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# Media in the Hunger Games

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# Media in the Hunger Games

## **Abstract**

Media bombards us with information at all times. How often do we stop to think about its influence on our opinions and behaviors? While some of us may wish to believe that we are capable of being informed without being persuaded, to some extent or another, we are all manipulated by media. Many theories about how media influences our current society can be seen in action in the Hunger Games trilogy, written by Suzanne Collins, with remarkable verisimilitude. In order to explore media and its effects on people, one can observe Katniss Everdeen as she becomes a tribute, a victor, and a leader, as she understands the power of media. Her varying degrees of awareness, understanding, and manipulation of televised content accurately reflect how our own society responds to it as well.

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Honors Faculty Mentor: Maureen Fitzpatrick, Professor, English

It is no secret that media is all around us. Magazines, newspapers, radios, TVs, cell phones, movies, and a myriad of other types of media are bombarding us with information at all times. For the most part, we see them as merely informative or entertaining, and rarely stop to think about their influence on our opinions and behaviors. After all, we are all capable of discerning fact and fiction, and being informed without being persuaded, right? While some of us may wish to believe just that, matter of the fact is that, to some extent or another, we are all manipulated by media—the degree of that manipulation, however, can vary along with our own levels of awareness and understanding of how media and people work. Karen E. Dill's book, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality—Seeing Through Media Influence* discusses exactly that: the different ways that media, specifically television, can impact viewers.

While Dill's book discusses the topic in regards to our American reality, many of her theories can be seen in action in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, written by Suzanne Collins, with remarkable verisimilitude. It is important to take a moment to acknowledge the fact that the societies depicted in both books, that of the American people and that of the citizens of Panem, are in fact, quite different. In the USA we enjoy much more freedom than in Panem. We have the right to speak our mind, the freedom to make choices, and, perhaps most importantly, we have a variety of media sources from which to choose. On the other hand, those in Panem suffer punishment for trying to do anything they were not assigned to do, have to be careful about what they say and to whom, and only have one source of mass media: the TV channel run by the Capitol. While it is easy to believe that in such a society it would not be a surprise to see that media is one of the many tools that the Capitol uses to keep its citizens in line and compliant, it might not be so easy to see that as the case in our own situation. The *Hunger Games* trilogy presents a society, much like our own, which is highly influenced by media. Although in our

reality, that influence is mostly exerted in terms of beliefs, opinions, politics, and purchasing, and is more about complacency than it is about control and oppression, there are many more similarities in the use of media in the *Hunger Games* and in the world we live than first meets the eye.

In order to explore media and its effects on people, one can observe Katniss Everdeen, the main character of Collins' books, as she becomes a tribute, a victor, and, finally, a leader, as she understands the impact that media can have on people. Her varying degrees of awareness, understanding, and manipulation of televised content shows its true power and accurately reflects how our own society responds to it as well, regardless of how different our populations may or may not be. Throughout the *Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss alternates between that awareness, understanding, and manipulation of media. The trilogy does not reflect these media concepts as linear modules, but they show how a person can alternate through all of these phases fluidly and with varying degrees of depth as their knowledge and consciousness on the matter grow.

As Dill mentions early on in her book, "we don't realize either that we are affected or how much we are affected. In the end, that makes us very vulnerable to being shaped by the media" (Dill 87) – That statement reflects how the Capitol was able to keep control over all of Panem. Media events such as the Hunger Games and its historic representation tug at heartstrings and keeps feelings in check. Feelings are often times much more powerful than fact. Knowing that, the Capitol uses a variety of approaches that instill fear in the general population—fear of destruction, fear of another war, fear of not being able to provide for their families, fear of lack of stability. The fact that it is repeated yearly and that fear never gets a chance to be laid to rest makes sure these thoughts and insecurities are always on the surface, guarantees that people are always worried, and thus end up falling in line and just go about their days not rocking the boat,

regardless of the fact that their life may not be all that they wish it to be. After all, they "know" that if they attempt to do so, they will be destroying Panem too.

In our own world, the effects of media are not all that different. "In one study, over a third of [...] respondents who reported being frightened by media said the effect of that fear lasted more than a year" (Dill 33). That is exactly what Katniss realizes when she states that "Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. 'Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen'" (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 19). Their use of the Hunger Games and the footage that surrounds it serves as a constant reminder of the fact that the Capitol holds control of the people's lives, reminding them of how helpless they supposedly are.

But how helpless are we? We live in a country of freedoms. We can, mostly, do as we please, say what we please, watch what we please. We can go online and research almost anything we want. Yet, even with all that, we still manage to be molded by a medium that we have no control over. Stop and think about what you know. How much do you know about people in other parts of the country, or even other parts of the world? How much of that perceived knowledge did you acquire first hand? "We may not realize it, but very often we learn about other people through what we see in the mass media. This is especially true when the other people we're talking about are different from ourselves and we have little face-to-face contact with members of their group" (Dill 88).

At one instance Katniss ponders how each district is portrayed in the Hunger Games, how they are always seen for what their district does, not for whom they are (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 66). Katniss also realizes that they also manipulate how much each district knows about

each other district, and how that may affect her understanding of each group of people that composes the rest of the nation of Panem, since she, personally, has no contact with them outside of the Hunger Games. As she talks to Rue during the Hunger Games, she thinks to herself that “we have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation, because though the information seems harmless, they don’t want people in different districts to know one another” (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 203). The people of Panem do not vacation outside of their districts, and therefore are not able to obtain any sort of first-hand knowledge about the other 11 districts other than what they see broadcast on TV. It sounds like Dill is describing this situation perfectly. Yet, it is about our society, full of freedoms and liberties, to which she is actually referring.

Maybe that is only a coincidence. After all, we do not throw our children in arenas, ready to die for a memory of a past long gone. We are much more civilized than that, or at least that is what we want to believe. So let us talk about greener pastures. Who does not like a good romantic comedy, or perhaps a wistful drama? Movies transport us. For an hour or two, we get to put our life on pause, and live someone else’s life for a change. Sometimes, we laugh with them. Sometimes we cry. Have you ever looked around in a movie theater to try to see if you were the only one getting teary? Think about it. “If a movie plays sad music to evoke a sad feeling, the naïve viewer’s reaction is to simply feel sad and not to be analytic about it or to be aware that the producers are creating a scene in order to evoke an emotion (Dill 47). What is the harm in that though? It is just a movie... but it is also manipulation.

It is not an accident that you laugh when you do, or get nervous and tense, or even cry when you do in a movie theater. Every scene is carefully thought out and composed to tell a story. We see that often in the *Hunger Games*. During the first Games of the trilogy, they work

on Katniss to evoke softness, and on her relationship with Peeta to keep love at the forefront of the viewer's mind, and take them into a journey of lovers fated never to be together—a story that we, readers, know is not exactly quite true, at least not at first. Then, during the rebellion, the leaders of District 13 run a series of propos entitled *We Remember*. It's a tribute to tributes (Collins, *Mockingjay* 109). They are personal, targeted messages. It is not quite a movie, but it is the media product closest to a movie that Panem produces.

But why propos? Why not do something else? "Why not just deliver the moral and not tell the story? Because stories have the power to engage the listener and to help the listener more deeply understand. When listening to a story, we identify with characters and their predicaments. We imagine what we would do in their situations. Stories are metaphors and people understand metaphors at a deep level" (Dill 50). How often do we see anything in media being shown in a sterile environment? How often do we use a person in an empty room, just talking monotonously about a subject, no matter how important or relevant or interesting, on air? Everything from newscasts to sitcoms and reality shows tell stories. They use narratives, sets, and characters to achieve the goal of getting their intended message across, whatever that may be. By doing so, by lending a personality and a life-story to someone, they create a point of reference for the viewers. They create someone they can relate to and understand which causes an emotional bond with the public. The same goes for media as used in the Hunger Games. Regardless of the fact that for a long time President Snow and his government had full control of media, they still made sure to tell a story, whether by recounting the history of the Hunger Games with emotional footage, focusing on the star crossed lovers story-line during the game itself, or trying to do damage control during the Victors' Tour (Collins, *Catching Fire* 28-29) . The same can be said about the rebellion. They don't just go on air in an empty white set and state what they believe to be true.

Why? Because "...seeing is believing. We're not built to discount what we see, to identify illusions. We're built to do just the opposite--to take in social information as just that. From an evolutionary or biological perspective we are supposed to believe what we see, not doubt it" (Dill 150). Being simply told something does not have the same impact on us as seeing it for ourselves. Let us look at an extreme: If we, as a nation, had simply heard about the 9/11 tragedy as a quick snippet of news, something along the lines of someone saying "Today, two planes overtaken by Islam extremist terrorists have crashed into the Twin towers, killing thousands of innocent people" and that had been it, while we would have accepted the information due to the fact that newscasts have credibility, would it have had the same effect and the same consequences on the population as a whole and even on the current war on terror had we not been able to follow the tragedy on TV, in real time, seeing the second plane crash into that tower and watching them both fall, and to see that repeated ad nauseam for months to follow, along with several stories and heartfelt testimonials of the tragedy of that day? By the same token, if this was something that the media decided to sweep under the rug—if we were in a society where user generated media did not exist, and the media at large had decided to not report this to the rest of the country and even the world—if we heard that something of this magnitude had occurred, would we have believed it if we had just heard a rumor about it but there was no news story on the matter, no one willing to confirm it, and no footage of the terrorist act at all? Regardless of its reality, had we not had all these other tools surrounding the event, the outcome from that day could have been completely different.

While nothing quite like that happens in the *Hunger Games*, the notion that seeing is believing has just as much power in Everdeen's world as it does our own. Regardless of how many people in Panem were unsatisfied with their current situation, they had never seen

someone try to break the mold and survive their show of dissent unscathed. They were either executed, publicly beaten, or turned into an Avox depending on the severity of their so called crime. It was not until Katniss was able to defy the Capitol in the games and come out a victor anyway that people saw rebellion as a true possibility.

So I leave you with this thought: "Always assume that when you are plugged in, the media are persuading you" (Dill 226). Media simply does not exist as an impartial entity. This happens because no matter how we slice it, media content is put out by people. These people have points of view and opinions, and some of that, to some extent or another always ends up in what is being created or aired. Some media outlets may try to be more objective than others, but even that objectivity requires someone deciding what is and is not partial or impartial, through their own opinions and knowledge. Therefore, you are always being persuaded, even when you believe you are just being informed. Be it from one centralized, government-controlled form of media, or be it through a wide variety of channels, if our television is on, the manipulation game is being played... and chances are, you don't even notice it.

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