

In the Corporate Interest: The YNN Experience in Canadian Schools

**Edited by Erika Shaker,
CCPA Education Project**

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Who Owns Our Schools?

In the winter 2000 issue [Adbusters #28] you write: "In Canada, the provinces of New Brunswick and Manitoba have declared that the Youth News Networks, a Canadian version of Channel One, will not be allowed in public school classrooms." But the story in Canada is far from over.

The province of Quebec has forbidden schools to contract with Athena Educational partners (AEP) Inc, (the company that is now organizing YNN), but it is individual school boards that have the power to set curriculum. The government used an old provision that forbids all commercial messages in schools, a provision widely flouted by schools and students alike. Three schools in Quebec have signed contracts with AEP.

Schools in Manitoba have also signed up with AEP. The province of British Columbia is opposed to the AEP

initiative and no schools have signed on. Nova Scotia and New Brunswick recently elected conservative governments, so the winds there may be blowing fair for commercialism in schools. So far, the governments of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Newfoundland/Labrador have raised no objection: schools in those provinces will participate.

Interested readers can follow the drama via AEP's web-site, www.ynn.ca, where there is a link to my own site, which has links to some of the more prominent critics. Preliminary broadcasts to schools are expected to begin early this millennium.

—Les McLean
Toronto, Ontario
From *ADBUSTERS* Spring 2000,
Volume 8 No 1

Introduction

YNN News Program

YNN is a daily educational program designed to increase student awareness about news and current events from a Canadian youth perspective.

In high schools participating in the YNN program, students will be able to view 10 minutes of current events news programming produced specifically for young people by media professionals, and in a format that they will find entertaining and informative. As part of the daily telecast, a maximum of two minutes of pre-approved commercial messages and a 30-second public service announcement delivering an educational or socially constructive message will also be shown.

YNN and its corporate partners and advertisers provide participating schools with an average of \$150,000 worth of equipment at no cost to the schools. This equipment includes a television set in every teaching area, a satellite dish, an internal video distribution network, and an interactive computer lab equipped with 15-30 computers, a server, network hardware, a printer and software. Schools will also receive television production equipment that will allow them to set up a functional in-school television studio for student productions.

(<http://www.ynn.ca/aboutynn/aepynn/newsprog.html>)

* * *

Youth News Network was incorporated by Roderick MacDonald in 1990,

and began to approach Canadian schools with an offer similar to that of Channel One's in the United States. Schools would sign agreements with the company that, in return for the loan of video/audio and computer equipment, would require students to watch a daily news and current events program (10 minutes) and commercials (two minutes in the case of Channel One, two-and-a-half in the case of YNN).

YNN was unsuccessful in its first attempt to enter the Canadian school market for several reasons: Canadian schools did not experience the same degree of socioeconomic inequity as American schools and therefore had less need for outside sources of equipment; the importance of a well-funded public system holds a more significant place in Canadians' national identity; and massive commercial infiltration of public life was not as pervasive in Canada as it was in the United States.

For these reasons, YNN was unable to successfully penetrate the Canadian school market; it could not guarantee potential advertisers that the student market would be there, and it could not convince schools that the infrastructure would be up and running, supported by advertisers.

After several other half-hearted attempts, YNN reappeared in 1998 in its most organized effort to date. Athena Educational Partners (AEP) was incorporated in the fall of 1998 as a wholly-

owned subsidiary of Telescene Film Group, an entertainment company based in Montreal, PQ.

Athena Educational Partners (AEP Inc.) is a private, Canadian-owned company based in Montreal, dedicated to establishing a satellite-based national distance education network called YNN. It is a private sector initiative that provides a complete package of state-of-the-art technology, including hardware, software and educational content at no cost to participating high schools. Students, teachers and adult learners benefit from the latest technology through AEP's innovative solutions and educational tools.

(<http://www.ynn.ca/aboutynn/aepyinn/aepyinn.html>)

YNN would therefore be a product of Athena, and Telescene would cover the expenses, and provide the office space and the company infrastructure. Currently, Athena and Telescene share a president (Robin Spry), vice-president (Paul Painter), and a Montreal mailing address.

Telescene is quite open about its interest in YNN, as demonstrated in the following document taken from their 1999 annual report and investor information:

Youth News Network (YNN)

Telescene has taken a 100% interest in Youth News Network (YNN) by investing approximately \$500,000 to help it become a reality. YNN plans to create a national interactive educational network for Canadian high schools.

Participating schools will be equipped with in-classroom audio/video communications and computer equipment, and satellite and terrestrial communications links. The

network is expected to be Canada's first national classroom linking schools across the country. In essence, YNN will be comparable to Channel One in the U.S.

In addition to other programs, YNN will broadcast a daily 12.5-minute news and current affairs program aimed at high school students. The program is expected to be comprised of news, current events, quizzes and curriculum-related material. Other programming available is expected to include a Classroom Channel, which will produce or supply supplementary curriculum material, and an Educator's Channel, providing programmes on teaching techniques.

YNN is expected to derive revenue from i) the sale of 2.5 minutes of advertising on the news and current affairs programs; ii) the sale of interactive distance learning services; and iii) marketing and distribution of educational materials.

YNN believes approximately 80% of its revenue will be generated from advertising. Many large corporations have expressed interest in advertising on YNN, given the company's targeted demographic and difficulty in reaching teenagers through other media. There are approximately 2.3 million high school students in approximately 4,800 schools across Canada.

Telescene is interested in this project for several reasons: it believes YNN will be a success, creating significant value relative to its investment; it will enable the company to test concepts for teenage programming; and it will develop closer relationships with advertisers.

(Griffiths McBurney & Partners 6)

While Rod MacDonald, who still conducts the promotion for YNN and Athena—although he has no legal ownership of AEP—maintains that less than 15% of YNN's revenue will come from the advertising and commercial spon-

sorship, Telescene's own investor documents tell a very different story.

Telescene has future plans for YNN; in an interview in the **Financial Post**, Paul Painter was quoted as saying that Telescene intends to sell 60% of its shares in YNN within the next five years to finance the second stage of the project. (Hanson) This opens up the very distinct possibility that, while YNN may begin as "purely Canadian," there is absolutely no guarantee that it will remain that way. After all, according to Painter, "advertising interest has always been there. You just need eyeballs. We're looking at a heck of a lot more once we get into the program."

Telescene has also addressed the possibility—in fact, the financial need—of other corporate partners for ownership of YNN.

During the past fiscal year, the company instigated a search for new niche markets. That led us to finance a feasibility study of the Youth News Network, where our objective is to raise the awareness of Canadian current affairs by students across Canada while increasing the level of computer literacy

in Canadian schools. When the feasibility study is completed, Telescene's involvement in YNN will be assessed.

It is likely that YNN offers good long-term business potential. However, during the company's analysis of the variables involved in the project, it also became evident that YNN will require substantial funds both in the short-term and long-term. Because of this and because it is not Telescene's core business, Telescene will seek to associate itself with a company with more extensive financial resources in order to try and establish this profitable and socially constructive all-Canadian endeavour.

(Telescene Film Group 13)

Clearly, Telescene requires other corporate players to make YNN the reality it needs to be in order to guarantee company profits, but again it means that schools signing deals with Athena need to understand that there are other corporations involved—corporations which are as yet unknown. And this is extremely problematic when speaking of mass access to public education and to Canadian students.

Why the need for this YNN study?

Part of Athena's YNN promotion includes a study commissioned by the company to be conducted by Dr. Les McLean, Professor Emeritus of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Athena is paying OISE \$53,970 for this study, which is to be conducted six months after the first airing of the program in Canadian classrooms.

The OISE study is designed to replicate the study undertaken by the University of Michigan and commissioned by Channel One in 1992. This study was unable to examine the advertising on the commercial classroom program, but instead could only focus on the reaction to and use of the current events programming in school.

Results from the study determined that, while there was a very slight increase in the knowledge of current events by students in Channel One schools over students in non-Channel One schools, it was "educationally insignificant." Furthermore, at-risk students were least impacted by the presence of Channel One—the very students that the company claimed would be most helped. And finally, Channel One had the greatest impact on the knowledge of current events with students whose teachers made an effort to incorporate the program into the curriculum; clearly, it is the teacher who positively impacts the learning of students far more than the presence of Channel One.

The presence of advertising on Channel One was addressed in a separate study by Greenberg and Brand, in which it was suggested that "regular watching of Channel One reinforces materialistic attitudes" (57). Additionally, students who regularly watched Channel One were more likely to agree that:

- money is everything;
- a nice car is more important than school;
- designer labels make a difference;
- I want what I see advertised; and
- wealthy people are happier than the poor.

The researchers addressed the greater impact of in-school advertising on a student audience as follows: "One might have anticipated that advertising would have less of an impact than our data demonstrate here. After all, these youngsters are bombarded daily with advertising...The in-school showing, however, perhaps offers an implicit endorsement of advertised brands and an opportunity for paying closer attention to the ads than students would get in a group or at home, where they can use the remote control to quickly remove any advertising from the screen. Perhaps with regular exposure to so many ads for so many different brands, the in-school showing provides an excuse for differentiating among the hordes of brand names." (56-57)

A 1993 study by the University of Massachusetts/Amherst demonstrated that “the schools that spend the least amount of money on instructional materials are over three times as likely to receive Channel One as the schools that spend the most” (UNPLUG 14). In other words, schools which can afford to say No, do. Additionally, “the greater the percentage of African-American students in a school, the greater the likelihood that school has Channel One,” although “poverty and a lack of educational resources...seem to motivate schools to receive Channel One, whatever their racial or ethnic composition.” Commercial programs such as this which exploit underprivileged schools, students and communities directly contribute to the undermining of an equal, quality system of public education.

Since its inception, Channel One has spent a good deal of time and money insinuating itself into the daily classroom experience of American students. Partnerships have been struck with several companies (including Yahoooligans and AOL), further promoting and reinforcing the presence of the broadcast in American schools and as an empowering web-based experience (<http://www.channelone.com>) for youth, via chat rooms and contests.

Primedia, Channel One’s parent company, has been enormously successful at targeting the youth market through its commercial endeavours, including “Channel One, ChannelOne.com, **Seventeen** magazine, and Primedia’s Cover Concepts, which sells advertising sponsorships for book covers given away in schools.” (*Company Press Release, Primedia*)

Currently, Channel One is in 40% of American schools, and is watched by 8.1

million students each day. This ubiquitous presence is no endorsement of the quality or validity of Channel One—rather, it is much more indicative of the chronic underfunding of American schools, and the growing and mistaken belief that an in-school corporate presence has no negative impact on students.

The commercial component of Channel One and of YNN is obviously a fundamental motivation for both networks. Channel One’s marketing literature make its intentions clear:

Channel One doesn't just deliver teen viewers—it delivers the hardest-to-reach teen viewers.

Channel One even penetrates the lightest viewers among teens.

Advertisers who target teens know they watch an average of 10 hours less television a week than other groups. “Traditional” television vehicles reach the same viewers over and over again. A typical schedule delivers 50% of impressions against the heaviest-viewing 20% of the audience and only 2% of impressions against the 20% who are the lightest viewers.

Channel One’s unique delivery reaches heavy and light viewers equally.

No waste. No wearout. Just impact.

(Channel One)

Marketers lament the fact that their ability to reach youth through commercial means is somewhat limited by the fact that kids are in school for such a large part of the day, and because there is no real guarantee that the student audience is in fact paying attention to the commercial message. In-school advertising campaigns by their very location circumvent both problems: they reach students in the classroom, as part of the

school day, which students are required by law to attend.

In keeping with the framework established by the University of Michigan-Channel One study, the OISE questionnaire ignores any mention of YNN's commercials, or the program's commercial motivation. To eliminate the discussion of advertising from analysis of either Channel One or YNN is to conduct that analysis under crippling limitations—particularly when the primary motivation of these commercial enterprises is to make a profit. And clearly, at \$200,000 per 30-second commercial spot, the profits are substantial.

“By October, 1989, Whittle [then CEO of Channel One] had sold more than \$149 million worth of commercials in three- and four-year contracts, with \$51 million for 1990 over half the launch revenue projections. To put these figures in perspective, the ESPN television network [a popular sports-only network] sold only \$10 million worth of commercials in its first year, and...[the] CNN network only \$24 million. (Barry, 1991, p.7)” (Apple)

In light of the sense among a significant number of stakeholders that concerns with a commercial, profit-making presence as a required part of the publicly-funded school day are not being sufficiently addressed, we feel a more thorough, comprehensive analysis of the impacts of and reactions to the presence of YNN in Canadian classrooms is necessary.

In addition to a historical and corporate overview of the company, this study will provide the testimony of teachers, parents and students at the YNN pilot site, Meadowvale Secondary School in Mississauga, ON. It will also include descriptions of the experience

with YNN at schools in other provinces. Additionally, this study will provide analysis of a sample of the YNN shows as completed by several media literacy specialists. Finally, there will be a thorough analysis of the arguments against a corporate presence in the classroom, and the implications of placing a public institution in the service of a corporation.

What are youth “worth”?

As their buying power and consumer influence has increased, youth have become a much sought-after market. It is only relatively recently that the degree to which youth impact purchasing decisions has manifested itself in slick and intrusive campaigns, under the guise of “empowerment.” Technology has also provided even more thorough means of targeting youth, because computers tend to be synonymous with education and are therefore seen as a positive academic influence. It is for this reason that parents tend to be less concerned with computer usage by their children than with television watching.

There are approximately 2.4 million teenagers in Canada with an estimated \$14 billion in disposable income. Youth Culture's Teen Landmark Study found that 85% or 2 million teens use the Internet, logging an average of 9.3 hours per week, roughly equivalent to the time they spend watching television. Of those on the Net, 33% say they spend less time watching TV since they have been on the Net.

Parents were also found to play a key role in encouraging their teens to use the Internet. In fact, 84% of parents surveyed believe the Internet is a positive environment for young people and 95% believe the Net is a great

OISE/UT's Approach to the YNN Evaluation

Our Goals:

- I. Study the process, programs and in-school responses in enough detail to permit:
 - A. a thorough, non-judgmental description of the events, the programs and the responses to everything by students, teachers, principals and parents. (We will not solicit reactions from the general public but will record them if they become part of the experience of the school), and
 - B. a preliminary assessment of the impact of the YNN presence on the school community, and
- II. Do this in such a way that OISE/UT's description and assessment are:
 - A. credible and persuasive, and
 - B. accepted as unbiased by all parties.

Evaluation Objectives:

Many important questions cannot be answered with such a short trial project, but much can be learned. The OISE/UT team proposes to answer the following questions:

- What are the startup challenges, costs to the schools and crucial decisions?
- Does the equipment function as advertised, and what do people in the school need to learn in order to make use of it?
- What is the content of the programs, and how well are they made for showing in schools? (We will give rapid feedback to the producer and will summarise our findings in a final report.)
- How do schools/teachers/students use the programs (discussion ... follow-up ... link to ongoing studies ...)?
- How do students/teachers/officials/parents/trustees/public respond to the programs? (Do they find them interesting of good quality.... valuable?)
- What use is made of the computers, and by whom?
- Do the new computers add educational value to what the school had already?
- Even at this early stage, do the participants think that the value of the programs and/or equipment is great enough to justify showing the sponsored messages? What happened that no one expected-good, bad, uncertain?

Evaluation Procedures:

The evaluation approach we propose is a mixture of interviews, observations, expert judgment and questionnaire surveys.

Just as the television producer and the schools will have to be flexible, the OISE/UT team will be prepared to adjust our plan as the pilot test evolves. In order to answer the evaluation questions, however, we will have to do some version of all of the following:

Interviews:

We will go to schools or employ local research staff to conduct structured interviews (by appointment, of course) with (a) the Principal—at least three times, beginning, middle and end, (b) any other staff given some responsibility for the conduct of the field trial—as required, and (c) a sample of the teachers, the number depending on the number of teachers in the school—minimum 5, beginning, middle and end. If teachers and officials agree, we will conduct focus group interviews with teachers and (separately) with students (who also have to agree, of course) about their views, especially concerning the 12.5 minute programs but anything else new they perceive as a result of the arrival of YNN. The focus groups will be organized as soon as the project is underway.

Observations:

With the teacher's permission, we will observe the class during the time they are watching a YNN 12.5 minute program—a minimum of 10 programs in at least two classrooms per school, beginning with the early broadcasts. We will also send observers to the places in the schools where computers are located—schedule to be designed when we see how many computers there are and how they are being used. (We will also make it easy for teachers and students to send us messages and we will send them questions via the computer.) If extensive use is being made of video recordings supplied by YNN, we will observe a few of these occasions (and try to document all of them).

Expert judgment:

This is required by every step, of course, but we will recruit independent judges to view at least 10 of the programs (five that we observe in class and five others), describe the content and provide a constructive, critical review. We will use as a guide the procedure devised by Johnston et al. for the Michigan-based evaluation of Channel One. We will also exercise our judgment of the uses being made of the programs and of the computers.

Questionnaires:

Short, easy-to-complete questionnaires will be developed and sent or delivered to a sample of parents, all the trustees and all members of the School Council (if there is one).

(<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~oiseynn/evalprop.html>)

A Form for People in Schools to Tell OISE/UT about YNN

This is a space for people who have direct experience with the presence of the YNN programs and computers in one of the five schools in Canada taking part in the Pilot Project. If you are not someone with direct experience with YNN, please do not use this form. If you wish to say something to the OISE/UT team about the YNN project, send e-mail or telephone (416) 923 6641, ext. 2478. We will treat these e-mail and telephone messages as newspapers treat letters to the editor: You must include your name and address in your message, but we will not identify anyone in our report unless they explicitly request us to do so.

Please tell us the name of the school (or schools) where you had your experience(s) of YNN.

When you click on "Submit" at the end of the form, your reply is sent to a secure and well-protected file in the OISE/UT computer.

Name of school (or schools):

Please choose one of the buttons below:

- Student
- Teacher
- Other

Please describe your experience and what you feel about it by typing in the box below.
If you need more space, use the next box.

More?

If you wish to give your name, enter it here, but feel free not to.

We appreciate your taking the time to share with us.

—The OISE/UT Team

(<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~oiseynn/oiseynn.cgi>)

learning tool. Teens agree—85% indicate the Net helps them learn and one-third of teens wish they had more time to use the Internet at school.

(Canada News Wire)

Not only do youth buy products today, but they will continue buying for the rest of their lives. It is for this reason that the practice of “branding” a child at an early age is so important for corporations, because it ensures several decades of loyal consumption. And in order to accurately reach this target market with carefully constructed and effective ad campaigns, a raft of new child-based consulting firms have set up shop.

There is also a growing number of conferences for marketers who wish to target youth in ever more ingenious ways: Understanding Youth 2000 (sponsored by Brunico) and the Kidpower Conference series. Kidpower Canada 2000’s latest conference in Toronto, ON, is a “must attend” for decision makers who market to kids. This conference promises:

- Up-to-date research and studies on Canadian kids
- Psychological issues that affect Canadian kids
- How to market responsibly to kids
- In-school marketing
- In-store research
- Effective marketing and PR vehicles to reach kids!
- Kids’ trends
- Reaching kids on the Internet

(http://www.kidpowerx.com/kp_ev0006can_ov.htm)

One of the conference organizers is Pascale LeBlanc of Youthopia Communications. The text below is taken directly from Youthopia’s web site, and

clearly explains how they are involved in the youth market.

The Youth Market is perhaps the hottest demographic. They have the power to spend and influence billions of dollars of purchases each year, but they represent a significant and exciting challenge, mainly because of their size, diversity and elusive nature. Today’s youth is opinionated, mall-wise, avid online shoppers, and the techno-savvy consumers of tomorrow. How you reach them today will be crucial to any brand’s long-term survival.

This is a RICH market. Canadian tweens (9-14) had \$1.6 billion in cash at their disposal in 1999. They exert massive “kidfluence” over household purchase decisions, as much as 90% on groceries, family trips and restaurant choices. Parents claim that kids influence their decisions 82% of the time...

But they’re a difficult group of consumers to target. Their most important sources of information for new products are TV and their friends. You can also efficiently reach them through their own magazines and on the Internet.

Here are Youthopia’s Power Tips to efficiently reach tweens and teens:

- Customize your messages and products by conducting research and focus groups.
- Target sub-groups based on age, gender and culture within the youth market to reach a specific niche.
- Make sure that your product or service is “relevant” to kids, easy to understand, fun, and that it lives up to its promises and expectations.
- Direct your advertising messages at tweens and teens not just the gatekeepers (Moms).
- Speak their language...with all the right French and English accents!
- Keep your team up-to-date with what’s hot in French and English Canada, such

as top music groups, trends, shopping habits, etc.

- Mostly, hit youth on their turf and at a gut level. Your message has to appeal to their emotions. Ask yourself, "what's in it for them?"

(Data sources: YTV Kid & Tween Report 1999 - Wave 5 Jupiter Communications - NFO Consumer Survey 1999)

(<http://www.youthopia.com/English/Eindex.html>)

In order to tap into the sense of youth "empowerment" represented by the worldwide web, chat rooms, educational portals and youth sites are being established with increasing frequency. Many of these are marketing-based initiatives which offer corporations the opportunity to "brand" with youth in a non-threatening environment, while gathering important marketing research on both kids and their families. Significantly, it was determined that youth are extremely likely to give away specific family income information online without recognizing the marketing purposes to which this information will be put.

These days, even the tiniest of tykes is tech-savvy. And it's no wonder.

In our highly wired culture, it's now de rigueur for the even youngest kid to get in

touch with his or her inner Web surfer. There are computers in elementary schools, computer games and, of course, educational software.

They even have their own laws. Late last month, COPPA, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act went into effect, making it illegal for sites to collect personal information from kids under 13 without parental consent. While this means that chat rooms and some activities will be off limits to the pre-teen set, these sites are worth advertisers' consideration because of time, content and influence: Kids can afford to idle away hours at a computer; many of these sites offer the kind of content that keeps them coming back; and there's the early-adopter factor—an effective ad can result in a lifelong customer.

(Feliciano)

It is significant that, had Athena's offer been limited to the YNN program, TVs, VCRs and satellite dish—Channel One's offer, in other words—it is doubtful whether Canadian schools would have even looked twice. But we need to be much more vigilant about the ways in which marketers are making use of the "knowledge appeal" of technology when considering technology-based educational supplements or other forms of corporate influence in schools.

YNN's "offer"

Athena has provided on its web site the terms of the YNN offer, which is elaborated on in the individual school/company contracts sent out in the company's promotional packages. However, the web information does provide a useful starting point in examining YNN's claims, and the implications for public education.

The "key benefits" are listed below in bold, with comments and analysis provided in ordinary type.

Key Benefits

- **All participating schools have a six-month opt-out provision in the agreement which allows the schools to evaluate the network over six months without obligation.**
- **During this six-month evaluation period, there is absolutely no mandatory viewing requirement. Teachers and students can choose to watch the daily program as often as they wish.**
- **After the six month trial, any student may request not to watch the program and must be provided with an alternative supervised activity.**

YNN has attempted to increase its presence in Canadian classrooms by promising that there would be no obligation on the part of schools to either watch the program or be tied to renewing the contract at the completion of the six-month trial. However, once the equipment is installed in the school—including televisions in every classroom and a computer lab—it will be extremely disruptive to both the physical structure of the school and to the school day itself to have it removed.

Once the equipment is in the school, it becomes much more difficult to say No to it.¹ In fact, when Lester B. Pearson school district in Quebec was considering a contract with YNN, the final reason for deciding against an agreement was because of the potential disruption to the school and students caused by installation and then removal after a six-month period.

And it is precisely this reluctance on the part of schools that YNN is relying on to keep the equipment in the schools after the user-friendly entirely optional trial period. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that after the six months there will be no obligation on the part of the school to provide YNN on a daily basis.

According to the terms of YNN's contract, "if a school does not telecast [YNN] on at least 80% of the School Days each School year on which the YNN Program is transmitted, then the Company may terminate this Agreement with respect to such school upon simple verbal notice." (School/School Board Agreement. D.3, pg. 7) And, while the company maintains that the viewing of YNN is not mandatory, the company may request a schedule of the school year, enrolment figures for the school, and the

school's daily attendance figures, which will be provided to the Company's "advertisers and their agencies, financiers and Suppliers." (C12, pg. 6)

Furthermore, the company may terminate the contract and reclaim its equipment if the school breaches any of its obligations under the agreement, or if the number of students enrolled at the school declines by more than 25%. (D3, pg. 7)

Athena maintains that the viewing of YNN is not mandatory because the agreement states that "the Board may, at its discretion, develop appropriate procedures to accommodate Students who do not wish to view the YNN Program or whose parents do not wish them to view the YNN Program. Upon request by the Company, the Board or the School shall advise the Company of the number of such students." (D2, pg. 7)

However, this requires schools and students to adopt YNN as the norm, and a YNN-free day as an option which may or may not be granted, depending on the school's or board's time, resources or discretion. Students who choose to opt-out are therefore required to physically leave the classroom, singling themselves out from the daily routine, for 12.5 minutes each day.²

Furthermore, if more than a small percentage of students do exercise this YNN-free "option," Athena's profits are directly threatened because the advertisers depend on reaching a classroom audience on a daily basis, as part of school time, and on a mass scale. If, as Telescene's investor documents maintain, 80% of YNN's revenue will come from advertising, this will require satisfied advertisers, which means a large,

dependable student audience. If too many students are seen to be opting-out (as the company will see from the school's attendance records), Athena can reclaim its equipment.

And turning down the volume on YNN, or turning it off before the final credits, is not an option either: "The Company shall be entitled to include the Schools in its automated audit program for the purpose of collecting information respecting the showing of the Programming, including: (a) the time of day any Programming is shown to students; (b) the length of the Programming shown to students; and (c) the volume level thereof." (B5 pg. 3)

While Athena maintains that YNN is a completely optional addition to the school day, it's abundantly clear that the longevity of the program rests on advertisers getting a "return on investment." And this requires what Athena is offering: direct access on a daily basis to cherished student wallets, minds and eyeballs. Any pretense at choice is false.

- **The complete infrastructure³ and daily news program is provided at no cost to participating schools.**

"At no cost" is a misnomer, because it implies that school time is free, or without charge. In reality, classroom time is actually quite expensive. The "tax dollar value" of school time can roughly be calculated by taking the per-capita amount of education funding (approximately \$5,500), multiplying it by the number of students in a particular school, and dividing it by the number of school days (180) to arrive at the total cost to taxpayers of an entire school day at any given school.

When we determine the cost of a minute's worth of public school time at a school and then multiply it by 12.5 minutes (the length of a YNN broadcast), we get a better idea of exactly how much public money is going towards providing a marketing environment to Athena and its advertisers.

Furthermore, at 12.5 minutes each day, one week (five days) of school time amounts to an hour of YNN. After 180 school days, students will have watched approximately 37.5 hours of YNN—at a time when Ministries of Education are calling for higher standards and increased instructional time.

This method of determining the “cost” of YNN to the public has its flaws, however, because it opens the door to the possible suggestion that, if Athena's equipment more closely approximated the price of school time, no criticism would be possible. However, it is a useful means of indicating how cheaply students and schools are being sold to marketers, especially considering the enormous public investment in that time that is being practically given to the private sector in which to target their products and messages to and through classrooms.

To minimize the controversy which would have ensued over replacing instructional time with YNN programming, schools actually altered the school day by shortening lunch hour or eliminating traditional home room activities in order to make time for YNN. This situation has been described at Swan Valley Regional Secondary School, in Swan Valley, Manitoba: “The school day used to begin at 9:15, but now the broadcast begins at 9:00. This time used to be time for the Tag team. The Tag teams are created when students enter their first year at SV. Students are assigned a single

teacher who has about 15 students. They are kept together as a group until graduation in an effort to “build relationships with the kids so they don't slip through the cracks.”

These teams used to meet and talk at this time in the morning, listen to announcements, and then begin classes. Now, since the broadcasts begin at 9:00, the time for the Tag team has been bumped back to about 8:50 (it's not clear it actually hasn't been eliminated altogether, since announcements and the YNN broadcast take up so much of the time here).” (*Keating*)

One should consider how much more difficult it is to eliminate YNN when the school day has been reorganized to accommodate YNN due to the program's inability to qualify as instructional time.⁴

- **All maintenance, support and upgrading of equipment provided at no charge by the company.**

Well, it *is* Athena's equipment. And the terms of the contract require the school to open its classrooms and facilities “after school hours” to private organizations that will be charged for their use of the equipment. So it's not necessarily the schools that will be the sole users, although Athena will certainly be the major beneficiary.

- **Student-produced news stories to be featured in national news program.**
- **All commercial messages and editorial content is governed by the independent Educational Advisory Council made up of representatives from participating schools.**⁵

The Education Advisory Council is made up of a number of teachers, principals and students, and headed by Scott Conrod, who is a vocal proponent of YNN and has represented the company to the media.

Furthermore, the EAC operates on a voluntary basis, though its expenses are covered. But how will this group meet on a daily basis across time zones to determine the “quality” of YNN’s programming? And how will this guarantee any standard of quality? In fact, if the EAC operates in any way like Channel One’s advisory body—which saw fit to permit a show comparing the war in Kosovo to a video game in order to attract a student audience—this does not bode well for the quality of YNN’s programming.

Philosophically, so-called “advisory bodies” such as the EAC operate as a means to establish a sense of local control or relevance in the face of clear corporate dominance over the school day, classroom content, or access to students. But this local control is illusory, because the decision to air the YNN program, or to offer students to marketers in a classroom environment, have already determined the new purpose of the school.

The minimal control which may in theory be exerted by the EAC to veto programs (if the logistics of travel allow for this decision-making process at all) or set advertising guidelines does nothing to change the fact that the school day and the school itself is placed in the service of a private corporation. Its existence merely allows the corporation to appear to be responsive to its critics by permitting select members of the public to determine how they will allow their

schools to be manipulated and their children sold to eager marketers.

- **A French language service will be available to all schools nation-wide in September 2000.**
- **Educational internet portal will permit secure communication between school, board, teachers and parents at home.**

The URL <http://www.icanlearn.ca> has been reserved by Athena Educational Partners in order to establish the web portal. This will be discussed in greater detail later on in this report.

- **Community use of facilities in after-school hours for a variety of training and continuing education courses.**

Athena has worded its contracts to allow for use of the school property and Athena’s equipment after school time by private organizations who can rent the class space and the hardware for training purposes. This is additional profit for Athena, and it is suggested that, once the capital costs are recovered, schools may also receive a cut of the profits.

However, as it is Athena’s equipment, and as the school keeping the equipment is contingent on Athena remaining happy with the arrangement, it is in the school’s best interests to facilitate Athena making as much additional profit as possible. When school-based, after-hours activities conflict with the opportunity to make extra money, and when schools are in a position of having to facilitate profit accumulation, it is very likely that school-based activities will suffer.

In this manner, not just the student body and the school day are necessary vehicles to provide a profit for Athena, but so is the very physical structure of the school as well.

- **OISE/UT independent, thorough evaluation of educational benefits of the YNN project during the six-month trial period.**

Athena has paid OISE/UT \$53,970 to have Dr. Les McLean conduct a study of the impact of YNN on Canadian schools. The study is due out later this summer. (For more information please refer to the letter by Dr. McLean on Page 1 of this report.)

(<http://www.ynn.ca/aboutynn/services/keybenef.html>)

Corporate Involvement in Education: Principles to Consider

How can all that equipment and valuable programming be installed for free?

The YNN system, including the daily programming, is funded in part by 2.5 minutes of corporate and/or government advertising and sponsorship appearing in the daily news broadcasts and by the use of the IDL center in after-school hours.

Won't the ads have a negative impact on students?

There is no evidence that suggests that these ads, which are generally the same ones shown on commercial television networks, have a negative or deleterious impact on teenagers when shown in a classroom.

(<http://www.ynn.ca/faqs/faqs.html>)

A Wealthy Audience

This report has already provided evidence as to the appeal of the youth market, both in the money they represent in the present, and their promise as future consumers. This is referred to as “cradle-to-the-grave” marketing, a rather self-explanatory term.

Of course, marketing campaigns are not restricted to the youth market: we are all exposed to ever more ingenious methods of advertising, from bathroom ads to corporate logos on supermarket fruit (Disney and Global Television, among others, have replaced Chiquita and Dole), and enormous billboards launched into space.

So, yes, kids are inundated with commercials on a daily basis. We all are. But this does not justify turning over new

environments to marketers to provide new methods to more effectively sell products to children. Especially since the classroom provides a very different environment than in a bank or at home watching television.

The Classroom as Marketing Medium

Schools are not just another marketing medium. To corporations, schools are the **ultimate** marketing medium. According to Cunningham Gregory and Co. (education developer), “[schools are] the most effective environment in which to change behaviour and attitudes, and target present and future consumers and workers.”

Commercial messages within the classroom are given added weight by the classroom itself. Students have indicated that, because these products and messages were seen in the school, they assumed the products were good for them because these products were seen to have the school’s endorsement.

Mandatory Attendance

The school does not only legitimize the commercial messages within it, but also provides a captive audience. Until the age of 16, school attendance is mandatory. Corporations wishing to reach this group know exactly where their target market is—in school. And, unlike at home, this audience cannot turn to an-

other channel or leave the room. In these so-called partnerships, the schools' mandatory attendance laws have become an extremely effective marketing tool. Not only does the school environment offer legitimacy, but the audience is virtually guaranteed. Little wonder that corporations are willing to pay enormous sums of money for the opportunity to target the classroom.

Product Monopoly

We've been told that marketing deals merely bring sheltered schools into the "real world." But exclusive contracts are not an extension of the free market into the classroom. Schools that sign with Coke will not carry Pepsi, for example. The issue of choice, even between two competing products, is completely absent. Corporations therefore have exclusive access to a captive audience.

Public Education is Not Free

School time is not free. It is paid for by our taxes, and we are well-compensated for our investment. Having a corporate presence in the classroom is tantamount to giving such companies school time—and the public money which pays for that time—in which to advertise their products to kids. Our taxes are literally paying for the commercial targeting of our students, and diverting both time and money from their education.

I'm not implying that all teachers use corporate handouts or programs uncritically, or that they use them all the time. But we have to recognize that, as classroom funding is reduced, and as schools are required to become more responsive to the private sector, we will see more and more of these programs.

In the past five years, the number of sponsored educational materials has skyrocketed to the point where most corporations have at least one educational initiative. And, as demands on teacher time increase, it becomes much more difficult to examine these materials for bias. Remember, these supplements are free. And classroom supplies are dwindling.

Corporate Providers: the Real Beneficiaries

Look at the corporations that are getting involved in education. I'm not talking here about the smaller local businesses, but rather about the multinationals that are sizeable enough to impact curriculum or educational philosophy in an entire city, or province or state, or country—even globally: Time-Warner. Disney. Coca-Cola. McDonalds. Jostens. IBM. Microsoft. Hershey. Cadbury. Wal-Mart. Procter and Gamble.

These are huge conglomerates which are responsible first and foremost to their shareholders. We cannot afford any misconceptions about this fact. And we need to be fully aware of the degree of consolidation among these companies in order to understand the thoroughness of their control over our classrooms.

Marketing Through Technology

As this issue has already been covered in some detail in this report, it will only be briefly mentioned here. It is important to recognize how technology has also facilitated the increasing corporate influence in classrooms. And this fact is not lost on marketers, who have combined exciting new "educational" initiatives with "computer literacy."

Even more troubling is the tendency some teachers and parents have to "for-

give” some of the most blatant marketing initiatives if there is the slightest chance that they might possibly promote the merest hint of computer literacy among students.

On Behalf of the Corporation: the School as Disciplinarian

Accountability to the public is replaced by accountability and gratitude to corporate sponsors. In some cases, the needs of the students and teachers are superseded by the school administration’s desire to keep the sponsor happy with the recipient of the corporate “donation.” In other words, the goal of the school literally becomes realigned with the goal of the corporation—and even to discipline dissenting voices on behalf of the corporation.

A Two-tiered Education System

When schools are forced to go outside the tax-base to fund education or educational “enhancements,” the education that students receive will reflect the wealth of communities or the “strategic philanthropy” of corporations, where a “return on investment” is not just expected but often demanded. If the public fund-raises, they have paid twice for education; once with taxes, and again as a charity. If the corporation receives a tax receipt (and school boards have established foundations to facilitate precisely this), it is filtered back into the economy and the public pays yet again.

The only way to fund education equitably is through the tax-base. Any attempt to fund through outside donations is to tie the quality of education to the wealth of communities, which reinforces socioeconomic inequities instead of giving us a basis from which we can attempt to overcome them.

Global Implications

The proliferation of on-line curriculum production and dissemination has only sped up the process of homogenization and consolidation of control. We need to be extremely aware of the “cross-branding” that is taking place precisely because of the implications for our education and culture.

It is the multinational conglomerates that are actively pursuing the dismantling of public education, and providing for-profit alternatives. Of course, as the public infrastructure is dismantled until it no longer exists, the private providers are able to charge whatever fees they wish, making quality education once again the domain of the wealthy.

* * *

These principles provide a context for the discussion of corporate involvement in the classroom, and it is within this framework that we need to examine the presence and impact of YNN, among other corporate initiatives. The school is a marketing environment like no other; we need to realize this before we submit to tired arguments about the “media-savviness” of teens. This is all quite true, but entirely irrelevant. Corporate involvement in education, especially within the context of an underfunded school system increasingly dependent on the “strategic philanthropy” of the private sector, can only undermine the education system and take advantage of the target market represented by students.

It is because the school is what it is that corporations are clamoring to insert their messages within the classroom. But it is precisely because the school is what it is that we must keep classrooms free of corporate influence—or as free as possible in a society increasingly confined and defined by market demands.

Content Analysis

What benefit does a daily news program provide?

It is important for our young people to develop an awareness of current events in our rapidly changing world, yet fewer than 10% of teens watch regular newscasts or read newspapers. The YNN goal is to help students achieve a greater awareness of the stories that shape world events, from a Canadian perspective.

(<http://www.ynn.ca/faqs/faqs.html>)

While Athena maintains that the goal of YNN is to educate and enlighten Canadian youth about current events, the annual report of Telescene Film Group suggests other, more commercial intentions.

At a public forum in Sudbury, ON in February 2000, Rod MacDonald stated that the commercial content provided the only means to deliver this valuable news content to students—that there was simply “not enough money” to provide a “free” service of this kind to students. The only way to do this seemed to be by raising taxes, which MacDonald claimed was the desire of the teacher federations. However, if the prospect of commercials was so egregious to the public, for the cost of “\$40, \$50, \$60 a student,” he’d make YNN ad-free.

These figures are especially useful, because they represent the amount of money each student is being sold through government underfunding to a

commercial entity to compensate for budget cuts. But, as has been suggested elsewhere in this report, the cost of 12.5 minutes of public school time each day is much greater to the Canadian public.

At that same public meeting, the response of students to the sample YNN broadcast⁶ seemed especially significant in light of the general tone of the Peel Board’s report on YNN (discussed in much greater detail in the following section of this study). After the lengthy presentation by Athena’s representatives, several audience members discussed their concerns with YNN, including one young female student who suggested that there was “nothing new” in the programming, that these were issues of which she was well aware because her teacher regularly discussed current event in class as part of the curriculum. Furthermore, she found the coverage YNN offered to be somewhat simplistic, compared to what she knew of these issues.

Much of the controversy about YNN has centred around the commercials; it is for this reason that Athena has recently announced that there will no longer be ads, but rather corporate-sponsored “socially responsible” messages about bullying or teen pregnancy, for example. However, this is merely a way of re-classifying the advertising in a program that is commercially-supported and an in-school marketing vehicle.⁷

Remember, according to Telescene's investor information, YNN is not just an optimal way to establish relationships with teens and with advertisers, but also to test programming concepts on the student audience. Presumably, this goes beyond the advertising, while still serving the commercial needs of a private owner.

Given that the intentions of YNN are essentially to build long-term relationships with advertisers, students, and Telescene's entertainment-based products, it is entirely appropriate to speculate that the "news" content would reflect that it is secondary to the marketing role.

Respondents to the Peel Board's survey on the impact of YNN on Meadowvale Secondary School indicated their impressions of the news content of the program, which would certainly suggest the secondary importance of this part of the broadcast. Exposing students to daily YNN broadcasts did not increase students' interest in local and world events, or motivate them to attend to news more often.(ii) Teachers, students and parents thought that the YNN news broadcasts had limited application to the educational curriculum.

The majority of teachers and students reported that YNN did not relate to what was being taught in school, and only 16% of teachers agreed that YNN answered a need in the curriculum.(iii) Students and parents concurred that teacher-led discussion would help consolidate learning for students and would increase YNN's educational value. However, teachers and students agreed that the topics covered on YNN were irrelevant to many subject areas, and the limited time following the broadcasts prevented teachers from leading mean-

ingful discussions.(iii) Students and teachers reported that students were not learning very much from YNN.(iii)

Several of the YNN broadcasts were thoroughly analyzed by media literacy specialists for bias, content, values and ideology. Some of their comments have been included below to indicate their concerns with the program, which also resonate strongly with the student and staff reservations about the program as mentioned in the Peel Board Report.

The primary concern with the YNN programming rested on the simplistic coverage, and the lack of depth that would be necessary to provide students with an accurate understanding of the issues.

The story on the Vietnam War (May 5, 2000) did not explore the reasons for the war, or the widespread protests against it. There was also no discussion of the economic context, and no addressing of why the U.S. government went to war and refused to pull out, in spite of the huge loss of life on both sides. There was also no meaningful discussion of communism as another context for the war. However, the following issues were included: where Vietnam is located; when the war occurred; 58,000 American soldiers were killed, as well as an estimated 2 million Vietnamese civilians; Canada was a safe haven for American draft dodgers and refugees; the war took place between the communist north and the south of Vietnam; the American government wanted to prevent communism from spreading to South Vietnam and parts of Asia; Canada did not send troops; Pearson and Trudeau would not be pressured by the U.S. government—although thousands of Canadian soldiers did join the Americans on their own because they

believed in the war; and 180,000 Vietnamese now live in Canada.

The Hepatitis C broadcast on May 11, 2000, was more of a “human interest” story, but what was interesting was what did not receive coverage: There was no discussion about why some of the blood comes from the U.S., and there was no opportunity to hear from a Red Cross representative, or even other political parties on this issue.

That same day, the story on Ethiopia was remarkably unbalanced. According to our analyst, “we hear nothing from the Ethiopian perspective; the narration here sets up an imperialist discourse where we’re in a position of power, and the ones sitting in judgment of the starving Ethiopians. There is no mention of the debt repayment that countries such as Ethiopia are faced with. Because of crippling debt, the country cannot maintain its infrastructure: education, health care, etc. In times of crisis, then, the country is devastated, and cannot withstand any kind of setback or catastrophe. [But] in spite of this devastation, now, just like in 1984, the Ethiopians are helping one another; we just never hear about it.”

The May 17th program provided a discussion of Cuba, explained the Helms-Burton Law and Canada’s relationship with Cuba. However, the ana-

lyst was uncomfortable with the final statement of the story: “The commentary was that the Cubans, hungry for economic independence, are frustrated with Castro and want their suffering to end.” This statement is not only leading, but it obscures the context of the U.S. blockade as a cause of Cuban poverty. It also does not address the public infrastructure within Cuba which provides universal health care and education, among other services. Perhaps a reexamination of free-market-based notions of wealth and poverty is necessary.

The following day, another “human interest” story followed Canadian students on a trip to Cuba, and did discuss the high literacy rates of that country, but ended on a note which had the Canadian students realizing that “fun could not mask the poverty.” Again, this leaves students with an inadequate understanding of the “value” of public programs in providing a standard of living that is currently being eroded by free market values.

The comments and concerns from the analysts were similar: at best, the broadcasts were somewhat simplistic, and avoided deeper contextual analysis. At worst, they provided commentary that was leading, and not entirely balanced in exploring alternative perspectives.⁸

YNN: The Meadowvale Experience

The YNN experience at Meadowvale S.S. is especially significant because Meadowvale was the pilot site for YNN and was featured prominently in the company's literature. There was a link from the school's web site to YNN's, and media showings of the program at the school. Meadowvale was also the site of the most organized student opposition to the program.

The Peel Board of Education conducted its own study on the impacts of YNN in Meadowvale S.S. after the first six months of the program. Teachers, students and parents were asked for their input on the effects of YNN on the school, the learning experience, the student body, and the community. While the study is limited in scope, it provides some interesting data.

Students who exercised their right to "opt-out" of YNN and its commercial content (it is significant that YNN in this context becomes part of the normal school day, and students must elect to leave the "norm" to be YNN-free) were put in the position of being outsiders at best, and troublemakers at worst. According to students who did opt-out, they were not allowed to do group work, but were forced to sit at library carrels and work singly in complete silence, while students who remained in class were allowed to talk and work together.

This treatment of the students who opted-out is especially significant because YNN was not included as part of

instructional time. Students who opted-out were in effect punished for not complying with a commercialized norm by being forced to follow harsher rules than other students, even during non-instructional time.

Students were vocal about the lack of discussion surrounding the school's decision to receive YNN, and this was examined in the Peel Board's report. The relevant section is below, providing some interesting insight to the way in which opposition to YNN was unaddressed in some cases and suppressed in others. Furthermore, the students provided some insight as to the divisiveness at the school since the implementation of YNN, based on the school community's opinions of the program.

"Students were concerned that the school community was not consulted in the decision to implement YNN. The pilot was presented to students and parents after the decision was made, at which time there were no formal, school-wide opportunities for students to share and discuss their thoughts about YNN. While teachers individually allowed discussions about YNN during class time, this was not a school-wide practice...Students who opposed YNN thought that opposition to the programming was suppressed by the school administration. They reported that teachers who opposed YNN felt uncomfortable expressing their views, and that information

meetings for parents were cut short when parents expressed concerns about YNN.

Students felt that they were being inappropriately singled out for their opinions rather than being encouraged to stand up for what they believed in. Tensions between anti-YNN students and the school administration may have escalated because the students felt oppressed. As one student said, 'Sometimes I misbehave on purpose because of the treatment we receive.'" (26)

Essentially, the findings of the report were mixed: respondents seemed to like the "free" equipment, but were ambivalent and often quite critical of the content, quality, and concept of YNN. According to teachers, parents and students, YNN had only limited application to the school curriculum. In fact, the vast majority felt that YNN did not relate to what was being taught in school. Furthermore, the program was not incorporated into the daily lessons by teachers, for the most part because "the topics covered on YNN were irrelevant to many subject areas." (iii)

There was one interesting section in which the disadvantages of YNN, according to teachers, were outlined. Although given limited space for discussion, the concerns of teachers vis-a-vis YNN are especially significant because many of them can be applied to other examples of corporate involvement in education, and therefore arguably deserve more analysis in this context.

1. The controversy surrounding YNN has created a negative atmosphere within the school. The existence of YNN has encouraged students to "take sides" with respect to their personal feelings of the program. As a result, students have become "po-

larized" according to whether they approve or disapprove of YNN.

2. The students who disapprove of YNN have become "antagonistic" and "rebellious" towards administration, teachers and other students. A lot of teachers' time and energy has been spent on "trying to control this conflict," making it difficult for the students to concentrate and for teachers to teach.
3. The controversy surrounding YNN has "monopolized" a lot of administration's time and energy. YNN has become the primary focus: "It has invaded every aspect of life at Meadowvale S.S." As a result, areas "important to Meadowvale's growth have suffered."
4. YNN interrupts the school day, disturbs the daily routine, and is a waste of valuable teaching time. The broadcasts are aired at different times each day and frequently interfere with period one teaching time. In addition, the extra 15 minutes of the school day is not appreciated by teachers.
5. The information provided on YNN has limited application to the curriculum in general because the topics and the material are irrelevant to many subject areas. YNN is viewed at the end of first period, which prevents the teachers from discussing the issues further with students, thus limiting the educational value of the broadcasts.
6. Public perceptions of Meadowvale S.S. have been compromised due to YNN. Exposing students to advertising in the classroom has created a negative public image for Meadowvale S.S., as the school is now viewed as advocating the "corpo-

rate intrusion of the educational system."... Advertising negatively influences students in their thinking and their behaviours. Therefore, exposing students to advertising during school is inappropriate and unacceptable.⁹
(Peel Board 34-35)

Several teachers, parents and students submitted their comments and impressions of the impact of YNN on their school, the student body, relationships with the administration, and the position of the school within the broader community. Their testimony provides eloquent and useful elaboration on the concerns raised by teachers in the Peel Board report on YNN, and has been included to illustrate the serious nature of these concerns. It should also be noted that the individual testimonies were submitted completely independent of the Peel Board report.

- The controversy surrounding YNN has created a negative atmosphere within the school. The existence of YNN has encouraged students to "take sides" with respect to their personal feelings of the program. As a result, students have become "polarized" according to whether they approve or disapprove of YNN.

When YNN arrived at Meadowvale, the more politically-minded students chose to go to the opt-out room. The first group of students that did so had to go for an interview with the principal. When more began to demand their rights, they had to write a paragraph explaining their reasons for opting out, get their parents to sign it, and wait a couple of days for the paperwork to go through.

After a few episodes of vapid presentations of current events (does a whole segment on hockey mouth-guards actually qualify?), I

chose to join them. Every day, a small group of us got up from our desks, walked to the library, reported to a teacher, and sat down at carrels to work quietly. If anyone protested the fact that other students in the library were allowed to talk, yet we weren't, that person was treated to a public tirade by a supervisor.

Every now and then the principal would appear, smiling determinedly, and promising to "address our problems." Finally, things came to a head. A supervisor made the mistake of saying that, if we didn't like the conditions, we should just leave. So we did. We milled around in front of the office until the bell rang. The next day, the opt-out students were told to report to the cafeteria instead of the library. Soon afterward, YNN was cancelled for the rest of the year.

(Signed: a Meadowvale Student)

The Student Fight Against YNN

The student movement against YNN started back in March 1999 with a one-page 'zine put out by OAC student Lindsay Porter, who now attends Carleton University. The 'zine included an article exposing dirt on YNN, as well as a "controversial" article on the Black History Month Assembly. The students involved in the 'zine were threatened. Focus was put on the article on the Assembly when all the while everyone knew it was the YNN article that had sent the principal up in arms.

As it was the end of the year, the OAC students put their YNN-fighting pens down and turned their focus to their studies. The student anti-YNN movement was at rest until Meadowstock 2000, in which a Grade 12 student, Dave Brand, wearing a "YNN Stinks" shirt, asked the school what they thought of YNN during his band Bikes' set. The response was an overwhelming negative from the crowd of students. No one is sure exactly how the story goes, but Dave tells that a teacher unplugged his amp and then the band was

disqualified from the competition for Dave's antics.

Around the end of the year, several students decided that they should, as a student group, plan some type of protest. In accordance with tradition, the students set out to organize a walk-out. At first everyone within the group was gung-ho about the whole idea, but then a feeling of doubt set in. YNN had stopped being shown at the school and several students were concerned that no one would walk-out if YNN wasn't being shown. But, after some convincing, a date was set and plans were made. Flyers promoting the walk-out were distributed off school property (of course). A letter was sent to the principal telling her about the walk-out, and the media was notified.

The day before, the students of the Students Against Youth News Network Organization set up at Dave's house and made cupcakes and cookies to give to the students who participated in the 15-minute walk-out the following day.

On the day of the walk-out, Lindsay Porter and Stephanie Crocker, an OAC student, arrived at the meeting point to set up the cupcakes and cookies and to meet with the press to answer any questions. And then at 9:45 a.m., the SAYNNO kids wearing red shirts emblazoned with the anti-YNN symbol across their chest and "Not For Sale" silk-screened across their backs led the group of about 75 kids to the meeting point. We all marched around to the sounds of up-beat music and ate the anti-YNN cupcakes as the walk-out was not only a protest against YNN, but it also was a celebration of the progress the group had made.

In spite of being told that the principal had planned on suspending all students who participated in the walk-out, approximately 100 students from all grades walked out on May 25th, 2000 for 15 minutes. In response, these students had letters sent home telling

their parents that their child had left class early by 15 minutes and that they "may or may not have participated in the student protest" (this is paraphrased).

The students have said that they will go ahead with another walk-out in the new school year if the Peel Board of Education decides to bring YNN back.

(By Lindsay Porter of Carleton University, a former Meadowvale Secondary School student:)

- The students who disapprove of YNN have become "antagonistic" and "rebellious" towards administration, teachers and other students. A lot of teachers' time and energy has been spent on "trying to control this conflict," making it difficult for the students to concentrate and for teachers to teach.

The "Right" to Remain Silent

Today, my school had the event that I and many other students wait for all year, Meadowstock. Meadowstock is a competition for bands that attend our school, Meadowvale S. S. My band, Bikes, walked onto the stage as the crowd roared. At the beginning of our second song, the power was cut on the bass and one guitar amplifier. I assumed this was an accident and continued singing without paying much attention to it. After we were done our set, I walked backstage and was informed by Mrs. Furzer, the staff sponsor of the event, that we had been disqualified and that we were to pack up our equipment and leave the school immediately.

Why were we disqualified? Why did we have to leave right away? Well, Meadowvale S. S. is not just any ordinary high school. We are the subjects of a pilot program for Youth News Network, or YNN. YNN has installed televisions in every classroom in our school and has given us a computer lab in exchange for the right to show us a 12-minute news pro-

gram with two-and-a-half minutes of commercials, every morning. The goal of YNN, although the company maintains that it is to keep the students up to date on news, is to make money. This has sparked a lot of controversy in our school.

The tension between the staff, the students and the administration has continued to rise over the past year. What happened to me today, though, has made me realize that the damage that this project is causing reaches far beyond having to watch a dumb news program with two-and-a-half minutes of stupid commercials every day. It is affecting our schooling, our extra-curricular activities, and the lives of every student, staff member, or anyone else who has anything to do with our school.

The whole thing started, for us at least, around this time last year. Televisions were being installed in all the classrooms. The teachers didn't seem to have any idea what was going on, or if they did they weren't saying anything about it. Shortly after, we were given some very limited information about the YNN project. Mrs. Pedwell, our new principal last year, gave us the opportunity to ask her questions at the end of an assembly.

One student, Owen Jarvis, asked why a profit organization was allowed to infiltrate our school. Those weren't his exact words, but it was something to that effect. The crowd applauded Owen's comment, and Mrs. Pedwell walked away.

After this, very little was said about YNN. One teacher, whose name I won't mention, told me it was because the teachers were afraid that, if they said they didn't like the project, their work environment would become a living hell. Another teacher who was at Meadowvale S.S. until January of this year told me that many teachers in our school are afraid to challenge the administration.

One student last year wrote a one-page underground newspaper sporting an anti-

YNN article on the front. The administration told teachers to confiscate these papers because there was a racist article on the reverse side. The article they were referring to was really a critique on the black history month presentation. Obviously they were confiscated for their YNN content.

This year, when the programs finally started in mid-January, which was later than the contract had said, the students were given the opportunity to opt-out of YNN. This meant that, instead of watching the program in class, we would go to a designated room to sit and not watch YNN. Those of us who decided to opt-out had to go to the office to get a sheet which we had to get signed by our parents and ourselves, and write a paragraph about why we had chosen to opt-out.

The sheets that we signed stated that we would work quietly in the opt-out room. If we wanted to opt-out of YNN, we had to sign the sheet.

The opt-out room is horrible. We all go to the library, where we are told to sit in carrels. Carrels are desks with walls on three sides so you can't see anything other than yourself and your work. A useful tool if you want to study quietly without distractions, or keep a group of students miserable for 15 minutes every day. If we speak at all, we are yelled at by our teacher supervisors and librarians. If we sit at the regular desks on the other side of the library, we are yelled at by our teacher supervisors and librarians. If we write letters to or try to speak to Mrs. Pedwell about the opt-out conditions, she beats around the bush and then throws the contracts that we signed back in our face.

The more students that opt-out, the more controversial the project becomes. There is no doubt that the administration knows that the opt-out students are going to talk about the miserable opt-out room in class. They also know that this is going to keep other students from subjecting themselves to the opt-out pro-

gram. I am sure that the pro-YNN administration will not admit to doing this on purpose, but it seems strange that they would make opt-out so unbearable for no reason.

I went to a meeting at the Peel board of office to try to resolve this issue. There I saw a few episodes of YNN. Because I have been in opt-out, I had not realized that YNN wasn't what it was boasting to be at all. YNN claims to be a news program designed to keep the students up to date on current events. The programs I saw were all magazine-style programs like 20/20 and 60 minutes. They did not deal with the news at all. Two of the episodes were about teen prostitutes. That's fine and maybe even important to show to teens, but it's not what YNN has promised to do.

At the meeting, I spoke to Janet McDougald, who is the trustee for Mississauga, Wards 1 and 7. When I explained the situation to her, she said that she would speak to Mrs. Pedwell about it and get back to us.

I can't point fingers because I don't know exactly where the plan fell through, but nothing has changed in opt-out and no one has ever gotten back to us.

It was what happened today that made me realize just how bad the situation was, though. I walked onto the stage wearing a white shirt that read "YNN Stinks!" I had shown my shirt to the president of the SAC and to the other staff sponsor, Mr. Pavelich. They had both said it was fine to wear.

After we had finished our first song, I asked the crowd, "So, what does everyone think of YNN?" The crowd booed. The bassist in my band, Andrew McArthur, quoted the WWF's DX and said, "I have two words for that." An audience member then yelled out, "It Sucks!" I then said, "That's what I thought," and we continued our set. Those are the events that caused our disqualification. All I did was ask the students what they thought about something that directly affects them. I

asked the students' opinion on a project that involves their time being sold to advertisers by their school.

What I did was so bad that Mrs. Furzer told me that I had no right to say what I did, that I had disqualified my band, and that I was to leave the school immediately.

It seems to me that I was perfectly within my rights when I said what I did. Even if I had said something bad about YNN, which I didn't, I still would have been within my rights. Just like I have the right not to watch YNN, but if I exercise that right I have to spend 15 minutes a day sitting at a prison-desk with a librarian threatening me.

What angers me the most about all this is not that we were disqualified. I couldn't care less about winning the school battle of the bands. What angers me is that, when Mrs. Furzer disqualified us because I spoke my mind on something controversial, she demonstrated to every student in that room that they will be punished for voicing their opinion. Tomorrow, when the other students hear about what happened, the same message will be conveyed to them: School is not the place to have an opinion.

(By David Brand, a Grade 12 Meadowvale student)

YNN and My Legal Rights

As an occasional teacher working for the Peel Board, I worked two contracts totalling one year at Meadowvale Secondary School, during the time of limbo between the installation of the television network and the actual start-up of the YNN broadcasts. My contract was up about a week before the broadcasts began, and I am glad that I did not once have to turn on that television to show commercials to my students.

YNN was cheered publicly around the school, while criticized through whispers in the corners of department offices. The community upheaval around YNN was often

downplayed by the administration, as if it was simply not worth discussing. Fellow staff members advised me to avoid any open critical discussion or expression of YNN for fear of upsetting the overlords, but were more than willing to discuss it privately. Little did we know that, just outside the doors of Meadowvale, there brooded such a large group of experienced, dedicated and concerned individuals demanding that all those concerned about YNN should be heard.

In moving to a new school in the Peel Board, I have met teachers who have publicly expressed their views toward YNN and have since been barred from stepping on Meadowvale's property. This information I took personally, because while I was at Meadowvale I know that I would have appreciated the opportunity to speak freely with other teachers about YNN. Perhaps they would have been able to ease my complete disillusionment with the mass market approach toward students and education, even sooner than they did. It would have meant a lot to me to know that so many other people cared.

I am not trying to shout that YNN, or anyone who has spoken for the Peel Board or Meadowvale, is lying to the community at large. Only that I have been lied to. Lied to through the surgical and purposeful removal of context. I was getting paid at Meadowvale to teach my students (among other things) that the media constructs reality. All the while, the school was constructing mine. I was told little and was asked even less.

There has been much debate about the educational merit of YNN (outside of Meadowvale, at least). I would like to draw some attention to a debate that I have not been hearing in schools or in the media. Should teachers be obligated to watch these commercials? By law (re: the Education Act), my place is in the classroom, and this remains true when the broadcasts are aired. In fact,

as teachers we were encouraged, if not forced, to integrate the broadcasts with the curriculum being delivered. Therefore, I am obligated to watch commercials in order to do my job.

Some Meadowvale students and I managed to get a moment to speak with Janet MacDougal of the Peel Board, after a public viewing of some YNN broadcasts at the board office. She explained to us that the board was acting on a desire to help students keep informed of current events, and that there was no financial dimension to YNN. As dubious a justification as it is for airing commercials to kids, I am challenging anyone with authority in the Peel Board to explain how this is educational for me. It is not my job to watch commercials, and I resent that I may soon be forced to choose between allowing myself to be willingly manipulated by YNN and the Peel Board, or working somewhere else.

I refuse to work in a school that forces me to watch commercials. At home I can change the channel, I can change the station, I can even hang up the phone when somebody is trying to sell me something. Other than those in the advertising business, does any other profession obligate its workforce to be exposed to commercial advertising on a daily basis? Do they have the power to do this? Has anybody stood up and asked? The answer to each of these questions, I expect, is No.

Does my not wanting to watch commercials mean that I am not a team player? Or that I am failing in my duties as a teacher? The advertisements may be geared toward a younger audience and not necessarily to me, but this matters little because it is the nature of advertising to sell to whomever it engages.

I am 25 years old and have been a secondary school teacher for two years. I have been a student for much longer than I have been a teacher, so perhaps I am accustomed to my professional authority figures (teachers, professors) encouraging me to think, to

refine my opinions, and to get them heard. It wasn't until I crossed over to the other side of the room and became the teacher that I feel like my thoughts and opinions are no longer required.

I am extremely concerned with the disempowering of students and teachers I have seen in my experience thus far. How can I think of children of my own one day going to wired-in schools like Meadowvale, when I cannot even bring myself to teach in them?

(By Stephen Mannello)

- The controversy surrounding YNN has "monopolized" a lot of administration's time and energy. YNN has become the primary focus, "it has invaded every aspect of life at Meadowvale S.S." As a result, areas "important to Meadowvale's growth have suffered."

The legacy of YNN will not be the high-tech equipment, but the adversarial atmosphere it created at Meadowvale Secondary School. Our first complaint was that administration was not up-front with us. The equipment was installed in the fall of 1998, before we were informed about the project. The school council's information meeting in February 1999 did not allow us to express our concerns. When we demanded a chance to ask questions, the council hid behind the agenda, and the principal asked us to leave the school.

This year, parents against YNN got on the school council, and meetings became a battleground. Unfortunately, the remains of the former council were able to hold their own, especially with the support of the student and staff representatives—all of the pro-YNN persuasion.

We don't feel that we have had a chance to publicize our views. The board's information brochure is YNN propaganda. Teachers seem afraid to speak up in opposition. Stu-

dents have not had an opportunity to debate the issue publicly. Fortunately, we seem to have made progress with the local media, with our city's newspaper now on our side.

YNN did make a media star of our principal. When she appeared on a YNN broadcast, some students in her school were wondering who she was. The students say she is only visible when reporters are.

(Signed: a Meadowvale parent)

- YNN interrupts the school day, disturbs the daily routine, and is a waste of valuable teaching time. The broadcasts are aired at different times each day and frequently interfere with period one teaching time. In addition, the extra 15 minutes of the school day is not appreciated by teachers.

Eyes Wide Shut

YNN and Meadowvale Secondary School: A Teacher's Perspective

The history of YNN at Meadowvale Secondary School is patchy. From the outset, it was not presented as something optional; as a direction that the school, or the Board for that matter, might take after an objective and careful look, after debate and deliberation. Instead, it was championed as a great prize we (the staff and students of Meadowvale) had won, and our job was to fantasize about how we will benefit from all of the technological gadgetry that had been bestowed upon us.

Was the staff duped into embracing corporate intrusion into the classroom? On the contrary, we were simply not asked. That there might be the need for objective analysis of the possible implications of YNN was largely ignored by the administration. If there are no questions, there are no answers. To take a stand against YNN is to take a stand against administration; and that's awkward if not professionally suicidal.

There are those who control the voice of the school who are passionate about YNN, and for every reason conceivable this should alert us to some of the corollaries associated with YNN. The mis-labelling, misleading void coupled with urgency, carried us from first blush to going all the way, with dubious design. It resonates eerily with Bill 160 and its smoke and mirrors. The front end of something coming towards us often looks a little different from the tail of the thing disappearing into the sunset.

Why the naked desire to see it happen? Why the masterminding of public awareness? To allow corporatism in the door for the purpose of attention-span coercion is a bad idea, but it is popular in some quarters where individuals see it as revolutionary to embrace anything that flickers on the screen, particularly if it jingles in the pocket.

In a time where attention deficit is a buzzword for anyone who is media literate, sensationalized and sound-bitten, fast-food news is poor justification for targeting markets in our schools. The fact of the matter is: there is no justification, no rationalization for YNN. Are we to believe that the appearance of corporate princes wielding magic beads is merely coincidental? And through it all the provincial government has been silent, as if this is the one territory of education that is none of its business.

The true vision of education is a lofty one entailing equality and enlightenment. It features objective examination and freedom of discourse. Learning to see things more as they really are behind the 8" by 10" glossies and the image-making machinery of corporate stylization. The spirit of education and its role as liberator of the mindscape can be eclipsed when people like YNNers usurp this spirit and replace it with the money-making realities of the corporate agenda.

Roughly 20 years ago, I wrote a TelePeel piece as part of the inaugural media program

in a Peel Board media launch, that, when boiled down to its essence, went something like this: Imagine how exciting education can be when TVs link up with computers. I still believe that. You could create a network where students truly communicate, and I mean a broad cross-section of students, not the few pedestalled smiles training for future careers in broadcasting, but the students who stand around smoking areas late for class, or students in the cafeteria, students in rock bands and classical bands, student poets, artists and filmmakers. A forum which encourages the expression of opinions about education and what's right with it and what's wrong with it, including comments about teaching style, or school and Board policies.

Students could establish a sense of identity with contextual overlays revealing what patch of time and space they see as their social milieu. There is the capacity and capability to hot-wire their voices in an electrifying manner to create a true renaissance in education. Something like this could spark our youth into thinking they have a true voice. If YNN wanted to, they could project that voice all across Canada.

But that is not what YNN is selling. It is the opposite. A few tidbits of bait from Big Brother to pacify criticism while they promote their brand of feudalism. Like in George Orwell's Animal Farm, they are changing the rules, and with it, what education means.

A number of forward-thinking provinces have clairvoyantly banned YNN for this very reason. But not Peel. The Peel Board is pounding the drum, waving the banners, and playing the masquerade to the hilt. And it's worrisome. Why? WhYNN?

(By David Courtney)

- The information provided on YNN has limited application to the curriculum in general because the topics and the material are irrelevant to many subject areas. YNN

is viewed at the end of first period, which prevents the teachers from discussing the issues further with students, thus limiting the educational value of the broadcasts.

When YNN comes on the TVs in my class, the kids aren't rejoicing. Of course, being kids, they like that class is over for the period. They like it even more if the TV is turned on early, so they can watch a few minutes of Divorce Court, which is what is on that channel before YNN comes on.

However, most of the time, class runs over into YNN and we miss the beginning. During the broadcast, few students are paying attention. Once or twice, my Business teacher has even given up on us and turned it off, saying we lost the "privilege" of watching because of our talking. There were scattered cheers at this announcement.

In that particular class there are computers blocking the teacher from seeing what we are doing, so the majority of the class continues on doing whatever. In Music class, more are paying attention, as the set-up is different. There are more reactions to the broadcast in that class: guesses at the lineup of commercials (ever so predictable), groaning at the Trident commercial and random shouting out of answers (rarely correct) to the pop quiz.

People have even started reciting along with the Clearspeech Works commercial. Even I can recall the exact words: "In the business world, not only do you have to know the language, you also have to know how to use it. Using Clearspeech Works is very easy. I highly recommend Clearspeech Works software to anyone who speaks English as a second language." I hear the echo of the music in my mind and can remember the last phrase that appears on the TV: "It speaks for itself."

(Signed: a Grade 9 Meadowvale student)

- Public perceptions of Meadowvale S.S. have been compromised due to YNN. Exposing students to advertising in the classroom has created a negative public image for Meadowvale S.S., as the school is now viewed as advocating the "corporate intrusion of the educational system."... Advertising negatively influences students in their thinking and their behaviours. Therefore, exposing students to advertising during school is inappropriate and unacceptable.

More and more students are becoming vocal about YNN

Meadowvale is a joke because of YNN. I clearly saw this a couple of days ago. I attended a conference about the media, hosted by Gordon Graydon Secondary School, at the Mississauga Civic Centre. Since there were students and teachers there from all schools in Peel, we were asked the question, "What school are you from?" quite a lot.

What we got when we answered "Meadowvale" were laughs, and looks of sympathy from everyone. They see our school as a joke, a commercialized joke. The whole day was dedicated to discussion of the media, and its influence on teenagers. YNN and Meadowvale were talked about the whole day, by everyone from students to board members to speakers from all over Ontario.

They all used YNN as the example of just how far the media and corporations will go. It was the bad example in every story, used as the idea of what to avoid.

The next day at school, I went to the office to try and opt out of YNN, which I hadn't done before. The secretary would not give me an opt-out sheet because we're no longer allowed to have that option. We're forced to watch the broadcasts now, simply because there are no longer commercials in the episodes. The commercials are obviously a big problem, but that's not the whole problem. I

do not want to watch the mind-numbingly ridiculous broadcasts— commercials or no commercials.

There are many students who are very upset at the fact that we're no longer allowed to opt out; that's not fair. Part of the deal has always been that we were never forced to watch YNN—they simply cannot withdraw that.

I would like to write to anyone and tell them how I feel. It seems we're always talking to someone, but still we can't get through to the administration. We've just got to keep trying, and I'm happy to see that more and more of us students are becoming more vocal about the issue, and that's the only way we'll get anywhere.

(Signed: a student at Meadowvale Secondary School.)

YNN - the experience in an Alberta school

by Eilish Murphy, Alberta Teachers' Association

Bowness High School is a typical Alberta secondary school. Situated on Calgary's north side, it is home to 1,225 students in Grades 10-12. It's also one of two Calgary schools taking part in a trial Youth News Network (YNN) approved by the Calgary Board of Education.

The project will see the students watching a 12-minute broadcast per day of news programming supplied by YNN. In exchange for this viewing, YNN will supply the school with a much-needed computer lab. Included in the 12-minute broadcast are two minutes of commercials—and that, therein, is the controversy.

Don MacKinnon, a 21-year teaching veteran who has been teaching science at Bowness for nine years, has serious reservations about the project. "I have problems with commercialism coming directly into my classroom when I have no control over the content," he says. "I just don't like gearing advertising to kids."

MacKinnon says this is the third attempt to bring YNN into Bowness High School and that the upcoming program was supposed to be up and running in January of this year. "The two previous attempts did not materialize," he said.

The science teacher is uncomfortable with "the blatant marketing to kids in school." MacKinnon did say he would be more accepting of the pilot if the two minutes of advertising were public service announcements with a redeeming educational message, as opposed to selling products.

"I understand why the board is doing this, but I can't, in good faith, do this," MacKinnon said. "What are we going to sell next?" he asked.

MacKinnon also questions the claim that schools can back out after six months and still keep the equipment. "How can YNN walk away from over \$140,000 worth of equipment?"

He notes the project go-ahead was a staff decision with support from the parent council, but this is one of the contributing factors leading to his request for a transfer to another school. "This is hard because it's a challenge to what I believe my role is as an educator. My classroom is not for sale."

Rod Burgess is also in his ninth year of teaching at Bowness High School and his 30th year of teaching. As the coordinator of YNN at Bowness High School, the social studies teacher believes in the benefits of YNN. "It's a viable educational tool," he said. "Most of its critics have not even viewed the content."

Burgess says it's likely that, by the time the program is up and running, there may not even be any commercial advertising. "Once the YNN software is implemented, students can buy on-line educational products at a reduced price because of the volume of sales," he explains.

Even so, Burgess questions what the big deal is about commercial advertising in schools. "Seeing a 20-second blurb for Kellogg's corn flakes will not make kids rush out and buy a box of corn flakes," he said. "Walk down any high school hallway and you'll see Coke or Pepsi machines, cafeterias with private food suppliers—you can't get away from it."

He argues that the school has the option of not showing any questionable content, that it's a great way to keep students informed of current events, and that it's a way of teaching kids to question advertising content. "Maybe in the process of watching these ads, we can teach students to become discerning consumers."

Burgess says it's hard to gauge the pilot before it's even started. "If you want your best answer, come back six months after the project has been running."

Athena's Future Plans: Beyond YNN

Educational Portal

Athena Educational Partners is developing the most comprehensive and sophisticated Internet education website in Canada. This Educational Portal will be a one-stop location for all education needs, resources and supplies. The education needs of everyone from 4 to 104 years of age will be met on the Athena Education Portal. Continuing education, online learning, digital courseware, home to school links and more will be available to access from any computer, anywhere. A sample of this Education Portal will be online on this website in the coming weeks. (<http://www.ynn.ca/aboutynn/aepyinn/educat.html>)

Athena has begun to attempt to refocus public attention away from YNN and toward the “real” goal of the program. AEP claims that YNN is a very small part of this educational endeavour—that it’s really much more about an education portal, on-line learning and curriculum, and adult and continuing education. This will all be made available through the new site, <http://www.icanlearn.ca>, which has already been registered to Athena and will soon be up and running.¹⁰

Promotional CD-ROMS have been distributed demonstrating the “look” of the site, which is custom-designed not just for each school on the network, but each student. Instead of actually *talking* to teachers or classmates, students can log on to see what homework is due, whether or not they have a team practice, and the last YNN broadcast. Par-

ents can log on to see their child’s attendance records, and do a little shopping on the on-line network, which is also ad supported (although when students log on from school there is no advertising. However, considering this network is being touted as the way to stay in touch with school when off campus, this nod to an ad-free site seems a little...insignificant).¹¹

Furthermore, it is inaccurate to say that YNN is unrelated to the education portal. Paul Painter has made it abundantly clear that 60% of Telescene’s shares in YNN will be sold to finance the “second stage of the project.” The web portal’s existence and Athena’s other long-term plans depend on YNN’s success—that is, YNN’s commercial success.

Athena also intends to move into the area of adult education and distance learning, producing and selling on-line curriculum to an international audience through the company’s growing web presence.¹²

It is no surprise that Athena is eyeing the market represented by education. The education industry in Ontario alone is worth \$14 billion; in Canada, \$60 billion; in North America, \$700 billion. And \$2 trillion globally. That’s the amount of money represented by the education market—teacher training, curriculum development, school supplies, maintenance and transportation. And it is this market that Telescene, fronted by Athena, is trying to enter. But it represents nothing less than the privatization of education delivery and services, and is an indication of how wide-reaching Athena’s intentions are.

Silencing Opposition

As mentioned before, it is inherently in the school's best financial interests to keep the corporate "partner" happy with the sponsorship arrangement; this often includes silencing¹³ or disciplining those who speak out against corporate involvement. In cases where the corporate presence is the "norm," as with YNN, the peer pressure factor, as well as the sheer inconvenience of leaving the usual school structure to avoid corporate messages, also plays a part in "confining" students to that corporate presence. It literally "pays" to keep a sponsor happy.¹⁴ And, as boards are forced to cut school budgets in accordance with chronic provincial underfunding, schools will become increasingly dependent on corporate handouts, creating even more pressure to see that the sponsor is getting its money's worth.

But while the role of the school expands to including disciplining on behalf of the corporate "partner," corporations can also react to "protect" themselves against community opposition. After all, the student market is worth millions in present and long-term dollars. And a good deal of care must be taken by corporations to convince a skeptical public that offering students up to the highest bidder is, in fact, in the best interests of students, schools, and the education system itself.

In May of 2000, Athena launched a lawsuit against four individuals and a community group, PACTS (People Against Commercial Television in

Schools), claiming from each of the defendants:

- a) damages in the amount of \$250,000.00 for defamation;
- b) punitive, aggravated and exemplary damages in the amount of \$150,000.00;
- c) special damages in an amount no less than \$500,000.00; as well as costs. (Athena Educational Partners v. Defendants and PACTS. Court file no. 00-CV-189834, May 4, 2000. Sec. 1, pg 3)

The defendants are accused of claiming the following:

- a) the Plaintiff produces poor quality news and other programming which is unrelated to the school curriculum;
- b) the Plaintiff and its services are biased, "right wing," and designed to promote its own improper agenda;
- c) the Plaintiff and its services are evil, untrustworthy, unethical and irresponsible;
- d) the Plaintiff is a failing business and unable to meet its ongoing commitments;
- e) advertisers are justifiably withdrawing from the Plaintiff and YNN programming;
- f) the NEAC will not fairly monitor YNN programming but was established by the Plaintiff as a ruse and a mere sham;

- g) the Plaintiff and its services is harmful, dangerous, and will cause pain and suffering to children;
- h) the Plaintiff exploits children;
- i) the Plaintiff exploits the education system and any participating school that accepts YNN programming;
- j) the Plaintiff and the business carried on by it are illegitimate and worthy of condemnation;
- k) the Plaintiff advocates compulsory viewing by children of advertising;
- l) the Plaintiff lacks credibility.
(Sec. 27, pg. 8)

Furthermore, “by reason of the publication of the [Defendants’ web site, literature and] words complained of and of the Defamatory Publication, the Plaintiff has been greatly prejudiced and injured and has been brought into public scandal, hatred, contempt and ridicule. Further, the Plaintiff has suffered a loss of trade in business, resulting in a loss of income and profits, the particulars of which are not known now but will be provided prior to trial.” (Sec. 30, pg 9)

In other words, Athena is suing four individuals (and a not-for-profit grassroots organization with no assets) who have been vocal in their opposition, feel strongly about corporate intrusion in education, and are publicly concerned for the well-being of schools, for profits this opposition *might* have cost the company. But how is this to be calculated? Will Athena assume that every school with which they intended to sign a contract and did not said No as a direct result of the defendants?

Since its inception, YNN has tried several times to enter the school system

and failed because of its inability to raise the significant start-up costs (and even Telescene has admitted difficulty in this area), and its inability to compete against a well-funded school system that did not require corporate handouts—particularly ones with such clear commercial strings attached. Can this really be the responsibility of the defendants?

The defendants are being attacked for little more than disagreeing with the premise of Athena, and using well-documented evidence to support their claims—much of which is taken directly from Athena’s parent company’s investor documents, the past record of YNN in Canada, and the existing information on Channel One. What does this action of the Company say about free speech when corporate profits are threatened?

The administration’s decision not to air YNN’s 90 minute interactive program on bullying at Meadowvale was to a great extent an attempt to deflect the growing student opposition which culminated in a walk-out intended to coincide with the “special edition” of YNN on May 24th. Will these politically active and vocal students be the next to be served with papers—or is that a publicity scandal even Athena is not ready for?

This lawsuit is being launched before YNN has any significant presence in Canadian schools. When schools are contractually obliged to air the program on a daily basis, and when the trial period is over and the longevity of YNN depends not on Telescene’s deep pockets but on the satisfaction of advertisers, will Athena use legal recourse to protect its profits against disapproving staff and students, or against an insufficiently attentive or docile school?

Conclusions

Since being implemented in approximately 15 schools across Canada—at least in the five provinces whose governments have not said No to YNN—the Canadian public has been forced to re-examine its understanding of public education and the growing influence of the private sector. However, much more analysis needs to be undertaken to adequately understand the implications of corporate intrusion and the erosion of the public sector.

While YNN is not unique in its intention to take advantage of the market offered by students and the classroom environment, the network (and Athena's future plans to profit from the education industry) does offer the opportunity to better understand why corporate intrusion in education is so inherently manipulative and ultimately destructive.

Athena is using the underfunding of education by provincial governments to its advantage by loaning to schools equipment they are increasingly unable to afford. But this technological bait merely provides Telescene Film Group, using Athena Educational Partners as a front, with the means to become another eager player in the education industry and take advantage of the student market within it.

When schools are forced, through chronic underfunding, to enter into “partnerships” with the private sector, no true partnerships are possible because schools are in a position of finan-

cial vulnerability. It is then in the school's best financial interests to keep the corporate sponsor happy by acting “in the corporate interest” by silencing (student, teacher or parent) criticism, and promoting the corporation's image to the public.

Because of the role the school plays in the community as a trusted institution with great influence on (and importance to) children, it is vital that it remain as free as possible of the influence of a ruling ideology, particularly one that protects profits rather than people.

By ignoring the profit motives of commercial classroom agendas in general and YNN in particular, any “analyses” of these initiatives are inadequate because they examine only the wrappings, not the intent of these programs. And they do not operate from what needs to be the primary question: **what is it about the school that makes it such a desirable environment for commercial interests? And how does manipulation of this sort ultimately damage the school by placing it, first and foremost, in the service of the corporation, not the public interest?**

Based on the testimony of students, teachers and parents, and taking into consideration the previous analysis of the American prototype Channel One, as well as corporate literature regarding the desirability and effectiveness of the classroom as a marketing medium, YNN has fundamentally changed the role of

the school and the educational experience for the school community.

This is not particular to YNN: as schools are increasingly underfunded, schemes of this sort will multiply, taking further advantage of an increasingly desperate and possibly more suscepti-

ble school system. YNN is, however, the most ambitious corporate initiative to date, and provides us with the opportunity to observe first-hand how such programs negatively impact the education system at enormous public expense.

Groups Opposed to YNN as of March 31, 2000

Here is a sampling of the organizations (provided by CAMEO - Canadian Association of Media Education Organizations) which have spoken out against YNN in the schools:

National Organizations

- Alliance for Children and Television
- Cable in the Classroom (includes CBC, CHUM and Shaw)
- Canadian Association for Media Education Organizations
- Canadian Association of Retired Teachers
- Canadian Home and School and Parent-Teacher Federation
- Canadian Teachers' Federation
- Conference of Catholic Bishops
- Council of Canadians
- Parents Against Commercial Television in the Schools

Provincial Organizations

British Columbia

- British Columbia Teachers' Federation
- British Columbia Ministry of Education (YNN not allowed in BC schools)
- Canadian Association for Media Education (British Columbia)

Alberta

- Alberta Association for Media Awareness

- Alberta Home and School Association
- Alberta Teachers' Association
- Calgary Catholic School Board
- Parents Against Commercial TV in the Schools

Saskatchewan

- Media Literacy Saskatchewan
- Saskatchewan Teacher's Association

Manitoba

- Manitoba Association for Media Literacy
- Manitoba Ministry of Education [YNN Banned from Manitoba schools]
- Manitoba Teacher's Society

Ontario

- Association for Media Literacy
- Institute for Catholic Education
- Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops
- Ontario Education Alliance
- Ontario Elementary Teachers
- Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
- Ontario English Teachers' Association
- Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations
- Ontario Federation of Labour
- Ontario Liberal Party
- Ontario New Democratic Party
- Ontario Public School Teacher's and Training Federation

- Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation
- OSSTF District 19 Peel (where Meadowvale is located)
- Ontario Teacher's Federation
- Parents of Peel
- People Against Commercial Television in Schools (PACTS)
- People for Education
- Retired Teachers of Ontario
- Toronto District School Board

Quebec

- Association for Media Education Quebec
- The Montreal English School Board
- Quebec Ministry of Education (YNN is not allowed in Quebec schools)

Nova Scotia

- Association for Media Literacy Nova Scotia
- Nova Scotia Home and School Association
- Nova Scotia Ministry of Education (YNN not allowed in NS schools)
- Nova Scotia Teachers' Union

New Brunswick

- New Brunswick Ministry of Education (YNN not allowed in NB Schools)

PEI

- PEI Ministry of Education (YNN not allowed in PEI schools)

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YNN—**Key Benefits** (<http://www.ynn.ca/aboutynn/services/keybenef.html>)

YNN—**Faqs** (<http://www.ynn.ca/faqs/faqs.html>)

Youthopia. Web Site. (<http://www.youthopia.com/English/Eindex.html>)

Endnotes

¹ To further reinforce the presence of YNN within classrooms, Athena has enlisted the help of one “contact person” at each school with whom it has signed a contract—a teacher who will act as a liaison between the school and the Company. This person will be responsible for the Company’s equipment, particularly the computer lab. Because of the extra time required to perform these duties in addition to teaching, that representative will have his or her salary “enhanced” by Athena.

² “Students who opted out of YNN thought it was unfair that students who stayed in the classroom during YNN could sit in groups and talk with their peers, while opt-out students were required to work individually. Students felt the opt-out procedure discouraged them from opting out. For example, Cindy said it wasn’t worth the effort to go to the main office for an opt-out form....Other students did not want to leave their peers and go to the library for fifteen minutes each day. When Jeremy was asked if he had considered opting out, he said ‘I was thinking about it, but there’s no real point. I don’t want to sit in there and watch it, but I don’t want to go into a room for 15 minutes.’” (*Peel Board Report 26*)

³ **YNN Network Infrastructure**

Schools participating in YNN will receive the following at NO COST:

1. A complete internal video distribution network which includes one 27 inch television monitor in each classroom suspended from the ceiling with a security bracket, VCRs, a satellite dish and receiver, and a control center (head-end).
2. All the wiring necessary to enable transmission of audio, video and data information throughout the school.
3. Interactive Distance Learning Centres (“IDL Centres”) which consist of 15 to 30 multi-media computer workstations depending on the number of students in the school. The IDL Centres will be used as computer labs by students and teachers during school hours, and by AEP in after-school hours for continuing education and training on a shared-revenue basis with the schools.
4. Direct financial support for an in-school broadcast facility to enable student productions and the broadcast or re-broadcast of school related activities such as graduation ceremonies, school play or school sports highlights.
5. A daily 12.5 minute news and current affairs program, created specifically to be of interest to a teenage audience, containing 2.5 minutes of carefully screened commercially-sponsored messages. All news and advertising content will be governed by the Educational Advisory Council (EAC).
6. Certain software including Microsoft Windows 95/NT, Microsoft Office and educational content such as StarChoice TV educational programming.
(<http://www.ynn.ca/aboutynn/services/network.html>)

- ⁴ To accommodate YNN without taking any time away from the curriculum, the school timetable was changed in 1999-2000 to include a 15 minute home room period. Classes then began at 8:30 am and finished at 3:00 pm. The change in schedule was a very big issue for the students. Although they were only in school 15 minutes longer, they lost half an hour in the afternoons. (*Peel Board Report 27*)
- ⁵ An independent self-governing body called the Educational Advisory Council (EAC) reviews and approves all commercials that are shown on YNN and sets the standards and guidelines which govern all news content. YNN's strict guidelines exceed those of the Canadian Broadcasting Code. The EAC is a voluntary organization consisting of educators, parent and student representatives. (<http://www.ynn.ca/faqs/faqs.html>)
- ⁶ During this newser, one suggestion as to the cause of certain animal species becoming extinct was not industrialism or overhunting or urban sprawl but suntan lotion leaching off bodies and into lakes and rivers.
- ⁷ It is entirely likely that YNN will lobby to return to traditional advertising once their infrastructure is in place in more Canadian schools.
- ⁸ With thanks to Carolyn Wilson and Gillian Al-Jbouri for their time and expertise.
- ⁹ To date, advertisers on YNN have been: Long and McQuade Music Stores, CMT (Country Music Television, Unite Against Racism, Trident Gum, AT&T Rogers (pagers), Clear Speech Works (computer software) and the CFB Foundation Heritage Project.
- ¹⁰ Marketers see online networks as a fertile new frontier for tapping into this "lucrative cybertot category." "...This is a medium for advertisers that is unprecedented... there's probably no other product or service that we can think of that is like it in terms of capturing kids' interest," remarked Erica Gruen, director of Saatchi & Saatchi Interactive. (*Web of Deception: Threats to Children from Online Marketing* <http://www.igc.apc.org/cme/kidadsreport.html>)
- ¹¹ The portal will provide a marketing channel for products and services that are currently distributed by schools to the home. Examples of which would include; internet advertising to the home market, product distribution between the school and the home and a community resource scheduler. (<http://www.ynn.ca/aboutynn/services/prodserv.html>)
- ¹² **The Distance Education Network**
- Distance educational programs are an integral part of AEP's mandate to create an educational network linking students and teachers across Canada through satellite-delivered video and Internet programming. YNN, the national daily news and current affairs program delivering a wide range of educational programming and learning materials to high school students, is one of the central elements of AEP's offerings. As a key component of the network, AEP sup-

plies, at no cost to participating schools, the hardware and technology necessary to receive and deliver, throughout the school, high quality educational programming.

(<http://www.ynn.ca/aboutynn/aepyinn/idl.html>)

Products and Services

Athena will deliver educational content in video or multimedia format including curriculum-related material and courseware, either accredited or non-accredited, for adult or continuing education programs. Courses will be delivered in three modes: in the IDL Centres through a dedicated server, via the Internet to facilitate external or at-home access, and through the direct purchase of CD-ROMs or videocassettes.

Athena is also designing a web based portal system that will act as the company's distribution system for content and services to the schools and between the schools and the home market. The portal will provide the interface for the after hours usage of the computer facilities and will also act as "source" for digital educational content which can be accessed by teachers and students during the school day. Athena will provide secure e-mail access between parents and teachers.

Adult Learners Benefits

Beyond the educational potential of YNN's daily news broadcasts, computers provided by AEP allow for further learning outside of the traditional class-

room. During school hours, students can benefit from educational programming designed to complement their curriculum and meet their specific learning needs through a high-tech, hands-on experience.

Adult learners are able to use the same equipment outside of normal school hours to study courses in a wide variety of digital courseware from first-aid certification to computer applications and programming to career training. These courses will be offered by the company on a user-fee basis to the community.

(<http://www.ynn.ca/aboutynn/services/adultce.html>)

¹³ In fact, the original deal with YNN was made between the Company and a principal who retired shortly thereafter, leaving YNN as his legacy. According to concerned parents, the approval to proceed was moved through the school board administration with minimal involvement and consultation of staff. It was then taken to the Program Committee as a recommendation for the board by the Program Superintendent without having been raised for discussion with the Program Department staff. (*Worsnop*)

¹⁴ Meadowvale S.S. has become a pivotal part of YNN's promotional campaign; Meadowvale and YNN have exchanged links on their web sites and the school is prominently featured in YNN's promotional video.