

Research Forum**MEDIA, IMAGE, REALITY AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

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For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.

Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922

Today, our world view is largely defined by the media of mass communications, particularly the electronic media, that are owned and operated by the multinational conglomerates (General Electric, Time Warner/Turner, Disney/Capital Cities/ABC, and Westinghouse) and are engaged in an intense competition for maximizing profits, global reach, and control. It is no secret that in recent years, a small number of the largest industrial corporations in the U.S. has acquired more public communications power— including ownership of the news — than any private businesses have ever before possessed in world history (Bagdikian, 1997). Furthermore, it is no secret that most (if not all) major mass communication channels (radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, motion pictures, internet) are owned by these very global corporations. It is often through these corporate-owned media portrayals and reports that we come to define the “outer world”, learn about far-away events and places, and form our perceptions of our fellow beings.

In fact, nearly four decades ago, the late Canadian media critic, Marshall McLuhan, predicted that future wars would not be fought by conventional weapons on the battlegrounds, but rather by images portrayed by the mass media. As we approach the millennium, “the war of images” is in full swing, and image-makers are busily packaging everything from soap, toys, and breakfast cereals to presidential candidates, nations, religions, and ideas. Unfortunately, wars produce casualties, and in contemporary wars of images, the Middle East and everything associated with it, including religion, politics, language, climate, and

custom has been under an unscrupulous attack by the Western media. Based on the prevailing Western media reports and perception studies, it is safe to say that the Middle East is perhaps the most misrepresented and stereotyped region of the world. It seems that whenever politicians need a scapegoat to boost their standing in the public opinion polls or a whipping boy to blame for their political shortcomings, failed policies, domestic problems, or an excuse for meddling in the internal and regional affairs of other nations, or a justification for selling arms, or a cause for exploiting the natural resources of other nations, or a campaign for gaining voters' sympathy, they resort to actions aimed at and against the Middle East or other developing countries. For instance, prior to the Persian Gulf War, President George Bush bribed some nations and persuaded others to form a so-called coalition of allies in his war against Iraq. In the meantime, a highly orchestrated media campaign began to transform Saddam Hussein's Clark Gable image to a ruthless ruler, worse than Hitler. (Interestingly enough, just prior to Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the U.S. government had vigorously supported Saddam's war against Iran for 8 years!) On the other hand, the American public relations firm, Hill & Knowlton, was hired by Kuwait's ousted rulers to stage media events aimed at stirring up the American public opinion in favor of military intervention. Hence, the Kuwaiti ambassador's 14-year-old daughter was coached by Hill & Knowlton to tearfully tell the U.S. Congress that she had personally witnessed Iraqi troops taking the newly born babies out of hospital incubators in Kuwait and throwing them on the floor to die. The reality was that she had not even been in Kuwait during Iraq's invasion, but her emotional and eyewitness testimony was aired repeatedly on television networks in the U.S. and elsewhere around the world to stir up public sentiment in favor of the planned war! Of course the viewers did not know that they were watching a staged or manufactured act, nor did the media mention the identity of the girl. In the process, American public opinion was manipulated, and Americans were skillfully deceived by the media and media handlers. Hence, in 1991, Bush went to war and Saddam to his safe underground bunkers while his innocent people were tragically slaughtered and Iraq's infrastructure destroyed, not to mention the immense damage done to the environment. Bush triumphed and shed his "wimpy" image, and Saddam survived and has continued to rule Iraq with an even tighter iron-fist than ever before. In 1998, it appears that Bill Clinton is ready to follow Bush's footsteps as his administration is preparing for a second Persian Gulf war — some argue to provide a cover for his alleged sexual relation with a 24-year-old White House intern, Monica Lewinsky.

The Persian Gulf War has taught us many lessons, including the mass media's dependency on government and vice versa, propaganda techniques aimed at manipulating public opinion, government censorship of the media, and manufacturing or altering public perception. Another lesson is that in the final analysis when it comes to politics and the leader's self-interest people or ordinary citizens do not really matter — they can be easily sacrificed in battles for political and economic gains by lords of the global village who own the communication channels and those who control the international commerce. Another lesson is that, although the mass media's version of events usually differs from reality, it is the concocted media version or the manufactured reality that is internalized by people as

reality. In other words, media portrayals of people, places, and events become perceptions and perceptions become realities. These realities or mindsets then become the basis for human interactions.

The Oklahoma bombing tragedy in 1995, the crash of a TWA Boeing 747 in 1996, and the bombing incident at the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta provide further illustrations of a mindset that every terrorist act committed in the U.S. or elsewhere must somehow be linked to the Middle East. During all these tragedies, the American media and the American security forces were quick to point their fingers at the Middle East or, at least, suggest a linkage through innuendoes. In practically every instance, assumptions and speculations by the media and government officials led the American public and, in fact, the world public, to believe that a Middle Eastern country, Iran, Libya, Syria or Iraq or perhaps a Moslem fundamentalist group, might be behind these tragedies. For instance, in its March 5, 1995, *The New York Times* ran this heading: "Terror in Oklahoma: Islam in Oklahoma; Fear about Retaliation Among Muslim Groups." Such speculations and assumptions led the U.S. security forces to detain and search a Jordanian-American who happened to be on a flight out of Oklahoma on the same day that the bombing tragedy took place. Furthermore, the TWA crash was a sufficient cause for President Clinton to sign a bill imposing strict economic sanctions on Iran and Libya amidst the tears of the mourners who had lost their loved ones in that crash. Of course, no journalist bothered to question the logic of that action. In fact, the American media followed suit with such sensational headlines as "Who Wishes us Ill? The CIA is casting a wide net for those who hate America, including groups from the Middle East" (*Time*, July 29, 1996). Furthermore, the U.S. officials have accused Iran of being behind the bombing incident at a U.S. military base in Saudi Arabia, and the bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994. Indications are, as reported by the media, that in both cases domestic dissident groups were behind those bombings.

The paradox is that in this post-Cold War era, when the Communist or Soviet nuclear threat against Capitalism has vanished, most signs appear to demonstrate that the Middle East (particularly Iran and Islam) has replaced the "Red menace". Accordingly, Iran, as well as other Middle Eastern countries, and Islam suffer from an overwhelmingly negative image throughout the world that is induced partially by their own actions (or inactions) at home and abroad, partially by opposition groups and their propaganda, and partially by the Western media. Additionally, the on-going Palestinian-Israeli conflict which has been routinely covered by the American media continues to overshadow the entire region negatively.

Unfortunately, the prevailing public mindset, fostered by the Western (read American) media and government officials, is such that the mere mention of the Middle East conjures fear, mistrust, hate, and terrorism. Hence, the general public unquestionably accepts any accusations of the Middle Easterners for any act of violence, anywhere around the world!

Clearly, the current state of affairs is counterproductive to both the U.S. and the Middle East as a whole. Hence, the anti-Middle East rhetoric and the Western (particularly American) mindset need to be changed in accordance with the realities of the Middle East — the cradle of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and the birth place of some of the earliest human civilizations such as the Egyptians and Persians. As any historian would attest, few regions

of the world can match the contributions in arts, philosophy, science, medicine, language, and natural resources that the Middle East has made to the world and humanity. Suffice to say that even astronomy, the science that studies the universe, began in the Middle East over 5,000 years ago. Unfortunately, the American media tend to simplify, sensationalize, generalize, and, in the process, dehumanize an entire region by not only portraying the Middle East as a dangerous place, but as a place where terrorists are born, raised, and trained.

The reality is that peoples of the Middle East, like many others throughout the world, aspire to gain a relative degree of freedom (e.g., economic freedom, political freedom, freedom of expression, peace, prosperity) in their daily lives and the choice to democratically choose their political leaders — leaders who have grassroots support.

It is true that Western journalists (as would, I suppose, other journalists) tend to report world events in accordance with their own ethnocentrism, through their own lenses, and largely in line with the views of their government, especially during major conflicts and crisis such as those mentioned earlier. The problem, however, is that such ethnocentric reports coupled with the global reach of the Western media often tend to be more confusing than enlightening, entertaining than informative, sensational than factual, and biased than balanced. What is lacking in the American media coverage of the Middle East is precisely what the journalists should have learned in the journalism classes in colleges and universities: To be objective or impartial observers of events and report in an accurate, balanced, and fair manner. In other words, journalists need to provide context for their reports, search for the causes or roots of conflict or problems, and resist making hasty generalizations or jumping to conclusions.

Considering that only a handful of media conglomerates control most news and information that is disseminated throughout the world and that these very same sources interpret reality according to their own interests, it is then no wonder that much of what we see, read, or hear has nothing to do with reality. According to Walter Lippmann (1922), the depictions by the mass media are often superficial and misleading, often creating completely false pictures in our heads for the “world outside.” Our “mental pictures” are then largely based on not only *what* media present to us but also on *how* people or places are portrayed by the visual media. It is then no wonder that American opinion as well as world opinion concerning the Middle East has been highly negative. Hence, the Middle East leaders and people must not only avoid fueling the prevailing stereotypical images propagated by the Western media about Islam and the region, but must collectively, consistently, and consciously try to counter these negative images by taking constructive actions toward enhancing the status of Islam and the region as a whole. Of course, in a world where the time-tested strategy of “divide and conquer” is still operational, it is easier to speak of cooperation than act upon it. Nonetheless, it is through a concerted effort that the negative portrayals of the Middle East image by the Western media and opportunistic politicians can be reversed.

Finally, it goes without saying that the image makers, often of Western origin, have their own agendas, but the leaders and peoples of the Middle East need to understand those agendas and act, or react, in ways that do not perpetuate the existing stereotypical images of their nations and peoples. Although there are no magic formulas, creating a favorable impression

requires knowledge about mass communication processes, public relations, interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, and nonverbal communication, coupled with careful research, planning, coordination, and implementation. Image, reality, or what others think of us, are social construction, and the tools used to construct this structure are mainly the mass media (Anderson, 1990). It is, then, no wonder that today a huge industry exists in the U.S. and elsewhere whose job is to transform unknowns into celebrities, build or enhance images, destroy images, package candidates for political offices, change appearances, and in the process change or modify public perception. In the final analysis, there is only one reality and that reality is perception. And the bases for perception are the contents of mass media.

References

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