

# Essay on the simpsons and media literacy

[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. In this paper, we will examine through Rushkoff's article the means by which *The Simpsons* makes viewers take what they are shown on television and in other forms of media with a grain of salt.

In the time before *The Simpsons*, media was taken at face value. People thought of information "as something fed to [them] from above." (p. 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.

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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. (p. 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. (p. 253)

While the audience is watching these things happen to the characters, and thus are interested, something in the back of their minds is telling them about every time this has happened on the news, or every time they have watched a clip show themselves. The Simpsons is a television show that provides metacommentary for television, and as such can be read on multiple levels. There is the layer where you can take the events of the show at face value, merely considering them as events in the universe of Springfield; however, there is also a deeper layer of metacommentary,

wherein events of the real world are commented on by the show, indicating the opinions and stance of the writers. The show then becomes their vehicle for social commentary.

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. (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. (p. 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. (p. 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.

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. (p. 248)

Its popularity and critical acclaim allow the show to endure, despite the fact that it disarms all the weapons at an advertiser's disposal. However, for those who enjoy *The Simpsons* and are fully aware of the tricks that the show is sending up, it is highly entertaining to be proven right. Matt Groening and his army of Harvard-educated writers, one episode at a time, help show people that television is not all it seems on the surface, and that a

bit of critical thinking can make all the difference in one's media literacy.

With proper media literacy, an audience member can gain a more comprehensive picture of how the news and advertisement business works - understanding why they do the things they do, and what effect they have on the public.