

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

### FRONTLINE: "THE MERCHANTS OF COOL"

They spend their days sifting through reams of market research data. They conduct endless surveys and focus groups. They comb the streets, the schools, and the malls, hot on the trail of the "next big thing" that will snare the attention of their prey--a market segment worth an estimated \$150 billion a year.

They are the merchants of cool: creators and sellers of popular culture who have made teenagers the hottest consumer demographic in America. But are they simply reflecting teen desires or have they begun to manufacture those desires in a bid to secure this lucrative market? And have they gone too far in their attempts to reach the hearts—and wallets—of America's youth?



In "The Merchants of Cool," which first aired February 27, 2001, FRONTLINE correspondent Douglas Rushkoff examines the tactics, techniques, and cultural ramifications of these marketing moguls. Produced by Barak Goodman and Rachel Dretzin, the program talks with top marketers, media executives and cultural/media critics, and explores the symbiotic relationship between the media and today's teens, as each looks to the other for their identity.

#### CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Just as you might add to your students' knowledge of a piece of literature by providing historical context and profiling the author, "The Merchants of Cool," which first aired on PBS February 27, 2001, provides vital background information about key media "storytellers." Because it exposes motives and techniques, the film is an invaluable tool for teaching media literacy. And because it is about their world, "The Merchants of Cool" is sure to hold students' attention and provide you with an excellent opportunity to engage them in discussions of culture, history, business, economics, ethics, mathematics, health, performing arts, gender stereotypes, ethnography, literature, social studies, and civics.

#### DEFINING MEDIA LITERACY

Traditional literacy is the ability to understand, analyze, and use print to communicate. Media literacy adds the ability to apply these skills to images, sound, and multimedia formats.



#### GRADE LEVEL: 9-adult

In showing examples from the media it analyzes, "The Merchants of Cool" includes some adult language and sexual content. Educators are advised to preview the film prior to showing it to students.

#### POP CULTURE PROFILES

Britney Spears  
*Cruel Intentions*  
*Dawson's Creek*  
Limp Bizkit  
MTV  
rage rock  
Sprite

## STATISTICS

- There are 31.6 million 12-19 year-olds in the U.S., the largest generation ever. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)
- Teens are exposed to an estimated 3,000 ads a day. (Adbusters)
- 65% of U.S. teens have TV sets in their own rooms. (Kaiser Family Foundation)
- 83% of U.S. teens reported going online last year. (Teen Research Unlimited)
- Last year, U.S. teens spent an estimated \$105 billion and influenced their parents to spend an additional \$48 billion. (Teen Research Unlimited)
- In 1998, U.S. companies spent nearly \$200 billion on advertising. Worldwide ad spending is estimated at \$435 billion. (*Advertising Age* and the United Nations Human Development Report, cited in Klein)

## CONNECTING THE DOTS - CORPORATE OWNERSHIP

(source: *Brill's Content* Jan 2000, p.99)

### VIACOM

CBS Television  
 CBS & Infinity Radio Stations  
 The Nashville Network  
 Country Music Television  
 Simon & Schuster  
 (publishers)  
 Blockbuster  
 Scribner (publishers)  
 Pocket Books  
 Paramount Pictures  
 MTV  
 Spelling Television  
 Nickelodeon  
 VH1  
 Showtime  
 TV Land  
 16 local CBS TV stations and  
 19 local Paramount Stations

w/ partial or joint ownership of:  
 UPN  
 Sundance Channel  
 United Cinemas  
 Comedy Central  
 SportsLine USA

### DISNEY

ABC  
 Hyperion Books  
 Infoseek  
 Go Network  
 Miramax Films  
*Discover Magazine*  
 Anaheim Angels (baseball)  
 Mighty Ducks (hockey)

w/ partial or joint ownership of:  
 ESPN  
 Lifetime Television  
*Talk Magazine*  
 Oxygen Media  
 The Biography Channel  
 The History Channel  
 A&E Network

### NEWS CORP. (Rupert Murdoch)

FOX Broadcasting  
 Los Angeles Dodgers (base-  
 ball team)  
 FX Networks  
*New York Post*  
*The Weekly Standard*  
 Harper Collins (publishers)  
 William Morrow (publishers)  
 Zondervan Publishing House  
 (bibles)  
 Avon Books  
 Regan Books

w/ partial or joint ownership of:  
 British Sky Broadcasting  
 Fox Sports Net  
 Radio City Television  
 Madison Square Garden  
 Arena  
 New York Knicks (basketball)  
 New York Rangers (hockey)  
 Speedvision  
 Outdoor Life  
 TheStreet.com  
 Music Choice Europe

### UNIVERSAL / VIVENDI

A&M Records  
 Interscope Records  
 Island Def Jam Music Group  
 Motown Records  
 Universal Pictures  
 Universal Studios  
 Spencer Gifts

w/ partial or joint ownership of:  
 USANetworks (which owns  
 Sci-Fi Channel, Home  
 Shopping Network,  
 Ticketmaster, etc.)  
 United Cinemas  
 Seagrams  
 Sundance Channel  
 Loews Cineplex

### AOL TIME WARNER

Time Warner Cable  
 HBO  
 Warner Bros. Pictures  
 Warner Bros. Television  
*MAD Magazine*  
 Looney Tunes  
 TBS Superstation  
 Turner Network Television  
 (TNT)  
 Cartoon Network  
 Atlanta Braves (baseball)  
 Atlanta Hawks (basketball)  
 Atlanta Thrashers (hockey)  
 World Championship  
 Wrestling  
 New Line Cinema  
 CNN

CNN/fn  
 CNN  
*Time Magazine*  
*Fortune Magazine*  
*People Magazine*  
*Money Magazine*  
*In Style Magazine*  
*Sports Illustrated*  
 Book-of-the-Month Club  
 Little, Brown & Co. (publish-  
 ers)  
 WB Television Network

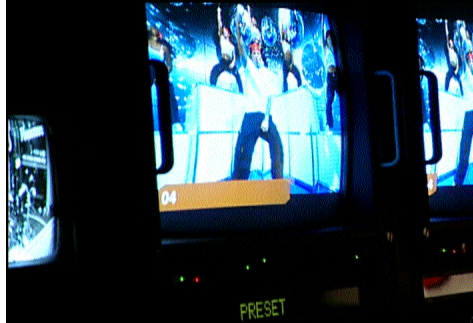
w/ partial or joint ownership of:  
 Oxygen Media  
 Comedy Central  
 Columbia House (music)  
 Court TV

## TIPS FOR TEACHING MEDIA LITERACY

We care about our students, so when we think that media makers may be manipulating them or doing them harm, it's natural for us to react with concern or even anger. But if we let these feelings block our ability to listen to our students or to respect their opinions (especially when they differ from our own), we lose an important opportunity to connect.

Here's how you can retain your opinions without letting them get in the way of engaging your students:

- Keep in mind that “The Merchants of Cool” is about teen culture. Just as you would treat a student's ethnic, racial, or religious culture with respect, approach their media culture with respect.
- Rather than convey a pre-determined conclusion, i.e., telling students what the message is, focus on giving students the skills they need to interpret messages for themselves.



- Include potential solutions or actions as part of your discussion. Lessons that stop at identification of a problem tend to leave students feeling cynical rather than skeptical or inquisitive.
- Because everyone interprets what they see and hear through the lens of their own experience, the more different you are from your students, the more likely it is that you will interpret media messages differently. So be prepared to encounter opinions that differ from your own and to recognize that multiple interpretations can be valid.
- Find out what has touched your students by opening your discussion with very broad questions, e.g., “What struck you most about this film?” or “What will you tell your friends about this film when you see them at lunch?” or “In one word, describe how you felt while watching this film. Explain your answer.”

## GENERAL MEDIA LITERACY QUESTIONS

The questions below can be used to help students analyze the media they see and hear. They assume that all media is a “story.”

- Who is the “storyteller”?
- What techniques are the “storytellers” using?
- Why are they telling this particular “story” (what is their motive)?
- Who is the “story” for (who is the target audience)? Why is the “story” being told to that audience?
- Is the story accurate, fair, and complete? If not, what information or perspectives are absent and why were they left out?

**Articles containing additional questions and strategies for deconstructing media, as well as general principles of media literacy can be found at:**

[www.medialit.org/ReadingRoom/keyarticles/key.html](http://www.medialit.org/ReadingRoom/keyarticles/key.html)

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

### CONCEPTS: Marketing Techniques

- If you were training a “cool hunter” to come into your school, what would you train them to look for? Do “cool hunters” engage in a self-fulfilling prophecy by giving the teens they select money, information, and attention (which extend their influence)?
- Recently, political leaders have objected to filmmakers showing “R” rated films to teens under age 17 in order to find out what would appeal to them. Is it okay to interview teens without parents present or without parental consent? Would your answer to that question change if the teen was alone with interviewers in their bedroom or in a focus group with other teens? Would your answer change depending on the purpose of the focus group (i.e., which product will be sold using the information gathered)?
- “The Merchants of Cool” describes the practice of “under-the-radar” marketing, including hiring teens to log-on to chat rooms to talk up bands and recruiting college freshman to throw campus parties where they distribute marketing materials. Ironically, marketers have justified “stealth” marketing as necessary because teens have become more media savvy. Do you think that “stealth” techniques are ethical? If a marketer offered you money to log-on to chat rooms or throw a party, would you? When you are tuned in to a concert (like the hip hop concert feature in the program), or reading a message in a chat room, how important is it to know whether or not it is a commercial? Can you identify the “storytellers” behind the media you consume most often?
- As “The Merchants of Cool” shows, Sprite’s success with the youth culture was created, in part, by intertwining the marketing of Sprite with Viacom’s interests in broadcasting and other media. Look at how a new film or the latest release from a popular band are promoted. Are there links between appearances or performances by stars and the producers, sponsors, and broadcasters of those shows? If so, does discovering those links influence your opinion of the film or the artist? Why or why not?

### CONTENT: Analyzing Media

- Does the restrictive structure of MTV, which limits exposure to a small percentage of artists who have significant corporate backing, mean that someone else is really making music choices for us? Is this kind of narrow control of music inevitable? Contrast the experience of a group like Limp Bizkit, which had corporate backing, to the careers of artists who have remained independent, like Ani DiFranco.



- Is the “mook” (the stereotypically crude, adolescent male) real, or just a media construction? How about the “midriff” (the girl as sex symbol)? Do you know any “mooks” or “midriffs”? Do you think you or your friends are influenced by the MTV standard of “cool”? If so, how? Are there ways to be “cool” without copying media? How do the “mook” and “midriff” stereotypes relate to the corporate interests of the media that perpetuate them (in other words, why these particular stereotypes and not some other stereotype)?
- Many media observers have claimed that programs like *Beverly Hills 90210* or *Dawson’s Creek* are popular because they are reflective of teen life. In what ways are shows like *90210* and *Dawson’s Creek* reflective of how teenagers really live and in what ways are they distortions? Do these shows mirror the way you live?
- Media makers think they know a lot about you. Consider whether you agree with the following assertions from “The Merchants of Cool”:

*“Sex is a part of teens lives, so it better be in their media, too.”*

*“No teenager is going to be satisfied with a PG-13 rated horror film. They want to see blood and guts. That’s what they want to do.”*

## DISCUSSION TOPICS continued

### CONTEXT: People / Society

- Like author Naomi Klein (see “Resources”), “The Merchants of Cool” argues that advertising has changed from *sponsoring* culture to *becom - ing* culture (e.g., Sprite sponsoring a concert as opposed to Sprite becoming a component of hip hop culture). What’s the difference? What happens to culture when its purpose is sales rather than expression?
- Distinguished scholar George Gerbner has asserted that those who control a society’s stories have the power to shape that society’s values. Who has control over your stories? Who do you want to have that control? Does who tells a story matter? Does MTV give an accurate voice to your stories? How does commercial control (i.e., control by those who are primarily interested in selling things) of media influence the kind of stories our society hears?
- Various social scientists devote their careers to helping us understand people who are different from us. For example, anthropologists study the structures and customs of a society or community. Ethnographers are anthropologists who focus on looking at the impact of culture on people’s lives. Are there parallels between “cool hunters” and anthropologists? Between market researchers and ethnographers? Why might adults see teen society or culture as so different or closed that they need researchers to tell them what your life is really like?
- Correspondent Douglas Rushkoff argues that “rage rock” is an attempt to break the hold of marketers on teen culture (“I dare you to put this in the mall.”) Do you agree, or are there other reasons behind the popularity of music celebrating anger or hate? Does “cool hunting” make increasingly destructive expressions inevitable, or are there other ways to break the marketing “feedback loop” (e.g., the recent protests of the World Trade Organization in Seattle and elsewhere)?

- In the program, several market researchers claim that parents contribute to the prominence of the teen market by giving them “guilt” money. Do you agree? What techniques might you use to gather evidence to prove or disprove their assertion? Besides parents, where else might teens be getting the money they spend? Do you think the marketers’ picture of parents is true for all families? If not, which families are being left out of their picture and why?

## QUOTES TO USE AS DISCUSSION STARTERS

**“The paradox of “cool hunting” is that it kills what it finds.”** - Douglas Rushkoff  
*What are the implications of cool hunting for the development of new ideas, new music, new art forms, etc.?*

**“In much the same way that the British Empire tried to take over Africa and profit from its wealth, corporations look at [teens] like this massive empire they are colonizing...And their weapons are films, music, books, CDs, Internet access, clothing, amusement parks, sports teams.”**

- Robert McChesney  
*Are “cool hunters” and those who use the information they supply similar to colonial powers? Do they exploit teens or are they providing desired benefits and services?*

**“They don’t call it “human” research or “people” research, they call it “market” research.”**

- Douglas Rushkoff  
*Did the marketers in “The Merchants of Cool” get it right? Do they really know you? If MTV was really based on understanding you as a person, what would it look like?*

**“The MTV machine doesn’t listen to the young so it can make the young happier...The MTV machine tunes in so it can figure out how to pitch what Viacom has to sell.”**

- Mark Crispin Miller  
*Are marketers concerned with the well-being of the consumer? Do they answer to consumers? If not, who do they answer to? Is marketing to teens different from marketing to adults?*

## ACTIVITIES

### ACTIVITY 1: NO LOGO DAY

As a class, choose a day when everyone is assigned to wear logo-free clothing. If students don't own any logo-free clothing, they may turn t-shirts inside out or place masking tape over the logo. To increase the impact, make the day school-wide, including covering all corporate logos displayed in your school (including soda machines, scoreboards, bulletin boards, etc.). Use the resulting visual impact to help students reflect on the role of branding in their lives. In a school-wide initiative, lessons can be integrated across the curriculum:

- English: Ask students to write a description of the image conveyed by a logo they often wear.
- Social Studies: Encourage students to look more closely at the "made in" labels in their clothing and compare the realities of global production with the image of particular brands.
- History: Explore the history of clothing and its use in reinforcing class and caste distinctions.
- Math: Compare how much the addition of a popular logo adds to the price of a pair of jeans or a shirt. Conduct a statistical survey of brands most popular in your class compared with the brands most frequently advertised on MTV.
- General: Consider the impact of branding on social relations between various groups at school.

### ACTIVITY 2: CREATE A BRANDING CAMPAIGN

To integrate the content of "The Merchants of Cool" into a literature or social studies class, have students assume the role of "cool hunter" and focus their attention on literary characters or historical figures they have studied. Who would they choose as "cool" and why? Have them design a marketing campaign to appeal to that person. De-brief the activity by asking them to justify the techniques used in their campaign and what kinds of information they needed to know about their target audience to design an effective campaign. You might also have students assess whether the campaign(s) developed by the class were ever misleading or unethical. Wrap up by asking students to look for present day examples of "spin" that mirror the techniques they used.

### ACTIVITY 3: ANALYZE AN AD OR MUSIC VIDEO

Before viewing "The Merchants of Cool", ask students to choose a favorite ad or music video and write a brief analysis or description. After viewing the film, have them re-write their analysis. Discuss what changed. You might use the "General Media Literacy Questions" at the end of the "Teaching Media Literacy" section to prompt analysis, or pose this trio:

*What are the messages? Are the messages the same as the product(s)?*

*What techniques are used to convey the messages?*

*Who is the target audience and how do you know?*

### ACTIVITY 4: AUTHENTICITY

Have students define the word "authentic" and assign them to create a visual representation of the various facets their "authentic" selves. Facets of their identity might include things like cultural, religious, or racial heritage; family, neighborhood, or community; song lyrics, magazines, clothing; favorite TV shows, hobbies, or sports, etc. To practice public speaking or writing you might ask each student to explain their choices. Then have them look at the sources of the items they chose. Use the "Connecting the Dots" section to help students determine whether there are any corporate interests represented in their self-portraits. For example, who profits from the logo on their favorite pants? Who owns the label that their favorite band records on? Let the class generate a list of corporations connected to their expressions of authenticity and talk about what they see as the distinction between their actual selves and corporate reflections of their identity. Then discuss Douglas Rushkoff's question about his own youth culture in "The Merchants of Cool": Was it just something being sold to us, or was it something that came from us? An act of expression not of consumption? Has that boundary been completely erased?

## RESOURCES

### BOOKS

**Rushkoff, Douglas. *Coercion: Why We Listen to What They Say*. Riverhead, 1999.**

The most recent book by the film's correspondent exposes marketing techniques and explores how marketing has become embedded in our culture.

**Klein, Naomi. *No Logo*. Picador, 1999.**

Klein traces the shift from advertising to branding and from sponsoring culture to becoming culture. In addition to identifying problems, Klein reports on how activists world-wide have creatively responded to the challenges of the new marketing practices.

**Wolf, Michael J. *The Entertainment Economy: How Mega-Media Forces Are Transforming Our Lives*. Times Books, 1999.**

Written by a leading media consultant, this book examines how media has become the driving force in the global economy. Especially appropriate for those interested in business or economics courses.

### WEB SITES

***Advertising Age*** - The major magazine for advertising professionals. Its profiles of ad campaigns often include product sales percentage increases associated with particular ads. Selected articles are available on-line at **[www.adage.com](http://www.adage.com)**.

***KidScreen*** - Much like *Advertising Age*, but specifically directed at people who market to children. Older articles are archived on their web site, **[www.kidscreen.com](http://www.kidscreen.com)**.

**[www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)** - The people who made ad parodies and "culture jamming" famous.

**[www.adcritic.com](http://www.adcritic.com)** - A great source to look at current popular ads.

**[www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)** - The web site for the Center for Media Literacy, the U.S. clearinghouse for media literacy materials, provides easy links to dozens of other sites.

### BONUS ACTIVITY

In addition to using these web sites as resources, you may want to use them as a basis for classroom activities. Choose a research topic and divide students into small groups, sending each group to one of the web sites. Have each group report what they found at their site to the rest of the class and discuss the differences.

Or have students do web searches using different but related keywords or using the same keyword(s) but with different search engines. Useful keywords might include:

- marketing + teens
- cool hunting
- consumerism
- media analysis or media literacy
- media analysis or advertising analysis
- media research or market research

## REFLECTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

MTV shares at least one thing with teachers: it wants to reach teens and influence their behavior. According to its CEO, MTV believes that to reach teens effectively you must “immerse yourself in their reality: in their music, in their art, in the things that they read. And if you see it or approach it any other way, and approach it as an anonymous, faceless, homogenous target market, then you will fail.” What, if anything, might advocates for standardized testing (which, by definition, assumes a “faceless, homogenous” group) learn from MTV? What are the potential implications of educators adopting marketing techniques? Do teachers have alternative ways to effectively reach teens that they might share with marketers?

What media do your students typically consume? What are their favorite TV shows? Bands? Movies? Web sites? Video games? How does what they see and hear influence how they engage with the material you present? How does it influence their language, their perception of normal, or the kinds of things they do to assert independence?

The film argues that “cool hunting” is destructive in part because it undermines teens’ ability to engage in genuine expression and create their own culture. What do/can you do to help students authentically express their individuality?

## CREDITS, ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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