

Forward, March!

MOLDING THE MINDS OF AMERICAN CHILDREN

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Many studies have been done on propaganda, but none have focused solely on children as targets. This is surprising, because children have been the focus of numerous related studies: of advertising, cartoons, literature, movies, television and the media in general. I will examine conscious attempts to influence children in the United States. Admittedly, in discussing children, with their “blank slate” character, just about anything could be considered a form of propaganda, or of education for that matter. Thus I have formulated a specific definition of propaganda, and limited “children” to those under 13 years of age.

Even within these parameters, there is an enormous amount of material that qualifies. I will focus on recent efforts, ones that occurred during and after what Daniel Boorstin calls “The Graphic Revolution.” The revolution, Boorstin describes, began when man acquired the “ability to make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images – images of print, of men and landscapes and events, of the voices of men and mobs.”¹ The revolution began in the last century, and has spawned all the mass media of today.

The modern media have been a profound influence on the lives and cultures of people of every country, and are the primary means for deliberately manipulating large numbers of people, especially the young. Most of the examples here deal with television, because of its powerful effects, especially on children. However, many examples reach across several media.

First, a working definition of propaganda is needed. For this I draw from two researchers renowned for their work in the field, Harold Lasswell and Jacques Ellul. Lasswell defines propaganda as “deliberate attempts to influence mass attitudes on controversial subjects by the use of symbols rather than force.”² From Ellul’s definition, (which encompasses an entire book), I add that propaganda is initiated by some organized group.³ This is the definition I will use to qualify the examples discussed herein. The “mass attitudes,” of course, will be those of children, and for this study I have defined children as those people under 13. Teens are another highly susceptible audience for propaganda, but they will not be discussed here. It should be noted, also, that identifying something as propaganda (whether harmful or not), is a highly subjective and sometimes accusatory task.

I will first discuss children’s vulnerability to propaganda, then a few of the channels through which they receive propaganda, including cartoons, advertising, other television programs, and printed matter. Finally, I will look at some new techniques of administering propaganda that are emerging as the media continue to evolve.

Humans learn in various ways. On an elementary level, there is conditioning, (Pavlovian and Skinnerian), and observational learning, or modeling. At this level, incidental learning also occurs; which is learning without awareness of learning, as when watching television passively, for example. On a higher, cognitive level, there is discovery, latent learning and memorization. Generally, the younger the child, the less developed the higher learning centers, and hence, the greater the reliance on elementary methods.

Effective propaganda usually makes some use of both higher and lower types of learning to change or reinforce perceptions; propaganda targeted specifically to the young usually makes extensive use of the lower form. Children can be easily conditioned to have involuntary, reflex responses to certain stimuli, as with phobias. By observing older “models,” children learn to emulate the action of those models. Through these methods, children form attitudes, or learned predispositions to people, objects or institutions. Though group membership plays a part in forming attitudes, the media are the main factor. Since punishment and reward, essential for conditioning, cannot be materially furnished by the media, modeling and stereotyping are most often used in children’s propaganda.

Cartoons

By their very nature, animated cartoons simplify experience. With their striking visual appeal and ability to exaggerate and distort like live-action film cannot, they are very convenient for caricaturing people and ideas. Almost since their inception, cartoons have been used to enforce or change attitudes about certain, controversial subjects. Early cartoons, a novelty, were shown before films, and enjoyed by adults as well as children, but adults gradually lost interest as films got better. Unfortunately, some distinctly adult themes and values remained in cartoons, even as children became cartoons' main audience.

The most striking, and tolerated, examples come from World War II. Studio heads the Warner Brothers were active contributors to the war effort, and their Looney Toons were as popular as their films. These are now regarded by some sociologists as ideal examples of all that is wrong with cartoons. While the Looney Toons had been mocking celebrities from Hollywood and the sporting world for some time, beginning in the late 1930's, there appeared political characters, such as an impossibly rigid Adolf Hitler and a ubiquitous, smiling, bespectacled Japanese. Naturally, the enemies always are made fools of in some way.

Such stereotyping also was used in times of peace, with other races besides the Japanese and Germans. Whether the animators were intentionally

trying to reinforce widely held stereotypes is debatable, but that is exactly the effect of such cartoons as *Uncle Tom's Cabana* (1947), which mocked blacks. Native Americans have almost never been seen in the media without war paint and tomahawk, and cartoons have been no exception, especially in the Looney Toons.

The violence of the old Looney Toons is now widely recognized, and many of the characters have been classified as harmful behavioral models. Yet the cartoons still appear on TV daily; these messages and others can still be seen in reruns. A new series of Looney Toons, (created by Steven Spielberg), is now coming to TV – ironically with infantile versions of Bugs Bunny and friends. The violence level, themes and characters' personalities have been drastically softened.

Not all modern cartoons are as cuddly as these, however. A recent study by psychologist Petra Hess focused on some recent, popular war cartoons, all of which have strangely disappeared with the Reagan presidency (though they still live in syndication and video stores). *He-Man/Masters of the Universe*, *She-ra*, *G.I. Joe*, and *Transformers* contained “notions that stimulate hatred, encourage suspicion and teach children that America must be defended from a world filled with violent and irrational enemies,” Dr. Hess concluded.⁴

Suddenly the Warner Brothers' war contributions don't seem so dated. Dr. Hess also noted that most of the enemies in the modern war cartoons had foreign accents and non-Caucasian features. They were greedy, and attacked without provocation or compassion. (An evil character in *G.I. Joe* says, “We possess television, and we control the creation of truth.”) The all-American good guys are overwhelmingly blonde, muscular and incredibly moral.

Some more recent cartoons show that little is changing. The protagonists in *Beetlejuice* more resemble Looney Toons heroes as they spend much of their time acting disgusting and deceitful. On *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* the heroes are named after Renaissance European artists, while oafish, grotesquely-featured characters are named “Rock Steady” and “Bebop,” both styles of African-derived music.

Also of note is the increasing cartoonization of movies. This began with the *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, which actually combined animation and live action, (though not the first to do so). Next were the comic book movies, *Batman* and *Dick Tracy*. They were live-action, but with a blatantly cartoonish gestalt. While seemingly targetted to children, these three films gloriously celebrated violence and other mature themes. *Roger Rabbit*, seemingly the most accessible to children, was perhaps the most adult. Even

its accompanying cartoons starred a cursing, spitting, cigar-chomping, woman-fondling “Baby Herman,” an infant who turns out to be a rude adult actor. All three films paint bleak pictures of urban life, *Dick Tracy* and *Roger Rabbit* of the 1930’s, and *Batman* of an ambiguous retro-future.

The question of intent by animators is a tough one. It reaches deep into the minds of the artists who drew the characters and formulated plots. Are they simply drawing only what they know, or are they purposely exaggerating what they consider good and bad? Whatever the answer, the cartoons discussed seem to meet all the given criteria for propaganda: They are deliberately made, they deal with controversial subjects, and make extensive use of symbols. Whether they influence mass attitudes has not been conclusively proven, but current evidence strongly suggests they do. From a psychological standpoint, these cartoons may be viewed as outlets for their creators to voice their fears and self-righteousness. The effect is that those qualities get transferred to yet another generation.

One additional influence in all of the recent cartoons and cartoon-movies mentioned is that of commerce. Each has its own line of related products, including toys, video games, feature-length films and more. This makes the cartoons essentially half-hour commercials and part of an ingenious strategy of licensing and synergistic marketing. (The *Ninja Turtles* alone appear on over 1,000 products of 200 companies.) This certainly gives the cartoons the deliberate persuasion that allows them to be categorized as propaganda. But advertising to children is another equally charged subject, one that will be dealt with separately.

“Today the future occupation of all moppets is to be skilled consumers.”
– David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd*.

Advertising to children is nothing new. Stewart Ewen describes, in *Captains of Consciousness*, how kids were first targeted early in this century:

Once a financial credit, modern childhood was a debit on the family – increasingly involving it in the consumption of goods and services connected to child-rearing. To many in the twenties, the association of children with the increase in external influence was clear. Working-class families of Middletown [Robert and Helen Lynd’s 1929 cultural study] spoke of how children carried into the home the messages of growing industrial authority and the industrial moralities of home economics, movies, Y’s, and education in general. As children brought home such messages, and argued for their expanded realm of consumption within the distribution of the family wages, parents felt these forces “drawing the child away from home.”⁵

With more contact with the outside world than their parents, children brought consumer values into the home, Ewen observes. Advertisers picked this up early, and used the children to break parental attitudes. They targeted kids as the future “modern generation.” Quaker Oats targeted children in an ad picturing a boy who “led his class last year and checked 100% in health tests too.” The boy’s mother, in the ad, attributes his success to his daily breakfast of Quaker Oats. With ads like this, the image of the success-

ful child/adult became one who performed well in the eyes of an institution.

Advertising to children, (Reisman called them “consumer trainees”), well meets the guidelines set forth here, or for that matter, any definition of propaganda. Michael Schudson states in *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion*: “Advertising is propaganda and everybody knows it.” But as he correctly points out, children do not know it. They are one of the few groups that, because of their limited consumer knowledge, are especially vulnerable to advertising. Because they are not yet literate, children cannot read product information; news is not made for, or made understandable to, them; they have little personal experience with products; and, perhaps most importantly, they have no knowledge of price, and its effects on desire. Hence, virtually all that children know about products come from television commercials.⁶

The problem is further compounded by the fact that young children cannot distinguish between commercial and content. To the delight of advertisers, this means that young children are more attentive to commercials.

Several studies support this. One, published in 1974 by Thomas Robertson and John Rossiter, measured the responses of youngsters at three age levels. Almost all fifth-graders recognized the “persuasive intent” of commercials, as did most of third-graders, but only half of first-graders did. A similar pattern emerged for the ability to discern between commercial and content, and there was an inverse relationship between grade age level and trust: Hardly any fifth-graders trusted commercials, but most first-graders did.⁷

Add to this the fact that most children see more than 20,000 TV commercials a year, and will have seen some 350,000 by the time they graduate from high school.⁸ This adds up to a bonanza for advertisers. Children’s advertising has come under increasing attack, as the following examples illustrate.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company began a new marketing strategy two years ago to “update the cigarette’s image,” a company executive said. They switched from ads of rugged-looking men in exotic locales to ones featuring a cartoon camel. “Old Joe” was always surrounded by beautiful women and seemed to be the life of the party. As an advertising researcher said, “He knows how to have a good time; that is the kind of message that turns a lot of younger people on.” Although Reynolds executives insisted the campaign was not an attempt to sell cigarettes to children, it appeared to many that the company was trying to enlist a new generation of smokers, as the older ones were dying off and the industry slid faster downhill. The “Old Joe” ads have just become second in a market research test, and Camel’s market share has increased.⁹ (It should be noted that most new smokers are teens – not within the parameters of this paper. But cartoons’ primary audience is children not yet in their teens).

Children already spend far more time in front of the television than on schoolwork. Now advertising has followed them into the schools. Another recent controversy surrounds a classroom news service called Channel One. Produced by Whittle Communications, Channel One provides, by satellite, a 12-minute newscast with two minutes of commercials. The trade-off is, the sponsors’ money allows Whittle to provide television monitors, video recorders and satellite dishes to every school that subscribes, all free of charge. The equipment, moreover, can be used for other purposes by the schools. The *New York Times*’ TV critic, Walter Goodman, was one of the few who praised the system:

No, advertisements do not belong in the classroom, but information does, and if the price of increasing the amount of information is two minutes a day of commercials, that presents a reasonable choice to school administrators. A deal between a school principal and Channel One need not be Faustian. The job of the principals and teachers will be to make sure that the cost does not go higher – that the commercials do not stretch into more than four 30-second spots, that they are not too vulgar or stupid and that the news content is not watered down. Teachers are free to comment on the commercials along with the rest of the program.¹⁰

Goodman is right: Ads don’t belong in the classroom. But alas, it is inevitable. Already some instructors are receiving money from corporations to use certain products at school, and name-brand products are ubiquitous in schools as much as anywhere. As Christopher Whittle has said, “Students are exposed to advertising throughout the entire day, on their scoreboards, on their uniforms. We’re saying, let’s use sponsorship to do something important.”¹¹

Corporate underwriting is nothing new; The Chevron School Broadcast appeared on radio in 1928. The same argument can be raised with the use of computers in schools: Donations of Apple MacIntoshes undoubtedly further that company’s interests, but that fact is offset by their value in the classroom. What about accusations that the state lottery is taking money from the poor and giving it to the schools? This harkens back to Bernard Shaw’s moral dilemma in *Major Barbara*, where the major source of contributions for the Salvation Army was an arms manufacturer. Should it take the money or not? The answer in all these cases is yes, for the benefits far outweigh the moral or ideological conflicts.

Whether they see ads in school or not, when kids get home from school, the advertising barrage continues. Surveys show that 80 percent of

kids watch TV after school. Some seven million kids are unsupervised before or after school. And more than a third of kids do the family shopping. These are the “latchkey kids,” and they are a prime target. Two brands of peanut butter introduced plastic containers for the unsupervised kids; Hi-C fruit drinks came up with the tag line, “Hi-C, Hi-C, when it’s up to me”; Heinz catsup ran three different TV spots for the kids; Whirlpool started a toll-free “Cool Line” and a safety guide called “Color Me Safe” to simultaneously promote home safety and polish their brand image; and several 976 “talk lines” began to be advertised after school. As one marketing executive said, “Children are becoming the brand managers of the family.”¹²

For all the attacks on advertising to children, surprisingly little has been done. In the 1970’s, lobbying by citizen’s groups and pressure by the FCC and FTC, the National Association of Broadcasters revised its TV Code to reduce the amount of commercial time on children’s programs, separate program and commercial (with “We’ll be back after these messages” and “We now return to...”), prohibit ads for vitamins and other drugs, and prohibit program characters from endorsing products. To combat deceptive selling techniques, the NAB required disclaimers like “batteries not included” and “accessories sold separately.” The NAB code also prohibits ads from explicitly telling kids to ask their parents to buy the product.

But all these seeming restrictions only show the weak nature of self-regulation. Research has shown, for example, that disclaimers like “Some assembly required” are rarely understood by children, even when simplified: “You have to put it together.” Most kids do not know what a “balanced breakfast” is, which is what all cereals claim to be part of.

Also, advertisers have far more, and more subtle, ways to tell kids to get their parents to buy a product; this is, after all, the primary purpose of commercials. James McNeal points out other ways of deception: The use of celebrity endorsers, which exploits children’s trust in authority figures; presenting products in unrealistic scale; focusing on premiums rather than the product, which causes children to use the wrong standards for assessing the product; the use of adult terminology; and excessive use of emotional terms and/or intense sounds or colors, which exploits children’s gullibility.¹³

In 1977, the FTC began its own investigation into children’s advertising. It concluded that the practice is indeed unfair, but it didn’t outline any steps to remedy the situation. The Reagan administration was no help; it sided with advertisers. Reagan’s FCC chairman, Mark Fowler, not only allowed more ads during children’s viewing hours, he lifted the regulations barring characters’ endorsements and program-length commercials; hence,

He-Man et al. Fowler accurately summarized his views in 1983: “If I am asked, Do broadcasters have a responsibility when it comes to the special child audience upon which their license will depend? the answer, I think, should be no.”¹⁴ Just before he left office, President Reagan himself vetoed a bill that would have limited advertising during kids’ shows and ended the program-commercials. A similar bill is now making its way through Congress. It would limit advertising to 10.5 minutes per hour during weekend mornings, and 12 minutes on weekdays. For four commercial breaks an hour, that’s still six 30-second spots per break.

Fowler’s view was that the marketplace would take care of children; so far, it has taken far better care of advertisers. But, as Clemson University sociologist John Ryan stresses, advertising makes children’s television possible. “I’m not sure these toy-based shows are any worse than Mickey Mouse Clubs when we were growing up. When Davy Crockett was on, I went out and bought a Davy Crockett coonskin cap.”¹⁵ (The Davy Crockett craze of 1955, Vance Packard points out, “gave birth to 300 Davy Crockett products, lured \$300,000,000 from American pockets.”¹⁶)

Even characters of respected children’s programs like *Sesame Street* have become endorsers and licensed images. This only illustrates advertising’s power. As the *Christian Science Monitor* recently noted, “Manufacturers have become a powerful socializer of the nation’s children. Their influence over children’s play has grown so strong as to suggest that they have taken control of children’s play, and the value of play, from parents. All without public dialogue or debate.”¹⁷

Schudson accurately concluded, “There is no doubt that advertising to children belongs in a different category from other advertising, and is, at best, morally suspect.”¹⁸ If all advertising to children were abolished, however, McNeal points out that there would be only one noticeable change: “All advertising previously aimed at children would be aimed at parents.”¹⁹

Before leaving advertising, it should be noted that there is one type that actually tries to perform a noble function. This is public-service advertising, which attempts to steer kids clear of dangers such as drugs, cigarettes and crime. The ad industry spends over half a billion dollars on these every year, to demonstrate that advertising can be used for uses other than consumption, and to showcase its creativity. Unfortunately, the majority of public service ads on TV are tiny horror shows that use scare tactics to get their message across. One that is well-known shows an angry, fatherly man breaking an egg into a frying pan, declaring, “This is your brain on drugs.”

According to a recent study by the Harvard School of Public Health, this imagery is not successful in reaching kids. “There is a substantial risk that a fear appeal will backfire,” the report says. One reason is that “viewers tend to tune out the message or deny that it was relevant to them.” The

report suggests that health organizations instead use more of the techniques of product marketing, like staging pseudo-events or distributing video news releases. Seemingly this would only add to the marketing clutter. But more, and better, public service ads would be far preferable to more product ads.²⁰

Since it is widely accepted that TV is a more powerful influence than teachers, TV is increasingly being employed for educational purposes. As the decline of America's children becomes more and more documented, educators have given up trying to fight TV, and are taking it to heart. This may be termed a benevolent form of propaganda. The effort is organized and deliberate, and deals with subjects both controversial and tame.

There has long been educational TV fare for the home: PBS has been offering such shows for a long time, and its *Sesame Street* is still highly rated. Other notable educational shows have been Leonard Bernstein's *Young People's Concerts* and *Captain Kangaroo*.

There are several groups currently bringing televised education into classrooms. Whittle Communications, in addition to Channel One, is planning the "Classroom Channel", 25 hours a week worth of educational programming also delivered via satellite. Whether commercial sponsors will help underwrite is not yet determined. For teachers, Whittle also has the "Educators Channel," which will feature ads. Both services, like Channel One, are free to schools, and presumably, are to be run on the free equipment provided with Channel One.

Ted Turner's CNN has a competitor to Channel One, called *CNN Newsroom*, produced jointly with the National School Boards Association.

Newsroom runs on CNN every morning at 3:45, with commercials. Educators can record it from there and edit out the commercials, or get the service delivered free to their schools, without commercials. CNN also provides 50 school districts with its *Week In Review* program. The only commercial aspect seems to be CNN's self-promotion. (Presumably, kids who grow up with *Newsroom* will become lifelong CNN viewers.)

Aside from news, several other cable networks are offering educational programs for use by schools, including the Discovery Channel, Arts and Entertainment Network and C-SPAN. Only Whittle, however, offers the free equipment to run the shows on, and only about 10 percent of high school classrooms currently have such equipment.

But what are the effects of having television in the classroom? Herbert Kohl addressed this and other questions in an article last year:

For example, do snippets of news reports such as those offered by *CNN Newsroom* and *Channel One* contribute to the development of active learners who have a broad sense of current political and social events? What activities can be given up in the already crowded school day to add daily newscasts, which could just as easily be assigned as homework? Might it be more effective to study one or two breaking-news events in detail and use video to provide background and reference material for an in-depth appreciation of the history and reverberations of significant events?...

More generally, is there not a danger of having a video monitor in each classroom? Many students have developed habits of lazy and uncritical viewing, and daily viewing in the classroom is unlikely to lead to increased attentiveness. Moreover, the presence of video makes it easy for teachers to fill up time with pre-programmed materials, which, no matter how well done, are no substitute for creative instruction and active learning. It is much more important for students to learn how to examine and articulate ideas and be challenged on how to solve problems than to be hand-fed pre-digested chunks of information tailored to the interests of teenagers.²¹

Kohl raises some good questions. Unfortunately, his answers are based more on opinion than research. Snippets of news are better than no news at all, which is what most students now see. 12 to 15 minutes a day is a relatively small part of the school day, and an in-depth analysis of a single story can still be done in addition. A monitor in the classroom will hardly be a boon.

Kohl's greatest failing is in his conclusion that kids' viewing is lazy and uncritical. In fact, a December 1988 study found that "contrary to popular assertions, children are cognitively active during television viewing and attempt to form a coherent, connected understanding of television programs." It said, "kids view television critically, questioning the content, thinking

about it," and, "there is little evidence to show that television viewing reduces children's attention span, and there is some evidence indicating that it may actually increase their ability to focus attention."²²

This evidence bodes well for educational TV, but also for advertisers. Another study, published around the same time, showed that TV can even teach children as young as 10 months old, before they can speak: "Watching television, at least certain kinds of programs, can help infants acquire language skills, the ability to perform physical tasks and an understanding that what they are watching is akin to the rest of life around them." Infants between one and two years old, the study says, have language comprehension skills that are "way ahead of what they can say. They can make sense of the kind of slow-moving, simple segments of the kind you see on *Sesame Street*, but still may have trouble understanding the quick montage editing that is the visual language of most television shows."²³

Conversely, older children are more responsive to MTV-style montages. Many advertisers are recognizing this, and now, some educators are too. MTV's creator, Robert Pittman, described the learning style as follows:

The pre-TV adults are the "one thing at a time" generation. They read a magazine article straight through from beginning to end; then they make a phone call or watch TV. The TV babies, by contrast, seem to be happy processing information from different sources almost simultaneously. They really can do their homework, watch TV, talk on the phone and listen to the radio all at the same time. It's as if information from each source finds its way to a different cluster of thoughts. And at the end of the evening, it all makes sense.²⁴

Can this be right? Research apparently supports the assertion: "There is no evidence that homework done during television viewing is of lower quality than homework done in silence."²⁵

So evidence clearly shows that TV can be a powerful way to influence children. Pittman observes how TV served up two disparate kinds of propaganda during the Vietnam war: "I watched the pictures. My parents, who grew up on radio, listened to the commentary. The video message conflicted with the narrative one. And so, when it came to an opinion about the war, I was in conflict with my parents."

This cannot be a sole explanation for the younger generation's opposition to the war and the older's support, because, for one, the young were draftable whereas the old were not. But the point is well taken. Thanks in large part to Pittman's MTV, TV politics are reduced to sound bites and

“photo ops.” Just as Pittman’s generation responded more to pictures than words, today’s young may respond more to cartoons and simple imagery than live action. Yet amid this sea of flash and trash, there is still *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Diversity thrives on TV, and even more so as cable TV becomes more “segmented.” The trick for parents is in the choosing, and the censoring.

Printed Propaganda

A look at printed matter may seem irrelevant, with all the influence that TV has. But such a look will benefit a study of TV, since the themes of old still survive.

George Orwell, in his essay "Boys' Weeklies", describes how the publications stressed certain values. One assumption in the story magazines of the 1920's and 30's was that nothing ever changes. He described how his British countrymen were oblivious to foreign affairs:

There is a cozy fire in the study, and outside the wind is whistling... Over in Europe the comic foreigners are jabbering and gesticulating, but the grim grey battleships of the British Fleet are steaming up the Channel and at the outposts of the Empire the monocled Englishmen are holding the natives at bay... That is approximately the atmosphere.

Foreigners were viewed as very comic indeed. Orwell describes the stereotypes thusly:

Frenchman: Excitable. Wears beard, gesticulates wildly.
Spaniard, Mexican, etc.: Sinister, treacherous.
Arab, Afghan, etc.: Sinister, treacherous.
Chinese: Sinister, treacherous. Wears pigtail.

Italian: Excitable. Grinds barrel-organ or carries stiletto.
Swede, Dane, etc.: Kindhearted, stupid.
Negro: Comic, very faithful.

In the American boys' magazines, Orwell notes there was a "cult of violence." One character, (a "superman", "he-man" or "tough guy"), replaced many, and he was fond of socking people in the jaw as a solution. The violence was graphic. The American magazines were full of gangster stories, rife with cynicism and corruption.

Naturally, anti-Nazi themes emerged: one issue, about a Nazi infiltration of America, was called "When Hell Came to America." The magazines advocated immigration restriction. Some had direct links to publishers of conservative newspapers. Girls also had their versions, which were a bit more realistic but still swimming in stereotypes and isolationism.²⁶

Boys' magazines were replaced with comic books, radio drama, TV and movies. Vance Packard linked the change to the rise of consumerism:

In earlier, more innocent days, when the pressure was not on to build future consumers, the boys' magazines and their counterparts concentrated on training the young for the frontiers of production, including warfare. As part of that training, Dr. Reisman pointed out in *The Lonely Crowd*, the budding athlete might eschew smoke and drink. "The comparable media of today train the young for the frontiers of consumption – to tell the difference between Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola, as later between Old Golds and Chesterfields"²⁷

The consumer aspect of children's fare has been noted earlier. But aren't the same values Orwell described also present? A look at the worlds of the Looney Toons, *G.I. Joe*, and the *Ninja Turtles* turns up the same stereotypes and xenophobia of the British boys' weeklies. It's as if the values leapfrogged from the weeklies to comic books to the screen.

Comic books still live, and they resemble the boys' weeklies more than television. Except for bible comics, the most popular comic books are those that contain characters kids see on the screen, like the *Ninja Turtles* and *G.I. Joe*. And, as has been noted, many comic book characters have made the jump to the screen, like Superman, Batman and Dick Tracy.

A few clever educators manage to enlist comic book characters. For example, an engineering group has just enlisted Spider Man to subtly lure minority readers to engineering fields of study. "It's like the subliminal messages that comes through TV – like on *L.A. Law*, where all the lawyers are

interesting and exciting," said George Campbell, Jr., president of the group. The comic books are otherwise indistinguishable from other *Spider Man* issues. Marvel Comics, which makes *Spider Man*, has produced 12 other "pro-social comic books," as they call them, in the last five years, including ones for the American Cancer Society and the FBI, (an anti-drugs story).²⁸ Could other comic books be called "anti-social"? The themes of most are hardly benevolent. Fortunately, most kids abandon comic books for TV and other media by the fifth or sixth grade, (which explains the decline of advertising in comic books).

Children's literature might seem to be a safe haven from propaganda. Picture books are usually a child's first teacher of societal values and roles. Parents generally pick them out and read them to the youngsters, thus reinforcing the content.

But a 1972 study revealed stereotypes and falsehoods in many children's books. Lenore Weitzman and her associates analyzed hundreds of books, mostly prize-winning ones, and concentrated on how males and females were portrayed. One finding was that there were few females at all: in 18 prize-winning books, there were 261 pictured males and only 23 females; even among animals, males outnumbered females 90 to 1. In the females' few pictures, they were portrayed in passive roles rather than active, whereas males appeared vigorous and even boisterous. And, as expected, "traditional" roles were reinforced: Females were performing domestic chores, while males were "mowing lawns, marching in parades, hammering wood, playing baseball, and so on."

All this came about at a time when the country's women outnumbered men, and more than half of the women were in the labor force. One book read, "Daddies drive the trucks and cars, the buses, boats and trains; Daddies build the roads and bridges, houses, stores and planes; Daddies work in factories and Daddies make things grow; Daddies work to figure out the things we do not know."²⁹ A 1980 study of children's books found that things hadn't changed. In general, picture books are providing children with a false first vision of the world that would do them a disservice in adapting to today's world.³⁰

The Future

One interesting development is the increase of computers in schools. Stewart Brand, in *The Media Lab*, describes an experiment in a school using enough computers for each student to use at any time. The result was that students designed their own curriculum to some extent, and teachers became little more than “interested assistants.”³² The computers empowered the students, but is this a positive development? Should children be allowed to learn only what they want?

Certainly the media, including computers, offer endless opportunities for education, and propaganda. A marketing executive in *The Media Lab* remarks, “We’ve spent a lot of time talking about the role of information and computing in education, but by far the dominant curriculum in education today does not take place 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., it’s 4 p.m. to midnight, when the kids watch television at home... Electronic entertainment will be the dominant educational medium that will shape the global consciousness.”³³

The main question is, Will propaganda continue to be served to children as today? Of course it will, advertising in particular. Of the forms of propaganda discussed here, none show any signs of abating.

Today’s children are one of the first to grow up with the personal computer. Learning to use complex electronic devices such as computers, VCR’s and digital sound systems at a young age makes using the devices second-nature, like toasters are to their parents. This is already causing parents some distress, as kids bring new technology into the home and soon feel they can’t live without it.

Today’s kids are also weaned on MTV and the style of television it has spawned – they are the “TV babies” Robert Pittman speaks of. As he observes, “TV babies seem to perceive visual messages better: that is, through sense impressions. They can ‘read’ a picture or understand body language at a glance.”³¹ This undoubtedly will change the way people interact, seek entertainment, and choose political figures. (Although several studies reveal that younger generations are becoming increasingly apathetic, politically).

Language is also changing, with techno-jargon filtering into the language and television encouraging short “sound bites.” Will the increasing use of personal computers make for more writers, or zombies with clipped dialogues and short attention spans? No one is to say how wide or deep these changes will reach.

Conclusion

I have only scratched the surface of children's propaganda, and, by some definitions, most anything is propaganda to children. One medium conspicuously absent from this study is radio. This is because radio offers very little of anything to children. This is unfortunate, because the sound media have great possibilities for stimulating imagination in our increasingly visually-oriented children. (There is, currently, a children's radio network in development.)

Clyde Miller's advice, from *The Process of Persuasion*, is embraced by many:

It takes time, yes, but if you expect to be in this business for any length of time, think of what it can mean to your firm in profits if you can condition a million or ten million children who will grow up into adults trained to buy your product as soldiers are trained to advance when they hear the trigger words, "forward march."³⁴

This is the doctrine of all who create propaganda for children, and not just advertisers pushing products.

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