



## LESSON PLAN

<b>Level:</b>	Grades 7 to 12
<b>About the Author:</b>	Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts
<b>Duration:</b>	1 to 2 hours

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# Bias and Crime in Media

## Overview

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In this lesson students are introduced to the key media literacy concept that media are constructions that re-present reality and consider how representations of crime in news and entertainment media may influence how we perceive members of particular groups.

The concept that media communicate values and messages and have social implications is introduced and students discuss how stereotypes of particular groups are formed. Finally, students read a number of articles on the question of whether and when a person's religion should be mentioned in a news article and create a public service announcement communication their opinion.

## Learning Outcomes

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Students will:

- become aware of how media representations of crime influence our attitudes towards diversity
- communicate an opinion through artistic expression
- create a media product

## Preparation and Materials

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Load the *Policeman PSA video* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqfqsOM2WFO>) onto a digital projector or interactive whiteboard, or photocopy the *Policeman PSA* onto a transparency

Photocopy the document *What should be the media policy about identifying a person's faith in their reporting?* (Five articles; copy enough so that each student receives **one** of the articles.)

## Procedure

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Begin by showing the *Policeman PSA* video or showing a transparency of the print version. Ask your students:

- What is this public service announcement's message?
- What stereotypes and assumptions is it based on and how does it counter them?
- Is it effective in delivering its message?



- Why or why not?
- Is its message still relevant?
- Why or why not?

The important points that should come out of this discussion are that we often make assumptions about people and these assumptions are often based on things such as race, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and so on. Introduce the key media literacy concept that **media are constructions that re-present reality** and ask students what **representation of reality** this PSA is responding to (the identification of Black men as criminals). If students respond that they don't believe stereotyping is still a problem, you can make them aware of a 2005 study which found that African-Americans appeared as perpetrators of crime almost twice as often in American TV news as they did in reality, making up 37 per cent of perpetrators on the news versus 21 per cent in arrest reports (Dixon, Travis L. and Keith B. Maddox. *Skin Tone, Crime News, and Reality Judgments*. Journal of Applied Psychology, 2005).

Tell students that persons with mental illness are another group routinely depicted as being violent and dangerous (when in fact they are more likely to be **victims** of violence) and ask for examples of the “psycho” character from film and TV. Point out that because **media are constructions**, their content is influenced by the biases, prejudices and assumptions of their creators. Ask students how seeing an over-representation of African-Americans or persons with mental illness in crime **news** reporting (which we expect to be an accurate reflection of reality) might influence the writers or producers of a movie or dramatic series about crime.

Tell students that **media communicate values and messages** (even if these are just the creator's unquestioned assumptions) and **have social implications** (because we base our view of the world in part on the media we consume). Ask students how we might see the world differently as a result of media stereotypes relating to crime, and how seeing these stereotypes might make members of particular groups feel about **themselves**.

Ask students how we come to view certain groups as more likely to be criminals or to be violent. (In his book *Mass Media and Popular Culture*, Barry Duncan uses the term "dangerous other" to describe our perceptions of certain individuals in society.) To what extent do we all, consciously or unconsciously, engage in prejudging other people as being dangerous? Can you identify groups of people who might be stereotyped as “dangerous” – not necessarily violent, but likely to cause trouble? (*This list might include immigrants, teenagers, persons with mental illness, motorcyclists and First Nations peoples.*) From where do we get these perceptions? (*Friends, family and the media all play a role in moulding these attitudes.*) *Is it possible to perceive members of other groups without bias and stereotypes coming into play?*

Distribute the *What should be the media policy about identifying a person's faith in their reporting?* articles so that each student receives **one** of the five articles and have students answer questions. Take up questions as a class and compare the five pieces:

- What did the different articles have in common?
- What were the key principles each author suggested were most important in deciding whether or not to give a person's faith in a news article?
- Can students think of any examples of news stories (particularly those relating to crime or violence) where a person's faith was stated or implied? (Rev. Ray Innen Parchelo's article has an example of how a news story may imply a person's faith without stating it outright.)



- Do they think the identification was justified?
- Can they think of examples in which a person's race, ability, sexual orientation or Aboriginal status was identified or implied? Do they think the identification was justified in those cases?

Ask students for their opinion:

- In what situations is it appropriate to identify an individual's religion in the news?
- Can this lead to a misperception of a particular religion in the media?
- If a suspect's religion is mentioned in reporting a crime, can this lead to negative stereotyping of that religion?
- How does the answer change when dealing with other forms of diversity (ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability)? Why?

### Evaluation Task

Have students create a public service announcement (poster, TV ad, radio spot) that communicates their position identifying an individual's race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or Aboriginal status in a news story.

### Extension Activity

Over the next month, students are to collect news stories relating to crime from print, broadcast and online sources. As these are brought to class, students will analyze and sort them under the following categories:

- No identification
- Relevant diversity identification
- Unnecessary diversity identification

Where identification occurs, they will also take note of:

- Tools and techniques used in reporting the story
- The tone and perspective of the story
- The overall effect on the reader

At the end of the month, students will tally and post their total figures.

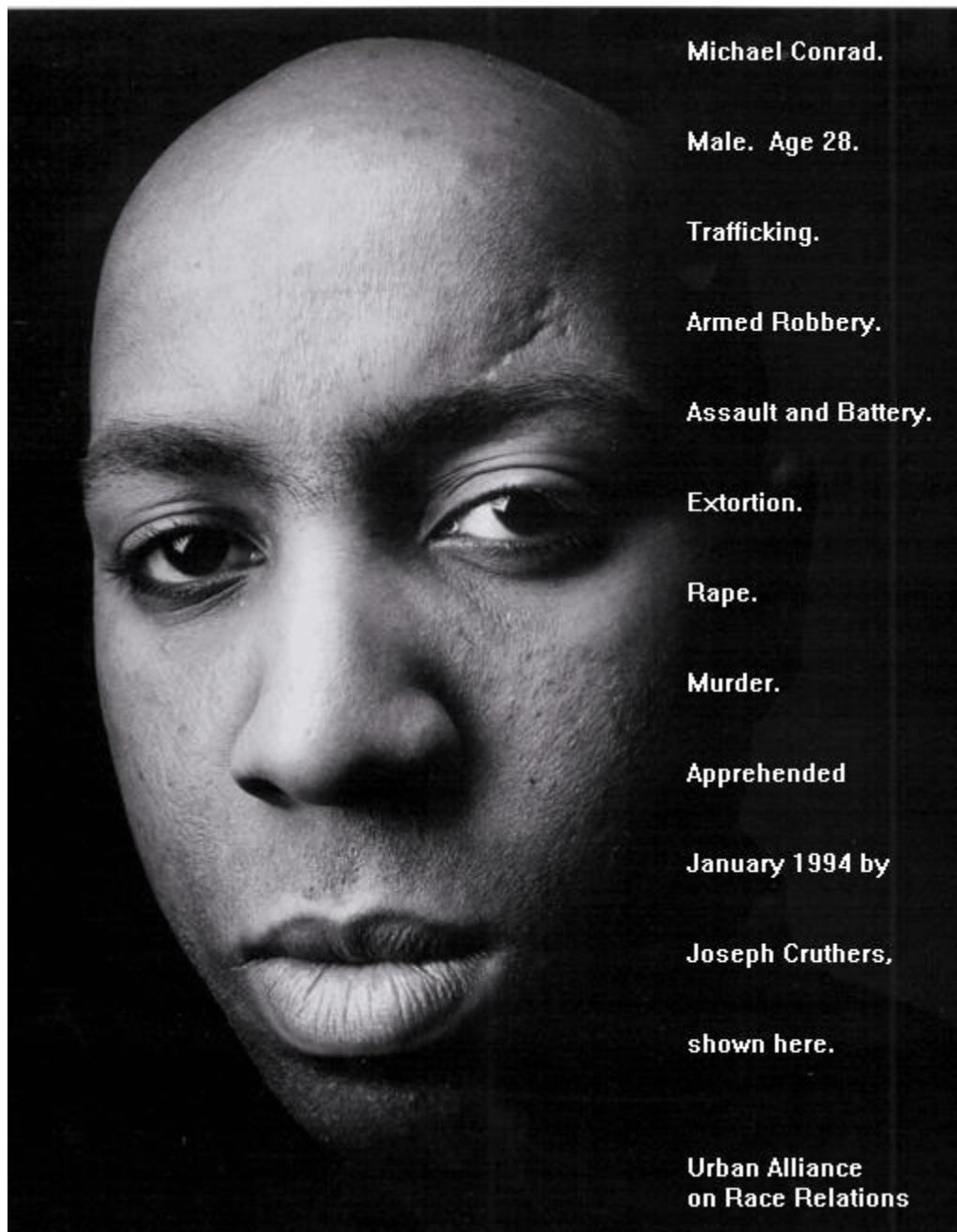
Once the total figures are tallied, students will complete a short paper that explores the issues associated with diversity identification in stories about crime. Included in this paper will be what was learned from the month of monitoring stories relating to crime and a list of ethical guidelines for journalists.

Students can also send their results to the magazines and newspapers they surveyed. For articles that contained unnecessary diversity identification, students may wish to contact the editor responsible to request an explanation of the newspaper or magazine's rationale for making this distinction.



## Policeman PSA

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Michael Conrad.  
Male. Age 28.  
Trafficking.  
Armed Robbery.  
Assault and Battery.  
Extortion.  
Rape.  
Murder.  
Apprehended  
January 1994 by  
Joseph Cruthers,  
shown here.  
Urban Alliance  
on Race Relations



## What should be the media policy about identifying a person's faith in their reporting?

*Rabbi Reuven Bulka is head of Congregation Machzikei Hadas in Ottawa and host of Sunday night with Rabbi Bulka on 580 CFRA. Ottawa Citizen, January 2, 2011. Reprinted with author's permission.*

Consistent fairness. No more, and no less.

I am not sure it is the media's business to announce a person's faith every time it reports on an issue involving people. Where does it end? Every time we mention a politician, are we obliged to announce that politician's faith or lack of it?

And if we are going to announce the person's faith or lack of it, why not announce that person's favourite food, or least favourite food, how many naps they take per day, and their preferred vacation spot?

There are times when people of faith do things which are media worthy -- either positive or negative. Certainly, a religious leader who is caught in a scandal will receive more than a full measure of opprobrium, and deservedly so.

The impression created is that it was the religion that caused the deviance. That conclusion is absurd, but it is certainly suggested -- though hopefully not intended. What is clear is that the espoused religious faith did not prevent the deviance. And it is almost impossible to avoid faith identification when it involves a religious leader.

On the other hand, if a religious leader does something extraordinarily commendable, then it is only fair that the person's faith be part of the reporting equation. Generally, the media are OK on this, even though the chances are greater that a scandal will be reported than a good deed will be reported. But that imbalance is true of everyone, not just religious leaders. "Man bites dog" is more newsworthy than "dog bites man."

This issue becomes more of a challenge when it involves someone other than a religious leader. Tiger Woods's religion was not part of the immediate media reporting of his escapades. Yet he himself admitted that part of his problem was that he strayed from his faith. One can have no quarrel with the media reporting this, as it was the subject himself (Woods) who opened up this pathway of reporting.

Otherwise, unless the matter being reported, for good or for bad, was linked to faith, there is no reason to mention it. In other words, whatever the media decide to do, it must be fair and consistent, not one rule for people of faith and another for those who lack faith.

### Questions

1. In what cases does the author feel it is appropriate to identify a person's faith in news reporting?
2. What general rule or principle does the author feel is most important in deciding whether or not to identify a person's faith?
3. In the author's opinion, why are the media more likely to run negative stories where a person's faith is identified than positive ones? Does he feel this is a problem? Why or why not?



## What should be the media policy about identifying a person's faith in their reporting?

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By Balpreet Singh

Ottawa Citizen, January 2, 2011. Reprinted with author's permission.

Faith should only be reported where it is directly relevant to the story. Particular care should be taken when reporting about minority faith communities so as not to feed into existing prejudices and stereotypes or create new ones.

Although Canadian media are usually quite careful in this regard, I am sometimes concerned to see faith reported where it bears no relevance to the story. For example, where a crime takes place, unless faith has played a role in the story, it ought not to be reported. In some situations, culture is relevant but it is religion that ends up being reported and the two are often quite different. For example, many Sikhs are of Punjabi origin but the values of the Sikh faith and Punjabi culture differ in many respects.

As a Sikh and a member of one of Canada's most visible faith groups, I am very conscious of the way my faith is reflected in the media. The first introduction many people have to the Sikh faith is through the media and so media coverage can have an impact on how I, and other Sikhs, are perceived on a daily basis.

The Sikh community has been in Canada for well over 100 years now and is actively engaged in every part of Canadian life. There are Sikhs serving in Canada's armed forces, local police forces and as elected members of all three levels of government. Every year, Sikh communities across Canada raise millions of dollars for Canadian hospitals, hold food drives and organize blood donation clinics during Sikh holidays. All the good things happening in the community are often not reported and even when they are, can be overshadowed by a single negative story.

Where faith is relevant, it should of course be reported, but in its proper context. The media need to be constantly aware of the way a faith group is covered and the impact it may be having on members of the community.

### Questions

1. In what cases does the author feel it is appropriate to identify a person's faith in news reporting?
2. What general rule or principle does the author feel is most important in deciding whether or not to identify a person's faith?
3. What particular concerns does the author have about how his faith is represented in the news?



## What should be the media policy about identifying a person's faith in their reporting?

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*Abdul Rashid is a member of the Ottawa Muslim community, the Christian-Muslim Dialogue and the Capital Region Interfaith Council. Ottawa Citizen, January 2, 2011. Reprinted with author's permission.*

An individual has many identities. A person can be identified by his/her name, sex, ethnicity, skin colour or faith. The media policy about identifying a person's faith should be the same as for other characteristics.

When reporting a business fraud, it may be relevant to identify a person's trade or position in that trade. However, it is entirely irrelevant to report on the skin colour or ethnicity of the person involved. It should also be equally irrelevant to report the faith of that person.

Sometimes, the media report on an individual where not only the faith of the person is identified but his/her entire faith community is associated with the report.

Whether deliberate or inadvertent, this practice is especially despicable.

It is also worth pointing out that sometimes an interesting bias appears in media reporting. On the one hand, a report involving a person belonging to a particular faith or ethnicity might be splattered on the front page.

On the other hand, a similar event involving a person from another faith might be reported as a routine news item somewhere inside the newspaper.

Of course, when it is relevant, the faith or religion may be discussed. I cannot think of a better example of this practice than the current column which has now been running for 13 years.

### Questions

1. In what cases does the author feel it is appropriate to identify a person's faith in news reporting?
2. What general rule or principle does the author feel is most important in deciding whether or not to identify a person's faith?
3. What is the "interesting bias" in news reporting that the author refers to?
4. What should be the media policy about identifying a person's faith in their reporting?





## What should be the media policy about identifying a person's faith in their reporting?

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By Rev. Geoffrey Kerslake

*Citizen, January 2, 2011. Reprinted with author's permission.*

The media have a critically important role to play in defending religious freedom by fostering a climate of open dialogue and mutual respect between members of different faith communities as well as persons who choose not to belong to any faith. The larger question behind this one is to what extent do the media report the "facts of an event" and to what extent do they "create" the news through editorial policy about what is "worth reporting?"

As a Christian, I am often bemused that some events are deemed newsworthy whereas others which conflict with the prevailing political climate are ignored; for example, for a number of years the media chose not to report the annual pro-life March for Life through downtown Ottawa, despite the presence of thousands of peaceful demonstrators from several different Christian and non-Christian traditions who gathered to first listen to a number of speeches by Members of Parliament from different parties on the Hill before uneventfully marching through downtown Ottawa.

In the prophetic document from the Second Vatican Council, the Decree On the Media of Social Communications (Inter Mirifica) in 1963, the Church wrote: "It is quite evident what gravely important responsibilities (the media) have in the present day when they are in a position to lead the human race to good or to evil by informing or arousing mankind" (n. 11).

The media have such a grave responsibility because of the power they have not only to report the facts of events but also because in choosing what to report and how to report it, the media play a role in shaping public opinion. For religious freedom to be maintained and to flourish, it is thus imperative that there is a climate of honest dialogue and mutual respect between all persons.

### Questions

1. In what cases does the author feel it is appropriate to identify a person's faith in news reporting?
2. What general rule or principle does the author feel is most important in deciding whether or not to identify a person's faith?
3. How does the author feel the news media can "create" the news as well as simply report it?





## What should be the media policy about identifying a person's faith in their reporting?

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*Rev. Ray Innen Parchelo is a novice Tendai priest and founder of the Red Maple Sangha, the first lay Buddhist community in Eastern Ontario. Citizen, January 2, 2011. Reprinted with author's permission.*

Most reputable media seem to have already established appropriate principles. We generally only get identifying information where it has something to do with the point of a story. So, we may get "Christians gathered at a St. Mary's Church in honour of ..." rather than a "group of Jewish kids were playing basketball on ..." This goes along with non-identifying reporting on ethnicity and sexual orientation. The policy can be said to work. Although, for people who know the makeup of city neighbourhoods, there still may be assumptions when they read/ hear about "18-year-old Ahmed Muhammed" being arrested in a predominantly Palestinian-inhabited part of town.

A more troublesome media tendency is to identify individuals using outdated and biased terms that only serve to blunt distinctions or fix people in stereotypes. Thus, we still read about wheelchair users as "wheelchair-bound" or, in faith circles, people who hold to certain kinds of religious teachings as being "fundamentalists." We have learned over the past decades that words matter and words have a power to confine and restrict us. One only has to compare the difference between the use of "liberal" in American and Canadian media. Reporting has come to mean characterizing for the benefit of your demographic, rather than the exploration of issues and ideas.

This fits with an even more disturbing tendency in contemporary media, what one might call "Twitterreporting." Less and less are we getting thoughtful analysis and carefully checked facts. In the race to be the first to break this second's gossip, in the scramble to ensure top spot in month's ratings or circulation, media are too often relying on superficialities. Stories splash, like boulders in a pond, without ever leaving any ripples of meaning or analysis behind. The transformation of news into entertainment has left us poorer and even more encouraged to accept a flickering attention span.

The use of such handy, but finally discriminatory, words of identification only sustains a superficial and trivializing understanding of our world.

### Questions

1. In what cases does the author feel it is appropriate to identify a person's faith in news reporting?
2. What general rule or principle does the author feel is most important in deciding whether or not to identify a person's faith?
3. How does the author feel that news reporting can be a cause of stereotyping and discrimination?

