



Using Popular Media in Youth Ministries



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Popular media have always been an important touch point for young people, whether they've been influenced by Jack Benny and The Shadow, Elvis and Marilyn Monroe, The Beatles and Michael Jackson, or Leonardo DiCaprio and Lauryn Hill.

Mostly, our media memories revolve around television and the three M's—movies, music and magazines. Rather than turning away from popular media that inform the attitudes and interests of young people, let's take our clue from Luther and use the popular media in ministry. Paying attention to the popular culture as it is expressed in the media helps young people explore and discern their own faith.

Why is the popular media so powerful in the lives of people of every age? The media tell stories—in still and moving images that capture our imaginations, with words that stir our hearts, and with music that fills us with emotion.

Take the *Titanic*. Most movie-goers who walked into the theater knew that the ship was going to sink, but they bought a ticket to see the story—the story of two young people and how their lives were changed. You may have loved *Titanic* or hated it, but the images were lush, the words moving and the haunting Irish music unforgettable.

The same holds true for *Apollo 13*. Those who were of school age in 1970 knew that those astronauts made it home alive, but like even greater epics such as *Amistad* and *Schindler's List*, the stories still held us in the dark theater as we recalled our collective, life-changing history.

And on another scale, there are the soap operas. They pull viewers into the lives of characters that are so filled with agony and ecstasy that we rejoice that our boring lives are not hampered by amnesia or populated with evil twins.

Even the commercials that interrupt the television stories are stories unto themselves. Is there a more creative, popular and powerful medium out there? Just ask the advertising folks at the Gap. Or, ask the kids at your church to tell you their favorite commercial. They likely can.

Stories move us. The popular media is in the business of making expensive, lavish productions.

We are fascinated by the images that are projected on the big screen and flicker on the screens of our darkened living rooms. Use these productions and our fascination with them to make faith-life connections for youth. Tie these stories to scripture so that young people are helped to examine the values and choices the media present. By watching excerpts from movies, television shows, even commercials (and reading stories from magazines), we can help youth connect what they hear on Sunday with what they see the rest of the week.

Tips and Ideas for Using Popular Media

- Music is the soundtrack of our lives and can evoke strong emotions and memories, especially the music of childhood and early adolescence. Ask young people to bring in their childhood and adolescent music and talk about how it helped shape their values and world view. New understandings of lyrics and underlying themes come with examination and maturity. And just as “Great is Thy Faithfulness” may bring comfort to some adults, a young person may escape into an Aerosmith tune.
- Honor young people by honoring their culture, not by putting it down. Using television, movies or music to illustrate how terrible their culture is will only drive a wedge between you and them. Instead of using the movie *Clueless* to show how materialistic students are, talk about control issues and how we’re all guilty of trying to be God.
- Have a videotape next to your television (even in the VCR), cued up and labeled “church” so it’s available when Julia on *Party of Five* encounters violence in a dating relationship or when the woman that posed as a 19-year-old to write for *Felicity* tells her story on *60 Minutes*.
- Students are the experts on their culture and their media—let them teach what they know. Ask students to provide devotions for classes or events by using clips from movies, TV shows, commercials, songs, or excerpts from books or magazines to illustrate a relevant scriptural passage. Establish a Media Minute and ask students to bring in media cuts for reaction and discussion. Invite them to teach an adult forum on the youth culture.
- Consider watching a weekly television show together and have some standard questions that can be used to debrief the content:
 - What was the theme of tonight’s show?
 - What was the show’s message?
 - What decisions were made and what factors were considered?
 - How did faith enter the story?
 - Who do you relate to in the story? Why?
 - What would you have done differently?
- Tape a string of commercials and ask, what products are being sold? Then ask, what else is being sold? Challenge young people to speculate on how producers of commercials appeal to our needs and wants in getting us to buy their product. Super Bowl commercials are great for such discussions. Find out how much an average commercial for a highly-hyped program costs and add that to the mix.
- Magazines have lots of articles about physical looks and attracting dates. Use them as the basis for a discussion on friendship, dating or family relationships. Pay attention to the faces in the magazines, especially when alone or in groups. Note that most magazines aren’t representative of the average young person in looks and possessions. Be sensitive to young people whose ethnicity isn’t represented in mainstream magazines, or who might be struggling with issues of sexual identity.
- Using popular media in youth ministry is especially important when popular culture challenges scripture. By examining the ways culture and scripture contradict one another—where faith and life in the 90s disconnect—students are able to wrestle with how their decisions are impacted by faith.

Youth Ministries is called to help young people think, rather than telling them what to think. If we struggle with them—especially by paying attention to their culture—they will know that faith is not a distant commodity. When they see faith and the world walk hand in hand, they’ll continue to look to God to inform their values and choices. Because remember, the images, words and sounds of culture shaped us, too.

Current television possibilities for discussion:

<i>Dawson's Creek</i>	<i>7th Heaven</i>
<i>Felicity</i>	<i>Touched by An Angel</i>
<i>Friends</i>	

Resources

Dancing in the Dark

Roy Anker

1990 W.B. Erdman

Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X

Tom Beaudoin

1998 Jossey-Bass Publishers

13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?

By Neil Howe

1993 Vintage Books

Reel to Real: Guides for using movies in youth ministry, Augsburg Fortress

www.medialit.org

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