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?

Questions for Classroom Discussion:
- What types of topics do contemporary news reports cover?
- Should we be surprised when people do not know the name of the Vice President of the United States? Do you know?
- Why do news sources say their stories have to be dramatic?
- Do you think people in the U.S. are more interested in being entertained than in being informed about the world?
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.
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?

Answers will vary. One set of possible answers has been marked. Given these, 7/15 of the stories are informative, 5/15 (1/3) are entertaining, and 3/15 (1/5) are both.

**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?
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.

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

How would you summarize the data the students collected?

Out of 16 headlines having to do with Mexico, 5 focused on drugs and/or violence. That’s 31.3%, or almost 1/3.

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

**TODAY’S NEWS: INFORMATION OR ENTERTAINMENT?**

**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.

________________________

________________________

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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...”
TODAY'S NEWS: INFORMATION OR ENTERTAINMENT?  

abandon  |  frivolous  |  contemporary  |  dramatic  |  exploit

UNIT 1.15

TAKE A STAND

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

abandon  |  frivolous  |  contemporary  |  dramatic  |  exploit

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Word Generation  |  Series 1B  |  Unit 1.15  |  wordgeneration.org  90