

## Thinking about *The Merchants of Cool*

- Douglas Rushkoff raises many serious questions during the course of *The Merchants of Cool*, among them:
- Rushkoff and another commentator—NYU Professor of Media Studies Mark Crispin Miller—make the point that advertising drives “standards” downward. What do you think they mean by “standards”? What’s an example or two of this downward spiral, in your opinion?
- What is “cool”? Do advertisers create “cool” only to sell it, or do teens rule “cool”? Is there or should there be a boundary between the culture that’s created by teens and the culture that’s sold to them? What are some examples either way? (What are some examples of “cool” being something kids can purchase and consume; and what are some examples of cool being something that can’t be packaged and bought by the “masses” through mass media?) Rushkoff wonders if there is still room for the majority of teens to discover and express their own “cool”—do you think he’s wrong to wonder about this? How is high school culture affected by mass media definitions of cool?
- What do you think of the way marketers use focus groups and “ethnography studies” to “spy” on teens in order to sell to them more effectively? Do you think it’s ethical for someone to “pose” as a teen in an Internet chat room, gaining information and smuggling in messages? Why do you think marketers go to such great lengths to understand and reach teenagers?
- How do you feel about the admission that advertisers never sell just a product, they sell a lifestyle, a feeling of being understood? How important is it to you to feel understood by the companies who market the brands you purchase?
- Consider one industry insider’s candid comment that “Teens are Africa.” How do you understand this provocative analogy?
- Rushkoff and Miller explain that in today’s world, giant media corporations like Viacom can extend any given message far across their vast marketing empires, which encompass every form of mass media. Viacom controls television outlets (CBS, MTV, VH1, Nickelodeon, Paramount, Comedy Central) major movie studios (Paramount, and others), 180 U.S. radio stations, book publishing (Simon and Schuster, which publishes 2,000 titles annually), VHS/DVD rental outlets (Blockbuster), and Infinity Outdoor, one of the largest advertising companies in the world. What is the effect, do you think, of one corporation having this much access to us? There are many critics, including Mark Crispin Miller, who believe this kind of monopoly is detrimental because it narrows our choices and eliminates diversity; but there are others who think it’s not a problem (for instance, [this article](#) by Jack Shafer of Slate.com).
- Would you ever find yourself asking whether VIACOM has ever given anything back to teens from the \$1 billion in profits it has earned doing business with them? Should it?

- What do you make out of the characters Rushkoff names the “mook” (crude, loud, obnoxious, in-your-face) and the “midriff” (consumed by sex and by what others think of her)? Do you agree with his assessment that these aren’t real people, but merely types that MTV has made popular? Are the mook and the midriff dated? Are there new types emerging on MTV in your opinion?
- Rushkoff says that there is no non-commercial part of MTV, that everything on it is an “infomercial.” Have you ever thought of MTV as one large infomercial? Does it bother you to think of it this way, or do you find you can easily accept it as the natural way to do business?
- Rushkoff is intrigued by the way media tries to hold a mirror up to teens and then teens try to mirror back the image that MTV has shown them. Does the mirror analogy start to get a little dizzying for you at this point? What kind of mirror would you call it? Rushkoff calls it a “feedback loop” that he fears is inescapable. What do you think?
- Are corporate sponsors the “superhero” of teen culture? Think of examples like Sprite. What other brands seem to “champion” teens?