Representation

This video introduces the concept of representation. Media representations of individuals or groups can hurt by reflecting stereotypes and mistaken beliefs or can help by being truthful and inclusive.

Stereotypes and media representations of different groups sometimes stem from the appropriation of different cultures; to learn more about of cultural appropriation and the ethical use of imagery and creative works by different artists and producers, watch *Appropriation & Attribution*.

Framing an image from one perspective can produce an entirely different representation of that image if framed from another perspective. To learn about the effects of framing images in the media, watch *Framing*.

The case studies on this page explore representation in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. "The *Miss Saigon* Controversy" examines the debate over ethical representation in the performing arts that ensued when a white actor was cast for the role of a half-French, half-Vietnamese character in the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*. "Covering Female Athletes" looks at the controversy sparked by *Sports Illustrated* when their cover photo of Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn seemed to focus more on her physical appearance than her athletic abilities. For a detailed case study about equal representation in corporate culture, read "Pao & Gender Bias." For a case study about the ethics of journalist Caleb Hannan's reporting when he outed the subject of his article as a trans woman, read ""Dr. V's Magical Putter"."

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: conformity bias, consequentialism, ethical fading, framing, integrity, justice, moral agent, moral myopia, morals, subject of moral worth, and values.

For more information on concepts covered in this and other videos, as well as activities to help think through these concepts, see Deni Elliott's workbook *Ethical Challenges: Building an Ethics Toolkit*, available for free download at the link below. This workbook explores what ethics is and what it means to be ethical, offering readers a variety of exercises to identify their own values and reason through ethical conflicts.

Discussion Questions

1. The video contends that stereotypes (e.g. of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, belief, ability, or age) negatively impact the groups of people being represented. Do you agree? Why or why not?

2. Can you think of an example of a stereotypical image in media that has caused harm? What about an example where no harm has been caused? What's the difference between these two examples?
3. How might artists, advertisers, journalists, educators or politicians balance freedom of expression and ethical representation?
4. To what degree is it necessary for an artist, actor, filmmaker, advertiser or journalist to have the lived experience of the group of people he/she is representing? How could lived experience impact representation?
5. Do you watch any shows that include a portrayal of a stereotype for comedic effect? Do you think this portrayal is offensive? Does it make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?
6. How do you distinguish between visual, written, or musical representations that are offensive and those that are humorous, effective, dramatic, etc.?
7. Do you think intentionally offensive artistic works serve a productive purpose? If so, can you think of an example?
8. If a group of people is offended by an artistic work, do the intentions of the artist matter? Why or why not?

Additional Resources

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Transcript of Narration

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"Media producers have the power to reach a mass audience. Now, along with this power to influence comes the responsibility to be conscious and careful of how they represent individuals and groups in the society in which we live.

Music, film, art, theater, journalism and advertising hold up mirrors to individuals and communities. These mirrors can be cracked or distorted, and even the very best mirror only shows a sliver of reality. Mirrors can reflect stereotypes and mistaken beliefs that are held by media producers or by dominant society itself. It's not unreasonable for individuals to want truthful representation.

For example, the film, The Hurt Locker, received nine Academy Award nominations, winning 6 Oscars. Yet, this story of a journalist embedded in an Army unit in Iraq drew strong criticism from some war veterans. According to critics who had been fighting in Iraq at the time, the movie showed a soldier getting blown up in a scene that would have called for robotic bomb detonation in real life, and according to another, "No soldier would go down an alley in Iraq by himself in 2004 at night."

Any individual or group can be presented unfairly, but those most likely to be negatively represented are members of groups who have a history of discrimination. When viewing media or when producing material for a public audience, here are four important questions to keep in mind:

One: Is the perspective presented that of dominant society or is it the perspective of the people within the group? Perspective matters. A media report might use common phrasing to describe someone as "confined to a wheelchair," but most wheelchair users would see it differently. Wheelchairs, for many of the people who use them, are symbols of mobility, not confinement.

Two: Which descriptors are needed to help your audience understand your story subject, and which needlessly perpetuate stereotypes? Any descriptor should be analyzed for relevance. Religion or race may be relevant to an individual's criminal act. But usually it's not. Based on demographics, for example, most robberies in the United States are committed by people who were raised in a Christian

tradition. But it does not follow that Christians are likely to rob people and the same is true about the lack of relevance of most terrorists' religions.

Three: Does the representation impede the group's progress toward equality within dominant society? The film, Argo, won Best Picture in 2012, but was critiqued for the decision to cast a white actor as Latino Tony Mendez. Many critics argued that Argo followed a long tradition of white actors playing Latino characters in film, such as Al Pacino in Scarface, thus denying Latino actors professional opportunities.

The last question to consider is who is not captured in the media mirror? Lack of inclusion in media presentation makes it easy to dismiss members of a group in real life. But, if viewers and media producers become sensitive to people whom the camera ignores, media presentations will expand to include a greater diversity of perspectives.

Most people strongly believe that artists and journalists must have freedom of expression, but we also value respecting the beliefs, customs and cultures of others. By keeping the four questions raised here in mind, we can start a dialogue that helps everyone understand the issues, with the potential of reducing moral disagreement. In this way, we can promote authentic and inclusive representation, and better understand the producer's message when prejudice is purposefully depicted."