

Media Literacy and the Critical Process

1 DESCRIPTION. Arrange to interview four to eight friends or relatives of different ages about their musical tastes and influences. Devise questions about what music they listen to and have listened to at different stages of their lives. What music do they buy or collect? What's the first album (or single) they acquired? What's the latest album? What stories or vivid memories do they relate to particular songs or artists? Collect demographic and consumer information: age, gender, occupation, educational background, place of birth, and current place of residence.

2 ANALYSIS. Chart and organize your results. Do you recognize any patterns emerging from the data or stories? What kinds of music did your interview subjects listen to when they were younger? What kinds of music do they listen to now? What formed/influenced their musical interests? If their musical interests changed, what happened? (If they stopped listening to music, note that and find out why.) Do they have any associations between music and their everyday lives? Are these music associations and lifetime interactions with songs and artists important to them?

Music Preferences across Generations

We make judgments about music all the time. Older generations don't like some of the music younger people prefer, and young people often dismiss some of the music of previous generations. Even among our peers, we have different tastes in music and often reject certain kinds of music that have become too popular or that don't conform to our own preferences. The following exercise aims to understand musical tastes beyond our own individual choices. Always include yourself in this project.

3 INTERPRETATION. Based on what you have discovered and the patterns you have charted, determine what the patterns mean. Does age, gender, geographic location, or education matter in musical tastes? Over time, are the changes in musical tastes and buying habits significant? Why or why not? What kind of music is most important to your subjects? Finally, and most important, why do you think their music preferences developed as they did?

4 EVALUATION. Determine how your interview subjects came to like particular kinds of music. What constitutes "good" and "bad" music for them? Did their ideas change over time? How? Are they open- or closed-minded about music? How do they form judgments about music? What criteria did

your interview subjects offer for making judgments about music? Do you think their criteria are a valid way to judge music?

5 ENGAGEMENT. To expand on your findings and see how they match up with industry practices, contact music professionals. Track down record label representatives from a small indie label and a large mainstream label, and ask them whom they are trying to target with their music. How do they find out about the musical tastes of their consumers? Share your findings with them, and discuss whether these match their practices. Speculate whether the music industry is serving the needs and tastes of you and your interview subjects. If not, what might be done to change the current system?

"Through their raw, nihilistic singles and violent performances, the [Sex Pistols] revolutionized the idea of what rock and roll could be."

STEPHEN THOMAS
ERLEWINE,
ALL-MUSIC GUIDE,
1996

Rock Turns Psychedelic

Alcohol and drugs have long been associated with the private lives of blues, jazz, country, and rock musicians. These links, however, became much more public in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when authorities busted members of the Rolling Stones and the Beatles. With the increasing role of drugs in youth culture and the availability of LSD (not illegal until the mid-1960s), more and more rock musicians experimented with and sang about drugs in what were frequently labeled rock's psychedelic years. Many groups and performers of the *psychedelic* era (named for the mind-altering effects of LSD and other drugs) like the Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company (featuring Janis Joplin), the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the Doors, and the Grateful Dead (as well as established artists like the Beatles and the Stones) believed that artistic expression could be enhanced by mind-altering drugs. The 1960s drug explorations coincided with the free-speech movement, in which many artists and followers saw experimenting with

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1 DESCRIPTION. Listen to a typical morning or late afternoon hour of a popular local commercial talk-news radio station and a typical hour of your local NPR station from the same time period over a two- to three-day period. Keep a log of what topics are covered and what news stories are reported. For the commercial station, log what commercials are carried and how much time in an hour is devoted to ads. For the noncommercial station, note how much time is devoted to recognizing the station's sources of funding support and who the supporters are.

2 ANALYSIS. Look for patterns. What kinds of stories are covered? What kinds of topics are discussed? Create a chart to categorize the stories. To cover events and issues, do the stations use actual reporters at the scene? How much time is given to reporting compared to time devoted to opinion? How many sources are cited in each story? What kinds of interview sources are used? Are they expert sources or regular person-on-the-street interviews? How many sources are men and how many are women?

Comparing Commercial and Noncommercial Radio

After the arrival and growth of commercial TV, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) was created in 1967 as the funding agent for public broadcasting—an alternative to commercial TV and radio for educational and cultural programming that could not be easily sustained by commercial broadcasters in search of large general audiences. As a result, NPR (National Public Radio) developed to provide national programming to public stations to supplement local programming efforts. Today, NPR affiliates get just 2 percent of their funding from the federal government. Most money for public radio comes instead from corporate sponsorships, individual grants, and private donations.

3 INTERPRETATION. What do these patterns mean? Is there a balance between reporting and opinion? Do you detect any bias, and if so, how did you determine this? Are the stations serving as watchdogs to ensure that democracy's best interests are being served? What effect, if any, do you think the advertisers/supporters have on the programming? What arguments might you make about commercial and noncommercial radio based on your findings?

4 EVALUATION. Which station seems to be doing a better job serving its local audience? Why? Do you buy the 1930s argument that

noncommercial stations serve narrow, special interests while commercial stations serve capitalism and the public interest? Why or why not? From which station did you learn the most, and which station did you find most entertaining? Explain. What did you like and dislike about each station?

5 ENGAGEMENT. Join your college radio station. Talk to the station manager about the goals for a typical hour of programming and what audience they are trying to reach. Finally, pitch program or topic ideas that would improve your college station's programming.

Creation of the First Noncommercial Networks

During the 1960s, nonprofit broadcasting found a Congress sympathetic to an old idea: using radio and television as educational tools. As a result, **National Public Radio (NPR)** and the **Public** first noncommercial networks. Under the pro-

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1 DESCRIPTION. Pick a current reality program and a current sitcom or drama. Choose programs that either started in the last year or two or that have been on television for roughly the same period of time. Now develop a “viewing sheet” that allows you to take notes as you watch the two programs over a three- to four-week period. Keep track of main characters, plot lines, settings, conflicts, and resolutions. Also track the main problems that are posed in the programs and how they are worked out in each episode. Find out and compare the basic production costs of each program.

2 ANALYSIS. Look for patterns and differences in the ways stories are told in the two programs. At a general level, what are the conflicts about (e.g., men versus women, managers versus employees, tradition versus change, individuals versus institutions, honesty versus dishonesty, authenticity versus artificiality)? How complicated or simple are the tensions in the two programs, and how are problems resolved? Are there some conflicts that should not be permitted—like pitting white against black contestants? Are there noticeable differences between “the look” of each program?

3 INTERPRETATION. What do some of the patterns mean? What seems to be the point of each program? What do they say about relationships, values, masculinity or femininity, power, social class, and so on?

4 EVALUATION. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each program? Which program would you judge as better at telling a compelling story that you want to watch each week? How could each program improve its storytelling?

5 ENGAGEMENT. Either through online forums or via personal contacts, find other viewers of these programs. Ask them follow-up questions about what they like or don't like about such shows, about what they might change, about what the programs' creators might do differently. Then report your findings to the programs' producers through a letter, a phone call, or an e-mail. Try to elicit responses from the producers about the status of their programs. How did they respond to your findings?

TV and the State of Storytelling

The rise of the reality program over the past decade has more to do with the cheaper costs of this genre than with the wild popularity of these programs. In fact, in the history of television and viewer numbers, traditional sitcoms and dramas—and even prime-time news programs like *60 Minutes* and *20/20*—have been far more popular than successful reality programs like *American Idol*. But when national broadcast TV executives cut costs by reducing writing and production staffs and hiring “regular people” instead of trained actors, does the craft of storytelling suffer at the expense of commercial savings? Can good stories be told in a reality program? In this exercise, let's compare the storytelling competence of a reality program with that of a more traditional comedy or dramatic genre.

“I may have destroyed world culture, but MTV wouldn't exist today if it wasn't for me.”

ADVERTISING ART DIRECTOR GEORGE LOIS, WHO COINED THE PHRASE “I WANT MY MTV,” 2003

people who seem more like us and less like celebrities. Additionally, these programs have helped the networks and cable providers deal with the high cost of programming. Featuring nonactors, cheap sets, and no extensive scripts, reality shows are much less expensive to produce than sitcoms and dramas. While reality-based programs have played a major role in network prime time since the late 1990s, the genre was actually inspired by cable's *The Real World* (1992-), the longest-running program on MTV. Changing locations and casts from season to season, *The Real World* follows a group of strangers who live and work together for a few months and records their interpersonal entanglements and up-and-down relationships. *The Real World* has significantly influenced the structure of today's reality TV programs, including *Survivor*, *Project Runway*, *Jersey Shore*, and *Dancing with the Stars*. (See “Media Literacy and the Critical Process: TV and the State of Storytelling” on this page.)

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1 DESCRIPTION. Consider a list of the Top 25 all-time highest-grossing movies in the United States, such as the one on Box Office Guru, <http://boxofficeguru.com/blockbusters.htm>

2 ANALYSIS. Note patterns in the list. For example, of these twenty-five top-grossing films, twenty-four target young audiences (*The Passion of the Christ* is the only exception). Nearly all of these top-grossing films feature animated or digitally composited characters (e.g., *The Lion King*; *Shrek*; *Jurassic Park*) or extensive special effects (*Transformers*; *The Avengers*). Nearly all of the films also either spawned or are a part of a series, like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Transformers*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Harry Potter*. More than half of the films fit into the action movie genre. Nearly all of the Top 25 had intense merchandising campaigns that featured action figures, fast-food tie-ins, and an incredible variety of products for sale; that is, nearly all weren't "surprise" hits.

The Blockbuster Mentality

In the beginning of this chapter, we noted Hollywood's shift toward a blockbuster mentality after the success of films like *Star Wars*. How pervasive is this blockbuster mentality, which targets an audience of young adults, releases action-packed big-budget films featuring heavy merchandising tie-ins, and produces sequels?

3 INTERPRETATION. What do the patterns mean? It's clear, economically, why Hollywood likes to have successful blockbuster movie franchises. But what kinds of films get left out of the mix? Hits like *Forrest Gump* (now bumped out of the Top 25), which may have had big-budget releases but lack some of the other attributes of blockbusters, are clearly anomalies of the blockbuster mentality, although they illustrate that strong characters and compelling stories can carry a film to great commercial success.

4 EVALUATION. It is likely that we will continue to see an increase in youth-oriented, animated/action movie franchises that are heavily merchandised and intended for wide international distribution. Indeed, Hollywood does not have a lot of motivation to

put out other kinds of movies that don't fit these categories. Is this a good thing? Can you think of a film that you thought was excellent and that would have likely been a bigger hit with better promotion and wider distribution?

5 ENGAGEMENT. Watch independent and foreign films and see what you're missing. Visit foreignfilms.com, the independent film section at irndb.com, or the Sundance Film Festival site and browse through the many films listed. Find these films on Netflix, Amazon, Google, or iTunes (and let them know if they don't list them). Write your cable company and request to have the Sundance Channel and the Independent Film Channel on your cable lineup. Organize an independent film night on your college campus and bring these films to a crowd.

with chains that control the most screens. In a multiplex, an exhibitor can project a potential hit on two or three screens at the same time; films that do not debut well are relegated to the smallest theaters or bumped quickly for a new release.

The strategy of the leading theater chains during the 1990s was to build more megaplexes (facilities with fourteen or more screens), but with upscale concession services and luxurious screening rooms with stadium-style seating and digital sound to make moviegoing a special event. Even with record box-office revenues, the major movie theater chains entered the 2000s in miserable financial shape. After several years of fast-paced building and renovations, the major chains had built an excess of screens and had accrued enormous debt. But to further

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1 DESCRIPTION. Check a week's worth of business news in your local paper. Examine both the business pages and the front and local sections for these stories. Devise a chart and create categories for sorting stories (e.g., promotion news, scandal stories, earnings reports, home foreclosures, auto news, and media-related news), and gauge whether these stories are positive or negative. If possible, compare this coverage to a week's worth of news from the economic crisis in late 2008. Or compare your local paper's coverage of home foreclosures or company bankruptcies to the coverage in one of the nation's dailies like the *New York Times*.

2 ANALYSIS. Look for patterns in the coverage. How many stories are positive? How many are negative? Do the stories show any kind of gender favoritism (such as more men covered than women) or class bias (management favored over workers)? Compared to the local paper, are there differences in the frequency and kinds of coverage offered in the national newspaper? Does your paper routinely cover the business of the parent company that owns the local paper? Does it cover national business stories? How many stories are there on the business of newspapers and media in general?

3 INTERPRETATION. What do some of the patterns mean? Did

Covering Business and Economic News

The financial crisis and subsequent recession spotlighted newspapers' coverage of issues such as corporate corruption. For example, since 2008 articles have detailed the collapse of major investment firms like Lehman Brothers, the GM and Chrysler bailouts, fraud charges against Goldman Sachs, and of course the scandals surrounding the subprime mortgage/home foreclosure crisis. Over the years, critics have claimed that business news pages tend to favor issues related to management and downplay the role of everyday employees. Critics have also charged that business pages favor positive business stories—such as managers' promotions—and minimize negative news (unlike regional newspaper front pages, which often emphasize crime stories). In an era of Wall Street scandals and major bankruptcies, check the business coverage in your local daily paper to see if these charges are accurate or if this pattern has changed since 2008.

you find examples where the coverage of business seems comprehensive and fair? If business news gets more positive coverage than political news, what might this mean? If managers get more coverage than employees, what does this mean, given that there are many more regular employees than managers at most businesses? What might it mean if men are more prominently featured than women in business stories? What does it mean if certain businesses are not being covered adequately by local and national news operations? How do business stories cover the recession now in comparison to late 2008?

4 EVALUATION. Determine which papers and stories you would judge as stronger models and which ones you would judge as weaker models for how business should be covered. Are some elements that should be included missing from coverage? If so, make suggestions.

5 ENGAGEMENT. Either write or e-mail the editor to report your findings, or make an appointment with the editor to discuss what you discovered. Note what the newspaper is doing well and make a recommendation on how to improve coverage.

defined primarily as events, issues, or experiences that deviate from social norms. Under this news orientation, journalists see their role not merely as neutral fact-gatherers but also as observers who monitor their city's institutions and problems. They often maintain an adversarial relationship with local politicians and public officials. These papers offer competing perspectives on such issues as education, government, poverty, crime, and the economy; and their publishers, editors, or reporters avoid playing major, overt roles in community politics. In theory, modern newspapers believe their role in large cities is to keep a wary eye fixed on recent local and state intrigue and events.

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1 DESCRIPTION. Identify two contemporary books that have been challenged or banned in two separate communities. (Check the American Library Association Web site [www.ala.org/advocacy/banned] for information on the most frequently challenged and banned books, or use the LexisNexis database.) Describe the communities involved and what sparked the challenges or bans. Describe the issues at stake and the positions students, teachers, parents, administrators, citizens, religious leaders, and politicians took with regard to the books. Discuss what happened and the final outcomes.

2 ANALYSIS. What patterns emerge? What are the main arguments given for censoring a book? What are the main arguments of those defending these particular books? Are there any middle-ground positions or unusual viewpoints raised in your book controversies? Did these communities take similar or different approaches when dealing with these books?

Banned Books and “Family Values”

In *Free Speech for Me—But Not for Thee: How the American Left and Right Relentlessly Censor Each Other*, Nat Hentoff writes that “the lust to suppress can come from any direction.” Indeed, *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee have all been banned by some U.S. community, school, or library at one time or another. In fact, the most censored book in U.S. history is Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the 1884 classic that still sells tens of thousands of copies each year. Often, the impulse behind calling for a book’s banishment is to protect children in the name of a community’s “family values.”

3 INTERPRETATION. Why did these issues arise? What do you think are the actual reasons why people would challenge or ban a book? (For example, can you tell if people seem genuinely concerned about protecting young readers, or are they really just personally offended by particular books?) How do people handle book banning and issues raised by First Amendment protections of printed materials?

4 EVALUATION. Who do you think is right and wrong in these controversies? Why?

5 ENGAGEMENT. Read the two banned books. Then write a book review and publish it in a student or local paper, on a blog, or on Facebook. Through social media, link to the ALA’s list of banned books and challenge other people to read and review them.

radical ideas or challenged conventional authority. In various parts of the world, some versions of the Bible, Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* (1867), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1989) have all been banned at one time or another. In fact, one of the triumphs of the Internet is that it allows the digital passage of banned books into nations where printed versions have been outlawed. (For more on banned books, see “Media Literacy and the Critical Process: Banned Books and ‘Family Values’” on this page.)

Each year, the American Library Association (ALA) compiles a list of the most challenged books in the United States. Unlike an enforced ban, a **book challenge** is a formal complaint to have a book removed from a public or school library’s collection. Common reasons for challenges include sexually explicit passages, offensive language, occult themes, violence, homosexual themes, promotion of a religious viewpoint, nudity, and racism. (The ALA defends the right of libraries to offer material with a wide range of views and does not support removing material on the basis of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.) Some of the most challenged books of the past decade include *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *Forever* by Judy Blume, the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling, and the Captain Underpants series by Dav Pilkey. (See Figure 10.3 on page 366.)