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# **Media Violence and Power in Suzanne Collin's Hunger Games Trilogy**

*On The Hunger Games and the Media in American Society*

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**Title:** *Media Violence and Power in Suzanne Collin's Hunger Games Trilogy: On The Hunger Games and the media in American Society*

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**Abstract:** Suzanne Collin's young adult novels of *The Hunger Games* trilogy present a dystopian adventure tale through the eyes of a teenage girl. The novels lift several topics such as the media spectacle, totalitarian government, and class differences. The aim of this essay is to investigate violence, reality television and media power in *The Hunger Games* trilogy to see whether the books criticize contemporary American media or not. Critical sources on violence and media are brought in to contrast and compare the dystopian society of Panem with contemporary America, focusing on the media. The essay shows that the books criticize the excessive use of violence on television in America and raise awareness of the power that the media can have.

**Key words:** *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins, America, dystopia, social criticism, media, reality television, violence, power, control, propaganda

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## Introduction

America is the superpower of our time and the lyrics of the national anthem proclaim that they are “the land of the free and the home of the brave” (*The Star Spangled Banner*). But in a different perspective on things, it becomes apparent that the ideal world the Americans believe they live in, is actually closer to a dystopia than one first may believe. Are Americans really free or are they being controlled without knowing? This essay will discuss, and examine whether Suzanne Collins's dystopian novel *The Hunger Games* is a critique of contemporary American media or not, with a focus on media violence and control.

*The Hunger Games* trilogy is set in the future, in North America, after a major disaster has struck. The book shows several signs of dystopia; the poor suffer from famine, the government is totalitarian, and there are extreme gaps between the rich and the poor. Dystopian literature always tells the reader something about a society, and in this essay, I intend to examine what *The Hunger Games* trilogy has to say about America. The primary source for this essay is *The Hunger Games* trilogy, *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010).<sup>1</sup> *The Hunger Games* trilogy can be regarded as dystopian literature, since it tells a story about a society which has deteriorated over the years into a state which seems corrupt and malicious.

To understand what dystopian literature is, and why it is relevant for this essay, there is a need to first define what dystopian literature is. The word dystopia is derived from the Greek prefix *dys*, meaning bad, and the Greek word *topos*, meaning place; thus the dystopia means “bad place” (Oxford Dictionary). The word utopia, made famous by Thomas Moore, is often seen as the opposite of dystopia, and means “no place”. Where a utopia is a place where most would desire to be, or wish that their society one day would develop into, a dystopia is the direct opposite. In a dystopian setting, there are usually many grim elements. Somehow the author wants the reader to understand that something terrible has happened to the world of the book. Dystopian fiction is about creating an image of the future, which by most would be seen as a horrible world. The factors that make the world dystopian may vary; in some tales it is the environment which is withering away, in others, the government has become corrupt, and quite often it is the society in general which is breaking apart. The conditions vary depending on what the novel is trying to comment on. Dystopian and utopian literature have been used to criticize or comment on current situations; utopian literature often presents ideas

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1 Hereafter cited as HG, CF and MJ respectively

in how much better the society could be, whereas dystopian fiction presents how bad society could become if the current predicaments do not change (Booker *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* 19).<sup>2</sup>

There are many ways of defining dystopian literature, but at the core, it is a tool that enables viewing contemporary realities from a different perspective. When many factors of a society are changed, the ones that remain the same become more apparent. Dystopian literature can be a critical force against settling for what we have, enabling us to see the faults of our society. "Briefly, dystopian literature is [also] specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism" (Booker *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* 3).<sup>3</sup> The norms which have built up society might actually become what brings it down, and Booker argues that dystopian literature can function as the warning finger to awaken society from its slumber.

Exactly how long dystopian fiction has existed is hard to say but an arguably early example of dystopian literature, Plato's *The Republic*, is dated to around 380 BC (Dystopian Impulse 5). Some other well-known works of dystopian literature are *1984* (1949) by George Orwell, and *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding. During the nineteenth and twentieth century the dystopian genre has become more common, and *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins has received much attention, even more so recently, when it was brought to the cinema as a motion picture.

There is, further, a strong relation between utopia, dystopia and science. Science cannot change the past, which is why the results of science are seen in the future. Since science is trying to make the world a better place, it can seem that the consequences of science should inevitably lead to a future which is brighter and better than the reality we live in; however, dystopian literature quite often shows a scenario in which what society thought to be a blessing, turned out to be its doom (*Dystopian Literature* 7).

There is a common saying that things were better before, which implies a utopian image of the past since it depicts the past ways as something more desirable; Booker sees this desire as an old longing for the perceived better past (*Dystopian Impulse* 5). The future has become a target of dystopian writers, since the dystopian setting is often caused by the ways of the current society.

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2 Hereafter cited as "Dystopian Impulse"

3 Hereafter cited as "Dystopian Literature"

Even though utopia and dystopia can be seen as each others opposites, they are still very much related. Dystopias are often subjective where one person's ideal world could be the other person's nightmare (*Dystopian Literature* 3). For example, if we imagine a world where there are no wars, that could be a dystopia for arms dealers. Often there are elements of both utopia and dystopia; one such example, Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002), demonstrates a world without wars, where the cost for peace is the ability to feel. In *Equilibrium*, the government has invented a drug that numbs away all emotion, and to experience emotions has been declared a crime. In that world, the utopian dream of “no more war” has lead to a dystopian society where many long for emotion.

By keeping a connection to reality, through places, names or attributes, reading a work of dystopian fiction can open the eyes of the reader to apparent problems in the society. Dystopian literature is very versatile in the way it can be used to critique contemporary society by changing small details but keeping the main ideas and features. One of the sources of power in dystopian literature is that by lifting a real life issue in imaginary circumstances, it can help the reader to think about the situation that exists today (*Dystopian Impulse* 19). One example could be that the author finds the government's process of dealing with immigration flawed, or perhaps how society deals with air pollution, or poverty. Those issues might not be an apparent problem to most citizens since they are accustomed to the ways of their society. However, the writer may be able to share his or her view of the current society by writing about another place which shares the same problems. The new perspective of the book may enable the reader to extend his or her train of thought, and realize that the problems can actually be dealt with.

In *The Hunger Games*, there are several factors which make it a work of dystopian literature. The book is set in the future in a land called Panem which is a country that has once been called "North America". Times have been rough, and after the natural disasters, floods, wars, and civil war, through the ashes, Panem has risen (HG 18). The new structure of Panem has twelve districts which are controlled by the Capitol. The Capitol is a large, extremely rich, and technologically advanced city which is located in the center of the nation (HG 59). The districts provide the Capitol with resources but are highly taxed and therefore the population of the districts generally live under less luxurious circumstances than in the Capitol. To most of the inhabitants of the Capitol, Panem is a wonderful country, full of prosperity, and high quality living. The wealth of Panem is very much centered around the Capitol, and there is

little concern for the poor.

The book is written in the perspective of Katniss Everdeen, a sixteen year old girl who lives in District 12, a district where many suffer starvation on a daily basis. To her, the government is corrupt and every day is a fight for survival.

In this essay, I intend to argue that *The Hunger Games* trilogy is a social critique of contemporary American society. The trilogy shows tendencies of dystopia in which I believe the use of media violence, and the power of the media in American society are being criticized. The focus of this essay will be the media, and the effect it has on the society. By carefully studying the trilogy, extracting parts of it that may be relevant to my topic, I intend to show how the American society is being criticized. This will be done through close reading of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, where certain passages which relate to the topic of this essay will be further compared and discussed with critical sources which relate to contemporary America and the media. My primary point of departure will be using secondary sources on contemporary media, and also specifically media violence to compare and contrast the society of Panem, to the society of Contemporary America.

In order to provide a broader perspective on the matter, this essay will also discuss previous research on *The Hunger Games* and interviews with Suzanne Collins. Even though the implied author uses violence to attract a larger audience for the books, violence as entertainment is still being criticized by using the thoughts and emotions of the main character, Katniss Everdeen.

The first chapter will focus on the Media, where I will address violence and reality television. How frequent is the violence in the books and in America, what is the attitude towards it, and how is it being used? W. James Potter's *On Media Violence* has collected and summarized many studies on media violence, the overall presence of violence, the context of violence, and also comparisons between countries (Potter 46). I will compare these studies of violence to the violence of *The Hunger Games* to discuss the use of violence and the attitudes towards it. The concept of violence, and the fascination towards it is one of the elements of the society that remains unchanged in the dystopian future of *The Hunger Games*. This can be seen in *The Hunger Games* during the recapitulation, when the games are being summarized: "Once we're in the arena there's detailed coverage of the bloodbath and then the filmmakers basically alternate between shots of tributes dying and shots of us," (HG 363). The emphasis is on the violence and the victors. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes the aspects of a society

that an author decides not to alter too much from the real world are the very things that might be what the author wants to discuss.

I will address some of the similarities between reality television and *The Hunger Games* and discuss how American television genre has developed over the last two decades. The second chapter will discuss how the media and television culture have been used to control the citizens in both Panem and in the USA. To understand the forms of control that are being used, it is also interesting to investigate who controls the media, the power and consumption of celebrities, how norms are established and how the media pacifies the people.



## **Chapter 1: Violence and Reality Television in the Media**

This chapter will discuss the development of American television, comparing and contrasting it to the Hunger Games of Panem. The main ideas will be how violence is being used, its frequency and the effect that it has on the viewers. The chapter also discusses the elements of reality television and sports, and how these relate to the Hunger Games in terms of the effects they have on society.

One of the central issues of the media in both Panem and America is the use of violence in television. There is no country in the world where violence gets as much time on television as it does in the United States (Potter 56). In contemporary America, violence is frequent in all genres of television. Ranging from children's programs to reality television, violence is an essential part in all programs. The glorification of violence is one of the factors that makes the American Media resemble the Hunger Games of Panem. Potter suggests that one of the key factors that has created this influx of violence is that the people who are behind the production of television believe that violence attracts audiences, especially the younger viewers. The primary target group for advertising is eighteen to thirty-four years of age. According to Potter the makers of television shows and movies have found a formula on which they can make a profit. They create a good character who is “pushed to a breaking point” and then the character fights back against the villains. Potter suggests that the people of the television industry believe that this simple structure intrigues the audience, creating a buildup of suspense which later will be released. By repeating this formula the producers can safely earn more income, and that is what their business is all about (Potter 157).

The fascination with reality television has been related to the concept of not knowing what is to come. This theme, of unscripted entertainment has been a large part of televised sports, where not knowing who will win is one of the features of the spectacle. Many reality television shows present some kind of competition where the viewer is left to wonder who will win, and how the relationships of the show will develop. These are some of the elements that make the reality television genre so compelling and popular in contemporary America.

In Collin's *The Hunger Games* and the land of Panem, the main event of the year, is a televised show called the Hunger Games. The show itself is a reality television program where teens are sent into an arena to fight each other to death. It is a gruesome spectacle where there is little censorship of the violence, which is seen as the highlight of the show. Children ranging from the age of twelve to the age of eighteen, are randomly selected in a broadcast

lottery event called “the reaping”, where the children whose names are drawn become “tributes”, the ones who will participate in the Hunger Games (HG 13). The implied author brings in the dystopian perspective by forcing children to take part in a reality television show which is an uncensored bloodbath. On American television, the children are not to be touched, and even in action packed movies, violence against children is considered to be extreme.

Televised lotteries are not a new thing in America though, during the Vietnam War, there were public lottery drawings that were broadcast on television, in which the names that were drawn were forced to enlist in the army. Those lotteries strongly resemble “the reaping” friends and families of those who were eligible to be drawn were anxiously waiting to see if their loved ones would go to war. Furthermore, the news casts that were filmed in Vietnam had a strong focus on combat footage, since it attracted more viewers. In her article “Communal Spectacle”, Gretchen Koenig states that “Collins seems to turn our own historical memory of the Vietnam War into a comment on our own capacity for, and attraction to, violence” (Koenig 41). Just as Koenig, I believe that the implied author comments on the American society's relationship with media violence and how it affects the country.

In the televised games of Panem, there are many uncensored acts of violence which are broadcast to the public. The Game Makers are the ones who are in charge of the show. It is their task to make the games into something spectacular. They change the settings from year to year, and try to place the tributes in an environment which forces the tributes to take life in order to preserve their own. One of the methods that the Game Makers use to induce violent situations is to arrange an event called the “feast”, where the tributes are drawn towards each other by placing something they need at the center of the arena. This is done to ensure a conflict, and most likely violence:

At this late stage in the Games, with an important event like the feast, school will probably be canceled. My family can either watch on that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens. (HG 279-280)

Blood, death and pain are the thrill of the show, and viewed by people of all ages. They even make sure the children are watching by letting the students leave early. In America, violence is very common in all ranges of television, including children's programming. In a study made by Nancy Signorelli between the years 1967 to 1985, 94% of all children's programming contained physical violence, and 81,7% of the leading characters were engaged in violent

activity (Potter 48).

In *The Hunger Games*, the people of Panem have their own views on violence. As Katniss and her friend Gale discuss the games, they talk about how the show was anticlimactic one year because several tributes died because of cold, instead of killing each other (HG 39). Gale comments on the event claiming that there was “[n]ot much entertainment in that”(ibid. 39). The violence is seen as one of the most exciting things to show on television and the Game Makers aim to keep the attention of the viewers as long as possible. Much like the film makers of contemporary America, the Game Makers have found violence to be an effective method in keeping the audience's attention. Adding on the element of having each district being represented by some of their own children, as the heroes of the district, further increases the inclination to watch the games.

One of the most gruesome parts of the 74<sup>th</sup> rendition of the games is when Cato, the antagonist of Katniss, is being slowly tortured by biologically enhanced hounds that are eating away at him without killing him. It is a horrible example of extreme violence that is valued because it will keep the viewers focused to the screens. As Katniss questions why the hounds do not kill Cato, it is apparent that it is the Game Makers' will to extend the torture as long as possible, to draw the attention of the viewers:

“Why don't they just kill him?’ I ask Peeta.

‘You know why,’ he says, and pulls me closer to him.

And I do. No viewer could turn away from the how now. From the Gamemakers' point of view, this is the final word in entertainment.” (HG 339)

Being exposed to violence activates the fight or flight part of the human brain, and as one level of violence becomes more common, the brain adapts to give less of a response. This causes the viewer to need more of a violent input to receive the rush of adrenaline which is often associated with action packed motion pictures. Furthermore, violent media need to increase the level of violence over time to satisfy the needs of the viewers (Potter 125).

The American Psychological Association states that “media violence can contribute to two other outcomes, desensitization of viewers to violent actions and fear of being the victim of violence” (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney 301). The Game Makers have placed themselves in this very situation, as they need to increase the level of violence to keep the attention of the audience. This has led to more violent shows, where the trend has moved towards more

realism. They also use the fear of violence as a means to control the districts. According to Potter, violence is more prevalent in American media than in any other country (56).

Moreover, in American sports, violence is a key element which some see as the most exciting part of the game. In his article "Viewer's Enjoyment of Violence in Televised Sports", Jennings Bryant presents some more factors that could explain why violence has become such a successful concept in entertainment.

[S]ports violence offers viewers a golden opportunity to purge themselves of destructive energies by vicariously participating with their sports heroes who regularly perform aggressive acts under the guise of 'play'. This purgation is seen to provide relief, which is enjoyable. The more violence, the greater the relief, and the more intense the enjoyment. (281)

It may seem ironic that a novel about the excitement of violence would actually criticize it; however, since *The Hunger Games* trilogy is written from the perspective of Katniss Everdeen, the reader is provided with the stress and anxiety associated with violence. As Cato is being tortured by the genetically enhanced hounds during the end of the 74<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games, the reader is able to hear Katniss's thoughts: "It goes on and on and eventually completely consumes my mind, blocking out memories and hopes of tomorrow, erasing everything but the present, which I begin to believe will never change" (HG 339).

Katniss represents the moral compass of *The Hunger Games*, and through her emotions, it is possible to hear the implied author's voice and the critique of the violence that the rest of Panem seems to praise. In *Approaching The Hunger Games Trilogy*, Henthorne states that "those who enjoy the violence, namely the Careers, are depicted negatively"(69). I agree with this statement, furthermore, the people of the Capitol, who see the violence as entertainment are also depicted as dumb and lacking empathy.

There are other events when we see the pain and hurt associated with violence. Katniss's sister Primrose is described as the most caring and innocent girl throughout the trilogy. Since the reader has seen Prim through the eyes of Katniss, and Katniss loves her very much, the pain related to the violence becomes apparent (MJ 406). Henthorne also discusses how the implied author "uses sentimentality to make her readers suffer in the ways her characters do, using Prim's death, for example to highlight the loss and suffering that war brings"(Henthorne 110). By appealing to the empathy of the readers, the implied author raises awareness that there is much hurt involved on many parts when it comes to violence.

Violence is featured in many types of content; *The Hunger Games* present various forms of entertainment that the games function as. Overall, the games could be seen as a reality television spectacle; however, reality television is a multifaceted concept. The Hunger Games can be seen as a sporting event since it is a competition where the physical attributes and various survival skills will determine a winner (HG 19). The games have commentators who engage the audience further as they get enthusiastic about the games, and reminisce on past years and events. The interviews allow the audience to get to know the tributes a little better, but the forms of interviews that the Hunger Games entail are more of the private kind, compared to the interviews of professional athletes. The questions resemble private interviews that talk-show hosts ask actors or other celebrities, making the Hunger Games seem more like a pageant. Then there is also the possibility of alliances that create a dramatic tension since there can only be one winner. The simplified version is that the Hunger Games is all of this, a reality-based sporting event, full of fashion and glamor, that features twenty-four different children of various ages, full of intrigue, violence and drama that can be viewed live at any hour of the day. It is an attempt to create the ultimate television experience.

In contemporary America, the television has trended towards more reality television-shows. MTV for instance, has gone from mainly broadcasting music videos to showing *16 and Pregnant*, *Jersey Shore* and other such programs, challenging what is considered socially acceptable to broadcast. In *Tabloid Culture*, Kevin Glynn discusses developments in American television, and one of the examples he mentions is *America's Most Wanted*, which is a reality based television program. Glynn presents the reality based television as “one of the most significant developments in recent U.S media.”(Glynn 2).

Many different reality television shows have been created during the twenty-first century in which it has become possible to watch people live as “[c]ameras are present all the time” (Bignell 115). The reality television show *Big Brother* was created in 1997, and its main theme is a group of individuals who eat, sleep, and drink in a house which is monitored by a multitude of cameras twenty-four hours a day. The show provides a service so that it can be watched at any time, much like the Hunger Games. These contestants do not kill each other, but they are depending on the viewers to like them in order to stay in the show. It is similar to how the tributes in *The Hunger Games* have to win over the crowds in order to receive sponsors who could save their lives.

The Hunger Games is a reality television show, and what they are after is real human

emotion, conflict, drama and violence. They want to give the audience close ups of all the tributes all the way from “the reaping”<sup>4</sup> to the moment of death (HG 23). This is apparent all over the book, where Katniss contemplates how the audience might view the current situation she is in. Katniss has to act so that her behavior is pleasing to the audience since they are her sponsors. She is very much aware of the fact that she is being watched all the time (164).

Katniss and Peeta become engaged in a fake romantic relationship due to the spectacle. This relationship is exactly the kind of drama that the people of the Capitol desire to see. But from Katniss' perspective it is apparent that it is all a show, that not everything about this reality television show is real. After Peeta reveals his secret infatuation with Katniss during his interview, Katniss and her mentor Haymitch discuss the event:

'You're all they're talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!' says Haymitch.

'But we're not star-crossed lovers!' I say.

Haymitch grabs my shoulders and pins me against the wall. 'Who cares? It's all a big show.' (HG 135)

Haymitch being the voice of reason, clearly states that what you see in a reality television show can not be seen as what is real. Even though it is based on real events, it is still a show which needs to be entertaining. What is real is less important than what can acquire sponsors.

*The Hunger Games* is criticizing the development of American culture in the media from music television to reality television, where conflict, beauty and drama become exaggerated. This is hinted in *Mockingjay* when Plutarch Heavensbee suggests that Katniss should take part in a music-oriented television show after the war is over: “And then he asks me if I'd like to perform on a new singing programme he's launching in a few weeks. Something upbeat would be good.”(MJ 442). This could be seen as an attempt to point MTV back to more music television instead of mainly broadcasting reality television. Katniss has become a star because of her survival abilities but also because of the dramatic love story that she and Peeta created. In order to reduce the violence and conflict in the society of Panem, Plutarch attempts to restore the positive influence of the media by arranging a new form of entertainment, which is really reverting back to the ancient form of music television that existed in North America before the Capitol came to power in Panem. As this is after the war, where the powers that be try to restore Panem to it's future glory, and brighter future, this is seen as a positive development in the eyes of Katniss. Since the Hunger Games was the only

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4 The reaping is the moment when the tributes are randomly selected through a public lottery.

show of the past, now the people of Panem can have a form of entertainment that does not depend on the suffering of less fortunate citizens.

The wealthy who live in the Capitol are the people most similar to the population of contemporary America. Most of the people who will be able to read *The Hunger Games* trilogy live in a society where they have access to food, shelter and free time. As the basic needs are covered, there then remains a need to fill the free time with another activity that feels engaging and entertaining. Television has become one of the most common forms of leisure activity; a study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2012 showed that the average American over the age of fifteen spent about 2,8 hours per day watching television (“American Time Use Survey – 2012 Results”). The implied author critiques how far society is willing to go to be entertained. There are already reality television shows where contestants are allowed to do anything but physically hurt each other to survive, such as *Survivor*. Professional boxing, mixed martial arts, and other violent sports have also become more popular during the twenty-first century, where contestants are allowed to hurt their opponent but not kill him or her. Is society willing to combine the two? The hunger for entertainment is great, as every year the television producers of America have to find new ways of attracting the viewers, and the viewers keep watching. In *The Hunger Games*, the theme of survival and conflict in *Survivor* has become merged with the violence of sports, and the tributes are even forced to kill each other for the entertainment of the audience.

Collins has said that the idea for *The Hunger Games* originally came from her watching television, switching between channels, eventually flipping between a reality television show and a news cast of the war in Iraq (Armitstead). In the search for the ultimate form of entertainment, the producers of television will probably follow the demand of the audience. I believe that through *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the implied author seeks to criticize what the media can do to a society. How the readers must decide to control their hunger for entertainment in order to avoid deteriorating into a society like that of Panem.

## Chapter 2: Control and Power of the Media

“[T]he power to influence meanings is the power to define questions, or the power to define what others view as important and how they think about them. This is power, indeed” (Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney 29). The media affects people in many different ways and this chapter will discuss how the the media in *The Hunger Games* functions in similar ways as the media of contemporary America. I argue that these similarities are no mere coincidences, but in fact, a part of the critique of the media. This can be found in how the media tries to incite the audience to watch more and more and how it promotes certain qualities that affect the society in general. The main difference between the media of Panem compared to the American media is that most of the media content of the United States is created by private corporations and monitored by an association which is called the Federal Communications Commission which strongly supports freedom of speech and innovation (“The FCC and Freedom of Speech”). The media content available in Panem is controlled and broadcast by the government and there is no such thing as freedom of speech. However, the effects of the media are apparent in both of the societies. In America, the media pacify the population, establish norms and values, encourage viewers to buy products, and these are just a few ways in which the media affect society. In Panem, it mainly keeps the country in control by entertaining the rich, exalting the Capitol, and deterring the poor from inciting a rebellion.

Even though *The Hunger Games* is supposedly set in the future, the only type of medium that is made available in all of the districts is television. In contemporary America, there is a vast landscape of different kinds of media. Almost every single person has the possibility to use the internet, read books or newspapers at a public library. It has also become increasingly common that many utilize telephones that can also access the internet.

The television device is a medium of one way communication, which enforces the idea that the media is being used to control the districts since the public has no way of communicating their ideas. I believe that the implied author only allowed for one type of medium to clarify the totalitarian regime of President Snow. It is made even more clear since the only available channel is completely controlled by the government, which is a huge difference compared to the multitudes of channels available to Americans. Removing the freedom of choice, the implied author creates a dystopian setting for the media, which causes the reader to reflect upon their own relation to the media. In an interview with the Guardian, Collins said that "I hope it does make people think about what they watch in a more reflective



way"(Collins qtd. in Armitstead).

It is the Game Makers' mission to make sure that the games become entertaining and frightening, and even more importantly that they make the Capitol appear strong and righteous. The Capitol makes a solid effort to ascertain that the Hunger Games are as captivating as possible to use it to spread their propaganda. They control the footage of the games so that the violence is made important, and they depict the tributes in ways which suits their purposes. They want to keep the citizens of the Capitol entertained, so that they do not see the horrible conditions that the people in the districts suffer from. They do this by creating the most magnificent show with amazing environments ranging from hot to cold (HG 39). The wealthy citizens of the Capitol need to be entertained, and the Game Makers have found that violence has been key in making the show exciting. In the eyes of most citizens of the Capitol, the games are a festive event, associated with parties, gambling and fun.

Even though violence is seen as an exciting feature of the show, the Game Makers still keep full control over what is to be shown. They have the power to censor whatever they like, and their goal is to entertain the population of the Capitol, and at the same time remind the people of the districts who is in charge. There is a mention of a tribute named Titus in an earlier rendition of the games who tried to eat the corpses of the dead tributes. The Game Makers gave Titus electric shocks to hinder him from performing the cannibalistic act since this was frowned upon in the Capitol (143). They also ensured he would not win, which shows how the games are not really a competition, but a show run by the government to suit their needs and norms.

The Game Makers control the actual arena as well. They have rigged the arena with cameras all over the place to control what they can see. Even more impressively, they control the physical environment, and can start fires, and perform other actions to steer the tributes closer to each other (173).

The control of the media is an essential tool of the Capitol to control the population. Most houses, even in the poorer districts where they hardly have enough money for food, still have a television device. For those who do not have a television, there are screens that are located in the cities where the capitol can publicly show what they want (280). The games are so important to the Capitol that they even shut down school for the bigger events. An example is the "feast" where the tributes are being drawn together by items that they need to survive

(280). These events are important for the government since they give the Capitol the opportunity to show their force and prove the fact that it is futile to resist.

The Game Makers are dependent on the viewers, and what the viewers want to see is what the Game Makers are required to provide, as well as what the President orders. They are motivated by fear and fortune, as being a Game Maker is an important position of power. The head Game Maker is the director and producer of the games, which will provide him or her with riches and fame if he or she succeeds in making the games as the Capitol wants them. The head Game Maker is in a position of power since he or she controls the media, and so can affect Panem in various ways. However, failing leads to dire consequences. The Head Game Maker of the 74<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games, Seneca Crane, was executed for his decision to have Katniss and Peeta win the games together rather than having no victor at all since this promoted that the districts could work together (CF 24). The worst case scenario for a Game Maker would be if the games made the Capitol appear inferior or if the games became boring and uneventful (HG 173). If the Capitol seems to be weak, the districts might rebel against it, and if the wealthy citizens of the Capitol become bored, then they may rethink the situation of the nation.

In Panem, the Hunger Games is a form of propaganda which utilizes the spectacle of violence, drama and reality television to make sure that the message gets through. Early in *The Hunger Games*, the reader is presented with how Katniss interprets the message the games are meant to convey: “Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen” (HG 19).

Another message the Capitol is sending is the magnificence of their power, by showing the multitudes of weaponry that are ready at their disposal. In the arena, they seem to control everything, like when they start a fire which leads the tributes towards each other: “This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together.”(HG 173). The arena shows the Capitol as an omnipotent force that can do whatever it wants.

The victors of the games play a certain role in the spectacle of the Hunger Games. They are the celebrities who symbolize the benefits of living by the rules of the Capitol. Katniss becomes a very well known celebrity, because of the Hunger Games, and she learns how to use the power associated with her fame. The citizens of the Capitol are emotionally attached to the stars of the Hunger Games and they spend much of their time watching the

games. In fact, all of the tributes become celebrities to some degree, and the victors keep their celebrity status after the games. In contemporary America, celebrities are a large part of how the system is built:

In contrast to other industrialized nations, the American economic system enables many to live in poverty based on the possibility of achieving great wealth. In reality, rising from the lower rungs to the top is extremely difficult and highly unlikely. But celebrities, whose personal histories are often well known, serve as modern-day Horatio Alger characters who rise from obscurity to fame, and in some cases from poverty to wealth. Their experiences reaffirm the presence of the American Dream, and provide guideposts for how we too might achieve upward mobility. (Sternheimer 240)

The Declaration of Independence is one of the key documents that captures the American Dream, and emphasizes being allowed and encouraged to pursue your dreams. Furthermore, Singh discusses the American Creed and the meaning of individualism in America:

Each person has the right to act in accordance with his or her own conscience and to control his or her own destiny free from external restraint [...] Rewards are seen as matching individual efforts. Failure to achieve economic or social progress is hence conventionally regarded as a matter of the individual's deficiencies, not the general social order or particular environmental conditions. (Singh 9)

There is an underlying message to this that says that if you work hard enough, you can achieve whatever you try to do. In order for the American system to work, it needs plenty of examples of people who can represent successful Americans who worked hard and reached their goal. Celebrities contribute to the system by being an example of success, and creating a desire to live the life of a celebrity, with all the luxuries that they can afford.

Continuing on the theme of individuality, the Capitol by all means promotes individuality. In order for the Capitol to control the masses, it is important that the people do not unite against it. The show controls the poorer districts by pitting them against each other in the Hunger Games. They deliberately bring two tributes from each district, but only allow for one winner:

The rules of the Hunger Games are simple. In punishment for the uprising, each of the districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. The twenty-four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins. (HG18)

The Capitol makes sure to disunite the districts by creating an 'us and them' mentality where it is every tribute for themselves. Outside of the games, the districts have little to no contact with each other, "...as travel between districts is forbidden except for officially sanctioned duties" (HG 41). Therefore, the districts are forced to see each other as competition rather than allies. In the games, the Capitol steers the tributes towards one another to force confrontation and conflict, and even though alliances are made there can only be one victor in the end.

In Panem, the Capitol understands that the victors become powerful due to their celebrity status, and therefore, they are very strict in making sure that the victors are under their control. The victors of the Hunger Games are meant to be examples to the people of Panem. The Capitol can point out that they played by the rules, and so there is a way out of the misery of their lives. The victors provide inspiration to the poor, who might see the rewards that the victors receive as a goal to aim for. In some of the wealthier districts, there are many who volunteer to be able to receive the glory of becoming a victor (HG 61). The ones who train their entire lives to become tributes are called careers and, in their districts, the games have become a sport more than a punishment (HG 94).

President Snow kills all the friends and family of victors who even hint at any defiance towards the Capitol, in order to discourage them to express any defiant opinions. Finnick Odair was forced into prostitution so that president Snow could keep him under control (MJ 198). Haymitch's family was killed since he defied the Capitol in the way he won his games (MJ 201). Instead, celebrities in America, answer to the corporations which they represent. If a celebrity publicly misbehaves or in any way misrepresents the company which they work for they can likely lose their source of income. An example of this is how the professional golf player, Tiger Woods, lost many of his corporate sponsorships after it was discovered that he had engaged in extramarital affairs (McCarty).

To the citizens of the Capitol, it is more important who Finnick Odair's secret lover is than knowing whether the people of District 12 will survive the winter. They cry as the tribute they cheer for dies, but they do not see how the entire district of that very tribute might be starving to death. This is also apparent in America, in how "[f]ans identify themselves with a particular media product, star or style" (Grossberg et al. 2007). To the fans, the lives of the celebrities become as interesting, if not more so, than their own.

During the revolution in *Mockingjay*, the rebels manage to use the media to their

benefit, in their own propaganda which they feed to the people of Panem.

'Our plan is to launch an Airtime Assault,' says Plutarch. 'To make a series of what we call propos - which is short for 'propaganda spots' – featuring you, and broadcast them to the entire population of Panem.' (MJ 52)

The Airtime assaults are crucial to the rebellion since they emotionally affect the population of the district into siding with the rebels. This is yet another example of how the media can be used as a means of control, regardless of who is behind it. But in these propaganda videos there is still some misinformation, the rebels edit the footage to ensure that the public accepts their message. In these short clips, the full usage of celebrities becomes apparent as they use Katniss and Finnick to appeal to the masses (MJ 197-198). This shows how the media can be used for good, but good is subjective.

The celebrities of the United States have great power as well. In all they do they influence their fans and, through the media, they have an extended opportunity to present whatever message they like to a greater crowd. Most celebrities sell their influence to corporations by promoting their products in advertizing whereas others start their own fundraisers for starving children. Quite often, the celebrities of America are able to see the world beyond the USA, so they have a different perspective than the average population. Like the victors, they are sometimes able to see the injustices of society and try to change that.

In *The Hunger Games*, the games themselves are considered to be the peak of entertainment. Not everyone enjoys them fully, but most are more or less compelled to watch them — some by choice, others by enforcement of the law. The citizens are forced to attend the reaping when the tributes are chosen and, if they do not, they can be sent to prison (HG 16).

After the games are over, the recapitulation of the games is mandatory to watch (362). This summary features the most interesting parts of the televised event; therefore, there is an emphasis on the journey of the victorious tributes as well as all the deaths of the tributes who died. This part is summarized because the government wants to make sure that none of the citizens of Panem miss the fact that they are in control of everything. It is the conclusion of each games, where the end result is always supposed to be the same, one victor. The implied author presents watching television as something mandatory; the idea is dystopian to most modern day Americans, but it raises the question as to why the viewing should be mandatory.

It shows that if someone would be willing to enforce viewing, then viewing would probably have a large impact on the viewer.

Watching the Hunger Games is also a mandatory part of school, so the children are brought up with the games (HG 169). Starting at an early age, the children are taught how to behave, and they are shown the horrible consequences of rising up against the authority. There is no special censorship to adapt the show to the children; they are forced to watch the same show as the adults, to ensure that they understand that power and brutality of the Capitol.

The Hunger Games is used by the Capitol to remind the citizens of Panem that there once was a rebellion which was struck down with brute superior force. The story of the rebellion is told every year, making sure that no one forgets it (18-19). The government uses another form of control by keeping information from the districts. They claim that District 13 was destroyed in the rebellion, whereas Katniss later finds out in *Mockingjay* that District 13 actually had a stalemate with the Capitol (MJ 20). By controlling the media the Capitol was able to withhold the information about District 13.

Another type of control becomes apparent in *Latent Destinies*, where the film *The Truman Show* is discussed. *The Truman Show* is about a reality television show that follows the life of a man who does not know that his life really is a show. The audience follow the main character from birth, seeing all of his mundane tasks in life. O'Donnell discusses how the audience views the show just to deal with how boring their own lives are (O'Donnell 5). In *The Hunger Games* the government uses a form of control by doing the opposite. They show how grim the world can be to remind the people of Panem how lucky they are not to be in the games. At the same time, the games show the terrible force of the Capitol as they show some of the weapons which they have used in the wars of the past, such as the trackerjackers, which are genetically enhanced killer bees, and other *muttations* [sic]. The *muttations* are animals which the Capitol altered to create weapons that were used in the war against the rebels, and they were also used in the games (HG 185).

One of the television shows of American television that functions similarly to the games of Panem is the reality show *Cops*. In *Cops*, the viewer follows a team of policemen as they respond to calls and hunt down criminals. In between cases, the policemen discuss their role and how they are needed by society. The show promotes a form of control since it promotes the need of law enforcement as the viewers experience close hand how criminals act. It also proves the effectiveness of the police as they apprehend perpetrators, and at the

same time, it acts as a deterrent as the criminals are handed with physical force (Glynn 42).

The media also controls the American population to some extent by establishing norms and views of the world. In the 1980's the nightly news broadcasts depicted black males as violent assailants whose animalistic nature caused them to attack innocent white females. By portraying the black males as villains, and white females as victims, the news reports created a norm which put the patriarchal role of the white male into a stronger position. This further established the white hegemonic politics through fear and suspicion of the unknown (Glynn 31).

The Game Makers have the same end goal as any other television company in America, to attract audiences; therefore, they require the show to be interesting. The difference is that the Game Makers primarily want the audience to see the propaganda, which is embedded in the show itself. The filmmakers, and television producers of contemporary America need to earn money by attracting viewers, and then turning the viewers into a commodity (Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney 209). If a television channel has viewers then they can earn their revenue by selling some of their air time to companies who want to advertize their products. Advertizing then turns the viewers into consumers once more who buy the products and then go back to their television sets. As such, the function of the spectacle is to feed the capitalistic system that is the American economy.

By showing the power of the Game Makers, the implied author of *The Hunger Games* raises awareness regarding the power of the media. The readers should learn to think critically, and question what they are watching, why they are watching it, and who wants them to watch. The books also raise the topic of who should be able to control the media. It appears that the system of today where the media are relatively free, but regulated by the government, might be preferable to having the media controlled by a single instance. However, if the media would become more centralized that could have terrible consequences.

## Conclusion

In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, many different topics are covered. Throughout the trilogy, the themes of violence and reality television are combined with how the media is being used to control the population of Panem. In parallel to this, the American media is made visible as there are many similarities in how the media functions in both nations. By placing the media in a dystopian setting, the implied author criticizes the way violence is being used in contemporary American media to boost viewer rates. The ethical aspect of having humans battle each other for the entertainment of others is also lifted, comparing the Hunger Games to the reality television shows of contemporary America. By gaining the perspective of one of the contestants of the show, the reader sees the competition from the inside, learning about how the reality show is more fake than real and also of how the participants suffer from constantly being on camera.

The books also present many examples of how media relates to power and control. Firstly, for the media to have an influence, it requires to be watched. The media of *The Hunger Games* utilize the spectacle of television violence both to frighten the people, but also to entice them into watching more. Throughout the books, it is apparent that the media has a strong effect on the ideas of the people of Panem, and the books raises the reader's awareness of the fact that the media will always affect the people who watch.

*The Hunger Games* present a dystopian society where the media has become corrupted, and are mainly used for propaganda through entertainment. The government has assumed full control of the media, and so it has provided the ultimate form of entertainment. The Hunger Games is an extremely brutal spectacle in which the perversity of the hunger for entertainment becomes apparent. However, in contemporary America the media are relatively free, where corporations compete in creating the highest forms of entertainment to attract viewers. The government monitors the development but mainly interacts as a censoring agent towards obscene or indecent material. The trilogy stands out as a warning to what could be our future, if the race for the absolute form of entertainment continues without caution. The implied author seems to hint at how the development of television is causing society to deteriorate.

In conclusion, *The Hunger Games* is a dystopian trilogy that raises awareness of the power of the media in America, criticizing the development of entertainment which utilizes the spectacle of violence and reality television to attract a larger audience. However, the book



itself uses the violence and the drama to keep the readers reading.

In this essay, the media spectacle of *The Hunger Games* trilogy has been compared and discussed in relation to contemporary America through critical texts and previous research on violence and the media spectacle. By using the dystopian genre as a background, I have been able to see the relation between *The Hunger Games* trilogy and the American media. The novels could also be seen as examples of other genres, such as the chic-lit. In this perspective a study could have taken other turns, such as investigating how Katniss develops as a strong female heroine throughout the novels.

Since the focus of this essay was to investigate the media of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, I did not discuss the theme of social issues such as poverty. *The Hunger Games* could be studied in correlation to the American dream, where *The Hunger Games* could be seen as an example of how economic conditions affect the chance of a successful life.

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