

# MTV: The Medium was the Message

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MTV, Music Television, continues to be a powerful cultural force. First introduced in the U.S. in 1981, MTV had an immediate impact on popular music, visual style, and culture. MTV was first to explore and introduce what are now staples of popular culture: It brought us “mega-events” such as LiveAid, the merging of popular music and corporate sponsorship, “unplugged” acoustic performances, and reality programming in the form of *The Real World*. MTV quickly became an iconic presence in popular culture, not only inspiring visual media culture (*Miami Vice*, for example) but also inspiring songs about it (Dire Straits’ *Money for Nothing* and Beck’s *MTV Makes Me Wanna Smoke Crack* are two very different examples).

MTV’s success spawned a flurry of research. Among the published work the standouts include Aufderheide’s (1986) analysis of music videos’ imagery and commercialism, Burns and Thompson’s (1987) reflections on music videos’ historical antecedents, Brown and Campbell’s (1986) analysis of music videos, race, and gender, Sherman and Dominick’s (1986) examination of violence in music videos, Gow’s (1990) genre analysis of music videos, and Frith, Goodwin, and Grossberg’s (1993) collection of essays on music video titled *Sound and Vision*.

MTV’s evolution and development over several generations of youth has proven more interesting than its immediate impacts on popular music, visual style, and culture. Unfortunately there has been too little scholarly focus on the longer-term consequences of MTV.

The study of MTV and music videos in the 1980s is a reflection of its time, as is most scholarship. (One only need look at the printed programs at our scholarly conferences to see the high degree of coincidence between popular phenomena and scholarship.) Our research instincts are often piqued, if not guided, by our participation as audience members, fans, and casual observers. For better or worse, however, our attention can quickly shift to other phenomena. The demands of an academic career, particularly

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the demands associated with tenure and promotion, can also cause us to re-focus our objects of study and to consider immediate phenomena important.

Furthermore, the sites of our research are often sites of convenience. First, in many cases the ready availability of data and texts will cause us to jump at a research opportunity. Second, some objects of study present themselves as particularly useful sites of scholarship by seeming to provide fertile fields for theory or analysis. I do not mean this as a critique of research, but only wish to point out that it would have been nearly impossible for the many of us studying popular culture, youth culture, popular music, or television in the 1980s to avoid attending to MTV and music videos. Whether one would publish on the topic is another matter, but to ignore the phenomenon of MTV and its consequences would have been folly. MTV provided us with a site of study at a critical moment, a juncture, confluence, of theoretical advances conjoining semiotics, post-structuralism, feminist theory, post-modernism, cultural studies, and critical theory. The degree to which MTV became a phenomenon in the U.S. in the 1980s was probably matched by the degree to which it became a cultural formation available to those of us seeking to use theoretical tools with which to construct understandings of music, image, and popular (particularly youth) culture.

Since that time, research and scholarship on MTV and music videos has declined in quantity. Whereas in the 1980s numerous communication journals dedicated special issues to articles on MTV and music videos,<sup>1</sup> none did so in the 1990s or since. The number of books on these topics has dwindled. There was no development of a field or sub-field and there is little evidence of sustained research on MTV. In some ways the rise of MTV, coming just after punk rock, formed a nexus at which scholarship, particularly theoretical interventions into visual and musical youth culture based on analyses of popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s, could flourish. A definitive collection of essays, *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader* (Frith et al., 1993), closes with the important observation by Grossberg that “the dominant contexts within which popular music operates in the contemporary world can no longer be described as, or in the terms of, rock culture” (p. 207). In short by the time MTV ceased being about music or television (more on that in a moment) scholars had moved on to study other sites of youth culture (including social phenomena on the internet). But critical studies scholars should not therefore abandon inquiry into MTV and music videos, for, as Grossberg continues, “we cannot simply dismiss these new formations.”

### **MTV as Global Phenomenon**

There are two important reasons still to consider MTV in our scholarship. The first and most important reason is that MTV continues to have an impact on popular culture, now on a global scale. Within a few years of launching in the U.S., and thanks in some part to the success of its 17 hours of international live coverage of the Live Aid benefit concert in 1985, MTV launched cable and satellite channels outside the U.S. MTV Networks now include the following: MTV Brazil, MTV Canada, MTV China, MTV/MTV2 Europe, MTV France, MTV/MTV2 Germany, MTV Holland, MTV India,

MTV Italy, MTV Japan, MTV Korea, MTV Latin America, MTV Nordic, MTV Poland, MTV Romania, MTV Russia, MTV South East Asia, MTV Spain, MTV Taiwan/HK, MTV UK, and MTV Base.

In the U.S., since being acquired by Viacom, Inc. in 1985, MTV Networks is home to numerous cable TV channels including Country Music Television (CMT), Nickelodeon, VH1, Comedy Central, and M2 (a channel for music video as, by the late 1990s, MTV had largely given up programming music videos). In January 2004, MTV Networks premiered MTVu, a channel available only on college cable systems at 720 universities, and in May 2004, it launched Logo, a cable channel for the gay and lesbian community planned to go on air in early 2005.

One can perhaps see some commonalities among the U.S. channels (an emphasis on youth audiences, and on music and lifestyle programming, for instance). The commonalities on a global level are much more interesting and noteworthy and should be the foundation on which ongoing research into MTV's cultural consequences should be built. The global consequences of MTV fall roughly into two categories, the economic and the cultural. In regard to the former the most impressive achievement by MTV Networks was its simultaneous creation of the first U.S.-wide music network (for, prior to its airing in 1981, no nationwide music playlist existed) and an instantly recognizable brand. These achievements did not come about accidentally but were forged, as Jack Banks (1996) has noted, by careful use of anti-competitive practices in collaboration with major record labels.

MTV Networks has cultivated similar relationships on a global scale within the regions in which it operates. Having learned in India in the early 1990s that it could not simply reproduce its U.S. programming in other parts of the world (if only because of competition from local or regional broadcasters), MTV Networks in 1996 launched MTV India. In the case of China, for example, MTV Networks forged an alliance with CETV, "a production company and satellite broadcaster . . . [with] a long-term strategy of nurturing relationships with Chinese authorities" (Weber, 2003, p. 282). MTV now follows a policy of airing local content in at least 70% of its programming, thereby "successfully replac[ing] its 'Classic Coke' global image with a retailored programme format that meets local political, advertiser and consumer tastes" (p. 286).

One consequence of such economic practices can be seen in the reinforcement of the cultural impacts of MTV Networks globally.<sup>2</sup> In an era of globalization, when local and regional cultures are unsettled, fluid, and challenged by global culture, it is not surprising that multinational advertisers and marketers would seize upon a youth-oriented global brand such as MTV. Doing so enables them to reach not only newly opened markets (such as China, or former Soviet republics) in the economic sense, but also to reach ones that are newly opened in a cultural sense (such as southeast Asia, or the European Union). As Chip Walker noted in an article about television, satellite technology, and teen culture, "Television isn't creating a global village, but a global mall. In a world united by satellite technology, teenagers the world over share many consumer attitudes because they watch many of the same TV shows and commercials" (1996, p. 42). In a 1996 news story on attitudes toward the European Union one German student studying in London was quoted as saying, apparently without irony

or criticism, “There’s now a real European youth culture, in fashion, in music—MTV culture, if you like” (Milne, 1996, p. 12). Even when a competitor to MTV arises it ends up playing by rules set by MTV, as was the case with Germany’s VIVA, for, according to one of its employees, “if you channel surf to VIVA while in Germany, you might think you were watching MTV—for a few minutes, anyway” (Stipp, 1996, p. 49). The main difference, according to him, is that VIVA’s “veejays don’t necessarily look like ethnic Germans; one is black. But they speak German.”

Walker noted, though, that satellite television was not creating a global monoculture. MTV Networks’ strategy of repurposing U.S. content for other markets changed in the mid-1990s, when it found that international programming could not succeed if it were entirely modeled on the U.S. version of MTV. As Chalaby noted:

Audience tastes and interests differ from one country to another, making it impossible for an international feed to be of equal interest everywhere. In the era of multichannel platforms, cross-border channels continuously run the risk of being outdone by local competitors who copy their format but can better meet the audience’s interests. This phenomenon has forced MTV to completely overhaul its international strategy. (2002, p. 183)

What MTV Networks did was to incorporate into its programming the imagined global thereby naturalizing discourses of struggle between the global and the local through an overlay of localization. To put it another way, by re-organizing its programming to provide local hooks into global culture, MTV Networks was able to coopt the local imagination of its place within the global. Juluri’s description of MTV India and Channel [V] (an MTV India competitor) veejays as embodying “an emerging sense of Indian-Western hybridity” (2002, p. 371) illustrates the point. The upshot is that these music video channels “have colonized, in this present phase of globalization . . . not only the hitherto relatively untapped spheres of home and family in postcolonial life, but in doing so, the very ground of definition itself” (p. 383).

Banks (1997) summarized the importance of MTV in processes of globalization: Music video is at its core a type of advertisement for cultural products: films, film soundtracks, recorded music, live concerts, fashion apparel depicted in the clip and even the music clip itself as a home video retail product. Omnipresent play of music videos on MTV (and elsewhere) helps shape global demand for this array of products. (1997, p. 58)

The point Banks makes is relevant to understanding the shift in MTV Networks’ programming. MTV is a global brand that can be marketed, and used for marketing, irrespective of the content and type of music programmed, indeed irrespective of music videos. As time passed what had once been the pre-eminent medium for the broadcast of music videos became the pre-eminent medium for reality TV. Why did this shift occur? To answer this question one must put both MTV and scholarship about it in context. Concerning MTV, music videos existed years before MTV went on the air, but they did not draw widespread attention from scholars (except in some cases *after* MTV had gone on the air and retrospective comparisons could be drawn, for example Frith et al. 1993; Fryer, 1997). In other words, at least initially, scholarly

interest was not so much placed in music videos *per se* as it was in music videos on MTV. Such placement was appropriate, for it was in the context of MTV, a particularly commercial context aimed toward creating MTV as a brand that would carry with it aspects of commercial culture, that the logics of viewing music videos operated.<sup>3</sup>

What caused MTV to begin moving towards live and reality programming was the need to capture audiences for longer periods of time than music videos would permit. This shift coincided with the rise of the talk format in radio. In both instances programmers sought to hold audiences for longer periods of time than was typical in a format that relied on the three minute long pop song to sustain interest. In the case of MTV the result was a move toward a more traditional television genre consisting largely of half-hour long programs, and also toward audience participation (probably both as a means of capturing audience interest and unpredictability and a means of keeping costs to a minimum). As Andrejevic noted in an analysis of *Total Request Live*, MTV's reality programming brings "universal access to the means of publicity as self-promotion that characterizes the democratic promise of reality TV" (2002, p. 268). As is the case with all commercial media, MTV was designed in the first instance to deliver an audience to advertisers. It may be that the audience it seeks to deliver to advertisers is now less interested in music videos than were previous audiences. It is more likely that music videos themselves, though proving a means of advertising music, have proven less well suited to bringing the same audience to those wishing to advertise other commodities and ideas.

## Notes

- [1] For example, several of the best music video research articles mentioned earlier (Aufderheide, 1986; Brown & Campbell, 1986; Sherman & Dominick, 1986) appeared in one themed issue of *Journal of Communication*.
- [2] The relationships between MTV Networks' anti-competitive practices and culture are much more nuanced than can be demonstrated in an essay as short as this.
- [3] I have on occasion asked students to imagine Mike Myers in his *Saturday Night Live* character of Linda Richman saying "MTV is neither about music nor about television, discuss." They are able, with a little prodding, to focus away from the music and videos and on the commercial context within which those are presented.

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