Media Influence and Persuasion

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3 Things to Know About Media Messages (& Why They Matter)

1. What media messages are
2. How media messages connect to agenda setting
3. The sometimes-surprising ways media messages exert social, cultural, and political influence in society

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What are media messages?

- Media outlets direct and focus the public's attention to the events, issues and stories of the times; they provide subtle and not-subtle cues about what's normal, abnormal, and how we should live our lives

- Producers always have a goal!
  - Educate
  - Entertain
  - Persuade
  - All of the above

Media messages are constructed in parts

- Media content gets your attention through **text**, which includes anything we can see and hear. The **subtext** of a message is the implied part of the message, which is not directly seen or heard, but often speaks to larger ideas/phenomenon
  - Unpacking the intention and meaning behind the text and subtext of the media is necessary in order to interpret the content

- All stories and media content have **embedded** values and viewpoints
  - Because media is constructed using its own creative language, media messages carry subtext of who and what is important. Subtext is not explicitly stated but communicated through clear allusions, associations, and metaphors

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Media messages & agenda setting

- **Agenda-setting** - McCombs & Shaw, 1972
  - Refers to the mass media's ability to transfer the salience of issues on their news agenda to the public agenda.
  - Media aren't mind controllers, but they participate in directing public attention to certain topics

- **Framing** is one tool media-makers use to influence the public agenda
  - Central organizing principles for content, which supply context and suggest what an issue means through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration.
  - All frames make information less complex for audiences
  - "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" –Robert Entman, 1993

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Media messages are everywhere

- Journalism (including social media posts about stories, stories and threads, explainer videos, interactive data visualizations)
- Advertisements (including paid social media influencers' posts)
- Television series and film (including streaming shows and movies)
- Music videos (including product placement, movie promotion)

- As we discussed in Module 2, digital settings blur the lines between different types of media - while also increasing their reach

Music video, car commercial, or both?

- After watching this video, which images stick in your mind?

- Based on the images in this video, what might viewers be persuaded to think about?

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgKAFK5djSk - "See You Again," Wiz Khalifa ft. Charlie Puth

Not all bad news: Empowerment through media messages

- "The Scully Effect: I want to believe...in STEM" (The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media)
  - Dr. Dana Scully (played by Gillian Anderson) has made a permanent mark on the millions of fans who still tune in to the top-rated science-fiction drama "The X-Files"
  - Scully was one of the first female female characters in a popular television series to have a multidimensional personality and work in a STEM field
    - She pushed the boundaries of conventional femininity, and she stood out against the stereotype which often pairs men with math
  - The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media conducted the first report on the "Scully Effect"-- in other words, the influence of Dana Scully on girls and women pertaining to STEM (2018)
    - Survey asked three questions: Whether Scully's character improved women's perceptions of STEM fields; whether she inspired girls and women to go into a STEM profession; and whether female viewers see Scully as a role model
      - The survey found statistically significant outcomes for each measure that confirm the "Scully Effect"

https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/x-files-scully-effect-report-geena-davis-institute.pdf
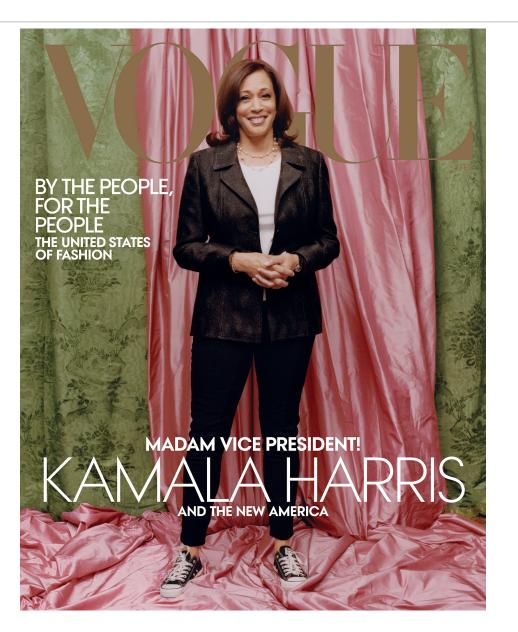
Music video, car commercial, or both?

- Entertainment media is influential in shaping life choices
  - The characters, images, and storylines in media shape our lives in profound ways

- *The X-Files*' depiction of a high-achieving woman in STEM encouraged a generation of girls and women to imagine new professional options

Empowered leader or laid back lady?

- For Vogue's February 2021 cover, the editorial team chose Vice President Kamala Harris as their star. Both cover images celebrate her victory as the first woman to be elected to the vice president's office in American history. The notable differences between the two covers are in Vice President Harris' attire and her general demeanor.
- On the left, she wears a powder blue two-piece suit, a string of pearls, and an American flag pin on her lapel. With her arms crossed over her chest, her demeanor is focused, trustworthy, authoritative. However, Vogue released this cover only after receiving scrutiny over their original choice: the image on the right, where Vice President Harris appears in black skinny jeans and her signature low-top converse shoes. Caught mid-laugh, Vice President Harris comes across as authentic and approachable, **but not necessarily powerful**.
- The distinction between these photos highlights media outlets' tendency to portray female politicians as soft and agreeable, in effect minimizing their accomplishments.
- For Vice President Harris specifically, readers argued that the photo was disrespectful, as her casual demeanor on the cover of an internationally-circulated magazine would undermine her authority in her newly-elected position.

![Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University]

Political influence of media messages

- Digital communication platforms like Twitter and Facebook have expanded our ability to connect with each other and with political leaders, but we must also evaluate media messages (and widespread dissemination of them) for harmful impact

What starts on social media doesn't stay confined to digital platforms - media messages have concrete, observable influence

Donald J. Trump
@realdonaldtrump

We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Poles are closed!

Nov 4th 2020 - 12:44:57 AM EST · Twitter for iPhone · View on Twitter

https://www.nytimes.com/spotlight/us-capitol-riots-investigations

Reflection Exercise

1. What influence do media messages have in your own life?

2. What types of media representations do you wish you saw more often or less often? Why?

3. What are the ethical implications of popular media?