The Virtue of Primary Representation in Various Forms of Media

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Conversations around representation in media, referring to how media such as television, books, and news portray certain types of people or communities, have grown exponentially since the 1980s. People of diverse races, ethnicities, religions, nationalities, identities, and more did not see themselves reflected in the art they were increasingly consuming. This was in addition to the representations they did see being based on cultural stereotypes and caricatures. Society has attempted to rectify this issue by inserting actors, characters, and more who embodied these ignored or stereotyped identities. While this change concentrated on the agents of the representation (the actor/character), focus should also be directed towards the storytellers themselves; those who write, produce, and direct the story, and the work they do or do not put into include and accurately represent diverse identities in different forms of media.

We use media to learn about the world around us — media shapes our beliefs, our understanding of other people and cultures, and how we interact with them in real life. The media we consume draws the image of individuals and demographics whom we may not have direct contact with. This is why media needs to represent these demographics accurately and faithfully, which can be difficult if the person who wishes to represent them is not part of that demographic (these types of people are herein referred to as "secondary storytellers"). To identify the positives of representation within the storyteller and the story, one must observe and analyze different types of media and its artifacts.

Primary Storytelling Facilitates Nuanced Stories

One positive of limiting storytelling to a member of the demographic, culture, or otherwise existence that the story is telling (herein referred to as a "primary storyteller") is that the resulting narrative is nuanced and descriptive. People experience certain things due to their

identity or membership within a specific demographic. Despite how small they may seem, these elements mark the line between a relatable and unrelatable event. By having someone who experienced the story be the one to tell it, there is room for personal anecdotes to be infused throughout the tale, adding to this sense of nuance.

This concept holds in various media forms, including television/movies and literature. Denzel Washington, an immensely popular American actor and filmmaker, pointed this out during an interview promoting a film about a black athlete. Asked why the film needed a black director, as demanded by the film's playwright and original director, he responded with the following: "It's not color, it's culture…I know, you know, we all know when a hot comb hits your hair on a Sunday morning, what it smells like. That's a cultural difference" (S.X.M, 2022). While some could argue that adding something specific, like a hot comb, in a film about a black athlete is irrelevant to the broader meaning, it nonetheless allows the story to be all the more relevant and accurate to the people and culture of which it depicts.

Take *Sanctuary* by Nella Larsen, for example; the short story, written by a black woman, was harrowed as plagiarism due to the story's similarities to a different piece written by a white woman. The only notable differences from critics at the time were dialect, setting, and the race of the characters. As Godfrey (2013) pointed out, Larsen satisfied the centering of White experiences in media by creating a somewhat universal tale but simultaneously added aspects specific to the Black experience (p. 123). To the broader (white) audience, her piece was nothing but an imitation of an earlier story created by a white woman. Godfrey (2013), however, understands *Sanctuary* to include specific nuances, like dialect, that lend authenticity to the conversation; it rendered the characters culturally significant to an African-American audience (p. 130).

Stereotypes and Preconceptions of Secondary Storytellers

Stories in popular media have the potential to create and perpetuate negative stereotypes, in addition to forcing characters into simple, cliche, and formulaic tropes. The consistency of these representations reinforces stereotypes, constructing a limited and distorted view of the individual or demographic depicted. In order to transform perceptions and ensure the experience is represented properly, the storyteller must depict them in all of their complexity rather than relying on preconceptions. This ability is bred from the storyteller having personally experienced the story itself. Another advantage of having storytellers tell stories they have primary knowledge on, then, is that the resulting story is relatively factual, lacking stereotypes and preconceptions that secondary storytellers may rely on. This concept exists in all forms of media, particularly video games and art.

Take research conducted into the depiction of Arabs, for example, in which European and American video games have "constructed the Arab or Muslim Other… the diverse ethnic and religious identities of the Islamic world have been flattened out and reconstructed into a series of social typologies operating within a broader framework of terrorism and hostility" (Sisler, 2008, p. 203). Sisler (2008) acknowledges how stereotypes – in which Islam is regarded as a terrorist threat and the Muslim community simply exists as an outgroup – can lower self-esteem, impact policies, and increase divisiveness (p. 204).

Similarly, *Who gets to tell the story: The ethics of art* by Rose Fredrick points out how cultural art created by someone outside of that culture reduces it to a romanticized cliche. This creates an idealized image and "discounts or devalues the real experience at every moment in time" (Fredrick, 2021). Thus, depictions created and told by secondary storytellers have the potential to not only generate stereotypes but reinforce harmful biases and preconceptions. In

order for this to be avoided and for representation to offer positive benefits, the real experience (that of the primary storyteller) must be valued and shared.

Bridging Cultural Gaps through Primary Storytelling

Primary storytelling allows media forms to act as agents of progression. By having a demographic, culture, etc. accurately represented by members of those groups, there is room to bridge cultural gaps and improve relationships. This is best exemplified in television, in which a new Indian television channel began to air shows from its neighboring rival country, Pakistan, effectively decreasing tensions largely fueled by cultural differences (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016). The channel and the shows it aired allowed for direct representation, integrating Pakistani culture and social lives into the regular viewing practices of Indian audiences. Researchers sought to look at how the portrayal of Muslim men and women on the new channel differed from the stereotypical representation of Muslim characters in Indian cinema and television. They found that the station opened an avenue, stepping away from stereotypical discourses and welcoming the "content, stories and diverse range of genres" (Bhattacharya & Nag, 2016, p. 69). The representation of Pakistan in India was thus run by Pakistani media companies and people, allowing them to form their own image and depict their lives more accurately. This depiction led to a progressive relationship between the two countries, in which they began to see each other as more than the "other".

Similarly, the involvement of minority and marginalized communities in media production is generally beneficial, proving to be a betterment to society. Analyzing the involvement of black Brazilians in media production, Carter, E. L. (2018) pointed out that "it is not sufficient merely to put people of color on-screen, especially if the portrayals perpetuate outdated ideologies and long-established stereotypes" (p. 353) To address this, Carter (2018)

states, society can promote involvement, in which "alternative voices emerge from outside the center, offering new perspectives and challenges to the existing hierarchy of power" (p. 354).

We have even seen the effects of primary representation in more modern mediums regarding tensions around gender, racial, and identity-based representation--primarily in video games and digital spheres. Representation in video games has not always been the greatest, as highlighted in Kondrat (2015). The article acknowledges how female characters had unimportant, inactive roles, serving as individuals to be saved and lulled. The consistently negative representation harms children of both sexes, as they "internalize these expectations and accept the idea that women are viewed as weak, as victims, and as sex objects" (p. 172). The effects of this representation of women are clear and persistent, fueling unrealistic standards for women and confirmations of societal expectations of gender roles and a "negative image for the antisocial, gaming man" (Kondrat, 2015, pp. 172-173). However, with the shift of gaming demographics from being dominated by men to being split between 55% male and 45% female (and steadily rising), as well as the rising push for feminism, the push for better gender representation is being seen across gaming spheres (Kondrat, 2015, pp. 184-186).

This carries over to more Queer identities, as more varied and inclusive representations are being presented and shared within gaming spheres as more and more companies work to involve people of different perspectives and identities in their projects. As recorded by Utsch (2017), "the number of instances of queer characters in games has largely increased, and that is also true for the analysis of individual sexualities and gender identities," leading to a reduction of bias seen within those games, and within the people who play and engage with the game (p. 847). While there is still a long way to go, active involvement and improvement of

representation within modern mediums such as video games have led to active change, education, and bias improvement.

Telling a story from a different lens also applies to news and textbooks. While some countries limit their media to only putting out information they deem acceptable and giving them a positive light, other governments value the truth. One example is Germany; in *Germany's new 'textbook' on the Holocaust* (2008), the author explains how the German education system teaches its students about the Holocaust. Instead of only going for an objective and informational approach, they try to invoke empathy in their readers. Putting the reader in the perspective of a Jewish person during this time allows the reader to gain a unique perspective. Germany confronts the issue head-on and does not try to change or silence history. Instead, they showcase history so the new generations can learn and progress, ensuring that an event like that never happens again.

Conclusion

Increased primary representation in media of different people, cultures, and backgrounds leads to bonds between groups and individuals. It can reduce harmful stereotypes and allow for the creation of more nuanced stories that are all different from one another to connect with an even larger and forever-growing audience. As the number of media consumers continues to grow, it is essential that said media represents our world in a fair and honest light while also expanding the amount of unique and personal stories shared with the world.

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