

“We Pledge Allegiance to Kids”: Nickelodeon and Citizenship

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INTRODUCTION

*In this selection, communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser looks critically at how we define citizenship in the United States and how this definition often excludes children. She considers how the Nickelodeon network addresses its young audience both as consumers and as citizens; these issues are not contradictions, she says, but are constant tensions. Her study challenges the notion that kids neither know nor care about politics.*

Within two weeks of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Nickelodeon released a special episode of its children’s news program, *Nick News*. “Kids, Terrorism, and the American Spirit” featured host Linda Ellerbee discussing the attacks with a group of children of various ages, genders, nationalities, and religions. The greater part of this *Nick News* episode was dedicated to defining the “American Spirit” for its audience through a mélange of patriotic images, liberal platitudes, and messages of “hope for the future.” Then, in October 2001, Nickelodeon featured another special episode of another popular program. This program, the animated series, *Rugrats*, was aired in honor of Columbus Day, and was entitled “Rugrats Discover America.” Unlike the *Nick News* special, *Rugrats* represented “America” through a variety of popular cultural and commercial references: Hollywood films, rock-and-roll music, and tourist souvenirs. These cultural artifacts were situated as “symbols” of America that were purchased on a cross-country vacation.

Both these programs contribute to a general discourse regarding children and citizenship, and both address, albeit in very different registers, questions about what it means to be an American. What I find particularly interesting about these two programs is that they are very good examples of Nickelodeon programming that attend to the tensions about citizenship within their narratives. The *Nick News* special attends to the various ways in which Americans unified around traditional liberal terms after September 11: individual displays of heroism, community mourning rituals, candlelight vigils for the victims, and melodramatic

sequences of the flag and other national symbols. *Rugrats*, while also focusing on issues of patriotism, interprets the sentiment within a slightly different frame of reference: patriotism is defined through a collection of consumer items or *products* that symbolize national identity, commitment, and community. In both these programs, political empowerment is referenced as a key component of citizenship, represented on one end of a continuum as a commitment to liberal ideals of individual agency and on the other end, as a kind of "market patriotism" or consumer freedom.

Despite their seemingly obvious differences, these definitions of citizenship are not binary opposites. Rather, they work in conjunction with each other, demonstrating a different emphasis depending on the context. Within the Nickelodeon universe, these two definitions of citizenship intermix and represent a broader tension in recent debates framing discussions of children, media, and citizenship. In the following pages, I examine the way Nickelodeon balances these seemingly contradictory ideals of citizenship through its use of audience empowerment rhetoric and its cross-generational address that insists that "Nick Is for Kids!"

### CHILDREN, MEDIA, AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

During the last several decades in the United States the question of whether, and how, children are politically empowered has developed into an increasingly complicated public, mass-mediated debate. More specifically, a public focus on children and empowerment frequently includes a discussion of technology and the potential "effects" (either positive or negative) of technologies such as television, the movies, and most recently the Internet on the political empowerment of children. The perceived connection between technology and empowerment is certainly not a novel discovery; as many scholars have noted, public opinion about new developments in technologies throughout the twentieth century has been both optimistic and pessimistic about the influence of technology on individual agency.<sup>1</sup> And when the discourse involves children and their relation with technology, the stakes become even higher and the debate that much more hotly contested.

Although mass-mediated debates around the question of technology's influence on children have heightened in recent years as school shootings in Colorado, Kentucky, and Arkansas have been "connected" to violent television, video games, music, and the Internet, the relation between children and technology has historically been fraught with conflict and contradiction. For example, as Lynn Spigel has astutely documented, in post-war American culture television was popularly understood as being both an important factor in "family togetherness" and the primary culprit in the creation of the "juvenile delinquent."<sup>2</sup> Later in the twentieth century, television advertising and the apparent excessive influence it had on children generated other debates over the problems of the "commercialization of childhood," while at the same time child development specialists were advocating the purchase of *particular* products to aid in the intellectual development of children.<sup>3</sup> And most recently, while new technologies and the Internet have been widely recognized by corporate culture and politicians as offering an enormous potential in terms of democracy, tolerance, and most importantly, commerce, the "dark side" of technologies such as the Internet are often understood in terms of the influence and control they seemingly have over children.

Part of the reason the debate over children and technology is so fraught with tension is because the definition of the child is characterized by different emphases depending on the context. Is the child an innocent victim of the corporate giants of mass media, or is the child an active citizen, involved in the negotiation and struggle over meaning in a productive,

identity-making manner? Or, as I hope to demonstrate in this essay, are these two positions *not* oppositional, but rather in constant tension and conversation with each other in the construction of citizenship? . . .

Although popular debate on the issue of children and the media has been largely formulated around these two oppositional extremes, it would be misleading to characterize scholarly debates around this issue as a simple binary opposition.<sup>4</sup> The "child as innocent victim" camp primarily understands the relationship between children and the media as one that needs to be continually supervised and protected (because of increasing violence, sexual activity among young adults, and so on). The "child as active player" camp challenges this cultural construction of the "innocence" of children and rather situates the child as a citizen who actively uses the media as a means to gain empowerment. Both sides, however, stipulate that the relationship between children and media is a complicated and contradictory set of historical arrangements, one that resists either a simple definition or a simple solution.

Thus, in order to theorize the complex relationship between children, empowerment, and media, we need to more sharply imagine the sense of contradiction that characterizes this relationship. By focusing on the instabilities and competing interests that permeate discussions of children and media, we witness how the category of "child" or, more broadly, "youth," operates as not only a social and political category but also as an important agenda for public debate about the broader concern of citizenship and empowerment. . . . " 'Youth' becomes a metaphor for perceived social change and its projected consequences, and as such it is an enduring locus for displaced social anxieties."<sup>5</sup> These anxieties reflect the tensions within the paradoxical constructions of young people, tensions that "highlight the bifurcated social identity of youth as a vicious, threatening sign of social decay and our best hope for the future."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps one of the most dynamic cultural sites for both the representation of and the struggle over these tensions is within entertainment and commercial culture.

Thus, I would like to shift the question of political empowerment to a commercial media audience of children. What, really, does it mean to invoke the idea of the "empowerment" of children? Can we, or how do we, take seriously the notion that a young media audience is "active" politically in the current political and commercial climate? Does conceptualizing children as "citizens" allow us to think of how and in what ways children are empowered politically? Children *are* in fact outside political life in the way that adults understand politics—they are not rights-bearing citizens of a nation in the way that adults are, they cannot vote, they do not have "free choice" as this is legally defined. However, to say that children are outside political life is not to say that they are outside relations of power. Indeed, the development of identity is *already* to be situated in relations of power, and children are developing their identities in part through their relationship to commercial media culture. . . .

### NICK'S FOR KIDS! NICKELODEON'S MISSION

The early history of Nickelodeon is largely one of failure in the television market. The early programming itself is identified by Nickelodeon as "green vegetable" television, primarily understood as beneficial for children by parents, but not by the children themselves. Regardless of parental desire, however, from 1979 to 1984, Nickelodeon's subscription rates were too low for the network to sustain itself financially. In 1984, Geraldine Laybourne became general manager and transformed the network in two crucial and interrelated ways: the network began accepting commercial sponsorship, and thus advertising became a key element

in its programming, and it adopted a new mission statement and overall philosophy that has since become its unique signature and contribution to children's television, a promise that Nickelodeon is a "kids first" or a "kids only" network.<sup>7</sup>

The result of these changes was the creation of a network that self-consciously and aggressively identifies as a "safe" place for children, a place that understands children *as* children, and somehow understands them differently than the rest of the world. As Laybourne puts it: "For kids, it is 'us versus them' in the grown-up world: you're either for kids or against them. Either you think kids should be quiet and behave or you believe kids should stand up for themselves and be free to play around, explore, and be who they really are. We were on the kids' side and we wanted them to know it."<sup>8</sup> Despite both the hyperbole and the arrogance of this statement, Nickelodeon has been unusually successful with its claim that it just "lets kids be kids," as well as with its apparent dedication to empowering children. The network self-consciously constructs itself as a "haven" for children in an otherwise confusing and scary world.

Nickelodeon consistently attributes its unusual success in an oversaturated children's market to its emphasis on the cultural divide between children and adults, and to its privileging of children as a separate, unique audience. Aside from commercial success, the use of a generational address is also an interesting challenge to dominant definitions of childhood as specifically adult-generated. In other words, many scholars have examined the ways in which the cultural construction of childhood as clearly separate from adulthood functions as a kind of strategy that supports the affirmation of adult identity. As Spigel puts it: "Childhood is the difference against which adults define themselves. It is a time of innocence, a time that refers back to a fantasy world where the painful realities and social constraints of adult culture no longer exist. Childhood has less to do with what children experience (since they too are subject to the evils of our social world) than with what adults want to believe."<sup>9</sup> Nickelodeon's challenge to this position is evident in the myriad pledges to children from the network, including: "Nickelodeon is what kids want, not just what adults think kids want," and "Nickelodeon is always there, from breakfast to bedtime, everyday, whenever kids want to watch. Nick is their home base, a place kids can count on and trust."<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Nickelodeon's claim that it allows children to explore their own self-agency, a specific identity construction that stands in contrast to childhood innocence that has served adults so well in the twentieth century, is one that we need to take seriously as an important element in the construction of citizenship. In line with this, Laybourne uses a kind of "liberal citizen" rhetoric profusely in describing Nickelodeon's mission:

We are here to accept kids, to help them feel good about themselves. It's a philosophy that impacts everything we do. It impacts casting: we don't look for gorgeous kids, we cast kids who are fat and who are skinny, kids of all colors and nationalities, every kind of kid. We don't give out the message, this is what a cool kid should look or be like. The philosophy impacts our marketing: we don't market based on gender, because that implies exclusion, which is not what we are about. If we want to make kids feel good, we have to embrace them all.<sup>11</sup>

The notion of inclusion, and the implied claim of equal opportunity, that permeates Laybourne's vocabulary is part of the overall political address that hails Nickelodeon kids as particular kinds of citizens. Indeed, the construction of childhood as a discrete realm, not only separate from adults but situated oppositionally, has allowed Nickelodeon to claim that it escapes the dynamic that Spigel discusses, where childhood is both defined and supported as a specific means to affirm *adult* identity. Insisting upon childhood as an identity construction

that is created *by kids for kids* is an important part of the way in which Nickelodeon constructs citizenship. This has resulted in the active self-construction of Nickelodeon as a champion and defender of kids' "rights": "The company's battle cry became that Nickelodeon stood with kids against anyone who found them 'unbearably loathsome' or sought to condescend to or undermine them. This voice gave the network a means to develop a style of comedy built on opposition to pompous or mean authority figures—bus drivers who yell at kids, anyone who treats them unfairly. In this regard, Nickelodeon's distinctive voice has not been uncontroversial, for some critics have viewed it as undermining the respect children should show adults."<sup>12</sup> The very element that has been seen as "controversial" is the one that allows Nickelodeon to set itself apart from other children's networks. And, although clearly Nickelodeon does construct children as citizens in relation to adults, the oppositional nature of this dynamic has permitted Nickelodeon to claim that it recognizes children as autonomous political subjects.

Part of the way in which Nickelodeon makes this claim about citizenship is through its original programming itself. Nickelodeon cartoons, game shows, and news programs challenge conventional understandings of what is "good" television for children by insisting not only that adults understand children's media on its own terms (not through an adult lens or viewpoint of what constitutes good or bad media), but also that *children themselves* understand that they are being addressed as an important group outside adult culture. Indeed, Nickelodeon has occupied an interesting position in the children's media market precisely because it has challenged the traditional adult-produced dichotomies that constitute the debate about "good" and "bad" TV, a debate that, as cultural theorist David Buckingham has argued, "rests on a series of binary oppositions that are routinely taken for granted: British is good, American is bad; public service is good, commercial is bad; live action is good, animation is bad; education is good, entertainment is bad; and so on. In the process, certain genres—game shows, action-adventure, teenage romance—are deemed to be simply incompatible with quality."<sup>13</sup> In resisting these kinds of conventional oppositions, Nickelodeon deliberately uses a generational divide to challenge the assumptions that structure the children and media debate, and in so doing, also challenges key cultural assumptions about childhood in general. Specifically, Nickelodeon challenges the assumption that children are not capable of making informed choices about not only what they like to watch on television, but also about the larger world in general. Through an examination of Nickelodeon's news program, *Nick News*, we can see at least one way in which the commercial network constructs its audience in these kinds of terms, as a group of political or civil citizens.

### KIDS' EMPOWERMENT: POLITICAL CITIZENSHIP

Despite an increasingly negative public opinion in the United States about the corruption of "official" politics and growing frustrations with the intimate workings of the democratic process, the notion that citizenship is formed *via* the democratic process continues to have both social and political currency. . . .

News journalism, then, often has been situated as an essential part of democracy, and as the key to an informed citizenry. Buckingham theorizes the significance of news journalism for a young audience, attempting to determine what role the media plays in "extending and developing young people's sense of their own political agency."<sup>14</sup> Conventional wisdom (frequently supported by academic studies) increasingly maintains that modern children and youth are remarkably uninterested in reading and watching the news. This lack of interest is

often attributed to either a postmodern citizenry comprised of a disaffected and cynical generation, or to a general understanding that children are politically “innocent” and thus incompetent to make informed decisions. Suggesting that both these positions are a kind of cop-out, Buckingham argues that “children will only be likely to become ‘active citizens,’ capable of exercising, thoughtful choice in political matters, if they are presumed to be capable of doing so.”<sup>15</sup> Within these terms, news programs for children are recognized as an important means through which young audiences can construct themselves as citizens. News programs for children (the few that are produced) offer factual information about current events and politics, and are considered “educational” television by the Children’s Television Act of 1990. Nickelodeon produces perhaps the most successful U.S. children’s news program, *Nick News*.<sup>16</sup> The program airs once a week, and is hosted by former network newscaster Linda Ellerbee (and is produced by her production company, Lucky Duck Productions). While most *Nick News* programs typically include four or five segments, Ellerbee also produces “news specials” which are entire programs dedicated to a particular cultural event, such as the aforementioned special on the terrorist attacks of September 11, “Kids, Terrorism, and the American Spirit.”

In this episode, Ellerbee begins by addressing the audience, asking children to make sure their parents believe it to be appropriate for them to watch a television program about terrorism. Aesthetically, the setup of the news program, unlike most news shows, is quite casual: Ellerbee wears jeans and tennis shoes and addresses a diverse group of children from a cross-legged position on the floor. She begins the discussion by saying to the kids in the studio and the national audience: “We will not lie to you, and so we begin with the facts.” The “facts” include not only a description of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon but also a definition of terrorism itself. The episode is interspersed with video segments portraying displays of mourning and patriotism: candlelight vigils, flags, firefighters, and so on. Together with a child psychiatrist, Ellerbee questions the children in the studio, two of whom are wearing traditional Muslim clothing and head-dress. She asks the children if they had watched television since the attacks, querying: “Do you think that kids should have been forbidden to watch television?” The children unanimously answered “No” to that question, with one child claiming, “We have a right to know.” Ellerbee also asks the children what the response of the United States should be to the terrorist attacks, and asks specifically if “we” should bomb “them.” The kids’ answers to this question consisted primarily of proactive suggestions, for example, that children write letters, give blood, or help other kids. One of the children suggested that the United States rebuild the Twin Towers, but even higher than they were originally, “to prove that it’s not going to let us down.”

An important part of this special *Nick News* is a segment called “American Spirit.” In this segment, Ellerbee narrates a *mélange* of images showing people helping victims of the attacks, giving blood, firefighters volunteering, people embracing around national images such as flags, candles, and other icons. These jingoistic displays of patriotism represented, for *Nick News*, the “American Spirit.” Ellerbee says, “What we were seeing was the American spirit, and more important than anything else, it is that spirit that defines us as a nation, and no act of terrorism can take that from us.” She also informs the audience that there is a message board on the Nickelodeon website that includes discussions about patriotism and the uniting of America during this crisis. From the moment Ellerbee began the program by informing the audience that she would “not lie” to them, it was clear that Ellerbee was taking her audience seriously as citizens.

Children's culture is fraught with conflict, contradiction, and power dynamics, despite the efforts of politicians, educators, academics, and parents to insist on childhood as a place that is innocent of the politics and power struggles that characterize adult culture. Occasionally, events within children's culture challenge both the construction of childhood "innocence" as a moralizing strategy that functions to obscure a more overt political agenda, and the notion that children themselves are outside the political world. Cultural scholar Henry Jenkins sees Ellerbee's *Nick News* as one of these events. As he argues, Ellerbee confronts the assumption that children are outside power dynamics "when she creates television programs that encourage children's awareness of real-world problems, such as the Los Angeles riots, and enable children to find their own critical voice to speak back against the adult world. She trusts children to confront realities from which other adults might shield them, offering them the facts needed to form their own opinions and the air time to discuss issues."<sup>17</sup> Aside from the episode on September 11, *Nick News* has also had special shows on the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal (the program won a Peabody award for that episode), as well as a special episode on the fate of children in Afghanistan since the United States declared war on that country, "Faces of Hope: The Kids of Afghanistan."

However, like all media productions, *Nick News* is situated within the children's television market in ways marked by tension. In other words, *Nick News* is not immune from the pressures to be more entertaining and sensational that often inhibit "adult" news programs from functioning as a public sphere.<sup>18</sup> On Nickelodeon's message board, which Ellerbee encourages children to visit, users exchange e-mails discussing programming. On the link for *Nick News*, there are many messages that claim the show is boring and unnecessary. For example, in one message titled "Nick News is sooooo lame," the child writes: "Nick News is so lame because of the way the peoples [sic] set it up. Instead of talking about news that adults care about in kid form, they should talk about things that matter to us (a.k.a. bands, the singer from TLC dying)."<sup>19</sup> This kind of sentiment reflects the way in which "traditional" news formats such as *Nick News* can also work to alienate viewers by refusing to "talk about things that matter to us."

But the website itself is an interesting example of political debate. For example, although the majority of the messages seem to claim that *Nick News* is boring, others challenged this position. One child responded to the previous e-mail message in the following way:

So you don't care that Saddam Hussein [sic] has nukes and could blow us up? Or that he is giving 25 grand to families that send their kids out to blow up other kids? Or that women in Afghanistan get beaten because their clothes slipped down? Or because they laughed in public? Or what about 911? Did you care about that? Or should Nick News talk about "Holy Fishpaste, News Flash! The guy from some boy band broke up with Britney Spears!" This is what's goin on in the world today, people, and there's no denying it. As sad as it is that a singer is dying, there's millions of other people that live lives that are worse than being dead. Nick news tells us what's goin on without the graphic images of reality that's on NBC.<sup>20</sup>

The message boards on the Nickelodeon website seem to confront the conventional wisdom that children are "innocent" and outside the political world by insisting that at least *some* kids are invested in traditional politics; as another website visitor argued: "I like Nick News because it shows a lot of interesting things I never knew before. I also watch CNN too. Kids should watch the new[s] so they know what is going on around the world."<sup>21</sup>

But the message board also reveals another contradiction within Nickelodeon's rhetorical address: when *Nick News* is situated within the context of the network's claim that "kids

should just be kids," the national news becomes, for some kids, part of that boring world of adults, and current events and political issues are understood as "things that adults care about." While this could be read as mere political disaffection on the part of children, it could also be seen as a challenge to conceive of citizenship in a realm outside that of "official" politics. The child who complained about the way *Nick News* was "set up" argued that within the commercial and entertainment realm (bands, popular musicians) events occur that kids *do* care about. There are tensions involved, then, in maintaining the "kids only zone" as more than mere rhetoric. Constructing an active audience which is treated not as beings in constant need of protection from the "adult" world, but rather as agents in this world, requires more than simply an acknowledgment that children can think for themselves. Constructing this audience also requires providing children with the active *means* to think for themselves. *Nick News* seems to provide these means for some children by encouraging them to be informed about the world, or to take an active role in their communities. However, providing the means to think for oneself not only involves this kind of political action, but also engages the balancing of the tension between insisting that children are *citizens* and addressing them as *consumers*.

### KIDS EMPOWERMENT CONSUMERS AS CITIZENS

"[The] notion that young people are not apathetic but rather disenfranchised continues to privilege a particular view of politics as official and real . . . and romanticizes the news media as the best source for the construction of this kind of political identity.<sup>22</sup> It seems clear that in order to understand the complexities of citizenship, we need to broaden this framework to include other, more contemporary processes and practices of political agency. Forms of popular culture and, more specifically, commercial entertainment, are not outside the realm of "official" politics; on the contrary, it is often within these realms that our understanding, resistance, and acquiescence to "official" politics are constituted.<sup>23</sup>

For example, the generational address of Nickelodeon is not only dedicated to recognizing children's *political* agency as it has been traditionally defined. It also recognizes the politics involved in recognizing children as a powerful consumer market in their own right, separate from adults. As Laybourne argues, "Nick empowers kids by saying to them, 'You're important—important enough to have a network of your own.'"<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it is clear that in the current cultural climate, visibility (whether on television, music, or other media outlets) does equal power—especially for children. In other words, being recognized as a "demographic" indicates a certain kind of power, and Nickelodeon certainly picks up on this dynamic. The unproblematic collapse that Laybourne makes between the realization of children as an important consumer group and perceived political power—"you're important enough to have a network of your own"—is certainly not a new phenomenon with adults, but the steadily increasing purchasing power of children ages four to eleven (American companies spend more than twenty times what they spent ten years ago on advertising for children, approximately \$2 billion each year) should be a reason to pause and consider how these issues of citizenship, perceived political power, and consumer power are crucially intertwined.<sup>25</sup> Consumption habits code individuals as members of particular communities, and grant individuals a kind of power that accompanies such membership. Thus, citizenship is increasingly defined within consumer culture—indeed, as a *process* of consumption itself. Nickelodeon's self-conscious address about kids "as kids" is as much about the *purchasing* power of kids as it is about the *political* power of kids; in fact, these two discourses inform and constitute each other.



It seems, then, that the grandiose claim made by Nickelodeon that they "pledge allegiance to kids" is about both these discourses simultaneously. Simply claiming that children are separate from adults, and have their own agendas, needs, and desires is not quite enough to make a claim of political agency, because political agency is not necessarily defined within terms such as autonomy, independence, and "rights-bearing" citizens any longer (if it ever truly was). But we *do* define citizenship (and thus political agency) in terms of our consumption habits, and we *are* recognized as meaningful citizens depending on both an economic and a cultural recognition of our purchasing power (hence the political power of boycotts). The ability to consume, and thus constitute a "market," has everything to do with one's perceived political power. Nickelodeon's claim to be a network "just for kids" is one of the ways in which it acknowledges the connection between political subjectivity and consumer identity: it is not simply a place defined exclusively for kids; it also capitalizes on the enormous commercial potential of its child audience. . . .

As I've discussed, an important element of Nickelodeon's self-construction is its insistence that kids are an active audience in their own right, separate from the world of adults. Indeed, as much of Nickelodeon's programming demonstrates, "adults just don't get it." Part of what adults "just don't get" are the consumption habits of youth, which are important markers of identity and ways of distinguishing one social group from another.<sup>26</sup> The boundary between the worlds of children and adults that is implied by the idea that adults "don't get" the world of children is important to the self-construction of children as particular kinds of citizens. Indeed, Allison James has argued that the deliberate mystification of children's culture by children is crucial for the self-conscious construction of the child as an individual: "The true nature of the culture of childhood frequently remains hidden from adults, for the semantic cues which permit social recognition have been manipulated and disguised by children in terms of their alternative society. . . . By confusing the adult order children create for themselves considerable room for movement with the limits imposed upon them by adult society."<sup>27</sup> A successful way of manipulating adult authority as a means to create a separate children's culture has been to select consumer goods that are distinctly outside the adult world, whether these choices be situated in popular music, fashion, or television programming. However, this strategy does not simply establish "an alternative system of meanings which adults cannot perceive"; it also constructs children as a very important demographic.<sup>28</sup> In fact, according to marketing specialist James McNeal, "tweens," children between the ages of eight and twelve have "become the 'powerhouse' of the kids' market, spending close to \$14 billion a year" and thus becoming a "retailer's dream."<sup>29</sup> The children's media market is especially attractive because of its multidimensional appeal: children have money of their own (and more and more each year), they have influence over the purchasing power of their parents, and they are considered a market for the future.<sup>30</sup> The relatively newfound (or at least, newly energized) recognition of children as a lucrative market has resulted in their increased visibility in the mass media—after all, part of targeting the tween market means that corporate culture needs to provide a kind of representation that is both appealing and inclusive.

Nickelodeon's claim of being a "kids only zone," then, is not simply about acknowledging youth as an audience in their own right, but also about the specific recognition of this audience as an important group of consumers. However, the construction of children as consumers has historically been formulated as a relationship characterized by *dependence* and manipulation rather than *independence* and individual agency. For example, media scholar Marsha Kinder argues that Nickelodeon's persistence in claiming that the network is a place just for kids relies upon an overt strategy of dividing children from adults as two very different consumer groups. In fact, she reads Nickelodeon's emphasis on generational conflict as a

strategy that actually functions commercially as *transgenerational*.<sup>31</sup> The issue of media inclusion—a “network of your own”—is thus inseparable from other corporate and commercial interests and points to Nickelodeon’s transgenerational address as a slippery strategy to target the kid market, rather than a means to empower kids as citizens.

. . . It is not merely the advertising that supports Nickelodeon that constructs its audience as consumer-citizens. This address is also present in the tensions and ironies of much of the programming. For example, consider “Rugrats Discover America.” Ostensibly in honor of Columbus Day (although neither the historical figure nor the federal holiday is mentioned in the special), the program was aired about a month after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, and took a different tack at representing American citizenship from the *Nick News* special discussed earlier. The program is a widely popular animated series that features four babies who constantly get into trouble and a group of parents who are generally clueless about what their children are “really” up to, a direct reference to Nickelodeon’s rhetoric of generational conflict. “Rugrats Discover America” opens with the grandparents of some of the characters distributing souvenirs to the children from their recent trip across America. The souvenirs include a Native American artifact and a toy Statue of Liberty. These souvenirs prompt a fantasy by the main characters involving a vacation across America in a tour bus, with stops at particular places of interest. These include the Grand Canyon, the American West, and New York City. A side story features two older child characters taking a motorcycle trip across the same terrain, complete with Easy Rider outfits and a version of “Born to Be Wild” playing on the soundtrack (a visual trope that assumes a transgenerational audience).

The *Rugrats* special offers a pointed and specific version of citizenship; focusing on popular culture and tourism, this program defines citizenship in terms of the consumer who acquires “national” knowledge at different tourist stops around the country that are then represented in souvenirs. This definition of citizenship, as an American consumer spirit represented in popular film references and commercial souvenirs (a kind of “cultural capital” that seems to be a specific prerequisite for citizenship), is offered alongside the broader, idealist American “spirit” represented in more jingoistic displays of patriotism such as the *Nick News* special. The two definitions of citizenship inform and constitute each other, and in so doing, help to form the social construction of the child-citizen for Nickelodeon’s audience. This then combines with the recent marketing campaign for the network that celebrates the “Nickelodeon Nation,” as well as the promises to “pledge allegiance to kids,” the encouragement of its young audience to “exercise those choice muscles,” and the insistence that “You have more power than you think!” As Heather Hendershot has pointed out, Nickelodeon’s emphasis on the “rights” of kids places in bold relief the connection *and* the tension between rights and modern citizenship, where rights for kids who watch Nickelodeon are most crucially the “right” to make purchases, and the “choices” that are exercised are consumer choices.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, then, it is this *tension*, between political and consumer rights, that most profoundly characterizes a modern sense of citizenship for both adults and children. For children, who are culturally situated outside formal, legal political rights, consumption habits take on perhaps even added significance in the construction of citizenship. In other words, while it is certainly true that political rights remain an important democratic freedom in the construction of citizenship, it is also the case that these older forms of understanding oneself as a citizen have been reformulated in the context of modern consumer culture. Rather, it is the *intermingling* of political rights and consumption habits that most profoundly characterizes citizenship. . . .

Yet, as Ellen Seiter has argued, to be “just a kid” means in part to establish an imagined community with other children based on goods and commercial items. Seiter points out that

"Toys, commercials, and animated programs are the lingua franca of young children at babysitters' and grandmothers' houses, day-care centers, and preschools across the United States."<sup>33</sup> Seiter argues that commercial goods provide children with "a shared repository of images," and this in turn allows for processes of identification based on race, class, and citizenship. Nickelodeon's vast empire of programming, toys, clothing, and other commercial goods clearly establishes a "shared repository of images" for its audience, which in turn organizes an imagined community based on a sense of belonging and membership.

In fact, according to Geraldine Laybourne, Nickelodeon's licensing agreement with the toy company Mattel is based on creating "the ideal citizen" through the particular marketing of toys. According to Laybourne, Nickelodeon was faced with a dilemma when it began working with Mattel because of Mattel's obvious gender-specific marketing. Since Nickelodeon was committed to banning gender-specific programming from its lineup (in an effort to be more inclusive of girls, a severely neglected demographic in children's programming), and since Mattel designs most of its products specifically for boys or girls, Nickelodeon worked with Mattel to design toys with empowerment in mind: "We hold to a philosophy of quality, of variety, of self-discovery for kids. We believe that boys and girls should be treated as equals. We expect the unexpected. And we seek to build a bridge for kids with the past, with what their parents did, that connects them to the whole history of American childhood."<sup>34</sup> Laybourne also argues that Nickelodeon's use of focus groups in its toy design is about recognizing the agency of children: "Surveys and research are the first steps in empowering kids—Nickelodeon's central mission. As part of the Nickelodeon Experience, when kids are given self-esteem and a voice, they are encouraged to make choices."<sup>35</sup> Again, the "choices" that Nickelodeon's audience are encouraged to make are consumer choices, and the network's "central mission" of empowerment is as much about authorizing kids as consumers as it is about empowering them in a more traditional political sense.

## CONCLUSION: CHILDREN AS CITIZENS

I really like nick news sometimes they have good topics sometimes and yes sometimes it makes me wanna go out and help others

*Nick News Message Board*

*RE: nick news rocks*

*Date: 06/18/02*

Kids need to hear about what's going on in the world now, so they'll be better prepared to face and deal with it when they step out of their homes, and into the real world. Yes, it might be boring at times, but it is a necessary evil—and one which we must acknowledge . . .

*Nick News Message Board*

*RE: No kids care about this stuff? oh really!?!*

*Date: 06/26/02*

This is a club for everyone!!!!!! As long as you like rugrats you can gone [join] my club!!!!!! All you have to do is tell me why you like the rugrats and then you can join!!!!!! bye

*Rugrats Message Board*

*RE: a rugrats club*

*Date: 04/16/02. . .*

Certainly children have been addressed historically as citizens-in-the-making or as potential citizens. Many patriotic rituals—the Pledge of Allegiance, the school textbook, or student government—are about the education of young children to be citizens. Much of children’s television has also approached children through this education angle. But to be considered “in-process” is to deny a particular power dynamic involved in identity making. In other words, it is difficult to exercise empowered and informed choices when always considered in a state of becoming. Nickelodeon seems to challenge this by addressing children as *citizens already*, and attending to their needs accordingly. If citizenship is both something that is ideologically “imposed” upon a member of society, and something that one creates and produces through activity, interaction, and identity construction, then Nickelodeon’s strategy of addressing kids “as kids” is to consider its audience as citizens. The commercial structure of the network allows for even more coherence to this community, and allows children to politically connect with their own needs and desires rather than those defined by adults.

But . . . consumption habits need to be combined with political action to elevate the status of consumers to that of citizens. Among other things, this means requiring “democratic participation by the principal sectors of civil society in material, symbolic, juridical, and political decisions that organize consumption.”<sup>36</sup> It is unclear whether Nickelodeon truly fosters this kind of intermixing of democratic participation and consumption. For the one child who wrote to the website claiming that watching *Nick News* made him “wanna go out and help others,” there are even more children who demonstrate a much more cynical and disaffected view toward reflexive political action. Nickelodeon, like citizenship itself, is characterized by tension. The empowerment rhetoric of the network is at times connected to a more traditional material politics, such as the *Nick News* specials and other social outreach programs developed by Nickelodeon. At the same time, this empowerment rhetoric must be read through the lens of consumer culture. Thus, Nickelodeon’s insistence that kids “exercise their choice muscles” often indicates a kind of empowerment that emerges through the recognition that children are a lucrative market. Either way, children are constructed as citizens. Whether citizenship is formulated in a meaningful way *within* consumer culture, a way that allows for the production of the social and political life of youth as a specific *function* of consumption, remains to be seen.

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### Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Nickelodeon program *Nick News* helps its viewers become active, aware citizens?
2. How does the conception of children as “innocent victims” contrast with the “active players” perspective?
3. Nickelodeon boasts that its programs are on “for kids.” Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
4. What do you think would best promote active citizenship amongst children, particularly since they are not eligible to vote?

### Notes

1. See Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990); Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar*

*America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); and George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American*