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Media Stereotyping: Images of the Foreigner

I

22,300 miles above the equator eighty satellites orbit the earth. They make possible an instantaneous worldwide network of communication. It is conceivable that the citizens of the 101 participating nations of the International Telecommunications Satellite Organization (INTELSAT) could simultaneously participate in the same public event. This dramatizes the degree to which the peoples of this globe have become linked through the technologies of communication. Satellite communication, however, represents only one facet of the communicative interaction occurring among the people of nations separated by national boundaries, but connected by the mediated sounds and images of persons and events. The daily communicative life for people in most nations is a mixture of interpersonal relationships and a host of impersonal relationships facilitated by the mass media of communication; newspapers, books, magazines, comics, radio, records, films, protographs and television. These mediated relationships involve us not only in our own culture and nationality but with the peoples and places of other cultures and nationalities. It is highly probable that most of us came into direct personal contact with a French national (or a German, Chinese, etc.) only after having been introduced to the image of a French (German, Chinese, etc.) person through either a dramatic or non-fictional media representation. It is quite likely that in the United States the average person has more contacts with Chinese people through comic books, films, and television than through direct personal contacts. How many of us have a mental image of a Saudia Arabian, Russian, Japanese or Eygptian? How accurate are those images? How often have we talked with our friends and neighbours about "those" foreigners. Is it possible that the media images influence our face to face interaction with friends and foreigners?

These questions are important when we realize the pervasiveness of mediated "foreign relations" in our daily lives. We cannot escape mediated

cross cultural or cross national communication. Our awareness and knowledge of people of other countries is heavily dependent upon our contact with media images of foreigners. The overwhelming majority of people of any one nation have little or no direct, first hand experiences with foreigners. The contacts made by international travellers and vacationers is infinitesimal compared with media travel. Yet, in spite of this imbalance, the literature on cross cultural communication pays little attention to the impact of mediated images of foreigners.

Throughout cross cultural literature the assumption is made that direct contact with foreigners is both the source of and solution to communication problems. It is frequently recommended that an increased knowledge of another culture and more sensitive person to person interaction are the best means for improving communication. Though undoubtedly valuable and worthwhile, this approach is likely to be of limited effectiveness because it overlooks the vastness and influence of our media contacts. It is a mistake to ignore the power of modern mass media to shape people's images of foreigners. We are not likely to alter our attitudes when confronted continually with images of foreigners which directly and indirectly conform to and confirm a set of stereotypical generalizations.

In the contemporary world the mass media provide the meeting ground for our interaction with foreigners. The media supply the role models and the scenarios for foreign encounters. What we see, what we say, and what we do when we encounter foreigners face to face, at home and abroad, is shaped by media images. Improved cross cultural communication will come about not only with more sensitive contacts with foreigners but also with an understanding of how the media process the images of foreigners.

II

In this essay we intend to explain the role of stereotyping as an inherent function of all mass media and to show how this influences our perceptions of foreigners. We will discuss how the representational aspects of modern electronic media hide the stereotyping function and cause us to process information as though it were direct and first hand. Finally, we will describe a simple communication model which links interpersonal communication with media communication and demonstrates how this interaction influences our concepts of foreigners.

Stereotyping and Media. In contemporary usage the term stereotype carries a negative connotation. According to the *Harper Dictionary of Modern Thought*, (New York 1977) stereotype is defined as "an oversimplified image of (usually) some category of person, institution, or event which is shared in essential features, by large numbers of people . . . Stereotypes are commonly, but not necessarily, accompanied by prejudice." Contemporary usage suggests a gap

between what is “out there” and the impression we choose to retain. Explicit is the idea that stereotypes are not isomorphic, that is, there is not a one to one relationship between the object and our perception of the object. Somewhere along the way we alter, distort and generalize to the extent that we retain an incomplete and convenient understanding of the object.

We know that as each of us interacts with our environment, we abstract those elements necessary to make sense of our surroundings. This process of abstracting is absolutely necessary for survival. Without it we could not order and categorize information, recognize similarities and differences or make inferences and judgments. Stereotyping, which is a form of abstracting, is a function of, the degree of accuracy involved, the intent of the abstracting process, and the nature of the medium utilized in the process. At this point it might be useful to examine the original definition of stereotype as stated in *The Oxford Universal Dictionary* (Oxford 1955). “Stereotype: 1. The method or process of printing in which a solid plate of typemetal, cast from a papier-mache or plaster mould taken from the surface of a forme of type, is used for printing from instead of the forme itself. 2. A stereotype plate 1817. b. In generalized sense 1823. 3. fig. Something continued or constantly repeated without change; a stereotyped phrase, formula, etc.; stereotyped diction or usage 1850.

A number of observations can be made. First, the term “stereotype” is rooted in a technological form. Second, the term deals with a process of replication in which multiple, duplicate copies are produced from a master mold; each copy being exactly like the others. The technological definition and our current usage appear to be quite far apart. The original concept suggested precision and exactness of the copy while contemporary usage suggests lack of accuracy and over-generalization. We would note, however, that the current concept of stereotype is very much dependent upon exactness and replication when we take into account the role of mass media. Modern media fulfill the same function as mold in the original definition. It replicates the object and makes possible distribution of the stereotype. It is our position that stereotypes cannot be created and disseminated without mass media. That which is disseminated is directly influenced by the degree to which the medium can replicate and duplicate ideas, sounds, and images.

The etiology of stereotyping requires the intertwining of a medium and interpersonal interaction. A medium creates stereotypes through the transcendence of time and space with the simultaneous distribution of images. This conforms with the original definition of stereotyping because the simultaneous dissemination and swift distribution of ideas, images and sounds suggests a concept of medium as mold; a means by which a facsimile is transmitted to a destination. While medium is integral to stereotype, stereotyping itself is an imprint on the human mind – an attitude which affects further human interaction. Our attitudes towards others is influenced by media images which in turn influence our behavior toward others. Stereotypes are made possible by

the technology of the mass media. Stereotypical attitudes are stimulated by the emotional intellectual responses to stereotypes of individuals in conjunction with other individuals.

We would all agree, probably, that the mass media can convey stereotypical images. What is not so easily understood is that our ability to recognize stereotypes is media bound. Each medium's intrinsic characteristics influence content and treatment of objects on a continuum running from a high level of abstracting sound and image to a low level of abstraction. This is similar to what *Marshall McLuhan* meant by high definition: "the state of being well filled with data," and low definition: where "very little visual information is provided." (Understanding Media, New York 1964, p. 22). Imagine a caricature of a Mexican peasant. What do you see? A line drawing of a small, fat man with a drooping mustache wearing a serape and sombrero. He is barefoot and behind him are a number of dirty children who look sad and hungry. Hopefully, we all understand the nature and bias of that image. It is a stereotype because it abstracts to such a degree that it does not allow for the individual differences and unique characteristics that distinguish one Mexican from another. Furthermore, in its selection it is demeaning to a whole group of people. It becomes a stereotype when it is duplicated, replicated and distributed with the intention of influencing receivers' perceptions of Mexicans.

Now let's shift medium and magically duplicate the same image in a photograph. To what degree do we process that medium and image differently? Do we question the intent of the photographic image in the same way as we do the caricature? Do we readily perceive the stereotype or do we assume, because the photograph presents us with a more representational view of reality, that the portrait is accurate and hence non-stereotypical? With the addition of motion to the photograph (motion pictures and television) we get more data, but are we any closer to the unique and individual Mexican we might meet on an interpersonal basis? By definition it is still a stereotype, but the more representational quality of the medium makes it more difficult to recognize the stereotyping process.

Facsimile and verisimilitude. It must be understood that no medium is capable of transferring reality without selecting and distorting some aspect of that reality. When this abstracted image is replicated and distributed it produces stereotypes. Our awareness of the stereotype is influenced by the medium's capacity to achieve degrees of representationalism. The photographic media, by definition, transfers "exact copies" of objects which exist in front of the camera. (We exclude for the moment the art of the darkroom.) The facsimile nature of photographic and electronic media is of great importance in the formulation of stereotypes. As the facsimilating character of the medium (the ability to duplicate and replicate) is increased, so is the sense of verisimilitude—the appearance of truth. The better the copy, the less we are aware of the degree of stereotype. We take for granted that there is difference in accuracy

between the caricature drawing and the photograph of the Mexican. In the case of the drawing we do not confuse the object on the page with an actual person. But how many times have we looked at a photograph and exclaimed "that's really you"?

Just as the degree of representation or facsimile make it more or less difficult to recognize media stereotypes so does the degree of verisimilitude or appearance of truth. The caricature of the Mexican would not be considered high in verisimilitude, that is, we would not believe that the artist is trying to present a truthful image of the Mexican. On the other hand a television documentary about Palestinians might be considered a truthful representation of that people. Though there is a connection between the degree of facsimile and the appearance of truth, verisimilitude is much more dependent on the intent of those responsible for the media creation rather than on the technology of the medium. The Keystone Cops and the police in "The Choir Boys" movie appear in the same medium, but no one would confuse one with the other. The comedic intent and the dramatic intent of the producers of each is readily recognized. Judgment of verisimilitude is a matter of evaluation of the treatment of the media persona by the individual receiver. Most would judge that the treatment of the image of police in the Keystone Cops is much more stereotypical and therefore less truthful. The police image in "The Choir Boys" is also a stereotype but much more difficult to recognize because the treatment places it higher on the verisimilitude scale.

Thus, distinguishing media stereotypes require two types of processing. The first is based upon our perception of a relationship which exists between the object and the medium used to communicate. The media image must be placed somewhere along a facsimile continuum running from high representation to low representation. This facsimile scale reveals the interposition of medium between oneself and the real object based upon the degree to which the medium creates representations of reality. The second type of processing require a judgment of the degree of verisimilitude in the representation. Each media image contains some degree of truth no matter how high or low the representationalism. We can place each representation somewhere along a continuum from high to low appearance of truth. The verisimilitude scale reveals the variation in treatment of material by those who are responsible for the creation of media images.

III

Now that we have discussed the inherent stereotypical function of mass media let us return to our earlier point about the interconnection of mass media and interpersonal communication in our perceptions of foreigners. We will use a simple communication model to illustrate the dynamics of stereotyping in relationship to the media and individuals.

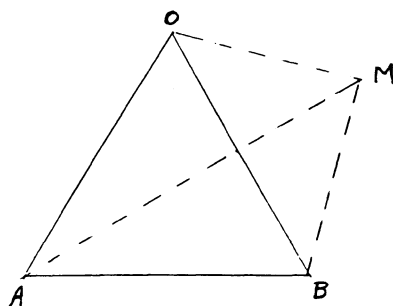


Fig. 1

A-B represents the interaction between two individuals located in the same time and place. It is what we normally regard as face to face or dyadic interaction.

A-B-(O)-M represents interpersonal perception and communication between two individuals about the group which is being stereotyped. Both individuals in the interaction are subject to media influences or stereotypes of foreigners.

A-O-(M) represents interaction between an individual and a member of the stereotyped group (e.g. a foreigner). In this case the interaction between A and O is shaped by previous media exposure of the stereotype.

A-M-(O)-M involves individual interaction with a mass medium which presents stereotypical images of foreigners. This interaction is influenced by previous media interactions and interpersonal contacts with members of the same culture and with foreigners.

This interactional communication model is based upon *Heider's* balance theory of attitude and behavior change. (See *F. Heider*, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, New York 1958). This theory holds that humans attempt to maintain a balance or consistency among attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Thus, information and perceptions of others are continually processed in a way that maintains cognitive balance for the individual. For example, person A who has a very positive attitude toward person B, but a negative opinion of object O, will be influenced to change his opinion of O if person B expresses positive attitudes and behaviors toward object O. If, however, person A dislikes person B, and B expresses positive opinions towards disliked object O this will reinforce the negative attitude of A about B. This is similar to the way in which stereotypical attitudes are altered or reinforced. That is, A and B are more positively attracted to each other when they both display the same attitudes positive and negative, towards foreigners or any other outside group.

Our communication model is similar to the *Heider* interpersonal model, but we have added the medium (M) to account for another series of attraction and rejection attitudes which require balancing in the interaction among individual, media object and the actual object. This model illustrates the way in which stereotyping produces positive or negative biases (prejudices) of foreigners depending on perceived similarities and differences. If the treatment (verisimilitude) of the mediated image (M) tends to emphasize similarities (facial features, eyes, hair, dress, customs, etc.) of the foreigner, then A and B

develop positive attitudes toward the actual object, i. e. foreigner. If differences are emphasized in the abstracting process, then A and B maintain their balanced attitude toward each other and their own culture by creating a negative bias toward the actual object, i. e. foreigner. The same holds true when a medium is introduced into the interaction. If A and B hold positive attitudes toward the medium, that is, they believe the medium is accurate and truthful, they tend to bring their own attitudes and beliefs about object O in line with the image produced by the medium. A and B then reinforce each other's attitudes toward actual foreigners based upon their favorable responses to the media. When reacting with a foreigner face to face both A and B maintain cognitive balance (i. e., attitudinal compatibility) by making their perceptions of the foreigner fit the positive or negative stereotypes created by their own interpersonal interactions and their interactions with media images.

This model also allows for differing responses when A and B develop opposing attitudes, either through interactions with actual foreigners or media images. A person who may have a strong positive bias toward Cubans might react negatively to media images which emphasize differences and maintain balance by rejecting persons who have accepted the negative media stereotype. Or, that person may tend to accept the positive images presented in books and films and reject the negative images presented on television. In any case, there is always an interconnection among interpersonal interaction, and media stereotype.

Furthermore, it should be recognized that although this model is based upon the dyadic encounter, it is representative of thousands of interactions going on in any national group. For example, thousands of persons (represented as A) interact with the mediated image of a foreigner presented on a TV newscast (represented by M) who in turn interact with thousands of persons (represented by B) who also interact with the same TV image. In each case they would work out a balance of attitudes and through this interaction create a strongly biased national stereotype of a group of foreigners. Should any member of that national group interact directly with an individual foreigner we might expect that person would try to maintain cognitive balance by filtering perceptions of the actual foreigner to fit the stereotyped image created by the media encounter.

Finally, we should understand that the institution of mass media is itself influenced by the stereotypical attitudes of the national culture which it has helped produce. The reverberating nature of stereotyping embraces the creators of media images as well as part of the A-B-O-M relationships. Therefore, the media images produced by the creators of media are a result of their own balancing of interactions with others, with mediated images and with face to face encounters with foreigners. The coterie of editorial and production staff who are instrumental in the creation of media images are human beings with attitudes, values, and emotions that they share with the consumer world.

All these persons have their own stereotypical attitudes which influence what they see, what they select, and how they interpret the image of foreigners. The producer of a film documentary on the changing role of women in Italy might consciously or unconsciously seek out women who are dark haired, heavy set, loud voiced, and come from large families as subjects for the study. The editor of a TV news broadcast might edit all scenes of the arriving Japanese delegates except those which show them bowing and smiling. In this way, the already established stereotypical attitudes play a part in determining which images of foreigners reach us. There is a continual process of selecting, sharpening, and distorting carried on by those who produce and transmit media images and this reinforces already established stereotypes. This process is repeated thousands of times in our media. When this becomes the main source of our information about foreigners, it is easy to see how these media images become stereotypes which influence our personal encounters.

IV

Ultimately, the question that must be asked is how do we cope with stereotypes? How should we react to the ubiquitous media stereotype? The answer is to be found, not in the elimination of media stereotypes or in the control of media producers, but in a heightened awareness of the form and function of stereotyping and in an acceptance of our own responsibility to critically process media information.

It is our conviction that effective communication carries with it the responsibility of awareness and understanding. It is particularly important that our interactions with foreigners be approached with sensitivity to the biases, preconceptions and needs we bring to the encounter. We can suggest at least five cross cultural interactional ideas that we should constantly be aware of:

- 1) We should learn to distinguish individual differences among members of other cultures;
- 2) We should be accepting of differences as well as similarities;
- 3) We should be able to understand our own biases and their sources;
- 4) We should be open to new experiences unblocked by stereotypical responses;
- 5) We should seek a wide variety of media portrayals of foreigners.

On another level, there is a need to counteract the destructive, dysfunctional stereotypes which seek to demean and villify other groups of people. One counteracts this through conscious correction, applied reason, and appropriate response to both those with whom we interact and to the media which facilitate such distortions. Our dependence upon mediated information and entertainment suggests an additional type of responsibility; that of understanding the process and the grammar of the media world. This means that we go beyond the

role of media consumer and become active critics of the media, its forms and its functions. It requires that we not merely look at a photograph or film but that we understand how the camera works and how projected filmic images shape our perceptions of reality. It becomes necessary to understand the television production process if one is to judge the degree to which images and ideas have been manipulated, distorted and altered. In other words, media literacy is as important to our understanding of stereotyping and improved cross cultural communication as is direct, first hand knowledge of another culture.

Zusammenfassung – Summary – Résumé

In diesem Essay wird der Gebrauch der Stereotype als inhärente Funktion aller Massenmedien gedeutet und die Rolle von Faksimile und Wahrscheinlichkeit als wichtigste Kriterien bei der Schaffung von Medien-Stereotypen erläutert. Außerdem wird ein Kommunikations-Modell der Medien-Stereotypen vorgeschlagen, das auf *Heiders* Gleichgewichtstheorie von Einstellung und Verhaltensänderung beruht. Das Modell berücksichtigt insbesondere die Wechselwirkung von Mediendarstellung von Ausländern und zwischenmenschlichen Kontakten mit ihnen.

This essay explains stereotyping as an inherent function of all the mass media and sets forth the role of facsimile and verisimilitude as primary criteria for processing media stereotypes. In addition, a communication model of media stereotyping is proposed based upon *Heider's* balance theory of attitude and behavior change. The model focuses on the dynamics of the interaction of media images of foreigners and interpersonal contact with foreigners.

Cette étude explique le stéréotype comme une fonction inhérente de tous les mass media et établit le rôle du facsimilé et de la vraisemblance comme critères primaires dans le développement des stéréotypes des media. De plus, cette étude propose un modèle de communication du stéréotype des media, fondé sur la théorie de balance d'*Heider* qui a à faire avec l'attitude et avec le changement de conduite. Le modèle se concentre sur la dynamique de l'interaction des images-media des étrangers et du contact interpersonnel avec des étrangers.

