



## Harvesting Minds: How TV Commercials Control Kids

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Roy F. Fox  
[Greenwood/Praeger, 2000](#)

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*In Harvesting Minds: How TV Commercials Control Kids* Roy F. Fox contends he is "not a media-basher, [but] . . . a concerned parent and teacher" (xix), and it is this concern for teenagers that has led him to study the impact of Channel One in public schools. Fox's concern is based in his experiences as an educator and an author. He directs the Missouri Writing Project and teaches at the University of Missouri-Columbia; he edited *Images in Language, Media, and Minds* (1994) and wrote *Technical Communication: Problems and Solutions* (1994).

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*Harvesting Minds* examines how Channel One's broadcast of 10 minutes of news and two minutes of commercials affected high school students in two rural Missouri public school districts. *Harvesting Minds* focuses on one central question: "What happens to kids when they are held captive to TV commercials?" (xviii). "Kids and Commercials" (Chapter 1) sets a theoretical and methodological context for the work. Fox gives an overview of advertising effects studies, describes Channel One and how it is utilized within school systems, and how Channel One broadcasts may impact students' perceptions of current events. In chapters 2-6 of *Harvesting Minds* Fox shares the findings of student focus groups he led between 1993 and 1995. "How Well Do Kids Know Commercials?" (Chapter 2) is an exploration of how well the students were able to recall the details and structure of commercials. In Chapter 3, "How Do Kids Respond to Commercials?" Fox details how students responded, both critically and uncritically, to Channel One commercials. Building on this foundation of response, Fox describes how students make judgments of commercials in Chapter 4, "How Do Kids Evaluate Commercials?" Student behavior, as relates to commercials, is discussed in chapters 5 and 6, "How Do Commercials Affect Kids' Behavior?" and "How Do Commercials Affect Kids' Consumer Behavior?" Chapter 7 recapitulates conclusions and recommendations. Chapter 8, "What Can We Do Right Now?" closes *Harvesting Minds* with thoughts for helping students develop more critical awareness about commercials.

While *Harvesting Minds* is well written and researched, it does suffer from some minor flaws. Although Fox strives to maintain an objective view of his subject, his bias is readily apparent in the title of his book and subsequent chapter titles. Fox participates in a long tradition in media studies that believes in the powerful negative effects of the mass media, especially television. This is especially apparent in the foreword, where George Gerbner refers to *Harvesting Minds* as "a remarkable and timely study" (xiii). Throughout *Harvesting Minds* Fox downplays the abilities of students to be critical viewers or take oppositional stances to the commercials. However, it should be noted that Fox's findings do seem to flow genuinely from his research pool. Since Fox examined students from two rural, primarily lower socioeconomic level school districts, it is not surprising that these students, because of age, socioeconomic level, and relative education level of their parents, were less able to critically analyze commercials. Research has made it clear that a variety of factors (socioeconomic level, etc.) influence the way people understand and use the media. Fox's study would have been more relevant if he had included more schools, especially schools from a larger urban area or from a higher socio-economic level. While the findings of *Harvesting Minds* may not be generalizable to a wider teenage audience, Fox makes valuable contributions

to the understanding of how teenagers from lower socio-economic levels may view the media. It is exactly this type of school system that would sign up for Channel One and put students at risk. In this context, Fox's recommendations regarding school systems, as found in chapter 8, are logical, worthwhile, and may help create more aware consumers and citizens for our society.

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