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Professional Resource:

Independent Film Channel's *Media Project* (2008)

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Upon first glance, the Independent Film Channel *Media Project*'s web site looks like many others devoted to the tech-savvy generation. Its academic usefulness cloaked in streaming video and fan forums, the site is a compendium of criticism on the media. Accessible via the *Media Project* home page at <http://www.ifc.com/mediaproject>, the site provides access to current episodes analyzing specific issues within the media and directs users to older episodes available for purchase. The homepage also directs viewers to media literacy resources, biographical information of the producers, and sister sites (like a blog and Facebook fan page) that further discuss the episodes. In its first season, the *Media Project* aired six episodes, exploring topics such as Pentagon propaganda, the dumbing down of news, and the importance of sources for news quality, among others. While the web site summarizes season one's episodes, full-length video of season one is only available for purchase.

Season two, which premiered May 3, opened by analyzing how the United States is portrayed in the world media, and likewise, how our own national media represents—and misrepresents—the world. Other season two highlights include an ethics discussion and a focus on the economics of news, which is arguably one of the most fitting topics in today's journalism climate. The episodes themselves are fast-paced and high-energy, perfect for the easily distracted college student.

The content of the *Media Project* fills a niche—on some level starting where major-league documentary projects like PBS' Frontline leave off in terms of media critique. Some media watchdog sites address serious voids in coverage but only from a content standpoint. Instead, the *Media Project* considers the media machine as a more dynamic and complicated force. While lacking a certain well-rounded-

ness in resources and academic connections, the site demonstrates a large potential for growth. Its media literacy resources pages promote less than a handful of resources, most of them self-stroking, but the variety in episodic content does well to introduce the viewer to a number of important issues. The project could have better capitalized on a media literacy link often missing from many watchdog sites: the opportunity to spell out the media literacy argument for casual consumers. Indeed, it is likely that those outside the media literacy field would find the episodes non-sequitur with the media literacy resource page. The media literacy push is most evident when the project is explored in concert with producer Meghan O'Hara's *Huffington Post* blog, which describes the need for more critical consumerism as the mass media web becomes more complex and interconnected. For example, O'Hara explains why a thorough exploration of the dynamic between government media tactics and coverage of the Iraq war is necessary. Through its Facebook fan page, which is still building momentum and a number base, the project seeks to gain a young and diverse audience. Put simply, the content and message of the *Media Project* are most effective when these three resources—the episodes, blog, and facebook site—are concurrently explored.

Video snippets of episodes are available on the web site, as are videos of panel discussions with major media players about the project. Partly reminiscent of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9-11*, which O'Hara helped produce, and partly shot in TV news magazine style, the video clips suggest juicier findings in the full-length episodes. The content of the episodes is ideal for the novice media consumer who senses there is more to every news article or broadcast than what is presented. Students just beginning to see the media in this new light will encounter some of the basic

tenets of media literacy: news is a commodity, the best sources are often the ones who respond by deadline, and sometimes information gets left out. Standing episodic features, such as an animated media encyclopedia, nit-pick journalism practices from a media-literate perspective.

In the first episode of season one, the encyclopedia segment deconstructs the use of the word “allegedly,” suggesting it is a word put in front of any statement to “magically make it true.” The segment also describes the word as a means to not “piss off” important people. While this analysis is both humorous and accurate at times, teachers should use O’Hara’s columns and other media literacy resources to point students toward a more complete synthesis: under what circumstances should journalists *actually* use the word “allegedly?” What are the implications and expectations of using that word? At times, in the episodes these transitions from anecdote to a more substantial media literacy discussion are lacking.

Entertaining and informative, the episodes don’t hesitate to be provocative and openly critical. As O’Hara writes in her blog at www.huffingtonpost.com/meghan-ohara, the project is devoted to revealing “the true influences of news in this country.” O’Hara minces no words in describing why, exactly, the site was deemed necessary in an already-saturated media market, its premier scheduled just weeks after the 2008 presidential election: “I couldn’t help feeling confident that what we were working on was the perfect wake up call to the white noise posing as ‘news.’” The vast failure of Americans to become media literate fueled her belief in the importance of the *Media Project*, her blog states.

Too often, the decisions of our news media are dictated by ratings and the profit margins of their corporate parent companies. We got into this mess partly because the media censored itself and too many of us were complacent with the answers we were given. It is time that we, the people, take a more active role in this national conversation.

Both the full episodes and the site’s sneak peaks make it obvious the project managers give no apologies for taking journalists to task if and when they fail to act in the public’s best interest. After all, O’Hara writes on the *Huffington Post* blog, the cast and crew are looking for answers from today’s story-

tellers.
We need them and we need to trust them again. So for our part - our show is doing just that - praising journalists when they take risks, calling them out when they are blinded by ratings, and spanking them when they are too lazy to dig beyond what is spoon-fed to them.

Introducing students to this rationale behind the site’s creation would better situate them to understand the episodic content and the sometimes-cynical attitude the segments exude.

Response from mainstream media has been mixed, with an *LA Times* review on Nov. 18, 2008 characterizing the episodic content as shallow and oversimplified. The *LA Times* criticizes host Gideon Yago (of MTV acclaim) for his own attitudinal spin on the stories presented (for instance, referring to Natalie Holloway as that “Aruba chick”). On the other hand, an April 30, 2009 article the *Buffalo News* web site compares the Media Project to CNN’s “Reliable Sources” save one big difference—the former has attitude. The *News* calls it a “must see” for news junkies. In a Nov. 14, 2008 article, the *Denver Post* extols the project’s purpose but criticizes its execution, which it calls “problematic” for its tone that wavers between “terminally hip and overreaching.” The article states that “like everything on TV, this project requires viewers to exercise editorial judgment.” Perhaps most importantly, and most accurately, the *Post*’s review reminds viewers that there is a difference between skepticism and cynicism, and not everything available in the mass media “is the cynical result of evil masterminds.”

Owned by Rainbow Media, a subsidiary of Cablevision (known most recently for its notorious role in the West Side Stadium debate), IFC would do well to remember that even it is part of the media conglomeration machine, and some introspection, even if only via full (and obvious) disclosure on the web site, would go far in completing the media literacy circle that the project mistakenly portrays at times as being quite linear.

Ultimately, the *Media Project* is an engaging first look at the media buzzsaw and, when complemented with full context from O’Hara’s blog and more grounded discussions on journalism practice and the economics of news, would be ideal for use in beginning news literacy classrooms.

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