Sexualization of Children
CRAN 2016
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The focus of study of CRAN 2016—exploitation of children—reminded me of the following story.

The cover* of the Summer 2009 issue of the Ottawa Citizen’s style magazine was a graphic picture of a young teen girl dressed seductively and posing provocatively.

To check my subjective reaction, I showed the magazine cover to several male and female colleagues. All agreed that the photo was sexually exploitive of youth.

I phoned the Editor of style to discuss my view that her magazine had purposely created a sexualized image of a girl in service of commercial marketing. We had quite a reasonable discussion during which I felt that the Editor was sympathetic to my view. She suggested I write a letter to the magazine. Here’s my letter:

To The Editor of Style,
June 23, 2009
re: the cover of Style, Summer 2009

Why is it necessary to contribute to the damaging sexualization of children with the depiction of a girl, who could be 14 or 15, modeling (in both senses of the word) hooking? The fashion and advertising industries are well able to reach markets and make money without distorting childhood – with its attendant personal and societal consequences – with such harmful portrayals and messages. More and more businesses these days recognize that exercising corporate social responsibility is good for their communities and good for their bottom line. Fashion and advertising need to catch up.

Ron Ensom
Ottawa

The style Editor forwarded my letter to the Ottawa Citizen’s Letter Editor. She was told that three letters similar to mine had been received and that my letter would be published in the Autumn 2009 edition of style magazine.

Shortly afterward, I spoke with the Office de la protection du consommateur of Quebec, which oversees compliance with the province’s legislation that bans commercial advertising targeting children under the age of 13. The Office sent me the publication, Your Kids and Ads. The following page is copied from that publication.

* The Ottawa Citizen did not consent to showing the style cover in this CRAN report.
This publication by the province of Quebec is an excellent example of responsible social marketing. It counters irresponsible and harmful commercial marketing. It is also a good example of the principled role that governments can play to protect the vulnerable and to prevent harm through legislation and education.

I forwarded the link to the publication to the Editor of style. In a further discussion, she seemed supportive of restrictions on exploitive advertising directed at children.

I looked forward to seeing my letter in print, but neither it nor any of the other “similar letters” appeared in the Autumn edition of style. I called the Editor. She was clearly uncomfortable and said she would inquire. She subsequently forwarded to me this terse dismissive reply from a senior editor, “None was really a letter to the editor that I would print.”

I then sent the following note to the Editor of style:
“I was disappointed, to put it mildly, that at least one of the letters you received about the sexualized depiction of the girl in the summer edition of style was not printed in the autumn edition just received. Do your advertisers and publisher feel no responsibility to acknowledge reasoned feedback about the social consequences of their commercial conduct? What kind of letter to the editor (“None was really a letter to the editor that I would print.”) on the subject would be suitable for printing?

Ron Ensom
Ottawa

This brief story illustrates quite concretely, I think, some of my career-long observations and conclusions related to the harmful exploitation of children by the media:

1. Whether intended or not, advertisers’ depiction of children for commercial benefit can carry messages harmful to children—and to society.
2. The media, who are dependent on advertising revenue, are complicit in delivering harmful advertising.
3. Absent oversight, the media have near full control over their product and the ability to defend against criticism.
4. Effective external oversight and regulation to protect children from harmful messaging can offset the dangers of media being a law unto itself.
5. Government has a unique role and power to counter, through legislation and education, the commercial exploitation of children—and other vulnerable groups.

Finally, I want to commend the insights of the youth who attended Shaking the Movers VIII, some of which are recorded in the following page of their impressive report:
Shaking the Movers VIII: Child Exploitation

Media exploitation

Here is what the young people had to say about exploitation from the media:

“When I am walking around the Eaton Centre and I see billboards and then I buy something I instantly feel better because now I look closer to the image of the person on the billboards. I feel like I need to control myself and remind myself not to do that.”

“Did you know there are creepers? Not just people, but third parties such as Facebook and other random organizations that have access to your web-cam and can take pictures of you!”

“Snap-chat preys on our vulnerability and insecurities. We think the photos disappear but they do not, they exploit us. Why is it free?”

“I feel like the Internet gives you a false sense of safety, there’s a literal screen in front of you. Things that you would not do in the outside world, we do them on the Internet. It’s difficult for us to understand to put up the same barriers in the online world.”

“You do not know who will get a hold of your picture and exploit it.”

“These campaigns such as the Dove campaign are exploiting people’s lack of self-esteem to persuade them to buy certain products.”

“My friends and I used to go on Chat-roulette, but we stopped after because the people on it show explicit videos.”

“Stranger danger applies online too.”

“Where I am from a very large incident went down where someone said ‘Look, I have this nude photo, now you have to go get three more nude photos.’”

“[Someone I know] had a picture of herself in a bikini and it kept getting sent to people throughout the school, and the teacher saw it, and constituted it as child pornography.”

“I feel as though even though the media blurs out the images of the girls who are exposing themselves it should still not be shown.”

“I never grew up with a lot of things, which is fine, but then I started working and then I was able to purchase these things and it just makes you feel like you fit in now. I have to stop myself because I do not want to be that type of person. I have to remind myself ‘No, it’s not important.’”

“What I learned was there are many ways that children and youth are being exploited through the media and there are not enough specific laws to stop this kind of exploitation or hold people accountable. Additionally, many children and youth are unaware that they are being exploited through the media.”