# Media representations of the Middle East

*Mohammed Hirchi*

*Media representations of Middle Easterners in the United States have been instrumental in the construction of a number of negative stereotypes portraying them as carnal, enigmatic, exotic, unpredictable and violent. After the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the American invasion of Iraq, these images have been intensified through a well structured network of television and film depictions. Within this particular historical and political context, images are loaded with ideological propaganda and are constructed to articulate, transmit, promote and legitimize knowledge and information about this geographical location. They are subject to manipulation by various political apparatuses and to tight government control.*

So how have these images that represent 'difference' in popular culture been elaborated to classify and to locate Middle Easterners in the realm of 'Otherness'? In what terms do the mass media create or reflect negative perceptions and/or (mis)understandings of Middle Eastern realities? What are the issues or problems that such representations create? In what ways does media coverage within the Middle East differ from or conflict with media coverage outside the region? Is it true that only Middle Easterners can understand the Middle East?

In this article, I will draw on an anthropological model that suggests that culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to particular positions within a classificatory system.

According to Stuart Hall, 'the marking of "difference" is the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture' (1997: 236). In this context, binary oppositions are crucial for maintaining difference which is fundamental for producing cultural meaning.

This marking of difference is articulated within clear boundaries; it does not tolerate ambiguous, unstable or hybrid spaces of indeterminacy. According to Hall:

> 'Stable culture requires things to stay in their appointed place. Symbolic boundaries keep the categories 'pure', giving cultures their unique meaning and identity. What unsettles culture is "matter out of place"– the breaking of our unwritten rules and codes' (1997: 236).

This process of purification legitimizes exclusion, intolerance and racism. It also allocates marginal identities to individuals who do not conform to the values of the West as a geographical and a cultural space. In this perspective, symbolic representations are necessary to maintain difference:

> 'Symbolic boundaries are central to all culture. Marking "difference" leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, strangely attractive precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order' (Hall, 1997: 237).

Throughout the centuries, symbolic boundaries have been very powerful in maintaining separation between nations and individuals. Since its first contacts with the Arab world, the West has developed a set of stereotypes depicting Arabs as uncivilized and violent. One of the most prominent texts that capture this historical encounter is the 12th century French epic poem 'The Song of Rolland.' The Enlightenment, a period during which philosophers ranked societies along an evolutionary scale from 'barbarism' to 'civilization', enormously contributed to the vulgarization of this ideology. With the spread of colonization during the 19th century, a well organized scholarship devoted to the rep-

resentation of 'Otherness' emerged as a defining moment in this cross-cultural history.

In the United States, a similar ideology evolved throughout the 20th century. From 1945 onward, the United States became increasingly involved with the Arab world and Israel. As a staunch supporter of Israel, America found itself in a difficult position to negotiate its preeminence in a world of competitive interests. Media corporations took an active role in redefining American cultural and political agendas.

## Representation of the Middle East in mainstream American media

Many media experts in the United States would argue that American media cover the Middle East within the worldview of a primarily Western audience. The coverage will thus remain negative and stereotypical unless a redefinition of cultural differences between the United States and the Middle East is negotiated. Diplomatic historians approach U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East from a rational perspective privileging American interests in the region. Culture, in this context, plays a subordinate role.

In this institutional framework, news media can be seen as a driving force behind political mobilization, both domestically and internationally. The media fosters stereotypical representations of Middle Eastern cultures and peoples and promote misunderstanding and intolerance in the mainstream American culture. Since 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, these negative representations became even more anchored in the American cultural imaginary. Media apparatuses contribute enormously to the construction of these images and symbols rather than construct a conceptual model that sheds light on the complex relationship between the media, culture, and the political process.

In the United States, despite the fact that Arabs have significantly contributed to the well being of this nation for at least the last two centuries, negative representations of this ethnic group abound in scope and intensity. The constructed images manipulated throughout time have delegated Arabs to second degree citizens, unable to embrace the secular ideals of the Western worldview.

In this respect, the representation of Middle Easterners in the American media is articulated within the framework of a binary oppositional dynamics where the Middle East is classified as an undesired space of barbarism and tyranny. As cultural critic Stuart Hall puts it, 'binary oppositions are crucial for all classification/establish a difference to facilitate the tasks of organizing systems of perceptions and classifications' (1997: 226).

This system of classification is elaborated to maintain oppositional relationships between the civilized and the uncivilized, etc. and to create an atmosphere of fear and discomfort to enhance 'difference' for the purpose of controlling the Other. In this context, misrepresentation becomes an effective instrument for advancing political agendas. Throughout the history of the West, negative portrayals have been used to develop means by which the imperial project can be achieved through visual representations. These representations serve as a popular medium to create a link between the Imperial eye and the domestic imagination.

In France for example, the Colonial Exhibition at the end of the 19th century served to capture the relationship between the empire and its 'domestic other'. Representation is a complex phenomenon, especially when dealing with cultural differences. It engages emotions, attitudes, reactions and tries to control the viewer's fears and questions. It also promotes a set of cultural values that respond to the anxieties of the viewer.

In this context, the Middle-Easterner in American popular media is defined according to these historical and cultural paradigms. Besides his barbarism and his violence, he is also depicted as belonging to the realm of emotions, violent savage and blood thirsty. Mainstream images of the Arab in the American media operate according to a dynamics of cultural distortions; the Arab is always portrayed as closer to nature than culture, genetically incapable of 'civilized' refinements. The concept of 'Naturalization' connotes the impossibility of Arabs to embrace culture. Therefore, they are imprisoned in a space of stability and of fixed 'difference' and meaning. They are beyond history and incapable of embracing cultural emancipation.

## Staging cultural 'difference' and the ethics of representation

The relationship between knowledge and power is fundamental in the process of cultural representation. According to Michel Foucault, power operates within an institutional apparatus and its technologies (techniques). This apparatus consists of developing strategies of relationships between the self and the other and to articulate them within a space of cultural antagonism. This model applies to the production of knowledge about the Middle East since most media outlets in the United States articulate their ideologies within its framework.

The production of knowledge about the Middle East has been an important feature in American scholarship about the 'Orient'. This scholarship contributed to the construction of images that have been contested by scholars from the Arab world. One of the most vocal critics of Western representations of the 'Orient' is the prominent scholar and political activist Edward Said. His well documented collection of essays *Orientalism* (1978) offers a new perspective of the reading of symbols and images that have been developed by Westerners in the 19th and 20th centuries. Said states that:

'In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism its durability and its strength... Orientalism is never far from... the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility

that a more independent thinker... may have had different views on the matter' (Said, 1978: 7).

This production of knowledge associated with the 'Orient' nourished Western imagination for centuries. In the United States, the same concept became convoluted with numerous meanings because of the importance of the Middle East in the American political imaginary. Within this framework, the 'Orient' became subject of accounts that contributed to the production of knowledge and images about the Middle East. Even though these discursive and visual representations vacillated between facts and fantasies, they have played a major role in the distortion of the complex relationship between the United States and the Middle East.

The politics of representation of the Middle East are the product of a historic reinvention of the image of the 'Other.' Strategies have been implemented to manipulate images to respond to the needs of the Imperial power. Staging 'difference' became a strategic move to sustain a power-knowledge relationship between the West and its 'Other.' In this cultural space, stereotyping becomes the privileged instrument for maintaining this cultural dynamics.

Richard Dyer argues that stereotypes are nourished by 'vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized' features about an individual. Dyer posits that there are three basic points related to stereotyping. The first point tends to reduce, essentialize and naturalize 'difference'. This process of stereotyping has been well exploited by American media in relationship to the portrayal of Middle Easterners. Television images are often simplified, reducing Arabs to a set of negative symbols; arrogant, violent, uncivilized, etc.

The second point of stereotyping uses a mechanism of 'splitting'. In this context, Arabs are defined according to cultural differences; they are religious fanatics, suicide bombers and belly dancers. In some cases they are portrayed as billionaires obsessed by their sexual drives and who come to the United States to conquer as many women as possible.

This process of stereotyping is exclusive; it expels difference. It also maintains clear-cut cul-

tural boundaries between the same and the 'Other' by promoting a divisive social and symbolic order. It is significant to note that 'Otherness' in this historical context can be defined as a pathological, abnormal and unacceptable feature that needs to be reformed, revolutionized, and changed.

The third point of stereotyping is enhanced through an ethnocentric cultural and political agenda. It is also understood within a power relations dynamic that taints inter-cultural encounters. Dyer's approach to ethnocentrism delineates the inequalities of power in the context of the Foucauldian concept of power-knowledge relationship. This homogeneous approach to 'difference' legitimizes imposing one's own cultural agenda on other groups.

The connections between the United States and the Middle East have historically been determined by this stereotyping strategy. The 2003 invasion of Iraq is a strong illustration of this process of power relationships. Prior to the invasion, television viewers were bombarded by all kinds of information related to the need to liberate Iraq from the hands of tyranny, corruption and intolerance. Constructing Middle Eastern identities became the major tool to promote imperial ideology by legitimizing the invasion.

## Self-representation and the power dilemmas

In this war of images, could we talk about a counter-strategy to the understanding of cultural 'differences'? How do Middle Eastern media outlets respond to American representations of the East? Do Arab media offer more nuanced / truthful, or accurate representations of the Middle East? In this section, I will be using Al Jazeera as an example.

Across the Arab world, most media apparatuses are owned by the state, except a small number of private media organizations. The Qatarite Al-Jazeera stands out as one of the most prominent media outlets that has been engaged in the image debate since its launching in 1996. In the Arab world, a majority of viewers consider Al Jazeera to be a symbol of democracy and free speech. With about 35 millions viewers in the Arab world and 5 million in Europe, Al Jazeera stands as one of the most watched networks in the world. In 2007, the Arabic Al Jazeera channel has begun to rival the BBC in worldwide audiences with an estimated 40 to 50 million viewers. Al Jazeera English has an estimated reach of around 80 million households.

Al Jazeera is perceived by its viewers as a well balanced broadcasting outlet that presents both sides of the spectrum. Its motto is 'the Opinion and the Other Opinion.' As stated by Mohammed El-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar:

> 'Al Jazeera's motto "The Opinion and the Other Opinion" is an indication that the channel, which was launched in 1996, aspires to cover all sides to a particular story in a fair and balanced way. But in the process of trying to live up to its motto, Al Jazeera has also tried to appeal to the values, beliefs, and sentiments of its Arab audience. This seemingly paradoxical dilemma is for some a form of contextual objectivity, one of the greatest struggles networks are dealing with today. The real concern is when there are lives at stake. During times like these, networks like Al Jazeera are faced with the following questions. How can they strike the balance that provides audiences with a true representation of real events while still appealing to public opinion? Does the public's right to know sensitive information outweigh the harm that releasing this information might cause?'

Some scholars and commentators refer to the notion of contextual objectivity to describe the existing tension between objectivity and audience appeal in Al Jazeera. However, many viewers believe that Al Jazeera provides its audiences with more trustworthy sources of information than other national and international news outlets. Despite its controversial video footages of Osama Bin Laden and the War in Iraq, the station continues to enjoy popularity among both Westerners and Middle Eastern audiences.

Al Jazeera is controversial within the United States and the Middle East as well. Its critical position vis-à-vis Arab political regimes is very important to its Middle Eastern viewers. It is the only news outlet that inscribes its ideological

tribulations within the framework of cultural and political pluralism. Many Middle Easterners with a conservative agenda tend to disagree with Al Jazeera's harsh criticism of some authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes.

It is immature to argue that Middle Eastern media culture is more prone to offer accurate and more nuanced representations of the Middle East. Attempts have been made by some news corporations to tackle daily challenges from the perspective of Middle Eastern journalists, but due to the lack of democracy and free speech, it seems very difficult for journalists to embrace freedom while dealing with sensitive political issues. ■

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# Who speaks for the Arab world?

## Nabil Echchaibi

*When Edward Said died in 2003, his fervent Arab supporters grieved the loss of an irreplaceable Arab celebrity intellectual who audaciously exposed the tyranny of the orientalist gaze and its imperialist paranoia. His searing description of how a dominating and effectively silencing Western discourse on the Middle East has ennobled the civilizing mission of Western empire has made him a resounding voice of resistance and a true spokesperson for the Arab cause. As a politically-bereft Palestinian, his trenchant advocacy for the rights of the powerless Arab has spawned an unprecedented celebration of Arab voices, most of whom share Said's experience of physical and intellectual exile at one point or another.*

Almost thirty years after the publication of Said's most influential book, *Orientalism*, Arabs speak for themselves today. In fact, there was a considerable input about the Middle East by Arabs even before the charge of orientalism became a flagship of intellectual resistance, but as Said made clear, the discursive machine of the 18th and 19th century orientalist kept much of this input at bay and consequently irrelevant.

Today, the new orientalists, Said and his followers would say, have an even more direct alliance with the political world, and their Middle East 'expertise' is seldom questioned in Western public discourse. So Bernard Lewis' treatises on what is wrong with the Muslim world, Daniel Pipes' reeling criticism of Arabs, and even Fouad Ajami's purportedly self-critical propaganda from an Arab perspective, have