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Readers’ interpretations of visual and verbal narratives of a National Geographic story on Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Using a National Geographic magazine story on Saudi Arabia as a case study, this article examines how pictures and text in a photo story interact to produce meaning for readers. Specifically, it investigates how participants’ perceptions of Saudi Arabia differed when they were exposed only to the text of the article, only to its photographs, or to both text and photographs, using focus group interviews. Participants exposed only to the text saw it as a cohesive narrative. The ‘photos only’ groups tended to jump between photographs without a linear pattern. The ‘text and photos’ groups perceived the photo story as composed of two competing narratives, which made them uncomfortable. In addition, readers exposed to the visual narrative – even when combined with the textual narrative – expressed more stereotypical views of the subjects than those exposed to the text only. The photographs appeared to detract from the text’s ability to generate a more complex understanding of Saudi culture.

KEY WORDS  National Geographic magazine  photo stories  photojournalism  visual/verbal narratives

National Geographic magazine (NGM) is a cultural icon seen by Americans as an authority about the world and its cultures. What began in 1888 as a dry, special interest journal for a group of amateur geographers grew within 20 years into a major source of information for an American people increasingly curious about their place in the world (Abramson, 1987; Block, 1984; Schulten, 2000). The magazine’s original mission was the diffusion of geographic knowledge, broadly defined to include the world’s places, peoples and cultures. NGM has grown into one of the largest circulation magazines in the USA, part of one of the largest non-profit educational organizations and most diverse media companies (Magazine Publishers of America, 2006). National Geographic is also
unique among print publications in that its stories are consistently presented in a photo story/essay format, allowing photographers and reporters lengthy stays in the field to report on places and people around the globe and offering readers extended visual and verbal views of the world.

The purpose of this article is to examine how pictures and texts in a photo story interact to produce meaning for readers. Using focus groups in which readers examined a recent NGM story on Saudi Arabia as a case study, we are trying to answer the same questions posed by Mitchell (1994) and Trachtenberg (1989): what is the relationship between photography and writing in a photo story and how do these aspects interact within the reader/viewer? What interpretations can readers form from viewing the photographs and/or reading the story?

Previous research has focused mainly on the magazine’s overall narrative (e.g. Hyndman, 2002; Lutz and Collins, 1993; Moors, 1996; Nordstrom, 1992; Parameswaran, 2002; Steet, 2000) or on reception of individual pictures removed from the larger context of the story (Lutz and Collins, 1993). This study builds on this previous research by focusing on the relationship between visual and textual narratives within an article. It also extends media research into picture/text interaction by focusing on the processing of a photo story (multiple photos with a text), rather than on the processing of a single photograph accompanying a news story (e.g. Mendelson, 2001; Zillmann et al., 1999) or that of a television news story (e.g. Graber, 1990; Grimes, 1990; Lang, 1995).

The nature of photo stories

National Geographic magazine has historically been ‘[A] dominant force in establishing American impressions of the world’ (Pauly, 1979: 532). More than anything, it is the magazine’s photographs that bring the world to Americans. NGM’s extensive use of photographs did not begin until 1905, with the publication of images of Lhasa, Tibet, in order to fill space. By 1908, however, half of the magazine’s editorial content was photographic (Collins and Lutz, 1992; Poole, 2004). According to former NGM Executive Editor Robert Poole, after 1908:

The magazine would henceforth be organized along photographic lines, on the assumptions that readers went first to the pictures, then to the captions (‘legends’ in the language of the magazine), and then finally to the complementary article, which might run eight to ten thousand words. All three parts of the story supported one another, with photographs providing emotional impact, text furnishing the substance, and legends the connective tissue. (2004: 67–8)
Today, NGM is one of the last print journalistic outlets publishing photo stories.

The photo story or photo essay\(^1\) came into being over the past 100 years through a combination of new printing technologies, such as the halftone, that allowed pictures and words to be easily printed together, and new camera technologies, especially small, handheld cameras such as the Ermanox and the Leica. New publications developed, first in Europe and then in the USA, to highlight these story types. NGM was one of them, along with Picture Post, Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung, Vu, Life and Look.

The photo story presents a sequence of photographs and a story, though it is more than just a collection of photos on a topic. As Kobre (2004: 147) states, ‘Multiple pictures remain individual images unless they are integrated into a cohesive narrative in which the selection, theme, and order of presentation transforms the individual photographs into stories that grab and then hold a reader's attention’ (see also Hunter, 1987; Kalish and Edom, 1951). A photo story is a unique journalistic format, where both the words and the photos carry significant narrative information, while most TV visuals or single newspaper or magazine pictures do not (Graber, 1990; Mendelson, 2001). At times these two narratives work together; at others they seem to present separate stories (Hicks, 1952; Hunter, 1987). Unlike a single news photograph, the reality of a photo story unfolds over space and time, over the course of pages, with varying amounts/sizes of text and pictures. In addition, unlike a television news story, a photo story offers the possibility of return, reexamination and/or reconsideration of earlier portions of the narrative. Mitchell (1994) argues that ‘The relations of photography and language is a principal site of struggle for value and power in contemporary representations of reality’ (p. 281), and that the photographic essay is ‘the ideal place’ (p. 285) to investigate this relationship.

**Photo stories at National Geographic**

The lead author’s 11 weeks of participant observation at the magazine's Washington DC headquarters revealed that the process of production of photo stories at National Geographic supports scholars’ assertion that it is composed of two separate and potentially competing narratives. After the editor's initial approval, a story team is assigned, made up, at minimum, of a photographer, an illustrations (picture) editor, a writer, and a text editor. Since the photographer and writer do not usually travel together (the photographer usually spends more time in the field), the team holds an initial meeting to
help establish a common direction for the story. The writer and photographer, and their editors, then establish their own sources and leads for the story, ideally communicating along the way. Thus, as Lutz and Collins (1993: 55) note, ‘A writer is not “assigned” a photographer to illustrate the piece’. A midway progress meeting is held back at the magazine’s headquarters, but it may not involve the writer, only the text editor.

Consequently, when a story is complete, there may be little in common, except thematically, between the story and the photographs. First laid out without the text, the pictures are edited to form a unified narrative independent of the story. This is especially important since it is felt that many readers of the magazine only look at the photographs and read the caption (Allner, 2000). It may not be very surprising that contradictions can occur between story and photographs. For example, Neuhaus (1997) argues, with respect to the magazine’s coverage of the Vietnam War, that photographs overwhelmed and simplified any more complicated reality posed by the text.

**Picture/text processing**

Pictures and texts speak differently to readers. On a basic level, words are a symbolic sign system, while photographs are more iconic and indexical (Fiske, 1990; Messaris, 1997). Photographs clearly resemble what they represent and they serve as proof that the object existed. Further, photos, especially documentary photographs, tend to be highly metonymic, suggesting to readers that what is represented in the image is representative of the entirety of the subject. Words take more time to process, perhaps leading to a more reasoned response, while viewers’ response to pictures tends to be more immediate and emotional (Hill, 2004; Lang et al., 1999). Photographs are more concrete, less abstract, than words, tied more closely to a specific time and place (Barthes, 1977; Nichols, 1991). This is not to suggest that photographs cannot represent more abstract concepts, but that they are more grounded in the denotative (Barthes, 1977). There are many concepts words can communicate which pictures cannot, such as, for instance, negatives, propositions, and conditionals (Messaris, 1994, 1997; Worth, 1982). Messaris (1997) refers to this as ‘syntactic indeterminacy’. The result is that viewers are often not sure how images relate to each other propositionally. Puzzling out the possible relationships between photographs may require greater effort than the viewer is willing to expend. As Mitchell (1994: 94) explains regarding the differences between the visual and verbal components of a photo story:

The normal structure of this kind of imagetext involves the straightforward discursive or narrative suturing of the verbal and visual: texts explain, narrate, describe,
label, speak for (or to) the photographs; photographs illustrate, exemplify, clarify, ground and document the text.

To understand how the visual and verbal aspects of photo stories might interact to affect interpretation, we look to two areas of research: first, the role single photos play in the processing of texts; and, second, the processing of the audio and visual tracks of television news stories.

Most of the psychological literature on the interactions between photographs and texts focuses on the effect of the presence of a single photograph on the learning of an accompanying story. This research assumes that key information resides in the text, and photographs play a supporting role. For instance, Levie and Lentz (1982) reviewed education research that demonstrated that the presence of a picture leads to better learning of a text passage, compared to viewing the text alone, but only for material redundant between picture and text.

Most relevant to our research, other cognitive psychologists have demonstrated that memory for both words and pictures can be altered by the presence of the other. Gentner and Loftus (1979) demonstrated that memory for what they called a general picture was integrated in memory with a sentence that was more specific. Likewise, Pezdek (1977) found that people often integrate a verbal description into their memory for pictorial information, even when the verbal description was not part of the visual scene. The visual and verbal aspects of a photo story should interact with each other to form a single unified perception of the subject, rather than modality-specific perceptions (assuming all aspects are processed).

As in the education research, media research has shown that the presence of a photograph can facilitate learning the information contained in a story (David, 1998). This is especially the case when the photograph is directly related to the content to be learned (Wanta and Roark, 1994; Wolf and Grotta, 1985). The choice of the photograph can alter perceptions of issues discussed in the story (Zillmann et al., 1999). Photos have also been shown to make a story more interesting to readers, serving as second headlines and telling readers what the story subject is (Garcia and Stark, 1991; Mendelson and Thorson, 2003; Stone, 1987).

Previous research suggests that information contained in pictures is by its nature better recalled than information contained in text (all things being equal) because they are encoded in memory as ‘a nonverbal image and a verbal code’ – what is usually referred to as dually encoded (Paivio and Csapo, 1973: 178; see also Paivio, 1971), perhaps because they are stored as episodic and semantic memory. Additional research suggests that pictures are more richly
encoded due to their distinctive features, thus making them more easily differentiated in memory than words (Mintzer and Snodgrass, 1999; Nelson, 1979; Nelson et al., 1976).

Like the research on still pictures, research on television news stories has shown that the audio and video tracks certainly interact, with viewers remembering a unified gist of a story rather than separate narratives (Drew and Grimes, 1987; Graber, 1985, 1990; Grimes and Drechsel, 1996; Lang, 1995; Neuman et al., 1992; Reese, 1984). Grimes (1990) referred to this as a ‘translation effect’, with words remembered as having been seen or pictures remembered as having been described verbally.

Processing both channels of information may present difficulties for building this unified mental concept of the story if contradictions are present. As Graber (1990: 137) states: ‘In fact, the need to attend to both pictures and words may interfere with comprehension because it distracts from the verbal messages that provide the frame for interpreting information.’ If confusion can occur with visuals that do not contain key narrative elements, such as in television news packages, a photo story containing a narrative could be more problematic if there is not agreement between the channels.

No one has examined how a photo story, where both the pictures and the text contain significant narrative content, is processed. The previous literature suggests that photos and text will create different perceptions in the minds of viewers/readers. Further, when combined, these elements will interact in complicated ways to form yet another narrative, though dominated by the visual narrative.

We build on this work by comparing the perceptions formed in reading/viewing the text, the photographs, or the entire package of an NGM story on Saudi Arabia (October 2003), purposely chosen because the photographs and the story present clearly distinct perspectives. Showing some individuals only the photographs, others only the text and some the complete photo story package, we explored a set of research questions about how readers process these different versions of the story: What perceptions of Saudi Arabia do readers form after viewing a packaged set of NGM photos? What perceptions of Saudi Arabia and Arabs do readers form after reading only the text? What perceptions of Saudi Arabia and Arabs do readers form viewing the complete NGM photo story? Which version calls up more Orientalist views of Saudi Arabia and Arabs? Which version constructs a more complicated view of the country? When story and photographs are combined, which narrative plays a greater role in readers’ interpretations?
Method

Design

In order to investigate the reception of this story, focus group interviews were conducted. We found focus groups to be particularly well suited for the study of the nature of visual and verbal narratives because they provide an environment that allows for extended, open-ended responses – an environment not offered by traditional close-ended experiment questionnaires or even written open-ended response formats. Focus groups are also effective for comparative analysis aiming at uncovering differences between groups (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

We obtained multiple copies of the October 2003 issue of *NGM*, containing the target story on Saudi Arabia, ‘Kingdom on Edge: Saudi Arabia’, a first-person piece written by Frank Viviano and photographed by Reza. Overall the photo story was 40 pages in length. We created three versions of the story for our study: photos (and captions) only, text only, and both elements. In order not to change the layout of the story in any of the three versions, elements that were not to be seen were simply covered with black construction paper. Since this story was also the cover story, we allowed everyone to see the cover of the magazine, a cropped version of a photograph of a sword-wielding Arab. The story unfolded over the same number of pages in all versions, with photo and text size and placement retained. The method and location of the reading of the magazine are highly artificial, with large swaths of two versions of the article covered by black construction paper. We felt that preserving the magazine’s format and layout was more important than the naturalness of the reading experience.

This article was chosen as a case study for several reasons. First, past research on coverage of Arabs in western media makes this story relevant (Alloula, 1986; Said, 1987; Steet, 2000). Second, at this time of war in Iraq, how Americans are forming impressions of Arabs is highly important, especially when many people do not delve beyond visual impressions. Even the then Editor-in-Chief Bill Allen (2003) suggests in his ‘From the Editor’ column the importance of the topic and the role that this story would play in dispelling the narrow western view of Saudi Arabia as consisting only of oil, Mecca, Al Qaeda, or oceans of sand. Furthermore, this story presented an excellent case study opportunity because the reporter and photographer did not seem to cover the same people or locations. Whereas the reporter spends a lot of time talking to named individuals, the photographs are mostly taken from a formal distance, even when in someone’s home, and very few of the subjects in the photographs are named.
While only one article was selected for the study, limiting the generalizability, the purpose of the study is not to generalize to all topics, but to examine processes of understanding.

The visual narrative, composed of 27 photographs, offered a relatively more stereotyped view of Saudi Arabia than the textual narrative (see Steet, 2000). Despite efforts to complicate the representation of Saudi life, as in photographs featuring a car-filled festival parking lot, a cityscape of Riyadh at night, or a suburban family at home, the majority of photographs depict more traditional or stereotypical scenes – a man in kaffiyeh holding up a sword, a ‘camel beauty contest’, a two-page spread of the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, a silhouetted individual dancing on a sand dune against the lights of an oil field, a man sitting on an Oriental rug reading the Koran. In addition, only two subjects are identified by name in the 27 photographs published. Most photographs are medium to long shots, and most are shot from eye-level to high angle, looking down on the subjects. Subjects’ faces are recognizable (because of positioning, lighting or distance) in only 10 of the images, and none look directly into the camera. Feelings of distance from the subjects are accentuated by the fact that only one photograph is a close-up.

The textual narrative covers much of the same geography as the photographs, but further expands on a number of different topics, both past and present. The main theme of the text is the complexity of contemporary Saudi society. The narrative juxtaposes history with the present and people’s musings about the future. The use of direct quotes further helps complicate the portrayal of Saudi culture. For instance, in a passage about the meaning of Islam, Viviano (2003: 22–3) writes:

At one majlis, I asked a noted Muslim scholar, an imam, how Islam’s venerable assertion of religious tolerance could be reconciled with Saudi Arabia’s ban on Christian churches in the kingdom. ‘It was the command of God, conveyed to us through the Prophet Muhammad, that no other religion be permitted in the land where Islam was born,’ the imam replied. To my surprise, another guest picked a point-for-point argument with him. ‘I’ve heard that allusion a hundred times, and nobody has ever convinced me that this is what the Prophet’s words really meant,’ he said.

More than 20 sources are quoted in the article, with approximately half of them identified by name, giving more authority to the information.

Examining perceptions

We randomly assigned participants in focus groups to the different versions of the photo story – text only, photos only, or text and photos. After completing the consent forms for participating and being recorded (in line with
university IRB standards), participants were given approximately 30 minutes to read the article (four copies of each version of the magazine – or at most one for every two participants – were provided). Everyone in a single focus group saw the same version of the story. A trained graduate student moderator then led the group on an open-ended discussion about the story and Arabs. Another graduate student observed and took notes during the sessions. Each discussion was audio recorded and transcribed and lasted between one hour and 90 minutes. A total of 42 participants, all students at a large East coast university, participated in the study. All participants were underclassmen enrolled in an introductory media and society class. Students were given extra course credit for participation. Four groups saw each of the three versions for a total of 12 focus groups. Thirty-one participants were female and 11 were male. All participants were US citizens. The majority of them were white (32). The next largest group was African American (8). Two participants were Asian American. Preliminary open-ended questions suggested that they had very similar worldviews before participating in the study. Mostly, the participants were not regular or even infrequent readers of NGM. Seven stated to have read 1–3 issues in the last 12 months. One stated she had read 10–12 issues in the 12 months. Everyone else said they had not read any issues in the past year. None of them were subscribers. While college students were chosen in part for reasons of convenience and availability, we consciously opted not to interview avid National Geographic readers for this analysis. We feared that individuals familiar with National Geographic might have interpreted the article in the context of the magazine’s long history of cultural representation – as academic scholars tend to do – rather than based on their immediate reactions to this particular text at this particular point in time.

Qualitative analysis was conducted on each set of transcripts to uncover similarities and differences between versions. Individual responses were not singled out. Rather, transcripts for each group were analyzed as one narrative. While a number of common themes arose in participants’ interpretations of the article, regardless of which version of the article they had been exposed to, some significant differences also emerged, particularly between groups exposed only to the text of the article and those exposed only to its photographs.

Results

Common themes

Some similarities emerged in the interpretations of participants exposed to the different versions of the NGM story. For instance, all participants characterized Saudi Arabia as a country caught between tradition and modernity,
and as a society where religion plays an important role and in which women have fewer rights than in the USA. Comments such as: ‘It seems like they really treasure their traditional values, and even though they can be modern, they’re just trying to hold on to that’, ‘They seem like they have tradition in society, and ... modernization’, or ‘It seems like a struggle between, like, the modernism, but then they’re also trying to keep ... their traditions and trying to find a balance’, came from all three groups.

Participants also deemed the influence of religion generally responsible for both the restrictive gender roles and Saudi Arabia’s inability to fully modernize. As one informant, having read only the text, put it, ‘They’re being modern, well, more of the men are being modern because the women are being held back.’ Or, as a participant only exposed to the photographs explained, ‘I would just think they have a bit of a more strict hold over the daily lives of their people because they have laws that affect them much more deeply, especially in the separation of men and women ... it’s based on their religion.’

Also common across groups exposed to the different versions of the article were participants’ expressions of surprise at much of the information encountered. When asked what images the words ‘Arab’ or ‘Saudi Arabia’ generally brought to their minds, participants – who admitted having had little knowledge of the country before reading/viewing the article – spoke of oil, desert, camels, Aladdin, headdresses, and, on several occasions, terrorism. As one (text-only) informant noted:

Honestly, before reading this, I didn’t think of the cash, money and stuff in Saudi Arabia. I thought it was mostly desert, there was oil and stuff there ... To be honest, [I hear] the word ‘Arab’ ... and I have a negative image in my mind about it ... Honestly, what comes in my mind is Islam extremists and terrorists and stuff like that.

It should thus be noted that all versions of the story successfully managed, at least to some extent, to challenge previously held perceptions. Participants exposed only to the photographs were struck by images of Saudi cities: ‘I was shocked to see that picture of the city, it was so pretty. I didn’t expect that, I just thought it was deserted’, ‘I didn’t expect it to be as metropolitan as it is.’ Those having read only the text spoke of cell phones, wealth, and of the influence of American music and television: ‘The cell phones really surprised me. Even the girls had cell phones.’ In this sense, both the verbal and visual narratives managed to construct a more complex, or at least more complete, picture of Saudi Arabia than the one our young participants had formed from their previous media exposure, even if this complexity might have been communicated differently to the audience in different versions of the package.
However, despite these similarities – and despite the fact that both text and images managed to challenge some of the stereotypes participants brought to the study – significant differences in the interpretation of the story arose between participants exposed to each of the three narratives examined. Because the most obvious discrepancies appeared between the ‘text only’ and the ‘photographs only’ narratives, these two will be compared first. Participants’ interpretations of the ‘text and photographs’ narrative are addressed in a later section.

‘Text only’ vs. ‘photos only’ interpretations

Participants exposed only to the text of the National Geographic article and those only exposed to its photographs offered very different sentiments about US/Saudi relations. Struck by photographs of boycotted American products, those in the latter group spoke of ‘ingrained hostility toward [American culture]’, and characterized Saudi Arabians as ‘bitter’, ‘resentful’, and ‘angry’. Comments such as ‘Their kind of culture is very hostile to us’, ‘[T]hey’re enraged by the US mid-East policy’, ‘I would say [they are] angry’, or, simply, ‘They probably hate us’, illustrate their sense of a strong antagonism between the two nations.

Those exposed only to the photographs also focused on the cover as a symbol of the stereotypical image of Saudi Arabia as threatening and dangerous. As one of them commented:

> It’s kind of tough to tell without reading the article, but, like, from the pictures, it’s weird because, like, if you look on the cover, it says ‘Kingdom on the Edge: Saudi Arabia’, it’s got a guy holding a sword. So, you know, automatically, I automatically thought some guy’s anti, you know, war-like, anti-US, are you gonna, like, burn some American flags.

While participants sometimes responded critically to this photograph – ‘I was offended at first, I was like, why do they always have to show someone from the Middle East being hostile?’ – and while they often acknowledged that the photographs and captions inside the magazine mitigated this initial interpretation – ‘[W]hen I read it, I said, well, OK, at least they wrote what it is he was doing, because I could have assumed something else’ – their assessment of the relationship between the USA and Saudi Arabia was overall quite negative. They frequently described Saudi Arabia as a country threatened by conflict with the USA and/or other nations, and several declared that they would not feel safe traveling there, or at least ‘wouldn’t want to stay long’.

In contrast, participants exposed only to the text of the article focused on the problems of *mutual perception* plaguing the two countries. As one
explained, ‘We all have this view of them that is completely wrong ... [I]t just kind of seems like they think that we might have such a biased opinion of them for a nation that doesn’t know the truth, the truth about their nation.’ Or, as another concluded, ‘I think they want us to be aware that they are not terrorists or 9/11 hijackers.’ Participants in the text-only group further commented that American influence might not always be experienced negatively, especially by younger generations. As one noted, ‘There’s probably ... someone somewhere that’s a little bit envious of America and maybe people who believe, who aren’t so into the Islamic religion and who maybe have different ideas about what their life can be like.’ Or, as another explained, ‘I think some of the people look down upon Americans, but at the same times, there are a whole lot of bonds.’

Other text-only informants interpreted the negative feelings toward American influence as illustrative of a generation gap among Saudi Arabians. As one of them put it, ‘I think the youth are very influenced by [American culture] and very attracted to such a different lifestyle, but the parents and grandparents are probably angry with the US for the changes.’ To which another added, ‘[I]f they’re mad at America, they’re probably just as mad at their own changes.’ Thus, even when acknowledging resentment toward the USA, participants exposed only to the text developed a more nuanced and multifaceted explanation for the tensions in the two countries’ relationship.

Possibly due to their assessment of Saudi Arabia as vaguely threatening, participants having only viewed the photographs were more likely to remain focused on the more exotic, foreign, and ‘tribal’ characteristics of the Middle Eastern nation than those having only read the text. For instance, despite their initial surprise at photographs of cities, suburban homes, and car-filled parking lots, photos-only participants repeatedly chose to focus on one image of a camel when commenting on the most striking aspects of the article (camels were not mentioned by participants who did not get to see the articles’ photographs):

I didn’t know they had contests for the camels. I looked at the picture, I was like, those are the prettiest camels I’ve ever seen!

[I was struck by] the camel contest, like, how do they get one million dollars to give for a camel?

It seems like there’s ... pictures of older men ... trying to keep traditions alive, like with the camel.

[Y]ou see cars, and then ... a few pages over you see camels, and they have contests for the camels or whatever, and it’s a little bit strange.
In contrast, those having only read the text of the article most frequently commented on the diversity of Saudi society, the level of urbanization and technological development, and America’s cultural influence – as one of them noted, ‘I didn’t know that they were so influenced by American music and television.’ Rather than describe the country as exotic and distant, text-only participants drew comparisons to familiar places. One of them explained, ‘I think [the article] kind of pushed away from its stereotype that it’s all sand. They actually have suburbs and they don’t live in tents, they live in houses.’ Another noted, ‘At night, the city turns into something else, like LA.’ Or, as a third concluded, ‘The way they portrayed them seemed like any other place around here. The one time [a man] went to a Starbucks. That, just, it kind of makes you feel like you could almost be there.’

This perceived proximity allowed text-only participants to relate, at least on some level, to the individuals described in the article. Comments such as ‘It kind of seems like America in the way that the young people are, and the way they dress’, ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if the relationship [between the young and the old] is similar to here’, or ‘I would say their youth seem similar, like, going to the mall and flirting, even though I guess the young girls are still covered’, illustrate text-only participants’ ability to draw parallels between American and Saudi life.

Describing the lives of Saudi Arabians as ‘really different’, ‘a complete 360’ or ‘a totally different point of view’ from their own experience, participants who were not allowed to read the text of the article found it more difficult to relate to the individuals and places portrayed in its photographs. They commented that, ‘It’s hard for me to realize how people live like that’, that, ‘[T]he pictures, don’t represent any experience that I’ve come in contact with’, or that ‘it’s like … a huge difference from over here’. As one, summarizing the group’s overall sentiment, concluded, ‘Because of the ways that we live, we couldn’t relate to them at all.’

Thus, participants only exposed to the photographs of the National Geographic article tended to characterize Saudi Arabia as an exotic nation far removed from their own experiences in the USA, a nation which they believed was rather negatively disposed toward American influence. Those having only read the text of the article, on the other hand, drew more clear parallels between Saudi and American lives, which allowed them to develop a more nuanced, and possibly more complex, interpretation of the nature of the relationship between the two countries. These differences of interpretation suggest, as we had predicted, that the visuals and the story of the National Geographic story constitute two separate narratives that may be interpreted differently. Let us now turn to what happens when individuals are exposed
to both of these narratives at the same time, as they are supposed to be when reading the magazine.

Reading text and pictures

As might be expected, participants’ interpretations of the text accompanied by photographs fell ‘somewhere in between’ those of individuals having only been exposed to either text or photographs. In some cases, the comments of participants exposed to both narratives fell closer to those having only read the text. In other instances, however, they were more in line with those having only viewed the photographs.

For instance, the text seemed to successfully mitigate participants’ impressions of Saudi anti-Americanism. The depictions of the relationship between the two countries offered by participants exposed to both text and images were similar to those exposed only to the text. They, too, focused on the problems of perception between the two nations. As one of them put it, ‘I got a feeling from pieces of the article that, you know, they’d like [the American perception] to change, and they’d like Americans to open their eyes and to realize that they’re not all extremists.’ They also recognized the possible effect of American influence on Saudi youth as a complicating factor to this relationship: ‘they really set it up in the beginning ... with a lot of Saudis owning SUVs and the guys walking in baggy pants and stuff with their hats backwards, and I think that’s almost sort of emulating.’

However, the text did not successfully counteract the exoticized image of Saudi Arabia that informants brought to the study. Participants exposed to both the textual and visual narratives seemed to be ultimately left with mental images of ‘marble palaces’, ‘people who kind of wander in the desert’, and ‘camel beauty contests’. Like those having only seen the photographs, they found it relatively more difficult to relate to the individuals portrayed in the article than those having only read the text. As one of them explained, ‘I’ve never been to a desert before, so I don’t know what it’s like being out, living in the desert.’ They were also more likely to express concerns over safety when asked if they would consider visiting the places described: ‘With the beheadings and stuff, I don’t even think that, I mean, can you just go to a travel agency and pick up a ticket to Saudi Arabia right now?’ Thus, the presence of images resonating with the perceptions of Arabs that participants brought to the interview (camels, desert, palaces, Aladdin) seemed to work to reinforce rather than challenge such perceptions even though images aimed at contradicting such stereotypes (cities, cars, modern homes) were also included in the article, and despite the article’s efforts to complicate such perceptions in its textual descriptions.
Analysis and conclusions

In his letter beginning the October 2003 issue of *NGM*, the then Editor-in-Chief Bill Allen stated that the cover story on Saudi Arabia was for ‘those who won’t settle for stereotypes’. This case study suggests that challenging stereotypes using a photo story is quite complicated.\(^5\) Photographs and verbal narratives speak in different ways, or at least have different potentials for building understanding(s). The photographs and text are read differently, drawing on different ways of understanding a subject. The linear nature of processing text and the non-linear nature of processing a set of photographs creates a tension of understanding within the reader/viewer. While the fact that different interpretations emerged in the course of this study is not surprising, the nature of these interpretations is revealing.

Our results suggest that journalistic articles about culture do have the power to inform readers and unsettle stereotypes, especially for participants who only read the text of the story. The photographs of Saudi Arabia, particularly when seen on their own, were more likely to resonate with and confirm stereotypes than to contradict or complicate them. As previous work on visual and verbal communication suggests, pictures are not effective at presenting propositional statements (Messaris, 1994, 1997; Worth, 1982). Participants who only viewed pictures were most impressed by aspects of the photographs that confirmed their previously held impressions, even though they did notice pictures that surprised them.

It should be noted that this is true regardless of photographers’ and/or editors’ intent. In fact, our interviews revealed that participants, including those who only viewed the photographs, developed a fairly accurate sense of the photographer’s and editor’s intent, even though they had not had a chance to read Bill Allen’s letter quoted above. Comments such as, ‘You can tell that [the photographs] are organized to contrast with each other’, or, ‘They kind of have some sort of order because the first picture you see is the guy with the sword ... what you think of stereotypically with Saudi Arabia ... Then it gets less stereotypical’, illustrate this fact. This recognition, however, did not necessarily lead to a more complex understanding of the culture represented, as the most stereotypical photographs were the ones that ultimately ‘stuck’ in the viewers’ minds. Thus, even (self-professed) well-intended efforts to complicate visual narratives of culture may not have the expected outcome.

In addition, the presence of a textual narrative offering a more complex representation of culture does not always successfully mitigate readers’ stereotypes as framed by the pictorial information also present in the story. Our results are consistent with previous research that suggests that schema or
stereotype-consistent information is better recalled than schema or stereotype-inconsistent information (Signorella, 1992; Silva et al., 2006; Stangor and Ruble, 1989). Pre-existing and well-developed knowledge structures make it easier to organize information consistent with the knowledge structure. In addition, information that is consistent with stereotypes and other existing knowledge structures may be given greater credibility (Hamilton et al., 1990). For example, children have been shown to recall gender-stereotyped content from pictures and stories better than non-stereotyped information (Koblinsky et al., 1978). Thus, it is not surprising that the more stereotyped photographs dominated our participants’ recall.

The advantage for recalling stereotype-consistent information seems dependent on the manner of the photograph’s presentation. In the Saudi Arabia package not much individualizing information, or information that causes the viewer/reader to attend to the unique aspects of the individual subject and not of the group to which s/he belongs, was presented with the photographs. In the case of our study, while many photographs featured individual Saudis as the main subject, only a member of the royal family and one woman were actually named. Thus, the images portrayed not individuals, but symbols or types, making viewers more likely to focus and recall information consistent with stereotypes. On the other hand, the article featured mostly named subjects who were quoted, allowing readers to move beyond the stereotypes to focus on the individuals.

Further, we found that individuals in the different groups ‘read’ the National Geographic piece quite differently. Participants exposed only to the text saw it as a cohesive narrative. The ‘photos only’ groups tended to jump between photographs without a linear pattern. The ‘text and photos’ groups realized there were two narratives going on and did not like this; it made them uncomfortable. As one of them explained:

Yeah, I would like to have seen the photo spreads more organized in ... one area, so I could just look at that and then read the article. Just going through one by one, I started reading the captions and everything with the photos, and then I’d have to go right back in the article and lose my place.

This study reveals tensions that occur in journalism between form or design, and content. Photographic treatments in a magazine can serve numerous purposes: creating emphasis, drama, movement and often related to cinematic montage (Owen, 1992). Visual placement can serve as an element of meaning. But this continuity of packaging can be at the expense of understanding the meaning within the photographs and how they relate to each other and to the accompanying story. By laying out the pages as the NGM editors do, emphasis is given to the aesthetics of the display, creating visual
interest and weight to carry readers through the story. In addition, this format breaks up the text blocks to be less overwhelming. This is not to say that the content of the photographs is not considered, just that the logic of modern magazine design dictates that feature stories spread graphic elements out across the pages of the magazine. If the photos are a truly coherent narrative in and of themselves, interspersing them with text may defeat a clear reading of them. Interestingly, readers did not raise concerns about their ability to follow the story’s narrative, despite it being broken up by photographs. The linear nature of texts makes it easier to follow the narrative across page jumps and around photographs.

If the photos and text are meant to tell a unified story, perhaps another format is needed. This could be accomplished through explicit references within the story to issues raised in the photographs or the explicit references in the captions to issues raised in the story. This might create more of a dialog between visual and verbal narratives. Another possible format might be suggested by the layout for the classic documentary project, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Agee and Evans, 1960), in which the authors consciously placed the photographs first as a complete unit followed by Agee’s text, understanding that both stories represent a complete narrative in their own right. This also speaks to the way *National Geographic* thinks of its projects. Editors want the best story told by the text and the best story told by the pictures. The intertwining of the two narratives may not, however, result in a third, unified narrative.

**Notes**

1. We use these terms interchangeably.
2. Most *NGM* photo stories begin with a portfolio of large two-page images running four to eight pages. The text begins after that. Pictures and text are woven together until the end of the story.
4. We included the captions with the photographs. As Barthes (1977) suggests, ‘The caption, on the contrary, by its very disposition, by its average measure of reading, appears to duplicate the image, that is, to be included in its denotation’ (p. 26).
5. We make no claim as to whether the magazine actually wanted to challenge reader stereotypes.

**References**


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