

## The Media, Stereotypes, Minorities, Foreigners and the Rest of Us

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The media, and especially the mass media, are an important social institution – some authors rank them alongside school and family, while others believe their importance to be even greater (Thompson 1995). Our knowledge of social reality in which we live and to which we relate draws and increasingly relies on the media. In fields of human activities in which we have not been professionally trained (such as space research), we have no experience of our own whatsoever – everything we know has been mediated to us. Although it is difficult to trace the causality of the relationship between media content and attitudes of the public, it is very likely that media content corresponds to these attitudes. (The question of whether the content inspires the attitudes or vice versa belongs to the same category as the question of what came first: the chicken or the egg? However, many authors note that media environment has its own gravity to which beginning professionals such as journalists adapt, as they consider it a form of their socialization; Campbell 1995).

People rarely realize that the media are not a reflection of social reality, but rather the result of peculiar and highly interpretative processing of this reality. There are two reasons for this. First of all, the media must – in spite of the diversity of their content – offer messages that resonate with the ideas, values and attitudes of media consumers. At the same time, the media produce and organize messages according to their intrinsic rules, which are intellectually and economically shaped by the so called ‘media logic’.<sup>1</sup> Both of these factors are inter-related.

As a part of the media logic, the media draw *on unquestioned and sweeping simplifying judgments* presented as *acquired experience* which society relates to phenomena and groups it is trying to cope with. The fact that media messages contain sweeping judgments and represent – in the given time and society – an unquestioned value has led to a situation in which study of mediated content is an increasingly important and irreplaceable source of information about the society itself – sweeping judgments (stereotypes) present in the media correlate with sweeping judgments (stereotypes) in

<sup>1</sup> We use the term ‘media logic’ in a way that is similar to Altheide (1995), i.e. to denote the fact that everything that becomes media content is processed and organized based on principles of production intrinsic to media and not on the content being processed. This is reflected in efforts to influence the content of media products (for example by actions in the area of public relations). In today’s political communication, for example, only the political entity which is able to make the best use of the media logic can be successful; to oppose this logic is practically out of the question (see also Jiráček 2003).

society. In the case of media with a truly mass appeal, it is safe to assume that such stereotypes will be considered as a matter of course or at least as acceptable by a vast majority of society.

This concept is behind a great number of research projects that employ analysis of media messages as a means of uncovering the stereotypes valid in a society, be it gender stereotypes, stereotypes in interpreting the relationship between majority and minority, stereotypes in perception of representatives of different nations or cultures, etc. Such research projects also function as a feedback for the media, although their utilization in communication activities of the media is rather limited and subordinated to economic pressures (with the exception of public television and radio broadcasters who are – to a varying extent and using various methods country from country – entrusted with the task of balancing the potentially harmful consequences of the prevailing stereotypical views presented by other media outlets).

Research of stereotypes in various kinds of mass media outlets (tabloids as well as ‘serious’ media outlets) and in various social and cultural contexts leads surprisingly often to very similar conclusions. These conclusions could be summed up as follows: all phenomena and groups which appear problematic and marked when viewed through the optics of mainstream society and which are difficult to cope with for mainstream society are often marginalized or clearly simplified after being processed by the media. Such marginalization runs from a simple failure to notice to ostensible treatment involving a degree of superiority a charitable condescension (without any true knowledge of and interest in the issues discussed). Media studies have advanced to examine and interpret issues such as ‘invisible minorities’ (e.g. Gist 1990) or ‘everyday racism’ (Campbell 1995). The first term refers to the fact that mainstream media have a tendency of focusing on representatives of the majority and overlooking the life of certain minorities or presenting their life only when it deviates from the majority’s idea of the ‘correct’ way of life. The second term refers to the fact that although the media condemn racially motivated crimes, they take part in common discrimination and stereotyping of members of ethnic minorities.

An important motive for monitoring media content is the presumed and anticipated influence of the media on the society as a whole as well as on the attitudes and behavior of its members. One of the most influential theories about influence of media concerns the ‘naturalization’ of presented values. By presenting certain content (and certain values), the media produce the impression that this content, phenomena judgments and values are obvious and perhaps even natural.

Sweeping judgments about minorities, foreigners and also policemen, businessmen or all of us therefore gain significance and may hinder or impair real analysis of any given phenomena as well as search for solutions of possible problems. The media, as an important social institution, may become an obstacle to resolution of issues that are crucial for the entire society.

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