

**Institute on College Student Values  
Hardee Center for Leadership and Ethics  
Florida State University**

**Ethics . . . Through a Media Lens**

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At least once each week throughout the semester at Columbia College Chicago, 300 students in several sections of a required course, *Culture, Race & Media*, are asked to contemplate and personally answer this very specific question: *What is your ethical responsibility as a potential media maker?* Or to phrase it closer to the youth vernacular: *As a media maker, what is your “sell-out” point?*

I am Dr. Beau Beaudoin, Associate Chair of the Television Department at Columbia College Chicago, an extremely diverse urban school with more than 11,500 students majoring in Media Arts and Communications. Our marketing department proudly cites that we are the largest film/video school in the nation. And, essentially every student intends to graduate with a degree in some form of media arts: film, television production, producing or writing or post production or graphic design or audio acoustics, radio, marketing, journalism, broadcast journalism, theatre, video game design, interactive multimedia, or photography. CNN’s staff looks like a class picture of alumni from my Television Department, scores of our graduates’ names appear on TV and film credits, and many are recipients of those revered Oscars, Emmys and Grammys. We have successfully educated hundreds of professionals in the media industry . . . or have we?

Although we have taught a wide variety of creative, aesthetic, producing and production skills utilizing cutting edge technology, did we emphasize media’s effects on society? Did we ask students and future media makers to question persistent stereotypes, negative representations, insidious violence in film, on TV, in print, or the consequences of the pervasive influence of all media on society?

These are also the questions I am asking you to consider today as well.

The goals of this interactive session are:

- To demonstrate, with video examples, specific influences of the media on one’s personal values regarding race and gender and prejudice
- To explore how our culture and values affect how we perceive visual messages
- To briefly explain the results of a three-year study that demonstrated changes in student media-makers’ ethical decisions after experiencing exercises utilized in the *Culture, Race & Media* course.

The unfortunate truth is that in average American households the television set is turned on for more than 7.5 hours a day and the Internet is ubiquitous. If we are to search for a common thread among all of our students - in areas of poverty or affluence, across cultures and class lines, immigrant homes or American-born - they are exposed to more hours of media than hours in school or in direct contact with their families and friends. Television and the Internet offer our students a viewpoint, sets of values of the world, that is carried over into the classroom whether we, as teachers, acknowledge what they watch or not.

But before speaking about our students . . .

How many of you believe that you have been influenced somewhat or strongly, in your ideas and even value systems by the media you've watched during your lifetime?

Tiedge (1980) surveyed a cross section of people regarding the effect media have on society. Eighty percent of those who responded “strongly agreed” that media had an effect on society as a whole, but only 12 % “strongly agreed” that media had a personal impact on them. Silverblatt (2001) reports the Tiedge findings and concludes: “. . . the more that people deny personal influence of mass media, the more susceptible they are to media messages” (p. 4).

Similarly, people recognize bias in others but seldom acknowledge prejudice on a personal level. Croteau & Hoynes (2003) add: “The media give us pictures of social interactions and social institutions that, by their sheer repetition on a daily basis, can play important roles in shaping broad social definitions. In essence, the accumulation of media images suggests what is ‘normal’ and what is ‘deviant’” (p. 163).

Upon viewing the following media examples, you are asked to determine if the message influenced you. You are also being asked what values are inherent in this commercial, and if any portion of the message is offensive.

\**Tott's Champagne* Commercial. Debrief about sexual metaphors and values.

\*Note: Because the presentation that this paper summarizes is an interactive dialogue between the audience and the presenter, the media examples are merely noted here. Specific conceptual details can only be described within context of actual viewing.

\**Colt .45* Commercial. Debrief about racial innuendos and images of African American males.

\**ER* – NBC television drama excerpt. Debrief about perceptions of prejudice.

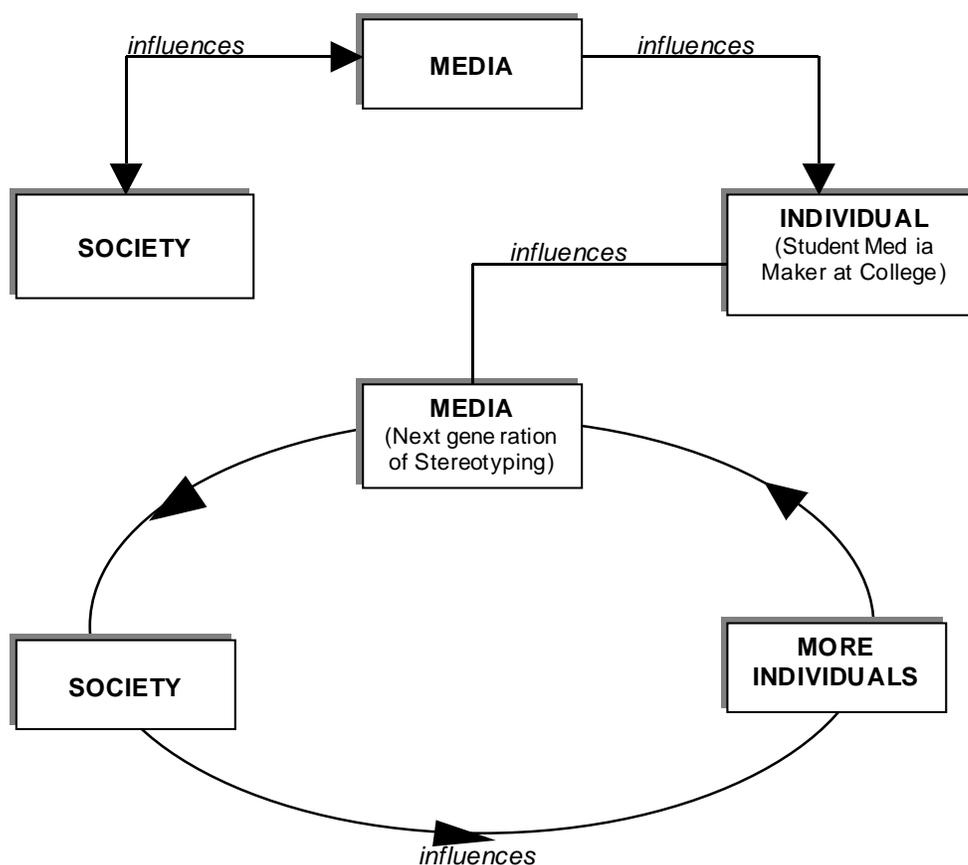
Each media example above was also utilized in the *Culture, Race & Media (CRM)* curriculum that I designed, where media analysis within a pedagogical framework of multicultural community building and trust could be studied. Students not only participated in the 15-week college-level course, but also evaluated their progress, new learning, frustrations, successes, and the validity of the project as a whole. The scope was limited to this population because these students had generally been ardent viewers of all forms of media and have/had intentions of entering media careers. By their admission, however, issues of race and gender portrayals, stereotypes, power, hegemony, media manipulation, cultural understanding, and self-awareness had only been peripherally addressed, if at all, during all their years of formal education.

Silverblatt (2001) offers this assessment of the importance of media as a cultural influence: The media have become such an integral part of a nation that the media system reflects the political, historical, cultural, and economic orientations of that country. Consequently, examining these aspects of a nation can provide insight into its media system. And conversely, understanding a nation's media system can furnish valuable perspective about that country (p. 391).

And, I, in turn, ask if understanding a potential media maker's personal ideology regarding race and gender can affect the contents of the next generation of media?

To establish a need for both the course and a study, I created a model –a “media feedback loop”– (see Figure below), to better visualize the influence of media upon society and society on the media. Its origin lies in writings from scholars like Cortes (2000), Masterman (1985), McLuhan (1964), Postman (1985/1988), Hall (1997), Jhally (1998), and Silverblatt (1999/2001).

Figure 1. Media Feedback Loop



Holtzman teaches and has written about the relationship between media and cultural beliefs. In the 2004 *American Behavioral Scientist* journal dedicated to media literacy Holtzman concludes: “Examining the role of entertainment media in shaping our beliefs about diversity and difference and the possibilities of teaching how to tease out and evaluate these messages provides a path to disentangling and unlearning the stories that can lead to distortions, hate, and violence” (p. 109). And Cortes (1981) preceded most of us with his “societal curriculum” that framed the dual curricular construct of nonschool and school learning as “parallel, interacting, and sometimes competing forces” (2000, p. 18). The definition as “that massive, ongoing, informal curriculum of families, peer groups, neighborhoods, churches, organizations, institutions, mass media, and other socializing forces that educate all of us throughout our lives” (1981, p. 24) reinforced the multifaceted nature of the origins of our beliefs. A natural progression was to investigate how popular culture teaches us about values, especially regarding race and gender.

The principal question guiding this research and the *CRM* course is “How can the process of analyzing media be used to gain awareness into one’s personal values and perceptions of race and gender?” Briefly, this was achieved through utilizing a mixed methodology: pre and post

course surveys for determining if and how much students became aware of media influence upon their values, and follow-up essays and interviews for qualitative analysis using grounded theory.

Some of the questions leading to the final conclusion were:

- A. How can students who have been influenced by media in constructing their race and gender beliefs recognize media's influence on their ideas?
- B. What process leads from media awareness to self-awareness and a paradigm shift?
- C. What is the "proof" that these potential media makers changed their perceptions of race and/or gender?
- D. For those admitting awareness and/or change, is recognition of ethical responsibility as potential media makers to "do no harm" also a requirement?

The principal quantitative tool was the pre-post 10-item survey. A later version without the Likert scale of 1-5 is at the end of this paper. From five sections of the course with different instructors, the study utilized 85 student participants. The directions were for the students to take the survey near the end of the first class with explanations that they would subsequently be given another opportunity to answer the same survey on week 14. Since privacy is/was of utmost significance in answering value-laden questions, students were assured that the Class 1 surveys would not be observed by anyone, were sealed in envelopes by the students after completing, and kept locked in a classroom cabinet until week 14. They were returned *after* the students rated the ten statements on the Likert scale on week 14. Students were given instructions to read and privately compare their pre and post course answers. They were requested to note which three of the ten statements changed the most, if at all, and to write a rationale or self-evaluation for any changes. They were also given an opportunity to write general assessments of whether their values or perceptions about race and gender had altered from when they entered the class 14 weeks previous.

Data collection was both random and convenience sampling. Students were not selected for a specific demographic but purely because they were in a section of the *CRM* class and fulfilled the assignment. Neither gender, nor race/ethnicity, nor any other factors were considered since names were not observed until after complete evaluations were tabulated. In the results described in this presentation I concentrate on only a few of the significant statements from the survey, those that received the most explanatory responses from the participants. The quantitative analysis used the SPSS Program to ascertain the following:

1. Which statements were most often answered?
2. Which statements had greatest variance pre/post?
3. Which statements had least variance pre/post?
4. On statements where the intention was for an increase to "agree", did that happen?
5. On statements where the intention was for a decrease to "disagree", did that happen?

In the interest of brevity, the table below demonstrates the most significant evidence of change in awareness from the beginning to the end of the *CRM* course.

Mean difference and  $p$  values of six principal statements

		Mean	Mean Difference	p value
1. Cartoon Influence	Pre	3.74	0.51	.00
	Post	4.25		
2. Influence Awareness	Pre	3.80	0.31	.01
	Post	4.11		
3. Truth/Ethnic Portrayals	Pre	2.11	-0.38	.00
	Post	1.73		
5. Awareness/Ideology	Pre	3.95	0.30	.01
	Post	4.25		
6. Factual Ideology	Pre	2.94	-0.09	.44
	Post	2.85		
8. White Privilege	Pre	3.39	0.82	.00
	Post	4.21		

A  $t$  test for significance of mean differences resulted in five of the six items having  $p$  values of .01 or lower.

That the mean of all students answering reflected a change from a 3.74 (closest to “neutral” on the scale) to 4.25 (very near a “strongly agree” on the scale) does not adequately reflect the many students who changed three or four points. Discussion and rationale for this change in the participants’ own words made the qualitative responses more meaningful. Their essays about how their ideas about what makes a character in a cartoon “good” in a Disney© cartoon and how that eventually translated into their ideas about people in real life was remarkable.

The *Culture, Race & Media* curriculum is more than viewing media, but learning media analysis, deconstruction, discussion of personal awareness with members of the class “community” and personal journaling and reflecting about one’s values and ethics and background. Some examples can be compared only through the viewing of another media sample:

\*Aladdin cartoon excerpt from Walt Disney© Productions.

Discussion of the image of Arabs in three differing examples of characters.

The principal result was student ownership of their values after recognizing some of the most common origins while viewing and deconstructing the media examples and debriefing.

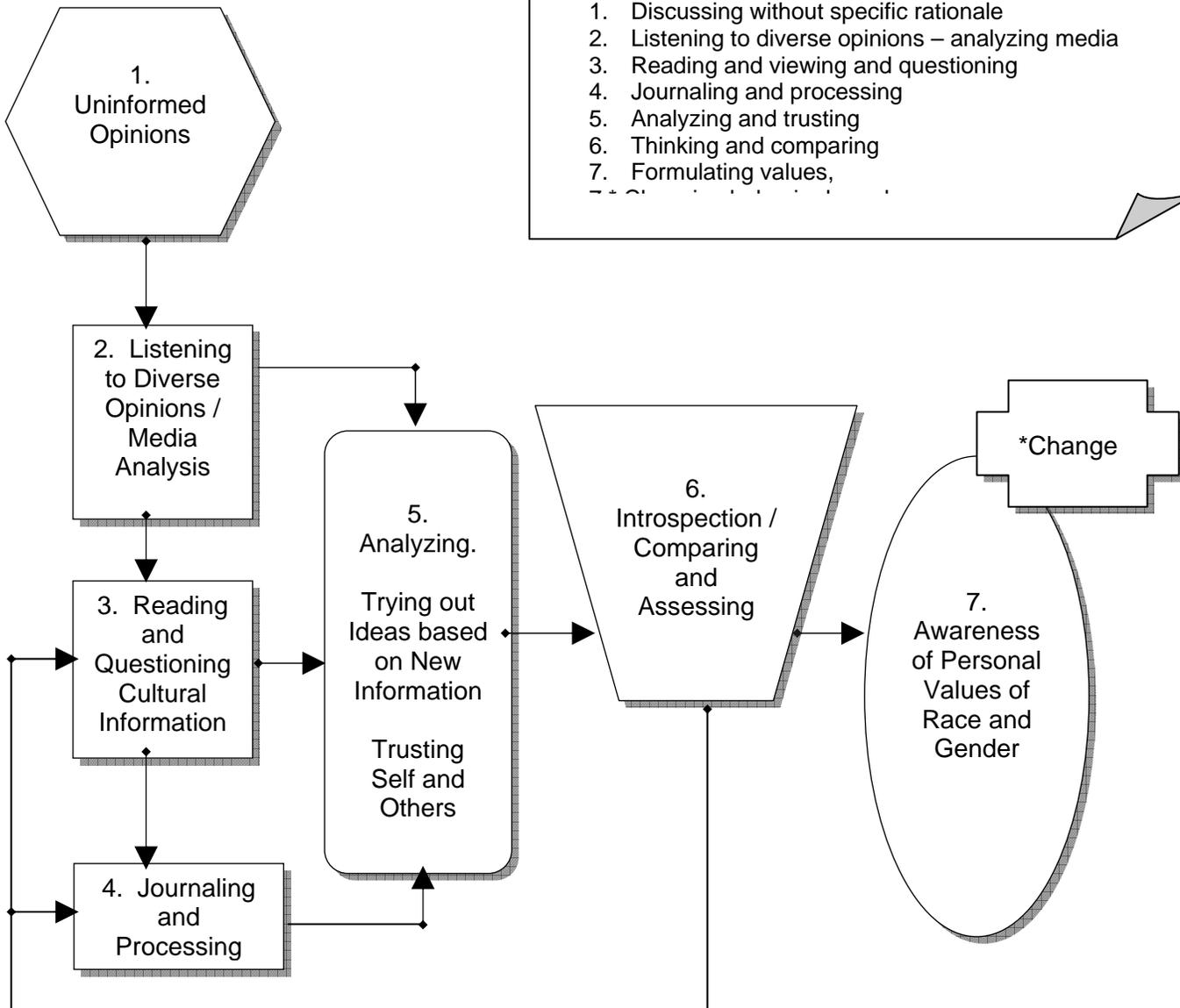
Because a *model* often demonstrates with fewer words, the *Values and Awareness Flow Chart* that I constructed is the essential curriculum and the results garnered.

Figure 2  
Values and Awareness Flow Chart

Legend: Progression through typical stages - from opinions to self-awareness of values. (See previous page).

7\* = resulting behavioral change often occurs, but was not a condition of the study.

1. Discussing without specific rationale
2. Listening to diverse opinions – analyzing media
3. Reading and viewing and questioning
4. Journaling and processing
5. Analyzing and trusting
6. Thinking and comparing
7. Formulating values,



I cannot claim that students' awareness will or has necessarily lead to change in attitude regarding their potential media making. The hope is that students have a baseline to use when making decisions about their ethical responsibilities as media makers.

We each must recognize the role that popular media plays in our students' lives and how many of their ideas about representation and values originate, in some measure, from media. It can benefit each of us to look at our values and ideas through a "*Media Lens*". When the students in this study became aware of their values and their origins they were better able to decide if they would perpetuate similar concepts or work toward change. What is your ethical responsibility as an instructor of students who may also be media makers?

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### Media Excerpts

Commercials of *Tott's Champagne* and *Colt .45 Malt Liquor* from <http://www.youtube.com/>

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