Are Schoolchildren For Sale to Advertisers?

April 19, 2000

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Corporate advertisers know that their television audience is dwindling rapidly. It used to be so easy to market their products to tens of millions in neat 30-second segments efficiently placed on the three major TV networks.

The networks have been losing audience to dozens of cable stations, and looming on the horizon is technology that will soon enable the average viewer to call up the programs he wants at any convenient time and deep-six the commercials in the process. So what's the beleaguered corporate advertiser to do?

Public schools have emerged as the advertisers' dream come true. The advertisers have figured out how to turn schoolchildren into a captive audience forced to watch commercials and forbidden to turn them off.

People at home can use the time during commercials to visit the refrigerator or the restroom or surf other channels. Schoolchildren, who are subject to compulsory attendance laws, do not enjoy such freedom of choice or movement.

The trailblazer in using schoolchildren as a captive market is a corporation called Channel One, which ten years ago started making unpublicized contracts with local school boards to require students to watch two minutes a day of hard-sell TV commercials along with ten minutes of what it described as news. In return for turning over the 12 minutes a day of classroom time, Channel One loans the school the equipment to receive the programs.

Channel One's ads and news have both been heavily criticized by parents for years. Its commercials include inappropriate sexual imagery and feature ads for violent movies. Much of its "news," such as the segments featuring Hollywood celebrities, has little or no educational value.

Now watched every school day by 8 million children in 12,000 schools, Channel One has proved such a profitable venture that it has attracted competitors. ZapMe! is another corporation seeking the same target with different technology.

ZapMe! offers to loan 15 computers and accessories free of charge to any school along with software called Netspace that allows students to visit up to 10,000 ZapMe!-approved Internet web sites. The software enables students to have personal e-mail addresses at school and possibly even at home so they can send and receive e-mail messages.

In return for this equipment, the schools must promise to have a student sitting at every computer for at least four hours of every school day to provide an audience for ZapMe!'s advertisements.

The ads occupy a third of the computer screen for those four hours, running constantly and changing frequently to attract the student's attention. With a click of the mouse, the ads enlarge to fill the screen. ZapMe!'s software includes more than 100 computer games that kids can play during school time.

But that's not all. ZapMe! secretly monitors students and their web-browsing habits, sorted by age, sex and zipcode, so that marketers can target their products more accurately.

ZapMe! makes itself very attractive to corporate advertisers. ZapMe!'s own literature offers them "an audience of students aged 13-19 who may not otherwise have access to the Internet" plus the promise that their ads on the screen are "a rich-media interactive experience, including audio and full-motion video; able to interact with users [and] recruit on line."

ZapMe! apparently has no guidelines for advertisers. Schools that accept this deal must also commit to give students ZapMe!'s commercial information to take home three times a year.

The Senate and House will consider different bills to address the problem of commercialism in the classroom and prying into pupils' privacy. Rep. George Miller's (D-CA) Student Privacy Protection Act, H.R. 2915, would require schools to obtain the "written, informed consent of the parent of the student" before allowing a "third party to monitor, receive, gather or obtain information intended for commercial purposes from any student under 18 years of age."

Senator Richard Shelby has an amendment stating that it is the sense of the Senate that state and local schools "should remove commercial distractions from our nation's public schools and should protect the privacy of school-aged children." Shelby's amendment also states that "federal funds should not be used in any way to support the commercialization of our nation's classrooms or the exploitation of student privacy, nor to purchase advertisements from entities that market to schoolchildren or violate student privacy during the school day."

This latter provision explains why commercialization of the classroom is a federal matter. Several federal agencies have been using taxpayers' money to buy ads on Channel One. Are Schoolchildren For Sale to Advertisers?

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