

The Other Parent

The Inside Story of the Media's Effect on Our Children

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Pocket Books, ISBN: 0-743-40582-X

Hardcover, \$26.00

Chapter One

At Home With the Other Parent

It's 6:30 A.M. Saturday morning. Thank God, we get to sleep in....All quiet in San Francisco except for the foghorn -- until the padding of tiny footsteps in the hallway, followed by the creaking of our bedroom door. It's Kirk, seven years old and full of energy. He struts into the room and does his little "Shake Your Booty" routine in front of our mirror. Where'd he learn that stuff? How could my son be imitating Mick Jagger at this age? "Dad, can I get into bed with you and Mom or go into the family room and watch TV?"

"Kirk, it's six-thirty in the morning," I plead; "we want to sleep. Okay, you can watch TV...but only PBS or Nick Jr. Nothing else. Got it?"

Kirk rushes off to the family room. Uh-oh. More footsteps. Now it's four-year-old Carly. "Kirk is watching Dragon Tales, and I wanna watch Barney," she says, crying -- well, fake crying. She wants her Barney video. "Work it out with your brother," I grunt. "Mom and I want some more sleep. It's Saturday."

More footsteps. This time it's Lily, eight years old and rubbing those big blue eyes. She wants to play Backyard Baseball on the computer and wants me to help install it. I want to pull the blankets over my head and hide. Why not let the TV and the computer be the baby-sitter while we grab an extra an hour or two of sleep?

Like most parents, my wife, Liz, and I find ourselves wrestling with that temptation regularly. It's so easy to let our kids tune into the media world while we steal a few precious moments for ourselves. We may be too tired, stressed, or busy to keep a close eye on what our kids are watching, but most of us assume that it's benign. After all, TV was such a big part of our own childhood experience, and we turned out okay, right?

Maybe so. But in fact our kids are living in an entirely different, much more complex media environment than we ever could have imagined at their age. The rules -- and the risks -- have changed radically, and many of us have been slow to grasp the difference.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, when many of us grew up, kids lived in a much simpler and safer media

environment. Back then, there were only three major networks plus PBS, a couple of key radio stations in each market, a few local movie theaters, and computers that were so big they filled a room. Media then was a lot like the "Ozzie and Harriet" type of family -- safe, positive, under control -- and it doesn't bear the slightest relation to the reality today. Unlike the children of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, whose media choices were limited and stood out like isolated, familiar landmarks in communal life, kids today inhabit an environment saturated and shaped by a complex "mediascape" that envelops and bombards them day and night. Roaming among TVs, VCRs, the Internet, radios, CD players, movie screens, and electronic games, kids can easily spend more time in this vast mediascape than in the real world -- and, not surprisingly, far more time than they spend in direct contact with their parents.

Today, as child development expert T. Berry Brazelton, M.D., warns, media is really "the biggest competitor for our children's hearts and minds."¹ According to a University of Maryland study, American kids now spend 40 percent less time with their parents than kids did in the mid-sixties. That's right, 40 percent less time -- just seventeen hours a week total with their parents, down from thirty hours in 1965. At the same time, they spend far more than double that amount of time -- more than forty hours per week on average -- staring at the tube or the computer screen, listening to the radio or CDs, and playing video games. Now, which is the parent in this picture?

It's strange that as adults we've paid so little attention to such a powerful influence on our children's lives. So many of us read armloads of books about babies and child care. We're careful to teach our kids not to talk to strangers or wander the streets by themselves. Most of us make sure we know where our children are physically and with whom. And yet, day after day, year after year, we let them wander alone, virtually unsupervised, through this other universe -- almost completely oblivious to what they're seeing, hearing, playing with, and learning.

Think about it. If another adult spent five or six hours a day with your kids, regularly exposing them to sex, violence, and rampantly commercial values, you would probably forbid that person to have further contact with them. Yet most of us passively allow the media to expose our kids routinely to these same behaviors -- sometimes worse -- and do virtually nothing about it.

The New Media Landscape

I have to admit that it took me a long time to understand this new media reality and its effect on kids. That's strange, because kids have been my passion since I was fifteen, when I got my first job as a counselor at the Fresh Air Fund camp in upstate New York. It was my mom who first inspired my love for kids. She worked as a schoolteacher in low-income schools for more than thirty years, and her "lectures" about the importance of teaching were a regular staple of our dinner table conversations for as long as I can remember. When I founded the national child advocacy organization Children Now in 1988, kids became my life calling and have ever since been at the center of my professional life.

But it was only when we had our first child, Lily, in 1993 that I really began to appreciate the impact of the media on kids' lives. I can still remember how, at as early as eight months old, my baby daughter was

already actively responding to images that would flicker across the TV screen. It was right about then that I started noticing, during the ball games that I so love to watch, all those sexy beer commercials with scantily clad women, and cringing when ads came on for TV shows and movies about kidnappings and gruesome crimes -- wondering if I should change the channel or at least mute them when our baby girl was in the room. What had seemed perfectly normal was suddenly making me feel uncomfortable.

Like most parents, I wasn't prepared for this new media reality. Growing up, my parents didn't let me watch much TV at all, because they thought reading and active play were more important. Sports on TV or radio were pretty much the only exception to the rule, and my brothers and I occasionally went to the neighbors' to watch the Three Stooges. I can still remember being upset in fourth grade because most of my classmates could discuss Batman in intimate detail, and we weren't even allowed to watch it. Those were the days when the Smothers Brothers were considered risqué, and when parents decried the influence of the Beatles. When *All in the Family* first appeared, it was considered edgy television because it dealt with issues like racism and discrimination against women. All in all, it was a very different era.

Back then, media was also still governed by at least some semblance of public-interest policy. The broadcast networks saw their news divisions as the standard bearers of a great tradition and often operated them at breakeven or a loss. There was, for a brief time, the "family hour" -- a voluntary code among programmers that they would air only family-friendly shows until 9:00 P.M. because so many children might be watching. We all knew that many TV shows could be as worthless as junk food, but for the most part we assumed they weren't a bad influence. Many of us who grew up in those days assume that the media continues to operate under those same rules today.

But while we weren't paying attention, everything changed. The implicit bond of trust between families and the media was broken. Spurred by cable competition and the relentless deregulation of the media industry during the 1980s, TV broadcasters, led by the new Fox network, abruptly abandoned the family hour and dropped the unwritten code that kept most sexual and violent content off the screen. Instead of maintaining a safe harbor for kids and families, the networks flooded channel after channel with increasingly explicit sex, commercialism, and violence. So much for voluntary codes of social responsibility.

At the same time, the reach of the mass media exploded, and it will be expanding even more in coming years. Cable channels have proliferated since the 1980s, and as industry pundits like to say, we've gone from the age of broadcasting to narrow casting. Instead of three major networks plus PBS, there are now hundreds of channels, and that number will soon multiply further with the advent of digital TV. With personal computers in more than half of all American homes, the Internet and electronic games are also competing, along with heavily marketed music, for kids' attention. As every parent knows all too well, kids are now surrounded by the clamor of media messages day and night. For millions of American kids, the media is, in fact, "the other parent" -- a force that is shaping their reality, setting their expectations, guiding their behavior, defining their self-image, and dictating their interests, choices, and values.

Confronting this media reality as parents, my wife and I realized that we had to take a much more active parenting role when it came to the media and our kids. Liz and I aren't zealots by any means, and neither one of us can relate to finger-wagging moralists or fundamentalist ideologues on the topic of the media and morals. In fact, I don't even think it's practical to go as far as the American Academy of Pediatrics, which recently recommended that kids under age two never watch TV. I'm hardly a paragon of virtue -- every once in a while, I can't resist showing my kids the food-fight scene from *Animal House* -- but my wife and I have set pretty strict media limits for our own kids.

Still, whatever rules we have at home sometimes feel like the equivalent of sticking a finger in the media dike. At the age of five, for example -- thanks to one of her friends across the street -- Lily was introduced to Spice Girls videos. I'll never forget watching with no small degree of horror as our tiny firstborn child provocatively danced and lip-synched to her favorite Spice Girls tune, "If You Wanna Be My Lover" -- abruptly teaching me the role-modeling influence that media has on even the youngest kids. I also noticed that most of the second, third, and fifth graders I taught at E. Morris Cox Elementary School in East Oakland, where I volunteered for ten years, don't have a clue about the names of their senators or the vice president of our country. But they know all about Bart Simpson, Kenan and Kel, the latest hip-hop artists, and the names of virtually every character on prime-time TV.

Inside the Media

When I started Children Now, I was convinced that if we were to reshape public policies on crucial children's issues such as education, Head Start, and child health care, we first needed to change the attitudes of the public and opinion leaders on these subjects. So from the beginning of our work as a major lobby group for children's rights, we approached media leaders for help in spreading the message.

By the time Lily was born, Children Now had begun researching and publicizing the effect of the various media, including news, entertainment, and advertising, on the daily lives, values, and behavior of children. We had commissioned national surveys asking kids to describe their experiences with mass media, and we were astonished to find that this was the first time that polls of this type had ever been conducted. Despite the incredible barrage of media that bombards kids, nobody had ever bothered to ask children themselves what they thought about its impact.

During the course of those studies, I spoke directly with hundreds of youngsters. Each had opinions on the media, and they all cared deeply that their views were being heard. The first thing most kids made clear was how thoroughly tuned into the media they and their friends were. They talked about how much it affected their peers and how it often left them feeling scared, angry, or depressed. I remember one ten-year-old telling me, for example, that he was "more scared watching the local news on TV than horror movies, because the news is for real."

Kids also said that the media didn't accurately reflect their reality -- that media companies didn't understand what it was like to be a kid. "They think we're pretty dumb, so they just feed us a lot of sex and violence whenever possible" -- that was the type of comment that I often heard. They felt alienated

yet at the same time heavily influenced by what they listened to or saw. And few kids I talked to thought that media was doing much of anything positive for kids -- such as modeling responsible behavior or educating them about issues that were important in their lives.

As we started lobbying in Washington, D.C., on issues like the Children's Television Act and a new ratings system for TV programming, it was amazing to see how few voices there were on the kids' side of the debate. I was also continuously frustrated to see how little serious attention was paid to the influence of media on kids by leaders from Washington to Hollywood and Madison Avenue. With rare and notable exceptions, few people seemed to be doing much of anything to make it better. So, in 1996, with my own kids squarely in mind, I decided to move on from Children Now and trade in my advocate's spurs for those of a media company leader. I was tired of trying to convince media leaders to do a better job for kids, so I had the notion that I would just do the job myself. As my mom always said, "Put your money where your mouth is." So armed with a little moxie and a terrific group of investors, I set out to build a new kids' educational media company -- JP Kids -- that would create high-quality content for kids on TV, the Internet, publishing, and related platforms. I had no idea what I was in for. And that's when my real education in the world of kids' media began.

In 2002, six years after launching JP Kids, we are still solidly in business, one of the few remaining independent kids' educational media companies dedicated to high-quality content in the United States. Our biggest hit series has been the very popular show *The Famous Jett Jackson*, which runs daily on the Disney Channel, and we've got a couple of new series that will hopefully be airing soon on PBS and other networks. We've also got a promising new publishing division as well as new educational media initiatives, but I'm not writing this book to promote JP Kids or Children Now. They'll succeed or fail on their own merits. Rather, this is an insider's view of the world of kids and media, from someone who's seen it up close from many different angles. As a parent, as a national child advocate, as someone who teaches constitutional law and civil liberties courses at Stanford University, and as the head of one of the few independent children's media companies in the United States, I've had a unique vantage point. And from where I stand, the world of media and children is not a very pretty picture. In fact, I'm convinced that the huge influence of the "other parent" should be a matter of urgent national concern for parents, policy makers, and responsible media executives alike.

Telling the Truth

When I first decided to write this book, my wife and some of my friends told me I was crazy. After all, it wouldn't do a lot for my relationships with some of the top executives at the big media companies that JP Kids does business with on a regular basis. And it probably wouldn't make some of my friends in the political and advocacy worlds happy either. Moreover, it would inevitably expose me as an imperfect parent who makes just as many mistakes as others do.

The stakes were made even clearer to me by author and media observer Ken Auletta. We were together at a kids and media conference in New York, and he asked me, "Jim, are you going to be honest? Are you going to tell the truth?" At first, I didn't understand exactly what he meant. Now I do.

If you want to tell the truth about today's media world, then you have to tell some pretty tough stories. And you have to name some names...including those of some people you like on a personal level and certainly some with whom you do business. As I said earlier, despite all the airbrushing that the media industry and some of its political allies manage so adeptly, it's not a pretty picture. There are a lot of very harmful things that are being done to kids and our society in the name of shareholder value, for profit alone. And there's not nearly enough being done to take the extraordinary potential of media and turn it into a positive force in our kids' lives and our global culture. That makes answering Auletta's question a lot easier. I'll do my best to tell the truth as I have experienced it, and let those proverbial chips fall where they may.

Money Rules

I may have been naive, but I originally assumed that the companies that produce and distribute kids' programming, as well as other media that kids so readily consume, have an overriding interest in children and a genuine concern for their best interests. How wrong and unaware I was. While I've met many people in the kids' media industry, both creative types and executives, who do fit this profile and care deeply about children, it's at best a minority viewpoint. What I learned the hard way is a very sobering lesson: market forces and the short-term profit goals of a few giant media corporations -- not quality issues or kids' needs -- dominate the media world, including nearly all the "edutainment" content produced for kids. Put simply, money rules all, not the best interest of kids or our broader society.

This lesson has been drilled home to me time and time again over the past five years by top media decision makers. During our first year at JP Kids, the head of kids' programming at the WB network, a woman who was a longtime and highly respected kids' programmer, warned me never to use the word "educational" within earshot of the individual who was head of the network at the time, unless I wanted to get our project killed immediately. Months later, I sat in the office of a top CBS executive and listened to her embarrassed explanation of why she was canceling a series order for a high-quality kids' show that she had previously raved about. "From a creative and educational standpoint, it was everything we were looking for. It's our favorite show," she told me. "But you know the reality of kids' television -- it's all about the deal and the bottom line. Somebody else just offered us an extremely profitable package deal that costs us virtually nothing, so we're going to cancel the order, even though we really love the show." In other words, no big profit potential, no sale.

Recently, the mercenary nature of kids' TV was described to me very bluntly by a colleague, the American-based head of a leading Canadian production company known for its successful deals in the U.S. marketplace. In May 2001, we were negotiating with this Canadian company to coproduce a couple of series. As this top executive explained to me:

It's easy to buy your way onto Fox Kids. Just show Haim [Saban, the then-head of Fox Kids and Fox Family] the merchandising money, and he'll make the deal...It's a lot harder to buy your way onto Nickelodeon than Fox, but now that Viacom is cutting budgets so much, it may be doable. It's all about the deal we offer them....Buying your way onto PBS

is pretty simple. If you can deliver one to two million dollars in sponsorships, you can usually get a weekly series. For three to five million dollars you can get a daily strip -- five days a week, the Holy Grail. At PBS, they're a lot more open to, ahem, more "entrepreneurial" and profitable strategies now that Bush is in office.

Welcome to the world of kids' TV circa 2002. That conversation reflects the basic reality that underlies not just kids' television but nearly every aspect of the media today. From TV, music, and movies to video games, the Internet, and publishing, an unprecedented and unfettered drive for short-term profits and rising stock prices now rules America's media companies and virtually all the content they create and distribute. Let me be very clear. This unchecked commercialism and obsession with the bottom line has a very direct and disturbing effect on the images and messages that influence our kids. Today, media companies, most of which are large, vertically integrated conglomerates, encourage coarseness and routinely "push the envelope" with sex, violence, and provocative language, not because it makes the creative product better, but solely because it makes that "product" stand out from the clutter of competition.

At a time when mergers and acquisitions and a disturbing, relentless trend of consolidation dominate the media industry, are we really surprised that concerns about quality and the needs of children have been shunted aside? Are we truly surprised at the lowest-common-denominator nature of so much content? As we'll explore in depth in subsequent chapters, the past decade's wave of media mergers has produced a complex web of business relationships that now defines America's mass media and popular culture. These relationships offer a huge opportunity for cross-promotion and the selling of products among different companies owned by the same powerful parent corporations. Today, America's media landscape, not to mention the content that our kids consume for five or six hours every day, is dominated by a handful of massive conglomerates -- only six or seven of them at most. These giant conglomerates own four of the five companies that sell 90 percent of the music in the United States. These same companies also own all the major film studios, all the major TV networks, and most of the broadcast TV stations in the largest ten markets. They own all or part of virtually every commercial cable channel. As outspoken media entrepreneur Ted Turner said recently,

Pretty soon there won't be but two cable companies left, and there'll be only four or five programming companies left. I think it's sad we're losing so much diversity of thought and opinions to big companies like News Corporation who only care about their own power. They don't care about the good of society.

These are all-purpose media corporations. And, quite simply, they look at kids as targets in this vast commercial empire they are conquering in the name of profit -- or, as they like to say, "shareholder value."

More Media, Less Choice

To the casual observer of today's media landscape, it might seem that there's been a serious increase in

consumer choice, especially for kids. But look more closely. As one noted author and media critic explains:

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t's the nature of the choice, and how the choices are laid out there, that is really the most striking feature....The issue isn't really the amount of choice; it's the amount of commercialism that permeates all the choices. So while it seems like you have a massive range of choices, they're really underneath it girded by the same commercial logic....Everything is dedicated to the idea of selling something.

Harsh words perhaps, but accurate. In the struggle to attract the largest audiences and ensure the greatest profit margins, these huge media giants are often locked in a crass race toward the bottom, employing sensationalism, not for artistic reasons but as a means of exploitation -- to grab, and keep, audiences' attention. This represents a fundamental shift over the past two decades. "It used to be that you stripped yourself of censorship to be honest," noted writer Larry Gelbart, whose credits include *M*A*S*H*, *Tootsie*, and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Now, he told *The New York Times*, "it's not done in the service of honesty, but in the service of competition, of the marketplace."⁴ Herb Scannell, the widely admired president of Nickelodeon and one of the most thoughtful and committed media leaders I know, recently observed, "There's a whole business aura to post-eighties culture that's completely different. Everybody has stock now, and I think business has impacted media in a way that says, 'What's my return?' sooner rather than later."

As I travel to various places around the country, I hear three primary concerns over and over again: there's too much sex, too much violence, and too much commercialism in media. I'll address each of these issues in later chapters, but it's important to understand right up front that the roots of each of these problems are most definitely colored green. As Reed Hundt, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), said plainly, "Market values aren't necessarily family values."

Loss of Innocence

For me, as a parent of three young children and as a longtime teacher, the loss of innocence at too early an age is perhaps the highest price that American kids pay in this new media environment. Ever since the Hays Office began monitoring Hollywood morals in the 1920s, Americans have worried about the media's impact on "family values." But before our mass-media culture became so explicit and so pervasive, before large media companies began to realize huge profits by pushing sex and sensationalism, things were different. Parents were much better able to control what their children learned about and when. I'm hardly a prude, having grown up in the "free love" era of the late 1960s and 1970s, but I am deeply troubled by this aspect of today's media culture. Our kids are bombarded with language, messages, and images that far exceed the most outrageous forms of pop culture we experienced. And instead of making a social or political statement, they aim to shock and titillate for commercial reasons.

Traditionally, childhood was guarded by what Neil Postman, chairman of New York University's Department of Culture and Communication and a respected media observer, calls a "sequence of revealed secrets." Kids were routinely protected from information that they were not yet ready to understand. That innocence is priceless. It's an essential element of childhood and growing up. But today, such gatekeeping is virtually impossible. In the course of a single year, the average American child is exposed to about ten thousand episodes of sexual intercourse or references to sex on television alone. We're not even talking about their repeated exposure to sex in movies, ads, magazines, music, radio shows, and easily accessed Web sites. In a recent two-week survey of TV shows by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, more than two-thirds of the shows that aired in what used to be the "family hour" -- from 7:00 to 9:00 P.M. -- contained sexual content inappropriate for kids. And this was only broadcast television, not the more extreme content routinely available on cable.

This constant and overwhelming exposure to sexual messages is coming at a time when splintered families, the decline in organized religion, and struggling public schools have left many kids without other clear messages when it comes to sexual behavior and values. Should parents be the first line of defense? Absolutely. But the media has some serious responsibility too, especially when they are using publicly owned airwaves to make billions of dollars.

If we don't start taking responsibility -- as parents first, but also by demanding it from the huge media interests as well as the government officials who are supposed to regulate them on behalf of the public interest -- then we put our children at continued risk. We will raise generations of kids desensitized to violence, overexposed to reckless sex, and commercially exploited from their earliest years. And our culture will pay an ever-increasing price.

Raised on Violence

Part of that price is a tolerance and a taste for violence. More than a thousand scientific studies have shown that over time, exposure to violence in the media results in desensitization, fear, and increased aggression. The American Psychological Association has stated it plainly: "The accumulated research clearly demonstrates a correlation between viewing violence and aggressive behavior." The surgeon general, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the American Academy of Pediatrics agree. Media industry flacks who question the evidence about media and violence are the equivalent of cigarette company executives who testify to Congress that there's no proven link between cigarettes and cancer.

Today, repeated exposure to media violence can start at frighteningly young ages. The average preschooler watches well over twenty hours of television and videos a week, and more than 90 percent of programs during children's prime viewing hours feature violence. By the time they enter middle school, American kids have seen eight thousand killings and a hundred thousand more acts of violence on TV. Again, we're talking about only broadcast television here -- not violent video games, movies, music, or the hugely popular, head-banging World Wrestling Federation (WWF) excesses on cable.

For some of the most vulnerable youngsters in our society, violent media can provide a script for

fantasies of mayhem. Are they the sole cause of adolescent violence? Certainly not. But they are definitely a factor. Repeated playing of violent computer games such as Doom can function as horribly realistic rehearsals. And unfortunately, weapons can be the far-too-easily-obtained props that kids use to put their rage-and-media-fueled fantasies into action. Other kids -- those who don't shoot up their schools -- can become more and more numbed to violence and tolerant of it as an alternative in life. This far more pervasive effect -- what former New York senator Daniel Moynihan refers to as "defining deviancy down" -- has disturbing, long-term implications for many kids and for the health and safety of American society.

Captives of the Free Market

Commercial exploitation is another price that American kids pay from the time they are in diapers. I can't tell you how many meetings I've been in over the past few years, both with media executives and advertisers, in which kids were referred to almost exclusively in terms of their monetary value as consumers. It's nauseating but entirely routine in the media world. As we'll see in chapter 5, consumerism among kids is at an all-time high (you might say "low" if you question the values that this represents). With hundreds of companies, armed with sophisticated studies and the latest focus-group research, targeting kids from the cradle through high school, is it any surprise that so many parents, including myself, are frequently taken aback by the consumeristic impulses of children? I sometimes wonder, for kids left alone in the afternoon, is it worse to watch the daytime talk-show parade of "little girls obsessed with their looks," "one-night stands," "teens who lie about abuse," and "sexy lingerie for criticized wives," or the endless stream of commercials that punctuate them? Both are driven by the same imperative -- the media's single-minded focus on the bottom line. But that impulse has its worst expression when it specifically targets kids, seeking to manipulate them in the interests of corporate profits.

Abandoned by Our Public Representatives

So who is looking out for the interests of the public and our kids? You might be asking yourself by now, hey, where's the government, and what's a more important national priority than nurturing the healthy growth of future generations? The American people, after all, own the airwaves and much of the other resources on which these large media empires have been built. Shouldn't there be special rules that protect kids and require these huge media conglomerates to operate in the public interest when it comes to our youngest citizens? It is more than naive to pretend that the market alone will protect them. After all, there's a reason we require kids to go to school until they're sixteen. There's a reason we have child labor laws. There's a reason we don't let people under sixteen drive cars. There's a reason we have strict underage drinking laws -- because kids are not equipped with the same capacity for judgment and discrimination as adults. They need guidance, education, and special rules to keep them from being damaged or exploited. We recognize this in virtually every sphere of American life. Yet in the media world, we have stripped away the very rules created both to protect kids and to enhance their lives, leaving them almost entirely to the profit-driven manipulations of a largely unregulated free market.

It wasn't always like this, as we'll explore in depth in later chapters. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, profit motives were balanced by a belief in social responsibility as well as, in many instances, public interest obligations enforced by government. As far back as 1934, Congress awarded broadcasters the free use of the public airwaves on the condition that they in turn serve "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." Courts, the Congress, and federal regulators such as the FCC have consistently upheld the public-interest standard, and for decades broadcasters and other media leaders respected it.

Today, however, the public-interest standard has been rendered virtually meaningless. With the exception of some much-watered-down kids' TV regulations, broadcasters and the huge media conglomerates that own them rarely provide any fare that remotely reminds us of their public-interest obligations. Other branches of the media act as if they've never even heard of the concept. So when -- and why -- did the media lose sight of its public-interest responsibilities?

The trend began in the 1980s, when free-market conservatism and the culture of "greed is good" captured the country. The deregulation craze shook industry after industry, as regulatory agencies were stripped -- or stripped themselves -- of their authority. The media industry quickly went the way of the airlines and financial services. Regulations protecting the public interest, not to mention children and families, were scorned, and the results were devastating. President Ronald Reagan's FCC chairman, Mark Fowler, waved the deregulation flag and announced that the TV is merely a "toaster with pictures." Under Fowler, the FCC stopped requiring stations to air educational and informational shows for kids, and it stopped limiting advertising on children's shows.

Fowler also handed the keys of the television industry to financial speculators, eliminating the rule that required media owners to hold on to a station for at least three years before selling it. As a result, a rash of speculative buying, selling, and mergers swept the industry. New corporate owners -- with no media experience and eyes focused exclusively on the bottom line -- took over venerable television networks such as NBC and CBS. Today, Westinghouse (which merged with CBS, which then merged again with Viacom) and General Electric -- the guys who really do make toasters -- are in charge of television. At the same time, cable TV -- which, being nonbroadcast, was never subject to "public trust" restrictions -- increased competition for audiences, began "pushing the envelope" with raunchy shows to grab attention, and intensified the focus on the industry's profit margins.

The bottom-line trend that began in the 1980s accelerated in the 1990s. The 1996 Telecommunications Act, which deregulated even more aspects of media ownership, triggered cutthroat competition and massive consolidation, particularly in the television arena. In addition, as recently retired FCC chairman William Kennard describes it, the 1996 Telecom Act "defanged" the FCC, making it virtually impossible for public interest and citizens groups to challenge broadcasters' licenses. As a result, the twenty-first-century world of media, more than ever before, is now focused on market share, mergers, and vertical integration. The huge companies that make various media products today also control the financing and distribution of those products. The media is guided by the forces of free-market capitalism, and media companies are even more tightly ruled by simplistic numerical yardsticks such as quarterly profit-and-loss statements.

In an interview for this book, Steve Case, the chairman and visionary leader of corporate giant AOL Time Warner, openly acknowledged this reality, admitting that even in his view, the media industry had "become too Wall Street-centric, too focused on what the analysts are saying, and much too focused on what the stock price is tomorrow."⁶ Today, shareholder returns matter far more than quality or the public interest. The resulting cost-cutting and ever-increasing competition mean that only the strongest and biggest media companies survive. This is social Darwinism in its purist form.

It does not have to be this way. We may have made many mistakes and missed many important opportunities to rein in big media and make it accountable to kids and the broader public interest. But we are at a watershed moment in our media-driven society, and we have a chance to reverse many of these trends and make the media much more of a positive force in our society. I didn't write this book (and nearly drive my wife and kids crazy in the process) just in order to describe the problem. I'm not merely going to explore the problems of vertical integration by huge conglomerates and how that leads to a proliferation of sex, violence, and commercialism in the various media. Instead, Part II of this book is about solutions and achieving change. We are going to look at the positive steps that parents, the media industry itself, government, and citizen activists can take to make the media environment healthier for kids. And I am going to outline a specific action agenda for each sector to pursue in addressing this most crucial issue.

Parents Taking Control

It's tempting to believe that we can trust the media with our kids, that we don't need to pay close attention to what movies or TV shows our kids are watching, what computer games they're playing, where they're surfing on the Internet, or what lyrics are coming through their Walkman headphones. It's much easier to believe -- as our parents could -- that we can trust the media. After all, we're only adding more work and more worry to our lives if we admit that we now need to be as wary of the media as we are of strangers accosting our children on the street. As a result, many parents are in a state of "media denial," while others feel overwhelmed and helpless.

But the fact is, we need to take as much responsibility for our children's media consumption as we do for their performance in school and their physical well-being. If we're worried about what our kids eat, then we should certainly be worried about what our kids are watching. Taking responsibility takes effort, no question, but it's achievable. I've devoted an entire chapter to the role of parents, and I've laid out practical, concrete strategies they can use to assert control over the "other parent" in their children's lives, starting today.

Calling the Media Industry to Account

I am sick and tired of hearing industry leaders and spokespeople try to evade their responsibility and point the finger at everyone else -- parents, "censors," or other media companies who they claim are worse offenders than they are. It is long since past the time when the media industry itself, and particularly the top executives of these huge media conglomerates, took sustained and serious

responsibility for the products and content that they are marketing to kids, for shaping our culture and values. They must be held accountable. Period.

Many of the people I know in the upper echelons of the media industry are intelligent, capable, and upstanding people. But they are leaders of companies that appear to have only one purpose: the relentless pursuit of short-term profit and "shareholder value." I believe, however, that the media industry, by its very nature and role in our society and global culture, must act differently than other industries -- not least because they have the free use of our public airwaves, our digital spectrum, and virtually unfettered access to our children's hearts and minds. These are priceless assets, and the right to use them should necessarily carry serious and long-lasting obligations to further the public good.

But rather than talking about our moral and social responsibility to kids, media leaders use the First Amendment argument to stop healthy debate. By framing every criticism as a threat of censorship, they derail any discussion and action on the real, underlying issue -- the need to protect kids and enhance their learning in the new media environment. Now, without question, the First Amendment is one of the most hallowed jewels of our Constitution. It stands for our nation's commitment to individual freedom of expression and to a free press so essential to a participatory democracy. But as someone who has taught First Amendment law and politics at Stanford University for more than a decade, I can tell you that the industry's application of the First Amendment to kids' media is largely a self-serving sham.

In chapter 9, we'll look at a range of proactive investments and measures -- including serious funding for quality children's media as well as media literacy programs -- that should be part and parcel of the huge conglomerates' operating mandates. And we'll explore how the media and advertising industries can play a critical role in realizing the enormous educational potential of the Internet and other digital technologies.

The Role of Government

As we'll see time and again throughout this book, a free, unregulated marketplace will never care about kids. In that Darwinian setting, only the fittest survive and only profits matter. Kids need special rules, special protections, and strong, mediating forces that will place their interests above the ruthless imperatives of short-term profit margins. The last time I checked, that was supposed to be the role of government in our democratic system. But in fact, our government has been doing very little lately to regulate the media on behalf of the best interests of America's kids and families. It's time for that to change. It's time for our elected officials to stand up to the deep pockets of the media companies and help create a healthier media environment for kids.

We'll explore further our government's far too cozy relationship with the media industry and look at the constitutional history of First Amendment law to show just how far Congress and the FCC can and should go to regulate media on behalf of kids. We'll also examine some instances in recent history when Congress, the president, and the FCC have used their constitutional powers to promote the interests of children despite industry objections. And we'll look at why, as Senator Joseph Lieberman has warned, the

current FCC is failing to use its basic enforcement powers in the best interests of America's kids and families.⁷ But perhaps most important, in Chapter Ten this book will set out an agenda for what government should do to help over the next decade. Given that the media is the "other parent" in kids' lives, government has a major role to play in curbing its excesses and promoting its use in the public interest.

Citizens Standing Up for Kids

In an interview for this book, former President Bill Clinton was surprisingly optimistic about the concept of forging a broad coalition to support media reforms that favor children and families. He saw possibilities for this in both Congress and among citizen advocacy groups, noting correctly that the vast majority of Americans -- both conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat -- feel a deep, heartfelt concern over the current state of our media environment. Drawing on his eight years in the White House, he compared this opportunity for cooperation to the broad base of support for economic aid to Mexico and other developing countries, which came from an unusual coalition of liberals and conservatives. It even brought Pat Robertson to the White House for his one and only visit during the Clinton presidency. I think the former president is onto something, and it's a sense I've had ever since I began researching this book and giving frequent talks about this subject. I find that people of all political persuasions agree with the need and many of the strategies for media reform. People from all backgrounds and political parties share concerns about the ways in which media is shaping our kids' values and behaviors. It's not unusual for people to come up to me after a talk and say, "I'm actually very conservative, but I agree with you about these issues." In fact, I found myself agreeing with a conservative like William Bennett, with whom I'd never agreed on anything, when he conducted his shaming campaign against Time Warner and their profit-driven distribution of misogynistic rap music.

I do think there's interesting potential here for an unusual cross section of American citizens -- and, hopefully, government leaders -- to come together around these issues. In chapter 11, as in the other solutions-focused chapters of this book, I've suggested a specific, concrete agenda for citizen activists to pursue as we seek to rein in and make more positive the enormous power of the media in children's lives.

At the end of the day, this is an issue that is simply too important to ignore. We are truly at a crossroads as we enter the twenty-first century. In the shadow of the events of September 11, 2001, we are learning the power of collective action and common ground. The need is there. The media's messages are ever more pervasive in our society and ever more powerful forces in shaping our children's values, behavior, and, very possibly, their future. The "other parent" is real, and it is everywhere. The challenge of restraining it is enormous. But so are the rewards for meeting that challenge -- and the consequences for failure will be equally profound.

What we need is a new model, a new contract between parents, the media industry, and our government. We do not face a Hobson's choice between free speech and a free market on the one hand and government censorship or bureaucracy on the other. Rather, the true choice is a balanced one of how best to serve the needs of American society and most of all our kids -- how to direct the extraordinary powers

of traditional and new digital media to be a positive force in our children's lives. That's no small challenge, but we ignore it at our peril. The wise former FCC chairman Newton Minow said recently, "If we turn away from that choice, the consequences of our inaction will be even greater educational neglect, more craven and deceptive consumerism, and inappropriate levels of sex and violence -- a wasteland vaster than anyone can imagine or would care to. Let us do for our children today what we should have done long ago."8 It's time to get started.

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