

How about 'The Sopranos' sell . . . soda?

Product messages of big-time sponsors leach into shows and scripts

BY SUSAN LINN

As First Amendment advocates rail against the government's involvement in inserting antidrug messages in television programs, the influence of corporate interests on media content represents an equally destructive, and more pervasive, threat to free speech.

It is an outrage that the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy has allowed networks to cut back on public service announcements in exchange for incorporating antidrug content into prime-time sitcoms and dramatic programming.

But why isn't there an equal outcry over the manipulation of media content through product placement; that is, financing programming by incorporating a sponsor's product into a show's content?

Corporate sponsors see such arrangements as an extremely effective way of selling products, especially to media-savvy teens — teens who might be skeptical of overt advertising.

With virtually no visible public distress, product placement is rapidly moving from mere set decoration to part of the plot. On PAX-TV this season, characters in the series

"Little Men" took jobs in a Welch's grape juice factory thanks to a deal with Welch Foods, which also bought advertising time on the show.

Eleven big advertisers, under the guise of the Family Friendly Programming Forum, have given the WB network almost \$1 million to create pilot scripts for series that will appeal to families. These same advertisers have offered scriptwriting scholarships to film schools at New York University and the University of Southern California.

It would be naive to think that the source of these gifts will not influence the course of creative flow either directly, through withholding money because of unacceptable scripts, or indirectly because writers adhere, even unconsciously, to the adage, "Don't bite the hand that feeds you."

Then there is the new joint venture between J. Walter Thompson USA, and Basic Entertainment. The former is a part of the WPP Group, a giant advertising agency with clients like Kellogg, PepsiCo, and Phillip Morris. Basic Entertainment manages actors, represents authors, and produces television programs like "The Sopranos," as well as having film and Internet interests. The goal of this alliance? According to a report in *The New York Times*, it is to involve adver-

tisers more in the early phases of program content development.

What this deal means for J. Walter Thompson clients, big corporate sponsors of media programming, is that they will no longer have only veto power over programs that they do not want to sponsor. They will be able now to shape programming from its inception on through writing and casting.

What it means for the rest of the population is that, for all the glitzy bells and whistles made possible by new technology, electronic media in the 21st century is going to function a lot like radio and television of the 1940s and '50s, the good old days when sponsors of programs like GE Theater and Kraft Playhouse exercised inordinate control over program content, even picking contestants for quiz shows or vetting scripts for the merest suggestion of a competitor's name.

It is time for defenders of the First Amendment to take on corporations as well as the government. Until they do, the speech they're protecting for us isn't really free.

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