



For Immediate Release

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## Monograph Debunks “Science” Behind Campaign to Limit Consumer Product Ads

In a MONOGRAPH released today by the Washington Legal Foundation (WLF), social science and public policy analyst **Dr. John C. Luik** injects a compellingly researched and argued dose of reality into the debate over limits on consumer product advertising. As Dr. Luik argues, the purportedly supportive studies, and the manner in which they have been presented and utilized, offer both scant support for limitations on commercial free speech and false hope that such policies could solve problems such as obesity and underage drinking.

**IDEOLOGY MASKED AS SCIENTIFIC TRUTH: THE DEBATE ABOUT ADVERTISING AND CHILDREN** was authored *pro bono* by Dr. Luik, who has written extensively on the use of social science to achieve policy objectives and is a Senior Fellow at the Democracy Institute. The MONOGRAPH features a foreword by **Professor Todd Zywicki** of George Mason University School of Law and immediate past Director of the Office of Planning and Policy at the Federal Trade Commission.

From the outset of the MONOGRAPH, Dr. Luik lays bare the activists’ goal in tying advertising to negative effects on children – to circumvent both the constitutional protection of speech and the argument that choices on what to consume are a personal matter. Efforts to posture the issue in this manner have intensified in the past several years, especially through research studies and papers issued with much fanfare by public and private institutions. These studies are presented as the “scientific truth” alluded to in the MONOGRAPH’s title. In four extensively documented and clearly presented sections, the MONOGRAPH reveals the deep flaws in this empirical “evidence” and exposes the case for limiting advertising, as Professor Zywicki states in the foreword, “***a tissue of distortions, confusions, and half-truths.***”

Dr. Luik begins by examining two notions that ideologically-motivated researchers feel are unassailable – that advertising is highly successful at altering behavior, and that children do not understand the purpose of advertising nor are able to distinguish it from entertainment content. A 2004 American Psychological Association (APA) study advances these notions, but, as Dr. Luik demonstrates, a growing body of empirical evidence, much of it ignored or minimized by the APA, dictates against the study’s findings. As Dr. Luik writes, “***while children’s movement toward adulthood is being accelerated in every other aspect of their lives, with advertising it is, like the APA Report’s data, trapped in the 1970s.***”

In the remainder of the MONOGRAPH, Dr. Luik focuses on the three areas of consumer product advertising which the APA’s study and paternalistic activists routinely demonize and tie to children: tobacco, alcohol, and food. While activists and like-minded social scientists assume in their work that tobacco and alcohol ads are aimed at children and succeed at enticing them to consume these forbidden products, Dr. Luik explains in two effective subsections that no such consensus exists and that few studies control for other factors implicated in illegal smoking or drinking. In debunking the ideological studies, Dr. Luik discusses the large body of evidence, overlooked by the media and others, which point to factors such as peer pressure, environment, and parental influence as the predominant causes of underage consumption.

Food advertising, which has come in for extreme criticism and scrutiny for its alleged role in America’s childhood obesity rate, is the MONOGRAPH’s final area of focus. Contrary to the views espoused by such “academic” reviews as a widely reported one by the U.S. Institute of Medicine (IOM), Dr. Luik argues that “***this story about the supposed causal connection between particularly children’s diets, weight, and food advertising . . . is at the least unproven and at the most false in each of its claims.***” He finds great fault with the IOM’s and other recent studies’ faulty reasoning and scientific method. As with research on tobacco and alcohol advertising, these studies fail to control for other factors which might lead to weight gain in children and ignored numerous, more recent bodies of empirical evidence which do not find a connection between advertising and consumption. The

author praises a 2004 study by the English Office of Communications for seriously considering other factors in children's eating habits other than simply advertising.

In his conclusion, Dr. Luik argues that even if one were to accept that advertising overbears children's power to resist illegal or harmful consumption, activists' policy prescriptions of limits or bans will be at best ineffective or at worst counterproductive. He makes the case for greater parental involvement in young consumers' decision making, as well as better educating children on the role of advertising and how to make healthy, intelligent food and other product choices.

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Copies of this educational WLF Monograph can be obtained by forwarding a request and a check for \$10 per copy to: Publications Department, Washington Legal Foundation, 2009 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036, or calling (202) 588-0302. Questions regarding the Monograph or WLF's publications can be directed to Legal Studies Division Chief Counsel Glenn Lammi.

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