International Communication Gazette

The Middle East in American Media: A 20th-Century Overview
Dina Ibrahim

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:
$SAGE

Additional services and information for *International Communication Gazette* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://gaz.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://gaz.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations http://gaz.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/71/6/511

THE MIDDLE EAST IN AMERICAN MEDIA
A 20th-Century Overview

Dina Ibrahim

Abstract / This article chronicles 20th-century American media coverage of the Middle East. Communication scholars have been at odds with determining just how the region has been portrayed, and their descriptions are not entirely uniform. Many of these scholars have accused the American media of favoritism in its coverage of the region's conflicts, arguing through their research that objectivity has been present but rare in the nation's mainstream press. This article traces those research efforts in an attempt to establish a picture of the patterns and shifting paradigms of American media coverage of the Middle East, particularly the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Keywords / Arab / broadcast / Israeli / literature review / Middle East / Muslim / Palestinian / press / stereotype

Introduction

Over the course of the 20th century, numerous media scholars have analyzed the depiction of Arabs in American news and entertainment content. They have utilized wide-ranging methodologies, which have added multiple angles of insight into this delicate issue. This review aims to examine what these historical studies reveal in an effort to trace their chronological progression throughout the various decades of the 20th century. This article also assesses the individual and collective contributions of these studies to explain how American media outlets depict Arabs and whether or not their representations have conveyed derogatory and stereotypical frames. It chronicles the trends of which media were analyzed and the methodologies applied to these analyses.

The studies in this survey were located by conducting electronic and manual searches for academic books and journal articles, as well as non-academic research reports authored by members of the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC). Electronic search terms included 'Arab', 'Arabic', 'Arab–Israeli', 'Islam', 'Israeli', 'Palestinian', 'news', 'Middle East', 'television', 'radio', 'newspaper', 'magazine', 'website', 'stereotype', 'representation' and 'depiction'. Manual searches involved interviewing scholars for further references, meeting with community activists and visiting the ADC offices in Washington, DC.

This review focuses on the broadcast and print media that were analyzed by the 52 studies included in the survey, as well as their methodologies and theoretical frameworks. The time frame of the published or broadcast media that the studies analyzed was from 1 January 1900 to 31 December 1999. Up to the year 2000, online media content had received scant attention from scholars examining the depiction of Arabs in American media and is therefore excluded from this overview.

Early 20th-Century Arabs in the News

The study of Arab and Muslim portrayals in 20th-century American media chronologically begins with a content analysis of Arabs in *The New York Times* from 1917 to 1947 (Mousa, 1984). Mousa found that the *Times*' coverage was mostly conflict-oriented and unfavorable to the Arabs. Military, political and economic stories dominated the 1930s and 1940s, in contrast with the more cultural and educational stories of the 1920s. This trend is described as the process of *deromanticizing* the Arab image. As a general rule, western sources were cited more often than Arab ones. The study concludes that Arabs were not presented as fighting for independence from colonial rule during this period; instead coverage was limited, distorted and presented from a colonial viewpoint.

Mousa's analysis is particularly useful because it empirically demonstrates the dominance of western colonial interpretations of Middle Eastern culture in academic discourse that Edward Said elaborates on in *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). Mousa also analyzes 30 years of coverage, an exception to other studies, whose time frame is generally much shorter. However, other studies with shorter time frames have the advantage of contrasting between newspapers and other media formats, such as television news. Another noteworthy aspect of this study is its examination of sources. The use of western sources more frequently than Arab ones is a trend that has been statistically confirmed by other studies (Batarfi, 1997; Suleiman, 1988).

1947–70: Postcolonial Arabs in the News

Evensen's content analysis of *The New York Times* from November 1947 to May 1948 outlines the interpretive framework that the newspaper created during this period. The analysis uses primary historical sources including documents from the Truman Library, poll data collected over the winter of 1947/8 and letters penned by editorial writers at the *Times* (Evensen, 1990). The value of this study is in its examination of the role of the *Times* in mobilizing public support for the creation of Israel, even though at the time the newspaper was widely known for its anti-Zionist political views. With support from the US, the United Nations voted in favor of establishing a Jewish state in November 1947. A few months later President Truman changed his mind, and decided instead to support a UN trusteeship over Palestine to give the two sides time to cool off. This move was framed by *The New York Times*' editorials as cowardly, weak and indicative of Truman's lack of leadership skills at the outset of what would come to be the Cold War. The *Times* editorial staff believed that its role was to shape informed public opinion about what it interpreted as national interest during this period.

Suleiman (1988) and Batarfi (1997) look at similar periods of conflict in the Middle East, the 1956 Suez War, the 1967 Six-Day Arab–Israeli War, the 1973 Arab–Israeli October War (Yom Kippur) and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. These are interesting and valid periods of study since reporting increased on the region by default due to the violent conflicts between Arab countries and Israel, and there is plenty of reporting to analyze. Both studies contrasted more than one medium, and both found similar results. Suleiman's content analysis was of eight American print outlets, both newspapers and magazines (*The New York Times*, *News of the Week in Review*, *US News and World Report*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life*, *The Nation* and *The New Republic*). Batarfi's analysis covered *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*. They both found that Arab perspectives were not presented fairly and objectively, albeit less so in 1973. Meanwhile, Israel was revered by the elite American press in 1956 and 1967.

In 1956, frames used to describe Arabs included being backward, dishonest, unreliable, undemocratic, and with low standards of education and living. Israelis were described as having high education and living standards, and as democratic and western. The Arabs were presented as the aggressors against peace-loving Israelis, and when Israel attacked its neighboring countries, these attacks were framed as retaliatory (Suleiman, 1988). In 1967, the data again show a clear pro-Israel and anti-Nasser direction of reporting. The Cold War dominant ideology played a significant role in this representation of Nasser. He was viewed by the American press as a pawn of Soviet regional power in the Middle East, playing a dangerous game of plotting East against West. Sources used in reporting the conflict were overwhelmingly American, followed by Israeli sources, then European, then Arab countries.

The 1970s: Oil Prices and Peace Agreements

The 1970s witnessed the beginning of studies on the television portrayal of the Middle East, particularly since the electronic medium quickly emerged as a primary source of news. During the 1970s, the Middle East featured prominently in headlines and evening newscasts across America (Adams and Heyl, 1981). The point at which coverage began to balance out was 1973. Positive qualities of Arabs, their achievements and views were increasingly reported in all news magazines surveyed with the exceptions of *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. The Arab–Israeli war of 1973, the oil embargo, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the Iranian hostage crisis were all major events that prompted a wide academic interest in the study of Arab and Israeli press portrayals. By conducting a content analysis of network broadcasts from 1972 to 1980, Adams and Heyl (1981) found that in 1972, an average of 30 seconds a weeknight was devoted to the Middle East. The 1973 war and the oil embargo were the turning points for media attention, with coverage of the region tripling after the October war. Middle East news decreased in 1975 and 1976. With Carter's diplomatic efforts at Camp David, coverage increased even more in 1977, and through to the end of 1980 the Middle East thoroughly consumed most television coverage of international affairs.

Adams and Heyl also contrasted their results with public opinion polls of the 1970s and found a positive change in direction and intensity of public opinion

paralleling television's coverage of Egypt and Sadat. In the late 1970s, despite the networks' increasing criticism of Israel, public opinion was found to contradict developments in television coverage. Israel's popularity remained high despite the changed tenor of television news coverage. The year of the most widespread Muslim news at the time, 1980, was dominated by coverage of the hostage crisis in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, with little coverage of the Arab–Israeli conflict. These general patterns of increased coverage applied to all three American national networks. From 1972 to 1974, ABC had the most Middle East news, from 1976 to 1978, CBS was leading, then from 1979 to 1980, ABC took the lead again. NBC consistently broadcast the least amount of Middle East coverage of the three networks, instead focusing more on domestic stories.

The value of the Adams and Heyl study is in its proportionate indication of the quantity of airtime the Middle East was given during the 1970s on each network. However, these data do not give us much insight into the quality of the 1970s coverage. The authors did not code for tone or direction, and instead focused on a quantitative assessment of news from the region.

Bagneid and Schneider (1981) textually analyzed 1970s network coverage of the Middle East. They examined network broadcasts of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem to determine how he fared against Menachem Begin. They found that Sadat was shown smiling twice as often as Begin, and he was portrayed as more friendly and outgoing. This was determined by counting the number of times he was captured on camera talking to people, shaking hands and being social. Asi (1981) conducted a time-series content analysis of network television broadcasts before, during and after Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. Results indicated that coverage of Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was more favorable and conversely, coverage of Israel was less favorable in 1979 than earlier in the decade. Reporting in 1979 was far from being pro-Arab, but it was significantly different from the pro-Israeli approach of previous years. By 1979, Egypt was receiving more favorable coverage than Israel. While other Arab countries received slightly more negative coverage by 1979, most stories in all three periods were coded in the study as neutral. Therefore, dramatic changes in the coverage of Egypt and the PLO did not pertain to the rest of the Arab states. Asi argues that by distancing themselves from Sadat, the Arab countries reinforced their villainous status and accounted for continued unfavorable coverage.

Asi demonstrates that favorable coverage of an Arab nation will be invariably linked with the extent of its diplomatic ties with Israel. Peace with Israel on its terms leads to more favorable coverage by American journalists. Meanwhile, Arab unity, the struggle for occupied lands and opposition to Israeli policies are frowned upon both by the White House and Congress, thus consequently the American media. On the other hand, Sadat's example shows how an Arab can dress in a western suit, charm the media and gain their favor by simply understanding how they operate and adjusting behavior accordingly. Sadat's press strategy did not always receive positive reviews. In a scathing essay, Leon Hadar (1980), a former Israeli press secretary and journalist, accuses Sadat of manipulating the media, particularly *The New York Times*. He calls Sadat an actor who understood the media's need for exclusives

and scoops, and unlike Begin, Sadat knew that the press prefers the news to be devoid of complexity, instead condensed into 'simplistic ideas and slogans' (Hadar, 1980).

During the 1970s, the Palestinians were the subject of both insightful and superficial American network documentaries, or current affairs programming. Prolific researcher Jack Shaheen examined the visual framing of a 1974 *60 Minutes* (CBS) segment that showed a Palestinian mother with a gun and a child in an army training camp and a video of Yasser Arafat showing him as disheveled and unshaven. Casualties of the Israeli targets Maalot and Quarat Shemona were highlighted, while no visuals of Arab casualties at the hands of the Israelis were shown (Shaheen, 1981b). Conversely, Howard Stringer's 1974 CBS documentary *The Palestinians* (which won the Overseas Press Club award for best documentary on foreign affairs) explained that only extreme fringes of Palestinian society were behind the massacre at Maalot. Stringer's documentary interviews Palestinian and Lebanese-Palestinian families from a wide socioeconomic spectrum, and points out that they too are fighting for a promised land. He refers to the militant Palestinians as guerrillas, never terrorists. Historical context is provided, and the program documents both Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints, presenting a complex and diverse picture.

Another even-handed network documentary about Palestinians, according to Shaheen, is Malcolm Clarke's *Terror in the Promised Land*, broadcast in October 1978. The issues were presented from the perspective of young Palestinians who volunteer for suicide squads. The program explained their rationale and passion for a homeland. The narrator interviewed the widow of Palestinian intellectual Ghassan Kanafani, and listed other civilian intellectuals killed by Israelis. The program also discussed human rights issues, including Palestinian torture and beatings at the hands of Israelis. Shaheen's in-depth interviews with the producers of *Terror* reveal that ABC received a vast amount of hate mail after the documentary aired. The Arabs are not easily explained in two-minute news broadcasts, according to Shaheen. But the documentary format, despite its limited verifiable effects on public opinion, can provide vital insight, history and contextual elucidation of the Middle East's complexity. However, like regular newscasts, they are not immune to distortion.

A content analysis of *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* as well as CBS transcripts was conducted for three constructed weeks in 1971 (Mishra, 1979). The Middle East made up an average of 5 percent of all stories in these media. The content of the stories comprised 66 percent hard news, 15 percent background stories and 4 percent opinions, editorials and letters to the editor. *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* had the most Middle East hard news coverage, while the *LA Times* had the most interpretive, background feature stories. *The New York Times* had the most pictures and editorials, while the *Post* had more opinion columns. The *Tribune* had the most letters to the editor dealing with the Middle East. Coverage in all the media analyzed concentrated on Israel, Egypt and Iran. Other Arab countries received coverage ranging from 1 to 4 percent of all Middle East news. Sources of Middle East news ranged from about 18 percent coming from the papers' foreign correspondents and staff writers, while the rest came from the three main wire services: UPI, AP and Reuters. The

wire service most frequently used was the American Associated Press. The *LA Times* emerges as the American newspaper with the most context provided on the Middle East, while the *Times* and *Post* lead in hard news.

Daugherty and Warden (1979) analyzed editorial pages of *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and the *Christian Science Monitor* between 1 January 1967 and 31 December 1977. They found that in terms of quantity, *The New York Times* published the most editorials about the Middle East, followed by the *Post* and the *Monitor* and the least amount was the *WSJ*. As for editorial position, the *Christian Science Monitor*, while having the largest proportion of neutral stories, also published the largest number of pro-Arab editorials. The *Post* was the most frequently critical of Arab nations, and was the least likely to present neutral editorials on the Arab–Israeli conflict. The number of anti-Arab *New York Times* editorials outnumbered those supportive of Israel by a ratio of three to one.

If there are any themes emerging from the analysis of 1970s coverage of the Arab–Israeli conflict, the authors argue, it is that the editorials of the prestige press are overwhelmingly neutral. Not only that, but their dominant support mainly goes to negotiations for peace settlements and criticism of belligerency on both sides. This is an important observation that is often underscored in studies of the portrayal of Arabs in American media. When conducting a content analysis, most stories and editorials were coded as neutral. Of the ones that take sides, these are more likely to legitimize the Israeli position and marginalize Arab opinion. Daugherty and Warden also stress that by no means do the prestige press present a monolith of opinion. There are significant differences between publications. The fact that there is a tremendous diversity of coverage is also largely ignored. Researchers should hesitate to make sweeping generalizations about the overall trends in the media.

The 1980s: Lebanon War and the First Palestinian Uprising

In 1982, Israel invaded southern Lebanon. Subsequently, Israel was more frequently portrayed by *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *LA Times* as aggressive (Batarfi, 1997). However, the prestige press justified Israel's actions twice as much as the Arabs. Batarfi identified eight frames in the coverage he analyzed: aggression, intransigence, peace seeking, terrorism, land legitimacy, action justification and competence/incompetence. Batarfi cites *The New York Times* as siding with Israel more often than the *Post*, and the *LA Times* as the least critical toward the Arabs.

By analyzing headlines and coding for the countries of the stories' primary and secondary focus for two six-month periods in 1976 and 1984, Barranco and Shyles (1988) found that the *Times* mentioned Israel and the US significantly more frequently than 10 Arab nations combined. The authors argue that due to Israel's close cultural, ideological and political ties to the US, news about Israel is likely to be more salient to both the press and public than news from Arab countries.

Gilboa (1989) and Griffin (1990) both conducted similar comparative analyses of network television and *The New York Times* between December 1987 and June 1988. Griffin concluded that Israeli press restrictions resulted in a decline in coverage of the Intifada (Palestinian uprising), while American public opinion adjusted itself

to supporting Israel's handling of the riots. Gilboa found that despite print and broadcast media's sharp criticism of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians during the uprising, public opinion remained strongly in favor of Israel over the Palestinians. His content analysis revealed that the *Times* reports placed equal blame for the violence on Israelis and Palestinians and its editorials squarely placed the blame on Israel. Despite this coverage, the public placed blame for the conflict mostly on the PLO and Palestinians.

This method of contrasting tone and direction of media coverage with public opinion polls can also help researchers determine extra-media factors (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) that affect public opinion toward Arabs. During the Intifada, President Reagan's administration and members of Congress were sending signals of Israeli support to the public that contradicted the media. This support was based on a shared Judeo-Christian tradition, common values and political institutions, and was magnified by negative media portrayals of Arabs. These factors, Gilboa argues, may have far stronger and more durable effects on American public opinion than the media alone. Another potential explanation for the divergence of media and public agendas could be linked to a decline in the American public's respect for and confidence in the media. Whatever the explanation, there are clearly factors beyond the media that account for the reverse agenda-setting effect seen in coverage of the Arab–Israeli issue, which become evident by contrasting public opinion polls with media content.

Shaheen (1981a) qualitatively investigated network documentary portrayal of Saudi Arabians in the 1980s. While television news is confined to superficiality by organizational constraints such as time and deadline pressures, documentary producers often have the luxury of months of careful preparation, planning and research. Thus, documentary programming can provide an invaluable opportunity to convey context and meaning to international conflicts, particularly in the Middle East. However, this is not always the case. Shaheen described the *60 Minutes* segment in vivid detail as overwhelmingly negative and stereotypical. He found that on network news magazines, Saudi Arabians were most frequently associated with oil, wealth and extravagance and their affluence framed as a threat to American society.

The NBC documentary *White Paper* about Saudi Arabia also framed the country in negative and ethnocentric terms, as determined by the choice of visuals, editing and narration. Saudi women were shown as shrouded in black veils and forbidden to drive; images of gas lines in America were followed by commentary about Saudi society still being essentially tribal. On the other hand, there are insightful documentaries as well. Shaheen cites *Saudi Arabia*, a CBS report aired in October 1980 that thoughtfully analyzed Saudi society and culture. The documentary respects the nation's history and Islamic religion, it also stressed that the Saudis share modernity with their traditions. Saudis were shown as people, human beings, whose society is different, not better or worse. Saudi women, both veiled and unveiled, were interviewed for the program, and they are shown playing volleyball, joking and studying.

The 1990s: Gulf War, Oslo and Islam as a Global Threat

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam became the contemporary global threat that replaced Communism as the enemy of the West. Sheikh et al. (1995) conducted research on the American and European press representations of Islam as a religion, entirely separate from connotations involving the Middle East. They analyzed randomly selected articles using a Lexis-Nexis search with the keywords 'Islam' and 'Moslem'. Articles were sampled from *The Times* of London, *The New York Times*, the Los Angeles Times and the *Detroit Free Press* from 1988 to 1992. The *Detroit Free Press* was expected to be more sensitive in its reporting on Islam due to the large Muslim population in the Detroit area.

Results showed that a majority of articles about Muslims involved events, groups and individuals from the Middle East. Topics were mostly centered on crises, conflicts and wars. Coverage of Islam was, for the most part, international. References to Muslim groups and organizations lacked specificity. A clear majority of stories did not distinguish between the various branches of Islam. As for negativity and bias, the authors found weak support for their hypothesis that a high level of negative tone would be detected. Overall, coverage was slightly more negative than positive, but the majority of stories they analyzed were neutral in tone. The *Detroit Free Press* was not significantly different in its coverage from the other papers included in the study, with the exception that the Detroit paper was less likely to describe Muslims in derogatory terms like 'fundamentalist'. This finding becomes more relevant when contrasted against *The New York Times*' trend of justifying Israeli actions in deference to a large Jewish readership in New York (Batarfi, 1997).

In *Covering Islam*, Said (1997) analyses the British documentary *Death of a Princess* and the American-produced *Jihad in America*, both aired on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television. He laments the lack of Muslim sources in both programs, and cites the documentaries as examples of furthering the divide between 'us and them'. Documentary analysis is a particularly revealing method of investigating the representation of Arabs and Muslims. Deconstructing longer format news shows can demonstrate in detail the reality of negative stereotypes television networks perpetuated, despite the time and resources in documentary production that should theoretically facilitate deeper analysis and discussion than regular television news programs.

Hashem (1997) drew systematic samples from *Time* and *Newsweek* between 1990 and 1993. He found that *Time* covered slightly more articles on the Arab countries than *Newsweek*. Iraq was the most mentioned Arab country, followed by Palestine, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf States. The coverage was mostly negative for both magazines during the first two years, 1990 and 1991, as a result of the Gulf War. However, his results did show a trend toward more neutral or positive coverage over the four-year period. Hashem constructed recurring themes in both magazines: a Middle East economic decline, growth of the fundamentalist Islamic movement, lack of democracy, the myth of Arab unity, Arabs living in the past, slavery still existing in the Middle East and finally, the changing political climate in terms of the peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians.

In her content analysis of editorials in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*, together with an analysis of television news talk shows on ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and PBS between October 1997 and February 1998, Ghada Khouri (1998) uses both numbers and journalists' testimony to argue that the mainstream press marginalized both Arab and western voices that were advocating sanctions removal and were opposed to further military assaults on Iraq. The *LA Times* once again emerges as the fairest newspaper to the Arab viewpoint; its editorial pages carried eight anti-war pieces and 10 editorials in favor of bombing Iraq. The rest were neutral. The *Post*'s op-ed pages published 23 editorials in favor of bombing Iraq and eight against, with 44 neutral ones. Of a total of 75 articles, two presented Arab authors and 14 expressed concern for civilians. *The New York Times*, on the other hand, published not a single Arab perspective out of 59 articles, one anti-war piece and 19 pro-war editorials. As for broadcast news, an analysis of the guests chosen to appear on debate format talk shows found that of the five networks studied, all featured guests who represented the US government line. Iraqi officials were the only Arab voices. These networks completely ignored independent Arab-American voices, and none of the shows discussed the suffering of the Iraqi people in detail.

Khouri also highlighted several themes that various American network television and newspapers adopted in their late 1990s coverage of Iraq: Iraqi deaths as propaganda, Arab lives do not count, Arabs are irrational and violent. She describes the media reaction to the possible bombing as sensationalist and hypocritical. Arab arguments against US policy toward Iraq were consistently marginalized. Khouri argues that the consequences of the media reinforcing the pro-war administration policy had a negative impact on the Arab-American community. Hate mail, racial slurs, discrimination cases and hate crimes toward Arab-Americans all increased after the US–Iraqi standoff (Khouri, 1998; Khouri et al., 1992, 1996).

Using Lexis-Nexis, Abunimeh and Masri (2000) analyzed elite newspapers for their coverage of Iraq during December 1998 and August–October 1999. Using the keyword 'Iraq', they found over 1000 articles, but adding the keywords 'civilians', 'sanctions' or 'UNICEF' the search results were far more limited, leading to their assertion that coverage of Iraq emphasized the bombing, while excluding reports of suffering by Iraqi civilians. They also analyzed transcripts from the television networks ABC, CBS and NBC, as well as CNN and NPR. They found that CNN and NPR were the only media outlets that reported on the effect of UN and US sanctions on the Iraqi people. They outlined seven themes of the press during this period, using qualitatively extracted examples to illustrate their observations. They found that the media in their study ignored or downplayed the sanctions' effects on the Iraqi civilian population, discredited or ignored reports of civilian victims of the bombings and personified Iraq as Saddam Hussein. The news analyzed also created an artificial balance of coverage by relying on Iraqi sources as opposed to including independent, non-governmental viewpoints. Journalists were towing the government line, exaggerating the threat of Iraqi weapons and using a narrow selection of 'experts' as sources.

Research on Journalists and their Attitudes: Surveys and In-depth Interviews

While the aforementioned studies examine content, they fail to reveal much about why journalists report the way they do on the Middle East. This is the job of researchers exploring the production realm, using research tools like in-depth interviews of journalists and surveys of their attitudes and experiences. One example of this research approach is Ghareeb's (1983) interviews with prominent journalists who reported on the Middle East. This study needs to be replicated and compared with his valuable, but archaic observations.

Through 17 extensive and exhaustive in-depth interviews with reporters, columnists, foreign correspondents, editors and State Department correspondents, all of whom covered the Middle East, Ghareeb provides insight into the process of crafting Arab and Muslim media depictions that quantitative studies lack as a result of their focus on content. The reporters Ghareeb interviewed all worked for various prestige news outlets: *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, PBS, the national television networks, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *LA Times*, Knight-Ridder chain, the *National Observer* and the *Chicago Daily News*. Ghareeb asked whether or not the journalists thought there was a bias against Arabs in the American press, and if so, what they thought were the reasons for the existence of such bias. Questions were also asked about the influence of the Israeli lobby and the differences between the Israeli and Arab information and public relations efforts.

Most of the reporters agreed there was a clear bias against Arabs in their media that significantly improved after the 1973 war and the oil embargo. Nevertheless, a few of the journalists interviewed strongly defended their professions and did not admit to the presence of any bias. Reasons attributed to bias primarily involved the weakness of the Arab information system, as well as heavy censorship from the Israeli government and military. Many complained about access and described how difficult it was to talk to any Arab officials, whether in the region or through Washington embassies due to heavy bureaucracy. Meanwhile, the sophisticated Israeli public relations system, which is constantly available to journalists both in Israel and the US, facilitates the reporting process. A vicious circle emerges, whereby information from the Arab side is difficult to obtain, which results in slanted content, leading to Arab government suspicion of western reporters' intentions, resulting in less cooperation and less information. The journalists also point to a lack of pressure from Arab-American groups on the media when bias is present, and a lack of praise from these communities when the coverage is balanced or positive. This complacency is in strong contrast to the vigilant activity of vocal Jewish-American groups and communities.

Ghareeb cites several reasons for an anti-Arab bias, and his logic is supported by the interviews. The first is cultural. Since Israel is a western-style democracy formed after the Second World War by European Jews, Americans are more likely to identify with it, as opposed to the Arab and Islamic cultures, which are alien to most Americans. This cultural bias stems from ignorance of the history, culture and politics of the Middle East manifested both in society at large and by members of the media, a contention supported by Said (1997). A determined and sophisticated

Israeli lobby and active Jewish media watchdog groups are contrasted against a disorganized Arab information strategy, as well as Arab failure to understand how American media work.

In addition to the production challenges American journalists face in covering the Middle East, which qualitative studies are more likely to reveal, surveys can also play an illuminating role in this research realm. Lichter's (1981) survey of American journalists is frequently cited by Arab researchers as proof that they are staunch supporters of Israel. Lichter found that 72 percent of the media members surveyed believe the US has a moral obligation to prevent the destruction of Israel. Therefore, Lichter concludes, the vast majority of America's leading journalists are strong defenders of Israel. In Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model, influential political and business entities use legal and public pressure to scare editors and reporters away from content deemed hostile to their interests and contrary to the ideologies and entities they support. Given this ideological pressure to conform, and the increasingly corporate structure of the media with its shrinking ownership in the hands of a few business elites, the results of Lichter's survey could inspire a new direction of research into how Arab representation is shaped by individual journalists' political positions and the relationship of those attitudes and beliefs to organizational and ideological influences on news content (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

Other surveys have targeted foreign correspondents in the Middle East, and these studies are also worthy of replication. Sreebny (1979) surveyed American correspondents in the Middle East covering the region since 1973. When asked about the major problems they face, they highlighted censorship and restrictions, a cultural gap between foreign correspondents and Arab societies, biased coverage of the region by American news media and the distrust of American reporters in the region. A number of them called for correspondents to learn Arabic and to undergo regional studies prior to their dispatch to the Middle East.

This type of information is vital to understanding how journalists operate and how perceptions of their jobs can affect coverage. Linking this data with content can lead to an overall better picture of why negative depictions of Arabs exist, and how this coverage can be improved. Arabs have improved the access over the years for foreign journalists, realizing that this is a major setback for their image. Arab-American groups have become much more actively critical of the press in recent years, which has also led to marginally better reporting. Hearing from journalists justifying or criticizing their work completes the picture.

Research on American Public Opinion and Popular Culture Media

In 1974, Suleiman (1988) surveyed high school teachers' attitudes toward Israel and Arabs, as well as public opinion poll analysis. His opinion poll data, covering 1930–80, show strong support for Israel and very low support of Arabs, although a significant percentage expressed indifference or no opinion. His main contribution to the study of Arabs in American media lies in his conclusion on the poll analysis: American attitudes toward Israel are clearly influenced by American–Israeli

relations. Half of the world history teachers Suleiman surveyed had not taken a course on the Middle East, but those that had were more likely to sympathize with Arabs. Among those surveyed, most were neutral on the Middle East, but those with an opinion were more likely to support Israel and hold negative attitudes about Arabs and Palestinians.

Unlike studies that have concentrated on what public opinion polls say about how America perceives Arabs (de Boer, 1983; Erksine, 1979; Lipset, 1978; Moughrabi, 1988), studies that have presented data on media coverage along with poll data to infer strong correlations between the two (Gilboa, 1989; Griffin, 1990) are more valuable in determining the scope of the effects of negative press portrayals on Arab stereotyping among the American public. In addition to the aforementioned poll studies, Slade's (1980) poll analysis suggests that the Knowledge Gap theory may apply in America's perception of the Arab–Israeli conflict. She found that images of Arabs are significantly better among college-educated and higher income bracket Americans, while approval of Palestinians and the PLO was higher among low-income non-college educated African-Americans.

One of the strengths of public opinion poll analysis may lie in its value for studying the cumulative effects of news, popular culture, film and literature and television programs on public perception of Arabs. The news is not the only source of popular negative stereotypes of Arabs held among the American population. The popular culture factor is highly significant. In *The TV Arab* (Shaheen, 1984), Jack Shaheen textually analyzed Hollywood entertainment output, and conducted in-depth interviews with producers, directors and industry executives. His research reveals three categories of the Arab stereotype in movies and television: the belly dancer, billionaire and bomber. There are also studies about Arab stereotypes in popular literature (Terry, 1985) and negative Arab representation in popular culture (Christison, 1987; Michalak, 1985; Sabbagh, 1990).

Summary and Recommendations

This article has attempted to chronicle the various American media that have been studied by scholars for their portrayal of Arabs, and the methods used by these scholars. The results they achieved have all led to a more comprehensive under-standing of how Arabs have been portrayed and why. An increase in qualitative analysis of American media images of Arabs would add further rich detail and nuance to the existing body of research literature. Further individual-level research is highly recommended, by the incorporation of more in-depth interviews with journalists, editors, reporters and producers, as well as surveys of foreign correspondents.

During the last part of the 20th century, the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) began to gain momentum in the effort to document and protest negative media stereotypes. The ADC reports on hate crimes detail the potential impact of derogatory media representation on Arab and Muslim communities all over the US. For example, following the 1991 Gulf War, the reports list thousands of incidents of violence against Arabs living in the US (Khouri, 1998; Khouri et al., 1992, 1996). Despite the fact that their data are not published in peer-reviewed

academic journals or books, their research adds a innovative dimension to the study of the American media's depiction of Arabs and Muslims. Research investigating the effects of derogatory media coverage needs to continue.

Negative depictions of Arabs in American media could have global consequences as well. The absence of fair and even-handed reporting may potentially lead to further erosion of American press credibility in Arab and Muslim countries. In the early 1990s, CNN and satellite television gained significant global popularity and influence, and America became the global leader of the export of information, entertainment and news (Hafez, 2000). The globalization of American media transformed its ability to disseminate news and will continue to impact the rest of the world in the 21st century. The national and international effects of American news coverage are rarely cited in 20th-century scholarly research on American media and the Middle East. The impact of this content needs to be further examined in future studies.

References

Abunimeh, A. and R. Masri (2000) 'The Media's Spin on Iraq', in A. Arnove (ed.) *Iraq Under Siege: The Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Adams, W.C. and P. Heyl (1981) 'From Cairo to Kabul with the Networks, 1972–1980', in W.C. Adams (ed.) *Television Coverage of the Middle East*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Asi, M. (1981) 'Arabs, Israelis and TV News: A Time-Series, Content Analysis', in W.C. Adams (ed.) *Television Coverage of the Middle East*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Bagneid, M. and S. Schneider (1981) 'Sadat Goes to Jerusalem: Televised Images, Themes and Agenda', in W.C. Adams (ed.) *Television Coverage of the Middle East*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Barranco, D. and L. Shyles (1988) 'Arab vs. Israeli Coverage in the New York Times, 1976 and 1984', *Journalism Quarterly* 65(1): 178–81.

Batarfi, K. (1997) 'Three American Prestige Newspapers' Stand toward the Arab–Israeli Conflicts: A Content Analysis of Editorials', paper presented at the International Communication Division at the 1997 AEJMC Convention.

Christison, K. (1987) 'The Arab in Recent Popular Fiction', *Middle East Journal* 41(3): 397–411.

Daugherty, D. and M. Warden (1979) 'Prestige Editorial Treatment of the Mideast during 11 Crisis Years', *Journalism Quarterly* 56(4): 776–82.

De Boer, C. (1983) 'The Polls: Attitudes toward the Arab–Israeli Conflict', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47(1): 121–31.

Erskine, H. (1979) 'The Polls: Western Partisanship in the Middle East', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 33(4): 627–40.

Evensen, B. (1990) 'Surrogate State Department? Times Coverage of Palestine, 1948', *Journalism Quarterly* 67(2): 391–400.

Ghareeb, E. (ed.) (1983) *Split Vision: The Portrayal of Arabs in the American Media*. Washington, DC: American-Arab Affairs Council.

Gilboa, E. (1989) 'American Media Messages and Public Opinion on the Palestinian Uprising', *Political Communication and Persuasion* 6: 191–202.

Griffin, J. (1990) 'Effects of Israeli Press Restrictions on Coverage of the Palestinian Uprising and on US Public Opinion', *Gazette* 45: 157–72.

Hadar, L. (1980) 'Behind the New York Times Middle East Coverage', *Middle East Review* 12(3): 56–61.

Hafez, K. (2000) *Islam and the West in the Mass Media: Fragmented Images in a Globalizing World*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Hashem, M. (1997) 'Coverage of Arabs in Two Leading US Newsmagazines: *Time* and *Newsweek*', in Y. Kamalipour (ed.) *The US Media and the Middle East*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Herman, E. and N. Chomsky (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.

Khouri, G. (1998) *The Other Gulf War Syndrome: Flaws in US Media Coverage of the 1997/98 Iraq Crisis*, Issue Paper # 27. Washington, DC: ADC Research Institute.

Khouri, G., M. Ramadan and M. Wingfield (1992) *1991 Report on Anti-Arab Hate Crimes: Political and Hate Violence against Arab-Americans*. Washington, DC: ADC.

Khouri, G., M. Ramadan and M. Wingfield (1996) *1995 Report on Anti-Arab Racism: Hate Crimes, Discrimination and Defamation of Arab Americans*. Washington, DC: ADC.

Lichter, R. (1981) 'Media Support for Israel: A Survey of Leading Journalists', pp. 40–52 in W.C. Adams (ed.) *Television Coverage of the Middle East*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Lipset, S. (1978) 'The Polls on the Middle East', *Middle East Review* 11(1): 24–30.

Michalak, L. (1985) *Cruel and Unusual: Negative Images of Arabs in Popular Culture*, Issue Paper #15. Washington, DC: ADC Research Institute.

Mishra, V. (1979) 'News from the Middle East in Five US Media', *Journalism Quarterly* 56(2): 374–8.

Moughrabi, F. (1988) *American Public Opinion and the Question of Palestine: An Analysis of Changes in American Views Based on Polls Taken from 1978–1988*, Issue Paper # 22. Washington, DC: ADC Research Institute.

Mousa, I. (1984) *The Arab Image in the US Press*. New York: Peter Lang.

Palmer, A. (1997) 'The Arab Image in Newspaper Political Cartoons', pp. 139–50 in Y. Kamalipour (ed.) *The US Media and the Middle East*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Sabbagh, S. (1990) *Sex, Lies and Stereotypes: The Image of Arabs in American Popular Fiction*, Issue Paper # 23. Washington, DC: ADC Research Institute.

Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.

Said, E. (1997) *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. London: Vintage.

Shaheen, J. (1981a) 'Images of Saudis and Palestinians: A Review of Major Documentaries', in W.C. Adams (ed.) *Television Coverage of the Middle East*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Shaheen, J. (1981b) *ABSCAM: Arabiaphobia in America*. Washington DC: ADC.

Shaheen, J. (1984) *The TV Arab*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Sheikh, K., V. Price and H. Oshagan (1995) 'Press Treatment of Islam: What Kind of Picture do the Media Paint?', *Gazette* 56(1): 139–54.

Shoemaker, P. and S. Reese (1996) *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*. New York: Longman.

Slade, S. (1980) 'The Image of the Arab in America: Analysis of a Poll on American Attitudes', *Middle East Journal* 2: 143–62.

Sreebny, D. (1979) 'American Correspondents in the Middle East: Perceptions and Problems', *Journalism Quarterly* 56(2): 386–88.

Suleiman, M. (1988) *Arabs in the Mind of America*. Brattleboro, VT: Amana Books.

Terry, J. (1985) *Mistaken Identity: Arab Stereotypes in Popular Writing*. Washington, DC: American-Arab Affairs Council.

Dina Ibrahim received her BA in Journalism and MA in Middle East Studies from the American University in Cairo. She has reported and produced news segments for CNN, BBC World Service Radio and NPR. She wrote for *Live Colors* magazine and reported for UPI in Cairo. In Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, Dr Ibrahim reported for *Arab News* newspaper, taught English to medical students at King Faisal University and wrote as a stringer for the Agence France Presse Dubai bureau. She received her PhD in Journalism from the University of Texas at Austin and has been teaching radio and television news at San Francisco State University since 2003.

Address *Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Ave, San Francisco, CA 94132, USA. [email: dibrahim @sfsu.edu]*