

Ad Council message weakens as media giants pinch pennies

[FRANCE CRAIN]

I HAVE WRITTEN BEFORE about how the powerful new media and communications conglomerates have the potential to blur the lines of objective journalism. As the forces of print, cable movies, books, telephones and computers come together, and with the media go-liaths forging complex deals with a variety of cross-marketing partners, you can see that the perception, at least, of objective reporting is fast becoming an antiquated notion.

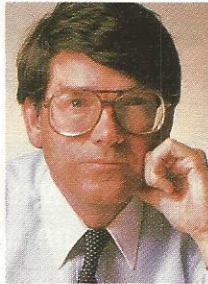
Now, Ruth Wooden, president of the Advertising Council, gives us another reason to worry about this vast confluence of media power. At the Ad Council's annual dinner the other week, Ruth said the dollar value and media space donated to the council's public service announcements declined last year (and is expected to be only modestly up in 1996). And she added: "I fear that this might be becoming a long-term trend."

Ruth feels the Ad Council should be doing better. "Never has the world seen such a building of empires and power as in the media industry today. Media are the currency of our culture, yet the allotments for public service—and not just for the Ad Council—seemed greater when there were just three TV networks, home-grown radio, and every major city still had an evening newspaper."

Those were the days, all right, but they were before the media companies acquired all that debt along with their farflung holdings. "I know the economics of the media industry have changed dramatically," Ruth conceded. "But I also know they are not going to get better if your audiences don't have healthy, economically stable families and if our children grow up ignorant of our values and disrespectful of our interests."

But it's pretty hard to be mind-

ful of these broader economic and social truths when you are loaded down with debt and struggling to keep your stock price up so you can make more deals. Such quaint ideals as journalistic truth, or running PSAs in greater frequency, take a back seat to the deadly earnest process of squeezing every last nickel down to the bottom line.



The Ad Council's banner year was 1994, when media donated almost \$900 million to run the council's messages. But last year was down 20% to not quite \$715 million. The Ad Council's newsletter says heavy demand by the big advertisers led to less time and space available for PSAs in 1995. Donna Feiner, senior VP-media, adds that the resurgence in advertising, which got under way in 1994, "caught up with us" in 1995 when the networks put an "emphasis on the bottom line" and sold every time slot they could get their hands on. The networks also

had to use more units for make goods to offset declining ratings and for their own program promotions (during NBC-TV's telecast of the Olympics, the network was the third-largest advertiser).

As Ruth Wooden says, the Ad Council is not alone in trying to get their public service ads on TV (radio, it should be noted, contributes 50% of the Ad Council messages vs. TV's 40%, and the consolidation in that medium doesn't seem to have affected its appetite for running PSAs).

The Partnership for a Drug Free America has seen its media contribution fall \$100 million from its 1991 peak—when drug usage was down.

Part of the problem might be that both groups are focusing on the plight of children, although Ruth points out that their target segments are different (the Ad Council messages talk about children's problems to an adult audience). But still they are both competing for the same free air time.

Ruth—honored last week as Adwoman of the Year by the Advertising Women of New York—pointed out that when the Ad Council was formed 54 years ago, advertisers contributed part of their ad budgets to the council. Indeed, why should the media carry the full load? Maybe the Ad Council should get back to its roots. □