

This week's issue:

TODAY'S NEWS: INFORMATION OR ENTERTAINMENT?



At the 2013 MTV video music awards, Miley Cyrus twerked during her performance. The morning after, CNN focused more on her dance moves than on a giant wildfire in California or new evidence of chemical warfare in Syria. The headline on the CNN webpage read, “She did what??” Pundits had **dramatic** reactions to her behavior. Pundits, or “talking heads,” are the people you see arguing on the news all the time. Some called Miley Cyrus “out of control” and blamed her father. MSNBC pundits called her “a mess” before their morning newscast.

The rise of 24-hour-a-day news channels has increased the demand on **contemporary** media for attention-grabbing reports. Often they use shock value and fear to guide their reporting. A common phrase in newsrooms is, “If it bleeds, it leads,” meaning the more horrible a story is, the more people will want to watch or read about it in the news. Sometimes a **frivolous** story about a celebrity will be the lead, instead of events that affect thousands of other people.

Many people believe that journalism has **abandoned** its job of reporting news to **exploit** a public more interested in celebrities’ lives and spectacular sports plays. What is more relevant to report to the public – that a new voting rights law has been passed or that a starlet had a baby? One common late night TV comedy segment has an interviewer go out on a street and ask the public questions about current events. It’s clear from these clips that many people do not know the name of the Vice President of the United States. The show’s host makes fun of these people. But when daily news reports focus more on Miley Cyrus than the Vice President, should we be surprised?

News organizations say they have to make the news more exciting so that people will watch. They point out that many Americans would not bother to watch the news if they were not interested in an entertaining story. Once the news catches a person’s attention, they may stay tuned in and learn about important worldwide issues and events. Therefore, some say that attention-grabbing stories actually help make sure the public is aware of important news.

What do you think? Have news organizations abandoned their responsibility to educate the public about important current events? Or are they just giving us more of the news that we really care about?



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USE THE FOCUS WORDS *and alternate parts of speech

abandon (*verb*) to give up; to leave behind

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Last year Jack broke his arm and **abandoned** his hopes of playing on the baseball team.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Why might someone **abandon** a pet?

***abandon** (*noun*) carefree freedom

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Although Janice is normally shy, she sang with **abandon** at the karaoke party.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** What is an activity that you do with **abandon**?

frivolous (*adjective*) not important; silly

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Some people think wearing makeup is **frivolous** and a waste of time.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** What is the last item you bought that you would consider **frivolous**? Why?

contemporary (*adjective*) modern; current

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Many parents think that **contemporary** songs lack good lyrics.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Do you prefer the style of **contemporary** or classic cars?

dramatic (*adjective*) exciting; full of emotion; extreme

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Newscasters fear that people will not watch their programs if the stories are not **dramatic** enough.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Are teenagers more **dramatic** than adults, or does it just depend on the person?

exploit (*verb*) to take advantage of

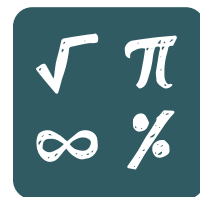
➡ **Sample Sentence:** Karla **exploited** her sister's weakness for chocolate when she offered her a candy bar in exchange for help with a school project.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Have you ever **exploited** a friend or sibling's weakness to get them to do something for you?

***exploit** (*noun*) something exciting and daring; an adventure

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Cynthia and Pamela's **exploits** included camping and telling ghost stories.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Describe your latest **exploit**.



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DO THE MATH

Historically, a good journalist's job has been to tell the truth. Journalists tell us when companies **exploit** their workers. They tell us when police officers are biased against minorities or teens or when they are heroes to a community. They cover stories that are **dramatic** but also important, like tsunamis, the War in Afghanistan, plane crashes, and presidential elections. They help us know what our world is really like.

Some **contemporary** news outlets are **abandoning** these responsibilities. They focus on stories that are **frivolous** or fun. Most people, they say, would rather learn about Charlie Sheen than health care reform. Is this true?

In March of 2011, an earthquake struck Japan. It was followed by a devastating tsunami. The country's nuclear plants began to melt down, releasing deadly radiation into the environment. Were Americans tuned in to the disaster?

Read each headline. Decide whether each article is "information," "entertainment," or "both." Put an X in the appropriate box. Can the class agree on each article? What fraction of the most-viewed articles fall into each category?

Top 15 most-viewed stories from cnn.com on March 17, 2011.

	Information	Entertainment	Both
1. Japanese settle in shelters, foreigners want out	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Japan struggles to cool reactors, spent fuel at damaged plant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Yale killing suspect admits murder, gets 44 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. U.S. hints at Libya airstrikes as Gadhafi pounds rebels	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Estranged son of anti-gay Westboro pastor says father does 'evil'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Rob Pattinson and Kristen Stewart's movie date (with fans)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Amid disaster, Japan's societal mores remain strong	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Sandra Bullock sends \$1 million for Japan relief	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Doctors feared mass suicide after deadly 'sweat lodge,' survivor says	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. The moments that make us fat	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. 'Radiation has always been part of my story'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Radiation: when to worry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. LeAnn Rimes defends her slim figure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Congress wants to cut tsunami warning centers? Really?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Tiger Woods: being a single dad is 'tough'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Discussion Question: What do the 15 most-viewed articles tell us about **contemporary** internet news viewers? Should we be embarrassed that while Japan was in crisis, Americans were reading about LeAnn Rimes' weight loss? Or is it natural for people to want to **abandon** real-world concerns and read about something "light" once in a while? What do you think about stories 3 and 9? Are they important, or are they just **dramatic** tales that **exploit** people's curiosity? Why do you think so many people were interested in story 5 about the Westboro pastor who pickets American soldiers' funerals?





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THINK SCIENTIFICALLY

The students in Ms. Kahn’s class are talking about biased reporting in **contemporary** news media. Aliyah brings up an article by Michael Massing, a reporter who sees bias in the U.S. media’s stories about Mexico.

“He says that U.S. reporters focus on violent Mexican drug gangs,” says Aliyah. “They ignore important stories about poverty and corruption. Instead, they **exploit** violent events like shootings and murders. They want to tell stories that are **dramatic** rather than fact-filled, and that are **frivolous** rather than important.”

“Is Michael Massing right?” asks Ms. Kahn. “Does U.S. news coverage of Mexico focus on drugs and drug violence and **abandon** other topics? What kind of evidence could you find to help answer this question?”

Some of Ms. Kahn’s students decided to monitor *The New York Times* for a month. They wrote down titles of articles that related to Mexico. At the end of the month they studied their data.

Date	Title of Article	Drugs/Violence?
9/1	Baja Battens Down as Hurricane Approaches	No
9/2	Hurricane in Baja Weakens	No
9/2	Leader Urges Cooperation Against Ills Mexico Faces	Yes
9/3	17 Killed in Mexican Rehab Center	Yes
9/6	Mexican Candidate and Family are Killed in Apparent Drug Hit	Yes
9/7	Mexican Police Make Arrest in Killing of Candidate and His Family	Yes
9/8	Seeking the World’s Biggest Meatball? Try Mexico	No
9/9	Mexican Police Thwart Plane’s Hijacker	No
9/12	Mexico Now Enduring Worst Drought in Years	No
9/13	Eyes Turn to Mexico as Drought Drags On	No
9/16	Lenient Sentences Given for Plundering of Artifacts	No
9/23	Survey Shows Pull of the U.S. Is Still Strong Inside Mexico	No
9/23	Two Arrested in Attempt to Crash Border	No
9/24	Mexican is Confirmed as Attorney General	No
9/28	2 Canadians Shot to Death in Mexican Resort Town	Yes
9/29	In Mexico City, a Political Deal Redone	No

How would you summarize the data the students collected?

Considering the results of the study, why do you think that Michael Massing sees bias in the U.S. media’s stories about Mexico?



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DEBATE THE ISSUE

Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

A

The balance of information and entertainment in today's news is a problem.

OR

B

The balance of information and entertainment in today's news is not a problem.

OR

CREATE YOUR OWN

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:

“ Can you show me evidence in the text that... ”

“ I believe that... ”

“ You make a good point, but have you considered... ”

“ I agree with you, but... ”

