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Rubina Ramji is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. Her research focuses on understanding images of Islam in North American mass media and their effect on Muslim identity, especially second-generation Muslim youth in Canada. She is on the editorial board for the Journal of Religion and Film and was also a co-chair of the AAR's Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group.

We live in an age of instant information access and the ability to draw on this information from a global perspective. Although we expect our students to keep up with the issues of the world, most times they access this information in bits and pieces, without taking into consideration the contexts in which the information is being presented to the viewer or reader. Students entering classrooms need to be taught to think critically about the many images they absorb, especially images of Islam and Muslims.

In the past century, American television and film have reflected the country's relationship to the Orient. They have adopted narratives and visual conventions, as well as the cultural assumptions described by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*. Through visual media, the Orient has been depicted as mysterious, for instance, by the recurring figure of the veiled woman in films such as *Thief of Damascus* (1952), *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and *Ishtar* (1987). Blockbuster films, newspapers, and video documentaries can be effectively used as "texts" in classrooms for the purpose of teaching students how to "read" these visual constructions of the Other's religion and culture.

Students' perspectives of Islam and Muslims are strongly shaped by news and popular media. After 9/11, many North Americans turned to popular media outlets to "understand" Islam and the motivations of Muslims for their actions. Instead, these outlets seemed to merely confirm the existing stereotypes. Amazingly, Canadian video stores recorded a huge surge in rentals of movies featuring violent terrorist attacks on Americans after the September 11th tragedy. *The Siege*

(1998) was ranked third on the list of top selling DVDs.

True Lies

, a 1994 movie starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as a U.S. agent battling an Islamic terrorist group called Crimson Jihad, ranked fifth. The Arab (read Muslim) characters in the films appeared brutish and backward. In contrast, Harry (Arnold Schwarzenegger) exemplified fair, superior, and civilized Western values.

Air Force One

, a 1997 movie about an Islamic terrorist's hijacking of the American president's plane, was rented ten times more frequently than before the attacks.

The official spokesperson for Rogers Video, one of the largest video chains in Canada, claimed that people were perhaps trying to gain insight into the events and the minds of the terrorists, looking for similarities and even wondering if the attackers had received their ideas from a Hollywood plot. Viewers think of movies as if they are sources of accurate information!

Jack Shaheen, author of *Reel Bad Arabs* (Interlink Publishing: 2001), examined 900 films and found that only 5 percent (approximately 50 movies) debunked the barbaric image of Islam. The most popular Arabs were cute, romanticized cartoon characters: Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad. In terms of "the Muslim woman," only a handful of movies depicted her as compassionate and heroic. In general, most films depict women either as silent, shapeless bundles under black garbs or as eroticized, enchantingly veiled belly dancers. Therefore, when I teach my course "Women in Islam," I am not surprised when my students voice these opinions. Showing these films provides an opportunity to counterbalance them with images, films, and writings from and by Muslim women themselves who talk about being a woman and being a Muslim.

Depending on their source and content, I use news media for a variety of purposes in my classes: to provide reliable information about Islam; to illustrate the different interpretations Muslims have about faith; and to analyze the impact of politics on the way we view the religion. I also use news media to make cultural comparisons that illustrate different national and cultural understandings of one event. The advantage of bringing current events into the classroom is that students realize how easy it is to stereotype without a solid understanding of the religion itself.

In my introductory classes on Islam, I use CNN's "The Hajj: A Journey of Faith" by Riz Khan to demonstrate how the show was televised for an American audience. I compare this with older documentaries on the Hajj. The contrast helps students see and analyze how dialogues, arguments, and ways of thinking develop over time. They also learn to see how they themselves take part in the representations they are witnessing.

For upper-level courses, I have students compare how a particular issue is explained and analyzed by different news media around the world. For instance, last year I used the banning of the hijab in French schools and government offices. Students read news coverage about it from around the world to understand how different newspapers covered the issue, whose voices were heard, and what role it played in the political arena of the country.

Political cartoons also are capable of transmitting scathing and yet witty perspectives about important events taking place in the world. My favorite cartoon shows two amorphous figures wearing burqas in Afghanistan. One turns to the other and says, "Let's go to the U.S. It sucks being a transvestite in this country." The controversy over the Danish cartoons in the Islamic world became a teaching tool in the classroom for students to investigate differing viewpoints on the representation of the prophet Muhammad, both secular and religious.

Students are surprised to learn that 65 percent of all the world's news is generated from America. This large percentage means America has the biggest share in controlling the news information that reaches the public. To illustrate this point, students examine the coverage of the Gulf War. They realize how much information was kept off American television stations, and how this affected the way North Americans saw and justified the war and constructed the "enemy."

They see that news coverage in India voiced such concerns over the pro-war news coverage from Western media outlets. A few Indian journalists argued that technologies of death were being romanticized and sanitized by the use of such terms as "precision bombing," "surgical strikes," and "smart bombs." All these terms dehumanized the "enemy" and desensitized viewers. Even though there were journalists who were appalled by the racism, lies, and demonization that ran through the coverage, their voices were drowned out by the other news reporting.

News analyses of the Bosnian conflict illustrate how American ignorance of cultural history and geography, and dualistic thinking of good versus bad and us against them, played a significant

role in the way groups within the Balkans were identified and discussed. Croats were consistently characterized as Catholic, Westernized, technologically advanced and sophisticated, and practicing Western-style democracy. Serbs, on the other hand, were routinely identified as Eastern Orthodox, Byzantine, and primitive remnants of the Ottoman empire.

Orientalist understanding of Islam from an American cultural perspective is a complex idea and one that is often hard for students to grasp. But through the news and media, they become more conscious of their own Euro-American and Christian preconceptions of the Orient, which are repeatedly exemplified in images of oil-wealthy Arabs and Islamic terrorists. Teachers, as well as students, now live in a world that seems to offer immediate understanding and comprehension about the events of the world. But it also allows us to access perspectives around the globe, which forces students to realize that their viewpoints are shaped by the American cultural understanding of the Orient and the Muslim. Analysis of news media allows students to step outside of their own constructions and prejudices to better understand multiple perspectives. By incorporating analysis of news media into the curriculum, students have a better understanding of the subversive ways in which Orientalism continues to persist in American culture.