

# Gratifying the “Self” by Demonizing the “Other”: A Call for Dialogue Not Monologues

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## Abstract

This qualitative study examines the U.S. media portrayals of African, Arab, and Islamic countries and sheds light on the response to these portrayals by a number of international students (Africans, Arabs, and Asians) in a middle-sized public university in the United States. The study uses Foucault’s power–knowledge constructs, Bhabha’s cultural difference, Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, and Said’s Orientalism as well the framing theory as a conceptual framework. It concludes that negative U.S. media portrayals of Africans, Arabs, and Asians were based on an Orientalist discourse and elicited negative reaction from the African, Arab, and Asian respondents.

## Keywords

communication studies, communication, social sciences, media and society, mass communication, intercultural communication, media consumption, conflict, criminology

## Introduction

The dramatic changes in the U.S. domestic and foreign policies following the tragic attacks of the September 11, 2001, drew public attention to religious and cultural identities of Arabs and Muslims (Zakaria, 2001; Telhami, 2002; Akram, 2002; Panagopoulos, 2006). Members of these ethnic and religious minority groups, who lived in the United States, received unprecedented negative media portrayals. For this reason, it is important to explore how young Africans, Arabs, and Muslims perceived the U.S. media representation of Islam, culture, and social events in their countries. Such an exploration can provide useful insights into these audiences’ interpretation of how and why foreign news is made and presented by the U.S. media.

This research extends our knowledge about the complaints and grievances of ethnic and religious minority groups who become subject to unjustifiable scrutiny and racial profiling. Sites of struggle have become the image, the identity, and the “self.” Presently, considerable numbers of Africans, Arabs and Asian Muslims do not trust the U.S. media and tend to accept conspiracy theories explaining its motives and interests domestically and worldwide. American mass media organizations can play a crucial role in correcting negative stereotypical portrayals, correcting negative images, and advancing genuine intercultural dialogue.

## Theoretical Framework

Some social conflict theories provide appropriate frameworks for explaining portrayals of minorities in the U.S.

media. The critical approach to media studies (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972; Gramsci, 1971) emphasizes the role of media as a tool for social control and maintenance of the status quo. The contributions of Gitlin (1978) and Hall (1980) extended this notion and highlighted the use of television as a vehicle for perpetuating ideological systems. Adhering to strenuous media routines, journalists wittingly or unwittingly construct and use culturally based narratives and frames that resonate with their audiences (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Silverstone, 1988; Lule, 2001). Some scholars argued that news frames reflect a social reality that bestows legitimacy on the ideas and policies of the dominant social class (Entman, 1993, 2007; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Hall, 1982; Hardt, 1992).

According to Gramsci (1971), ruling groups perpetuate their dominance through coercive as well as persuasive strategies with the help of media outlets. Thus, media organizations directly and indirectly play an instrumental role in sustaining the dominant ideology (Gitlin, 2003). Foucault’s power–knowledge constructs, Said’s Orientalism, Bhabha’s notions of cultural difference, Derrida’s deconstruction, and Bakhtin’s dialogism, heteroglossia and chronotope provide useful conceptual tools for studying how audiences make their own meanings out of mass-mediated messages. This article begins by looking at how theorists articulated the

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concepts of power, knowledge, hybridity, representation, and identification. And although there are some theoretical divergences among these theorists, particularly Foucault and Bakhtin, and Said and Bhabha, the core of their theoretical frameworks remains potent and instructive to this study.

Foucault (1977, 1980, 1994) articulated his theories on power and knowledge. According to Foucault (1977), the discourses about “madness,” “punishment,” and “sexuality” include statements about knowledge as well as rules prescribing what to include and what to exclude when discussing them. Thus, the language, particularly, word choice at any given historical moment privileges one viewpoint over others, making it rational and rendering others as nonsensical (Foucault, 1977).

The Foucauldian approach to discourse, representation, knowledge, and “truth” is historicized and grounded in the Marxian concept of historical specificity (Foucault, 1977). Accordingly, knowledge about various subjects of discourse and social practices becomes historicized and culturally contextualized. Foucault (1980) asserts, “Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain . . . In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application” (p. 98).

Derrida’s (1982) deconstruction is a useful conceptual tool for unmasking the values and interests embedded in the text and the knowledge they present. Deconstruction can also help in breaking down binary oppositions and reveal a hybrid of unheard marginalized voices. Derrida depicts binary oppositions as “the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed,” with the privileged term juxtaposed with the “other.” According to C. Norris (2002), “logocentrism,” which privileges one term over another, indicates notions of superiority.

Bhabha (1983) draws upon Foucault’s notion of the power/knowledge nexus and focuses squarely on the “processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (p. 18). He describes a stereotype as a “complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive” (Bhabha, 1983, p. 22). He envisages the problem of representation in terms of the “Lacanian schema of the Imaginary,” and sees the imaginary as “composed of: narcissism and aggressivity” (pp. 109–110). Thus, Bhabha diverges from Said’s ideological realm and binary oppositions, to recast the problem of representation in a postmodern one of ambivalence, hybridity, and heterogeneity. Bhabha (1995) discusses cultural differences and describes the “Third Space” as a place where cultural interactions and hybridity occur.

Bhabha reflects on the concepts of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity, explicating how a subject of colonial discourse can retool mimicry, a colonial discursive strategy of domination, to disrupt colonial structures of power. According to Bhabha (1996), mimicry enables the colonized subject to become the “other” but “not quite” and lives an “in-betweenness” that empowers the colonized to respond with a colonial

gaze with counter-gaze. Thus, ambivalence is transformed from assuring to menacing.

Bakhtin’s theoretical categories can be utilized for conceptualizing ethnic representation, particularly dialogism, polyphony, and heteroglossia (Stam, 1991). The Bakhtinian approach rejects binarism and celebrates “the in-betweenness” and hybridity. Bakhtin (1986) refers to heteroglossia, a “third space” between centripetal and centrifugal forces that allows for agency in the construction of Arab, African, and Asian identities in the interviewees’ comments. Conceptualizing language as ideology-saturated, Bakhtin (1981) argues, “A unitary language gives expression to forces working towards [. . .] ideological centralization which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization” (p. 271). The Bakhtinian approach recognizes socioeconomic hierarchical inequality in society and values cultural differences (Bakhtin, 1984).

Extant literature (Karim, 2000; Said, 1978, 1981, 1994; Sardar, 1999) demonstrates that Orientalism as a hegemonic ideology dominates Western perceptions of the Arab and Muslim worlds. Orientalists use narratives constructing the Orient with specific social and cultural traits different from the West (Said, 1994). The Orientalists consider these social constructions as “truth,” although they are at variance with reality.

Orientalist representations of the Middle East during the last 50 years focus on degrading Arab states challenging Western interests, particularly Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Egyptian leader, Nasser, received demeaning characterization for allying himself with the Soviet Union and espousing Arab socialism. However, allies of the United States, particularly oil-rich Arab states, as well as Islam in general, received their share of negative portrayals and demonization in the U.S. news media. McAlister (2001) argues that such demonization “has been a consistent feature, from policymakers’ disdain for Nasser to the public outrage against ‘oil sheiks,’ ‘terrorists,’ and ultimately Islam itself” (p. 270).

Muslims are not only stereotyped as monolithic and terrorists, but Islam itself is depicted as an archrival of the West. This theme of rivalry and threat manifests itself in Samuelson’s “Clash of civilizations,” as well as Barber’s “Jihad versus McWorld.” According to Karim (2000) in the post–Cold War era, Western media narratives depict Islam as a source of violence destabilizing many countries and threatening the New World Order. Karim argues that Western media’s sustained Orientalist characterization of Islam as a threat has metamorphosed into a dominant global narrative.

Orientalist discourse relies on linguistic binary opposition (Said, 1978). As a method of thinking, it is a dichotomous Western worldview grounded in “an ontological and epistemological distinction” (Said, 1978, p. 2) separating the so-called Orient and the West. This dichotomy according to Sardar (1999) represents the lifeline of “Western self-identification” (p. 13).

Orientalism as a style of thought also employs an essentialist discourse, universalizing certain features, traits, and characteristics to the Orient (Said, 1978). Orientalists were found at the highest echelons of power in Western countries. Said (1978) describes the Middle East experts advising U.S. policymakers as “imbued with Orientalism, almost to a person” (p. 321). Moreover, Orientalism signifies an ideology legitimizing Western encroachment on other countries and amounting to Western imperialism (Macfie, 2000).

The concept of dividing the world into dichotomous categories rests on a structuralist view of language (de Saussure, 1959). In this sense, linguistic binary opposition can be described as reductionist. Switzer, McNamara, and Ryan (1999) argue that news narratives based on binary signs reduce reality to “discrete, dichotomous ‘facts’” (p. 33). The authors assert that binary language defining the world in terms of opposites represents the sociocultural basis of ideology.

Said (1978) argues that, in the process of Western self-presentation, Orientalism is constructed as the West’s alter ego, because every culture requires the existence of “another, different, and competing alter ego” (p. 331). Linguistically, the binary vocabulary of Orientalism includes East versus West, despotism versus democracy, cruelty versus fair treatment, irrational versus rational, and cunning versus trust (Baldwin, Longhurst, McCracken, Ogborn, & Smith, 2000). By defining the Orient vis-à-vis the West, Orientalism fits nicely in the Foucauldian discourse of power and domination (Said, 1978). Said’s (1978) work identifies the eight Orientalist themes.

According to Alatom (1997), eight Orientalist categories can be gleaned from Said’s (1978) work:

1. Oriental untrustworthiness underlines the belief that Orientals are by nature untruthful and therefore should not be trusted.
2. Islam as a threat asserts that the Orientals are threatening because of their adherence to an Islamic ideology.
3. Oriental inferiority questions the basic humanity of the Oriental as compared with the Westerner.
4. Oriental backwardness makes up the argument that the “backward” Orient is the opposite of the “advanced” West.
5. Oriental irrationality stresses the mystical and irrational nature of the Oriental.
6. Oriental submissiveness advocates that the Oriental is by nature in a position of submission.
7. Jews versus Arabs (or Muslims) operates when the significance of a situation is defined in terms of the Palestinian–Israeli confrontation.
8. Oriental strangeness stresses the oddities of Oriental individuals as compared with a normal Western standard.

## Literature Review

### *Portrayals of Africans in the U.S. Media*

Research on media coverage of Africa is meager compared with that of the Arab and the Muslim world. Journalists treated many African issues using the Cold War frames. An example of this simplistic media coverage is the U.S. media coverage of the Nigerian War 1967–1970. Ibelema (1992) studied *Time* magazine coverage and argued that the Ibos were depicted as “light-skinned” and “the faces on their masks and carvings are not negroid, but Eastern” (p. 84). Ibelema (1992) concluded that the “*Time*’s coverage clearly fits the themes of tribal fixation” (p. 89).

Govea (1992) investigated both *Newsweek* and *Bulletin* coverage of African affairs and concluded that their coverage was influenced by the Cold War climate. “East–West themes in coverage of African violence will be more frequent during periods of increased Soviet activity and lower when there is less activity” (p. 98). Govea (1992) concluded, “The 1980s present the issue of apartheid as an issue that frames violence in South Africa” (p. 107).

Fair (1992) argued that the *New York Times* coverage of food aid to Africa revolved around four primary discourses: “(1) the discourse of crisis, (2) the discourse of aid donors, (3) the discourse of aid recipient (government of African countries), and (4) the discourse of the people” (p. 110). He added, “It seems that news stories must include three elements: events, crisis, and superpower conflict” (p. 111). Masmoudi referred to the depiction of developing countries in the West, and argued that the media “present these communities—when indeed they do show interest in them—in the most unfavorable light, stressing crises, strikes, street demonstrations, putsches, etc., or even holding them up to ridicule” (p. 144).

Bodie (1992) examined the African American press coverage of Africa, and asserted that it differed from other press. He argued, “Readers learn about the opening of an airport in Zambia, the loan policies of Kenyan banks, and how Ghanians assigned names to people” (p. 123). Brock (1992) criticized the media for portraying the conflict in South Africa as “racial” and “tribal.” He added that “it appears acceptable in the American media to view Africans, as well as many other non-Western peoples, as groups who live in tribes and/or individuals whose worldviews are prescribed by tribal definition” (p. 152).

Paterson (1992) researched television coverage of Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, and Mozambique and suggested that these states were depicted as poor, starving, Marxist, and fighting U.S. allies. He added, “U.S. television has, since its inception, delivered to its viewers such a distorted and simplistic view of Africa that American ignorance of African geography, politics, and culture is hardly as bewildering as African visitors often find it to be” (p. 176). David Gergen, communication director in the Reagan

administration, argued, "The history of American media . . . has been one of general inattention to Africa, except when there's been major famine or conflict" (Hultman, 1992, p. 224).

The portrayals of Africans in the main U.S. media are comparable with the portrayals of African Americans. The mainstream media played a considerable role in perpetuating negative stereotyping of African Americans. When these groups adhere to ideals of society (1963 March on Washington), they receive some positive portrayals in the media (Hon, 1997). However, when African Americans participate in violent protests (1992 Los Angeles riots), their negative portrayals (criminal and disruptive) in the media continue (Heider, 1997). Some studies have indicated that public opinion on race is shaped by how issues are framed by the media (Domke, 2001; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). According to Domke (1997), the media framing of Black struggles and civil rights protests undermined their quest for equality and contributed to their exclusion by Whites. Campbell (1995) argued, "Iranians and Arabs have been singled out for negative stereotyping in U.S. media; rarely this stereotyping been recognized as symbolic of marginalization and prejudice" (p. 178).

Nelson (1986) referred to representation of Blacks in television, and stated,

When these peripheral members of society *are* represented, they may be "clawed back" to a position of socio-centrality by means of emphasizing their "positive" features . . . Subjects who are considered incapable of being clawed back are either ignored completely, or their "deviant" differences are magnified. (p. 57)

Wallace (1993) expressed similar views in her reflections on the distorted African American female representation in the news media.

Negative portrayals of Africans started to give way to more fair portrayals as more Whites and Blacks have begun to critically examine the benefits of accepting the "other." West (1993), who articulated the new "cultural politics of difference," argued that the distinctive features of this culture is "to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity" (pp. 204-205).

### *Portrayals of Arabs in the U.S. Media*

A considerable body of literature explored the portrayal of Arabs in the U.S. media. Many researchers have found that the perceptions and knowledge of many Americans about the outside world are shaped by the U.S. media reports (Ghareeb, 1983; Kellner, 1992; Kunczik, 1997; Mowlana, Gerbner, & Schiller, 1992; Shaheen, 1984a, 1984b). Media organizations play a crucial role in foreign policy because they edit, gate keep, and interpret foreign affairs (Said, 1981). The portrayal of Arabs, in recent years, was affected by the Gulf War. Accompanied with media "video games," portrayal of the

Gulf War aimed at dehumanizing the "enemy." According to Fisk (1991), American pilots could talk about "turkey shoot" and the killing of Arab "cockroaches" (p. 379).

Kellner (1992) argued that "in an attempt to manage public opinion, the Bush administration and the Pentagon produced a barrage of propaganda, disinformation, and outright lies that covered the more unsavory aspects of the Gulf War and that legitimated the U.S. policies" (p. 1). For many Arabs, the Gulf War was an event for venting their cynicism and feelings of powerlessness. According to Gerbner (1992), Saudi financier Adnan Khassoghi described his feeling regarding the Gulf War as "going to a movie: we paid our money, we went to the theater, we laughed, we cried, the movie ended and an hour later we had forgotten about it" (pp. 243-244).

Artz and Pollock (1995) studied Arab portrayals in political cartoons and argued that "because of the standing demonization of Palestinians and Libyans, associating Hussein with Arafat and Qaddafi helps frame the crisis as a stereotypical problem of the psychology of the uncivilized terrorist" (p. 127).

The authors asserted that "news reports most often have framed Arabs as terrorists, religious zealots, or culturally backward nomads" (p. 131).

According to Shaheen (1984b), an Arab is portrayed by an anti-Arab media as wealthy, oil-rich sheikh; the uncultured barbarian; the sex maniac harem owner; and the ruthless Arab terrorist. He argued that television depicted Arabs as untrustworthy, potential killers, "dark, swarthy, and sinister" (pp. 41-42). Shaheen (1984a) suggested that "some of the stereotyping of the Arabs as villain began with the creation of the state of Israel" (p. 161). Hashem (1995) argued that "the newsmagazines repeatedly depicted Arabs as lacking democracy, unity, and modernity. Arabs were also described as having a common heritage of defeat, living in the past, moving rapidly toward fundamentalism, and treating guest workers as slaves" (p. 159).

Woll and Miller (1987) criticized representation of Arabs in U.S. mass media, and asserted that "Arab stereotypes undermine American foreign policy and appeal to racism in the United States" (p. 182). They argued that the "movie Arabs represent a religion, Islam, supposedly at war with Judaism and Christianity and a region at war with Western concepts of political economy and order" (Woll & Miller, 1987, p. 179).

### *Portrayals of Islam in the U.S. Media*

Media coverage of the Islam associates that religion with terrorism and lack of civic-mindedness. Spayde (1994; as cited in Fuller, 1995) referred to depiction of Islam in media and said that it "can be summed up in the three images to which the media are addicted: the Terrorist, the Veiled Woman, and the Demon Demagogue" (p. 75). DeSousa's (1991) study demonstrated how the media demonized Khomeini and



demonstrated how media's symbolic violent images could provide cathartic role for Americans who could not punish their adversaries. The U.S. media coverage of the Taliban was congruent with the U.S. policy, which backed the Taliban at the beginning, and rebuffed them later, when they became "an embarrassment and a liability" (Rashid, 2001, p. 397) because "their atrocious human rights record and treatment of women drew international scorn" (Bearden, 2001, pp. 26-27). Elite media organizations also treated Islam as a source of civil strife and communal unrest. Articles in *The New York Times* (February 7, 1993), and the writings of Gurr (1994) suggested that Muslims were involved in more than half of the ethno-political conflicts worldwide in 1993-1994.

The political climate in the United States exhibited diminished hospitality for Muslims during the 1990s. The ramifications of the second Gulf War, 1990-1991, and the bombing of the World Trade Center, 1993, caused some Americans to display distrust and animosity toward Muslims. This situation worsened dramatically following the terrorist attacks of the September 11, 2001. Although the U.S. government asserts that it is not at war with Islam, some prominent scholars argue that there is a conflict between the West and Islam (Huntington, 1996).

International news coming from Arab, African, and Muslim countries influenced by newsworthiness include timeliness, proximity, important, impact or sequence, interest, conflict, and controversy (Chang, Shoemaker, & Brendlinger, 1987). Ideology, economic interests, organizational culture, media routines and journalistic training and values of reporters and editors also influence international news (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). To engage their audiences, journalists and editors package and frame international news to suit mainstream American audiences (Chang & Lee, 1992). Other important factors affecting international news include deviance, relevance to the United States, and potential for social change (Chang et al., 1987; Galtung and Ruge, 1965). A number of media critics expressed concern about scarcity of international news in the U.S. main media outlets (Arnett, 1998; Hachten, 1992; Hess, 1996; Lent, 1977).

### Research Questions

**Research Question 1:** How did African, Arab, and Asian Muslim students studying in the United States perceive the portrayals of social actors and events in their countries as depicted by the U.S. television news?

**Research Question 2:** Did they consider these portrayals and media frames positive, neutral, or negative?

**Research Question 3:** How did the interviewees relate news frames to the U.S. domestic and foreign policy?

**Research Question 4:** To what extent did the interviewees' responses converge with Orientalist Themes?

## Method

### Participants

This qualitative study employed purposive sampling (Babbie, 1998). To generate reliable data, the author interviewed 30 international graduate students in a midwestern public university. These students represented different ethnic groups and nationalities, including African, Arab, and Asian Islamic countries. Because Arabism and Islam are occasionally perceived as overlapping, inclusion of Muslim students from Asian countries was deemed necessary for the purpose of this study. Female interviewees were included in the sample because portrayals of veiled Muslim women involve issues pertaining to ideology and power relations. Maxwell (1996) described this technique as useful because it helps in achieving the goal of "representativeness," heterogeneity, contrast, and comparison (pp. 71-72).

### Instrument and Procedure

Structured interviewing was the instrument for data collection. Respondent interviews were used because it "elicits open-ended responses to a series of directive questions" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 171). The average duration of each interview ranged from 40 to 50 min. For data collection, the author used a tape recorder and took notes during the interviews (Babbie, 1998). Taking notes during the interviews helped in capturing how the interviewees felt about the research questions (Cresswell, 1994). The interviewees' statements were systematically transcribed before being analyzed. Methodic reading of the data was conducted several times. Then, the transcribed interviews were classified into thematic categories. Identical views were collapsed, and similar ideas were aggregated on indexed papers (Lindlof, 1995). Data analysis was conducted rigorously and systematically to ensure trustworthiness and integrity of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

## Findings

### "American Superiority"

The notion of "American superiority" emerged as an overarching theme permeating most of the interviewees' statements. Most of the interviewees criticized the U.S. media for negatively portraying the "cultures" and the "peoples" of other countries. They argued that the U.S. news media tried to show the world that the United States is a "superior culture." To assert American superiority, "Americans use their media to tell the world that they are the best," according to one interviewee. Many interviewees shared this view. One interviewee went further arguing that Americans "discriminate against others, and look down upon them." For many interviewees, negative media portrayals were "intended" to

“degrade” non-American peoples and cultures. Many interviewees wanted the U.S. media to be objective and “tell the truth.” Some of them saw a dichotomy between what the U.S. officials preached and what the U.S. media did. They criticized what they called the American “double standard.” They considered negative media portrayals “unfair” and unwarranted.

### *Arabs as “Terrorists”*

Many interviewees agreed that Arabs were portrayed negatively in the U.S. news media. They asserted that Arabs are unfairly depicted as “violent” and as “terrorists.” Three interviewees mentioned the Oklahoma City bombing to prove how the media victimized and incriminated the Arabs. One interviewee argued, “Immediately after the bombing, the media described the perpetrator as someone with Middle Eastern features.” He added that many media outlets rushed to judgment reporting that an American of Jordanian origin, who left Oklahoma City at the time of the bombing, was intercepted and arrested in London. Another interviewee wondered, “Why Americans who accused Arabs of the bombing in Oklahoma City, did not apologize for that even after the arrest and the conviction of a White Christian.”

Some interviewees mentioned that the framing of Arabs as terrorists increased after the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. An Arab female interviewee argued, “As a veiled woman I feel insecure when the United States is involved in a conflict in the Arab world.” She added, “I and my veiled girl friend were insulted by some young American men during the Gulf War of 1990.” Another Arab Muslim female interviewee corroborated verbal attacks during the Gulf War of 1990. She says, “A group of Americans approached me and my veiled friend at a shopping center and shouted at them: ‘go to hell.’” She explains that she and her girlfriend felt scared because they thought they might be physically attacked.

One Arab Muslim female interviewee commented on an Arab man shown on a television film with “tens of women surrounding him.” She argued that her sister, a visitor to the United States, was surprised to see that scene. The interviewee told her sister that “this is our image in United States.” She added passionately, “That image is naïve. It makes you laugh. It makes me sick.”

To avoid negative portrayals on the U.S. television news, some interviewees said that they started searching for news about their country on the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) channel. Some Arab interviewees criticized television programs depicting Arabs as “villains” and “womanizers.” One interviewee argues, “If all Arabs are lustful and obsessed with bodily pleasures, then they are not pious.” Another Arab interviewee described Arabs as “God-fearing” and peace-loving people. One Asian Muslim female interviewee added that she felt “disappointed,” because the

U.S. media should tell the “truth.” She described the U.S. media portrayals of Arabs and Muslim women as “absurd.”

### *Arabs as “Attackers of Israel”*

Most of the interviewees agreed that negative U.S. media portrayals of Arabs were meant to justify the “Israeli occupation of the Arab lands.” One interviewee indicated that the U.S. media tried to “justify the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon,” by referring repeatedly to “Lebanon’s inability to control *Hezbollah* faction.” Another interviewee argued, “The American media try to portray Israelis as innocent, peaceful, and civilized people, while depicting Arabs as terrorists and attackers of Israel.” Arabs feel “angry” because “Israel occupies Arab lands” and receives unflagging “military support and massive economic assistance from the United States,” one interviewee asserted. Most of the interviewees contended that “the security of Israel is central to the U.S. foreign policy formulation.” One Asian female interviewee argued, “The main U.S. media outlets represent the dominant ideology.” Another Arab male interviewee added, “Arabs are depicted as violent . . . and hostile to the U.S. interests.” An Asian male interviewee referred to the symbiotic relationship between the media outlets and the U.S. government, indicating that “the mass media and the U.S. government serve the interests of each other.” Another Asian male interviewee accused media organizations in the United States of being “biased in favor of Israel,” and undermining the interests of the Arab people. Many Arab, African, and Asian interviewees concurred with this view.

### *Africans as “Backward,” “Uncivilized,” “Hungry, and Needy”*

Many interviewees depicted news media coverage of Africa in the U.S. media as negative. Some African interviewees criticized media portrayals of Africans as “hungry and needy.” One African Christian interviewee argued, “The image of hungry and needy Africans waiting for food donations from the West is a colonial construction.” Another African Muslim male interviewee added, “I think this is not a good image . . . It is a brain-child of an old colonialist view point.” A number of interviewees referred to the “prevalent” image of the “hungry” and “the needy,” pointing out to the media coverage of famines and civil wars in Somalia and Rwanda as examples. One African Christian female interviewee argued, “Africa was selectively depicted as a jungle, and a place of uncivilized people.” Some interviewees indicated that Africa was “stereotyped” as the continent of “disease.” They corroborated their view by referring to the media’s focus on pervasive “diseases” and “sickness” in Africa. But, “when Africans won medals in Atlanta Olympic games in 1996, they were ignored,” one African Muslim male interviewee asserted. He added that no positive news

came out of Africa: "For example multiparty elections in Kenya were not mentioned in the media."

### *Africans are Negatively Portrayed to Demoralize African Americans*

Some of the interviewees correlated negative portrayals of Africans and race relations in the United States, suggesting that negative media portrayals of Africa remind African Americans of their "uncivilized" origin. One African Christian male interviewee argued, "When African Americans stand up for their rights, they are reminded of their African background which is characterized by civil wars and chaos." Some interviewees referred to Anita Hill's testimony against Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, and the trial of O.J. Simpson. They "resented" the negative depictions of African Americans in the U.S. media. One African Muslim male interviewee argued, "The media discredited and degraded the Nation of Islam because of its leaders' African ancestry." According to many interviewees, the media wanted to haunt African Americans by constantly reminding them of an Africa that is "backward," and rife with "wars," "diseases," and "famines."

### *Muslims as "Violent" and "Terrorists"*

All interviewees of Muslim faith agreed that the U.S. media aims at "discrediting Islam." Some of them argued that "Muslim fundamentalists" were to blame, at least partially, for "distorting the image of Islam" in the U.S. media. One African Muslim male interviewee suggested that the media focused on "terrorism in some Islamic countries, like Algeria, to discredit Islam." Another African Muslim male interviewee accused the U.S. media of negatively framing Islam as a "violent" religion. "When there were news about a killing in an Islamic country," he argued, "the U.S. media showed people brandishing their guns while some people saying their prayers in the background." The interviewee added, "The intention is to make a direct link between the killers and the Muslim saying prayers."

One African Muslim male interviewee mentioned the aborted terrorist bombing plot against the United Nations headquarters in New York, and the Lincoln Tunnel, masterminded by a group of "Muslim extremists," led by Sheikh Omer Abdelrahman. The interviewee argued, "I remember vividly the framing of the aborted plot, and the link that the media made with images from the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center." Some interviewees argued that "Muslims have little space" in the U.S. media, which is dominated by "powerful Christian and influential Jewish groups." According to some of these interviewees, the media serves the "interests" of some Christian and Jewish groups. One Asian Muslim male interviewee argued, "For this reason the media portrayed Muslims as terrorists and potential killers, who can inflict pain and agony on innocent and peace-loving people."

Some female interviewees mention the suffering that Muslim women feel in the United States: "We feel insecure whenever relations between the United States and an Arab or a Muslim country deteriorates," one Arab Muslim female interviewee argued. An Asian Muslim female interviewee criticized the "behavior of some Muslims," describing it as "part of the problems that many Muslims face in the West." She explained, "A female friend of mine did not want to shake hands with our American classmates." She added, "Such a behavior was not conducive for improving the image of Muslims in the West."

## **Discussion**

Methodic analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed one main theme, and four sub-themes. The main overarching theme suggests that Americans want to assert their "superiority" on other nations. This viewpoint of "them" against "us" suggests a binary opposition of the Self against the Other. The four sub-themes included the following: portrayals of Arabs as "terrorists and villains," portrayals of Africans as "uncivilized and needy," portrayals of Islam as a "threat to Western values," and the media organizations were "biased."

Some interviewees argued that the Americans want the world to believe that their culture is "superior" to all other cultures. One way to do that is to degrade and devalue the "other," according to some interviewees. Thus, the U.S. media aims at telling the world that the American culture is universal because it is "the best." This notion of an "American superiority" appeared in most of the interviewees' statements and comments. This finding is consistent with previous research documenting unfair representation of minority groups, particularly indigenous Indian Americans (Bird, 1999; Hanson & Rouse, 1987; Murphy, 1979; Van Dijk, 1991; Weston, 1996). At times of crises, American journalists are expected to express ethno-centric biases, and to defend national interests and security of the United States (Bloom, 1990; Gans, 1979). This finding answered the first and the fourth research questions.

Many of the interviewees' comments echoed anti-American and anti-Western sentiments that swept the Arab and Muslim worlds during the 1980s and the 1990s (Huntington, 1996). They expressed feelings of frustration and resentment and used conspiracy theory explanations. The interviewees felt that their countries and cultures were unjustifiably "marginalized," dehumanized, and "victimized." They perceived the mass media as a politicized tool used to sustain injustice. Some interviewees referred to "double standard," thinking that the main U.S. media outlets represented the policies of the U.S. government. Thus, they conflate the U.S. media and the U.S. government.

Most of the African interviewees echoed what Fanon (1986) described as the feelings of being degraded, humiliated, and exploited. They decried the negative portrayals of Africa in the U.S. media. This resonates with Bhabha's (1994) descriptions of a stereotype, which is "an arrested,

fixated form of representation,” and can never capture the complexity of a human being (p. 75). The interviewees wanted to see positive news about Africa in the U.S. media. This finding supports previous research on U.S. media coverage of foreign countries. Because Africa has little economic and political clout, and is not as strategic to the U.S. interests as some parts of the world, it receives meager attention in the U.S. news media (Adams, 1986; Nnaemeka & Richstad, 1980; Wu, 1998). Natural disasters, civil strife, armed conflicts, and flagrant violations of human rights are, however, considered newsworthy and received some media coverage (P. Norris, 1995; Taha, 1999). The interviewees hoped that inaccurate and unfair media coverage gives way to a more balanced and objective news coverage. Although arguing that negative U.S. media portrayals of Africa were intended to demoralize and degrade African Africans is ludicrous, it can be understood as a reaction to a colonial discourse that attempts to denigrate the other by calling their practices or beliefs nonsense. Thus, the interviewee has mimicked “nonsense” to disturb, confuse, invoke fear, and challenge structures of power (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 124-138).

The findings on media coverage of the Arab world evoked feelings of frustration and bitterness. For example, One Arab Muslim female interviewee argued that representing Arabs as “womanizers” was “naïve . . . It makes you laugh. It makes me sick.” Although the colonial discourse aims at devaluing the other by calling their practices or beliefs nonsense, the interviewee has appropriated “nonsense” and mimicked it to disturb foundation of power nurturing the colonial discourse (Bhabha, 1994).

A number of Arab females said that they felt “insecure” in the United States whenever there was a war in the Middle East. She says, “A group of Americans approached me and my veiled friend at a shopping center and shouted at them: ‘go to hell.’” Derrida (1979) argues, “In the first of these propositions the woman, taken as a figure or potentate of falsehood, finds herself censured, debased and despised” (p. 79). Thus, a veiled Muslim woman faced tremendous humiliation and fear when she encountered a “credulous man” who owned the “truth.”

As Middle Eastern people, many Arab Muslim interviewees expressed their anger for being negatively portrayed in the U.S. media. They argued that the U.S. media mischaracterized their countries and misrepresent their peoples. The issue of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular came to the forefront in most of the interviews. The interviewees suggested that negative portrayals of Arabs and tarnishing their image were meant to help Israel. Although one may expect Israel to receive a more sympathetic coverage compared with Arab countries, one can hardly claim that the Israeli government controls the content of the U.S. media organizations. The interviewees’ assertions about the U.S. media depictions of Arabs as “terrorists” corroborated previous research (Artz & Pollock, 1995). These findings answered the second and the

third research questions. The findings are consistent with the findings of previous studies highlighting negative news coverage of the Arab countries (Arnett, 1998; Shaheen, 1984b; Woll & Miller, 1987).

The majority of the Muslim interviewees criticized the media portrayals of Islam. Some of them expressed their sympathy for Muslims in the United States. Many of the interviewees accused the media of framing Islam as a “violent” religion, aimed at agitation and civil strife. They thought that the media tried to make a causal relationship between Islam and “terrorism.” One Asian female described the U.S. media representation of Islam as “absurd.” Thus, the interviewee used mimicry to disrupt and challenge this colonial discourse as well as its structures of power (Bhabha, 1994).

These interviewees see no correlation between Islam and terrorism, despite the fact that some Muslims were found guilty of terrorist activities and are imprisoned in the United States. But, these Muslim terrorists can easily be dismissed as nonrepresentative of the Muslim world. The comment that “Muslims have little space” in the U.S. media, which is dominated by “powerful Christian and influential Jewish groups,” resonates with Bhabha’s “third space,” as well as Bakhtin’s “in-betweenness,” heteroglossia, and chronotopes.

Some of the interviewees expressed similar views to those voiced by other Muslim students in some parts of the United States. According to Goodwin (2003), Muslim students complained of being “isolated” and “discriminated” against (p. 13). These negative portrayals cause Muslims in Diaspora to be wary of their host communities and foster relations among themselves with a view of establishing a social safety-net. Thus, some of the interviewees’ statements and views about the U.S. media portrayals might have been affected by other factors (personal experiences, stereotyping, and misperceptions in the United States) external to media messages. But, these external factors might have been sustained and reinforced by the negative portrayals in the U.S. media. These findings answered the second and the third research questions, and gave credence to previous research demonstrating negative coverage of Islam in the U.S. media (Spyde, 1994; DeSousa, 1991).

All the interviewees expressed their frustration and disappointment because their countries and cultures were negatively depicted in the U.S. media. Many of the interviewees agreed that these negative portrayals resulted from biases, as well as ignorance on the part of the U.S. editors, journalists, and reporters. Some interviewees expected the U.S. media to be more ethical and tell “the truth.”

Because some of the U.S. television programs do not appeal to many Arab, African, and Muslim audiences, some of these audiences seek gratification by subscribing to satellite television channels. The MBC is an example given by one Arab female interviewee. Arab and Muslim-sponsored satellite channels (e.g., Al Jazeera) provide social and cultural safe heavens for these audiences. These satellite



television channels, however, may insulate and deprive their African, Arab, and Muslim viewers from watching the U.S. news media. Coupled with internalized religious and cultural indoctrination, these satellite channels may also inhibit their viewers from socializing with American people and blending into the American social fabric. Most of the interviewees knew that what was shown on television news did not necessarily reflect objective reality. Their personal experiences informed them that objectivity is hard to get, and reality is socially constructed. This echoes Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, a "third space" between centripetal and centrifugal forces that allows for addressees to challenge media construction of their identities. Having in mind Bakhtin's chronotopes (time/space), it is interesting to note that the U.S. media and the interviewees had divergent and sometimes incompatible chronotopic frames.

Although many of the interviewees were not fully aware of newsworthiness factors (Chang et al., 1987), they seem to believe that the news in the U.S. media is slanted to serve the interests of the U.S. government (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). This thinking concurs with Chomsky's (1989) argument that the media in the United States functions as "adjunct of government" (p. 75). But, such an assertion dismisses the relative autonomy that most U.S. media organizations enjoy (Schudson, 1995).

The U.S. government in general, and the President in particular, have a comparative advantage in setting agendas for mass media, and in influencing political discourse on international issues (Entman, 1991; Kellner, 1992; Manheim, 1994). But, to characterize the mainstream U.S. news media as a mere propaganda machine for the U.S. government is far-fetched.

Many of the interviewees' responses attribute media misrepresentation to ideology and economic interests rather than organizational culture, media routines, journalistic training, and values of reporters and editors (Hackett, 1984; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). It seems that the interviewees did not appreciate the difficulty that American journalists and reporters face when trying to make international news comprehensible to the mainstream American audience. Chang and Lee (1992) and Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) found that the more negative coverage a foreign country received in the U.S. media, the more likely audiences were to think negatively about that country. Unfamiliar with how international news is gathered, distributed, and presented, some interviewees resort to simplistic interpretations of media misrepresentations.

Two decades ago, many developing countries criticized how world news were produced and distributed. They called for a "new world information and communication order" to correct the unfairness in the existing world communication order (Masmoudi, 1979). The recommendations of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference in Belgrade, 1980, aimed at adjusting the imbalance in the flow of information were ignored by the developed nations (MacBride, 1980).

Some of the interviewees' views may appear irrational, extremist, or absurd to some Americans. To put some of these views in context, we have to remember that during the 80s and the 90s, some Arab, African, and Muslim scholars traded accusations with Western intellectuals on the reasons leading to the emergence of extremism and ethnocentrism worldwide. Some scholars argued that the excesses of "Eurocentrism" generated ultra-nationalism and Islamic extremism (Amin, 1989). Theories of hegemonic power and the "American cultural imperialism" (Hallin, 1987; Meyer, 1989; Schiller, 1976) attribute many of the problems occurring in developing countries to the exploitative policies of Western Europe in general and the United States in particular (Mattelart, Delcourt, & Mattelart, 1993). Media representation, portrayal, and framing of other cultures contribute to how members of these cultures perceive the United States.

Inaccurate and negative media portrayals of Africans, Arabs, and Muslims may adversely affect the interaction of these alien groups with mainstream Americans. Samovar and Porter (2000) have indicated, "frequently, prejudices and stereotypes led to assumptions about members of co-cultures that are false, hurtful, and insulting" (p. 115). To promote a healthy intercultural dialogue, journalist should refrain from using harmful stereotyping that offends minority groups (Berger, 1997).

Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, Derrida's deconstruction, Said's Orientalism, Bhabha's notions of cultural difference, and Bakhtin's dialogism, heteroglossia and chronotopes, allow us to see how the interviewees decoded and reconstructed the U.S. media discourses and how they accepted or disavowed messages related to their cultures and identity constructions.

## Conclusion

The interviews succeeded in revealing how the interviewees made meaning of the U.S. television news. The interviewees argued that most of the U.S. television news from Arab, African, and Islamic countries were distorted. No adequate background information was given to civil strife in Somalia, Rwanda, and Algeria, the interviewees argued. They added that the U.S. media helped Israel by negatively portraying the struggle of the Palestinians in particular, and the Arab people in general. The U.S. media outlets were accused of magnifying "Islamic extremism," and employing specific media frames for stereotyping Arabs and Muslims as terrorists (e.g., Algeria). Many interviewees expressed their resentment and anger for these unfair media portrayals.

Some of the interviewees took the initiative to exercise self-criticism. An Asian Muslim female argued that some Muslims were to "blame" for being negatively portrayed. Another Muslim male interviewee referred to the killings perpetrated by Muslim militants in Algeria, and said that such killings provided pretexts for the U.S. media to generalize and depict Muslims as terrorists. An Arab Muslim female interviewee underscored the sense of insecurity that veiled

women feel in the United States at times of escalating tension between the United States and Arab or Muslim countries. These findings provide important insights affirming that Muslim women as bearers of Islamic values are put at frontline of cross-cultural discourses. The veil becomes a site of cultural struggle not only in Islamic countries, but in Western countries as well.

Although unsurprising, the findings of this study are instructive and insightful. They provide important cues for understanding how the interviewees felt when they watched negative media portrayals of their countries, cultures, and peoples. These findings acquire more significance after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, because they underscore the need for more interethnic, interreligious, and intercultural dialogue. Editors, reporters, and journalists should undertake a critical evaluation of how they gather international news, frame events, and depict peoples of other cultures. Genuine efforts should aim at overcoming simplistic explanations and derogatory stereotyping that offend ethnic and religious minorities and do injustice to members of other cultures. It would also be appropriate to provide members of minority groups, including Arabs, Africans, and Muslims a window of opportunity to speak for themselves, tell their stories, and comment on what they consider injurious to their feelings and harmful to their interests. According to the interviewees, what is needed from the U.S. media organizations is clear: accuracy, fairness, and objectivity in foreign news reporting.

This study has two limitations: First, the number of the interviewees was limited and does represent a full spectrum of global cultures. Because the sample was nonprobability sample, the findings cannot be generalized to all international students in the United States. Second, the length of the interviews (40 to 50 min) was short for answering all aspects of the questionnaire, and examining complex socioeconomic issues. Further research should be done on the same topic to examine how international students from other regions of the world perceive the U.S. media coverage of international news.

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