Beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism
Identity constructions in Arab and Western media

av

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Abstract

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This study examines how the media construct the identities of the Other by creating various 'us' versus 'them' positions (Othering) when covering non-violence-based intercultural conflicts in Arab and Western news media. Othering in this study is understood as an umbrella concept that in general terms refers to the discursive process of constructing and positioning the Self and the Other into separate identities of an 'us' and a 'them.'

This process is analysed using a mixed method approach. A content analysis is used to map the data, and then a closer examination of the discourse is conducted using a qualitative approach inspired by critical discourse analysis. Two empirical studies are conducted based on this analysis: 1) the case of the Swedish newspaper Nerikes Allehanda's publication of caricatures of the Prophet Mohamed in 2007 and 2) the media coverage of the headscarf ban in French state schools in 2004. This study also employs Galtung's Peace Journalism model as a frame of reference in the conclusions to discuss how this model could contribute, if applied in journalistic texts, to more balanced constructions of intercultural conflicts.

The results show that Othering is a central discursive practice that is commonly adopted in both Arab and Western media coverage of non-violent intercultural conflicts, but it appears in different forms. Many of the previous studies have devoted considerable attention to rather conventional dichotomous constructions of Eastern and Western Others. The present study, in contrast, brings to the fore more non-conventional constructions and, while recognizing the occurrence of the conventional constructions, goes beyond these binary oppositions of 'us' and 'them'. Variations in the types of identity constructions found in my study can be attributed to the mode of the article, the actors/voices included, the media affiliations and the topic and its overall contextualization.

The different types of identity constructions in the media coverage may bring about a less black and white understanding of an event and help bring forth a more nuanced picture of what is going on and who is doing what in a conflict situation. Their occurrence in the media can possibly be linked to a new vision of a global society that does not necessarily constitute homogenous groups with the same characteristics, but rather is more consistent with a hybrid identity.

This research is timely, as with the recent arrival of large groups of migrants from the Middle East, the 'fear of Islam,' and the right wing propaganda regarding Muslims as a threat is increasing. Islamophobia can be seen as a new form of racism used by elites to serve particular agendas. If media practitioners applied a more critical awareness in their writings so as not to reproduce culturally rooted stereotypes, which can inflame conflicts between people and nations, we might see less hostility against migrants and achieve a less racist world.

Keywords: Orientalism, Occidentalism, Arab, West, Othering, identity, media constructions, tolerance, multiculturalism, xenophobia, Peace Journalism, Global War on Terror

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