
Youth Truth



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Compulsory ADucation

Susan Wishnetsky & Justin Mallone

In around 12,000 middle and high schools around the country, some 8 million students are now spending 12 minutes of every school day watching a TV show.

Channel One, the daily news program designed to be broadcast in school classrooms and to appeal to young viewers, is not new. It was created in 1989 by Whittle Communications, which offered schools a free satellite dish, television sets and VCRs in exchange for their agreement to air at least 90% of the 12-minute programs, once a day in their entirety, in at least 80% of their classrooms.¹

The costs of equipment, installation and maintenance (and of producing the show) are covered by Channel One's *advertisers*.

In around 40% of America's schools, the daily lesson plan includes two minutes of commercials for such products as clothing, acne products, snack food, bubble gum, soft drinks, video games. Required by law to attend institutions supposedly devoted to education, students are also educated by corporations which may pay \$200,000 for 30 seconds of commercial time.²

The audience for these commercials is literally a captive one, not permitted to change the channel or leave the room. Refusal to watch Channel One may be considered truancy or disobedience; in Ohio, two junior high school students spent a day in their county's juvenile detention center for refusing to watch Channel One.³

Aside from the commercials, is Channel One educational? It is hard for outsiders to know, since the company refuses to allow public access to its programs, or even to specific data about its distribution. Two researchers criticized this secrecy:⁴

To make intelligent decisions, voters and policy-makers need information on the nature of private vendors seeking public business. In a democratic society, such information is the basis for open evaluation and discussion.... Despite the fact that the bulk of Channel One's revenue derives from its access to public schools, important information about Channel One is concealed behind a proprietary curtain.

After Channel One was threatened with a lawsuit, the company released 36 tapes from shows distributed in 1995 and 1996. Researchers from Johns Hopkins University and Vassar College, who analyzed the tapes, found only about 2 of the 10 minutes of programming devoted to "recent political, economic, social and cultural stories"; the remaining 8 minutes covered weather or natural disasters, sports, light features, music intros, self-promotion of Channel One, and banter between anchors and correspondents.⁵ The program was also criticized for its narrow cultural focus; while its news staff was ethnically diverse, its on-camera sources and interviewees were found to be overwhelmingly "white and male".⁶

Even so, poorly-funded schools may find the temptation of free equipment hard to resist. A study by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst found that the program is most often shown in schools "in low-income communities ... where the least money is available for education."⁷

But the satellite dishes provided are *only* capable of receiving Channel One broadcasts, and the VCRs (2 per school) and television monitors (one per classroom) are *only loaned* to the school for the duration of its contract with Channel One. If the school does not renew, or fails to comply with the terms of its contract, the equipment is taken back.⁸ A joint study by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. suggests that the value of the equipment may not come close to compensating schools for the value of the time they provide to Channel One.⁹

Senate hearings on Channel One were held in May 1999, prompting the company to hire a prominent Washington lobbying firm, spending nearly a million dollars to prevent further action.¹⁰ Professional organizations such as the NEA (National

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— THE AUDIENCE FOR
THESE COMMERCIALS IS
LITERALLY A CAPTIVE ONE —

Another Depressed Mother Attacks Children

On September 3, a 39-year-old Florida woman fatally shot her 6-year-old son and wounded his 16-year-old brother before turning herself in to police. According to the article at <<http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/03/bc.bibleshooting.ap/index.html>>, antidepressant medication was found in the home.

Daughter of Busy Hospital CEO Dies in Hot Vehicle

The overstressed mother of 7-month-old Clare Engholm forgot her daughter was in the minivan when she went off to attend meetings on a hot day in Perry, Iowa. The story at <http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/car_kid_010705.html> mentions other similar cases that have occurred this year.

New Guidelines for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Realizing that parents sometimes suffocate infant children, the American Academy of Pediatrics revised the guidelines for naming SIDS as a cause of death, according to <<http://www.cnn.com/2001/HEALTH/parenting/09/05/sids.policy.ap/index.html>>.

Nepal Creates New Underage Drinkers

An item at <http://jtodirect.madd.org/plugin.jhtml?siteID=MADD&p=2&Tab=News&Object_ID=545555> says that the nation of Nepal has raised its legal drinking age to 24 and imposed new alcohol restrictions on people of all ages.

America West Airline Bans Solo Kids

In a move that now seems almost irrelevant, one airline reacted to the publicity over a few children who got stranded this year while flying alone by requiring all passengers under 12 to be accompanied by adults. The article at <<http://www.cnn.com/2001/TRAVEL/NEWS/08/15/unaccompanied.minors/index.html>> stresses that cases of misdirected kids have been rare.

NYRA President Seen on National Television

Alex Koroknay-Palicz appeared on the cable network CNN to debate the drinking age of 21 with a representative of MADD. The program was broadcast live throughout the United States on Sunday, July 29 at 5:30 pm Eastern time; a transcript can be found at <<http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0107/29/sun.08.html>>. The consensus among those who watched was that Alex did an excellent job.

ASFAR Treasurer Heard on Canadian Radio

On Sunday Aug. 19, Susan Wishnetsky accepted a last-minute invitation by Vancouver radio station CKNW to talk about lowering the voting age to 16 (a move being discussed since two local teens filed a lawsuit claiming that their rights as taxpayers were violated by being denied the vote). The interview, including calls from the audience, ran from 9-10 pm Pacific time.

Opinions expressed may not reflect the views of ASFAR.

Letters

September 11, 2001

Today's events are undoubtedly horrible. However, I think we should be careful to not be unduly distracted or intimidated from pursuing our goals. Regardless of political events, our issues are still just as pressing—and maybe even more so. For if things escalate—well, I think it's important that people experience as much liberty as they can before they die. So, ironically, today's horror may actually give extra urgency to our goals.

Whether I'm right or not, I just thought I'd post this perspective.

Pat

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And the problem is ... ?

Much has been made recently about the decision of parents in a fairly posh area outside of New York City to let their teenagers have “adult entertainment” for their birthday party, which included 50 or so of their closest friends. Acts in which the 15-year olds are said to have participated include licking whipped cream off of the female performer, for one. (Sounds like a birthday they’ll always remember!)

The Media has repeatedly told me that I should feel morally disgusted, to the point of feeling like I must physically gag, over this ostensibly “debaucherous” activity, and (GASP) that the parents would actually *arrange* for this to happen. Truth be told, all I can muster is a hearty laugh and a thumbs-up to all those involved.

The ramblings of fascistic vigilantes like Curtis Sliwa on intellectual cesspools like CNN’s ludicrously insipid-to-the-point-of-caricature “TalkBack Live” aside (this man, clad in his very appropriate red jacket and beret, pathetically attempting to use the emotional appeal of class warfare rhetoric and tired Puritan morality to crucify these parents, called for everything BUT their lynching, so much so that he actually had to say “Now I’m not saying they should be lynched” on the air!), anybody looking at the situation objectively can quite easily realize the fact that it’s the absurdity of the age-based attitudes regarding sex which are the actual cause of these scandals.

In many states one must be 21 to view “hardcore” porn, 21 or 18 to go to a nudie bar, and only 16 (sometimes younger) to have sex. Oh, and in a “backwater” state or two, you can marry at 14. HUH?!? Come again?

The moral outrage surrounding this situation would make one think, by the sheer amount of wind contained in the age-centric Puritans’ sails, that the parents have been molesting their children since they were born, or something equally morally offensive. When one realizes that the facts of the situation are that some teens merely got their Cool Whip served to them in a most interesting and unusual way, the red-faced, vein-on-the-forehead-popping outrage on the part of the intellectual nitwits of the world seems to border on unintentional self-parody.

News Links

D.C. Kids to Be Catalogued

The *Washington Post* reported on August 15 about a plan by the District of Columbia to establish a database of D.C. children aged 2 to 14. Maintained by the Department of Motor Vehicles, the database would include fingerprints and photographs, to be retaken every two years; officials plan to collect the information from children while they are in school. A brief report mentioning the privacy concerns of many residents can be seen online at <http://www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,46135,00.html>.

The President’s Pen

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What the Problem Is.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, where we have far greater concerns than incidents of female entertainers being used as desert trays for horny teens, a most interesting article caught my eye at *InsightMag.com*. Now far be it for me to toot my organization’s own horn (ha!)—or beat a dead horse until it’s not just skin and bones, but merely bones—but it’s nice to have some tremendous re-affirmation of an issue you’ve been harping on for, well, a long time.

The article in question, located at <http://www.insightmag.com/archive/200110015.shtml>, details how a new study by the Brookhaven National Laboratory “not only confirms the similarities of cocaine and Ritalin, but finds that Ritalin is more potent than cocaine in its effect on the dopamine system, which many doctors believe is one of the areas of the brain most affected by drugs such as Ritalin and cocaine.”

Among the articles’ many facts is the huge increase in the number of youth being prescribed Ritalin, which *Youth Truth* has previously reported.

One of the many things that jumped out at me from the article (a must read!) is what the research team leader, a lady named Nora Volkow, had to say. I’m sure many of you are familiar with reading quotes from scientists; they’re normally fairly dispassionate in their terms, to the point where even an assumption-shattering discussion is often deemed “a signal that a major re-analysis of the field needs to be done,” or some such. Ms. Volkow, however, said she was “shocked as hell”(!) at the results, at the *more-potent-than-cocaine* drug which one out of every FIVE students in the U.S. has been given.

And where, you ask, is the major media in all this?

Standing outside a posh suburban residence, torches, pitchforks, and microphones at the ready, for the lynching of parents who gave their kids an unusual birthday party.

Two books on censorship

The mayor of Chicago recently praised local parents for making September 4 a much better attended “first day of school” than last year’s, with about 40,000 fewer absences (no reports in the news attached any importance to the fact that last year’s opening day was August 22, when the sweltering heat might have discouraged any reasonable person from attending the many school buildings in the city that lack air-conditioning).

On the evening of September 4, I found a copy of the Chicago Public Schools 2001-2002 *Uniform Discipline Code* that someone had dropped on the sidewalk. Nine of its 34 pages were devoted to “Student Misconduct”. I found many of its rules ridiculous and wrong-headed, but I feel that way about compulsory education in general, so that wasn’t surprising.

But one of the prohibitions absolutely floored me; here’s the exact quote describing what is forbidden:

Posting or distributing unauthorized or other written materials on school grounds.

“Unauthorized or other”? So, *no* written materials, not even “authorized” ones? Had the Supreme Court’s famous 1969 *Tinker* decision been overturned when I wasn’t looking? Oddly enough, the *Uniform Discipline Code* itself reassured me that it hadn’t—in its **one** page devoted to “Student Rights” I read the following:

Liberty to distribute independent publications in school without substantial disruption to the educational process.

So ... *can* students distribute written materials, or not?

The First Amendment rights of kids in school are among the few rights they legally possess; that alone makes the issue of censorship an important one. But many of us, hearing about some outrageous performance or work of art in danger of being

Nuzum, Eric. *Parental advisory: music censorship in America*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

censored—often a work that we wouldn’t have been interested in anyway—fail to realize the affect censorship can and does have on our lives. Our TV and radio shows. Our music. Our books. Our opinions. Our offhand comments.

Parental Advisory, while limited in scope to censorship in the music industry, does a pretty good job of showing the “everyday” influence of censorship. Written in a casual, readable style, it brings together stories of censorship efforts by “concerned citizens” and legislators, and reveals some of the political maneuvers that enabled some of them to succeed. It gives examples of censored songs that most of us would consider quite tame and innocent, such as “Rocky Mountain High” and the fairy tale “Puff the Magic Dragon”, and of anti-drug and anti-violence songs being astonishingly misinterpreted as *pro-drug* or *pro-violence*, such as the song on Bizzy Bone’s *Heaven’z Movie* which prompted the album’s removal from Wal-Mart stores, or Neil Young’s “The Needle and the Damage Done”.

The first half of *Parental Advisory* is organized by topic, separately examining issues such as politics, race and racial prejudice, religion, sex, drugs, and violence, exploring the role these issues played in attempts to suppress music. The second half presents a chronological view of events in music censorship from 1950 to the present (with just a few sample incidents mentioned from the 1940s and earlier).

Author Eric Nuzum did his homework, researching hundreds of sources and conducting personal interviews with people as diverse as the current president of the Parents Music Resource Center (the influential group which first proposed warning labels on records) and folksinger Pete Seeger. The pages are graced with nearly 100 photos that bring the stories to life, and the book includes an extensive bibliography *and* a list of specific references.

News Links

Chicago Schoolteachers Can’t Make the Grade

According to a *Chicago Sun Times* expose, hundreds of schoolteachers standing in Chicago classrooms actually failed the tests required for certification, even the “Basic Skills Test” (reportedly so easy “an eighth- or ninth-grader should be able to pass it”). Some are still on the job because administrators simply ignore the certification requirement; others slip through loopholes in the law. Thousands more succeeded in passing only after multiple attempts. You can try out a sample “Basic Skills Test” and read more details at <http://www.suntimes.com/special_sections/failing_teacher/index.html#>.

Editor's note: Content of reviewed books may not represent the views of ASFAR.

Heins, Marjorie. *Not In front of the children : "indecentcy," censorship, and the innocence of youth.* New York : Hill and Wang, 2001.

Sue's Review

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The book is not unbiased—it strongly opposes censorship. One portion addresses the very different reactions of communities and record stores to Eric Clapton's version of Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff" and Ice-T's more recent song "Cop Killer", both of which told similar stories, but only the latter of which provoked any noticeable public outcry. The author comments:

Does the song advocate violence against police officers? The answer to that depends upon whom you speak with But here's the more critical question: Does the song incite an immediate breach of the peace? The answer is no. Censors of Ice-T's song should ... prove that a person hearing the song will immediately pick up a weapon, hunt down a police officer, and end the officer's life on the spot. Obviously, you won't find many examples of that type of reaction.

Expressing the same point of view in a more scholarly manner is *Not In Front of the Children*, which covers all kinds of censorship—of speech, publications, art, performing arts, broadcast media, and so forth—throughout history. As the title suggests, its focus is the often-used justification of censorship as protection of the more "vulnerable" members of society (usually children, but sometimes women or people of particular races or nationalities).

A great deal of Heins' book is devoted to court decisions, providing background and analysis of each one. Developments and court cases in other countries, as well as comparisons of various nation's policies, are also discussed. For example, after explaining the broad coverage of sex education in the primary schools of Denmark, Heins tells what happened when some Danish parents objected, citing the provision in the European Convention on Human Rights that "the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions":

... the European Court in its 1976 *Kjeldsen* decision refused to elevate the parental proviso above the child's "fundamental right to education"; the curriculum was permissible because it was not designed to indoctrinate but to instill sexual knowledge "more correctly, precisely, objectively and scientifically" than youngsters were likely to imbibe from other sources. If parents could "object to the integration of such teaching or education in the school curriculum, all institutionalised teaching would run the risk of proving impracticable."

A particularly strong point of *Not In Front of the Children* is the full chapter entitled "Media Effects" which describes studies that have claimed to link exposure to violent images or words to actual violent behavior—as well as those that have countered such theories. Heins reveals the often laughable conclusions derived from faulty studies, and also mentions one which found that "low-aggression preschoolers" displayed increased levels of aggression after watching *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. She also explains the process by which scientific studies commissioned by groups or government bodies may never be publicized if their results fail to support the "correct" point of view.

They're both excellent books, with loads of good information and quotes to memorize. Keep them in mind for book reports (assuming you're allowed to pick your own books to read).

And while I'm following up with the Chicago Public Schools to straighten out their confusion, why not get a copy of your own school's discipline code, and make sure it guarantees *your* free speech rights?

News Links

India's Street Urchins Don't Need Teachers

An experiment by a software company executive, who installed a computer on a wall accessible to children living in an impoverished area of Delhi, revealed that—with no previous computer experience and no instruction—the children were quickly able to teach themselves to surf the internet, download games and music, and use drawing and painting programs. The experiment has been duplicated in other areas, and is described in greater detail at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/sci/tech/newsid_1502000/1502820.stm>.

The Devil Made Me Do It : Youth Rights Versus Censorship

Last April, 12-year-old Thomas Hitz **deliberately** lit his hand on fire by spraying insect repellent all over it and igniting it. Panicked, he tried to put the fire out by rubbing his hand on his chest; needless to say, he suffered some nasty burns all over his body. Why did he do this? Was he suicidal? Apparently not. Thomas Hitz reportedly told everyone that he was inspired by MTV's *Jackass*, a show that features host Johny Knoxville and friends performing stupid (but nonetheless entertaining) stunts and injuring themselves for our amusement. Immediately after this incident (and also after a similar incident involving 13-year-old Jason Lind) some people were already proposing that the show be taken off the air for children's safety.

Perhaps I'm a bit oversensitive, but this really offended me, as it implies that children in general are too stupid to know that they shouldn't blow themselves up. I've watched the show twice before and still fail to see how it could inspire any person of average intelligence who values their own life to mimic it. At the beginning of each show there is a big skull and crossbones along with a warning that the stunts are performed by professionals and so aren't to be tried at home. This same message is repeated throughout the show before each stunt just to make sure viewers just tuning in don't miss it. On top of this, when Johny decides to perform something exceptionally dangerous, he shows us what types of precautions he would take before performing it (for example, if it involves fire, he puts on a flame-retardant suit; if it involves unsanitary conditions, he goes to his doctor for some recommendations and vaccines). The really sad and disturbing thing is, unlike Jason Lind who did roughly the same thing after being inspired by *Jackass* but refused to blame the show, Thomas Hitz seems to have refused to take personal responsibility for what he's done to himself by insisting that the show should be moved up to a later time when kids aren't awake to watch it.

Funny—when I broke my arm at age 12 from jumping and slipping off my garage roof “in a single bound”, I didn't see fit to blame Superman or the law of gravity. I'm not saying that everybody who does something risky and hurts themselves is a moron—everyone makes mistakes. But it is my opinion that *if you decide to do something knowing all the risks involved, then you are responsible for yourself*—one of the basic tenets of freedom. It is difficult for me to understand why people would risk their lives for nothing just because someone on a TV show did, regardless of what their age may be.

Seriously folks, if your son or daughter is telling you that they are engaging in high-risk activities because their TV sets or video games tell them to, they have serious problems. If by the age of 10 someone is still unaware of the dangers of lighting themselves on fire or bungee-jumping from skyscrapers like Batman does, then chances are things won't be much better by the time they reach 18 (assuming they survive that long), because common sense isn't something you instantly receive at the magical age of 18—it's something you learn over time. And folks, it doesn't take a genius or a near-fatal accident to figure out that fire burns. Bottom line is, Thomas Hitz knew the dangers involved in what he was doing, but for his own reasons he did it anyway! Don't go blaming *Jackass* for that.

Unfortunately, Mr. Hitz is not the first or the last of the “innocent victims” we've seen claiming to have received sinister messages from a screen telling them to hurt themselves and others. We all know about those poor kids in Columbine who were brainwashed by their computer games into going on a shooting spree, or the guy who brought a gun to school and tried to shoot someone because of *South Park*, right? A few months ago I was watching a news program on TV that quoted from a supposedly reputable psychological study that “children below the age of 12 do not realize the finality of death.” Excuse me? I think that may just be a WEE BIT patronizing! Give us a little credit! Unless you've spent your entire life locked away in a room somewhere watching Loony Tunes (where not even dynamite can keep anyone down for long), chances are you probably have enough sense to know that if you shoot someone with a gun, they aren't going to get up moments later and smile. While debates as to what happens after death abound, even chimpanzees know that biological death is real and irreversible. I certainly can not speak for everyone, but neither I nor any of my friends were as stupid and ignorant as these psychologists claim we should have been at a certain age. I was well aware of death by age 5, which is long before I should have been, according to experts.

News Links

UK Youth Face Early Curfews

British magistrates are now authorized to impose 9 pm to 6 am curfews on young people up to age 15. The curfews, intended to be applied to high-crime areas, are effective for 90-day periods, but may be renewed. The *Daily Telegraph* story at <http://news.telegraph.co.uk/news/main/jhtml?xml=/news/2001/08/01/ncurf01.xml> is, to our eyes, quite sympathetic toward youth.

As for violent video games, while I'm no fan of ultra-gore, I've played some two-player shooters with a friend and feel no more prone to violence than usual. In fact, out of the thousands of people who play violent video games, only two kids in Colorado seem to have snapped. That means that (assuming video games to be the sole reason behind the Columbine massacre) if you were at a national convention for people who enjoy playing violent video games, you have roughly a 2 in 30,000 chance of being murdered. Blowing my best friend off the screen is not a symbolic act of aggression or a way to let off steam or any such nonsense; it's just a fun game. Saying that video games encourage real violence is similar to concluding that wolf pups wrestling in the wild are really trying to kill each other. Any naturalist will tell you that wolf pups wrestle with each other for fun; the same is true for humans. It's just playing.

Well, despite common sense, these few supposed incidents of media-inspired violence and idiocy are leading both parents and politicians to chip away at the few freedoms we as youths have left. Instead of treating these cases as isolated events involving people who are obviously emotionally disturbed or mentally challenged, the powers that be choose to instigate further restrictions on our entertainment options, which really all boils down to censorship: restricting an entire segment of the population (youth) from access to certain kinds of information (including, but not limited to books, movies, and a good portion of the internet). Politicians and certain special interest groups are pressuring movie and software vendors to stop doing business with children and teens directly, forcing youths to take their parents with them every time they want to go to the mall (this is where adult friends come in real handy). And to top it all off, as if restricting our entertainment options to *Harry Potter* and *Pokemon* weren't enough, opportunists are now cashing in on the widespread paranoia to take *those* away from us also. Fundamentalists rave from the pulpit and write books about how *Harry Potter* is leading your children down the path of occultism, and Pocket Monsters have become the new pantheon! Oh, please. If your children honestly find more spiritual fulfillment in watching Saturday morning cartoons than going to church,

News Links

Polite Honor Student Finally Fights Back

Although he apologized in person and in writing, Michigan high-schooler Alex Smith wound up with a 10-day suspension last October for "verbal assault" after sharing his written parody about his school's tardiness policy with his friends in the school cafeteria. Now the ACLU has filed a lawsuit on his behalf; see <<http://www.aclu.org/news/2001/n090501a.html>>.

Commentary

Scott Foster
ASFAR Member

maybe you should switch churches or try a new religion. Don't blame your kids for finding *Pokemon* more interesting than Sunday School (and it must be really, really bad if they would rather watch *Pokemon*—the very idea is frightening), and don't blame J. K. Rowling for possessing superior writing ability to that of your pastor.

I know what some readers may be saying right now: "But don't the news stories at the beginning of your article prove that some kids are just better off without certain forms of entertainment? Better safe than sorry, right?" Okay, fine, but if we are going to ban *Jackass* and *Harry Potter*, we might as well ban some other classics while we're at it; for instance, *the Bible*. Seriously, folks. I know it's really not a bad book all in all, but look at all the problems it causes. At the very least the book should be banned in Ireland before the more volatile followers of the Prince of Peace blow each other off the face of the planet. The book is just *too* easy to misinterpret, which is a shame. But hey, if we can ban Johnny Knoxville for inspiring kids to light themselves on fire, surely we should ban the Bible for inspiring people to set old woman 'witches' on fire.

Of course, I'm not seriously proposing to ban the Bible or any other text; I am simply proposing that just because some people claim to be inspired to do some nasty things does not mean what inspired them is a bad thing in itself. More often than not, they are probably claiming to be inspired because they do not want to accept personal responsibility for their actions. Blaming the media is just another way of saying "The Devil make me do it." It's time parents and politicians stop blaming the media and entertainment industry and start trying to teach their children valuable lessons such as empathy, respect for self and others, and common sense. Any negative influences from the media could easily be counteracted if we would only educate and make sure it's understood that books, games and movies, no matter what their value may be as entertainment, literature, art, humor, drama or even scientific theory, are not always the most reliable guide to reality. We should also look beyond the media when confronted with tragedies like the Columbine massacre. It is ridiculous to think that *games* could make someone become so consumed with hatred and self-loathing that they would be capable of committing such randomness and gruesome acts of violence. No, there has to be a better answer than that. By getting over all the hype and paranoia surrounding the media's influence on young minds we are not only ensuring free speech, but also hopefully moving closer towards real solutions to the problem of violence.

Compulsory ADucation

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Education Association) and the PTA (National Parent-Teacher Association) have gone on record as opposing Channel One.¹¹ New Jersey's Commissioner of Education attempted to ban the program, but reversed his decision under pressure from politicians and school administrators.¹² New York's Department of Education, however, succeeded in banning Channel One; New York is now the only state in which the public schools may not broadcast Channel One.¹³

It seems to be difficult for Channel One's opponents to find compelling arguments against a program that provides schools with equipment, no matter what the "hidden costs" may be. Phyllis Schlafly of the right-wing group Eagle Forum disapproved of the rock music intros and some "inappropriate" movies and video games being advertised.¹⁴ The American Academy of Pediatrics objected to the ads for sweets and other less-than-nutritious foods.¹⁵ But the idea of forcing kids to view advertising in school doesn't seem to upset people much. Yes, it's probably wrong, but so what? Kids see advertising all the time. It can't do them much harm. And for some kids, Channel One news is the only news they watch; it's bound to be better than nothing. If it helps the schools, it's a fair trade-off, isn't it?

There's little question that advertising can be effective in influencing purchasing behavior, in people of all ages. But advertising is not a bad thing; in fact, it's a source of information that can improve our lives. And advertising money does support the production of many well-made, intelligent TV shows and movies.

But advertising can influence the content of what it sponsors. Advertisers may threaten to withdraw sponsorship of programming that is too controversial, as was reported to have happened to the Fox program *Married With Children* (in

this case, other sponsors were found, and the program never did tone down its "political incorrectness"). They may also use their influence to suppress or alter content that relates to their own company or its products, as was reportedly the case with the sponsor's prohibition of "no smoking" signs from appearing in any news footage shown on the 1950s *Camel News Caravan* (a restriction that was honored by that show's producers).

The power of advertisers to control the content of programming is tempered by the power of the viewers. The desire of TV producers to entertain the public and get high ratings can overcome the objections of many sponsors. As long as viewers have the ability to turn off the television or change the channel, TV producers will try to cater to what viewers want to watch, rather than what advertisers would like them to see. In the case of Channel One, however, viewers don't have this power.



Whittle Communications sold Channel One in 1994. It is now owned by Primedia Corporation, a subsidiary of a large holding company that also owns tobacco giant RJR Nabisco Company.¹⁶ After this same company purchased the student news magazine *Weekly Reader*, it was noticed that articles on the health risks of tobacco,

a topic that previously had been quite frequently addressed by the magazine, largely disappeared from its pages.¹⁷ If such a noticeable change in policy occurred with the buyout of *Weekly Reader*, couldn't the same kinds of bias be present in Channel One?

Children *are* exposed to plenty of advertising and plenty of bias in their lives. While it's been found that many learn to recognize brand names and associate logos with products at very early ages, most quickly learn to read between the lines and take advertisers' claims with a grain of salt.

But even if no harm is done, it is hard to imagine any group of adults submitting to a similar situation: forced by law to sit through a particular program—created for the profit of the company that owns it—five days a week, and expected to perform this duty willingly, as it is "for their own good." Adults are simply not permitted to be confined without their consent, except for inmates of prisons or mental hospitals (who cannot be confined without some due process proceedings—and who are not generally considered a target audience for advertisers anyway).

The only group of adults one can think of who are (more or less) confined by law without due process are people serving on juries. True, they can usually "opt out" of the jury pool by not registering to vote, and it is usually possible to get out of jury duty if one is highly motivated. Further, jurors know that their compliance is a service to the court—a civic duty, but one performed for the court's benefit, not their own. However, once one reports for jury duty, one is expected to remain for at least a full day (and possibly for the duration of a trial), and abide by the rules of

— ADVERTISING MAY
APPEAR ON SCHOOL WALLS,
LUNCH MENUS, OR ATHLETIC FIELDS —

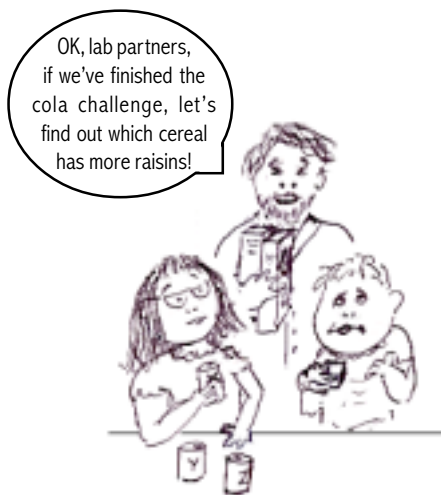
the courtroom and the orders of the judge. So Primedia could conceivably create a series of videos, perhaps on the topic of jury service, to be shown to *this* captive audience.

Although many court systems could surely use the kind of equipment Primedia loans to schools, I don't imagine *any* court would agree to show a program with advertising to their prospective jurors; the risk of tainting a jury would be too great. Even if they did, the audience would surely not be expected to view the program seriously; poking fun at the program would likely be the expected response. The exposure of these individuals to the program for a few days (or even weeks) would not add up to very much time, unlike schoolkids, for whom the exposure to Channel One's ads—*just the ads*—over seven years of school attendance can potentially add up to more than 45 hours.

Those hours are worth a lot to Channel One's advertisers. Primedia, which also publishes such magazines as *Seventeen* and *Soap Opera Digest* (the company recently sold off the *Weekly Reader*), reported a net loss of \$120 million in 1999, but Channel One, bringing about \$346 million in ad revenues that same year, was probably the company's biggest money-making product.¹⁸

Primedia is the only company, so far, to use this particular approach to introduce television advertising into classrooms, but a company called ZapMe! Corp. recently tried to imitate Channel One's tactics, offering free computers and an internet connection (with plenty of ads targeted at kids) to schools that agreed to require students to use them for a certain amount of time each day.¹⁹

But companies have used various techniques to get advertising into schools for years. Soft drink companies regularly make contracts with schools to keep out competing brands. Advertising may appear on school walls, lunch menus, or athletic fields and score-boards. While the state of New York banned Channel One in public schools, they didn't rule out placing advertising on and inside school buses, and have recently contracted with several companies to do so.²⁰



In 1999, the McGraw-Hill publishing company was criticized for a mathematics workbook containing product names and logos in story problems.²¹ Other companies have created curricular supplements which incorporate the brand names of their products into math or science exercises. Educational posters offered to schools for display on classroom walls may also feature recognizable company logos. Some videos on environmental issues, distributed to schools as educational supplements, have turned out to be nothing more than public relations vehicles for the major oil companies that produced them.²²

One middle school in Florida accepted an offer by McDonalds to present a seven-week class on the fast-food business, which covered applying and interviewing for a job, how McDonalds are run, and the design of the restaurants; the school felt that the free instruction was a good deal. One 10-year-old participant commented that students whose life goal is to work at McDonalds "already know what to do."²³

Even companies that don't advertise in schools try to profit from them. Breakfast cereals have long offered customers the chance to "help their schools" by saving boxtops or barcodes (and thereby buying more cereal!); now a soup company has launched a similar promotion. And major office supply and discount stores have begun to trumpet *their* programs "for the schools"—which encourage sales by matching customer dollars with donations.

Meanwhile, the founder of Channel One invented a new, and perhaps even more profitable, way to make money in the field of public education: the Edison Project, a chain of for-profit charter schools which receive public funds to operate.²⁴ This chain of so-called "McSchools" (a topic for another article—stay tuned!) has expanded rapidly and has made overtures to European countries with proposals for overseas markets for their schools, a proposition called "chilling" by the British publication *New Statesman*.²⁵

It is ironic that one of the supposed goals of compulsory education was to keep children from being exploited by businesses for profit; now businesses are finding ways to use these laws to their advantage. One can hardly blame them for seizing an opportunity, since the primary goal—and obligation—of most businesses is to sell "most anything that is legal"²⁶ to anyone they can. Their job is to make money, not to promote social welfare.

— PROFITING FROM COMPULSORY EDUCATION LAWS IS A FORM OF EXPLOITATION OF YOUTH —

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Compulsory ADucation

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Nevertheless, profiting from compulsory education laws is a form of exploitation of youth. While certainly not as harsh as parents or others forcing kids into working grinding hours, any situation that allows for a “legally” captive audience to be forced to endure advertising by government-favored corporate sponsors is morally wrong.

It would be a dramatically different situation if youth *chose* to attend an academic institution that happened to have some level of advertising. And this is where many anti-ads-in-schools organizations miss the point—it’s not so much that ads are in schools; it’s that the *kids* are forced to be there in the first place.

If youth had a say in the way schools were run—by voting in school board elections, or even broader political power—they would at least have a voice in any foolish experiments a school district decided to try out on them. And if youth were allowed to choose their own educational experiences—to educate themselves, or opt out, rather than being forcibly educated by others—the ethical problems with Channel One would cease to exist, as would many other problems that have eternally plagued the schools. Only if children are not forced to attend can the problems of “disruptive” students ever be eliminated. And only when schools are no longer guaranteed a “captive” audience can they become truly competitive.

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