critical media project

The Power of Educational Interventions

www.criticalmediaproject.org
“I think that... we all need to be more informed about our society.”

“I learned how being underrepresented can affect us and how people see us.”

“What I found most valuable about this project was that I was able to present in class and let out all the things, my life story, the hardships, and my motivation, that I had bottled up inside.”

“I think that... we all need to be more informed about our society.”
Youth are often confronted with biased media representations that can impact how they see themselves and others. Students confront these media representations at a crucial point in their adolescent development, when they are gaining self-efficacy and making decisions that affect their future selves. Far too many youth in the U.S. do not have the tools to make sense of media content and the biases embedded in it. This is especially true now, when lines are increasingly blurred between entertainment, news, advertising, and social media. And rarely are youth encouraged to bridge in-class learning with their personal time spent with media technologies and online content. Critical Media Literacies (CMLs) are our solution to combat hateful media representations.

In our pilot evaluation, we found that Critical Media Literacies (CMLs):

Effectively combat biased media representations over a single semester. Our pilot evaluation shows that our curriculum improved Critical Media Literacies in over 200 youth in Los Angeles high schools aged 14 – 19. This improvement increased tolerance for others and understanding of crucial civic concepts like “community.”

Empower students to understand how their own identities relate to media representations. We found that students gained confidence in their own identities and showed increased tolerance of others. They were better able to take the perspective of different groups and understand why the media may not present an entirely “true” image of themselves.

Spark conversations in homes and other classes about ways to use media to represent themselves. As they acquired Critical Media Literacies, nearly all (81%) of our students said they had one or more conversation with their friends and family about Critical Media Literacies. Some (15%) “superusers” used Critical Media Literacies more than five times, frequently having conversations where they questioned how the media represented them. Most (70%) students used Critical Media Literacies in other classes, demonstrating how a curriculum can spread knowledge throughout a school.

Inspire students to use our online resources to learn more about media representations outside the classroom. Most of our students visited the Critical Media Project website outside of the classroom (72%). Our Google analytics detected over 100,000 site visits in 2019, making it a leading website for media literacies.

Encourage students to create their own media that reflect their community and culture. Most (75%) students produced their own digital video and audio content on their own time. Students were better able to understand the sources of biased cultural representations by creating their own media.
Welcome to The Critical Media Project! Critical Media Literacies (CMLs)—delivered through targeted curricular interventions in Los Angeles’ diverse high schools and online resources—improve young people’s understanding of media bias. Our program is designed to foster CMLs among a diverse range of educators and students. Over the last year we have combined web-based learning and in-class engagement to enable a diverse cross-section of Los Angeles students to understand and combat the biased media representations they encounter daily.

Alison Trope  
Project Founder & Director
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INTRODUCTION

We use critical thinking, empathy, and identity awareness as pathways to activate Critical Media Literacies among educators and students. Over the last year we have used web-based learning and targeted engagement to enable a diverse cross-section of Los Angeles students to understand and combat the culturally-biased media representations they encounter daily. Our online media examples, activities, and supplemental worksheets are also compatible with common core standards to encourage wider adoption among public school teachers. This report describes the effectiveness of our educational interventions this year, and how our online resources work in tandem with classroom interventions.
1.1 THE PROBLEM

BIAS, HATRED, AND VIOLENCE ARE ON THE RISE GLOBALLY AND PERMEATE THE MEDIA WE CONSUME. TO INCREASE TOLERANCE, WE REACH IMPACTED YOUTH WHERE THEY SPEND MOST OF THEIR TIME: ONLINE AND IN SCHOOL.

The United States is becoming a more diverse country by gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. The United States Census projects that in the next twenty years, we will become “majority minority”—over half the country will identify as at least one racial minority group. Similarly, a 2017 Gallup poll found that more adults now identify as LGBTQIA than ever before. Millennials increasingly (7.3%) identify as non-heterosexual. To foster tolerance and shared understanding, we believe we should celebrate and welcome a diversity of identities and representations.

A toxic backlash of biases and hate crimes has put youth in danger. The Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI), calculated by the United Nations, found that 90% of people across the world still hold biases against women. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center study, most American adults (82%) see anti-Muslim biases around them. The Federal Bureau of Investigation found that violent hate-based attacks on transgender people increased by 34% between 2017 and 2018. A recent report by the American Defense League (ADL) found that cases of white supremacist propaganda doubled between 2018 and 2019. These racist incidents took place both in and out of school. Throughout their adolescence, youth are confronted by hateful media and violent incidents.

We combat this crisis of intolerance through in-class education and online resources. First, classrooms are part of our solution. In our curriculum, high school students spend time in school critically analyzing media through exercises that inspire, reorient, and challenge their thinking. Second, we reach students where they already are: online. Teens spend over nine hours daily online. When we account for time spent “media multi-tasking” that number jumps to about eleven hours of total media use for the average teen every day. Free materials on our website gives them access to videos and activities that encourage them to decode biased media representations. Through this novel curriculum and set of online resources, youth report an increase in tolerance and media literacies, vital tools to combat hate in their school and community.
IDENTITY

WE LEARN ABOUT OUR OWN IDENTITY AND THE IDENTITIES OF OTHERS THROUGH INTERACTIONS WITH FAMILY, PEERS, ORGANIZATIONS, INSTITUTIONS, AND THE MEDIA. BUT NOT ALL IDENTITIES ARE PRESENTED IN A CULTURALLY SENSITIVE OR EQUITABLE WAY.

Our program centers on media representations of identity. We all possess identities—including gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, religion, and disability—that define our place in the world and our relationship to others. Identity plays a significant role in determining how we understand and experience the world. It also plays a key role in shaping the types of opportunities and challenges we face. Media increasingly plays a large role in shaping how we see ourselves and others. This is especially true for youth. Media representations of identity convey ideas, values and meanings. Media representations tell us where we belong, set expectations on our actions, and delineate our worth. At the same time, media can be a critical and creative tool of empowerment and self-efficacy. It can be used to create new representations, challenge traditional value systems, and bring visibility to marginalized groups.
MEDIA LITERACIES

MEDIA LITERACY PLAYS A CENTRAL ROLE IN UNDERSTANDING AND CRITICALLY QUESTIONING MAINSTREAM REPRESENTATIONS. GROUNDED IN TRADITIONAL LITERACY EFFORTS, MEDIA LITERACY BUILDS COMPETENCE AROUND “READING” TEXTS THAT PERMEATE POPULAR MEDIA CULTURE THROUGH FILM, TELEVISION, NEWS, ADVERTISING, WEBSITES, SONGS, MUSIC VIDEOS, WEBSITES, AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS.

Critical Media Literacy builds on traditional media literacy education in three primary focus areas:

IDENTITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY
exploring how different groups are represented in media

CONTEXT AND POWER
exploring the industries behind the creation and dissemination of media products and messages

CRITICAL CREATIVE PRACTICE
exploring the strategies and tools to create one’s own media representation and use one’s own voice
We believe that the best way to promote Critical Media Literacies (CMLs) is to provide media examples that can be critically analyzed in the classroom and at home. These examples foreground representations of identity and serve as discussion points for media bias. In turn, they motivate and challenge students to see the world differently. We show students clips from movies and television shows, advertisements from billboards and magazines, newspaper articles, online viral videos, and comedic satire. Students and teachers watch, analyze and discuss how these media represent identities, convey values, and have impact on audiences. Intended not as a textbook, but rather as a supplemental resource for teachers and students, the Critical Media Project website brings together a wide array of media examples that are also placed in historical and cultural context. To encourage further study, the site frames the media examples alongside original writings, discussion questions, in-class activities, and additional resources—all in one central place. **Our in-class and online curriculum has four stages to educate students:**

1. **EXPLORE**
   Students observe and become cognizant of messages about identity that surface in everyday media and culture.

2. **EXPAND**
   Students understand and gain perspective on the historical, social, and political contexts of media representations of different identities.

3. **ENGAGE**
   Students critically decode and develop skills to analyze the meanings (and ideologies) behind various representations of identity across media genres and platforms.

4. **EXPRESS**
   Students deploy strategies and skills to create their own representations, tell their own stories, and create counter-narratives.
To bring our method into the classroom, our 7-unit curriculum teaches students how to decode and analyze representations, then builds their capacity for self-representation and storytelling. Students are provided with one lesson per week and given weekly homework assignments to engage self-reflection through creative practice. At the end of the unit, students produce a culminating media project, with the opportunity to share in a curated showcase at USC Annenberg.

From Fall 2015 through Spring 2020, we partnered with 10 local Los Angeles schools, including Communication and Technology School (Diego Rivera Learning Complex), Francisco Bravo Medical Magnet, Susan Miller Dorsey Senior High School, Animo City of Champions Charter High School, James A. Foshay Learning Center, Robert F. Kennedy School of Global Leadership, Animo Pat Brown Charter High School, USC Media Arts and Engineering Magnet, USC Hybrid High School and Canoga Park Senior High School. During this time:

Approximately **1400 students** participated in classes based on our curriculum.

Our teachers worked in **31 classes** in a range of subject areas including social studies, English language arts, ethnic studies, journalism, art, filmmaking, and animation.

We trained **60 USC student-instructors** including undergraduate, masters and PhD to use the curriculum.
For our pilot study in Fall 2019, participants included students at Robert F. Kennedy Ambassador School of Global Leadership (n=60, 28.8%), Francisco Bravo Medical Magnet High School (n=29, 13.9%), Ánimo City of Champions Charter High School (n=19, 9.1%), Canoga Park Senior High School (n=35, 16.8%), and the James A. Foshay Learning Center (n=39, 18.8%). This data set was used for the descriptive data analyses in this report.
2.2 STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

RACE / ETHNICITY

- Black or African-American: 9.8%
- Latino or Hispanic: 67.8%
- Asian or Asian-American: 13.1%
- Native American: 0.5%
- Multiracial: 8.2%
- Other: 0.5%

GENDER

- Male: 48.2%
- Female: 50%
- Trans or Other: 1.8%

SEXUALITY

- Heterosexual / Straight: 85.7%
- Homosexual / Gay: 2.7%
- Bisexual, Pansexual, or Other: 11.5%
3 RESULTS
3.1 PRIMARY OUTCOMES: MEDIA LITERACIES AND TOLERANCE

Students reported increased media literacies and tolerance over the time our Critical Media Literacies curriculum was administered, approximately from October to late November 2019 (Please see Appendix 4.1 for more information). Encouraging students to reflect on their own identity and showing them examples of media bias increased their overall media literacies. That is, our curriculum increased their ability to understand, decode, and critique media representations. Our curriculum and additional online resources also helped students increase their tolerance of others. Specifically, it increased their multicultural efficacy—their ability to recognize other cultures as important and communicate across lines of difference.

All differences were significant at the $p < .01$ level.
3.2 SECONDARY OUTCOMES: TAKING ACTION

Media Bias is a serious problem that confronts our increasingly diverse high school students. Our theory of change situates media literacies and tolerance as powerful levers that don’t just change minds—they improve a range of secondary outcomes. These outcome behaviors are the result of our custom curriculum, but often spill out into students’ personal lives. In this way, the Critical Media Project empowers young people to explore and expand their knowledge of media bias, while encouraging them to engage with identity-specific issues and create their own media to contest representations they find unjust.

- **81% of students** had conversations about media bias with friends and family.
- **75% of students** created their own digital video and audio content about media bias.
- **72% of students** visited the Critical Media Project Website.
- **68% of students** say they felt more comfortable talking with people who have different backgrounds and points of view.
4.1 METHODOLOGY

The Critical Media Project used mixed-methods data collection and analysis to balance breadth and depth of insights. Quantitative data included two waves of survey data collection. The first round Qualtrics survey (pre-test) was created by Dr. Trope and Ph.D. research assistants at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism in fall of 2019. Pre-test surveys before the curricular intervention were administered mostly online and in-class by instructors between Wednesday, 10/2/19 and Wednesday, 10/7/19.

Researchers at USC, along with Aloi Research and Technology, slightly altered several demographic questions in the second round Qualtrics survey (post-test) to account for aberrant responses in the first round. Specifically, items for race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality were changed to drop-down questions rather than free response questions. Additionally, several questions about behavioral outcome measures were added (e.g. number of conversations had about media bias). Second round surveys were administered mostly online and in-class by instructors between Wednesday, 11/20/19 and Monday, 12/16/19. The wider range of administration dates was necessary due to conflicts with the final exam period in most high schools.

After removing non-responses (surveys that were started but contained no data), 208 valid responses remained for the post-test. To retain anonymity, a unique ID number was assigned to each student before the pre-test. Students input their unique ID number in the pre-test and post-test surveys to link their responses. This resulted in 140 matched pairs. This linked data set was used for inferential data analyses in this report.

The quantitative data was supplemented with qualitative data, including 428 weekly written responses and 17 semi-structured interviews with students. One focus group was also conducted with instructors. This qualitative data was analyzed by a post-doctoral scholar, who provided a document of findings. These findings were then combined with quantitative data to produce the data in this report. Representative quotes were extracted from the qualitative data to illustrate key data points from the quantitative survey data.
The I Too Am: Teens, Media Arts & Belonging, supported by a USC Provost initiative (Arts in Action), was designed to engage communities around USC through the arts. This extension of Critical Media Project’s curriculum and outreach efforts brought youth from two South Los Angeles schools on four field trips to explore different geographic areas. The program, which took place in Spring and Summer 2019, merged best practices of Critical Media Literacies and outdoor environmental education. Youth produced media to reflect on transition and displacement stemming from immigration, gentrification, and other demographic and economic shifts impacting local communities.

The I Too Am Media Festival—which took place on February 1, 2020—showcased media on themes of identity and community produced by local Los Angeles youth from underserved communities. There were 51 submissions from 82 students and 21 schools. Sponsored in part by California Humanities/Humanities for All, this festival featured screenings of student media and hands on media-making workshops. Invited guests included Edna Chavez—a young Los Angeles activist (March for Our Lives, Community Coalition) —and actor Brett Gray—from On My Block, a Netflix show about a South Los Angeles high school. The goal of the festival was to offer students a platform to share their work, commune with other young creators, and be empowered in their expression of identity. It also supported their creative practice and instilled in them an activist, change-making spirit.
4.3 CURRICULUM

Lesson 1: Introducing CMP & Identity
Students consider the different ways they are seen as individuals and as parts of groups. They explore how identities are constructed by and represented in media, learning the basics of decoding and analyzing different types of media. Students ponder: “who am I? and who will I become?” in relation to media representations.

Lesson 2: Media Representation
Students learn what representation means and how media representations are tied to identity. They understand how media representations of themselves and others are internalized, create norms, and have power, especially in cases of stereotyping. Students ponder: “how do I see others? how do others see me? how does the media shape these perceptions?”

Lesson 3: Intersectionality
Students learn the meaning of intersectionality as a concept, considering the power and privilege tied to some identities, and the prejudice and discrimination tied to others. Students ponder, “how and why do I have certain privileges or disadvantages because of the different facets of my identity?”

Lesson 4: Displacement & Belonging in Media
Students explore themes of displacement and belonging as they arise in media and everyday life, and consider how media representations can shape one’s sense of place/belonging. Students ponder, “where do I fit in? where do I belong? where do I make community? where am I excluded?”

Lesson 5: Media Industries—Visibilities and Invisibilities
Students learn why certain groups have more media visibility and representation than others; become aware of institutional and industrial contexts of power, and what happens behind the scenes in production and distribution of media (including casting, marketing/advertising, target audiences/demographics). Students ponder, “how am I represented? how am I seen? who decides how I am represented and valued?”

Lesson 6: Storytelling for Awareness & Change
Students learn how to identify a problem in media representation and gather research to support its existence. Students ponder, “how can I advocate for changes in media representation? how can I use media to celebrate my identity?”

Lesson 7: Representing Myself and My Community (workshop/presentations)
Students identify (and brainstorm execution) of persuasive means to call for change using digital media. Students workshop final projects, pondering, “what are the best strategies to use to convey my argument, share my ideas?”