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TODAY'S NEWS: INFORMATION OR ENTERTAINMENT?

Word Generation - Unit 1.15

Focus Words

abandon | biased | contemporary | dramatic | exploit

WEEKLY PASSAGE

What is the role of news media? Which stories should they cover? The news is reported every day by TV, radio, newspapers, and web sites. Some programs report on celebrity life, on everyday topics like shopping, or on strange events that do not affect many people. But is that news?

Some people think the public is missing out on important information. They believe we should be hearing more about what is happening with the war in Iraq and government spending of our tax dollars. They don't think the news should tell us about movie stars having babies and athletes getting arrested. Some people think that many **contemporary** news reports are **biased**. They say that today's reporters often present only one of many views on complex issues such as immigration or the conflict in the Middle East. Even the words and pictures that reporters use to describe an event can affect people's feelings about it. Critics also say that today's news is sensationalized or made more exciting than it really is. They think that stories are chosen for shock value and told in ways that appeal to people's emotions and **exploit** their curiosity. These kinds of stories are designed to make people want to know more.

Some news sources say that they are giving the public what it wants. They fear that people will not watch their programs or read their papers if the stories are not **dramatic** enough. Is America more interested in being entertained than in learning about what's happening in the world? Or have the news media **abandoned** their job of informing people about events and issues that really matter?

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Today's news: Information or entertainment?

FOCUS WORDS OF THE WEEK

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

FORMS: _____

EXAMPLES OF USE: _____

NOTES: _____

biased : (adjective) slanted; one-sided

FORMS: _____

EXAMPLES OF USE: _____

NOTES: _____

contemporary : (adjective) modern; current

FORMS: _____

EXAMPLES OF USE: _____

NOTES: _____

dramatic : (adjective) exciting

FORMS: _____

EXAMPLES OF USE: _____

NOTES: _____

exploit : (verb) to take advantage of

FORMS: _____

EXAMPLES OF USE: _____

NOTES: _____

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PROBLEM OF THE WEEK

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 gossipy or fun. Most people, they say, would rather read 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?

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

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's 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 number 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 number 5, about the **biased** Westboro pastor who pickets American soldiers' funerals?

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THINKING 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** sad events like shootings and murders. They want to tell stories that are **dramatic** rather than stories that are 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 their city's newspaper for a month. They wrote down the title of each article that related to Mexico. At the end of the month they studied their data.

Date	Title of Article	Drugs/ Violence?
9/2	Baja Battens Down as Hurricane Approaches	No
9/3	Hurricane in Baja Weakens	No
9/3	Leader Urges Cooperation Against Ills Mexico Faces	Yes
9/4	17 Killed in Mexican Rehab Center	Yes
9/4	Tahéima Wellness Resort	No
9/7	Mexican Candidate and Family are Killed in Apparent Drug Hit	Yes
9/8	Seeking the World's Biggest Meatball? Try Mexico.	No
9/8	Mexican Police Make Arrest in Killing of Candidate and His Family	Yes
9/10	Mexican Police Thwart Plane's Hijacker	No
9/13	Mexico Now Enduring Worst Drought in Years	No
9/14	Eyes Turn to Mexico as Drought Drags On	No
9/17	Lenient Sentences Given for Plundering of Artifacts	No
9/19	Ending the 'War on Drugs'	Yes
9/24	Survey Shows Pull of the U.S. Is Still Strong Inside Mexico	No
9/24	Two Arrested in Attempt to Crash Border	No
9/25	Mexican is Confirmed as Attorney General	No
9/29	2 Canadians Shot to Death in Mexican Resort Town	Yes
9/30	In Mexico City, a Political Deal Redone	No

How would you summarize the data the students collected?

_____

_____

_____

Does this table support Mr. Massing's statement that news coverage focuses on drugs and drug violence in Mexico?

_____

_____

_____

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DEBATING THE ISSUE

Get ready...

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

A News stations are too biased. They should present many different opinions about contemporary issues in order to keep people interested.

B News stations have abandoned their responsibility to inform people about the world. They should focus less on celebrity life and more on important world events.

C News stations should cover dramatic stories people want to hear about, like when movie stars have babies or athletes get arrested. Their job is to give people what they want.

D Contemporary news reports are not biased or sensationalized; they do a good job of showing people what they need to know about the world.

E _____

_____

_____

Get set...

Be ready to provide evidence to back up your position during your class discussion or debate. Jot down a few quick notes:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

GO!

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these.

...because...

I disagree with part of that...

What part of the passage makes you think that?

An example might help convince me. Can you give me an example?

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What types of stories should the news media cover?

WRITE ABOUT IT

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

Focus Words

abandon | biased | contemporary | dramatic | exploit

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