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Comment in response to FCC Notice of Inquiry (NOI) in the matter of “Violent Television Programming And Its Impact on Children,” MB Docket No. 04-261

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important issue. I will divide my comments into those of a strictly scientific factual type and those that are of an expert opinion type. In both cases, my comments are in keeping with my expertise as a leading researcher in the area of human aggression in general, and in media violence effects research in particular.

A brief description of my credentials may be helpful. I am a Professor of Psychology and Chair of the Department of Psychology at Iowa State University, in Ames, Iowa. I obtained my Ph.D. in psychology from Stanford University in 1980. I have over 100 professional publications, most in leading peer-reviewed scientific journals. I have been called upon to write state of the art summaries of research on human aggression for several major outlets, including the American Psychological Association’s *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, the *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, and the *Annual Review of Psychology*. My professional colleagues and I have published a number of empirical and theoretical articles on media violence in recent years, including the monograph “The Influence of Media Violence on Youth,” which appeared in the December, 2003 issue of *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, the leading public policy journal of the American Psychological Society. The team of co-authors on this monograph (hereafter called the “*PSPI* monograph”) included the leading media violence scholars from psychology and from communications departments across the U.S.

### **Scientifically Factual Comments**

1. Many of the questions posed in the FCC NOI document could be answered by a careful reading of the December 2003 *PSPI* monograph mentioned earlier. A copy of that monograph is included with this comment. This monograph, which actually did not appear in print until the spring of 2004, was probably not available to FCC researchers in time to inform their preparation of the NOI. The *PSPI* monograph is the most current review of research on media violence effects, and so must be carefully considered in any subsequent reports. It includes sections on: (a) the relation between media violence and aggression-related outcome variables such as aggressive and violent behavior, aggressive thinking, and aggressive emotion; (b) theoretical explanations of media violence effects; (c) variables that might indicate higher vs. lower susceptibility to media violence effects (i.e., “moderator” variables); (d) research on media use and media content; and (e) interventions.
2. **NOI Section II, B “Effects of Viewing Violent Programming.”** This section should include the summary and discussion from the *PSPI* monograph, or some portion of them. At a minimum, the following quotations seem crucial.
  - a. “Research on violent television and films, video games, and music reveals unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior

- in both immediate and long-term contexts. The effects appear larger for milder than for more severe forms of aggression, but the effects on severe forms of violence are also substantial ( $r = .13$  to  $.32$ ) when compared with effects of other violence risk factors or medical effects deemed important by the medical community (e.g., effect of aspirin on heart attacks). The research base is large; diverse in methods, samples, and media genres; and consistent in overall findings. The evidence is clearest within the most extensively researched domain, television and film violence. The growing body of video-game research yields essentially the same conclusions.” (p. 81)
- b. “Well-supported theory delineates why and when exposure to media violence increases aggression and violence. Media violence produces short-term increases by priming existing aggressive scripts and cognitions, increasing physiological arousal, and triggering an automatic tendency to imitate observed behaviors. Media violence produces long-term effects via several types of learning processes leading to the acquisition of lasting (and automatically accessible) aggressive scripts, interpretational schemas, and aggression-supporting beliefs about social behavior; and by reducing individuals’ normal negative emotional responses to violence (i.e., desensitization).” (p. 81)
  - c. “Certain characteristics of viewers (e.g., identification with aggressive characters), social environments (e.g., parental influences), and media content (e.g., attractiveness of the perpetrator) can influence the degree to which media violence affects aggression, but there are some inconsistencies in research results.” (p. 81)
  - d. “...the existing empirical research on moderators suggests that no one is exempt from the deleterious effects of media violence; neither gender, nor nonaggressive personality, nor superior upbringing, nor higher social class, nor greater intelligence provides complete protection. Many youths who consume media violence will not be obviously influenced by it (e.g., will not rush out to commit violent crimes), but the psychological processes that can produce the effect operate in everyone, thereby putting all at some risk.” (p. 104)
3. **NOI Section II C, on “Defining Violent or Excessively or Gratuitously Violent Programming for Public Policy Purposes.”**
- a. A common assumption is that unrealistic violence (e.g., cartoon violence) has little or no impact on older children, adolescents, or adults. In fact, there are numerous studies that have used unrealistic violence with participants who clearly understood that the portrayal was fictitious (e.g., college students) and still found an increase in aggressive behavior, relative to a non-violent control condition. Thus, there is no evidence that cartoon violence is safe for any age children or adolescents.

## Expert Opinion Comments

1. **NOI Footnote 18, on the amount of research on television and other forms of media violence.** Most of the discrepancies in the claims about how many studies have been conducted are the result of differing definitions of what constitutes a “study.” Some scholars include every publication that discusses media violence in scientific journals or books, regardless of whether or not it reports new data. This leads to the very high numbers sometimes cited. Others include in their “count” only original empirical studies of the effects of exposure to television violence on some form of aggressive behavior. This leads to a much lower number. But even in this restrictive case, there is room for ambiguity. Many published empirical articles that have original results (i.e., results from new samples of participants) contain more than one study. Thus, without specifying exactly how the counting is being done, there is no way to get different scholars to come up with exactly the same number. And there is no need to do so, for the number

of independent, original studies is quite large and the results are generally consistent. Note that meta-analyses go a long way to clarifying the ambiguities regarding how much research has been done.

**2. NOI Section II, C, on “Defining Violent or Excessively or Gratuitously Violent Programming for Public Policy Purposes.”**

- a. An important point frequently missed in these discussions is that the short term and long term consequences of highly graphic materials might be different. Displaying realistically graphic consequences of violence might decrease aggression somewhat in the short term (compared to the same violence but without graphic consequences), but may increase desensitization to real world violence in the long term. There is not enough empirical evidence on this point to warrant firm conclusions, in my opinion.
- b. Another commonly misunderstood idea concerns the effects of depicted violence realism on later aggressive behavior. It is commonly assumed by the general public, by the FCC, and by the various industry-based ratings systems that unrealistic violence has less of an effect on later aggression than does realistic violence. However, in my opinion the research on this point is that although there is some evidence supporting this assumption, the evidence is not very strong and needs further work.
- c. There is confusion between a “community standards” approach versus a “harmful effects” approach to defining what constitutes violent or excessively violent programming. The community standards approach is subject to long term desensitization effects across generations, and has resulted in the shifting standards that have been applied over the years. The harmful effects approach has never, to my knowledge, been used to determine what ratings should be applied to what types of content. But the harmful effects on children are likely to remain the same even as community standards change, making the harmful effects approach a better one to use if the intent is indeed to protect children.

**3. NOI Section II, D, on “TV Parental Guidelines and V-Chip.”**

- a. Multiple problems have been documented with existing rating systems.
  - i. They are voluntary and therefore incomplete. Many TV products are not rated, especially on cable television.
  - ii. Too much emphasis is on age (which attracts younger viewers) and not enough emphasis is on violent content.
  - iii. Many parents do not know how to use the V-Chip.
  - iv. Violence ratings won’t work if parents don’t understand or believe in the harmful consequences of violent television.

Thank you for examining these important social issues, and for carefully considering my comments offered in this document and in the *PSPI* monograph. Please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Craig A. Anderson  
Professor & Chair