Explicating the Enigma Through the Cultural Lens:
Media Stereotyping as a "Ritual"

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Media, communication, and cultural scholars have repeatedly criticized news media's enactment of cultural stereotypes. While their criticism has merits, it rests on the view that communication is about facts and information, leaving scholarship clueless as to why stereotyping by the media continues. This qualitative study, which complements previously executed quantitative investigations, probed well-known, well-worn media stereotypes over a 30-year period and argues that the recurrent use of national clichés in the news media is indicative of the "ritual" function of communication; through this lens, we may begin to understand the underlying logic behind such unreflexive, repetitive, and often demeaning nature of cultural stereotyping. The study's broader implication in the new, digitalized information environment plagued by repetition of misinformation is discussed.

Keywords: stereotype, repetition, ritual view of communication, James Carey, cultural theories, social psychology

One of the most problematized issues in mediated communication is the frequent enactment of stereotypes (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Dyer, 1999; Hall, 1997; Said, 2003; Schemer, 2012; Shaw, 2012). A subtle use of stereotypes that percolates into language and culture can be invisible and illusive, yet can prove to be detrimental to those stereotyped, typically, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. Its historic practices are duly noted as perpetuating the discourse of domination and subjugation by the West of the non-West (Said, 2003). From a contemporary scholarly point of view, it lacks concrete theory and evidentiary studies to pinpoint its existence, locate the problems, and explicate its persistent use in the contemporary media.

In the studies of news media, stereotypes have often been problematized by simply identifying them in media texts and attributing them to ignorance of the issues involved, coupled with audience's unfamiliarity with the culture, religion, and geography. International media scholar Hafez (2007) has said that news media's heavy reliance on the stereotype demonstrates the ignorant and oblivious nature of the media and is exemplified by their coverage of the Middle East and Islam. *The Washington Post* columnist Meg Greenfield made a fitting observation—as cited in Hafez's (2007) book—on the failure of the American media to comprehend the complexity of Middle East geopolitics. One essential challenge was to caricaturing

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and stereotyping the Arabs, obscuring observers' understanding of the serious geopolitical events (Greenfield, 1977). While adequately capturing the contours of the stereotype phenomena, scholarly efforts to explain *why* stereotyping continues is in short supply.

In essence, scholars point out that stereotype usage reflects recipients' lack of knowledge. The media employ them to promote reader understanding by inducing simplicity (Lasorsa & Dai, 2007). Employing national/cultural stereotypes is perhaps inevitable in the audience-hungry, market-oriented media because they easily "resonate" with the national audience and thus strengthen the power of mediated communication (Tanikawa, 2018). A previous study (Tanikawa, 2019) found a threefold increase in the number of stereotypical words and expressions in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* over the preceding 30 years. National/cultural stereotyping, in other words, is as rampant in today's international news media as ever, despite the erstwhile assumption that globalization may bring better understanding of the other.

These newspapers of record that purport to serve the most intelligent audiences repeatedly cover the same topics, personalities, and geography of the world and continue to draw on images and perceptions based on familiar cultural clichés. Pervasive among them, for instance, are well-known historic figures such as General Francisco Franco (Spain), Mao Zedong (China), Augusto Pinochet (Chile), and Suharto (Indonesia), who serve as a thematic framework to many a feature stories pegged to a news development. As will be elaborated later, these are "object stereotypes" from which various associations emanate.

An example would be *The New York Times* feature coverage of Mao Zedong's "heritage" in Chinese society and culture such as the September 30, 2019, story about a massive number of villagers who starved to death in Xinyang under Mao's Great Leap Forward policy during the late 1950s–early 1960s (Buckley, 2019). Current president Xi Jinping's visit to the region occasioned the *NYT* coverage. Articles focusing on Mao's legacy periodically appear in the *NYT* and other leading U.S. press, decades after his death in 1976. Similarly, news and features regarding General Franco, dead since 1975, regularly make headlines regarding his political legacy, such as Spain's supreme court's 2019 decision to exhume Franco's body, which the family members opposed (Minder, 2019).

Favored geography includes the Himalayas, Timbuktu, the Amazon, and the Nile, about which feature stories might be written occasioned by a recent event relating to these locations just like the historic figures. Flowing from such object stereotypes within the text are more descriptive stereotypes that characterize and slant foreign cultures using adjectives, as will be exemplified later.

Foreign countries are also incessantly tied, topically, to particular national products/objects associated with them such as vodka for Russia, sushi for Japan, and camels for North African and Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, narrowing and simplifying readers' understanding of other cultures to a few fixed objects. It is hardly believable that lack of presumed (audience) ignorance leads the news media to recurrently return to the same motif. Could there be other, underlying reasons the news media harp on the same things?

This study is an attempt to answer these questions theoretically and empirically. The aforementioned preceding study quantitatively and randomly examined stereotype usage in the previously

mentioned newspapers across three different time periods (1985–2014; Tanikawa, 2019). This approach, however, did not permit tracking particular national stereotypes over time, studying for instance how the *NYT* has produced articles about General Franco over the last 30 years to understand the pattern and persistence of certain stereotype enactments.

In this study, therefore, I take a purposively targeted, longitudinal case study approach following selected topics, supplemented by a constellation of content analytic data, similarly diachronic that add an indication of numerical scale/dimension to the phenomena. Textual analysis will be conducted over the main cases to study the style, patterns, and variations of the stereotype.

Understanding repetition of information, the role it plays in people's cognition, and its structural-cultural origins, has broader significance in the study of communication today, not least because of issues such as disinformation and fake news, where the efficacy of groundless information is partially found in its repetitiveness (McDermott, 2019). The transformational digital and multimedia environment has multiplied the chances for exposure to the same or similar information, and the AI-induced "filter bubbles" suggest that our repeated encounter with familiar information is not accidental. Experimental studies have confirmed that repetition enhances the believability of information even when it is untrue or has little basis in facts (Unkelbach, Koch, Silva, & Garcia-Marques, 2019, p. 2), which suggests that information with built-in "fluency" and a hint of a "kernel of truth" (Schneider, 2005, p. 17) emanating from the stereotype might disseminate powerfully and be believed and may assist in the proliferation of "information blend" (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016, p. 25) that includes other blatantly false information.

This study, with a goal of offering an explanation as to why stereotyping persists and even expands in the media, is structured as follows. After a review of theories and concepts in media, cultural studies, and social psychology, the stereotype will be conceptually analyzed, and I come up with "object stereotype," such as historic figures and famous cities as an investigative heuristic concept. Relying on this quantitatively and qualitatively useful device, content analytic data from news databases will be presented and reviewed to obtain a glimpse of the scale of the textual phenomena (use of object stereotypes) in the news media. Then, we will proceed to the said case study as the main body of evidence to support the conclusion. In so doing, we find a useful framework in James Carey's (2009) theory of "communication as culture" (p. 9) to argue that pernicious cultural stereotyping is indicative of the "ritual" function of communication as formulated by Carey.

Theoretical Background

Scholars of communication, culture, and social psychology have investigated national, social, and ethnic stereotypes and affiliated issues, employing different methodologies (Desmarais & Bruce, 2010; Shaw, 2012; Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018), studying such media as film (Berg, 2002; Dyer, 1999, McArthur, 1982), news media (Hafez, 2007; Lasorsa & Dai, 2007; Schemer, 2012; Shaw, 2012; Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018), literature (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 2003), and online media and video games (Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, & Brown, 2011).

Scholars are interested in this subject partly because media stereotyping is considered a manifestation of social problems, and studying them may reveal deep-seated prejudice and biases that exist in society, such as race, gender, and ideological tensions (Schneider, 2005). Media stereotyping itself may have self-perpetuating impact on the audience (Schemer, 2012). Social psychologists in the "cultural school" tradition point out that media perhaps play a crucial role in originating and disseminating the stereotype (Kashima, Fiedler, & Freytag, 2008; Stangor & Schallor, 1996). Extensive problematizing by social psychologists, media, and cultural scholars, however, has not been matched by explanatory efforts to show *why* stereotyping continues. Here, I focus on the media's drive for and persistence in stereotyping.

On the whole, it is understood that stereotyping, as a form of generalization, is employed to facilitate understanding of inherently complicated world problems for easy digestion by the contextually challenged audience: Most audiences do not have a good grasp of what happens outside their own daily worlds, especially in foreign countries.

The argument that stereotyping is enacted to induce audience interest or to combat ignorance fails to explicate on a number of fronts. It first assumes that the audience becomes interested if the facts are made simple. Second, if the dearth of knowledge and understanding was the (main) reason for stereotyping, repeated usage should at some point obviate the need for it. Rather, repetition appears to be inherent in media stereotyping.

Homi Bhabha (1994) deftly captures—but does not explain—this intrinsic dilemma in his writing on colonial discourse, *Location of Culture*. He stated that the stereotype "vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated . . ." (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66). His "always in place" formulation poignantly exhibits stereotype's intriguing characteristic: It is not only familiar to the audience but has an "eternal" structure; it presents the characteristic of those stereotyped—often negatively—as if they have eternally existed (Barthes, 1972). Yet such knowledge is to be repeated to the point of saturation and excess (Bhabha, 1994), as the production of excess is an integral strategy of othering.

Edward Said (2003) makes a similar point when he refers to stereotype's discursive nature of "otherness" and "fixity." "The tense they employ is the timeless eternal; they convey an impression of repetition and strength" (Said, 2003, p. 72). Both Bhabha (1994) and Said (2003), therefore, acknowledge the stereotype's timelessness and the imperativeness that the stereotype is repeated and reminded as if it *must*. In their formulation, the persistent enactment of stereotype is part and parcel of the colonial discourse, which problematically contributed to the power apparatus of Western colonial leaders. Quite separately from colonial intentions, however, stereotyping as a discourse may inherently be repetitive, communicative, and problematic.

The stereotypical thread does serve as a textual framework to introduce a new set of information (Berkowitz, 2005; Hannerz, 2007). As will be demonstrated, the aforementioned cultural clichés are usually engaged when newsworthy facts arise in association with those stereotypes. But this leads to a more fine-grained question: Is the stereotype only an easy framework/springboard to present new information, or is

stereotyping itself the exercise? Are there persistent patterns or a framework through which information is presented such that the framework itself is perpetuating?

"Communication as Culture" Perspective

James Carey (2009) has argued in *Communication as Culture* that there exist two broad viewpoints regarding communication. The first and the more intuitive one conceptualizes communication as transmission of information. Under this view, communication is a linear act of conveying information from a sender to the receiver, consistent with the modern, empirical model, notably those of Shannon and Weaver (1949) and Lasswell (1948).

The second and by far an older approach to thinking about communication is the "ritual view." In the ritual definition, communication is connected to notions such as sharing, participation, and fellowship. It exploits the ancient identity, the notion, and common roots of the terms, commonness, communion, community, and communication. Communication is directed not toward the passing of messages in physical space but toward the maintenance of society and shared values in time (Carey, 2009).

Such conception of communication has a much older predecessor, as Carey (2009) acknowledges. John Dewey (1966), an early 20th-century educator, philosopher, and communication scholar, said, "Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (p. 4). What they must have in common for the community are aims, beliefs, knowledge, and like-mindedness. Consensus demands communication, he noted. The ritual view of communication is suggestive, considering that stereotypic references in the news are by their very nature repetitive and recurrent (Hannerz, 2007; Shaw, 2012), and per se provides no new knowledge to the audience.

Carey's approach calls for the need to view the news—more precisely, "the news experience"—as a whole rather than seeing each story as distinct (Bird & Dardenne, 1997). Here, the news reading experience should be viewed as accumulative—with the temporal dimension—as well as holistic. In this vein, Lule (2001) argued, news "offers the steady repetition of stories, the rhythmic recurrence of themes and events" (p. 19). In this study, therefore, attention is given to the patterns that are repeated over time and a possible template observed through repetition and consistency, despite what might be a shifting focus of events and happenings in the news, the informational aspect of the news.

Stereotype, Meaning, and Identity

Many critical and cultural theorists have amply demonstrated the connection among meaning, culture, and identity (Hall, 1997). Culture is tied through language to meaning, and meaning is produced—often in abundance—to cement our identity. Culture is thus full of meaning, and meaning is what gives us a sense of who we are and with whom we belong: "So it is tied up with the question of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups" (Hall, 1997, p. 3). Woodward (1997) similarly says identifies are forged through the marking of difference: "This marking of difference takes place both through the symbolic systems of representation, and through forms of *social* exclusion" (p.

29; emphasis in original). These forms of symbolic and social differences are established through the operation of what are called the "classificatory systems," which leads to opposing groups, "us" and "them" (Durkheim, 1995).

Crucially, the stereotype is a component of a culture of the in-group (Tanikawa, 2018; van Gorp, 2007) because it is the enunciation of what is culturally resonant for the members of the in-group. A stereotypical thread functions like a "cultural device" in media texts (Schudson, 1989) and often spawns narratives and narrative threads (Desmarais & Bruce, 2010). Stereotypes render the text significant, resonant, and meaningful for the national audience just like "a cultural device" generally does (Schudson, 1989). This points to a working rationale to reproduce the stereotype other than for simplification and understandability. Stereotypes, just like culture in general, contribute to meaning-creation about the out-groups for the in-group audience that in turn contribute to identity formation (Hall, 1997; van Krieken & Sanders, 2017). Stereotyping the "other" marks and strengthens one's identity, as the other is the function of self (Woodward, 1997). Dyer (1999) argued that stereotype is not only a shortcut, but it is the guarantee of our self-respect, as it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value. It is the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy, he said.

The above references about meaning, language, and identity reveal that meaning is what gives us identity by marking it out. Stereotyping is a symbolic demarcation that gives us meaning about ourselves in relation to and in comparison with others. Historicity and repetition add further depth to the differentiation (Barthes, 1972).

Strategy to Investigate Media Stereotypes

Stereotype typology is not well established such that a broad consensus exists as to its categories either in social psychology or communication studies. As defined by social psychologists, stereotypes generally refer to human traits and characteristics that end up being overgeneralized or exaggerated (Mackie, 1973). Many of them take the form of adjectives, such as Italians being "romantic" or Germans as "industrious" (Diehl & Jonas, 1991), where stereotypic notions are expressed descriptively. Social psychologists with the cultural approach are concerned with such content of the stereotype expressed through language and involves the category label and the trait term, the former as activating the latter (Stangor & Schaller, 1996). "Italians" is the category and "romantic" is the trait term.

Andersen, Klatzky, and Murray (1990) distinguished between personality traits, which are adjectives, and social stereotypes, expressed by nouns. Occupational roles such as politicians, comedians, and used-car dealers correspond to the latter and could be described as "social roles." The same study showed that social roles are associatively richer, more visual, and more distinctive than traits, as they are associated with a larger set of attributes in memory. In an experiment, participants reacted more rapidly, for instance, to the sentence the "daddy's girl" type closed the door (Andersen et al., 1990, p. 195).

Most national stereotypes identifiable through a quantitative content analysis were specific objects that come in the form of words and expressions (Tanikawa, 2019) such as food (i.e., "paella" as a Spanish stereotype). These stereotypes, for this study, will be called "object stereotypes" and are closer in definition

to "social roles." Examples of these object stereotypes are provided in Table 1. Object stereotypes filter through to traits just like social roles (Andersen et al., 1990) because objects tied to a national culture offer the audience associations emanating from the object and may be employed by the journalist for that purpose. Through the known associations, the audience can relate to the culture/country (the category). The stereotype facilitates the cognitive connection between the readers and the reported country. For instance, flamenco dance, which is an object, being pervasive in the context of stories from Spain (category), in all probability activates a passionate image of human action and expressions emanating from the dance. It is further associated with Southern Spain, which gives the audience the impression of a sunny, breezy, climactic environment. Southern Spain represents only a portion of the country that could otherwise be cold and frigid, such as the northeast region. The category label (Spain) activates the said associations such that the category and the various attributes (i.e., weather) begin to gel in the audience's mind even when such broad-brush connection is erroneous.

In this study, object stereotypes were the basis of the investigation for reasons of convenience, as objects can be defined by words and can be quantitatively marked and identified. For instance, an article from Spain about flamenco would reveal the very word in the story. Media stereotypes that are not objects include descriptive statements such as "Italians are romantic."

Object Stereotypes and Data

For the data review, object stereotypes were selected with due consideration to global geography and a range of types of objects that included foods, performing arts, animals, historical persons, geography, and "empires" commonly found in previously described studies (Tanikawa, 2018, 2019) where objects were confirmed in intercoder reliability tests as to which country/culture they belong. Each type included two examples (Table 1). Selection of these object stereotypes was not meant to be comprehensive but illustrative.

The frequency of appearance of a given stereotype representing different regions of the world, categories, and concepts, was high, ranging from a few hundred times to over 3,000 (1,000 was the upper limit for a single search in the LexisNexis database). When a given word appears, such as "Pinochet" or "panda" in the context of a Chilean or Chinese story, respectively, the article as a whole did not necessarily revolve around Pinochet or panda thematically. Rather, they often were on a different theme.

Writers gather up and deploy every word imaginable that is associable to the country/culture and throws them into the text, such as "camel," "desert," "turban," and even "terrorists" in the context of a story from the Middle East, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to enhance the cultural association between the audience and the country in question, a case of "word-level" stereotype (Tanikawa, 2019, p. 1428). This practice boosted the number and frequency of the stereotypical words contributing to the large number of hits (Table 1).[1]

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[1] The numbers represented a steady linear growth from the first (1989–1999) to the second (1999–2009) and to the third period (2009–2019) for 14 of 22 object stereotypes, excluding the case of the "Soviet" (which reached the upper limit for searches). Most of the remaining eight cases indicated a general uptrend,

Table 1. Number of Database Hits for the Stereotype-Word/Country Combination.

	Stereotype/ Country	Media	1989–1999	1999–2009	2009–2019	Total
Food	Paella/Spain	*NYTimes*	84	144	159	387
		Guardian	32	86	146	264
	Sushi/Japan	*NYTimes*	297	435	543	1275
		Guardian	65	160	257	482
Performing arts	Flamenco/Spain	*NYTimes*	258	449	296	1003
		Guardian	113	216	217	546
	Geisha/Japan	*NYTimes*	103	197	117	417
		Guardian	55	65	52	172
Animals	Panda/China	*NYTimes*	106	180	389	675
		Guardian	65	139	324	528
	Camel/Saudi Arabia	*NYTimes*	77	94	132	303
		Guardian	45	39	79	163
Historic person	Pinochet/Chile	*NYTimes*	496	735	375	1606
		Guardian	594	664	492	1750
	Mao Zedong/ China	*NYTimes*	500	423	1151	2074
		Guardian	347	281	513	1141
Geography	Timbuktu/Mali	*NYTimes*	22	48	237	307
		Guardian	17	38	199	254
	Himalaya/Nepal	*NYTimes*	165	213	415	793
		Guardian	128	227	355	710
Empire	Soviet/Russia	*NYTimes*	1000	1000	1000	3000
		Guardian	1000	1000	1000	3000
	Ottoman/Turkey	*NYTimes*	421	560	835	1816
		Guardian	242	380	624	1246

The Case Study: *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*

        Two cases were selected for in-depth textual analyses. The first (*The Guardian*) focused on the coverage of Timbuktu as the African geography of imagination and fantasy and the second (*The New York Times*) on flamenco as a Spanish performing art and a famous cultural stereotype. The Spanish stereotype was chosen to represent a Western culture that is not known to be the subject of colonial discourse and the narrative of subjugation (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 2003) that Africa is. If anything, the Spanish were the conquerors. Thus, Africa, having been subject to among the severest Western colonialization, historically and more recently, to media stereotyping with the well-known coups and earthquakes syndrome (McPhail, 2010) while Spain, serving as an example of a historical conqueror, made for an appropriate comparison for contrast and difference. On one hand, choosing the *NYT* as the material to study the Spain/flamenco

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pointing to an overall growth in the use of stereotypical expressions during the past three decades—in keeping with this Tanikawa's (2019) research findings which examined more precisely how stereotypical expressions increased per article.

stereotype, rather than *The Guardian* (and thus to compare it with *The Guardian* reporting of Timbuktu), had the rationale that Spain is geographically distant from the United States, where the *NYT* is based, thus greater room for imaginary fantasies and cultural stereotyping. On the other hand, the United Kingdom, where *The Guardian* is based, and Spain are European neighbors.[2]

According to Roland Barthes (1972), content is understood as "text," not as a fixed entity but as a complex set of discursive strategies that is generated in a social, political, historic, and cultural context. Textual analysis focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of a text (Fürsich, 2009). Being attentive especially to the cultural assumptions with an eye toward the historic-temporal dimension, the following investigation searched for patterns that were repeated over time, as textual analysis reveals a closer pattern of repetition and style (Berkowitz, 2005). Qualitative interpretation works "in the mode of pattern recognition" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 232). And in that spirit, I observed over time, uses of and choices of words and expressions that are similar or may be different but exhibited similar meanings and configurations.

A LexisNexis word search for the 30-year span to 2019 found 254 articles under the search terms "Timbuktu" and "Mali" in *The Guardian* and 1,003 articles under "flamenco" and "Spain" in *NYT*. For each of the 10-year spans (cf. Jan 1989–Jan 1999, Jan 1999–Jan 2009, etc.), the same searches were performed. Each of the top 20 articles "by relevance" (LexisNexis) was examined for each decade. Therefore, a total of 60 (20 × 3) articles for each newspaper were read and analyzed (*N* = 120). The "relevance" filter effectively limited the articles only to those that thematically revolved around Flamenco (*The NYT*) and Timbuktu (*The Guardian*). In a subsequent analysis, clusters of articles were identified from different time periods and patterns of writing and choices of words were examined for consistency and repetition.

The Guardian *Coverage of Timbuktu* (Mali)

Timbuktu has been a site of imagination and fantasy in literature and creative writing for Westerners, especially Europeans, throughout modern history. In the last several decades, that Timbuktu is a popular object of coverage in the news is clear not only by the frequency of appearance but in depth and persistence of coverage. It is important to view this examination of *The Guardian* coverage as a news exercise with a connection to a news development (informational aspect) and the accompanying use of the "news peg" (Itule & Anderson, 2006).

In the following analysis, I begin with a feature story from the recent period (2010–2019) and move back in time to analyze series of stories to observe the thematic and narrative patterns, eventually going back to the 1990s.

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[2] This does not imply much stereotyping does not occur when the UK paper reports on Spain as is evident from the number of references to "flamenco" in *The Guardian* (Table 1).

2010–2019

On January 18, 2018, a feature story reported from Timbuktu was meant to cover a recent musical concert that symbolically exhibited the resurgence of peace in the city, following the jihadist invasion in 2012. Describing the scene of the concert, it opened as follows: "Gold jewelry glinting, robes changing from blue to green under the lights, the diva of Timbuktu sang of Allah, salt mines and camels" (Maclean, 2018, para. 1). The nut graph that followed below then stated, "Khaira Arby had been away from home for a long time, but on a Tuesday last month, she brought her music back to Timbuktu, the legendary Malian city of poetry and learning" (Maclean, 2018, para. 3). While conveying the stereotypical African-Islamic image in the lead, employing such resonant words as "Gold jewelry," "robes" "Allah," and "camels," Timbuktu is noted as the "legendary Malian city of poetry and learning" (Maclean**,** 2018, paras. 1 & 3).

Preceding this article was a series of reporting on the prolonged conflict in and out of the city and the international court's judgments on the perpetrators of the destruction of historic artifacts, as well as softer stories such as the September 16, 2016, travel story about the writer's journey in sub-Saharan Africa to Timbuktu.

Even when the reporting related to the hard news of war and conflict, as in an April 30, 2017, reportage, for instance, the focus was on the tale of a brave local librarian who "miraculously" saved numerous ancient "manuscripts" from burning by the invaders. The article's title conveyed the point: "Jihadists Were Going to Burn It All: In 2012, Tens of Thousands of Artefacts From the Golden Age of Timbuktu Were at Risk in Mali's Civil War" (English, 2017a).

Here, terms such as "artifacts" and "the golden age" were closely in sync with the image for Timbuktu. Only a few weeks later, on May 12, another article ran with the headline: "Why the Chroniclers of Timbuktu are the City's Most Innovative Writers; Historical Documents About the Gilded City Offer a Visionary Merging of Myths and Facts." Here, the set of resonant words included "documents," "gilded," and "myth," which conveyed a similarly mystic image of the city (English, 2017b, paras. 2, 4, & 6).

Writings on Timbuktu were equally prolific earlier in the decade. On September 16, 2014, a lengthy feature appeared entitled "Life in Timbuktu: How the Ancient City of Gold Is Slowly Turning to Dust," detailing how a city, "Once a hub of Arab-African trade," was crumbling because of desertification, fall in water supplies, government neglect, and renewed threat by rebel fighters (Duval Smith, 2014). A *Guardian* journalist returned to the city only one month later to write on a plan to build a university that draws on the city's "Islamic heritage." The text of the article contained referentially similar language: Timbuktu "is famously remote, a byword for the impossible-to-reach" and that the city possesses "history as a centre of Islamic learning from the 14th to 16th centuries," and that the planned university might offer courses in "the history of its manuscripts," of which there are several hundred thousand (English, 2014b, paras. 1 & 5). Another landmark reporting on Timbuktu appeared the same year, on May 23, an extensive report—3,800 words long—on the impending destruction of cultural artifacts "ancient manuscripts" in Timbuktu by separatist rebels. While also reporting on military activities, cultural artifacts remained the focus of the story (English, 2014a).

Backing up one year to January 28, 2013, yet another article on the "artifacts" with the headline "Timbuktu Library a Treasure House of Centuries of Malian History by Peter Walker—Famous Manuscripts Mainly Date Back from 14th to 16th Centuries When the City was a Hub for Trade and Islamic Knowledge" (Walker, 2013).

2000–2009

In the early 2000s, the Islamic militant angle was obviously absent. But *The Guardian* coverage struck a similar theme. On July 2, 2007, for instance, the article's headline stated: "Timbuktu: In Fabled City at the End of the Earth, a Treasury of Ancient Manuscripts: The Race Is on to Preserve Papers that Document a West African Golden Age" (Rice, 2007). Similar articles on manuscripts and relics with familiar headlines (but with different factual outlines and content) were found throughout this decade.

1990–1999

The Guardian readers were treated to the same theme and details in the 1990s as well. A December 31, 1999 (January 1, 2000, online) feature on Timbuktu presented the reporter's journey to the city. It was pegged to the "millennium theme" prevalent in the news around 1999, and stated "Even in Timbuktu, Mali, a byword for remoteness, isolation and mystery, the millennium is being celebrated" (Vidal, 2000, paras. 1, 2, 3, 4, & 6). The article contained repeated references to "sand," "desert," "camels," "byword for remoteness," and "isolation" (Vidal, 2000, paras. 1, 2, 3, 4, & 6).

Just one year earlier, on May 16, a full-fledged travel story had the following headline and a summary:

> Timbuktu: The far side; It's a journey straight from the pages of heroic fiction beginning on a low-slung steamboat drifting down the Niger and ending at a legendary city in the back of beyond. Jim Shelley sets off in search of adventure and discovers a town that time forgot preserved under a thick layer of dust. (Shelley, 1998, p. 2)

"Time forgot" is another expression for isolated and "layer of dust" is indicative, among other things, of the desert. "Straight From the Pages of Heroic Fiction," shows the image of the city as mystical and unreal (Shelley, 1998, p. 2).

The above textual analysis reveals a consistent pattern of portrayal of Timbuktu: That it is a fabled city, a place of imagination, history and treasure trove of ancient relics, culture, and artifacts (especially old "manuscripts") relating to scholarship dating back centuries. It is an isolated location surrounded by deserts, far removed from locales of civilization. It is prized because of its remoteness and isolation and reminds people of its "Golden Age" going back in history. The news angle (the information aspect of the article) certainly changed such as the jihadist threat and the millennium motif. But the narrative, story structure, and key words/concepts remained constant.

New York Times Coverage of Flamenco

The NYT has taken up flamenco in the news, features, arts, and travel sections throughout the 30-year period.

2010–2019

The year 2018 saw a resurgence of interest in the Spanish dance with at least half a dozen lengthy features on the topic reported from Madrid, Seville, and New York in the art, travel, and city news pages. An October 2 "Critic's Notebook" reported on the flamenco festival in Spain. Following a brief description of the scene bursting with "mini-performance" everywhere, the nut graph stated: "This is Seville, a city that is flamenco mad at any time" (Sulcas, 2018, paras. 2, 4, & 7). The selection of adjectives and nouns included the "Gypsy roots," "fluidity of the arching back," "the rapid-fire footwork," "percussive rhythm," and "clapping" of the hands (Sulcas, 2018, paras. 2, 4, & 7).

A March 6 feature interviewing a dance director opened with a question: "What makes a flamenco star? A driving sense of rhythm. A visceral, almost carnal connection with the musicians onstage. And, of course, impressive technique: crisp, blindingly fast footwork, deep backbends, sculptural arms, fluid hands" (Harss, 2018, para. 1).

Only six days later, on March 12, another "Critic's Notebook" appeared with the title "At Flamenco Festival, Finding the Force Beneath the Glitz," and opened thusly: "Everyone wants to think of flamenco as bubbling over with spontaneity, urgency, and authenticity. Yet most of the flamenco that gets exported to us from Spain arrives intensely packaged with elaborate lighting, fancy costume changes, and star personalities" (Macaulay, 2018, para. 1). In the text that followed, expressions abounded indicating the effervescence, energy, and passion emanating from the performing art, such as "raw vitality," "glamourous preening," "body arched like a bullfighter," all within the initial paragraphs of the story (Macaulay, 2018, paras. 1, 2, & 5). As expected, references included "Andalusia" and "Gypsyorigins" (Macaulay, 2018, paras. 1, 2, & 5).

Flamenco coverage in *The NYT* goes beyond arts reporting. A March 16, 2013, story, for example, featured the flock of foreign students coming to Seville to study flamenco (Minder, 2013). Yet the article had a familiar opening: "Alicia Márquez raises her arms high above her head to get her students to look up while they stamp their feet. She claps her hands hard to keep them in rhythm" (Minder, 2013, para. 1). While noting in the same paragraph that only one of 10 of her students is Spanish, it continued, "Flamenco remains a quintessential component of Spanish culture, embedded in the Gypsy community of the Andalusia region" (Minder, 2013, para. 2).

2000–2009

Flamenco-themed stories abounded in the article in the earlier decade as well—the festival reporting being almost an annual affair and the standard declaration of the topic nearly formulaic, such as on January 27, 2002: "DANCE; Keeping the Flame of Flamenco" (Gladstone, 2002a). The article

spotlighted a young Spanish dancer with a traditionalist flair. A similar but even stronger—bordering on condescension—headline appeared on April 14, 2002: "DANCE; All That's Spanish, Encoded in the Sinews" (Gladstone, 2002b).

A slightly different format came in the form of a book review on a flamenco novel on September 10, 2006. The article, however, was tonally concurrent with all other flamenco articles as the lead unfolded as follows,

> DAME la verdad: "Give me the truth." Flamenco's fierce demand of the dancers who stamp through Sarah Bird's sixth novel is brief but consuming. And in a novel keyed to such a passionate Gypsy dance, the question of pitch arises early. (Galehouse, 2006, para. 1)

Vocabulary such as "stamp," "consuming," and "passionate," not to mention "Gypsy" and "pitch," appear to be inserted crucially at the outset to create a stereotypical trigger in readers' minds.

1990–1999

Flamenco reporting was no less pervasive in the 1990s. A cluster of cultural features on flamenco appeared, for instance, in 1997. A March 2 headline blared: "Variations on a Spanish Theme Steeped in Tradition" (James, 1997). It continued:

> A defining characteristic of modernism in the arts has been a softening of distinctions between "high" and "low," with Picasso's discovery of African tribal sculpture, the Futurists' fascination with the machine, and the pervasive influence of jazz on composers as disparate as Ravel, Stravinsky and Copland. In Spain, isolated from the rest of Europe by the impervious wall of the Pyrenees, it was flamenco, the passionate, quasi-mystical idiom of the Gypsies of Andalusia, that exerted its magical influence on the nation's art. (James, 1997, para. 1)

Aside from the Gypsies, Andalusia, and "the passionate," insertion of "Picasso" "modernism in the arts" and "the Pyrenees" should not be seen as accidental but are the case of aforementioned "word-level" stereotype, a method to generate additional association to the culture, Spain.

On October 12 of the same year, another headline: "The 'Flame of Flamenco' Keeps Alive a Tradition" (Gladstone, 1997). The lead then followed:

> Seville's brilliant sun can't penetrate the plain, cavelike building where the renowned flamenco dancer Cristina Hoyos rehearses. It's a dark, intimate space, reminiscent of the Gypsy camps where the art developed here in southern Spain in the early 19th century. (Gladstone, 1997, para. 1)

The recurrence of the theme, the phraseology, and the narrative explicit in all of these articles throughout the three decades are clear and consistent: They tell the audience that flamenco is a dance of

passion. It is dynamic and effervescent, with flowing movements and emotions, has roots in the Gypsy culture and the sunny and temperate geography of Andalusia. Like *The Guardian* features on Timbuktu, there is an emphasis on the historicity and tradition of the art highlighted by such phrases as "steeped in tradition" (James, 1997, para. 1) and "Keeps Alive a Tradition" (Gladstone, 1997). In all of these examples, a strong association is made between flamenco and Spain as a nation, as both occurred in the headlines, leads, and main text, solidifying the connection between flamenco and the Spanish nation, conflating the stereotype for all of Spain.

Taken together, articles on Timbuktu and flamenco are not precisely meant to give the audience information or to help them learn anything. It is quite likely that readers did not learn of the stereotypical narrative in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* articles for the first time but rather were already familiar with it, suggesting these articles are not meant to inform but to *confirm* what people already know.

Discussion

Inclusion of national stereotypes and the cultural clichés in news articles has become a standard affair (Hafez, 2007; Hannerz, 2007; Tanikawa, 2019) and has been long criticized by many communication and cultural scholars (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 2003; Shaw, 2012). Critics have said reproducing stereotypes in international reporting is premised upon the status quo of audience ignorance, and thus the influential news outlets have, instead of helping the audience achieve better understanding of the world events, perpetuated their ignorance.

Instead of being creative, active, or reflexive, the work of cultural intermediaries involves "habitual, unreflective, and uncritical adherence to well established production routines and occupational formulae" (Negus, 2002, p. 510). Canonical works on the history of colonial discourse duly noted stereotype's confounding nature: That it is something already known and utterly familiar but paradoxically, must be anxiously repeated (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 2003).

If one were to apply the ritual view of communication (Carey, 2009), however, such would be the very point of communication. That is, to tell, retell, affirm, reaffirm in an endless stream what the audience already knows—about other cultures. As the case study has shown, when a certain stereotypical template— such as highlighting the historic and the emotive dimension of the culture—and an accompanying set of associatively rich words and phrases (such as "golden," "camels," and "isolation" for Timbuktu and "passion," "gypsies," and "Andalusia" for flamenco) are established, they become inevitable components of the story— and perhaps into the future. Many of the resonant parts of the article do not convey new information or impart knowledge to the audience. The repetition itself is the exercise.

Observation of the 30-year period indicates that stereotypical communication cannot be understood as separate independent pieces of news, each with its own, discrete set of information (which they do possess). Rather, they should be understood in totality and over time, and culturally rooted (Bird & Dardenne, 1997; Lule, 2001).

James Carey has articulated a historically rooted notion of communication, one that conceives of communication as a practice of preserving tradition, culture, and shared understanding of the values of a community. Rituals ascertain and validate a society's shared values in a never-ending, two-way process. Stereotypical communication is never ending. It is reciprocal between the communicator and the national audience to whom the understanding of "other" is delivered and confirmed for the shared understanding, as "consensus demands communication" (Dewey, 1966, p. 5).

Communication as culture argument does not preclude the news from having informative character (Bird & Dardenne, 1997; Carey, 2009). It may well entail transmission of new information as virtually all news does. The existence of "news peg" in feature articles indicates they are structured to link with previously (recently) reported news (Itule & Anderson, 2006; Yopp & McAdams, 2007) such as terrorist/jihadist military attacks in the case of *The Guardian*'s Timbuktu reporting. But the repetition speaks of an underlying cultural structure—where repetition of the stereotype itself is the point.

But what does the stereotype "confirm" for the audience? And what community function does it play? Superficially, it may allow the audience to fantasize about or fetishize other cultures. Fantasy and myth are helpful for imagining popular travel destinations such as Timbuktu and Southern Spain. Repeating the stereotype allows the image and the understanding of the foreign cultures to coalesce into a simple, understandable, continuous historical entity—adding in a subtle pejorative connotation—while keeping the image of one's own society the opposite: diverse, dynamic and changeable, and flexible with ample agency. It is part and parcel of the act of "positive self-preservation and negative other-preservation" (van Dijk, 1998, p. 39). Durkheim (1995) contented that it is through the organization of ordering of things into classificatory systems that meaning is produced. They provide the order of social life and are affirmed in speech and ritual. Stereotyping through repetition eternalizes the object (Barthes, 1972; Bhabha, 1994) rendering the distinction—with all its otherness and exoticism—as if it had predated today's consciousness, time, and space. Carey's (2009) rendition of communication lays out the purpose of such communication thusly:

> This projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form—dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech—creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing fragile social process. (p. 15)

Reproduction of stereotypes for the consumption of in-group members is a way of affirming the preexisting notion of other cultures and relegating them to simple and predictable forms and identity—to one's comfort—and to validate one's own system of values. It is not meant to alter minds but rather to maintain them. The findings, meanwhile, suggested that contrary to the common understanding of the Western colonial discourse toward non-Western societies (Said, 2003), both cases, Western and African, equally displayed news media's propensity to exoticize and oversimplify the foreign as was evident from the rigidly patterned usage of nouns and adjectives. Misleading, troublesome, and potentially harmful was the association created between Spain, as a nation, and the flamenco culture, which represents only a particular geographic region of the country. The aesthetics, bodily and behavioral images of the dancers, may easily

filter through to the Spaniards more generally. The impulsiveness of the culture, bordering on pejorative, is suggested by such expressions as "steeped in tradition" (James, 1997, para. 1) and "encoded in sinews" (Gladstone, 2002b). In *The Guardian*'s Timbuktu series, the exoticization and condescension are manifest in such headlines as the September 16, 2016, travel story: "The Most Remote, Alien Place on Earth" (Jubber, 2016). Incessant references to the past, history, exoticism, and isolation suggested the city's backwardness and lack of progress and development.

Past stereotype research has amply demonstrated the harm media stereotyping brings to the audience (Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Schemer, 2012; Shaw, 2012) but research efforts have not been directed toward showing why stereotypes continued to be reproduced for the audience. This study's contribution is, therefore, to have pointed to the underlying cultural logic behind media's ceaseless and timeless reliance on cultural clichés and that is it is indicative of the ritual aspect of communication. This could potentially explain other forms of stereotyping such as those of racial, sexual, and ideological nature. Yet it would be the burden of future research to probe *when* and *how* a cultural cliché attains the status of a ritual, such that it becomes embedded in our culture. We discuss this study's broader implication below.

Conclusion

When scholars see recurrent national cultural stereotypes being embedded in news media articles, they might be troubled by the mindless repetition and the perpetuation of audience ignorance about the world happenings. But it should not surprise them, given the cultural imperatives of the news media (Lull, 2000; Schudson, 1989). Such practices reflect the ritual function of communication. Through such cultural practices, they draw from and contribute to and amplify the classificatory system—subtly othering and exoticizing the out-groups and distinguishing them from the in-group. Problematically, they conflate the stereotype for all members of a larger, complex, and diverse society such as Spain.

The problematic dimension will likely continue and may even amplify. Laboratory experiments confirm that repetition of information increases perceived accuracy of statements (Hasher, Goldstein, & Toppino, 1977; Unkelbach et al., 2019) even when the plausibility is low (Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2018) in what is known as "repetition induced truth effect" (Unkelbach et al., 2019, p. 247). It stands to reason that stereotypical information, with its nucleus of truth hypothesis, will likely disseminate powerfully among those who are new to the information, suggesting ever proliferating stereotypical perceptions/understanding (of "other") among members of the audience. Unquestionably, stereotypes arrive from multiple sources of news and media genres (i.e., movies, advertising, and social media), thus the exposure to them could be extensive.

We fully recognize that the new media ecology with its AI-shaped "filter bubbles" may have exacerbated the information environment where group polarization and people aggregation around shared beliefs and narratives—fertile grounds for stereotype formation, dissemination, and acceptance—are becoming acute, highlighted by distribution of misinformation that is well catered to audience schema and emotional needs (Bessi et al., 2015; McDermott, 2019).

The stereotype, perhaps a lesser evil than disinformation, fake news, rumors, untruths, and half-truths, should be continued to be investigated, monitored, and analyzed, perhaps in relation to its more problematic cousins, as such types of information mingle with each other and are reinforced in "factitious information blends" (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016). Despite the long history of research behind it, the stereotype's enigma has not been fully resolved. As audience fragmentation and group polarization progress, the stereotype and its group dividing mechanism are taking on new significance in the networked information era, possibly serving as a lubricant for the dissemination of other components in the information package. For instance, fake news about a foreign country might resonate strongly if it plays up its stereotypically perceived images, reinforcing the harm/negativity by strengthening believability. Comprehending stereotype's mechanisms including its cultural-structural origins may help unlock the logic of problematic communication that has come to plague the information environment we inhabit. Our differing worldviews, driven by the sociocultural and ideological imperatives and our inclinations to gravitate toward familiar, comfortable narratives (what we want to believe in) organized around the dictates of our cultures and group identity (which create the desire to repeat the same information), may be at the heart of the communicative problems we face today.

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