



Issue Brief: Media Literacy

Overview

Since the consolidation of the recording music industry in 1997 and 1998, major labels have honed their formulas for success, concentrating on those with the greatest likelihood of producing hip-hop superstars. As with advertising and other mainstream commercial efforts, these formulas for mass appeal rely all too often on imagery that shocks, is violent and/or sexualizes women.

To survive in the commercial realm, today's aspiring poets and rappers increasingly self-censor, squeezing their artistry into narrowly defined themes that reinforce sexism, homophobia and violence. In the film, HIP HOP: Beyond Beats and Rhymes, Professor Mark Anthony Neal discusses the dilemma of young rappers, "What they are hearing from the record companies and what the record companies are hearing from these video stations is that there are only certain examples of blackness that we are going to let flow through this space.... We want to see... the hard core thug performing hip-hop, we want to see booties shaking in the background, and when hip-hop videos don't fit into those conventions, they don't get played."

Recognizing that young people are on the receiving end of these images, many youth advocates have begun to teach media literacy. With the help of caring adults, youth practice critical thinking skills to filter the music, television, movie, print, Internet, advertising, billboard, product placement and other media messages they are exposed to. Media literacy questions the intent and content of songs, scripts and images and helps the audience to gauge for itself what is poetic expression, entertainment or a formula for consumption. Media literacy activists argue this is an increasingly important skill as young Americans today are consuming an unprecedented volume of media.

To get a better understanding of the field of media studies and what young Americans are exposed to everyday, consider the statistics below.

Television

- In 1950, only nine percent of U.S. households owned a television. (Television Bureau of Advertising, 2001)
- By 1965 at least one TV was in 92.6 percent of U.S. households. (Television Bureau of Advertising, 2001)
- *Today, at least one TV is in 98.2 percent of American households. (Television Bureau of Advertising, 2001)*

- Today, most viewers (with cable or satellite) have access to an average of 202.6 available channels. (Television Bureau of Advertising, 2001)
- *By age 18, the average American teenager will have spent more time watching television—25,000 hours—than learning in the classroom. (American Academy of Pediatrics)*
- American children ages two to 17 watch television an average of 25 hours per week. One in five watch more than 35 hours of TV each week. (Gentile & Walsh, 2002)
- Fifty-six percent of 13 to 17-year-olds have TVs in their bedrooms. (Gentile & Walsh, 2002)
- Children today spend an average of 5.5 hours a day using the media, more time than they spend doing anything else besides sleeping. (Kaiser Family Foundation, February 2004)
- Every year children see an estimated 40,000 TV ads; most of those ads are for food; mainly cereals, candies, sodas, chips and fast food. (Kaiser Family Foundation, March 2004)
- Advertisers spend about \$15 billion annually marketing to children using a variety of media. (South Bend Tribune, November 2003)
- In 2001, U.S. advertising expenditures topped \$230 billion, more than doubling the \$105.97 billion spent in 1980. (Media Education Foundation)
- In 2000, children 12 years and under, directly and indirectly, influenced the household spending of over \$600 billion. (Media Education Foundation)
- Sweden, Norway and Finland do not permit commercial sponsorship of children's programs. (Kaiser Family Foundation, February 2004)
- Identification with television stars (for girls and boys), models (girls), or athletes (boys) positively correlated with body dissatisfaction. (Hofschire & Greenberg, 2002)
- A new study on race and gender diversity on television has found that, despite a significant increase in Latino characters on this season's prime-time TV, Latinos are twice as visible in real life than on television. (ChildrenNow)

MTV

- MTV globally reaches 350 million households. (PBS On-Line, 2001)
- MTV is the most recognized network among young adults ages 12 to 34. (Nielsen Media Research, 2000)
- An analysis of music videos found that nearly one-fourth of all MTV videos portray overt violence, with attractive role models being aggressors in more than 80 percent of the violent videos. (DuRant, 1997)
- One-fourth of all MTV videos contain alcohol or tobacco use. (DuRant, 1997)
- On MTV, 75 percent of videos that tell a story involve sexual imagery; over half involve violence; and 80 percent combine the two, suggesting violence against women. (Pediatrics, 2001)

Violence in Media and Video Games

- Nearly two out of three TV programs contain some violence, averaging six violent acts per hour. (Kaiser Family Foundation, Spring 2003)
- Violence was found to be more prevalent in children's programming (69 percent) than in other types of programming (57 percent). (Kaiser Family Foundation, Spring 2003)
- The average child who watches two hours of cartoons a day may see nearly 10,000 violent incidents each year, of which researchers estimate at least 500 pose a high risk for children learning and imitating aggression and becoming desensitized to violence. (Kaiser Family Foundation, Spring 2003)
- *The level of violence during Saturday morning cartoons is higher than the level of violence during prime time. There are three to five violent acts per hour in prime time, versus 20 to 25 acts per hour on Saturday morning. (Media Education Foundation)*

- Nearly 75 percent of violent scenes on television feature no immediate punishment for or condemnation of violence. (Media Education Foundation)
- Media violence has not just increased in quantity; it has also become more graphic, sexual and sadistic. (Media Education Foundation)
- A September 2000 Federal Trade Commission report showed that 80 percent of “R” rated movies, 70 percent of restricted video games and 100 percent of music with “explicit content” warning labels were being marketed to children under 17. (Media Education Foundation)
- By the time the average child is 18 years old, they will have witnessed 200,000 acts of violence and 16,000 murders. (Media Education Foundation)
- Most of the top-selling video games (89 percent) contained violent content, almost half of which was of a serious nature. (Media Education Foundation)
- The highly criticized video game *Grand Theft Auto 3* was initially banned in Australia for its graphic violence and sexual content. The game grossed \$300 million in the United States by the end of 2002. (Media Education Foundation)
- In households with children, 67 percent own a video game system. (Subrahmanyam et al, 2001)
- Sixty to 90 percent of the most popular video games have violent themes. (Anderson, 2001)
- Fifty-nine percent of fourth grade girls and 73 percent of fourth grade boys say that the majority of their favorite video games are violent. (Anderson, 2001)

Media Literacy

- All 50 states now have at least one element of media literacy as part of the educational framework. (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003)
- Some free speech advocates support media literacy education as an alternative to restricting access to ideas and information that may be harmful to children. (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003)
- Maine has provided over 36,000 laptops to its public middle schools and integrated the use of technology into its curriculum. Researchers have been impressed by the level to which the students have engaged technology and by their deep commitment to learning. (www.glef.org)
- Several studies have indicated that media literacy lessons incorporated into standard curriculum can help reduce potentially harmful effects of TV violence on young viewers. (Thomas Robinson et al., 2001)
- Media literacy skills can help high school girls enhance their sense of self-acceptance and empowerment regarding media images of women’s bodies. Studies have found that even brief peer-guided workshops can be effective in counteracting messages that perpetuate unrealistic body images and promote unhealthy eating. (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003)
- Research has shown that people generally remember about twice as much when they hear and see something through television than when they hear it with no visual images. (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, January 2004)

Source:

Just Think: Quick Facts, www.justthink.org, Accessed on January 6, 2007.