



THE DEMISE OF CHANNEL ONE NEWS



It happened not with a bang but a whimper: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt announced that its in-classroom TV service, Channel One News, had aired the final broadcast of its 29-year history.

The announcement attracted scant attention, especially for a project described breathlessly by a 1995 *New York Times* article as “the highest-profile—one might even say glamorous—controversy in American education.”

Founded in 1989 by entrepreneurs Christopher Whittle and Ed Winter, Channel One sparked debate by requiring participating schools to show students 12 minutes of commercial-filled television daily in classrooms. In exchange, the schools received equipment such as satellite dishes and televisions. Critics, including the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, objected to the insertion of corporate advertising into schools. Research co-authored by Alex Molnar, co-director of the NEPC’s Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU), found that the broadcast cost taxpayers an average of \$229 per pupil in 1994 dollars (which would equal \$389 in 2018 dollars) in lost school time.

As co-director of CERU, NEPC research associate Faith Boninger is an expert on commercialism in schools. In this Q&A, she reflects upon the controversial project.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q: What is the significance of Channel One’s demise? In other words, does it signify anything about broader trends in education or commercialism in education?

A: It’s good news—there are now a lot of kids who will no longer be manipulated by Channel One and its clients. But unfortunately, there’s still a lot of marketing to children in schools. Many schools accept “free” digital resources, for instance, that put children at risk for infor-

mation about them to be collected and used for marketing purposes. One **significant example** is Google products. Many schools use Google Classroom, which is free, and/or provide students Google Chromebooks, which are relatively low-cost, compared to other computers. This gets children to use, become familiar with, and like Google products. Also, YouTube is the **second most accessed site** from school Chromebooks. YouTube (owned by Google), of course, advertises to and collects information from its student users. This is a real problem.

Q: What does research have to say about the impact of Channel One on the students who were exposed to it?

A: Channel One was, first and foremost, a commercial enterprise designed to deliver a captive audience of children to advertisers. You can see the true goal of the project in its **marketing materials to advertisers**, in which it promised to deliver a teen audience that was forcibly prevented from engaging in any distraction. You can always tell a company's true colors by how it portrays itself to advertisers.

Research on Channel One supported what other marketing research shows: that advertising is effective. For example, a **study** that compared students who had to watch Channel One in school to students who didn't found that those who watched Channel One evaluated products advertised there more favorably. They also expressed stronger consumption-oriented values than did the students who didn't watch—agreeing more that designer labels were an important feature of their clothing and that they usually wanted what was advertised on television.

Another **study**, co-authored by Alex Molnar, examined the true costs of Channel One to schools. The “sell” was that the school would get “free” equipment in exchange for making the kids watch the program every day. But it turns out that there are hidden costs to accepting “free” equipment. The study calculated the dollar value of the time schools are required to allocate daily to Channel One and compared it to the cost of the equipment provided. Even when they conservatively calculated the value of time lost from other educational experiences (counting only the daily two minutes of commercials rather than the full 12-minute broadcast time), they found that the cost of instructional time lost was substantially greater than the value of the equipment provided.

Q: What are some common critiques of Channel One? What are some common benefits perceived by the districts or schools that adopted it?

A: Critiques involved the abusive advertising to a captive audience (and its effects on children) and hidden costs. There was quite a bit of lost educational time. It takes more than 12 minutes per day (the length of the broadcast) if you include the transition time, also. The perceived benefit was the seemingly free equipment. Schools are strapped for money, and they are susceptible to offers of free equipment.

Q: What, if anything, currently exists that resembles the Channel One model?

A: The same argument about there being “no free lunch” that applied to Channel One applies to ed-tech. Google is a major example, but only one; there are literally hundreds of companies looking to provide ed-tech to schools, and many of their products are “free.” Data

collection is a hidden cost.

Q: Why do you think Channel One was discontinued?

A: The business struggled in the face of continued criticism of how it took advantage of and manipulated children and schools. It changed hands. In recent years its business model had to change to advertise relatively more subtly. Instead of straight-out commercials, it would promote things like movies, or stars, in the guise of news segments on them. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt finally pulled the plug.

NEPC Resources on School Commercialism

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