# Phi Delta Kappan


## The Commercial Transformation of America’s Schools


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***Private corporations have long found ways to market themselves to students. Digital technology has turbocharged their efforts.***

Although John Dewey may be the more familiar name to American educators, Edward Bernays, the father of modern public relations and marketing, has an arguably greater influence on today’s schools. During World War I, he worked for the Committee on Public Information, helping the committee sell the Woodrow Wilson administration’s war policies. After the war, Bernays signed on as “public relations counsel” to an impressive list of America’s most powerful corporations. One notable “success” was his effort on behalf of the American Tobacco Company to increase cigarette smoking among women. As part of this campaign, he persuaded socialites to march down Fifth Avenue in the 1929 New York City Easter Parade proudly smoking “torches of liberty” as a protest for women’s rights (Jacoby, 1989, p. 38).

Bernays preached the gospel that public relations is essential in a democracy and that social science knowledge is essential to public relations. He begins his 1928 book *Propaganda* by arguing that:

> The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. (p. 9)

The issue of how to have a democracy while restraining the mob and maintaining social stability has occupied American political theorists throughout our history. Bernays saw public relations and advertising as important tools of democratic governance in a market economy. But the reality today is that modern mass marketing poses a threat to democratic political institutions in general and to public education in particular. A review of the history shows how we reached this state.

## Marketing vs. democracy: Advertising and social control

At the end of the 19th century, American industry was, for the first time, able to produce more than Americans could consume. This did not mean that poverty had been abolished, just that more goods and services were available than our society, as it was then structured, could consume. Thus, sellers of goods and services had to find a way to promote and make possible mass consumption of their wares without threatening the position of the existing political and economic elites.

Education was central to this process. It was, however, education of a very particular sort. Stuart Ewen (1977) quotes philanthropist Edward Filene, the founder of a chain of Boston-based department stores, who pointed out that modern education should focus on "the 'facts' about what is being produced rather than questioning the social bases upon which those facts lay" (p. 55). Yet, as Otis Pease (1958) points out in his study of the development of American advertising between 1920 and 1940, the advertising industry was not necessarily interested in facts. Whether an advertisement was literally true or false was mostly irrelevant — what mattered was the psychological impact of the advertisement — the associations it created in the minds of its targets. Pease (1958) writes:

> The practices of the advertising men merely confirmed the suspicion that there existed in the industry no operating concept which would encourage the public to exercise free or rational judgements as consumers. (pp. 201-202)

If a powerful, privately controlled institution systematically sets out to undermine people's ability to make rational judgments, then people become more likely to fall prey to the forces of mass consumerism in commerce and politics. Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Hurlock, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen (1982) argue that market research techniques could be understood as ways of trying to figure out how to "paralyze the critical powers of an individual with the result that he or she follows the lead, whatever that lead may be" (p. 229). And, too often, these efforts lead to people being defined by consumption rather than by creation and participation. The result is the creation of what David Riesman and his coauthors (1955) term the "lonely crowd" in which people define themselves by their possessions and express their individuality by looking, smelling, and thinking like everyone else.

## Marketing vs. education: Mis-educative vs. educative experiences

Bernays's views about the value of public relations are profoundly at odds with John Dewey's conception of an engaged democratic community built on rational interactions. Indeed, the edifice of American mass marketing is built on what Dewey (1938) termed "mis-educative experiences," meaning any experience "that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience" (p. 25). Such experiences limit people's ability to exercise thought and control their own actions. In fact, in Dewey's view, mis-educative experiences are a barrier to freedom:

> It may be a loss rather than a gain to escape from the control of another person only to find one's conduct dictated by immediate whim and caprice, that is, at the mercy of impulses into whose formation intelligent judgement has not entered. A person whose conduct is controlled in this way has at most only the illusion of freedom. Actually he is directed by forces over which he has no command. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 64-65)

The last thing in the world that advertisers want is for a target audience to have self-control. But for Dewey, freedom is expressed through the control of impulse in the service of intelligent purposes. To his mind, "The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgement exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while" (Dewey, 1938, p. 61). Dewey's educational philosophy is rooted in the belief that individuals are active members of real communities that shape and, in turn, are shaped by them. In contrast, advertising deploys a variety of nonrational appeals and attempts to create pseudo-communities based on consumption or the uncritical acceptance of a particular policy or point of view.

If the methods of modern mass marketing threaten the self-control and judgment of adults, deploying them against children is particularly insidious. No one can seriously suggest that children are rational consumers who have the same power, information, and freedom that adults are said to have to freely enter into contracts for goods and services. Advertising to children is, then, a kind of immoral war on childhood, waged for the profit of adults who should be childhood's guardians. Furthermore, when advertising is conducted in schools, the immorality is compounded because the power of the state is twisted to the service of special interests, the ethical standing of educators is compromised, and the orientation of the school is shifted toward mis-educative experiences.

## The relentless spread of school commercialism

Marketing in schools is not new. Its development parallels that of the public relations industry as a whole, and educators have been wrestling with how to respond to it from the very beginning. In 1929, the National Education Association's Committee on Propaganda in the Schools surveyed school officials to determine what sponsored materials they had received and how they dealt with them. The committee also reviewed state education departments' policies governing the use of such materials, interviewed groups of teachers, made school visits, and examined advertisements for sponsored materials. And it offered general guidance to school decision makers, such as to avoid allowing outside parties to offer contests or to present only a single side of a debate, or to address classes or assemblies without educational authorities vetting them beforehand.

By the 1950s, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (1953) and the American Association of School Administrators (1955) published guides on using "free materials." Although both guides warned teachers against uncritical acceptance of sponsored content, they recommended that schools not reject such offerings outright. (They also eschewed the term *propaganda* in favor of the blander and less accurate term *free materials*.) When Sheila Harty (1979) surveyed 1,250 teachers for her book *Hucksters in the Classroom*, the responses suggested that approximately half of U.S. teachers used sponsored materials from a wide variety of commercial interests, such as banks, utilities, manufacturers, and food processors. The fox had found a home in the henhouse.

In 1990, a group of educators met in Wisconsin to develop principles to govern school–business relationships. Known as the Milwaukee Principles, these guidelines did not call for banning corporate involvement in schools, but they did clearly identify corporate interests as secondary to those of students, teachers, and schools. Several national education groups and state superintendents of education endorsed the principles (Molnar, 1996, pp. 185-186).

The marketing imperative was, however, much more powerful than any suggested guidance or voluntary principles, even if the materials offered were lackluster. When Consumers Union (1995, pp. 2-16) evaluated more than 100 sponsored materials provided by corporations, trade groups, and others, it found the vast majority to be highly commercial, educationally trivial, or both.

One area where corporate influence has been felt is nutrition (a topic Jennifer Gaddis discusses at length in this issue of Kappan). Food of little or no nutritious value (as the USDA delicately terms it) has been heavily marketed in schools (Molnar et al., 2008).

For example, in 1998, the Coca-Cola Company promised to award $10,000 to the high school that developed the best plan for marketing Coke-sponsored discount cards. The marketing campaign made international news when student Mike Cameron of Greenbrier High School in Evans, Georgia, was suspended for coming to a photo-op at the school's "Coke in Education Day" in a Pepsi shirt. At the time, about 20 Coke officials were on hand to lecture on economics, provide technical assistance to home economics students who were baking a Coke cake, and help chemistry students analyze the sugar content of Coke. According to Cameron, while dressing him down in her office, principal Gloria Hamilton not only told him he was being suspended for his disrespect but also admonished him for potentially costing the school a lot of money (Marshall, 1998).

The incident at Greenbrier was an especially colorful example of the kind of commercial activity that became common in the 1990s. To track these activities, Alex Molnar founded the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education (CACE) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1998. In 2001, CACE became the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU) and was housed in the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University until moving to the University of Colorado Boulder's National Education Policy Center in 2011. Between 1998 and 2016, CERU published a series of reports (see Molnar & Boninger, 2015, chapter 2) detailing and documenting the prevalence of seven sometimes overlapping categories of commercial activity in schools:

1. *Sponsorship of programs and activities:* Corporations paying for or subsidizing school events or onetime activities in return for the right to associate their name with the events and activities.

2. *Exclusive agreements:* Agreements that give corporations the exclusive right to sell and promote their goods or services in the school or school district, with the district or school receiving a percentage of the profits.

3. *Incentive programs:* Corporate programs that provide money, goods, or services to a school or district when its students, parents, or staff engage in a specified activity, such as collecting particular product labels or cash register receipts from particular stores.

4. *Appropriation of space:* The allocation of school space such as scoreboards, rooftops, bulletin boards, walls, and textbooks for the display of corporate logos or advertising messages.

5. *Sponsored educational materials:* Materials supplied by corporations or trade associations that claim to have instructional content.

6. *Electronic marketing*. The provision of electronic programming or equipment in return for the right to advertise to students, their families, and/or community members who visit or interact with the school or district.

7. *Fundraising*. Commercial programs to raise funds for school programs and activities, including door-to-door sales, affinity marketing programs, and similar ventures

(Between 1990 and 2009 CERU also followed school privatization as a category, but because privatization differs from the other categories in its relationships to advertising and marketing, we stopped following it in the context of commercialism in schools in 2009.)

Sponsored educational activities (especially involving junk food) — such as the "Coke in Education Day" at Greenbrier High School — was the most prominent category of commercial activity in schools in the 1990s and early 2000s, with electronic marketing becoming increasingly popular. In recent years, marketers have heavily invested in digital technologies that collect data from students as they use digital platforms and programs that are often offered "free" and that often contain marketing messages.

Whatever the medium, the corrosive impact of marketing on children and their education remains the same. As targets of marketing, students are not treated as persons, as John Dewey would have understood the term. Instead, they are treated as objects to be exploited for the benefit of others. It goes without saying that objectified students are going to be miseducated.

## The past is prologue: Using digital technology to cash in on schools

Two late-20th-century electronic, or digital, marketing programs foreshadowed the 21st-century explosion of digital marketing. In 1989, Channel One began broadcasting a 12- minute current events program — which carried two minutes of commercials. Schools that signed up with Channel One were required to make their students watch the newscast (with commercials) daily in exchange for receiving "free" video equipment. Schools with high concentrations of poor students were almost twice as likely to use Channel One as schools serving more wealthy students (Morgan, 1993), and the cost of the instructional time lost was significantly greater than the value of the equipment provided (Sawicky & Molnar, 1998). Also, students who watched Channel One were more likely to express materialist values such as "Money is everything," or "A nice car is more important than school" (Greenberg & Brand, 1993).

Channel One has ceased operation, but another technology company that made inroads to schools in the 1980s remains strong. In 1983, Apple donated 9,000 Apple II computers to California schools in a campaign called "Kids Can't Wait" — after Steve Jobs personally lobbied the California Legislature to pass a 25% tax credit to companies that donated computers to public and private schools (Buck, 2017). Ever since, Apple has continued to provide technology to schools, the place where many children first learn about computers and coding (Kolodny, 2016). The company has also released an app, Swift Playgrounds, and a coding curriculum, Everyone Can Code, which teach children a coding language specifically geared to Apple products (Kolodny, 2016).

In recent years, a well-funded campaign to promote virtual education has succeeded in broadening the scope and expanding the reach of digital educational technologies across the country (Boninger, Molnar, & Saldaña, 2019, 2020). However, there appears to be no research evidence that virtual education produces student outcomes superior to or even as good as conventional, face-to-face approaches to teaching and learning (Molnar et al., 2019).

To be sure, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new need for virtual technologies, but the fact remains that little to no research exists supporting their educational efficacy. On the contrary — their use is tied to significant threats to the integrity of schools' curriculum and instruction programs, their student assessments, and their data collection and record-keeping practices (Boninger, Molnar, & Barbour, in press). Whenever school leaders use digital technologies, they should be aware of what is "hidden under the hood" in their algorithms and user agreements.

Any app or website can easily incorporate code that collects IP addresses and other information, including the pages, content, or ads children see or click on; what they download; what games they play, and what device they are using, with what operating system and settings, and so on. And when a contract defines a company as a "school official," the company can access even more data, including student data that is part of school data systems (Rotenberg & Barnes, 2013). Vendors benefit from state policies that encourage schools to use digital platforms (particularly those claiming to provide "personalized" or "adaptive" learning services) and that exempt those platforms from restrictions on data collection designed to protect student privacy (Boninger & Molnar, 2016, p. 16).

Corporations that gather this information may claim to refrain from using it for commercial gain, but there are no guarantees (Cardozo, 2015; Singer, 2015). The contracts that schools sign with digital vendors often include provisions that prohibit selling or transferring data or using the information for purposes other than their stated educational use; however, those provisions can often be insufficient to actually protect the data from misuse (Boninger, Molnar, & Saldaña, 2020, pp. 17-18).

Even when companies claim to use the information they collect simply to improve websites, apps, and services and to personalize users' experience, they often connect children to third-party sites (such as YouTube) that collect data for advertising purposes while denying responsibility for any use a third party might make of children's or teachers' data (Boninger, Molnar, & Saldaña, 2019, p. 34). Companies may also share aggregated and "de-identified" data without notice to users (Boninger, Molnar, & Saldaña, 2020, pp. 17-18), despite evidence that such "de-identified" data is easily reidentified (Narayanan & Shmatikov, 2008).

Further, although companies may promise compliance with U.S. data privacy laws, once data cross international borders, companies may no longer be held to the laws of the country where the data were originally gathered (Marachi & Quill, 2020). A 2018 Fordham Law School study of data brokers' sale of student lists found a wide variety of student information for sale — including a list of 14- and 15-year-old girls with a perceived need for family planning services — but they were largely unable to discover the sources of the data (Russell et al., 2018, p. 3). Indeed, the Federal Trade Commission (2014, p. iv) noted that the resale of data is so common that it may be virtually impossible for consumers to determine the origin of any commercially available information about them. Schools can try to avoid using products that most threaten students' privacy by carefully examining such features as the extent to which products collect and store student data, the transparency of their operation, and how they secure the data they collect (Boninger, Molnar, and Barbour, in press).

## Not really free

Proprietary digital educational applications serve the business needs of the people who pay for them, not the educational needs of students who use them. In addition to potentially compromising children's privacy for purposes not in their interest, digital educational applications put important educational decisions (such as whether a child has attained a specific competency or grade level) in private hands. This can distort pedagogy in ways that stifle students' learning and stunt their ability to grow into fulfilled, competent adults, and engaged citizens.

If the capacity of the United States to renew its democracy rests on an educated citizenry making well-informed public policy decisions, as Dewey believed, then every American is poorly served when public schools turn their curricula into an educational flea market open to anyone who has the money to set up a table. Yet that is precisely what the 40-year assault on funding for public education and repeated calls for "cooperation" with the business community have pushed schools to do. The COVID-19 crisis is a golden opportunity for well-heeled hucksters to further integrate schools into the corporate digital marketing machine fueled with student data. If Mark Zuckerberg has taught the world anything, it is that data are fungible. And that "free" products offered by opaque and unaccountable organizations come at a very high social cost.

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