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QUESTIONING THE MEDIA: A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

WHAT ARE 'MEDIA'?

A medium is something we use when we want to communicate *indirectly* with other people – rather than in person or by face-to-face contact. 'Media' is the plural of 'medium'.

The term 'media' includes the whole range of modern communications media: television, the cinema, video, radio, photography, advertising, newspapers and magazines, recorded music, computer games and the internet.

Many of these are often called 'mass' media, which implies that they reach large audiences. However, some media are only intended to reach quite small or specialised audiences, and they can be important too.

Media *texts* are the programmes, films, images, web-sites (and so on) that are carried by these different forms of communication.

Media texts often use several types of communication at once – visual images (still or moving), audio (sound, music or speech) and written language.

WHAT IS 'MEDIA EDUCATION'?

Media education is education *about* the media. This is not the same as education *through* the media – for example, using TV or the internet to learn about other school subjects.

Media education focuses on the media we all encounter in our everyday lives outside school – the TV programmes we watch and enjoy, the magazines we read, the movies we see, the music we listen to.

These media are all around us, and they play a significant part in our lives. Media help us to understand the world and our place in it. This is why it is so important for us to understand and study them.

Media education involves *making* media as well as *analysing* media. In this booklet, though, our main emphasis is on analysing.

QUESTIONING THE MEDIA

Our aim isn't to stop you from watching your favourite TV programmes, or to save you from what some people see as harmful influences. Nor is it about getting you to agree with a particular point of view about the media.

Our aim is simply to encourage you to *question* the media you use every day, and to try to find out more about how they work. In this booklet, we'll be looking in more detail at four key questions:

- Production: who makes media?
- Language: how do media communicate meaning?
- Representation: how do media portray the world?
- Audience: how do people make sense of media?

2 PRODUCTION

Media texts don't just appear from nowhere. They take time – and sometimes a lot of money – to produce. Some are made by individuals working alone, just for themselves or their family and friends. However, most of the media texts we consume are produced and distributed by groups of people, often working for large corporations. Media are big business: the most popular movies and TV shows make large profits. Media are also

global in scale: the same movies, records and TV formats are available in countries around the world.

KEY QUESTIONS

Looking at media *production* means looking at:

- **Technologies.** What technologies are used to produce and distribute media texts? What difference do they make to the product?
- **Professional practices.** Who makes media texts? Who does what, and how do they work together?
- **The industry.** Who owns the companies that buy and sell media? How do they make a profit?
- **Connections between media.** How do companies sell the same products across different media?
- **Regulation.** Who controls the production and distribution of media? Are there laws about this, and how effective are they?
- **Circulation and distribution.** How do texts reach their audiences? How much choice and control do audiences have?
- **Access and participation.** Whose voices are heard in the media? Whose are excluded, and why?

EXAMPLES

Example 1: News Corporation

News Corporation is an example of a large, multi-national media company. Owned by Rupert Murdoch, News Corporation began as a newspaper publisher and now has interests in television, movies and the internet. It owns the Fox TV networks, Times Newspapers, Twentieth Century Fox and Star TV. See if you can find out which other companies and brand names are owned by News Corporation. How do these companies connect with each other? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the media being run by such large corporations?

Example 2: Big Brother

The 'reality show' *Big Brother* is an example of a TV format that has been sold around the world. The format was invented by a TV company in the Netherlands, and versions have since been shown in more than 40 countries. *Big Brother* has also led to many other

'reality shows' in which real people are set challenges and can be 'voted out' by the audience. See if you can find further examples of such programmes. How do shows like this use other media, like the press and the internet? Are these shows 'interactive', and do they give power to the viewer, as some people claim?

Example 3: GAP (Global Action Project)

GAP is a small organisation that works with young people to make videotapes and television programmes. It is based in New York City, but has worked with young people in many countries, including Guatemala, Ireland and Israel. It does not run for profit, and it is funded by charities and foundations. See if you can find out about the productions it has made, and where they have been shown. Are there production companies like this in your own country? What are the difficulties faced by organisations like this? Why aren't they featured more on mainstream TV?

TAKING IT FURTHER

Ownership

Take a copy of your favourite magazine, or the newspaper your family reads. See if you can find out the company that owns it. What other companies do they own – for example, other media companies?

Branding

Take two TV channels in your country. Compare the logos and graphics they use, and the links between the programmes. What kind of identity or feeling do they try to create? Who do they seem to be aiming at?

Merchandise

Take a popular media phenomenon – a new movie or computer game. Look at the range of other media that surround it: press coverage, free offers, advertising, merchandise. How are they trying to maximise the audience?

QUESTIONS TO DEBATE

Global culture

Look at a list of the most popular movies or records. How many of them were produced in your country? Where else do they originate from? Do you think we will all end up with the same media – and does that matter?

Commercialism

How much of the media produced in your country is made for commercial profit? How much of it is made by government, or by non-commercial organisations? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a 'public' system, as opposed to a 'market' system?

Control

If the media are controlled by large corporations, does that make it harder for minority voices to be heard? Do some media offer more opportunities for participation than others?

3 LANGUAGE

Every medium has its own 'language' – or combination of languages – that it uses to communicate meaning. Television, for example, uses verbal and written language as well as the languages of moving images and sound. We call these 'languages' because they use familiar codes and conventions that are generally understood. Particular kinds of music or camera angles may be used to signal particular emotions, for example; a page of a newspaper or a sequence of shots in a film will be put together using a certain kind of 'grammar'. By analysing these languages, we can come to a better understanding of how media make meaning.

KEY QUESTIONS

Looking at media *languages* means looking at:

- **Meanings.** How do media use different forms of language to convey ideas or meanings?
- **Conventions.** How do these uses of language become familiar and generally accepted?
- **Codes.** How are the grammatical 'rules' of media established? What happens when they are broken?

- **Genres.** How do these conventions and codes operate in different types of media texts – such as news or horror?
- **Choices.** What are the effects of choosing certain forms of language – such as a particular type of camera shot?
- **Combinations.** How is meaning conveyed through the combination or sequencing of images, sounds or words?
- **Technologies.** How do technologies affect the meanings that can be created?

EXAMPLES

1: Images in Advertising

Advertisers use images and graphic design to say what is unique and valuable about their product. For example, they use colours and lighting to create a mood; unusual camera angles to add drama; and typefaces to give a sense of style. The people in the ads are carefully dressed and posed in order to show how the product makes them more powerful, more sexy or more intelligent. Compare a selection of ads for a particular type of product. How do advertisers create the idea that the product is classic or modern, natural or high-tech, sophisticated or down-to-earth?

2: The Codes of TV News

TV news generally has very strict rules and conventions. The newsreaders are smartly dressed; they generally sit behind a desk, shot in medium close-up; they rarely show emotion; and they look straight into the camera - although nobody else is allowed to do this. News begins with 'serious' stories, and ends with light-hearted ones; it often focuses on dramatic or unusual events; and it tends to show politicians and celebrities rather than ordinary people. Why do some things become 'news' and others do not? Why do news programmes all tend to look very similar?

3: The Language of Editing

Film-makers take great care to select and combine shots in order to tell a story, and to create the effects they want. Most feature films use 'continuity editing', which has definite rules. For instance, when we see a shot of a character looking out of the frame, and then we cut to another shot of an object or a person, we automatically assume that this is what they are looking at. Many pop videos and some experimental films use montage editing, which combines shots to convey feelings and ideas. Watch a sequence of film and try to

concentrate just on the editing. Is it fast or slow, smooth or jarring? How does it help to tell the story or create the mood?

TAKING IT FURTHER

Body language

Collect some photographs from a fashion magazine, featuring women and men. Compare the poses, the way the models look at the camera (or at each other, or out of the shot), the use of lighting and colour. What are the similarities and differences, and what do they tell you?

Talk radio

Make a tape of a radio talk programme (a phone-in or discussion show). Listen carefully to the kind of language that is used, and who controls the discussion. What are the rules of talk radio? What kinds of talk are not allowed?

Storyboarding

Make a storyboard of a TV ad you have recorded. Draw each shot, showing whether it is a closeup or a long shot, a low angle or a high angle, and how each shot is joined to the next. How does the advertiser use visual 'language' to tell a story or give the product a unique identity?

QUESTIONS TO DEBATE

Alternative languages

See if you can find examples of films or videos that 'break the rules' or try to create a different language – for example, experimental films made by artists. Are they harder to understand or less enjoyable than mainstream films? Why/why not?

Mixing genres

Look at media texts that mix or combine genres – such as comedy-horror films, or drama-documentaries on TV. What are the problems with mixing genres? What new ideas can be conveyed in this way?

New technologies

Digital technologies have offered us new forms of media language – for example, in computer games and the internet. But how have these technologies affected ‘old’ media such as newspapers or television or recorded music?

4 REPRESENTATION

The media don’t just offer us a window on the world. They don’t just present reality, they represent it. Media producers inevitably make choices: they select and combine, they make events into stories, they create characters, they invite us to see the world in a particular way. Media offer us versions of reality. But audiences also compare media with their own experiences, and make judgments about how far they can be trusted. Media representations can be real in some ways and not in others: we may know that something is fantasy, yet it can still tell us about reality.

KEY QUESTIONS

Looking at media *representations* means looking at:

- **Realism.** Is this text intended to be realistic? Why do some texts seem more realistic than others?
- **Telling the truth.** How do media claim to tell the truth about the world? How do they try to seem authentic?
- **Presence and absence.** What is included and excluded from the media world? Who speaks, and who is silenced?
- **Bias and objectivity.** Do media texts support particular views about the world? Do they put across moral or political values?
- **Stereotyping.** How do media represent particular social groups? Are those representations accurate?
- **Interpretations.** Why do audiences accept some media representations as true, or reject others as false?
- **Influences.** Do media representations affect our views of particular social groups or issues?

EXAMPLES

1: In the news

Most newspapers have a particular political 'line', or a particular party they will support. This is normally very clear from the 'editorial' sections of the papers, where journalists are allowed to present their own views directly. Yet political beliefs may also influence the kind of new stories they choose to cover, and how they interpret and present them. Compare how a couple of newspapers cover a political story, or an election. How are their beliefs shown in the choice of language and images? Does bias in the news necessarily influence readers?

2: Representing social groups

Critics have often argued that the media ignore minority or less powerful groups, or show them in a negative light. The proportion of women or people from ethnic minorities who appear on television, for example, is generally much lower than the proportion in society. Researchers also find that non-white characters are more likely to be shown as criminals or villains; and that women are less likely to be shown in powerful roles. What do you think are the consequences of this situation? Can you think of any important exceptions to this, and what do they tell you?

3: Access

Mainstream media are often dominated by powerful groups. However, many TV and radio stations have 'access' slots that allow ordinary people to present their views: this might be in the form of a phone-in or a studio talk show, or a separate programme. Many minority groups also publish newspapers or make videotapes to communicate ideas on issues that concern them. Try to get hold of an example of a minority newspaper or magazine, or watch an access show on TV. How is it different from mainstream media – both in what it is saying, and in how it is saying it?

TAKING IT FURTHER

People in drama

Take a couple of popular TV drama serials or soap operas. What roles do women or ethnic minority characters play in them? Are any of them obviously 'stereotyped'? Why do stereotypes seem to be so necessary?

Documentary

Watch a documentary that deals with an issue you already know about: it could be about school or young people, or about a hobby or interest you have. Does the documentary give an accurate picture? How does it claim to tell the truth?

Fantasy

Look at a fantasy text, such as a film or a novel or a computer game. Study the setting, the storyline and the characters' actions, and look at how they are portrayed. What is realistic and unrealistic about this text? Can it be both at the same time?

QUESTIONS TO DEBATE

Objectivity

Journalists often claim that they are representing the world objectively, without showing their own point of view. But is objectivity ever possible? Is there a difference between being objective and being fair?

Influences and effects

Some people see the media as the primary source of prejudices such as racism and sexism. But how important are the media, when compared with other influences, such as the family or school?

Positive images

Critics have often argued that the media show minorities or less powerful groups in society in a negative way. They have called for more 'positive images'. Do positive images always have positive effects, for example on people's attitudes?

5 AUDIENCE

Media would not exist without audiences. Yet the media have to compete for people's attention and interest; and finding and keeping an audience is not easy. Producers might imagine they know what different groups of people will want, but it is often hard to explain why some things become popular and others do not. People also use, interpret and respond to media in very different ways. A given media text will not mean the same thing to everybody. Understanding and reflecting on our own and others' uses of media is therefore an important part of media education.

KEY QUESTIONS

Looking at media *audiences* means looking at:

- **Targeting.** How are media aimed at particular audiences? How do they try to appeal to them?
- **Address.** How do the media speak to audiences? What assumptions do media producers make about audiences?
- **Circulation.** How do media reach audiences? How do audiences know what is available?
- **Uses.** How do audiences use media in their daily lives? What are their habits and patterns of use?
- **Making sense.** How do audiences interpret media? What meanings do they make?
- **Pleasures.** What pleasures do audiences gain from the media? What do they like or dislike?
- **Social differences.** What is the role of gender, social class, age and ethnic background in audience behaviour?

EXAMPLES

1: Measuring TV audiences

In most countries, the popularity of TV programmes is measured by 'ratings'. Often, a fairly small sample of viewers have meters attached to their TV sets to show when it is turned on; and some have 'people meters' that show who is in the room at the time. This information is multiplied to give an estimate of the overall audience. This information is vital for advertisers, who want to know how many people are watching and what kind of people they are. TV companies also use it to know how much to charge advertisers for screening their ads. What do you think are the limitations of this system?

2: Fan culture

Many TV programmes, film stars and pop groups have a very dedicated fan following. In many cases, the media encourage this by forming fan clubs and publishing fan magazines and websites. However, fans often exchange information between themselves via magazines or the internet, or at meetings or 'conventions'; and in some cases they even write stories or make videotapes about their favourite stars. See if you can find some examples of this material. What does it tell you about the pleasures people derive from the media? Do you think fans are typical of media audiences in general?

3: Media Violence

One of the most important areas of research on media audiences has been concerned with the effects on media violence. Some research has involved experiments, in which people's responses to media are observed and measured. Some has involved surveys, in which people are questioned about their television viewing and their attitudes towards violence. There is a great deal of disagreement between researchers about the nature and extent of such effects. Why do you think there has been so much research on this issue? Will we ever find convincing proof?

TAKING IT FURTHER

Targeting readers

Take two newspapers that seem to be targeted at different groups of readers. Look at differences between them – for example in price, layout, language, the use of photographs, the range of content and the coverage of particular stories. What do the editors of these papers assume about their readers?

Media diaries

Keep a diary of your own uses of media across the course of a week or two. If possible, compare it with a friend's. Are there predictable patterns in your media consumption? Do you think you are typical of people of your age or social group?

Watching audiences

Spend an evening or a weekend observing your family's use of media. What discussion or interaction goes on when people watch TV, read the newspaper or surf the internet? Do people combine different media? Who controls the use of media, and how?

QUESTIONS TO DEBATE

Negative influences?

Many people argue that children and young people are particularly vulnerable to the influence of media. Others see them as much more knowledgeable and sophisticated than adults. What is your view? What evidence do you have to support it?

Global audiences

Some media texts are popular with audiences throughout the world – particularly those that are produced in the United States. According to some critics, this means that audiences are all being led to accept American values and ideologies. Do you agree?

Interactive media

The internet and computer games are often described as ‘interactive’ media. To what extent, and in what ways, do they allow audiences to be ‘active’? How much power and control do audiences really possess?

6 MAKING MEDIA

Media education isn’t just about analysing media. It’s also about making your own. There are many reasons for wanting to make your own media:

- To get your views across to an audience
- To help you explore your own ideas and experiences
- To learn to work with other people
- To have fun!

TECHNOLOGIES

New technologies create all sorts of possibilities for making media. With the right computer packages, you can manipulate photographs and images, create layouts for newspapers or magazines, edit video and sound, and put your work out on the World Wide Web. This technology is getting cheaper all the time, and it can make your work look really professional. But making media doesn’t have to be high-tech. You can make great stuff with instant cameras, or even just paper, scissors and glue. Magazines, collages, posters and photo displays are cheap and easy to make, and can be a good way of getting your message across. Radio or audio tape can also be a great medium to work with.

AUDIENCES

Of course, there’s a lot of fun to be had just messing around with media. But if you want to really improve your work, you can learn a lot from trying to reach a particular audience.

This will help you think hard about what you want to say, and how you are going to put it across.

Finding out how people respond to what you produce can be surprising and informative – and (if you're lucky) it will really give you confidence. There are more and more ways for young people to get their productions noticed: use the World Wide Web, or approach your local TV or radio station.

QUESTIONING THE MEDIA

Making media yourself can also help you think about how the professionals do it. Several of the questions we've asked in this booklet can also be asked about your own productions. Here are some things to think about:

PRODUCTION

- What kinds of technology can we use, and how will they affect the finished product?
- How are we going to organise our work together?
- How is our production going to reach an audience?

LANGUAGE

- What are the most effective ways of getting our message across?
- Can we use well-known conventions or genres, or do we need to do something new?
- What choices are we making, and what consequences will they have?

REPRESENTATION

- What ideas or values are we trying to convey?
- How do we want to represent the world?
- Are we using stereotypes, and what are the consequences of doing so?

AUDIENCE

- Who are we communicating to, and why?
- What assumptions are we making about our audience?
- How are we going to persuade them, or get them to believe us?

7 CONCLUSION

In this booklet, we have been asking four key questions:

- Production: who makes media?
- Language: how do media communicate meaning?
- Representation: how do media portray the world?
- Audience: how do people make sense of media?

Of course, these questions are all connected. If you ask one, you're almost bound to start asking the others.

These questions apply to any media phenomenon. Whether it's *Pokémon* or the *Spice Girls* or *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, these questions should help you think a little more about what's going on. And these questions can also be applied to your own productions – whether it's a photo for your family album or a home video, or a fanzine or a music tape you record with your friends.

FINDING OUT MORE

There are plenty of ways to find out more about the media:

- Read specialist magazines, and look for the media pages in newspapers
- Contact your local TV or radio station or newspaper and ask them to send you information about their work
- Use the World Wide Web to seek out media websites
- Look out for information about alternative media workshops, film and video festivals and events

[NOTE: THIS LIST CAN BE SUPPLEMENTED WITH LOCAL INFORMATION]

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