Neo-liberal News for Kids: Citizenship Lessons from Channel One
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ABSTRACT
This article asks “What lessons does commercially produced news teach young people about the meaning of democracy and of citizenship?” Three competing models of democracy are introduced: Neo-liberalism; Communitarianism; and Participatory. With these three models as reference points, one week of Primedia’s Channel One video news program—the week of the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle, Washington—is analyzed. While the concept of “democracy” is never directly taken up in this programming, it is argued that the stories, advertisements, and formal structure construct a compelling vision of neo-liberalism as the normative standard for democracy in the United States.

News stories, popular magazine articles, and academic studies have been pointing to a rising tide of political apathy among young people for nearly a decade. And the indicators include everything from: low and declining rates of voter turnout for young adults (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003; National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1999); lack of political knowledge (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999); declining trust in government and news (Putnam, 1996); declining attention to news (Buckingham, 2000; Hess, 2000; Patterson, 2001; Pew Center for People and the Press, 2000); large numbers of young people report that for the political information they do acquire, late night talk shows are regular sources for information for nearly one in four (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2000); and an unprecedented number of young people didn’t really care about who would win the 2000 Presidential election (Pew Research Center, 2000).

This rising tide of apathy stands as a particular challenge, if not a threat, to the press in the United States. As Schaffer (1999) put it: “The goal is to produce news that citizens need to be educated about issues and current events, to make civic decisions, to engage in civic dialogue and action—and generally to exercise their responsibilities in a democracy. Civic journalists believe that it is possible to create news coverage that motivates people to think, and even to act, and not simply entice them to rubberneck. And, in fact, they believe it’s their responsibility to do so.” Against this background, we looked at news produced for young people, particularly by the major provider of video news for classroom use in the United States—Channel One—to see what ideas of citizenship were being directly and indirectly communicated.

This focus seemed particularly appropriate to us as media educators and students of the media committed to media literacy as a practice fundamental to promoting and nurturing a democratic culture and as media educators particularly concerned with the connection between the press and democracy. This abstract concern was transformed into a specific research project as we watched the protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in the fall of 1999, protests which turned out to be the beginning of a significant international anti-globalization movement, muted by September 11, 2001, and its immediate aftermath, but once again gaining renewed strength and support by late 2003.

Here was an event that seemed to have taken the news media, as well as the United States, quite by surprise. As the news media struggled to define what was taking place, a certain consensus emerged that, in its own way, this series of protests and demonstrations marked the most significant social activism since the 1960s. While one could argue with that characterization, it did become clear that a debate was being opened up—particularly as the news coverage veered from anarchist actions to AFL-CIO rallies and...
marches—about what constituted responsible citizenship. And this debate invited discussion in terms of
the “crisis of political apathy” among young people that over the last decade was becoming the standard
way of thinking about the connection between young people and politics.

Is there a rising tide of political apathy? What do we mean by political apathy? What do we mean by
citizenship? Or perhaps even more unsettling, what do we mean by democracy? Because in Seattle,
clearly another theme protesters were struggling to bring to national and international attention was
the very concern that the WTO as an organization was replacing the rights of people with the rights
of corporations. The protests in Seattle, followed by protests in Washington, D.C., followed by protests
around the world, have continued to raise this central theme: What is the relationship between democ-

Models of Democracy

For most citizens of the United States, when we think about what democracy means, our thoughts turn
to contrasting democracy with various forms of totalitarianism. We think of U.S. efforts to fight for
human rights and promote democracy around the world. We tend to think of the United States as
putting forward a fairly unified vision of the idea of democracy. In fact, for many of us, the United
States is thought to stand as the model of democracy for the rest of the world. If we think about argu-
ments about what democracy should mean, we tend to think about arguments between Republicans and
Democrats over policy, style, and emphasis, rather than over fundamental issues concerning the very
meaning of democracy.

Political scientists disagree. The history of democracy in the United States has been marked by strong
disagreements over the most fundamental of issues, from the very purpose of democracy—whether
it is a means to an end or an end in itself—to the meaning of individual rights, to the meaning of
the individual, to the role of government, to the relationship between democracy and the marketplace.
Drawing on this history, a number of political theorists have attempted to map out the major competing
models of democracy before us today. The map we will draw on will come largely from the work of
Benjamin Barber but is reflective of the work of a wide range of political theorists attempting to
map out the meaning of democracy at the beginning of the 21st century (Barber, 1984, 1998, 2001,
2003; Berger, 1999; Held, 1996). While Barber’s work favors a particular view of what democracy
should be, it also clearly lays out some of the deepest differences between the competing models.

Neo-liberal Democracy

The normative model of democracy, the model that we are most accustomed to hearing about and
seeing in the news, the model which has been basic operating principle of political leaders in the
United States since Ronald Reagan, the model which most of our political and media leaders are refer-
ing to when they simply say the word “democracy” is what Barber calls radical liberal democracy or
“neo-liberalism.” Barber summarizes this model of democracy as “a synonym for the private sector.”
However, given the powerful negative public reaction to this view of sink-or-swim democracy, the
hard edge of neo-liberal thinking was softened a bit recently by a return to a Ronald Reaganesque
“new morning” conservatism labeled by President George W. Bush as “compassionate conservatism.”
Perhaps this is why Barber (1984) ultimately comes to call neo-liberal democracy, whether practiced by
democrats or republicans, “thin democracy.” At its heart neo-liberal democracy “is based on premises
about human nature, knowledge, and politics that are genuinely liberal but that are not intrinsically
democratic. Its conception of the individual and of individual interests undermines the democratic
practices upon which both individuals and their interests depend. Liberal democracy is thus a ‘thin’
theory of democracy, one whose democratic values are prudential and thus provisional, optional and
conditional—means to exclusively individualistic and private ends. From this precarious foundation,
no firm theory of citizenship, participation, public goods, or civic virtue can be expected to arise” (p. 4).

And at the same time, as neo-liberalism erodes, consumes, demonizes, and attacks collective action, cel-

enate the individual and private life over community and common values, it opens up a black hole of
moral emptiness. An attempt is then made to plug this black hole with the moral stopgap “God is in
charge” (Conason, 2003; Kutchins, 2001). Democracy is surrendered to the two deeply incompatible
and disconnected ideas of the unregulated market and faith. Most fundamentally, Barber alerts us to
the fact that, if we are going to start talking about ideas like citizenship and democracy, one of the
first points we have to acknowledge is that there is not just one meaning to the idea of democracy.
In fact, the fundamental meaning of democracy should be one of the most critical debates taking
place both in the “democratic” society of the United States and internationally. Democracy, in the
words of Dunn (1993), is a profoundly “unfinished journey.”

The Communitarian Model

The Communitarian model of democracy is also very much concerned with the breakdown of commu-
nity values and social solidarity and the deep sense of meaninglessness experienced by many citizens
today. However, communitarians believe that these problems with civil society are substantially
caused by the excessive individualism central to neo-liberal democracy. The solution, then, cannot simply be
to add “God” to libertarianism, but requires a reconceptualization of the relationship between the indi-

dividual and civil society.

Barber’s catch phrase for the Communitarian Model is “civil society as a synonym for community.”
Barber develops this caricature of the Communitarian Model of democracy in order to dramatize its
commitment to the idea of the self as a social being, but a social being who finds his or her primary
fulfillment in identifying with a set of pre-existing “traditional membership” categories in the private
realm—such as family, religious, gender, ethnic, and national communities (Kronheiser, 1999). Barber
is particularly concerned that Communitarianism, in its radical form, contains the seeds of what he
has elsewhere called “Jihadism”—the willingness to sacrifice the process of democracy for the false
security of absolute religious or spiritual values. Amidst the recent celebrations of a revival of religious
values in government, it is easy to forget that the authors of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights
did not specify a state religion, not because its writers did not value spirituality, but because they feared
conflict inspired by religious dogmatism. Communitarians, in this exaggerated sketch, value civil society
and the open-ended nature of democratic process too little. It also must be acknowledged that within the
Communitarian position, there are advocates of what might be called “democratic communitarianism”
such as Amitai Etzioni's Communitarian Platform and Michael Lerner’s “politics of meaning,” which
actually come closer to reflecting the democratic vision of our next model (Barber, 1998; Etzioni,

Participatory Democracy Model

The Participatory model of democracy—what Barber refers to as “strong democracy”—attempts to
reconceptualize civil society as a place not just founded on private and community values, but as a
truly public space between government and the market. As Barber (1998) writes: “The strong demo-
cratic perspective on civil society distinguishes our civic lives both from our private lives as individual
producers and consumers and from our public lives as voters and rights-claimants” (p. 38). This is a
space that historically existed for only a small group of democratic elites. It is also a space which,
even for those elites, was squeezed between a growing governmental bureaucracy and increasingly

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expansive and intrusive market forces. This is the space that he believes must be recovered and enlarged. Civil society is the critical space in a truly democratic society. It is the space in which individuals have the opportunity to develop responsible freedom, freedom to consciously create themselves and their values, but in constant relationship to the rights of others to do the same. Civil society is also the space in which a moral value critical to democracy is produced: public good. Public good is the social and material embodiment of a democratic recognition that we are each other. It is also a recognition that democracy is not simply a technical system for managing a form of government. It is both a process and an end in itself. It is a recognition of the fundamentally social character of human existence.

Barber (1998) also sees the “myth of the market” as our “most insidious myth” concerning democracy, “not just because so many people believe it, but because the market’s invisible bonds slip on so easily and feel so much like freedom.” (p. 72) But the market, he argues, is not democracy. “Markets are simply not designed to do the things democratic polities or free civil societies do. Markets give us the private, not public modes of discourse: we pay as consumers in currencies of consumption to producers of material goods, but we cannot use this currency when we deal with one another as citizens or neighbors about the social consequences of our private market choices. Markets advance individualistic, not social, goals and they encourage us to speak the language of ‘I want,’ not the language of ‘we need.’ Markets preclude ‘we’ thinking and ‘we’ action of any kind at all, trusting in the power of aggregated individual choices (the ‘invisible hand’) somehow to secure the common good. In the name of diversity and private choice, markets foster a kind of consumer totalism, turning multidimensional citizens into one-dimensional, solitary shoppers” (pp. 72–73).

It may now seem that we have drifted a long way from our initial and seemingly obvious question about political apathy, citizenship, and news for kids. Let’s see if we can make our way back.

**Political Apathy, Citizenship, and News for Kids**

At this point we hope that it is becoming clear that as we expand our thinking about democracy, citizenship, and the news, the issue of commercialization and the commercialization of education begins to take on a new urgency. In this sense, we begin to see how a neo-liberal view of democracy, citizenship, and news tends to suppress the contradictions between democracy and economics, between citizenship and consumerism, and between information and critical deliberation. Our original question—“Given the rising tide of political apathy among young people, what lesson does news teach, particularly news produced for young people, about what it means to be a democratic citizen?”—reflects this suppression. How would we, using the ideals of participatory democracy, reconsider the question of political apathy, news for kids, education, and citizenship? Most importantly, we would place the question into a historical context that foregrounds the issues of critical/participatory citizenship, public space, and civil society.

In these terms, a number of observations come quickly to light. Public education and media (including news media) can be viewed as critical dimensions of both public space and civil society. And both are under siege (e.g., Apple, 2001; Bagdikian, 2000; Giroux, 2002; McChesney, 1999; Saltman, 2000). In the case of media, the siege has been long-standing, but has heated up considerably in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. In the United States commercial interests stopped the formation of a public broadcasting service until the late 1960s and then quickly began an assault on its mission and federal funding. Since the 1980s, there have been a series of assaults on the public domain of media and encouragement for the privatization of media space. Federal funding for public broadcasting was dramatically cut in the early 1980s, the cable industry was effectively deregulated in 1984, and a further wave of media consolidation was unleashed by the Telecommunication Act of 1996 (Bagdikian, 2000; McChesney, 1999).

Bringing education into the picture, we can see the same pattern of attack and cutbacks in federal funding throughout the 1980s (Giroux, 1999; Saltman, 2000). At the same time, turning to news, what we see is a profound change in commercial network policy toward news beginning in the late 1970s and intensifying throughout the 1980s. Up until the late 1970s the commercial networks saw
news as primarily a public service obligation of the corporation, perennially losing money, but establishing public service credibility and prestige. By the early 1980s, the networks had come to see the news as another potential profit center, especially given that news or news-like shows could be produced for relatively low costs and drew substantial audiences.

From a participatory democracy perspective, what becomes visible is that a massive assault was launched on public space and civil society in news, education, and the media during the 1980s under the banner of Reaganism and neo-liberalism. And this assault was driven by and led to, in part, a significant ideological transformation of the idea of democracy in relationship to the market. During the 1960s, few people were talking about the political apathy of youth. However, by the early 1970s, a significant number of corporate leaders had formed the Trilateral Commission to begin talking about the excesses of democracy (Kellner, 1990). It wasn’t until nearly a decade into the Reagan-Bush political era that widespread popular outries about political apathy among youth were heard.

Even from this extremely rough historical sketch, the strong democracy perspective leads us to view our original question in very different terms. A participatory democracy perspective on citizenship and education makes clear that 1989, the year when Channel One was launched in the schools, was also a time of growing fiscal crisis for public education, anxiety about the availability of new technologies to schools in the “information age,” continuing cuts in state and federal funding for public broadcasting, and the time of the first major reports on the civic disengagement of youth. Within this historical context, Channel One did not enter the schools first and foremost as a civic-minded effort committed to the regeneration of civic life, but as a neo-liberal marketing effort preying on growing weaknesses in the public sector. While there was a substantial debate around Channel One when it first appeared, this debate subsided as other educational crises surfaced and as the fiscal crisis and information hysteria that created the opening for Channel One not only did not recede, but deepened (e.g., Apple, 1998; Apple 2000; Buckingham, 2000).

The year 1989 was also when the “Cable in the Classroom” initiative was launched by the cable industry to offer free cable access and commercial-free cable programming to schools. “CNN Newsroom” was developed and offered under this program. In an interesting liberal turn of libertarian thinking, one can see both a recognition that there might be something valuable to offer children by excluding commercials, but at the same time a failure to consider that, if the programming were initially developed for commercial purposes or to explicitly carry commercial messages, the logic of this motive might be imprinted on the programming itself. Further, in considering that the “Cable in the Classroom” initiative was more than just civic generosity, it must also be taken into account that it serves as a critical dimension of marketing through the creation of brand awareness and positive brand associations. Further still, the “Cable in the Classroom” initiative partly grew out of strategic efforts on the part of the cable industry to ensure that there would be no regulatory backlash to the 1984 Cable Act that largely expanded the scope of private enterprise in the field of cable. These dimensions of “Cable in the Classroom” seemed to be lost on many early critics of Channel One, who regularly pointed to “CNN Newsroom” as the commercial-free alternative.

Participatory democracy, in taking up the question of news in the classroom and citizenship, begins a historical contextualization of the terms of news, citizenship, and education by themselves and in relationship to one another, foregrounding the tensions and contradictions that emerge in treating democracy and the market as synonymous and in assuming that the starting point for both democracy and the market begins with radically separate individuals committed to maximizing their own private interests. The story of citizenship told by news in the classroom cannot be understood without attending to the historical context of the telling.

So, let’s Watch some News for Kids

From a participatory democracy perspective, we begin to see that what we introduced as a subtext to our original question—the issue of commercialism and education—now emerges as directly related to the central question of media, education, and citizenship. In fact, we might reframe our original question
to ask “What lessons does commercially produced news teach, particularly news produced to accomplish the commercial goals of organizing young people as a commodity and as a market, about the competing meanings of democracy and of citizenship?” Unlike the neo-liberal perspective of democracy and news, which sets aside commercial and news editorial questions, the strong democracy perspective requires that these issues be taken up as deeply interrelated. For instance, not only are advertisements seen as needing interpretation both as context and content bearing on values of democracy and citizenship, but the larger commercial logic of news coverage and production needs to be reconsidered as carrying lessons regarding democratic and citizenship values.

Specifically, our attention is directed toward the following questions. What explicit and implicit lessons are taught with respect to individual verses collective action? Here we will need to take into account not only representations of action, but also of individualism and celebrity. What explicit and implicit lessons are taught with respect to the relationship between democracy and the market? Here we will need to take into account the representations of choice, of freedom. What explicit and implicit lessons are taught with respect to knowledge as science/facts versus the outcome of debate/deliberation? Here we need to take into account the general mythology of science as absolute knowledge versus the idea of knowledge as dialog. What explicit and implicit citizenship lessons are taught by Channel One with respect to the relationship between democracy and the market? Here we will need to take into account the representations of choice, of freedom, and the idea of the “public.”

With these questions in mind we turned an examination of the programming on Channel One for the week of November 29, 1999, to December 3, 1999. News stories covered that week included World AIDS Day, the historic shift of power in Northern Ireland, the World Trade Organization’s Ministerial meeting in Seattle, and the dramatic high-seas rescue of a small boy—Cuban refugee Elian Gonzalez. Television commercials aired during the week featured the Marines, Clearasil face cleanser, Schick’s Silk Effects razor for young women, Pokeman, Pepsi Cola, and Polaroid’s JoyCam.

From this list of questions, we were able to clearly draw out a number of specific issues to examine in these news programs for school children. The four we focused on reflected what we believed was both the highest priority issues within the list, as well as the dominant focus of the news programs themselves. They included: Representations of the self; Representations of activism; Representations of critical deliberation; and Representations of the relationship between the “free market” and “democracy.” These representations are explored in terms of program structure, themes that cut across programs and stories, and specific story content.

**Representations of the Self: Radical Individualism verses Social Interdependence**

To watch Channel One looking for clues as to its representation of how we should think about individualism is like standing next to a cannon that has just been fired and asking where is the sound. The first and foremost clue is the show itself, which nearly stuns one with its relentless repetition in graphics, slogans, and camera work of the program’s theme “The Power of One.” The only set of images that one could imagine that even begins to come close to its relentless fascination with the images of “oneness” portrayed in the week’s worth of episodes that we viewed was Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. Each episode begins with a still shot of original art work created by a student viewer which in someway incorporates the Channel One logo focusing on the number “1”; the viewer sees “1’s” flying around a fairy or a dragon wrapped around “1” or fish swimming around “1” or “1” against an abstract background. Art in the service of and intertwined with Channel “oneness.”

Nearly every graphic contains the Channel One logo. And when the program cuts to the studio to allow the anchors to welcome the viewers and introduce the program for the day, the shot almost always begins with a close-up of the Channel One logo “1” on a television monitor in the studio or returns to the “1” at the end of a long establishing shot or both. Typically, there are anywhere between three to six monitors all displaying the “1” logo in the background of all studio shots. Almost always when a teen anchor is speaking, a logo “1” appears on a monitor in the immediate background;
or, if there are two anchors conversing, the logo appears between them. And if the camera does not focus its shot on a logo “1” on a monitor, it pulls away, and dollies up to reveal a huge logo “1” on the studio floor.

“The Power of One” theme is also employed to define program segments, where the “news” to follow is framed within the “Power of One” ideology. And the “1” logo is appropriately adjusted and redesigned to define a particular program theme, such as tying a red ribbon around the “1” in honor of World AIDS Day. The omnipresent logo “1” throughout the program on the monitors and floor is interspersed with “Power of One” music video montages, which might include heroic individuals (sometimes thematically presented such as pilots and astronauts) or computer graphic simulations representing futuristic or science fantasy settings. They always celebrate “1” or the “Power of One.” When one examines the “Power of One” montages alongside the advertising content in the regularly repeated United States Marine ad “The Few, The Proud, The Marines”—an ad that features a single, young muscular man catapulted into what looks like a dungeons and dragons video game where he slays a technodragon with a technosword—there is no sense of discontinuity. The computer graphics, the science fantasy, the “Power of One” theme are nearly seamless from program to advertisement. Indeed, the running theme for the U.S. Army recruitment campaign at the time of the study, “Be an Army of One,” would fit equally well with the celebration of “oneness.”

At the same time, this blatant surface celebration of libertarian radical individualism is developed somewhat more subtly using additional structural techniques, as well as through theme and content. Structurally, the format of the program blends the news anchor form with the news host or talk show host form, creating anchors that communicate informality, accessibility, scientific omniscience, and celebrity. These anchors, as in conventional news, magazine news, and the talk shows, provide a familiar, continuous human focus—an anchor that encourages identification with their celebrity personalities rather than the discontinuous, fragmented and oftentimes disturbing “news.” In addition, viewers are directly addressed by the anchors to think about how they would “feel” about a news item or story, encouraging the viewers to adopt a self-centered, individualized frame of reference.

The theme of radical individualism is substantially carried through this celebrity discourse. The celebrity anchors literally stand for the power of “oneness.” And the theme of celebrity—of having achieved a meaningful identity through hyper-individualism, a kind of transcendent state of being—is developed continuously in the program in a variety of seamless ways that cut across the “editorial” and “advertising” segments of the program. Consider a few quick examples. In the Marines ad, the virile, clean-cut young man must cross a bridge of light that is protected by a dragon. Shots of him dueling with the dragon are framed from the point of view of the enslaved masses waiting to be freed. After he triumphs, he is magically clothed in a dress Marine uniform, while a filled stadium of onlookers cheers his hyperindividual accomplishments. The Clearasil ad begins with a featured model holding her hands in a frame around her face, both indicating that she is to be looked at in her role as celebrity, and that she is framing your face—the viewer and possible celebrity—to be looked at. Clearasil leads to her triumphant moment of being kissed by two boys simultaneously. Celebrity is a repeated theme in the regularly repeated Pepsi commercials. In one commercial a black male celebrity in a limousine pulls over to hand bottles of soda to a group of thirsty group of boys in the desert: his version of “a lift.” In a second Pepsi ad, the celebrity in the limousine is a woman who hands the boys bottles of soda, offering to “share her joy.” In a third Pepsi ad, the famous Pepsi girl, who literally takes on celebrity persona after celebrity persona in the series of ads she appears in, takes on the persona of an older, hip black male DJ. In the Schick Silk Effects ad the young woman explains “when you live guys, you learn all kinds of things . . .” What she has clearly learned is to “dress to kill” and to be the featured, celebrity-style, object of the boys’ attention. In the Polaroid JoyCam ad, the act of being looked at and photographed is presented as a critical element of teenage play, with the camera finally being turned on the viewer in the last scene in a kind of offer to “join us” and be looked at and photographed.
Certainly, these are all examples drawn from the ads embedded in the Channel One programming. Yet the aura of celebrity and the central importance of looking, being looked at, and camera play are in no way out of place in relationship to the representations of the Channel One celebrity anchors. But celebrity is also a critical dimension of the “news” stories themselves—not so much that the stories are about celebrities, but the idea that the idea of celebrity is presented as the pinnacle of achievement. Consider, for instance, the profile for World AIDS Day of a 15 year-old girl who has been an AIDS activist since she was five. She is introduced in a video montage that would make a supermodel blush: a music video montage of fast-cuts of magazine covers and magazine stories that have highlighted her work and accomplishments. A key frame for the story is her appearance at the “Essence Awards” to receive a special award recognizing her work. In this frame she is dressed in designer evening gown addressing a celebrity crowd and receiving celebrity-like adulation. The story even refers to her as a “celebrity.”

In this week’s worth of episodes, we also find a segment that introduces “student produced week” where viewers are invited to submit applications to fill a wide range of positions. Again the framing of this segment makes a significant comment on both the program’s radical individualism and celebrity. Three of the celebrity anchors join forces to tell viewers that, even though they are all unique, what they secretly share in common is that they achieved their anchor status by first appearing on the show as guest anchors during a previous “student produced week.” This segment can be viewed as accomplishing several dimensions of “celebrity” work. It can be seen as simultaneously reinforcing their celebrity status as having been chosen from among the multitudes for their positions; it makes the assumption that the viewers want to be like them; and it heightens viewer identification with them by offering symbolic access to them and to their status through the possibility of becoming part of student produced week and of the show itself.

This segment, which can be understood in relationship to the program’s insistent focus on “oneness,” also provides an opportunity to consider how the show handles the relationship between “radical individualism” and “belongingness” or social interdependence. Clearly, in the “student produced week” segment, celebrity is offered up as both the height of “radical individualism” as well as an exclusive club made up of radical individuals. When we turn to the question of belonging and begin to look for instances of belonging across the episodes, what becomes clear is that the first and foremost form of belonging is to belong to the Channel One team or club or cult. Almost everything that happens on the show is primarily a vehicle for developing the relationships between the anchors, and vicariously between the viewers and the anchors. Consider, for instance, how the extended on-location coverage of the new peace accords in Ireland is summarized by one anchor as “what a great experience” for the anchor who went to Northern Ireland to cover the story. When other images of “belonging” show up, we see that they are quickly distinguished into “good” belonging and “bad” belonging.

Interestingly, good belonging has two seemingly antithetical dimensions: a “tribal” kind of belonging and a “scientific brotherhood” kind of belonging. The kinship of tribal belonging is clearly the belongingness of the celebrity anchors, but it is also spread through numerous advertising messages ranging from the Silk Effects girl living “with guys,” to the Pepsi girl as hip black DJ bringing a town together through music, to the group of boys in the Pepsi ads that journey from car cruising to being stranded in the desert to back slapping each other over their good fortune of encountering a celebrity in the desert bearing soda, to the carnivalesque JoyCam ads where young adults dance around poles, jump into a swimming pool and even parody a tribal dance in the swimming pool wearing not primitive but science-fiction masks.

Good belongingness along the lines of “scientific brotherhood” emerges primarily in news stories where science as a team effort marked by consensus is constantly reinforced by regularly referring to scientists in the plural, by citing scientists as speaking together as in “scientists say,” by calling attention to international cooperation among scientists, and by using phrases like “working together.” When the context of the conversation switches from commercials and science to politics, there is a dramatic shift in the image of belonging. To belong to the group of protestors in the story on the WTO or the groups...
involved in the protest against British rule of Ireland and Northern Ireland is to become linked to chaos and violence. In the domain of politics, good groups are officially sanctioned groups. Bad groups are those that challenge the established order.

**Representations of Activism**

To examine how activism is represented in *Channel One* programming, we can look at how activism is explicitly and implicitly defined in the news content, what kinds of activities are presented as legitimate or appropriate political action, and the value of individual versus collective action. The events of the last week of November 1999 provide a wealth of potential lessons about national and global politics and citizens’ role in the political process. In presenting its version of these events, what kinds of representations of engaged citizen action does *Channel One* construct?

At the most basic level, we might ask simply who is an activist and how is activism defined? In the news programming aired during the week, only one person in any *Channel One* story is identified as an activist: 15 year-old Hydeia Broadbent, who is introduced as “an AIDS awareness activist on a mission to save lives.” As we travel with *Channel One* to Seattle on December 2 to witness the aftermath of massive demonstrations against the WTO, we are presented with a montage of images of citizens marching, chanting, singing, and carrying banners—all sights, sounds, and behaviors we might associate with street-level activism—while teen anchor Gotham Chopra (who was not alive during the youth movements of the 1960s) rhetorically links the action in Seattle to anti-Vietnam War activism. Yet, while participants in the WTO mobilization are referred to seven times as “protesters” and identified four times as “demonstrators,” they, unlike Hydeia, are never labeled “activists.” Similarly, in the Northern Ireland story all traces of “activists” and “activism” have been entirely erased. In the cursory history of the struggle in the region constructed by *Channel One*, activists do not play a role on either side. The source of the conflict is “hatred” and “violence” of an unspecified nature.

What definition of activism emerges when we “read” this week’s worth of programming? We could infer a definition based on what *Channel One* says activism is: In the case of the AIDS activist, it is the work of one remarkable individual (a “small voice with a big message” demonstrating how “the power of one voice is ringing out to save lives”) using her celebrity status to reach people and “spread knowledge.” Or we might define activism based on what, according to *Channel One*, it is not: Protesting or participating in a demonstration, for example, is not identified as activism. In keeping with most media coverage of the spectacle over the substance of the protests, participants in the WTO mobilization were defined in terms of the event, not the issues they brought to the discussion. *Channel One*’s presentation of the story disconnects the activists who came to Seattle from their ongoing work on various struggles and narrowly categorizes them based on their activities on November 30. So participants were not environmental, labor, or human rights activists, but simply an undifferentiated mass called “demonstrators” or “protestors.”

**Acting Appropriately**

Taking a step back and locating activism within the larger context of engaged political participation, what lessons might these representations teach about active citizenship? Specifically, we can ask who, according to *Channel One*, can be politically active, and when is action appropriate? Who can have influence over the political realm, and how should that influence be wielded?

Several direct and implicit lessons emerge when we read this week’s programming. We learn, for example, that appropriate political action does not take place in the streets, but (in the case of AIDS activism) at school assemblies and celebrity events like the Essence Awards. It does not involve banners, chanting, or slogans, it does not call for action (beyond personal action), and it does not make any demands. Unlike other AIDS activists, Hydeia does not make appeals for more money for AIDS research, better access to affordable treatment, more or better prevention programs, and
so on. And appropriate political activity most certainly is not militant action or armed struggle (as in the case of “violence” in Seattle or the conflict in Ireland).

Instead, legitimate, appropriate, and effective political action is undertaken by celebrities and political elites. In the AIDS story, Hydeia is credible and effective because like a “movie star or singer” she has “magazine covers, autographs, and too many awards to display.” And in Northern Ireland, political change is credited to the intervention of former U.S. Senator George Mitchell (Democrat—Maine) and the decision for leaders on both sides to come to the negotiating table to craft an agreeable settlement. Citizen action or participation is not part of the equation. This message is most clearly communicated in the WTO story, where “political and business leaders from around the world” provide all of the answers to the problems of globalization and “free trade.”

Citizen empowerment—taking matters into one’s own hands through some sort of direct political engagement—stands firmly outside of the realm of appropriate political action. Citizens demanding that their voices be heard outside the WTO conference are condemned for causing a “disturbance” and “unrest,” thus leading police to (justifiably) “crack down” and take a “harder line with protesters.” The visuals from Seattle show in graphic detail the consequences of unauthorized citizen empowerment: shattered storefront windows at downtown corporate mega-chains, flaming dumpsters in the street, and young people openly defiant of authority. The message: too much citizen participation is a dangerous thing. Similarly, militant action on both sides of the Northern Ireland conflict is described only as “countless acts of violence” without any explanation of the politics driving the use of extreme tactics. In each case, the lesson for the young citizens who watch Channel One is that many social/political problems are beyond their control. “Problems” that can be “solved” will be addressed by elites through appropriate official channels (or will take care of itself through the glories of the “free” market); problems that somehow defy any this solution must simply be passively accepted.

**Individual versus Collective Action**

The representations of activism found in this week’s programming suggest that effective political participation ought to take the form not of collective action directed at structural change, but individual efforts that encourage highly individualistic “solutions.” The lesson for student viewers is that you don’t achieve political efficacy by joining with fellow citizens to collectively address problems or effect change. Instead, we learn that we ought to put our faith in celebrities and political elites, the market, or science—not ourselves or each other—to solve problems. The young AIDS activist, as noted above, epitomizes the idea of the “Power of One”: while activism typically isn’t thought of as a solitary pursuit, there is no evidence in the story to suggest that she is part of any sort of AIDS awareness community. There is, apparently, no Hydeia Broadbent foundation, nor does her profile suggest that she is affiliated with any other organizations or activists. Rather than depicting her working with others to address one of the world’s most serious public health crisis, Channel One takes us into her bedroom, inviting us to see her as a private individual working on a one-woman/girl campaign.

We would expect to see just the opposite in Seattle, where we find 50,000 people engaged in collective mass action. Yet when we see protesters up close we get a very different picture. Channel One presents a series of quick cuts between interviews with individual, unnamed protesters who are allowed no more than a sentence or two to describe their personal “issue” with the WTO. No attempt is made to establish links between the various issues or between the participants. Demonstrators are presented as disconnected individuals with discrete agendas. Despite the convergence of hundreds of well-known and readily identifiable activist groups in Seattle, not a single organization is mentioned in the story. Any sense of consensus or coalition—arguably the defining features of the Seattle protests—is completely erased.

So when, if ever, is collective action appropriate? The examples in Channel One news content featuring young citizens working collectively are all found outside of the traditional political arena. In a “Get a Job” news story, for example, we see students working together to help their classmates find holiday
Critical Deliberation versus Fate

To examine the contribution of these Channel One programs to the task of critical deliberation central to a participatory idea of democracy, we can look at representations of what counts as knowledge, the process of deliberation versus fate, and the criteria of evaluation. Perhaps the most consistent message student viewers get about what knowledge means, according to Channel One programming, is that there are two kinds of knowledge: Adult knowledge and kids’ knowledge. Let’s look at both.

Adult knowledge is fragmented, disconnected, often grim, has to do with lots of jumbled together numbers, is not subject to debate or challenge, and is mostly absurd. How is this communicated? On the surface, Channel One offers an extremely clear model of a neo-liberal idea of knowledge: fact-based and compartmentalized—some might say, fragmented and disjointed. Each day the opening headlines summarize three events in extremely compressed, decontextualized sentences. These “headline” stories are not returned to in the program and may or may not be addressed later in the week. They stand as near meaningless bulletins which the viewer is encouraged to understand as important enough to have heard of, but not important enough to know about in any detail or depth. From the headlines each episode turns to a quote for the day, again typically decontextualized, with no necessary connection to the stories that follow.

If a student viewer attempts to follow whatever complexity or contextualization is offered in a story such as the Italian art restoration story or the WTO protest story, they are rebuffed for their efforts when each story turns to the Pop Quiz segment. For instance, the art restoration story is reduced in the pop quiz to a multiple-choice question on “what is a fresco?” The WTO protest story is reduced to the multiple-choice question “Where is Seattle?” The message that adult knowledge is decontextualized and irrelevant knowledge is particularly well illustrated by a news story on solar flares that could potentially disrupt telecommunication systems on earth. After a mini-documentary on solar flares and a video montage including many images of satellites, spaceships, astronauts, and extraterrestrial objects, the segment moves to the pop quiz. This pop quiz question is to be delivered by a guest on the show, a teacher whose class won a previous Channel One midterm exam contest. The teacher, a heavy-set middle-age woman, is essentially forklifted onto the set, sitting on a small stool suspended above the ground. From this awkward perch, the teacher poses the pop quiz question “How many earths would fit in the base of a solar flare?” Not only is the question irrelevant to the story—irrelevant in terms of issues such as our increasing social and economic dependence on communication technology and the potential impacts of disruptions to these systems—it is also irrelevant to the effort made in the story to connect it (albeit in a self-centered and individualistic way [solar flares might disrupt the use of pagers and cell phones]) to the lives of the young viewers. The teacher is made to look absurd, and the invented math problem simply requires the formulaic manipulation of meaningless numbers to arrive at a meaningless result.

In sum, adult knowledge is presented as absurd, authoritarian, and irrelevant. Kid knowledge, mostly available through commercials, on the other hand, is rich with relevant and useful information. It delivers on knowledge about how to present oneself (Clearasil), how to negotiate relationships with the opposite sex (Clearasil, Pepsi, Silk Effects), and how to achieve power and esteem (Marines, JoyCam). It also validates one’s experience as the basis for active knowledge, and, perhaps most importantly, it communicates how kid knowledge can be used to challenge and even defeat authority, authoritarian knowledge, and adult knowledge. It is also a world where kids are not controlled by scientific knowledge and authority, but draw on this knowledge to empower themselves.
Consider the Marine advertisement, for instance, where kid knowledge, knowledge based on good looks, computer game literacy, and physical prowess is used to defeat evil—an evil which is part machine and part monster. In the Silk Effects ad, the authority of adults is challenged by “living with guys” and the authority of guys is challenged by physically fighting for territory and finally asserting the right to be a sexual object. Or consider the JoyCam ad where young people control technology (the high tech camera) for their own authority-challenging purposes—which have to do with sensuality, wild abandon, and a heightened sense of “identity.” This sensual, emotional, individual idea of knowledge is also evoked in the news, but not in as nearly a positive context. For instance, when a Channel One reporter went to Northern Ireland to report on the status of a new peace accord, she interviewed a number of young people. The knowledge she elicited was primarily about feelings, emotions, and individual reactions. And these feelings and emotions, unlike the ads, focused the interviewees’ attention on fear, loss, and helplessness.

On the one hand, we have knowledge as endless numbers and meaningless facts that must be learned by rote in the service of authority; on the other, we have knowledge as the experience of the body in the service of sensual liberation, where the truth of kid knowledge is established not by distant experts, but by the judgment of a “tribe” of friends and relationships. Perhaps the most significant statement about the value of adult knowledge comes in the format of the midterm exam contest, where the categories for competition are “who, what, when, where, or whatever.” In this standard list of the five “W’s” of journalism, the last “w”—the “why” of events that probes their meaning and context—is replaced with the ironic and detached coolness of “whatever.”

The Process of Deliberation

When we deconstructed this week's worth of Channel One programming, searching for examples that modeled the act of deliberation or actually invited deliberation, the first lesson that became clear was that almost no thinking is required. And certainly no critical evaluation. In the few rare examples where student viewers are invited to think—such as when each program opens with headlines of the day, or when the pop quiz is presented—the primary message is less about thinking than about the importance of speed. While the headlines are still framed, a small graphic in the lower corner counts down the seconds. At the end of the reading of each pop quiz question—a question that, with only one exception, required only rote memorization—the anchor announces “take ten” and a new countdown graphic begins. The idea of speed in general and speed in thinking or acting without thinking is a theme that is interwoven across the programming. For instance, in a Pokemon commercial, the safari guide tells his clients who are bumping along in the backseat of tan SUV: “Today’s assignment: photograph the elusive Pokemon . . . you’ve got to be fast!” In the news story on the human genome project, a featured scientist explains the value of the work as “. . . this is a dream come true for the gene disease hunter” because it will make the search for key genes “dramatically more efficient and rapid.”

In the few instances where the programming actually invites the student viewer to think, it is to think only in terms of feelings, not to think logically or rationally—and definitely not to think in terms that would evaluate the quality of information under consideration, the credibility of sources, or the logic of an argument. In the one moment where the “news” program asks student viewers to think beyond memorization or feelings (the solar flare math problem mentioned above), the idea of thinking is literally reduced to the idea of calculation. At the same time, in the introduction to the segment on solar flares, the anchor, after introducing the segment in a provocatively ambiguous manner, says: “If you think I’m talking about Y2K, you’re wrong.” Even the rare use of the word “think” is invoked only to let the viewer know that to “think” is to be a sucker.

Again looking over the week’s worth of programming searching for examples which modeled the act of deliberation or actually invited deliberation, a second lesson also became clear: The reason acts of deliberation are so hard to find was that in the structure of both the news and the commercials, the story
is almost always presented as taking place after a decision had been made. The question is not still pending, not still open to reflection. The question is not still up in the air. The debate is over. All that is left for young people is either to passively react (which is the predominant mode of telling the news) or act without thinking, impulsively (which is the predominant theme of the advertisements).

The only people that are portrayed or referred to as decision-makers or individuals engaged in deliberation are business and political elites. In the WTO protest story, the protesters are introduced as “demanding that their voices be heard.” The WTO representatives are introduced as “political and business leaders from around the world, whose decisions could affect millions of people.” In the Northern Ireland story, after the standard montage showing random acts of violence and images of soldiers attempting to control the situation, the story cuts away to a low-angled shot of an imposing and formal government building, and then to a shot of largely older, white men gathering around a conference table with the voice over, “leaders from both sides got together to form a government . . . .” Even in the WTO protest story, the anchor clearly, forcefully, and with the aid of graphics explains the few basic facts that “to understand all this you have to know.”

In this Channel One world—where thinking is mostly not allowed and where most decisions have already been made—perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising how prominently magic realism comes into play in both news and advertisements (Jameson, 1986). Consider the magical intervention of the celebrities in the limousines in the desert to solve the problem of thirst, or the Silk Effects razor that shifts the balance of power in the battle of the sexes in the favor of the young woman, or the ability of the young white Pepsi girl to take on the persona of the black DJ, or the JoyCam’s ability to transform an everyday pool party into a carnival of sensual abandon. Or consider the following “news” stories: the anchor introduces the Northern Ireland story with “In Northern Ireland this week a lot of people are having to pinch themselves to know that they aren’t dreaming . . . .” the scientist mentioned above who refers to the work of the human genome project as “a dream come true”; or the Cuba story that begins with the premise that “Elian Gonzalez is lucky to be alive . . . .” Luck and magic replace deliberation and action in a world where human consideration, reflection, and agency appear to have little impact. Or, as another scientist reminded the student viewers in the solar flare story, “we can’t do anything about it, we can’t do much to influence the sun.”

Paradoxically, science is presented as both impotent in the face of nature and capable of god-like intervention—e.g., the human genome project—in the control and redesign of nature. In both cases, however, science is offered up primarily as an act of discovery, not debatable social policy. And since science only discovers what nature has made, the idea that there might be debate or challenge to the priorities of scientific research or applications is presented as, again, outside the realm of critical deliberation. As the act of deliberation and critical reflection is portrayed as meaningless calculation or hopeless in the face of foregone conclusions or outside of the realm of experience or understanding of average young people and average adults, the world of impulsive action and magical intervention makes increasingly good sense.

Criteria of Evaluation

Given the lack of examples of deliberation—and given the overriding tone of foreclosed debate—it may seem silly to even raise the question as to what criteria are invoked for evaluating alternative courses of action or competing positions for decision-making to be made and for evaluation to be undertaken. However, these criteria are not entirely absent; they are just difficult to see because they are the taken-for-granted values that are assumed to have operated in determining whatever course of action was to be taken in the first place. For instance, in the Elian story, Elian’s flight with his mother is understood to be motivated by a desire for freedom. The meaning of freedom is not subjected to debate, although the news story implies that “freedom” means just “not-Cuban.” On occasion this high level of abstraction is reduced to concrete examples of what “freedom” or the lack of “freedom” means, as when a Channel One anchor interviews some Cuban-American teenagers now living in Miami. For
them, the lack of “freedom” means: “there wasn’t much to do.” Interestingly, the Northern Ireland “news” segment, in exploring the meaning of the long drawn out civil war and the lack of peace, was able to come up with nearly the same lament among Northern Irish teenagers. The lack of “peace” meant it was hard to find places to “hang out.”

Criteria tend to be vague abstracts such as “freedom,” “peace,” “democracy,” and “law and order”—all of which tend not to be immediately visible and certainly not open to discussion or debate about their meaning or application. When abstract values are given some concrete manifestation, it is typically in the form of emotional or sensual feelings. A case like the Marine ad illustrates, in an exaggerated form, the extent to which the actual meaning of abstract values remains largely irrelevant. In the Marine ad, there is only good and evil. The basis of “goodness” is entirely blank, appearing to be mostly associated with allegiance to the United States. The basis of evil seems only to have vaguely to do with monsters, enslavement, and rusty machines.

Evaluation of alternative courses of action or positions is primarily constructed around how it feels to oneself. It is never based on issues of process about who is included or excluded from the decision-making or on the consequences of alternatives to other people or ecosystems. Even in the WTO protest story, which provides visual illustrations of charges of injustice and exploitation against multinational corporations by the activists, the overall story itself is framed by and closed by a primary consideration as to whether the activists are behaving in a legal and orderly manner. Perhaps not surprisingly in the commercial world of the Channel One programming, decisions are made, or appear to have been made, in the interests of individual emotion and physical satisfaction. At the same time, it is also clear that “tribal allegiance” is a critical criteria, whether in choosing to be part of the poolside carnival, the Pepsi community of music, the Cuban-American community, or the missed opportunity of belonging to the world of celebrity elites who cruise through the desert in their limousines looking for others with whom to share their colas. Judgments based on a grounded sense of social justice, political justice, and ethical responsibility within a democratic community are not on the map.

“Free Market” Ideology versus Democracy

What explicit and implicit citizenship lessons are taught by Channel One with respect to the relationship between democracy and the market? Here we will need to take into account the representations of choice, freedom, and the idea of the “public.” At the same time, we will need to consider the ways in which both journalism and education are represented as institutions connected to the practice of democracy. And, of course, we will have to keep in the forefront of our analysis the recognition that there are several meanings to democracy itself.

“Free market” capitalism is set in opposition to democratic values in Channel One programming, but, instead of democracy prevailing, capitalist ideology does. To deconstruct these discourses, it is necessary to discuss what constitutes free market ideology and democratic ideology. To grossly oversimplify, “free market” capitalism is considered by its proponents (classical economists, neo-liberals, and mainstream scientists) to be a rational system in which autonomous actors in the marketplace act in their individual best interests. When added together, these interests serve larger social interests. Society is conceived as a collection of autonomous individuals behaving “selfishly.” They believe that the “invisible hand” of the economy guides their actions in a rational, non-regulated structure. The market is thought to be “free” due to the relative lack of government/public oversight. Individuals and their capital/money do just fine on their own. Democratic values, in contrast, are such that citizens make political and social decisions based on deliberation, informed action, and consensus. This action can take the form of voting in elections or other forms of activism that serve the larger society. Things such as education, health care, welfare, and meaningful and life-sustaining work are democratic values. Getting ahead, competition, profit, cutting costs, and individual success are market values. How are these ideas conveyed in Channel One’s programming for the week?
The Meaning of the “Public”

Structurally speaking, the first and most powerful statement about the meaning of the public is communicated to students simply by the presence of Channel One in the classrooms. It is an entrepreneurial activity, not unlike setting up a hot dog stand in each classroom, with a clear, if not overbearing, corporate and brand identity. The “public,” non-commercial space of the schools, once seen as an integral value of public education, is now shared with commerce. Commerce, in symbolic terms compatible to neo-liberalism, comes to share the idea of “publicness” with public education. And, given the enormous production costs per second of Channel One programming, the technical and marketing resources at its disposal in creating a stimulating, even seductive, kid-friendly message, and its non-existent demand on student intellect and student discipline, it would seem to make “normal” public classroom time appear quite dismal by comparison.

The market, it would seem, can do a much better job of occupying “public” space than inefficient, stodgy, overpaid, non-charismatic, public service bureaucrats—formally known as “teachers.” In the one week of programming we examined, only one teacher appeared on the program. And, as mentioned above, both the context of her appearance and the content of her presence made a clear distinction between Channel One’s idea of “public” education—which seemed to mean mostly hip, fun, sexy, popular, and easy—and the impossibly unhip, out-of-it, irrelevant, wanna-be-hip school teacher’s “public” education.

Indeed, the full structural message about the new neo-liberal meaning of “public” is carried forward by the presence of the advertisements themselves. Video advertisements are now a “natural” part of public space, as natural as their ever-dominant presence outside the classroom. In fact, the “naturalness” of advertising is one of the most important defenses put forward both by Channel One spokespersons and by administrations defending their Channel One contracts: advertisements are everywhere, so students might as well get used to it.

At the same time, the regular inclusion of “public” service announcements such as the “Just Say No” anti-drug commercials also communicate that “public” service is a natural component of the commercial world and an indication of Channel One’s commitment to be a responsible steward of “public” space. And even the military ads such as the Marine recruitment ad repeated throughout the week can be read as a quasi-public service announcement in that it is a celebration of patriotism and a call to duty even though it was paid for by the military from tax dollars and represents a huge economic taxpayer subsidy to the commercial media. The nature of the “patriotism” that is being celebrated and the quality of “duty” one is called to are certainly open to debate and consideration. These ads also contribute to a reconstruction of the meaning of “public” away from a democratic, interdependent, deliberative, and critically reflective space and toward the more individual, non-reflective, and product-friendly world of the “free” market.

In addition to the movement of commercialism staking its natural and even righteous claim to “public” space, we also found science presented as a synonym for “public” interest. In various stories, science was working hard to, if not control, at least warn all of “us” about the dangers of solar flares, monitor and fight the spread of AIDS, and correct the “misspellings” which create genetic disorders. In the meantime, in one-sentence headlines spread across the week, the student viewer was told that science was finding T-rex bones in South Dakota, helping Russians with their Y2K problems, and safely landing a space probe on Mars. Science and the market made what appeared to be natural claims on the true meaning of the idea of “publicness.” Conversely, when the student viewer was confronted with images of people gathered together in groups in Northern Ireland or Seattle—something that might be understood as a “public”—the “public” was portrayed in terms of violent and disorderly mobs.

Another important way in which Channel One reconstructed our idea of the “public” was through the story it told about the meaning of “news.” Channel One reconfirmed for the student viewer that “news” is primarily what commercial news organizations tell us it is. In modeling the Channel One
format on a mix between a typical network evening news show and a typical network magazine format news show, the program teaches both that “news” is best left to corporate professionals and that the democratic part of news, the part that “informs,” is readily and easily separated from the commercial part of news such as advertisements. Again, science plays a critical role in this distinction by helping to convey that the “news” part of the program is quasi-scientific in its use of facts and graphics and in its “seeing is believing” approach. Science is presented as in the public interest and outside of politics (which is messy and dangerous); it is used as a kind of symbolic guarantee that the “news” too is in the “public” interest (although what that means has been seriously clouded) and outside of politics. When news anchor Gotham Chopra physically and symbolically stands in the space between the police and the demonstrators in Seattle, he is symbolically articulating that he—along with Channel One itself—is simply a disinterested reporter of facts: facts in the neo-liberal “public” interest.

Freedom of Choice: The Market as Democracy?

At the very heart of the conflict between the various meanings of democracy and the free market are the concepts of freedom and choice. The deep and driving idea of freedom that underpins liberal and neo-liberal thinking is freedom from. Historically, this was seen as freedom from unjust or excessive political authority, such as the authority of kings and non-representative government. But, in more general terms, it has come to mean that the ideal of freedom is freedom from all restraints. One can see the obvious historical influence of this view in the development of “free” market thinking and proselytizing. One can also see the surprising link between the ideology of WTO free marketeers, the black hooded anarchists in the street, and the costumed teens in the JoyCam ad dancing wildly around the pool. But one can also see the threat of this kind of “total freedom” thinking to any form of government, community, and to the market itself. Total freedom from is the end of all rules, all responsibilities, all limits, and all contracts. The main question becomes: how does one temper the anarchistic tendencies of freedom from? Where and under what circumstances are individuals and groups to be given the opportunity to express this total freedom from restraint? This has become the great dividing line in the development of the competing models of democracy that we have looked at. Within neo-liberalism, the free-market is offered up as both the standard of total freedom (complete deregulation) and as the means of regulating that freedom (let the market decide). Of course, this can’t work: once there are no rules, even a market can’t operate because there is no authority to enforce even the contractual conditions of a sale, much less protect the property one calls his or her own.

Choice is a “freedom” held dear to most Americans. In a democratic context of liberal pluralism, choice suggests that citizens have the freedom to choose their representative. Choices in both the political sphere and in the market are exalted. In the AIDS Day story, HIV/AIDS is referred to as “a disease of choice.” Hydeia is presented as an “innocent” victim having become infected prenatally by a intravenous-drug-using birth mother, while persons contracting AIDS through sexual contact or drug use are characterized as “stupid” and thus deserving of the fatal illness. She chastises teenagers: “If you’re stupid enough to get AIDS, you will.” Students internalize this message, and one girl is quoted as saying: “I learned that AIDS is a disease of choice, and I choose to protect myself.” The notion of choice is grafted onto an individualizing discourse to produce a social health issue stripped of its social and political context and displaced solely into the realm of choice.

Similarly, the Elian story constructs a discourse of U.S. market values as globally triumphant, although the story is ostensibly “about” democracy. Consider the interview clips from Elian’s family. While his father in Cuba promises to give the boy love, his Miami relatives pledge love, “plus things like education [and] other stuff.” This is a curious statement. Although the story claims otherwise, Cuba’s youth are more educated than American children; they are all covered under national health care, as opposed to the millions of children in the United States without health insurance. Furthermore, the “other stuff” that she refers to is not elaborated on, but we have a clue. A Blue’s Clue, to be exact. Elian is shown wearing a colorful, sideways baseball cap and a brand new Blue’s Clues tee shirt. We deduce that these commercial commodities are the other “stuff” that the child may have growing up in the

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United States. The story also interviews several Cuban teenagers preparing boats to escape Cuba on their way to the U.S. They cite freedom as their reason for leaving, although the story does not clarify what types of freedoms they are in search of or are longing for.

The WTO story similarly privileges market values over democratic values. The trade representatives, who were trying to expand global capitalism and the “free market,” escape criticism, while demonstrators demanding that these leaders make decisions subject to democratic processes are depicted as dangerous and uninformed. The focus on property destruction is telling. President Clinton chastises protestors for “vandalizing ... small businesses,” although only the windows of specifically targeted multinational corporations, such as Starbucks and McDonald’s, were destroyed. From one perspective, the transnational corporations’ right to property is valued above the collective democratic action of the people.

The market reigns supreme in the “Get a Job” story as we witness kids in their blue blazers and khakis experience the embarrassment of selling oneself to a prospective employer. We see students rehearsing the wage labor behavior that places temporary and contingent teenaged workers at the mercy of a Chick-Fil-A owner. The kids are depicted as needing to work not because they need to contribute to their family’s income in a meaningful way, nor because they need to put themselves through college. Rather, they want to work so they can “buy a car so [my] mom doesn’t have to drive me everywhere.” They are working not for empowerment, but rather to gain market power—to buy cars and clothes.

**Where Do we Go from here?**

We began with what appeared to be, on the surface, a simple question. Given the rising tide of political apathy among young people, what lesson does news teach—particularly news produced for young people—about what it means to be a democratic citizen? The question, as it turned out, was anything but simple, and led us to a reconsideration of the meanings of citizenship, news, and the relationship between democracy and capitalism, citizenship, and consumerism. At the end of this journey we were left with a very different question—a question that makes demands on us as media educators to seriously consider the intersection between civic education and the rising tide of commercialism in the schools. Our argument was that commercialism in the public schools is a new, pervasive, and unexamined civic education curriculum with significant implications for how we teach our children to think about citizenship and how we will reinvent the meaning of democracy. As media educators, we need to distinguish between and among competing models of democracy as we develop our lesson plans and teach. We need to understand that the question of commercialism in the schools cannot simply be seen as the province of some well-intended but extremist liberals who don’t understand the realities of school funding. In other words, the territory of civic education must be seen as unavoidably the territory of media education.

We conclude with two suggestions. First, never watch or read Channel One, “CNN Student News,” or any other news sources produced for students as stand-alone examples of “current events.” All of these commercial (and even non-commercial “public”) sources are loaded with political ideology both in structure and content. If the programs are to be watched, they need to be counterbalanced on a daily basis with news that has been developed from a strong democracy perspective. But this, of course, means that students can distinguish between various models of democracy. Our second suggestion is that we need to think about, debate, and imagine what news should be—for adults as well as for young people. Holding examples of adult commercial news production up as ideals for young people to aspire to and emulate is worse that asking the wrong question. It is asking no question at all about what news is, should be, or who or what purpose it serves. The idea of news as simply being about informing people with a suffocating avalanche of facts—or factoids—occasionally dressed up with celebrity, sex, humor, graphics, irony, and violence teaches students to understand democracy as absurd, irrelevant, and best replaced with the social bonds of some form of new tribalism, whether it be a tribalism based on drugs, sex, religion, mysticism, or consumer goods. If news is to be seen as more than information,
if it is to be seen as one of the great means of communication in modern society by which a community, a society, and a public comes to a consciousness of itself as an interdependent community, an interdependent society, and an interdependent public, then we must rethink the idea of news. At the barest minimum, we need to add to the task of the news, not just the requirement that it be a watchdog of government, but that it also be a watchdog of the ways in which the interests of economics intersect with, conflict with, and potentially undermine the interests of participatory democracy.

More broadly, the critical role the news plays in both defining citizenship—and potentially modeling active citizenship—must be recognized. News must be seen and practiced much more as a public forum of many voices and interests than as an oracle of truth handed down from political elites and supposedly disinterested science filtered through the constraints of a for-profit market. As Dewey (1929) wrote: “Shared experience is the greatest of human goods” (p. 145). Our humanity begins in our capacity and practice of language, in our ability as social beings to make sense of the world. Our humanity is sustained in recognizing that, in an imperfect world, our best hope for justice is in constantly returning to the collective wisdom of a community of free men and women. In these terms, can consumerism ever become a substitute for critical, participatory citizenship?

COLUMBIA ONLINE CITATION: HUMANITIES STYLE
http://www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/ejournals/simile (insert access date here).

COLUMBIA ONLINE CITATION: SCIENTIFIC STYLE
http://www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/ejournals/simile (insert access date here).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
Carl Bybee is the director of the Oregon Media Literacy Project and an associate professor of Communication Studies in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon. His current research focus is on helping youth find a new vocabulary for becoming engaged, democratic citizens drawing on the connections between news, entertainment, media literacy and new models of active democracy. Ashley Fogle is a research associate with the Center and is completing her Ph.D. work at the University of Oregon. She is currently studying media representations of popular resistance to neo-liberal globalization. Christine Quail is also a research associate with the Center completing her Ph.D. work at the University of Oregon. In addition to her research on the political economics of new technology infrastructure, she is teaching media literacy and research at Brooklyn College.

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