

## STEREOTYPES OF THE MIDDLE EASTERN IN THE U.S. MEDIA COVERAGE

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### Abstract

In the United States, one of the most important ethnic groups comes from the Middle East. They have been portrayed by the Western media, including movies, news coverage, theatre, and cartoons. It seems that cross-cultural communication is difficult between the United States and the Middle East due to cultural issues. They are framed as 'terrorist,' 'barbaric,' and 'enemy of the world. They have been portrayed as "primitive," "ignorant," "poor," and "criminal." In the case of the Asian, there have also been some bad stereotypes in the Western countries. However, as it is said before, because Western culture and Eastern culture does not know enough each other, they have negative stereotypes about themselves. Moreover, differences among religions and value systems have a significant impact on the image of the Middle Eastern women in the public opinion over here. Because in general, the American public often has very little knowledge of the Middle East, the terms of 'uprising conflict,' 'coups,' and 'terrorist activities' have not been understood clearly by them. Therefore, the media and newsmakers affect American. Most of American gets information from television, television news, movies, advertisement, and cartoon have given intentional image about some races such as the Middle Eastern, Asian, or African. In this point, it can be useful to describe how these visual images influence people's opinions. In this project, it will be studied the image of Middle Eastern people in the United States, by analyzing the photographs and images of the two important newspapers of U.S, which are called the Washington Post, and the New York Times. It will be tried to highlight that the Middle Eastern people have been portrayed negatively by the U.S media coverage. Indeed, this paper examines newspaper coverage of Middle Eastern during two mounts in 2009.

**Key Words:** Stereotypes of the Middle Eastern, US Media Coverage, Photos' Effectiveness, American Society, Western Cultures.

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## Introduction

Western understanding of other cultural groups is different because they have different religions and family values. Unless they try to comprehend other cultures, there will be serious problems resulting from the inflexibility of prevalent dogmas in various cultures. There are many stereotypes, which have been framed by the Western media such as, Hispanic, African, Asian, and Middle Eastern. Even though there is a significant number who can see the truth, most of them still prefer to believe the stereotypes of nations or regions. For instance, if we look at the case of Africans, it is clearly evident that they do not have good image in the eyes of the Western people as well. They have been portrayed as “primitive,” “ignorant,” “poor,” and “criminal.” In the case of the Asian, there have also been some bad stereotypes in the Western countries. The stereotypes of the Asian are "submissive," "humble," "passive," "quiet," and “try to be like Americans.” They also have positive stereotypes such as "genius," "great in math and science," "overachiever," and “nerdy.”

In the United States, one of the most important ethnic groups comes from the Middle East. They have been portrayed by the Western media, including movies, news coverage, theatre, and cartoons. In this project, it will be studied the image of Middle Eastern people in the United States, by analyzing the photographs and images of the two important newspapers of U.S, which are called the Washington Post, and the New York Times. It will be tried to highlight that the Middle Eastern people have been portrayed negatively by the U.S media coverage. Indeed, this paper examines newspaper coverage of Middle Eastern during two mounts in 2009. The findings indicate that two well-established American newspapers, namely the New York Times and the Washington Post, portray the Middle Eastern negatively. It seems that cross-cultural communication is difficult between the United States and the Middle East due to cultural issues. Moreover, differences among religions and value systems have a significant impact on the image of the Middle Eastern women in the public opinion over here.

## Literature review

Stereotypes are considered as a category under fictional characters in media editing. The character does not change or develop during the narrative. It is usually shown in repetitive activities. Richard Dyer (1977:29) distinguishes between social categories and stereotypes. While genres usually refer to people living within the rules determined by society, narratives and stereotypes are more likely to be patterns that break the rules and are open to go beyond it. For example, film and series creators do not have to spend a lot of time describing the character, as the body language or clothing style in the character helps to create this perception.

The U.S newspapers frame the image of the Middle Eastern. First of all, it is necessary to realize how the Middle Eastern have been portrayed by the media coverage. *The U.S. Media and the Middle East: Image and Perception*, edited by Yahya R. Kamalipour in 1995, is a study of the presentation of Middle Eastern images in the U.S. media coverage. Central to this book is the thesis that media images of the Middle East and Islam have been reported negatively in the U.S. media coverage. Because the American public often has very little knowledge of the Middle East, the terms of ‘uprising conflict,’ ‘coups,’ and ‘terrorist activities’ have not been

clearly understood by them. Therefore, the media and newsmakers affect American. According to Kamalipour, media images of the Middle East are unrealistic and may create false realities. The major issue of the book, *The U.S. Media and the Middle East: Image and Perception*, is that the continual circulation and repetition of representation of the Middle East society influences American perceptions and actions, and in the end, this representation becomes the reality of Middle Eastern people. However, according to the authors, these kinds of presentations can be described as an assimilation of the minds of people. For this reason, one of the authors suggests “instead of relying on xenophobic, stereotypical media images” of the Arabs and Muslims, “Westerners can begin to listen to and learn from Middle Easterners themselves to provide us with a truer picture.”

In addition to Kamalipour, in the article *of Elements of Cross-Cultural Communication and the Middle East*, Mazharul Haque (1997) talks about the possibility of misunderstandings between the Americans and the Middle Eastern Arabs. He says:

“If we consider one of the most basic elements of culture, namely, its worldview, Americans and Middle Easterners are separated by divergence of their worldviews. Worldview has to do with a “culture’s orientation toward such things as God, humanity, nature, the universe and other philosophical issues that are concerned with the concept of being” (Porter & Samovar, 1985:26).

Porter and Samovar point out that worldview influences a culture in a profound way. Its effects are subtle, and it may not be visible in such external things as dress, gestures, or vocabulary, but it influences beliefs, values, attitudes, and numerous other facets of life (Porter & Samovar, 1985:18). According to Haque, we can talk about the appearance of Arabs on Shaheen’s perspective, one of the famous authors of Arab world. Shaheen (1985), argues that the Arab world has been damaged by the Western media coverage by representing Arab as negatively. According to Shaheen (1985), it is obviously seen that media is one of the most crucial constituents to influence policymakers’ decisions, and Arabs’ world is damaged by this kind of effectiveness of the media coverage. In addition to that, according to *Reel Bad Arabs*, one of the awarded books of Shaheen, Offering primarily reviews of the 900 films he has seen or researched over 20 years, he documents a century of offensive stereotypes and shows how the image of the "dirty Arab" has reemerged over the last 30 years, even as other groups have more or less successfully fought to eliminate the use of racist stereotypes (Shaheen, 2001).

In that point Shaheen focuses on problematic illustrations of Arab people in the American culture and some stereotypes of Arabs who have been portrayed negatively by mass media instruments. In addition to that, according to author, it is clearly seen that media is the most crucial constituent to influence policymakers’ decisions, and Arabs’ world is damaged by this kind of effectiveness of the media coverage. Since policymakers’ actions can canalize all events inversely, images and ideas of Middle East, especially Arabs’ situation, should be portrayed correct and unsusceptible by media coverage. Arabs, as an apparent stereotype, are generally presented as not only “barbaric and cruel’ and “wealthy” but also “sex maniacs” and “terrorists” (Shaheen, 1985).

After focusing on how the Middle Eastern has been portrayed by the Western media coverage, it is also important to spotlight the effects of this kind of presentation to the relationship between the Western and the Middle Eastern countries. According to the book *Headline Diplomacy: How News Coverage Affects Foreign Policy* deals with the relationship between politics and

communication (Seib, 1997). For last two decades, in various events of the American history, press took a determinant position to create an idea about the events, which have occurred in the Middle East. Shaheen (1985) argues that because most of American gets information from television, television news, movies, advertisement, and cartoon have given intentional image about some races such as the Middle Eastern, Asian, or African. In this point, it can be useful to describe how these visual images influence people's opinions.

According to Greisford and O'connor's article titled *Modelling what users see when they look at images: A Cognitive Viewpoint*, "If a picture is worth a thousand words to one viewer, it is worth a million words to 1,000 viewers" (2002). Due to that reason, it is important to analyze the impact of the news photos to the news. For that reason, the role of the media in the U.S. is very important to understand how the Middle Eastern have been portrayed by the U.S. media coverage because according to Fawaz A. Gerges (2003), "Although observers of the American scene agree that the mainstream media's negative news coverage of Islam and Muslims conditions public perceptions of and attitudes toward Muslim societies, they find it difficult to delineate the complex relationship between the mainstream media and U.S. policy." To some, the "dominant media are themselves members of the corporate-elite establishment," so fundamental tensions between the foreign policy and media establishment seldom arise (Herman, 1993:25 and Sigal, 1973: 42-49). In this view, a number of factors contribute to the situation, including the media's overwhelming dependence on government sources for their news stories; the lack of public contestation of government propaganda campaigns; and the government's use of ideological weapons like anticommunism, a demonized enemy, or potential national-security threats. Only rarely do offbeat reporters dare to challenge the fundamentals of official policy (Sigal, 1973: 82-83).

### **Research question**

This study will focus on the photos' effectiveness of news coverage about the Middle Eastern because despite of the fact that there are many researches about the image of the Middle Eastern on movies, cartoons, or visual areas, it is realized that there is not enough research about how written media portrays the Middle Eastern people by creating a visual picture of the readers' mind. Because it is believed that visual images have huge impact to influence people's mind, it is going to be very important to find media's role about the Middle Eastern's image. Therefore, my research question is:

**R<sub>1</sub>: How do American media create stereotypes about the Middle Eastern people through photos?**

### **Methodology**

In this study, it is used the qualitative content analysis, which "is one of very few research methods that can be employed qualitatively or quantitatively, opening up a wide array of methodological possibilities". Under the qualitative content analysis, it will be focused on the visual research: photographs, images, which can be combined "qualitative and quantitative approaches to visual analysis in order to explore social issues such as inequality in representation" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006: 279-300).

First of all, the Washington Post and the New York Times were selected as samples of this study. I chose these newspapers because they are some the most significant national newspapers in the United States. The visual content analysis was applied to 50 news articles' photos from January 1, 2009 to April 30, 2009. I chose these dates because after George Bush, the old president of the

United States, handed over his seat to Barack Obama, Obama promised he would have more moderate policy about the Middle Eastern countries because in the Bush's administration period, the Middle Eastern people had good images neither in the American society nor the American media. Therefore, it will be tried to analyze whether there was a change about representation of the Middle Eastern pre-White House (before January 20, 2009) and pro-White House of new president of the U.S. The news photos were selected randomly, and in this project, the target population is news photos. In addition to that, the photos were retrieved electronic source of University of North Texas, which is <http://libproxy.library.unt.edu>. If we spotlight the independent variables of this study, we can say that subject categories, page selection, page placement, and photographic perspective. These news photos were coded as four categories, including subtitles. Those are:

**1.Environment:**

1. Home front:
2. Fighting scenes
3. Civilians
4. Protestors
5. Terrorist
6. Battle area
7. Art organization

**2. Page Selection**

1. Front page
2. Inside left section
3. Inside right section
4. Other

**3.Page placement**

1. Top
2. Middle
3. Bottom

**4.Photographic Perspective**

1. Close
2. Medium
3. Far

**Result/Data**

If we look at the photos, it can be clearly seen because there are many photos about the Middle Eastern, it should be limited for selected newspapers, which are the Washington Post and the New

York Times. Because there are some categories which are including subject categories, home front, fighting scenes, civilian, protestors, terrorist, battle area, and art organization. The other category is page selection, which includes front page, inside left section and right section. Another category is page placement, which includes top, middle, bottom, and other (whole page). As last category, photographic perspective includes close, medium, and far perspectives on the news photos. If we focus on the subject categories of the news photos, there are 20 battle area photos (40%), 10 civilian (poor) (20%), seven terrorist photos (14%), five protestors photos (10%), and four fighting scenes photos (8%), while two home front (4%) photos and two art organization photos (4%) in these two newspapers. If we analyze this category, we can conclude that the Middle Eastern have appeared in negative way like battle area more than appearance as normal citizen of that country. In fact, when a reader looks at a photo, which gives a Middle Eastern in battle area or poor life, he or she can think more negative about the Middle Eastern than positive way. Looking at these photos, retrieval of the message of that news can create negative aspect to the Middle Eastern people.

Other category, page selection of these newspapers, gives important clues to understand how the Middle Eastern have been stereotyped by the U.S. media coverage. If we look at the page selection, we can see that 30 (60%) news were given from inside left section of the newspapers, whereas 15 (30%) news were given from inside right section and five (10%) from front page. If we say that giving news from right section always shows that given news is more important than other news that is presented from left section of the newspaper. Therefore, we can conclude that 60% of news of the Middle Eastern was given as less important than other news. Moreover, interestingly, news which were given from inside left section carries some positive aspect about the Middle Eastern people, whereas news which were given inside right section and front page carries negatives images about the Middle Eastern. Therefore, we can conclude that less important news seem more positive perspectives, and carrying negative character makes the Middle Eastern people more important in the U.S. media coverage. In addition to that, it can be clearly seen that page placement of the news is generally on the top and bottom. In fact, 22 (44%) of the news and photos were given from on the top and 19 (34%) of the news were given in the bottom of the selected newspapers, whereas just nine (12%) of the news was given in the middle of the pages. Therefore, if we accept that putting the news to the middle of the page is always more valuable than not only top but also bottom, we can infer that most of the Middle Eastern news and photos were laid out on the top and bottom of the page.

As last section, photographic perspective is also one of the significant factors to understand how the news and photos influence people's opinion. If we look at the photos perspectives, we can say that nine photos were presented closely on the page. As it said before, there are more negative subject categories such as battle area than positive categories such as art organization. Therefore, when these negative subjects are given closely rather than far, the retriever of the message can be affected easily because of photo's perspectives. In this situation, we can conclude that the photos about the Middle Eastern are taken closely due to fact that it has huge effects on people.

## **Conclusion/Discussion**

In conclusion, according to these data, we can clearly see that the stereotypes of the Middle Eastern are neither good nor positive not only on television, movies, or cartoon but also written media

coverage. There is obvious negative portray of Middle East and the Middle Eastern people. They are framed as 'terrorist,' 'barbaric,' and 'enemy of the world. However, as it is said before, because Western culture and Eastern culture does not know enough each other, they have negative stereotypes about themselves. As Shaheen (1985) said in his book and articles, Middle Eastern people do not have this kind of harmful labels. In fact, according to him, all Middle Eastern are described as sloping to kill other people; in sharp contrast, the Middle Eastern especially Arab society is one of the safest societies in the world (Shaheen, 1985). In this research, after analyzing 50 news photos of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* newspapers, I found that the question

**R1: How do American media create stereotypes about the Middle Eastern people through photos?**

Can also be answered by looking at the news photos of the U.S. newspapers about the Middle Eastern. The image of the Middle Eastern has negative aspect rather than positive aspect. All categories that were chosen to analyze how American media create stereotypes about the Middle Eastern people photos shows that American written media has negative outlook about the Middle Eastern people when they create their news articles.

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