



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

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Anne Bryant, EdD
Executive Director
National School Boards Association
1680 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

Josh Golin
Associate Director, Campaign for
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Dear Dr. Bryant,

We are writing to urge the National School Boards Association to disavow its report, "Creating & Connecting: Research and Guidelines on Online Social—And Educational—Networking," which suggests, among other things, that schools consider easing their restrictions on the in-school use of social networking sites.¹ Both the funding and the content of the report are at odds with the NSBA's stated mission to "serve as a trusted representative of the nation's 95,000 local school board members...dedicated to leadership for student achievement."²

CCFC
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Studies suggest that the source of funding is a factor in research findings, particularly when it comes from corporations with a vested interest in the results.³ As an educational organization, NSBA should model sound research techniques. This report was underwritten by three corporations with significant financial interest in promoting commercial social networking sites: News Corporation, which owns MySpace;⁴ Microsoft, which recently purchased a stake in FaceBook⁵ and Verizon, which advertises on both sites.⁶ As you are aware, many schools block the use of MySpace and FaceBook during school hours.⁷ Microsoft, News Corporation and Verizon all have a significant interest in seeing those restrictions removed.

With these funders, it is not surprising that the report reads more like a public relations tool designed to allay educators' concerns about social networking than a serious investigation of the complex issues raised by introducing new commercialized technology into the classroom. In fact, the report was researched and written by Grunwald Associates, a public relations and marketing firm that helps "clients to garner positive media coverage" and "enhance their brand image."⁸ If the report was merely the product of Microsoft, Verizon, News Corporation and a PR firm, it would be easy for schools to dismiss its self-serving findings. But with NSBA's imprimatur, the recommendation that schools "reexamine social networking policies" that ban the use of MySpace is likely to be taken seriously.



Second, notably absent from the report is any mention of the fact that leading social networking sites generate revenues through advertising. This is essential information for school boards because incorporating these sites into classrooms will significantly increase students' exposure to marketing in schools. Advertising is seamlessly embedded in MySpace and other social networking sites, and any endorsement of these sites as an educational tool also carries an implicit endorsement of products advertised. Some of the products currently touted on MySpace are:

- McDonald's,⁹ Burger King,¹⁰ Dominoes,¹¹ and Jack-in-the-Box.¹² Junk food ads abound on MySpace at a time when school districts across the country are limiting unhealthy food in schools because of concerns about the childhood obesity epidemic.
- *Manhunt 2*,¹³ a Mature-rated videogame so graphically violent that it was banned in Britain, and *Saw IV*,¹⁴ the latest installment in the R-rated film series notorious for its torture scenes.
- Tobacco brands like Marlboro,¹⁵ Camel,¹⁶ and Skoal,¹⁷ and brands of alcohol including Skyy Vodka¹⁸ and Captain Morgan.¹⁹ The Captain Morgan MySpace page explicitly promotes binge drinking and alcohol-fueled sexual activity.

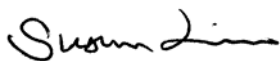
Third, in addition to overt advertising on social networking sites, both MySpace and Facebook plan to mine users' profiles for data that will allow marketers to send ads targeted specifically to their interests.²⁰ Facebook is also encouraging young users to allow the company to send their friends unsolicited ads disguised as personal endorsements.²¹

The push to drive kids to online social networking with its ubiquitous marketing is enormous—beginning with sites like Barbie Girl or Webkinz that are increasingly popular with children as young as five.²² Given the financial stakes, it is not surprising that News Corporation and Microsoft would do everything they can to get their sites into schools. But it is unconscionable that the National School Boards Association would help them by lending its prestigious name to a public relations play clearly designed to convince educators to drop in-school restrictions on social networking.

Instead, the NSBA should be asking hard questions: What are the educational consequences if children are immersed in online marketing even in schools? How does it affect critical thinking? What are the ethical implications of companies exploiting friendship to get kids to market products to their friends? What values and skills are essential for students growing up in a highly commercialized culture?

Organizations like NSBA have a responsibility and a critical role to play in providing honest, objective information to help educators respond to the unprecedented convergence of sophisticated, ubiquitous media technology and unfettered commercialism. We ask that you immediately disavow "Creating & Connecting: Research and Guidelines on Online Social—And Educational—Networking" and advise school boards around the country about the subtle and unscrupulous marketing techniques practiced by major commercial social networking sites.

On behalf of the CCFC Steering Committee:



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¹National School Boards Association. (2007). *Creating and Connecting: Research and guidelines on online – and educational – networking*. Alexandria, VA: Vockley Lang. pp. 9.

²National School Boards Association. (2007). Retrieved November 15, 2007, from <http://www.nsba.org/site/page.asp?TRACKID=&CID=2216&DID=41495>

³Barnes, Mark and Florencio, Patrick S. “Financial Conflicts of Interest in Human Subjects Research: The Problem of Institutional Conflicts,” *Journal of Law Medicine & Ethics* 30 (3) (2002), 390–402.)

⁴“News Corp. to buy InterMix for \$580 million” (2005, July 19). *USA Today*. Retrieved November 15, 2007 from http://www.usatoday.com/money/media/2005-07-19-news-corp-intermix_x.htm.

⁵Greene, Jay (2007, October 25). “Microsoft and Facebook Hook Up.” *Business Week*. Retrieved November 15, 2007 from http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/oct2007/tc20071024_654439.htm?chan=top+news_top+news+index_top+stor

⁶Claburn, Thomas (2007, November 7). “Facebook and Myspace Monetize Friendship With Targeted Ads.” *Information Week*. Retrieved November 16, 2007 from <http://www.informationweek.com/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=202803071>

⁷MySpace.com (2006). “The Official School Administrator’s Guide to understanding MySpace and resolving Social Networking Issues.”

⁸<http://www.grunwald.com/pr/index.php>. Retrieved November 8, 2007.

⁹<http://www.myspace.com/miconcierto>. Retrieved November 8, 2007.

¹⁰“Welcome to the King’s Court” <http://www.myspace.com/burgerking> (retrieved 29 Mar. 2007).

¹¹“Domino’s Revealed as Creator of Popular Internet Videos; Colorful Videos Launched to Create Buzz over Anything Goes Deal.” (2007, January 25). Retrieved on March 29, 2007 from [http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=109&STORY=/www/story/01-25-2007/0004512862&EDATE=.](http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=109&STORY=/www/story/01-25-2007/0004512862&EDATE=)

¹²<http://www.myspace.com/jackbox>. Retrieved April 16, 2007.

¹³<http://vids.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=vids.individual&videoid=20466413>. Retrieved November 8, 2007.

¹⁴<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=247754215>. Retrieved November 8, 2007.

¹⁵<http://www.myspace.com/smokemarlboros>. Retrieved November 8, 2007.

¹⁶<http://www.myspace.com/smokecamels>. Retrieved November 8, 2007.

¹⁷<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=29800729>. Retrieved November 8, 2007.

¹⁸<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=75211891>. Retrieved November 8, 2007.

¹⁹http://www.myspace.com/captainmorgan_rum. Retrieved November 8, 2007.

²⁰Claburn, Thomas (2007, November 7). “Facebook and Myspace Monetize Friendship With Targeted Ads.” *Information Week*. Retrieved November 16, 2007 from <http://www.informationweek.com/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=202803071>

²¹Morrissey, Brian (2007, November 6). “Facebook Unveils Ad Strategy.” *Adweek*. Retrieved November 16, 2007 from http://www.adweek.com/aw/national/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003668848

²²Bulik, Beth Snider (August 20, 2007). “Webkinomics: Cute, Cuddly and Creating a Halo Effect.” *Advertising Age*. Retrieved November 13, 2007 from <http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/news/webkinomics.htm>