

Obligation, Inc.

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Promoting What Helps Children, Changing What Harms Them.

March 28, 2008

THE BUS RADIO CONTROVERSY

Your seven-year-old daughter wants a CD by Fergie (it has a Parental Advisory warning). Your ten-year-old son asks permission to watch the new TV show *Aliens in America* (the Parents Television Council has given this raunchy sitcom its worst rating). Your thirteen-year-old daughter is singing, "Everybody has a ... on speed dial. Hey, I want to be a rock star." (The missing words are "drug dealer" from a Nickelback song.)

What's going on? Are your children suddenly hanging out with the "wrong" crowd?

No, they are probably listening to a new controversial radio show played only on school buses called Bus Radio.

Bus Radio is a start-up company that says they want to provide "age-appropriate" music on school buses and they want to help make buses safer. They are doing neither.

They are offering school districts, free of charge, bus radios that play their special radio show. They claim that children will behave better because they'll love the show so much that the threat of turning it off will keep them in line or because the music will soothe riders.

Steve Shulman and Michael Yanoff dreamed up Bus Radio after they sold their first school marketing company Cover Concepts in 2003. That company got ads into the school by putting them on textbook covers. Companies like McDonald's loved the fact that kids would see their logo every time they opened their English book.

Bus Radio was not created by bus safety experts, but by marketing experts. Bus Radio plans to succeed by selling the captive attention of bus riders to advertisers.

The potential ad revenue for Bus Radio is enormous. That is why Sigma Partners and Charles River Ventures, two large venture capital firms, have pumped millions into the company. There is a tremendous economic value in being able to get into the minds of a captive audience of impressionable children.

One of the more disagreeable aspects of Bus Radio is their decision to target elementary school students. They want a boy or girl stepping foot on their first school bus going to their first day in First Grade to be listening to their advertising. That is how you build brand preferences. Get them young.

One of the chief selling points of Bus Radio is they only play "age-appropriate" music. Unfortunately, only Bus Radio determines what that means.

I have met with the company's president Steve Shulman. I have asked him to publish each day on their web site a list of all songs played that day on their three versions of the show (elementary, middle school, and high school) and the names of the advertisers. He has refused to do that. That alone should raise a red flag.

Bus Radio has played Timbaland's "The Way I Are" from his "Parental Advisory -Explicit Content" CD "Shock Value." The song has repeated references to stripping ("I'm about to strip, I want it quick").

In an interview Bus Radio's Ed Maloney has denied a bus driver's claim that Kanye West's "Stronger" was played on the elementary school version. He assured the audience that a part of the song was only played for middle and high school students. He expected everyone to be relieved. Type in "Stronger lyrics" in a search engine and see the type of song Bus Radio thinks is OK to be promoting to 11-year olds.

Bus Radio believes a song that contains vulgarity can be made "age-appropriate" if the bad words are bleeped out. This is moronic. They are still promoting the music of artists that parents would find unacceptable and the

profanity is still communicated even if deleted. Bus Radio repeatedly played Fergie's "Glamorous" with the f-word bleeped out, but one can imagine some students filling it in as they sing along on the bus.

Bus Radio also believes it is acceptable to play any song off a CD with an explicit content warning sticker if that particular song has no offensive lyrics. So a "clean" song off a dirty CD is OK. Parents might disagree.

Some of the feature stories Bus Radio has published on their web site are truly disgusting. Acts known for vulgar or drug lyrics like Lil' Jon, The Used, My Chemical Romance, Andre 3000, Akon, and Wu-Tang have been introduced to children in articles on Busradio.com. Children are told repeatedly on their bus ride to check out this site. Bus Radio has removed these articles because of complaints but they can be read at our website obligation.org/busradioallarticles.php.

Kids learn to like and trust the Bus Radio DJs and when one of the DJs interview Will I. Am, an artist known for his explicit lyrics, it encouraged children to like this artist. The interview can be heard at busradioarticle.php?recordID=894.

The company claims that only "about four minutes" per hour of programming will be devoted to commercials. Any advertising should outrage parents. All Bus Radio's ads have the implicit endorsement of the school. "If my school is making me listen to this one station, everything on it must be good for me."

If your child is listening to Bus Radio twice every day, he or she will want a cell phone (Cingular has advertised on the elementary school show), they will want to watch much more TV, their music tastes will become edgier, they won't feel good about themselves.

The purpose of radio advertising is to make the listener want what is being advertised. Children must be made to feel incomplete, ugly, or inadequate in some way in order to be receptive to the product pitch. Everybody has cell phones - you need one. Everybody is staring at you - you need our expensive acne medicine. Everybody will be watching tonight's episode - you need to watch too, or what are you going to talk about with your friends tomorrow?

Additional advertising is sneaked into the "non-commercial" part of show. For example, Bus Radio's DJs interviewed the star of the raunchy sitcom called Aliens in America. In the first episode, a teenage boy is encouraged to have sex with his sister. The show got worse with each episode. The DJ tells children to "make sure you check it out." You can hear the interview at obligation.org/braliensinamerica.mp3.

This company also wants the attention of the drivers and this should scare everyone. In January and

February 2008, Bus Radio ran a contest aimed solely at bus drivers. It was called the "Call, Listen, and Win" contest. Drivers were to call Bus Radio and to register and then listen for their name to be called out on the show as they drove their route. Drivers could win a \$500 or \$100 American Express gift card.

School employees should not be accepting money from school vendors. More importantly, Bus Radio has no business distracting drivers from their sole purpose - delivering children safely to and from school. How can a driver's attention not be at least slightly diverted if they have to be glued to every Bus Radio broadcast?

The DJs encourage students to call them during the school bus ride for a "shout-out" or to sing along with a DJ selection. This creates situations where students would obviously have to be grouped together with some students standing in the aisle. This can't be in the best interest of maintaining decorum on a school bus.

You don't have to be an honor student to know a blaring radio is not going to make buses safer. Don't let your school board use your child's school bus to experiment with Bus Radio.

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