

Multiculturalism, Diversity and Stereotypes: Engaging Students with Images in Media

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Commercial interests invariably become entwined with making films, with reporting the news and with other forms of information and entertainment. Pervasive media-generated gender and racial stereotypes distort cultural representations and negatively impact users' perceptions of society. As students learn to create various forms of media, their points of reference are often these negative images, which are then reflected to some extent in their content. This creates a worrisome cycle reinforcing the stereotypes in the present and perpetuating these for the future. While there are clearly no right or wrong answers in art, there are good and bad interpretive choices in pedagogy. This essay explores and articulates a more useful method of student engagement, especially in reference to media literacy, multiculturalism and stereotypes and presents pedagogical methods and strategies to combat negative images in the media.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, media literacy, stereotypes

Given that the Holy Grail of commercial filmmaking is the million-dollar feature film and the covenant that rules television networks is deeply mired in ratings, commercial and business interests thus invariably become entwined with making films, with reporting the news and with other forms of information and entertainment. Investment, marketing, and profit-making objectives drive the quest for successful production models in the world of commercial filmmaking. It is not surprising then that in the pursuit to satisfy the majority for financial success, minorities are often casualties of storytelling.

In traditional media, gender and racial stereotypes are very pervasive and these media provide distorted representations of women and minorities; exposure to these distorted images can have a negative effect on users' perceptions of women and minorities (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). So while learning how to create various forms of media, students are constantly being both informed and influenced by these negative images. As their points of reference are often these negative images, these are then reflected to some extent in their storytelling. This creates a worrisome cycle reinforcing the stereotypes in the present and perpetuating these for the future.

To combat the influence of this cycle, this essay will explore and articulate a more useful method of student engagement, especially in reference to multiculturalism and cultural, racial and gender stereotypes. The essay first examines the concepts of media literacy, multiculturalism, stereotypes and portrayals of these in media. It then proposes pedagogical methods to combat stereotypes.

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Media Literacy

Media literacy has been defined as the “ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms.” (Aufderheide, 1993). It is a term used by scholars and educators to refer to the process of critically analyzing and learning to create one’s own messages in print, audio, video, and multimedia. (Hobbs, 1998). Media literacy is about helping us to become more consciously aware of cultural mediation. Media literacy help “viewers and listeners become more consciously aware of identity representation, formation, and mediation” (Pedelty & Kuecker, 2014).

Multiculturalism and Stereotypes

Multiculturalism allows the co-existence of various cultures and languages in a society. In recent years, multiculturalism views us as having values and customs conforming to the majority of the population, “while still allowing for immigrants and minorities to celebrate their past cultures in a formalized way” (Legare, 1995). It is becoming a tradition nationally to dedicate certain months of the year to celebrate a certain segment of the population. Thus we have Black history, Hispanic heritage and American Indian heritage months, to name a few. These celebrations take place on special occasions and highlight cultural traits such as language, food, clothing and music (Legare, 1995). However, as Crawford, 1998, points out, “this display is very much like the cultures found in museums or on a bookcase—it is taken out on special occasions but afterwards put back and everyone returns to normal customs” (Crawford, 1998). Although the concept of multiculturalism is meant to bring diverse cultures together, the celebrations tend to focus on the differences rather than the assimilation of the cultures and often at times result in depictions of stereotypes. This mental “shorthand which helps to convey ideas and images quickly and clearly” (Courtney & Whipple, 1983, p. 205) refers to one group’s generalized and widely accepted perception about the personal attributes of members of another group (Ashmore & Boca, 1981; Dates & Barlow, 1990).

Stereotypes serve multiple purposes in a variety of cognitive and motivational processes (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). They emerge as a way of simplifying the demands on the perceiver (Bodenhausen, Kramer, & Susser, 1994); or as a way in response to environmental factors, such as different social roles (Eagly, 1995), group conflicts (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995), and differences in power (Fiske, 1992); or as a means of justifying the status quo (Jost & Banaji, 1994), or in response to a need for social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Stereotypes, however, do accurately reflect one social reality: unequal relations in society and in the world. (Wei, 1999).

Images of Different Cultures in Media

Although stereotypes and their applications have been studied for a long time, recent mass media research has also documented the depiction of minorities in a variety of modes of visual communication, including films (Park, Gannadon, & Chernin, 2006), television programs (Owens-Patton, 2001), televised sportscasts (Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005), news programs (Meyers, 2004; Schaffner & Gabson, 2004), and advertisements (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000). Collectively, this body of research has suggested that minority citizens, and in particular, “African-Americans, are often minimized and are portrayed as aggressive, as buffoons, as criminals, as ignorant, as lazy, and as menacing” (Buckler, 2008).

According to Buckler (2008), this concept is seen in the critically acclaimed movie *Crash*. The 2005 film won three different Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Editing. The main theme of the film is an exploration of racial and ethnic stereotypes. In analyzing the film, Buckler (2008) points out that although all the main characters make stereotypical comments about race/ethnicity with clear disparaging connotation toward one or more of the characters in the scene, the race/ethnic-based conduct by White characters is presented in ways that minimize either the wrongfulness or impact of the conduct (Buckler, 2008). It also portrays the minority character as the initiator of the interaction and by using subsequent redemptory conduct by the character, and reaffirmation of the stereotype. (Buckler, 2008). Using a scene from the movie, Buckler goes on to explain further the working of this reaffirmation:

The character of Jean Cabot (wife of District Attorney Rick Cabot) is shown grabbing her husband's arm and pulling closer to him when she spots two young Black men walking toward her in the film. The gesture is out of perceived fear of Black men by White people. (pp. 16).

According to Buckler (2008), not only did this scene reinforce the existing stereotype of the young Black male as menacing, but this approach to communicating information about racial and ethnic stereotypes also serves the function of personally excusing and justifying the original behavior of the Jean Cabot character (Buckler, 2008).

Stereotypes are also an easier way of representing a great deal of information. The problem here is that stereotypes can oversimplify or falsely state the complexity of people (Crawford, 1998). For example, a "blonde" refers to more than just hair color; it usually associates her persona with inability to behave and think rationally (Dyer, 1993). This is clearly represented in a television advertisement for a Mercedes automobile Mercedes-Benz (2008). The ad opens with an attractive blonde woman who walks up to another woman behind a desk and orders a hamburger, fries and a milkshake. The unusual situation here is that the setting is actually a library and the woman behind the desk informs the blonde woman of that fact. At this point the camera pulls back and reveals that it is indeed a library and after the blonde woman looks around and takes stock of the situation, leans in and repeats the same order for her food, but this time in a stage whisper (as it is often done by patrons in a library when they are conversing with another). The ad ends with the tagline, "Beauty is nothing without brains."

Television programs use these same concepts and add a twist to the images. The stereotypes are typically disguised in "humor" where minority characters are often portrayed as caricatures of their race. Examples: Babu Bhat in the American sitcom *Seinfeld*: Babu is originally from Pakistan; he owns a restaurant in New York City. To make him culturally different, he is shown wearing a turban in the show. Sanjay and Craig: an American animated television series on Nickelodeon. In the show a boy named Sanjay Patel owns a pet snake named Craig. The cultural reference to the snake and snake charmer is unmistakable. *Glee*: an American musical drama, which has an ensemble, cast of characters from different ethnic backgrounds but every character is very much a "different" character; the two Asian characters on the show have the same last name. The Latina cheer leader is actually named Santana Lopez; the homosexuality of another is over accentuated with outlandish clothing and over the top gestures that (wrongly) define homosexuals. *Rob*: The comedy on CBS about the main character living with his wife's Mexican family; all the members of Maggie's family are almost entirely painted only as "Mexican."

Big Bang Theory: Kunal Nayyar plays an Indian character who is presumably very intelligent and hence, very nerdy, down to his clothing choices and social awkwardness. Modern Family: Gloria's ethnicity or her stereotypical "Colombian" behavior is accentuated heavily with her accent. Homeland: The critically acclaimed television show on Showtime, often depicts Islamophobic stereotypes, in building a premise that Islam simply equates with terrorism. Homeland essentially combines together every aspect of political Islam, Arabs, Muslims and the whole Middle East into a global threat that really doesn't exist (Durkay, 2014).

Shows such as Saturday Night Live, MAD, the Simpsons and The Office, use parody as their vehicle and present stereotypes with subtle sarcasm. But if a viewer does not have the required visual and cultural literacy to understand the parody, then their pre-conceived notion is further cemented by the stereotypical images. Television shows like The Jeffersons and Sanford and Son used stereotypes to portray black families as "obsessed with upward mobility, material trappings of success, and lack creativity and imagination" (hooks, 1996). These two shows were broadcast on television in the 1980s and today, the show *black-ish* delivers the same message. The new ABC show is about an upper-middle-class black family. The main male character (Dre) struggles to gain a sense of cultural identity while raising his kids in his predominantly white, upper-middle-class neighborhood. The family consists of four children and a live-in granddad. The father is an advertising executive and the mother—a doctor—is of mixed race. In the pilot episode, Dre is anxiously awaiting a promotion that would make him the first black senior vice president at the white owned advertising agency. But he is appointed as the Senior Vice President of Urban Division, rather than Senior Vice President of the entire company. (The term Urban is often used to refer to black culture, without mentioning the race.) He is predictably upset but his wife points out the other side, a notion rooted in reality that he should accept the position since there is really nothing wrong with the "Urban Division" title.

Again, as Davison noted in his original writings, the underlying assumption in the show *black-ish* is that whiteness is the norm and success is only possible by conforming to those values. The humor in these shows is derived from the "futile attempts of the characters to imitate white people" (Davison, 1997).

Stereotypes are also an effective way to invoke consensus about the way we think about a social group and imply that all members of society arrived at the same definition collectively (Dyer, 1993). This is evident in advertising commercials where the majority of advertisements reaffirm traditional gender norms. In their recent study, Pedelty and Kuecker (2014) offer an example: Apple's Siri feature for the iPhone 4 (Apple, 2011). In the advertisement, several people are shown asking Siri for help. Each of their queries represents traditional gender roles (Pedelty and Kuecker, 2014). One man seeks information regarding how to tie a bow tie, while another schedules a business meeting. A third man asks Siri to tell his spouse what time he will be home, assumedly from a work context. The women in the advertisement are shown asking Siri directions to the nearest hospital, to send someone to fix a flat tire, a reminder to call a friend and a reminder for grocery shopping. As in most advertisements, the men are shown in work settings while the women are shown in domestic contexts (Pedelty and Kuecker, 2014).

Other examples include black males as "lying, cheating dogs" and professional black women as "wild, irrational, castrating, bitch goddesses" (hooks, 1996, p.57). These are effectively shown in the movies like *Waiting to Exhale* and *Crash* to name a few.

In media, it is worth noting that stereotyping by omission (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, Fiske, 2012) is also another relevant factor. Minorities are still under-represented in the media (Hunt and Ramon, 2015) and the absence or omission of these

groups acts to reaffirm traditionally held views (Crawford, 1998). Stereotyping by omission occurs frequently in movies, advertising and even news. In television and print commercials, couples in advertising are overwhelmingly white; It is very rare to find black or other minority couples (in the advertisements promoting the product for general use and not meant for a specific minority). Even rarer are the images of mixed-raced couples and families. Although there are certain brands that are challenging these stereotypes by providing positive images of minorities and mixed-raced couples, notably among them, the Cheerios brand of cereal in the USA, overall, minorities tend to be under-represented in advertising. This is not only evident in the USA but in Britain as well. Clearcast, an organization that approves all commercials before they are broadcast on British television, found that only 5.3 per cent of television advertising used actors for a non-white background (Sweney, 2011). In a country like India, where there are no indigenous white people, the advertising still shows people of Caucasian descent and if Indian actors are used, they very much resemble Caucasians in their skin tone (Picton, 2013).

News reporting is often guilty of stereotyping by omission (Crawford, 1998; Young, 2016). Most commonly this takes the form of omitting positive minority roles and focusing on negative ones. Many research studies in the 1990s revealed news organizations chose their sources from a narrow strata of society. For example, Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) found news sources were predominantly white males in positions of power and that non-minorities were disproportionately represented.

Under the guise of merely reporting the facts, news tends to create negative images of outlying groups. For example, Crawford (1998) found crimes of Native Americans or other minorities are reported along with those of white Americans but the news agencies tend to ignore Natives otherwise. The omission of these positive roles leaves traditional negative images of Natives intact (Crawford, 1998). This trend is also true in portrayal of many developing countries in news reports. The reports usually highlight and perpetuate the negative images of these countries and very rarely, if at all any positive happenings are reported.

To address this situation, a new way of practice of journalism arose – civic journalism. Civic journalism - sometimes called public journalism—takes a different approach to covering news than traditional journalism. With civic journalism, the community sets the reporting agenda not the media managers and reporters. For example, addressing issues of literacy or public housing may take center stage in newspapers and television reports instead of crime. Community members are featured as prominently as local politicians in public affairs reporting, in news organizations practicing civic journalism. Kurpius (2002) found that civic journalism improved source diversity especially in regard to representations of women and minorities as sources in news reports.

Despite any perceived gains civic journalism may contribute to the practice of local journalism, the lack of minority journalists in newsrooms is also an issue. Campbell (1995) found underrepresentation of journalists and sources of color in television news. “While news is not entirely white, the infrequent presence of journalists of color and of minority news sources dictates an otherness that is compounded when the coverage that does exist perpetuates traditional racist notions about minority life” (p.57).

Professional associations’ codes of ethics address stereotyping. In regard to news photography/videography the National Press Photographers Association’s Code of Ethics encourage journalists to “avoid stereotyping individuals and groups. Recognize and work to avoid presenting one’s own biases in the work” (https://nppa.org/code_of_ethics). The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics encourages journalists to, “boldly tell

the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.” It more implicitly tells journalists to “avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting” (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>).

Pedagogy and Stereotypes in Media

Approaches to teaching art that focus on purely formal and expressive characteristics are very different from the approach that recognizes the critical and political power of visual imagery (Yokley, 1999). In discussing the evaluation and teaching of content in student film/television production, one of the conflicts that arise is how artistic freedom sometimes is at odds with stereotypical images of different ethnic minorities. Given the prevalence of stereotypes in media, student productions often reflect poor content and it is passed off as art using shallow, one-dimensional stereotypes. For example, in the author’s filmmaking classes students often use the “short-cut” representations (dumb blonde, nerd, backward rural kid, black drug dealer, to name a few) to create characters. In one case, a young woman used the term “MILF,” frequently found in pornography, to identify the traits of an attractive older woman. There have also been instances when students have tried to debunk the stereotype myth by providing a culturally sensitive storyline. In these cases, unfortunately, their storytelling becomes a bit condescending to the minorities being portrayed. (e.g. a white woman has prejudices against all black people but during the course of the film, she is helped by a black person and so in the end, her attitude changes). Although laudable, it does reinforce the notion that even in today’s time, black people are different.

Based upon William Wei’s (1999) ideas in using Asians and Asian Americans as illustrations, this paper suggests ways for educators and students to deal with the problem of stereotypes. As Wei (1999) points out, the issue is not whether “specific stereotypes are politically correct or incorrect, negative or positive, but rather that they are, by definition, basically false and misleading.” (p. 18)

- (i) *Recognize*: To overcome the problem of stereotypes, one has to recognize that it is a problem and be cognizant of the fact that it exists in media, in our classrooms and in each person.
- (ii) *Identify in Others*: The best way to address whether you have unintentionally stereotyped a group of people is to do a short exercise on paper. Ask the content creators to write a list of recent movies or television shows that they have seen which has a minority population cast. Ask them then to really describe the minority characters: their physical appearance, their attributes, values within the storyline. Evaluate this list in terms of the number of examples listed and the image attributed to the characters.
- (iii) *Identify in Self*: Another way is simply to have producers write down several adjectives they think best describes a people. Extrapolating Wei’s (1999) suggestions, for example, given the negative image of Islam as a religion in the United States, it might be relevant today to compare what they have written down about Muslims.
- (iv) *Confront*: After identifying potential stereotypes, use critical scrutiny and factual verification. However, asking minority members in the classroom to share what they see is true and false about the portrait the students have created may seem convenient

but is not useful; unless they have studied their group's history and culture, they will probably know as little as others do (Wei, 1999).

- (v) *Research*: If what emerges is a stereotypical portrait of a people, examine the origins of these stereotypes. Provide examples quoted elsewhere in this paper to showcase how the media create and cultivate these stereotypes.
 - (a) Since stereotypes are found in popular culture, an effective way to engage students is to have them collect examples from a medium of their choice. They could be asked to watch newscasts, music videos and advertisements in magazines or television and then look at the images in them with the intent of analyzing if the images are accurate and to the purpose they serve.
 - (b) Structure assignments that actually involve researching minorities, social class and other subjects prone to stereotypical depictions. A few examples might include, an advertisement for a fictional product that might have a requirement to actually depict the characters in "reality" based upon research. In news classes, have students research the demographic makeup of the community in which they live.
- (vi) Ultimately, as Wei (1999) points out, someone will ask, that "if the images are inaccurate or unidimensional, what are the minorities really like?" Since students know that there are characteristics that distinguish one group of people from another, they will want to identify these traits. This is the most demanding part of the process, since it requires real knowledge that can be acquired only through study. (Wei, 1999). Here pointing them to literature in ethnographic studies will provide more insight.

Once their inquisitiveness is piqued, assign them a "voice of the voiceless" project in which they tell the story of a disenfranchised person or group of people. In a similar vein, you can also assign a project where the narrative is about seeing a person in a group other than his or her own. Allow them to tell the story on why they are different. By articulating why the "other" is different, salient features of stereotypes are bound to emerge. Follow this assignment with another one where they actually work with the "other" person and form a narrative around how they would like to be represented. This will in turn, provide opportunities to examine the false imagery of stereotypes and will challenge them with facts. Assignments like this serve multiple purposes. They force students out of their comfort zones by asking them to meet those less represented in society. These assignments also serve the at-large community by shining a spotlight on people who live on the margins. They also force the student producers to self-reflect; they may confront their own biases or challenge their own belief systems. Lastly, assignments like these can enlighten student producers about media agendas and, in so doing, may make them more willing to challenge the mediated status quo.

Conclusion

Media has always been an important source of entertainment and information for our society; it is projected that an average American will spend nearly 290 minutes with TV (cable and broadcast) daily in 2018 (Statista, 2014). Media's effect in creating images that are often accepted in society have been documented and as the consumption continues to increase, it will be more important than ever to pay critical attention to its social functions. Critical pedagogy requires critical and reflective selfexamination concerning how identity

and subjectivity are formed as a result of living within particular political, social, economic structures, and other contextual and historical circumstances (Yokley, 1999).

For many media educators and students, media literacy combined with this critical pedagogy will be an effective way to counter influence the portrayal of minorities and underrepresented population in the media. Media literacy can help students become more aware of the social structures and representations in society, make them more aware of the reinforcing media messages they encounter on a daily basis (Mihailidis & Hiebert, 2005) and recognize their own biases when producing creative works.

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