

## Work and Media: Editor's Notes and Introduction

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## “Work and Media” Editor’s Notes and Introduction

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**Introduction: Work and Media**

**Elena D. Hristova**

The subject of work is often overlooked in the teaching of media literacy. Nevertheless, representations of work are abundant and significant for how we understand the rich, the middle classes, the working class, and the working poor. Work also shapes how we rationalize and explain political and economic ideas and lived experiences. Scripted television shows such as *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *The Fall*, *The Killing*, reality television shows such as *Undercover Boss* and *Border Wars*, and films such as *Elysium*, *Alien*, *The Wrestler*, and *The Hunger Games* deal with the opportunities for work, the jobs people do, how they perform their jobs, and how that work is monitored and mediated. Media texts also construct social meaning about the people who do particular jobs. These social meanings are political and have material consequences on the lives of workers. Documentary films on the evolution of women's labor, migrant labor, and even public relations all point to work as an important area to be interrogated and brought into the teaching of media literacy. Importantly, work always intersects with gender, class, race, sexuality, geographic location, and education, and has larger political and economic implications.

In this issue of *Teaching Media Quarterly* we have sought to define work broadly in order to open a further discussion on work, labor, and class in the teaching of media literacy. We have considered the actual variety of jobs people do and their workplaces as well as the historical and political transformation of labor unions. We have addressed questions of waged and unwaged labor; the work engendered in the production of media; and the intersection of work with class, race, gender, sexuality, and place. We hope that the lesson plans offered here will not be definitive statements but evolving lessons and concepts that seek to engage students with the daily experiences of varieties of work and workers. Importantly, these lesson plans seek to destabilize the normalcy of work in late capitalism and allow students to critically engage with the ways in which work, especially mediated work, is a powerful organizational scaffold of our society.

In "*Dirty Jobs: A Cultural Lesson in Work, Social Class, and Masculinities*," **Daniel Farr** offers a lesson that invites students to examine media constructions of working class masculinities and the implications of the ways in which various forms of work are coded as "dirty." Students analyze episodes from the Discovery Channel series *Dirty Jobs* (2005-2012) to consider how work, class, and gender intersect in contemporary media culture. The lesson plan provides a range of activities that can be readily implemented in timeframes ranging from a single class period, to a week, to an entire semester.

**Matt Stahl's** contribution, "Work and Popular Music: The Politics of Cultural Labor and Creative Property," takes a Marxist approach to highly mediated creative work in the cultural industries. The lesson plans include viewing of the documentary film *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* and Marx's theory of alienation to provide students with useful analytical frameworks for evaluating the politics of cultural production in particular workplaces. Stahl's lesson plans encourage classroom discussions and seek to engage students in a critical understanding of their place as workers in their current and future employment.

In “Deconstructing Media Messages about Workers and their Unions,” **Amy Bach, Bryan Mercer, and Rebekah Scotland Phillips** lead students through a systematic critique of the effects of media consolidation on public affairs coverage. A sweeping, hands-on exercise in media literacy, the modular three week lesson plan takes news coverage of labor as a case study for the ways in which mainstream media have shifted over time and under the influence of neoliberalization. By comparing current texts with historic texts as well as examples of contemporary alternative media, students interrogate the influence of public policies and industrial logics on representations of work and workers. Examples include transit workers’ and teachers’ organizing, as well as low-wage service workers.

**Erika Behrmann**’s “Lawyers, Doctor’s, Cops...oh my!: Exploring Racial and Gendered Labor Divisions on Television” asks students to engage with a television show of their choosing and analyze how race, gender, and class are represented. Statistics from The U.S. Department of Labor serve as a useful framework for students to begin their analysis by comparing portrayals in shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy* or *Mad Men* with statistics on wage gaps and diversity in the workplace. Behrmann’s lesson plan incorporates meticulously planned worksheets for reflection and analysis that effectively supplement the postracial and postfeminist theories presented in the readings.