

# Youth News Network and the Commercial Carpet-Bombing of the Classroom

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*“The median age when children first go to a supermarket is two months. By 19 months, they can point to and name brands on the store shelves. By the time they are three, they can walk beside the cart and take their favorite brands from the shelves. By age 8, they are likely to have made their first independent purchase.”*

—James McNeal, *The Kids’ Market: Myths and Realities*

## YNN

### The background:

In 1990, Youth News Network (YNN) was incorporated with Roderick Macdonald, a former Manitoba PC Party organizer and Montreal radio talk show host, as president. Macdonald began approaching schools with an offer: in return for the loan of video/audio equipment and computers, schools would agree to broadcast a daily program consisting of 2½ minutes of commercials and 10 minutes of news and current events to all students.

This was not an original concept. YNN was patterned on the American Channel One, which was (and still is) in approximately 12,000 American schools, and is viewed by over 8 million students each day. Channel One was initiated by Chris Whittle, who had previously attempted to target the student market by placing “wall boards” in schools—a mixture of “pro-social” messages, school announcements, and, of course, advertising. The only significant differences between the two programs were the half-minute less of commercials on Channel One, and the absence of computers.

Channel One charges advertisers \$200,000 per 30-second commercial spot. Such sums of money, however, are justifiable when one con-

siders the following explanation found in Channel One’s own marketing literature:

**Channel One doesn’t just deliver teen viewers—it delivers the hardest-to-reach teen viewers.**

**Channel One even penetrates the lightest viewers among teens.**

**Advertisers who target teens know they watch an average of 10 hours less television a week than other groups.**

**“Traditional” television vehicles reach the same viewers over and over again. A typical schedule delivers 50% of impressions against the heaviest-viewing 20% of the audience and only 2% of impressions against the 20% who are the lightest viewers.**

**Channel One’s unique delivery reaches heavy and light viewers equally.**

***No waste. No wearout. Just impact.***

*—From a Channel One packet to a potential advertiser, December 1996/January 1997*

**YNN was patterned on the American Channel One, which was (and still is) in approximately 12,000 American schools, and is viewed by over 8 million students each day.**

**Mandatory attendance is the hallmark of in-school marketing campaigns, of which Channel One and YNN are two of the most blatant.**

The message is simple: companies who advertise on Channel One have an absolute guarantee that they are reaching their target audience because children under the age of 16 are required by law to be in school. They cannot leave the room. They cannot turn the channel. They cannot adjust the volume. Mandatory attendance is the hallmark of in-school marketing campaigns, of which Channel One and YNN are two of the most blatant.

### **Commercial Classroom Television: The Research**

There were other serious concerns with Channel One. A 1993 study by the University of Massachusetts/Amherst demonstrated that "the schools that spend the least amount of money on instructional materials are over three times as likely to receive Channel One as the schools that spend the most." (A Teachers' Guide to Commercialism in the Classroom 14) In other words, schools that can afford to say No, do.

Additionally, "the greater the percentage of African-American students in a school, the greater the likelihood that school has Channel One," although "poverty and a lack of educational resources...seem to motivate schools to receive Channel One, whatever their racial or ethnic composition."

Concerns with Channel One go beyond the overt commercialism of the program itself. The classroom is used to reinforce all the messages within the 12-minute broadcast: both the commercials and the current events. It is therefore vital that we examine the "hard" content of the broadcast itself.

In order to establish itself as an "educational" initiative, Channel One sponsored a study at the University of Michigan. The examiners were instructed to focus only on

Channel One's news content; the advertising was to be ignored. The principal investigator called Channel One "educationally unimportant" and added, "What the research suggests is that the average student in the typical school day is not learning a lot from Channel One."

Further, the study confirmed that at-risk students do not benefit from Channel One ("Channel One is Educationally Ineffective: But What Does it Teach?" UNPLUG). Students who did appear to benefit from Channel One did so primarily because their teachers incorporated the program into the school day. This begs the question: is it Channel One that is beneficial to a student's ability to learn? Or is it the work of a dedicated teacher?

Although the University of Michigan study did not deal with the issue of advertising, Bradley S. Greenberg and Jeffrey E. Brand did their own analysis of the commercial program, suggesting that "regular watching of Channel One reinforces materialistic attitudes." (Greenberg and Brand 57)

Students who regularly watched Channel One were also more likely to agree that:

- **money is everything;**
- **a nice car is more important than school;**
- **designer labels make a difference;**
- **I want what I see advertised; and**
- **wealthy people are happier than the poor.**

Commercial programs such as this, which target underprivileged schools, students and communities, do not contribute to the an equal, quality system of public education.

When concerns about classroom-based advertising are raised, there is a ready re-

sponse. Children are inundated with commercials on a daily basis, both inside and outside the classroom; why would a program such as Channel One or YNN make any difference? Greenberg and Brand address this argument as follows:

"One might have anticipated that advertising would have less of an impact than our data demonstrate here. After all, these youngsters are bombarded daily with advertising...The in-school showing, however, perhaps offers an implicit endorsement of advertised brands and an opportunity for paying closer attention to the ads than students would get in a group or at home, where they can use the remote control to quickly remove any advertising from the screen. Perhaps with regular exposure to so many ads for so many different brands, the in-school showing provides an excuse for differentiating among the hordes of brand names."

Thanks to organizations and individuals in the United States who have provided (and continue to provide) excellent information and analysis regarding attempts to exploit the classroom and students for commercial gain, Canadians had a wealth of information with which to confront the 1991-92 YNN threat. As well, Canadian schools did not experience the enormous inequalities between schools that are evident in the American education system, due to the more equitable distribution of public money in this country.

And there was an immediate sense of outrage at the blatant commercialism of Rod Macdonald's "entrepreneurialism" where Canadian schools and students were concerned. Macdonald found himself caught in a fiscal

crunch as he tried to sign up advertisers without being able to guarantee an audience. Organizations and individuals across the country reacted swiftly, and YNN was defeated—apparently. There were a few repeated attempts, but for the most part the Canadian schoolhouse door appeared to be closed to YNN.

These factors changed in the fall of 1998. Schools across the country have undergone massive restructuring and de-funding, rendering them increasingly receptive to corporate handouts as their budgets are slashed. The increasing promotion of classroom technology—"technolust," as Heather-jane Robertson has called it—has shifted the educational emphasis to computer-based learning. This trend—and its impacts—has been documented in David Noble's "Digital Diploma Mills," parts 1, 2 and 3.

And, finally, there has been a marked shift in the attitudes of the public. As governments and the private sector tell us the money is "simply not there" for programs like education and health care, public institutions are "encouraged" to become more "entrepreneurial" in order to make up the fiscal shortfall. During all this budget-slashing, commercially motivated corporate handouts to the classroom have increased in number.

While Youth News Network—like its American precursor—is by no means the first or the

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### **Creating Customers for Life**

"The average family is faced with a slew of decisions every day—decisions in the grocery, decisions in the bank, decisions in a host of places.

"Provide families with the knowledge that will help them make these decisions more easily and their lives simpler, and you will build a link to the families that will benefit your brand, your store, your bank, your health-care facility—everywhere a family goes.

"Deliver this education through children (the ultimate influencers) right in the environment where decisions are made."

—From *KidPower Xchange Conference, Family Power '99*.

Athena is little more than a front group to allow Telescene to expand its repertoire from producing entertainment to producing "educational content," a field in which they have no experience whatsoever.

only example of corporate intrusion into our schools, it provides the opportunity to examine various manifestations of—and justifications for—commercial manipulation of the classroom.

### YNN: The present

In 1998, YNN appeared on the scene once again. But this time there were some significant changes. Youth News Network was a production of Athena Educational Partners Inc. According to YNN's new web-site, Athena consists of Gage Educational Publishing Company, CanCom, BKM Research and Development Inc., Star Choice, and Telescene Film Group.

We are told in a press release that "Athena Educational Partners (AEP) Inc., Canadian-owned and based in Montreal, was established to create a national distance education network, called YNN, linking secondary schools across the country. This Canadian private sector initiative is intended to provide a complete package of state-of-the-art including hardware, software and educational content at no cost to participating schools."

However, closer examination reveals that, far from being one of several partners, Telescene is in fact the **only** shareholder in Athena. Additionally, Telescene and Athena share the same mailing address, the same president (Robin Spry), and the same vice-president (Paul Painter). In fact, Athena is little more than a front group to allow Telescene to expand its repertoire from producing entertainment to producing "educational content," a field in which it has no experience whatsoever.

In a company profile prepared by Griffiths, MacBurney and Partners, the following explanation for Telescene's involvement in this commercial-education venture is given:

"Telescene has taken a 100% interest in Youth News Network (YNN) by investing approximately \$500,000 to help it become a reality. YNN plans to create a national interactive educational network for Canadian high schools...In essence, YNN will be comparable to Channel One in the U.S...YNN is expected to derive revenue from i) the sale of 2.5 minutes of advertising on the news and current affairs programmes; ii) the sale of interactive distance learning services; and iii) marketing and distribution of educational materials.

"YNN believes approximately 80% of its revenue will be generated from advertising. Many large corporations have expressed an interest in advertising on YNN, given the company's targeted demographic and the difficulty of reaching teenagers through other media. There are approximately 2.3 million high school students in approximately 4,800 schools across Canada. Telescene is interested in this project for several reasons: it believes YNN will be a success, creating significant value relative to its investment; it will enable the company to test concepts for teenage programming; and it will develop closer relationships with advertisers" (6).

In spite of Telescene's financial backing, YNN will need additional funds to meet its somewhat grandiose intentions before the project launch this fall. According to an interview with Paul Painter (VP of both Telescene and Athena) in the **Financial Post**, "The network needs more than \$5 million to finance its first round of expansion. Once

that's complete, Telescene plans to sell 60% of its stake 'to bring in other partners to finance the next stage'."

Apparently, 25 advertisers have already expressed substantial interest in YNN. The prospect of an unknown company or companies with majority control over a program intending to provide educational content to students across the country is enormously disturbing, but virtually undiscussed. (This is all the more significant when we consider the fact that Channel One is in the process of looking to international markets. According to several staff representatives, Channel One is well on the way to establishing itself in several other countries. They explain that they are "happy" with their 12,000 American schools, and would like to pursue international markets.)

Painter dismisses the public's concerns with YNN by insisting that this is not about "brainwashing kids." In fact, he says, YNN is far more about "enhancing students' education" than about commercialism or marketing. In Painter's words, "It's insulting to think this is all about chips and Camel cigarettes. That's ludicrous and insulting to our intelligence."

But why would legitimate concerns about a privately owned commercial media source broadcast daily in classrooms across the country be an insult to Telescene's intelligence and not simply an awareness of Telescene's commercial motives?

As further "proof" of the educational validity of YNN, Painter points to the establishment of the Education Advisory Council (EAC), chaired by volunteer Scott Conrod. This group, we're told, will meet "regularly" to discuss the appropriateness of the broadcasts and commercials; however, YNN is intended to be a daily program, which will make it dif-

ficult for a group of individuals to meet frequently enough—and at considerable expense—to monitor daily broadcasts. It is unlikely that this body is much more than what Channel One's advisory council is: a token group designed to deflect public concern from the real issue—a private entertainment corporation providing educational content to Canadian high school students on a mandatory and daily basis.

### **YNN: Beyond the School Day**

But Telescene's intentions apparently go far beyond YNN. Adult learning classes are part of the larger plan—a national distance learning network. And YNN's web site and literature suggest that there is the possibility of profit-sharing. Athena also intends to create "independent distance learning centres" (the "IDL Centres") in participating high schools. "The IDL Centres will be able to be utilized as computer laboratories by students and faculty and by the company for adult education and training requirements on a shared revenue basis with schools." (YNN web-site) After school hours, the computer equipment—and the school property—can be made available for a price to private companies for training and education purposes.

It is important, however, to recognize that school activities often extend far beyond the 8:30-3:30 schedule. There are extracurricular activities: assemblies, clubs, parent-teacher meetings, extra help, school plays, and community events, none of which generate a profit and all of which may conflict with the possibility of profiting from renting out school space for computer training.

Which events will take precedence? Public not-for-profit events, or those that are profit-based? Painter's comments are revealing: "Advertising interest has always been

**"Advertising interest has always been there. You just need eyeballs. We're looking at a heck of a lot more once we get into the program."  
—Paul Painter, Vice-President of Telescene and Athena**

there. You just need eyeballs. We're looking at a heck of a lot more once we get into the program."

## Teens: "Thick Wallets and Plenty of Free Time"

YNN is indicative of two methods of commercial exploitation: of the discretionary income of students and of the fiscal insecurity of the education system in Canadian classrooms. The first method to be examined is perhaps the most obvious: the marketing of products to students during school time.

The commercial "value" of children has been recognized for some time, but only recently has the opportunity for exploitation been fully explored. Not only do children enjoy a healthy discretionary income, but they also influence the spending of friends and family. According to the 1998 YTV Tween Survey, tweens (children aged 9-14) annually spend \$1.5 billion, and influence the spending of an additional \$15 billion.

According to Channel One's promotional material, "Teens spend almost \$3,000 annually per capita. Nearly half of this is their family's money...Teens today make brand decisions for purchases ranging from food to fashion, from clothing to computers, and from ice cream to shaving cream." Additionally, consumer decisions made at this age tend to be set for life—a further incentive to convince students about the superiority of specific brands.

The influence and financial importance of the high school demographic is explained in a recent article on Adweek Online (Cheng):

"There's a youthquake trembling across America and the seismic tremors rumbling through the corridors of pop culture and the economy are affecting everything from movies and tel-

evision programming to spending habits and purchasing trends. Little wonder, then, that advertisers have finally caught on to the country's current obsession with all things Teen by aggressively chasing the mindshare and dollars of the "it" demo of the moment, Generation Y, a.k.a. teens age 12 to 19."

Teens are an attractive combination of "thick wallets and plenty of free time" (Cheng) and marketers (particularly those in the technology sector) are finding innovative methods of reaching them.

## Web-Based Marketing: Teens Online

The problem, however, appears to be that teens are difficult to reach through traditional media outlets. According to president and CEO of Bolt.com, Dan Pelson, this age group is "in school all day and then they're hanging out with their friends. They're not in a dormant situation where they're going to be sitting in front of a television a lot."

This is cited as justification for reaching teens through other, web-based advertising methods, but it is interesting that in-school commercial television programs such as YNN and Channel One can in fact reach this audience. *Because* teens are in school all day, there is a built-in guarantee that televised programs (YNN and Channel One) will be watched as a matter of course—indeed, as a required component of school attendance. Access to this age group—and a virtual guarantee that the audience will be watching your commercial messages—is virtually priceless.

Not coincidentally, on-line marketing is also a major part of Channel One, and provides additional reinforcement of the daily broadcast's commercial messages. With Athena's emphasis on the technological of-

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ferings included in the YNN package, it is probable that on-line advertising will also be a prominent feature.

"Nielsen Research has found that younger teens today watch less television than 18-49-year-olds, but spend more time online than any other demographic. Marketing to teens on the Web therefore gets them where they live, or at least where they surf." (Cheng) And YNN and Channel One evidently get them in both places—on classroom television and online. And, presumably, it's all "educational."

The cynicism factor is also important. This is a cynical world, we're told. Kids, even more than adults, know when someone is trying to sell them something. Ads are "tuned out," or mocked, or ignored. However, according to marketers, "despite their overall cynicism, teens are in fact receptive to marketing messages, as long as those messages are pertinent, well-executed and enticing." (Cheng) It is doubtful that corporations would be so eager to spend such huge sums of money on advertising budgets if it were not to their benefit.

Far from tuning out those messages, this generation of teens is listening, and even interacting with the media through which these ads are received. "Contradictory to teens' spread-out approach to receiving and participating in media, purveyors of teen content are convinced that teens really are paying attention and that advertisers are breaking through the clutter. And, unlike their slacker predecessors, Gen Y is actually getting involved." (Cheng)

So, much in the same way that teens "multi-task" (talking on the phone, doing homework, watching television, listening to music, and surfing the Internet simultaneously), marketers are creating multi-faceted approaches, using a variety of media, to reach

this generation, all under the guise of promoting independence.

Says Pelson: "It's teen empowerment with technology, media and communications."

But the overriding motivation is *marketing* to this age group, not empowering it. Brand loyalty is a huge issue for advertisers because it determines the amount of advertising "required" to maintain this target market. According to Susan Mernit, director of new media at react.com, the New York-based Gen Y e-'zine, "[Teens] can be very loyal—but loyalty in their world represents six to eight months. During that six to eight months, they will listen only to that radio station, they'll buy that brand of jeans, and then they'll move

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## How Kidsay Works

*The foundation of Kidsay rests on two major components: 1) the ability to find kids where they live, and 2) our expert communication methods that capture precise data.*

## Where And How We Find Them

The EMR staff labored many years to create a solid bond of trust with educational institutions and administrators across the nation. Through work, we have gained in-depth knowledge of the unique internal dynamics of both public and private arenas. An EMR network of several hundred affiliate schools has emerged.

It has been proven that inside the school building provides a more comfortable and non-threatening environment in which children respond openly and easily to questions and stimuli. Administrators, staff and parents realize that not only do the students enjoy and learn from EMR-constructed research experiences, but the school also receives benefits in the form of money and incentives—yet another way EMR helps improve our children's world.

Our ability to gain access to students through the Kidsay network is unprecedented. And, through this network, we can satisfy the most exacting demographic and psychographic project requirements.

*The Kidsay system captures most accurate, unbiased opinions possible.*

—From Education Market Resource's web site.



**...although it has the potential to provide the opportunity for individual and community achievement regardless of race, gender, class, or socioeconomic situation, the school environment itself reinforces the legitimacy of the messages taught within.**

on to the next brand. *This is not a generation that's shopping on price. It's completely the opposite. They want style and they want what they think is quality.*" (Italics mine.)

Given this pattern of loyalty-fickleness, marketers appear to have little choice but to carpet-bomb children with advertisements to maintain the level of appeal necessary to generate profit. And, if a target audience can be guaranteed, so much the better.

So, in the rush to reach this affluent and impressionable audience, and limited by the conventional methods of advertising to teens, more innovative marketing methods must be developed. Given the fact that children are required to be in school every day, and given the role the school plays in society, the classroom is becoming one of the most effective locations in which to market to kids.

### **The Classroom Influence**

The impact of the school environment on the advertising message cannot be ignored. According to Cunningham Gregory and Co., school is "the most effective place to influence behaviour and attitudes"—commercial or otherwise. The classroom is where we learn the information and skills we require to be considered "educated." It is also the institution which, in a democratic society, guarantees us all the opportunity to access a quality education as a fundamental right.

The public education system must always necessarily straddle these two possibilities: although it has the potential to provide the opportunity for individual and community achievement regardless of race, gender, class, or socioeconomic situation, the school environment itself reinforces the legitimacy of the messages taught within. It is for this reason that the implications of any association with

the content of public education must be carefully scrutinized.

The classroom provides several different marketing methods to a wide variety of audiences. Schools are trusted institutions in communities, so organizations, individuals, or content associated with them are granted a certain legitimacy. When contemplating educational supplements for their children, parents will ask teachers for the names of the products used in class, because they trust the teacher's judgment and the school's implicit endorsement. This is an incentive for manufacturers to get their products into the classroom, because it guarantees two markets: the classroom itself, and the home.

Marketing conferences that focus on the consumer power of entire families take a special interest in reaching parents through their children, who are trusted decision-makers in their own right. And the most reliable and effective place to reach these young consumers is the classroom.

In fact, the classroom is such a trusted environment that there are children's marketing research companies which conduct their research **in** the classroom. Kids are more relaxed in a familiar setting, and are likely to trust people who appear in their classrooms. And kids, unlike adults, do not need to be paid. Rather, the school receives a payment for services rendered.

This brings up another issue: the present financial insecurity of Canadian schools. A large reason why Channel One was able to establish itself in so many schools in the United States was because of the enormous financial discrepancies between schools in wealthy and poor communities. Research revealed that schools that could "afford" to say No to Channel One's commercial offerings in fact did so. Apparently, contrary to Channel

One's claim of quality content, only schools that were financially destitute found Channel One "educational" or desirable.

With changes in funding formulas, which has resulted in a massive de-funding of public education in Canada, schools across this country are also increasingly forced to do more with less. Additionally, schools are encouraged to become more "entrepreneurial" by approaching the private sector to initiate relationships—although it is difficult to find superintendents who will deny that these are initiatives arising primarily out of fiscal desperation.

Granted, there has always been some inequity between schools in wealthy and in disadvantaged communities. But the recent restructuring and funding centralization has created a much more polarized system that does not take into account the special needs of students or of communities. This philosophy mistakenly believes that, when given the same per-capita funding, students will all have the equal opportunities they need to reach their potential.

As education budgets are slashed, teachers find there is less money for curriculum supplements, school supplies, and in some cases entire programs. Surely it is not a coincidence that at the same time corporate "handouts" to the classroom are becoming more numerous and more elaborate. And many corporations are not even bothering to conceal their commercial motivation, explaining that surely they deserve *some* compensation for their apparent altruism.

It is alarming how many people seem to feel that commercialization of the school is appropriate—or at least a necessary evil—because schools have to get the money *somewhere*, and what harm will it do to market to kids who are used to advertising, anyway? In

fact, research demonstrates that association with a school will virtually guarantee corporations a positive image in the community... and therefore additional potential customers.

A recent Angus Reid poll illustrated the growing acceptance of overt commercialism and corporate involvement in schools. "The general public is fairly divided (53% versus 46%) on whether public school boards should accept corporate donations, such as computer equipment for students and teachers, in exchange for allowing companies to have some advertising in the classroom. The generational divide is again evident, with two-thirds of younger Canadians supportive of this concept while a majority of those 55 and older voice opposition." (Angus Reid)

However, there were several major issues unaddressed by the poll's questions. Absent was the understanding that in-school advertising is more effective than other forms of advertising because of the guaranteed attendance of the audience. The influence of the school itself on the marketing message was also not explained. Rather, the seeming inevitability of the corporate presence in every facet of our daily lives remained unquestioned.

And it really is in every facet. New "innovative" forms of advertising are appearing everywhere: ads on luminescent floor tiles; ads on blimps, balloons and projected onto floating billboards; giant ads pressed into the sand on beaches; ads wrapped around entire buses; ads continuously played on store loudspeakers and while on hold during a phone call; ads stuck onto fruit at the supermarket; ads on screens at automated bank tellers. And, of course, ads in schools.

**Many corporations are not even bothering to conceal their commercial motivation, explaining that surely they deserve *some* compensation for their apparent altruism.**

**“The education system is changing. Schools are no longer the hallowed halls of sacred public trust they used to be.”**

**—Rod Macdonald, President, YNN**

### **YNN: A Classic Example of Corporate Intrusion**

YNN provides an encapsulation of a multitude of aspects of corporate involvement in the classroom, which is why it is potentially a very effective tool for examining the issue of corporate manipulation of the classroom. Careful analysis demonstrates the ways in which a program of this sort undermines the nature of public education, while selling to advertisers access to students—and the integrity of the school itself.

#### ***Technolust and Education Defunding***

There are at least two driving forces behind initiatives like YNN: systematic education de-funding which renders schools more vulnerable to corporate handouts; and the reinforced, positive association of technology with education. Fiscal desperation and the reigning emphasis on the inherently “good” nature of technology in education have contributed to a situation where we are perhaps less critical of corporate handouts, especially if they have a potential tie-in to technology.

For example, Education Market Resources (EMR) claims that, because students fill out marketing research forms on-line (with questions such as “how much TV do you watch?” and “what’s your favourite cereal?”), they are learning about technology. Therefore, this marketing research which is so profitable for EMR is also “educational” for students.

Rod Macdonald reinforces the prevailing belief that technology is itself overhauling the entire education system, but he carries this one step further into justification for increased corporate involvement in the classroom.

“Technology is already changing the way in which students learn and the way that teachers teach. To deny that the private sector must play a role in managing this change is tantamount to sticking one’s head in the sand.”

Far from being in control of these supposedly necessary sweeping changes to all aspects of learning, Macdonald obviously intends the private sector to call the shots. In fact, to deny this power structure is apparently not just naïve. It is ignorant.

But in one sense Macdonald’s claim is actually quite accurate. When the private sector is allowed to dictate the terms and goals of education, it is the private sector that will ultimately control it. In this arrangement, technology is not simply a tool to “enhance” education. It signals a rearrangement of the entire structure and focus of education around technology. Education supports technology, not the other way around.

The contracts between Athena and participating schools give Athena the right to rent out the “multimedia” equipment and the school property (after school hours) to private companies to make extra money.

Which activities will be considered a priority: those that are for the benefit of students, or those that have the potential to make the

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### **What are Internet Panels?**

Kidsay Internet Panels consist of students all across America who visit a safe and secure web site at their school and share their opinions about their favorite movies, activities, clothes, etc. When asked to share their ideas and opinions, America’s students feel a sense of empowerment and self-confidence. Not only is this a safe, exciting way to share and be involved on the Internet, but panels have the capability to generate ongoing money for use in improving the school or organization.

*—From EMR Web-site.*

company extra profit? When schools become a profit-making forum at the behest of a commercial body, activities that do not guarantee a profit are jeopardized.

### ***School Attendance: A Marketing Tool***

There is another way in which the school day is reconstituted to support YNN and its technological offerings. Schools are required to show YNN to 90% of students for 80% of all the days that school is in session. This is a contractual obligation. Athena also has the right to request access to school attendance records to ensure the size and frequency of the target market. In spite of this requirement, however, Athena claims it is not forcing students to watch the program, because "the Board may, at its discretion, develop appropriate procedures to accommodate students who do not wish to view the YNN Program, or whose parents do not wish them to view the YNN Program." (YNN/School Board Contract, sec. D2, pg. 7.) However, in the same manner that the school facility and school hours become a means to support the profit motive and the technological component of YNN, the school day itself is reconstituted to include the commercial program. Students who wish to exclude YNN as part of their school day are, in this equation, an aberration. YNN's daily presence in every classroom is the norm. Non-commercial education becomes, in effect, a courtesy dependent on the school board's time, finances, or good-will.

It is important to reiterate that YNN, in spite of its rhetoric, is not a gift. It is not free. The equipment is only loaned to the school for as long as the students are offered for commercial exploitation—during school time—and for as long as the school allows itself to be used as a marketing site and a means to increase corporate profits. If the

**Posted by Johnny Yen on April 02, 1997 at 09:45:42:**

For those still in High School, did you hear Tomorrow on Channel One? It was the Whiplash Version. It was on at the very end.

For those who don't know what Channel One is... It is a 15-minute news channel on in a lot of high schools during homeroom. They play a lot of music. Cool, ha?

(<http://james.wattyco.com/jamesboard/messages/1551.htmlz>)

required number of students are not viewing the program, or if the program is not viewed for 80% of the school year, Athena may, "upon simple verbal notice," terminate the agreement and remove the equipment.

It is interesting that the school board must follow much stricter guidelines for termination of the agreement. According to the contract, "The Board may terminate this Agreement with respect to any or all Schools by giving thirty (30) days prior written notice to the Company of said decision. Such notice may only be given during the thirty (30) days immediately following the first one hundred and eighty (180) calendar days of the first school year of the Term, failing which this Agreement shall be deemed to remain in full force and effect." (D4.2, pg. 8).

The end result is the simple fact that YNN, like any other in-school commercial initiative, uses compulsory school attendance as a marketing technique. Unlike billboards, or television commercials at home, or ads in magazines, these students do not have the option of turning the channel, or closing their eyes, or walking away. These in-school commercial programs become a required part of the school day, like English or Math or History.

### ***YNN: The Hidden Price Tag***

Not only does YNN come with a hidden price tag, but the school time in which YNN

**YNN's daily presence in every classroom is the norm. Non-commercial education becomes, in effect, a courtesy dependent on the school board's time, finances, or good-will.**

**The dollar value of the time “spent” watching YNN is worth far more than the “value” of YNN’s loan of \$150,000 worth of equipment to schools.**

is to be watched is not “free,” either. One of the great myths of corporate handouts to the classroom is that schools are getting something of value without having to pay for it. Public education, however, is paid for by our taxes, and it’s just as possible to assign a “dollar value” to the time spent watching YNN and its commercials as it is to the total time spent in the classroom. In fact, the dollar value of the time “spent” watching YNN is worth far more than the “value” of YNN’s loan of \$150,000 worth of equipment to schools.

This argument, however, is not without its shortcomings. It implies that, if Athena’s loan of technology equals the “cost” of the time spent watching YNN, the deal is somehow fair. This is not the case at all: regardless of the dollar value of Athena’s temporary gifts, the cost of YNN is already too high—because it is, simply, wrong.

YNN, *fundamentally*, is an inappropriate use of time, resources, the school environment and community role, and the minds and wallets of students. To debate the internal merits or flaws of the individual deals themselves is to lend a kind of legitimacy to the notion of commercial manipulation of the classroom. But it is important to recognize that corporate handouts to the classroom are not free, and neither is the time in which they are used to market to students.

### ***YNN: Infotainment as News***

To date, Athena has produced only one YNN newscast, which appears on its promotional video. YNN’s parent company, Telescene, was responsible for the broadcast, which “starred” Chris (Ross Hull) and Emily (Nicole Lyn) from Telescene’s successful teen show, **Student Bodies**.

We need to remember that Telescene’s documents suggest that YNN would be an op-

timal method to test programming concepts on their classroom audience. Perhaps this fall we can look forward to an in-depth discussion on peer pressure, with clips from an upcoming episode of **Student Bodies**. Presumably, product tie-ins with the popular cast and YNN’s advertisers can be arranged. (It is important to note that Channel One’s “news” broadcasts include promotion for upcoming CDs, on a studio set emblazoned with promotional posters for the band in question.)

The news content of YNN’s one and only broadcast is significant, because this is a company that intends to establish “a national distance education network” across the country. There were four major topics covered: biotechnology and genetic engineering; the low Canadian dollar; the Quebec Referendum; and the creation of Nunavut. Additionally, there were commercials for Nintendo 64 (WWF), Dentyne gum, Kellogg’s “Sugar Pops” cereal, Natrel (a Sealtest product), and a public service announcement about smoking.

The quality of the “news” itself was alarming. Genetic engineering was presented as a positive development, because it will “eliminate the need for pesticides.” However, experience tells us the opposite is happening, as multinationals overwhelmingly set the terms of biotechnology.

An economics professor at Concordia University explains that our dollar is so low because we’ve accumulated a huge debt, primarily as a result of spending on social programs. So it might be more expensive to buy the things we want (pan to a large display of Nike shoes).

The Referendum segment shamefully marginalized francophone voices, which were not only outnumbered but were also voiced-over with YNN “commentary.”

And the Nunavut segment was primarily a quiz designed to test students' knowledge of the name of the territory (closely resembling a similar Channel One quiz to select the name of one of the newly-created countries in the former Soviet Union).

Both the news and the commercials are designed to "sell" something: either a product or a mindset. At best, YNN's news is simplistic. At worst, it is blatantly misleading. But this is scarcely surprising. YNN is not an educational initiative. It is a commercial venture, pure and simple.

### ***YNN's Search for Academic Legitimacy***

However, YNN needs academic legitimacy. And it is for this reason that the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) has been commissioned, to the tune of \$54,000, to undertake an analysis of YNN. The study was intended to provide schools with some "background" information in their decision to accept YNN. However, it appears the research has been put on hold.

The YNN pilot site is Meadowvale Secondary School in Mississauga, Ontario. After installing the video/audio/ technological equipment, establishing a link on the YNN website, participating in promotional events, the Peel Board of Education (in spite of protests and petitions from parents, students and teachers) signed a six-month trial contract with Athena.

Meadowvale is the only school that will retain the equipment after the contract is over. It is interesting that the Peel Board of Education's policy on corporate partnerships appears to oppose initiatives such as YNN. However, the decision to enter into a deal with Athena apparently takes precedence over the preservation of educational standards.

### ***YNN: Protecting Corporate Demands Over Student Needs***

There is another factor in this debate, which has gone largely undiscussed. Whose interests and rights will be protected: those of the corporate donors, or those of the teachers and students? Canadians shook their heads in disapproval last winter when an American high school student was suspended because he wore a Pepsi shirt on "Coke Day," thereby allegedly disrupting his school's participation in promotional events with its corporate sponsor. But, like so many other corporate relationships with schools, YNN now forces us to examine the issue of who will be silenced in the interest of profit.

Lindsay Porter, a student at Meadowvale Secondary, decided to exercise her right to free speech and began an underground paper criticizing YNN. For this, she was threatened with suspension, although she took great pains to write, print and distribute the paper off campus. In an interview on CBC Radio in Montreal, she explained that the principal, Laurie Pedwell, told her that, even if the publication was distributed off campus (and therefore on public property), Lindsay would still be suspended because these were "my [Pedwell's] students."

Evidently, YNN's equipment takes precedence over a student's freedom of speech. Any threat to YNN's name must be quelled in order to keep the techno-goodies. A "united front" is therefore more important than a variety of opinions, especially if some of those opinions may threaten the potential profits of the corporation.

When the profit motive is introduced into a public institution such as a school, and the school's financial health is tied to the corporate sponsor's profits, certain beliefs will be sacrificed—including the belief that students

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and teachers should have the right to express their opinions so long as it does no damage—physical or otherwise—to the remainder of the community. Or the belief that a school must serve the well-being of its students first, and not that of a corporation.

In this case, YNN is part of the Meadowvale school day. Students who do not wish to be subjected to marketing during school hours must defend their position. Ordinarily, a private company that wished to gain access to a school would have to demonstrate not just that it will do no harm, but that it will be beneficial. YNN was accepted without any experience, and with only one promotional video of questionable quality.

### ***Provinces Say No to YNN***

To date, Ministers of Education in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, British Columbia and Quebec have formally said No to YNN. The recently elected NDP government in Manitoba has expressed its intention to remove YNN from the province's classrooms as soon as possible. Other provincial Ministers of Education have left the decision up to individual school boards—a convenient way of passing the proverbial buck.

Quebec Minister Francois Legault's decision came shortly after three schools in the Lester B. Pearson School Board had agreed to sign contracts with YNN for the fall. His rationale was interesting. Legault said the ar-

range would constitute "without a shadow of a doubt commercial solicitation that is contrary to the mission of the school."

Article 94 of the province's Education Act says a governing school board may solicit and receive gifts or grants from any person or organization wishing to provide funding for school activities. But it carries a restriction that says a governing board may **not** solicit or receive any contribution "incompatible with the mission of the school," particularly if it involves commercial solicitation. (Flipside) Clearly, according to the Minister, making a deal with YNN would be in direct violation of the Act.

Legault's decision is being hotly contested by members of the Lester B. Pearson Governing Board, who say that it is not up to the Minister to determine the mission of the school. Marcus Tabachnick, chairman of the board, claims that, "if solicitation is contrary to the mission of a school, it raises a lot of questions about fund-raising and order forms that students take home with them. Scholastic Books, for example, seeks business through the schools with its monthly catalogue."

This is a perfectly accurate observation. I agree: we absolutely need a complete examination of all aspects of corporate and commercial contributions to the classroom. At the very least, YNN, as Channel One did in the United States, can open up this discussion, precisely because it provides us with such a multi-faceted example of corporate intrusion in the classroom.

## **Even without ads, Quebec's deal with YNN was a mistake**

The recent decision by the Quebec Ministry of Education to allow Youth News Network (YNN) into Montreal's Lester B. Pearson School Board's classrooms this fall was both disappointing and badly mistaken.

YNN is a 10-minute current events program, with two-and-a-half minutes of commercials, to be shown to 90% of students for 80% of the days schools are in session. The viewing is mandatory. In return, schools get the loan—not the gift—of video and audio equipment and computers. Athena Educational Partners, YNN's parent company, may request attendance records to ensure that its advertisers are getting a good "return on investment."

How good a return, you may ask? Channel One, YNN's enormously profitable American prototype, is in 40% of schools in the United States, is viewed by 8.1 million students, and charges advertisers \$200,000 per 30-second spot. Significantly, Channel One's own study (from the University of Michigan) concluded that Channel One classroom presence was "educationally unimportant."

Earlier this summer, the Quebec education minister decided that YNN's commercial content would be contrary to the goal of the school, and therefore an inappropriate relationship between the private sector and education. Other provinces which said No to YNN include B.C., P.E.I., Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, as well as the Yukon. The recently elected NDP government in

Manitoba has also expressed its intention to remove YNN from the province's classrooms as soon as possible.

When YNN proposed replacing the commercials with federally-sponsored public service announcements, presumably the Quebec ministry's concerns were allayed. However, the presence of YNN in classrooms is inappropriate, regardless of the advertising content, or lack of it.

YNN is not free, and neither is the time in which students are required to watch it. Public education is provided as a result of public money. Contracts between Athena/Telescene and schools demand that twelve-and-a-half minutes of that precious time be in effect given over to a private company—accountable first and foremost to its shareholders—to market ideas and products to students during public time.

Replacing the commercials with public service announcements (as YNN has agreed to do in Quebec) does not change this fact. Public time is still being given to a private company which is using that classroom setting and school time to increase corporate profits—whether by selling ads or promoting other Telescene programming concepts. It is no coincidence that the two "hosts" in the YNN promotional video also star in one of Telescene's most popular teen sitcoms, "Student Bodies."

Further commercial influence over Canadian educational content becomes even more apparent when

one considers future plans for YNN. Especially significant are statements by Paul Painter, VP of Telescene and of Athena, that within five years 60% of YNN's shares are intended to be sold to a future corporate partner.

Athena has tried to appease critics by insisting that viewing YNN is no longer mandatory—at least for the six-month trial period. Of course, after this trial period is over, viewing is once again a contractual obligation. School attendance requirements therefore are reshaped into an effective marketing technique. This "flexibility" on the part of YNN is little more than a way of getting the equipment and the program into schools; as we all know, it is far more difficult to get rid of something once it has been installed than to say No to it at the outset.

YNN's concessions to the Quebec Ministry of Education can be seen in the same light. It is not known if, after the trial period, advertising will resume in the same manner as the mandatory viewing "flexibility." But it is to achieve the same ends. YNN is trying to make itself less unpalatable by making it easier for schools to say Yes to it on a trial basis by appearing to remove the essence of YNN.

And the essence of YNN is that this is a commercial initiative, not an educational one. Its goal is to deliver a captive audience to advertisers; this is how YNN makes a profit. And this private corporate profit is reaped during public time—in exchange for the loan of technological equipment. The temporary elimination of commercials does not alter the fundamentally inappropriate nature of YNN.

*(This article was excerpted from The CCPA Education Monitor, Fall 1999.)*



**The school day is reconstituted to include, reinforce and support YNN's messages—both commercial and ideological.**

## Conclusion

Athena has taken advantage of the current fiscal desperation of schools to make its commercial offerings more "attractive." YNN is also a perfect example of a corporation that will provide just enough "educational" wrappings to a commercial message in order to make it barely palatable to schools and school boards. It is doubtful whether YNN would have managed to entice any schools if the computers were not part of the deal.

Athena, like all corporate donors, perpetuates the myth that school time is somehow "free," and so any corporate "gift" is somehow without cost (though certainly not without value) to the school. This is patently untrue. Public education represents an enormous investment on the part of all Canadians in the present and future well-being of our country. This means that taxpayer dollars pay for not only public education, but any commercial program students are required to watch during school time. We are paying for the right to have our students' time sold to advertisers—and being told it is a gift *from YNN to us!*

When the school becomes a means to ensure corporate profits, with the possibility of the school receiving a cut, it is in the interests of the school to keep the corporate donor happy. This directly jeopardizes the well-being of those who may not agree with the corporate message—or whose best interests may conflict with those of the corporation. Thus, the school doles out discipline on behalf of the corporation, without even being told to do so—because it is in the financial interest of the school to keep its donor happy.

Athena, like similar commercial initiatives, uses a respected institution to validate, reinforce, and disseminate its corporate messages. Athena becomes a reputable educational operation because it is in schools. The products advertised on YNN have the implicit endorsement of the school administration. And the news content is legitimized by the classroom setting.

In this scenario, which is expected to be launched in a certain number (the figure is contested) of schools across the country, education is placed in the service of a private, commercial company. The school day is reconstituted to include, reinforce and support YNN's messages—both commercial and ideological. This represents a gross manipulation of the school, instructional time, taxpayer money, and students.

But it is vital to recognize that, even if YNN is defeated once again, the fight will not be over. It is precisely because the school is what it is—respected and mandatory—that it will always be a target for those who market to children.

YNN is visible, but it is not alone. It can, however, provide us with the tools to begin an informed discussion about corporate intrusion into public education, and how to reject it for one simple reason: because such manipulation of the school system subverts the role of public education and betrays our commitment to it—and to our students.

*(Editor's Note: Quebec recently reversed its ban on YNN after the Company agreed to replace the advertisements with public service announcements sponsored by the federal government. See the box on Page 15.)*

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## Resources on YNN and Commercialism in the Classroom

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<http://www.commercialfree.org>  
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110 Argyle Ave. Ottawa, ON, K2P 1B4  
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YNN Watch-Raj a l'Oeil

Canadian Home and School Federation  
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Email [chsptf@cyberus.ca](mailto:chsptf@cyberus.ca)  
<http://cap.unb.ca/sites/chsptf>

Flipside: Award-winning online muckraking daily  
<http://www.flipside.org/features/ynn/main.html>

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