STEREOTYPING – A Typical Hurdle in Mass Communication

Ever since the emergence of mass communication, the media has been facing a problem of stereotyping in sending information across. This perhaps is the only area which even a layman can easily point out to and hold the mass media responsible for practicing and promoting what, by a common sense, is far from reality.

Although stereotyping has its origin from ordinary human communication and the chronic problem which mankind is finding difficult to ward off, it has been strengthened particularly by the media of mass communication over the years.

Media stereotypes are some time inevitable, especially in the advertising, entertainment and news industries, which need as wide an audience as possible to quickly understand information. Stereotypes act like codes that give audiences a quick, common understanding of a person or group of people—usually relating to their class, ethnicity or race, gender, social role or occupation – true or false is left on the people who receive the information.

As we get close to understanding the mass communication in its various forms, it is pertinent to mark this peculiar area which is widely in practice in news, views, scripts, TV radio shows and, honestly, in common remarks on mass media.

What is stereotyping?

Stereotypes are ideas held by some individuals about members of particular groups, based solely on their attitude. They are often used in a negative or prejudicial sense and are frequently used to justify certain discriminatory behaviors.

Stereotypes are a generalization of characteristics; they reduce complexity, provide stability and also can offer opportunities to identify themselves with others.

In common practice we assume a certain attitude by a group of people and start using our assumption as a reality and thereafter all our analysis are based on our assumption. Problem is compounded when listeners (receivers) also starting taking the assumption for granted and so a wrong done once continues to cast shadows in our communication which at times results in complete disaster.

Global Phenomenon

The stereotyping in communication, which has its origin in printing process, is a global phenomenon and hurting the mass media alike all over. The preoccupied assumption about people, or group of people in the form of nationality, ethnicity and cast and in business matters, is holding strong ground in communication and the experts are still striving to get out of this menace. One solution is to make media people aware of it so that its usage may be reduced.

One Example from Hinterland

Pakistan has produced some finest hockey players from a small town called Gojra – besides from Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad and Sialkot. But still Gojra stands distinguished in this matter. Now, there is a hockey coach who has not seen two hockey players but asked to include one in the team. One of the players belongs to Gojra and the other from little known town (in the sense of producing hockey players) of Nawabshah, for instance.
What the coach would do in general, is any body's guess. To economize time and effort and, in his own way to justify selection, the coach would not bet on one from Nawabshah. If he takes in the one from Nawabshah, the coach may be criticized for experimentation, favoring or showing prejudice to Gojra etc. Who can risk against such strong stereotyping.

Stereotype Groups
Not in sports, but stereotyping is found in scores of ways. Let's see the common stereotype groups based on:

- Age
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Nationality
- Religious belief
- Profession
- Social class

Stereotypes can also be based on an individual's physical size, handicaps or other characteristic like the blinds.

About all the above mentioned groups we attach a particular behavior and characteristics which, if examined individually on every member of the group, may not prove true.

Islamic (religious) Approach
Every individual is responsible for its individual deeds and not be seen as what cast, creed or tribe he/she belongs to at the time of justice on dooms day, is only to defy stereotyping approach towards human beings.

Media transform assumptions into realities
The sore point in media stereotyping is that by the (over) use of certain ideas people (receivers) start believing a truth in what is being said. It is a common sight watching plays in theater, or in comic stories especially, to portray a group of people standing for certain characteristics. The worst is ethnic division. In early Urdu dramas, the role of baser nature characters was assigned to certain ethnic people, it continued in TV plays for sometime till a strong voices in opposition were raised.

Commercial Interest in Stereotyping – A Case Study
This example has been taken from US media where stereotyping is being opposed very vehemently in recent years.

Beauty Image in the Media
Images of female sell everything from food to cars. Popular film and television actresses are becoming younger, taller and thinner. Some have even been known to faint on the set from lack of food. Women's magazines are full of articles urging that if they can just lose those last twenty pounds, they'll have it all—the perfect marriage, loving children and a rewarding career.

Why are standards of beauty being imposed on women? The roots, some analysts say, are economic. By presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain the cosmetic and diet product industries are assured of growth and profits. And it's no accident that youth is increasingly promoted, along with
thinness, as an essential criterion of beauty. If not all women need to lose weight, for sure they’re all aging, says the Quebec Action Network for Women’s Health in its 2001 report (French) Changements sociaux en faveur de la diversité des images corporelles. And, according to the industry, age is a disaster that needs to be dealt with.

The stakes are huge. On the one hand, women who are insecure about their bodies are more likely to buy beauty products, new clothes, and diet aids. It is estimated that the diet industry alone is worth $100 billion (U.S.) a year. On the other hand, research indicates that exposure to images of thin, young, air-brushed female bodies is linked to depression, loss of self-esteem and the development of unhealthy eating habits in women and girls.

How much stereotyping can damage a group is so much despised by experts. To quote one;

"We don’t need Afghan-style burquas to disappear as women. We disappear in reverse—by revamping and revealing our bodies to meet externally imposed visions of female beauty."
Robin Gerber, author and motivational speaker

The American research group Anorexia Nervosa & Related Eating Disorders, Inc. says that one out of every four college-aged women uses unhealthy methods of weight control—including fasting, skipping meals, excessive exercise, laxative abuse, and self-induced vomiting.

In 2003, Teen magazine reported that 35 per cent of girls 6 to 12 years old have been on at least one diet, and that 50 to 70 per cent of normal weight girls believe they are overweight.

Media activist Jean Kilbourne concludes, "Women are sold to the diet industry by the magazines we read and the television programs we watch, almost all of which make us feel anxious about our weight."

Unattainable Beauty
Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that media images of female beauty (stereotyping) are unattainable for all but a very small number of women. Researchers generating a computer model of a woman with Barbie-doll proportions, for example, found that her back would be too weak to support the weight of her upper body, and her body would be too narrow to contain more than half a liver and a few centimeters of bowel. A real woman built that way would suffer from chronic diarrhea and eventually die from malnutrition.

Still, the number of real life women and girls who seek a similarly underweight body is epidemic, and they can suffer equally devastating health consequences, due to unhindered use of stereotyping in the mass media.

Self-Improvement or Self-Destruction
The barrage of messages about thinness, dieting and beauty tells "ordinary" women that they are always in need of adjustment—and that the female body is an object to be perfected. (This the media does not say about men. Why? Because they are not stereotyped this way).

Jean Kilbourne argues that the overwhelming presence of media images of painfully thin women means that real women’s bodies have become invisible in the mass media. The real tragedy, she says, is that many women internalize these stereotypes, and judge themselves by the beauty industry's standards. Women learn to compare themselves to other women. This focus on beauty and desirability "effectively destroys any awareness and action that might help to change that climate."
This case study does not end here. In fact all stereotyping used so frequently in the mass media fetches the same result. It is here that students of mass communication are told to be aware of using terms which carry stereotyping more carefully and in the sense that they may not be used at the cost of individuals in the groups formed by the stereotyping-approach for its own convenience.