

# Are We Reaching Da Youth?

Young adults' 'rejection of "the news" might be a reaction to big journalism's rejection of them.'

By Danny Schechter

First, a scene setter: Please don't call it a screed. Journalism tends to look up. Most news is about older people. It is about people in power. Presidents and potentates. Corporations. Celebrities. The Rich and Famous. It is about the people running things and the people who want to run things. And when it's not about their glories, it's about their darker sides, their scandals and deceptions. And when it's not about them—the Innies—it's about estranged outsiders, losers and the lost-lone gunmen, suicide desperados, corporate criminals, everyday crooks, and ordinary victims. Body counts galore.

Victims are roadkill on the electronic highway to ratings heaven.

On TV, there's a daily parade of sound bites and press conferences brought to us by news guys who look like jocks with great haircuts and perky blondes standing in front of buildings yakking through thick makeup like political science majors. Presidential candidates compete with movie stars. Madonna is writing children's books. Cookbook connoisseur Martha Stewart is arranging flowers in courtrooms. A rap mogul is now a black political leader. Howard Stern is the King of All Media. Don Imus has become a caricature of himself. Jay Leno offers a launching pad for candidates.

And Fox News is anything but news.

Even the dream machine on the small screen has been reduced to inspiring us to survive "Temptation Island," not get thrown out of the "Big Brother" House, win a rose and a rela-

tionship from the hunk-like Bachelor or, if you are a "Bad Boy," delight in those 15 seconds of fame outrunning "Cops."

Reality television is anything but reality.

This is the media environment all in

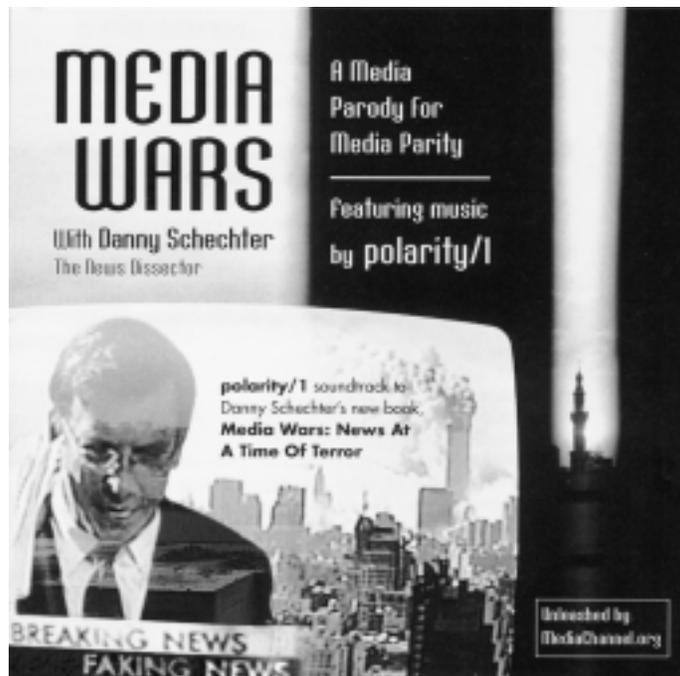
now get their "news" from late night TV, the Comedy Channel or "The Onion." Attitude is what excites them, not information. For most, it's not even cool to read newspapers or vote. The turnouts prove that.

There are so many distractions, so little time: DVD's video games, comic books and video games. The channels are many. The choices are full. The voices are few. They don't watch news. How do I know? Watch the ads. The advertisers, whose business it is to watch who is watching, know. That's why there are so many commercials for Viagra, stomach remedies, and arthritis medications. In TV jargon, news-casts "skew old."

That's why Al Gore, who started out wanting to launch a liberal TV alternative, has been persuaded that a youth-oriented channel is the way to go. His new TV venture will use stealth "lifestyle" programming to politicize by appearing not to. If Fox News is the stern, finger-wagging Archie Bunker-like, patriotically correct party-liner on the right, Gore, who has greened, pastel shirts and all, has become a permissive do-your-own-thinger. For him, depoliticizing politics is the only hope. He will learn that pandering won't work. Honesty and authenticity might.

## Meshing News and Music

I've written books, such as "The More You Watch, the Less You Know," to explain what is going on with news these days. But I have also collaborated on some music projects hoping to zone



The cover of a CD about media coverage of terror.

the know concede has been dumbed down for years. Even serious people can't take it seriously. As news biz merges into show biz, Time magazine calls war "militainment" and politics "electotainment." Facts are what they say they are like WMD's in Iraq or a fair vote in Florida. News-lite does not make Americans very bright. A recent study took note of pervasive misperceptions among TV news viewers.

When younger people are not downloading libraries of recorded music from the Internet, or piercing their noses and tattooing their behinds, they

into this apolitical zeitgeist to try to reach younger people who seem to have tuned out on so many fronts. (This does not include a whole generation of young activists crusading on the environment, human rights, peace and global justice issues.)

As the father of a hip media-savvy 20-something, I have had an up-close and personal education about why my orientation towards big ideas and political engagement doesn't always connect. ("If it's too loud, dad, you're too old.") When I was her age, I believed with Abbie Hoffman that "you can't trust anyone over 30." Now it sometimes feels like you can't trust anyone under 50.

Over the years, from my days in rock 'n' roll broadcasting, I have seen the way popular culture leads politics. As a result, I've been involved with multiartist music benefits to promote awareness on important issues: from "No Nukes" in 1979 (about nuclear power) to "Sun City" in 1985 (against apartheid), from "Give Peace a Chance" in 1991 (trying to stop the first Gulf War) to "We Are Family" in the immediate aftermath of September 11th (an appeal for tolerance).

As the editor of Mediachannel.org, a global media Web site, I am now focusing on media issues by creating CDs with the musician/producer Polar Levine, who records as "polarity/1." Our first, in 1997, used hip-hop to take on what we call "News Goo." Here is a sample lyric:

Communication Breakdown! Pause for this message. Wake up!

Every station is identification

Global syndication is shaping the nation. ABC-Disney, NBC-GE.

Murdoch is Foxy and we're the hen, He owns the pen, the camera, the sword.

Buy a Coke, buy a Ford. Gettin broke? Getting bored?

Selling attitude like food for the masses. Junk consumption. We're lumpen

A bumpkin to the corporate state.

You cannot satiate what you can't negotiate

Your will's been snatched, The bill's attached

Flim-flam diagram, data-jam, handi-cam Caught it, Yo, ya bought it

A mind is a profitable thing to waste. Ya want another taste, baby? We got

CHORUS:

News Goo—What we need to know

News Goo—What we want to know

News Goo—What we think we know

Got remote control to choose the show.

But the more we watch, the less we know

Ignorance grows on the spirit like a tumor ... till freedom is a rumor<sup>1</sup>

The song is provocative and hard charging, but getting it on the air in this

sound bites have—in no way—been manipulated to create a context different from that which was intended. The off-the-cuff remarks made by many of our leading, highly influential TV infotainers, who pass for presenters of news, reveal much about the current state of a once vigorous press. Fox News's 'fair, unbiased' commentary speaks for itself in the pride it takes in being 'unafraid' to serve as propagandists for Washington's right wing political establishment."<sup>2</sup>

Songs like these won't transform the media or "elevate" a generation of news rejectors. How many will even hear them? They are an expression of a dissenting point of view that tends to get marginalized anyway. But they do flow out of the theory that believes that if the news business is to reach this audience, it will have to speak its lan-

---

**Younger people 'now get their "news" from late night TV, the Comedy Channel or "The Onion." Attitude is what excites them, not information. For most, it's not even cool to read newspapers or vote.'**

---

age of hyper media consolidation in radio is, shall we say, problematic. It has been played on alternative radio and Internet radio stations worldwide. Boston's WBCN, the radio station where I spent a decade dissecting news that is now owned by Viacom, which is one of the companies crusading for larger media monopolies, won't play it. No surprise there.

In 2003, at the height of the Iraq War, we went another way, making "Media Wars," named after another of my books. This track is an audio collage to a funky electronica groove track that uses comments of mine and some "rapping" that is intercut with bits of TV news broadcasts and presidential pronouncements. Levine explains on his popCULTmedia Web site: "The TV

guage and echo its concerns. Far too much of our news ignores young people or puts them down. All too often they are stereotyped as troublemakers to fear, not learn from. Their rejection of "the news" might be a reaction to big journalism's rejection of them.

Ya dig? ■

*Danny Schechter, a 1978 Nieman Fellow, writes daily on media issues for Mediachannel.org. His latest book is "Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception" (Prometheus Books 2003) on the coverage of the war on Iraq. A new Web site featuring his body of work can be accessed at [www.newsdissector.org](http://www.newsdissector.org).*

✉ [danny@mediachannel.org](mailto:danny@mediachannel.org)

<sup>1</sup> From "News Goo" ("The More You Watch, the Less You Know") © 2000 Polar Levine-sine language music/BMI. You can download the song at: <http://www.polarity1.com/fc wd9.html>

<sup>2</sup> To download "Media Wars": <http://www.polarity1.com/mediawars.html>