

Picturing Diversity: Using Theory and Content Analysis to Drive Journalism Practice

This assignment, designed for an introductory, skills-based course in news writing, gives students the chance to take the lead to explore how diversity, and the lack thereof, concretely manifests in journalism in the “real world” – specifically, in the *New York Times*. I use this assignment as a springboard to invite students to think critically about what diversity means on our campus and how they can include a robust array of voices in their own stories. Its chief goal is to transform diversity, an enormous, abstract concept, into something concrete that students can strive to achieve in their reporting. The assignment’s secondary goals are to introduce students to content analysis; to use theoretical scholarship to drive journalism practice; and to give students hands-on experience in scholarship as a shared endeavor.

The project begins with a lesson about symbolic annihilation: groups absent from, or whose representation is distorted by, the news media. To show students how that theoretical concept manifests, I share graphs from Stanley’s (2012) study about photographs published by the *New York Times* and *Newsday* from 1966 to 2006. Using a content analysis, Stanley (2012) showed how photographs of men have consistently outnumbered photographs of women – that is, how women are symbolically annihilated from public culture. I explain how a content analysis works, then tell the students that we are going to use that same method to test if symbolic annihilation is still occurring in photographs published by the *Times*.

First, on the overhead projector, I pull up the *New York Times*’s homepage, and review the paper’s different sections (i.e. “international,” “science,” “fashion & style,” and so on). I tell the students that, once a day for a week, they will be assessing symbolic annihilation by looking at the thumbnail photographs on the right-hand-side of their section’s landing page. I invite students to select the section of the newspaper that they would like to track. Inviting students to do this, rather than assigning them to a section, is fruitful; the students have strong opinions about what they would like to study (“I hate politics,” “I want to do television”). This information is useful for me, too, in considering how to advise them to develop future story ideas.

Then on the projector I pull up an Excel spreadsheet of the paper’s sections. For each day, students fill in the total number of photos; number of people; women; men; people of color (to the extent that this is evident); and visibly disabled. Photos that don’t show people are included, but photos showing a crowd, defined as more than five people, are not. Filled in, the spreadsheet looks like this:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Monday	Number of photos	Number of people, total	Number of men	Number of women	People of color	Whites	Visible disability
Obituaries	5	5	3	2	0	5	0

I share this spreadsheet via Google documents, enabling them to build a single data set concurrently.

We then discuss how evaluating ethnicity and disability from photographs is imperfect and overly simplistic: what does “white” or “Hispanic” or “deaf” look like? This conversation is necessary to the success of the assignment, and is significant for its own sake. It also lays the groundwork for the second part of this module, in which we discuss why and how diversity is more than tokenism.

Once students have finished collecting their data, I create bar graphs using their findings. I share these charts in class, and invite each student to introduce and share comments about her section. The students are often surprised by the utter absence of the visibly disabled (“It’s like they don’t exist,” said one student) and by the extent to which certain groups, such as white men, vastly outnumber others in business, science, and sports.

The assignment is far more effective in teaching about symbolic annihilation than readings about diversity and inclusion or more-general class discussions about the politics of representation. This is particularly true for students who previously had not given a second thought to diversity in the media. As at least one student put it, rather sheepishly, “I didn’t know it was this bad.” The students also seem to enjoy seeing, through graphs, the results of their data collection.

In the next class session, I bring up the limitations of focusing on *visual* representations of diversity, of defining diversity in a news story as obtaining a balance of ethnicity, race, and gender. I use this limitation to guide a conversation about diversity on our campus, and share data that the college collects regarding students’ age, major, race, and graduate/undergraduate program. We discuss how these groups might offer diverse points of view. I then break students into small groups and ask them to brainstorm other manifestations of diversity on our campus. We come back together to share their ideas, which are often very thoughtful; students name groups such as veterans, sexual and gender identification, political orientation, religion, and commuter or resident student, to name a few. I then ask the students to come up with five “hot” stories unfolding on our campus, which have included an upcoming tuition hike and a speaker whose appearance provoked student protests. In small groups, the students discuss what it would mean to write a story that represents a diverse set of voices and perspectives that speak to these issues. Whom would they have to talk to and how could they find those groups? As important, we also talk about how no one person can speak for a single group.

After this assignment, students often do a much better job of thinking critically about diversity and achieving it in a meaningful way in their own stories. They also refer to their findings from the *New York Times* data collection in subsequent in-class discussions about the politics of representation in the mass media, an essential and ever-present concern for educators of journalism and mass communication.

Work cited

Stanley, J. 2012. “Women’s absence from news photos: the role of tabloid strategies at elite and non-elite newspapers.” *Media, Culture & Society*, 34(8): 979-998.