

Madonna in the hallowed halls

By Ellen Metter

Use of popular media in collection development and reference

The time has come for all good academic librarians to switch on MTV. That is exactly what graduate student Charles W. Wells did when he wrote his 230-page Florida State University M.A. thesis on Madonna (the singer Madonna, that is).

Classroom faculty often urge students, especially those just learning to do research papers, to "choose a topic of interest to you so you will enjoy writing the paper!" Are librarians always familiar enough with popular media to be prepared when students want to blend a popular media event or phenomena into the topic of a scholarly paper? Are librarians in tune with some of the popular passions of college students?

The question is: Are librarians neglecting certain popular media sources, believing them to be unrelated to collection development and reference? George Bush, in his 1992 campaign for reelection as president, made what seems in hindsight to have been a miscalculation. He refused to appear on MTV because it was not "presidential." Hopefully, librarians will not make the same mistake in deciding that popular media is just not "academic" and so has nothing to offer us.

Last year a student came up to the reference desk and asked where he could find articles on Snoop Doggy Dogg. Now be honest, how many of you would have responded to this question by looking up articles on Charles M. Schultz and the "Peanuts" comic strip? Through my popular media browsings I knew that Snoop Doggy Dogg was a rap singer and even knew to add the double-g on the last "Dogg." Now

the student wasn't impressed because he probably assumed that everyone would know the rapper. (And if you are a rap-music-loving librarian, you are equally unimpressed.) But the point is, I didn't have to conduct a reference interview in order to start assisting my patron.

Becoming a mass media hound

How well rounded should librarians be? We know the importance of browsing academic and trade journals, but what is the place of mass media in collection development? And what do we need to keep up with? Should we fill our evenings with *Married with Children*, *The Simpsons*'s, and *The Home Shopping Network*? Well, it might not be as useless as you think. Almost anything you absorb may be useful later:

The Home Shopping Network is a good example of new consumerism. What are some of the reasons that people shop from home? What are some of the psychological techniques those on the network use to convince viewers to spend? You would probably be best able to help a researcher if you had seen this phenomena for yourself. *Married with Children* is a satirical look at familial relationships. Do some of the broad and seemingly foolish interactions depicted have a basis in reality?

The Simpsons was mentioned recently in an article from *The Sciences* (November/December 1994) titled "The Solace of Patterns," an article by Stanford professor Robert M. Sapolsky. In this piece Sapolsky uses the actions of the dad on *The Simpsons* (Homer) to illustrate the stages of grief. If Sapolsky can call on Homer, Bart, and the gang for illustration, then our students certainly can!

Mass media surfing

There is simply not enough time to absorb all of mass media, just as there is not enough time

to stay abreast of the cutting-edge scholarship in different areas, fine arts, and technological advances. But mass media can be easy to slip in here and there. Simple familiarity with some of it can be an asset. Try perusing some of the following:

Your local community paper

This recommendation goes out particularly to those who live in areas where major newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* overshadow the local papers. Many years ago, when I was a librarian in New Jersey, most of my colleagues chose to read the *Times* over the local *Star Ledger*. While few would dispute that such heavy-hitting papers have worthwhile information for the information professional, some might question the local rag, which often will contain reprints of articles from the better-known papers.

But community papers have one great advantage over the national papers: they care about the community, state, and region they are based in. Residential college students become a part of that community. There is junk and sensationalism to wade through but there is also news of community leaders, new businesses, specialized concerns, and influential groups that may shape the interests of your clientele.

The local paper also has a unique and popular feature not found in the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Christian Science Monitor*: comics! You never know what gems you'll find there. Consider the controversial series of LuAnn comics in which the teenage lead character begins menstruation and the many characters of the strip discuss it. It was fascinating and thought-provoking (and was unfortunately banned from running in some newspapers).

Award shows

Programs that honor the popular favorites in music, theater, and other performing and visual arts, such as the *Academy of Country Music Awards* and the *Grammy Awards* offer a quick method of getting up-to-date on mainstream performers. (In fact, I saw and heard Snoop Doggy Dogg on such a program. Not bad.)

Experience some "hot" networks and shows on TV and radio

There is no need to watch each and every show religiously . . . though you may find that you want to! But make it a goal to experience at least some of the media that a great percentage of your students are absorbing. MTV runs 24 hours a day. If you are a cable subscriber, flip to it during the commercials of your favorite shows.

Could your patrons be among the 12 million plus who listen to Rush Limbaugh? While some of us may not be fans of his, there is no denying that the man plants many ideas; ideas that may be investigated at the library.

Children's television

The children of today may be freshman somewhere down the line. Do you know what morphing action is? If not, you're not familiar with the popular *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. Modern children's educational television can be a marvelous place to learn things. From watching Nickelodeon's *Wild Side Show* I learned that the camel does not store water in its hump (that's fat up there), and that only 62 condors are now known to exist but that they are slowly being reintroduced to nature. (Hey, I don't want some six-year-old to know more about camels and condors than I do.)

What are the chances that someone will ask you a question or request a source relating to the latest radio talk show program or last night's sitcom? Most librarians I have spoken with agree on this mysterious phenomena: once you learn or become aware of something, you get a query about it! So do some channel surfing or pick up a local paper. Don't worry, you don't actually have to be a Snoop Doggy Dogg fan. ■

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