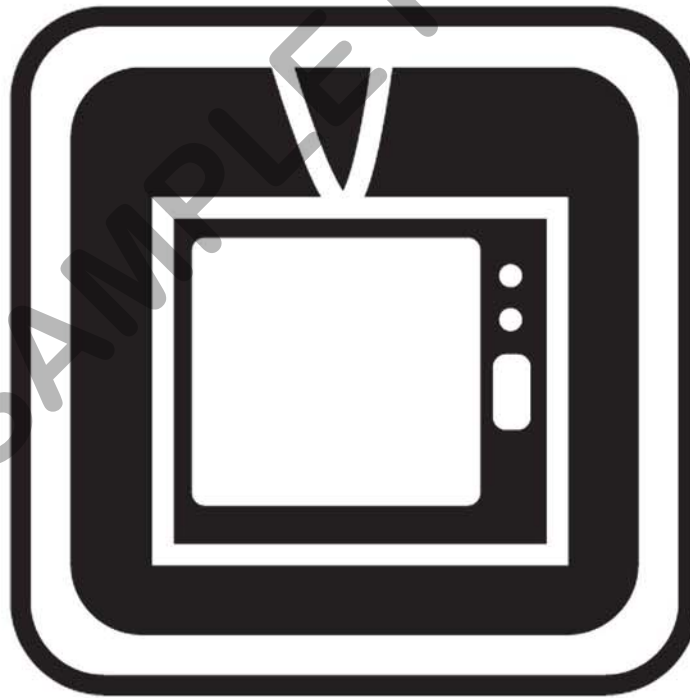


# MEDIA LITERACY

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT  
TELEVISION

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# Contents

<i>To the Teacher</i> . . . . .	<i>vii</i>
<i>To the Student</i> . . . . .	<i>viii</i>

## **Unit 1: History and Current Structure of Industry**

Teacher Buzz . . . . .	1
Television Buzz . . . . .	2
Activity 1: Changes in Television . . . . .	5
Activity 2: Synergies . . . . .	7
Activity 3: No News Is Good News? . . . . .	9
Activity 4: United States Television Abroad . . . . .	12
Activity 5: Your Local Cable System . . . . .	14
Activity 6: Who Has Control? . . . . .	15
Activity 7: Can Television Be Avoided? . . . . .	17

## **Unit 2: The Public's Consumption of Television**

Teacher Buzz . . . . .	19
Television Buzz . . . . .	20
Activity 1: Television in Your Household . . . . .	22
Activity 2: Your New Cable Channel . . . . .	24
Activity 3: Doors, Windows, Walls . . . and Television . . . . .	26
Activity 4: A Vast Wasteland? . . . . .	28
Activity 5: The Rating Game . . . . .	30
Activity 6: What Makes a Good Show Good? . . . . .	35

## **Unit 3: Program Types—Situation Comedies**

Teacher Buzz . . . . .	38
Television Buzz . . . . .	39
Activity 1: The Formulas of Situation Comedies . . . . .	40
Activity 2: Television and Diversity . . . . .	42
Activity 3: Television Families and Friends . . . . .	46
Activity 4: A New Paradigm . . . . .	48
Activity 5: That Person Is Crazy . . . . .	50
Activity 6: Sitcoms As Stories . . . . .	52

## Contents

### Unit 4: Program Types—Dramas

Teacher Buzz . . . . .	54
Television Buzz . . . . .	55
Activity 1: Violence on Television . . . . .	57
Activity 2: What Is Justice? . . . . .	61
Activity 3: Television Goes to Work . . . . .	64
Activity 4: Television and the Professions . . . . .	66
Activity 5: Gender and Work . . . . .	68
Activity 6: Your Demographic, Your Drama . . . . .	70

### Unit 5: Program Types—News

Teacher Buzz . . . . .	72
Television Buzz . . . . .	74
Activity 1: The Structure of Television News . . . . .	76
Activity 2: The Language of Television News . . . . .	78
Activity 3: How Much Information Does Television News Give Us? . . . . .	79
Activity 4: Television News and Crime . . . . .	81
Activity 5: The Kennedy/Nixon Debates . . . . .	82
Activity 6: The Lapel Pin . . . . .	84
Activity 7: Politicians, Public Policy, and the News . . . . .	86
Activity 8: Life in the Public Eye . . . . .	88
Activity 9: What Makes American Television News “American”? . . . . .	90

### Unit 6: Program Types—Sports

Teacher Buzz . . . . .	93
Television Buzz . . . . .	94
Activity 1: What’s Wrong with Hockey on Television? . . . . .	95
Activity 2: NASCAR’s Popularity . . . . .	97
Activity 3: Pro Wrestling—Good versus Evil . . . . .	100
Activity 4: Golf versus Wrestling . . . . .	102
Activity 5: The Super Bowl . . . . .	103
Activity 6: A Word from Our Sponsor . . . . .	104
Activity 7: Athletes—The Rich and the Famous . . . . .	106

**Contents**

**Unit 7: Program Types—Reality Programming**

Teacher Buzz . . . . .	109
Television Buzz . . . . .	110
Activity 1: What Is a Celebrity? . . . . .	111
Activity 2: What Price Fame? . . . . .	114
Activity 3: What Is Real? . . . . .	117
Activity 4: Reality Shows and Social Comparison . . . . .	119
Activity 5: Stimulus Addiction . . . . .	121
Activity 6: Executions on Television . . . . .	123
Activity 7: Cops and Cameras. . . . .	125
Activity 8: Cops, Cameras, and Your Community. . . . .	129
Activity 9: The Makeover . . . . .	131
Glossary . . . . .	133
Additional Resources . . . . .	135

SAMPLE PAGE

## To the Teacher

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION for Media Literacy Education tells us that:

Media literacy is an essential life skill for the 21st century. It is the process of applying literacy skills to media and technology messages, learning to skillfully interpret, analyze, and create messages. As communication technologies transform society, they impact our understanding of ourselves, our communities, and our diverse culture. Media literacy empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using image, language, and sound.

This revised book, the first of a series of nine books on media literacy and critical thinking, focuses on television, certainly the single most powerful communication

medium in the United States for the past half-century, and a medium that is today rapidly converging with new media, including wireless communications and the Internet. The guiding principle of this book is that television can be used to teach critical thinking skills. The units in this book provide students with information about television as a communication medium, as a business, and as a source of social and cultural exchange.

The activities require students to describe this new information and apply it in varied exercises. Students will analyze and evaluate how well television serves its public. They are also provided opportunities to create hypothetical new television programming. Ultimately, this book strives to make students more informed and more discerning consumers of television.

## To the Student

**YOU ARE PART** of an audience. The main purpose of televised entertainment is to attract an audience for advertisers. Because you and almost all other Americans watch television, advertisers spend over \$65 billion each year for commercial time. Advertisers rely heavily on television to get you to buy the goods and services that they are selling.

In a twice-a-year national survey called “Taking Stock with Teens,” researchers at the financial services firm Piper Jaffrey have consistently found that television remains very influential among teenagers when they make purchasing decisions—second only to friends. Obviously, television broadcasters have a tremendous financial interest in delivering the teenage audience to their advertisers. They deliver this audience by creating and broadcasting programming that gets people to turn the television on and pay attention.

The television industry does not just focus on attracting an audience. It also strives to “condition” the audience, to make the audience more receptive and more responsive to advertisers’ messages. Thus, the television industry tries to prevent you from doing exactly what this book asks to you to do: look critically at television and its messages. With these activities, you will examine how the television industry maintains its prominent position in American culture, and what the positive and negative effects of television are on our communities and us.

It is *not* the purpose of the author to try to convince you that all television is bad! In fact, much of television programming is entertaining, educational, and informative. There are times when all of us want to (or need to) laugh. Watching television is a very helpful way to relax. Television can bring us interesting stories, whether real or fictional, about lives and situations that are very different from our own. Television also provides important news about what is happening in our city, our country, and the world.

The purpose of the activities is to:

- present you with methods for evaluating the quality of the information that television provides us
- encourage you to investigate your relationship with television
- help you become more knowledgeable about how the television industry gets you to watch television, what messages it wants you to receive, and sometimes, what the television industry doesn’t want you to know about television
- anticipate television’s future role in society as communication technology continues to evolve and converge

The objectives of this unit are to help students:

- understand the processes by which fame and celebrity are created
- evaluate the consequences of “extreme” television programs
- understand what empathy is and apply empathetic thinking as they watch television
- understand the role of television in the conflict between society’s interests and individual rights

THE RECENT POPULARITY of reality programming offers students the chance to examine some interesting aspects of contemporary American culture. These include the willingness of many Americans to do almost anything for their “15 minutes of fame.” Feeding the desire to attain fame is the public’s attraction to famous people, irrespective of the source of that fame. In a society that endures a constant media barrage, the resulting desensitization of audiences compels creators of television programming to constantly “up the ante.” Many shows strive to be more shocking and more titillating than they or their competitors have been previously. In this unit, students investigate the consequences of this phenomenon.

#### In This Unit

**What Is a Celebrity?** has students provide a definition for *celebrity*, identify celebrities, and explain the public’s attraction to famous people.

**What Price Fame?** asks students to evaluate the intentional embarrassment of people on “shock talk” programs, using the notion of empathy.

**What Is Real?** looks at the recent trend in “reality” programming and asks students to

evaluate the recent popularity of this type of programming.

**Reality Shows and Social Comparison** introduces students to Leon Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory. Students then decide if this theory supports the popularity of reality shows and assess whether viewers benefit from watching reality shows.

**Stimulus Addiction** has students consider the consequences of programs that increasingly challenge social proscriptions against violence, conflict, and poor taste.

**Executions on Television** asks students to weigh the pros and cons of broadcasting the execution of criminals.

**Cops and Cameras** has students evaluate the conflict between the public’s right to know and the individual’s right to privacy.

**Cops, Cameras, and Your Community** has students appraise the positive and negative reactions to the taping of reality-based crime shows in one’s community.

**The Makeover** asks students to judge the commercial agenda behind, and the efficacy of, this popular form of reality program.

IN THIS UNIT, WE DISCUSS programs in which the people on the programs are (supposedly) playing only themselves. The word *supposedly* is added because there are many people who speculate that at least some of the participants on these types of programs are actually paid actors, and that the producers of the programs script much of the programs' activities in advance.

**Famous or Infamous?**

This unit also investigates our fascination with fame—many Americans admire famous people, and many people really want to become famous themselves. Often, members of American society ignore how and why a person became famous, and focus instead on fame itself as the desired objective.

Some reality shows do indeed require participants to demonstrate some talent, such as *American Idol*. However, many reality programs feature so-called “nobodies”—ordinary people who lack significant athletic or artistic talent, and yet become famous nevertheless. These reality programs may be games of competition to avoid elimination, such as *Survivor*. Others focus on dating, marriage, or relationships, such as *Wife Swap* and *The Bachelor*. Sometimes, the people on these shows become famous for something good they have done, but others become famous for something embarrassing or even wrong. For various reasons, television viewers like to watch contestants succeed on reality programs, while viewers also like to watch other contestants fail.

SAMPLE PROOF

## **What Is a Celebrity?** -----

ON MANY TALK SHOWS, such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and *The Late Show with David Letterman*, people whom we refer to as “celebrities” appear and talk about what they are doing in their lives. The hosts of these programs often ask these celebrities for their opinions on things, about their reactions to current events, and often about their personal lives as well. We know that many people like to watch and listen to these celebrities, because many of these talk shows enjoy high viewership ratings.

Consider the following questions. Write your response in the space provided. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.

1. What is your definition of a celebrity?
2. List and describe at least three characteristics of a celebrity.
3. Do all celebrities share the same characteristics, or do some celebrities have different types of characteristics from others? Explain.

**Activity 1: What Is a Celebrity? (continued)**

4. List three people whom you consider to be celebrities. For each person, describe why that person is a celebrity.

Name of celebrity	Reasons he or she is a celebrity

5. What must a person do, or what characteristics must a person possess, to become famous?

6. Would you like to become famous? Why or why not?

