

Channel One Whittles Away at Education

Educators beware: if Whittle Communications' offer sounds too good to be true . . .

In March 1989, magazine entrepreneur Chris Whittle of Tennessee-based Whittle Communications launched Channel One, a pilot venture billed as a "new kind of partnership between business and education." What Whittle proposed to provide to each of six secondary school districts in a nationwide test of the program was indeed impressive: \$50,000 worth of TV monitors, VCRs, and satellite dish hardware, along with news and information programming produced in a television format specifically designed for secondary school students. If the initial test proved successful, Whittle would provide 8,000 schools nationwide similar packages of technology and programming at an estimated total cost of \$80 million annually.

Whittle clearly wants the education establishment and the public at large to understand the project in terms of the pressing needs of education in a context of national educational crisis. Quoting strategically from the Bennett/Bloom/Hirsch school of criticism, Whittle's promotional literature points to stunning, even comical, instances of political and

cultural illiteracy: high school students confidently reporting that *Chernobyl* is Cher's full name or that the District of Columbia is a Central American country.

But, with public relations acumen well above that of most of the *Nation at Risk* crowd, Whittle quickly adds that neither the schools themselves nor the teachers are entirely to blame. What the schools need are the

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contemporary technological and informational resources that public funding is increasingly hard pressed to provide.

How does Whittle propose to deliver such resources to our public schools? By soliciting corporate sponsorship for the programming. In each of the 25 12-minute segments of Channel One produced for the initial pilot series, 2 minutes would be set aside for commercial messages from the corporate sponsors, whose fees would underwrite the project.

On the face of it, this looks like another triumph of the American entrepreneurial spirit. The schools get high technology, the teachers get lesson plans, the students get information in an entertaining format, the districts get results, Whittle gets a cash cow, and the sponsors get a captive audience.

Whittle Responds

Critics immediately protested that what Whittle was proposing would be like placing advertisements in school textbooks. And they raised the specter of Saturday morning children's television programming, an overwhelming

barrage of bad taste aimed at badgering 6-year-olds into craving a lot of useless junk.

Whittle has anticipated these criticisms. He responds that the Channel One audience will not be impressionable 6-year-olds but "TV savvy teenagers," who see an average of 100 similar TV commercials a day. Further, he insists that the programming in this case will be "network quality news." There's nothing special about the captivity of the Channel One audience, he argues, since teenagers have the ability to tune out whatever they are disinterested in (e.g., textbooks and lessons). He points out that commercial advertising is already tolerated in the public school environment (e.g., on athletic scoreboards). Finally, he cautions critics to withhold their objections pending the results of initial trials.

Whittle's responses have succeeded only in dodging and blurring the issues. First, his remark that the Channel One audience is "TV savvy" does not mean that it is not impressionable. If teenagers were not susceptible to the influence of advertising, Whittle could scarcely hope to attract sponsors. Second, his assumption that network quality news has significant educational value that would distinguish it as suitable material for the secondary school curriculum is dubious at best. Moreover, there is a crucial difference between placing commercial messages in the school environment—on soft drink cups and athletic scoreboards, for example—and placing them in curriculums. Thus, the one relevant analogy, between Channel One and ads in textbooks, is the one Whittle studiously avoids. Even if advertising within the public school environment is tolerable, advertising within the required curriculum thoroughly compromises the integrity of public education. Finally, as for suspending judgment, in June 1989, not even a full semester into the trials, Whittle announced the results of the five-week pilot project and his plans to go nationwide in 1990 with a three-channel educational network.

What were these results? In the June

press releases Whittle claims that on educational assessment tests of current world and national affairs, students who had watched Channel One got 53 percent correct while the control group got 36 percent correct. My persistent efforts to obtain copies of the assessment instruments and the raw data have met with nothing but evasive responses. Besides, there are conflicting studies. In an experiment conducted for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, students who had been exposed to Channel One and those who had not achieved identically unimpressive 55 percent scores on current affairs tests.¹

All in all, the Channel One proposal adds up to a flagrant display of duplicity in which the public rationale of support to struggling institutions of public education barely masks the patently obvious real agenda.

The Real Whittle Agenda

Whittle was honored in 1984 by *Adweek* and the Magazine Publishers' Association as Publisher of the Year, but he is not a publisher of periodicals in the conventional sense of the term. It is a commonplace in publishing where advertising revenue is a primary source of funding that circulation and advertising sales exert a powerful influence on editorial policy; nevertheless, periodicals publishing is rooted in a tradition in which editorial

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policy is fundamental and central, while circulation and advertising are subordinated as means to ends.

Not so at Whittle Communications. Whittle is in the business of creating efficient vehicles for advertising, pure and simple.

Whittle accounts for his company's remarkable growth precisely in terms of the innovations he has introduced to streamline his advertising clients' access to specifically targeted audiences. His fundamental insight was that advertisers might be less than fully satisfied with traditional mass media as vehicles for their messages because (1) mass media generally reach a large but overly diverse audience for the purposes of many advertisers, and (2) they accept advertising from one's competition. Thus, Whittle's two major innovations are what he calls "target-specific media" and the "single-sponsor concept."² In such contexts, editorial policy and content become subservient to the intent to deliver a specific category of potential consumers to the sponsor in a mood receptive to the sponsor's message.

Media analysts have coined the term *advertorial* to describe this postmodern range of phenomena, which has aroused concern among magazine editors. The American Society of Magazine Editors recently adopted guidelines to reinforce the distinction between editorial content and advertising.³ What goes for Whittle and publishing goes double for Whittle and education. If the "advertorial" worries magazine editors, how much more concerned should educators be over the advent of "ad-vertisement"?

In assessing the Channel One proposal, educators who may be bowled over by the promise of thousands of dollars worth of high technology should be aware of the strings attached. First, the offer is not available to schools with fewer than 500 students: they do not represent a large enough share of this advertising market to count as cost-effective. Second, participating schools would be obligated to show the Channel One program daily, in its entirety, with the

commercials intact, with only very limited discretion. Third, participating schools would be further obligated not to show any other broadcast news service for the three-year period of the contract. This final restriction is secured in part by means of a limitation built into the satellite dish itself: the dish is locked onto one particular communications satellite (the one on which Whittle has rented channels) and is not equipped to tune in others.

Educators should also understand what this package offers the sponsor. Ordinarily, harvesting the attention of an audience of potential consumers on a large enough scale to interest a major advertising sponsor involves considerable risk. With Channel One, that risk is virtually eliminated. The program's sponsors know the size and demographic makeup of their audience with a level of certainty unmatched by practically any other form of advertising.

To reassure skeptical educators, Whittle is quick to argue that the goals of education and those of profitable business or advertising aren't necessarily incompatible and that the presence of effective advertising needn't detract from the educational value of the surrounding material. It's a clever argument. Interpreted theoretically, the premise is plausible. However, in practice, where it counts, advertising and education are at cross purposes.

Educators and advertisers alike recognize this. The active, alert, engaged, inquisitive, creative, skeptical, reflective, self-reliant habits of mind that education aims to encourage are hardly optimal for the reception of advertising. What advertisers want is a passive, unreflective, credulous audience, susceptible to the dictates of external authority.

Thus, most commercially sponsored television programming is produced precisely to prepare an audience to receive advertising. Years of experimentation with various kinds of programming have by now produced a basic formula for maintaining receptive second-by-second audience attention: "constant violence, gratuitous sex, and deliberate manipulation of split-second change of images and

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sounds to make an emotional and sensory impact that leaves no time for reflection."⁴ In short, commercially sponsored television homogenizes and degrades whatever it touches.

Initial suspicions concerning Channel One's depth and educational value are quickly confirmed upon viewing any of the pilot programs. MTV production values predominate: the emphasis is on superficial polish and lightning-fast pace. The three main program segments (separated by the commercial breaks), averaging roughly three minutes in length, are subdivided into story-packets averaging a minute or less each. Transitions are accomplished via 10- and 20-second "Fast Fact," "Pop Quiz," and "Flashback" spots. Subtract the show's opening billboard, the teases for upcoming segments and tomorrow's program, and the closing segment's obligatory piece of human interest fluff, and what's left? It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that each of the commercials makes a heavier, and at 30 seconds a longer, demand on viewer attention than any of the "news and information" items—just what one would expect.

There is a further item on the real Whittle agenda that educators need to factor into their assessments of Channel One. As an entrepreneur, Whittle is understandably interested in maximizing the value of his company as a business asset in the increasingly

"hot" global media market. The prospects of developing the burgeoning populations and emerging economies of the world as markets for the goods and services of major multinational corporations, the huge advertising revenues associated with such development, and the emergence of new instantaneous global communications technologies such as satellite systems and fiber optics—all have opened world communications as a new field for profitable enterprise of immense scale. Recent mergers and takeovers have produced a shrinking number of stunningly huge market leaders and have thereby centralized control of the global information environment beyond the scope and regulatory reach of existing political structures. Case in point: In October 1988, Time Inc. acquired 50 percent of Whittle Communications for \$185 million, making Whittle Communications part of what promises to be the world's largest media conglomerate.

Thus, perhaps the most dangerous, though least discussed, of the implications of the Channel One proposal is the transfer of substantial control over curriculum and content from individuals and institutions that are locally responsible—teachers, school boards, and parent groups—to a remote corporate hierarchy.

An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

To hear Whittle tell it, Channel One is unstoppable. In the present climate of public opinion, proposals like Whittle's do have a lot going for them. Whittle is a persuasive salesman, and the general public is all too easily sold on this sort of thing. He has been remarkably successful in obtaining favorable press coverage, editorial and op-ed support, and, most frightening, enthusiastic reception from local school administrators and teachers. With an obliqueness that is almost polite, Whittle characterizes Channel One's detractors as out of step with the times and . . . well, grouchy. To all outward appearances, Whittle is nowhere near ready to give up.

But even if Whittle eventually does abandon the project, other media tycoons are poised to stake out territory in the schools. Ted Turner has already entered the arena with a proposed educational television service for schools. Turner's proposal, initially intended "to compete with Channel One in the potentially lucrative school market," was to function on the basis of "substantial revenues" derived from corporations who would be allowed to insert "public service announcements." Turner, who now says he isn't sure how he will fund his service, has apparently backed away from the main sticking point in the Whittle proposal.

The only plausible explanation for the intense interest, given the economic structure of the mass media, is the financial (i.e., commercial) value of the market. If its value cannot be harvested presently, then it's the mar-

ket's future value that Whittle and Turner want to corner.

The Best Defense

The ominous and horrible idea of commercially sponsored television in the schools is probably not going to go away soon. There's too much at stake. That's why the best defense against Channel One and similar proposals is organized, informed, and, most of all, *sustained* resistance by educators, particularly classroom teachers. These efforts must succeed. If not, one of the few remaining preserves in contemporary society will be penetrated and harvested as just another advertising market. □

¹C. Tate, (May-June 1989), "Opinion: On Chris Whittle's School-News Scheme," *The Columbia Journalism Review*, p. 52.

²For example *GO!* (Girls Only!), which is distributed three times annually free of

charge through the schools, is targeted at girls in their pre- and early teens and carries the ads of the Personal Products Corporation (makers of a line of feminine hygiene products) exclusively.

³J. Alter, (May 22, 1989), "The Era of the Big Blur," *Newsweek*, pp. 73-76.

⁴B.H. Bagdikian, (June 12, 1989), "Cornering Hearts and Minds: The Lords of the Global Village," *The Nation*, p. 819.

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