

RUNNING HEAD: Image Theory and International News

Effects of international stories, previous knowledge, and credibility on images of foreign
nations: An image theory perspective
(Extended abstract)

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Abstract

The effects of stereotypical depiction of national out-groups in online international news stories are studied from the image theory perspective. In particular, the paper aims at exploring how depictions of nations as allies, enemies, barbarians, and dependents influence individuals' impressions of these nations and the tendencies to support different foreign policies targeting these nations. Taking in consideration that previous knowledge and experiences as well as news story credibility might affect evaluations of nations, we propose a model where previous knowledge moderates the effects of stereotyping, and perceived story credibility mediates the relationships between news story depictions and attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. A 4 (Image) x 2 (Stereotyping) mixed experimental design is proposed to study the effects of international news stories. The results of a pretest study are reported. The data are currently being collected for the primary experiment.

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Ninety years ago, Walter Lippmann (1922) wrote about social stereotypes and culture that defines how we see the world. Since then, research on social stereotypes, or well-learned beliefs, evaluations, and theories about representatives of different social groups (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996), has been constantly developing. Stereotypes are important tools of social categorization as they help individuals to process information effectively and save cognitive resources (Brewer, 2007). However, stereotypical perceptions can lead to undesirable consequences such as negative evaluations of out-groups, intergroup discrimination and hatred, and support of violent actions toward the “Other” (Brewer, 2007). This paper aims at exploring how media contribute to intergroup communication by depicting foreign nations in stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent ways. We take the image theory approach (Alexander, Brewer, & Herrmann, 1999; Alexander, Brewer, & Libingston, 2005; Brewer, 2007) to examine the effects of international news on readers’ impressions of other nations and the support of certain foreign policies toward these nations.

Image is an organized stereotype of an out-group, or, in international relations, a nation (Alexander, Brewer, & Herrmann, 1999). The image of a nation is defined based on three components: perceived goal compatibility; perceived political and economic power; and, perceived cultural status. These factors determine cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements of image. The cognitive component refers to perceptions of nations as allies, enemies, barbarians, and dependents. An ally is a nation with equal power and status whose goals are compatible with those of an in-group nation. Enemies may have

equal power and status, but their goals are incompatible with those of the in-group. In the case when power is equal or higher, goals are incompatible, and cultural status is lower, the country is thought to be barbarian. Dependent nations are characterized by goal incompatibility, low status and power (Brewer & Alexander, 2002). Each image corresponds to a particular intergroup emotion and intention to behave (Alexander, Brewer, & Libingston, 2005; Brewer, 2007; Brewer & Alexander, 2002). Based on the image theory propositions, we hypothesize that,

H1: The depiction of a nation having certain levels of perceived goal compatibility, power, and status would affect individuals' impressions of this nation and the tendencies to act according to these impressions.

Stereotypes are cognitive, knowledge-based structures (Devine, 1989; Dovidio, Evans, & Tyler, 1986), which means that images of particular nations depend on individuals' previous learning. The more an image is supported by previous knowledge, the stronger the stereotype, thus, the more difficult it is to change (Stangor & McMillan, 1992). The level of knowledge about each country is hypothesized to moderate the effects of international news stories.

H2: Individuals with lower levels of knowledge about foreign nations would be more likely to accept stereotype-inconsistent information about these nations than individuals with higher levels of knowledge.

Previous studies (Leshner, 2006) found that stereotype-inconsistent information presented in news stories reduces story credibility. We consider credibility as mediating the effects of international news stories.

H3: Perceived credibility level would influence the effects of stereotype-consistent and stereotype-violating news stories on individuals' impressions of and behavioral intentions toward foreign nations.

Method

A 4 (Image: ally vs. enemy vs. barbarian vs. dependent) x 2 (Stereotyping: image-consistent vs. image-inconsistent) mixed experimental design is utilized in this study. *Image* is a within-subject factor and has four levels. According to each of four cognitive schemas, foreign nations are described in international news stories with certain levels of goal compatibility, power, and status. *Stereotyping* is a between-subject factor with two levels. Four countries were picked to relate to particular images: the United Kingdom (ally), Iran (enemy), Taiwan (barbarian), and Somalia (dependent). In stereotype-consistent news stories, nations and images match while in stereotype-inconsistent stories, nations are depicted in a non-stereotypical way. *Previous knowledge* is measured by multiple-choice and open-ended questions. *Perceived credibility* is a five-item index including fairness, trustworthiness, accuracy, comprehensiveness, and bias measured on 7-point scales. Dependent measures include a three-component image measured on multiple scales (Alexander, Brewer, & Libingston, 2005) and behavioral intentions toward foreign nations.

The experimental procedure starts with previous knowledge questions. Then, participants read four international news stories corresponding to four images (all stories are stereotype-consistent in one group and stereotype-violating in another group). After reading each story, participants rate their impressions of each nation, behavioral

intentions, and perceived story credibility on 7-point scales. Demographic and media use questions are asked at the end.

Preliminary results

Twenty eight participants pretested international news stories for the primary experiment. The pretest consisted of two stages. First, nations' depictions were tested without references to country names. Participants rated each depiction on a 9-point scale as corresponding to images of ally, enemy, barbarian, and dependent. As a series of paired-sample t-tests showed (Tables 1 and 2), all stories were found to be consistent with assigned images. The depiction of ally received the highest ally rating and was significantly higher than the ally rating for three other depictions. Expected results were found for the depictions of enemy and dependent. Although the depiction of barbarian received the highest rating as a barbarian and was rated significantly higher than the depictions of ally and enemy, it did not differ much from the depiction of dependent. This result suggested strengthening the manipulation for the image of barbarian.

In the second section of the pretest, we asked participants to identify country names: the U.K., Iran, Taiwan, and Somalia, based on the depictions of foreign nations in news stories. All but one participant identified the country names right. Thus, in stereotype-consistent condition, the U.K. represents an ally, Iran – an enemy, Taiwan – a barbarian, and Somalia – a dependent. In stereotype-violating condition, the U.K. is presented as a barbarian, Iran – as a dependent, Taiwan – as an enemy, and Somalia – as an ally.

The data are currently being collected for the primary experiment. The estimated number of participants is 80.

Appendix. Statistical results for pretest

Table 1. Means

	U.K.	Iran	Taiwan	Somalia
Ally	7.26	2.22	6.19	3.44
Enemy	2.74	6.85	3.07	4.74
Barbarian	1.67	3.48	5.81	5.71
Dependent	3.56	3.63	5.59	7.48

Table 2. Results of mean comparison (paired-sample t-tests)

	U.K.	Iran	Taiwan	Somalia
Ally		t=8.44, df=26, p<.001	t=11.62, df=26, p<.001	t=6.83, df=26, p<.001
Enemy	t=13.28, df=26, p<.001		t=5.42, df=26, p<.001	t=5.97; df=26, p<.001
Barbarian	t=2.91, df=26, p<.05	t=7.90, df=26, p<.001		t=3.20, df=26, p<.05
Dependent	t=7.99, df=26, p<.001	t=3.77, df=26, p=.001	t=.24, df=26, p>.10	

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