



Born to Shop: How Marketers Brainwash Babies

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Santa's shopping is in full swing. Peak season for what I consider child abuse, family abuse and democracy abuse -- marketing to children. I'm of the baby boomer generation. When I was a kid, there was Tony the Tiger hawking Frosted Flakes and little elves selling me cookies, but marketing to children was peanuts -- well, probably Cracker Jacks.

Everything has changed, and changed gradually on such a scale that we are paying an enormous price -- in kids' physical, mental and emotional health, and in the health of our families and our democracy.

From 1992 to 1997, the amount of money spent on marketing to children doubled, from \$6.2 to \$12.7 billion. Today they are spending over \$15 billion. Children influence purchases totaling over \$600 billion a year. Children spend almost 40 hours a week outside of school consuming media, most of which is commercially driven. The average child sees about 40,000 commercials each on television alone. 65 percent of children 8-18 have a television in their bedroom.

Earlier this year 11 companies agreed to voluntarily scale back their marketing to children in an effort to slow down the rise in obesity.

Susan Linn, an instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, weighs in on this effort and what's at stake. Linn is the Associate Director of the Media Center at Judge Baker Children's Center and a co-founder of the coalition Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. An award winning ventriloquist, Dr. Linn created video based classroom materials *Different and the Same: Helping Children Identify and Prevent Prejudice* (with the producers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*). In the face of our media-saturated commercialized culture, she encourages make-believe play. She is the author of *Consuming Kids*.

Terrence McNally: Those numbers in the intro are a few years old. Have they gotten much worse?

Susan Linn: What has gotten worse is that commercials are just so 20th century now. The number of commercials that children see on television has become practically irrelevant -- because they're seeing them so many other places. On the web and in school, through brand licensing and product placement in movies and television programs and even books, and through viral marketing. Marketing has essentially permeated every aspect of children's lives, and that's what marketers want. They want to insinuate their brands into the fabric of children's lives.

McNally: Colonizing parts of your brain and your heart and your identity. What got

you interested in this?

Linn: It's a complicated question for me. I was raising a child at home, so it was affecting my life directly. I worked with children, and I could see it in their lives. And I was in a position at the Media Center to begin tracking it. By the late '90s, advertising and marketing to kids had gotten so pervasive that I felt somebody had to do something. It violates most of what I think is important about being a human being.

McNally: What pushed you over the edge?

Linn: Teletubbies transformed me from a concerned clinician and aggravated mom into an activist. That was 1998. I really believe in public television -- and it was the idea that my public television station would import a television program from Britain and market it as educational for babies, when they had no evidence of that. But the idea that they would exploit the trust of American parents that way was kind of the last straw for me. That's when I realized that this wasn't just a problem I was struggling with, but it really was a societal issue.

McNally: Though television commercials are so 20th century, could you talk a bit about the way television marketing evolved over the years. From innocent Keebler elves to the linkage of almost every show with a toy. There are hours Saturday mornings where everything you see is something you can buy.

Linn: I think that it evolved for a couple of reasons. First is the proliferation of electronic media. One of the reasons that commercialism was limited when you were growing up is because there just weren't that many avenues for marketing to reach kids. It's not that they didn't want to. I'm also a boomer ... The early television programs that we loved ... Do you go back as far as Howdy Doody?

McNally: Howdy Doody, Romper Room.

Linn: Kukla, Fran and Ollie.

McNally: They were so low tech and so low key.

Linn: But they were filled with product placement.

Kukla, Fran, and Ollie was filled with product placement. Howdy Doody was actually totally commercials for Wonder Bread and just about everything else -- but it was only on once a day.

McNally: We'd watch a half-an-hour or an hour, then go out to play.

Linn: Now kids see a program not once but several times a day. There are so many choices of programs for kids, and they can get them on so many venues -- iPods and cellphones and portable DVD players. Kids are so much more saturated with media, and with the marketing that goes with it. That's one thing. And then there was the deregulation of everything in the 1980s.

McNally: That really opened the floodgates ...

Linn: Children's television had been regulated in the '70s.

McNally: They had to at least make a show that there was some sort of educational content .

Linn: What they couldn't do is make program length commercials.

In the '70s there was a lot of concern and activism around marketing to children -- mostly with food and mostly concerned about cavities. Childhood obesity wasn't an issue. In 1978 the Federal Trade Commission actually recommended a ban on television marketing to children under the age of eight. Due to corporate pressure, they were rewarded for that by having their authority to market to children severely restricted by Congress two years later. In the '70s they'd passed laws saying that you could not make program length commercials or have the host selling. In 1984 the FTC deregulated children's television, allowing entire programs whose sole purpose is to sell toys.

McNally: Now most children's television consists of shows based on toys. They coexist and promote each other.

Linn: Not only do they promote each other, they also promote clothing and accessories and food and all sorts of other things as well. Now you are hard put to get a program for children funded on television without brand licensing. And in many instances, I think the licensing comes first. You have to create sellable characters. That's true on PBS as well.

McNally: When did that happen?

Linn: I think that it started happening almost as soon as PBS was funded. They were under the gun. But I think that in 1984, 1985 the Republicans took over Congress and they really went after PBS in a big way. PBS responded by deciding that they needed to try to compete in the marketplace. So they went the commercial route. One of the ways that they could do that is through children's television.

McNally: I can only imagine the hundreds of millions of dollars in merchandising that have come out of that "educational program" Sesame Street.

Linn: They brought in something like \$52 million just in brand licensing two years ago. I haven't seen this past year's tax returns. Sesame Street does enormous amounts of brand licensing. You can see the pressure of commercialization in a program like Sesame Street, because they start making decisions that aren't really in the best interests of children. For instance, Disney started making Baby Einstein -- videos that are falsely marketed as educational for babies. Then they decided to do Little Einstein, a show for preschoolers, so that Baby Einstein is a feeder into Little Einstein. Sesame Workshop responded by creating Sesame Beginnings, video programs for babies, along with a whole new raft of licensed toys.

McNally: I can see the positive effects on the bottom lines of corporations. What are

the effects on children?

Linn: Studies suggest that marketing is a factor in many of the problems facing children today. It's not the sole cause of any of them, but it's a factor in childhood obesity, eating disorders, precocious and irresponsible sexuality, youth violence, certainly underage drinking and tobacco use, family stress, the acquisition of materialistic values, the false notion that things will make us happy.

And the one that is dearest to my heart, the erosion of children's creative play. Which doesn't sound like much until you realize that such play is the foundation of learning, critical thinking, and empathy -- and I believe, also essential to democracy.

McNally: People ask, what's the worst result, and in your book, you reply, "What's your kid's problem?"

If your kid's problem is obesity, then for you that will be the worst result. If your kid's problem is difficulty reading, then that would be the worst result. If your kid's problem is emotional stunting, then that would be the worst result, because, as you say, it's a contributing factor to so many of them.

Linn: In the year or two since I wrote *Consuming Kids*, I've come to believe that the worst instance of commercialism in marketing has to do with targeting babies. The escalation of babies in front of screens is probably going to have the most disturbing and worrisome impact on our society.

McNally: You say screens, where ten years ago you might have said television.

Linn: We need to start talking about screens, not television.

McNally: 11 big players announced that they would voluntarily scale back their marketing to kids. What's the good and the bad in that announcement?

Linn: I think what's most important is that it's a tacit acknowledgement by the food industry that their targeting of children is a problem. They've actually come a long way, and I believe that's a real tribute to activists and activist organizations all over the country. This is an example of when enough people make enough noise ...

McNally: And when the problem gets glaring enough --

Linn: The problem is only getting "glaring enough" because the activism is raising public awareness.

McNally: I attended a panel on obesity and marketing to kids, and the food industry people claimed it's an issue of choice: In America people should have a choice. We certainly believe in and support public education. Ultimately it's the parents' responsibility. So, maybe \$100 to \$200 million is spent on public education in a year -- a drop in the bucket against the endless onslaught of the junk food message.

Linn: Absolutely.

McNally: What did the corporations actually agree to do?

Linn: First, let me say I think the announcement is good news. I think the bad news is that none of what they agreed to do is enforceable. We've had 25 or more years of self-regulation by the food industry that has failed, and I suspect that this is going to fail as well.

McNally: I always suspect these kinds of announcements are made to head off something in the regulatory realm.

Linn: There's no question about that, and that's a tribute to activists and a few brave politicians. The food industry is really starting to feel the heat, so they're responding. Instead of just ignoring it, pooh-poohing it, making fun of it, now they're trying to change -- or at least trying to look like they're changing.

What are my concerns? One is that it's not enforceable, there's no enforcement agency. Another is that we have eleven or twelve companies making eleven or twelve different kinds of changes. So it's going to be really, really hard to monitor.

McNally: You write that two of the most worrisome things to you -- and I suspect these are not things that people might think of immediately: One, that it's having an adverse effect on creativity and children's creative play, and two, on democracy itself.

Linn: There's a threat to creative play in a lot of different ways. One of them is the notion that you need certain products or brands in order to play. You can't play Harry Potter without a Harry Potter wand or a Harry Potter broomstick or this or that. Creativity comes out of silence and emptiness in some ways and out of desire. You need that in order to create. So if everything is given to you -- all of these media-linked toys, and the scripts themselves, and your seeing them over and over again. One thing that happens is that you don't need to be creative.

McNally: You don't even realize that there was another way.

I went to Disneyland a few years ago. In the finale of the big show, a pirate ship sailed into view, and Mickey came out on the bow and sang a song about imagination -- you've got to have imagination, you've got to use your imagination. Yet for an entire day leading up to that, every foot you walked, some sort of Disney image or Disney character was thrown at you. The message about using *your* imagination is totally disingenuous. Your imagination is completely filled with Disney images before you ever consider having a thought of your own.

Linn: And it's Disney on top of Nickelodeon on top of Shrek. It's not like I'm a technophobe or a Luddite at all. I've worked in television, and think that it has some potential to do good. But the business of media has really compromised children's creativity.

McNally: You say it has a ripple effect on democracy. How so?

Linn: What children learn through marketing or in commercial culture is antithetical

to democracy. What do marketers want them to learn? Impulse buying -- that's terrible in a democracy. Lifetime brand loyalty, unthinking brand loyalty -- well, we're certainly experiencing the problem with that. They're learning "me first" -- that's not helpful in a democracy.

A more subtle message in marketing is that there is a right way to do something. That's where we get the connection to the erosion of children's creative play. Creativity thrives in democracy and democracy thrives because of creativity. When we squelch that, we'd do very well in a dictatorship.

McNally: What can people do?

Linn: They can go to our website -- commercialfreechildhood.org. The Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood has all sorts of actions that you can get engaged in. You can send a letter to your senator supporting Tom Harkin's bill to restore the FTC's power to regulate marketing to kids. You can send an email to Scholastic, asking them to stop marketing the Bratz dolls in schools. We have fact sheets and a PowerPoint presentation you can use to educate other people about one of the central problems in the 21st century.

Interviewer Terrence McNally hosts Free Forum on KPFK 90.7FM, Los Angeles (streaming at kpfk.org).

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