

# JEO Seminar: Media and the Danger of the Single Story

Hosted by: Dr. Rhana Gittens

Task:

1. Watch author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TED Talk titled "The danger of the single story."

[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en)

2. Read excerpt from *Media & Culture 12e* by Richard Campbell, Christopher R. Martin, and Bettina Fabos (pg. 13-14). See full excerpt below title "Stories: The Foundation of Media" and "Media Stories in Everyday Life".
3. Review discussion questions: How do media stories affect the way we view each other? How does the current media environment affect the danger of the single story? How is the media's influence changing in the global information age?

## Stories: The Foundation of Media

The stories that circulate in the media can shape a society's perceptions and attitudes. During the first years of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, courageous professional journalists covered armed conflicts, telling stories that helped the public comprehend the magnitude and tragedy of such events. In the 1950s and 1960s, network television news stories on the Civil Rights movement led to crucial legislation that transformed the way many white people viewed the grievances and aspirations of African Americans. In the late 1990s, news and tabloid magazine stories about the President Clinton–Monica Lewinsky affair sparked heated debates over private codes of behavior and public abuses of authority. Today, impassioned discourse led by the eloquent survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School has once again turned the topic of gun violence and control into a national dialogue. In each of these instances, the stories told through a variety of media

outlets played a key role in changing individual awareness, cultural attitudes, and public perception.

Although we continue to look to the media for narratives today, the kinds of stories we seek out and tell are changing in the digital era. During Hollywood's Golden Age in the 1930s and 1940s, as many as ninety million people went to the movies each Saturday. In the 1980s, during TV's Network Era, most of us sat down each evening to watch professionally produced news or scripted sitcoms and dramas, written by paid writers and performed by seasoned actors. But in the digital age, many of the performances feature nonprofessionals. The stories we watch on YouTube and read on blog sites are mostly produced by amateurs. Audiences are fascinated by stories of couples finding love, relationships gone bad, and backstabbing friends on franchise shows like *The Bachelor* or *Real Housewives*. Some reality shows—like *Big Brother*, *Born This Way*, and *Shark Tank*—give us glimpses into the lives and careers of everyday people, while others entertain us by pitting amateurs against each other on talent, singing, and cooking competitions such as *America's Got Talent*, *The Voice*, and *Top Chef*. While these shows are all professionally produced, the performers are for the most part “ordinary” people (or celebrities and professionals performing alongside amateurs). This is part of the appeal of reality TV—relating to the characters or comparing our lives with theirs because they seem just like us. Part of the appeal, too, is feeling superior to characters who often make bad decisions that we can judge or laugh about.

Online, many of us are entertaining and informing one another with videos of our pets, Facebook posts about our achievements or relationship issues, photos of a good meal, or tweets about the latest school shooting and gun control. This cultural blending of old and new ways of telling stories and offering opinions—told by both professionals and amateurs—is just another form of convergence that has disrupted and altered the media landscape in the digital era. More than ever, ordinary citizens are able to participate in, and have an effect on, the stories told in the media. Our varied media institutions and outlets are, after all, in the **narrative**—or storytelling—business. Media stories put events in context, helping us better understand both our daily lives and the larger world. As psychologist Jerome Bruner argues, we are storytelling creatures, and as children, we acquire language to tell the stories we have inside us.<sup>12</sup> The common denominator, in fact, between our entertainment and information cultures is the narrative. It is the media's main cultural currency—whether it's a hilarious and heartwarming Super Bowl commercial, a post on a gossip blog, a Fox News “exclusive,” a *New York Times* article, or a tweet praising a local restaurant about a recent dining experience. The point is that the popular narratives of our culture are complex and varied. Narratives are, in the end, the dominant way we make sense and meaning of our experiences. As writer Joan Didion once put it, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”<sup>13</sup>

## Media Stories in Everyday Life

The earliest debates, at least in Western society, about the impact of cultural narratives on daily life date back to the ancient Greeks. Socrates, himself accused of corrupting young minds, worried that children exposed to popular art forms and stories “without distinction” would “take into their souls teachings that are wholly opposite to those we wish them to be possessed of when they are grown up.”<sup>14</sup> He believed that art should uplift us from the ordinary routines of our lives. The playwright Euripides, however, believed that art should imitate life, that characters should be “real,” and that artistic works should reflect the actual world—even when that reality is sordid.



Marc Riboud/Magnum Photos

### VIETNAM WAR PROTESTS

On October 21, 1967, a crowd of 100,000 protesters marched on the Pentagon, demanding the end of the Vietnam War. Sadly, violence erupted when some protesters clashed with the U.S. Marshals protecting the Pentagon. However, this iconic image from the same protest appeared in the *Washington Post* the next day and

In *The Republic*, Plato developed the classical view of art: It should aim to instruct and uplift. He worried that some staged performances glorified evil and that common folk watching might not be able to distinguish between art and reality. Aristotle, Plato's student, occupied a middle ground in these debates, arguing that art and stories should provide insight into the human condition but should entertain as well.

The cultural concerns of classical philosophers are still with us. In the early 1900s, for example, newly arrived immigrants to the United States, who spoke little English, gravitated toward cultural events whose enjoyment did not depend solely on understanding English. Consequently, these popular events—such as boxing, vaudeville, and the emerging medium of silent film—became a flash point for some groups, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, local politicians, religious leaders, and police vice squads, who not only resented the commercial success of immigrant culture but also feared that these “low” cultural forms would undermine what they saw as traditional American values and interests.

In the United States in the 1950s, the phenomenal popularity of Elvis Presley set the stage for many of today's debates over hip-hop lyrics and television's influence, especially on young people. In 1956 and 1957, Presley made three appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. The public outcry against Presley's “lascivious” hip movements was so great that by the third show, the camera operators were instructed to shoot the singer only from the waist up. In some communities, objections to Presley and rock and roll were motivated by class bias and racism. Many white adults believed that this “poor white trash” singer from Mississippi was spreading rhythm and blues, a “dangerous” form of black popular culture.

Today, with the reach of print, electronic, and digital communications and the amount of time people spend consuming them (see [Figure 1.1](#)), mass media play an even more controversial role in society. Many people are critical of the quality of much contemporary culture and are concerned about the overwhelming amount of information now available. Many see popular media culture as unacceptably commercial and sensationalistic. Children, who on average watch more than forty thousand TV commercials each year, are particularly vulnerable to marketers selling junk food, toys, and “cool” clothing.<sup>15</sup>

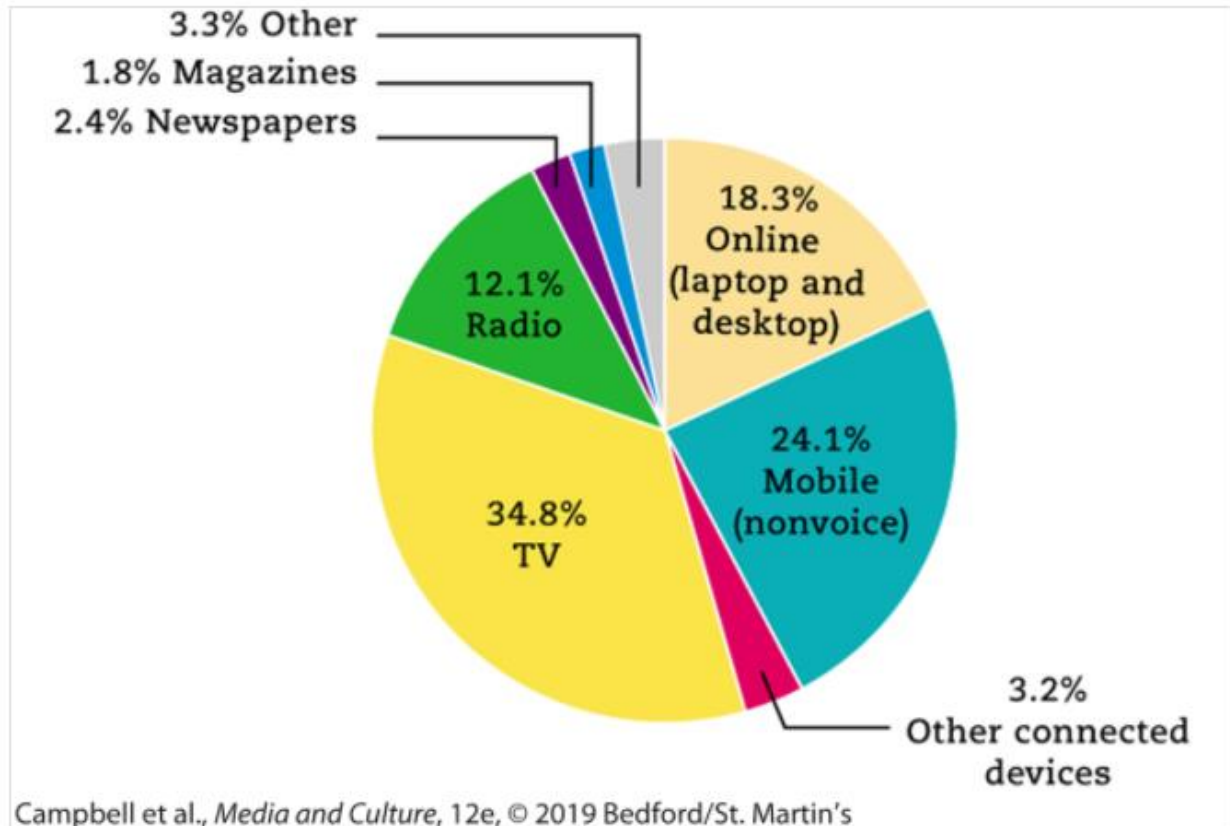


FIGURE 1.1

DAILY MEDIA CONSUMPTION BY PLATFORM, 2017

Data from "Average Time Spent with Major Media per Day in the United States as of

Yet how much the media shape society—and how much they simply respond to existing cultural issues—is still unknown. Although some media depictions may worsen social problems, research has seldom demonstrated that the media directly cause our society's major afflictions. With American mass media industries earning more than \$700 billion in 2017 (according to the U.S. Department of Commerce), the economic and societal stakes are high. Large portions of media resources now go toward studying audiences, capturing their attention through stories, and taking in their consumer dollars. To increase their revenues, media outlets try to influence everything from how people shop to how they vote. Like the air we breathe, the commercially based culture that mass media help create surrounds us. Like the air, its impact is often taken for granted. But to monitor that culture's "air quality"—to become media literate—we must attend more thoughtfully to a vast array of media stories that are too often taken for granted.

## Notes

12. Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), 8.

13. Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), 14.

14. See Plato, *The Republic*, Book II, 377B.

15. Romeo Vitelli, "Television, Commercials, and Your Child," *Psychology Today*, July 22, 2013, [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/media-spotlight/201307/television-commercials-and-your-child](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/media-spotlight/201307/television-commercials-and-your-child).