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The Power of (Mis)Representation:

Why Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes in the Media Matter

As communication systems reach nearly every corner of the world, mass media matters more than ever since it influences how people see and understand themselves and others in the world. As a powerful social force that makes the most of visual, audio and textual techniques, it has the capacity to shape civil society, its discourses, policies, and the built environment all around us (Schiller, 2014). Therefore, media are not insignificant audio-visual outlets that merely entertain and inform, but they are culturally expressive conduits that have the power to transform the popular imaginary into real world practices of love and hate, peace and violence. Certainly, audiences are not passive robots that merely accept everything that is broadcast to them but given our societal context in which media images drive so much of the narratives in politics, culture and economics, it is deeply important to acknowledge its power so that we may develop the critical agency necessary to make informed decisions and take appropriate actions. Furthermore, understanding the role of media as a communicative stimulus becomes especially necessary when it comes to deconstructing the media (mis)representation of racial and ethnic populations and the stereotypes that are perpetuated.

This essay examines why racial and ethnic stereotypes in the media matter and their implications. It does so through four sections as an effort to clearly articulate

media's importance even as digital technologies promise to upend the status quo. The first section lays out the ways in which media representations and misrepresentations have the power to incite cognitive and social impact. The second section discusses the most dominant ethnic and racial stereotypes in the media, and the section thereafter aims to engage with the issue as to how media representations justify racial inequality and discrimination. The final section shows the different ways organizations, activists, and young people are working to change the circulation of narratives because media matters and it matters how we engage with the media.

The Power of Media (Mis)Representation

A few years ago, the founder and director of the National Hispanic Media Coalition argued that the lack of favorable images about Latinos in the U.S. and the nearly non-existent access to the airwaves by communities of color placed the U.S. Latino community at significant risk. The risk Mr. Nogales was referring included the very real threats that Latinos face through physical assaults and deportations, as well as the symbolic violence that permeates across the media landscape, which has become especially evident during the most recent U.S. presidential primaries. Unfortunately, the lack of diversity across the U.S. media landscape and the racialized caricatures that are often broadcast on the airwaves creates a cultural context in which people of color are particularly viewed through a stereotypical lens. In summer 2015, for instance, an Arts and Culture reporter for the New York Times reviewed the television programming created by the prolific cultural audio-visual artist, Shonda Rhimes, one of the few African American television writer and producers in Hollywood. In the newspaper review, the

reporter asserted that Ms. Rhimes' success and the popularity of her television work was due to its foundation to the "Angry Black Woman" trope. The stereotypical characterization of this artist and her abundant body of work not only demonstrated that even historically and culturally sensitive popular culture writers are not impervious to the institutional and cultural racism. Additionally, despite Ms. Rhimes' momentous success, the racial stereotypes of Black, Latino, and multiracial people still govern media discourses even when they achieve the status of highly regarded media interlocutors.

A larger issue has to do with the fact racial minorities are not adequately represented in traditional mainstream media (Castañeda, Fuentes-Bautista, & Baruch, 2015). The limited media diversity not only creates limited understanding of the social world, but can also produce real violence, and thus the "significant risk" that was noted above. The anti-immigrant discursive and physical attacks as well as the non-stop ICE deportations authorized by President Barak Obama during his administration have emboldened a plethora of hate speech on the radio dial and hate crimes particularly against people of color. Although industry representatives argue that media itself, including popular culture, have little to no power to create material effects in the world, they fail to recognize the data amassed over the years (see Bryant & Oliver 2009). Multiple studies have demonstrated the cognitive and social impact that media have on everyday people, especially children (Dohnt & Tiggemann 2006; Rivadeneyra, Ward, & Gordon 2007; Greenberg & Mastro 2008). Over time these children become adults whose values are in part shaped by a media system that in the U.S. is based on a capitalist, racist and sexist framework in its content and regulatory processes. For instance, the rise of virulent racist taunts at K-12 schools during the 2016 presidential primaries, especially at

sporting events, is the direct result of a political media landscape that utilizes the persuasiveness and pervasiveness of communication systems to espouse a white supremacist ideology that aspires to diminish people of color as legitimate social and political actors.

It is important to acknowledge that the capacity of the media to stereotypically (mis)represent minorities is tied to the history of colonialism and exploitative labor in the U.S. (Castañeda, 2015). Consequently, by marginalizing non-white communities, dominant structures can write these communities out of history as well as hinder their capacity for political-economic agency. This is one of the reasons why so many people of color, Latinos and African Americans in particular, have historically fought ardently for media access. In *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948*, Barbara Savage (1999) argues that black leaders understood the importance of media images and the need to exert influence on their representation. The media are not merely entertainment and information venues, but powerful social forces that impact our material, social and political realities. She notes that the “highly capitalized white-controlled national media of film and radio” left very few opportunities for African Americans and Latinos to influence the popular images of ethnic communities and “radio broadcasting remained an inaccessible political medium for the expression of dissident views, especially on race” (p. 44). Thus, despite the liberal democratic principles of free speech, Savage and other scholars have shown that the media, especially broadcasting, have utilized policy processes to protect the entrenched political and racialized status quo as represented through communication content. Nowhere is this more evident than the racial and ethnic stereotypes that have permeated the airwaves and print culture, although

today such stereotypes are reproduced through specific media practices such as publicizing the names and faces of criminals of color but not necessarily for criminals who are white.

Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes in the Media

The media is persuasive and pervasive, which is why racial and ethnic stereotypes continue to persist. Digital technology has deepened its omnipresence and transformed access to media content into a commodity that is available 24/7. Additionally, through individual mobile equipment and spectrum frequency accessibility, individuals can consume audio-visual images virtually anytime and anywhere. The rise of “reality television” has also transformed popular cultural images from being merely fiction into possible reflections of society. Audiences view the broadcast of racial and ethnic stereotypes as simply reflecting the ways things (and people) “truly are” and hence these images are perceived as potentially real and unquestionable. The mainstream reproduction of racial and ethnic stereotypes, and the ways in which they intersect with class, gender and sexuality in the media, hence creates the conditions that maintain the status quo and reinforce racist, classist, sexist and homophobic hegemony. By reinforcing a white supremacist and pro-capitalist ideology in news and entertainment programming, forms of social control can be sustained in which people of color are perceived as largely embodying the negative racial and ethnic stereotypes, and consequently, unworthy of upward mobility or educational resources. Consequently, the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle message) becomes that the places where people of color best belong become prisons, agricultural fields, kitchens, and homeless shelters, but not in positions of power.

In the case of Latinos, regardless of citizenship status, the continuously marketed narrative of deportation to Mexico or somewhere else in Latin America becomes viewed as a political and economic (and apparently not racist) action that bolsters the idea that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in particular do not belong in the United States, and are unworthy of its resources (Castañeda, 2008). Media images create meaning, and as the demographics in the U.S., and across the Americas, continue to shift towards more people of color, those images will mean the difference between intersectional inclusion and violent exclusion. By analyzing the discourse and visual iconography of minority stereotypes as constructed through mass media, including digital platforms, we can specify the cultural politics of how race, gender, sexuality and class are segregated and represented as silos by the regime of neoliberal communications. People's lived experiences in fact intersect across these and various other axis but mainstream media aims to veil the intersectionality of racial, gender, sexuality, and class realities while continuously reproducing minority stereotypes that reinforce oppressive conditions on and off the airwaves. The symbolic violence of racial formation across U.S. media platforms is especially insidious since it helps define who and who is not worthy of (cultural) citizenship and access to resources, such as education.

How do media illustrate the embodiment of sexist, racist stereotypes and how does this in turn affect how they are treated? According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), racial formations are the result of processes in which multiple forces (political, economic, social and communicative) influence the significance and substance of racial categories, which then influence notions of racial meanings. Since race is such an enduring category in the U.S., even changes to the social context or symbols of

stereotypes or racial myths are not enough to eradicate what Chandra Mohanty notes as the underlying presence of racial meaning systems that anchor American culture. Thus, “stereotypes contribute to the racist definitions people of color must ensure vis-à-vis a dominant white, middle-class, professional culture” (Mohanty, 2006, 55).

How do Media Representations Justify Racial Inequality and Discrimination?

Racial minority stereotypes in the media vary across ethnic/racial groups but at their core, there are similarities that cut across all of them. Mass media stereotypes of Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans and Asian Americans tend to highlight racialized, classed, and sexist notions regarding their sexuality, sociability, intelligence, trustworthiness, and socio-economic standing. Meaning, these racial/ethnic groups are consistently represented in the media as hypersexual, violent, unintelligent, dishonest, and consistently poor. The characterization of these groups in these ways creates images and perceptions of who deserves cultural citizenship, to be part of the nation, to be counted as valuable and to merit recognition as a noteworthy contributor to society (Entman and Rojecki, 2001). By representing racial minorities through negative stereotypes, it raises the question as to whether “these people” have a right to the societal resources available to those who are part of a productive populace. With too few media representations that challenge negative characterizations especially of Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans, these populations are then granted limited privileges in civil society. The result then becomes that they need to be controlled, managed, subdued, and perhaps even incarcerated or unwelcome in everyday day society. The impact is not only felt interpersonally such as when a young Latina enters a high-end

store and is followed throughout, or an African American male is targeted by the police, but also in the kinds of biased policies and practices that are instituted by educational, economic or political institutions, which ultimately not only hurt minorities in the long run, but white populations as well (Ross & Lester, 2011).

The following are some of the more common racial stereotypes that are promulgated by the media especially about Latinos and African Americans. Latinas are sexualized maids or anchor baby mamas. Latinos are passive garden works or alcoholics. African American men are gang members or drug dealers. African American women are prostitutes or junkies. These are just a handful, and others can just as well be developed for Asians and Native Americans. It is important to note that these problematic stereotypes work to subvert the human agency of racialized groups because media representations become transformed into seemingly “real knowledge” and produce the deeply hurtful notion that these racial/ethnic populations deserve to be somewhat outcast (Yosso, 2002). Consequently, such media representations create the belief that minority groups lack the capacity to cultivate the fertile political, social and cultural land of the U.S. and only white communities have the knowledge and power to deserve the bountiful resources of the nation. Given this history, is there a way to challenge the current context and change the course of the media’s future? Yes, there is! As social actors, we the people, must care about and actively engage in countering the negative media stereotypes of racial minorities in our everyday discourses, behaviors, and beliefs.

Working to Change the Narrative because Media Matter

The fact minority populations are nearly nonexistent and/or stereotyped in the U.S. media is not inconsequential. The media and the material conditions they embody communicate the importance or lack of importance of racial/ethnic communities, especially with regards to their intellectual and political power. These communities are valued differentially according to the needs of the media sector, the imperatives of the global economy, and the cultural politics of the United States (Castañeda, 2015). Media matters and these issues, especially with regards to stereotypes, must be critically investigated if all people are to be full participants in our social world and in the eradication of media exploitation. Organizations such as National Hispanic Media Coalition, Media Action Grassroots Network, and Center for Media Justice and Free Press are examples of how coalitions can be formed to develop media activist movements that aim to transform our communicative system in the 21st century.

The rise of digital technologies is also providing a slew of possibilities, especially for developing counter-narratives that challenge the mainstream and create alternative images of racial/ethnic communities. There is a great need to increase positive Latina/o media representation and many immigrant rights activists, media justice advocates, and critical scholars are increasingly understanding how mass communications can work as powerful tools that have the potential to reshape the negative stereotypes and misinformation about people of color and low income communities that circulate in the mainstream entertainment and news environments, and sometimes create dangerous situations for marginalized communities. It is ironic that Latinos are disproportionately absent from mainstream English-language media sectors, while at the same time young Latinos continue to be the most coveted consumer

demographic of the near future (Castañeda, 2008). Given the present contradictions in which Latinos are both celebrated as the next top consumers and reviled as the least-wanted citizens, it is more crucial than even to understand the ways in which the media uses its capitalist practices of representation to divide and conquer communities. We are at a moment when the sociocultural and political milieu is changing once again, and with increasing access to digital media, now is the time to shift the power of representation, to develop more expansive narratives about the rich complexity of race and ethnicity in the U.S. and beyond.

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End of chapter features:

Include 4 suggestions for further reading

- Behnken, B. D., & Smithers, G. D. (2015). *Racism in American popular media: From Aunt Jemima to the Frito Bandito*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Dines, G., & Humez, J. M. M. (2011). *Gender, race, and class in media: A critical reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pickering, M. (2001). *Stereotyping: The politics of representation*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave.
- Rosenthal, A., Bindman, D., & Randolph, A. W. B. (2016). *No laughing matter: Visual humor in ideas of race, nationality, and ethnicity*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press.

3 questions for further discussion (critical thinking questions)

- 1). If the media are powerful in creating and sustaining racial/ethnic stereotypes, then how can that same power be utilized to challenge stereotypical images?
- 2). U.S. society has a long history of promulgating particular notions of race, class, gender and sexuality, but is at stake for mass media in reproducing those narratives?
- 3). How can the widespread use of digital technologies and social media both reinforce as well as disrupt problematic narratives about communities of color?

website links

Media Action Grassroots Network - <http://mag-net.org/>

National Hispanic Media Coalition - <http://www.nhmc.org/>

Center for Media Literacy - <http://www.medialit.org/reading-room/how-break-stereotype>

Media for Social Justice - <http://proof.org/>

audio/visual suggestions if applicable

Media Education Foundation “Latinos Beyond Reel” – educational film documentary

Media Education Foundation “White Like Me” – educational film documentary

The Representation Project “Miss Representation” – commercial documentary film