



Critical Race Theory as a Pedagogical Imperative in Mass Media

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Abstract:

Communication and media strategy are integral parts of effective campaigns that target defined populations. What is often underutilized is the application of critical race theory as the framework to analyze power structures present throughout the process. This leaves students with a practical understanding of mass media but no agency to redesign how the practices that reinforce power, racial assumptions and social inequalities might shift and evolve. This paper explores challenges to introducing this topic and a case study of experiential learning that asks first-year college students to confront biases and evaluate advertisements targeting residents of Chicago communities.

Introduction

The examination of race and culture continue to be prevalent topics for mass media educators, whether the scope is national or global. The nuance of American racism is predicated on systems that replicate in varied forms throughout generations. In the United States, race is defined and measured. In *White By Law*, Ian Lopez describes race as a social construct that maintains superiority of White identity by unconsciously accepting the racialized structure that alienates people of color (Haney-López, 2006). These structures are discussed at length in constructs like biased policies that disenfranchise voters of color, inequality in the criminal justice system, and the gentrification of communities that mimic segregation-era ideals. However, mass media often represents the inconspicuous, and far more replicated, depictions of race that lack cultural awareness and often relegate people of color to stereotypical images. Normaliz-

ing this type of media feeds into perceptions that allow racist structures to maintain their dominance in mainstream media.

Identifying and deconstructing structuralized white supremacy in mass media presents a pedagogical challenge, as teaching this requires instructors and students to confront their own biases and examine the process, development and execution of media strategy as crucial parts of maintaining the effects of societal racial power. Lopez argues that if these “hierarchies of social worth are to be brought down, it will only be through choice and struggle.” Critical race theory suggests that power structures based in white supremacy and racism fuel assumptions and conditions that allow oppressive systems to continue. To eradicate the product of these conditions would require us to decenter ourselves and deliberately choose to view something from the perspective of the oppressed (Stefancic, 2013).

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Critical Race Theory in Mass Media

In “Selling whiteness? – A Critical Review of the Literature on Marketing and Racism,” Judy Foster Davis explains how racism is embedded in the structure of our institutions, often presenting itself in law, policy, economics and education (Davis, 2017). Media became one way racism was manifested to uphold a social paradigm of superiority based on hierarchical racial categories. Her examination highlights media framing respective to people of color, with Black people depicted as illiterate, dangerous, or as dehumanizing caricatures. Print advertisements, films, digital product endorsements, and even academic texts are everyday examples of likeness, ability and opportunity on display. Those examples, however inaccurate, feed into an unconscious bias against their subjects.

Media depictions as projections in communities of color often define and shape ideas about residents. One of the core segments of the marketing mix is placement. The location of ads in cities often reflects how advertisers feel about the viability of the neighborhoods to drive profits for specific products. As urban planners redevelop communities, their process takes a similar economic-centered approach. June Manning Thomas unraveled the characteristics of redevelopment in post-war Detroit and noticed that positioning physical changes as the catalyst to economic growth often further stratified residents and fed into racist systems (Thomas, 2013). Thomas found that equity, social justice and community were more reliable forms of transformation. Her suggestion reimagines the process of urban planning by centering the voices of marginalized groups.

Thomas’ vision could be utilized when assessing how media is created. What is the rationale of widespread liquor, lawyer, and cash advance advertisements in lower income communities and how might that reinforce stereotypes, contribute to internalized racism, and halt economic opportunities for residents? What is the role of news organizations in setting perceptions of people of color through framing and agenda setting? How might casting for films, connected television and streaming media differ based on the creative control each platform allows during the production process? One of the core objectives in profitability requires targeting the right audience, but should their vulnerabilities be motivations for conceptualizing media placements and imagery? As Thomas describes in the context of urban planning, evaluating the process from a social justice lens rather

than an economic one may be of more value. From advertisements to news, film and general mass media, we should explore the processes that we use to create stories and reimagine their constructs from the view of the oppressed. Preparing students with the tools to redesign how and why messages are constructed for various audiences allows them creative agency and consciousness in their application.

A Pedagogical Approach

Scaffolding critical race theory within pedagogy begins at the individual course level. However, fundamental to that is the overall curriculum of mass media and marketing in higher education. Leveraged as the foundation for many practitioners, courses build from a general survey of concepts to more specific tactics and strategies before culminating in a capstone deliverable that usually requires a creative production or employs a real client. How institutions develop courses to prepare scholars includes, among other things, relevant texts and planned lessons. Paula Chakravarty and Sarah Jackson worked on a project to decolonize university curriculum (Chakravarty & Jackson, 2020). They reviewed mass media, communication and journalism doctoral syllabi to assess the texts used within those classes. As they noted, a syllabus, in itself, is a form of discourse, and their findings showed that the most frequently cited texts were not only written by White, male scholars but they also did not incorporate critical race theory as a dominant theme. Decolonizing the curriculum is a vital step in giving students access to more scholars of color and their vantage points in critical race theory. While structuring curriculum requires more than analyzing texts used in classes, it is a step in shifting the supporting materials for the class. Students who graduate with an abundance of practical knowledge and the ability to critically assess the process of media strategy from the position of those it impacts will be better prepared for the industry. To do this, their texts should include voices of those impacted.

One pedagogical approach to applying critical race theory to mass media beyond development of the curriculum is through classroom exercises that deconstruct themes in mass media strategies. Students should learn how to identify power structures that are present throughout the creation of media, which could be modeled using the marketing mix. The 4Ps of the marketing mix include product, price, place, and promotion. As previously mentioned, placement has

far-reaching effects when targeted at specific communities. The marketing mix is a straightforward example for marketing and media students that may spark dialogue if given the right comparative examples.

For instance, this process can be applied to the creation of the Pepsi video advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner that premiered in 2017 as compared to Nike's 2018 "Dream Crazy" ad that features Colin Kaepernick. Students might recognize that the industry trend for more established brands is to rely on marketing and media messages that more closely align to audience identity. Both Pepsi and Nike framed their video advertisement to highlight social justice movements occurring at the time. They each hired a celebrity to center their message and both ads were distributed on Youtube. However, The Pepsi ad was pulled shortly thereafter for iconography that resembled and reframed the Black Lives Matter Movement, centering Whiteness and co-opting the movement for profit (Victor, 2017).

This example highlights multiple touchpoints in media strategy that were at play in development and execution. A pedagogical approach to critical race theory would ask students to examine the components of the marketing mix in each advertisement under the lens of power adjacent to societal ideas about race. Using promotion, one of the elements of the marketing mix, you could discuss how each brand positions itself within the movement and how the chosen actors contributed to the overall campaign. Kendall Jenner is an influencer who gained fame through a reality television show, while Colin Kaepernick is most known as the football player who chose to kneel during the National Anthem as a sign of protest against racial injustice of Black people at the hands of law enforcement (Beer, 2019).

A linguistic and iconographic examination might recognize the differences between the main actors' sense of voice and the incorporation of brand-specific icons or colors. Kendall Jenner never speaks in Pepsi's ad, but her positioning as a White female who looks on at a protest adjacent to her is similar to the white gaze; actors within the march beckon to her and her acceptance positions Whiteness as the figurehead of this adapted pseudo-movement (Washington Post, 2017). Protest signs are all blue and white, which are specific to Pepsi's brand, and include nonspecific phrasing that references "peace," "love" and "join the conversation." Jenner interacts with a police officer, offering him the branded beverage in likeness to the

iconic image of a calm Ieshia Evans confronting police in riot gear during a Black Lives Matter protest (Berlinger, 2016). Jenner was celebrated while Ieshia was detained. Colin Kaepernick, on the other hand, is the narrator in Nike's campaign, making his voice, which is a critical element to the Black Lives Matter movement, centered in this piece (Nike releases full ad featuring Colin Kaepernick, 2018). The Nike logo is placed throughout the ad, but in subtle frames that act as supports for the people portrayed. Kaepernick, who is centered on the screen, famously narrates the line "believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything" with the backdrop of an American flag in a city-scaped background. The buildup to this moment included various athletes who have overcome odds and some who are also figures in the social justice movement, such as Serena Williams.

Teaching this comparison requires students to contemplate how voice, language and tone reflect power. Ecuardo Bonilla-Silva's linguistic interpretation of white ambivalence is traced back to post-civil-rights in America and challenges the colorblind approach to confronting racialized topics (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Kendall's voice is absent in Pepsi's ad, and her initial ambivalence to social unrest could act as a reflection of the attitudes held by racist structures in the American system. When she joins the movement, her placement is centered, but her voice is still absent. Students may interpret how this mirrors racial issues that are co-opted by White leaders furthering the notion that racist systems require White leadership to diffuse unrest, but very little change actually occurs. Pepsi's ad reinforces oppression by centering Whiteness, whereas Nike's ad subverts the structure by positioning Blackness as leaders in change. A further analysis of logo placements, text and colors add additional layers to the discussion of promotional messaging. This type of pedagogical approach that employs one element of the marketing mix has vast implications for students to better understand how critical race theory might be applied in the mass media process.

Case Study

To encourage contextualization of media messages for the audiences they target, the culminating project of an introductory marketing survey course tasks first-year students to apply the framework of critical race theory to touchpoint marketing and mass media strategy through experiential fieldwork. Students pinpoint ads on outlined maps of two distinctly different

communities in Chicago to evaluate how the perpetuation of power, racial assumptions and social inequalities present themselves in the marketing, communication and advertising strategy. The variation of ads may include billboards, transit placements, yard signs, storefront window ads, and other forms of more permanent media. Coupled with ethnographic research, including interviews with residents and demographic data, students are asked critical questions related to power structures represented in the marketing mix.

Chicago is known for its seventy-seven defined geographical neighborhoods that are often segregated and framed by the race of residents. The Northside is perceived as wealthy, predominantly white, well educated and safe, whereas the South and West sides are depicted as unsafe, lower-income, and home to many people of color. Intermittent pauses in the project are used to apply critical race theory with the goal of recognizing moments in media strategy that impact the final product. In one activity, students are given 5-8 photos that represent different items or concepts, such as Starbucks, Target, Dollar General, homelessness, parks, convenience/liquor store, and lottery machines. They place each item in the neighborhoods that it would most likely be found and follow up with a candid discussion about how perceptions of neighborhoods influence funding, educational opportunities, the availability of food and more. In every activity where this has been done, lower-income, predominantly minority neighborhoods are always perceived to have items that are less desirable, such as liquor stores and lottery machines; whereas higher income or tourist areas are perceived at a higher value based on what they believe is available. The examination of power structures and marginalization of people of color challenges their own framework and builds on to the next phase of the project, understanding how advertisements and marketing strategy aimed at culturally defined communities only amplify assumptions and maintain these structures.

This type of assignment does not come without challenges or limitations. Research shows that critical conversations about race in the classroom can often be met with hostility and, because of that, instructors may choose not to approach the topic. After replicating the project much was learned to make it a valuable lesson for students. Without a foundation in critical race theory from relevant reading or multimedia resources, students won't understand the purpose and scope of the project. Apprehensions about enter-

ing certain neighborhoods proved challenging until leaders from those communities were added to the class as guest speakers. Students had to learn about photography, interview skills, secondary and primary research and assessing advertisements, a vast undertaking for an introductory survey course. A new challenge is managing restrictions placed on cities impacted heavily by COVID-19, or the coronavirus, and maintaining a sense of safety. This project has a digital version that utilizes Google 360 to capture advertisements and a shared powerpoint that provides the final layout.

Because critical race theory implies social activism and understanding racist structures, students should reflect on the mass media processes that allowed certain ads to be placed in defined communities of color and what power dynamic it maintains through its placement. They may then determine which parts of the process, in this case the marketing mix, are open for social activism and how shifting the narrative might look. Responses from qualitative evaluations showed that some didn't fully understand how certain communities are undervalued before doing this project. Observations also indicated that neighborhoods have ads that are tailored to the predominant language in that community, such as Spanish or Chinese/Mandarin. Advertisements in Belmont, also known as 'Boys Town' are highly geared towards the LGBTQ community, although students did notice that they catered predominantly to White gay men. The layered responses add context to the known intersectionality also present within critical race theory. When asked how they might adapt the process to mitigate instances of racial power, students were able to identify very specific strategies and adjustments, such as including research from more diverse authors before developing imagery and speaking to residents about the types of content they would prefer in their communities. Their suggestions indicate an understanding of how the process reinforces racist structures as well as imaginative approaches to changing it.

Conclusion

Applying critical race theory as a pedagogical approach to mass media will have lasting effects on the way students understand the implied power structure present in images, video, audio and other channels consumed daily. Challenges may be mitigated through careful consideration of resources given to students and a discussion-based model of learning, where the

instructor acts as a facilitator of the student's growth. There are many fields that tackle critical race issues, but the media has a key role in maintaining this system. The practical application of tools won't be sufficient in preparing students for the types of diverse, inclusive projects they will encounter in their career. Transformative pedagogical adaptations of course text, deliverables and discussions are imperative for educational institutions to develop.

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