

Islam Today

Written Assessment n. 3

Using examples, evaluate contemporary media representation of Islam and Muslims in western contexts

It is in the media - conceived as “the main ways that large numbers of people receive information and entertainment, that is television, radio, newspapers and the internet”¹, or “The means, such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, by which advertisers, politicians, etc., communicate with large numbers of members of the general public”² – that probably the representation of Islam is more problematic. In the text “Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes. The Representation of Islam in the British Press”³, the authors offer an overview of the studies carried out on the representation of Islam in the British and Western media. The first reference text cited is that of Said “Covering Islam”⁴ published in 1981 and revised in 1997. Said describes the media as they determine what Westerners learn about Islam, as they sort out information. They represent a backward, extremist, oppressive and dangerous Islam. Also Awass (1996)⁵, following the analysis of the American media, asserts that they consider Islam as dangerous for Western security, creating an association between religion and terrorism. About the Australian newspapers, Dunn (2001)⁶ suggests that in 75% of cases Muslims and Islam are pictured negatively - as fanatics, fundamentalists, misogynists, etc. - while only in 25% of cases they are described positively. Poole's (2002)⁷ analysis of British Muslims between 1993 and 1997 in British newspapers shows that the latter are represented as a threat to Western democracy, fanatics and extremists, corrupt and involved in crime. In the same way Richardson (2004) examining the English newspapers published in 1997 confirms the same view: they are represented as a threat, insofar as they are insured against terrorism and religious extremism. There are numerous studies on this topic cited in the non-exhaustive review reported by the authors. We will therefore focus on some examples, starting with the study conducted by the latter in English newspapers. The authors point out a difference between explicitly Islamophobic representations and those that are implicit. The formers are more numerous and explicitly aim to create an "us" in contrast to a "them". For example, some headlines say: ‘Muslims tell British: go to hell!’ (Daily Express, 4 November 2010), ‘BBC put Muslims before you!’ (Daily Star, 18 October 2006) and ‘Muslim schools ban our culture’ (Daily Express, 20 February 2009)⁸. With respect to implicit Islamophobic representations, there is a frequent association between terms, such as Islam and terrorism. Similarly, terms such as terrorism,

¹ Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

² <https://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=media&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true>

³ Baker, P., Gabrielatos, C. & McNery, T. (2013). *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes. The Representation of Islam in the British Press*. Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Said, E.W. (1997). *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. Vintage.

⁵ Awass, O. (1996). “The Representation of Islam in the American Media.” *Hamdard Islamicus*, Vol. XIX No.3.

⁶ Dunn, K. (2001). Representations of Islam in the politics of mosque development in Sydney. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 92, 291-308.

⁷ Poole, E. (2002). *Reporting Islam: Media Presentations of British Muslims*. I.B. Tauris.

⁸ Baker, P., Gabrielatos, C. & McNery, T. (2013). *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes. The Representation of Islam in the British Press*. Cambridge University Press.

extremism and militancy are associated with the Islamic term. A "key" theme about the stereotypical representation of Islam is that of gender. Muslim women are represented in the majority of cases as victims of both their own culture and of men, as well as being rigorously veiled. The authors point out that in 42 percent of cases, wearing the veil is described as a form of oppression or obligation, rather than as a choice or a right. "The conservative newspapers reference a 'horror' discourse around veiling, by using terms such as *zombies*, *Daleks* and *shroud*" (p.442)⁹. The conclusion is that the description of Islam turns out to be distorted, as it is not complete nor exhaustive. The reality described by the media constitutes a marginal and over mediated aspect of Muslims and Islam, at all representatives of the plurality, complexity and heterogeneity of Islam as a religion and of Muslims on a global and local level.

The text "Pointing the finger. Islam and Muslims in the British Media"¹⁰ also gives us an interesting picture of the representation of Islam in the British media. The theme is treated from a plurality of perspectives and angles, deepening issues such as gender representation, journalists or some particularly significant case studies, highlighting that, although the British media cannot be represented in a homogeneous way, the trend that emerges is a confirmation of the aforementioned, that is a simplified, generalized and prejudicial representation of Islam. Even the representation of Islam on the Internet, a theme explored in recent decades by various authors¹¹, returns a worrying picture of Islam, conceived as the other par excellence, the antithesis of the values espoused by the West. Ittefaq and Ahmad, for instance¹², analysing 50 Facebook pages in various Western countries - USA, UK, Canada, Australia, Germany and Denmark - over 2017, they study the representation of Islam starting from five categories: Muslims Are the Threat to the Peace and Normality, Muslims Are the Threat to the Public Safety and Security, Muslims are the threat to the lifestyle and Civilization, Muslims are the threat to the ideology and other Religions, Muslims Are the Threat to the Dominant Forces and others. These categories are functional to systematize the large amount of information. It is probably online, on social networks such as Facebook, that the hate speech manifests itself and is revealed without filters. Where there are no limitations linked to the formality of some institutional and "public" contexts subject to regulations, Islam appears even more and more than ever the target of xenophobic prejudices. As an example, "Islam has been given the name of cult, virus, rabies, cancer, problem, bigot etc. same as Muslim women while wearing burqa are called; "bullies" and "a potato sack". Muslims are given the name of murder machines. Mosques are called training place of sharia force or little sharia police station"¹³ (p.48). But what is shocking is that even if we focus on what are termed "educational media" we see how the research¹⁴ that analyse such media (textbooks, digital extensions of textbooks and other digital aids used by teachers) shows not comforting data about the representation of Islam in such more formal media. The two themes through which more stereotypes and prejudices are

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Petley, J. & Richardson, R. (Eds.).(2011). *Pointing the finger. Islam and Muslims in the British Media*. Oneworld Publications.

¹¹ Bunt, G. R. (2003). *Islam in the digital age: E-Jihad, online Fatwas, and Cyber-Islamic environments*. Pluto; Bunt, G. R. (2009). *Muslims: Rewiring the house of Islam*. University of North Carolina Press; Poole, E., & Richardson, J. (2006). *Muslims and the news media*. IB Tauris; Salaita, S. (2008). Curricular Activism and Academic Freedom: Representations of Arabs and Muslims in Print and Internet Media. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No.1-14.

¹² Ittefaq, M., & Ahmad, T. (2018). Representation of Islam and Muslims on social media: A discourse analysis of Facebook. *Journal of Media Critiques*, August 2018.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ For instance: The Current Status or Representations of Islam and Muslims in Textbooks in European Countries – Germany, Austria, France, Spain and England" (2011), <http://www.gei.de/en/projects/completed-projects/current-status-or-representations-of-islam-and-muslims.html>; Lucenti, M. (2018). *Il mondo arabomusulmano e l'occidente nei manuali di Italia e Tunisia*. Roma: Aracne; Nasr, M. (2001). *Les Arabes et l'Islam vus par les manuels scolaires français*. Paris: Editions Karthala.

reiterated are those of terrorism and women in Islam¹⁵. Pictures as well tend to confirm this rather poor representation of Islam. “With regard to the subject of North Africa and the Middle East, the representation of such a vast and heterogeneous territory is traced back to some stereotype icons: the desert and the dromedaries on the iconographic background, from antiquity to today everything seems to be still and unchanged. Even the images confirm this timeless and stereotypical vision: dromedaries, mosques, Mecca, veiled women in whole or in part, are the elements represented iconographically. With respect to today’s economic and social condition it is said: «The path to democracy is still slow and meets a lot of resistance. The economic conditions of the population are still quite backward and are at the origin of the many social conflicts within these countries [...] the result is that this region is in fact a powder keg, continuously lit by war» (Sogri G, Sofri F. 2010, 317)”¹⁶ (p.207). Regarding the theme of women, in general, the Arab-Muslim women who appear in the textbooks are rigorously veiled and the texts do not address the polysemous use of the veil by various Muslim women in the West, in the Muslim or non-Muslim countries. The extract found in the textbook *Il lungo presente 1* is very telling. He affirms in fact that “Islamic culture wants women to cover their heads when they are in public: it is an indisputable precept of this religion and its application has a significant effect on the balance of relations between men and women (p. 380)”¹⁷. By using the terms culture and religion as synonyms, the textbook misleads students. To conclude, whether it is media used in informal contexts, such as social networks, or media used in more formal contexts, such as the press, or educational ones, such as schools, the representation of Islam, albeit in a way and with different tones, is marked by the paradigm of monolithic otherness often incompatible with Western values.

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¹⁵ Lucenti, M. (2018). *Il mondo arabo-musulmano e l'occidente nei manuali di Italia e Tunisia*. Aracne.

¹⁶ Lucenti, M. (2018). Educational policies and school manuals: historical-comparative analysis between Italy and Tunisia. *RSE – Rivista di storia dell'educazione*, Vol. 5 No. 2.

¹⁷ Cantarella, E., & Guidorizzi, G. (2015), *Geostoria. Il lungo presente 1. Dalla Preistoria a Giulio Cesare*, Milano, Mondadori Education, Einaudi scuola.

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