

# THE U.S. MEDIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST \_\_\_\_\_ IMAGE AND PERCEPTION

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FOREWORD BY  
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## *Foreword: What's Wrong With This Picture?*

As this book was nearing completion, human rights groups protested stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists, villains, fanatics, or buffoons in a wide range of U.S. productions from Arnold Schwarzenegger's *True Lies* through Hanna-Barbera's *Arabian Nights* to Disney's *Aladdin*. Of course, there is nothing new to the historic practice of stigmatizing, demonizing, or ridiculing large groups of people with whom the West had long colonial and post colonial but still imperial relations. What is new, however, is the rising dismay and militancy—also demonstrated in this book—targeting the all-important and damaging cultural manifestations of that relationship. Indeed, the movement on the cultural front marks the waning of one era and the emerging of another.

The era that is unraveling is the post-World War II global order. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed the cold war rationale for hot wars in its peripheries and repression at home. The growing crises of waste and pollution, of shrinking opportunities for productive employment, equal dignity and security, and the inability to project a vision of a better society—crises still largely hidden behind the media screen—mark the erosion of U.S. hegemony as well.

The massacre of non-resisting armies and fleeing civilians (misnamed the Persian Gulf War) was the first large-scale non-cold-war-justified open attack on a Middle Eastern country. It was preceded and followed by intermittent bombings of urban targets on flimsy pretexts, covered-up rather than covered in the press, as described in chapters in this book. But open warfare without the cold-war rationale runs increasing risks of loss of popular support, while re-

pressive policies of Middle Eastern states locked into a global financial system are losing legitimacy at home.

An implicit argument of this book is that, in such a situation, the rise of a dynamic and militant Islam is the new factor to understand and reckon with in the world, and the rigid media formulas of omission and commission prevent us from facing that fact. Big mainstream media are trapped in the same global system of finance, marketing images for sale to the highest bidders at the least cost, perpetuating rather than challenging conventional stereotypes, and thereby imposing an effective screen between us and a realistic understanding of new forces being unleashed as the old order disintegrates. Images of conflict, violence, and terror, presented without historical perspective and balance, evoke irrational fears and fuel fires of vengeance and repression, further exacerbating the invisible crises upon us.

Dipping into our own "Cultural Indicators" database of prime-time network television drama, we find only a handful of characters of Middle Eastern extraction playing speaking parts, whose rate of failure in achieving goals is three times that of other characters and 2.7 times that of other "ethnics." Take a single typical example of silly light-hearted adventure movie, *Ishtar*, set in a mythical Saudi city. More than a dozen Arabs play speaking parts. More than twice as many Arabs as Americans are villains. One out of three Arabs but only one out of five Americans fail and become victims of violence, including Arabs (but no Americans) killed. Of course, no viewer or moviegoer makes that count. Such a calculus of values, risks, and fate is absorbed over a lifetime of steady exposure to stereotyped plots and portrayals until it is integrated in one's framework of "knowledge."

While the world is changing, the obsolete and damaging image-bound media system is becoming increasingly rigid, commercialized, concentrated, and globalized. Channels multiply but communication technologies converge, media merge, and merged media conglomerate. With every merger, staffs shrink and creative opportunities diminish. Cross-media conglomeration further reduces competition, squeezes out independent producers, and denies entry to newcomers.

Fewer sources fill more outlets more of the time with ever more standardized fare designed for global markets. Global marketing streamlines production, imposes stereotyped formulas on creative people, and sweeps alternative perspectives from the mainstream. The coming of cable, satellites, and VCRs has not led to greater diversity of product or actual viewing. It has led, instead, to similar fare penetrating more broadly, more often, and more deeply into the lives of people and cultures all over the world.

U.S. media anti-trust legislation and broadcast regulations for localism, public trusteeship of license holders, fairness and equal time, and against multiple and cross-media ownership and trafficking in stations are ignored, or obsolescent, or irrelevant. There is no historical precedent, constitutional provision, or legislative blueprint to confront the challenge of the new consolidated controls that

really count—controls over the design, production, promotion, and distribution of content. Even the word *media* has lost its meaning of plurality. Media coalesce into a seamless, pervasive, and increasingly homogenized cultural environment that has drifted out of democratic reach.

We face a triple crisis of the collapse of the old order but persistence of old stereotypes, the consequent alienation from the forces changing the world around us, and the lack of mass-mediated public intelligence that could enable us to form a reasoned, deliberate, democratic response. The picture that emerges from this book will help confront these crises. It will illuminate what we are up against, energize resistance to some of the most damaging manifestations, and mobilize forces for change on the cultural front.

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