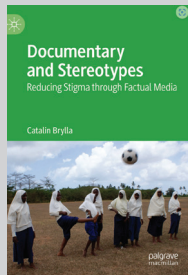


Book review: Documentary and stereotypes – Reducing stigma through factual media by Catalin Brylla

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Review Title:

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If I had a time machine, I would travel back to the noughties with this book to use it for my doctoral study. This would perhaps save me months, if not years, of perplexity when I conducted my research on representations of disability in soap operas. While the central focus of the book is on *documentary* and stereotypes, the model Catalin Brylla has developed and applied throughout has much wider applicability, well beyond documentary, potentially to all genres in media. His scholarly critical engagement with the constitution of stereotypes, and his reflections on a wide range of factors affecting the way that representations may be received by audiences, are likely to have considerable import for sociology, psychology and multidisciplinary work on cultural attitudes, representations and the multidimensional production of affect. The book undoubtedly has considerable value to documentary makers. He has a clear passion to create a framework, which might take media-makers beyond current impasses in the promotion of diversity within the media industries' content, and in so doing, he makes a timely and far-reaching contribution to academic debates on stereotyping.

Documentary and stereotypes are topics that Catalin Brylla is ideally placed to theorise, given his scholarly and practice-based reputation in these areas, and his clear development of theory and practice. All of this is drawn upon in the book. His previous work has ranged across a variety of marginalised groups, with dominant themes including disabling imagery, blindness, postcolonial identities, and film aesthetics. Any student or media scholar researching the representation of marginalised (or even non-marginalised) groups will, undoubtedly, find both the arguments about stereotypes and the model he proposes invaluable, such is his wealth of knowledge.

Brylla's arguments and the outgroup-ingroup-media-discourse (OIMDA) model he proposes, (p. 19) framework, are multidisciplinary, but his 'dominant research perspective' (p. 15) is social psychology. Although this might be off-putting for those not familiar with such methodologies, he provides clear explanation of social psychology, while making his own epistemological framework clear. This allows the reader transparency in understanding the knowledge, which informed the approaches, methodology and analytical tools for his model and its application. This is enhanced further by a prologue that had made his own positionality as a researcher clear, making his 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1991) evident, an important strategy for anyone who is using critical discourse analysis to understand and change forms of social oppression. Knowing his position as the ultimate constructor of the arguments, alongside a commitment to careful explanation, puts all readers in a better position to assess both the 'objectivity' of his analysis and the model on which it is based. Indeed, my initial resistance to the central place of social psychology (here I acknowledge my own disciplinary bias) was soon overcome by the power of his arguments. This paid off with a much better understanding of the role of cognitive processes in the production of audience affect, especially in understanding the significance of understanding the impact of 'cognitive load' on the desires, expectations and opinions of viewers, for example, in Chapter 9.

His design of the OIMDA model (based on a critical discourse method) is to be found in the second chapter (Chapter 5 – The OIMDA model) of Part 2 ('Analysing Stereotypes') in the book. This follows, smoothly, from a thoroughgoing review of work on stereotyping in Chapters 2–4. Similarly, his explanation of the model is carefully applied to a case study of two documentaries on blindness in Chapter 6. Thus, he provides a clear demonstration of the model's value in analysing and deconstructing the ways in which documentaries 'other' blind people. Here, and in the remaining chapters, his model allows him to place the social and psychological processes of audience interpretation at the heart of analysis. This section flows neatly into Part 3, the all-important matter of how stereotypes can be reduced.

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Brylla's expertise and practical experience in documentary making and critical intellectual scholarship on documentary and filmmaking shine through every page of this book, making it an indispensable guide for documentary makers who are committed to more sophisticated representations. In an era where most broadcasters, film companies, and associated diversity organisations have placed approaches and initiatives for equality, diversity and inclusion on their agendas, there is a clear need for research which digs deeper into the mechanics of stereotype creation and the ways that audiences interpret them, if we are to develop critical approaches to representational change. While many cultural producers, equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) organisations, and research bodies have produced a plethora of reports on industry inequalities and stereotypes, and recommendations for change, media recommendations are seldom, if ever, founded on critical analysis on how stereotypes *actually* work with, and perpetuate or challenge cultural prejudices. Thus, models such as Brylla's are indispensable to the media industry strategies for change, aiding movement beyond appeals to repeated calls assuming, or appealing to, negative or positive representations, concepts that are wide open to varying forms of interpretation. This makes the book crucial to those who are committed to real change in diversifying content, to help us go beyond the impasse.

The British Film Institute's commitment to 'stop funding films in which negative characteristics are depicted through scars or facial difference' (Changing Faces n.d.a:para 7) is one such example. This decision was made in support of Changing Face's campaign, a charity committed to supporting the 'visible difference' community, that is, 'scar, mark or condition on your face or body that makes you look different' (Changing Faces n.d.b:para 6). Similarly, researchers such as Smith et al. (the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative) have shown the devaluing and 'disparagement' (Pieper et al. 2023:8) of characters with mental health conditions, but initiatives based on recommendations of such reports can lead to reductive, and possibly unimplementable strategies for change. The most obvious of these is the avoidance of violent characters who are coded in terms of mental illness, and quite abstract appeals to positive imagery (e.g. Mindframe [2020] and Mind [n.d.] guidelines). Conversely, like others who problematise binary oppositions of positive

and negative frameworks for media reforms of representation, Brylla's book provides powerful, meticulous scrutiny of the deployment of a wide range of stereotypes in documentaries and their potential impacts on a diverse range of groups, which allow us to move beyond easy dualisms to provide more nuanced ways forward.

Perhaps the book's greatest strengths lie in the elegantly constructed arguments and their persuasive powers. I say this, despite my initial resistance; although I occasionally found myself wanting to ask deeper sociological questions about areas of his analysis, I was increasingly seduced by the powers of social psychology to disentangle tricky questions around how and why audiences interpret things in the ways they do.

This is a long book. Consequently, it is tempting to recommend specific chapters to readers who may want shorter soundbites, but I am torn in so doing, especially as the recommended strategies proposed in Part 3 are carefully built on all that has gone before. Nonetheless, I would advocate that readers who need shorter cuts to practical and theoretical approaches for stereotype reduction will find the second half of the book (Part 3) most instructive, especially Chapters 7 (Current Strategies), 8 (Perspective Taking), 9 (Cross Categorisation), 10 (Recategorisation), and 11 (Decategorisation). The epilogue also provides valuable cautionary notes on the risks and limitations of the strategies proposed. These actually left me with more questions, but I regard this as a sign of an excellent book. I guess it had to end at some point!

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