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overview

Harvesting Minds

How TV Commercials Control Kids

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For
Joel Frederick Fox
Emma Caitlin Fox
&
All Kids

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Foreword

[To be mailed at a later date.]

Introduction

"What products are advertised on TV, here at school?" I asked a group of ninth-graders sitting around the table with me.

"Cinnaburst," replied Eric. "You know--it's that gum that has these little red things and--"

"No," injected Lisa, "those are flavor crystals."

Lisa's interruption was spoken softly, politely. Eric, seated across the table from his classmate, Lisa, hesitated for a second, and then muttered, "Oh yeah, flavor crystals," and quickly nodded in agreement, before recalling other television commercials that he'd seen in school this quarter.

When Lisa voluntarily corrected her classmate, two students sitting near her also silently shook their heads in agreement: Lisa was right; Eric was talking about "flavor crystals." It was the exact phrase used in the gum commercial.

None of the other five students sitting around the table questioned the accuracy of this label. None of them found anything unusual in the fact that Lisa expressed this information with these words and retrieved them so easily. There were no raised eyebrows, no shades of doubt. Everything was normal.

Nobody in the group saw any differences between the real thing they were talking about--the gum--and the label they had so quickly and naturally affixed to it--"flavor crystals." This hollow phrase simply enhances the product, making it seem better than it is. These students are unaware that they've given this gum a positive evaluation by using the advertiser's exact words.

Lisa, Eric, and the others sitting around the table on this October morning are scrubbed, decent, bright kids. They attend a consolidated school in rural Missouri, where most students are signed up for the hot lunch program. Every day, when Channel One broadcasts into their classroom, Lisa and her friends absorb, over and over again, commercials not only for bubble gum, but for Snickers, Levi's 501 jeans, Milky Ways, Sega Video games, Gatorade, Dorritos chips, Sure deodorant, Little Caesar's pizza, and a gaggle of other products.

Every day at school, Lisa and her classmates are systematically exposed to high-impact TV commercials. So are eight million other American kids, who also attend schools which have contracted to receive Channel One--a twelve-minute broadcast from Los Angeles, containing two minutes of commercials.

These commercials now constitute our national curriculum. More than any other experience or text, commercials are now "read" by more students, more often, than *Romeo and Juliet* or *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Huck Finn* or *The Catcher in the Rye*. This

book, then, answers one main question: "What happens to kids when they are held captive to TV commercials?"

I have mentioned only a few facts about this complex, social phenomenon. But there are many more stories to tell--especially those told by students themselves, whose voices are seldom heard in the debates about television advertising--which is one reason why I wrote this book.

The first chapter, *Kids & Commercials*, looks at the closed world of public school students and TV commercials. Also, this chapter answers some essential questions: 1) Does watching Channel One help students become more culturally literate? 2) What do we know about the effects of commercials on kids? and 3) How does Channel One function like a propaganda machine? The final section describes the methods and procedures used in conducting this study.

I chose to study TV commercials within Channel One schools because they represent a largely "controlled" or "pure" environment in which to study the effects of persuasive messages. (These same qualities attracted advertisers to schools in the first place.) The qualitative research described in Chapters 2-6 was carried out between 1993 and 1995. My purpose was to describe students' responses to Channel One's commercials--how kids interacted with these viewing experiences, what and how they thought about them. The results of this exploratory study (which employed small focus groups of students at rural school) are

presented in the following chapters: *How Well Do Students Know Commercials? How Do Students Think about Commercials? How Do Students Evaluate Commercials? How Do Commercials Affect Students' Behavior?* and *How Do Commercials Affect Students' Consumer Behavior?* After summarizing conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 7, the final chapter, *What Can We Do Right Now?* describes approaches for helping kids (and adults) better understand a world hot-wired with commercials and other media.

I wrote this book for several reasons. Although this book is critical of TV commercials beamed at captive audiences of school kids, it is certainly not critical of media itself. On the contrary, I have always been awestruck by images--wherever and however I encountered them--in media, in language, in art, in music, in nature, in mind. I have long regarded images (and imaging) in the same way that scientists view DNA--as the most fundamental element of human life, representing the most basic unit of thought and communication. So my first reason is an unshakable optimism, respect, and faith in these products and processes.

While I am not a media-basher, I am, though, a concerned parent and teacher, which leads me to my second reason for writing this book: something as elemental and valuable as media should never be abused--especially if kids are the "targets." So,

to answer the question, "Why did you write this book?" I point to each page, to each story told. I point to Eric, Lisa, and all the other kids I talked with--the natural, normally naive, good-hearted, open-faced kids, who, on trust, absorb the world around them. "Flavor crystals" should never have been allowed to invade the tender, green shoots of Lisa's and Eric's growing psyche. They have more important things to do--like being allowed the freedom to grow up nurturing their own images, not those selling products.

The fragile selfhood of children--especially children in school--belongs to them and to their parents and families and teachers and friends and pets and communities--not to advertisers, marketers, and manufacturers. Yet Lisa and millions of American school children are being inoculated, day in and day out, with high-voltage commercials which have proven infinitely more interesting to them than anything that could happen at school.

Most people, though, don't think twice about school-sponsored television commercials. And why should they? After all, TV is a close, common presence in our lives. We think of it in the same ways that we think of loading the dishwasher and brushing our teeth--as normal routines of daily life. We regard television sets as furniture. However, for these reasons and more, we forget that the TV commercial is a commodity, sold in units of viewers-per-thousand. But our children are not

commodities to be obtained, defined, labeled, and sold. Children should enter their school each day without being "targeted" by advertisers and corporate investors.

Most important, we must accept "flavor crystals" for what it really is--a hollow, euphemistic, silly ad phrase. That Lisa and Eric so easily absorbed this phony representation of reality into their consciousness serves as a visible reminder of something more serious that's hidden from view, a kind of internal hemorrhaging of the spirit that seems to afflict children who are hostage to an endless stream of ads. America has not held so many people captive for purposes of selling them for profit since lines of ragged slaves clambered up the auction block. This parasitic practice, systematically inflicted upon American youth, must stop. That is the message in this book.