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Action for (and against) Children's Television



"Militant Mothers" and the Tactics of Television Reform

*People criticize ACT for the lack of creativity today. We never asked for that. They don't remember what it was like before we were around. There was no *Sesame Street* or *Electric Company*. It was never our idea to sanitize the superheroes and reduce the art of animation to its present standards. The broadcasters are responsible for what's on the air today, not Action for Children's Television. We're trying to see that the product is improved, not worsened.¹—Peggy Charren, ACT cofounder*

Action for Children's Television (ACT) sought to make children's television better; it was often accused of making it worse. Many broadcasters and certainly cartoon producers have argued that ACT hampered free speech. Indeed, in spite of its pro-TV projects and its self-constructed image as noncensorious, some of ACT's campaigns were censorious. From 1968 to 1992, ACT worked both for and against children's television programs.

Citizen groups such as ACT challenge television by calling for broadcaster accountability. Although there are many left- and right-wing media activists, media activism is often moderate in its politics, as in the case of ACT. ACT's history demonstrates that media resistance in and of itself is not necessarily radical. It is the voices of the least radical citizen groups that both governmental regulatory agencies, such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and

Heather Hendershot, *Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation before the V-Chip* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

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network executives are most often willing to listen to. ACT is important not only because it served as an advocate for certain kinds of children's television and as an opponent of other kinds of children's television but also because, for the media and the government, it superseded other kinds of more radical activism.

ACT's moderate politics enabled it to attack certain corporate actions in the name of middle-class children, but ACT was loath to threaten corporations economically through boycotts or stockholder pressure. This reluctance made ACT palatable to both regulatory agencies and the media. Although the FCC and FTC have only infrequently acted on ACT's complaints and suggestions, they have repeatedly listened to ACT. ACT used tactics common to other media reform groups—such as attending FCC meetings and citing the Communications Act of 1934—and to a certain extent, these tactics worked better for ACT than they did for anyone else. The group has not always succeeded, but it has repeatedly been heard by the media and the government, which has not been the case for activists whose politics have been considered more “dangerous” or “extremist,” such as feminists, Civil Rights activists, and AIDS activists. In its seventies campaign against sugared products, however, ACT uncharacteristically, dramatically, and ultimately unsuccessfully threatened the sugar industry, a corporate octopus. ACT's most radical undertaking, this campaign has been largely forgotten, perhaps because it seemed so out of character.

The Public Move for Media Reform

The seventies witnessed a widespread media reform movement—or rather movements. Activists with wide-ranging concerns challenged corporate media production with a level of energy and determination that was unprecedented, with the exception of the reform movement against radio commercialization in the late twenties and early thirties.² The roots of the seventies media reform movement are intertwined with the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements; it was Civil Rights and Vietnam War activists who first learned how to use the television medium to their advantage, to the consternation of those who disagreed with their politics.

At the time ACT was formed in 1968, the public and the government were deeply concerned about how TV depicted people of color. Debates about TV's representation of people of color predate this era, though.

Throughout the fifties and sixties, racist viewers complained that the television industry was reacting to the Civil Rights movement by presenting more images of people of color, particularly African Americans.³ Antiracist viewers also objected to the new images on TV, which consisted mainly of two kinds of representations: blacks protesting and being beaten on the news, and middle-class and (arguably) depoliticized blacks on shows like *I Spy* and *Julia*.⁴ “There were now ‘two black realities’—the synthetic reality of the sitcoms and the one broadcast by the news programs—which for a decade, though juxtaposed strangely, could never be reconciled.”⁵ Black media reform activists of the seventies addressed this juxtaposition of images and called for other kinds of images.⁶

Sixties Civil Rights activists saw TV news as an ally, to a certain extent, and even as “the chosen instrument of the revolution,” as one television historian has phrased it.⁷ Martin Luther King Jr. explained that public demonstrations were necessary, in part, because African Americans were not given access to other forms of expression and self-representation such as the print and broadcast media.⁸ “Lacking sufficient access to television, publications and broad forums,” King said, “Negroes have had to write their most persuasive essays with the blunt pen of marching ranks.”⁹ It was precisely those marching ranks that finally gave blacks access to television; the news showed blacks attempting to enroll in the University of Alabama, assembling in Washington, D.C., to demonstrate support for President John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Act in 1963, and being blasted by fire hoses in Birmingham. King understood the televisual impact of these events and the importance of TV visibility of black struggles. On television, northern audiences saw violence against southern blacks for the first time, and, importantly, isolated southern blacks could feel solidarity with others involved in the struggle.¹⁰

Many white southerners expressed anger not just at President Kennedy and the federal government's desegregationists but also at television itself for producing and disseminating what they saw as antisouthern propaganda. The governor of Mississippi, Ross Barnett, complained about an NBC program called *The American Revolution of '63*: “Fellow Americans you are witnessing one more chapter in what has been termed the ‘Television Revolution.’ Information media, including the TV networks have publicized and dramatized the race issue far beyond its relative importance in today's world.”¹¹

Southern politicians were not the only ones to question the “Television Revolution.” In 1968, the government’s *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (or Kerner Commission) devoted a chapter to mass media riot coverage, which the commission found wanting. A year later, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence published its findings, which also confronted the power of the mass media. Government reports asked whether the media correctly represented activist activities and questioned how activists themselves used the media.¹² After the violence of the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention, popular debate about activist media use increased, and it was widely felt that the mass media had not merely recorded but had actively participated in the Chicago confrontation between the police and peace demonstrators. The demonstrators had cheered the arrival of NBC cameras, shouting, “The whole world is watching!” and “Sieg heil!” at the police armed with nightsticks, mace, tear gas, and guns.¹³ One contributor to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence report stated that at Chicago, “what ‘the whole world was watching,’ after all, was not a confrontation but the picture of a confrontation, to some extent directed by a generation that has grown up with television and learned how to use it.”¹⁴ By the year of ACT’s founding, those unsympathetic to Civil Rights activism and Vietnam protest would lament that activists were savvy in media manipulation and that TV allowed itself to be manipulated. Those more sympathetic would say that alternative viewpoints had finally found much-needed representation.

It was in the context of volatile governmental and public debates about the media that ACT appeared, asking the federal government to hold broadcasters accountable to the nation’s child TV viewers. ACT did not initiate government concern about television’s possible effects on children, but it was the first prominent activist group to focus on children’s television. ACT did not steal the spotlight from Vietnam and Civil Rights activists, but it did act as a kind of regulatory safety valve: it was politically easier for the FCC to address ACT’s complaints than to address the complaints of more “extremist” activist groups.

Whereas some seventies activists saw the media primarily as a technological means of broadcasting their messages to the public, groups like ACT focused their activism on the corporate media institution itself, seeking to make those using the airwaves answerable to citizens. In the early

sixties, commissioner Newton Minow had popularized the idea of the FCC actively serving the public interest (which he defined in elitist terms), but this pseudopopulist stance was quickly suppressed by the Johnson and Nixon FCCs, which catered to business interests.¹⁵ In principle, broadcasters nonetheless remained accountable to the public because, according to the Communications Act of 1934, broadcasters did not own the airwaves. Rather, they received short-term licenses from the FCC to use publicly owned airwaves, operating “in the public interest, convenience, and necessity.” It was the FCC’s responsibility to define what the “public interest” was and how broadcasters could best serve that interest. As far as the FCC was concerned, the public interest was served by providing access to clear, nonoverlapping signals sent by corporations. The possibility of activists using the Communications Act or its rhetoric (“the public interest, convenience, and necessity”) was certainly not foreseen. In fact, the act initially signaled the end of reformist debate over whether broadcasting should be commercial. “The Communications Act of 1934 . . . had been the conscious result of keeping the public and Congress itself as far removed as possible from any debate over broadcast issues.”¹⁶

Nonetheless, public debate about broadcasting did not disappear after the act was passed. A variety of parents’ groups protested children’s radio throughout the thirties, accusing it of “overstimulating” children and causing delinquent behavior, and anti-TV sentiment existed in the earliest days of television’s proliferation. In the fifties, many Americans saw television as a potentially dangerous medium: citizens undertook letter-writing campaigns and boycotts to keep alleged Communist actors off television; a plethora of medical authorities questioned the biological and psychological dangers of television; and women’s magazines asked if TV would bring families together or tear them apart.¹⁷ But there had never been a readily apparent means by which citizens who were dissatisfied with broadcast practices might influence FCC policy. This changed as a result of action taken by citizens in 1964. Civil Rights petitioners, spearheaded by the United Church of Christ, protested that the Mississippi TV station WLBT should not have its FCC license renewed because it did not properly serve its community. The petitioners charged that the station had denied blacks access to facilities, had promoted segregation, and had failed to present problack perspectives on its news programs. The FCC responded that the church group could not be an active party to WLBT’s license

renewal proceeding; only corporate claims regarding economic injury or electrical interference would be heard by the FCC.¹⁸ But in 1966, the Court of Appeals challenged the FCC's dismissal of the United Church of Christ, forcing the FCC to give the petitioners a hearing.

As a result of the court's WLBT decision, the petition to deny license renewal to broadcasters who did not serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity became a viable method for citizens to oppose broadcasters at the federal level. Now citizens could do more than picket, sign petitions, or write angry protest letters to advertisers and network executives; they had governmental recourse. Groups ranging from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), to the Tribal Indian Lands Rights Association, to the National Organization for Women (NOW), to the Polish-American Guardian Society incorporated the petition to deny into their media activism tactics. In the wake of the United Church of Christ's FCC appeal, a plethora of reform groups focusing exclusively on the media were newly formed, including Black Efforts for Soul in Television (BEST), Terminate Unfair Broadcasting Excesses (TUBE), Students Opposing Unfair Practices (SOUP), Protesting Unfair Marketing Practices (PUMP), and ACT. ACT was unique in its focus on children, but it clearly rode the contemporary wave of media criticism and activism. ACT was not unique in its tactics (using the Communications Act to justify the right to petition to deny license renewal)¹⁹ or in its central belief that citizens have the right to protest broadcasting policy and practices. Perhaps the most unique thing about ACT was that the media actually provided the group extensive coverage. The media's interest in ACT was largely a result of the group's moderate, motherly image. By covering ACT, the media could pay lip service to "women's issues."

ACT's Image and Media Tactics

In 1968, feminists staged a protest at the Miss America Pageant, marking the first major feminist intervention in network television. Outside the pageant, the protesters picketed and performed guerrilla theater, crowning a live sheep Miss America. Inside the pageant, protesters unfurled a "Women's Liberation" banner and shouted "Freedom for Women!" Although TV cameras inside the pageant ignored the protesters, home view-

ers could sense something was wrong when they heard shouting, and the 1967 Miss America began to tremble and stutter.²⁰ That same year, when a group of women from the Boston suburbs founded ACT, TV cameras eagerly turned to cover the group. Confrontational but less threatening than the so-called bra-burners who had disrupted the Miss America Pageant, ACT offered much that appealed to news cameras: professional sound bites that were argumentative yet relatively inoffensive since, after all, these were mainstream moms acting in their children's best interests.

ACT was an activist woman's group that garnered positive media attention, in part, because its tactics diverged dramatically from those of radical feminists. To the mainstream media, the moderate, middle-class ACT with its prochild platform seemed comfortably "normal" compared to other social movements of the day, such as Women's Liberation, Civil Rights, and Gay Liberation. Cofounder Peggy Charren states: "[A]ll of us had young children, and all of us had worked . . . outside the home. And I think that is the essential ingredient to the start of ACT. I think the fact that we had work experience was important. We tended to see this as a *professional* effort from the moment we started. We wanted to organize in a way *different from just sitting together and talking*. We were very much aware of what you do to start an organization; you name it, you incorporate, you have limited liability" (my emphasis).²¹ Like members of the middle-class women's movement, ACT praised working outside of the home as inherently positive. And ACT founders wanted to go beyond "just" talking or, in the terms of Women's Liberation, "consciousness-raising," in order to take action for (and against) children's programming, which meant starting a legitimate, incorporated organization. Although some contemporary Women's Lib groups were certainly as organized and efficient as ACT, ACT fostered an image of organized efficiency that made these moms even more respectable in the media's eyes.

Broadcasters and FCC commissioners were willing to listen to ACT, in part, because it represented itself as a group of concerned mothers. "ACT was born of the *mothers'* indignation about the programs—and the incessant commercials—television offered *their children*" (my emphasis).²² In 1972, when broadcasters argued there was not enough "scientific" evidence to prove that advertising affected children adversely, Charren replied, "There are millions of mothers out there who are not willing to wait

for a lot of research. Generations of children are growing up.”²³ Such maternal rhetoric both legitimated and hindered the group. The press and the television industry could easily label and dismiss ACT activism—intended to protect children from poor-quality TV—as “maternal instinct.” Indeed, the industry and the mainstream media often disparaged ACT members as “those ladies from Boston” or “those militant mothers from Newton.” In 1969, the *Boston Globe* both condescended to ACT and acknowledged its potential activist power: “[T]he hand that rocks the cradle is now doubled up into a fist. Its aim: to pound some sense into the television industry. As yet, it doesn’t pack much of a punch. . . . But women aroused can be formidable foes indeed. Television had better steel itself for the assault to come.”²⁴ The *Globe* painted ACT members oxymoronically as violent-yet-maternal adversaries of the industry, adversaries who derived their power from their status as scolding mothers.

ACT wanted to be taken seriously, not to be dismissed as a group of fisted, hysterical moms. Members thus strove to project an image of being very well informed. Charren explains, “We . . . made sure to get our facts straight, to educate ourselves on what the problem really was. One of the first things we did was subscribe to all the industry magazines, so we could see what the other side was thinking.”²⁵ ACT found that industry and government policymakers were willing to listen to its informed arguments, yet their responses to ACT varied from polite to condescending. Senator John Pastore praised ACT cofounder Lillian Ambrosino as “a very, very alert, young girl,”²⁶ and FCC commissioner Dean Burch said that ACT’s representatives were “very compelling [and] not a bunch of crybabies.”²⁷ ACT members knew they were troublesome to the FCC and, it seems, delighted in their ability to make waves. In celebration of its fifteen-year anniversary, the group released a history of itself entitled *Rocking the Boat*. The cover showed a 1970 *TV Guide* cartoon picturing ACT members as soggy middle-aged women struggling to climb aboard a boat flying an FCC banner (figure 1). Although ACT tended to avoid any in-depth discussion of its all-woman status, its use of this cartoon comically highlighted its awareness of a gendered divide between ACT members and government officials, an awareness that must have been constant for ACT but was rarely publicly acknowledged. And this is why the FCC was willing to listen to ACT. The group stuck to the controversial yet relatively nonthreatening political

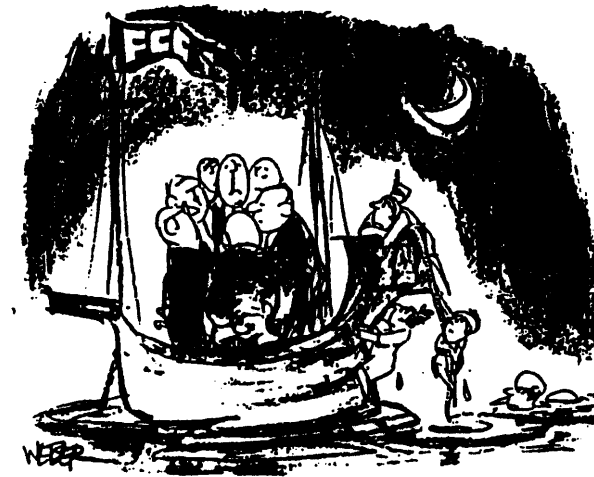


Figure 1. Cartoon depicting ACT members rocking the boat. Source: *TV Guide*, 13 Apr. 1970, p. 18.

terrain of children’s television and focused on commercialism, avoiding public discussion of thorny issues such as sexism.

A brief comparison of the FCC’s initial meetings with ACT, NOW, and the National Black Media Coalition will make clear the contrast between the FCC’s perceptions of ACT and its perceptions of groups it considered more radical. ACT first met with the FCC in 1970, armed with detailed, practical proposals for rules to govern children’s programming. This meeting set the ball slowly rolling; eventually, the FCC formed a permanent (as opposed to ad hoc) children’s unit (1971) and issued a Children’s Policy Statement (1974). The commissioners found radical ACT’s proposal to do away with children’s advertising, but at least ACT did not attack privately owned, for-profit broadcasting across the board. ACT was not against commercial television per se but against what it saw as the exploitation of children.²⁸ ACT’s demands were not necessarily seen as plausible by the commissioners, but its goals and motivations were understandable to them. Some even responded as empathic parents. One of the commissioners had been ill the weekend before meeting with ACT and was supposedly more receptive to ACT because he had spent Saturday morn-

ing watching cartoons with his children. But he opined that broadcasters might be trusted to regulate TV themselves since “capitalists are human beings and have children of their own.”²⁹

Before ACT’s 1970 meeting, the FCC had rarely met with citizen’s groups.³⁰ The next citizen’s group the FCC met with was NOW in 1973. NOW arranged the meeting through Charlotte Reid’s office. Reid, a conservative who had declared herself “not a woman’s advocate,”³¹ was the FCC’s first woman commissioner since Frieda Henock (1948-1955). No written record was made of the closed meeting with NOW, but according to FCC consultant Barry Cole, NOW president Wilma Scott Heide began by observing that the commissioners were seated on a dais: “We’re equals! I don’t look up to you, and I don’t want to have to sit here looking up to you.”³² Cole’s report of Heide’s presentation gives a good sense of the commission’s reaction: “Ms. Heide told the Commission she was about to read an essay that would provide an ‘awareness experience.’ She did not want to be interrupted while reading the essay; she would tell the commissioners when it was appropriate for them to speak. To the utter bemusement of the commissioners, Ms. Heide proceeded to read her essay. . . . Cole wished he had had a camera to record for posterity the expressions on the faces of the commissioners as they listened or tried to avoid listening to Ms. Heide’s presentation.”³³ To the commissioners’ dismay, Heide read a lengthy treatise on the problems men have because of vagina envy. Following this presentation, Heide explained the ways in which media representations of women were inaccurate, and then, according to Cole, “several important and useful suggestions were offered by Ms. Heide’s colleagues; for example, some methods by which the Commission should select stations for further examination of their compliance with equal opportunity requirements.”³⁴ The details of these “useful suggestions” are forever lost since no official record was kept of this meeting and no action was taken on the suggestions. According to Cole, Heide had set the wrong tone, and thus NOW’s practical proposals fell on deaf ears. Although the other NOW representatives were deemed courteous, “the milk was spoiled. The experience provided ammunition for those in the FCC who believed that meetings with public groups were a waste of time, a hairshirt.”³⁵ Clearly the experience also confirmed the sentiments of FCC commissioners who believed that feminists and feminist issues were too weird for FCC consideration. NOW goals were not only threatening but also nonpractical in

the eyes of the commissioners. The FCC did not see vagina envy as an appropriate subject for it to address. ACT, on the other hand, like the citizens who used the Fairness Doctrine to oppose TV cigarette ads in 1969, offered what were deemed practical and appropriate suggestions.³⁶

The FCC was more receptive to people of color, at least initially, than it was to the feminists of NOW. After the 1973 NOW meeting, a meeting with blacks, Native Americans, Asians, and Latinos was arranged by BEST, the group that previously had been instrumental in gaining the appointment of Benjamin L. Hooks, the FCC’s first black commissioner. The citizens offered a balance of criticisms and practical suggestions; the meeting was fairly amicable, but no action was taken on the citizens’ suggestions. Likewise, the FCC did not respond to the Latino Media Coalition’s request that a task force be formed to address Latino issues. Apparently, “the decision not to form a task force was consistent with later decisions not to become involved in any type of advisory committee relationship with any minority groups.”³⁷ After this brief period when the FCC seemed willing to hear out people of color, albeit without taking any action in response to their complaints, a volatile meeting with the National Black Media Coalition in November 1973 changed the FCC’s attitude. James McCuller, the group’s leader, criticized the FCC for its disinterest in black issues, and when Chairman Burch suggested that he “construct a dialogue, not a diatribe,”³⁸ McCuller angrily and extensively detailed a long history of whites silencing blacks. He indicated that Burch was like a master silencing a slave. This encounter convinced the commissioners that citizen’s groups were irrational and impossible to deal with. Yet the FCC continued to deal with ACT and to maintain a children’s television task force. In other words, although throughout the seventies the FCC had reservations about citizen’s groups across the board, it was its experience with “irrational” blacks and women that really turned the FCC off.³⁹ The FCC continued to interact with the group it perhaps found least threatening, a group of white middle-class mothers.

ACT was fairly successful largely because it was an incorporated organization that played by the rules not only of the FCC but also of big business. Even as it attacked certain products and business practices and called for the elimination of ads on children’s shows, ACT confronted television professionally, using language and strategies comprehensible to TV and FCC executives. ACT’s tactics were the kind that appealed to Nicholas Johnson,

an early seventies FCC commissioner who was atypically sympathetic to citizens' protest. Johnson detailed his concerns about corporate concentration of media ownership and his high hopes for citizen-induced reform in *How to Talk Back to Your Television Set* (1970), which, amazingly, drew praise from both Tommy Smothers and William F. Buckley Jr. In his book, Johnson promoted the kind of moderate and, at the time, moderately successful approach that ACT took, which he called "the law of effective reform." He conceded that the public can try to affect broadcast policy by many means: picketing, signing petitions, and staging sit-ins. However, he believed that ultimately the most effective reform would come through appealing to official channels and making positive, legally sanctioned suggestions. In his concern for citizens' rights and corporate accountability, Johnson was an anomalous FCC commissioner. His relationship with other commissioners was fraught with difficulty; he was consistently outvoted on major policy decisions, and he wrote unexpurgated dissents. He went public with his gripes, testifying before Congress that broadcasters were "vicious" and "evil" and that the FCC was abusing the public trust.⁴⁰ Although he was rather radical for an FCC commissioner, Johnson did not condone impassioned polemics about slavery or vagina envy. To work toward practical goals, Johnson suggested that

in order to get relief from legal institutions (Congress, courts, agencies) one must assert, first, the factual basis for the grievance and the specific parties involved; second, the legal principle that indicates relief is due (constitutional provision, statute, regulation, court or agency decision); and third, the precise remedy sought (new legislation or regulations, license revocation, fines, or an order changing practices). When this principle is not understood, which is most of the time, the most legitimate public protests from thousands of citizens fall like drops of rain upon lonely and uncharted seas. But by understanding and using the right strategy the meekest among us can roll back the ocean.⁴¹

ACT shared Johnson's David and Goliath philosophy and understood the principles of "the law of effective reform" very well—so well that the group was incredulous in the eighties when the same tactics no longer worked. In that deregulatory climate, it simply did not matter how much factual evidence one could gather or what legal precedents one could invoke (such as

the FCC's prior decisions regarding children's television). Johnson's principles could not compete with the eighties FCC's free market mentality.

But throughout the seventies, ACT was fairly successful not only at affecting public policy but also at attracting an audience for its concerns and raising public awareness of children's TV as an important public policy issue. ACT's media-savvy tactics made the group, and cofounder Charren in particular, into the voice for children's television advocacy. Recall "the leaders of the Mexican-American community" and the heavily accented co-worker that I discussed in chapter 2: the networks like having an expert consultant to advise them on touchy issues. As Kathryn Montgomery has explained, over the years, the networks have learned to manage advocacy groups by insisting upon the "one-voice concept." The networks prefer to listen to only one group protesting a particular issue. If forced to choose among several groups vying to represent a community or communities, the networks (and the mainstream media in general) naturally choose the most moderate group. ACT quickly became the one voice of children's television advocacy that was heard by both the networks and the mainstream media. Whenever newspapers or news shows needed a sound bite on children's television, they called ACT, and they have continued to call Charren even since ACT disbanded in 1992.

One way ACT caught the media's attention and established itself as the one voice of children's television advocacy was by staging events such as its annual symposium on children and television, at which keynote speakers included celebrities such as Fred Rogers and Bob "Captain Kangaroo" Keeshan. This event was cosponsored by prestigious organizations that legitimated both ACT and the symposium: the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Yale Child Study Center, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. ACT also received media attention for giving achievement awards to individual affiliates for local programs, to the networks for national programs, and frequently to corporations that had sponsored programs, such as Exxon, General Mills, Sears Roebuck, McDonald's, and the Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Corporation. Notwithstanding its complaints that market forces objectified children, ACT was more than willing to reward corporations that it felt served children's needs. Unlike other media activists who focused exclusively on attacking what was wrong with TV, ACT was willing to reward TV that it considered high quality.

in fact, ACT's support of "good" shows was crucial to its anticensorship stance. As Charren put it: "It was never our idea to sanitize the superheroes and reduce the art of animation to its present standards. . . . We're trying to see that the product is improved, not worsened."⁴² In spite of its real desire to eliminate bad programming, ACT insisted upon its investment in promoting good programs, and this insistence was crucial to the maintenance of its anticensorship image. ACT believed in the possibility of freedom from censorship. This is crucial, for at base ACT was ideologically compatible with corporations and the FCC for two reasons: it was white, nonfeminist, and non-"extremist," and it understood free/unfree (or uncensored/censored) as binaries. Like the broadcasting industry and the FCC, ACT opposed censorship, assuming that it was antithetical to American democratic society rather than part and parcel of that society.

ACT and the Politics of Censorship and Boycott

The Coalition for Better Television (now the American Family Association) and the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV) were high-profile media reform groups that threatened sponsor boycotts in order to eliminate/censor certain programs. Conversely, ACT persistently and adamantly opposed boycotting as a media reform tactic. There is a striking contrast between ACT's philosophy and tactics and the philosophy and tactics of these two more radical media reform groups. In a 1981 television debate with Donald Wildmon of the ultraconservative Coalition for Better Television, Charren explained that ACT harangued broadcasters instead of advertisers because targeting advertisers

is not the way to behave in a free society. . . . If I go to the broadcaster who's using public airwaves and say "you're not serving me," and somebody else thinks that he is being served (or she), she can go to the broadcaster and say "That woman is wrong. You are serving me." And then it's a question of broadcaster decision, majority rule, or whatever. It can even be a case at the Federal Communications Commission, and everybody can testify. That's how a free society works. If you go to an advertiser, the advertiser's very vulnerable. . . . [T]he advertiser doesn't want any controversy . . . doesn't want to be part of a hearing where both sides get the right to decide how the issues should go.⁴³

Charren further wondered "what kind of a free press would we have" if advertisers could influence television and newspaper content. Charren may have erroneously implied that we now live in a "free society" in which benign advertisers do not influence television and newspaper content and press censorship does not exist less out of naïveté than as an anti-Wildmon tactic. But her liberal rhetoric does demonstrate an ongoing belief in the moderate tactics of "the law of effective reform." Wildmon, whom the media has taken as the "one voice" of right-wing extremist wackos for almost twenty years, used a means of "talking back to his television set" that largely ignored the pragmatic law of effective reform but demonstrated an equally pragmatic vision of how American government and businesses operate. Government regulation of business is slow. Antitrust cases can be drawn out over decades. Conversely, direct economic pressure, or the threat thereof, can be fast and efficient and is a perfectly legal way to bring about censorship. Wildmon's group took a shortcut, bypassing the FCC and going straight to the industry's jugular, the sponsor. The Coalition for Better Television threatened to "vote" with its collective wallet by boycotting sponsors of the shows it found objectionable.⁴⁴ Wildmon has repeatedly declared, sounding vaguely libertarian, that "the network can show what it wants, sponsors sponsor what they want, and the consumer can spend his money wherever he wants."⁴⁵ This may not be "the way to behave in a free society," but it is one widely sanctioned way to behave in a survival-of-the-fittest capitalist society.

ACT decided to pressure networks and government agencies rather than specific sponsors because it seemed like the appropriate way to promote broadcast reform in a democratic society. The studio audience of the Charren-Wildmon debate clearly agreed with Charren. Ironically, Wildmon was barely allowed to get a word in edgewise by Charren and audience members who attacked him for being against free speech. With his southern accent and uncultured grammar, Wildmon easily served as a free speech whipping boy for the studio audience of liberal, middle-class Bostonians. But Wildmon had the last laugh: he understood that speech is not free but costly, that voting with one's wallet is not only a very effective way but also practically the only way to get the TV industry's attention. Wildmon's bigoted Christian fundamentalist agenda is sexist, racist, and homophobic, but he also happens to be a savvy activist. I compare him to Charren to show that different styles of activism use the con-

cepts of “freedom” and “democracy” differently and produce different results. ACT members changed the FCC guidelines for children’s television by approaching the FCC as citizens voicing their opinion, whereas Wildmon’s Coalition for Better Television made the networks increase their self-regulation of TV sex by approaching the TV industry as a potential boycotter. Wildmon’s success was quicker but not longer lasting.

In spite of the Government in Sunshine Act⁴⁶ and the fact that the FCC has issued calls for citizen letters and held public panel discussions in the past, the commission has always been more receptive to TV industry opinion than to public opinion. Citizens may see their letters to the FCC as votes, but the commission does not read and tally them that way. For example, in response to ACT’s regulatory proposals in 1971, the FCC received 80,000 pro-ACT letters. The letters were “stacked in large boxes for later filing in bound volumes. There was no timetable for examining the letters and no one on the staff was considering reading them. ‘What’s the sense in reading them?’ [an official in the Broadcast Bureau’s Rules and Standards Division] asked. ‘They all say the same thing.’ ”⁴⁷ These letters may have helped legitimate ACT and its complaints, but they did not count as votes. Receiving 800,000 letters instead of 80,000 would have meant more filing for grunt workers at the FCC, but it would not have made ACT’s case any stronger.

The NCTV was another group that, like the Coalition for Better Television, favored sponsor boycotting as a media reform tactic. The NCTV repeatedly wooed ACT, hoping it would lend its support to the NCTV’s project. NCTV chair Thomas Radecki told Charren that he was trying to pull together different groups in order to make a “united national effort” to oppose TV violence.⁴⁸ However, ACT’s tactics were irreconcilable with those of the NCTV. The NCTV monitored programming, counting acts of violence and regularly releasing rankings of programs and lists of sponsors whose ads appeared on high-violence shows. The NCTV encouraged letter-writing campaigns and sponsor boycotts based on the rankings. ACT also monitored programming, but it did so primarily to gauge deceptive advertising, which is legally censorable/regulatable by the FTC. Because ACT defined the NCTV’s monitoring as censorious (which it was), it could not possibly lend its support to the group.

In an effort to convince Charren that the two groups’ goals were not irreconcilable, Radecki argued that

in the past you have shied away from firm efforts on the TV violence issues worrying about First Amendment issues. NCTV is certainly not attempting governmental censorship but only to offset the distorting effects of commercialization on TV with which you are very familiar. Thus actions such as public exposure of TV vilence [sic] advertisers, stockholders pressure, or national product boycotts are not really censorship. Indeed, we are aware that the networks are censoring off non-violent and news programming of certain types because it doesn’t fit the profit mission of commercial TV.⁴⁹

ACT would not be swayed. Affiliation with Radecki was almost as unthinkable as collaborating with Wildmon. The Coalition for Better Television had a right-wing image, whereas the NCTV had a more left-wing image, but both groups had a procensorship image. (Interestingly, the NCTV did hope to form an alliance with the Moral Majority but soon realized, to its disappointment, that the Moral Majority only paid lip service to concerns about violence. Really, it only objected to TV sex. It condemned *The Love Boat* as one of the most objectionable programs on television, whereas the NCTV felt that *The Love Boat* was one of the least violent and therefore least objectionable programs on TV.)⁵⁰ Perhaps ACT sensed that to much of the public, TV sponsor boycott, regardless of its goals, was irredeemably linked with censorship. Although broadcasters frequently held that ACT was censorious, this was not the widely held public opinion, nor was it ACT’s view of itself.⁵¹ Association with the NCTV would have tarnished ACT’s anti-censorship image. This is not to say that ACT was not sincere in its anti-censorship stance, merely that ACT’s choice not to align itself with certain media reform groups, a choice that was grounded in high principles, had certain political results that were in the long run advantageous to ACT.

ACT could not have approved of Michigan housewife Terry Rakolta’s 1989 campaign against *Married . . . With Children* and other “trash TV,” as she put it. The campaign involved hit listing particular programs and threatening advertisers with boycott. In spite of Rakolta’s obvious right-wing position on many issues, Corretta Scott King stated her support for the campaign: “At the risk of disappointing some of my fellow liberals, I tip my hat to Terry Rakolta. . . . I know that to many artists and civil libertarians, such citizen initiatives raise the specter of censorship and represent a threat to free expression. But. . . boycotts and selective patronage are not

only consistent with our democratic values, they are an essential tool for encouraging corporate social responsibility.”⁵² One can guess that “fellow liberal” ACT would not have been thrilled by King’s words. Although ACT certainly would not have been critical of fifties and sixties Civil Rights activists whose boycotting of products and services had proved a crucial tactic, it consistently held that the kind of boycotting Rakolta advocated was not democratic and not the appropriate way to encourage corporate social responsibility.

By choosing not to boycott or encourage stockholder pressure, ACT chose not to attempt to damage corporations. ACT did attack particular corporate practices, however. For example, ACT gave McDonald’s awards for sponsoring PBS shows but condemned McDonald’s for its Ronald McDonald Family Theater, which ACT considered a plug for McDonald’s. Yet as Armand Mattelart has explained, corporations perform public services—like sponsoring PBS programs—in order to offset their negative corporate images: “At the same time as ITT was plotting against Allende, it was giving its patronage to the production of twentieth-century ballet in New York. While IBM was being hauled up before the anti-Trust committee, it was sponsoring an excellent documentary on madness on the public television network. The notions of ‘quality of life’ and ‘corporate responsibility’ were behind these new public relations exercises.”⁵³ Both the PBS show sponsored by McDonald’s and the Ronald McDonald Family Theater were advertisements for McDonald’s. Indeed, ACT’s own awards were ads for McDonald’s.

The proboycotting Coalition for Better Television and NCTV seemed to understand what ACT did not—that where media reform activism is concerned, it is not a question of whether noncensorship or censorship will win. Rather, it is a question of what I call “competing censorships.” Producers and pressure groups are both censors in that they want their version of the TV text to be the version of the TV text at the expense of other versions. A pressure group that protests racist images wants those images removed and replaced with “better” images, and a group that protests the very presence of images of people of color wants those images removed. My point is not that censorship is a positive social force because it may eliminate racist images but rather that it is ubiquitous and is inherently neither progressive nor conservative.

Furthermore, it is unfair to dismiss media pressure groups because they

are censorious, as if without them TV programs would be censorship free. There is no such thing as a free or uncensored text, but the idea of freedom from censorship is a particularly seductive lure that sidesteps many other crucial political issues that a pressure group raises. Although it is easy to condemn right-wing groups like the Moral Majority or the Christian Coalition by labeling them censorious, it is much harder to both analyze their motivations and arguments and formulate an argument against the morals they seek to instill in others. For example, right-wing religious groups hope to save the family by eliminating adult programs like *NYPD Blue*. Rather than accusing such politicians of hampering free speech and telling them to shut up, leftists might rebut by offering an alternative definition of the family or questioning what it actually means to “save the family.”⁵⁴ The cry of censorship is all too often used to silence, not encourage, the open debate that Charren advocated.

ACT used the “freedom from censorship” lure repeatedly and successfully. ACT argued it was noncensorious on the grounds that it acted *for* children’s TV, not *against* it. Like ACT, the networks and the FCC defended their own interests by using the concept of freedom from censorship, so although the networks and the FCC were often irritated by ACT, they found the group’s central anticensorship stance palatable. Early ACT member Judy Chalfen recalls that “when we first talked, we were most concerned with violence . . . but we got off that. Violence is so hard to define and really, it’s just part of the whole picture of poor quality.” Charren adds, “[W]e knew that if we got into violence alone, we would be treading into the area of censorship. That’s not what we wanted.”⁵⁵ ACT deliberately shifted its focus to commercialism as an anticensorship tactic. It also gave out awards and objected to sponsor boycotts, as described above, in the name of opposing censorship. Siding with TV producer Norman Lear and others who were under attack for their adult programming, ACT also came out strongly against the Family Viewing Hour in 1976. And in its book *TV and Teens*, ACT included an interview with Lear.⁵⁶ Lear has been attacked repeatedly by overtly procensorship media reformers, so ACT’s obvious respect for his work and his opinions were proof positive that it aligned itself on the side of free speech.

ACT’s campaign against indecency legislation also bears witness to the group’s sincere anticensorship beliefs. After the *Pacifica* decision in 1975, in which indecency was declared regulatable/censorable by the FCC, a

“safe harbor” for indecency was established; the FCC declared 12:00-6:00 A.M. to be a legal broadcasting time for so-called indecent material. ACT opposed the safe harbor idea, not because it wanted indecency banned around the clock but because it opposed any indecency regulation on First Amendment grounds. In 1988, a federal appeals court overturned the FCC’s safe harbor order in *Action for Children’s Television v. FCC*. At this point, Congress, spearheaded by Jesse Helms, imposed an around-the-clock prohibition on indecency, eliminating the safe harbor altogether. In *Action for Children’s Television v. FCC* (1991), the court of appeals held the elimination of the safe harbor to be unconstitutional.⁵⁷ Helms and others fought this ruling, but the Supreme Court upheld it in 1992.⁵⁸ It is striking that ACT would go out on a limb to challenge indecency and safe harbor rulings, which were ostensibly motivated by the desire to protect children. ACT’s challenges to the FCC and to the Helms contingency demonstrate the depth of its anticensorship convictions.

ACT’s interest in media education was further evidence of the group’s genuine desire to be for, not against, children’s television. In a platform statement, ACT explained that its goals were “a combination of advocacy and education.” ACT’s advocacy activities were focused on what it opposed: advertisements. ACT’s education goals focused on the positive. ACT educated “organizations and individuals by planning national conferences and publishing handbooks on various aspects of children’s television, encouraging programming on the arts, science, consumer education and for the disabled child. . . . [ACT educated] adults about the critical effect television has on children, through its reference library, national speaker’s bureau, and distribution of materials.”⁵⁹ In its first fifteen years, ACT commissioned fifteen studies on children’s programs and commercials. ACT put together a “resource list” of the titles, all of which could be purchased from ACT. The studies were wide-ranging, including *Images of Life on Children’s Television: Sex Roles, Minorities, and Families*, *Pre-Christmas Advertising to Children*, *Romper Room: An Analysis*, and *Mothers’ Attitudes toward Children’s Television and Commercials*. Interestingly, the project on mothers’ attitudes was the first study ACT commissioned, which further illustrates that it presented itself as a maternally motivated group. Importantly, while these studies were evidence of ACT’s desire to educate, they were self-serving as well. ACT commissioned studies that it could use to prove its arguments. From reading trade publications, ACT knew that the point of

kids’ TV was to sell stuff to kids, but it realized it had to do more than just go before the FCC or broadcasters and say that. As Charren put it, “[W]e needed statistics to back us up.”⁶⁰ ACT’s commissioned studies served not only as educational material for others but also as a source of statistics for the group.

At ACT’s Resource Library, researchers could find books, videos, pamphlets, unpublished research reports, and bibliographies on different aspects of children’s television. ACT also began producing public service announcements in 1975 and 1976, and in 1977, it released a documentary film about TV marketing to children, *It’s as Easy as Selling Candy to a Baby*. It seems that ACT’s community outreach really took off in 1976 when Ann Landers mentioned the group in her column. ACT received 25,000 inquiries about children’s television and responded by distributing a poster of parental guidelines for child TV viewing called “Treat TV with T.L.C.” Apparently, “tens of thousands of ‘T.L.C.’ posters [were] handed out. Another ACT poster, ‘Nutrition Games,’ [was] designed to suggest appealing alternatives to TV-advertised snacks.”⁶¹ The nutrition poster was aimed at elementary school children and came with a teacher’s guide. It was also ACT’s first bilingual (Spanish and English) instructional effort. This and other outreach projects demonstrate ACT’s commitment to education rather than censorship. However, ACT was not immune to censorious impulses; censorship is not an either/or choice of media reform groups but rather an inevitable component of their activism.

The Attack on Sugar

ACT never planned boycotts, but it did target specific TV ads for toys and food by filing complaints with the FTC. Over the years, ACT singled out TV ads produced by Hudson Pharmaceutical (maker of Spider-Man Vitamins), General Foods (Cocoa Pebbles), General Mills (Trix), Quaker Oats (Cap’n Crunch), and many other corporations. From 1978 to 1981, however, ACT did more than target particular ads. The FTC had always worked on a case-by-case basis, ruling on particular product ads, but in 1978 the FTC agreed to investigate ACT’s contention that children’s advertising as a whole unfairly exploited children. As usual, ACT went high profile with the antisugar campaign, and the TV and print media paid much attention to the FTC case. “You got it Twinkies-freaks,” the *Chicago Tribune* condescend-

ingly proclaimed, "ACT is going after TV advertisers, those Madison Avenue magicians who insist on selling children the chocolate-star-spangled illusion that life can be dandy with sugar and candy."⁶²

ACT's mandate was to eliminate child-directed television ads in general, but the particular focus of its FTC complaint was sugared foods such as candy and breakfast cereal. At points in its campaign against sugared products, ACT seemed to directly contradict its "public debate in a free society" platform. In a 1975 speech to the Parent-Teacher Association, Charren boasted that "ACT representatives and other concerned individuals have joined in an attempt to persuade General Mills to stop their test marketing of a new breakfast food, 'Magic Puffs,' which has been advertised to children on television. A chemical analysis of the cereal indicated that it contained more than 53% sugar, and could therefore be more appropriately categorized as a candy than an essential ingredient in a nutritious breakfast. Based on precedents . . . the group has reason to believe that their efforts will be successful."⁶³ Charren added that "another nutritionally deficient cereal," a "sticky breakfast concoction" being test marketed as Mr. Wonderfull's Surprise, was permanently withdrawn from the market because of activist pressure. Consumers have every right to protest breakfast cereals, but product hit listing is exactly what ACT repeatedly rejected when TV programs were under attack. In other words, when Wildmon tried to deny *Dallas* to the world by boycotting the show's sponsors, Charren accused him of operating outside of the bounds of open debate in a free society, but ACT successfully obliterated Magic Puffs and Mr. Wonderfull's Surprise before they were released to the general public. It seems that the moral imperatives underlying the Coalition for Better Television's and ACT's campaigns were not as dichotomous as they appeared to be, in spite of the obvious political differences between the two groups. Wildmon's group objected to *Dallas* and other programs portraying sinful people, whereas Charren's group objected to the corrupting evils of sugar. Both felt they had the right to make decisions for other more vulnerable and less enlightened consumers.

In its campaign against sugared products, ACT vilified food companies, their ads, and sugar itself. ACT's stance, as summarized by a sympathetic member of the FTC, was that "sugar commercials . . . call upon the child to make very sophisticated health judgments, [but] until children are about to the age of twelve or so they lack the cognitive ability and experience to

make long-range abstract decisions. . . . They don't know what a commercial is and lack the experience or maturity that adults have to treat commercials with some judgment."⁶⁴ These are dubious claims on several counts. For one thing, the speaker underestimates the intelligence of children, who voice skepticism about ads at an early age.⁶⁵ Moreover, he/she assumes that adult viewers make "very sophisticated health judgments" and "long-range abstract decisions" about food products they see advertised, when actually adults are just as likely as children to buy a food product because they like its image, not its nutritive value. In fact, marketers know that some health-conscious adults can be persuaded to buy nonnutritious foods such as candy and soda if they are labeled "low fat," "no fat," or "lite."

ACT's FTC actions were not simply based on the premise that commercials are inherently bad for easily duped children. ACT also specifically demonized ads for sugared products for not promoting proper ideas about how and when to consume foods. Objectionable ads did not advise children to brush their teeth immediately after eating sticky foods. ACT attacked the Mars Company for a Milky Way campaign that irresponsibly advised children to eat the candy bar "wherever you are . . . at work, rest, or play," and ACT denounced an ad showing a boy eating a Milky Way while white-water rafting. Such food was inappropriate for consumption while engaged in a wholesome sporting activity. Plus, it would have been impossible for the boy to brush immediately after consumption. ACT also attacked ads that suggested eating foods dangerously—by sucking and holding them in your mouth. In 1977, Charren complained to the American Dental Association about "ads for sticky between meal sweets that stress and emphasize that 'chewy chewy caramel' candy is 'fun on your tongue and made to last.'" She deemed these ads problematic because "it is the stickiness of sucrose and the frequency or duration of exposure that are the prime factors that determine the cariogenicity of sucrose. Yet, those are exactly the qualities that are glorified in candy commercials!"⁶⁶ ACT criticized ads that strove to appeal to the ways children take pleasure in sweets—by sucking, chewing, and slobbering. The ACT campaign against sucking and chewing and *for* prophylactic brushing was supposedly merely a matter of promoting good dental hygiene, but clearly this puritan dental campaign also depended on very *adult* and "proper" (and middle-class) conceptions of how children should sanitize their pleasures in the name of good health.⁶⁷ ACT sought, first, to protect children from their

own naïveté, which supposedly allowed them to be seduced by dangerous advertisements, and, second, to reconstruct children as educated, mature consumers. The reform group implied that if advertisers would properly inform children about the healthful way to eat sugared foods, children would happily oblige and reform their eating habits. They would eat like adults.

ACT's campaign to eliminate deceptive and dangerous ads in order to control child desire for and consumption of food was symptomatic of the broader adult desire to control and discipline the child body. Many adults object to television on the grounds that it makes children unmanageable. Because of TV, the argument goes, children do not sleep, eat, study, or play when adults want them to. ACT took a moderate position by implying that the correct TV messages would help children use their bodies properly. More conservative TV critics argue that it is the television apparatus itself, regardless of content or message, that takes control of the child's body, addicting the child, making his/her eyes glaze over, draining him/her of creativity, and so forth. In spite of their differences, a similar moral imperative sustains both kinds of TV protest. Conservatives like Marie Winn (author of *The Plug-In Drug*) argued that all TV made children stupid and passive, whereas the liberal ACT argued that only *some* TV made children stupid and passive. Both conservative and liberal camps assumed that children are excessively malleable viewers, and both sought to protect and control the bodies and minds of implicitly middle-class child viewers. Winn posited that certain middle/upper-class-coded activities such as Victorian-style parlor games and visits to museums were inherently better than TV viewing, whereas ACT's abstract notion of "quality" indicated a disdain for "low-quality" or escapist television. Like Winn and many other intellectual television critics, ACT must be held up to scrutiny for "its simple advocacy of 'good' culture—as universal and self-evident—over mass culture, and its facile distinctions between the commercial and the artistic, the worthwhile and the merely sensually pleasurable."⁶⁸

To argue that the adult desire for a controlled, rationally consuming child body has Foucauldian dimensions is not to disparage all adult control of children. My intention here is not to advocate permissive childrearing tactics. Rather, I am pointing out two things. First, ACT's antisugar campaign, apparently waged selflessly on behalf of children, was not merely an act of altruism; it was fueled by the adult desire not only for healthy,

cavity-free children but also for tidy, properly bourgeois children who do not snack recklessly. Second, ACT's conceptualization of the proper middle-class child viewer was not a unique one. Rather, across the political spectrum, child TV viewers tend to be problematically figured as unsophisticated, feckless viewers desperately in need of education from inherently more sophisticated adult TV viewers. ACT represented a moderate incarnation of a typical adult attitude toward child viewers. That is, ACT did not argue that television was inherently destructive of the traditional family, as Winn did, or that TV viewing was inherently passive. Rather, the group argued that better programs (which often meant more "tasteful" programs that rated higher on ACT's cultural capital scale) and parental intervention could change TV "from a passive to a positive learning experience."⁶⁹ An educated child would view ads for sugared products with a critical eye, knowing that it was inappropriate to eat candy bars between meals (or at meals, or ever, for that matter). Whereas more conservative TV critics tend to see TV as a lost cause and "media literacy" as oxymoronic, ACT believed that through activism TV shows could be fixed and through education TV viewers could be fixed. Notwithstanding ACT's "simple advocacy of 'good' culture—as universal and self-evident—over mass culture" and however problematic ACT's view of the unenlightened child viewer may have been, ACT exhibited tenacious optimism and steadfastly stood its ground against adults who thought TV was unredeemable.

The manufacturers of Count Chocula and Lucky Charms certainly did not admire ACT's tenacious belief in the power of citizen advocacy. In response to ACT's antisugar campaign, in 1978, cereal manufacturers, advertisers, and broadcasters coordinated an attack on the FTC children's advertising rule-making proceedings, pooling together a reported \$30 million for the lobbying effort. By 1980, the powerful prosugar industry lobby had won the legislative ear, and Congress voted to eliminate the FTC's authority to promulgate industrywide rules about unfair advertising. (Anticipation of the Reagan administration's deregulatory policies may have played some part in this turn of events.) Then, in 1981, the FTC staff said that "child-oriented television advertising is a legitimate cause for public concern" but recommended that the commission terminate the children's ads rule-making proceeding. The upshot was that the FTC's hands were tied. It could regulate individual ads on the basis that they were deceptive,

but it could not consider whether all ads for candy and cereal—or advertising as a whole—might be unfair to children. The campaign to eliminate TV ads for sugared foods was officially dead.

Examination of three commercials from the late sixties and early seventies will clarify what ACT objected to in commercials and how ACT's campaign, although it officially failed, did influence (or censor, depending on your perspective) TV representations of sugared products while leaving unchanged some of the classic conventions of kid-targeted ads. An ad for Hostess Cupcakes opens with live-action kids spotting an animated cupcake captaining a ship. The cupcake invites them aboard, and they become animated. They go to Cupcake Island, where they are threatened by an octopus, who, it turns out, is easily placated with cupcakes. Captain Cupcake takes the kids home, and they return to their live-action form. Another animated ad, for General Mills's Frosty-O's cereal, takes place in the Wild West. A little man asks a big unshaven desperado why he's shooting holes into cakes. The answer: he's making them into "sugary doughnuts." The roughneck then commences to shoot at the little man's feet, until the man advises him that there's an easier way to make doughnuts. As the little man sings, "Shaped like little sugar-frosted doughnuts—Frosty-O's!", the cartoon ends with the two reconciled, eating Frosty-O's together, using an old saloon sign as a breakfast table. In a third commercial, a cartoon boy exclaims, "Look, a fire chief." An Ed Wynn sound-alike answers, "Not me! I'm a Twinkles sprinkler. I spray Twinkles with sugar in bright party colors." He uses a fire hose to coat the cereal with sugar, and then he and the boy happily consume Twinkles together, as the Twinkles sprinkler half-sings, "Sugar-frosted Twinkles in bright party colors."

Largely because of ACT pressure, today's ads could never be like these. They portray play with guns, which is now forbidden in (censored from) children's ads; they do not state "with juice, toast, and milk, part of a complete breakfast" (an effort to make cereal seem more nutritious); and they gleefully use the word "sugar," which has now been euphemistically replaced by "honey." Although ACT's official complaint about these kinds of ads was that they promoted improper health messages, I believe that what ACT opposed was commercial narratives, which it saw as tricks used to deceive children. ACT pressure failed to eliminate such "tricks." The cupcake ad depicts the alluring fantasy of entering the world of animation; the exciting movement between cartoon and live-action worlds is still a

convention in many children's ads. The Frosty-O's commercial plays on a favorite kid genre, the Western, and the Winkles ad features a favorite kid character type, the firefighter. All three make sugared foods into sites of fun and adventure. Even if ads can no longer praise sugar as a high-energy food, sweets persist as transformative agents in the world of kid's television. Starburst candies, for example, change boring schoolrooms into tsunami-flooded fruit-fests. "Children's advertising offers an appealing vision of a world where 'kids rule.' Like most popular entertainments, commercials are utopian in some respects—portraying a childhood world more exciting, intense, and exhilarating than everyday life."⁷⁰ In protesting commercials for sugared products, ACT implicitly sought not only to eliminate bad health messages but also to remove intensity and exhilaration from children's TV commercials.

Sugar Paranoia

From today's perspective, an antisugar crusade may seem laughable or eccentric, but ACT's antisugar campaign was far from trivial. In the seventies, sugar was as demonized as fat is in the nineties. A plethora of anti-sugar books and articles enjoyed popular success.⁷¹ Sugar was the highly contested subject of legal and governmental debate, and in 1973, doctors testified about sugar before the Senate Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs. The senators and doctors debated whether or not sugar was an "antinutrient" and whether or not it was fair to label sugar a "carbohydrate." Previously, the FTC had made sugar companies stop advertising sugar as a nutrient and an energy builder.⁷² One reason that ACT could not continue its antisugar campaign in the eighties was undoubtedly because public anxieties about sugar had died out; the new villain was cholesterol, and the new panacea was oat bran.⁷³

The U.S. health-food movement of the seventies rejected First World processed foods, embracing and romanticizing unrefined Asian foods. One health-foodist, in fact, attributes the rise of the movement to the U.S. rapprochement with China. At a time of backlash against sixties radicalism, the health-food movement was vaguely countercultural, a tepid expression of antiwar and hippy sentiments. Health-food advocates were not only perceived by conservatives as unpatriotic for rejecting hotdogs, meatloaf, and other classics of American cuisine but also as radical, or

even pinko, for promulgating nutritional pacifism: to eat vegetarian was to eat without killing. Vegetarianism was also symptomatic of a widespread cynical attitude toward the government in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate. In the seventies, there was a burgeoning awareness of the dangers of pesticides in produce and hormones in meat. With this awareness came the realization that the government was not doing anything about it. As vegetarian guru Anna Thomas put it, "In these strange seventies, ominous and dramatic new reasons are compelling people to reexamine their eating habits."⁷⁴ The U.S. military continued to spray napalm and Agent Orange in Southeast Asia, while back in the States, the banning of DDT pesticide spray in 1970 represented a battle won for health-foodists.

Along with the health-food movement, sugar paranoia reached its peak in the seventies, and ACT's campaign both benefited from and contributed to this paranoia. William Dufty's antisugar polemic, *Sugar Blues*, was a 1975 best-seller. This book was a virtual bible for the health-food movement. Simultaneously left wing in its critique of the sugar industry's imperialism and capitalist opportunism and right wing in its moral tone and antidrug message, the book is hard to peg politically. Comparing sugar to opium, morphine, and heroin and calling sugar companies "pushers," Dufty blamed sugar for everything from acne to scurvy and bubonic plague. Although Dufty's critique of sugar focused on its potential for inflicting bodily harm, he also criticized sugar's potential for spiritual and moral harm. Sugar could blight body and soul. Infused with antihippie sentiment and fire-and-brimstone moral rhetoric,⁷⁵ Dufty's text easily lends support to Elizabeth Walker Mechling and Jay Mechling's argument that the pervasive antisugar sentiment of the seventies can be read as a backlash against the countercultural drug and sex "excesses" of the sixties. As Susan Willis observes, "[T]he stand against sugar [was] . . . a call for a moral return to social order."⁷⁶

The antisugar crusade should also be considered in light of cultural anxieties about Vietnam and Vietnam veterans. Antisugar crusaders aligned sugar "addiction" with moral and physical weakness, whereas those who could defy the "diseasestablishment" (Western doctors and sugar companies) and kick the habit were strong. They were winners; sugar junkies were losers. In 1970, 96 percent pure heroin was readily available on the streets of Saigon, and around 28 percent of the U.S. troops took hard drugs. Over half a million became addicted.⁷⁷ As those troops

returned to the United States, veteran drug addiction became a national concern. To those who reacted to addicted vets with moral outrage, such troops were symbolic of the entire Vietnam endeavor: we had failed because we had been literal and figurative drug addicts—losers.⁷⁸ Dufty went so far as to blame sugar for fostering a desire for other drugs in Vietnam: "Refined sucrose might have worked as a stimulant through World Wars I and II; but by the time of Korea and Viet Nam, the troops were so glutted with sugar that many turned on to hashish . . . pot. . . grass and even stronger addictive drugs" (original ellipses).⁷⁹

Dufty praised the fortitude of the Vietcong, who had no refined sugar and ate brown rice. It was their sugar-free moral fortitude that made our Asian enemies superior to us. Dufty explained that a Japanese philosopher who had recently returned from Saigon told him, "If you really expect to conquer the North Vietnamese . . . you must drop Army PX's on them—sugar, candy, and Coca-Cola. That will destroy them faster than bombs."⁸⁰ In effect, this was the strategy the United States inadvertently deployed against its South Vietnamese allies, whom it supplied with strength-sapping Minute Rice. In 1971, a Pentagon official explained that Vietnamese rice was "useless to a soldier in the field since it would have to be cooked in the field."⁸¹ To remedy the situation, the Pentagon had been supplying instant white rice to the South Vietnamese since 1968, at a cost of almost \$1 million a month. In Dufty's argument, the rice, like Coca-Cola, made the South Vietnamese soldiers weak, dependent, and malnourished. There is, no doubt, a grain of truth in this; Dufty is right to criticize the introduction of refined sugar and Minute Rice into Vietnam as imperialistic and detrimental to the health of the Vietnamese. Where he errs is in his casting of sucrose and the U.S. "diseasestablishment" as the conspiratorial villains in his melodrama. The introduction of refined sugar and instant rice was one of a multitude of signs that the United States did not understand Vietnamese culture, that it did not understand its allies or its enemies in Southeast Asia.⁸² Unwanted U.S. processed foods served as metonymic reminders of the unwanted U.S. military presence.

Certainly, the U.S. crusade against sugar in the seventies was not a direct result of veteran drug addiction, countercultural backlash, and U.S. defeat in Vietnam. It is not my intention to imply such historical causality but rather to show several possible ways of understanding why antisugar alarmism took off in the seventies. Antisugar sentiment should not be dis-

missed as a senseless, widespread whim; nutritional fads are meaningful cultural phenomena. Without an understanding of the antisugar movement, ACT's antisugar campaign might seem trivial or misguided, when it was not. Although ACT did not speak of sugar in Dufty's radical, pedantic terms, the group certainly profited from his high-profile attack. Judging from press coverage of the campaign and the fact that the FTC actually listened to ACT, ACT's campaign clearly tapped into already-existing cultural concerns.

The Attack on Chester Cheetah

After the antisugar campaign, ACT's nutritional concerns would resurface only tangentially in its campaign against a cartoon program designed to sell Chee-tos. The Frito-Lay Company tried to make its animated spokescat, Chester Cheetah, into a regular cartoon in 1992. By this time, the FCC had already rejected ACT's petitions against product-based programs such as *Strawberry Shortcake* and *Transformers*, which were created to promote toys. But ACT had a slightly different case with the Chester Cheetah cartoon. Chester Cheetah had been a well-established commercial logo since 1986. The character had not existed before Frito-Lay created it to sell Chee-tos, and it had not existed as a toy. It was therefore possible for ACT to argue that Chester Cheetah existed purely as an advertising character and that the cartoon would therefore serve as an ad for Chee-tos. Since commercial speech is not as extensively protected by the First Amendment as noncommercial speech, ACT saw its attack on the show as noncensorious.

Interestingly, throughout its Chester Cheetah FCC petition, ACT's rhetoric consistently condemned the show not only as a "program-length commercial" but also as unhealthy because of its lead character's passion for junk food. Although ACT did not explicitly make its good-nutrition platform part of its attack, it included nutritional analysis of Chee-tos Paws in the appendix of its FCC petition, consistently referred to Chee-tos as "cheese-flavored," and referred to Chee-tos Paws as "cheese-flavored snacks *supposedly* shaped like the paws of a cheetah" (my emphasis),⁸³ as if part of the problem with Chee-tos Paws was their lack of verisimilitude. Footnotes in the FCC petition labeled Chee-tos as junk food, attacked their fat content, and quoted a professor who said that "junk food" pro-

gramming perverts the marketplace of ideas."⁸⁴ However, ACT stated that "although Chee-tos Paws may be a 'junk food,' the case does not turn on this fact,"⁸⁵ realizing that having already lost its nutrition case at the FTC, it certainly was not going to win it at the FCC.

In fact, ACT did not officially win this case; the Bush FCC simply was not going to rule against any broadcast content unless it could be declared "indecent," like Howard Stern's graphic radio monologues. Frito-Lay eventually withdrew its plans for the cartoon project, probably realizing that because of protest, *Yo! It's the Chester Cheetah Show* might have done more harm than good for Frito-Lay profits. Frito-Lay claimed it was just a coincidence that the project fell through at exactly the same time that ACT was attacking it, but Charren triumphantly announced, "We feel we have zapped, for the time being, the problem of logos turning into half-hour programs."⁸⁶ At the same time, apparently in response to the ACT pressure on Frito-Lay, Kraft dropped its plans to make a cartoon starring its Macaroni and Cheese promotional character, Cheesasaurus Rex.

In its FCC petition, ACT avoided describing Chester Cheetah as a "real" character in order to maintain that he was merely a commercial logo. Of his character, the ACT petition notes only that he is "crazy about Chee-tos and often appears wearing sunglasses. He also likes rap music." ACT said nothing about the politics of Chester's ethnicity, barring the connotations of "rap music." Chester Cheetah was a jive-talking cool cat whose rhyming speech was unmistakably coded as black. (Frito-Lay was an old hand at appropriating the ethnic order; in the seventies, the company created the Mexican-stereotyped Frito Bandito, which Latino protesters forced off the air.)⁸⁷ In his more recent incarnations, Chester Cheetah's voice is noticeably less black coded. In its own newsletters, ACT had been outspoken about racial stereotyping in cartoons, and the group surely realized that Chester was an African American stereotype. In fact, one of the cosupporters of ACT's FCC petition against Chester Cheetah was Black Citizens for a Fair Media. But this group's complaints against Chester Cheetah were not explicitly stated anywhere in the press coverage of the Chester Cheetah protest. Perhaps as a tactical maneuver, the politics of Chester's ethnicity took a backseat to ACT's prochild politics. On a practical level, Chester's black stereotyping could not have been the focus of the petition; ACT knew it would lose if this had been its grounds of critique. Regardless of what ACT members or Black Citizens for a Fair Media might have believed about

the show's racial politics, in order to censor it, they had to prove that it was exploitative commercial speech.

Action for/against Censorship?

Some of ACT's activities were censorious in effect. ACT influenced cereal commercial conventions, played a major role in keeping *Yo! It's the Chester Cheetah Show* off the air, protested deceptive advertising, and was in part responsible for network self-regulation of representations of sexism, racism, and violence. On the other hand, ACT actively worked against censorship by opposing TV sponsor boycotting, the Family Viewing Hour, and anti-indecency legislation and by promoting viewer "education" and appreciation of "quality" programs.

To argue that ACT censored is not to condemn ACT but to complicate the notion of what it means to censor. Prior to the attack on *Yo! It's the Chester Cheetah Show*, ACT had attacked specific ads but not specific shows. Even when asking the FCC to ban all product-based programs, which ACT maintained were really commercials, ACT avoided publicly hit listing particular shows. (Conversely, the files in the ACT archive indicate that internally "Strawberry Shortcake" may have functioned as a code word for the anti-product-based programs campaign.) Yet ACT did hit list and induce the censorship of *Yo! It's the Chester Cheetah Show*, and its attack on ads, co-terminous with a widespread social movement against sugar, resulted in dramatic changes in how sugared cereal could be marketed. It is true that commercial speech does not enjoy the same First Amendment protection that noncommercial speech does, but that does not mean that attacking and eliminating commercial speech is not an act of censorship.

It would be misguided to lump ACT together with more overtly censorious media activist groups. Clearly organizations such as the Moral Majority and the Coalition for Better Television did actively labor, and laboriously pray, for the broad-based censorship of television they found to be immoral or anti-Christian. These groups exhibited a greater power and will to censor than ACT ever did. If ACT had a moral agenda, it was mild mannered and innocuous compared to the holier-than-thou sexist, racist, and homophobic fundamentalist Christian agenda. But as different as the liberal ACT was from conservative activists, the Moral Majority and ACT

do not merely represent procensorship and anticensorship contingents. Rather, they represent different or Competing censorship contingents.

The concepts of censorship and free speech are often waved like banners in the United States, as if their meanings were immanent. But the various meanings of censorship and free speech are created and re-created only through their social enactment. Ultimately, whether or not censorship is "bad" does not inhere in censorship itself as a concept but in how censorship is culturally executed. For example, many of us would agree that the Fairness Doctrine was an example of "good" censorship. Eliminated by the Reagan FCC, the Fairness Doctrine directed broadcast license holders "to devote a reasonable amount of time to the coverage of controversial issues of public importance and to do so fairly by affording a reasonable opportunity for contrasting viewpoints to be voiced on these issues." The mandate to provide "balanced presentation of . . . opposing viewpoints" meant that if a broadcaster expressed a controversial or slanderous opinion on the air, someone on the other side of the issue (only two sides were assumed for any issue) would get a chance to rebut, free of charge.⁸⁸ The Fairness Doctrine regulated broadcasters' speech so that others might have access to speech. However, in the early sixties, the Democratic National Committee orchestrated a covert campaign to use the Fairness Doctrine to eliminate the far right's right to free speech: "Our massive strategy was to use the Fairness Doctrine to challenge and harass right-wing [radio] broadcasters and hope that the challenges would be so costly to them that they would be inhibited and decide it was too expensive to continue."⁸⁹ The Committee used the Fairness Doctrine to get free airtime devoted to the support of New Frontier policies. This is a good example of how, in the course of its social execution, "free speech" is not inherently liberatory. The committee used access to literal and figurative free speech to curtail someone else's speech. Most journalists saw the Fairness Doctrine as censorious, whereas most activists saw it as an anchor for free speech, but it could actually be both.

Censorship and free speech are competing, heterogeneous, nonbinary cultural constants. Even the adamantly anticensorship American Civil Liberties Union must acknowledge cases in which there are "competing civil rights," in which value judgments must be made and someone must be censored. It is crucial to argue for a notion of competing censorships in

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the United States, where censorship is so frequently denied discursive existence at the national level. It is precisely because the United States does not have official state censorship and is not overtly fascistic that censorship can thrive here. Censorship can never be challenged within a system where it is insufficiently acknowledged. Admitting censorship's prevalence does not have to make one into a despairing cynic. Rather, acknowledging the pervasiveness of censorious impulses—from the left, right, center, and every other direction—enables critical thought, discussion, and activism. It enables one to go beyond the all-too-common, politically narrow position of being merely for or against censorship.

Any number of media reform groups could be taken as case studies illustrating censorship's inevitability. ACT was not the most censorious or worst media reform group but rather one of the best—the best at simultaneously resisting and advocating censorship; the best at gaining access to the FCC because of its moderate self-presentation; and the best at getting press coverage because of its savvy media tactics and its maternal image. But ACT was not unique in other ways. The group's concerns about child consumption of both sugar and TV were problematic in the same ways that many adult campaigns for children are. Campaigns for children's rights frequently evince class bias and blindness to cultural differences linked to gender, race, and ethnicity; presume the authorization to speak for all children; myopically focus on the local at the expense of broader, global contexts; and depend on simply drawn moral lines.⁹⁰

ACT admirably tried to force broadcasters to serve children, not advertisers. Anyone who feels that broadcasting should not be subservient to commercialism owes a debt to ACT for raising public awareness of how the FCC and the TV industry operate and for attempting to force programming changes through means other than casting a Nielsen family vote. Certainly, ACT should not be demonized for its well-meaning reform efforts. But it is important to examine why ACT's activism was palatable to the press, the government, and much of the public. In the seventies, ACT was tolerated and managed by the FCC. In the eighties, Reagan's FCC, particularly Chairman Mark Fowler, dismissed ACT as a group of censorious, meddling kooks. The very foundations of liberal media activism were SNAFU: situation normal all fowler-ed up.