

Introduction

In this Special Edition, Ralph Nader warns; "A struggle different than any before in world history is intensifying between corporations and parents. It is a struggle over the minds, bodies, time and space of millions of children and the kind of world they are growing up in."

Human consciousness, as a unified field, is being radically altered by its own invention - by the technologies we have created and by the logic and values which drive them. Cars are machines. Television and computers are machines. So are the corporations, which control them. They are all machines and we are living inside them.

In 1870 Emerson and others sounded a warning: *Machinery is aggressive. The weaver becomes the web.* Years later, Ashley Montagu urged us to beware; "The deepest hidden recess of spontaneity and freedom must be infiltrated, subjugated and reclined into conformity with the technological society... The dehumanization of man, initiated from without, would finally be accomplished from within, by a voluntary act of compliance and conversion."

In past issues, Bruce Lipton, PhD, a cellular biologist described how the cells of our body are adapting to the environment we have created. Perceptions, values and behaviors are changing. Who, or what, is shaping and controlling our environment and for what purpose? Who is creating the web that we, the weaver, are becoming?

Last year 600,000 children were prescribed Prozac or other antidepressants, a 46% increase from the previous year for ages 13 to 18. Teen suicide rates now equal that of adults. Annual Prozac sales totaled \$ 1.73 billion in the United States. The adult market however, is shrinking. Growth is imperative for corporations. FDA clearance of antidepressants for children will open vast new markets. Drug companies are hungry. They need new consumers.

Orwell and Huxley were futurists. Dominating the market, i.e., public or consumer perceptions and values, on a global scale, was and is the issue - brute force or Prozac/Soma? What difference does it make? The final blow will be a *voluntary* act of compliance and conversion.

Consider how easily marketers eliminated breast-feeding in most of western culture. Consider how difficult it is to reverse the false perceptions created by these corporations. International research has confirmed that mother's milk contains essential nutrients for normal brain growth and function, which are not found in store-bought formula. But who cares - just switch the channel.

We are living in what Jerry Mander calls, "the belly of the beast". It's normal. We grew up here and it is difficult to imagine anything else. Controlling and limiting public

perception was one of the most powerful instruments used by Orwell in his prediction of 1984 and by Huxley in his *Brave New World*.

Eliminate the source of alternative perceptions. Flood the environment with powerful messages which validate only corporate-consumer values. Transform the internet into a global infomercial and sell it to our schools for untold billions of dollars. Take infants and children away from mothers and fathers so they can continue to feed the machine. Growth is imperative. Form is content. The weaver becomes the web.

Corporate America's Exploitation of Children

A struggle different than any before in world history is intensifying between corporations and parents. It is a struggle over the minds, bodies, time and space of millions of children and the kind of world they are growing up in.

Year by year parents are losing control over their own children to the omnipenetrating hucksterism of companies. Driven by tens of billions of dollars in sales, profits, bonuses and stock options, the men driving giant companies are in a race to the bottom with their competitors - always pushing, pushing the range of violence, sex, addiction, and low-grade sensuality through evermore, manipulative delivery systems.

They have large sums of capital, technology and influential connections; lobbyists, child psychologists, marketing, advertising and communications specialists. They use television, radio, videos, arcades, movies, toys, malls, advertisements, magazines, even schools and cyberspace as well as stores, physicians, day care centers, fast-food restaurants, clinics, theme parks, maternity wards and the streets themselves. Thousands of employees and consultants analyze, test and interview children, hoping to learn how to stimulate and exploit their anxieties, fears, loneliness and sensual drives in order to sell, sell, sell.

Parents have no such resources. Parents are working to make ends meet, raising children, dealing with the stresses of workplace, household, school and street. Unless they throw out their televisions, radios and VCRs, keep their children in home schooling and quarantine them from friends and neighbors, parents cannot insulate their sons and daughters from the multilevel commercial grip of marketers.

A recent New York times poll revealed that Americans have a starkly negative view of popular culture, and blame television more than any other single factor for teenage sex and violence. Most parents saw a direct connection between popular culture and behavior, noting that their children imitate the behavior and language they picked up from television, movies and radio. Most felt powerless to prevent their children from seeing and hearing inappropriate entertainment.

Clearly, parents are spending less time with children than did any previous generation while corporate products and entertainment are spending more. So pronounced is this shift that many preteens are experiencing what might be called the "corporate week" - more than 40 hours each week in the product world created and controlled by corporations.

Corporate advertising and marketing specialists deliberately play on parental guilt. They incite children to nag parents into buying this video or that toy, this clothing or that sugary food, watch this television program or play that violent computer game. Guilt or weariness often induces parents into a dependency on corporate entertainment, the electronic baby-sitter, which exposes the child to even more promotions, logos and brand names.

The corporate selling machine is seductive - colorful packaging, reassuring slogans, the pace and excitement are carefully crafted to arouse the child. All the more reason for parents to know just how premeditated, profit driven and cunning these marketing strategies are. The price is right - the annual children's market represents more than 150 billion dollars.

What about our children? Youngsters are fatter and more out of shape than any time since records have been kept on such matters. They are not reading, studying, conversing with family or friends, creating their own hobbies, writing, playing with their buddies in the backyard or thinking at any level above a Pavlovian-conditioned response. Instead they are sporting logos, brand-name clothing, audio equipment, violent toys, junk food, tobacco, alcohol and drugs.

The marketplace of destruction and impairment follows them everywhere. Three-thousand studies confirm what most parents know from experience - there is a connection between violent television, video games, music and violent behavior. Young children are imitators and are given much to imitate by business interests.

Commercial entertainment lacks historical or social context - it is a fantasy world populated by cartoon characters on increasingly violent missions, from the *Power Rangers* and *Mortal Kombat* to *Beavis and Butthead*. Dozens of scenes changing *each minute* replace any use or reflection of the real world.

Inner-city youngsters have been clocked watching television 11 hours a day with thankful parents saying, "at least it keeps them off the dangerous streets." With sharply reduced attention spans and shriveled vocabularies, the horizon for these children is indeed limited.

The television-video-music-cable moguls are busy planning the next generation of outrage under the rubric of "virtual reality" and "interactivity," transforming the child from an observer of television mayhem to an active participant in the carnage right down to do-it-yourself massacres and dismemberments. Advertisers and marketers are rapidly going after the spending dollars of children on-line, the so-called "lucrative cyber-tot category." Highly targeted practices are invading children's privacy through solicitation of personal information and with deceptive advertising. Advertising and content are being interwoven in on-line "infomercials" to create electronic environments where children can interact with product persons such as Tony the Tiger, Chester Cheetah and Snap! Crackle! & Pop!

The goal is to so personalize the assault on children, based on data gathered about their in-line use and from on-line interviews, that they enter a "flow state" of total absorption. Erica Gruen, director of Saatchi & Saatchi Interactive, waxes with anticipatory joy: "There is nothing else that exists like it for advertisers to build relationships with kids."

Virtual reality, cyberspace and interactivity are huge leaps away from parents who find this "one-to-one marketing" of their children difficult to control. In a recent report, titled "Web of Deception," the Center for Media Education concluded:

While many parents may try to monitor their children's use of on-line services, it is not an easy task. Unlike television, which the entire family may watch together, many children use their computers alone. Children also tend to have greater computer skills than their parents, which makes periodic monitoring more difficult. And because of the "halo effect," arising out of the educational use of computers, many parents implicitly trust computers, preferring that their children go on-line instead of watching television. They are unaware that children's web sites can be more intrusive and manipulative than the worst children's television.

A 1996 survey on the Nickelodeon area of America In-line that asked children which they trusted more - their parents or their computers. The majority of children said they put more trust in their computers.

Corporations are pulling children away from parents and into a world of commercialism that knows no restraints of time, is subject to no concern for any aspects of the child's development, and is under little or no regulation. The velocity of this rampant and sensual commercialism is stunning. Sixteen-year-olds are commenting on how much more violence-prone 9-year-olds are. Commentator Richard Rodriguez, writing in the *Los Angeles Times* on "The Coming Mayhem," notes: "A tough street kid (16 years old) says he thinks of himself as bad. But his younger brother, nine years old, is crueller - that mother scares even me."

Noting the rising tide of youth violence, Rodriguez says, "We are entering a Stephen King novel: Where adults cower at the approaching tiny figure on the sidewalk ahead... Was there ever a generation of adults so ill-prepared to assume the central responsibility of adulthood - that of raising children?" This corporate organization of childhood was never announced or decreed. It just keeps coming.

For the first time in human history, most children are born into homes where most stories do not come from the parents, schools, churches, communities, or native countries, but from a handful of conglomerates who have something to sell. Children are grown through products: the Disney Generation, the MTV Generation, the Joe Camel Generation, the Pepsi Generation. Stories used to sell products are being used to raise our children.

The corporate marketing culture stresses materialism, money, sex, the power of violence, junk food and the status they bring; it crowds out and erodes the inherent worth and dignity of the human being and the critical nurturing values children need to fulfill their potential in life.

The same executives who pontificate about the need to upgrade educational standards are part of the marketing madness enveloping children in the corporate week - dedicated to the corporate product world - who are crowding out and undermining both parental control and the emergence of the educated child.

The big business of selling to children has led to consulting firms that psycho-research the "youth market". One report concluded that the children of the 1990's have more emotional stresses due to increased rates of divorce and family instability. These tragedies in the lives of children can become the hooks of sales strategies. Companies can "help kids build their own islands of happiness, independent of parental interaction," by creating a separate children's world that give the child the power, peer acceptance, happiness and sense of identity separate from the family world.

These companies are succeeding beyond their wildest dreams. Specialists who track the takeover of children's time estimate that the average 12-year-old spends 48 hours a week, year-round, with commercial entertainment (TV, music, video games, movies), excluding shopping at the mall or hanging out with friends. By contrast, these youngsters spend 30 hours a week in school, nine months a year and only 8 minutes a weekday with their father and 11 minutes with their mother in "meaningful conversation." It starts very early. Pediatricians William Dietz and Victor Strasburger estimate that 2- to 5-year olds average more than 27 hours a week watching TV.

The creation of a separate product-centered world must confront an obstacle however - parents. Here the companies face a dilemma - parents are in the way, but they provide the dollars.

This dilemma invites subtle and oblique messages for children's liberation from parents. As parental resistance crumbles year by year the messages that weaken parental authority become more blatant. Attrition is the corporation's stock in trade. The replacement of breast milk by infant formula over several decades demonstrates the capability to shape values through emotional appeals.

Consider the symbol of the new family meal, McDonalds. McWorld's advertisements intensify the nag factor. One ad starts with the teaser, "If kids take over the world ...". Every McWorld advertisement has a different theme but the approach is common. Commercials muse with a youth's wish for McDonald's at every meal, the elimination of a sibling and gym for every period in school. Throughout the commercial, adults are portrayed as lame, stupid and a pain in the butt - with the exception of the McDonald's workers, of course.

Other corporate commercials, most extremely by video firms like Nintendo, degrade and devalue parents. So do programs like Beavis and Butthead and The Simpsons. As Laura Sessions Stepp wrote in her article, "Where Have All the Families Gone?": "For children and adolescents, the advertisers' message is clear: We understand you better than your parents (something teens are only too willing to believe). Parents often are incompetent and tyrannized by their children."

Selling to kids means parents cannot be trusted. They are not emotionally equipped to be role models, Jason Rich of Teen Talk Communications told a Teenage Market Conference in San Diego two years ago:

Family situations are not good. There are a lot of single-parent families, low-income families where both parents work and do not have enough time to spend with the kids. These kids, instead of having their parents as role models or responsible adults, they are turning to MTV, or they turn to television or they turn to the movies, or they pick an athlete as the person they want to replicate. This is why using a celebrity [in advertising] will have a strong influence on kids. Youths believe whatever they say.

MTV is saying to youths: This is your station, these are your role models, these are the heroes, you want your MTV! And MTV thinks big. Former chairman of the MTV Board and MTV creator Bob Pittman exuded: "MTV do[es] not shoot for the 14-year-old [market], we own them." (He's not kidding. Politicians running for national office now see MTV as perhaps the only way to reach young people of voting age.)

Pittman is saying that MTV controls the youngsters, not parents. A Minnesota parent exclaimed: "I try to teach my children something, and then when I turn my back for a moment, the television is undermining what I said." Parents are in the way - their values must be over-ridden if they contradict the product-centered materialism of big business.

One market researcher described the way corporations can surround the child from every experience of their lives (except possibly their places of worship) this way:

Imagine a child sitting in the middle of a large circle of train tracks. Tracks, like the tentacles of an octopus, radiate to the child from the outside circle of tracks. The child can be reached from every angle. This is how the [corporate] marketing world is connected to the child's world.

The way baby products and infant formula companies surround the new mother and her infant with freebies in the maternity wards of hospitals, the angle of access starts very early in life indeed!

The sheer time, talent, image-making and resources that companies bring to creating the direct selling to children in a "children only" world thrives in stark contrast to the poverty of 25 percent of America's children, along with the other serious necessities that millions of children are deprived of by a malfunctioning political economy.

Take the fantasy world for kids created by Kool Aid's advertising strategy. The thrust is to bypass the parents as much as possible. Each packet of Kool Aid comes with a number of points on the back which can be exchanged for toys and prizes as the child collects a certain number of points and sends them back to Kool Aid. To promote this point system, Kool Aid created an imaginary Wacky Wild Prize Warehouse, making an intangible concept into the tangible. In one advertisement campaign, Kool Aid showed children visiting the Warehouse while their parents are put into a huge playpen.

Kids run about and collect Kool Aid toys in a frenzy while drinking Kool Aid. Please note just how premeditated these campaigns are, in the words of Grey Advertising's Bob Skollar, executive vice-president of advertising, who developed this campaign:

All kids like to drink Coke, but they have to have their own drink. Kool Aid is going to be a kid's own world; it belongs to the kids. A world that only kids can understand, and that adults just were not allowed into...

We showed the commercials to adults and they did not get it. Then we showed it to a group of kids, and we showed it to them just one time, and they played back almost every element of the campaign. They got it. They knew that it was something different [for children] and they loved it.

Every part of their intimate, social and impressionable young lives can be touched by the corporate tentacles, shaping their minds, and wants with corporate characters and products. This is the definition of a complete integrated marketing system — to be able to create a huckster-dominated world for children and raise them for the corporate bottom line of profits.

What the children, without the protection of their parents, don't realize (until years later perhaps) is how the corporations got them! In his 1992 book *Kids as Customers*, marketing guru James McNeal gives us a sense of how cold-blooded marketers view children as profit-centers by scanning his headings: "Children as Customers," "Children's Development as Consumers," "Children as a Multidimensional Market," "Children as a Primary market," "Marketing Implications of Kids with Money," "Overprivileged Children," "Children as a Market of Influencers," "Information Sources Underlying Children's Requests," "Kids as a Future Market: Reaching Them Through a Multidimensional Segmentation Strategy," "Importance of Loyalty in Cultivating Kids as Future Customers," "Reasons for Retailers to Target Children as Customers," "Advertising as Part of the Marketing Communication Mix," "Effects of Advertising to Children," "Encoding/Decoding Problems in Advertising to Children,"...

Clearly, companies see a vacuum in the household and neighborhood. Unlike poorer times during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, children do not have an economic function that assists parents. Where they used to work in the fields on farms, or picking up some needed income in the cities, or helping produce or prepare food or other needed chores around the house, today's children are largely viewed economically as a market. Household functions have been increasingly assigned to the marketplace — food, restaurants, clothing, repairs, entertainment, day care and counseling — as disposable income increased. Most teenagers today work to increase their consumer income rather than to support their family.

After World War II, children were less and less seen as economically necessary, leaving them to be valued in primarily emotional terms. With the growth of the two-earner household, long commutes and the decline of the extended family residence, the traditional American household culture dissolved as the emergence of television and direct selling to children commenced. The less adults were there with the children, the more children sought their own system of gratification and meaning. Corporations obliged, enveloping them tighter and tighter in the corporate commercial culture.

Home alone, or on their own, stripped of their innocence and trusting entirely the hucksters who accost them — those are the children most prone to the sweet profit-pickings of corporate marketers.

END