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Framing the Foreign Feminine: Portrayals of Middle Eastern Women in American Television News

Marci Manley
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

FRAMING THE FOREIGN FEMININE: PORTRAYALS OF MIDDLE EASTERN WOMEN IN AMERICAN TELEVISION NEWS

By Marci Manley

Department of Journalism

Faculty Mentor: Hoyt Purvis

Department of Journalism

Abstract

This study examines whether American television news coverage uses negative agenda-setting to depict Middle Eastern women. In approaching coverage of the Middle East, one of the key issues has been the plight of Middle Eastern women in their Islamic societies. Qualitative scholarship and limited quantitative analyses of print portrayals argue that Western media depict Muslim/Middle Eastern women negatively. However, there appears to be no research documenting how American television news, neither network nor cable, portrayed these women.

I conducted a content analysis of 61 news packages from ABC, CBS, and NBC along with Fox News and CNN, aired between September 11, 2001, and December 31, 2008, to answer the questions I had concerning how television news portrayed these women. I was curious to see if television journalists fell into the habit of depicting Middle Eastern women as submissive, second-class citizens, which was the accusation leveled at the Western press in prior scholarship. In addition to a quantitative analysis to determine the actual elements of coverage (frequency of portrayals and prevalence of frames), a qualitative analysis of anchor lead-ins was also conducted. This study revealed that Middle Eastern/Muslim women were depicted more negatively than positively. They were often portrayed as submissive victims of their societies, an "othered" entity requiring rescue through Western intervention. Palestinian and Iraqi female suicide bombers were also portrayed as threats while being depicted simultaneously as victims. In short, this initial research analyzing American television media discovered networks and cable channels do practice negative agenda-setting in regard to portrayals of Muslim women and their societies. The following article is a synopsis of a longer work exploring the extensive literature on women in the Middle East.

Introduction

This study examines whether American television news coverage adopts a negative news slant regarding Middle Eastern women. Wilkins (1995) found "given most of what we know about other regions is received through mass-mediated sources, images transmitted through the news play a critical role in the shaping of knowledge about perceptions of persons from other cultures" (p. 50). Wilkins goes on to report, "Eastern women have most often been described in Western literature and popular media as subservient figures, suffering from ethnic or religious oppression" (p. 51).

While past research has been well documented regarding agenda-setting, frame-setting, and the news coverage of the Iraq War (Kull, Ramsay & Lewis, 2002), research directed toward portrayals of Middle Eastern women has focused solely on the print media. In fact, much of the past research used in this study to formulate an approach to studying news portrayals of Middle Eastern and Islamic women in broadcast media has been drawn from print and other research findings. Sharia Fahmy (2004) analyzed Associated Press wire photographs of Afghan women before and after the Taliban regime, and her research is the first dealing directly with media portrayals of Middle Eastern women. She found that AP photographs largely depicted women in negative frames, leading me to question whether television news might also portray Middle Eastern women negatively. Fahmy's research has been widely cited, illustrating the need to examine the issue further by incorporating a look at broadcast news depictions.

Research in this field is necessary to evaluate perceptions Americans may develop from interpreting news coverage regarding the Middle East. It is important to discover whether the media may be propagating a negative stereotype of oppression of Middle Eastern women that could influence Americans' perceptions. If American television coverage depicts Islamic societies through a negative lens, the American public could likewise develop a negative, and perhaps inaccurate, perception of Islamic culture.

Due to the lack of prior research establishing the nature of television news coverage regarding Middle Eastern women, the present study analyzes American television news as a whole. The purpose is to describe the composition of coverage and to identify portrayal practices across networks. Examination of network and cable channel differences in news coverage and possible biases would require a far broader sample than the 61 stories that comprised this sample, although such an examination would undoubtedly be valuable. In addition, this article is an abbreviated version of a much longer work that incorporated literature from a wide variety of academic fields and also discussed Orientalism, veiling practices and uses, and Arab feminism. However, in the interest of space, only the literature needed to explain the methods carried out in this research was included in this article.

Literature Review

Past research on agenda-setting, frame-setting, and depictions of Middle Eastern/Muslim women provides the basis for this research. Methods, variables, and operational definitions

are based on research from a variety of disciplines, as no work was found that examined specific portrayals of Middle Eastern women in American television news coverage.

Agenda-Setting and Frame-Setting Literature

In agenda-setting theory, the first level of agenda-setting is concerned with issue salience. First level agenda-setting argues that "media transfer issue salience to audience agendas by covering some topics more than others" (Aday, 2006, p. 767). Whereas first level-agenda-setting theory "suggests a role for media in deciding what issues the public is aware of," second level agenda-setting theory suggests "the media also frame attributes of these issues; thus, affecting how the issue is defined" (Coleman & Banning, 2006, p. 313). Agenda-setting research conducted by Coleman and Banning (2006) examined television news' framing of presidential candidates during the 2000 election. They noted that in examining second level agenda-setting most past research had not considered non-verbal, visual aspects. Coleman and Banning (2006) proposed to close the gap between analysis of verbal and nonverbal representations of candidates given the "adeptness of nonverbal attributes in communicating affective information" (p. 313). They argued what the audience sees is as influential as what it hears. "Stories are often complex combinations of visual and verbal content, and in some instances the visual information is so powerful that the verbal attributes can be overwhelmed" (Coleman & Banning, 2006, p. 314). This is important for the present study because what is said in the news coverage through reporters and anchors must be weighed against what is shown in the video to represent Middle Eastern women.

Frame-setting, or the act of assigning attributes within a story to newsmakers, has been a distinct area of study that has been progressively merged into agenda-setting studies (Aday, 2006, p. 728). This is due to the expansion of agenda-setting research to include first-level and second-level agenda-setting. News selection is at the heart of agenda-setting because the issues that fail to pass through the gatekeepers of the news also fail to give the public salient cues regarding the relative importance of the issues (Aday 2006). Audiences overlook those issues that do not make the final cut for broadcast due to lack of exposure. Attributes newsmakers assign to issues influence the perceptions the public links to the newsmakers (in this case, Middle Eastern women). Therefore, while first-level agenda-setting postulates that the media influence what we think about, the second-level of agenda-setting postulates that the media does, in fact, influence how we think (Wanta, Golan, and Lee, 2004).

Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) found that exposure to news coverage of foreign nations can influence individuals' perceptions of those nations. The more negative news coverage a nation received the more negative the public opinion of that nation became. Further, there was no correlation between positive news coverage and positive public opinion. That is, once a negative perception was developed, positive coverage did not offset initial, negative perceptions. Negative attributes in visual representations influenced the public's perception of

candidates in the 2000 presidential election. Al Gore exhibited more positive nonverbal expressions than George W. Bush in media coverage (Coleman & Banning, 2006). Consequently, Gore made viewers feel more hopeful and proud. Bush made subjects feel more angry and afraid. Bush was significantly more likely to be perceived as dishonest and out of touch with ordinary people. Not only were the differences significant, but the public opinion was significantly correlated with exposure to candidates' nonverbal expressions. However, Bush did win the presidential race, which indicates that opinions can change over time and that public opinion does not necessarily correlate with definitive action. While Gore received the largest popular vote, and the election was contested, if citizens had voted for Gore as overwhelmingly as Coleman and Banning's (2006) results of subjects' responses to his visual representation implied they would have, the vote would not have been close enough to contest.

Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) and Coleman and Banning (2006) coded for valence in their research. Valence is defined by Coleman and Banning (2006) as rating "on the basis of positive, negative, neutral" (p. 318). Second-level agenda-setting operates through effective framing, or assigning attributes to a newsmaker. Therefore, the attributes assigned are done so through positive, negative or neutral portrayals (p. 315). Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) defined valence as whether a country or nation "was covered in a predominantly positive, negative, or neutral manner" (p. 370). Both studies developed specialized methods of determining positive, negative, and neutral coverage based on the focal attributes the research intended to measure.

The unit of analysis in research by Coleman and Banning (2006) was the individual camera shot of candidates on television. Therefore, a new operationalization of coding for valence of visual attributes was required. Nonverbal behaviors were characterized using five nonverbal dimensions of activity, posture, arms, hands, and eyes. They also used verbal attributes in which binary words such as angry versus proud and hopeful versus afraid were used to measure valence. Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) developed a system of determining negative coverage as including reports that a foreign country was involved with activities not in alignment with the goals or interests of the United States. It is important to note that Wanta, Golan, and Lee's (2004) research transferred the object/newsmakers ideology of agenda-setting and applied it to a country or a nation's coverage in the news. Presumably, agenda-setting can be applied to a group of people (Middle Eastern women). The second-level agenda-setting theory still applied, despite the fact that the object of research was a country and not an object/individual.

Literature on Western Portrayals of Middle Eastern Women

Quantitative research on portrayals of Middle Eastern women, or women in an Islamic society, has been limited in Western media. Fahmy (2004) conducted one of the few content analyses involving Middle Eastern women (Afghani women). She examined Associated Press photographs prior to and

after the fall of the Taliban regime and found that more positive imaging of Afghan women occurred after the fall of the Taliban regime. Qualitative research has been conducted discussing the power of the veil in Western perception (Macdonald, 2006), the role of Middle Eastern women in their societies, and portrayals of Middle Eastern women as gendered slaves in need of "saving" by the West (Ayotte & Husain, 2005, p. 112).

Kahf (2006) observed that the Western prototype of Muslim women is one of victimized categories. If the women manage to avoid the victim stereotype, they are most often relegated to the assignment of escapees. Victims are classified using seven aspects that may be used in Western media to portray the Middle Eastern woman (Kahf, 2006). Those aspects include references to culture, family, and behavior (see Table 1). The escapee frame uses the same representations, except the escapee also battles her birthright, owes gratitude to the West for setting her free from oppression, and removes the veil. The escapee may also begin to ascribe to mainstream sexual values in Western society, as well as develop Zionist sympathies (Kahf, 2006).

Table 1

Victim/Escapee Aspects

Aspects	Victim	Escapee
Mute Marionette	X	X
Meek Matrons	X	X
Forbidding Father	X	X
Cruel Country	X	X
Vile Veil	X	X
Rotten Religion	X	X
Stifled Sexuality	X	X
Rejection of Religion	---	X
Rejection of Veil	---	X
Sexually Liberated	---	X
Rescued by the West	----	X
Battler of Birthright	---	X

Jiwani (2005) found evidence that Arab/Muslim women are depicted as victims in her content analysis of Montreal's *Gazette* newspaper. However, she also discovered a contradictory frame pervading news coverage regarding women: the perspectives of victim and threat. She noted the profile builds a "confusing and sometimes contradictory conflation of woman as helpless victim and manipulative activist" (Jiwani, 2005, p. 186) and argued that Middle Eastern women's activist efforts still support an "us" versus "them" paradigm.

One of Kahf's (2006) victim cues is the vile veil. Much prior research has found that the "veil" is used as a means for

Western media to frame Middle Eastern women as oppressed and submissive. The image of the Middle Eastern woman is often as a "veiled, uneducated, oppressed, silent female" (Hamilton, 1994a, p. 175). While there are some who dispute this image, it remains a dominant perspective for many.

"There seems to be considerable agreement that the *burqa*...has become the universal symbol of women's oppression in Afghanistan" (Ayotte & Husain, 2005, p. 115). Ayotte and Husain (2005) argued as a result of the fetishization of the veil in western societies, *burqa*-clad figures have become the visual and linguistic signifier of Afghan women's oppression. Fahmy (2004) supported this argument, noting that in Western thought the *burqa* is a visual element that conveys submission.

Analysis of Muslim women within different regimes is "inhibited by a fixation on veiling" where the veil refuses "the play of difference" that exists for Muslim women across the Middle East (Macdonald, 2006, p. 7). Following September 11, 2001, a plurality of women's voices was accepted in more liberal areas of the media, but this was undermined by the continuing obsession with veiling/unveiling in Western discourse (Macdonald, 2006). Macdonald (2006), like Ayotte and Husain (2005), found that the veil has become an "all-encompassing symbol of repression, and in its dominant association with Islam reinforces the monocular representation of that religion" (p. 8). The veil also has the capacity to evoke a plethora of emotions including fear, hostility, and derision in those outside the Middle East (Macdonald, 2006).

After the fall of the Taliban government, some Western officials (including President George W. Bush) expected Afghan women to rejoice, unveil themselves, and embrace liberation from the burqa mandate. The reality was that Afghan women continued to wear the burqa, despite its no longer being required by the government (Fahmy, 2004). In her content analysis, Fahmy (2004) examined visual subordination, imaginary contact, point of view, social distance, and behavior shown in AP photographs to determine if stereotypes prevail in press photographs. Visual subordination was based on the principle that the burqa was understood by Western audiences to be an icon of oppression. Therefore, images of women in burqas were coded as visually subordinating Afghan women. Contact implies that the viewer and the Afghan woman photographed can establish contact through eye direction. If subjects in photographs are depicted as begging, pleading or asking for help, they are understood by the viewer to be submissive, passive and with little power over their lives (Fahmy, 2004, p. 94).

Fahmy (2004) used point of view and social distance to determine if Afghan women were depicted in stereotypical frames in the photographs. Point of view implies the camera angle at which the photo was taken. If the photo was taken from above, it implies symbolic empowerment and superiority of the viewer. If the image is shot at eye level, it implies equality, and shots from below imply that the viewer is inferior and/or submissive to the subject. Social distance involves where the woman is in the picture. Medium- to close-range shots signify

individuality of the subject and build a relationship between the viewer and the subject. The opposite is equally true with shots from long distances conveying the women as strangers.

Fahmy (2004) studied behavior, including physical activity and general portrayal, as an indication of whether Afghan women were pictured in subordinate traditional roles. Physical activity is further sub-divided between passive and active physical activity. Passive would include the woman's simply sitting or standing without completing a task. Active would illustrate the woman's working to accomplish something a goal. The general portrayal aspect of Fahmy's (2004) research distinguished between women depicted in traditional roles and nontraditional roles in society. Traditional roles included images of women working inside the house, acting in a motherly role, carrying a child or food, etc. Non-traditional roles would include working outside the home, interacting with friends, or shopping as modes of behavior outside the traditional roles (Fahmy, 2004, p. 98).

Fahmy (2004) also examined the mute marionette attribute in her study. The mute marionette aspect was defined by Kahf (2006) as a Muslim woman portrayed as "powerless to speak" (p. 79). The West must give her a voice. The assignment of Muslim women as oppressed fixes their status as objects by denying them "the power to speak of differences" (Ayotte & Husain, 2005, p. 118). Further, Western media have problematically ventriloquized Muslim women by entering into "discourses speaking for (both on behalf of and in place of) them [Afghan women]" (Ayotte & Husain, 2005, p. 116). Saliba (1994) reported that not only are women silenced in media portrayals, but they are often rendered absent. The absent Arab woman occurs in two forms. "The first is a literal absence, when the Arab woman is not present or is entirely missing from the scene; the second, a symbolic absence, when she is present but only for the purpose of representing her invisibility or silence" (Saliba, 1994, p. 126).

Research Questions

Based on past research, there is a need to examine broadcast television news coverage of Middle Eastern women in order to add to the body of research and literature currently available. Hamilton (1994a), Wilkins (1995), and Fahmy (2004) have investigated the prevalence of negative portrayals of Middle Eastern women in the West in print and have found that the largely negative portrayals of Middle Eastern women in a Western context results in a negative stereotype applied to Middle Eastern women. Therefore, this research seeks to answer three research questions:

RQ1: How are portrayals of Middle Eastern and Islamic women (e.g., portrayals of the veil, contact, behavior, point of view, social distance, and victimization) distributed in major network (ABC, CBS, NBC) and cable (CNN and Fox News) television news coverage?

RQ2: Does American television news coverage portray Middle Eastern women positively, negatively, or neutrally?

RQ3: Do certain aspects of portrayals in television news coverage (e.g., portrayals of the veil, contact, behavior, point of view, social distance, and victimization) correlate more frequently with negative portrayals of Middle Eastern women?

Methods

Quantitative and qualitative research techniques were employed to examine the research questions, including a content analysis of news coverage on American network and cable television news.

Quantitative Approach

The content analysis consisted of coding for factors to indicate valence in coverage of Middle Eastern women in television news. News packages, defined by Shook (2005) as "an edited, self-contained report of a news event with pictures, sound bites, voice-over narration and natural sounds, typically lasting from 1:10 minutes to 3:30 minutes for features" (p. 187) were the units of analysis. These news packages were selected through convenience sampling from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archives. Riffe, Lacy and Fico (1998) reported the archive is often used in television news research because it aids in "locating stories about given topics" (p. 204). The specific nature of this research, analyzing only Middle Eastern women's portrayals, lends itself to this archive selection method.

Sixty-one video packages meeting the date and time limit parameters of this study were selected from the database using a Boolean content search. Stories airing after September 11, 2001 and prior to December 31, 2008, were analyzed because prior research (Fahmy, 2004; Jiwani, 2005) claimed portrayals of Middle Eastern women became more negative after September 11, 2001.

ABC, CBS, and NBC are the three largest networks. In 2007, ABC's World News Tonight reported an average audience of 8.38 million. NBC averaged 8.29 million viewers, while CBS ranked third, averaging 6.43 million (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008). Fox News and CNN are the primary cable news providers in the United States. Fox News had a median primetime audience of 1.41 million; CNN reported a median prime-time audience of 736,000 in 2007 (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008).

Qualitative Approach

Within the video, both the news package and the anchor lead-in were analyzed. The anchor lead-ins were analyzed based on research by Reese and Buckalew (1995). Following their example, anchor lead-ins were discussed on a qualitative basis, because they employ adjectives and sensationalized wording, which can reveal frames more directly (Reese & Buckalew, 1995).

Variables

The Middle East is not well defined as a geographic location or ethnic group. Afghanistan is particularly difficult to place in scholarship. Some consider it beyond the "boundar-

ies" of the Middle East, placing it in South Asia (The World Bank, 2009). However, media outlets, such as The Washington Post, often lump Afghanistan into the Middle East. Therefore, Afghanistan is incorporated because of its inclusion in some Western mass media based on its Islamic society and its relationship with the United States as an area of conflict. News stories analyzed in this research included women from Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia.

Portrayals of Middle Eastern women in television news were defined through the use of the veil, contact, portrayal, point of view, social distance, presence, victimization, and behavior. Valence (positive, negative, or neutral) of portrayals was determined by examining these factors. News packages were ranked through ordinal codification by overall depiction as 1= positive, 2 = neutral, and 3 = negative in accordance with content analysis procedure. Valence was determined using coding factors. If positive aspects outnumbered negative aspects, the story was defined as Positive. If negative aspects outnumbered positive aspects, the story was coded as Negative. In the instance that negative and positive aspects were equal, the story was coded as Neutral.

For Middle Eastern women's portrayals, Middle Eastern dress was coded per instance using a nominal coding system. For the purpose of this study only *burqas*, *hijabs*, and *niqabs* were coded for as the most common types of coverings for the countries in the analyzed packages. Watson and LeJeune (2004) define the *burqa* as "a long, loose garment covering the entire face and body with a mesh material, allowing for some visibility" (p. 8). The *hijab* "can mean anything from modest Islamic dress to a full veil. It is often a headdress that covers a woman's hair in combination with long, loose clothing" (Watson & LeJeune, 2004, p.7). The *niqab* is "a veil worn by women that completely covers the face" (Watson & LeJeune, 2004, p. 8). The veil was coded as 0 = absent, 1 = present/ positive, 2 = present/neutral, and 3 = present/negative. Determinations of valence as positive, negative, and neutral were determined considering the verbal, contextual, and visual usage of the veil in the portrayal. For instance, if the script noted the important function of the *hijab* in signaling women's Muslim faith, and the image accompanying it was one of a *hijab*-clad smiling as she praised the veil in an interview, this was coded as present/positive. This assured stories containing veil cues were not assumed to be negative simply due to the presence of these articles of clothing and provided a method of recognizing patterns between dress and valence.

Visibility was based on Saliba's (1997) research in which Middle Eastern women seemed to be absented. If the story referred to Middle Eastern women, but none were shown, it was coded as absent=0. The contact factor was also coded using this binary system, based on whether the women shown in the videos of news packages made eye contact with the viewer. Based on Fahmy's (2004) research, women shown wearing face veils or *burqas* in which the eyes cannot be seen were coded as no contact.

Victimization was determined based on Kahf's (2006) victim/escapee aspects. Each aspect was coded using the binary system of presence. This method is useful in examining how certain aspects are used in conjunction with one another and the frequency of certain aspects. It also allows for data manipulation at the interval level, providing more information in data analysis. Victimization includes the factors that create the Escapee category as noted by Kahf (2006). Therefore, coding victimization was divided between victim and escapee aspects, and stories were coded as either Victim or Escapee.

Behavior was divided between physical activity and general portrayal (Fahmy 2004) and was coded through binary coding. Physical activity was passive or active, and general portrayal was either traditional or non-traditional. Point of view was coded on the three-step scale of valence, in which shooting from above indicates submission (Fahmy 2004) and was coded as 3 = negative. Those images of women shot at eye line were coded as 2 = neutral, and those from below were 1 = positive. Social distance, or placement in the photograph, was coded similarly. Therefore, shots with Middle Eastern women in the foreground were positive, while those with the woman in the background were negative. Women depicted in the middle of the frame were coded as neutral.

An independent coder was employed to enhance objectivity. Twenty percent of stories were coded (Riffe, et. al, 1998). Stories to be coded were selected through simple random sampling. Inter-coder reliability was measured for each variable using the Scott's Pi reliability formula. All variables were above the acceptable .70 standard of reliability (see Table 2).

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question asked, "How are portrayals of

Table 2

Intercoder Reliability

Variable	Intercoder Reliability
Arab Female Presence	1.00
Contact	1.00
Behavior	.75
Portrayal	1.00
Point of View	.80
Social Distance	.75
Burqa	.84
Hijab	1.00
Niqab	1.00
Mute Marionette	.80
Meek Matrons	.82
Misogynist Males	.80
Radical Religion	.75
Cruel Country	.80
Vile Veil	.80
Stifled Sexuality	.75
Rejection of Religion	1.00
Battler of Birthright	.80
Rescued by the West	1.00
Rejection of the Veil	1.00
Sexually Liberated	1.00

Middle Eastern women distributed in major network and cable television news coverage?" Data analysis showed that women were present in 98% of stories. However, contact was only depicted in 20% of the stories; women were active in 83%. Further, portrayals of women as non-traditional were more than three times as frequent (78%) as traditional portrayals (22%). Both point of view and social distance were largely neutral at 76%. However, negative portrayals (22%) outweighed positive portrayals (2%) in point of view and social distance (15% negative; 9% positive).

The burqa was absent in 57% of the stories, present-neutral in 3% and present-negative in 40% of the stories. The hijab was absent in 15% of stories, present-positive in 3%, present-neutral in 60%, and present-negative in 22% of the stories. The niqab veil was absent in 78% of stories. When it was depicted, there were no instances of it being present-positive, and representations of present-neutral consisted of 10% of stories while present-negative constituted 12%. The burqa was never depicted as present-positive and was present-negative in all of the stories (23) depicting women in Afghanistan. Kahf's (2006) victimization aspects were analyzed, and all but one of 61 stories (98%) used at least one victim/escapee aspect. Eighty-four percent of stories were characterized as victim, and 14% were escapees (see Table 3).

Research Question 2

Research question two asked, "Does American television news coverage portray Middle Eastern women positively, negatively, or neutrally?" More stories were negative (53%) than positive (34%). Neutral coverage constituted 13% of the

Table 3

Victim/Escapee General (N = 61 stories)

Victim/Escapee Aspects	Featured (in stories)	
	Nos.	%
Mute Marionette	21	34%
Meek Matrons	30	49%
Misogynist Males	46	75%
Radical Religion	49	80%
Cruel Country	57	93%
Vile Veil	27	44%
Stifled Sexuality	19	19%
Rejection of Religion	1	2%
Battler of Birthright	6	10%
Rescued by the West	4	7%
Rejects the Veil	1	2%
Sexually Liberated	0	0

stories analyzed. However, anchor lead-ins must be considered in determining valence. As the anchor introduction to the story sets the tone for what is to follow, it is interesting that the majority of anchor lead-ins used one of two frames. The first frame is a "before the U.S. interceded and after" frame. The second is a "terrorist/religious fanatic" frame.

For stories on countries where the U.S. was actively engaged, women were most frequently depicted in the anchor lead-ins as victims of their culture in need of rescue or beneficiaries of American intervention. For example, Tom Brokaw introduced an in-depth NBC report on Afghan women in October 2001.

> **Brokaw:** *NBC News in-depth tonight, the other victims of terror. Women in Afghanistan and girls held hostage, in effect by the Taliban regime. Tonight's question was 'What is the life expectancy of an Afghan woman?' The answer: it's just 45 years. Not surprising when you know about the way they are forced to live. NBC's Ron Allen has our in-depth report. This is a rare look behind the veil.*

Introductions tended to invoke the idea that women were victims of their society, unable to change their status without Western intervention. Even once the Taliban was removed, the idea that Afghanistan might continue to persecute women prevailed. Stories were analyzed across the time frame to determine that this was a portrayal that prevailed from 2001 to 2008.

Palestine is somewhat unique in that the U.S. is not militarily engaged in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, it is one of the few nations (although not a nation-state) other than Iraq and Afghanistan featured in coverage of Middle Eastern women in this sample. News stories about Palestine portrayed women most frequently as terrorists and as victims. In February 2002, Aaron Brown introduced a CNN story regarding suicide bombers in Palestine:

> **Brown:** *Twice now suicide bombers, terrorists entering Israel, have been women. That is unheard of. We can all speculate on what it means, but we can't ignore it as a fact. And the fact is that these two women are being hailed as something akin, at least, to feminist heroes in the Arab world.*

Brown states that Palestinian women acting as militants or suicide bombers are "unheard of" (CNN, February 28, 2002). However, Najjar (1992) noted that Palestinian women "actively joined in the 1976 and 1981 uprisings, but they joined in even larger numbers in the 1987 Intifada." (p. 85). Therefore, Palestinian females have a well-documented history of militancy.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked if certain aspects of portrayals correlated more frequently with negative portrayals of Middle Eastern women. Comparisons of negative news coverage to portrayal factors implied that negative depictions did frequently occur alongside specific depictions of the burqa,

victim aspects, and other portrayal factors.

When the burqa was present-negative, the meek matron victim aspect was employed more frequently than expected (see Table 4). A chi-square test revealed that when burqas were present-negative women were significantly more likely to be depicted as meek matrons, $X2$ (1, N= 58) = .018, p < .05. When the burqa was absent, the meek matrons aspect was more likely to be absent as well. Stifled sexuality aspects also seemed to occur more frequently than expected when the burqa was present-negative. When the burqa was absent, stifled sexuality was recorded in fewer instances than expected (see Table 5). A chi-square revealed that women were significantly more likely to be depicted as victims of stifled sexuality when the burqa was depicted as negative and less likely when the burqa was absent, $X2$ (1, N= 58) = .004, p < .05.

Other factors of portrayal could not be subjected to chi-square tests, but the frequencies were compared to examine

Table 4

Burqa Absent-Negative and Meek Matrons Chi-Square Test (N=58) with 0 = Absent and 1= Present

			Burqa - Absent or Negative		Total
			Absent	Present / Negative	Absent
Meek Matrons	0	Count	22	8	30
		Expected Count	17.6	12.4	30.0
		%	73.3%	26.7%	100.0%
	1	Count	12	16	28
		Expected Count	16.4	11.6	28.0
		%	42.9%	57.1%	100.0%
		% of Total	20.7%	27.6%	48.3%
Total		Count	34	24	58
		Expected Count	34.0	24.0	58.0
		%	58.6%	41.4%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.545(b)	1	.019		
Continuity Correction(a)	4.360	1	.037		
Likelihood Ratio	5.635	1	.018		
Fisher's Exact Test				.032	.018
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.450	1	.020		
N of Valid Cases	58				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.59.

relationships that could be analyzed in future research, including levels of victimization comparisons with activity, point of view, and behavior and frequency of portrayal factors/aspects most frequently used in negative depictions. The victim/escapee index was divided into three subgroups: below mean (less victimization), mean (average victimization) and above mean (most victimization). Data showed women were more frequently depicted as active, even as they were depicted as victims. With respect to portrayals (either traditional or non-traditional), women were depicted as non-traditional more frequently when they were depicted as victims (see Table 6). Point of view was largely neutral; in all three categories neutral point of view occurred more frequently than expected. Negative point of view depictions occurred less frequently than expected in all three categories. The victim/escapee index comparisons with social

Table 5

Burqa Absent-Negative and Stifled Sexuality Chi-Square Test (N=58) with 0= Absent and 1= Present

			Burqa - Absent or Negative		Total
			Absent	Present / Negative	Absent
Stifled Sexuality	0	Count	28	11	39
		Expected Count	22.9	16.1	39.0
		%	71.8%	28.2%	100.0%
	1	Count	6	13	19
		Expected Count	11.1	7.9	19.0
		%	31.6%	68.4%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.518(b)	1	.004		
Continuity Correction(a)	6.941	1	.008		
Likelihood Ratio	8.573	1	.003		
Fisher's Exact Test				.005	.004
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.371	1	.004		
N of Valid Cases	58				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.86.

distance portrayals were found to be largely neutral as well. However, negative portrayals in the above mean category were higher than expected, implying that when women are depicted most negatively, they tend to also be distanced from the viewer (see Table 6).

Table 6

Distribution of Victim/Escapee Index in 3 Categories and Portrayal Factors (N=60)

	Below Mean				Mean				Above Mean			
	Expected		Observed		Expected		Observed		Expected		Observed	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Contact												
No Contact	15.2	25%	15	25%	12.8	21%	14	23%	20	33%	19	32%
Contact	3.8	6%	4	7%	3.2	5%	2	3%	5	8%	6	10%
Portrayal												
Traditional	4.1	7%	3	5%	3.5	6%	3	5%	5.4	8%	7	28%
Non-Traditional	14.9	25%	16	27%	12.5	21%	13	22%	19.6	33%	18	30%
Behavior												
Passive	3.2	5%	3	5%	2.7	5%	1	2%	4.2	7%	6	10%
Active	15.8	26%	16	27%	13.3	22%	15	25%	20.8	35%	19	32%
Point of View												
Positive	0.3	0.1%	0	0%	0.3	0.1%	0	0%	0.4	0.1%	1	2%
Neutral	14.6	24%	18	30%	12.3	21%	13	22%	19.2	32%	15	25%
Negative	4.1	7%	1	2%	3.5	6%	3	5%	5.4	9%	9	15%
Social Distance												
Positive	1.6	3%	2	3%	1.3	2%	1	2%	2.1	3%	2	3%
Neutral	14.6	24%	14	23%	12.3	21%	14	23%	19.2	32%	18	30%
Negative	2.9	5%	3	5%	2.4	4%	1	2%	3.8	6%	5	8%

The average number of negative aspects used when the overall story was negative was four. A comparison of Less Negative (below the mean), Moderately Negative (at the mean), and More Negative (above the mean) revealed that the largest portion of stories (44%) were Less Negative and used 1-3 aspects (see Table 7). That is, while they were more negative than positive, they used less than the average number of negative aspects in their portrayals. The More Negative stories were slightly more common (30%) than the Moderately Negative (26%).

The comparison of stories coded as Negative with those stories coded as Victim seemed to imply that when the story was More Negative the meek matrons, radical religion, vile veil, and stifled sexuality aspects occurred more frequently than expected (see Table 8). However, the misogynist males aspect and the cruel country aspect were most frequent in those

stories that were categorized as Less Negative. Therefore, these two aspects were featured most frequently when women were depicted as less victimized, but they were key aspects to building this victimized frame.

Discussion of Results

In past research it has been alleged that American media portray Middle Eastern women and their society negatively. Overall, data analysis seemed to imply that news stories were more negative than positive in their depictions of Middle Eastern women. The results of this research support past research of Middle Eastern women's depictions in print news.

Table 7

Distribution of Negative Aspects (N=61)

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Below Mean	27	44.3
	Mean	16	26.2
	Above Mean	18	29.5
	Total	61	100.0

These results seem to imply that, as Fahmy (2004) argued, American news media prevent contact between the Middle Eastern women being depicted and viewers. The data support Fahmy's (2004) argument that the burqa is a negative symbol to signify women's oppression in Afghanistan. The burqa was never depicted as positive in any story, and in all stories about Afghan women it was depicted as negative. It appears the burqa serves as a concrete symbol of women's oppression in Afghanistan in American television news coverage, although this has been interpreted in various ways in academic literature. This requires consideration regarding stories when it was depicted present-neutral. If the burqa is repeatedly signified

Table 8

Victim/Escapee Aspects by Negativity (N=61)

	Less Negative				Moderately Negative				More Negative			
	Expected		Observed		Expected		Observed		Expected		Observed	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Meek matrons												
Absent	13.7	23%	18	30%	8.1	13%	6	10%	9.1	15%	7	12%
Present	13.3	22%	9	15%	7.9	13%	10	17%	8.9	15%	11	18%
Radical religion												
Absent	5.3	9%	9	15%	3.1	5%	1	2%	3.5	6%	2	3%
Present	21.7	36%	18	30%	12.9	21%	15	25%	14.5	24%	16	26%
Vile veil												
Absent	15	25%	29	48%	8.9	15%	10	17%	10	17%	4	7%
Present	12	20%	7	12%	7	12%	6	10%	8	13%	14	23%
Stifled Sexuality												
Absent	19	31%	22	36%	11	18%	11	18%	12	20%	9	15%
Present	8	13%	5	8%	5	8%	5	8%	6	10%	9	15%
Misogynist Males												
Absent	7	12%	9	15%	4	7%	2	3%	4	7%	4	7%
Present	20	33%	18	30%	12	20%	14	23%	14	23%	14	23%
Cruel Country												
Absent	2	3%	2	3%	1	2%	1	2%	1	2%	1	2%
Present	25	41%	25	41%	15	25%	15	25%	17	28%	17	28%

as a symbol of oppression, regardless of what textual or oral representations are presented, can the burqa ever truly be understood as a neutral symbol?

The hijab, on the other hand, was depicted in 63% of the stories as either positive or neutral. This seems to imply that news agenda-setters view the hijab as a more acceptable veiling practice. In 2002, the Brookings Institute reported that there were 3 million Arab Americans living in the U.S. and 6 million Muslim Americans who could be watching these news programs (Telhami, 2002). As such, the need to "other" women who wear the hijab may be less, because the hijab has ties to certain American populations.

Unlike the findings of Fahmy (2004), point of view and social distance were most frequently depicted neutrally. However, the data seem to imply a depiction is more likely to be negative if it is not neutral. One must consider the nature of television news in analyzing these two variables. Fahmy's (2004) analysis was of photographs, or single moments captured in time. In this study, television stories were analyzed that ran from 1:30 to 3:30 minutes. The typical television journalist has a larger "blank canvas" to fill with content, allowing for a larger variety of shots within a story. Therefore, the point of view and social distance variables may not reflect agenda-setting or frame-setting in television as much as they reflect the nature of the television news product. The need for diverse shots and a variety of distances/angles in television coverage may make these two variables inappropriate for analyzing agenda-setting in television news.

Kahf (2006) postulated that Middle Eastern women are most frequently depicted within the victim/escapee paradigm. The results of this content analysis did seem to support her theory. None of the stories, as Kahf (2006) predicted, mentioned any grassroots efforts within the region against human rights violations or for feminist equality in the region prior to Western intervention.

A qualitative analysis of the stories suggests that Jiwani's (2005) postulation that Middle Eastern women are depicted simultaneously as victims and threats could be supported, under certain circumstances. Stories about Palestinian women all featured them as threats: either as nationalist activists for Palestine against Israel and the United States' foreign policy or as fanatical religious martyrs. However, these women were also depicted as victims and other Middle Easter females were also depicted as threats. For example, in stories concerning Iraq, women's suicide bombings are explained as terrorist tactics luring women in, against their will or by exploiting their ignorance. Anchor lead-ins tended to use tones of bafflement and shock in relation to Iraqi female bombers, a different use than anchor lead-ins regarding Palestinian female bombers.

Recommendations for Further Research

The importance of news coverage is that it conveys messages to the viewing/reading public. Thus, one must wonder if news coverage influences public perception of the issue being covered. The present study could not investigate this particular

question. However, it can serve as a starting point to suggest further research regarding portrayals of Middle Eastern women in television news. Future research should inquire about the effects of those portrayals on the public perceptions of Middle Eastern women as portrayed in American television news. Future focus group research could examine stories, after being determined to be positive, negative or neutral, that are shown to individuals with a variety of preconceptions about the state or "plight" of Middle Eastern women in their societies. Using a larger sample could improve the knowledge of television news portrayals of Middle Eastern women, including biases (if any) across networks and cable channels. For this research, date/time parameters, story availability in the Vanderbilt News Archives, and limited research funds necessitated a smaller sample for this initial content analysis. However, a larger sample might reveal more prominent patterns of cues and frame-setting, allowing for more sophisticated statistical techniques in analyzing the data.

Conclusion

This is the first research of its kind, examining the portrayals of Middle Eastern women in American television news coverage. These results serve to build a foundation on which future research can be based. The data imply that American television news does portray Middle Eastern women more negatively than positively. Women are frequently depicted as victims, as Kahf (2006) argued. Contact between the Middle Eastern women depicted is often not observed, as Fahmy (2004) found. However, unlike Saliba's (1997) argument, it cannot be concluded that American television news "absents" Middle Eastern women; women were present in 98 percent of stories. Unlike the findings of Fahmy (2004), point of view and social distance were both largely neutral. However, this may have more to do with the conventions of television news gathering rather than agenda-setting.

The data do seem to support Shirazi's (2001) argument regarding the burqa. The burqa was never depicted as positive, and when it was depicted, it was typically depicted as negative rather than neutral. Therefore, the burqa does seem to serve as a symbol of oppression for American audiences in describing Afghanistan's Islamic society. Behavior was generally non-traditional. Women were more often depicted as active, though they were simultaneously cast as victims or escapees.

Overall, the results suggest that American television news and cable network channels do employ a form of agenda- and frame-setting, depicting Middle Eastern women as victims of their cultures. Differences in experience are often ignored, replaced with a generalized depiction of an existence of oppression. The burqa remains a pervasive symbol of the misogynistic, patriarchal society in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the stories depict Afghan and Iraqi women as having more rights and freedom, thanks to American intervention in overthrowing the regimes that relegated women to second-class citizens. However, both Iraqi and Palestinian women were depicted as new terrorist threats and were often victimized as sacrificial pawns, exploited by fanatical Islamic institutions.

This research was intended to determine the portrayals of Middle Eastern/Muslim women that prevailed following September 11, 2001, in American television news coverage. While initial impressions have been gathered and certain patterns seemed to occur, further research can only help our knowledge in understanding the mediated images of Middle Eastern women in television news coverage. Questions regarding bias of individual networks, correlations between coding factors, and their impact on overall portrayals may be discovered in further research with larger sample sizes than this research could provide. However, this research does provide a foundation on which further research may build upon to answer these remaining questions

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Mentor Comments:

Professor Hoyt Purvis draws attention to the unique contribution of Marci Manley's research on television coverage of Middle Eastern women, noting the way in which she drew from multiple disciplines in order to answer the challenging questions she posed.

Marci Manley is an exceptional student and an exceptional young woman who has been undaunted by the challenges of pursuing a demanding, innovative, and ground-breaking research project. Her research project effectively combines her interests in journalism, Middle East studies, and international relations. This was a project which she conceived and which she pursued independently. While Marci stayed in regular contact with me and also sought advice from other faculty members, this was her project from start to finish.

All the work that she did demonstrated a seriousness of purpose and commitment that was highly impressive. Marci had developed a special interest in the way that news is reported from the Middle East and Islamic societies, especially as it relates to women and how they are portrayed and perceived in the American media. In conceiving and carrying out this research, she was also able to draw upon valuable experiences as a study abroad student in Morocco and an intern in Washington, D. C., with Al-Arabiya, an Arab-language television network.

She thoroughly familiarized herself with the relevant, if rather limited research done on this topic as well as the pertinent concepts for both quantitative and qualitative research on media content and portrayals. She developed a good understanding of the agenda-setting and framing roles of the media and how they influence public perceptions and integrated that into her research and analysis.

What is especially distinctive and significant about Marci Manley's research is that she focused on television coverage, whereas virtually all research on coverage of Middle Eastern women had dealt with print media coverage. For obvious reasons, it is easier to study and analyze print coverage. However, Marci, who has been actively involved in broadcast journalism herself, understands the importance of television as a source of information and influence and in shaping perceptions. Therefore, she was determined to concentrate her study on televised portrayals.

It is one thing to recognize the need for and potential value of such an analysis; it is quite another to be able to pull it off. In this case, it meant painstaking collection from the Vanderbilt Television Archives of relevant video segments. Simply identifying, selecting, and assembling the video clips and transcripts is a major undertaking. However, that was only a part, if an integral part, of Marci's project.

Her study focused on whether the coverage presented a more positive or negative image and the extent to which it reinforced stereotypes of Middle Eastern women. Using recognized content analysis techniques, tailored to the specific needs of this project, she developed a basis for systematic analysis of the coverage, including the lead-ins by the television news anchors. Her research, as she analyzes and explains, indicates that American television news does portray Middle Eastern women more negatively than positively.

Her work represents the first serious examination of the television portrayals of women from the Middle East and Islamic societies and in that sense is definitely ground-breaking and unique. This project is original, the analysis is sophisticated, and the overall product represents a significant contribution to research on inter-cultural portrayals and stereotypes in media coverage.