

Fact Finders™

MEDIA LITERACY

# TV Takeover

*Questioning TV*

by Guofang Wan



Mankato, Minnesota

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# Flipping Through the Media

Can you imagine what life would be like without TV? No up-to-the-minute news coverage. No sports. No *Simpsons*, *American Idol*, or *CSI*. Where would we get all our information?

TV is part of the media. It's a way of communicating. Video games, movies, and the Internet are all part of the media too. The media plays a big role in our lives. It gives us entertainment and information. It also gives us ideas. And those ideas can **influence** our thoughts and decisions.

Madagascar DVD Cover, Laptop computer, Tony Hawk Underground video game cover

TV stations and advertisers know just how influenced we can be. That's why it's good to question what the TV is selling. Here are some questions to help get you started.

Who made this message and why?

Who is the message for?

How might others view this message differently?

What is left out of the message?

How does the message get and keep my attention?

## Who made the message and why?

TV is a money-making business. Sure, we get entertainment and information, but the real purpose of this biz is to bring in the cash. Networks make all their money by selling airtime to advertisers. But here's the deal—advertisers want to get the most for their money. So they advertise when the most people are watching. Hit shows like *House* and *The OC* bring in lots of viewers for FOX. FOX can then charge advertisers more to play commercials during those shows.

The race to get viewers is pretty competitive. If a show doesn't bring in the viewers, you won't see it in *TV Guide* anymore. It's cancelled.



### Lingo

**airtime:** space during a network's programming

**network:** a central company that sends out programming to TV stations across the country

## Reality Check

When is 30 seconds worth \$2.5 million? When it's the Super Bowl! In 2006, ABC charged advertisers \$2.5 million to air one 30-second commercial during the game. Why would advertisers spend so much? The Super Bowl is a rare television event that draws in more than 85 million viewers. Since the Super Bowl is known for good commercials, many of those viewers are actually watching the ads. That makes the time worth the cost.



Super Bowl ads are often hilarious. Do you think using humor helps to sell a product?



# Can You Spot the Ad?

## More Ads Comin' Up

In this age of TiVo and DVRs, viewers can skip right over commercials. That has advertisers looking for new ways to get your attention. Their answer: product placement. On *American Idol*, do you think that Simon, Paula, and Randy really like Coca-Cola that much? Probably not. Coke just paid producers a ton of money to advertise during the show. Next time you watch your favorite show, see if you can find some product placements there too.

You might be surprised by how many product placements are in the shows you watch. Take a look at these images from TV shows. Can you spot the ad?



*The Apprentice*

## Lingo

**product placement:** putting products and logos in shows so viewers will see them

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*Two and a Half Men*



Advertisers wouldn't have anybody watching their commercials if it wasn't for the shows. It takes all kinds of people to get programs on the air. Here's a behind-the-scenes look at who's making the shows you watch.



The camera operator works with the cameras. He films the actors so you can see it at home.



The scriptwriter writes the stories that the actors perform.



The producer is the master controller. She creates programs and hires the rest of the team.

The actor does just what ~~her~~<sup>he</sup> name says: "ACT". Actors are the people you see on the screen.



The director is the boss of the control room. He tells the actors and camera operators what to do in the studio.



The editor selects, shortens, and rearranges the scenes.

# And Now a Word from our Sponsor

## Who is the message for?

When it comes right down to it, the goal of TV commercials (and product placements) is to influence you. Advertisers want to get people to buy what they are selling. But advertisers don't **market** to just anybody. They are very specific about who they are selling to.

Take a look at this marketing **campaign**: "Silly rabbit! Trix are for kids!" Can you guess who they're targeting?!



## Lingo

**air**: putting a show on TV

Commercials that target kids air during shows kids watch. Tons of cereal and toy commercials run during Saturday morning cartoons. The same idea is true for commercials targeting men, women, or the elderly. You don't usually see a commercial for AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) during *Yu-Gi-Oh!*



## A Station for Me

TV networks know they can make more money if they can offer advertisers a better way to reach their target audiences. So many cable channels offer programming to interest certain groups of people. This is called narrowcasting. And advertisers love it.

Nickelodeon, for example, targets kids by playing shows like *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

### Lingo

**narrowcasting:** airing shows that appeal to certain groups

**target audience:** the group of people that producers think will be interested in the message the show is sending

Advertisers looking to sell products to kids will spend a lot of money to get their commercials on a channel like Nickelodeon.

Other cable channels like MTV, The History Channel, and Food Network are also examples of narrowcasting. These stations know that only certain people will be interested in the shows on their channel. And so do advertisers.



## Try It Out!

Networks create shows so advertisers will want to spend money playing commercials. Your job is to create a new show to attract advertisers. Grab a notebook and a pencil. Write up who the characters in your show would be, how long the show would be, and an outline for the pilot. Answer these questions as you're planning your new show.

- Who is your show for?
- What would your show be about?
- What companies would be interested in advertising during your show?

object shot of a children's proposal for a new show.

# Stay Tuned for Values

How might others view this message differently?

TV isn't a one-size fits all hat. Even though one show is popular, it doesn't mean everyone in the world likes it. But why is that the case? Well, it's all about what we think is important. It's about values. Age, gender, life experiences, and even religious beliefs factor into our values. They help us decide what's funny, what's mean, or what's true.

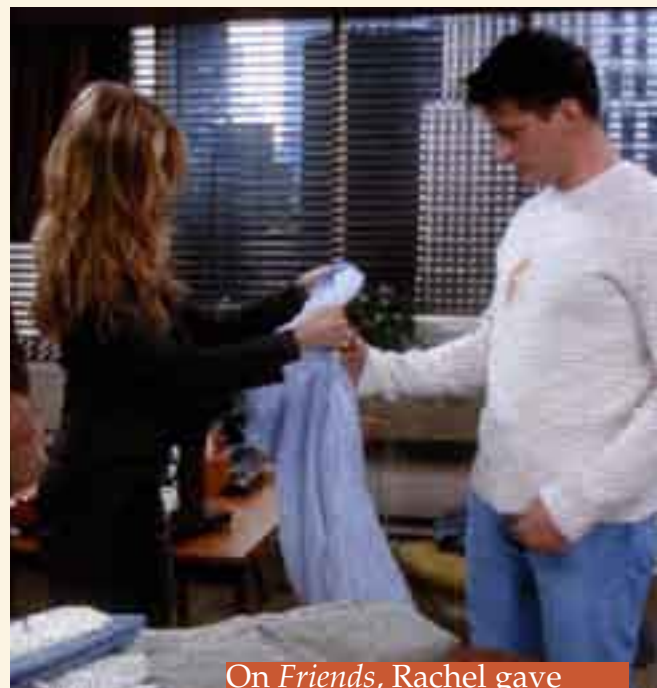


*Sesame Street* was probably one of your favorite shows a few years ago. But as your values changed, so did your taste in TV shows.



## Trash or Treasure?

Think about what you see on TV now. Some people find the show *The Office* hilarious. But others don't find it funny at all. Kids totally get the *Lizzie McGuire* show. But parents think the show is lame. What one person thinks is a great **spoof** is **offensive** to someone else. Nobody has exactly the same values.



On *Friends*, Rachel gave Joey a Ralph Lauren shirt. You can bet it was an ad to sell us the brand name.

## What Should I Think Today?

Programming on TV has values too. The values can influence how we look, act, or feel. When characters wear name-brand clothes, they're trying to sell us the label. Commercials want you to think you'll be able to do amazing things if you use their product.



If you drink this beverage, you might be moved to create your own sports field. Or maybe not!



Stereotypes are a value TV shows **promote**. Stock characters give an overly simple view of a type of person. You've seen them. The nerdy smart kid. The not-so-smart blonde. The street-wise black friend. Values on TV aren't necessarily bad. TV is a great place to get ideas. But when we start believing that all smart people are dorks, then we've got a problem.

## Lingo

**stock character:** types of characters that are used repeatedly in TV shows.



What kind of stock character do they use in *Malcolm in the Middle*?

# Try It Out!

Write a script about a day in your life. Make your parents, friends or even your dog characters in your show. (Don't forget to include yourself!) Give your characters dialogue that promotes your values. Here are some questions to help get you started.

- What do you believe in very strongly?
- What do you love?
- What do you hate?
- What is really important to you?

When you have your script written, have some friends help you act out your show in front of your class. See if the class can pick out your values.

object shot of a kid's script

# You're Watching: One-Side Story

## What is left out of the message?

Before the 1970s tobacco companies used commercials to convince people to smoke. But what didn't their commercials tell us? Well, they didn't say how addictive cigarettes are. They didn't say that smoking is a health risk either. But because viewers weren't given all the info, many were influenced to smoke.



Tobacco companies even used cartoon characters to sell their products. Who do you think their target audience was?

You see, commercials sometimes leave info out. Why do they do that? Because they want to make their product appealing. Toy commercials leave out that the toy will break if you drop it. Car commercials might leave out bad results on a safety test. If the commercials had told all the bad stuff, do you think many people would have bought what the ad was selling?



In 2006, the Ford Fusion got some poor safety ratings. Do you think they mentioned that in their ads?

## Try It Out!

With a group of friends, write a commercial that highlights all the bad things about a product. You could make a commercial talking about cereal that tastes like dirt or makeup that stains your face. When you are done, act out your commercial in front of your classmates. When everyone is finished, answer these questions.

- Would anyone pay attention to your ads? Why or why not?
- Would people want to buy the product you are selling? Why or why not?

storyboard of a commercial, made by a kid

# Reality Check



## Missing Pieces

Have you ever noticed that reality shows like *Survivor* are really dramatic? That's because the boring stuff was all **edited** out. We don't usually see the players having day-to-day conversations. But we're always there for the fights. Wonder why? Fights are more exciting. That's why we have to question what we're shown. Reality TV might not really be reality after all.

In April 2006, U.S. news broadcasts headlined that crude oil prices had risen to \$70 per barrel. The newscasts stated that this price set a record for the highest price ever. This was true. No one had ever paid \$70 per barrel before. But what viewers weren't told was that if **inflation** was taken into account, the \$70 per barrel wasn't really a record. You see, in January 1981, a barrel of oil cost \$38.85. According to the U.S. Energy Administration, that is equal to \$86.99 today. The news stories weren't wrong when they said *paying* \$70 per barrel was a record. They just misled viewers to believe that prices had never been higher. Sometimes information is left out of news reports too. That's why we even have to question the news.



# The Tricks of Their Trade

## How does this message get my attention?

Networks have a tough job getting us to sit down and watch their shows (and commercials). One way to get viewers is to play commercials promoting shows. But these aren't just plain old commercials. These are fast-paced, action-packed whirlwinds of information. Marketers use quick cuts to piece together a summary of a show. Have you ever watched a show because the preview looked great, only to find that it wasn't really that exciting?



*Lost* is an exciting show. But next time you see a commercial for it, pay attention to how many quick cuts the use to make you excited.



### Lingo

**quick cut:** fast scene changes that are meant to jolt you and make you excited



## Watch and Win!

There are so many programs to choose from on TV, marketers are finding other ways to get us to watch. Some shows offer cash prizes to viewers. Those features aren't there just as an added bonus. They are there to influence you to watch. *Wheel of Fortune* has a club you can join. If they roll your number during the show, you win a prize. But you have to be watching to see if your number comes up.

# How does this message keep my attention?

On the screen a car races down a street. Suddenly, you are face-to-face with the car as it heads straight for you. This is a trick. A trick of the TV-show-making system. Cutaway shots make us feel like we're right in the action. Cutaways, as well as tracking shots and fades, are only a few of the tricks shows use to boost their jolts per minute.

1 still showing a car going down a road

Another shot showing the same car coming down the road toward the viewer

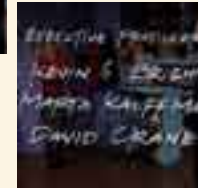
## Lingo

cutaway: a quick change in the angle of the camera that brings the viewer face-to-face with the action

jolts per minute: scene changes that happen very quickly or very often in order to keep viewers interested and excited.

## Fade Away

You're watching a scene and slowly the image begins to disappear. The fade is a dramatic effect TV shows use to end a scene. It's not quick, so it leaves you feeling relaxed.



## Track 'em Down

A show would get boring if you couldn't see the action. Tracking shots are a trick camera operators use to keep you in the moment. The camera and the operator ride on a truck, wheelchair, or a cart on a track. They stay focused on the subject by moving along with it.



## Tune In Next Time...

TV is great fun. It's also a great influence. Next time you sit down to watch your favorite shows, tune in these questions too. You might be surprised by what you see. Happy watching!

## Time Line

1927- Philo T. Farnsworth applied for patent on the image dissector tube, beginning the age of electronic TV.



1928: First TV license issued to W3XK by the Federal Communications Commission.

1941: First commercial airs.

1948: Cable TV begins.



1971: Advertising of tobacco products banned on TV

1997: FCC begins requiring TV broadcasts to post ratings on the content of each show.

Jan. 2006: ABC charges \$2.5 million for a 30-second spot during Superbowl XL.

April 2006: News broadcasts headline record oil prices, without considering inflation.

## Glossary

**campaign** (kam-PAYN)—actions organized over a period of time to achieve or win something

**edit** (ED-it)—to cut and rearrange pieces of film to make a movie or television program

**inflation** (in-FLAY-shuhn)—an increase in prices

**influence** (IN-floo-uhnss)—to have an effect on someone or something

**market** (MAR-kit)—to sell

**offensive** (uh-FEN-siv)—causing anger or hurt feelings

**promote** (pruh-MOTE)—to make the public aware of something or someone

**spoof** (SPOOF)—a funny imitation

## Internet Sites

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## Read More

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## Meet the Author

Dr. Guofang Wan teaches future teachers at Ohio University. She is a big fan of teaching children with and about multimedia. Her other book, *The Media-Savvy Student*, and her many journal articles help to bring media literacy into the classroom.