

Media Biases

An exciting and wide-ranging activity for a group to work on the role of the media in spreading or countering stereotype, prejudice and bias.



Issues addressed

- Stereotypes and prejudice: how they are multiplied and spread in society.
- The quantity, quality and amount of information: manipulation, slants, abuse and lack of information, etc.
- Images of people and “different” groups due to generalizations and stereotyping.
- The difficulties we face in changing our images and perceptions.
- The social “scapegoat” mechanism. The tendency to blame “others” for certain social problems without analysing all the causes.

Aims of the activity

- To enable participants to explore the images that the majority society has of people from different cultures or origins, minorities, etc.
- To notice that not all the cultures different from our own carry a socially negative image.
- To analyse the role of the mass media in the creation and development of stereotypes and social prejudice.

Time

Part A: Two and a half hours

Part B: One week

Part C: Two and a half hours

Group size

A minimum of ten and a maximum of twenty five people.

Participants should be over 13 or 14 years of age.

Preparation

Part A:

- Flip chart, marker pen

Part B:

Depends on the resources available. The materials which can be used in this type of activity are very varied:

- newspapers,
- magazines,
- video recordings of TV programmes,
- radio etc.

It is however, possible to do this activity simply with newspapers and magazines that the participants can bring into the working groups.

Part C:

- For the plenary: a flip chart or a large board as well as some markers or chalk.

Instructions

This activity is developed in three stages:

Part A: Preparation

1. Divide the participants into groups of 4-6 people.
2. Explain that during the course of the next week, they are going to analyse the different mass media: TV, radio and, especially, written press in order to find out how foreigners or 'people who are different' are portrayed.
3. Discuss exactly what the participants are going to look for and be aware of. For example, the language used (are they freedom fighters or terrorists?), the amount of time or space given to these news items, the priority given to it e.g. is it headline or footnote and check how people are treated or portrayed according to their origin. What sorts of photos and other images are used.
4. List the types of media you are going to work on and allocate them to the groups. Depending on the members of the group and your own acquaintance of the mass media you may opt between giving all the groups the whole task, or asking each group to deal specifically with one medium, i.e. one team works with daily newspapers, another with weekly magazines, another with TV another with radio, etc.

Part B: Field work

Allow a week for the groups to carry their research and tasks.

Part C: Conclusions

1. In plenary ask each group to present the results of their research and documentation. Allow 20 minutes per group.
2. Write down the main findings of each group on the flip-chart or board.

Debriefing and evaluation

Once the results have been put together, give a brief summary of the information reported by each group. Try to stress the most common findings as well as those which might be contradictory.

The discussion can follow with questions such as:

- What are the main features by which the minority groups around us are portrayed in the media?
- Are there minorities or groups of foreigners that are portrayed positively?
- Are there others that are portrayed negatively?
- Are the images presented based on facts and data or upon assumptions or judgments?
- How are the images built, from the real knowledge about those groups or minorities, or through stereotypes and manipulation of information?

Tips for the facilitator

Part A: There are advantages and disadvantages in both options. Asking all the groups to cover the range will require a greater effort and organisation of the work, asking each team to deal specifically with one medium will limit the global vision of each group but will be easier to organise and perhaps allow people to go into the issues in greater depth.

Since the main part of this activity is carried out over a week, introduce the activity (part A) at the end of a session but reserve a whole session for bringing the results together (part C).

It is recommended that you do this activity with participants who already know each other and have some experience of group work e.g. be members of a youth club or organisation.

Depending on how well you are acquainted with the participants and the situation you may change the time frame indicated for the activity. For example, if the activity takes place during school holidays, the time needed for the field work may be reduced to three days; similarly it may be extended if circumstances call for it.

Suggestions for follow up

According to the work done by the teams, you may propose that they set up a 'watch dog' group to regularly review the media for examples of bad reporting and distortion. This could be followed by writing collective letters to the newspapers, TV or radio whenever they find examples of discrimination against someone or some minority.

If you wish to explore further the relationships between ideas, words and images, a fun way to do it is to play 'Cultionary' (page 67). Alternatively, you might enjoy playing the board game, 'The path to development' (page 138) which raises many social, economic and political issues covered regularly in the media.