



ACTIVITY ONE

MEDIA SURVEY

Media—including movies, television, the Internet, radio, billboards, music, newspapers, and magazines—educate us, entertain us, and help us form our opinions. They influence our culture by reinforcing accepted values and beliefs. This kit looks at some of the ways media create and disseminate their messages.

Even today, when virtual reality and computer simulations are taken for granted, it is often difficult to believe that what we read, see, or hear is not reality, but is someone's point of view that has been carefully assembled, edited, and constructed.

For example, advertisements can use dramatic music or a solemn-sounding narrator to lend an important or serious tone to their words and images. Similarly, a magazine cover featuring brightly colored text in a soft or fanciful typeface suggests entertaining or lighthearted contents. Headlines, cover art, celebrity photos, pop-up ads, movie trailers, flashy graphics, rousing music, and catchy slogans and phrases grab attention and entice consumers.

The media introduce us to unfamiliar places, people, and time periods. Very few people have been to outer space, for example, but movies such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) or television programs such as the "Star Trek" series help us imagine what it might be like. The screenwriters of these works may study current scientific research or interview astronauts, but we understand that they will also have to invent many details.

Even a movie about real people and events does not stick strictly to the facts. Actual incidents may be combined or changed for dramatic effect or to suit other needs of the story. Scenes that never took place may be added to better convey the movie's theme.

The 2000 film *Erin Brockovich* is based on the true story of a working-class woman who successfully helped the residents of a small town sue a giant corporation. Although the film is largely faithful to the facts, the real case and the real Erin Brockovich are more controversial and complex than they are portrayed in the film.

Stories told in movies, on television, and in print let us explore who we are and help us imagine who we would like to be. They may shed new light on particular groups, individuals, and events, or they may reinforce false perceptions and negative attitudes. For example, if actors from one ethnic group portray only poor, lazy characters on screen, the public may form a superficial and distorted image of that ethnic group. Similarly, an actor who continually performs heroic roles in films may be expected to behave the same way in real life.

An actor's perceived personal qualities may also affect the way viewers react to his or her screen role.

In *Philadelphia* (1993), likeable actor Tom Hanks won an Academy Award for his portrayal of a gay man suffering from AIDS. At a time when the escalating AIDS epidemic met with public fear and hostility, Hanks's participation probably made the story more acceptable to mainstream audiences and allowed them to connect with the movie's message.



2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY was released in 1968, before a manned spacecraft had landed on the moon; today, the film still has a "futuristic" sensibility and reflects uncanny instincts about what space travel would be like. Key choices of the director, production designer, and costumer designer, including the choice to use classical music on the soundtrack, give the film a timeless quality. Contemporary visual effects artists who have powerful CGI tools at their disposal still admire the mechanically produced effects in this ground-breaking film.

Take a survey of your students. Ask them what media they use during the week, including newspapers, books, magazines, Web sites, billboards, movies, television, radio, and video games. Have them name specific examples, and ask them why they use each one, whether for entertainment, information, gossip, connecting with friends, or other purposes. Ask them to log the time they spend during one week watching television, using the Internet, reading a newspaper, watching movies, etc. Discuss what they learned from each source and ask whether they trust the information. Have them explain why or why not.

EXTENDED ACTIVITY

Have your students pick a topic such as the presidential election, 9/11, or another event in American history and compare the treatment of that topic in various media such as television, movies, magazines, Internet blogs, and advertisements. Ask them to discuss the ways that the same information can be represented differently to emphasize a specific message.

