

April 19, 1983

Dr. C. Everett Koop
Surgeon General
U.S. Public Health Service
Room 716 G
200 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Dr. Koop:

The undersigned were senior scientific advisors in a project of the National Institute of Mental Health that resulted in the 1982 publication of Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties. We are writing you to express our strong support for the conclusions and scientific integrity of that NIMH publication. As you know, that two volume report was prepared as a ten-year update to the 1972 Report to the then Surgeon General, Dr. Jesse Steinfeld. The new NIMH report has recently come under public attack by some members of the television industry. The substance of that criticism, which we believe to be unfounded, calls for an informed response.

This letter is specifically intended as an open reply to a newly published 32 page pamphlet, widely distributed by the American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. The pamphlet, "A Research Perspective on Television and Violence," purports to be a rigorous and objective refutation of the NIMH report. However, the ABC statement is neither rigorous nor objective. Instead, it is a shallow attempt, ostensibly for public consumption, to focus on only one portion of the NIMH review, rehash industry attacks on independent research of the past ten years, ignore or distort both the evidence presented in the NIMH report and the consensus of the field, and present conclusions that obscure the issues and deceive the readers. It would be no exaggeration to compare this attempt by the television industry to the stubborn public position taken by the tobacco industry on the scientific evidence about smoking and health.

The ABC statement concentrates on four research issues. We deal with each of these in a critique of the ABC charges. Our critique is attached to this letter. We invite your attention to that analysis and request that you transmit it to the NIMH and others who may be concerned, for their information.

A telling indictment of the ABC position is inherent in findings on the effects of television that were ignored in their statement. Research has long since gone beyond the issue of violence. The summary (Volume 1) of the NIMH report devotes only nine out of 91 pages to that topic. Similarly, only 72 out of 362 pages of technical reports in Volume 2 deal with violence and aggression. Some other topics include: health-promoting possibilities; effects on cognitive and emotional functioning; effects on imagination, creativity, and prosocial behavior; and effects on education and learning. These are all parts of a related body of data which only confirms the obvious conclusion that television is an influential teacher of children and adults. It is ironic that the networks themselves have pursued and used the concept of positive programming in defense of some of their children's productions. The research on positive effects is no better or worse than that on violence and aggression. Yet the industry, by some convenient logic, accepts the former and disputes the latter.

What is especially distressing about ABC's effort to discredit a carefully developed assessment of research is that it only serves to confuse and deter the considerable opportunity for constructive change. It is now more than a decade since the original Surgeon General's Report. In testimony before Senator Pastore in March 1972, all three network presidents acknowledged, with some qualification, the findings on televised violence and pledged to improve television for children. (It is noteworthy that the most forthright and responsive statement was made by Elton Rule, President of ABC.) Surely the creativity, talent, and considerable resources of the television industry could have been put to better use than the renewed campaign of obfuscation and evasion after ten years of significant scientific progress. Indeed, instead of a positive response to that evidence, quality programming for children on commercial television has become increasingly rare.

As our appended critique indicates, the ABC argument is scientifically indefensible. By the very manner in which it was constructed, it is only the latest example of unwarranted resistance to the clear policy implications of overwhelming scientific evidence. The renewed attempt to evade, undermine, and discredit the work of hundreds of scientists summarized in the NIMH volumes and to shape the course of public discussion by selective attention and misrepresentation, is unworthy of an industry that professes -- and is licensed -- to serve the public interest.

While we realize that the Department of Health and Human Services has no direct regulatory responsibility for television, we did want to bring to your attention our confidence in the validity and integrity of the NIMH report, and our conviction that the research summarized in the report documents both the dangers of certain program content and the potential for positive change.

We believe ABC should reexamine its stance on this issue. We believe all broadcasters should exert their considerable influence to serve viewers more effectively and to use research to that end. We hope you will lend your good offices to this goal in any fashion you deem appropriate.

Respectfully,

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