


Manufacturing The Enemy: An Analysis of the Media's Villainization of Arabs and Framing Tactics

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ABSTRACT: The consistency of our values and perceptions are reinforced daily by the media we consume. The way in which a piece of media is framed can entirely shift one's perspective, shaping opinions and public perception on critical issues. In the case of villainization, the framing of a news article can push someone away from a cause and entirely dismiss it or draw them in by capturing their sense of care. The media has captured and controlled many of our ideologies, promoting them as the correct way of thinking. This plays an integral role in societal perceptions of the Middle East. Why do negative connotations come to mind when one hears Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan? This article will explore how Western media representations of Middle Eastern and Islamic peoples often rely on negative framing to perpetuate hegemonic power structures. Through an exploration of modern media tactics, we examine vilification while also acknowledging the complexities and nuances of media dynamics. This article asks us to critically engage with media representations and advocates for a more self-reflective approach to consuming media.

KEYWORDS: Middle East, democracy, multiculturalism, nationalism



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Introduction

With the Palestinian movement on the rise, the mediatization of news has increased proportionally. News coverage has taken new forms, with the development of digitalization and mediatization raising questions about the validity of the news. Historically, awareness of media bias has dated back to the theorization of the public sphere, though now it is more powerful than ever, with the term media taking on new connotations. In addition to the biases of traditional publishing outlets like the New York Times (NYT) and the Cable News Network (CNN), social media actors like Britain First have used their platform to distort the content put out by major publishers even further. The social impact of media has intensified as social media takes on the biases of content creators and who push constructed narratives.

This article investigates how media framing influences societal behavior towards Middle Eastern communities, with attention to practices that perpetuate vilification by looking at headlines obfuscating the Gaza Genocide, and visual representations of Muslim women as victims and purveyors of a dangerous culture. This paper utilizes framing theory as its primary theoretical approach – this allows us to challenge common perceptive thoughts and biases. The theory serves an important role to understand how the concept of framing is used by publishers and writers to deliver distorted content to their audiences.

Framing Theory

Framing theory offers a lens to understand how media shapes public perceptions by interpreting storylines and categorizing information to specific audiences. The media's influence on public perceptions has been exacerbated by the many options people consume. Storylines and streams of thought are "interpreted" through framing, which categorizes information for a target audience and caters to specific audiences.¹ Frames can be categorized in three separate ways: perception, principles, and cultural constructs.² Perceptive frames involve association with familiar events shaped by an individual's

experiences. This frame divides people by their principles as they filter information to process it, creating a perceived reality that inherently makes sense to a niche group.³ Additionally, cultural construct is the higher level of framing as the culture of the individual shapes their experiences, morals, and values.⁴ These experiences shape the receiver's common sense and create the so-called perceived reality.⁵ Culturally, the data that is being consumed by the readers should be understandable to each society and cater to its morals to be received successfully. Societies are shaped by public figures and hegemonic powers, which can leave framing in the hands of the wrong people.⁶

In our modern world, people have high grounds and advantages politically, financially, and socially. If a state of power holds a specific viewpoint, the rest of the world is influenced to change their own framing to match those in power. We see repeatedly in history that propaganda supports systematic hierarchies, sometimes causing the downfall of marginalized groups.⁷ For example, take this New York Times article from 2023 titled: "Hundreds Reported Killed in Blast at a Gaza Hospital." The title makes it seem as though these hundreds of innocent Palestinian civilians that were murdered by Israel have been "killed" from a natural "blast," when in fact it was a war crime committed by the Israeli government.⁸ Such framing of a dire issue minimizes critical engagement and perpetuates narratives favorable to hegemonic powers, in this case to shield the reputation and savior complex of the West and fuel their own narrative.

Another recent example of this is shown in a CNN article that is titled "Human Rights Watch accuses Israel of genocide by 'deliberately' restricting water in Gaza."⁹ The title speaks for itself, insinuating that the people of Gaza are lying when they say that water restrictions are caused by Israeli occupation, which is common knowledge for the lay person. The article then shows a child holding three bottles of water, insinuating that there is water available in Gaza. Not only does this type of media create a frame for Israel as the good guys in this situation, but it also paints Gazans as liars. Rather than reporting news, it is pushing a narrative.

Cultural Relativism and Saviour Complexes

A significant issue in the media's portrayal of Islamic and Middle Eastern peoples is a lack of cultural relativism, which often leads non-Western practices to be viewed through a Eurocentric lens.¹⁰ A prevalent example of this is the 1947 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; Saudi Arabia raised concerns regarding Articles 16 and 18, which relate to freedom of marriage and religion.¹¹ Due to Saudi Arabian cultural practices, the articles did not match their societal standards, though they were met with accusations of oppression.¹² These reactions and responses fail to consider cultural and religious contexts underpinning Saudi Arabia's stance, illustrating a boarder, harmful tendency to universalize Western norms.¹³ This exemplifies a pattern of Western media forgoing cultural relativism by mobilizing rhetoric.¹⁴ Consequently, the framing becomes centered around Western superiority.

This can also be explained by savages, victims, and saviors (SVS), a three-dimensional compound metaphor of "a contest that pits savages against victims and saviors."¹⁵ White people and Western societies are portrayed as the saviours, while the savages and victims are people of color and less fortunate individuals, a black-and-white construction that pits good against evil. The West has created a discourse that is predictable and unidirectional, affirming their upper hand and consequently using it to spread information that is in their best interest. This is a pattern that has been seen in Western media; good versus bad are seen as objective black-and-white categories. Furthermore, because the narrative is created in assumption of public safety, it claims Arabs are inherently savage terrorists, making it unsafe for the West to assume innocence before guilt.¹⁶ The SVS metaphor rejects cultural relativism, instead supporting a Eurocentric ideal.

Villainizing Media Tactics

Using framing theory, one can see the types of media tactics used to villainize Islamic and Middle Eastern peoples. Western media frequently uses specific wording, analogies, and images to paint these

groups as terrorists. This excuses Western dominance by asserting a saviour complex. In recent history, we can identify 9/11 as a pivotal event in the rise of hate for Arab culture. The aftermath exemplifies how these tactics have fueled an uprising of Islamophobia around the world. The victim narrative was then shifted in to their benefit, to reframe the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁷ The underdog prevails against the savages! A notable tactic is taking pictures and stories out of context, manipulating them to become ideological tools that reinforce negative stereotypes. The US Department of Defense released many articles speaking in a heroic manner to enforce this frame after 9/11, “But, on that day and every day since, the United States has demonstrated that we would never bow to fear and hatred.”¹⁸

Another common tactic is the use of specific language to assert cultural superiority. This is seen vividly through the work of Lila Abu-Lughod, a Palestinian American anthropologist who sheds light on the topic of Muslim women in Islam and how they are viewed as oppressed, specifically in Afghanistan. Western media often make deliberate word choices to create a narrative that Muslim women must be “saved” from their own culture.¹⁹ Furthermore, this language is employed without evaluating the cultural and historical significance of choices

Muslim women make, which removes their individuality.²⁰ Before Muslim and Arab women get any historical background to their own stories, they are automatically labeled as victims of oppression who need saving.²¹ Western feminism holds a superiority complex and since Western society is seen as the savior, it is then labeled as the correct ideology and practice. This issue is most clearly represented in the rhetoric against hijabi women. Western feminism views women covering up as oppression, while Muslim culture views covering up as a gesture of empowerment. While oppression of women is prevalent all over the world, placing this label on a large demographic creates unfounded perceptions and strips agency from Muslim peoples. This creates a collective punishment for Muslim women and men by labeling one as oppressed and the other as the oppressor. There is a lack of cultural relativism and nuance when

approaching the life of Muslim women; though this is not unique to the West, it is more prevalent and powerful there, as discussed previously. Paul Evans's picture makes a clear distinction between how cultures perceive one another, in the absence of any context (Figure 1). Depending on cultural background, someone may find one or the other more insulting.

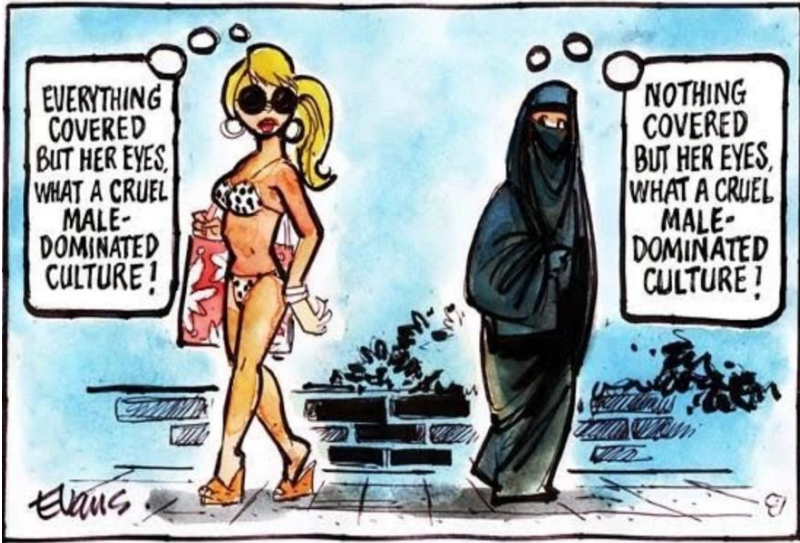


Figure 1. Evans, Malcolm Paul. "Burkas and Bikinis." Alexander Turnbull Library, January 6. 2011. <https://tiaki.natlib.govt.nz/#details=ecatalogue.628296>

A notable photograph taken out of context is the photograph taken by Lana Slezić of Malalai Kakar (Figure 2) as part of a profile. A famous Afghani police officer, Kakar was an advocate for women's rights in Afghanistan and would often go on missions to protect women.²² The photograph shows her wearing the burqa on top of her police uniform as she holds a pistol. Shortly after the picture was taken, Kakar went on a rescue mission.²³ As the photograph went public, UK media jumped at the opportunity to conclude that the burqa is used for violent purposes, using the photo against Kakar and Muslims in general. Western media framed the photo to villainize Islam by creating false propaganda. This presents an ironic reality: the same media which preaches for freedom of choice bashed a woman for making the wrong choice. One sees in this example a

continuing erasure of context that intentionally reaffirms Islamophobic stereotypes. This reveals challenges that media faces in balancing accuracy and reinforcing powerful narratives around the world.

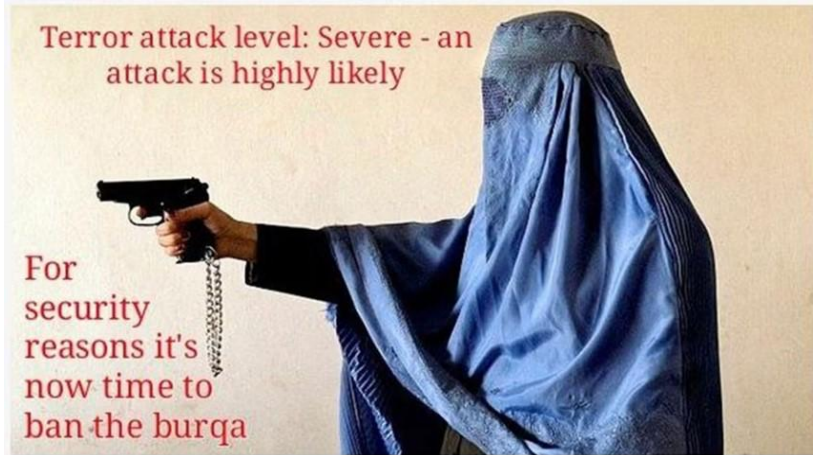


Figure 2. Screenshot shows the image of Lieutenant Colonel Malalai Kakar which was posted on Facebook by Britain First. Saul, Heather. 2014. "Britain First Picture: Photographer 'Horrificed' after First Afghan Policewoman Killed by Taliban Used for 'Ban the Burka' Campaign."

How These Tactics Assert Western Dominance

The media uses several different tactics to frame specific narratives and perspectives against Islamic and Middle Eastern peoples. But why? These narratives reaffirm the focus of power in the West. Such rhetoric creates a perfect scenario where the foreigners are the villain, and the West is the hero that prevailed against all odds.²⁴ The power they hold with the media allows them to control the reputation of others and themselves. This is extremely beneficial to the West as they could frame any threat as bad and shun them against the world. Their power and reputation allow them to use the media to reaffirm themselves as saviors of the good world. Though it is crucial to note that not all Western media aims to create this narrative and perpetuate biased representations. To generalize Western media in one category would be playing in their court;

instead, we must highlight patterns in specific contexts and emphasize the need for critical engagement. Future research could benefit from larger data samples and rigorous methodological approaches to examine these dynamics more comprehensively.

Conclusion

The best way to combat these strategically constructed narratives and frames is to be more self-critical and analytical when consuming media. The public rhetoric should be questioned, how perceptions came to be and why are some cultures are inherently viewed as good or bad. It is important to challenge our beliefs that often stem from our cultural values or media narratives. The use of framing and media tactics has created a generalized belief of the SVS dynamic, out of involuntary ignorance due to our media consumption. Therefore, it is more important than ever to be aware of how information is portrayed and question one's automatic perceptions. Using the frames of the SVS metaphor to categorize and identify pieces of media, we can reduce bias on either end of the spectrum and critically observe media.

Notes

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² Carvalho, "Discourse analysis and media texts.", 22.

³ Carvalho, "Discourse analysis and media texts.", 22.

⁴ Carvalho, "Discourse analysis and media texts.", 22.

⁵ Carvalho, "Discourse analysis and media texts.", 22.

⁶Anders Hansen and J.R. Cox, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Environment and Communication*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2015)

⁷ Donnelly, Jack, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice Third edition*, Ithaca Cornell University Press, 2013, 290.

⁸Hilba Yazbek, "Hundreds Reported Killed in Blast at Gaza Hospital," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/17/world/middleeast/gaza-hospital-explosion-israel.html>

⁹Sophie Tanno, "Human Rights Watch accuses Israel of genocide by 'deliberately' restricting water in Gaza," *CNN World/ Middle East*, CNN World, December 19, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/19/middleeast/hrw-israel-genocide-restricting-water-intl/index.html>

¹⁰ Yazbek, "Hundreds Reported Killed in Blast at Gaza Hospital."

¹¹ William A. Schabas, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Documents Collection Center, Cambridge University Press, 2013), 112.

¹² Ignatieff, Michael, "The Attack on Human Rights," *Foreign Affairs* (New York, N.Y.), Vol. 80, Council on Foreign Relations, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20050331>.

¹³ Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Challenge of Religion*, (Columbia, Missouri: The University of Missouri Press, 2017).

¹⁴ Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Challenge of Religion*

¹⁵ Makau W. Mutua, "Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights," *Harvard International Law Journal* 42, no. 1 (2001):201-245, SSRN, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1525547.

¹⁶ Caroline Mara Corbin, "Terrorists Are Always Muslim but Never White: At the Intersection of Critical Race Theory and Propaganda," *Fordham Law Review* 86, no. 2 (2017): 455-485, <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5437&context=fllr>.

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¹⁸ Joesph Clark, "Leaders Remember Those Lost on 9/11," *U.S. Department of Defense*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/NewsStories/Article/Article/3521648/leaders-remember-those-lost-on-911/#:~:text=0%22Sept.,always%20remember%2C%22%20he%20said>

¹⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?," *TIME*, November 1, 2013, <https://ideas.time.com/2013/11/01/do-muslim-women-need-saving/>.

²⁰ Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?"

²¹ Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?"

²² Heather Saul, "Britain First Picture: Photographer 'Horried' after First Afghan Policewoman Killed by Taliban Used for 'Ban the Burka' Campaign," *The Independent*, September 21, 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/photographer-horried-after-claims-britain-first-used-picture-of-first-afghan-policewoman-killed-by-taliban-for-ban-the-burka-campaign-9745959.html>.

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