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Now, Class, A Word from Our Sponsors ... <sup>1</sup>

By Allen D. Kanner

Why is the child advertising industry suddenly so interested in school buses? Earlier this year the marketing agency SAC signed a contract with the South Carolina Department of Education to place an eleven-inch strip of advertising above windows inside the venerated yellow-and-black vehicles. The state and participating school districts will split the revenues, each pocketing \$2,100 per month. BusRadio is a new company that produces daily radio programs beamed over the Internet to school buses. The programs include four minutes of ads per hour. The company claims it reaches one million students in twenty-three states. Some students have complained the programs are so noisy they can't study. Colorado, Arizona, and New York allow exterior ads on school buses that, according to one expert, are ten times more profitable than indoor banners. Tustin Amole, spokesperson for Colorado's Cherry Creek School District, defended the new practice, noting that "The ads are only four to six feet long, so a school bus is still unmistakably a school bus." Of course, the easy identification of the vehicles promotes the school's implicit endorsement of the products splayed across the exterior signs.

In truth, it's not so much the desirability of the buses that has the marketing industry panting as the fact that they are one of the few remaining pieces of school property that haven't been saturated with commercial messages. Advertisements are now found inside school buildings and classrooms, on gym floors and gym clothes, on school computers, over PA systems, and on textbook covers. Math books present problems that feature Nike, Gatorade, and Topps trading cards as examples. Tens of millions of children have entered Pizza Hut's BOOK IT! contest, which gives pizzas to kids who have read a certain number of books. Channel One News, a lightweight twelve-minute news program now partnering with NBC News, includes two minutes of commercials with each broadcast and is viewed at least four times weekly in nearly 11,000 schools. Of late, and in violation of its own policies, Channel One's website has been advertising *prescription* drugs such as acne medications Differin and BenzaClin. Coke and Pepsi have contracts with schools across the U.S. that exclude the presence of other soda companies and often include financial incentives to the schools to increase sales. One business, The Field Trip Factory, has organized over 20,000 off-campus trips to places such as Toys "R" Us and Domino's Pizza. And just in case no more room is left on the buses, the Miami-Dade School District is considering renting ad space on fences surrounding its schools.

The commercial invasion of schools is changing the actual materials that students are taught. Corporations are providing teachers with free curricula, called Sponsored Educational Materials (SEMs), which function both as advertisements and public relations tools. SEMs include detailed lesson plans, colorful texts, and entertaining DVDs and cost from \$25,000 to more than \$1 million dollars to produce. In science class, for

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<sup>1</sup>Note: This article was in press for Designer Builder Magazine when the magazine folded following the unfortunate and sudden death of one of its editors.

example, students can conduct a “Prego Thickness Experiment” that compares the thickness of Prego versus Ragu spaghetti sauces. A first-grade curriculum uses logo recognition of brands such as K-Mart, Pizza Hut, Jello-O, and Target to teach reading. McDonald’s offers materials that teach students how to design one of its restaurants and apply to the corporation for a job. Revlon instructs children on “good and bad hair days” and asks them to consider the three hair products they’d most need if stranded on a desert island.

As public relations tools, SEMs are particularly useful to companies that need to “greenwash” their exploitation of nature. To this end, the American Coal Foundation has produced a curriculum that explains how Earth can be helped rather than harmed by increased carbon dioxide. Materials created by Chevron challenge the existence of global warming. The Pacific Logging Company offers a SEM that describes clear-cutting as “environmentally responsible.”

Scholastic, the world’s largest publisher of children’s books, is well known for its annual book fairs held across the nation. But the books are being left behind. For example, capitalizing on the popularity of the Clifford the Dog series, Scholastic’s website features eight different Clifford dolls – one that retails for \$199.95 – as well as a Clifford hand puppet, backpack, rattle, adventure DVD, and a dress-up doll based on Emily Elizabeth, another book character. It is also selling Bratz dolls, which have been widely criticized for their role in the sexualization of young and very young girls. The website also features a “kid reporter” who covers events at Disney theme parks and reviews new Disney movies and plays.

To help sales, Scholastic has created the In-School Marketing Agency that “specializes in the development and distribution of in-school and consumer marketing products.” The agency has teamed up with Volkswagen to produce “Fasten Your Seat Belt ... Go Far!,” a program designed to encourage seat belt safety and “[p]romote the Volkswagen brand to thousands of teenagers, specifically those from diverse, urban communities.” Taking its cue from SEMs, the program provides teachers with free “co-branded curriculum materials,” including “a teaching guide with lessons and reproducible worksheets, student magazines, a classroom poster, and a mini-site on Scholastic.com.” There is also a nationwide contest in which students design public service announcements for seatbelt safety and vote for the winners through the website for MTV’s program “Total Request Line” and Volkswagen’s website. It is not clear, however, how Scholastic’s encouragement of children to watch MTV will enhance their interest in reading.

The latest trend in marketing is towards “multi-platform” campaigns for single products intended to capture a child’s attention wherever she or he may turn – the Internet, television, radio, magazines, billboards, the sides of skyscrapers, product placement in movies, and on and on. Already schools are home to a number of platforms, such as television (Channel 1), radio (BusRadio), the Internet, schoolbook covers, and Scholastic book fairs. This means that a single campaign could reach school children through multiple channels each day. And more school platforms are on the way.

The commercialization of education is proceeding at a dizzying pace. Not surprisingly, as I have learned as a child and family psychologist and co-founder of the national advocacy group Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, most parents are unaware of the extent of the problem. They certainly won’t find out from their children,

who think all the marketing is normal. Nor are the schools going to announce each time they sell out. Further, unless a school prohibits it, the kids themselves are walking ads, with corporate logos beckoning from their clothes, backpacks, cell phones, and any other possession they are likely to bring to campus.

How did schools become so commercialized? In the 1980s economists discovered that children had far more discretionary income and influence on their parents' spending than previously imagined. Marketing to children boomed. U.S. companies spent \$100 million on advertising to kids in 1983, nearly \$17 billion in 2005. Schools were especially attractive targets because (1) students were a captive audience, (2) parents, the traditional gatekeepers, were absent, (3) many schools were desperate for funds, and (4) school ads carried the implicit endorsement of the institutions.

The increase in marketing is harming children in many serious ways. It is contributing substantially to childhood obesity, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, precocious sexuality in pre-teens and very young children, and the adoption of materialistic values. Materialistic values, in turn, play a causal role in children's depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, low self-esteem, and poor relationships with parents and peers.

The vast majority of products advertised to kids are bad for them. Marketing is now a major negative force in child development. The time has come to eliminate advertising in schools and ban advertising to children in general.

### **Capitalist Propaganda at School**

Modern marketing, as it has grown and spread in the twentieth century, has transformed from an institution that merely sells products into one that functions as propaganda for American corporate capitalism. Imbedded in corporate advertising are a number of "meta-messages" that cut across commercials and support the free enterprise system. The average marketer is not purposefully advocating capitalism. Rather, the implicit values, beliefs, and goals – the ideology – of the corporate culture from which marketing emerges is expressed through these meta-messages.

For example, most advertisers do not set out to promote materialistic values, per se. But they do claim that owning their products will solve people's problems and make them happy. Cumulatively, this creates a materialistic meta-message that promises joy and satisfaction to anyone who purchases an endless array of new products and services. The average city dweller now sees approximately 5,000 advertisements a day, up from 2,000 thirty years ago, and each commercial is a covert mini-plug for materialism.

But this is just part of the story. In the last several decades corporations have developed a marketing technique, called branding, in which the corporation itself is promoted above and beyond any given product. This is accomplished through tag lines, logos, and the like (think "Just Do It" swoosh). When branding is successful the corporate image is more important than the item being sold. Branding adds value to the product and allows large corporations, through mergers and acquisitions, to expand into whole new areas of merchandise with brand-addicted customers in tow.

But branding, too, has a meta-message, which is that corporate products, and therefore corporations themselves, are essential to happiness. I call this corporate materialism. From a young age many children these days explicitly identify with a series of brands that includes their clothes, music, toys, cell phones, video games, and other

meaningful features of their lives. Whether it is conscious or not, on a deeper level they come to believe that the system that generates these branded products, which we would call American corporate capitalism, is essential to having fun, being cool, and living a satisfying life. When I've asked middle- and high-school students in the liberal Bay Area to imagine a life without corporate products they have a hard time doing so, and just as hard a time understanding why one would even bother to entertain such an absurd fantasy. Marketing has narrowed their sense of future possibilities, a sign of successful propaganda.

The implicit school endorsement of products advertised on campus also functions as propaganda. When advertising is sanctioned even in school, children are being taught to accept marketing as a normal and expectable part of their lives, no matter where they are or what they are doing. Commercials may be annoying at times but they are a small price to pay for all the benefits of capitalism.

Often when new territory is breached in school marketing, it carries with it a new meta-message supporting the capitalist system. This year start-up company Droga5 signed a contract with the New York City Department of Education to create the Million Program, which would provide free mobile phones for the district's one million students. The phones come with built-in learning tools such as a thesaurus, spell-check, and extra-help tip-line. Students can earn rewards, including movie discounts, sneakers, clothes, music downloads, talk time and text message time (the latter two shut down during school), by getting good grades and using the tools. Achievement and attendance incentives include a congratulatory message from baseball player Derek Jeter and a wake-up call from rapper Jay-Z. There will also be advertising on the phones during off-school hours. A trial run of 10,000 to 15,000 students began in January. If New York is successful, Droga5 plans to go national.

Note that Droga5 is introducing a new school platform, mobile phones, that will be of great use in multi-platform campaigns.

In terms of corporate propaganda, the Million Program makes it abundantly clear to children that the main reason to get an education is to gain access to more corporate products. Again, I suspect that Droga5 isn't consciously promoting this idea. But each time a new part of the educational experience is commercialized there is an excellent chance that it carries with it a meta-message supporting capitalism.

### **Structural Filters**

In their seminal book *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky provide a description of propaganda in non-authoritarian countries that is very useful for understanding the full impact of advertising in schools. In non-authoritarian countries the press needs to at least appear to be free. Propaganda is therefore folded into the structure of the media, where it remains largely hidden from public view. Often it works as a "filter" that keeps out opposing views to the prevailing ideology. For example, in the U.S. the extremely high cost of owning and running a national media company ensures that only the very rich will be owners. The conservative bias of the ultra-wealthy is thus built into the national media. Further, news programs themselves are subject to a structural bias. Stations are loath to report on developments that reflect negatively on their sponsors for fear that it could jeopardize their funding. Over time, reporters and editors internalize this practice as a routine and unconscious part of their work. Herman

and Chomsky note that when biases are built into a system there is no one individual or group responsible for their perpetuation. It is just the way things are.

*Adbusters* magazine has tried to place a humorous public service announcement critical of consumerism on all the major U.S. commercial and cable networks, offering to pay the full fee. Every network has rejected it. The network executives make no bones about why: they don't want to offend their corporate sponsors and risk losing their funding. *Adbusters* has effectively exposed the ideological censorship that permeates the mainstream media not only in regards to the news but to all content areas, including public service announcements.

In a similar fashion, as corporations solidify their position in public schools the educational system becomes vulnerable to censorship. Here is what can happen (if it isn't already going on): A sponsoring business lodges a complaint with the school administration about a teacher who is presenting materials critical of its industry. Under pressure, the teacher either withdraws the lessons or refuses to and is fired. As with the news media, school administrators and teachers internalize the message not to be critical of sponsors and begin to self-censor, eventually not even noticing that they have done so. A commercial filter has become part of the system.

This scenario is not far-fetched. It is how large corporations behave once they have a foothold in any area they intend to exploit. Unfortunately, already some schools are treating business sponsorship as an ongoing revenue source rather than reporting it as part of a budget deficit they would like to eliminate. Once corporate funding is permanently structured into the school budget the censorship process is set to begin.

Propaganda works by being repetitive, ubiquitous, psychologically sophisticated, and in non-authoritarian countries, indirect. The capitalist meta-messages of corporate marketing fit this recipe to a "T." Propaganda also works by filtering out opposing points of view. Schools are poised for this to begin happening. Children brought up in an educational environment that indoctrinates them into corporate capitalism will become addicted consumers, not critical thinkers, as adults.

### **Turning the Tide**

People are fighting back. Bills have recently been introduced in the Massachusetts and Vermont state legislatures that would prohibit advertising on school grounds during school hours. In South Carolina pending legislation would prohibit advertising on school buses. A press release by Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood brought enough negative publicity to McDonalds's branded report cards that the junk food giant discontinued the campaign and paid for the printing of "clean" report cards. These developments indicate a nascent but growing political will to put a halt to the commercial invasion of school.

While Massachusetts and Vermont are on the right track, our larger goal needs to be a ban on marketing in schools that itself is part of a national ban on all marketing to children. Our group, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, has "commercial-free" in its name because advertising to children cannot be justified. According to a large body of research, children under nine years old do not have the cognitive capacity to understand that a marketer is far more interested in profit than in the child's well-being. Older children, even teenagers, do not have the full cognitive and emotional capacities of

adults and are at a distinct disadvantage when confronting adult-produced commercials. It's simply unfair to market to children, and a nationwide ban is long past due.

The most common objection I hear to the idea of banning advertising, whether to children or adults, is that such a restriction would suppress free speech. This objection rests on the assumption that modern marketing is simply a collection of independent advertisements rather than an extremely powerful institution that itself systematically suppresses speech that is antithetical to its ideological values and goals. Restrictions and bans on marketing are now necessary for free speech to flourish.

Expelling advertising from schools is an excellent place to start in reclaiming childhood from the corporations. On a practical level, most people intuitively know that marketing violates the integrity of the educational system. Even administrators who increasingly sound like marketers in their justification of school advertising ("since ads are everywhere why not school"; "we're teaching children to be informed consumers"; "it's simply a matter of giving students and schools choices") will admit, when pressed, that they would not turn to the business world if they had sufficient funding.

Further, by drawing the line at schools we are sending a message to students, and everyone else, that marketing is harmful to children and needs to be contained. This message is frightening to corporations, for it is the beginning of a slippery slope towards further restrictions and towards a society that is willing to curtail advertising for the good of the whole. What better legacy to leave our children.

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