Creating Inclusive and Equitable Communities – A Call to Action

Understanding the origins and impact of bigotry in the U.S. today and what we can do about it

Lesson 6: Dominant Narratives in the Media

Contributors:
Melissa Levinson, MA in Arab Studies
Nikhil Laud, MA in Education
Magdalena Gross, PhD in Religious Studies
Ameena Jandali, MA in Near Eastern Studies

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Introduction

This lesson will help students to identify dominant narratives about ethnic groups in mainstream media platforms, including the news outlets, TV shows, and movies. We believe that in order to combat harmful portrayals of ethnic minorities, students must first be able to recognize these dominant narratives so that they become less susceptible to internalizing the effects of biased popular culture and are better equipped to design effective ways to combat media prejudice.

Lesson 6 highlights the dominant narratives of Arabs in American media (TV, film, and news) as a case study for helping students develop skills in content analysis and media literacy. Students will identify common stereotypes in these dominant narratives and discuss the consequences of these negative portrayals.

Theme: Systems of Power

Disciplinary Area: General Ethnic Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 3, 4, 5

Relevant Curriculum Standards

California's Literacy in History/Social Studies Standards:

- **Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies: RST.11.12.1; RST.11.12.2; RH.11.12.7; RH.11.12.8**
  - Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
  - Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
  - Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
  - Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

- **Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: WHST.9.10.1; 9.10.4; 9.10.9**
  - Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.
  - Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
  - Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Background Information for Educators

Because people all over the country (and world) encounter media messages on a daily basis, dominant narratives in the media are able to spread far and wide. The media, therefore, has the power to transmit dominant narratives throughout a society. Numerous studies have found that films and television rely heavily on stereotypic characterizations of ethnic groups.[1] Further, advertisements and news coverage also perpetuate stereotypes and bias against minority groups.[2]

Psychological studies have found that these stereotypical portrayals do not fall on deaf ears. Rather, evidence suggests that people's perceptions of social groups are related to how much media they are

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[1] Jack G Shaheen, "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588, no. 1 (2003): 171–93; David M. Newman, *Identities and Inequalities: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012).

[2] Russell Luyt, "Representation of Masculinities and Race in South African Television Advertising: A Content Analysis," *Journal of Gender Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): 35–60; Melinda J Messineo, "Does Advertising on Black Entertainment Television Portray More Positive Gender Representations Compared to Broadcast Networks?" *Sex Roles* 59, no. 9–10 (2008): 752–64.

exposed to.[3] Because mainstream media platforms overwhelmingly present biased narratives about ethnic minorities, audiences internalize this prejudice, which creates a cycle of perpetual racism. Therefore, because of this power of the media to influence people's attitudes toward ethnic groups, we must better understand the content of these media narratives in order to effectively evaluate and counter the consequences of these messages.

Despite the negative influence of biased media, popular culture platforms also hold the power to positively influence people's perspectives about ethnic groups. Later lessons will introduce students to tools for harnessing the power of the media to present counter-narratives to combat dominant narratives.

Learning Objectives

Identity: *How will my instruction help students learn something about themselves and/or others?*
- Students will be able to explain how popular culture shapes their views of and attitudes toward themselves and others.
- Students will be able to reflect on their experiences with popular culture to identify dominant narratives they may have encountered.

Skills: *How will my instruction build students' skills relating to the content?*
- Students will be able to conduct content analyses of dominant narratives in the media.
- Students will be able to demonstrate reading comprehension skills by analyzing an academic report.

Intellect: *How will my instruction build students' knowledge and mental powers?*
- Students will be able to recognize and critique bias in mainstream media.

Criticality: *How will my instruction inform students' views of power and equity and the disruption of oppression?*
- Students will be able to identify whose voices are often missing in mainstream media.
- Students will be able to explain the harmful impact of dominant narratives in popular culture on members of marginalized groups.

Guiding Questions

1. How does popular culture shape our views of others?
2. How does the way a narrative is told by the media impact an audience's interpretation of the issue or event?
3. What tools can we use to recognize dominant narratives in popular culture when we encounter them?

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[3] John H Shaver et al., "News Exposure Predicts Anti-Muslim Prejudice," *PloS One* 12, no. 3 (2017); Travis L Dixon and Keith B Maddox, "Skin Tone, Crime News, and Social Reality Judgments: Priming the Stereotype of the Dark and Dangerous Black Criminal 1," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35, no. 8 (2005): 1555–70.

Key Concepts and Terminology

- **Content Analysis** - a research method used to describe and evaluate messages and narratives.
- **Media Literacy** - the ability to analyze and evaluate messages in the media.
- **Bias** - an attitude of favor or disfavor toward something or someone.
- **Stereotypes** - beliefs and opinions about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of various groups.
- **Portrayal** - a depiction or description of someone or something.

In-Class Activities

1. **The Hook** - Explain to students that this lesson will be devoted to identifying and critiquing dominant narratives in popular culture. In particular, it will introduce students to dominant narratives about Arabs. First, ask students to define popular culture. Next, ask students to discuss with a partner what role they think popular culture plays in shaping our views of others. How do they think the media typically portrays minority ethnic groups? Then, ask students to reflect on dominant narratives that they have heard perpetuated about Arabs. Guiding questions may include:
   - What are the stereotypical representations of Arabs?
   - How are these representations problematic?
   - In which types of media have you encountered these narratives?

2. **Main Activity** - Hand out a copy of "A Guide to Content Analysis" (page 7). Explain to the class that content analysis is a tool used by researchers to describe and evaluate messages/narratives. Because people all over the country (and world) encounter media messages on a daily basis, dominant narratives in the media are able to spread far and wide. Therefore, analyzing the content of these narratives helps us to better understand the consequences of these messages and how bias can be perpetuated (or combatted) through the media. Ask students to read the introductory paragraph of the handout. Clarify any questions students may have.

   Next, play the short video "Planet of the Arabs," which shows a compilation of the dominant portrayals of Arabs in Hollywood. (**Note:** the video contains some graphic violence and inappropriate language. To avoid these scenes, only play the following clips: 0:00-02:45; 04:53-07:05). Ask students to take notes on the "A Guide to Content Analysis" handout (page 7).

3. **Class Discussion** - Lead a class discussion about the short video students just watched. You may alternatively want to break students into smaller discussion groups. Use the Discussion Questions (page 5) to facilitate the conversation.

4. **Reflection** - At the end of the class period, ask students to independently write down answers to the lesson's three Guiding Questions (page 3). Ask students to share their answers with a partner or with the class.

5. **Extension Activities** - Here are some ideas for further student exploration:
   - Students watch videos from the Stanford History Education Group's <u>Civic Online Reasoning</u> modules.
   - Students complete the Newseum's <u>"Stereotypes: Identifying One Form of Bias"</u> activity

Discussion Questions

1. What dominant narratives did you recognize in the video?
2. What impressions of Arabs do you think the narratives in the video leave the viewer with?
3. Have you encountered any of these narratives in your daily lives?
4. Why do you think these narratives are so prevalent?
5. What can we do to combat these dominant narratives?

Homework

Option 1: Students Conduct Independent Content Analysis - Ask students to each choose an ethnic group and research dominant narratives of this group in the media. Students should identify and read at least one academic article that discusses the portrayal of this group in the media. Once they have completed this review of the existing literature, ask students to find an article from a mainstream media outlet (ex: CNN, Fox, MSNBC, NYTimes) that features these dominant narratives. Students conduct their own content analysis of the article by using the handout "A Guide to Content Analysis" to analyze the narrative. Students can also answer the following reflection questions:
   - What conclusions are you led to by the article's narrative?
   - What rhetorical tools (tone, language, narrative voice) did the author(s) use to try to influence the audience?

Option 2: Students Compare Two Articles - Ask the students to choose a current event related to ethnic studies. Examples can include coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests, articles about the building of the wall on the US Southern border, or reporting on disputes over indigenous land rights. Students should choose two articles about the event to compare. One article could be from Fox News and the other could be from CNN, for example. Students read the articles and write answers to the following questions for each article:
   - Which facts does the article choose to focus on?
   - Whose voices or opinions are highlighted?

- What do you think the motivation behind this article is?
- What type of tone does the author use?
- What conclusions is the reader led to?
- Research the author and news outlet of each article to find out more about the background and possible motivations for writing the piece.

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection

- Refer to steps 3-4 of the In-Class Activities section

Additional Resources

- National Hispanic Media Coalition, "The Impact of Media Stereotypes on Opinions and Attitudes Towards Latinos" - NHMCLatinoDecisionsReport.pdf (ucla.edu)
- Pew Research Center, "News Content Analysis" - https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/news-content-analysis/
- American Sociological Association, "Teaching Content Analysis through Harry Potter" by Adam M. Messenger - https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0092055X12445461
- Scholars Strategy Network, "How Racial Stereotypes in Popular Media Affect People - And What Hollywood Can Do To Become More Inclusive" by Nancy Wang Yuen - https://scholars.org/contribution/how-racial-stereotypes-popular-media-affect-people-and-what-hollywood-can-do-become
- Newseum, "Recognizing Bias" - https://newseumed.org/curated-stack/recognizing-bias
- Edutopia, "Teaching Adolescents How to Evaluate the Quality of Online Information" by Julie Coiro - https://www.edutopia.org/blog/evaluating-quality-of-online-info-julie-coiro
- Stanford History Education Group's Civic Online Reasoning - https://cor.stanford.edu/
- Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, "Activists Voices Missing from Corporate Coverage of Uprisings" by Loretta Graceffo - https://fair.org/home/activist-voices-missing-from-corporate-coverage-of-uprisings/
- Media Portrayals of Minorities Project - https://www.mediaandminorities.org/
- UWillDiscover, "Islamophobia: American and Canadian Media News Coverage of Muslims, Arabs, and Middle-Easterners" by Maryam Wael Faraq - https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/uwilldiscover/2020/online/84/
- Maydan, "The News Media and Portrayals of Muslims Foreign and Domestic" by Nazita Lajevardi - https://themaydan.com/2019/05/the-news-media-and-portrayals-of-muslims-foreign-and-domestic/
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Student Worksheets

A Guide to Content Analysis

Content analysis is a tool used by researchers to describe and evaluate messages/narratives. Content analysis can use both qualitative (descriptive) and quantitative (numeric) methods. In qualitative content analysis, a researcher examines the language, images, and tone of the narrative. In quantitative content analysis, a researcher often counts the frequency of specific words or phrases in a narrative. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, we can identify themes, patterns, and bias within a single narrative or across many narratives.

Use the following questions to guide your content analysis of the dominant narratives of Arabs.

1. What words or phrases do you hear repeated?

2. Are these words or phrases positive, negative, or neutral?

3. What images do you see repeated?

4. Are these images positive, negative, or neutral?

5. What impressions of Arabs do the words/phrases/images leave the viewer with?

For more information on content analysis, see Colorado State University's "An Introduction to Content Analysis"-
https://writing.colostate.edu/guides/page.cfm?pageid=1305&guideid=61