Wide World of Reports

ABC objections to linkage of aggression to TV violence in NIMH report brings social scientists into contention in novel public skirmish

The perennial question of whether the depiction of violence on television causes aggressive behavior by its viewers has sparked an unusual clash among social scientists. The American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. (ABC) recently took public issue with the views expressed in a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) report *Television and Behavior*. A critique by the network's social research unit titled *A Research Perspective on Television and Violence* argues that research cited in the report does not support its conclusion that there is a causal link between televised violence and aggressive behavior. The conclusions are "unsubstantiated when subjected to scientific analysis," the ABC critique asserts.

The ABC refutation has, in turn, been rebutted by the seven senior researchers who served as scientific advisers on the NIMH report.* In a gloves-off countercritique of the ABC document, they wrote that it reads "like a slick brief for the defense replete with carefully worded misinterpretations, omissions of large bodies of evidence, and sheer misstatements of fact."

U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, to whom the advisory group addressed its rejoinder to ABC on 26 April, directed his own stinging obiter dictum to the networks in general and ABC in particular. In the course of remarks on family violence prepared for an audience of military physicians, Koop referred to "the dreadful basket of alleged research analyses done by ABC. Their pamphlet is an embarrassment to the social science research community as well as to the media."

The exchange over the NIMH report is obviously more than a scholarly wrangle over methodologies and the interpretation of data. The discussion has become part of the continuing controversy about the social effects of television which seems to be moving toward one of its periodic peaks of intensity. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), for example, on 27 April reopened the record on its docket on children's television, in which violence is a perennial issue. And a House subcommittee on telecommunications seems likely to propose formation of a national commission on children's television to come up with recommendations on how to improve it.

The ABC reaction to the NIMH report seems to be based at least in part on a network view that if the report's findings of a causal link between televised violence and aggression were accepted as scientific fact, the public and Congress would call for tighter restrictions on such material on television.

The implications of the NIMH report, in fact, were the subject of a National Research Council (NRC) workshop in December. And the House Judiciary subcommittee on crime in March made the report and ABC's rejoinder the focus of the first of a projected series of hearings on the influence of the media on crime.

The NIMH report updates a report published in 1972 under the imprimatur of the Surgeon General and titled *Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Television Violence*. As the title indicates, the main focus was the effect of television violence on children. The report's central conclusion was that the research then available yielded "some preliminary indications of a causal relationship, but a good deal of research remains to be done before one can have confidence in these conclusions."

In the new study the key comment on the effects of violence was

> After 10 more years of research, the consensus among most of the research community is that violence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch the programs. This conclusion is based on laboratory experiments and on field studies. Not all children become aggressive, of course, but the correlations between violence and aggression are positive. In magnitude, television violence is as strongly correlated with aggressive behavior as any other behavioral variable that has been measured. The research question has moved from asking whether or not there is an effect to seeking explanations for the effect.

In commissioning its updating report, NIMH asked for an analysis of the increased body of research rather than commissioning new research as had been done for the original study.

The new report differs from the first in devoting under 20 percent of its space to the subject of violence. The balance is given over to a discussion of other social effects of television. Emphasis is placed on the value of television as an education tool in areas such as health, and its potential for "prosocial" effects.

The ABC reply, however, concentrates on the portion of the NIMH report dealing with televised violence and aggressive behavior. Alan Wurtzel, a psychologist and former academic who heads ABC's social research unit, says that the network decided to make a public response on the issue because the press focused heavily on the discussion of violence in the NIMH report after the summary volume was published in May 1982.

A main thrust of the 32-page ABC response is to deny that a valid cause-effect relationship has been established between televised violence and aggression. The ABC document argues, for example, that researchers' measures of violent behavior are inadequate, noting that "it is simply impossible to observe this kind of behavior in research subjects on a systematic basis." Researchers are, therefore, compelled to substitute other less reliable means such as laboratory experiments or panel studies.

Similarly, the use of correlation to imply causation is questioned. ABC argues that there may be a statistical interrelation between two variables such as televised violence and aggressive behavior, but in this case, a third variable may be the cause of aggression. Also criticized is the NIMH report's reliance on convergence, that is assuming that cause has been established when a number of different studies point in the same direction. This method is dismissed as unreliable because all the studies may share biases or illogical assumptions that undermine them.

The ABC paper also cites problems arising from variations in the definition of violence used by different researchers. ABC takes special exception to the definition used by George Gerbner and his colleagues in compiling an annual "violence profile" of network TV programs. Gerbner, who is dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, is a member of the seven-member advisory group on the report. ABC argues that the definition of violence used in the Gerbner profiles can include accidents,

*Steven H. Chaffee, Stanford; George Gerbner, University of Pennsylvania; Beatrix A. Hamburg, Harvard Medical School; Chester Pierce, Harvard Medical School; Eli A. Rubenstein, University of North Carolina; Alberta E. Siegel, Stanford School of Medicine; Jerome L. Singer, Yale.

slapstick comedy, and acts of nature and that this "expanded" definition results in tallies that distort the amount of "realistic violence."

In their response to the ABC critique, the advisers on the NIMH report took pains to clarify the report's central point on violence emphasizing that "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."

Replying to ABC's attack on convergence, the advisers alluded somewhat testily to the ABC comment that the "convergence approach led scientists to the widespread belief that the world was flat." The response was, "Ten billion dollars are expended annually in the 'widespread belief' that advertising induces people to buy products. There is not a more definitive causal relationship between advertising on television and subsequent buying behavior than there is between television violence and later aggressive behavior."

The major objection among the advisers to the ABC critique was expressed this way by Gerbner. "By concentrating on the violence-aggression issue, the network is insisting on reducing a very complex question to a very simple one. The real issue is not does TV violence cause aggression," but rather it is "the lessons television can teach." Gerbner said, "The report was an effort to change the nature of the public discussion on the subject. The ABC response puts us right back in the same old rut."

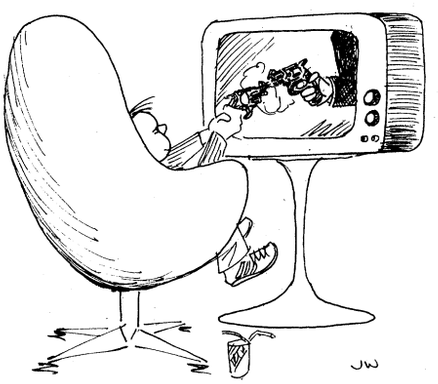
Neither side is budging. ABC is even considering issuing a response to the riposte from the seven researchers so that an infinite progress of rebuttal statements seems possible.

The ABC stand gets support from those knowledgeable about social science research in the other major networks, CBS and NBC, although not on every point. NBC's vice president for news and social research J. Ronald Milavsky says that he thinks the NIMH study was a "bad report in the respect that they went way overboard in interpretation."

ABC contends that the report's portrayal of a consensus among researchers on a violence-aggression link is erroneous. The NIMH finding, however, does seem to reflect the general views of the best-known and most-published researchers in the field. This includes four of the advisers—Gerbner, Rubenstein, Singer, and Siegel. But Wurtzel and others suggest that the NIMH's selection of researchers with established views made the product predictable.

An alternate view was offered at the NRC workshop by Thomas D. Cook, a professor of psychology and public policy at Northwestern. Cook was asked to assess the NIMH report for the workshop, which was sponsored by the Justice Department's National Institute of Justice.

On the matter of consensus, Cook told *Science* that "Among people who actually study the subject, my guess is that close to 100 percent would say that there is a causal link. But if there is a link, and I believe there is, it is not so large as portrayed in the report."



According to Cook, people who are interested in the possibility of change in television, "should be looking at the political economy of the broadcasting industry. Unless they do that, they won't know whether leverage exists."

In respect to prosocial programming, he asks, "Why should any network do it?" The network might get public relations kudos, but such material would be "likely to earn low ratings, be expensive to produce and mean foregoing revenues," says Cook.

What are the prospects for changes in such things as televised violence? First and foremost, discussion of tighter regulation of televised violence invites constitutional conflict. Broadcasters are protected by the same First Amendment free speech guarantees as the press.

The government agency responsible for regulating the broadcasting industry is the Federal Communications Commission. Through the years, the commission's interpretation of its responsibilities has varied with its membership, but traditionally the commission has avoided attempts at direct control of program content. Congress oversees regulatory agency activities, but has generally been reluctant to take action against broadcasters, a stance usually attributed to an unwillingness to antagonize the local radio and television stations which have grown increasingly important in political campaigning.

The 1980 elections brought the FCC a new chairman, Mark S. Fowler, and a turnover in membership. Fowler's penchant for deregulation is expected to influence the commission's rule-making on children's television which is scheduled for action by early autumn. Fowler is a vocal advocate of a "marketplace approach to broadcast regulation" which he defines as allowing "viewer preference rather than percentage guidelines or quotas to determine the programming mix on TV."

Fowler has expressed concern about the quality of children's television, but advocates increased support for public television programming in the children's field. And he sees the increased availability of new television services such as the Disney network on pay TV as offering opportunities for improved children's programming.

Many observers see the advent of new technologies—cable, pay television, cassettes—as meaning viewer choices will be substantially increased. But in the relatively unregulated atmosphere expected to prevail, they suggest that the exposure of children to violence and other objectionable influences are actually likely to increase.

The networks themselves are operating in a rapidly changing climate. A public interest group identified with the Moral Majority recently spurred a boycott of products of companies that sponsored TV programs with what was regarded as too much sex and violence. Some major sponsors reportedly reviewed their TV commitments. The networks perhaps have more to worry about in the implications of a recent survey commissioned by the National Association of Broadcasters. Preliminary accounts of the survey indicated that viewers were spending less time watching network TV, were more critical of TV fare generally, and thought that programs showed too much sex and violence.

Against this background, it is clear that social science research alone does not determine public policy on television. In its introduction, the ABC critique notes that "The issue of television violence can be addressed on two different levels: as an objective *scientific* question and as a subjective *values* issue." Change seems likeliest to occur when scientific evaluation and value judgments show a strong convergence.

—JOHN WALSH