

## Critique of

A RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE ON TELEVISION AND VIOLENCE  
published by the American Broadcasting Companies, Inc., 1983.

By

Committee of Scientific Advisors to  
the National Institute of Mental Health  
report on Television and Behavior

The 32 page pamphlet, prepared by the Social Research Unit of ABC, is intended as a response to the 1982 NIMH publication, Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties. The booklet identifies itself as an analysis dedicated to "rigor, objectivity, and the adherence to a predetermined set of rules and procedures." (Page 1) It fails on all three counts. It reads instead like a slick brief for the defense replete with carefully worded misinterpretations, omission of large bodies of relevant evidence, and sheer misstatements of fact.

The pamphlet begins (Page 2) by calling into question the entire body of research reviewed in the NIMH report as "simply a reiteration of information which has already been made available." ABC sees this as a fatal flaw, despite the fact that the foreword to the NIMH report and most of the press coverage made clear that the report was not based on new research, but was a comprehensive and integrative review of existing research. The ABC interpretation suggests that once published, research findings quickly go stale and lose their validity or relevance. On the contrary, of course, findings accumulate with later studies testing, confirming, and extending those published earlier.

What is especially lacking in rigor or objectivity is the premise by ABC that research on violence stands in isolation from the larger body of research reviewed by the NIMH report. Perhaps the most telling confirmatory evidence on the effects of televised violence is that it is now only one part of a massive body of research, all of which clearly points to the obvious; television entertainment is a teacher. A pattern of effects has emerged from all this evidence. It would be indeed anomalous if the findings on violence and aggression did not fit into this larger pattern.

Ignoring that crucial issue, the ABC pamphlet isolates four specific conclusions from what is actually a minor part of the NIMH

report. In this critique we shall address only some of the many violations of the principles to which that booklet claims to be dedicated.

We shall begin by citing the ABC summary of and response to each of the four NIMH conclusions addressed in the pamphlet, and follow that with our critique, citing ABC further as needed to illustrate our examples.

"NIMH CONCLUSION NO. 1

The research findings support the conclusion of a causal relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior.

"ABC RESPONSE:

The research does not support the conclusion of a causal relationship."

The attribution of causality is a complex way of defining relationships, even in the physical sciences. The question is not how irrefutable the causal conclusion may be, especially in the social sciences, but rather can it be invoked at all. In 1972, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee, on which two distinguished members were full-time scientists for NBC and CBS respectively, and on which three other members had been part-time consultants to the industry, came to the unanimous conclusion that there is "some preliminary indication of a causal relationship, but a good deal of research remains to be done before one can have confidence in these conclusions."

The ten year update provided much additional research to add "confidence" to the conclusions.

Defining and Measuring Violent Behavior

Most research in the field has concerned itself with the linkage between "televised violence" and "aggressive behavior." Rarely have scientists attempted to observe, let alone induce, "violent behavior." The ABC statement uses a subterfuge in equating aggressive behavior with violent behavior and then asking if televised violence causes violent behavior. While few studies, for obvious reasons, can legitimately explore that connection, one notable instance does exist (Belson, 1978). That study did find such a causal connection between televised violence and actual antisocial behavior. Despite the fact that the study was funded by CBS, when it was independently published in book form, it was dismissed by the industry as merely "correlational." That charge is now leveled by ABC against the NIMH report's conclusions.

### Use of Correlation to Imply Causation

Although even the stimulation of harmful tendencies in millions of children is of no small consequence, ABC obfuscates the issue. It states baldly that "The point is, correlation can never tell us anything about causation." (Page 6) Even theoretically, let alone in a practical way, this is simply not true. Correlation is a necessary but not sufficient condition in a causal relationship. To argue that a study is "correlational" as the industry did with the Belson study, is not legitimately to dismiss its significance. If there had been no correlation, the question of causation would have been settled long ago. Instead, study after study by independent investigators found significant correlations.

### The Use of Convergence Theory

The ABC pamphlet next develops something called Convergence Theory to argue that scientists can be led to accept any "widespread belief" on which many different studies seem to converge. If there is any substance to that curious criticism, it must be in the basic assumption behind the operation of the television industry itself. Ten billion dollars annually are expended on the "widespread belief" that advertising induces people to buy products. There is no more definitive causal relationship between advertising on television and subsequent buying behavior than there is between televised violence and later aggressive behavior.

To put it in simple statistical terms, let us assume that finding a significant positive correlation, no matter how small, was equivalent to a penny falling "heads." Assume further that finding no such correlation is a case of "tails." What would one infer if the penny fell "heads" ninety-three times out of a hundred? The advertisers, and those of us doing research on television effects (where a vast majority of studies comes up "heads") are quite convinced that betting on "heads" is the correct way to go.

Of course, no researcher cited by NIMH argues that television violence is the only or even necessarily the main factor in aggression. The conclusion on which there is a significant "convergence" is that it is a contributing factor. Having set up a straw-man relationship between causation, correlation, and convergence, ABC next argues that only a handful of studies support the NIMH conclusions.

### Review of NIMH Studies

The ABC statement begins: "The NIMH technical chapter on violence and aggression in Volume 2 cites 14 studies which the author suggests proves a positive relationship between television and violence

and which the NIMH Report relies upon to reach its conclusion of a cause-effect relationship." (Page 7)

The chapter referred to is a rather comprehensive review not just of 14 studies but of the larger penumbra of research on televised violence which further illuminates this body of findings. In fact, 95 publications are referenced in this chapter, most of which support the major argument.

The ABC statement points out that this chapter does not discuss a study by NBC researcher Milavsky, one that dismissed television's effect on aggression as negligible, "although the NBC study appears in its own chapter in the NIMH report." Of course, it is precisely because another chapter was devoted to the NBC study that it would have been superfluous to incorporate its findings in the chapter under discussion. Indeed, it was NIMH and our committee that invited the NBC researchers and requested the inclusion of the NBC study as a separate chapter of Volume 2. What ABC implies was an omission is in fact the result of a conscientious effort on the part of NIMH and our Committee to include all relevant research. The conclusions of the NBC study were carefully considered in the final evaluation and summary published in Volume 1.

In sum, ABC has not refuted the NIMH conclusion of a causal relationship between television violence and aggression, and has misstated both the convergence and weight of evidence bearing on the issue.

"NIMH CONCLUSION NO. 2

There is a clear consensus among most researchers that television violence leads to aggressive behavior.

"ABC RESPONSE:

There exists a significant debate within the research community over the relationship between television and aggressive behavior."

ABC found one (unpublished) study (Bybee, et al.) that it could construe as suggesting that there is no consensus among academic researchers. The problem is that ABC misrepresented even that study. To be precise, the sample polled was not all "academic researchers," as ABC states (Page 8) but members of professional societies in speech and journalism, an unknown proportion of which are researchers. More importantly, researchers in the field of television include many psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists who were also absent from the sample.

Even more deceptive is ABC's interpretation of the results of that survey. The issue is not whether television is the cause of

aggression. As we have already noted, no responsible researcher makes that claim. All complex behavior has many causes. What the research results showed, as NIMH reported, is that television is a significant contributor to such behavior. On that point, the Bybee study cited by ABC actually showed a clear consensus. About two-thirds of those polled agreed that television increased children's aggressive behavior. Had more scientists from other fields been included, that consensus would probably have been even higher. The authors of the Bybee study are themselves distressed at the ABC misrepresentation of their findings.

Attempting to neutralize the great preponderance of published studies that find the linkage, ABC claims that studies which find an effect are more likely to be published than studies with no findings. That seeming anomaly would have disappeared if ABC had correctly stated that well-designed studies, with clearly developed hypotheses, and careful statistical analyses, leading to scientifically defensible conclusions, are more likely to be published in reputable scientific journals than poor studies with inconclusive results.

It is an insult to the research community to state as ABC does -- baldly and without qualification -- that "Since editors naturally prefer to report results, publication policies can result in a distortion of the scientific evidence which actually exists." (Page 9) In that sentence, the ABC statement attempts to discredit the entire formal process of scientific publication.

Finally, ABC cites seven references to claim that many academic scientists have concluded that the research evidence does not support the causal linkage. In fact, that list of seven all but exhausts the list of "many." In the context of the previous example of 93 "heads" coming up in the penny toss, these are the seven "tails."

In sum, the ABC has not refuted the NIMH conclusion that there is a clear consensus among research scientists on this issue.

**"NIMH CONCLUSION NO. 3**

Despite slight variations over the past decade, the amount of violence on television has remained at consistently high levels.

**"ABC RESPONSE:**

There has been a decrease in the overall amount of violence in recent years."

ABC's contention that "there has been a decrease in the overall amount of violence in recent years" is based on an in-house CBS report and is not supported by independent studies. In any case, it does not

necessarily contradict the NIMH conclusion that "the amount of violence on television has remained at consistently high levels."

Singled out for special attention by ABC is an extensive and long-standing research project called Cultural Indicators, conducted at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications since the late 1960's. The project began as a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (the "Eisenhower Commission") and continued under various foundation and medical auspices to investigate many aspects of television content and viewer conception of social reality.

Ignoring its proper name, broad scope, many publications, and assessment by NIMH and others, the ABC pamphlet reaches back six years to claim that "The Gerbner content analyses have generated a great deal of controversy within the research community (Newcomb, Coffin and Tuchman, Blank)." Of the authors cited as being responsible for the "controversy", Coffin, Tuchman, and Blank were network employees and Newcomb a humanistic scholar whose dialogue with the Cultural Indicators team was as supportive as critical of the effort. Of course, all complex research relevant to social policy does and should be debated. But ABC conceals the actual debate from the readers of its pamphlet; it does not mention the rebuttals published in the same journals -- and usually in the very same issues -- as the works cited.

The ABC pamphlet repeats perennial network objections as if they had never been addressed and dealt with both in the literature and in the NIMH report. In fact, at least three chapters of Volume 2 of the NIMH report provide critical overviews and assessments of all aspects of the content analyses ABC insists are "controversial." One of these, an overview of measures of violence in television content, compares several measures including that of Cultural Indicators and the CBS study. It finds "no detectable trend," and observes (on Page 117): "Regardless of measure, changes that within the scope of 2 or 3 years would appear to constitute an upward or downward shift become, in the long run, oscillations." That and other similar reviews of the research evidence by independent scholars led NIMH and our Committee to conclude that despite variations over the years, violence on television "remained at consistently high levels."

#### The Definition of Violence

The ABC pamphlet supports its contention of a decrease in the amount of violence by reference to a CBS study not subject to peer review or other scientific scrutiny and not regularly published. However, it was introduced into the 1981 Congressional hearings on "Social/Behavioral Effects of Violence on Television" as the industry's attempt to counter evidence presented by researchers at the hearing. An examination of the 1981 hearing record (e.g. page 108) shows that CBS succeeded in "reducing" the amount of violence reported by simply

excluding a significant (and unreported) amount of violent representations. (The violence monitoring effort announced by ABC itself with much fanfare a few years ago did not seem to yield results suitable for its own pamphlet.)

The ABC pamphlet argues (on Page 10) that "The CBS study and the Gerbner study utilize radically different definitions of violence and consequently arrive at very different conclusions." The CBS study definition of violence (not cited by ABC) is "The use of physical force against persons or animals or the articulated, explicit threat of physical force to compel particular behavior on the part of a person." The ABC pamphlet states that "Gerbner defines violence as: 'The overt expression of physical force against self or other compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing.'" The two definitions are in practice virtually identical. ABC argues that "What makes the Gerbner definition unique is that this definition is applied not only to serious and realistic depictions of violence, but is expanded to include comedy and slapstick, accidents, and acts of nature such as floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes." Actually, both definitions include the use of physical force in any context. The difference is not in definition, as ABC claims. It is in what CBS chose not to include in its report.

The counts CBS excluded from its report were those it claimed, without evidence, to be "harmless" acts of "accidental" and "humorous" violence. The evidence reviewed by NIMH indicates that violence in any context may teach powerful lessons and can be harmful in its effects. But even with such manipulation, the CBS study was able to reduce its violence score from 138 incidents a week in 1972-73 to 105 a week in 1980-81. That is still more violence in one week of prime time watching alone than most people experience otherwise in a lifetime. It can hardly be seen as contradicting the NIMH finding that "violence on television remained at consistently high levels."

How much of all that mayhem is "accidental" and "humorous" violence that the networks claim is "harmless?" Here again, ABC is wide of the mark. On Page 11 the pamphlet claims that "in a number of Gerbner studies, over one-third of all the violence counted did not result from human action but was caused by accidents or acts of nature." (Emphasis in the original.) What are the facts?

The ABC pamphlet deals with prime time programs alone. The source of ABC's observation on "human action" is the original Report to the Surgeon General, Television and Social Behavior, Volume 1, Media Content and Control, Page 40 and Table 67 on Page 107. Those figures refer not to prime time but to the combined results of prime time and weekend daytime children's (mostly cartoon) programs. In cartoons, humanized animals rather than humans, strictly defined, commit most violence. Therefore, the "over one-third of all the violence counted" was not "caused by accidents or acts of nature" but mostly by cartoon

"animals" committing anthropomorphic mayhem. (ABC uses cartoon violence only to obfuscate the facts but not to express concern over the most violent and exploitive part of programming, what the trade calls the "kidvid ghetto.")

A careful look at the same Table 67 would have revealed that when only regular programs (rather than cartoons) are considered, as in prime time, nine out of ten acts of violence are perpetrated by human agents. Table 69 in the same series also shows that of these acts of hurting and killing people only one-fifth appear in a "light" or "humorous" context, with consequences that, according to available evidence, cannot be blithely dismissed.

Where does that muddle leave those real "acts of nature such as floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes" that according to ABC "distort" the amount of violence reported? In light of the facts they also shrink into insignificance. An analysis of Cultural Indicators data for 15 sample periods since 1969 shows a grand total of only 13 fictional "acts of nature" hurting and killing. The viewer bombarded with violence every hour of prime time has to watch an average of three and a half weeks to encounter one act of "accidental" violence. The social pattern of such victimization (i.e. what types of characters tend to get hurt or killed "accidentally") may be far from inconsequential. But the rarity of the occurrence makes the ABC claim groundless.

The argument that an "expanded" definition "distorts" even one set of violence figures used in the NIMH report is thus both deceptive and trivial.

#### The Violence Index and Sample

One of the oldest claims of network publicists, renewed here despite ample clarification through the years, is that the Violence Index "is an arbitrary and idiosyncratic measure which does not accurately reflect program content. Rather than simply count the number of violent incidents per program, Gerbner combines various numerical scores, some of which are weighted to reflect his own theoretical and controversial assumptions." (Page 11)

This reiteration ignores responses published since 1972 and the annual publication of the Violence Index in which the "simple count of the number of violent incidents per program" is separately tabulated for the convenience of those who prefer that simple measure to also considering the pervasiveness of violence in all programming and lethal vs. non-lethal consequences. An extensive review of tests in Volume 2 of the NIMH report found that the Violence Index "meets the critical statistical and empirical requirements of an index: unidimensionality and internal homogeneity." (Pages 167-8)

ABC's quibble with the sample employed in the Violence Index is similarly misdirected. Without citing any support, the ABC pamphlet states that "The use of one week's worth of programming to represent the total content of a 52 week season is clearly inadequate." (Page 11) As explained many times, and reviewed in at least two technical chapters of the NIMH Report, but ignored by ABC, experiments with up to 7 weeks of programming have not produced notably different results (e.g. see Volume 2 Page 113). The NIMH review concluded: "These studies thus indicate that while a larger sample might increase precision, given the operational definitions and multidimensional measures that are sensitive to a variety of significant aspects of television violence, the 1-week sample yields stable results with high cost efficiency." (Volume 2, Page 165) Certainly, the consistency of violence and other measures of fictional demography and power from year to year would be hard to explain with a sample that is inadequate to the task for which it was designed.

The extensive research evidence supporting the definition of violence and its measurement in samples of television content has not been examined by ABC; it has been ignored. The ABC claims appear to be designed for the uninitiated, repeating contentions network publicists have been propagating for over a decade. In sum, the ABC statement did not refute the NIMH conclusion that violence on television remains at consistently high levels.

"NIMH CONCLUSION NO. 4

Television has been shown to cultivate television-influenced attitudes among viewers. Heavy viewers are more likely to be more fearful and less trusting of other people than are light viewers as a result of their exposure to television.

"ABC RESPONSE:

The research does not support the conclusion that television significantly cultivates viewer attitudes and perceptions of social reality."

ABC moves on to challenge the extensive body of research findings on television's cultivation of viewer attitudes and conceptions of reality. The ABC pamphlet claims that even though the NIMH report accepted many of the findings of the cultivation analysis, "the authors of the technical report chapter reach a different conclusion. They state, 'The evidence concerning the causal direction of television's impact on social reality is not sufficient for strong conclusions' (Hawkins and Pingree)."

The fact is that the chapter by Hawkins and Pingree supports the cultivation theory and confirms findings cited by NIMH. "Causal direction" is not an issue in cultivation theory which holds that the pervasive and repetitive patterns of television cultivate rather than only create attitudes and perceptions. After the passage cited by ABC, Hawkins and Pingree observe that "the relationship between viewing and social reality may be reciprocal." (Page 239) In their review of many studies, including their own, Hawkins and Pingree conclude:

"Is there a relationship between television viewing and social reality? Most studies show evidence for a link, regardless of the kind of social reality studied. These studies cover a diverse range of areas including prevalence of violence, family structures, interpersonal mistrust, fear of victimization, traditional sex roles, family values, images of older people, attitudes about doctors, and concern about racial problems....Relationships between viewing and demographic measures of social reality closely linked to television content appear to hold despite controls." (Page 237)

Another example of the criticisms cited by ABC is the statement that ". . . [C]ultivation researchers group 'non-viewers' who don't watch television with 'light' viewers who watch less than average. When non-viewers are analyzed independently of light viewers, their fear and mistrust scores are actually higher than light viewers. Similarly, "extremely heavy viewers" are grouped with 'heavy viewers.' When extremely heavy viewers -- who view eight or more hours of television daily -- are analyzed independently, they are found to be less fearful and mistrusting than heavy viewers." (Page 14)

The facts were reported in an article in the same journal from which ABC selected its information, but they were omitted from the ABC pamphlet. What are these facts?

Non-viewers and "extremely heavy viewers" are very small and atypical groups (about 5 percent of the population each. Their deviant responses are trivial in size and nonsignificant statistically. In any case, the inclusion of these deviant groups means that the NIMH conclusions about cultivation are underestimated; when they are excluded, the resulting patterns are even stronger for the remaining 90 percent of the population.

A series of additional repetitions of criticisms already dealt with in the research literature and reviewed in the NIMH report further strains the credibility of the ABC "critique." Clearly its authors are aware of the scholarly exchanges that have taken place; they seem not to have missed a single negative comment, no matter how far-fetched. Yet they seem to be oblivious to the much more numerous extensions and confirmations of findings by independent scholars in the United States and abroad.

In sum, the ABC pamphlet deceives the reader not familiar with the research literature. It is thus the ABC pamphlet and not the NIMH report that distorts, in its general design as well as its details, the evidence on television and violence that it purports to place in perspective.

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