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PERSPECTIVES

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Trapped in consumer paradise

The media and corporate America combine to create a world where reality has no role

CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

"What the hell is going on?"

No one can spend any considerable amount of time in a college town without asking his or herself that question. But as I ease into my second year of college, I find it occupying an inordinate amount of my time.

Apparently, there is a youth culture around here somewhere. Or at least fashion magazines and TV commercials keep insisting there is. And if we know what's good for us, we should go out right now and jump right into it.

OPINION

Kameron Cole

Fortunately, it doesn't take much digging to see that what is passing for culture these days is basically a lot of hype and nonsense. Harder to fathom, however, is why so many people seem to be buying it.

One of the more intriguing theories claims that the younger population is actually getting dumber. Not in terms of brain cells or I.Q. points, but rather in the sense that our collective knowledge seems to be leaning away from the traditional and more toward the trivial.

General sentiment places responsibility for this "dumbing down" at the doors of several sources, the most conspicuous of which is the mass media.

Recent years have witnessed the increased emphasis on entertainment over news. As society's fascination with celebrity has grown, interest in reality has waned. A look at events of the past couple years reveals that anything even remotely connected to the personality of the week will sell papers, attract ratings and boost ad revenues — fast.

The long term consequences of such practices are disturbing. It's scary to think that legitimate news is being buried under the latest O.J. drama or an in-depth interview with Princess Diana's hairdresser, but it's even more frightening to conceive of a society that may one day come to regard *Entertainment Tonight* as "the news" and *The National Enquirer* as "the paper."

Of course, the principle of supply and demand can't be overlooked here. People want to be entertained. Escapism is a normal, indeed a necessary, part of life. The problem starts when people establish residency in the world they escape to.

Obviously, there must be some middle ground between the deadly serious and the patently inane. Unfortunately, the media that spawn monsters like *Hard Copy* and *A Current Affair* don't seem to have found it yet.

But as with most social problems, there's more than enough blame to go around. If the media are going to be the whipping boy here, then the corporate machine is going to have to take its share of licks.

Corporations operate with one key objective: finding the most effective way to sell you the most stuff you don't need. And like a pit bull on a squirrel, once they latch on to a desirable demographic, they have no intention of letting go. Pretty much everyone within the 15 to 30 age group — from the teenage militias that while away the days at Eugene Station to the most frazzled grad student — can be certain that they'll receive a healthy dose of sound bites and catch phrases each day.

One trend segues into another on an almost weekly basis, adding to the mountain of irrelevant crap that forms the foundation for much of modern life.

Culture manufacturers whittle away at independent thought by serving up prefabricated identities and ideas. In fact, the most notable thing about mass culture is the ease with which it can be bought and sold.

The saddest part about all this is the legacy we stand to leave. The idea that years from now my generation will be remembered not in terms of turning points and contributions but rather ad campaigns and video clips is, at the least, disheartening.

One of the biggest perks of college life is the ability to pick and choose how much of real life you actually want to experience.

It's extremely tempting to simply slip on a pair of Nikes, pull back the tab on a can of Bud Light and spin "Barbie Girl" one more time; it's also extremely dull.

The real world can be exceedingly unpleasant at times, but it is also infinitely more interesting than anything MTV or Time-Warner has to offer. Anyone who doesn't at least try to explore the opportunities that lie outside of his or her own microcosm is wasting the college experience.

Kameron Cole is a columnist for the Emerald. *Her columns appear on alternate Wednesdays. Her views do not necessarily reflect those of the* Emerald.

Quoted

"This is great news for sprouters. I've already got my seed source located and will probably have sprouts in seven days."

Nancy Snider, *president of the International Sprout Growers Associated, responding to news that broccoli sprouts might help prevent cancer, quoted in the Tuesday* Register-Guard.

"A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest... [C]riticism is absolutely indispensable for any transformation. A transformation that remains within the same mode of thought, a transformation that is only a way of adjusting the same thought more closely to the reality of things can merely be a superficial transformation."

Philosopher Michel Foucault, *in a 1981 interview, quoted in* Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture, *edited by Lawrence Kritzman and translated by Alan Sheridan.*

"It appears that virginity for both sexes is back in style."

That prophet of the cutting edge, ***Ann Landers,*** *quoted in Tuesday's* Oregonian.

DRAWING BOARD

CORRECTION

The Welcome Back concert Monday night cost $2,000. The ASUO paid $500 from its programs budget; sponsors funded the rest. The *Emerald* regrets the error.