

The Government Gets into the Advertising Literacy Business

Think it's great that the FCC is involved in media literacy? Well, we're not convinced --

A Review from the Media Education Lab

Admongo (www.admongo.gov) A free interactive online game for children ages 8 – 12. Washington DC: Federal Trade Commission (FTC) with Scholastic, Inc.

By David Cooper Moore and Renee Hobbs

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The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has had a long and complicated relationship with advertising targeted at children. In the 1970s, when the FTC first explored regulating advertising of products targeted to young children, their work was stymied by pressure from the business community. Congress then revised the commission's mandate in ways that limited their ability to regulate advertising to children (Jordan, 2008). But now the FTC is now taking steps to promote advertising literacy in the classroom with **Admongo**, an online multimedia edutainment game and curriculum designed in collaboration with Scholastic. The program is designed to teach children ages 8 to 12 basic principles of advertising literacy, including increasing awareness of types of advertising, understanding ad techniques, and examining methods of targeting audiences. Today, young people are exposed to increasingly pervasive media messages from a wide variety of sources that go far beyond television advertising. To reflect the changing media systems that young people are growing up with, the Admongo curriculum also explores online advertising, viral marketing, text message ads, product placement, and advergaming.



The centerpiece of the Admongo program is an elaborate online edutainment game, visually resembling the online multiplayer game, **Poptropica**. Children create an avatar and then begin their journey by finding advertisements hidden throughout the game. Along the way, they collect coins and beat baddies in a search for ads in the outside world and in the home. The Admongo game may be used by children in a school computer lab or assigned for homework.

The program also offers three complementary lesson plans designed for use in school: (1) **Ad Awareness**, where children find many different types of advertising in their home and community, including catalogs and ads on busses; (2) **Ad Targeting and Techniques**, where children learn strategies that are used to attract and hold attention; and (3) **Ad Creation**, where children discover how specific strategies are matched to meet the interests of certain demographic groups. To conclude the learning experience, there is also a final reflection activity and quiz. Each lesson relies on some classroom discussion, but also provides simple worksheets, a sample of "fake" print, TV, and online ads, and a vocabulary list.

Questions of representation-reality, values, ethics, and the real-world impact of marketing are unavoidable when exploring advertising literacy with children. Eight to twelve-year-olds can understand how advertising can be deceptive, flattering and overpromising in ways that promote greed and materialism. They can recognize that ads conflate products with deeper human needs, making products seem more important than other social values to the detriment of the individual and the society. But the Admongo curriculum steers far away from these deeper issues, and instead reduces advertising literacy to its most non-controversial and fundamental level: building advertising awareness.

The Use of Fake Ads

Admongo doesn't make use of Starburst, T-Mobile, Cheetos, Snickers, or Coke ads in the online game or in the curriculum materials. Instead, it uses a variety of "fake" advertisements for soft drinks, movies, videogames, deodorant and cereal, which are approximations of popular advertising genres. These seem familiar yet are oddly abstracted from children's lived experiences. Children are intimately familiar with specific brands, and can often identify brand logos before they have developed basic print literacy skills (Young, 1990). These strong brand associations present both a powerful learning opportunity and a potential setback to an advertising literacy program. The use of real ads could provide an opportunity to make a real-world connection that may help children investigate their direct relationships with existing brands and link abstract concepts of targeting an audience and persuasion techniques to the way that they actually desire and consume these products.

Real ads pose a disadvantage, however, that Admongo creators may have considered in their decision to use artificial ads for nonexistent products. Like other forms of popular media, children form strong personal bonds to their favored brands. Brand loyalty, when explicitly challenged, may result in disengaged behavior, such as that which occurs when critiquing a favorite television show, film, or piece of music. Children may experience outright disengagement and resentment or mere parroting of the teacher's desired responses (Buckingham, 2003). In addition, if the Admongo program used real ads, critics might complain that it was promoting products while teaching advertising literacy.

However, a robust advertising literacy program should engage directly with children's actual experiences with ads in order to help with the transfer of skills from the classroom to the realm of private consumption. This process is difficult even when children are taught to be more conscious and critical of advertising effects (Buckingham; 2003; Van Evra, 2004). Admongo's creators strike a middle ground, suggesting that teachers bring in outside ad material from real newspapers and magazines while supplying them with "fake" ads, which may be seen as a safer, less controversial choice.



Recite and Absorb

Despite the game platform's interactivity, the online learning experience is quite passive. For example, in level one, when a player comes across an ad, a narrated screen first presents information about the advertisement and then asks a multiple choice question based on the conveyed information. There are no consequences for getting the answer wrong. The learning is truly incidental to the game play. In addition, Admongo lesson plans rely on passive "banking"-type instruction techniques, through which teachers recite and students absorb information. There is little evidence of the use of instructional practices that promote critical thinking. In the Ad Awareness lesson, teachers are provided with simple definitions of advertising to impart to their students. But these definitions range from problematic to disingenuous. The lesson encourages teachers to "explain that advertising gives people information to help them decide what to buy."^[1] This is the role of a consumer report, not advertising. Teachers are instructed to "tell students that advertisers are required by law to tell the truth, and that most advertisers work hard to do this." Without further elaboration, this potentially mischaracterizes the purpose of advertising—which is fundamentally about persuasion—and conflates persuasion with information. For many of the readers of the [Journal of Media Literacy Education](#), this approach might be hard to swallow.

The [National Association for Media Literacy Education](#) emphasizes the importance of identifying what is *omitted* from a media message as one of media literacy's key questions (NAMLE, 2007) but in Admongo's definition of advertising, the fact that "leaving out" is often synonymous with disingenuousness is never addressed. Without frankly addressing omission and omission's relationship to truth, the curriculum ignores a major component of how and why advertising works—a component directly responsible for developing critical interpretation or understanding.

Lacking a strong critical foundation, the FTC's approach advertising literacy essentially rewards students for identifying successful advertising. Students are expected to recognize technique, but are not encouraged to constructively question the values implicit in those techniques. Constructive criticism does not necessarily mean portraying advertising negatively, but it must involve a range of perspectives and an introduction of the role of judgment into a meaningful discussion.

For example, in an activity designed to introduce "Ad Targeting and Techniques," students examine a fictional advertisement for women's designer clothing and are then asked to "change it to appeal to kids your age."^[2] The more complex media messages regarding the ad's representation of its subjects and the *values* associated with portraying this

particular media message for its target demographic are absent. Instead, children vindicate or ignore these embedded messages by simply replicating them in their own creative style.

The Elusive Production Process

The Admongo online game and curriculum address the concept of message production in a rather superficial way. Though students are asked to construct their own approximations of advertisements on paper, there is no discussion of how advertisements are created in the real world, through careful design planning, digital photo manipulation, casting, photo shoots, etc. For example, when asked to create their own original ad in Lesson 3, students are asked to target their ad for breakfast cereal to “space aliens.”¹³ The abstraction of a target audience in this outlandish scenario cuts off potential for meaningful discussion about the social and ethical issues at stake in targeting specific audiences. Suppose, instead, that children were asked to market a highly-sugared cereal to different demographic groups, including members of their own school, their grandparents, or their older and younger siblings. In the FTC’s lesson, children are merely rewarded for their creative inventiveness, without getting to the root of what, as an advertiser, it is their job to do. Though students are told that advertisements exist to sell products, the consequences of advertising are limited to the effectiveness of the ad in reaching its target.

When done well, the production process aims to be “invisible” to consumers—particularly young consumers with no real experience in media production. Knowing that an advertisement is made for a particular audience is crucial, but equally important is knowing *how* it was made for that audience. When children better understand the creation process, they are also better equipped to think critically about why certain production decisions may have been made.

The Missing Audience

The FTC’s online game and curriculum focuses primarily on recognizing advertising in the social environment, identifying persuasive techniques, and understanding target audiences. What seems to be fundamentally absent from the curriculum, though, is a meaningful engagement with students themselves as an *audience*—highlighting their lived experiences with advertisements and using their own values and opinions to drive deeper understanding of how advertising works.

Students have countless experiences with advertisements that are correlated with judgments—of advertisers, of products, of their own experiences as consumers. Engaging these judgments by activating lived experiences is one way to ensure that the skills they learn in school are transferred to their everyday lives. Students should discuss how they feel about an advertisement, whether they agree with the advertisement or not, and whether or not the advertisement really “worked” on them. Teachers can encourage students to visualize other audiences and how the message might affect them differently. In one Admongo lesson, students are asked to redesign an advertisement for a new target audience, but there is no discussion of the implications of marketing the product to this new audience. Do students think that this product *should* be advertised to a younger audience? Why or why not? Students can use their knowledge of younger siblings and friends, say, to consider potential responses of other audiences. This helps children to articulate a set of personal values about the ethical and social responsibilities of an advertiser.

The Impact of Ads in Shaping Desire

Admongo’s interactive game and classroom lessons omit the one perspective that is most crucial in transferring skills from the classroom to the world outside: considering the impact of the message on its recipients. In each of the FTC’s framing questions, the emphasis is either on an ad creator (“who is responsible for the ad?”) or on the content of the advertisement itself (“what is the ad actually saying?” and “what does the ad want me to do?”) But missing here is the role of the consumer—how do I feel about this ad? Do I *want* to do what the ad wants me to do? How might another person feel differently about this ad? Without these crucial questions that directly engage the lived experiences of students, advertising literacy becomes an abstracted experience that may not transfer in any meaningful way to students’ ad-saturated lives. The simplest value judgments—good and bad, worthy and unworthy, truthful and deceitful—are not consciously engaged in discussion in any meaningful way. Teachers who are familiar with media literacy pedagogy will recognize this omission instantly; but it’s possible that educators who are less familiar with media literacy might not.



Identifying omission is a central concept in media literacy education—it is through recognizing what is left out of media messages that we begin to more fully understand the processes and decisions through which advertising media is

made. Whenever students are asked to identify advertising techniques, there should be a concerted effort to understand what is *not* in the advertisement. What isn't the advertisement telling you about the product that you might need to know? Who *isn't* an ad targeting and why was that audience left out.

For years, teachers have done this quite simply by connecting the child's lived experience of a product to the claims its advertisement makes. By age 7 or so, children recognize that the product does not live up to its hype (Young, 1990). Children realize, "The ad suggests that the shoes make you jump higher, but I don't jump any higher in these shoes than in my other shoes." The FTC's omission of deception and distortion in advertising and its refusal to examine the difference between representation and reality is glaring.

Currently the only assessment tool in the Admongo curriculum is a brief quiz in which students choose from multiple-choice options. The FTC has an opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion and reflection by asking children to actively *transfer* their knowledge back outside of the classroom, by giving them tasks to be completed not just in the classroom but in the world. A true test of advertising literacy would function much like a driving test does for teenagers seeking a license—students would be asked to *apply* their knowledge in everyday experiences to demonstrate that the concepts they have learned in the classroom can be of use outside of the classroom. Students should be asked to participate in individual and group reflection, applying concepts learn to their real-world experiences with advertisements, then sharing this information with a class to see how different students were able to use these skills differently, depending on the advertising media they encountered.

What's Omitted: Why Was this Curriculum Created?

It's only natural for the reader to wonder about the FTC's own motivations for developing an advertising literacy curriculum. Clearly, the focus of the curriculum emphasizes the many new and varied forms of advertising, especially those newer forms of advertising found in the online and digital media environment, as in text messages, video games, and ring tones. In Admongo, the FTC teaches children: "One government agency works to protect consumers from being hurt by advertising. This agency is called the Federal Trade Commission, or FTC."⁴¹ The FTC implicitly acknowledges its own role as author of the curriculum, but its self-referentiality also seems calculated to circumscribe the ways in which the role of government regulation can be brought into discussion.

The essential paradox of the Admongo curriculum is that while the FTC views advertising to be a potentially pernicious influence on children, nothing in the curriculum offers the opportunity for this influence to actually manifest itself in the classroom. The FTC claims that young consumers must be "protected" from advertising, but there is no indication in the classroom activities that there are real-world consequences for *not* understanding how advertising works.

These real-world consequences open up a range of interconnected issues that seem inextricable from a well-rounded advertising literacy program. One of the most obvious of these consequences is advertising's impact on childhood nutrition, as advertising targeted at children ages 8 to 12 typically encourages the consumption of grossly unhealthy—and quite directly and immediately harmful—food products. Though citizen activist groups have successfully lobbied to end the most egregious junk food and programming crossovers on television, such as cartoon shows starring junk food mascots (Nestle, 2007), such efforts have done little to put a dent in the industry of junk food advertising. Excluding an advertisement's omissions or dishonesty from the overall conversation about advertising precludes a discussion of whether or not there are demonstrably harmful products that should or should not be marketed to particular age groups.



Finally, a key question that remains after exploring the Admongo curriculum is what the FTC feels is its purpose in promoting advertising literacy, especially in relation to the commission's more recent efforts in regulating food and alcohol advertising as well as advertising for violent videogames and movies. The FTC makes the claim to teachers and parents that the FTC "protects consumers by educating them about advertising and how it works."⁴² But teachers who are invited to use the curriculum receive no explanation of the *context* of this work. No information is provided to explain the FTC's history with children's advertising regulation nor is there any real discussion of *why* the FTC feels it is important to build children's understanding of advertising. Enrolling educators in the larger political, economic, social and cultural context of the issue of advertising to children would seem to be a natural way not just to get teacher "buy-in," but to demonstrate respect for teachers' own motivations and values in making the decision to teach advertising literacy to students in elementary and middle-school.

About the Authors

David Cooper Moore is the Curriculum Director of the Powerful Voices for Kids program and a graduate student in the Film and Media Arts Department at Temple University. **Renee Hobbs** is the Founder of the Media Education Lab at Temple University.

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^[1] Admongo (2010). Lesson 1: Ad Awareness. Retrieved April 25, 2010 from <http://www.admongo.gov/curriculum-lesson-1.aspx>

^[2] Admongo (2010). Lesson X: XXX Retrieved April 25, 2010 from <http://www.admongo.gov/>

^[3] Admongo (2010). Lesson 3: Ad Creation. Retrieved April 25, 2010 from <http://www.admongo.gov/curriculum-lesson-3.aspx>

^[4] Admongo (2010). Lesson 1: Ad Awareness. Retrieved April 25, 2010 from <http://www.admongo.gov/curriculum-lesson-1.aspx>

^[5] Admongo (2010). Lesson 1: Ad Awareness. Retrieved April 25, 2010 from <http://www.admongo.gov/curriculum-lesson-1.aspx>