

Book Review

Captive Audience: How Corporations Invaded Our Schools

Catherine Gidney

Toronto, ON: Between the Lines, 2019

Reviewed by: A. R. Ruis
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Although there has long been commercialization in public schools, the degree of involvement that corporations have had in schooling has increased markedly since the 1990s. Catherine Gidney, a historian at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, Canada, explored the origins and implications of this phenomenon in her most recent book, *Captive Audience: How Corporations Invaded our Schools*. Gidney argued:

[School commercialism is no longer] simply the by-product of business owners and employees wanting to help their children or of the philanthropic bounty of corporations The form it takes today is also a direct result of the demand for new, varied, and some-times expensive educational programming, slowing investments in education, contracting support for public sector services in favour of private enterprise, and the increasing application of business models to schools. (p. 2)

Gidney began by exploring early efforts to commercialize classrooms. Beginning in the early 20th century, teaching aids designed and distributed by corporations, such as booklets, posters, and other educational materials, simply branded the kinds of maps, charts, and texts that teachers were already using (or wanted to use). But, by the mid-20th century, corporations began to target students more directly, through sponsorship of after-school clubs, essay contests, and other endeavours that facilitated both marketing to kids and collecting information about their interests and perspectives. Free materials were a particular boon to rural schools, which had few resources, but for teachers in both rural and urban contexts, commercial offerings filled needs for educational information and resources not provided in textbooks, and helped connect children to broader issues and material culture. Although there was some resistance to this commercialization from teachers and parents, it was generally limited. Gidney wrote:

Teachers needed resources. School administrators and departments of education encouraged teachers to draw on a wide variety of materials. And teachers' professional magazines and their colleagues endorsed the use of all available supplementary sources As a result, corporate material and corporate-sponsored events became one means of enriching the classroom and activities of the school (p. 25).

In chapters 2 and 3, Gidney explored the emergence of school-business partnerships, beginning in the 1980s, and their rapid expansion in the 1990s. These partnerships appealed to

schools at a time when services were expected to expand, but public financing of education was flat or declining. Amid neoliberal arguments for smaller government, rising inflation, and increasingly science, technology, engineering, and mathematics-focused educational policy, businesses found schools to be a market ripe for further development and schools desperately needed the funding and the novel programming that corporations could provide. This situation became particularly acute with the rise of personal computers, which were not only expensive but also required significant technical expertise to operate. Computer labs thus offered a particularly strong argument for school-business partnerships. Yet, such partnerships often involved unpaid teacher and student labour and only deepened corporate influence on education.

Gidney then turned in chapters 4 and 5 to the ways in which students, parents, teachers, and others resisted school commercialization, which had little success in the broadest sense but some success in specific cases, such as preventing the permanent establishment of the Youth News Network. In this case, the Youth News Network offered schools opportunities for students to produce journalistic content, but required that classes then air the broadcasts in unmodified form, including advertisements. The tensions between commercialization and its opponents are perhaps clearest in chapter 6, in which Gidney explored the increasingly commercialized foodscapes of public schools. Although there had always been a tension between commercialization and pedagogy, food introduced a third component: student health. This aspect muddled resistance, splitting those who opposed the dissemination of unhealthy foods and beverages from those who opposed commercial influence over the foodscape. A focus on nutrition enabled companies simply to offer healthier options as a way to maintain their market share in schools, and thus did little to address the commercialization of education and educational spaces. Chapter 6, which focuses on the increasing role of fundraising to support educational programming, encapsulates how the pressures placed on schools maintain openings for commercial investment in education, often encouraging parents to facilitate that investment.

Captive Audience is an accessible, nuanced, and insightful look at the history and current status of school commercialization, and it will be of interest to both scholars and more general readers. Although it does not dive deeply into the ideological or pragmatic implications of commercialization in broader social, cultural, and political contexts, it signposts many areas where expanded research and exploration are needed. As such, it is an excellent introduction to the topic for those unfamiliar with it, and for scholars in the field it opens a large number of questions worthy of further analysis. Issues of race and gender, labour politics, and the erosion of separation between the public and private spheres are only a few areas where considerably more work could be done.

A. R. Ruis is a historian of medicine and a learning scientist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He is the author of *Eating to Learn, Learning to Eat: The Origins of School Lunch in the United States*, as well as numerous articles on the history of food, nutrition, and health; learning analytics; and STEM and medical education.