

Corporate Influence
in Schools

My View Remains the Same:

A Response to Rukeyser

Rukeyser has said nothing to change my mind about Whittle Communications' intent or Channel One's merit.

I seem to have struck a nerve in Knoxville, provoking a response from none other than Whittle Communications Editor in Chief William S. Rukeyser, who objects to a number of misrepresentations and inaccuracies in my comments about Channel One.

First, let me say that my primary source of information concerning Channel One was Whittle Communications' own press releases. Having read Rukeyser's remarks, especially concerning the terms of Whittle's offer to participating schools, I find myself less confident in their publicity material as a source of reliable information than I was before.

To pursue the matter further, I inquired at the office of Bill Honig, State Superintendent of Public Instruction in California. From a representative there, I learned that Honig's office experienced the same sort of difficulty I have in obtaining actual copies of the test and raw data from the Channel One educational assessment study, though they had requested this information immediately and repeatedly throughout the Channel One trials. In the end, however, they had obtained the information (and would supply it to me as well).

Superintendent Honig's office continues to experience difficulty in obtaining a sample of the contract that participating schools would be asked to enter into. So they have had to arrive at their own understanding of the terms of the Whittle offer by way of the Whittle publicity material and a number of conversations with the corporation's representatives. From these bits of information, a clear version of the offer has yet to emerge, but a number of points seem clear:

- Originally the offer had been restricted to schools of 500 or more students but will now be extended to districts with at least one high school with 500 or more students. This is in accord with Rukeyser's response to my original paper. But I would add that this revision in the Whittle offer is of little significance and actually reinforces my original point, which remains that the offer is so structured as to provide cost-effective access to a specifically targeted advertising market.

- Schools may indeed specify which classrooms are to be wired for Channel One, principals may preview programming and decline to show any material deemed "objectionable," and students individually may withdraw from participation in Channel One viewing—these add up to "limited discretion" about showing the program. The important question to consider here is whether teachers will be obligated to devote class time to material they would not otherwise have chosen for *curricular reasons*. The answer is "yes."

- Rukeyser's protestations notwithstanding, there are significant contractual restrictions placed upon participating schools regarding the classroom use of other broadcast news services. Superintendent Honig's representative was able to extract the following from Whittle Communications Vice President Ed Winter: Though teachers would be at liberty to use the Whittle technology to show commercial network television specials and regularly scheduled noncommercial television programming in class, the classroom use of any regularly scheduled commercial television news programming is ruled out for the three-year period of the contract.

- The Channel One satellite dish is fixed on one communications satellite, and the system is, to that extent, inflexible. Rukeyser is at pains to point out the options available for add-ons, to be funded presumably by the local school district. The school or district may elect to install its own steerable dish, and an instructor might elect to bring in his or her own VCR to plug into the classroom monitor. Of course, but so what? A district able to afford its own steerable dish has no need for the Channel One setup, and a school with such a setup would have a tough time getting funding for an additional satellite dish.

- And here's a little surprise: Schools apparently *do not* acquire title to and the right to retain the Channel One satellite dish and video hardware, contrary to the distinct impression fostered throughout the Whittle literature. The question was put to Winter, "What happens if a participating school declines to renew the contract at the end of the three-year period? Does the school get to keep the video technology?" The answer: Whittle Communications would recover everything but the wiring. In effect, the satellite dish, VCR, and monitor hardware are loaned to the participating school or district.

I, for one, have heard enough. Nothing Rukeyser said in his response has altered my view. Channel One is neither the only nor the best way to incorporate television into education, if that is a goal worth pursuing. □

Joel Rudinow is Research Associate, The Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA 94928.

Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.