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Conservatives clash over advertising in schools.

Changing the Channel

By RUSS BAKER

THE FOLKS AT Channel One—the “televisions in the classroom” company—probably never imagined they’d be celebrating their tenth anniversary with a vicious battle against a most unlikely foe.

Back in 1989, Channel One, the brainchild of entrepreneur Chris Whittle, came on like gangbusters, offering advertisers new opportunities to reach teenage consumers and giving cash-strapped schools a cost-effective way to acquire audiovisual equipment. Channel One would lend schools TV sets, videotape players, and school-wide broadcasting apparatuses that could double as high-tech public-address systems. In return, the schools’ students would watch Channel One’s daily twelve-minute broadcast, which consisted of ten minutes of current-events programming and two minutes of advertising, often sold at network-level rates. As the then-president of Channel One would boast to a youth-marketing conference in 1994, “[T]he advertiser gets a group of kids who cannot go to the bathroom, who cannot change the station, who cannot listen to their mother yell in the background, who cannot be playing Nintendo, who cannot have their headsets on.”

Not surprisingly, this concept was fairly controversial, particularly among liberals. When Channel One was founded in 1989, liberal programming activists and consumer rights crusaders immediately raised a stink. A coalition of 50 organizations—including the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the American Academy of Pediatrics—formed to oppose Channel One. But Channel One weathered the storm, and most of its liberal opponents eventually moved on to other issues. Meanwhile, Whittle sold Channel One to Primedia in 1994. Today, it is watched by 40 percent of American teenagers.

But Channel One faces a new threat. This time, though, it comes not from the left but from the right. Groups such as the Family Research Council, founded by Gary Bauer, and Focus on the Family, headed up by the activist James Dobson, are campaigning to dramatically alter Channel One, if not to shut it down completely. So are Reverend Donald Wildmon’s American Family Association and Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum. In June, the 15.9-million-member Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution condemning Channel One and urging parents “to seek effective

ways to protect their children from the advertising assault of the network.”

And the network is running scared. Unlike the situation ten years ago, when Channel One was able to more or less ignore the initial storm of protests against it, this time the company has had to launch an aggressive counteroffensive. Which raises the question: Has Channel One finally met its match?

THE CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH against Channel One began in December 1994, when Pat Ellis, an Alabama housewife and conservative Republican, discovered that her two sons were obliged to watch the daily twelve-minute Channel One broadcasts at their school. Ellis was alarmed that a large corporation could dictate curriculum without local input and that the curriculum included proselytizing to schoolchildren on behalf of junk food, violent movies, and other products. She also became upset when her sons came home talking about how it might make sense to legalize drugs—an opinion they got, apparently, from seeing a Channel One interview with Joycelyn Elders. Within a year, Ellis, with the help of local business leaders, clergy, and parents, had persuaded her school system to turn off Channel One.

In the spring of 1996, Ellis enlisted the aid of Jim Metrock, a prominent Alabama businessman who was one of the founding board members of the Business Council of Alabama and who had recently written an op-ed on “trash TV” for the *Birmingham News*. Although Metrock knew nothing about Channel One, his son informed him that he’d been watching the broadcasts in school for three years. Metrock was incensed by the mandated use of class time for watching commercials; he dedicated Obligation, Inc., his vest-pocket nonprofit group, to expelling Channel One from Alabama classrooms. Over the past two years, the group has done just that, persuading a number of Alabama’s school systems to either dump Channel One or simply broadcast it before the day’s first bell. Metrock estimates that 75,000 students in Alabama who used to watch Channel One no longer do so. Not content to restrict their efforts to Alabama, Metrock and Ellis successfully lobbied one of their senators, Republican Richard Shelby, to hold hearings on Channel One in May 1999, and the two courted support from national conservative groups.

Not surprisingly, Channel One didn't take this lying down. To counter the growing campaign against it, the company hired former Christian Coalition executive-turned-consultant Ralph Reed to shore up its conservative credentials. Not long after that, the pro-business Citizens Against Government Waste issued a press release in support of Channel One, and Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, wrote a sympathetic op-ed about the network for *The Washington Times*.

But it was in Alabama that the Channel One counter-offensive mobilized most visibly. Earlier this year, a seemingly spontaneous conservative grassroots movement emerged in support of the network. Judson Hill, a former official of Promise Keepers, the men's Christian movement, sent out a memo to a handful of fellow conservatives assert-

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ing that Planned Parenthood was lobbying against Channel One. (Planned Parenthood officials say the national organization has never taken a position on Channel One.) The Reverend Lou Sheldon of the California-based anti-homosexual and anti-abortion group Traditional Values Coalition (TVC), who had initially opposed Channel One, sent out a 15-minute video to Alabama pastors in support of it. (TVC was recently in the news when the *Orange County Register* reported that the California Fair Political Practices Commission had found that gambling interests secretly paid Sheldon's son to generate religious opposition to new, competing card clubs. Sheldon insists that TVC's positions on both issues are based on their respective merits and that TVC has "not received one single penny" from Channel One.) And Alabama talk radio, Christian, and country-and-western stations began carrying ads emphasizing Channel One's conservative credentials. "Channel One ... tells teens to turn their backs on drugs, reject violence, and abstain from sex before marriage," proclaimed one ad. "And it's working.... But some on the radical left want Congress to ban such programming. Call Senator Richard Shelby ... and tell him to stand up for Channel One's right to teach our kids to say no to drugs and no to sex before marriage."

JEFF BALLABON, a Channel One executive vice president, denied funding the Alabama pressure campaign. Rather, the sponsor of the radio ads appears to be Dax Swatek, the only person publicly identified with a previously unknown group called the Coalition to Protect Our Children. As a 28-year-old law student, though, Swatek wouldn't appear to have the resources to mount such an effort, and Metrock's camp says that a well-connected consulting firm, the McWhorter Group, was involved in developing the campaign against Channel One. The firm's head, Pat McWhorter, declined to say whether he had done any work on Channel One's behalf or whether he had any ties to Swatek.

But when my research assistant made a separate call to McWhorter's office and asked for Swatek, a receptionist offered to provide his cell-phone number or even patch the call through to him. Swatek did not return messages left on his voice mail or with a man who said he was Swatek's roommate. The impression that Metrock and other opponents have is that Channel One is directly behind the Alabama effort but works through middlemen.

Ballabon insists that it's Channel One's critics who are deceptive: "There's a lot of lying about us that goes on." He called the network's critics little more than a few "rabble-rousers," and claims that Channel One supporters feel harassed and threatened by Metrock.

Metrock, a genial man who chooses his words carefully, is undeterred by such remarks. For one thing, he's convinced that the more parents learn about Channel One, the more they'll want to get it out of their children's classrooms. Moreover, Metrock is encouraged that he and other conservatives have found common cause with some liberals, such as Ralph Nader, in their opposition to the network. According to Metrock, it's just a matter of time before he and his allies, old and new, bring the network down. ■

RUSS BAKER is a New York-based investigative journalist. Additional reporting by Rachel Tsutsumi.