriously distort the image of the real world. This issue has been of special concern in regard to all forms of stereotyping; racial, social, sexual, and by age. Minority groups in the past decade have recognized and strongly objected to such stereotyping. While racial and ethnic stereotyping still exists it is now far less blatant than it had been. Similar concerns have been voiced over the stereotyping of old people on television. The helpless, senile and ugly old person often shown in dramatic programming is slowly changing, partly due to pressure from senior citizens groups. It is not unlikely, also, that growing awareness by the television industry of the increasing size of that older segment of the viewing audience is influencing the reduction of negative stereotyping of the elderly on television.

One of the most promising direct utilizations of research involves the findings on prosocial behavior. Quite simply, children can and do learn such behavior as altruism, helping, cooperation, friendliness and self-control from watching

programs that demonstrate such behaviors. The television industry has, in the past decade, adopted this term and has used these findings in the development of special programming for children. The three networks have produced programs that incorporated concepts adapted from research on prosocial behavior. Of even greater importance, the networks have been more actively utilizing social scientists as consultants for such programming.

It would be misleading to assume that all program quality will easily be improved by either employing social scientists as consultants or by any direct translation of research findings. In some instances, the research is still at a state where it more readily reveals a problem than a solution. But even the identification of a problem is a step towards the solution.

Television and Growing Up

The full title of the original advisory committee report to the Surgeon General was "Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence." Unfortunately, the report and the research on which it had been based dealt minimally with the actual process of growing up. The relation of television viewing to that process had not been extensively investigated. We now know much more about how that developmental process relates to television viewing.

Over the past decade, research has clearly revealed that what a child comprehends from watching television varies with age, with general experience and with familiarity with tele-

vision itself. The fact that young children until about age eight do not easily relate consequences to earlier actions, makes the adult interpretation of the entire story quite dirferent from that of the child. Thus, the contention is often made of children's programs -- or of adult programs that children watch -- "these are prosocial programs because the bad guy gets punished in the end." What is being ignored in this argument is the critical fact that the younger children do not relate that punishment to the earlier antisocial behavior.

This finding can be generalized to include a large number of other age-specific responses to and attributes of television viewing as described in earlier chapters. The dilemma raised by these findings is that it is difficult to produce programs which simultaneously satisfy the needs and capabilities of a widely diverse audience.

One promising approach to this problem is the teaching of critical television viewing skills and increased participation by parents in making television a more positive learning experience. The value of this approach is not only in the teaching of these skills, but in the increased awareness by educators, parents and children that television viewing can be made a more positive experience. There is the added benefit that television viewing itself can thereby become a constructive source of better parent-child interaction rather than a focus for parent-child conflict.

The development of these critical viewing skills in no way diminishes the responsibility of the industry for dealing

with this problem of meeting the needs of a diverse audience. Some small steps in this direction are being taken not only by some increased attention by the industry to age-specific programming, but by such devices as public service announcements urging parents to more actively involve themselves in their children's viewing activities. While the research indicates that such parental involvement has been minimal in the past, there is no reason why this situation cannot be changed by further public and industry efforts.

Making Use of Research

There is also a fundamental flaw in how the industry now makes use of research, not just on television and children, but on the totality of developmental psychology research. On the one hand, an encouraging development over the past decade has been some increased use of social scientists as consultants and some expansion of social science research itself by the television industry. Witness the major studies on TV violence supported by or even conducted by the three networks.

More than offsetting that slightly positive development is the peripheral use, at best, of the large body of knowledge that does have implications for social policy, much of which is ignored by the industry. This ignorance is not premeditated or intentional. It is built into the organizational structure of the industry.

Two cases in point, one trivial and one more fundamental may serve to illustrate this ignorance of the potential pertinence of research findings to policy. The greatest

sophistication in presentation techniques is employed in producing commercials for television. No greater concentration of expense and care occurs than in the production of a 30 second commercial. Yet, until recently, little attention was paid to using language in children's commercials which was appropriate to the language comprehension level of the intended audience. One small study in 1977 clearly revealed that 8 year old children do not understand the phrase "partial assembly required", used almost exclusively in toy commercials at that time. The children did understand "you have to put it together yourself," used as a substitute in the study. Advertisers now, under their own self-regulation guidelines, are advised to use language appropriate to the age of the intended audience.

On a much more basic level, until the advent of the Surgeon General's program in 1969, the total amount of money spent by the networks for social science research was infinitesimal. While the three networks had social scientists in their employ, these scientists were peripheral to the production and development of programs. The pressure of publicity from the Surgeon General's report stimulated all three networks to sponsor or pursue research, primarily on televised violence. Exact figures are unknown, but a generous estimate would suggest that less than $5 million dollars has been expended by all three networks on social science research in the 1970's. With the American television industry operating in 1980 at about a $10 billion annual budget, the expenditure for the entire

decade thus amounted to less than one-twentieth of one percent of one year's annual budget.

Nor are there any indications that this level of financial commitment is likely to increase substantially. The American television industry has shown no initiative in examining the need for a major program of research, either individually by network or in some collaborative way for the entire industry.

By contrast, the British Broadcasting Corporation sponsored a comprehensive report in 1979, to prepare an agenda for new projects of social research in the field of broadcasting. The report recommended a new "Institute for Broadcasting Research" be funded and staffed. It would focus on policy-oriented research whose ultimate goal would be to bring to bear social science research expertise in improving the quality of programming. In 1980, a limited effort was initiated under the joint sponsorship of the BBC, the British Film Institute and an American private foundation, the Markle Foundation. A three year grant, totalling $375,000 is being used to support a small research unit, housed at the British Film Institute. The unit supervised by a research advisory committee is initiating a few research projects and attempting to organize larger projects, for which additional funds will be sought. In announcing this project in July 1980 the British Film Institute justified this effort by noting that broadcasting's increasing impact on society and the heightened public awareness of the social consequences of broadcasting require a new

approach to research.

Ironically, this is not a new idea. Over the past twenty years, here in the United States, there have been various proposals for some kind of national media center, especially as it relates to television. The functions designated for such a center have included; the conduct or promotion of research; advocacy of public interest regarding media policies; monitoring and evaluation of media performance; and dissemination of research finding relevant to media practice. Despite repeated efforts, both public and private, to organize such a center, none has emerged. Nor does such a center seem feasible at the present time.

And yet, these attempts toward some national body or bodies to provide constructive oversight and research input to television stem from an awareness that more can and should be done to increase the positive potential of television.

What began in 1969 with the Surgeon General's program has, in the past decade, gone well beyond the issue of violence. To modify a currently popular terminology in economics, the research of the past decade has provided much more in the way of supply side findings than demand side findings. The thrust of the violence research was initially to inhibit program practices. The major thrust of the more recent research is to reveal new directions for the improvement of television.

Two promising areas, for example, have direct relevance to health issues. One involves the programming of health portrayals. The other involves programming for special

populations. As discussed in an earlier chapter, commercial programming includes much health-related content. While self-regulatory codes set some standards for this content; i.e. drug abuse should not be encouraged or shown as socially acceptable, much more could be done in a positive way. The same fundamental issue of stereotyping exists with health-related content as exists with the presentation of racial and ethnic stereotyping. Mental illness is presented more often as accompanied by violence, either as aggressor or as a victim. The use of alcohol is pervasive and often casual with no indication of potentially negative consequences. Seat belts are rarely used. Conscious effort to change these and other depictions detrimental to good health practices would in no way inhibit the dramatic impact of the programming, but could have positive social consequences.

What is involved here is part of a larger issue: What messages are being conveyed that are unintended side effects of programming? How can these side effects be changed or eliminated? It is laudable to produce special programs which periodically convey important health messages as their central intent. Commercial television does this very well in its documentaries and in its news programming. Greater awareness of what is covertly taught in incidental messages is another area in which constructive change can be made. In the long run, such awareness might lead to the most effective television health campaign of all.

Programming for special populations, such as the

institutionalized individuals in psychiatric settings, in homes for the aged and in hospitals, affords another opportunity for constructive change. To some extent, cable television is responding to the needs of some specialized populations, such as the aged. But the financial resources and the creative talents in commercial television could well accelerate and improve the programming for such special populations.

Conclusion

If this discussion of implications for the future does not appear neat and tidy it is because the points at issue are not neat and tidy. The research of the past decade has confirmed some of the problems. Televised violence does have an adverse effect on the viewer, even though evidence for long-term effects is still not unequivocal. More importantly, the television world, with all its dramatic distortions of reality, is accepted as reality in ways that seriously impinge on that reality itself. On a more fundamental level, children do not see television in the same way as adults. Their perceptions and comprehension are developmentally different. What is presented to them must be responsive to those differences.

Those problems all are amenable to solution within the framework of the existing structure of commercial television, if the industry and the viewing public address the issues collaboratively. The role of the government in this regard should be as an advocate and facilitator of change, but not as a regulator.

The research of the past decade, at the same time, carries

many positive overtones. Central to all the findings is the clear evidence that television viewing as an activity can benefit by understanding it better and by using it with more conscious and structured objectives. Furthermore, the viewing activity can be used as a positive influence on parent-child relationships if it is purposefully approached with that objective in mind.

In sum, the research of the 1970's is much more promise than threat to the ultimate well being of television. It remains to be seen if the industry and the viewing public can learn to help transform that promise into a reality.

REFERENCES

Barnouw, E. (1978) The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate. New York: Oxford University Press.

_____(1977) Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television. New York: Oxford University Press.

_____(1970) The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in The United States from 1953. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bauer, R. (1958) "The Communicator and the Audience," Conflict Resolution. 2:66-78.

Bogart, L.(1973-74) "The Management of Mass Media: An Agenda for Research" Public Opinion Quarterly. 26 (Winter):580-589.

_____(1956) The Age of Television. (First Edition) New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.

Brown, L. (1971) Televi$ion: The Business Behind the Box. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Cantor, M. G. (1980) Prime-Time Television: Content and Control. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing Co.

_____(1979) "Our Days and Our Nights on TV," Journal of Communication. 29 (Autumn): 66-72.

_____(1972) "The Role of the Producer in Choosing Children's Television Content," pp. 259-289 in G. A. Comstock and E. A. Rubinstein (eds.) Television and Social Behavior. Vol.I.Content and Control.Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office.

_____(1971) The Hollywood TV Producer: His Work and His Audience. New York: Basic Books.

_____and A. K. Peters (1980) "The Employment and Unemployment of Actors in the United State" pp. 210-217 in W.S. Hendon, J. L. Shanhan and A. J. MacDonald (eds) Economic Policy for the Arts.Cambridge, Mass.: Abt Books

Cater, D. and S. Strickland (1975) TV Violence and The Child: The Evolution and Fate of the Surgeon General's Report. New York: Russell Sage.

Comstock, G. A. (1980) Television in America. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing Co.

_____(1972) "New Research on Media Content and Control (Overview). pp. 1-27 in G. A. Comstock and E. A. Rubinstein (eds.) Television and Social Behavior.Vol. I. Media Content and Control. Washington: DC:U. S. Government Printing Office.

_____,Chaffee, S., Katzman, N., McCombs, M, and Roberts, D. (1978) Television and Human Behavior. New York: Columbia University Press.

Elliot, P. (1972) The Making of a Television Series: A Case Study in the Sociology of Culture. New York: Hasting House.

Faulkner, R. R. (1971) Hollywood Studio Musicians: Their Work and Careers in the Recording Industry. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.

FCC (1980) An Analysis of Television Program Production, Acquisition and Distribution. Federal Communications Commission Network Inquiry special Staff. June 1980

Fireman, J. [ed.] (1977) TV Book: The Ultimate Television Book. New York: Workman.

Friendly, F. W. (1975) The Good Guys, The Bad Guys and The First Amendment: Free Speech vs Fairness Boradcasting. New York: Random House.

Gans, H. J. (1974) Popular Culture in America. New York: Basic Books.

_____(1966) "The Shaping of Mass Media Content: A Study of News" Presented at Miami Beach, Florida. American Sociological Association Annual Meeting.

_____(1957) "The Creator-Audience Relationship in the Mass Media: An Analysis of Movie Making." pp. 315-324 in B. Rosenberg and D. White (eds.) Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America. New York: Free Press.

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Signorielli, N., Morgan, M. and Jackson-Beeck, M. (1979) Violence Profile No.10. Philadelphia: Annenberg School of Communication.

Gitlin, T. (1979) "Prime-time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment." Social Problems 26(February): 251-266.

Head, S. W. (1976) Broadcasting in America. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Hirsch, P. M. (1972) "Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organizational Set Analysis of Culture Industry Systems." American Journal of Sociology. 77(January): 639-659.

The Hollywood Reporter (1980) "TV Production." November 6:16-17.

Krasnow, E. G. and L. D. Longley (1973) The Politics of Broadcast Regulation. New York: St. Martins.

Lazarsfeld, P.F. (1963) "Some Reflections on Past and Future Research on Broadcasting" pp. 409-22 in G.A. Steiner, People Look at Television. New York:Alfred A. Knopf.

Lewis, G. H. (1978) The Sociology of Popular Culture. Current Sociology 26 (Winter)

Miller, M. and Rhodes, E. (1964) Only You, Dick Daring! New York: William Sloane.

Mosco, V. (1979) Broadcasting in the United States: Innovative Challenge and Organizational Control. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Newsweek (1979) "Producers in Revolt" December 10:126-129.

Peters, A. (1974) " Aspiring Hollywood Actresses: A Sociological Perspective" pp. 39-48 in P. L. Stewart and M. G. Cantor (eds.) Varieties of Work Experience. Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman Publishing Co.

Reeves, R. (1979) "Power in Television" TV Guide. June 23: 2-8.

Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights (1979) Window Dressing on the Set. An Update. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.

_____(1977) Window Dressing on the Set. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.

Stein, B. (1979) The View from Sunset Strip: America as Brought by the People Who Make Television. New York: Basic Books.

Sterling, C. and T. R. Haight (1978) The Mass Media: Aspen Institute Guide to Communication Industry Trends. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Terrace, V. (1976a) The Complete Encyclopedia of Television Programs, 1947-1976. Volume I A-K. New York: A. S. Barnes.

_____(1976b) The Complete Encyclopedia of Television Programs, 1947-1976. Volume II L-Z. New York: A. S. Barnes.

Tunstall, J. (1977) The Media Are American: Anglo-American Media are American. New York: Columbia University Press.

Turow, J. (1978) "Casting for TV Parts: The Anatomy of Social Typing" Journal of Communication 28 (Autumn): 18-24.

U. S. Congress, House (1977) Violence on Television. Report of the Subcommittee on Communications of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce. 95th Congress, First Session. September 29.

Weintraub, B. (1979) "The Whole Idea of TV May Change." Washington Star, Dec. 12: C-2

Whitefield, S. E. and G. Roddenberry (1968) The Making of Star Trek. New York: Ballantine Books.