ZAPME! Zaps You
By Bettina Fabos
Published in the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, May, 2000 43(8) pp. 720-725

I type the URL www.zapme.com and am treated to a dramatic Flash animation: movie-style, bold white (and sometimes red) letters dramatically fade in and out on a black screen:

Teenagers today

They think they know it all.

And if we have anything to do with it

They will.

ZapMe!

ZapMe! is a broadband interactive network that is bringing the latest in technology tools and exciting educational content to schools across America. Free.

[The words “They will” and “Free” are in red. “Free” fades in a few seconds later on the same screen for emphasis.]

ZapMe!

it’ll rock your world wide web!

Now I’m in ZapMe!’s educational “netspace.” With a purple and orange interface, “raised” bubble buttons and clean, simple lines, the page is both fast-food familiar and high-tech cool. “What’s New!,” “What’s Hot!” and “What’s Fun!” call out from the center, accompanied by rotating image sequences and vibrating ellipses. Within these three categories, students can learn more about ZapMe!’s latest features (e.g., the new ZapMe! game section), and read various commentaries written by ZapMe!’s content editors. At the
top of the screen, a line of seven purple buttons connects students to the main areas of the interface: Homework, Classroom, Library, Teachers, Newsstand, Your Future, and Entertainment. Another series of orange buttons appear above the purple ones with searching, communication, and personalization tools: ZapMail, Shopping, Message Board, ZapSearch, Personal Planner, Help, and Corporate Website. There are three places where advertising appears: the banner ad at the top of the netspace, the “dynamic billboard” in the bottom left-hand corner, and a page sponsor logo near the upper left-hand side.

What is ZapMe!?

ZapMe! is a company that operates an Internet site (what they call a netspace) of the same name that is geared towards educators, students and parents. Launched in 1998, the ZapMe! netspace also presents a deal to money-strapped schools wanting to bring Internet technology into their classrooms: Thousands of dollars worth of computer hardware, immediate Internet access, and aggregated Web content, in exchange for student-targeted Web advertising in the classroom.

The San Ramon, California-based company provides schools with a computer lab equipped with 15 PCs, word-processing software, a laser printer, satellite-based Internet access, and enough technological support to maintain the system for as long as the school keeps its “subscription.” The most important part of ZapMe!, however, is the proprietary interface it requires students to use as part of the deal. Like other notable Internet portals (e.g., AOL, Yahoo!), the company’s home page serves as a practical launching pad for all kinds of research, communication, and entertainment activity. Aside
from a few monthly thematic essays written by ZapMe!’s content editors, ZapMe!’s educational resources are mostly a series of links to existing sites, which are grouped under subject headings. The effect is like a scaled-down, teen-focused Yahoo! page (Yahoo! is actually in partnership with ZapMe!). The point of ZapMe!, though, is to make the Web site such a convenient interface that users never have to leave. “Starting today,” the company president says in a ZapMe! press release, “students can now become immersed in the ZapMe! netspace, learning while they build friendships and explore new worlds.”

In return for hardware, Internet access, and Web content, participating schools agree to provide space for the computer lab, tables and desks to support the computers, and printer supplies. They also must ensure that for four hours every day, various classes with students are sitting in front of the computers with the ZapMe! interface, which contains student-targeted advertising and shopping opportunities. Furthermore, ZapMe! schools must allow ZapMe! to track students’ Web-browsing habits and develop user profiles on them, adding to the company’s target-based advertising and marketing potential. Finally, schools must allow ZapMe! corporate partners, like Sylvan Learning Systems — the testing preparatory service — to operate the lab after hours, further extending the public/noncommercial space of the school into corporate control.

In a sense, ZapMe! is an updated version of Channel One, which, since 1989, has required participating schools to show an advertising-supported news program every day in exchange for video technology. Overwhelmingly successful, Channel One is now transmitted to 40 percent of American schools and earns $800,000 a day for its parent
company, K-III Communications, with ads targeting teens as effectively as the Super Bowl targets men.\(^1\) At the onset, Channel One offered tools that teachers and administrators were not particularly looking for—VCRs, TV monitors, and teen news programming—and inspired vigorous protest among educators.

ZapMe! offers tools teachers and administrators are looking for, tools that educators feel pressured to justify as normative and necessary pedagogical resources. ZapMe! is potentially even more lucrative than Channel One, however, because its service is in high demand (every school wants more computers and Internet in the curriculum, right?) and the extent of its commodification of students is far beyond Channel One’s two minutes of commercials a day. Students using ZapMe! are constantly invited to click through the “dynamic billboards” and instantly access shopping sites. Because ZapMe! offers a high bandwidth connection, the company can offer full-speed video capabilities for educational purposes. But the same high-speed video is also offered to advertisers wishing to create more visually provocative banner ads for students’ eyes.

There is little debate surrounding the ZapMe! netspace among educators, who are often quite happy to use the Yahoo! and other commercial portals as an Internet starting point in their schools, since many students are already so familiar with it. One technology coordinator recently told me that her concern with the advertising of commercial Web portals was not the ethical nature of sitting students in front of it, but that it increased a Web pages’ load up time.

\textbf{ZapMe! and Literacy}
What does the ZapMe! interface have to do with literacy? When we ask ourselves what it means to be a reader and writer in the 21st century, we also have to ask ourselves what it means to be a reader and writer of Web content, as well as a user of Web-based interactive communication technologies. Over the past five years, Internet technology has become an increasingly prominent classroom resource. In the U.S., the Clinton-Gore administration has been particularly concerned about access, and has lobbied for such programs as the $2.25 billion E-rate initiative, which has aimed to give schools and libraries low-cost telecommunication services. Consequently, 90 percent of American schools report having Internet access today. Taxpayers foot the educational technology bill, paying $5.53 billion in 1998 (or about $119 per student)², and $6.9 billion in 1999.³

While the bulk of the spending has gone (and continues to go) towards Internet access, not much public funding has supported Web content and teacher training to use or create this content. (Content refers to written and visual material, as well as links, that make up any given Web site). As a result, Corporations from Microsoft to Hewlett Packard have gladly invested in this area, seeing a potentially enormous market in Internet educational content. Presuming that taxpayers will not be willing to allot more funding for non-commercial, high-quality educational Web content (in addition to sustaining increasingly enormous Internet-access bills), commercial education sites will likely be more enticing to schools. If so, companies like ZapMe!, with their sweet bargain to taxpayers, will make further inroads into education and pedagogy.

Accordingly, how are we, and how will we be reading commercialized Internet content in schools? What will it mean to be a critical reader and a writer when so much of
our literacy tools are built around —indeed, saturated by — distracting and often invasive commercial messages? In our discussions about critical literacy in New Times, many of them occurring in this column, we have spoken of the need to develop a critical understanding of how texts position readers or viewers, and to include in our analysis a study of texts, audiences, media industries, and production in order to better understand the social and cultural contexts of texts. How would one critically evaluate the ZapMe! netspace? Let me provide an example in the next section.

A Critical Reading

Using a more traditional media literacy approach, I could begin by evaluating the text and image design of the ZapMe! netspace alone and consider the audience that text is reaching. Besides describing the purple and orange color scheme and button placement, I could better understand the organizational structure of the netspace, and understand why things appear where. ZapMe! content is grouped according to typical school subjects (Arts, English, Science), and seems to be appropriate for ZapMe!’s targeted age group—13-19 year-old teens. The overall netspace is easy to navigate, however, with bold subject headings leading to more and more precise subheadings, and finally to pre-existing sites, which have both nonprofit and commercial affiliations. ZapMe! places these sites in alphabetical order and provides brief one-sentence descriptions.

While it is impossible to critique the entire array of “continuously updated” Web content organized by ZapMe! editors, what strikes me is how vast, yet how ultimately limiting the information is. After clicking the purple Classroom button, for example,
students can find subject headings from Art to Women’s Studies. I select Multicultural Studies, which connects to African American Culture, Asian Culture, Cultural Awareness, Latino Culture and World Culture. African American Culture has 21 sites, which include “African American History 1691 to 1998” (this link is not in operation), “The Black Market.com” (offering products, services and feature stories for the Internet’s African American community) and “Kwanzaa information center,” (sponsored by the MelaNet Marketplace).

Of these 21 African American Culture site listings, one might ask why “The Black Market.com” and not NAACP? I can eventually find NAACP after accessing the “Internet Resources for Students of Afro-American History” link and locating a tiny listing near the bottom under “organizations” (that is not annotated), but does that mean that ZapMe! has got the most prominent African American organization in the U.S. “covered”? Similarly, why are there no Canadian news sites in the Newsstand section under North America, or no Australian news sites under World News? In the ZapMe! world, do these countries or continents not exist? Moreover, labor isn’t even a topic in the ZapMe! netspace, with the exception of one link to “the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics” under “Miscellaneous” under “Business and Economics.” Indeed, while many of the site links offered by ZapMe! may be wonderful educational tools, one might ask what the content selection criteria are for ZapMe! editors, and what is missing or buried. With no ZapMe! disclaimers about the limitations of their resources (only claims about the totality of these same resources), students may very well get the idea that ZapMe!’s educational material is all-inclusive.
The only original content supplied by ZapMe! comes from ZapMe!'s editors, who are responsible for picking suitable sites and for writing occasional essays on particular Web sites or ZapMe! features. One essay from November, 1999 called “ZapBuys,” for instance, discusses how ZapMe! can help seniors decorate their future barren dorm rooms with cool products from the ZapMall. “Check out ZapBuys! and see what you can find to help allieve your fears” (sic). Questionable topics aside, the writing is dismal, trite, and error-ridden. The overall quality is so bad that one wonders how these less-than-able writers can be trusted to pick “high quality” Web sites.

As I surf the ZapMe! netspace I am, of course, subjected to advertisements. A page might have a banner ad featuring the U.S. Army, a dynamic billboard promoting Topps trading cards, and a page sponsor icon for Gilat Satellite systems, for example. While the banner ad and page sponsor logo disappear at times depending on which content page a user is visiting, the dynamic billboard is a constant, even if a student is writing a paper using the computer’s word-processing software. Also constant are additional orange buttons at the top of the screen, mostly tools for Internet navigation and communication. The orange Shopping button, however, takes me to the ZapMall, where I can search for specific products or peruse an extensive catalogue featuring “cool stuff,” electronics, games, music & videos, software, sports gear, and products for seniors, such as dorm accessories. It’s important to note that while in the ZapMall, the number of cookies, sometimes 8-10 per page, increases. Cookies are computer files that track a users’ movements, and ZapMe! uses this information (with full consent from participating schools) to create advertising profiles on students and other ZapMe! users.
Once in the ZapMall, I can access the PointZone, which takes me to the ZapPoints page, where I learn about redeeming ZapPoints for real products:

It's simple. You surf the netspace. You earn points. Right now, you're surfing, learning and earning ZapPoints. For example, got a report on the Roman Empire? No sweat. You search the netspace, pull up research on Caesar's adventures and ZAP! . . . more ZapPoints may be headed your way. What do you do with your treasure chest of points? When you earn enough, you can redeem them for all sorts of cool stuff like CDs and books. There's more in store, so stay tuned. In the meantime, surf the ZapMe! netspace and get to know the coolest resource around. Surf. Learn. Earn ZapPoints today. Think of them as frequent surfer miles.

Besides earning ZapPoints, students can sign up for an “Internet-based buying card” (referred to as ZapCash) which directly links to their bank accounts and is “debt-free.” Parental permission is only necessary for students under thirteen, and the card’s coding mechanism prohibits the purchase of restricted items from unauthorized merchants.

**Critical Literacy and the Political Economy**

One must ask again, what does ZapPoints have to do with literacy? Never before has reading in a classroom been directly connected to consumerism. It is here that I need to turn to a larger, critical literacy framework that includes the political economy of education. Who is behind the ZapMe! production? What are the company’s goals? And what is their commitment to education? To answer these questions, I visit ZapMe!’s Corporate Web site. The first thing worth noting is that, depending on what area of the site one visits—“Partners”, “Educators”, “Parents”, or “Teens”—the ZapMe! message mutates. Understanding these various messages, it turns out, becomes an interesting exercise in critical literacy.
On the ZapMe! Partner page, prospective corporate investors are urged to “be part of the most exciting way yet to wire America’s schools,” and reminded that the ZapMe! network is immediate, interactive, and practical, bringing “high-quality educational content to students and teachers across the country.” ZapMe! also introduces its management team, whose members have backgrounds in information technology systems, computer superstore chains, consumer database marketing, children’s product and multimedia entertainment, and global information technology services. Noticeably missing are the educators, which casts a certain amount of doubt on the high-quality educational content ZapMe! says it promotes.

“ZapMe! Corporation,” the Partner Web site reads, “envisions a world where all teens — regardless of race, gender or financial status — have access to the tools and information they need to realize their full potential.” “Full potential” in this case could mean full academic potential. But in the context of this corporate Web page and the apparent goals of the management team, “full potential” could just as well refer to users’ full potential as advertising recipients.

On the ZapMe! Educators page, geared towards administrators and teachers, the words “free,” “easy,” “quality” and “safe” are emphasized. Here, people in the education trenches are reassured that every computer is fully outfitted for immediate use, that teacher training is free and available, and that the ZapMe! Web environment is pre-edited and educationally appropriate. “At ZapMe,” one section reads, “educational content is our highest priority.” Indeed, the company claims, over 10,000 of the best educational sites are regularly reviewed and updated by a qualified staff of ZapMe! editors, and teacher input is encouraged. To further assure concerned educators of ZapMe!’s content quality, Cyberpatrol filtering
software is “always on hand” to guide authorized searches. (A press release deep in the Partner page reveals, however, that to have Cyberpatrol on hand costs extra.)

Appealing to overworked teachers, ZapMe! also highlights the company’s prepared lesson plans and how-to information from the Teacher Toolbox, and steers educators to the convenient purchase of school supplies and educational software at the one-click-away Faculty Store. In its discussion of ZapPoints, ZapMe! uses the Educators page to frame the program from a more school-based or civic angle. Teachers are notified that more points are available for logging in at specific times of day, by participating in special on-line activities, or through afterschool and weekend surfing. While students (and teachers) can redeem their ZapPoints for fun merchandise (the student appeal), it is here that ZapMe! tells educators about donating ZapPoints to the school (to purchase paper, toner and school supplies) or to non-profit organizations partnering with ZapMe!.

On the ZapMe! Parents’ page, the company recognizes parental anxiety about low-quality, pornographic Internet environments, and reminds its audience of ZapMe!’s numerous content links and commitment to screening unauthorized sites. Above all, though, ZapMe! promises parents that parental involvement is a key function of the netspace, which promotes access to teachers and “a whole community approach to education.” Besides facilitating better parent-teacher relations, ZapMe! affirms that parents can help their children with their homework via readily available Microsoft tools like Word, Excel and Powerpoint. Parents are also encouraged to purchase school supplies at the hassle-free e-commerce environments of Classroom Direct, Scantron Quality Computers, and the ZapMe! Computing Store. Although the Parents’ page fits
the democratic notion of community involvement in education, it better serves ZapMe!'s purposes of extending its commercial Web environment into every student’s family life.

It’s on the ZapMe! Teens page, however, where the marketing focus of ZapMe! is most evident. Teenagers are addressed with the clumsy hipness of adults eager to appropriate the aura of adolescent cool. “Homework again? No problem. ZapMe!’s Web browser gives you fast easy access to everything you need to succeed.” Teenagers no longer need to make unnecessary trips to the library, they are told, because ZapMe! has these 10,000 pre-selected educational sites. Besides, ZapMe! has other things for teens to do, like email their friends, get “the 411 on your fave groups and tunes,” play multiplayer on-line games in a full Internet Arcade, get the latest highlights from tonight’s big game (“you get everything but that stanky smell in the locker room”) and “be the first to know when Leonardo’s newest is gonna drop.” It’s only the Teens page, however, where visitors are invited to the ZapMall — the place to shop without “hassling for the wheels or a ride from the ‘rents:”

Check it out: ZapMall’s got Games, Music, Videos, Books, Electronics, Sports, School Stuff — It’s all good. Plus, there’s the PointZone, where you can use your ZapPoints to score great gear. At ZapMall, the only thing you won’t find is the food court.

Through its constant reminders about the ZapPoints program, ZapMe!’s Teens page constructs self-conscious, peer-pressured, shop-happy students who are excited to redeem their earned ZapPoints “for all sorts of slammin’ stuff.” Not surprisingly, the Teens page never mentions the more charitable applications of the ZapPoints program.
The educational messages from these four sites seem to contradict each other.

Together, however, these sites, all of which ooze with public relations savvy and careful doublespeak, present a coherent picture of ZapMe! students, parents and teachers hooked to the portal at all hours, surfing for ZapPoints, purchasing products, tucking away advertising messages for future (or immediate) purchases, and being corralled into ZapMe!’s increasingly expanding curricular offerings, parental features, and teacher templates. Advertisers have long believed that reaching consumers early is beneficial to building life-long brand loyalty, and that having brands legitimized by the school environment and a teacher’s authority is even better. Creating school-sanctioned (and by default, home-sanctioned) brand immersion plus instant shopping access is the most important “content” ZapMe! has to sell.

Indeed, ZapMe! presents educators with a new kind of education. Instead of helping students learn to navigate the Internet environment, read and write, and develop sound critical thinking skills, ZapMe!’s obvious goal is to fashion students as uncritical consumers-in-training. As a rapidly growing company, ZapMe! says as much in its various employment announcements. In December, 1999, ZapMe! needed people to:

• coordinate with copywriters and the Content group to integrate appropriate content into promotions
• work with teachers to gain priorities and make recommendations on what courses and curricula to prioritize
• promote and implement revenue generating shopping experiences for parents of teens within the ZapMe! e-commerce site, and
• develop programs which leverage the ZapMe! school relationship to attract parents to shop with ZapMe!
Judging from their employment opportunities, ZapMe! wants to expand into teacher training and the development of actual courses that are highly dependent on the ZapMe! interface. The company also wants to develop new ways for parents and teens to use the interface at home and with their parents and integrate the ZapMe! portal (and its many e-commerce opportunities) into their lives. These strategies help push ZapMe! use well beyond the daily four-hour in-school requirement.

**Steps To Take**

It is because of this kind of thinking — these kinds of calculated attempts to influence pedagogy and the entire educational environment towards a non-educational goal (and then make educational claims to the contrary) — that educators need to begin questioning the economic and political motives behind the literacy practices related to new technology, and to also help students build these kinds of critical literacy skills. In their tendency to embrace popular culture as a means for reaching students, many media literacy advocates are often too quick to read the pleasure into commercial messages (which often inspire or derive from popular culture) without also evaluating the production and processing behind the pleasure. Using a political economy critique to “empower” students and “arm them” against corporate manipulation, while a good first step, is not an ideal goal, however. It’s as good, in a way, as accepting a defective product without any safety features, and then warning students that they’re responsible for protecting themselves. My point is that if you have the opportunity to use or create a *better* product, do so.
A second step is to encourage Web page production to help create better products. Not surprisingly, ZapMe! discourages production by offering “personalization” of the same commercialized netspace. Personalization, which amounts to listing your favorite ZapMe! links on a page within ZapMe!’s ad-heavy interface, is the antithesis of the Web’s do-it-yourself home page capabilities that give users valuable creative control over Web page design and content. We should applaud those schools that have created their own school Internet portals — more than half of the public schools in the U.S. have a home page on the Web already. But we should further encourage schools to increase the capabilities of their home pages, aggregate those exceptional links that aid educational practice, develop an informed context for these choices, and use the Web as a means for community building inside and outside of the school.

Finally, we often forget that as schools increasingly become marketing-glutted image and message environments (and thus more susceptible to corporate control), we as educators have less control in helping students step outside of consumer culture and properly critique its many problems. We should work to better understand, and then vigorously fight against consumption promotion in school, which inevitably has a different bottom line — return on capital investment — than that of educators. Indeed, we need to remind ourselves why public spaces — the heart of all democratic discourse — should be free of corporate imagery and control. As Herbert Schiller points out, democracy shouldn’t come to be narrowly “defined as the act of choosing...goods.”

Part of this understanding involves a continued questioning of the role of technology, including the Internet, in education. How did schools come to be wired so
quickly, and what is the political and economic impetus behind this movement? We also need to consider what stands to be gained and lost from the intense efforts and expense to connect our schools, and what circumstances lead schools to welcome projects such as the ZapMe! interface into their learning environment.

---