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Demonizing Islam before and after 9/11
Anti-Islamic Spin: an Important Factor in Pro-War PR?

After years of research about the coverage of Islam in German and other European Media, I come to the conclusion that an analysis based purely on descriptive features is not enough to capture the phenomenon and its impact. Therefore, I expanded my analytical work to include the question of the purpose the mostly negatively biased coverage of topics (possibly) related to Islam has served over the years.

One thing worth noting when examining the coverage of Islam is that there is no qualitative difference between the coverage before and after 9/11.[i] For example, my dissertation "Isam in German Media" shows on the one hand that anti-Islamic stereotypes, which were cultivated for decades, resulted in something of a tradition of covering Islam, Muslims, and Arabs as backward and violent.[ii] On the other hand, however, there has been a large quantitative difference: after 9/11 the same topics came up more often and in a much more explicit way.[iii] From a Western perspective, the conclusions drawn from the attacks and the arguments advanced in their aftermath seem logical – in that they do not contradict the impressions created over time through books, TV programs, and public discourse.

The Framing of "The Muslim Woman"

One illustrative example of how stereotyped portrayals can be shaped by selectively mentioning and omitting, emphasising and de-emphasising facts is the framing of the discourse on Muslim women. Emotionally potent portrayals in films like Betty Mahmoody's "Not without My Daughter" and the discussions about women's

emancipation in Arab countries initiated by Nawal El Sadaawi and Fatima Mernissi reinforced the orientalistic idea that all Muslim women suffer the same, monolithic fate. By overlooking important aspects of the issue – e.g. existence of a large number of female professors in Egypt, the number of female students in Iran and the powerful role of women in families, and the lack of a universal "Islamic" concept of explaining the different conditions of women and men – dominant portrayals have reduced the situation of Muslim women to the frame of "the oppressed Muslim woman".[iv] This stereotypical concept of "the Muslim woman" plays different (independent) roles in Western discourses – including the following:

1. This discourse establishes a metonymic relationship ("pars pro toto") that allows the mere reference to "Muslim women" or an image of a woman in a headscarf to act as a substitute for detailed coverage of a complex situation in another country.

(Frankfurter Rundschau 28th March 1992)

2. The rights of Muslim women are assigned an exaggerated importance in the West, overshadowing issues closer to home feminist issues in the West – these eailly seem to be exaggerated facing "the condition" of Muslim women.

3. The fight for Muslim women's rights can be instrumentalised both for domestic policies such as banning headscarves, which contribute to a mood of fear,[v] and as a means of legitimising invasions of countries like Afghanistan or Iran.

The latter aspect was recently demonstrated by the CIA "Red Cell Paper" published on Wikileaks.[vi] Even the acknowledgement of this strategy – also mentioned on the important website of Germany's ARD TV station[vii] – didn't prevent our media from picking up the very emotional story of a woman known as "Bibi Aisha" from *Time* Magazine – shown there on the cover with her nose chopped off – only a few days

after Wikileaks had published the disturbing documents of the Afghan War Diary.[viii] Because the majority in Europe are against the war in Afghanistan, stories like this can help to sow confusion, or even convince people of the necessity of war – even though the violence against Bibi Aisha took place during the occupation of Afghanistan by Western troops.

Using Bad Images

Whether or not the negative images of the Muslim world that are so common in Western discourse were specifically created as an argument in favour of "humanitarian intervention" in the Muslim world, we must acknowledge that the strategy works today,[ix] perhaps only because many people have become accustomed to a reductionist and stereotypical framing of Islam or "the Orient", as either exotic, or as a threat to freedom, women and development. We all tend to recycle the same aspects again and again – by automatically choosing the already known subjects and pictures and overseeing many others.[x] This is how our perception works, if we don't maintain awareness. Of course, this lack of reflection may be used by strategists like Zbigniew Brzezinski and others to make us believe that "our" mission is good.[xi] Frames and complex metaphors – like that of the altruistic hero fighting for human rights and freedom as in every Western movie – can be exploited for Public Relations purposes.[xii] The media become the vehicle; the framing may shift between "selfless" humanitarian motives and self-defence, but the Manichaean – according to which "we" are "defending" our right and only good way of life – is never challenged.

Playful Preparations

Another type of media may probably be another vehicle towards acceptance of violence as a solution using the same frames of "self-defence" and "humanitarian action". This should be taken into account, because our youth, especially boys, are spending more and more time on video game consoles and the Internet. As modern video games fit strikingly well into the conceptual framework of the mainstream media (and, indeed, are not infrequently designed and marketed by corporations affiliated with the corporations that own the mainstream media), their sort of reflection of political discussions seems important. Is it possible that games like Kuma War, Medal of Honour and others serve to change the attitudes of their players, leading them to be more accepting of war as a legitimate form of policy, normalising war for the next generation? While it would be difficult to answer this question definitively now, I'd like to encourage more research on this topic – for the sake of human rights and international law – by showing a few screenshots depicting "the enemy" from these games below.

(Screenshots: KUMA Trailer – see
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3K292hBCQUM&p=CAE609711E86531B&playnext=1&index=16)

(Screenshots: Medal of Honor – see http://www.ea.com/games/medal-of-honor)

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Publications include a book on ‚Die Darstellung des Islams in der deutschen Presse' (The Portrayal of Islam in the German Press) [2005], a contribution to ‚Mediale Barrieren – Rassismus als Integrationshindernis' (Racism as a Barrier to Social Integration) [2007, ed. by Jäger/Halm] and journal articles about anti-Semitism, news coverage of the Middle East, and the increase in on-screen violence. Her recent book, published jointly with Constantin Wagner, is a comparative analysis of the anti-Semitic discourse of the 19th Century and the anti-Islamic discourses of today.

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