

## Preface

This book draws on my multiple experiences as a media scholar, an advocate, and a parent. In many ways it chronicles my own dual journeys—through the labyrinth of media politics and policy, and through the new culture of digital media. In 1990, after twelve years as a professor of film and media in California, I moved to Washington, DC, where I founded the nonprofit Center for Media Education (CME) with my husband, Jeffrey Chester. One of our goals was to participate in critical policy decisions that would determine the future of electronic media. At that time, the media system already was undergoing tremendous technological change. In addition, major revisions were about to take place in U.S. telecommunications laws. But while the communications companies had a phalanx of high-paid lobbyists heavily engaged in pushing their agendas in Washington, only a tiny handful of groups were representing the public interest.

Throughout the 1990s, CME worked with dozens of nonprofit organizations, professional associations, academic institutions, and foundations to help build a new public-interest movement. During the earliest days of the debate over the “Information Superhighway,” CME cofounded the Telecommunications Policy Roundtable, a coalition of civil liberty, education, and computer groups that called for “public interest principles” to guide the development of this new medium. After Action for Children’s Television closed its doors in 1992, CME also became the leading advocate for children in national media-policy debates.

My move to Washington took place one year after the publication of my first book, *Target: Prime Time*. Written while I was a professor at UCLA, that book chronicles the thirty-year history of advocacy groups’ efforts to influence the content of prime-time television programming. Several years later, we were in the beginning stages of our four-year campaign over the Children’s Television Act (CTA), which ultimately would lead to new government rules for children’s educational programming. While attending a

meeting, I found myself in a conversation with a television network executive I had interviewed for my book. She asked me whether I was still studying pressure groups. I thought for a moment then responded: “Well, I guess you’d have to say I’ve become one.” I had made a conscious choice to cross the line between “objective and neutral scholar” and “politically involved activist.” I had done so because I wanted to make a difference in the media world and saw myself following in the footsteps of many people about whom I had written and long had admired.

My daughter, Lucy Chester, was born on April 29, 1993, within a day or two of the official release of the World Wide Web, making her a bonafide member of the Digital Generation. Becoming a parent both complemented and complicated my role as a children’s advocate. Watching Lucy grow up has enabled me to remain closely connected to her generation’s media culture—and to gain an appreciation for its ability to engage her attention, captivate her imagination, and occupy her time—as it follows her from the toddler through the teen years. Motherhood also has made me appreciate the challenges that all parents face in trying to raise their families in a media-saturated world.

The Center for Media Education’s policy efforts in the children’s media arena were part of our constituency-building strategy to mobilize support for broader public policies in the new digital media system. We also pushed for specific policy goals aimed at ensuring that the new media system would fulfill its potential as a positive force in children’s lives. As Congress was debating the new Telecommunications Act in the early 1990s, we encouraged education and library groups to become involved, which led to passage of the “e-rate” provisions, providing schools and libraries with affordable access to the Internet.

In the earliest days of the Web, we also began to follow the emerging online marketplace, finding that advertisers already had set their sights on children in the new world of cyberspace. With my staff, I pored over the dozens of trade publications and new-media research reports that were hailing the importance of “digital kids” in the e-commerce strategies of the digital economy. I attended conferences and trade shows, interviewed dot-com executives in Silicon Valley and Silicon Alley, and monitored children’s Web sites. Alarmed by some of the new online-marketing practices, I worked with my colleagues at CME on a study to alert the press, the public, and policymakers. After the 1996 publication of our report *Web of Deception*, CME in partnership with Consumer Federation of America led a national campaign that brought about passage of the 1998 Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act.

During my twelve-year tenure at the helm of the Center for Media Education, I participated in some of the major media-policy developments of the era. From time to time, I found myself in the middle of highly controversial debates that were played out under the glare of the media spotlight. For example, in 1996 and 1997 I led a coalition of health, education, and child-advocacy groups in a campaign over the V-chip television ratings as we faced off with the Motion Picture Association of America's Jack Valenti in a series of pitched battles. On other occasions, I negotiated with advocates, policymakers, and industry leaders in behind-the-scenes, closed-door sessions. I was an indirect participant in numerous policy campaigns led by my colleagues—over such issues as media ownership, universal service, and spectrum allocation. But much of the time I was immersed so intensely in my own pressing work—tracking new media trends, filing petitions and complaints with regulatory agencies, meeting with White House staff, testifying before Congress, taking press calls, and raising money—that I could not keep tabs on all of the events taking place around me.

However, throughout the period I remained a curious scholar, sometimes seeing my own involvement from a variety of different perspectives, both inside and outside the process. From time to time I identified familiar patterns in the contemporary events that echoed those of earlier periods in the history of American media. As I was in the midst of some of my most fascinating experiences inside the Beltway, I knew I had to write about them someday. I kept notes, collected documents, and jotted down my observations and insights in small snippets. But I understood that these were just some of the pieces of the puzzle. To tell the larger story, I had to return to my role as a media scholar and follow the more traditional path of research.

In the late 1990s, CME launched a research initiative on new media and children. In partnership with the College of Communication at the University of Texas, we held a national conference in Washington, DC, inviting academics, health professionals, nonprofit leaders, and new-media creators to focus on "Ensuring a Quality Media Culture for Children in the Digital Age." The meeting also highlighted the dearth of academic research on children and new media, even in the midst of a booming online marketplace, and outlined a set of questions for guiding the development of a research agenda for the future. Following the conference, CME conducted its own study of teen use of the Internet, releasing our report *TeenSites.com* in 2001. In addition to our examination of commercial Web sites, the study offered one of the first glimpses of noncommercial and civic online efforts

by and for young people. With additional funding, we were able to expand that study, launching a multiyear project to track the growth of hundreds of youth civic Web sites.

In the fall of 2003, I returned to teaching full time, taking a professorship in the School of Communication at American University. We closed the Center for Media Education, and I brought our Youth, Media, and Democracy project to the university. In 2004, with additional funding from the Ford Foundation and the Surdna Foundation, we published our study of the Internet and youth civic engagement, *Youth as E-Citizens*. A year later we convened a group of youth activists and policy leaders in the *FreeCulture2* conference. That project introduced me to the work of a new generation of advocates, including groups such as Downhill Battle and FreeCulture.org.

My reentry into academic life gave me the time, space, and support to complete the research and writing for this book. Out of the spotlight and the pressure cooker of intense Washington politics, I have been able to take a fresh look at this very recent history—in which I was involved intimately—and to reexamine, reflect, and in some cases reconsider the events of the decade. The process of writing the book has enabled me to see some of the broader national and international events that are influencing the policies and practices of the new media. It also has deepened my understanding of the digital marketplace and where it is headed. Some of my research has taken me into new areas, exploring, for example, what other scholars have learned about how young people are engaging with digital media, and how public health and civic organizations are using new media to reach and influence youth.

The research for this book came from a variety of different sources. In the sections based partly on my own experiences, I used personal notes, internal memos, and other private documents. However, because personal recollection is not the most reliable source of historical information, I also worked to confirm and augment my narrative by seeking out independent sources, including newspaper coverage, government documents, research articles, and interviews. I have found that carefully reconstructing the sequence of events not only has ensured greater accuracy, but also has enabled me to place these events in a broader historical, political, and social context. Where the source of my information about an event is solely from my own personal experience, I have cited so in the endnotes. In a handful of places, I have included passages that are based on off-the-record conversations with individuals involved in these events. For obvious

reasons, I have not cited these specific sources, but the information is a crucial part of the story. Except for the preface, the entire book is in the third person, even in chapters 3 and 4, where some of the narrative covers my own work and that of my organization.

In the interest of complete disclosure, I must mention that two of the organizations I have written about in this book are past supporters of the Center for Media Education's work. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation funded CME's 1999 public-education campaign to promote the V-chip and the Parental Television Guidelines. Chapter 6 profiles Kaiser's youth campaigns on sex education and HIV/AIDS, efforts with which neither I nor my organization ever has been involved directly. In 2002 the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), whose work I mention in chapters 6 and 7, provided funds for CME's study of youth civic engagement and the Internet.

This book is not intended to be a compendium of new-media content and practices, and I cover certain topics in more detail than others. Nor have I written a "how-to" book for parents. Instead, I have tried to provide background and insight about this new digital-media culture, the forces that are shaping it, and the ways in which young people are involved with it.

The dynamic nature of the new media makes it impossible to be up to date. New developments crop up every day, followed avidly by both the trade and the mainstream press. By the time the book is published, there will be further innovation, additional studies, and new controversies. But the deeper structural, economic, and social patterns this book explores likely will not change significantly in the years to come.