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VIEWING TELEVISION VIOLENCE DOES NOT MAKE PEOPLE MORE AGGRESSIVE

Jonathan L. Freedman*

I. INTRODUCTION

You have heard two slightly different descriptions of the current status of the research on the effects of viewing violent programs on aggression. Professor John Murray is what I might call the true believer.1 Professor Edward Donnerstein is mostly a true believer, but he is willing to hedge a little bit.2 But, both of them clearly think that watching violent programs causes an increase in aggression, and that the research proves this. I do not agree.

Before telling you why, let me mention briefly the role of psychology in the political debate about restricting television programs. Most of us in psychology tend to be of a liberal persuasion at least in terms of censorship. Professor Donnerstein makes it very clear that he does not think that censorship is a good idea. He does not think that anyone should use social science data to support censorship or to support the kinds of bills that Senator Ernest Hollings and others are proposing that would restrict what could be shown on television. However, the fact of the matter is that we do not make those decisions. This morning you heard a talk by John Windhausen defending the Hollings Bill, one of the most restrictive bills ever proposed.3 He made it very clear that he and the Senator consider the social science research a major justification for the bill. Indeed, he implied that without the social science research there would be no such bill—not because they would not like it—but because they would not be able

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to justify it. So I think we, as psychologists, and the rest of you, should understand completely that whatever we think of the quality of the social science research, and however much we like to qualify it, it is used by those in Congress for their own purposes, and it is this research that is one factor underlying the kinds of bills that have been proposed.

Therefore, it is extremely important that we be accurate about what the social science research shows. We all agree that no study is perfect, that the results of studies in this area are always going to be a little inconsistent, and that some studies will be open to different interpretations. Nevertheless, we have to take all of this into account. We have to look at all of the research carefully and critically, and then say to the world, and in particular to Congress: "This is what we know now." Because this is an important issue and because what we say will have profound effects on law and public policy, we should be very sure that what we say is accurate.

Let me say in the strongest possible terms that I do not agree with the previous two panelists. I believe that what they have said is not an accurate description of the research. Contrary to their assertions, the research does not support the idea that watching television violence causes aggression. This disagreement is not just a matter of degree—in my opinion they are just plain wrong.

We are not merely using different terms. Professor Donnerstein says it is not a matter of television violence causing aggression, but that it does contribute to aggression. I do not know what the dictionary would say, but that sounds like he is playing with words—"cause" and "contribute" sound pretty much the same to me in this context. In any case, whether one says "contributes" or "causes," Congress is going to use this to defend these restrictive bills.

The crucial question is whether violence on television causes (or contributes) to aggressive behavior in the real world. Does it produce an increase in aggression or crime? Their answer, based on their reading of the evidence and much appreciated by Senator Hollings and others, is that it does. My answer, based on my reading of the research, is that it does not. This conclusion comes not from picking apart or criticizing the methodology of a few studies (although I have tried to read them all critically) but from reading all of the studies

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4. Id. at 786.
5. Donnerstein, supra note 2, at 829.
that have been done. I have tried to look at them objectively, from a
distance, with no prior commitment to one position or another, and I
sincerely believe that anyone doing this would come to the same
conclusion.

II. COMMITTEE REPORTS

Before discussing the research, let me warn you not to be overly
impressed by the list of committees that have issued supposedly
learned statements to the effect that television violence is harmful.
Organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the
American Psychiatric Association and others have set up these com-
mittees, and they all agree that television violence causes aggression. Sounds impressive! But, there is less here than meets the eye.

First, these committees include very few people who have read
all of the studies. It takes a great deal time and effort, as well as a
considerable amount of methodological and statistical expertise, to do
a thorough review. I am sure that the members of these committees
are well-meaning people who are concerned about television violence.
But, few, if any, of them already know the literature and those who
do not, cannot possibly have the time to read more than a tiny
amount of the research. They are, after all, generally busy people who
have many other interests and concerns. The committee is not their
life-work. They may be happy to serve on it, but they are hardly
going to sit down and read two hundred or even fifty research arti-
cles. Even if they did decide to read the research, many of them lack
the skills to do it well.

Instead, the committee members either take the word of the one
or two “experts” on the committee, or they accept the words of the
experts in the field. The problem with that is that there are only a
few people who are generally considered experts. Almost all of them
have devoted their research careers to this issue, have built their
reputations on the harmful effects of television violence, and are thus
ture believers. Since the committees all base their conclusions on the
words of these few experts, naturally all of the committees agree, and
naturally they all conclude that television violence is harmful. This
does not mean that many independent groups doing independent re-

6. 1 AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, VIOLENCE AND YOUTH: PSYCHOLOGY'S
RESPONSE—SUMMARY REPORT OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION COMMISSION
ON VIOLENCE AND YOUTH (1993).
views of the literature have come to this conclusion. All it means is that various groups, depending on the same few experts, have echoed what these experts tell them. Thus, these committee reports are essentially meaningless.

This is equally true of the supposedly objective reviews done by government. The National Institute of Mental Health ("NIMH") spent years on its 1982 report,\(^7\) and it should be a document we can rely on. Alas, NIMH apparently did not make any serious attempt to do a thorough review. It asked a few people to write position papers and solicited exactly one review of the literature. This review was done by L. Rowell Huesmann,\(^8\) one of the most avid true believers. Even he did not really do a review; instead, he referred to a few articles and spent most of the paper on his own research. Thus, no unbiased review was done, and sure enough, the report simply agrees with Huesmann that television violence is harmful. Pretty sloppy! Pretty useless!

Congress, as might be expected, is even worse. There have been various legislative committees and subcommittees concerned with the effects of television. As far as I know, they have all concluded that watching television violence is harmful to children. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, these committees tend to invite people who will give them the kind of testimony the committee wants. Since the committee chairs almost always want to restrict television programming, they naturally invite only psychologists who are known to be true believers in the harmful effects of television violence. They may occasionally invite a token skeptic whom they typically insult and then ignore. And, of course, they often invite some television executives who are treated even worse. So, naturally, the official record includes testimony that strongly supports the idea that television violence is harmful.

The point is that you should not be overly impressed by the apparent unanimity among the various committees, reports, and legislative committees. They are based on a biased sampling of opinions made mainly by people who were convinced ahead of time that television violence was harmful. In any case, it is the research that matters—not what people say about it.

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7. 1 NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, TELEVISION AND BEHAVIOR: TEN YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EIGHTIES (David Pearl et al. eds., 1982).
I. HOW I BECAME INVOLVED

Perhaps it will help you put my comments in perspective if I tell you how I got involved in this issue. This is not my major area of research in psychology. The only reason I got involved was that ten or twelve years ago I was planning to teach a graduate research course, was looking for a good topic that everyone would be interested in, and picked television and violence. It was an ideal topic for the course which was supposed to focus on how to study complex issues and also on what had been found in the research on one such issue. Researchers studying television violence have used a wide variety of methods, which raised many fascinating methodological questions. Moreover, although there is quite a bit of research, there was little enough that we were able to read most of it in the course. Five faculty members and five graduate students sat in on this course. Not all the faculty members attended all the time, but the students did. We came from very different points of view. Some of the faculty members began as true believers in the harmful effects of television violence while others were neutral. I was neutral but admittedly slightly skeptical, not because I had any reason to be, but because that is my nature. None of us had done any research on the topic, none of us had ever gotten a grant connected with the issue, and none of us had based our careers on it in any way. So, in a sense, we were about as neutral and objective as you can get.

We read everything we could possibly read in the course of a few months. That was a lot because we worked hard. We did not manage to read all of the studies, but we read a great many of them, including several books and long monographs. We all read everything, discussed each study at length in class, argued and debated and questioned as much as we could. We were initially surprised, then amazed, and finally, unanimously, appalled at the discrepancy between what we found in the research and the way it was generally described.

We found that the research was extremely inconsistent, and that there were obvious contradictions from one study to the next, which were never followed up as they normally would be in a serious scientific endeavor. Overall, the research did not support the belief that television violence caused aggression. On the contrary, it was such a muddle that we felt that if people were not already true believers or already committed to the belief, that if they were really objective, no one who sat down and carefully read the research could possibly believe that it supported the causal effect of television violence on...
aggression.

I was so upset about this—at the discrepancy between what social scientists were telling the world and what I thought the research showed—that I spent another year reading everything I could possibly find. During this period, I read the work even more carefully than we had read it in class. I discussed it with some of the people who had taken the course and with others, and I finally wrote it up. That paper was published in the major American Psychological Association journal for this kind of review.\(^9\) Since then I have gotten involved in this a little, but as an outsider, not someone who is committed to it one way or the other. My career does not depend on this in any way. I think it is simply a matter of setting the record straight, and I think that the record is not straight at the moment.

So what are you to make of this? Two psychologists tell you one thing; I tell you the opposite. I assume most of you have not read all of the research and will not bother to read it in the future. I cannot honestly recommend it as light or entertaining reading, although some of the papers might serve as cures for insomnia. But, since you have not read it, how can you decide who is correct? We certainly cannot go through all of the research here. It would take all day and probably most of next week, and I am afraid we would lose most of the audience. Instead, let me mention a few points that may show how weak the evidence is.

### IV. LABORATORY RESEARCH

Most of the true believers put a lot of weight on research done in the experimental laboratory studies. In these studies, children are brought into a laboratory room either alone or in small groups. Some are shown a violent television program or film; some are shown a non-violent one. Then, a measure of aggression is taken. When this is done, generally those shown the violent program score higher in aggression than the others. The results, however, are not entirely consistent. Sometimes it works under some conditions and not others; sometimes this is reversed. Also, sometimes you get no effect on aggression. In fact, Professor Donnerstein did a very nice study of this kind some time ago and got no effects on aggression from a violent film.\(^10\) Instead, he found that those who watched the violent

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10. See Charles W. Mueller et al., *Facilitative Effects of Media Violence on Helping*, 40
film, at least under some circumstances, were much more prosocial, much more helpful and nice than those who watched neutral or prosocial films. This study, as you would imagine, has not gotten a lot of publicity. Despite these inconsistencies, it is fair to say that usually you get an effect—aggression scores are higher after a violent film than after a neutral film.

The true believers find this very encouraging and mention it a lot. I think it tells us nothing about what goes on in the real world. Most of my career has been based on laboratory research, and I think it is a very powerful tool. However, it has its limitations, and I think it has virtually no relevance to the issue at hand. Without going into this in great detail, let me tell you why.

First, the measures of aggression are usually poor or worse. Obviously, you cannot incite or allow real violence in the laboratory, so most of the measures of aggression are not real aggression but analogues of it. The problem is that these other measures often have little or nothing to do with real aggression. One such measure, believe it or not, was to show a child a balloon and ask whether it would be fun to see someone pop the balloon—I am not making this up. If the child said “yes,” this was supposed to indicate aggressiveness. Several studies gave the children Bobo dolls (plastic dolls that are inflated and that bounce back up if they are hit), and saw if they hit them—as if hitting a Bobo doll is an aggressive act. That is what Bobo dolls are made for—they are supposed to be hit. To be fair, some studies have used somewhat better measures, but by and large, they have been poor.

A more basic problem involves the logic of the whole exercise. According to Dr. Murray and other people who have studied these things, by the time they are eight, most children have watched thousands of murders and tens of thousands of violent acts on television. They have been immersed in violent acts, bombarded with them. According to those who believe in this effect, watching these

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11. *Id.*
violent acts makes the children more aggressive. Presumably, the effect is gradual—it does not happen all at once with only one exposure. Rather it is incremental, at least up to a point, the more violent acts children see, the more aggressive they become. In fact, the whole logic of the theory and of the field research which I will discuss in a moment, is based on the assumption that watching a lot of violent acts is worse than watching just a few.

Now, in the experimental situation we have children of six or eight or ten years of age, all or most of whom have watched television for years and been exposed to a great many scenes of violence. Some have seen hundreds of violent acts, others have seen thousands, still others maybe tens of thousands. They have, according to the causal theory, been greatly affected by this exposure. They have been made more aggressive and violent than they would have been if they had not ever watched television or had never watched a violent program on television. The damage has been done. At least that is what the true believers say.

Well, following their own logic, why in the world would one more depiction have any effect? It is like saying, all my life I have eaten much more fat and cholesterol than I should have, my arteries have been ruined, and I am at great risk for a heart attack. I go into the laboratory and eat one tiny little pat of butter and bang, I am dead. There is no conceivable reason, no possible mechanism by which one gram of fat is going to make a noticeable difference when I have consumed tons of it before; and, perhaps even more so, there is no possible reason why one more violent television show is going to have a noticeable effect on aggression when kids have watched thousands of them before. Life does not work that way; science does not believe in these magical effects. It simply is not plausible.

On the other hand, there are at least two simple, plausible explanations for the effect that have nothing to do with the supposed harmful effects of television violence. One reason is that violent programs are arousing. Professor Donnerstein has actually suggested that, as have several others.\(^{15}\) Watching a program filled with action and violence gets the kids more excited than watching a relatively quiet neutral film. When they are then given a chance to respond, those who are more excited respond more strongly, more actively to almost

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anything. Sometimes they are more prosocial, sometimes they are more aggressive. Whatever the behavior, they do more of it. This effect of arousal is one of the most clearly established in psychology, and obviously applies directly to the laboratory studies on television violence. In other words, the effect is not due to the violent films themselves or to their content, the children are not learning to be aggressive from watching them, but rather all that is happening is that they are getting excited, and that makes them more aggressive. Presumably, watching an exciting baseball game or a scary movie or any other exciting program would have the same effect.

The other explanation has to do with what the children are being told by the experimenter when he or she shows them a violent or neutral program. Remember, these are children, not rats. They have lively, active, probing intelligence. When they find themselves in a strange situation, and the laboratory certainly is one, they try to figure out what is going on, and especially what is expected of them. The experimenter shows them one film, and it is either a violent one or a neutral one. There is usually no good explanation of why they are being shown the film except maybe that the experimenter happens to have it, and they should watch it while the experimenter is busy with something else.

What do children’s active minds make of this? Why am I being shown this film? One likely answer that comes to them is that the experimenter is saying: “I like this kind of film” or “I think you will like this kind of film” or “This film tells you how you should act later” or some similar interpretation. If it is a violent film, the experimenter is saying: “I like violence” or “I think you probably like violence” (and is approving of this) or “I would like you to act aggressively.” If it is a neutral film, there is no such message. When the children are subsequently given a chance to act aggressively, they are affected by the experimenter’s message. They feel freer to act aggressive, or even feel that they should act aggressively when they have seen the violent film than when they have seen the neutral one. This is what psychologists call experimenter demand—the experimenter, unintentionally, is demanding that the children act in a particular way. It is this demand rather than the film itself that is producing the effect.

Thus, it seems clear to me that the laboratory experiments are of little importance and their findings are highly questionable. They are probably produced by arousal and/or experimenter demand. It is highly implausible and quite illogical that they could be produced by the
impact of one more violent program. Accordingly, these results tell us nothing about what effect television viewing has in the real world.

V. FIELD RESEARCH

I think we almost all agree that it is the field studies that have to bear the brunt of the argument because these are studies that are done in the real world. In fact, if psychologists did not believe that, they would not bother doing this kind of research because it involves so much more work and is so much harder to conduct than research in the laboratory. Clearly, the results of the field studies are what matter in this debate.

That is what I would like to turn to. My review was primarily of the field studies. I can say categorically, with no hesitation, that they do not provide any convincing evidence of an effect. I am not alone in this. Tom Cook, a highly respected psychologist, wrote a critique of the 1982 NIMH report on television.16 In it, he and his co-authors said, "[i]n our view, the field experiment on television violence produced little consistent evidence of effects, despite claims to the contrary."17 Joyce Sprafkin was originally a believer in the effect. In fact, she was a co-author of a book that attacked television.18 Yet, she has recently changed her opinion. In a review of the evidence written with Kenneth Gadow, they wrote: "[a]t the present time, the findings from the field experiment offer little support for the media aggression hypothesis."19

And that brings us to this conference at which you have just heard two psychologists say that the research shows that watching television violence increases aggression while I say it does nothing of the kind. How are you going to know whom to trust? Drs. Murray and Donnerstein are serious, earnest psychologists who obviously believe what they said, and I am just another psychologist taking the opposite position. Since we cannot go through all of the research, I thought I would just mention a few studies to show you how my reading of them is entirely different, and also to give you some idea

17. Id. at 181-82.
of the kind of research that the true believers are basing their conclusions on.

Let us start with one study that Dr. Murray described—one conducted by Aletha Huston. This study was published under the names Friedrich and Stein in 1973 (I assume that Huston changed her name since then). Now remember, I did not pick this study, Dr. Murray did. Presumably, he chose it because he considers it a strong and convincing example of the kind of research that supports his view that watching television violence increases aggression. In fact, he referred to this same study in his testimony before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, so clearly he must be very familiar with it, and must think that it is one of the best studies he could cite. He is not alone. This study is regularly mentioned by the true believers to support their position. In his review of the literature done for the major 1982 NIMH report, Rowell Huesmann included it as one of only seven field studies he listed as showing the harmful effects of television violence; a recent meta-analysis of the research counted it as showing the negative effect of TV violence; and, indeed, it is generally one of the studies most often cited to support the belief that watching television violence produces an increase in aggression. I would like to go through the results of this study, not to attack it in particular, but to make the point that if you read the research carefully, you will be amazed at the discrepancy between what people have been saying about the research and what it really found.

This is a nicely designed study in which children are shown either violent programs (*Batman* and *Superman* cartoons) or prosocial programs (*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*). There was a third group that watched a variety of so-called neutral programs, but I will ignore that for simplicity. They watched these programs for four weeks, and measures were taken of how aggressive and how pro-social (helpful, cooperative, etc.) they were after watching them compared to before.

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Now let me remind you of what Dr. Murray said about the results of this study. By the way, he said much the same thing in his testimony to Congress. He described the study as showing that those who watched the violent programs (Batman and Superman) became more aggressive, and those who watched the prosocial programs (Mister Rogers) became more prosocial and helpful. Obviously, this is just what the true believer would predict and would hope to find. It is, however, not an accurate description.

Let us take aggression first. To begin, it is important to know that there were four main measures of aggression: physical aggression, verbal aggression, object aggression and fantasy aggression. Clearly, the authors of the study expected to see effects on these measures as would be predicted if watching violent programs actually made children more aggressive. The results are summarized in Table 1. As you can see, there were no effects on any of these main measures. Watching the violent shows did not increase physical, verbal, object or fantasy aggression.

Undeterred but perhaps somewhat discouraged, the authors next computed an index combining physical and verbal aggression (items one and two of Table 1). There was no effect on either taken alone, but they presumably hoped that there would be if they were combined. A famous psychologist once paraphrased Archimedes as saying let me compute an index and I can show you anything. The problem with computing indexes is that you have lots of chances to find something, and you can pick and choose what to combine with what. It is likely that the authors tried all sorts of other combinations of their measures—physical and object aggression (which are much closer to each other than to verbal aggression), verbal and object, maybe physical, verbal and object, and so on. Each index may make some sense, but by trying them all, you greatly increase the possibility of getting a result by chance. In any case, putting aside the statistical problems inherent in using indexes, the results (also shown in

\[\text{Table 1} \]

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<th>Measures Used by Friedrich and Stein (1973)</th>
<th>Significant Effect?</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Physical Aggression</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Object Aggression</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Fantasy Aggression</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. 1 plus 2</td>
<td>NO</td>
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25. Murray, supra note 1, at 815.
26. See Friedrich & Stein, supra note 21.
27. Table 1

http://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/hlr/vol22/iss4/9
Table 1) were the same as before—no effect. That is, even combining physical and verbal aggression, there was no difference between the kids who had watched *Batman* and those who had watched *Mister Rogers*.

This must have been quite disheartening, but the authors did not give up. They then did what we call an internal analysis. This is a perfectly legitimate procedure, but it is well known and fully accepted that once one does an internal analysis, the results must be viewed with caution for a variety of reasons. Once again it increases the possibility of getting chance results, because there is virtually no limit to the number of internal analyses one could do. Moreover, the study is no longer experimental in nature, and therefore lacks the strength of that method. Thus, results based on an internal analysis are usually less convincing and more ambiguous than those found without such techniques. But, this internal analysis was the last chance to find anything, so naturally the authors tried it.

Friedrich and Stein divided the subjects into those who were initially low aggressive and those that were initially high aggressive. The results are shown in Figure 1:

![Figure 1](image-url)
As you can see, the major result was that regardless of what type of program they had watched, the low aggressive kids became more aggressive and the high aggressive kids became less aggressive. This is what we call a regression effect and means absolutely nothing. For statistical reasons, it would be expected. Clearly, it tells us nothing about the effect of the programs.

The big deal of the study is the difference between the low aggressive and high aggressive kids who watched the two types of programs. When the low aggressive children watched a violent program they became more aggressive, but when they watched a neutral program, they became even more aggressive. In other words, if anything, the neutral program caused more aggressiveness for these kids than did the violent program. So far, still no hint of a negative effect of violent television.

What about the high aggressive children? Here, at last, is some slight comfort for the true believers. After watching a neutral program, these children became less aggressive; but after watching a violent program they became less less aggressive. That is the effect. Not an increase in aggressiveness after watching violent television, but less of a decrease for one group of children while the other group actually increases more after watching violent television. This is not a distortion; I am not suppressing other effects. This is all they got.

Let me just review it once more. They had four main measures of aggressiveness and got no effects on any of them; they computed an index and still got no effect; they then did an internal analysis and found a very weak interaction which showed that the low aggressive children became more aggressive after a neutral film than after a violent one, but that the high aggressive children became less less aggressive after a violent film than after a neutral one. My own reading of this study is that it should be considered evidence against the causal hypothesis, not in favor of it. If you try four main measures and one index, and you get nothing, and you then do an internal analysis and that is all you can get, I consider that evidence against a harmful effect of television violence. That this study is used as evidence for a harmful effect shows, I think, three things: first, many people who cite it have not read it or have not read it carefully; second, those who argue that the research supports the harmful effects of television violence must be desperate to have to mention this study. Third, it also suggests that one should be cautious in accepting the true believers' descriptions of the research findings.

I am not quite done. Let us consider the other part of what Dr.
Murray said about the study, which was that after watching *Mister Rogers* rather than *Batman* and *Superman*, the children became more helpful. These results were surprisingly similar to those regarding aggression. First, there was no main effect on any measure of prosocial (helping, positive) behavior. This time they did not compute an index, but they did do another internal analysis. Sadly, it was not the same internal analysis as for the aggressiveness measure. I should say that when you do this kind of analysis, it is often questionable, but doing two different ones for different parts of the data is extremely questionable.

This time they did not divide the children into low and high aggressive children, nor into low and high prosocial children. Either of these might have made sense and would at least be somewhat consistent with the first analysis. Instead, they picked something more or less out of a hat and divided the children into low and high socioeconomic status (roughly social class). There is no reason to think this is the only division they tried, but it is the only one they report, presumably because they found something.

But what they found is hardly what Dr. Murray described. As you can see in Figure 2 after watching a violent or neutral movie, the low social class children became slightly less prosocial, whereas after the prosocial movie they became more prosocial. The effects are tiny, and the effect of the violent program does not differ from the neutral one, but at least this is in line with what Dr. Murray said. But what he did not mention is that the high social class children show exactly the opposite pattern. After the prosocial film, they become a little less prosocial, and the strongest effect is that after the violent movie, they become much more prosocial. Does this mean that watching violent television is good for these kids? I doubt it, but it sure is not bad for them according to these results.

Figure 2
Type of Film and Change in Prosocial Behavior

The point of this rather long presentation of the results is not to criticize this study (it is quite a good one) or to attack Dr. Murray, but merely to demonstrate that what is said about research that supposedly indicates the harmful effects of is not always correct. Here and before Congress, the results of this study were described as showing that watching Batman and Superman increased aggressiveness and decreased pro-social behavior compared to watching Mr. Rogers. This description was not qualified in terms of the type of children or the particular measure used. Yet, as I hope you have seen, this is simply not what the study found. There was no overall effect of type of program on either aggressive or prosocial behavior on any of the major measures. There were some minuscule effects that depended on computing indexes and/or internal analyses, and even these were by no means what was described nor what would be expected if viewing television violence were harmful.

Let me discuss one more study, conducted by Leonard Eron and Rowell Huesmann,29 two of the most prominent researchers in this

29. TELEVISION AND THE AGGRESSIVE CHILD: A CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON (L.
field. They have probably done more research than anyone else and certainly the most elaborate research. They are both very strong believers in the harmful effects of television violence, are almost always on committees to evaluate the issue, and are cited prominently in all reviews of the literature. This a wonderful cross-national study that involved six different countries, with a total of fourteen different groups. All of the groups were observed over time so that they could assess the effect of watching violent television at one age on aggressiveness at a later age.

They used what is now the commonly accepted statistical test to assess this effect. This test, a multiple regression, asks the question: holding constant how aggressive the children were at the earlier age (because we know aggression is extremely stable over time), is there any additional contribution made by the amount of violent television the children watched? This test tells us whether, for example, of those kids who were very aggressive at age six, those who watched more television violence become more aggressive at age nine than those who watched less television?

For the results of the test to be convincing, it also has to show that the effect of television violence is bigger than the reverse effect—that being aggressive at the early age affected watching television violence at the later one.

The results of this study are shown in Table 2. As you can see, there was no significant effect for Australia, Finland, the children who lived on a Kibbutz in Israel, the Netherlands, Poland or the United States. The only groups for which effect was significant and greater than the reverse effect were the two groups in Israel who lived in the city. And, the effect for them was so large, so out of the

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30. Table 2
Results from Huesmann and Eron (1986)
Early TV to Later Aggression Significant and
Higher than Later TV to Early Aggression

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<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
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<td>Score: 2 YES 12 NO Hit rate: 14%</td>
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normal range for this kind of research, that it is highly questionable. But even accepting it, there are only two significant effects out of fourteen possible ones. Not a very good hit rate. If you are a little more lenient and ignore the reverse effects, four of the effects are significant—hardly impressive.

For some reason, Huesmann and Eron conclude at the end of their book that this pattern of results supports their position. I have heard the old saying that looking at a glass, some people will say it is half full while others will say it is half empty, but I would have thought that it would be harder to say that the results are fourteen percent positive when they are eighty-six percent negative (or even to say that they are twenty-six percent positive when they are seventy-four percent negative). It seems to me that if you do this massive study, spend a vast amount of time and money on it, and end up with two out of fourteen, it should be pretty discouraging for those who want to believe.

This is the most up to date study, nicely designed and conducted, run by two of the strongest believers in the effect. These are not NBC people, they are not associated with the television networks, they are committed to the notion that television violence is harmful. And, this is what they got. I would count it as negative evidence, as evidence that television violence has no effect on aggression. It seems to me if there is a harmful effect, the results should have been stronger. It makes me believe either that there is no such effect, or it is vanishingly small. Otherwise, it should have shown up.

One of the difficulties in this area is that some of the people involved are so committed to their beliefs that they simply cannot accept negative results. I do not want to attack Eron and Huesmann personally. I do not know Rowell very well, but I know Leonard Eron is a lovely man and has done the best research in this field for many years. But, they seem to be so involved in the work and so tied to their position that they sometimes do not deal with the evidence in an even-handed way. In this study, the research group in each country wrote up their study separately and the deal was that they would all be included in a book edited by Huesmann and Eron. Although the findings must have been disappointing, most of the groups tried to put the best face on it that they could. Despite the fact that they had not gotten the effects they wanted, they hedged,

31. Huesmann & Eron, supra note 29.
did other analyses, and tried to make it sound as if the results supported the initial prediction that television violence would increase aggression. The Dutch group did not hedge. Their write-up came right out and said that there was no evidence of an effect. Well, Huesmann and Eron would not publish their chapter unless they revised their conclusions. To this the Dutch replied that they were “competent enough to draw our own conclusions.” And, they had to publish their report separately. There may be another side to this story, but the fact is that they did publish separately and their view is that their contribution was rejected because they would not change their conclusions. This is an unfortunate incident and indicates, I think, how politicized this issue has become and how difficult it is for some of the researchers to be objective about the research.

I have, of course, discussed only two of the studies that are usually cited as showing that viewing television violence increases aggressiveness. Let me repeat that in my opinion the research as a whole does not support this position. This is not a matter of criticizing a few studies or disagreeing about their findings. There are naturally problems with many of the studies, but that is not the issue. The important point is that if you look at them all, at all of the studies done outside the laboratory, there is simply no reason to believe the effect. If one wanted to convince the Federal Drug Administration (“FDA”) that a drug was effective, and you presented this kind of data, they would laugh at you: Two significant effects out of fourteen, one effect after all sorts of analyses and that effect does not even show what you want, and so on. The FDA would require consistent, clear effects and they simply are not present in these studies on television violence. The FDA would tell you to come back with more research, or even that the evidence indicates that the drug is not effective. Indeed, the results are very discouraging for those who want to believe in the harmful effects of television violence.

Given the difficulties of doing this kind of research and the complexities of the analyses, I do not think it reasonable to expect one hundred percent of the results to be positive. I would not ask for one hundred percent, or ninety percent or even eighty percent. If the research produced significant results seventy-five percent of the time, that would be pretty good. But, that is not at all what the studies have shown. Instead, there have been a handful of promising results,

32. O. WIEGMAN ET AL., TELEVISION VIEWING RELATED TO AGGRESSIVE AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR (1986).
but not one showing a clear, strong effect of television violence on aggressiveness. The FDA would not approve a drug on the basis of these results and legislative committees should not pass laws restricting television programs based on it either.

VI. WHY TV VIOLENCE MIGHT NOT CAUSE AGGRESSION

"But, is it not obvious that television violence increases aggression?" I hear that all the time. In fact, the chairman of the Canadian organization that regulates television recently asked his staff to prepare a report on this subject. The report concluded that the evidence did not support the idea that violence on television increased aggression. To this the chairman replied that it was self-evident, and he proceeded just as if it were proven. What can one say to this?

Well, it is not self-evident to me, and even if it were, I would be impressed by the negative findings from the research. But it is reasonable to ask why television might not affect aggressiveness. We know that television is a powerful medium, that children spend a lot of time watching it, and that they see a lot of violence. Why should this not make them more aggressive? There is no clear answer to this, but let me try to make it at least plausible that television would not have this effect.

The first thing to remember is that children in the real world do not watch just one program or even one type of program. They watch a diet of programs, some of which are violent, some not; some are cartoons, some real people; some are funny, some serious; and so on. Just what they learn from all of this should according to any theory or any common-sense understanding of the process, depend on the particular mix of programs and their contents. Psychologists who believe in the harmful effects say that since the children see violent behavior, they will imitate it and/or will learn that it is all right to be violent themselves. But, just what they learn and just what they imitate will depend on what is in the program, what message the programs contain.

The programs that do contain violence are quite varied, but we can describe them in general terms. In most programs for children, or for that matter for adults—it is often difficult to tell them apart—one or more bad, evil people initiate the violence. That is, the bad guys start it. And, in all of the kids’ programs and virtually all of the adult programs, these bad guys eventually get punished. This is standard television fare, from the Roadrunner and the Coyote (in which the coyote always ends up in a mess) to cops and robbers shows (in
which the robbers end up dead or in prison). If children learn something from this, if there is a moral, it is presumably that you better not start a fight, because you are going to lose. Or, to put it another way, people who initiate violence get punished. We know that children tend not to imitate the behavior of someone who gets punished, so perhaps rather than teaching children to be violent, these shows teach children not to use violence. So far so good.

The other thing that happens in most of these programs is that the good guys often respond with violence. But it may be crucial that most of the time, the good guys are people who, in our society, are allowed to respond with violence. They are police, detectives, soldiers, or SWAT teams, all of which have the right or even the responsibility of dealing with violence and often use violence themselves. There are also, especially in children’s programs, special defenders of the Good such as Batman, Superman, Ninja Turtles, or, these days, Power Rangers. They may not exactly be mandated by society to defend us, but they are special defenders, clearly distinguishable from the average person.

What might children learn from this? The first thing is that when bad guys use violence, it may be necessary and acceptable to use violence to fight them. Some people think this is a terrible lesson for children to learn. Well, maybe it is. But, to a large extent, it is realistic. In our world, in our society, it is difficult to deal with violence without using it in return. This is a sad fact of life, but it is a fact. Clearly, sometimes there are other ways; clearly, the authorities should not automatically resort to violence themselves. Yet much of the time, probably most of the time, it is difficult if not impossible to deal with people who are violent without using some kind of force. If children do learn this, they are simply learning how the world works. There is no reason, however, to think that this teaches them to be violent. Instead, they learn that when bad guys are violent, the authorities, the legitimate forces of good, must be violent also.

Finally, there are occasional programs, quite rare, in which ordinary people resort to violence to protect themselves from evil forces: Charles Bronson becomes a self-appointed vigilante, some innocent person who is attacked fights back, and so on. From these programs, children may learn that it is acceptable for them to use violence, and it may encourage them to resort to violence when other means might be available. This would be unfortunate—no question. But, keep in mind that these programs represent a tiny percentage of the shows on television. If these programs were kept off the air, there would be
virtually no change in what television shows. Indeed, this type of program is so rare that it is hard to imagine that children are exposed to enough of them to learn much of anything.

Thus, overall, the message from most of the programs that contain violence is not: "it is okay for you (the viewer) to be violent." The message could just as easily be "it is not okay to be violent," since usually those who are violent are punished. Let us be clear that we do not know what children learn from television—this is speculation. My only point is that it is plausible that although they watch ten thousand murders and fifty thousand acts of violence, children do not learn to be aggressive themselves.

There is another argument that might make it plausible that television violence does not cause aggression. Consider the differences among countries that have equally violent television. Children in Canada and the United States watch virtually the same television. Yet, the murder rate in Canada, and the rate of violence in general, is much lower than in the United States. Children in Japan watch probably the most violent, the most lurid and graphic television in the world, and the rate of violent crime there is minuscule compared to Canada and the United States. If television violence really had a substantial effect, these differences among countries would be unlikely. It makes it clear that if television violence has any effect at all, it is vanishingly small.

Let me end by repeating that the research does not support the idea that watching violent television causes aggressiveness. Those who say it does have misread or distorted the actual findings. They have ignored the results that do not support their position and have cited research as supporting it when the research in fact did not support it. It is difficult to prove that something does not have an effect. But, with so much research and such poor results, one must eventually say that if there were an effect, it would have been found. My own opinion now is that either there is no effect at all, or it is so small as to be meaningless. I think that anyone reading the research carefully and critically with an open mind would come to the same conclusion.