

Massachusetts Institute of Technology Communications Forum

<http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums.html>

Friday, 2 April 2004

Prof. Thorburn,

I feel I should acknowledge, in some way, your need to publicly apologize (read: chastise me) for my opening question at yesterday's forum with **MTV's Betsy Frank**. Your instinctive reflex to come to some defense of your guest was honorable. No problem. My question was never meant to disrespect, hurt or embarrass her, you, or to rant like some right-wing goofball. My intention was to simply subject her to one of her own techniques. In fact, I wanted to infect the entire room with the meme...."corporate pedophilia". It worked. Few there will forget the term, especially Ms. Frank. It needed to be said. If you want to hear more of my reasoning read on, below. If not, cool, I said my peace. Thanks.

I know a lot of the folks at MTV, past and present. I've worked with them. I greatly admire much of their work especially in the areas of print and on-air design. But that's really where it ends. Look, it's no secret that Viacom (in this case) is blatantly exploiting children. The reason being that 6-18yos represent an estimated \$200 BILLION pile of discretionary spending. EVERYBODY wants a piece of that pie. So who's gonna yell fire?

My exact comment to Ms. Frank was:

"If you were a priest you'd probably be hauled outta here as a pedophile. I say this because you're devising a Cradle-to-Grave marketing strategy by primarily micro-designing media into an aggressive consumer experience - one which borders on corporate pedophilia. I seriously doubt you would encourage your own children round-the-clock viewing of your own product. Because I'm guessing that you also have research that clearly implicates MTV in Cause-

and-Effect concerns about the massive increases in: - teen consumption - teen obesity - teen suicide - teen debt - teen plastic surgery. So I guess my question to you is: How would MTV change if every viewer were your 12 year old daughter?"

I thought Ms. Frank's (non)answer to my question spoke volumes. Listen again to the webcast when it's posted.

My question was far from inappropriate. For instance from previous forums:

- **Josh Bernoff** stated (1:37:40) that "Ethics is not at the top of the list in the minds of media executives".
- **Jeffrey Dvorkin** said to the effect that, "It's obvious that money drives most media decisions."

So then, why not go straight to the horse's mouth? Look, if we whisper the words gay and marriage, jew and nazi, or children and porn in the same sentence most folks go berserk. But there is very little outcry about exploiting undeveloped minds with every possible form of scientific manipulation known to man purely to turn them into consuming machines. I can offer reams of research to support this. Corporations are not being held accountable, period.

Ms. Frank managed to spend maybe 30% of the forum extolling MTV's "pro-social" virtues when in actual broadcast terms it probably represents only 1% (15min.) of an average broadcast day. And ketchup is also a vegetable, right? Lip service. But these are the easy arguments. Ms. Frank's efforts are much more insidious. She is teaching corporations how to hook viewers for a lifetime. Consuming drones. Consumption as citizenship. Instant gratification as true health and happiness.

I don't have to spell this out to you....we all know exactly what I'm saying. The hundreds of hours of ads seen during a child's formative years. The huge number of "image" promos each day that foster self-loathing. The addictive brand-lust forced into every nook and cranny of every broadcast. Celebrity worship. Crack coke?

Ms. Frank is a chieftain in all this. And she needs a good dose of "reality" ethic. She appeared stunned by the term "corporate

pedophilia" and claimed to have never heard it. How could this be? In all her years of deep research she never made that possible connection? If not, then we may be in even more trouble than I fear. Ms. Frank is brilliant and we need her to interpret ALL her research.

It doesn't take a media expert to see that the recent MTV "pro-social" piece on Sen. John Kerry was broadcast once at 10:30pm...yet they run back-to-back hours of "I want a famous face", et al, from 2:30pm on, every day, during the unsupervised after school hours. Just ask a parent. Her weak aside on MTV's concerns about teen obesity can be summarized in one 2sec. video clip of a plastic surgeon holding up for the camera a 12 pound hunk of human fat from a teen's tummy-tuck.....the \$15,000 poorer (but ecstatic) teen-patient was intent on looking like Kate Winslet. On and on. Sit with me some day and we can watch MTV together.

Technology is neither good, bad, nor indifferent. But it's USAGE can really make a difference. And no surprise, money rules. Try this: After every PowerPoint bullet in Ms. Frank's presentation say the words, "...because we want more teen money.".....you'll start to hear the true undercurrent. MTV is only a delivery device, the front story veneer, to the very real backstory of how to get viewers hooked on unceasing consumption. (That was even Bush's patriotic plea of citizenship after 9/11....for the love of god don't stop spending.) Ms. Frank pleads innocent because she only draws bomb blueprints....she could care less who makes the bombs. For that she's totally unapologetic. Creepy.

I don't have a 12yo daughter either. But that's no excuse for Ms. Frank or anyone else. If her kind of PowerPoint presentation was about bombs - the FBI would be over that like flies on crap. If it was found in a Priest's briefcase....the Globe headline would read..."Stalker Found With Detailed Plans To Seduce Children". Evil doers?

David, I like your forum. I enjoy it. But you simply can't talk about "new emerging media landscapes" without discussing the impact of VISUALS. (...and I'm not just talking about pictures of hanging dead Americans from a bridge in Fallujah....that's another discussion.) And you also can't talk about "changing media-audiences" without a nod

to how corporations are mastering the manipulation (the enslaving) of the new generation of go-go-90's kids into their own personal, lifetime gold mines.

For more on **Betsy Frank** link to:

http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/changing_audiences.html#speakers