

The simpsons, modern family and media literacy essay

[Media](#), [Television](#)



In Douglas Rushkoff's article "Bart Simpson: Prince of Irreverence," he refers to the FOX sitcom *The Simpsons* as "the closest thing in America to a national media literacy program." (Graff et al, p. 241) Within this program, the Simpson family deconstructs memes and cultural landmarks of television at a breakneck pace, holding a lantern up to the way that media works and displaying it for all to see. *The Simpsons* educates its viewers to view media with a more critical eye due to its irreverence and ability to recognize and lampoon the structure and politics of the media industry. This is accomplished through copious use of social critique and satire of current events and elements of our modern world through the exaggerated world of cartoons. Unlike animated comedies, live action comedies do not often focus this much on outright presentationalism; their stories are much more character-oriented, though they can provide characterizations that pose social and political questions. The show *Modern Family*, in its portrayal of minorities and homosexual characters, is one such popular program that focuses on these issues.

In the time before *The Simpsons*, media was taken at face value. People thought of information "as something fed to [them] from above." (Rushkoff 242) There was no questioning of something that was said, or why it was being said – we just took it as gospel and moved on with that information. There was no evaluative measure for newspapers, advertisements, television programs – the viewer simply assumed they knew what they were doing. This was why incidents like the sinking of the *Maine* in 1898 caused the Spanish-American War; the news depicted it as an attack by Spain, despite it not being clear who was responsible. Though it is a drastic example, it is an

effective instance of news being inaccurate, and yet still trusted enough to take action on without doing proper fact checking.

The landscape has now changed – with a more media-savvy younger generation, they are much more likely to recognize and lampoon the various methods and strategies of advertisement that are used by media executives. These tricks include drawing a person into the story of the television show or commercial, only to solve their tension-inducing problem with the right ideology or product. Today's generation sees right through the manipulation and recognizes that they are being pandered to. They are no longer as connected with programming as the earlier generation, since it is so much easier to tune out of it and change the channel. There is even less respect for the image itself, as video games allow people to control that image.

(Rushkoff 244)

The Simpsons taps into all of that through the character of Bart Simpson; he is a young character that represents all the people who can see through the manipulation and call media out on their tricks; this provides an immense library of media literacy lessons. These show people the purpose of clip shows, for example - complete and total filler to pad out running time, so that more people tune in, thinking it's a new episode and see the advertisements. In one episode, they comment on the silliness of clip shows, and in another they point out the transparent manipulation of news media, when Bart pretends to be a little boy trapped in a well. (Rushkoff 253)

The show's writers do this intentionally; Matt Groening, the creator of The Simpsons, hires a mostly Harvard-educated writing staff, ensuring an intellectual perspective on a majority of the writing. (Rushkoff p. 248) This

enables intelligent, thought-provoking episodes that smartly tear apart the conventions of television and news media. The Simpsons provides a means to “assume that organized structures and institutions are out to get you,” showing its audience that the people who provide you your television programs are trying to get you to buy stuff, not just give you a quality story for the sake of it. (Rushkoff 253)

All of this contributes to the idea that The Simpsons, as a whole, is an engine for social change through media. By helping to satirize and parody clichés and conventions found in most media, it educates its audience on why they recognize that pattern, thus awakening them to a greater understanding of how the industry works. They know, after watching Itchy and Scratchy on The Simpsons, that television is getting far too violent, and kids are innocuously eating it up. They recognize that the media will grab onto a juicy story as long as it is fresh and new; if that same type of event happens again (or happens for real), they will simply ignore it. (Rushkoff 252) All of these things are taught by The Simpsons, and as a result the audience becomes a more media-conscious viewer. When an audience member can pick up on the fact that events in the show are referencing real-life events, and thus giving the writer’s perspective on them, this is known as media literacy. Becoming conscious of this metacommentary is important, as it will allow the audience to understand the show’s intentions more clearly, as well as the goals and opinions of the writing staff.

Live action programs do not often take this literal an approach to lampooning or commenting on current events. The ABC show Modern Family, for example, depicts the trials and tribulations of the extended Pritchett

family in a situational and character-specific style, very few episodes focusing on anything other than the unique situations that arise from the character's traits and decisions. While the majority of the family itself consists of upper class white heterosexuals, the show is also noted for its substantial and nuanced portrayal of gays and Hispanics. The show features a committed, mature gay couple, Cameron (Eric Stonestreet) and Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), as well as the native Hispanic wife and son of patriarch Jay Pritchett (Ed O'Neill), Gloria (Sofia Vergara) and Manny (Rico Rodriguez). While the show itself sometimes panders to stereotypical behavior and attributes many of its more cartoonish elements to these minority characters, they are never treated with disrespect or scorn, and the characters themselves are portrayed as positive, loving people.

Cameron and Mitchell possess many traits that could be considered stereotypical homosexual behavior, and these elements are often played up for laughs within the show. Cameron and Mitchell both possess very effete, sensitive personalities, with very feminine qualities to their voice and body language. There is a subtle lilt or lisp to their voices, and they are both very fashion conscious. While they do not inhabit completely offensive personalities to the realm of being cartoonish - including completely flamboyant behavior and/or crossdressing - their personalities and behavior are clearly meant to provide a stereotypically gay couple. In the episode "Aunt Mommy," the couple become very anxious about having a child, but then come up with the idea of having a surrogate child through mixing their sperm and impregnating a surrogate mother. One of the following scenes involves Cameron going completely baby-crazy and creating composite

pictures of babies made from himself and handsome male celebrities, including Justin Timberlake. They then bicker about which hot male celebrities they are "allowed" to fantasize about. While this scene is humorous, it does serve to paint the two gay men as wholly fixated on sex and celebrities, stereotypical portrayals of gay people in media.

Despite all of the stereotypical elements featured in these characters, there is a surprising amount of depth and nuance depicted. In the long run, they are depicted as members of the extended Pritchett family first, and "gay" or "Mexican" second. For the other characters in the show, their sexuality or race is hardly an issue - in the beginning stretch of the show, Jay maintained a certain level of discomfort with Cameron and Mitchell's sexuality, but the lesson is that he learns from it and accepts them as family. This stance that the show takes, about accepting everyone for who they are, is what helps keep the show from falling into offensive levels of stereotyping.

Some may argue that The Simpsons is merely a cartoon, and that it only needs to be taken at face value. This position implies that there is no social commentary occurring or satire of the media and news industry; that it merely showcases the misadventures of the Simpson family and nothing more. While this is certainly true, the sheer number of celebrity cameos (Larry King, Ringo Starr, Johnny Carson, the list goes on) as well as parodies and satires of current events at the time (celebrity sex scandals, political elections) indicate an interest of the show in events that are outside the sphere of their own fictional universe. Groening et al. are commenting on the events of today in their fictional program in order to get their perspective across to media literate audiences. According to Rushkoff, "the joy of

watching The Simpsons for its media-literate viewers is the joy of pattern recognition," where people recognize their own popular culture being reflected back at them through the creators and writers of the show. (248)

In conclusion, animated and live-action comedies, like The Simpsons and Modern Family most certainly have their socially relevant elements to them – the ability to create any sort of situations easily with animation opens the door for many presentational scenarios they can lampoon. Live-action shows, meanwhile, due to the limits of who and what they can film, often focus their attention solely on the characters themselves rather than ripped-from-the-headlines social commentary. Certainly, Modern Family has many stereotypical elements to its minority characters, but these elements are not so far in the foreground as to be offensive, and are merely used to establish these characters. Furthermore, the comedy is not strictly about how different they are, and the other characters in the show wholeheartedly accept them as they are. With this in mind, the show promotes a sense of crossculturalism that is more nuanced than might be expected in the world of situation comedies. This, combined with The Simpsons' ability to promote media literacy through necessitating knowledge of current events, provides ample social commentary for the general public.

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