

Framing the Other: Media (re)construction of Islam

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Rather than providing the audience with objective facts, the journalistic account constructs a codified definition of what should count as the reality of the event, a representation that is culturally embedded and ideologically determined. As postulated by Lippmann (1922: 29), the news media create “pictures in our heads”, generating impressions concerning the world that is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind”. The elements prominent in the media picture become prominent in the audience’s picture, which seems to be of particular significance in the case of issues, events and cultures relatively unfamiliar to the viewers.

Nowhere can the accelerating post-September-11 trend towards a global polarization of society into “Western” cultures and Islam be seen more clearly than in the media reconstruction of Islam, equated with violence, terrorism, fundamentalism, and backwardness. Iranians, Arabs and Muslims, viewed through an ethnocentric Western lens and discussed almost entirely within a framework of prejudice and political conflicts, are merged into one broad category of religious fanatics and extremists, uniformly intolerant and anti-democratic. Presented from the perspective of secularism and individualism, the Islamic identity provides a contrastive image against which Western values can be redefined. Anything of non-Western origin becomes either inferior and substandard, or illogical and irrational. The veil (hijab), one of the most popular Western ways of representing the problems of Islam, emerges as a symbol of silencing, depersonalization and brutal treatment of women. When the media do present a “positive” image of “some” Muslims, it usually means portraying them as “more Western”, which in fact leads to reinforcing the negative stereotypes as the presupposed norm. The world is then reconstructed in terms of West and non-West, two incompatible forces, the former standing for modernity, civilization, democracy, rationality and freedom, and the latter representing non-modernity, barbarism, irrationality, and despotism. In this discursive construction of “the West and the Rest”, “the Rest” is “essential to the West’s formation both of its own sense of itself – a ‘Western identity’ – and of Western forms of knowledge” (Hall 1992: 318).

The objective behind this paper is to maximize the validity of an eclectic approach and corpus methodology in the domain of news discourse along with the processes within this discourse and the practices behind it. Starting with the premise that providing frames of reference - highly stereotyped representations of specific situations, media influence the frames we use when interpreting information about events, I investigate some stereotypical framing techniques and the interaction between linguistic and visual means employed by the news media to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies when reporting on the Islamic world. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods in my analysis of the CNN news reports broadcast in 2005, 2006 and 2007, I look at various aspects of the frame-building and frame-setting process and examine the motives behind and the possible implications of imposing particular news frames.

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