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PBS PANEL - WH

THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON  
AT PBS PANEL DISCUSSION  
THE WHITE HOUSE

MRS. CLINTON: Good morning. And welcome, everyone, to the White House for this very important meeting. I am delighted that you could all be with us, and I want particularly to recognize a few people who were able to join us this morning. We have Representative Jim Moran from across the river in Virginia, and Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton from here in the District of Columbia.

We are also delighted that Richard Carlson, the President of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Ervin Duggan, the President of the Public Broadcasting Service; Delano Lewis, the President of National Public Radio; and Larry Irving, the Secretary for Communications in the Department of Commerce are also all here with us.

This is a meeting about a very important subject. It is about the role that television plays in the lives of our children and, particularly, the role of public broadcasting. I think that it is very important in our country today to acknowledge and admit that television is a pervasive influence in our lives and has a particularly significant impact on the development of our children.

There are some who have engaged in a long discussion -- even an argument -- over the last decades about what television means in our lives, what the role of violence, for example, in television is. But I would like to focus today on an issue that we are now finding more about, and that I hope will influence the debate about the role of public broadcasting and its contribution to children's development as we struggle with and argue over the proper role of government.

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Public broadcasting is for many, many children the only channel available that has consistently effective educational programming. Probably about 40 percent of our families in America do not have access to cable television. And because of the demographics and incomes of those 40 percent of our families, we know that they have a disproportionate number of our children. More than 40 percent of our children reside in those 40 percent of our families.

If you were to look, as I have done, at the daily television schedule of our three major networks and our public broadcasting channel, you would see what is available for those children in those homes. Now, certainly, there are other options on cable, but they are often far outnumbered by channels that provide information and programming that is not always suitable for our children.

But looking only at the four available channels that those 40 percent of our families have access to, it is clear that what is available to children with respect to their educational and developmental needs is not usually found on commercial television. It is found during the day on public broadcasting.

And there are those who think that the educational programming of public broadcasting is a luxury. But to them I would ask: What is the necessity that can be substituted for that luxury? Where are the outlets for the kind of helpful, productive, learning opportunities that children have access to on public broadcasting day in and day out?

But you don't have to take my word for it. You don't have to take anybody's word for it. We actually have research. We have evidence about the impact of television and the impact, in particular, of public broadcasting.

One of my great hopes from a meeting such as this is that our decision makers will not just engage in ideological discussions, but will make decisions based on the evidence that we have available to us. If one disagrees with the evidence -- fine. Provide counterevidence. But it is difficult to engage in a conversation about what is in the best interests of our children if the people engaging in it are merely taking ideological positions.

And so, today, I have asked some people who have a great deal of experience and knowledge about the impact of television and, particularly, the impact of public broadcasting on children, and

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especially on low-income children who often do not have the educational opportunities, the intellectual stimulation, the academic preparation that many of us try to provide for our own children.

I am sure anyone who has followed our national discussion about television knows of the woman I am about to introduce. She is someone who, for many years, has been, in effect, sounding the alarm about the impact of television. I wish that alarm were heard in every family more loudly than it sometimes is, as well as in the board rooms and legislative chambers of our country because she has pointed out, time and time again, that children are shaped by what they see, by what they hear, by what they are taught.

And the constant, pervasive presence of television in most of our homes is a challenge for parents who will have to learn and be willing to accept responsibility for monitoring more closely the television-watching of their children. But it is also a challenge for the larger society.

And so it gives me great pleasure to introduce Peggy Charren. She is the founder of Action for Children's Television and is currently serving as a visiting scholar at Harvard, continuing to examine and accumulate and analyze evidence about the impact of television on our children's lives.

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MS. CHARREN: There's time for a few questions, and I though that, given that we have the First Lady with us, we would let the First Lady ask the questions today instead of the audience.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, the one thought that kept running through my mind after what we've heard is, can you imagine any child rushing home from the first day of school and trying to tell the Power Rangers that she'd gone to school? (Laughter and applause.) You know, there's just sort of a disconnect there.

Well, I really find everything that each of you has said to be born out in our common experience. Really, it is common sense. But let's see if we can maybe take it one step further for people who are still saying to themselves, well, if this is so important, commercial television will pick up the slack; if this is so significant in the lives of our children, there will be a market for it, so all of what you are saying can be understood and accepted, but

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doesn't necessarily lead to the conclusion that you have to have a public television presence with designated programming for children in order to make the point that each of you has supported.

So let me ask both Peggy and John and then everyone else to comment. Why isn't it likely that if the worst were to happen, and the programming that we've already talked about and the significance of it that the research has demonstrated were to disappear, that that vacuum wouldn't be filled by the existing marketplace?

MS. CHARREN: I think that if there's anything that my 27 years of activism on behalf of choices for children on television has proved, it is that even with a lot of conferences, even with articles in the paper, even with the people who make that kind of television having children, they will not provide the kind of programming that children need that really enhances education. They are more comfortable with the other kind of programming.

And the problem is that when you talk to 2- to 15-year-olds in a voice that you want to tell them something important, you speak in a different language to preschoolers, to elementary-age kids and to older kids. And if you want to get the most eyeballs watching the commercials, you tend to say things that all children will listen to. And maybe all children do read comic books at one point. But when you talk to them about how wonderful literature is, you do it the way the book business does. And Public Broadcasting handles that screen the way the book business handles children's books.

MR. WRIGHT: I think the most important thing to think about with respect to the private sector is not that it's unwise, not that it's entirely vicious, not that it's a handicapping condition to the entertainment and education of children, but that they are focused entirely on the bottom line. They exploit children. They gather eyeballs glued to TV sets which they then sell to ad agencies and advertisers who then re-exploit the children to sell them products they don't need, food that's not good for them, and toys that enhance their fantasy and their willingness to attend the programs which gather their eyeballs for sale. I think I'll stop on that line. (Laughter.)

But the research that they do -- I spoke to the executive producer of Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, and I asked her, what kind of research do you do? How do you know what messages you are getting across to children? And she said to me -- and this is a

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quote -- "After every rap we sit around and we ask each other, what questions have we answered; what ideas would children take away from this episode that we have just made?" And in the research community -- this was at a Children Now conference and some of you were there -- in fact, you were there by television -- everybody said, you asked who? They said, we asked ourselves.

Until we start asking the children, until we start doing the research, something other than market research, until we leave a program like "My So-Called Life," -- one of the few decent programs for young people that the commercial ever made that was cancelled. Not enough eyeballs to sell. Not a wide enough range of children watching it. And every network has done that. I can remember "Hot Hero Sandwich" on NBC -- a wonderful, wonderful program. What happened to "Big Blue Marble" on ABC? And many, many, many more.

It is incompatible. The system is incompatible. You've got to do it because air waves belong to the people, the children belong to the people. And you've got to have something for kids that is theirs.

MS. MANZANO: Well, I'd just like to say, the private sector won't pick up the slack because I'm always amazed that "Sesame Street" hasn't been imitated in the private sector. We've been on the air so long, and everybody agrees that we're great. But nobody cares to sort of -- to imitate us. And like you said, there were all these wonderful shows for children that got cancelled right away.

I was asked once to write for a children's show on commercial television. And I asked, what age group is this show aimed at? And they said, oh, you know, kids. (Laughter.) Well, how could -- you don't write for a three-year-old the same way you write for a five-year-old, and certainly not a seven-year-old. So I knew immediately that they hadn't even examined themselves and they didn't even know what they were going to say to these children. It was bottom line. And they started out with the result of what they wanted their show to do which was sell a certain product -- not what the show was about.

MS. CHARREN: And one of the worst problems that happened in the last few years is that the show itself has become a product too often on children's television on commercial broadcasting. And that's unfortunate because it -- that line between editorial and commercial speech so you don't know who's talking to you.

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And it means that we're telling our children, one in four of whom lives below the poverty line, what they should spend money on to feel good, to have friends. And that's really very sad. They can do what they do as long as we have the part of that broadcasting service that is saved for public broadcasting which cares first about the public and first about our children. And I'm not sure they care about anything else at all.

MRS. CLINTON: Joan, do you want to add anything?

MS. DYKSTRA: No. I think everyone has stated it very clearly. I think the bottom line is that we want quality programming for children. They have an opportunity. They can give us quality programming. I fail to see where it is. I do know that PBS brings me quality programming for children.

MRS. CLINTON: You know, I think it's an important point that the economy that we all rely on is driven by a need to create aspirations and expectations and, really, unfilled wants. I mean, that's how people continue to buy goods and services. So that's really the reason -- for a market economy in a way that is going to continue to grow and provide more prosperity for people, it has to be rooted, in a funny kind of way, in people's insecurity. I mean, if all of us today said to ourselves, we have more than enough stuff, we are not buying anything else, and we really meant it, you know, that would not be good for the economy. (Laughter.)

So there is a need on the part of the economy, and particularly one like ours, to continue to try to create in our minds the desire for more and different things. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. That is the way the system works.

But I do think there is a dark side that we don't pay attention to. And it's something that was just alluded to -- that when we turn our children and think of our children as miniature adults, and really see them primarily as consumers, as little shoppers who we want to turn into grown-up buyers of as many goods and services as we possibly can sell them, that has a very different perspective than if we see them as individuals with certain potentials who it is our responsibility as parents, as citizens to nurture.

And so there is an inherent conflict as the Professor pointed out. And it is very difficult, I think, to be fair to

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commercial television, for them to fulfill a nurturing developmental responsibility when that is not, as they clearly understand, their bottom line.

So part of what we have to do as a society is to assign different roles and responsibilities to different sectors of our society. And commercial television has a different role and responsibility, particularly as it pertains to children, than public broadcasting.

And I think without that kind of choice, it is very difficult for parents, even those trying hard to be conscientious ones, Joan, to do what they believe they should do. I mean, teaching values to children in between commercials on Saturday morning cartoons is a lot harder, believe me, than watching "Sesame Street" or "Mr. Rogers" or "Barney" or something like that with your child.

So it's not an either/or. And that's what I think we have to keep trying to emphasize. It is not an either/or where it's only commercial television or it's only public broadcasting. It is both. And we have to see the responsibilities, particularly for child rearing, in a much broader way so that each sector of our society, starting with parents, but expanding far beyond just the nuclear family, understands they have a role in determining how well our children turn out.

And that's really what your research has shown is that we know children are going to watch television. What we have to do is provide the best possible choices. But if we don't have the choice, then we've already made the decision, haven't we? And that's what we're trying to avoid in this discussion about what happens with the future of public television.

MR. WRIGHT: I'd like to add a parenting anecdote because I think you did bring in parents and you did bring in teachers, and they are going to be critical in the future of kids' understanding and use of media.

And I'd just like to tell a very quick story. I have four grandchildren, two more on the way. And these four kids love to watch television. They watch lots of television. But none of them, as yet, know that there is such a thing as commercial broadcast entertainment television. I'm not even sure about PBS. And the reason is that television for them is something that you take off the shelf in a little box and put it in a machine and play it. And on

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that shelf are videocassettes and books. And the videocassettes were taped off the air; they were bought; they were rented. I blush to admit, some of them were taped from rented copies. (Laughter.)

But they got there because some parent cared enough to put them there and to let the children watch over and over again, as they do with their favorite books, the stories that are dear and near to them.

MS. CHARREN: And to follow up on that, a lot of the choices that are available from the new technology, which I mentioned earlier, are not available to kids who need them the most. They are expensive. Cable is expensive. Some of the pay channels are money on top of money, and they provide a number of the choices that cable does provide for children, and that if we don't really take care of the public sector of broadcasting, we are going to have a situation in this country that will make what's going on now look nice by comparison when we don't reach one, whole, big portion of kids growing up in America. So I want to take very good care of PBS.

MRS. CLINTON: And I just want to add to that comment, Peggy, that we haven't talked this morning about the evidence that I think is now conclusive about the impact of watching violence on television and on children's behavior. We have argued about this issue ever since the Surgeon General's report back in 1972 talking about the impact of television viewing on children's behavior. There have been many studies since.

And it is like the old problem we have -- every time there is another irrefutable piece of evidence about the linkage between smoking and lung cancer, there will be somebody, well-paid, who will stand up and say, well, that's not definitive. And we face the same problem when we talk about the effects of violence and children's behavior.

But Peggy is right. I mean, this is not just a do-gooder, altruistic, nice thing that people like Peggy and I and the rest of us here think should be done because we like children's television. Certainly, I do. And I believe strongly in it. And that's what my daughter watched, and we read the books that went along with it.

But I am equally concerned about the other side of the equation that the Professor talked about. And that is, those children who are not watching the 25 minutes a day of public

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broadcasting but are, instead, watching the 25 minutes of commercial television without much parental supervision or mediation as to what they are seeing.

It is absolutely true that not every child who watches hundreds of hours of violent television becomes violent. But most of the reason for that rests in the home and the neighborhood that are structured and coherent enough that the child's experience of watching television is mediated. But in the absence of that mediation, and in the absence of the other factors that help a child separate reality from fantasy, that help a child learn empathy and sensitivity, it is absolutely clear that the television-watching habits of vulnerable children will affect both their own violent behavior and their response to violence that they see around them. It has a desensitizing impact.

So this is an issue that we think goes far beyond the narrow concerns of the group of us who are arguing strongly to preserve public television and, particularly, educational and children's programming. It is also a plea to all programmers of television, including commercial television, to think about the impact of your decisions.

The bottom line can be described in many ways. Only one of those descriptions concerns profitability and the dollars that come in. There's a bottom line to society as well. And we think that bottom line is better served by having better television programming for our children

Thank you all very much for being with us. (Applause.)

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