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April 16, 2001

President George Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

RE: Reading on the Bus and Train

Dear President Bush:

We are writing to you today about reading, and about the public places in which people do it. These places are under attack. The precious quiet moments that people find in their busy days on public transit, for reading and study, are threatened.

You can stop this theft of reading time, and we hope you will.

The assault comes in the form of a new scheme to turn the nation's mass transit vehicles into amphitheaters for the compulsory watching of television. According to The Wall Street Journal, two corporations -- Itec Entertainment Corp. and Orbital Sciences Corp. -- have launched a joint venture to put TV's on buses and trains across the country. The purpose of the TVs will be to broadcast "a package of news and weather -- and a lot of ads."

The companies are starting with a pilot project on buses in Orlando, Florida. But they are moving quickly to penetrate "municipal bus services nationwide," the Journal reports. Eventually, the companies say, they want to deploy their compulsory television system in "buses, rail and other modes of mass transit" across the country -- in other words, just about every kind of transportation in which people might want to take a few moments to read.

Millions of people do. If you have ever ridden on New York City's subways, Washington's Metro, San Francisco's Muni or Boston's T, you have seen fellow riders engrossed in reading. You've seen students reviewing their lessons and recent immigrants wrestling with an English as a second language text. You've seen a kind of mobile field of dreams.

You've also seen people reading bestsellers and Bibles. Many riders use the quiet time to just think or pray.

Now the hucksters want to call a halt to this. They just can't bear the thought that somewhere in America, people might be doing something constructive and not looking at their ads. They brag to advertisers of a "captive audience" that doesn't have a choice in the matter. They have designed the TV's so that riders cannot turn them off or even turn them down. They boast that the sets are "hammerproof" -- a telling admission regarding the emotions these sets will provoke.

Americans today lead hectic lives. They don't have much quiet time for reading, and we should treat the little that remains as a precious national resource. Certainly the government should not abet in any way the destruction of this reading time. It should not help turn public transit into a commercial free-fire zone.

As Governor of Texas you labored hard to improve reading skills in the state. As President, in February you proposed a new \$5 billion federal reading initiative. Your wife Laura is well known for her dedication to the causes of childhood reading and adult literacy. In a high point of your presidential campaign, which the media mostly ignored, you encouraged children to turn off their TV sets and read. "If you're a good reader, you can go to college and be anything you want to be," you told a third grade class in San Diego.

That's why reading time is so important. It is why we urge you to defend the users of the nation's mass transit against the invasion of compulsory commercial noise. You can do this. You can keep these spaces safe for reading, study, work and quiet reflection. Specifically, you can prohibit any expenditure of federal transportation funds on mass transit systems that coerce their riders to watch TV to the detriment of these quieter pursuits.

This would be a noble action. It would make you an environmental president in a new and most important way. We urge you to take this stand.

Sincerely,

Don Block, Executive Director, Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council

Les Blomberg, Executive Director, Noise Pollution Clearinghouse

David Bollier, author, policy strategist

Jason Catlett, President, Junkbusters Corp.

Stuart Ewen, Chair, Department of Film and Media Studies, Hunter College; author of *PR! A Social History of Spin**

George Gerbner, President and Founder, Cultural Environment Movement; Dean Emeritus, Annenberg School of Communication*

Todd Gitlin, Professor of Culture, Journalism and Sociology, New York University; author, *The Twilight of Common Dreams**

Sut Jhally, Founder and Executive Director, The Media Education Foundation

Jean Kilbourne, author, *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel*

Bob McCannon, Executive Director, New Mexico Media Literacy Project

Jim Metrock, President, Obligation, Inc.

Robert McChesney, Research Associate Professor, U. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; author, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy**

Carrie McLaren, publisher, Stay Free!

Mark Crispin Miller, Professor of Media Ecology, New York University*

Paula Quint, President, The Children's Book Council*

Douglas Rushkoff, Professor of Virtual Culture, New York University; author, *Coercion and Media Virus**

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Betsy Taylor, Executive Director, Center for a New American Dream
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cc: First Lady Mrs. George W. Bush
The Honorable Norman Mineta, Secretary of Transportation
Senator Richard Shelby, Chairman, Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation
Senator Patty Murray, Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations, Subcommittee on Transportation
Senator John McCain, Chairman, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation
Senator Ernest Hollings, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
Representative Harold Rogers, Chairman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation
Representative Martin Olav Sabo, Ranking Member, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation
Representative Don Young, Chairman, House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure
Representative James L. Oberstar, Ranking Member, House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure