

Danville News Column
Robert John Andrews
"Consuming Kids"
Friday, November 27, 2009
Word Count: 750

I'm trying to figure out if there's much difference between pedophiles and those who market children's products. Hello, Black Friday -- the biggest day of the year when we pay Disney and Sesame Street to exploit our children. Try to find a baby product that isn't branded.

The Media Education Foundation, in a frightening, alarming, disturbing documentary called "Consuming Kids," reports how the primary purpose of computers and TV screens is neither to teach nor entertain but "to deliver eyeballs to advertisers." To sell product, they'll keep kids watching by any means necessary. This explains the violence, sex, base humor, anything to stimulate the maximum jolt of cheap emotion with the least amount of effort. If you haven't noticed, our kids are becoming de-sensitized to the base humor, sex, violence. The media has noticed, that's why they're intensifying these jolts.

Study TV commercials. See how many products are marketed for their social meaning rather for the thing itself. Do you want to be cool? Then you must have this. What you buy is who you are. Our product will make you happy. You are what you own. Worse, they make our kids believe that what they buy determines their value, and if you don't have it you are nobody. They've always targeted adults this way, but increasingly our children are the bulls-eye. Said one marketing vice-president: "Our role, our initiative is to move product and if we know you move product with a certain creative execution, placed in a certain type of media vehicle, then we've done our job. They are tomorrow's consumers, tomorrow's adult consumers, so start talking with them now, build that relationship when they're younger, then you've got them as adults." One marketing company sponsors secret girl clubs, which really recruit them to test products and spy for them. What is the advertiser's strategy? Cradle to the grave brand loyalty.

There is a price. A child psychologist mentioned how years ago he'd ask a child what they wanted to be when they grew up. They'd say, "I want to be a fireman, policeman." Now

they say, "I want to be rich." Our media - from Disney to SpongeBob -- are masters of consumer indoctrination.

There's a deliberate media strategy to compress childhood. They call it "kids getting older younger." For a fast buck, childhood is being squeezed out. 10 year old girls read "Seventeen." A 6 year old isn't a child but a 'tween.' Child products use to be inexpensive; now they're upscale. Sesame Street markets cell phones. 4 year olds demand iPod's. Third grade girls must dress in the hottest fashion and apply the coolest cosmetics.

Sure, it's Mom and Dad's job to protect their children. Which is as fair as asking a rowboat to sink a battleship. It's Mom against a \$15 billion dollar industry.

Some parents have decided to fight commercial crap with high end crap. No SpongBob allowed, but baby will watch Baby Einstein. Yet there is no evidence that Baby Einstein makes smarter babies. Actually, it harms them. A diet of TV makes it difficult later for the child to listen to teachers. Reports the Media Foundation: "screen media makes it difficult for our children to amuse themselves or calm themselves down."

Most modern toys smother creative imagination. We buy performing dolls or costumes. The kids don't play, they regurgitate. Then they get disappointed when re-enacting Spiderman isn't as thrilling as the movie.

Marketers, not parents, define our kid's values. Instant gratification. Shallow. All about me. Got to have it. Gimme. There's a teenager who's sad because she's been sold an illusion. She thinks Hannah Montana is real. She wants what Hannah has, but can't. But Hannah is a lie. No wonder we see an increase in obesity, medications, anxiety. There's a growing correlation between increased time exposed to screen media and depression.

What recommendations (besides restoring regulations to children's programming)? How about removing TV from bedrooms? Don't buy toys that require batteries. Don't let our schools shill for companies. Pediatricians advise there should be no screen media for infants under 2 years. Parents, make compacts with other parents. Pedicure parties for 5 years olds isn't cute, it's damaging. Let's

agree to stop giving presents to each child who attends your child's birthday party. It ain't their birthday!

SpongeBob's job is to sell them stuff. Entertainment is how they manipulate kids, profit off kids, own kids souls. They don't care how. Make sure your children understand that the media doesn't care about them.