How K-III Communications

Buys a Captive Audience

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When people watch television, they certainly are at liberty to channel-surf during the commercials or to use that time to get refreshments or go to the bathroom. How would you feel if the government mandated that you must watch every commercial?

That would be a huge cash windfall to the advertisers, and it wouldn't sound like America. But that's what's going on in the public schools every day with Channel One.

Some 8,100,000 schoolchildren (nearly 40 percent of all 11 to 18 year olds) are required by their school officials to watch at least two minutes a day of television commercials on the daily program called Channel One. This gives the advertisers a daily guaranteed teen audience equal to the audience of the Super Bowl, and the commercials are priced like ads on primetime network shows (about $200,000 per 30 seconds).

Channel One is a 12-minute TV program (including two minutes of commercials) that the students of 12,000 middle schools and high schools are compelled to watch under the terms of a deal their schools have made with K-III Communications. The schools are bribed with the loan of a TV for every classroom, two VCRs, and a satellite dish so that the program can be beamed directly to the classrooms.

The Channel One corporation has total control over the content of the programs; the program cannot be halted once it starts, and it cannot be edited. Teachers and parents have no practical way to view the program before the students see it.

In peddling the two minutes of commercials to corporate advertising departments, K-III boasts: "Channel One is viewed by more teens than any other program on television. Channel One's audience exceeds the combined number of teens watching anything on television during Primetime. Huge ratings. Unsurpassed reach. Unparalleled impact among teen viewers."

It isn't only the tobacco companies that know the business value of advertising to teens. One marketing

manual advises advertisers: "When a young person is between 13 and 18 years old, you have the chance of a lifetime to transform a fickle consumer into a loyal customer. . . . You can efficiently influence attitudes, and build brand loyalties."

The problem is not only that Channel One is a marketing tool to exploit a captive audience of children, but what the ads are selling. The commercials sell junk foods, soft drinks, video games, $150 Reebok athletic shoes, vulgar and offensive PG-13 movies, magazines, and primetime TV sitcoms.

Channel One has aired commercials for "Down Periscope" (which Entertainment Weekly called "vulgar" because of its stream of obscenities and blasphemies), "The Quest" (which contains a series of brutal acts of violence), and the TV show "Unhappily Ever After" (which some say is the crudest show on network television, with graphic sexual references, gutter talk, and disrespect for parents).

Channel One boasts that its commercials can send children to see any movie Hollywood will pay to advertise, and Channel One advertises PG-13 movies to pre-teens in middle school. Channel One ran a 30-second "See It and Win" commercial for a PG-13 movie, and 500,000 children phoned the next week and entered the contest.

Channel One has recently been urging schoolchildren to use Internet chat rooms, where they can send anonymous messages to other users from around the world. FBI Director Louis Freeh has expressed his concern about chat rooms because they "provide pedophiles an anonymous means of establishing relationships with children."

Channel One was sharply criticized this year by two separate studies. One was conducted by sociologist professor William Hoynes of Vassar College, the other by media expert Mark Crispin Miller of Johns Hopkins University.

Hoynes and Miller analyzed 36 programs that aired in 1995 and 1996, which contained a total of 91 news stories and 177 on-camera sources.

Hoynes reported that, contrary to Channel One's promise that 10 minutes of the 12-minute program would be devoted to news, actually only 20 percent of the air time is devoted to coverage of recent "political, economic, social and cultural stories." The rest of the time is filled with ads, a news quiz, promotional activities, weather, sports, Hollywood gossip, music and banter.

The research revealed that Channel One's "real function is not journalistic but commercial. The news is meant to get us ready for the ads. It must keep itself from saying anything too powerful or even interesting, must never cut too deep or raise any really troubling questions, because it cannot ever be permitted to detract in any way from the commercials."

Most education organizations are opposed to Channel One, including the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the National PTA.

The time devoted to Channel One adds up to six days of instruction a year lost to schoolchildren. It's time to call a halt to this exploitation of a captive audience.