Media & Money: Crash Course Media Literacy #5

Crash Course: Media Literacy
https://youtube.com/watch?v=QpYrSLiIoKo
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/QpYrSLiIoKo

Did you know that Finding Dory made $486 million in 2016? Or that Barack and Michelle Obama received $65 million in advance of writing their newest books? Or that Beyoncé made $105 million in 2017? Those are the big bucks, people! Sure, media is a form of communication and the foundation of our shared culture. But it's more than a collection of songs and book and movies and newspapers. It's also a lot of money.

The media is a big collection of massive, money-making industries. That means most of the media you digest was made by specific people with specific paychecks. And that money has a specific impact. Understanding how and why the media is produced, the business of it all, is key to the full media literacy picture.

If the last episode was about your mind on media, today is all about your media on money.

[Opening music]

Pretend for a second you're a superstar movie director with a string of award winning hits. Hollywood anxiously awaits your next film, but you're feeling the pressure. First you've got to land on an idea – should it be an original film? A remake? A sequel? About what? Who's gonna write it? You? That woman with the funny webseries you love? A studio hack paid by the word? Speaking of studios, who are you going to work with? Will they have a say in what you make, and how it's written? Or who's in it?

Then you've got to shoot the thing. Find the perfect cast, build all the sets or find locations, pay the CGI company, hire a costume designer, make sure the schedule runs on time. And then it's not even over! Hopefully a distributor will pick it up. Who will see it? How will it be advertised? Will your cast end up on every late night show to promote it? That's a lot of questions to answer.

So instead of making decisions, you're sitting on your couch eating cereal and watching Scandal reruns pretending your problems don't exist.

But you're not a big-shot Hollywood director. (Well, if you are, hit me up in the DMs.) Anyway: have you ever thought about how much goes into a movie before it gets to your screen? Or before a video game gets to the story or a newspaper onto your doorstep?

Media is made. Every bit of it is constructed by someone or groups of someones. Each step of the way they've made choices, too, about what to create and how to create it.

And they've made those decisions based on life experiences, preferences and money – who has it, and how they can make more of it. But those choices affect you, the consumer.

First, let's focus on why media is created. Its purpose, like to entertain, inform, or persuade. The reason a piece of work is created can be really helpful in understanding its impact.

An advertisement's purpose is to convince the viewer to buy a product. You see an ad for soda, you know the company created and paid for it in hopes that you will buy their soda. Great, that's an easy one. What about movies? You might say they're made for entertainment, duh. They're for fun. And yes, movies are made to make money and entertain. But if that was their only purpose a lot more movies would just be remakes of Titanic, the greatest and most entertaining film of all time.

Some movies are made to bring up important topics and encourage cultural conversations. On the outside, Pixar's Inside Out looks like a film made to bring families together through entertainment. But if you've seen Inside Out you know it's really a film designed to make you cry while contemplating the complexity of human emotion, and how we're all so different and yet the same. Or think about the film "Get Out". On one level, it's a horror movie about a man whose girlfriend's family wants to kill him. But along the way, the film unpacks issues of contemporary racism and how horrifying the modern world can be to black men. Every piece of media has many purposes, and they each impact how the work is made from day one.

If purpose is the "why" of media creation, the "what" is focus. Focus is the topic or subject, what we're including (and at the same time excluding) when we create. Sometimes deciding what to focus on is the name of the game – like when a newspaper can only fit so many stories on the front page. They're deciding what news is the most important. But sometimes focus can be a bit more…manipulative. Like that soda ad you saw earlier; it didn't mention how much sugar each bottle contains or how it will affect your health. It just wants you to think about that crisp, refreshing taste.

Or a government report that touts how many jobs were created last month, but conveniently leaves out that most of those jobs were low-paying, temporary ones.

The thing is, the purpose and focus of media can affect how you think about other people, especially when they're not like you.

Let's head into the Thought Bubble to wrestle with that a bit.

Media texts have the power to impact your understanding of things like race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, or sexual orientation. The way they deal with and present these topics is called representation. Like everything else, the way different people and places are represented in media is always a choice. And since the mass media is disproportionately run and created by straight white men, that means the representations of everyone else can skew toward stereotype.

Think about a pretty common TV trope, the "gay BFF" stereotype. There's Kurt and Blaine from Glee. Cameron from Modern Family. Justin from Ugly Betty. Or, throwback, Jack McFarland from Will and Grace and Stanford from Sex and the City. What do they all have in common? Well, as I mentioned, they're all gay men. They're all BFF to a major female character. Also, they're all fashion-conscious, they all love theater. Most of them have really broad personalities, too. Weird how they're all so…similar. Media representation of gay men has historically skewed toward these stereotypical depictions, where only one type of gay man is found on-screen.

Our brains love familiar things since they're easier to understand. So why invest in shows written by and about complex gay men or women, or LGBTQ people of color, when you could save time and money by lazily using stereotypes instead? Plus, as a familiar stereotype, this representation can be used in mainstream media without ruffling too many conservative feathers. That means more viewers and more money.

This is a big problem for diverse cultures that have trouble understanding each other. When minority groups are frequently stereotyped by the media, people may start to believe the associated stereotype is even more true. They reinforce themselves. Paying attention to how different groups and people are represented in the media is critical. Each representation is a choice made by the creator, sometimes because of money, and they can be used to positively or negatively impact how we think. Thanks, Though Bubble.

Of course, every production choice isn't part of a grand scheme to

sell more pop music or present more women of color from directing films. The media is a nebulous group of individuals all doing particular jobs. But there are people and systems at work within the business of media that help block or perpetuate certain stereotypes and ideologies.

For instance, cultural theorist Stuart Hall wrote about how racist ideologies are spread throughout the media. He said, “It would be wrong and misleading to see the media as uniformly and conspiratorially harness to a single, racist conceptions of the world.” The idea of the “media monolith” doesn’t exist. If it’s not some grand conspiracy, how do stereotypes and ideologies like these persist? That’s right, it’s money again.

Who has it, and where they want to spend it.

If you’ve ever posted on Tumblr or doodled in a notebook, you were probably able to do that for free. But somewhere along the way, someone had to pay for you internet access and phone or a notebook and pen. Maybe you paid for it, or your parents did. But without that money, you couldn’t have even doodled. All types of media creation require some kind of money. The big, fancy, mass media kind, like publishing a newspaper, or making a movie requires a lot. And not everyone has the money to create media. When you don’t have the money to create media, sometimes you can get other people to pay for you to create it. Like a patron or an investor. But because media creation costs money, and not everyone has money, it’s most often done by people who already have it.

And those who have it often want to spend it on people and things they already know will make more money. How do they decide who to give it to? They consider who has the experience making media that makes money. And usually that’s people who have already had the money to make media make money. It’s a cycle that prevents different voices from creating different kinds of media, keeping cultural power in the hands of a few.

Critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer believed that this closely held, homogenous mass media was dangerous. “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness.” …in 1944. They thought that mass-produced popular culture created for profit lulled consumers into passive contentment. No matter your situation, you’d be happy as a clam if you could access the easy entertainment of pop culture.

At the same time, it manufactured needs in the audience – like I need to see this movie, I need that brand of shampoo to be happy – that could only be solved by buying more stuff. In many ways, social media has helped break this cycle by lifting up diverse voices and challenging the ways media is traditionally made. Social media campaigns have even thrown the spotlight on negative or non-existent representations in mass-media. But the mega media players still tend to dominate the scene. That’s not to say every creative decision is based solely on money. Plenty of decisions are made for practical reasons, or by people just doing mundane jobs. Each one may not seem like a big deal, but when strung together they create all the media we absorb.

We spend most of our day with media, so it’s crucial we understand what is created by who, how, and for what reason. It’s almost as important as constantly reminding each other that media is created. It didn’t just appear out of nowhere, humans did that. And humans do some weird stuff, especially for money. Next time on Crash Course Media Literacy we’re talking about people who do it all for that cold, hard cash: advertisers.

But until then, I’m Jay Smooth. I’ll see you next time.

[Crash Course closing theme music]

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