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The Reverberating Network

The protesters lost the battle and won the war. Education professor George Hillocks, Jr., called the Kanawha County dispute "the most prolonged, intense, and violent textbook protest this county has ever witnessed."¹ The fact that nothing like it has occurred since gives a good indication of how effective it was: no publisher has dared offer to schools any textbooks of a comparable range of subjects and ideas and points of view to those the protesters vilified and crippled on the market. Theoretically returned to the Kanawha County schools, they may as well not have been. In many other ways the bitter controversy closed up its own school system as much as it did textbook editorial offices. Let's look at the effects of the dispute, starting locally and moving outward.

Of the immediate aftermath Candor-Chandler gives this picture.

With threats of violence and lawsuits hanging over their heads for using certain materials with some students or failing to use the same materials with other students, teachers were understandably frustrated. The trust relationship between teachers, students and parents was replaced by an atmosphere of apprehension and doubt. A student noted, "In my school we are two armed camps—the teachers against the community. Teachers are afraid to teach. . . ."

Just how far the doubt and uncertainty regarding acceptable classroom subjects extended is illustrated in one principal's comments to *Washington Star-News* reporter John Mathews, "A teacher came to me the other day and asked, 'What do you think? Can we defend teaching this in class?' She was talking about a unit in biology on the sexual reproduction of mollusks."

Although the conflict created by the textbooks ended, controversy remains over what should be in the curriculum and what should be the concern of the school. A great deal of frustration and confusion remains over what is or is not acceptable in the classroom. Many teachers no longer feel comfortable to use their professional judgment in the selection of instructional materials. "They distrust the Central Office staff, the Board of Education and the community. They are afraid for their safety, peace of mind and even their jobs," commented Gene Douglas, Principal of George Washington High School.

A number of teachers and principals, especially in those areas where the textbook protest was most active, either resigned or requested transfers to other positions. For example, one school in the Upper Kanawha Valley, Cedar Grove Community School, that was closed by protesting parents, lost six teachers and the principal prior to the 1975-76 school year. It was generally agreed by the press, school officials and the public that the effects of the textbook controversy would be felt by the Kanawha County School system for years to come.²

After visiting the county system a couple of years after the row Hillocks reported this in *School Review*, August 1978:

Children whose parents granted permission must use the controversial books only in the library, not in the classroom where other children might overhear discussions of them. Or teachers must make other special provision for use of the books. The result is that many do not use them at all. Many of the texts sit in the board of education warehouse. One elementary principal told me that she will not order the books. Her school was in a major hotbed of the protest. She does not wish to disrupt the school program again. . . .

Some teachers are looking for ways out of education, many others are angry at the vilification to which they feel they have been subjected, and many say they will never feel the same about teaching again.³

When I visited the county eight years after the controversy, in June of 1982, people at the School Board offices told me that school morale was still bad. As one sign, the activities of the local affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English had fallen into depression. A language arts coordinator there said to me, "It [the dispute] did irreparable damage. The teachers were afraid to teach anything. I have no doubt they are still gun-shy about many issues. If you teach noun and verb and parts of speech in the traditional way and have them fill in blanks—that's a good safe way to do it."⁴ A young teacher who had not been employed in the Kanawha district at the time of the dispute told me in 1982 that she had found the atmosphere so charged and repressive that in English she dared to teach only very prudently and so she stuck close to her grammar lessons. Even these blew apart, however, when she got to the topic of gender. "My parents don't want me to be taught about sex," some students asserted, and she did indeed hear from their parents.

Kanawha County, as board people there dismally related to me in 1982, was the only school district in the United States to have adopted the creationism textbook program produced in Anaheim, California (Robert Dornan's congressional district) based on the "creation science" that in 1982 an Arkansas judge ruled was not science when he invalidated

a state ordinance passed at the behest of a fundamentalist movement, and that the United States Supreme Court itself repudiated in 1987. Although West Virginia has, since 1974, made a law of the multicultural adoption requirement that was only a resolution then, the Kanawha incident has so intimidated publishers that adoption committees will look in vain to find a program truly fulfilling that requirement. The adoption guidelines that Kanawha County passed while in the grips of the fracas (see chapter 1) were essentially drawn from the Gablers' censorship service. In reality these county guidelines and the state multicultural requirement contradict each other.

The controversial textbooks that brought on this state of affairs were never reordered, and the copies originally purchased languished on shelves for the most part, an object of revulsion even to those who believed in them. Adoptions are changed or renewed every five years for each subject, and other books have come in from the chastened publishers, who have carefully retrenched on noncanonical writers and subjects and have dusted off and refurbished their once discarded grammar series of the forties. The programs they put into Kanawha County all suffered severe losses as word spread over the censorship network to other states.

A textbook series represents millions of dollars in investment, and only a few large corporations in the trade can ante up that kind of capital. They will do virtually anything to protect those outlays and make them pay off. Educational philosophy does not play even a bit part in this financial theater. School superintendents and school boards fear offending their constituencies and bringing on themselves what their counterparts suffered in Kanawha. Why risk your job when other textbooks will serve as well, to all appearances?

An elementary English series up for adoption in Texas at the time of the Kanawha controversy and rated near the top right up to the last moment was suddenly dropped, despite its being considerably more innocuous than the West Virginia books. The publisher felt that the failure to get listed owed entirely to effects from Kanawha County. If no textbook showdowns have occurred since 1974 of comparable magnitude and intensity, it is because that one so cowed publishers that no successor could occur. Of the Kanawha County dispute a schoolteacher who was one of the authors of *Communicating* wrote: "Somehow minority opinion has been allowed to effectively dictate in the selection of textbooks, and even, I suggest, in determining the philosophy and content of the curriculum."⁵

But smaller struggles continued, and in 1982 alone the Public Broadcasting System aired two programs dealing with censorship in schools—a portion of the "MacNeil/Lehrer Report," devoted to Texas adoptions and the influence of the Gablers (represented by Mel), and "Books Under Fire"

in the "Crisis to Crisis" series. Emboldened by textbook successes and the increasingly regressive atmosphere of the later 1970s, conservatives of the eighties focused on banning regular trade books from school and town libraries, a trend that has grown dramatically up to this writing, in 1987. But the two biggest cases of schoolbook conflict in North America occurred in the year immediately following the Kanawha County case.

The first began on November 7, 1975, when two school board members in the Island Trees Union Free School District in New York decided to see what they could find in a high school library.

Armed with a list of "objectionable books" that they had received at a conservative political conference two months earlier, they searched the card catalog for volumes they would later label "mentally dangerous." They found nine, many of which deal with the experiences of Jews, blacks, and Hispanics.⁶

Some of the authors were Bernard Malamud, Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Eldridge Cleaver, who, along with J. D. Salinger, Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence, and a couple of dozen other writers show up with totally predictable regularity in censorship cases, not because they are worse violators of the objectors' values but because they got firmly established early in the network.

When the Island Trees Board of Education removed the books from the libraries and the curriculum, Steven Pico and four other students filed suit against the district on the basis of First Amendment rights. Courts avoided dealing with the issue as long as possible, and even after a United States Circuit Court of Appeals finally ordered the case to trial in 1981 and it reached the Supreme Court, it never received a decisive ruling on constitutionality, because the Court split down the middle. *Pico vs. Island Trees Board* did, however, push litigation over school book banning farther than it ever had ever gone before. In doing so it revealed just how profound is the dilemma about individual rights and local governmental authority.

There began also in 1975 what may be Canada's most significant school book controversy, still being waged as of 1987. The Peterborough County Board in Ontario removed from schools Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* because some parents had complained of its "gutter language" and "immoral passages." An article by two Canadian educators in 1985 makes clear that "Prior to 1975 in Peterborough County selection issues were resolved without publicity," but "the situation changed dramatically in 1975. . . ." This change was set up, however, by the removal of two books "immediately prior to 1975," that is, during the period of the Kanawha County upheaval, which received a tremendous amount of

publicity not only through regular news coverage but in special talk shows and feature articles.

The repercussion was typical. Educators "felt that the situation would lead to self-censorship, or what Kenneth Donelson has called 'the chill factor'—the pre-selection and removal of books by teachers and librarians in anticipation of complaints."⁸ Subsequently, in fact, two high school principals did remove two novels on their own because they felt sure parents would object to them. Periodically, the community conflict flares up again as some other books become at issue. (Incidentally, an organization called Renaissance Canada plays the same role in censorship there as the Moral Majority does in the United States.)

As a program only a year old, *Interaction* was being considered for adoption in many places at about the time the Kanawha fracas got publicity. This provided a fine cause for the national censorship network. A city that Houghton Mifflin salespeople considered a sure thing—Modesto, California—voted against adoption essentially because of an editorial appearing the day before in the *Modesto Bee* asking whether the citizens really wanted their children to read the immoral books that were thrown out of Charleston, West Virginia.

For several previous years the enlightened and dedicated language arts supervisors and coordinators of the Modesto Unified School District had been casting about for good ways to educate a student population comprising up to 50 percent, in some schools, children of migrant farm workers, mostly Chicano. Though the agricultural towns of California's San Joaquin Valley can be among the most conservative in the nation, the special difficulties of schooling in this district, where half the students may turn over between the start and close of a school year, had caused district curriculum leaders to reach out for innovation, having long ago discovered that traditional approaches were hopeless. These leaders were trying to get *Interaction* into their schools because it afforded the flexible methods and authentic materials that they felt could work where so much else had failed. (As late as 1980 the East Harlem district adopted *Interaction* for the same reasons.) They said after *Interaction* was voted down that the letter in the *Bee* made teachers anxious and was the main cause of the program's being defeated despite their own support.

We recall that the language arts specialists in both the West Virginia State Department of Education and Kanawha County had strongly favored *Interaction* but were overruled by public opinion. Fine! Schools should represent the will of the people, not of school administrators, as I have written in my books to educators. But the public is plural. The opinion that won out in Charleston and Modesto was of only one faction. Whether that faction was a minority or a majority makes no difference if school contradicts home. The "rule of the majority" does not hold

when personal values and child-rearing are at stake. That in fact is a point about which the Kanawha protesters were certainly correct. Which means that when they win, others suffer a loss as great as the one they fear.

An extremely well organized campaign, replete with ringers from out of state, pulled off a similar feat on the eve of state adoption in Arizona, which till then had also been regarded as sure to adopt *Interaction* if for no other reason than that its neighbors, California and New Mexico, had already done so, and generally that southwestern bloc votes the same way (and includes, let's note, some of the most conservative citizenry in the nation). *Interaction* had been adopted by California the same year as the Kanawha row, by the largest vote ever accorded a textbook program there. But aside from the example of such an influential state, Arizona seemed very likely to adopt *Interaction* for some of the same curricular reasons that Modesto educators wanted it, since Arizona, too, has many migrant workers and students for whom English is a second language. While in San Antonio in '74 to deliver a lecture to a professional reading association I talked with company field consultants, who said that despite the unconventionality of *Interaction*, New Mexico teachers seemed to know instinctively what to do with the program and were happy with it.

What happened at the textbook hearings in Tucson is recounted in a letter from someone who was there.

The Reading Reform Foundation, which was (and may still be) power-housed by one woman whose name I can't seem to dredge up from the memory bank, had a very good and direct pipeline to all of the Kanawha Co. activities and people. Many of the things which surfaced in newspapers around the country resurfaced in Arizona as part of the anti-nonphonics programs which had been submitted in the state adoption. On the day of the textbook hearings, the RRF people sat on one side of the room and "others" sat on the opposite side. RRF people also wore buttons with two unfurled American flags on the front and a statement around the edge which said something like "Concerned Citizens of Kanawha Co." These people (many of them simply parents and laity outside of the educational world) wanted only one program on the state list: *Open Court*, ostensibly because of its strong synthetic phonics program. Within their arguments, however, they got into all sorts of values judgments that went beyond their ridiculous declarations of "Phonics cured my daughter's asthma!" and "God believes in the beauty of phonics," etc., etc., etc. Truly, statements like these were actually made.⁹

(As a method, phonics tends to isolate and drill on the sounds of English as they are rendered by the spellings rather than to teach these "phonographemic" relations through actual texts, where meaning resides.) "These were educated people," this correspondent added, "who were fraught with lack of reason based on some inward sense of righteousness."

During the first weeks of the Kanawha outbreak the Tucson *Arizona Daily Star*, on September 26, 1974, had said in an editorial called "Militant Ignorance":

There is reason to believe that what the militant miners in Kanawha County perceive to be against Americanism and Christianity merely is critical of their brand of white supremacy.

The Kanawha County crusade for decency really is no better than an appeal to violent emotion and a plea for continued, blind ignorance. If the protesters succeed they will ensure another generation of stupidity.

A typical polarization occurred in Anchorage, Alaska, another town on the censorship circuits, with a direct line in fact to Kanawha County protesters. In April of 1975, while the Kanawha dispute dragged on, I was invited jointly by the University of Alaska and the Anchorage School District to do, as a regular paid consultant, a three-day credit course for teachers specifically on *Interaction*. This means that language arts specialists and education professors were trying to familiarize teachers with it in order to help bring it into the schools. They seemed totally unaware that the program they were enthusiastically advocating was at that moment being blacklisted by some of their constituents.

In January 1975, the Houghton Mifflin vice-president in charge of school textbooks wrote me, regarding the sales figures on *Interaction* for 1974:

The West Virginia controversy and the general mood of the nation, coupled with the difficult economic conditions, have taken a toll and will probably continue to do so in 1975. We have had orders cancelled and sales returned primarily on the basis of the Kanawha County publicity. Much of that is balanced, however, by the continuing enthusiasm of those who have been using the total program.¹¹

Actually, sales for 1975 increased over 1974 and made this third year the peak year of *Interaction's* career. Nevertheless, in 1976, the company started phasing out portions of the materials and quit supporting *Interaction* generally. This means that it stopped advertising and other promoting such as workshops or significant booth displays and decided to let the program die on the vine except to the extent it might sell itself. When the home executive office takes this stand, the sales forces in the field tend to drop a program also and not to make further efforts with it in their school visits and their own promotion.

I was told by Houghton Mifflin that it follows a formula requiring a program of *Interaction's* magnitude to gross, at that time, over \$3,000,000 a year after the third year or be dropped. Since *Interaction* earned somewhat less than this in 1975, it failed by the formula despite great favor in

the profession. In other words, the company dropped it after its best year because that year was not good enough. Of course such negative assumptions become self-fulfilling prophecies so that sales do in fact go down, as happened with *Interaction* the following year, 1976.

Many factors account for why *Interaction* did not go over in a big way (one of them being, I believe, this rigid corporation formula itself). Co-authors and I had always understood that its many innovations, most having little to do with reading content, might seriously limit the program's penetration into schools. But the Kanawha County uproar played a significant part in defeating our effort to reform the teaching of school's main subject.

It hurt us a great deal not only by lowering sales for the crucial third year enshrined in the formula but also by generally making company executives fear for the company's reputation and hence entire line of textbooks. For both personal and legal reasons they would of course never admit to sacrificing one program for the others, but company people have told me that sales representatives of all textbook publishers routinely badmouth their competitors to schools and therefore make certain when they go before selection committees or school principals to carry the glad tidings that so-and-so's books have been condemned as immoral. They know this will strike terror into the hearts of anyone holding public office or bound by the job to cope with the community.

The book dispute hurt us most not by influencing school people directly but by influencing company sales people. After the flurry of publicity settled, not many educators remembered which publishers and programs had been embroiled, *but in such cases the sales representatives never forget*. They remain traumatized and drop the offending program like a hot coal. A large textbook publisher offers programs that compete among themselves within each major market, that is, within each major school subject. It may make little difference to a salesperson *which* program he sells so long as he or she sells *one*.

The chief risk was put to me very forcefully by a salesman who said he didn't want to be associated with either *Interaction* or my name because when he went to a school to sell his line of other Houghton Mifflin books — in math, social studies, science, as well as English — he would be branded as representing the company that put out *those* books. The deadliest fear of salespeople is to become *persona non grata* in schools, for whatever reason, because then they simply cannot function. I feel sure that this fear causes them to exaggerate considerably, and to imagine effects far beyond, as I say, the memory of school people, who are focused other ways ordinarily. Still, one can understand that to be tainted with such emotional conflict as was enacted around Charleston could so jeopardize a representative's whole line that even an easily sellable program would not be worth

the risk of association. Within six weeks I learned of three representatives under one regional sales office who refused to have anything to do with *Interaction*. This included unwillingness to set up a display of *Interaction* at the request of a conference host where I was the featured speaker and, in another case, not cooperating with a university education center that volunteered to research and promote *Interaction* itself.

So circular is the influence between home-office executives and field salespeople that it is quite possible that the company's decision to quit investing in *Interaction* was substantially influenced by the perception of negative field attitudes. If salespeople turn against a program, it's dead; the home office cannot control them. Then, of course, the home-office decision exerts a second negative effect on the field, and the original trouble amplifies itself as it goes full circle.

All this is not to say that the disturbance in Kanawha County necessarily caused the demise of *Interaction*, but it shows how far, through chain reaction, can reach such an incident of book-banning. All of the other new programs attacked there also lost momentum and were prematurely phased out or rendered innocuous by alterations. And nothing like them has come again.