

Maria Kyriakidou*

Stereotyping the Foreigner: Revisiting Gumpert & Cathcart's Seminal Contribution

Gumpert, G. & Cathcart, R. (1983). Media Stereotyping: Images of the Foreigner. *Communications*, 9(1), 103–112.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.1983.9.1.103>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2024-0183>

Abstract: Media stereotypes have been a persistent concern in media and communication studies, especially in the context of mediated images of cultural and national others. This paper discusses Gumpert and Cathcart's seminal 1983 contribution on the topic. Influenced by the field of social psychology, the authors emphasised the embeddedness of media stereotypes in social interaction and interpersonal communication. They also highlighted how the media perpetuate stereotypes by emphasising cultural differences. Evaluating Gumpert and Cathcart's analytical framework more than forty years later, this paper argues that little has changed in terms of media stereotypes, despite advances in technology and diversity in representations.

Keywords: media stereotypes, interpersonal relations, social psychology, globalisation, representations

Media stereotypes have been a persistent concern in media and communication studies, and a particularly pertinent one in the context of mediated globalisation and the current influx of images of foreigners in international news and social media platforms alike. It is this context of globalised communication that Gumpert and Cathcart take as a starting point in their discussion of media stereotypes. In their article titled “Media stereotyping: Images of the foreigner,” published in *Communications* in 1983, the authors make an attempt to systematise the discussion on stereotypes and the pertinent role of the media, by bringing insights from social psychology to the study of media and communications. Media images, the authors argue, affect our knowledge of the world and, by extension, shape the relationships

*Corresponding author: Maria Kyriakidou, Media and Communication Studies, Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden, E-mail: maria.kyriakidou@sh.se

we develop with others, how we see them, and how we treat them. It is, therefore, imperative to understand how they function.

Gumpert and Cathcart define stereotypes as abstractions: incomplete and convenient understandings that are necessary for survival (p. 105). The media, they argue, are integral to stereotypes, as they both create and disseminate them by choosing what aspects of the social world to portray and how. They are also so inextricably intertwined with interpersonal interaction that the latter is moulded by them, to the point that interpersonal contacts with the foreigner are not enough to challenge stereotypical ideas of them. The authors start their argument by drawing our attention to two interrelated aspects of the media that obscure their representational limitations. The first has to do with the facsimile—or perceived “realness”—of representations allowed by the technological affordances of the media. The more high-definition and authentic-looking the media image of the world is, the harder it is to discern it as stereotyping (p. 106). The second aspect involves the degree of verisimilitude or the appearance of truthfulness of media images. This perception of truthfulness reflects the assumed intentions of the media producers (for example, a documentary will have a higher degree of verisimilitude than an entertainment film) (p. 107). These two qualities of the media work together to obscure the selective and therefore limiting nature of media representations. Discerning media stereotypes requires that we question the degree of facsimile and verisimilitude of each image.

The second point that Gumpert and Cathcart make has to do with how media stereotypes interact with interpersonal communication. Building on Heider’s (1958) balance theory of attitude change, the authors offer a communication model that illustrates how stereotypes are produced and reiterated through the interaction between individuals, the stereotyped group, and the media. The model is based on the assumption that humans, always attempting to maintain a balance among attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, are influenced not only by the media but also by each other in terms of how they regard different groups and their perceptions of foreigners (p. 108).

It is this emphasis on the embeddedness of stereotypes in social interaction that is perhaps the biggest analytical contribution of the paper, and one that has been largely neglected by later media research. Gumpert and Cathcart emphasize how our perceptions of each other influence how we see the foreigner, given that people tend to be affected by those they like. Evaluations of the media as truthful and accurate—and thus trustworthy or not—further affect the way stereotypes are accepted or not. Finally, when the media emphasise similarities, physical and cultural, with the foreigner, audiences are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards them. On the contrary, when differences are emphasised, given people’s propensity to stick to their existing beliefs, foreigners are negatively stereotyped.

These stereotypes, the authors argue, are hard to shake off, even after face-to-face interaction with foreigners, given people's need for cognitive balance, which means that their in-person perceptions of the foreigner will be tailored to their existing stereotypes, positive or negative. Media producers are also engulfed in this "reverberating nature of stereotyping" (p. 109), Gumpert and Cathcart argue, and, thus, are themselves influenced by the nationally embedded stereotypes they help reproduce. This then means that their editorial choices will reflect these stereotypical beliefs, and ultimately further reproduce stereotypical images in a process "repeated thousands of times in our media" (p. 110).

The paper is theoretical and interdisciplinary in nature, drawing upon concepts and models developed in the field of social psychology to provide insights relevant to media studies. Their inclusion of interpersonal relations in the consumption and reiteration of media stereotypes is an important contribution that helps us understand the persistence of these stereotypes beyond the media. At the same time, this focus on the interpersonal risks losing sight of the political economy of the media that allows for some groups to be more negatively stereotyped than others, a point that is missing from the overall argument. The ideas presented in the paper appear to have been the basis on which the authors developed significant research in the field that gained them public recognition (Ethnic images, 1986; Zverina, 1987). As professors of Communication at Queens College, New York, at the time, Gumpert and Cathcart conducted cross-cultural research by exposing viewers in the US, Japan, and France to existing stereotypes of them in foreign advertising, film, and news. In their conclusions, they reiterated their arguments that stereotypes are reinforced exponentially through use in different contexts, and that they persist even after people get to know foreigners in person.

Reading Gumpert and Cathcart's article more than forty years later, it is impossible not to see its originality and significance, but also feel despondent about how little has changed in the ways media stereotype and marginalise national and cultural others, despite developments in both technology and media literacy. The concerns the authors expressed in their 1983 paper started to more explicitly preoccupy the field of media studies towards the end of the 1990s, in what Ong (2015, p. 15) has described as the "moral turn in media scholarship." It was then that the moral role of media and communications in the context of globalisation started to become a more consistent concern in the field. It is perhaps in the writings of Roger Silverstone that one can find the clearest echoes of Gumpert and Cathcart's arguments about the power of television to shape the social world, albeit from a normative perspective. "All of what we do, all of who we are, as subjects and actors in the social world," argues Silverstone (1999, p. 135), almost mirroring word-by-word Gumpert and Cathcart's writing, "depends on our relationships to others: how we see them, know them, relate to them, care for or ignore them. Seeing them

is crucial.” In his later work, Silverstone (2007, p. 31) described the contemporary world as a “mediapolis,” in order to emphasise how its “materiality is constructed through (principally) electronically communicated public speech and action.”

The detrimental role of media representations in reproducing stereotypes of cultural and national others has been studied extensively since, both with regard to fictional and factual media content. There are three fields in which such questions have become crucial in the last decades. The first concerns studies of migration, which have been preoccupied with the ways stereotypical representations of migrants and refugees in the media negatively predispose host societies against them, thus affecting migrants’ and refugees’ opportunities for adapting to a new life, and their well-being (e.g., Demetriou, 2018). The second area is the study of global news, which has revealed the narrow frames through which the world is represented on the screen. These frames reflect global power dynamics and construct hierarchies of life in ways that reproduce Western hegemony (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006). Finally, the politics of representing the foreigner have been a focal concern for humanitarian communication. Attempts to instigate public emotion and donations through effective campaigning about humanitarian crises around the world have been consistently met with critiques about how the instrumentalisation of human suffering deprives victims of their agency, while fixing them in the public imagination into positions of powerlessness and victimhood (Härting, 2008). Studies in these three fields, often overlapping in terms of empirical focus and concerns, have predominantly studied media texts, thus largely neglecting the social life of stereotypes beyond the text and their adoption in interpersonal communication, which Gumpert and Cathcart highlighted in their paper. Only a small, albeit significant number of studies, have explored the relationship between media images and public discourse, exploring how people’s perceptions of the “other” are constructed through media stereotypes and other pertinent discourses (see Kyriakidou, 2015; Philo and Berry, 2007; Scott, 2014).

These questions about media stereotyping and its role in interpersonal relations and societal attitudes have been especially relevant in the last decade or so, as continuous global crises have tested our relationship with the foreigner. What has become known as the “European refugee crisis” of 2015 has thrown into relief the role of Western media as “symbolic borders” that stereotyped migrants as either powerless and dependent victims or as an imminent cultural and economic threat to European societies (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017). These symbolic processes were reflected in political discourse and restrictive border policies that still affect the lives of refugees. They were further questioned a few years later, when the media coverage of Ukrainian refugees, after the Russian invasion of 2022, broke those patterns of representation, revealing once more established hierarchies in Western media coverage. Emphasising similarities with Ukrainian refugees, the

media coverage, as Gumpert and Cathcart pointed out, contributed to positive attitudes towards them (p. 108). This highlighted even more the Islamophobic and Western-centric stereotypes that underlined the portrayal of refugees from Syria and other countries in the developing world. A crisis of a different nature, the global Covid-19 pandemic, instead of engendering a sense of cosmopolitan empathy on the basis of an imagined global community of fate (Beck, 2006), enabled the re-emergence of Orientalist stereotypes and outbursts of xenophobic attacks against Asian communities in Western countries. In all these crises, media narratives ultimately functioned as hegemonic devices that stereotyped and marginalised the foreigner, while reproducing the primacy of the nation. The reason why these stereotypes were so easily accepted and reproduced is that they confirmed already existing biases, perpetuated by different media images over time, and reaffirmed in our everyday interactions with fellow nationals, as Gumpert and Cathcart highlighted in their communication model.

For sure the media landscape, especially at the technological and institutional level, has dramatically changed since Gumpert and Cathcart wrote their essay. The authors started their paper by referencing how satellite communication, enabling people around the world to simultaneously watch an event, dramatised “the degree to which the peoples of this globe have become linked through the technologies of communication” (103). Today, of course, digital technologies and social media platforms have intensified such links to an even more dramatic degree. These technologies, besides multiplying images of foreigners to an exponential degree, further allow us to directly engage with such foreigners through interpersonal communication. They present themselves daily on social media platforms without the mediation of institutional frames. We can interact with them, talk to them, and even develop interpersonal relationships of sorts with them. The promise of self-representation afforded by social media platforms is that it can challenge established media templates and stereotypes. For example, digital media platforms have allowed refugees to manage their visibility and advocate for themselves (Georgiou, 2018; Risam, 2018), while citizens can document and share real-time human rights violations across the world (Gregory, 2015). This in itself complicates the communication model that Gumpert and Cathcart suggested. As people have the opportunity to present themselves on social media, the role of mainstream media narratives can be challenged and even diluted. This process of disintermediation allows for greater visibility of national and cultural others in their own terms, and thus can undermine established media stereotypes.

Such optimism about the possible democratisation of the global mediated space of appearance has been met with critical work that has illustrated that the multiplicity of voices has not challenged established patterns of visibility. This is due both to the persistence of national and cultural stereotypes within the context

of digital media consumption, and the political economy of contemporary media. Digital testimonies largely depend on established media to reach the wider public, and are thus strategically co-opted to fit dominant Western narratives (Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi, 2022), reinforcing existing stereotypes. Studies have further shown that non-Western content creators struggle for visibility in the digital space (Bidav and Mehta, 2024) and are subjected to global hierarchies of race and culture (Lee, 2024). These racial hierarchies are also reflected in the opportunities for monetisation among social media influencers, which are considerably lower for non-white content creators (Christin and Lu, 2023). Algorithmic visibility is ultimately tied to racial capitalism and embedded within existing hierarchies of power. Despite the radical changes in the media landscape since 1983, not much has changed with regard to media stereotypes as seen by Gumpert and Cathcart.

What is there to be done, then, in a context where both sociocultural and economic structures allow for and even reinforce the proliferation of stereotypes? How are such established frameworks of thinking about the world and other people to be challenged? In the vein of their overall argument, the authors introduce recommendations for effective communication with the foreigner, based on “cross cultural interactional ideas” (p. 110), which ask for openness towards new experiences, the ability to distinguish differences among other cultures and accept these differences, and an acknowledgement of our own biases. They also highlight the significance of media literacy, as the ability to understand the “process and the grammar of the media world” (p. 110). However, what distinguishes this call for media literacy is the way that Gumpert and Cathcart place responsibility for it on audiences themselves. What they ask for is that “we go beyond the role of media consumer and become active critics of the media, its forms and functions” (pp. 110–111). It is perhaps in this view of media audiences as active participants in the communication process that one of the biggest strengths of the paper lies. Challenging stereotypes, the authors assume, is not only a matter for media practitioners or policy and education. It is up to all of us to counteract them, whenever we encounter them. And we can do that, Gumpert and Cathcart argue, “through conscious correction, applied reason, and appropriate response to both those with whom we interact and to the media which facilitate such distortions” (p. 110). This call for such daily actions of resisting stereotypes in all social interactions introduces an everyday politics of inclusion and diversity, and reminds us that change is to be found not only in structural reforms but also individual acts. Even if the media remain an unhospitable space for the foreigner, we can and should still fight against the destructive stereotypes that demean and vilify them.

References

- Beck, U. (2006). *Cosmopolitan vision*. Polity Press.
- Bidav, T., & Mehta, S. (2024). Peripheral creator cultures in India, Ireland, and Turkey. *Social Media + Society*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241234693>
- Chouliaraki, L. (2006). *The spectatorship of suffering*. Sage.
- Chouliaraki, L., & Al-Ghazzi, O. (2022). Beyond verification: Flesh witnessing and the significance of embodiment in conflict news. *Journalism*, 23(3), 649–667. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211060628>
- Chouliaraki, L., & Zaborowski, R. (2017). Voice and community in the 2015 refugee crisis: A content analysis of news coverage in eight European countries. *International Communication Gazette*, 79(6–7), 613–635. <https://doi.org/10.1177/174804851772717>
- Christin, A., & Lu, Y. (2023). The influencer pay gap: Platform labor meets racial capitalism. *New Media & Society*, 26(12), 7212–7235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231164995>
- Demetriou, D. (2018). Welfare restrictions and ‘benefit tourists’: Representations and evaluations of EU migrants in the UK. *Communications*, 43(3), 379–401. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2018-0015>
- Ethnic images: What we see isn’t always who we are. (1986, April 28). *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/28/style/ethnic-images-what-we-see-isn-t-always-who-we-are.html>
- Georgiou, M. (2018). Does the subaltern speak? Migrant voices in digital Europe. *Popular Communication*, 16(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1412440>
- Gregory, S. (2015). Ubiquitous witnesses: Who creates the evidence and the live(d) experience of human rights violations? *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(11), 1378–1392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1070891>
- Gumpert, G., & Cathcart, R. (1983). Media stereotyping: Images of the foreigner. *Communications*, 9(1), 103–111. <https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.1983.9.1.103>
- Härtling, H. (2008). Global humanitarianism, race, and the spectacle of the African corpse in current western representations of the Rwandan genocide. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 28(1), 61–77. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-2007-056>
- Heider, F. (1958). *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. Wiley.
- Kyriakidou, M. (2015). Media witnessing: Exploring the audience of distant suffering. *Media, Culture & Society*, 37(2), 215–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714557981>
- Lee, J. (2024). *Korean women go global on social media: Representation, algorithms, and audiences in transnational content creation* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Washington.
- Ong, J. C. (2015). *The poverty of television: The mediation of suffering in class-divided Philippines*. Anthem Press.
- Philo, G., & Berry, M. (2007). *More bad news from Israel* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press.
- Risam, R. (2018). Now you see them: Self-representation and the refugee selfie. *Popular Communication*, 16(1), 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1413191>
- Scott, M. (2014). The mediation of distant suffering: An empirical contribution beyond television news texts. *Media, Culture & Society*, 36(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443713507811>
- Silverstone, R. (1999). *Why study the media?* Sage.
- Silverstone, R. (2007). *Media and morality: On the rise of the mediapolis*. Polity Press.
- Zverina, I. (1987, April 22). *TV stereotypes of three nations*. UPI. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1987/04/22/TV-stereotypes-of-three-nations/6385546062400/>