



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

December 20, 2017

Arthur O. Sulzberger, Jr., Chairman
The New York Times Company
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY, 10018

Re: Advertising in the *New York Times For Kids*

Dear Mr. Sulzberger:

We are writing to urge the *New York Times* (“the *Times*”) to make future editions of the *New York Times For Kids* (“the *Times For Kids*”) advertising-free.

We applaud the concept of a children’s supplement of the *Times* to foster an interest in reading the newspaper. But when we reviewed the November 19, 2017 edition of the *Times For Kids*, we were dismayed to find that five of its 16 pages – 31% of the supplement – were full-page ads for the Google Home Mini.

Parents who trust the *Times* for its well-deserved reputation for journalism likely had no idea the supplement was merely a Trojan horse for Google advertising, particularly if they followed the supplement’s “Editor’s Note” which said “This section should not be read by grown-ups.” And since the advertisements were unfairly disguised as content, children probably didn’t know they were being targeted with marketing.

Marketing directed at children is always unfair. Children are considerably more vulnerable to the effects of advertising than adults. Research has found that most children do not understand the persuasive intent of advertising until they reach the age of 11 or 12.¹ That research is based on children’s understanding of television advertising, where regulations dictate clear separation between ads and programming. When such separation doesn’t exist, it’s even harder for children to recognize and understand advertising.²

Such is the case with the November 19 edition of the *Times For Kids*. The ads were brightly colorful cartoon drawings, with interwoven questions in bubbles meant to engage children – a visual style quite similar to much of the editorial content of the supplement. Each ad was disguised as a puzzle for kids, with this question at the bottom referring to Google characters embedded in the ads: “Can you find the donut, G, and Android in each drawing?” These

¹ Owen B.J. Carter, et al., *Children’s understanding of the selling versus persuasive intent of junk food advertising: Implications for regulation*, Science Direct, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S027795361100061X> (“Highlights” section on webpage) (last visited Nov. 29, 2017).

² Dr. Barbie Clarke & Siv Svanaes, *Digital marketing and advertising to children: a literature review*, Advertising Education Forum 45 (2012) (citing Mallinckrodt and Mizerski 2007; Ali, Blades et al. 2009).

advertisements were deceptive to children and violated the guidelines of the Children’s Advertising Review Unit, an industry self-regulatory program, which state: “Advertising should not be presented in a manner that blurs the distinction between advertising and program/editorial content in ways that would be misleading to children.” We believe the advertisements also violated the *Times*’ own Advertising Acceptability Manual, which says “Advertisements that, in our opinion, simulate *New York Times* news or editorial matter or that may be confused with our news or editorial matter are unacceptable.” If such advertisements are unacceptable for all *Times* readers, they are especially unfair when directed at children.

This marketing was particularly concerning because Google Home is harmful to children. Just when the *Times* and others are reporting how Silicon Valley’s data collection, advertising practices, and algorithms threaten children’s wellbeing,³ you have helped Google target children with ads for an intrusive, always-listening, internet-connected device. Experts caution that internet-connected devices which “converse” with children and collect information about them pose a threat to children’s wellbeing.⁴ The collection and sharing of kids’ personal information invades their privacy and can threaten their safety. The ad copy says a “kid’s Google account” is required to play games on Google Home—which makes clear that Google’s intention is to mine children for valuable data when they use the device. But children, or even their parents, will not understand that. And under its Family Link privacy policy, Google may share children’s personal information with third parties for purposes which include serving personalized advertising to children.

Sadly, parents may expect their children to be targeted by advertisers when they watch Nickelodeon or YouTube. Since the *Times* has not advertised to children in the past, parents could hardly expect the *Times for Kids* would be rife with advertising.

The *Times* has announced it will publish the *Times For Kids* monthly, beginning in January 2018. Getting kids in the habit of reading your newspaper will undoubtedly pay long-term benefits for The New York Times Company. Rather than trying to squeeze out additional profits at the expense of families who have already paid for the Sunday newspaper, the *Times* should make future editions of the *Times For Kids* completely free of advertising.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our concerns.

Sincerely,

³ Sapna Maheshwari, *On YouTube Kids, Startling Videos Slip Past Filters*, N.Y. Times (Nov. 4, 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/business/media/youtube-kids-paw-patrol.html>;
Julia Alexander, *YouTube Kids has been a problem since 2015 — why did it take this long to address?*, Polygon (Dec. 8, 2017) <https://www.polygon.com/2017/12/8/16737556/youtube-kids-video-inappropriate-superhero-disney>

⁴ Rachel Rabkin Peachman, *Mattel Pulls Aristotle Children’s Device After Privacy Concerns*, N.Y. Times (Oct. 5, 2017) https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/well/family/mattel-aristotle-privacy.html?_r=0;
Sherry Turkle, *Why these friendly robots can’t be good friends to our kids*, Washington Post (December 7, 2017) https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-these-friendly-robots-cant-be-good-friends-to-our-kids/2017/12/07/bce1eaea-d54f-11e7-b62d-d9345ced896d_story.html?utm_term=.8fb7f739caac

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Center for Digital Democracy

Consumer Action

Consumer Federation of America

Consumer Watchdog

Corporate Accountability

New Dream

Parent Coalition for Student Privacy

Public Citizen's Commercial Alert

The Story of Stuff Project

cc: Arthur Gregg Sulzberger, Deputy Publisher, NY Times
Sundar Pichai, CEO, Google, Inc.
Children's Advertising Review Unit