

## **The Case of Channel One TV: The Argument for Increased Information Dissemination Concerning the Enhanced Media Effect**

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### **Abstract**

In the midst of the ethical debates about Channel One TV, the issue of its unique and heightened media effect has been minimized even though this is one of the more significant disadvantages of this corporate-based news program. I situate the findings of this meta-analysis with the greater societal dialogue concerning corporate-public school partnerships. In this essay, I argue that the unique media effect produced by Channel One should be a greater part of the debate as principals and teachers are considering whether to include Channel One into their classrooms. I also argue that college media literacy courses for elementary education majors should give case-specific information about Channel One's media effects.

### **Introduction**

Channel One TV is a corporate-owned news show beamed by satellite to public schools throughout America. The 12-minute news show (containing two minutes of commercials) is produced by professional journalists and shown on closed-circuit televisions to a captive audience of students and teachers each school day. At various times since its creation in 1990, the show has been broadcast to an audience of up to 12 million students and 200,000 to 300,000 teachers, which comprised a third of the students and teachers in America. Currently, the program is beamed to six million students in 8,000 middle schools and high schools across America.

Channel One has been controversial since its introduction into the school system. The controversies have involved the news program's introduction of commercials into the school day, the pop culture features in the program and the loss of instruction time during the school day. There are also problematic features with respect to its editorial content and news coverage (Golden & Burbank, 2005; Hoynes, 1997; Miller, 1997).

Congressional hearings were held in 1999 concerning Channel One, in spite of lobbyists' efforts to delay or cancel the hearings. Activists from both liberal and conservative corners, such as Ralph Nader, the consumer activist, and Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum, testified at the hearings against Channel One.

Nader went so far as to say that "Channel One is simply a vehicle for commercial advertisers to bypass parents and promote products to school children" (Manning, 2000, p. 55). Nader decried the commercialization of the public schools while Schlafly questioned the morality of the content, especially of the commercials. In spite of the opposition, Congressional Republicans opposed federal control of commercial activity. The hearings resulted in the determination that decisions over Channel One would continue to rest with the local school boards and parents (Namita, 2006). After the hearings were completed, the Channel One news show continued to be broadcast to schools throughout the U.S.

As the debates about this news program have continued over the years, the issue of its increased media effect has been minimized even though this is one of the more significant disadvantages of the program. While Angulo and Green (2007) argued that there is a need for courses in university teacher training programs that would teach about school-based news shows such as Channel One, their suggestion arose from an acknowledgment of the other controversies surrounding Channel One and did not highlight the unusual media effect elicited from watching the Channel One news program.

This meta-analysis reveals that one of the more disturbing aspects of the Channel One news program is that it causes an increased media effect on students that is more powerful than the effect caused by other TV

programs consumed by teenagers. The news program appears to change the students' paradigms and schematic frameworks concerning advertising, the acquisition of wealth and the corporate value system. The viewing of Channel One appears to be associated with a greater sense of materialism in the students. It also appears to encourage an enhanced appreciation of advertisements as a source of entertainment and truth.

In this essay I argue that the unique and heightened media effect produced by Channel One should be a greater part of the debate as principals and teachers are considering whether to include this news program into their classrooms. I also argue that media literacy courses in university settings should give case-specific information about Channel One's media effects.

Initially, in this meta-analysis of Channel One research, I discuss the findings of prior research studies that reveal an increased media effect from the Channel One news program. Then I situate the findings in the wider dialogue about corporate/school partnerships and discuss the implications of this media effect in that wider context.

### **Channel One's Increased Media Effect**

Overall, this meta-analysis examined 35 research studies that focused on the Channel One news program. This study examined differing aspects of research foci, which varied from investigations of the media effects to studies of the content of this news program.

This analysis found that one of the most troubling aspects of Channel One was highlighted when scholars studied the effect of the advertising on Channel One and found that the advertisements had an intensified effect on the students, even beyond the usual powerful advertising effects of commercials shown through other outlets. Scholars and even advertisers have observed in the past that commercials can have a powerful effect on children's desires. Even a single ad can change the way a child perceives a toy or a game (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).

However, the advertisements on Channel go beyond the mere changing of the students' evaluations of a single product. Researchers found that the commercials on Channel One were not only effective at selling products, but also at selling the concept of advertising itself. Kremar (1991) studied the belief systems of students with respect to advertising and found that Channel One viewers had more of a belief that commercials were a source of truth, and more of a willing attitude to watch commercials in order to see the programming.

Greenberg and Brand (1993) found that Channel One viewers rated commercials higher than nonviewers. Bachen (1991, 1998) surveyed the students concerning the commercials and found that one third of the students agreed with the statement: "Seeing the ads on Channel One makes me want to go out and buy these products" and over 20 percent said that they had followed through on this impulse. Students in Channel One schools are also more likely to evaluate products in commercials more favorably (Greenberg & Brand, 1993) and buy the products advertised (Tozzo-Lyles & Walsh-Childers, 1995).

Even more troubling are researchers' findings concerning the heightened sense of materialism that was being nurtured in the students (Shaker, 2000). Greenberg and Brand (1993) found that students who regularly watched Channel One were more likely to agree that:

- \*Money is everything
- \*A nice car is more important than school
- \*Designer labels make a difference
- \*I want what I see advertised
- \*Wealthy people are happier than the poor

In other words, the Channel One news program affects students more intensely than other TV programs. In the course of viewing the program over the six years spent in junior high and high school, the teenagers' basic view of advertising is altered so that they view commercials more favorably and incorporate a greater sense of materialism into their value systems when compared with students who do not have the Channel One news program in their classrooms.

## **The Partnership Between the Corporate World and the Educational System**

This media effect is a manifestation of the increasing integration of the corporate paradigm into the school system, even as education policy scholars observe that, in many cases, this partnership can be detrimental to the well-being of students. White and Lowenthal (2009) argue that "history has shown that it's unproductive to talk about or even worse treat schools as businesses; instead, we argue that it is time to learn from history's lessons and reframe the way we talk about and therefore think about education" (p. 1).

Some scholars observed that Channel One was a product of its time. Buckingham (1997) wrote that the controversies concerning Channel One appeared to be about more than just a few minutes of news and commercials, but appeared to symbolize much broader tensions and concerns that were emerging in the context of a certain time period.

While some decried Channel One's aggressive marketing as a singular phenomenon that had the dubious distinction of being both the largest form of commercialism in schools and one of the most exploitive (CorpWatch, 1988), other scholars, such as Appleby (1973) argued that to understand the widespread acceptance of Channel One, scholars must look to the ideological, political and economic context in which these partnerships emerged. Specifically, Channel One appears to be a manifestation of what happens when an array of forces converge to bring about a crisis of values (Saxby, 1996). It was constructed during a period of time when the American educational system was in a period of flux and crisis. Since the "Nation at Risk" report in 1983, the national conversation about the U.S. educational system centered on the idea that the schools were failing and children were ignorant about the world around them (Buckingham, 1997). Also, during this period, as budgets were being cut, schools were looking for outside assistance, especially in the realm of technology (Bachen, 1998).

To some, Channel One was seen as part of a grander vision, that of the wholesale commercial privatization of public schools, which gained support among right-wing commentators (Giroux, 1994; McLaughlin, 1992). While some scholars point to the introduction of commercialism in the classroom dating back to the 1920s (Cook, 2004; Ewen, 1977; Molnar, 1996), it was during the 1980s and 1990s that the advertising industry realized that it needed to reach teens in different settings. During that same period a number of forces, such as chronic budgetary problems, the ever-growing presence of commercialism in all sectors of society, and the growing competition for the burgeoning "youth" market, were converging. These converging forces put pressure on teachers and administrators to accept ads and other promotional materials in school (*Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at School*, 1995).

As businesses intervened, educational private-public partnerships developed. Proponents noted that Channel One's success could partially be traced to its arrival during a point in history when the trend was for public schools to engage in partnerships with the private sector (Greenwood, 1994). Marketers especially strove to partner with schools as they realized how soon brand preferences were crystallized in the life cycle of their customers, and so they were awakened to the desirability of developing future markets through the school system and reaching young consumers who spent almost 20 percent of their day in the classroom (Bachen, 1998). It was during this time that the advertising industry started aggressively negotiating contracts and partnerships with schools (Saxby, 1996; Stole & Livesay, 2004).

Strasburger and Wilson (2002) observed that, as time passed, commercialism in schools soared, spurring increased public debate about the ethics of such practices (Aidman, 1995; Richards, Wartella, Morton & Thompson, 1998). While proponents called it a partnership, others called it an intrusion which has continued unabated until the current day. Sheila Harty, a civic educator with *Educational Leadership*, observed that "Intrusions into the classroom by business interests continue unabated, some blatantly promotional, others more subtly biased" (*Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at School*, 1995).

Some scholars summed up the controversies regarding the existence of Channel One as a manifestation of both a financial and ethical crisis in American schools (Saxby, 1996). This period of educational crisis and

budget cutting, which hailed corporatism and commercialism as solutions to the problems in public schooling, paved the way for Channel One's successful corporate entry into the arena of public education

### **Implications**

Education policy scholars have observed the negative aspects involved in the conceptual intermingling of corporate ideology and the educational system. White and Lowenthal (2009) wrote that society has been caught in a trap of conceptualizing education metaphorically as a business. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) explained that "In this metaphor, students are consumers, their education is a product, and teachers are labor resources ... Consumers should be getting the "best education" for their dollar" (p. 532).

As part of the intermingling of corporatism and the educational system, this study finds that some corporate/public school partnerships can potentially have a negative effect on the students, as seen by the media effects studies of Channel One. This meta-analysis reveals that one of the more disturbing aspects of the Channel One news program is that it causes an increased media effect on students that is more powerful than the effect caused by other TV programs consumed by teenagers. The news program appears to change the students' paradigms and schematic frameworks concerning advertising, the acquisition of wealth and the corporate value system.

These findings are disturbing and should be part of the larger dialogue about this news program in the school system. I argue that the enhanced media effect (with respect to the power of advertisements and the greater sense of materialism) should be a greater part of the debate as principals and teachers are considering whether to include the Channel One news program into their classrooms. The decision they make with respect to this news program involves more than the gain of a 12-minute news program or the loss of 12 minutes of instruction time.

I also argue that media literacy courses in university settings should give case-specific information about Channel One's media effects and educate the future teachers on the effects of this particular news program. The media literacy courses could help the future teachers to explore the possible reasons why the advertisements on Channel One may be causing media effects that are more serious than the effects from other TV programs.

Finally, this study raises the issue of the need for media literacy programs in the schools that would attempt to counteract the positive view of advertisements and highlight the negative aspects of increased materialism that students could be gaining from viewing this program. While this news program is a representation of corporate philosophies mixed in with news and pop culture, there are ways that teachers can attempt to counter the influence of the news program through deconstructing the messages that advertisements are projecting to the audience.

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