Defending the Indefensible

Steven H. Chaffee, George Gerbner, Beatrix A. Hamburg, Chester M. Pierce, Eli A. Rubinstein, Alberta E. Siegel, and Jerome L. Singer

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) project for which we were senior scientific advisers resulted in the publication of *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties*. The two volume report was prepared as an update to a 1972 report to the surgeon general. 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 article is specifically intended as an open reply to a statement written by Alan Wurtzel and Guy Lometti for the American Broadcasting Companies, Inc., the text of which precedes us in this issue of Transaction/Society. The ABC statement purports to be a rigorous and objective refutation of the NIMH report; however, it is neither rigorous nor objective. 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 issue 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.

A telling indictment of the ABC position is inherent in findings on the effects of television that are ignored in their statement. Research has long since gone beyond the issue of violence. The summary (Volume 1) of the NIMH report devotes only 9 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 that only confirms the obvious conclusion: television is an influential teacher of children and adults. Ironically, the networks 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. (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. Instead of a positive response to that evidence, quality programming for children on commercial television has become increasingly rare.

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.

The ABC response reads like a slick brief for the defense replete with carefully worded misinterpretations, omission of large bodies of revelant evidence, and sheer misstatements of facts. It begins 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, 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. A pattern of effects has emerged from all this evidence. It would be anomalous if the findings on violence and aggression did not fit into this larger pattern.

Ignoring that crucial issue, ABC isolates four specific conclusions from what is actually a minor part of the NIMH report. We address only some of the many violations of the principles to which the ABC statement claims to be dedicated. We begin by discussing the ABC summary of and response to each of the four NIMH conclusions that are addressed. First, to the conclusion, "The research findings support the conclusion of a causal relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior"; ABC responds, "The research does not support the conclusion of a causal relationship."

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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 can it be invoked at all. In 1972, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee, of which two distinguished members were full-time scientists for NBC and CBS respectively, and of 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 update provided much additional research to add confidence to the conclusions.

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. The study by Belson 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.

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." Even theoretically, let alone in a practical way, this is 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. Study after study by independent investigators found significant correlations.

Wurtzel and Lometti develop 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.

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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 argues that only a handful of studies support the NIMH conclusions.

The ABC statement begins: "The NIMH technical chapter on violence and aggression in Volume 2 cites fourteen 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." The chapter referred to is a comprehensive review not just of fourteen studies but of the larger penumbra of research on televised violence which further illuminates this body of findings. Ninety-five publications are referenced in this chapter, most of which support the major argument.

Wurtzel and Lometti point 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." Precisely because another chapter was devoted to the NBC study would it have been superfluous to incorporate its findings in the chapter under discussion. 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 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.

Television is an influential teacher of children and adults.

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. To the second summarized conclusion, "There is a clear consensus among most researchers that television violence leads to aggressive behavior"; ABC responds, "There exists a significant debate within the research community over the relationship between television and aggressive behavior."

ABC found one (unpublished) study, by Bybee et al., that it could construe as suggesting there is no consensus among academic researchers. ABC misrepresented that study. The sample polled was not all "academic researchers," as ABC states 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 social scientists who were 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. No responsible researcher makes that claim. All complex behavior has many causes. What the research results showed 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 ABC's misrepresentation of their findings.

Attempting to neutralize the findings in the great preponderance of published studies, ABC claims that studies that 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 insulting to the research community to state as ABC does—baldly and without qualifications—that "since editors naturally prefer to report results, publication policies can result in a distortion of the scientific evidence which actually exists." In that sentence, the ABC statement attempts to discredit the entire formal process of scientific publication.

ABC cites seven references to claim that many academic scientists have concluded that the research evidence does not support the causal linkage. That list of seven all but exhausts the list of "many." ABC has not refuted the NIMH conclusion that there is a clear consensus among research scientists on this issue. To the third

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summarized conclusion, "Despite slight variations over the past decade, the amount of violence on television has remained at consistently high levels"; ABC responds, "There has been a decrease in the overall amount of violence in recent years." ABC's contention about a decrease in the overall amount of violence is based on an in-house CBS report and is not supported by independent studies. It also does not necessarily contradict the NIMH conclusion.

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 1960s. 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, ABC reaches back six years to claim that "the Gerbner content analyses have generated a great deal of controversy within the research community." 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

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the effort. All complex research relevant to social policy does and should be debated. ABC conceals the actual debate from the readers of its statement; it does not mention the rebuttals published in the same journals—and usually in the very same issues—as the works cited. The ABC authors repeat perennial network objections as if they had never been addressed and dealt with both in the literature and in the NIMH report. 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 those of Cultural Indicators and the CBS study. It finds "no detectable trend," and observes: "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 ABC statement 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. 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 shows that CBS succeeded in "reducing" the amount of violence reported by 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 statement.

ABC argues, "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." Wurtzel and Lometti state 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, "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." 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.

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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. Even with such manipulation, the CBS study was only 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. They claim 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.) ABC 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*. 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, not to express concern over the most violent and exploitive part of programming, what the trade calls the "kidvid ghetto." A careful look at table 67 in the original report 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 fifteen sample periods since 1969 shows a grand total of only thirteen 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. 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 both deceptive and trivial.

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." ABC maintains that rather than counting 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." This 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. nonlethal 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."

ABC's quibble with the sample employed in the Violence Index is similarly misdirected. Without citing any support, the ABC authors state that "the use of one week's worth of programming to represent the total con-

tent of a fifty-two-week season is clearly inadequate." As explained many times, and reviewed in at least two technical chapters of the NIMH Report, but ignored by ABC, experiments with up to seven weeks of programming have not produced notably different results. 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.

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. The ABC statement did not refute the NIMH conclusion that violence on television remains at consistently high levels. To the fourth summarized conclusion. "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 responds, "The research does not support the conclusion that television significantly cultivates viewer attitudes and perceptions of social reality."

ABC challenges the extensive body of research findings on television's cultivation of viewer attitudes and conceptions of reality. The ABC statement 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." Those authors stated, "The evidence concerning the causal direction of television's impact on social reality is not sufficient for strong conclusions." The technical report 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." In their view 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.

Another example of the criticisms cited by ABC is the assertion that cultivation researchers group nonviewers with light viewers. When nonviewers are analyzed independently, ABC states "their fear and mistrust scores are actually *higher* than light viewers." Similarly, it is said that extremely heavy viewers are grouped with heavy viewers, but when extremely heavy viewers are analyzed independently, "they are found to be *less* fearful and mistrusting than heavy viewers." The facts were reported in an article in the same journal from which ABC selected its information, but they were omitted from the ABC statement. Nonviewers 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 not significant statistically. 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 more numerous extensions and confirmations of findings by independent scholars in the United States and abroad.

The ABC statement deceives the reader not familiar with the research literature. It is thus the ABC statement 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.□

Steven H. Chaffee is director of the Institute for Communication Research at Stanford University.

George Gerbner is professor of communications and dean of The Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania.

Beatrix A. Hamburg is professor of clinical psychiatry and pediatrics at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine.

Chester M. Pierce is professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School.

Eli A. Rubinstein is adjunct research professor in mass communications at the University of North Carolina.

Alberta E. Siegel is professor of psychology at the Stanford University School of Medicine.

Jerome L. Singer is professor of psychology at Yale University.