



Using the Media to Promote Adolescent Well-Being

Elisabeth Hirschhorn Donahue, Ron Haskins, and Marisa Nightingale

Adolescent media use has exploded. Parents are worried that teens are drowning in messages about sex, smoking, drinking, consumer goods, and a host of other behaviors and products that threaten their health and well-being. This brief advocates fighting fire with fire by creative use of media to provide youth with positive messages that counteract the negative and potentially damaging messages to which they are so frequently exposed.

Teenagers are insatiable users of electronic media. While many adults of a certain age struggle simply to understand what MySpace might be, teens are whirling away expertly on their computers, cell phones, and personal digital assistants. What are they doing? Instant messaging their friends, buying merchandise, looking up information for homework, playing video games, displaying their artwork and writing on the

Internet, and inhabiting virtual worlds. During a considerable portion of this time they are unsupervised, selecting with almost complete freedom the messages to which they are exposed and the social relationships in which they are involved.

Especially for anxious parents, there is a large “we’d better get a hold of this” factor in the tsunami of media that is such a routine part of adolescent culture. Not surprisingly, many adults have argued that government policymakers should impose restrictions, backed by penalties, on the types of messages that media can broadcast. Although we do not intend in this brief to enter the debate over the First Amendment and whether government should and can regulate content, we do assume that the nation’s longstanding guarantee of free speech will limit—for at least the immediate future and perhaps much longer—serious regulation of media content.

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For a broader discussion of electronic media and children, go to www.futureofchildren.org to read the full report, edited by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Elisabeth Hirschhorn Donahue.

Do we then advocate simply leaving the nation’s youth to the wiles of Madison Avenue, the purveyors of smut and violence, and Internet predators? Not at all. Rather, we want to focus attention on a strategy

that uses media, sometimes in sophisticated ways, to help young people avoid behaviors that reduce their well-being and increase behaviors that promote their well-being. We propose meeting youth where they are—riding the airwaves—with positive messages that compete with and offer attractive alternatives to the negative, unhealthful, or illegal messages that others offer.

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Teenagers' Use of Electronic Media

According to a survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project covering the period 2005–06, media use by adolescents aged twelve to seventeen has increased rapidly in recent years and continues to grow.¹ Fully 93 percent of teens use the Internet, and most of them have access to at least one high-speed service that permits a wide range of media activities. One important trend captured by the Pew survey is that nearly 65 percent of teens who use the Internet are now actively creating content—sharing artwork, photos, stories, or videos; creating Web pages or blogs for themselves or for friends or organizations they support; writing online journals; maintaining a personal Web page; and remixing content from online sources to create their own material.

Young people's Internet activities are by no means limited to computers. Teens also access the Internet using cell phones and personal digital assistants (such as the BlackBerry). Nearly 85 percent of teens own at least one of these media platforms, and about 45 percent have two or more. Almost half of teens have their own cell phones and about one-third text message their friends on a regular basis. And it's no wonder that teens own and use these devices. Among

the forces drawing them to the Internet is one that motivates teens of every era—the desire to have and interact with friends. Pew found that 83 percent of teens say that their friends are online.

The Role of Parents

Parents may be their children's first and most important teachers, but as children grow older they are able to vote with their feet on an expanding universe of decisions about selecting friends, joining organizations, using leisure time, and making a host of other day-to-day choices. The growing independence of adolescence itself is nothing new. But starting roughly in the 1950s, television and radio added a new dimension to children's choices and parents' inability to shape those choices to their satisfaction. After several decades of sometimes bitter fighting, family advocates and industry interest groups developed some strategies to help parents select and monitor media—specifically, rating systems voluntarily adopted by the movie, music, television, and gaming industries, and mandatory installation of V-chips in TVs. In truth, however, none of these strategies has worked well enough, not least because parents don't understand them or have the time and patience to use them effectively.²

If parents have had trouble regulating what their children see on television and in movies and what music they hear, how well are they managing their children's use of computers, cell phones, iPods, and devices like the BlackBerry? The Internet has opened new vistas of communication far beyond those offered by TV and radio. And the increasing portability of new media platforms means that youth can access most media outside the supervision of parents or other responsible adults. The brute fact is that even the most vigilant parents cannot supervise their teenagers at every moment. The result is that teens are exposed to a vast array of unfiltered negative messages that encourage unhealthful choices: smoking, early sexual initiation, eating junk food, underage drinking—just to name a few.

The Role of Communities and Government

With parents unable to counteract negative media

on their own and with federal government regulation of media content problematic at best, advocacy groups, foundations, and community organizations have stepped into the breach to create and run social marketing campaigns, many of which make use of the same electronic media that so worry parents. Some of these groups are even working in partnership with commercial entertainment media. These same organizations also help rally parents and interest groups when social and legal pressure needs to be brought to force industry to clean up its act. Schools have also joined in, teaching youth how to use media wisely and how to resist harmful options. Below we provide numerous examples of how these concerned groups use the media in creative ways to provide youth with the positive messages they need to resist the media onslaught.

Government has and should continue to support these efforts. Because the budgets of nonprofit groups trying to counteract commercial messages harmful to youth do not come close to matching the budgets available to commercial media, government should help close at least part of this funding gap. With the help of government funding, media messages designed to enhance adolescent well-being can compete with commercial advertising and media

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programming that portrays and glamorizes harmful behavior. Government dollars and organizational capacity can bolster efforts of nonprofits to use electronic media to produce positive messages for teens and their families.

Social Marketing and Media

Social marketing campaigns have gotten their messages across to youth using media in a variety of ways. The methods range from traditional public service announcement campaigns, to informational websites, to incorporating messages in mainstream commercial programming, to the innovative use of “new media” such as social networking sites to connect with teens and young adults immediately and personally. By their example, the social marketing campaigns highlighted below can show other nonprofit groups how to create programs that government, foundation, and private dollars could fund to promote youth well-being through electronic media.³

One example is a program started in Chicago to address childhood obesity. The Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children (CLOCC) developed a public health education initiative that supports a healthier lifestyle. The resulting 5-4-3-2-1 Go! campaign uses a variety of electronic media to spread the message that children should have five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, four servings of water, three servings of low-fat dairy, no more than two hours of screen time, and one or more hour of physical activity. To support youth ambassadors who go out in the field to spread the word, CLOCC offers PowerPoint presentations that address its recommendations in depth and a website, www.clocc.net, that provides links to important sources of information.

Another is Parents Speak Up, a \$10 million social marketing campaign funded by the federal government, which encourages parents to talk to their pre-adolescent and early adolescent children “early and often” about delaying the onset of sexual activity. The campaign, publicly released in June 2007, consists of public service announcements, outreach centers, billboards, bus media, posters, Web banners, and media kits, all of which contain motivational messages about

why delaying sex is a good idea for young teens. The campaign's www.4Parents.gov website contains information aimed at educating parents about how to discuss the topic with their children, as well as background information on sex and risky behaviors, sexual development, and reproduction.

While more traditional social marketing campaigns provide facts about the harm that a product or practice can do, some nonprofits are experimenting with an approach known as countermarketing. These campaigns provide messages that counter what an industry is telling youth and give positive alternatives for combating industry messages. For anti-tobacco forces, this has meant using marketing techniques to “sell” the idea that tobacco companies and the products they create are uncool and unacceptable. For example, in the Truth Campaign, originally started in Florida and replicated and expanded nationwide by the American Legacy Foundation, the goal is to get facts out about cigarettes, tobacco companies and their advertising techniques, and the risks associated with smoking. The campaign uses a variety of media, including advertisements and a website, [www.the truth.com](http://www.thetruth.com), to portray tobacco companies as the bad guys pushing disgusting products (such as the fact—sure to grab the attention of teens—that urea, found in cigarettes, is also found in urine) and to create the image that it is cooler for teens to stand up to the tobacco companies than to buy their products.

Several nonprofit organizations have pushed the envelope to create entirely new forms of marketing. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, for example, has partnered with two media powerhouses, CBS Corporation and Viacom, to create a public education campaign, Know HIV-AIDS, to inform the public about HIV prevention and testing. But in addition to using radio, TV, billboards, and online materials (www.hivtest.org) to get its message out, the campaign is embedding its themes directly into CBS and Viacom programming and then providing educational resources to accompany the programming in print and on a website. Similarly, for the past ten years the Kaiser Foundation has worked collaboratively with MTV to promote a public information campaign,

It's Your (Sex) Life, www.mtv.com/onair/ffyr/protect/lifeguide, to encourage young people to learn more about HIV and their own HIV status. In addition to public service advertisements and a comprehensive website, the campaign's latest effort is a contest, co-sponsored by the hip-hop artist Common and others, that offers youth the chance to submit original lyrics that address the importance of getting tested for HIV. The winner of the “A Minute” contest will have her lyrics performed by Common in a public service announcement that will air throughout the summer on MTV stations and the campaign's website.

What is noteworthy about these and similar initiatives is that their sponsoring organizations work with commercial media to present positive messages. Such collaboration is cost-effective.

Global Kids, a youth development organization, takes a preventive approach, using new media to engage urban youth and inspire them to become global citizens, community leaders, and successful citizens. To do this, the Global Kids Online Leadership Program, www.globalkids.org, infiltrates online youth spaces with substantive, issue-oriented experiences, from online dialogues about current events, to a game about poverty and education in rural Haiti, to supporting virtual-world-based training to promote youth social entrepreneurial activity around such issues as preventing bullying and raising self-esteem.

Another sophisticated media program is run by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, www.teenpregnancy.org. Like the Know HIV-AIDS initiative, the National Campaign's media program is incorporating its pregnancy prevention mantra directly into the entertainment media most popular with youth. It provides its messages and research to the media professionals—the TV writers,

magazine editors, website producers, and bloggers—who know how to attract young audiences, hold their attention, and keep them coming back week after week. As with the It's Your (Sex) Life and Global Kids Leadership initiatives, the National Campaign is taking advantage of adolescents' increasing interest in user-generated content, the hallmark of new media.

What is noteworthy about these and similar initiatives is that their sponsoring organizations work with commercial media to present positive messages. Such collaboration is cost-effective. By working with top cable outlets, popular magazines, and leading websites, the National Campaign, for example, has reached more than 300 million young people with its messages and garnered just over \$50 million worth of exposure through messages integrated directly into shows and public service announcements. Each time its messages appear in a TV show or magazine feature, the campaign develops online components (quizzes, discussion questions, even character blogs) to help bring these situations to life and enable viewers—parents and teens—to use what they're seeing in the media to learn more and to discuss their own views and values.

In another example of bringing media to life by directly involving teens, the National Campaign has recently launched a public service announcement initiative encouraging teens to enjoy what's best about the teen years and postpone pregnancy and parenting. The public service ads were designed to be shared and they have been—widely. They have been viewed more than 300,000 times on MySpace, the nation's most-visited website, and teens can post the ads on their own MySpace pages and other online profiles. MySpace co-sponsored a "How Do You Stay Teen?" contest and the winning entry is now part of the ad campaign, which has won free placements on *American Idol*, *The Simpsons*, thecwtv.com, and other popular media. In this and its other initiatives, the National Campaign is trying to supply young people and their parents with entertaining, thought-provoking tools to enable them to have their own conversations about preventing teen and unplanned pregnancy. Thus empowered, teens can

become advocates and resources to their peers, who, along with parents, are an even more powerful influence than the media when it comes to their decisions about sex.

Nonprofit groups are beginning to increase their efficacy by making more creative use of the media—both old and new—to reach and hold teens on their own terrain.

The examples above are just the tip of the iceberg of what has been done and what can still be done to involve teens and their parents in media initiatives that convey positive messages about youth well-being. The approaches to creating an innovative media campaign are multi-pronged. One strategy is to work with television writers to embed positive messages into the storylines of television programs popular with teens and to partner with broadcasters to create a blog where the plot can be discussed by teen viewers. Another is to work in collaboration with a television program's website to create interactive features to bring important facts and messages to the audience and allow audience members to answer questions and give comments. Another is to embrace the user-generated world of new media by airing ads created by teens on prime-time popular shows and on the Internet. Some innovative campaigns use heavily trafficked social networking websites to create a network of youth ambassadors who can spread the word to their peers about risky behaviors and positive choices, while others create websites that not only contain information but also allow teens to upload their own photos and videos to create their own customized positive message ads.

Conclusion

Energetic, committed nonprofits are already doing their own marketing, using the media in various forms to engage young people and deliver positive

messages. And although there is clearly still a place for the traditional public service announcement or advertisement broadcast on television or radio, these nonprofit groups are beginning to increase their efficacy by making more creative use of the media—both old and new—to reach and hold teens on their own terrain. Other nonprofits can follow their lead by entering into partnerships with entertainment professionals to get their positive messages included in the shows teens love. They can also turn to their advantage the new social networking that teens are using to share their own content—news, messages, videos,

artwork, and stories. Nonprofits with a positive message can draw teens into conversations by supplying them with expertise and tools they can share with their friends to become advocates to one another. Adult advocates may not “own” these conversations, but they can inform, moderate, and expand them. The ultimate goal is to reach youth with positive messaging. Embracing media rather than trying to counteract it promises to be an effective tool in shaping teen behavior.

Endnotes

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2. Amy B. Jordan, “Electronic Media and Policy,” *Future of Children* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 235–53.

3. For a broader discussion of how social marketing works and an overview of the research on successful campaigns, see W. Douglas Evans, “Social Marketing Campaigns and Children’s Media Use,” *Future of Children* 18, vol. 1 (Spring 2008): 181–203.

Additional Resources

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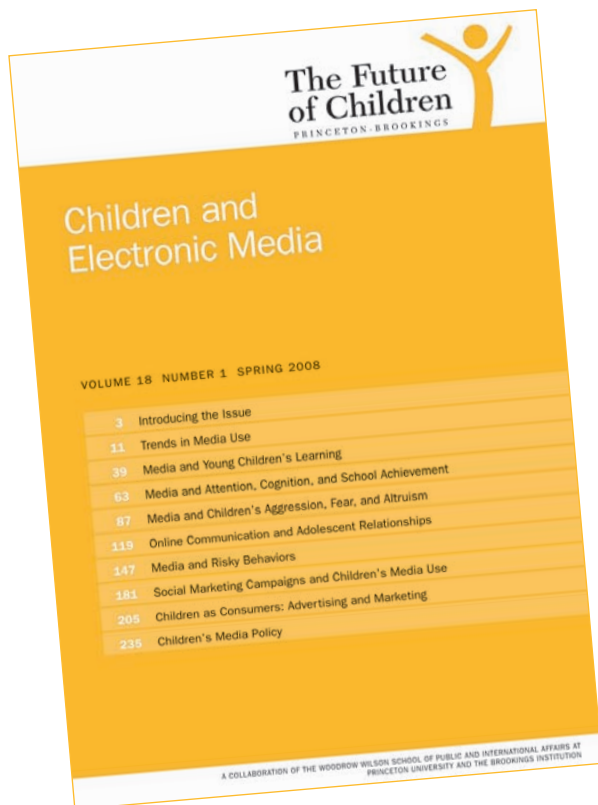
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