

Commercialism in Classrooms

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ABSTRACT. Opinions expressed in commentaries are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the American Academy of Pediatrics or its Committees. Commentaries are not peer-reviewed. *Pediatrics* 2001;107(4). URL: <http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/107/4/e44>; *commercialism, children, classrooms.*

Do children—our patients—go to school under contract to watch commercials? Unfortunately, for many the answer is yes. More than 8 million children watch computers or television in schools with demanding and persistent commercials.

The last 2 years have seen an unprecedented intrusion of commercials in the classroom.¹ Whittle Communications is credited with escalating the popular trend 10 years ago with a satellite television concept called Channel One, shown in >25% of schools every school day.^{2,3} This program, now owned by Primedia, reaches >12 000 schools every day that they are in session. Recently, N2H2, a company that filters inappropriate content from computers in school classrooms, is providing a commercial experience. More and more companies are willing to provide a perceived need of the school in return for time to advertise their products to children in a respected school setting.

CLASSROOM TELEVISION

What's the Deal?

Channel One provides a daily TV show and some documentary programs as well as the equipment to receive and broadcast the programming. The school receives 2 VCRs, a 13-inch preview monitor, a fixed satellite dish, and a 19-inch television set for every classroom (the contract describes the classroom as a minimum of 23 students). Although the satellite receives Channel One programming exclusively, the school has full use of the television sets and VCRs.

What's the Show?

Channel One starts with artwork by students that always includes the logo (an advertisement?). There is a 30-second silent introduction that is not included in the 12-minute requirement of the contract. The introduction of the anchors includes teenage popular

music and a not so subtle ad for Channel One. The program generally contains a story, a commercial break, another story, more commercials, and a pop quiz or audience participation question that usually relates to one of the stories. Then the show closes with some music and chatter by the anchors, followed by some extra time featuring Channel One products.

What's the Catch?

Commercials

In exchange for 10 minutes of programming, there are 2 minutes of commercials in every session. The commercials are generally for cosmetics, video rentals, video games, athletic shoes, soft drinks, candies, cereals, television shows, and movies. Many of the commercials are unique, only shown on Channel One. There are some public service announcements and government-sponsored military recruitment spots.

There have been commercials showing violence, the subject of a recent report by the Federal Trade Commission.⁴ Other commercials promote snack foods and sensationalize risk taking behaviors. Some commercials for cosmetic products advocate perfection and beauty, which does not enhance self-esteem at a critical time in a child's psychosocial development.

Additional insight is obtained about the commercial emphasis placed on marketing to children by looking at advertisements for advertisers. These ads boast effectiveness of commercials, brand preference, and access to the children who don't usually watch TV.

Time

Channel One contracts for 12 full minutes of student time each day, or 1 hour each week, which for a 35-week school year displaces 1 full week of instructional time. As for commercial time, students are obligated to watch >5 hours a year. The equivalent of 1 full instructional day is committed to watching advertisements.

Curriculum

The local, city, county, and state school boards abdicate their responsibility for determining curriculum for 1 full instructional week a year. The content of the programming is determined by Channel One's Hollywood studio. The content may fit into the curriculum, but only by accident.

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Contracts

The school board signs a contract stating that at least 80% of the classrooms will watch 90% of the Channel One programs in their entirety.⁵ If the principal, school board, or teacher doesn't like the programming for that day, they can elect not to show it, but that right is limited to only 10% of the programs sent to them.

Ethics

It is improper for students to be forced to watch commercials in a publicly funded classroom situation. School is not the place to get pressured to develop life-long brand preferences and to be advertised on how to spend disposable income.

Slippery Slope Argument

If a school sells part of its school day to a candy bar, then what is to prevent it from selling more of its day to other products? All of our schools can use more equipment, facilities, and software, and there are many companies willing to provide something desirable if they are able to influence young children.

Contradictions

The National School Lunch Program has rigorous detailed regulations about foods allowed to be served to children.⁶ In conflict with these rules and even with the impending epidemic of adolescent obesity and type 2 diabetes, we are allowing many of the same schools to contractually obligate children to watch ads for soft drinks and candies.

What's the Benefit?

Educational benefits are difficult to quantify. Students in classrooms with Channel One have shown about a 3% advantage on a test that covered the most recent 3 months of news.⁷ Other rigorous studies fail to report any differences.⁸

Certainly, students get exposed to cosmopolitan reports of events from within and without the United States. Although news content occupies ~60% of the air time, only 20% of the broadcast is spent on recent political, economic, social and cultural stories other than sports, weather, and disasters.⁹ If the school wants to provide additional equipment and space, students can develop creative skills by setting up a studio to do their own programming. They can do weather reports, news, or even create their own broadcasts.

Computers and Internet Service Providers

A more recent commercial intervention provides computers and Internet hookup to schools¹ with a banner ad running continuously on the screen.⁴ Companies providing computers for schools have recently formed, are rapidly changing, and although they are advertising in a public arena, are not very forthcoming with information. One entrepreneurial innovator, ZapMe!, is undergoing corporate restructuring and publicly states it plans to withdraw from the public educational market.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the New York City Board of Education is seriously con-

sidering putting computers in schools that deliver ads.

Content-Filtering Companies

Companies have developed the ability to filter Internet material to ensure inappropriate content is blocked from students' view. This service helps maintain educational credibility. However, at least 1 company boasts to potential advertisers that they not only deliver the largest online audience of tweens and teens in the educational environment, they know what the students are doing on line. Their ad page states that it is impossible to launch an effective online advertising campaign during the school day without N2H2.¹¹ A demonstration website for their search engine is available.¹²

Companies in the Classroom

Content

Anytime a company gets involved in education, editorial content can be impacted. Anti-tobacco articles decreased from 62% to 24% from before to after K-III Holdings had controlling interest of Weekly Reader.¹³ The parent company of K-III was also the parent of RJR Nabisco, a cigarette manufacturer. When any educational program depends on commercial support, considerable effort has to be expended to keep content and curriculum objective and unbiased. The student should not be viewed as a consumer.

Privacy Invasions

Contests are propagated whereby companies can have access to that child's name and address. Students are enticed to go to a website after school where companies can acquire telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, social security numbers, and credit card numbers if they declare they are at least 13 years old.

Results from a survey by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center states that more than one third of children would reveal their allowance amount, family-owned car types, and family political discussions for a gift.¹⁴ What are parents to say to children when their school will give them a prize for information about their brand preferences and recreational activities? It is hard to convince a child that information given to their school invades their confidentiality.

POSITIVE ACTIVITIES

This commentary is negative, and is meant to be so to obtain the attention of parents, physicians, and school boards. A positive outcome of this commentary and our activity to eliminate commercialism in the school is to have media literacy courses in America's schools. Working with the New Mexico Media Literacy Project,¹⁵ the American Academy of Pediatrics has a program to inform pediatricians and our patients about the impact of media.^{16,17} With the amount of time we and our children spend in front of the media, and with the number of commercials we are exposed to, we should become much more liter-

ate and understanding of techniques, strategies, and efforts to motivate us to change our behavior.¹⁸⁻²⁰ Being able to deconstruct commercials helps us understand the process, and consequently have more decision-making ability about their impact. Media literacy is a very necessary positive that should be taught to all children in the classroom. This course, as others, should not be tainted by sponsorship by a company or industry with a vested interest.

Programming

Options exist including commercial-free programming that the teacher can freely choose to have the students observe or not. Cable in the classroom is one of those options.

Hardware

Most schools could find local businesses to provide television sets to schools. Although Channel One does not charge for hardware or programming, the average taxpayer cost in lost educational time watching commercials is \$26 333/year/school.²¹ With some effort, computers could be given to schools with maintenance and an Internet service provider that contained no commercials.

School Boards

We can do what Michael Doyle, a pediatrician in New Jersey, did. Being concerned about commercialism in his community's schools, he attended a meeting of the school board and argued against signing a Channel One contract. He won.

Organize

We also can support organizations against commercialism in schools. Progressive consumer advocate Ralph Nader and conservative Phyllis Schafly both have taken positions and made statements against commercialism in the classroom. The American Association of School Administrators, the National Parents Teachers Association, The Southern Baptist Convention, The National Association of State Boards of Education, and others have statements against commercialism in schools.

Legislative

We can support conservative Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL) and liberal Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT) who introduced a bipartisan amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to ensure that parents are informed about invasion of privacy of their children through commercial activities in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Visit your schools. Visit the websites of advocacy organizations.²²⁻²⁴ Become and stay active in your local school activities. Our children are too important to have their educational time bartered for time watching commercials.

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