

Planning a Ten Year Update on the
Surgeon-General's Report on Television and Social Behavior

Background to Project

December 31, 1981 will mark the tenth anniversary of the Surgeon-General's Advisory Committee Report on Television and Social Behavior. Because of the importance of that major federal program examining the effects of television on children and because of the continued impact of that report on subsequent research in the field, it seems appropriate to plan for a comprehensive ten year update of research on television and children, to be published on the anniversary date of the Surgeon-General's Report.

At the time of the release of the report in January, 1972, the full significance of the research was initially clouded in public controversy. Subsequent events have largely confirmed the major conclusions of the advisory committee; that TV violence does induce aggressive behavior in children. The program itself has since been evaluated as one of the most successful large-scale federal programs of social science research and has been credited with being a major stimulus to further research in the field. Almost all subsequent research on television and social behavior cites one or more of the individual studies published in the five volumes of technical reports. The committee conclusions are constantly cited. Many of the researchers who participated in the program have continued to publish in the field and are now among the most productive and respected scientists in their specialties.

Most importantly, research on television and social behavior continues to flourish and influence public policy in areas well beyond the original emphasis on TV violence. The wisdom in labelling the Surgeon-General's program with the broader title has been confirmed by this continued expansion in research interest. A ten year update of research on television and social behavior would be both: 1) a tangible affirmation of the initial and continuing contribution of the original Surgeon-General's program to that research, and 2) a significant statement on the present and future status of research in this field.

Notes on Content of Ten Year Report

Two important themes interrelate in structuring the content of the report. First, what has been the total federal contribution to knowledge about television and social behavior? Here, DHEW, and the NIMH in particular, play a major role. Second, after ten years time what has been the contribution of the first Surgeon-General's Report? Naturally all of this should be cast as a comprehensive survey and evaluation of research to date and a forecast of areas most promising for future research.

It should be emphasized that no funding for new research is contemplated in this plan. It is assumed that new research will continue to be supported from existing sources.

Some specific topics for inclusion:

1. A comprehensive longitudinal report on the annual violence profile, beginning with the first one in 1969. Dr. Gerbner might be commissioned to do this, since he has published the annual reports themselves.

2. An extensive evaluation of all the research on TV violence, including reanalysis, if necessary, of some primary data to make a new definitive statement on the effects of TV violence.

3. An examination of the new areas of investigation and a summary of the status of research in such areas as: TV advertising, prosocial programming, consumer socialization, political socialization, sex on television, effects on family interaction, television as a cultural indicator and other significant areas of research.

4. A critical evaluation of the original Surgeon-General's report and its impact over the ten years, including numbers of citations, important policy decisions derived from the report, present activities of original researchers, and a summary of reviews of the original report.

All the above are only preliminary and tentative topics. To refine and extend the list of topics a plan of action should be initiated before the end of 1979.

Starting the Process

As soon as possible, a small steering committee should be established to develop a formal plan for the report. A committee of four or five members, including DHEW professional staff and outside consultants should be convened to discuss the development of the report. With a two and a half year lead time, a solid and substantive report could be made to the field without an unreasonable expenditure of funds. From inception to completion, including cost of publication of the report itself, the entire project should require somewhere between \$50,000 to \$75,000.

Because of its initial involvement in the original program, the NIMH is probably best suited to serve as the central resource for initiating and completing the new report. A memorandum from the Surgeon-General to the Director of NIMH, indicating the Surgeon-General's intention to develop such a report and designating the NIMH as the action agency should start the process. A senior NIMH staff member should be designated as coordinator and a modest budget should be allocated initially to organize and convene the planning committee.

If the entire process is well planned, the ultimate report would be a marker for what has been accomplished in the ten years since the original report and a stimulus to new research. As such, it should also serve as a major public policy statement on television and social behavior. It would be a fitting testimony to the contribution of the Surgeon-General's office and the NIMH to this important area of public concern.

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