

The Media Foundation

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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WHO CONTROLS THE PUBLIC AIRWAVES?

The Media Foundation, a Vancouver based non-profit society and publisher of ADBUSTERS QUARTERLY magazine, has released a six minute video of advocacy advertising that could mark the beginning of a media and advertising revolution . The video features eight provocative commercials that sell ideas rather than products.

Two of the ads will run on CBC Late Night in Toronto and Vancouver for two weeks starting February 4th, 1991. The Media Foundation plans to expand the campaign to Boston, Mass. in the spring, and Los Angeles and New York later in 1991.

"We want to inspire North Americans who have passionate causes to put alternative advertising ideas on the air. We want them to walk into their local TV stations and purchase airtime for their own ads -- or one of ours," says Kalle Lasn, president of The Media Foundation. "Why should 12 minutes of every commercial TV hour be reserved for promoting consumption?" asks Lasn. "It's far more interesting and environmentally friendly to sell ideas instead of products. We don't need a 130 billion dollar advertising industry telling us to consume-- we already consume too much. The future of advertising lies in selling ideas, not products.

"A wave of grass roots media-activism may be the only way to redefine a commercial TV culture that is distorting our personalities and culture in grotesque ways.

"It will also force the major commercial networks in North America to publicly debate why they routinely censor citizen-produced advertising. It is a debate," argues Lasn, "that the networks will not win."

Reaction to the ads from CBS, NBC and ABC have indicated they would refuse many of the ads , but so far no official decision has yet been taken. Meanwhile, Canadian broadcasters have approved only two of the ads.

Regardless of the networks' decisions, the video, shown in media literacy classrooms, university communications departments, and advertising agencies, promises to trigger a far reaching debate about who controls the public airwaves. Do Canadians and Americans have the the right to walk into their local TV stations and purchase 30 seconds of airtime for a cause they believe in? If not, why not?

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An Immodest Proposal

The media revolution will not begin with a network executive shouting "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" but with ordinary citizens walking into their local TV stations to purchase airtime for their own homemade ads. The 30 second TV spot is the most powerful communications tool ever invented, yet up until now it has been used primarily to "sell soap." Imagine what a grass roots army of media strategists selling ideas instead of products could do.

Imagine environmental, political, and religious groups, and individuals with passionate causes buying up some of those 12 minutes per TV hour now reserved for selling products. Picture switching on your TV to a "commercial" that invites you to live a frugal life. Imagine a news item on the worsening recession being followed by an ad that accuses the economics profession of incompetence. And later that evening, a message comes on asking, "Haven't you seen enough TV for one night? Go talk to your kid, your wife, your dog."

Now envision this movement of citizen-produced advocacy ads gathering momentum, and in a few years, taking over as many as three of those 12 minutes. Imagine the impact on the public mind; how it would jolt us right out of our TV stupor and revitalize public debate on a host of critical issues.

And here's the real payoff: the \$130-billion advertising industry and our whole TV culture will be transformed when these maverick advertisers start muscling into the financial power base of TV, sponsoring different kinds of programs — and maybe even making money.

Now we're talking democracy of the airwaves.

WHOA! Hold on, you say. Wouldn't every pressure group this side of the Ku Klux Klan have as much, if not more, access than the mavericks? Wouldn't we be turning the idiot box into a Pandora's box of virulent messages? This has been the very argument used for over 25 years by Canadian and American TV networks in their fight to keep citizen-produced advocacy messages off the air [see *Who Controls the Public Airwaves?* page 52]. But has this policy of "benign censorship" worked? Of course it has — it has allowed commercial TV to become a cheerleader for consumer culture without any critical voices to spoil the fun.

Granted, a truly free marketplace of TV spots will not be without its risks and dangers. But nothing could be worse than what we now have: a medium of mindless commercialism that distorts our personalities and culture in grotesque ways. We have allowed television to become the command centre of our ecologically unsustainable way of life.

The old TV culture, based on selling consumption as a way of life, has had its day. Now it's time to rethink television, to broaden its financial and creative bases, to take back its heart and soul.

In fact, using TV's enormous power to communicate ideas and influence society may be the only way to solve the mounting social and environmental problems now bearing down on us.

Kalle Lasn *Bill Schmalz*

Kalle Lasn and Bill Schmalz, Publishers

Who Controls the Public Airwaves?

Canadian and American television networks have a long history of keeping citizen-produced advocacy advertising off the air.

Page two of the CBC network's Advertising Standards Codebook states: "CBC does not permit advertisers to buy time for the broadcast of controversial material. (For the purpose of this policy, controversy is



Rejected by CBC, accepted by CTV.

defined as 'A matter of public interest about which there is significant difference of opinion and which is, or is likely to be, the subject of public debate.')

The principle of this policy is that the airwaves must not come under the control of any individual or group who, because of wealth, special position, etc., might be better able to influence listener or viewer attitudes on a contentious issue."

Under this policy the chief of Advertising Standards in Ottawa is the arbiter of what is too "controversial" for the public airwaves. Over the years this unelected bureaucrat has consistently skewed public debate by limiting access to the airwaves in arbitrary ways. For example, B.C. forest companies were allowed to air their advocacy ads (including the infamous *Forests Forever* series), but all of the Media

Foundation's environmental ads that tell the other side of the forestry debate were rejected. (See page 65 for one of these rejected ads.) The Advertising Standards chief rejected an anti-nuclear TV spot produced by a student group at the University of Saskatchewan, but allowed the Canadian Nuclear Association to advertise as part of a \$2.5 million campaign to promote nuclear energy.

The Telecaster Committee of Canada, ad standards watchdog for CTV and other private Canadian broadcasters, also routinely censors advocacy ads; though not for the same reasons as the CBC. The Committee, for example, rejected all the Media Foundation's Tubehead commercials, while the CBC was

happy to run these (apparently non-controversial) spots. The two watchdogs then reversed their positions on The Talking Rainforest commercial. This kind of inconsistency in Canadian advertising standards demonstrates why self-regulating networks should not be allowed to become the arbiters of what is too controversial for public airwaves.

In the U.S., the major networks talk as if they own the public airwaves. When asked if he would sell airtime for a Tubehead spot, Harvey Dzodin, ABC vice president of commercial clearance said, "Showing that ad would be like shooting ourselves in the foot...make that shooting ourselves in the tube." Matthew Margo, CBS vice president of program practices was even more blunt, "We would not broadcast a commercial

that denigrated television. We also don't broadcast commercials that take controversial positions on important topics. If we did, companies with the finances at hand could control the national agenda."

The \$64,000 question, of course, is who is controlling the national agenda now?

Is This a Democracy or What?

It is alarming to discover that networks routinely censor TV messages because the views expressed are deemed controversial. Controversy is the lifeblood of democracy. It should not be the criterion by which airtime is sold. Notions of what is controversial are inescapably subjective, and they change over time. Until the ecological movement invited us to rethink our consumer culture, who could have imagined that consumption itself (and therefore just about every commercial on TV) would become the controversy of the 90s?



Rejected by CTV, accepted by CBC.

A free marketplace of TV spots is an idea whose time has come. Every citizen should have the right to walk into a local TV station and purchase 30 seconds of airtime. It would revitalize public debate, and it could even save our skins. ■

—Kono Matsu