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LS 451-Google Image Project

Image Is Everything

Teacher: *Sexy white chick*

Thug: *Dred-headed black guy*

Family: *2 car, 2 kids, Mom and Dad*

High achieving: *Smiling, white people*

Low achieving: *Depressed and abstract minorities*

Public policy:  *Policy minus the public*

I could go on...In fact, I will

Journalism: *stale, antiquated, White point of view*

1st day of school: *Nope! Doesn’t include you!*

Food and medicine: *Junk and pills*

*Distant Social Justice*

*Mocking Mexicans*

Tell me are these images real????

Google. It’s what we run to. Need to check out that creepy guy who keeps asking you out on a date? Google him. Or how about that accident you overheard two women talking about on the train? Google! Research paper? Bump on your leg? Yourself?

Google. Google. Google. I mean, being on Google legitimizes it, right? ...Until it doesn’t.

If we were to base our reality on what Google images portrayed about the opening topics of this paper, we would believe that happy, white, sexy women are the epitome of teachers and dred-headed black guys are the embodiment of thugs.  But because we know they aren’t, we boldly query, “Why, Google, would you reflect them as such?”

Destination Google Images

        To begin our quest, of course we started with...drum roll...Google search! We wanted to know how Google Images decided what images to post. So we Googled *“who determines what images appear on Google Image”.*We discovered that although Google hosts the site, it doesn’t exactly decide what images appear. Without getting too technical, Google Image simply spews out images, from around the web, in accordance with the descriptive text associated with them (Site Google).  And if that’s the case, *Houston, we have a problem.* That would mean these images aren’t being conjured up arbitrarily but they in fact appear to reflect what we (the beautiful, richly diverse America) espouse.

Historical Under/overrepresentation in Media

So, why are these the images that the Internet conjures up? Why do we see young Black men as thugs and feel its ok to mock Mexicans?  Why is our image of low achieving students so severely slanted towards minorities?  It’s likely because, in American media outlets, which historically have been owned, operated and dominated by white faces, these are the long-standing and traditional images associated with these minorities.

In the 1960’s, (they) African Americans started violently protesting their near complete exclusion from media.  It was then that President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Kerner Commission recommended working harder towards racial inclusion. It seems poignant to mention, in the media, this commissioned study gained the nickname “The Riot Report” and despite the suggestions of this near fifty-year-old commission, as of 2007 the minority presence in the newsroom (both on and off camera) was only at 13.6% (Washington, 2008).  We’ve made some progress but we still have a long way to go. As long as minorities have limited control of media outlets, they have limited ability to control how these outlets depict them.  While Google Images may be relatively young, it seems to be following historical trends in its portrayal of certain images and this is not to be taken lightly.

Media Impacts Our Perspectives

Past research has shown that the mass media can exert a powerful influence on public perceptions and attitude (Gilens 1996).  While watching the daily news and being bombarded with image after image of dangerous black gunmen, Mexican rapists, or Islamic terrorist destroying the lives of innocent white folks, biases begin to develop; biases that in turn affect how we act or fail to act.

In Gilens’ (1996) 5-year study of news stories on poverty, he noted that although African Americans only make up about 29% of the nation’s poor,  62% of news magazine’s pictures of poverty were black faces, and in televised news, 65% of them were black. This overrepresentation of blacks as poor in media rendered poverty to be a black problem, not a societal one, and therefore failed to generate support from white Americans for anti-poverty efforts on the part of government.  When individuals are not represented as products of society, but as products of lack of -- or misinformed -- action, this changes the way the populace is willing to interact with a cause, thus having great implications for civic engagement. If people are reluctant to supply the impoverished with resources, then the impoverished remain impoverished and unheard, resulting in a redounding cyclical of poverty. We would dare to say the effects don’t stop there.

Because a majorityof media images show minority students as rebellious, trouble-making, gangster rapper thugs, we believe these images may be effecting the educational trajectory of these students.  There is a disproportionate number of racial and ethnic minority students enrolled in special education classes around the nation (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).  There are also a disproportionate number of minority students being disciplined in schools, for a myriad of behaviors (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). While it would be an incredulous accusation to say that Google is responsible for this disparity in school placement and punishment, as one of the most widely used search engines, Google Images, as an artifact of our culture can unsuspectingly serve to reinforce such ideas.

There are, undoubtedly, countless contributing factors to why so many minority students are considered to need remedial help in school.  There are countless good justifications for the need to punish minority students for offenses at school.  But, perhaps, this image is serving to reaffirm itself.  If we already view minorities as thugs, as slackers and low achievers, as caricatures of their culture, we are more inclined to find support for our existing perspective than we are to consider the possibility that our perspective has been cultivated by years of selective reporting and slanted media portrayal. To further address how closely popular culture reflects representations in common media, it may be of import to review the statistics.

Some Statistical Comparisons

Findings suggest that Google image searches lean heavily in favor of the *American* norm. Again using some of the words from the beginning of this article, Google image search “family,” and the majority of the images (76 out of 100) are of white families. Google image search “beauty,” and the majority of images (88 out of 100) are of white women. Google image search “CEO,” and the search returns a high percentage of men (95 out of 100). Google image search “home,” and the majority of images that appear are of multi-story houses with yards and garages (99 out of 100). These are the norms as reflected in American media, though not necessarily as overwhelming a majority as the searches would suggest.

Public opinion on patriotism in the US is trending downward; merely half (and less than half, pending one’s political leaning) claim they are proud to be an American (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2014) as opposed to 1984, which was a year of “flag-waving patriotism” in the US (“The Reagan Era,” Schmoop, 2014). This is, however, not the same for Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in the US, where immigrant-culture can forge a sense of community and pride parades are a cultural staple (National Puerto Rican Day Parade, Inc., 2014).  The US is so diverse that its ties sometimes become undone; but are, at least, our consensuses the same? Do our norms coincide? This is to be argued.

For example, “home” returns no images of apartments, yet only about 62% of people live in a detached housing unit (“Selected Housing Characteristics,” Census.gov, 2013). Only 63% of Americans are white—and 15% of the world— (“State and County Quickfacts,” Census.gov, 2013), but 89 out of 100 images of a “person” is a person of European descent.

Some searches did not, however, deviate so substantially from the norm. According to the CDC, between 2007 and 2010, nearly half (48.5%) of the United States population used at least one prescription medication in a 30-day timeframe. Also during 2007 and 2010, adults consumed 11.3% of their total daily calories from fast food. That is, the average American adult buys a meal from a restaurant 5.8 times a week as opposed to adults in the United States consuming fruit—as in, one item—about 1.1 times per day, which is under 8 times per week (United States Healthful Food Council, 2014). Our allegiance to healthy food and supplement choices is also reflected in the sheer amount of hamburgers (18 out of 100) depicted in a search.

Food choices are not the only statistic accurately proportioned on Google images: 4.8% of CEOs are female (Fairchild, 2014) and about 5 out of every 100 pictures is of a female. On teachers, who are overwhelmingly female (84%) (Feistritzer, 2011) and overwhelmingly white (also 84%), the demographics conveyed are aptly reflected in the Google Image Searches (about 80 out of every 100 human teachers). What about for the less honorable endeavors?

The term “thug” has a colorful 180-year history but is currently defined as “a violent criminal” (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.) and depicted, normatively, as an African American with dreadlocks.  But although “violent crimes,” as defined by those wielding power, are committed at a proposed rate of over 50% by black offenders, there were 4,861 unique reports of police (a profession dominated by whites on the order of 75%, “Local Police,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014) misconduct tracked, leading to 247 fatalities and over $300 million spent in judgments and settlements. One must consider the possibility that our statistics are heavily skewed in favor of norm-dominated policy.

As such, civics following through with implementations of social justice, an image search dominated by nebulous hands and ornamented quotes, could be a benefit. Teaching our students to be civically engaged citizens through, in large part, a journalistic lens could be a healthy start; students could review these statistics themselves and react accordingly.

In general, the statistics align pretty well with what we view as the “norm,” and this view is echoed in Google Image searches. This can be detrimental as when underrepresentation of minorities in both positive and neutral media, and overrepresentation in negative media, correlate with decreased self-esteem in youth ([Umaña-Taylor](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140197103001118), 2004) or disillusionment with forms of civic engagement as addressed in our previous section.

Since media can influence perceptions of social reality and contribute to cultural norms (Strasburger, 2005), we thought it only wise to conclude our inquiry by exploring the demographics of today’s media influencers; those internet users who generate original thought and content through blogs, websites and other social media where images can be uploaded.

So Who’s *Really* *“Controlling”* Media

Because Google Image takes images from around the internet and displays them according to the descriptive text associated with them, our last venture was setting out to discover what connections we could make between internet users, images and word associations.  We initially experimented with Google’s Ngram Viewer and found that historical events did have an effect on what was written during specific time periods. However, we were not able to effectively track that in relationship to images and so we moved on to investigating internet use among certain people groups and identifying any noticeable trends associated with images they uploaded through multiple news and social media. Although Internet use increases yearly, certain groups of people have more access to it than others. In 2011, it was reported that 82.7% of Asians, 76.2% of Whites, 58.3% of Hispanics, and 56.9% of Blacks had Internet access in their households. Education wise, people with a bachelor’s degree and when considering age, 35-44 year olds reported the highest percentage of Internet access in their households (File, 2013).

In 2005, it was reported that 33% of teens used the Internet to generate original content, such as images (Lenhart, & Madden, 2005). In 2012, the percentage of teens with access to the Internet increased to 95% (Seo, Houston, Knight, Kennedy, & Inglish, 2013) and if the pattern follows the increasing trend, we can expect that more than 33% of teens are using the Internet to generate original content. This original content then becomes available on the Internet for any user to find. Without any authority as to who can submit or protocol as to what can be submitted, the material to be viewed on the Internet becomes an unfiltered representation of a society.

Conclusion

Society and media have a reciprocal relationship. In our exploration of Google Images, we discovered that images are fueled not by an entity known as Google, but they are, in fact, a result of the collective collaboration of internet users who tag these images with certain words, therefore defining and reinforcing our perceptions of these images and ultimately reflecting what we, the American society, think they represent.  This leads us to conclude: he who controls the media, controls the images and vice versa.

However, in this digital age, unlike the print heavy media of our past, which was predominantly white-owned and white-operated, there is room for media to belong to us all. Minorities (and anyone else misappropriately identified in Google Images) do not need to appeal to the President and solicit a modern day Riot Report to affect change. One can simply start by becoming media savvy and taking every opportunity, when uploading new and original images online, to connect and associate them with words that do away with bias and prejudice and instead, honestly reflect respect and value for all members of our society.

Yes, media influences society’s perceptions. And fortunately, media is our tool. We choose what we want to write and focus on. Unfortunately, not all members of society have equal media access and therefore cannot equally influence what is displayed and reported, but exploring that is an entirely different journey. As far as Google Image is concerned, if we dare cry foul, we have to realize we’re in essence making that call upon ourselves.

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