# CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND THE U.S. MEDIA

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*Foreword by*

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*To my family: Mah, Niki, Shirin, and Daria*
                                        —YRK

*For my sisters Angie and Gigi, whom I cherish*
                                        —TC

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CHAPTER 13

# The Representation of Arabs in U.S. Electronic Media

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The study of media representation of various social and cultural groups is vital for several reasons. Chief among these is the realization that the media do not merely "report" events—the reports themselves are representations of reality that are inextricably linked to the reporter's perceptions (Kern, 1981; Mowlana, 1984; Said, 1981). As Trew (1979) argues, "all perception involves theory or ideology and there are no 'raw,' uninterpreted, theory-free facts" (p. 95). And to report one's perceptions requires they be encoded—another value-laden process, according to Roeh (1981): "no author or speaker is free of the necessity to choose words, syntax, and order of presentation" (p. 78).

Further, any representations of social or cultural groups that may be based on racial stereotypes are worthy of examination. Stereotypes are not merely descriptive; they exist within a historical context and contain both descriptive and evaluative aspects (Gorham, 1995; Seiter, 1986). Stereotypes exist only because people construct them. Gorham's (1995) definition of racial stereotypes—"the operationalization of racial myths as social reality beliefs concerning members of racial groups based on perceived group affiliations" (p. 6)—emphasizes their social construction. As shown below, past representations of Arabs in Western media have relied heavily on racial myths and stereotypes. Has this pattern continued into the mid-1990s, or have things improved?

This chapter analyzes the representation of Arabs in U.S. electronic media by studying the transcripts of approximately 35,000 hours (nearly 136 million words) of television and radio content aired on ABC, CNN,

PBS, and NPR[1] from February 1993 to February 1996. This study improves upon previous research (which is sorely in need of an update, since most studies were published in the 1970s to mid-1980s) by analyzing a much larger body of text, by analyzing the universe of programs rather than a sample thereof, and by relying on a more rigorous methodology than is typical of much content analysis. This research utilizes a form of computerized network analysis that, according to Danowski (1993), provides qualitative analysis by using quantitative procedures. Danowski's Wordlink program allows us to (1) discover and map the relationships among words within messages; (2) interpret the underlying themes and structures present in mediated representations of Arabs; (3) discern the frequency with which certain words, terms, concepts, attitudes, and values are associated with Arabs; and (4) do something Terry advocated 25 years ago (1971, p. 96): "A word tabulation would be an extremely informative study and would provide more concrete verification" of patterns evident in the portrayal of Arabs in the U.S. press.

This investigation becomes even more important when considering the primacy of electronic media as an information source—most Americans cite TV as their most important source of news (Roper, 1985)—and the cultivation research of Gerbner and others, which argues that by viewing television, people assimilate values and feel they understand what is going on in the world. Several studies have shown links between Arab portrayal in the media and public opinion about relevant issues (Adams & Heyl, 1981; Belkaoui, 1978; Kressel, 1987; Suleiman, 1984).

As noted, much attention has been paid to Arab portrayal in the Western press. The wide-ranging work has focused on newspapers and newsmagazines (Belkaoui, 1978; Barranco & Shyles, 1988; Mishra, 1979; Suleiman, 1965; Terry, 1971; Terry, 1974; Whitehead, 1987), editorials (Piety, 1983), political cartoons (Lendenmann, 1983), television news (Adams & Heyl, 1981; Roeh, 1981), entertainment and doc-

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1. All segments of these programs aired between May 1993 and January 1996 were analyzed. ABC: "Breaking News," "Good Morning America," "News Special," "Nightline," "Prime Time Live," "This Week with David Brinkley," "Turning Point," "World News Saturday," "World News Sunday," "World News Tonight," "20/20." CNN: "Both Sides with Jesse Jackson," "Capital Gang," "Crossfire," "Diplomatic License," "Evans & Novak," "Future Watch," "Health Week," "Health Works," "Inside Business," "Inside Politics," "Larry King Live," "Moneyline," "Moneyweek," "News," "Newsmaker Saturday," "Pinnacle," "Reliable Sources," "Science and Technology Week," "Showbiz Today," "Special Assignment," "Talkback Live," "Your Money." NPR: "All Things Considered," "Morning Edition," "Weekend Edition." PBS: "American Experience," "Charlie Rose," "Frontline," "Nova," "Wall Street Journal Report," "Washington Week in Review."

umentary television (Shaheen, 1984), popular fiction (Sabbagh, 1990; Terry, 1983; van Teeffelen, 1994), and textbooks (Jarrar, 1983). The general consensus seems to be that Arabs have—with some exceptions and with some improvement over time—been fairly consistently portrayed in a racist, stereotypical, and negative fashion.

According to Shaheen (1984), four myths are evident in televised portrayals of Arabs: Arabs are fabulously wealthy; Arabs are barbaric and uncultured; Arabs are sex maniacs with a penchant for White slavery; and Arabs revel in terrorism (p. 4). These myths seem to mesh well with the findings of other researchers, although not all myths are equally evident in all types of content. Additionally, previous research found that Arabs and Muslims are often lumped together—yet, according to Ghareeb (1983), "the Arabs do not number more than 12% of the world's Muslims" (p. 161).

Past studies have concluded that Arabs are associated with violence and terrorism and are often seen as the aggressors in the conflict with Israel. So strong are these associations that, according to Bazzi (1995) and Alter (1995), the media are quick to blame Arabs for terrorist acts such as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, even without any evidence.

The media content analyzed in the present study includes coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, but does not focus on it. Rather, this study investigates the full range of 3 years' worth of news and public affairs content on ABC, CNN, NPR, and PBS, so we can determine precisely how Arabs are portrayed in the electronic media—in a global sense, not just in times of crisis.

## METHOD

"You shall know the meaning of a word by the company it keeps" (Baker & Hacker, 1980) is a quote often cited by scholars of computational linguistics who study statistical patterns in large text collections. These scholars acknowledge that people vary in the meanings they have for words. Some meanings are idiosyncratic, while others (macro-level meanings) are widely shared and may be linked with membership in particular social, ethnic, or language communities. Wittgenstein's work provides the theoretical basis for making use of statistical text analysis to identify societal or macro-level meanings for words.

The macro-level meanings of words can be estimated by looking at the extent to which words frequently appear in close proximity; that is, we can infer words' meanings from the statistical distributions of their co-occurrences. We can be relatively confident that the language community (e.g., the audience of news and public affairs programs on ABC,

CNN, PBS, and NPR) has a high degree of agreement about the meanings of those words. We therefore are able to infer the meanings of particular words (e.g., "Arab" and "Arabs") by investigating their surrounding word context.

A method that is increasingly popular is to take large sets of content, called *corpora*, and perform statistical analysis of word co-occurrences. The basic unit of analysis is the word pair—two words that are used together. For this study we filtered 3 years' worth of transcripts of news and public affairs programs, using computer programs that function like an information refinery. Our software was set to slide a window through the text and find all words that appeared seven words before and seven words after the words "Arab," "Arabs," "Arabic," and "Arabian." The program recorded and counted the windowed word pairs. Because of the focus of this study we expected there would be relatively high use of formal names of organizations, countries, and so on, therefore we used a seven-word window radius so these formal words would not limit our sight through the window. We could then see some of the more common words associated with our target "Arab" words.

## RESULTS

We searched through a total of 135,759,087 words, looking for word pairs that previous studies of Arabs' representation in the media led us to assume would be associated with Arabs. We were particularly interested in investigating whether Arabs were portrayed as wealthy, barbaric, terrorists, and aggressors. We also investigated the extent to which Arabs are linked with Islam, and the extent to which Arabs are portrayed in association with Israel. We didn't focus on the stereotype of the Arab as sex maniacs, because we assume that image relates to entertainment content rather than news.

Overall, Arabs seem to be relatively absent from U.S. news and public affairs programs. We found a total of 7,801 references to Arabs in the nearly 136 million words analyzed—only 0.00575% of all words. Thus, an Arab reference appeared only about once every 17,000 words. This analysis didn't employ a drop list (words such as *a, an, be, but, could,* etc., which are sometimes excluded by computational linguistics scholars), but even if half of the words would have been dropped, the proportion of references to Arabs would still be only about one hundredth of one percent. The electronic media are not extensively focusing on Arabs. However, it remains important to determine whether even limited coverage reflects the stereotypes discovered in previous research.

### Wealth

Our investigation of the depiction of Arabs as "fabulously wealthy" found that words such as "money," "rich," "economic," "wealthy," and additional synonyms for wealth were included in the same window as "Arab" or "Arabs" a total of 134 times. The most frequent word pair (36 occurrences) was "economic-Arab/s." The word pair "wealthy-Arab/s" occurred 13 times, while "rich-Arab/s" occurred 14 times. There was even some indication of relative wealth among Arabs, with the word pair "richer-Arabs" occurring 10 times. The discovery of only 134 relevant word pairs seems to indicate that this stereotype is not particularly evident in news and public affairs programs. Indeed, of the 7,081 total references to Arabs, only 1.7% addressed issues of wealth.

### Terrorism

The corpus was examined for the co-occurrence of the word "Arab/s" with lexical variations of the word "terror." We found a total of 169 such co-occurrences. The most frequently appearing word pair was "terror-Arab/s" (71 occurrences), followed by "terrorist/s-Arab/s" (51 occurrences) and "terrorism-Arab/s" (43 occurrences). These 169 word co-occurrences reflect only 2.2% of the total references to Arabs; however, we are not ready to conclude that Arabs are no longer portrayed in the media as terrorists. We will return to this point later.

### Barbarism

Operationally defining *barbarism* in modern terms is not an easy task. The "barbarians" have been referred to mainly by classical scholars of the Roman Empire and its fall. For our study, we consulted *Roget's Thesaurus* and liberally included in our analysis words that seemed to capture the sense of barbarism. The literal word pair "barbaric-Arab" appeared only once in the entire corpus, but we found diverse other words that are associated with classic notions of barbaric behavior. These include "massacre," "enemies," "violence," "hate," "victims," "hostility," "hysteria," "bloodshed," "extermination," "slaughter," "lunatic," "dismembering," "treacherous," and many others. Since we are analyzing "aggression" in addition to "barbarism," and there is some similarity between these concepts, we were careful not to duplicate the words included in the analyses.

The words "Arab/s" or "Arabian" co-occurred with words associated with barbarism a total of 1,164 times. The most commonly occurring word pair was "Arab/s-massacre/d" (70 instances). "Arab/s-hate/red" appeared 49 times, and "Arab/s-violence" appeared 38 times.

"Arab-fear" appeared 26 times, while "Arab-threat" and "Arab-enemies" each appeared 19 times. In all, 14.9% of Arab references contained some allusion to "barbarism," which indicates the continued presence of the "Arab as barbarian" stereotype.

## Relations With Israel

With the many centuries of conflict between Semitic peoples in the Middle East—and the intensifying of this conflict in the past 50 years with the creation of the modern state of Israel—we would be surprised if our analysis did not contain frequent word pairs linking Arabs and Israelis. In fact, such word pairs were the most frequent in the corpus. There were 2,611 co-occurrences of "Arab/s," "Arabic," or "Arabian" with "Israel" or "Israeli/s," which represents 33.5% of all Arab mentions.

Even though we anticipated a large number of these word co-occurrences, we were surprised at the magnitude, and wondered to what extent Arabs are linked with countries other than Israel. To investigate this, we analyzed the corpus for word pairs linking Arabs with America, Europe, England, Japan, and other countries. We found very few instances of such linkages, other than between "Arab/s" and "America/n," which had 588 co-occurrences. Given the media analyzed for this study are American, and the position of the United States as a world power, we expected a significant number of references linking Arabs to America or Americans. Yet at 588 co-occurrences, the connection between Arabs and the United States is made less than one quarter as often as that between Arabs and Israel. Other countries were linked with Arabs far less frequently. For example, Arabs were linked with England/Britain 52 times, Russia/Soviets 33 times, Europe 32 times, and Japan 22 times. All other countries—Spain, Sweden, Cuba, France, Germany, Italy, and so on—were linked with Arabs fewer than 20 times (and in some cases only once.)

While the Arab-Israeli relationship is not a stereotype per se, the preponderance of presentations of Arabs in terms of their involvement with Israel indicates at the very least that "Arabs" are defined in terms of "Israel." This becomes even more evident in our investigation of religion, below.

## Aggression

The contemporary hostilities between Israel and the Arab countries that occurred during the time of this study is evident in the word pairs analyzed for depiction of Arabs as aggressors. As noted above, there is conceptual overlap between "barbarism" and "aggression," so we included in the study of aggression only those words we associated with modern

states of hostility and open conflict between peoples. These include direct conflict words such as "war," "conflict," "kill/ed," "fighting," "attack," "bombing," and so on. We found a total of 864 word pairs linking Arabs and aggressive behavior, with "Arab/s/ian-war/s" occurring 243 times, "Arab/s/ic-kill/ed/ings" occurring 179 times, and "Arab/s-attack/s/ed" occurring 124 times. Thus, Arabs were linked with aggressive behavior in 11.1% of all mentions. Again it seems the stereotype of "Arab as aggressor" is alive and well, particularly when seen as part of a greater picture including barbarism and terrorism.

## Peace

Prior research claims that Arabs have been portrayed as aggressors. However, we looked not only for evidence of aggression, but also for evidence of Arabs' association with peace. We found a total of 633 word pairs linking "Arab/s" and "peace/ful" or "peacemaking/keeping/loving," which reflects 8.1% of all Arab mentions. While the connection between Arabs and peace is not as strong as that between Arabs and hostility, there are significant co-occurrences of words linking Arabs with peace.

## Religion

Others have claimed that the unrelated entities of "Arabs" and "Islam" are often lumped together indiscriminately. To investigate this, we analyzed co-occurrences of "Arab/s" and words associated with Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Given the conflict in the region, we expected a high number of co-occurrences of "Arab/s" and words such as "Jew/ish." A total of 632 such word pairs were found, with "Arab/s/ic-Jew/s/ish" accounting for all but ten. This reinforces our earlier finding of a very strong Arab-Israeli relationship.

Words linking Arabs and Islam occurred less frequently than did words linking Arabs and Judaism, but were much more prominent than words linking Arabs to Christianity or to religious practices not associated with one specific religion. Word pairs such as "Arab/s-Muslim/s" and "Arab/s-Islam/ic" occurred 426 times. Only 45 word pairs linked Arabs to Christianity; all but 7 of these took the form of "Arab/s-Christian/s." A total of 51 word pairs linked Arabs to general religious concepts: The words "Arab/ic-god" co-occurred 20 times, "Arab/s/ic-religion/ious" co-occurred 17 times, and "Arab/s-holy" co-occurred 14 times.

All told, 1,154 word pairs linking Arabs to religion were discovered in the corpus, representing 14.8% of all Arab references. Most of these linked Arabs to Judaism (8.1% of all Arab mentions), and it is reason-

able to consider these part of the greater relationship between Arabs and Israel, discussed earlier. Arabs are clearly associated with Islam (5.5% of all mentions), and clearly not associated with Christianity (0.8% of all mentions). Thus it does seem as though Arabs are linked with Islam in the media, but that link does not seem to predominate.

*Culture*

Given the focus of this book, we thought it interesting to extract all word pairs associating Arabs with lexical variants of "culture." Throughout the entire corpus of nearly 136 million words, "culture" variants were paired with "Arab/s/ic" only 20 times (0.3% of all Arab references). The most common co-occurrence was "Arab-culture," which appeared 13 times.

*Summary by Topic*

Table 13.1 shows the summary counts for all word pair frequencies by topic area, along with the percentage value, based on the 7,801 total occurrences of the words "Arab/s," "Arabic," and "Arabian" within the corpus.

## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this study found very little coverage of Arabs and even less coverage of Arab culture in the U.S. electronic media. It appears reasonable

TABLE 13.1
Summary of Arab Representation by Topic Area

| Topic | Freq. | Percent* |
|---|---|---|
| Israel | 2,611 | 33.5 |
| Barbarism | 1,164 | 14.9 |
| Religion (Total 1,154) | | |
| Judaism | 632 | 8.1 |
| Islam | 426 | 5.5 |
| Christianity | 45 | 0.6 |
| Nonspecific | 51 | 0.7 |
| Aggression | 864 | 11.1 |
| Peace | 633 | 8.1 |
| Terrorism | 169 | 2.2 |
| Wealth | 134 | 1.7 |
| Culture | 20 | 0.3 |

* Percent of the 7,801 total references to Arabs contained in the corpus.

to assume that if a people and their culture are ignored, this leaves a fertile field for negative stereotyping. The picture that emerges by the lack of attention to Arabs and Arab cultures is that these countries, these peoples, and their cultures are neither significant nor important. If the American public counts on television for its news, it is not learning much about Arabs. Arabs and Arab cultures thus are marginalized.

What depictions there were of Arabs served mostly to reinforce the predominant stereotypes delineated in prior research. However, one improvement of prior stereotypes seems clear—at least in news and public affairs programming, the Arab is not portrayed in a manner that reinforces the "Arab as fabulously wealthy" stereotype. Arab wealth is not a frequent subject of the media content we analyzed.

Yet there is an overwhelming association in the media between Arabs and violence, threats, and war, which serves to foster the stereotypes of "Arab as barbarian/aggressor/terrorist." While there were fairly few word pairs directly linking Arabs and terrorism, we must interpret that in conjunction with our separate investigations of aggression and barbarism. The concepts of aggression, barbarism, and terrorism are closely related, and to a certain extent our findings reflect our decision to include a set of words in one category rather than another. Thus, if we consider the big picture created by layering all three of these concepts, we are left with an image that overwhelmingly reinforces the perception of Arabs as threatening, frightening, terrible, unreasonable warmongers. This seems little changed from the conclusions of prior research.

Our finding of a fairly clear association between Arabs and peace reflects a positive depiction of Arabs, which presents an alternative to the "Arabs as aggressive/barbaric/terrorist" depiction. The appearance of this positive image is reassuring, but it occurs much less frequently than does its negative counterpart.

Another of our major findings is that Arabs are defined most strongly in terms of their relations with Israel. Such Israeli-oriented coverage of Arabs reflects a subordination of Arabs and Arab cultures, and reinforces the already-evident marginalization of Arabs and Arab cultures discussed above. Arabs and Arab cultures are not defined and do not exist as entities unto themselves; they exist primarily in terms of Israel. Again, the ground remains fertile for continued racism and stereotyping.

We believe this investigation of these electronic media transcripts—nearly 136 million words over a 3-year period—has resulted in rich quantitative information about the qualitative representation of Arabs on ABC, CNN, NPR, and PBS. The validity of this study—internal and particularly external—reinforces a clear picture of how Arabs are represented in some of the largest U.S. news and public affairs program sources on television and radio.

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