

Free Film Guides are Propaganda Tools

James R. Bennett

Recently I wanted some films for a class called "Language and Public Policy." Lacking money for film rental and finding the State Department of Education Audio Visual Service in my state limited, I turned to the *Educators Guide to Free Films* and the *Educators Guide to Free Filmstrips*. I was looking for films to inspire students to think independently and critically. The very size of the *Guide* was encouraging. Here, I thought, was a visual storehouse of the world's and history's ideas.

I now think differently. Here is why.

The thirty-ninth edition (1979) of the *Guide to Free Films* contains 754 pages with 4,574 titles divided into 22 subjects, an impressive increase over the 102 pages and 671 titles in the first edition (1941). A count of the first three pages of each of the subjects (omitting the religion section, which, except for six or seven of the 107 titles, is limited to the doctrine and history of the Judeo-Christian religion) discovered 181 titles produced by business, 39 from the military, 81 by government (mainly federal), 42 by educational organizations, 25 by foundations and charity organizations, three by trade unions, two by religions, and seven miscellaneous—a total of 444 items. Apparently few if any of these titles are critical of the established corporate-military media complex that President Eisenhower warned against in his farewell address.

The "History" section reveals the whole game. Of the total 467 items, 23 titles are from corporations, and 359 are from the military



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(the first three pages, with one exception, entirely military-produced). There are also 65 miscellaneous, 19 state and federal governments, and one foundation, but none of these questions the rectitude or utility of the corporate-military establishment. The historical reality available to the schools through free films is not merely one-sided, but almost monopolistic.

The same thing is true in many of the other categories. Here I will compare two years. Consider Aerospace Education in the 1976 *Guide* (pp. 18-51). In the first three pages alone, six films by corporations, four by the military (USAF), and 13 by the federal government (NASA) boost fighter aircraft, missiles, and space flight. In the first 13 pages (pp. 18-31), 46 films exalt space flight: 27 by NASA; eight by USAF; five by TRW Systems; three by McDonnell-Douglas; one by Thiokol Corporation (all three corporations heavily invested in space contracts); and one by the

U.S. Geological Survey. At least 21 of these films pertain to manned lunar landings, an indecent bias in favor of one program at the expense of other national priorities. The 1979 *Guide* reveals a similar imbalance of point of view. In the first ten pages there are 15 films by the military (mainly USAF), 18 by NASA, and 21 by corporations—27 on space flight (mainly manned), six on missiles, and 20 on fighter aircraft. *Educators Guide to Free Films* thus serves the NASA - USAF - White Sands Missile Range - TRW - McDonnell-Douglas - Thiokol - General Dynamics - Sikorsky - Geological Survey propaganda machine in spending millions each year to sell space flight and fighter aircraft to the American people.

Consider "Consumer Education" in the 1976 *Guide* (pp. 108-111). Of the 24 entries, businesses produced 18, the U.S. government two, and the Underwriters Laboratories two. No consumer organization's film is listed. In the 1979 *Guide* (pp. 116-122), out of 36 films, 34 were from corporations, five from the U.S. government, and one from Underwriters.

The films on "Social Problems" seem better balanced. In the 1976 *Guide* in pages 459-467, I found 22 from businesses (the Sun Oil Company on how the traditional American system operates; Aetna Life on how to plan your money, and so on); the same number from government (14 of these from the military and civil defense); but six from religious denominations, four from foreign governments, and six miscellaneous

(the Red Cross, CARE). In the 1979 *Guide* in pages 504-513, I found 20 from corporations, 27 from government/military, six from religious groups, ten from service/charity organizations, and four from foreign governments. The film *Day of Justice* in the 1976 *Guide* by the National Legal Aid and Defender Association presents an admirable exposition of widespread inequality in our society. It is no longer listed, however.

The *Educators Guide to Free Films* propaganda blitz persists in volume after volume. (Not only am I basing my conclusion upon the descriptions of the films in the *Guide*, but during the past three years I have viewed several dozen of the films.) Business "spent almost half a billion dollars in printing its message on 16-mm" in 1969.¹ The Department of Defense supports its messages similarly.² To the publisher the *Guide* is "one more step in this march of progress" of more and more free films.

The *Educators Guide to Free Filmstrips* (30th Annual Edition, 1978) is similar, though not in the same subjects. The five "Aerospace" filmstrips dealing with domestic air transport were produced by the airlines. The "History" section is dominated by the Austrian and Italian governments with filmstrips about their pasts. The military-industrial complex has not invested here in filmstrips, apparently. But in other areas the corporations dominate. Of the 32 entries under "Home Economics: Food" about 25 are corporate-sponsored—Betty Crocker, 11;

C&H Sugar, four; and Dr. Pepper, two. The 25 "Environmental Education" entries offer 16 from corporations (Wood Industries, six; Dow Chemical, three); five from government (Corps of Engineers, national parks); one from religion (drought in Africa); and one from Sweden (which does apparently provide some social alternatives). Under "Science," 32 entries range from 20 by corporations (Dow Chemical, eight; Asphalt Institute, four) to one by Glenn Educational films on menstruation. Some of the corporate-sponsored films are apparently objective "how-to-do-it" films (*Handling Chlorinated Solvents Safely*), but others "explain" highly debatable social issues, for example, Dow Chemical's *Energy Crisis II*, an "explanation of the implications of the shortage in gas, oil, and coal on the cost of petrochemicals." And even the apparently strictly technical filmstrips—for example, Dow's *Chemicals in Transit*, "which shows the many problems and solutions involved in transporting chemicals of all kinds"—portrays Dow and the chemical industry favorably, while omitting

"Educators Guide to Free Films thus serves the NASA-USAF-White Sands Missile Range . . . propaganda machine in spending millions each year to sell space flight and fighter aircraft to the American people."

numerous issues of policy and actual instances of dangerous spills. Also, I should mention that, as with films, some of the filmstrip entries are listed as coming from one of the two corporations whose business it is to distribute free films—Association Films and Modern Talking Pictures—that is, users cannot know until receipt who sponsored those films.

As we have seen with free films, the corporate point of view enjoys great influence through free filmstrips. Alternatives to the establishment *status quo* rarely appear. And this is almost as true throughout the entire range of free materials available to the schools. A writer in *Mother Jones* expresses the problem forcefully:

The Fortune 500 have come into the classroom to teach Jane and Dick about nutrition, energy and air pollution, and their arsenal of slickly designed propaganda is making teachers, books, and public-interest ideology look tacky.

Pinched school budgets first opened the door to industry's enticingly free "educational material." Curriculum innovations make it tough for standard texts to keep up, so

¹ Stuart Little. "Sponsored Films Are Better Than Ever." *Saturday Review* 53: 90; Sept. 12, 1970.

² J. William Fulbright. *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine*. New York: Liveright, 1970. According to *The United States Budget in Brief: Fiscal Year 1980*, the budget for intelligence and communications in national defense is approximately \$120 billion. A spokesman for the Directorate for A-V Activities, the Department of Defense, told me that in 1976 the department spent \$11,316,000 for 784 films, \$3,411,000 of that for 241 information and recruiting films.

teachers rely on supplemental material. . . . So industry, quick to recognize an impressionable — and captive — audience, has flooded the schools with freebies.³

The danger of information monopoly and exclusion of debate, and, therefore, of real choice seems less with printed materials. The *Free and Inexpensive Learning Materials* published by the George Peabody College for Teachers provides a wider range of choices than do the films and filmstrips (perhaps because printed materials are within the financial capacity of small citizen and public interest groups).

What Can Be Done?

If teachers and librarians are not to become unwitting propagandists for the corporate-military-media special interests, they must actively resist. They can take some of the following actions:

1. Teachers can apply the Fairness Doctrine to the schools, a doctrine that functions for TV and radio to balance special interest monopoly of information in controversial issues by requiring equal time for all viewpoints. When corporate or military materials (or those of any other monopolistic power) are used in the classroom, the Fairness Doctrine suggests an obligation for the school to provide an alternative perspective.⁴

2. Teachers can also argue the analogy that solicitors are not allowed on school property. Even if educationally sound in presentation, the brand name promotion

and PR image-building are market advertising as much as any street solicitation.

3. Librarians and teachers can make a special effort to locate free films that possess challenging points of view. *Media and Methods*, *Edcentric*, *New Schools Exchange Newsletter*, and *The Radical Teacher* list free films. We should demand such a service from all mainstream educational journals.

4. We can work for increased local budgets for renting films that provide conflicting points of view. Yes, money. That is the very point: money controls what information is available in the schools. Sources for questioning, dissenting, and reasonably-priced rental films are: Jeffrey Schrank's *Deception Detection*; the magazine *CINEASTE*; the *Tricontinental Film Center Catalog* (333 6th Ave., New York, New York 10014); *San Francisco Newsreel* (630 Natoma, San Francisco, California 94103); and university film libraries that provide catalogs.

5. The Public Broadcasting Service, limited as it is,⁵ does at least offer more diversity than do the *Guides*. It should be used as much as possible (Public Television Library, 475 L'Enfant Plaza, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20024).

6. We can take a more active part in determining what films are purchased by state education departments' film libraries. Let your state film librarian know about the bias of the *Guides* and urge that person to compensate with a wide range of perspectives and options.

7. Librarians should survey

their holdings to identify areas of imbalance and monopoly of information.

8. Librarians can provide magazines that survey the full spectrum of political, social, and economic choices.

9. English teachers should subscribe to the NCTE's *Public Doublespeak Newsletter*.

10. Communications teachers should subscribe to the *Freedom of Speech Newsletter* (Michael Kelley, Editor, Department of Speech

³ Zina Klapper. "Look! Look! See Kids Get Hustled!" *Mother Jones* :7; September-October 1978. See also: *Edcentric*, Spring 1978, on how Edison Electric and Exxon promote nuclear power in public school classrooms through comic books, games, and other devices; Sheila Harty. "Who Produced These Teaching Materials?" *Today's Education*, November-December 1978 (the magazine provided a counter-argument); G. William Domhoff. "Education in Economics" *The Powers That Be*, New York: Vintage: 1978; William Lutz. "The American Economic System." *The Gospel According to the Advertising Council.* *College English* 38:860-65; April 1977. *Edcentric* has also published several other related articles.

⁴ The Federal Communications Commission's Fairness Doctrine, virtually ineffective in the hands of the feeble FCC, is finding new opportunities in the public interest. Recently, the Environmental Defense Fund, charging the Pacific Gas & Electric Company with presenting a false dilemma in their million-dollar advertising campaign to promote nuclear and coal-fired power plants as the only way to meet future energy needs, challenged PG&E on Fairness Doctrine grounds.

⁵ See: Les Brown. "The Public Service." *Television: The Business Behind the Box*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1971; Charles Steinberg. "Has Public TV Become Corporate TV?" *Columbia Journalism Review*: 14-17; September-October 1977.

Communication, California State University, Los Angeles, California 90032.)

11. If we cannot have the full range of films and filmstrips (and books, magazines, pamphlets) worthy of autonomous individuals, all is not lost. We can provide our students with attitudes of resistance. We can help our students understand that a democracy needs minds capable of fighting against the dominant orthodoxies and

cliches of the times, minds resistant to easy belief, minds that question the reality desired by powerful establishments. We can also provide our students with tools of self-defense. We can teach them methods of propaganda analysis beginning in elementary schools, perhaps even in kindergarten.

Teachers and librarians should actively advocate a genuine marketplace of ideas as basic to a democracy. A good place to begin is

to increase awareness of the illusion of freedom provided by the free film and filmstrip *Guides*.⁶ *ETJ*

⁶ Further reading: Sheila Harty, *Hucksters in the Classroom*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Study of Responsive Law; Matthew Lyon, "And Now the Word from our Sponsor: Buying Into the Public Schools." *The Texas Observer* (Nov. 3, 1978). pp. 2-9; Betty Medsger, "The 'Free' Propaganda That Floods the Schools." *The Progressive* 40:42-46; December 1976; Irwin Stark, "The Pentagon Goes to School." *The Progressive* 43:22-26; October 1979.

Free Materials: A Response to Bennett

Charles R. DuVall and Wayne J. Krepel

Bennett's criticism of free films and filmstrips, particularly those listed in *Educators Guide to Free Films* and *Educators Guide to Free Filmstrips* may be warranted, if a mere count of available materials is the sole criterion measure. However, we believe that this approach is one-sided and overlooks several pertinent considerations.

First, and probably most serious, is the assumption that teachers are either ignorant or incapable of recognizing and counteracting overt propaganda efforts on the part of any special interest group. Teachers are constantly making curricular decisions regarding materials to be used with students in implementing the instructional program. These decisions encompass a wide range of options that include publicly purchased textbooks, as well as films and filmstrips—whether rented, purchased, or free. The same basic decision must be made in all instances, that is, to

use or not use the material. This decision must be made by the teacher, on an individual basis, for a particular instructional situation.

Weiss,¹ in a recent article in *Learning*, issued a warning about the unquestioned use of free materials. In an effort to avoid the introduction of sponsor bias he stated, "... by turning off the projector before the credits appear, the teacher can eliminate the last frames (and the company's name) from an otherwise unbiased film." He mentioned that only one evaluative checklist for free materials was presently available. This form can be obtained from the National Association for Industry-Education Cooperation.²

All materials, regardless of source or producer, contain bias. Instructional materials purchased at public expense contain author and editorial interpretation, and are therefore biased. Teachers regularly make decisions regarding

use and emphasis to be made of these materials. To assume that they do not do this with free films and filmstrips, or other free (sponsored) materials is, we believe, to underrate the academic integrity of the teacher.

Bennett is to be commended for making available sources from which listings of materials representing alternative points of view may be obtained.

Some special interest groups have produced films and filmstrips that represent their point of view.
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¹ Brian Weiss, "Now Is the Time for Freebies" and "Warning: Freebies May Be Dangerous to Your Curriculum." *Learning* 8(1): 132-41; August/September 1979.

² For a copy of *A Guide for Evaluating Industry-Sponsored Educational Materials*, write: National Association for Industry-Education Cooperation, 235 Hendricks Boulevard, Buffalo, New York 14226. Minimum order is ten copies (\$1.10 each).

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