ONE CULTURE, TWO FRAMEWORKS: U.S. MEDIA COVERAGE OF ARABS AT HOME AND ABROAD

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Introduction

The ideology and tradition of mainstream U.S. journalism asserts that journalists represent reality in their news reports, that they suppress personal viewpoints to report the facts as they encounter them in order to give to their audiences an accurate, fair and balanced picture of events. These attributes are sometimes gathered under the rubric of “objectivity.”

Scholarship that challenges these journalistic conventions suggests that news is socially constructed, that it reflects institutional, cultural and personal biases of those who produce it, that news employs myths and ritual in conveying information to its audience.

This article draws on theories of the social construction of news to analyze American newspaper coverage of Arab Americans and of Arabs in the Middle East, while acknowledging the real-world constraints of journalists who have covered the stories. Among those whose theoretical work informs this study are Herbert Gans, Edward Said and Gaye Tuchman.

An important study of the values and forces that shape news was Gans’ Deciding What’s News. In this study of mainstream television and news magazine domestic news coverage in the 1960s and 1970s, Gans identified eight “enduring values”: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, and social order and national leadership. These values “are built into news judgment,” Gans wrote. “As a result, they do not conflict with objectivity – in fact, they make it possible. Being part of news judgment, the enduring values are those of journalism rather than of journalists; consequently, journalists can feel detached and need not bring in their personal values.” Implicitly thus, while journalistic ideology praises neutrality and impartiality, certain cultural norms and values are rarely challenged in the mainstream press.

A related view was expressed by Edward Said in describing the role of the news media in conveying images of Islam. His description could, by extension, be applied to coverage of Arabs, too:

[T]elevision, radio and newspapers observe certain rules and conventions to get things across intelligibly, and it is these, more often than the reality being conveyed, that shape the material delivered by the media. Since these tacitly agreed-upon rules serve efficiently to reduce an unmanageable reality into “news” or “stories,” and since the media strive to reach the same audience which they believe is ruled by a uniform set of assumptions about reality, the picture of Islam (and of anything else, for that matter) is likely to be quite uniform, in some ways reductive, and monochromatic.
Said continued, “Such aims of the press as objectivity, factuality, realistic coverage, and accuracy are highly relative terms; they express intentions, perhaps, and not realizable goals. ... News ... is less an inert given than the result of a complex process of usually deliberate selection and expression.”

For several decades scholars have examined the process by which events or issues are turned into “news” and presented to audiences. These studies have variously looked at journalistic norms, traditions and conventions; internal newsroom dynamics and imperatives; individual journalists’ attitudes and behaviors, and influences of institutions outside the newsroom.  

For example, Gaye Tuchman notes a number of institutional influences on the definition and gathering of news. Among other points, she calls attention to the influence of established institutions (e.g. police, courts, government agencies) that constitute reporters’ “beats” as defining what is and is not newsworthy. “Obviously, reporters cannot write about occurrences hidden from view by their social location, that is, either their geographic location or social class.”

But Tuchman also quotes Harvey L. Molotch: “To become news, an occurrence or issue must come within either a reporter's or a news organization's purview. ... [A]n issue or event must be sociologically or psychologically pertinent to a reporter’s grasp of the world – and the issue or event must resonate with the reporter's purposes and practical activities.”

Among the cultural narratives embedded in news in the U.S. are racial and ethnic images and stereotypes. Stereotypes as they occur in journalism were first discussed by Walter Lippmann, who observed that the news media both depend on them and reinforce them. Gans describes journalists’ use of stereotypes in the context of “reality judgments,” that is, “the assumptions about external reality associated with the concepts which journalists use to grasp it.” When journalists judge what is new or wrong or abnormal, they must have in their minds a picture of what is old or right or normal. And these pictures often are stereotypes “which journalists borrow from elsewhere because of their availability and familiarity both to the journalists and the audience.”

However handy, stereotyping also can depict peoples inaccurately and harmfully. Particularly in the case of groups with whom the audience has no direct contact, inaccurate stereotypes encourage prejudices that lead to harmful actions and public policies. Arabs and Arab Americans have long asserted that stereotypical coverage and imagery exist in U.S. news and entertainment media. The outlines and origins of the stereotypes, according to Edward Said, date from Arabs’ and other Easterners’ earliest contact with Europeans. In Orientalism Said suggests that Europe and the West posed the Orient, particularly the “Near Orient” as “its great complementary opposite since antiquity.” In essence, the foreign nature (to the West) of the East is viewed not on its own terms, but through the lens of the West. Said called this the “domestications of the exotic.” “Something patently foreign and distant acquires ... a status more rather than less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well-known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing.” Thus, for
example, “Islam is judged to be a fraudulent new version of some previous experience, in this case Christianity.”

This process of “othering,” according to Ibish, is a “universal political function of distinguishing self from other.” It “not only creates an illusion of superiority, it provides a defense against the reality of internal fragmentation and division, and the ambivalence and complexity of identities within a given group or society.”

In documenting the positioning of Arabs as the other, Said traces Orientalist discourse from classical Greek drama through the development of European thought. Said points out that Aeschylus’ “The Persians” and Euripides’ “The Bacchae” present two motifs that resonate to contemporary times: 1) that of Europe [and, today, America] as “powerful and articulate” and Asia, articulated by Europe as “defeated and distant” and 2) the Orient as “insinuating danger. Rationality is undermined by eastern excesses, those mysteriously attractive opposites to what seem to be normal values.”

Twentieth and 21st century events have somewhat altered – but not eliminated – the stereotypes. Certainly the second theme is echoed in the current stereotype of Arabs and Arab Americans as terrorists and Islamic “fundamentalists.”

Both Arabs and Muslims rightly object when Western journalism confuses their overlapping but distinct identities. Without perpetuating such confusion, it is nonetheless useful to apply some of the points made in Said’s Covering Islam to the coverage of Arabs and Arab Americans.

The frequent coverage of Islam generated by events in the Middle East, Said writes, has misled the public. In the guise of objectivity, “there is an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized limitless by means of a handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés.” These clichés often come into play because reporters are sent into situations for which they are unprepared and often do not know the local language.

Said writes that coverage of Islam in the late 20th century was almost always tied to crises. “Only when there is a bomb in Saudi Arabia or the threat of violence against the United States in Iran has ‘Islam’ seemed worthy of general comment.” But American hegemony coupled with the technology that allows instantaneous coverage from any part of the world means that “Islam” is familiar to most Western news consumers but in a skewed, superficial sense in which Muslims and Arabs are essentially portrayed “either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists.” Similar criticisms – cliché and superficial coverage of peoples affected by complex circumstances and events that become newsworthy only in a crisis – can be made of news about Arabs and Arab Americans. As will be seen in the examples below, stereotyping in recent coverage was often more subtle than earlier examples, but still a flaw.

**Methodology**

This article draws on a variety of approaches suggested by the scholarship cited above to analyze recent U.S. mainstream newspaper coverage of Arabs in America and in the Middle East. Newspaper articles (as well as articles from weekly magazines published by newspapers in their
Sunday editions) are analyzed from the point of view of the audience. That is, through analysis of these texts one can infer cultural, institutional and political influences, but such linkages cannot be proven. The questions to be examined are:

1. What images of Arabs and Arab Americans emerge from news stories?
2. How and why do the images differ?

It is important to note that most research for this paper was conducted before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The paper does not deal with coverage of or after those events. Thus, perhaps, it can serve as a baseline study for further research.

It is crucial to keep in mind also that the texts examined here – any journalism, in fact – are written in response to immediate, real-world situations. Journalists writing on deadline for daily newspapers have little time to reflect or analyze. They report and write from the traditions and imperatives of their professions. While those writing and editing longer newspaper features and magazine-length pieces have lesser deadline constraints, the traditions and conventions of mainstream journalism affect their work as well. Thus, it may seem unfair to make close textual analysis of journalism from the vantage point of academia. What such retrospective analysis can contribute, however, is insights on the mindsets of journalists and the practices of journalism.

Specifically, articles are analyzed around these themes:
- **Framing and voice.** How is the story defined as a story? What journalistic values and conventions make it “newsworthy”? Whose voices are heard? Whose go unheard? To what sources do reporters attribute their information?

- **Imagery and Otherness.** What images of Arabs and Arab Americans do the stories present? To what extent do the images conform to the notions of “the other” well documented in Western discourse?

- **Context.** Does the story give the reader balanced and nuanced background information?

For coverage of Arab Americans, daily news reports published in the *Detroit Free Press* were used as a case study. The *Free Press* is the largest-circulation paper in the area said to have the greatest concentration of Arab Americans in the United States. However, its coverage is not typical of American newspapers. The *Free Press* has put the Arab American community on the news agenda to a greater extent than many other papers. It has done this at least partially in recognition of the prominence and cohesiveness of Arab Americans in the Detroit area.

For coverage of Arabs in the Middle East, an examination of mostly feature-length newspaper and magazine articles was made from a variety of newspapers, focusing primarily on peoples and venues in the Arab world most frequently reported on in the U.S. mainstream press: the Palestinians, Jordan and Egypt.
Coverage of Arab Americans: The Detroit Free Press

The first Arab immigrants arrived in the Detroit area in the late 19th and early 20th century. They were mainly Christians from the province of Greater Syria in the Ottoman Empire and were called Syrians. This area included present-day Lebanon. These immigrants were often itinerant peddlers who opened small retail businesses when they accumulated enough capital. Later immigration waves brought both Christians and Muslims from the area to work in Detroit's automobile factories. A distinct group in the area is the Chaldeans, Iraqi Catholics. They are distinct both from Arab Muslims and Christians, though they make common cause with the Arab community on occasion. More recent immigrants have tended to be Muslims from Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Egypt. But Christians, too, have come, from Lebanon and Egypt in particular.\(^1\)

Enumerating the Detroit area's Arab American community has proved tricky. Commonly accepted figures are 250,000 to 300,000 in the Detroit metropolitan area including about 30,000 in the suburb of Dearborn, 20 percent to 30 percent of that community's population. The U.S. Census does not have a category for Arab Americans, so numbers are difficult to discern.\(^2\)

According to present and former editorial employees of the Free Press, journalistic attention to the Arab community burgeoned in the 1980s when two reporters, both speaking Arabic, began aggressively to cover the community. Their work stemmed both from their own enterprising recognition that there were newsworthy stories to be found here and the paper's tradition of giving good reporters wide latitude in their reporting. Coverage has waxed and waned since then, depending mainly on the availability and interest of reporters to cover the community.\(^3\) A high point came in 1990 on the eve of the Gulf War. The Free Press published a special eight-page report, “Detroit's Arab Community: Tradition and Tension.”\(^4\) In 2000 the paper published a guide for journalists covering Arab Americans.\(^5\) The guide is distributed to new employees as part of their orientation packet and has been widely circulated among journalists working in other news organizations.

As of early September 2001, there was no single reporter assigned to an Arab American “beat” at the Free Press. Many Arab American stories fell to the reporter on the “multicultural” beat and to the reporter who covered Dearborn and nearby suburbs. Also, reporters and editors were expected to be culturally sensitive and sophisticated, integrating Arab American individuals into their stories and reporting stories about Arab Americans wherever they happen.\(^6\) However, the bulk of coverage in 2000 and 2001 came from Niraj Warikoo, the reporter who covers Dearborn. As Gaye Tuchman and others have observed, the journalistic institution of “beats” helps define what is news. Having predominantly Arab American communities and institutions on reporters’ beats ensures coverage of stories arising in those areas.

With this background in mind, selected stories about Arab Americans from the Free Press in 1999, 2000 and 2001 will be analyzed to identify themes of framing and voice, imagery and otherness, and context.
Framing of *Free Press* stories about Arab Americans fell into themes common in local journalism, themes that have been used to tell the stories of other racial, ethnic and religious groups outside the white mainstream. These included Arab Americans as a growing political force; Arab Americans as struggling immigrants; Arab Americans striving against discrimination and stereotyping. The voices heard in such stories is an important aspect of framing. The sources whose voices are heard through direct quotation powerfully convey the points of view and humanity of Arab Americans. On the other hand, if outsiders speak for them, Arab Americans’ distance from the audience is increased. Their remoteness allows the audience to imagine inferiority. Lack of a direct voice allows Arab Americans to be defined in terms of and through the eyes of the majority, thus reinforcing their otherness. As will be seen, Arab Americans’ voices were heard clearly through *Free Press* coverage.

An important theme was the community’s growing political power. By highlighting the political power of Arab Americans, stories transmitted the message that they were participants in the life of the larger community and that they were a force to be reckoned with. Local politics in any urban area involves negotiating and jockeying for power among competing groups. In Detroit at various times competing ethnic groups have included Poles and other East Europeans, African Americans and Latinos. By framing stories around the assertion of political power by Arab Americans, stories imply that their interests must be considered, too.

As James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, observed in a commentary just before the 2000 presidential election, “Arab Americans are now a fixture on Michigan’s and America’s political maps. If we seem excited and pleased, understand why. We’ve known the humiliation of exclusion and rejection and now we’re being courted. Believe me, being courted is a lot more fun.”

Zogby referred to the attention paid to Arab Americans by both presidential candidates, attention that was closely covered by the *Free Press* both before and after the election. Stories portrayed Arab Americans positively as a growing political force. For example, a post-election story headlined “Arab Americans flex their voting muscle” quoted Abed Hammoud, president of the local Arab American Political Action Committee, as saying, “We have started a political machine here.” An earlier story emphasized high voter turnout and noted that “Arab Americans ... went to the polls with a new sense of their political strength.” The story also indicated how new that political strength was, observing that while both George W. Bush and Al Gore had “actively courted” Arab Americans during their campaigns in 2000, in 1984 and 1988 the Democratic presidential candidates refused to meet with and returned contributions from Arab Americans. By framing such stories around Arab Americans as political players, the *Free Press* portrayed them as a functional and important part of the larger community.

Stories also framed Arab Americans as participants in local politics. A story about congressional redistricting centered on Arab Americans’ protests against a plan that would split their community between two districts. Another depicted Arab Americans as allying themselves with Latinos to fight a transportation center that would adversely affect both communities. Again, Arab Americans (and in this case, Latinos, too) are portrayed as communities with political power whose claims must be heard. In all these stories the voices of Arab American leaders
are heard prominently, sometimes alongside voices of other politicians. This adds to their image of status-holders in the local community.

A second way stories about Arab Americans were framed involved the immigrant experience. Immigrant stories have been a staple of the American press since at least the 19th century. Such stories have variously portrayed immigrants as threatening strangers who would subvert American values (e.g. the Chinese in the 19th century), benign innocents who were charmingly ignorant of American ways yet succeeded against the odds (Greeks, Italians, Jews in the 20th century), pitiable refugees from evil foreign regimes (such as Nazism or Soviet Communism) or as economic predators who took jobs away from Americans by entering the country illegally and working for lower wages (Latinos in current times). Some of these frames were used in stories about Detroit’s Arab American immigrants.

For example, Free Press stories about Arab American immigrants depicted them in a variety of ways, appropriate to the varied community. Nonetheless, the stories struck some time-honored themes. A story about a Palestinian immigrant doctor described the poverty he overcame. “Hammad was born 44 years ago in a Palestinian refugee camp in West Jerusalem. ... The family’s two-room house had no electricity or telephone. He had no bikes or toys. He never owned more than two pairs of pants and two shirts. He went barefoot most of his childhood.” The story continues in a familiar vein. “Like the rest of his family, Hammad studied hard to better himself.”

Other stories frame the immigrant experience in darker terms. A series on health problems of Iraqi Shiite refugees describes victims of post traumatic stress disorder whose “complex mental health issues [are] forcing community agencies and hospital systems to create or expand programs.” Another story profiled a man who suffered from a brain tumor with no money and uncertain healthcare benefits. A third described the plight of an Iraqi refugee doctor who, prohibited from practicing in the United States, was working at menial jobs and falling far into debt. Taken together the stories framed immigrants as people with great mental and physical needs who struggled, sometimes unsuccessfully, to make new lives for themselves. The stories were generally sympathetic in tone, sometimes portraying their subjects heroically, but they did not sugar-coat the depressing realities of the subjects’ lives and often framed their promised land of America in harsh terms.

A third way stories about Arab Americans were framed depicted them as people fighting against prejudice. Such stories gave voice to community concerns over ethnic profiling at Detroit Metro Airport. “Flying while Arab continues to be treated as a crime at Detroit Metro Airport and around the nation despite the use of a new passenger screening system, according to a civil rights report released Thursday,” was the lead of one story. The stories seemed to give equal weight and credence to the discrimination claims of Arab Americans and the terrorism fears of airport and immigration officials. This even-handed treatment allowed the reader to evaluate the competing viewpoints.

A story about an Arab American whose deportation order based on secret evidence was overturned struck an almost jubilant tone. It noted that the decision “is being hailed as a civil-rights victory by Arab Americans” and quoted the subject, Imad Hamad, as saying “I was in tears
when I heard the news. ... This is a victory not just for me, but also for civil liberties in the U.S.” And, later in the story, “This proves again that America is a great country.” Framing the story in the larger context of a civil-rights victory associates Arab Americans with the honored American tradition of struggling against domestic oppression.

In general the framing and voice of Arab American coverage portrayed them as real people, members of the larger community. The tone was generally sympathetic. Taken together, the coverage presented multifaceted images of Arab Americans. This was not universally the case, however. The image of Arab Americans as “others,” in this case foreign, exotic people, ignorant of or distant from American culture, surfaced in many stories. Such stories implicitly evaluated their Arab American subjects through the prism of homegrown American values.

For example, a column by Rochelle Riley about a high school with 28 nationalities represented among the students described Yemeni immigrant students confronting the intersection of their traditions and American popular culture. The column quotes a 12th grader as saying, “There were so many temptations. You want to do things but you can’t because of certain rules. For example, friends would go out and have fun or play basketball, and you can’t do it because you have to pray or do stuff with the family. They understand, but then when you try to explain it to parents, what fun you could have, it’s difficult.” Prohibiting a teen from playing basketball with his friends would likely strike many readers as odd or even exotic.

Another story that subtly played up the distance between Arab immigrants and American culture described an “Arab American Catholic” who erected a 5-foot statue of the Virgin Mary on his front lawn and ran afoul of his subdivision’s landscaping restrictions. The story does not explain why his ethnicity is tied to the controversy. But describing him as an immigrant from the West Bank city of Ramallah puts his “otherness” at center stage and ties it to a story about religion, aesthetics and suburban property rules. A story about an ethnic festival almost literally depicts Arab Americans as strange and exotic. The lead is,

It might be one of Dearborn’s secrets.

But the word will spread this weekend about East Dearborn’s Arab business district and its nearly 200 Arab specialty shops, bakeries and restaurants.

The story ends by quoting an Arab American business leader who confronts otherness head-on.

“There’s a lot of misconceptions about the Arab American community and we’d like to dispel the stereotypes. ... We want to show non-Arabs that we’re a strong, vibrant, economically viable community.”

In sum, this coverage reflects a pattern identified in the co-author’s earlier work on news coverage of Native Americans. That is, that the local press tends to treat such groups as multifaceted members of the community and that stereotyping and over-generalizations increase as distance from the community increases.
Coverage of Arabs in the Middle East

While by no means common in the mainstream American press, blatantly stereotypical references to Arabs in international coverage do slip through. Reporting on the visit of President Clinton and first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton to Israel and the Palestinian territories in December 1998, a page 1 *Tribune* story reported that a visit to Israel and the Gaza Strip by President Bill Clinton

... produced a barrage of startling images: Clinton cutting a ribbon at a new Palestinian airport, Clinton and his family laughing amiably with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and his very Western-looking wife ...40

While such overt textual stereotyping is indeed rare, a more subtle type of stereotyping – *insinuation of otherness* – is often woven into the text of reporting on Arab and other Middle Eastern societies abroad. Insinuation of otherness takes three primary forms, as noted above: absence or muting of *voice*, unbalanced or distorted *point of view* and *framing of issues*, and lack of historical and/or political *context*. It is important to note that this is especially true when the reporting focuses on venues in which U.S. national interests are prominent.

In *Covering Islam* Edward Said acknowledged the independence of the American press and the wide variety of news sources. But he observed

[N]early every American journalist reports the world with a subliminal consciousness that his or her corporation is a participator in American power which, when it is threatened by foreign countries, makes press independence subordinate to what are often only implicit expressions of loyalty and patriotism, of simple national identification. ... What is surprising is that the independent press is not normally thought of as taking part in foreign policy, although in many ways it so effectively does.41

The textual analyses that follow focus first and at greatest length on Palestinians. This is not only because the majority of international news reporting on Arabs in the mainstream U.S. press focuses on Palestinians within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the peace process42 – not surprising given the focus of U.S. foreign policy in the region – but also because all three components of “otherness” are readily found and easily identifiable in reports on Palestinians. Briefer examples of press coverage of Egypt and Jordan follow. The final set of examples addresses international coverage of Arabs out of the Israeli-Palestinian orbit, some with direct ties to U.S. interests, others without.

The Palestinians: Voice, framing and otherness

In both *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said explores many corollaries to the notion that peoples of developing societies are somehow incapable of speaking for themselves, or that their points of view can be better expressed by others from economically powerful, usually Western, societies – a legacy of the thinking prevalent among leaders and planners of Western European nations that embarked on the classical age of imperialism in the 16th century.
While the physical manifestations of classical imperialism have all but disappeared – some would argue that they have been replaced by a neo-imperialism engendered by American political, military and economic hegemony in the post-Cold War era – examples of the muting and marginalizing of indigenous Arab voices in their communities and societies abroad continue to appear routinely on the pages of some of the most prominent American newspapers.

One of the more stunning examples of subordinating Arab voice to the point of nearly erasing it can be seen in a December 1995 New York Times Magazine piece entitled “In the Muslim City of Bethlehem” – the apparent news peg for which was the withdrawal at that time of the Israeli army from the West Bank town of Bethlehem. The subhead on the piece conveyed its theme: “The Israelis have pulled out and Christians [in Bethlehem] are nervous. There’s more peace than good will.”

Not inappropriate in a magazine feature (as opposed to a news report), its writer, André Aciman, exercised considerable license in assuming the main narrative voice in the piece. He noted near the top his identity as a Jew who grew up in Alexandria, Egypt. Throughout the piece in his own words, Aciman made the following assertions: “The implication is clear: they’re [Christians in Bethlehem] are afraid of the Muslims. Everyone knows but no one says it: they are the Jews of Bethlehem.” Speculating that a Muslim could become the town’s next mayor, Aciman wrote, “This does not worry the Christians as much as the fact that Hamas and Islamic fundamentalist elements will inevitably make life difficult for them as a minority.” And in assuming the very psychology of some Bethlehemites, he offered: “The writing on the wall is clear. There are Christian mothers who breathe easily once their children are safely abroad.”

But Aciman provided no quotes from Arab sources to illustrate any of these assumptions. Throughout the story he quoted only four people directly. Two were Christian Arabs: a souvenir-shop owner named George, whose spoken English and “ugly” merchandise the writer openly derided; and then-Mayor Elias Freij, whose directly quoted words numbered 11.

The other two quoted sources were two Jewish Israeli taxi drivers named Moishe and Itzhak, whom Aciman quoted more extensively than he did the purported Arab subjects of the piece themselves. It was the voices of the two taxi drivers that explained to the writer and through him to his readers why Bethlehem and its Arab inhabitants were in such sad shape. Not a single Muslim Arab resident of Bethlehem was given the opportunity to confirm or negate the story’s premise of inter-religious tension between the town’s Muslim and Christian Arab residents. Also, Bethlehem’s “poor,” “dirty,” “shabby” and “slovenly” appearance (in the words of the writer) were never attributed even in part to the 28 years of Israeli military occupation that had just come to an end.

So blatant was the cumulative effect of these stereotypical devices that a Hunter College professor of religion was moved to write a letter that the magazine published three weeks after the story appeared. The beginning of the letter stated:

It is troubling but not surprising that as Palestinians are preparing for their first chance to represent themselves, you could find no articulate Palestinian to discuss the situation in Bethlehem, but instead had to rely on an expatriate Egyptian Jew. … His article is so
full of traditional Orientalist clichés and anti-Arab remarks that I plan to use it next term as an example of how religion, politics and bigotry sill substitute for substantive discourse on the Middle East. 44

The subordination of Arab voice can occur even when Arab point of view is not distorted. As part of its coverage of the 50th anniversary of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in May 1998 the Chicago Tribune ran a long, detailed page 1 story about the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel, which numbered at the time 1 million citizens and accounted for 18 percent of the Israeli population. The story was neutral in tone, full of data from several government ministries and generous in historical context. But the Arab minority community was characterized primarily in opposition to the Jewish majority, with Arab voices cast in a markedly subordinate role. In describing the “difficult and tense relationship between Israel and its Arab citizens,” the “nut” paragraph of the story explaining its premise stated:

At best, they are seen by the Jewish majority as construction workers, gardeners and dishwashers – a convenient source of cheap labor, people willing to take the jobs that Jews don’t want. At worst, they are counted as part of the “enemy,” a dangerous fifth column that can never be fully trusted or accepted.

The story ran 48 paragraphs long at an estimated 1,500-1,600 words. The first direct quote characterizing the Arab community appeared in the 10th paragraph of the story; its source was a Jewish Israeli civil rights activist. The second direct quote came in the 21st paragraph of the story; its source was a Jewish Israeli journalist. The third source quoted in the story was a member of the actual community being reported on, an Arab member of the Knesset, or Israeli parliament. His quote, the first that afforded a member of the community an opportunity to characterize its relationship with the Jewish majority, appeared in the 29th paragraph of the story after it had “jumped” off page 1 to an inside page. The fourth and final source quoted directly was an Arab pizzeria owner, quoted in the 41st paragraph of the 48-paragraph story.

In the absence of a statistical analysis documenting the voluminous press coverage the anniversary story received, it appears that U.S. mainstream media “mega-framed” its coverage of the 50th anniversary of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in May 1998 as the 50th birthday of the state of Israel. Overall, the coverage was framed very much in terms of the achievements and struggles of the state of Israel from 1948 to 1998, culminating in a bittersweet 50th anniversary when Israeli society found itself suspended in a crepuscular juncture between war and peace. Perhaps it is naïve to expect that American media would frame the story any other way, in light of the fact that Israel has been, at least since 1967, the United States’ chief Mideast ally and recipient of foreign aid and diplomatic support. Nonetheless, the 50th anniversary was yet another occasion in which Arab voices – in this case Palestinian Arab voices – were relegated to a subordinate position.

An example of this framing of coverage can be seen in the May 10, 1998, special edition of the Chicago Tribune Magazine, published with that day’s Sunday newspaper. Titled “Israel at 50,” the 62-page issue carried 12 bylined stories, nine of them written by Tribune staffers, several of whom had been sent to Israel on special assignment. Seven of the 12 pieces – while making
frequent reference to Palestinians – reported on various aspects of Israeli society per se and thus reflected either exclusively or primarily Israeli points of view. Among these pieces was a signed essay by Leah Rabin, widow of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, titled “Keeping the dream alive/Leah Rabin on her late husband’s vision for Israel.” Two of the 12 pieces focused on U.S.-Israeli diplomatic relations, past and present. One of the 12 pieces focused on the ties between the metropolitan Chicago Jewish community and Israel; one piece focused on Jewish Americans who joined the fight for Israeli independence in the 1948 war.

Only one of the 12 pieces was written from a Palestinian point of view, and its source was extraterritorial to the conflict itself. “The catastrophe/Rashid Khalidi on the Palestinians’ sense of loss and frustration” was written by the noted professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Chicago, an American of Palestinian descent. Despite the fact that an estimated 60,000-80,000 Palestinians live in the Chicago metropolitan area, the viewpoint of this constituent community was virtually absent.

A similar framing device could also be observed in a September 2000 New York Times Magazine article on the Palestinian minority in Israel. A balanced piece of reportage that characterized the community primarily from the perspectives of two Arab Knesset members, it assigned quotes from Jewish Israeli analysts and activists a distinctly secondary position. But its headline treatment imparted a distinct tone and point of view that can be seen as yet another textbook example of insinuating otherness by purporting to paint a portrait of one subject by holding a mirror up to its counterpoint:

Israel’s Next Palestinian Problem
As the Israelis wrestle with an external peace process, they may soon have to confront a parallel, internal conflict. The nation’s Arab population is growing more impatient, raising issues that threaten the identity of the Jewish state.

Missing: Context

A surefire method of creating stereotypes, intentionally or not, is to build a narrative without context – especially when reporting on a historical conflict. It is important to note that as a matter of journalistic process, it is not only impractical to expect but also impossible to include a complete historical exegesis in every report on some aspect of a conflict for two obvious reasons. First, space limitations won’t allow it. Second, there is no simple historical version on which all parties to the conflict agree. The omission of pertinent historical background, however, raises an important question: What effect can a critical mass of such incomplete and non-contextualized reporting have on public opinion – and perhaps public policy – over time? Two examples of such reporting aspects of the Palestinian narrative will be analyzed here.

Ein El Hilweh, Lebanon

In April 2000 the Chicago Tribune published a page 1 story about Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, specifically the inhabitants of the Ein El Hilweh refugee camp. The “news peg” for the 1,670-word story was the recent talks that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had conducted
with King Abdullah II of Jordan and President Clinton on the topic of Palestinian refugees’ right of return. The story’s headline treatment and opening paragraphs provided a dramatic word picture to accompany a photograph of the Hajit family eating by gaslight in their home in the camp:

Palestinian exiles’ hopeless life
in Lebanon fuels a growing rage
Arabs who left what became Israel fester in a country that disdains them. Living in squalor, they are growing more desperate.

EIN EL HILWEH REFUGEE CAMP, Lebanon—Inside his family’s dim and dilapidated home, Fahdi Hajit can recite the most defiant poetry of the decades-old Palestinian pursuit of a homeland.

For Hajit, just getting home is also difficult. His family has lived on one refugee camp after another since it fled from what is now Israel 52 years ago, and Hajit, disabled since birth, faces a daily struggle to negotiate the shattered concrete and open sewer traps of this camp’s filthy passageways.

“If we don’t get a solution that allows us to return to our village, then even I am ready to become a suicide bomber,” Hajit says with bravado.

Unwanted and unable to envision a better future, Hajit and hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are sensing a new hopelessness, teaching each new generation about a homeland most have never seen.

The story continued to paint a portrait of the camp being inhabited by young men who were growing increasing radical – out of disillusionment with the peace process and “fear of being abandoned to a permanent refugee status” – in their shift away from allegiance to Arafat toward Syrian President Hafez Assad. The phenomenon of this radicalization, coupled with the fact that “every house has 10 guns,” according to one camp dweller, had spurred Lebanese President Emile LaHoud to ask the UN to disarm Palestinian refugees for fear that they would start a series of “mini-wars” after Israel’s anticipated withdrawal from Lebanon.

The report’s detailed description of the desperate and threatening physical conditions of the camp was matched by equally desperate and threatening statements uttered by its inhabitants. Fahdi Hajit’s comment about becoming a suicide bomber was echoed in the words of another camp resident, militia leader Mounir Maqdash:

“When Hezbollah [the Islamic resistance movement battling Israeli occupation troops in south Lebanon] stops, we will start. It’s most important that the enemy never rests. If there is one Palestinian refugee left in the region, there won’t be peace.”

The camp itself is described as being “isolated” and “out of sync.”
Leaders here still talk about taking Jerusalem by force and rallying the rest of the Arab world to the cause; shopkeepers still display portraits of heroes of causes that are more the stuff of myth than victory – Che Guevara, Saddam Hussein, condemned Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan.

The aggregate picture that emerges is a portrait of hopelessness and belligerence supporting and supported by a carefully yet incompletely arranged narrative. For a “cause” to be “the stuff of myth,” it must be part of a conflict that has only vague beginnings and no end in sight but rather an infinite path of protracted chaos. By way of historical explanation for the plight and resulting rage of the Palestinian méretables that dwell in Ein El Hilweh – and by extension Palestinian refugees in general – the story offered a single paragraph:

Israelis reject the idea of allowing even some of the refugees to return because their former homes were in cities and villages that have become almost exclusively Israeli. They prefer a solution be found in the refugees’ host countries.

How did the older generation of Ein El Hilweh refugees come to reside there? Under what circumstances – flight or some variation of ethnic cleansing – did they leave their villages in Palestine in 1948? What were the names of some of the villages – comprising “a homeland most have never seen” – that they left behind? How did those “cities and villages that have become almost exclusively Israeli” come to be in the wake of Israel’s depopulation and destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages in 1948-49? What are some explanations – from Israeli and Palestinian points of view – for why compensation for the inhabitants of Ein El Hilweh – and Palestinian refugees in general – has not been forthcoming for 52 years?

The report from Ein El Hilweh doesn’t address these concrete issues behind the narrative of Palestinian refugees. Instead it substitutes drama for fact, point-and-shoot journalistic impressionism for detailed reporting, and stereotypes of Palestinian refugees as deluded primitives for portraits of three-dimensional human beings in possession – but not control – of their own history.

Occupied Gaza Strip

“Playing War,” a New York Times Magazine piece published in December 2000, investigates why Palestinian children in the Gaza Strip were motivated to flock to the Karni crossing in the northern end of the strip in order to hurl stones at Israeli soldiers in the face of the considerable risk that they will die by soldiers’ return gunfire in the process. The piece eventually succeeds in answering its question of a premise, but only after having imparted a string of stereotypical images.

Why, indeed, do Palestinian children put themselves at such risk? At the very end of the 7,546-word piece, readers get the answer from Anaam, mother of Muhammad (whose surname is not given), a resident of Gaza’s Beach refugee camp and one of a passel of teenage Gazan boys whose stone-throwing ritual at Karni crossing the writer observes for two weeks. Anaam, the only person quoted in the piece at any length, explains that her son – who presumably is motivated to throw stones for the same reasons that motivate his peers – “goes to sleep scared and he wakes up scared.” Anaam describes how Muhammad’s oldest brother, Raed, was shot in
the mouth while stoning Israeli soldiers in 1995; about how a few months before that Muhammad watched Israeli soldiers break the right arm of his father for venturing out past curfew to the local mosque. “When the boys see their friends killed,” she explains, “they get angry, and they go to the clashes.”

The dual message, obliquely if not directly stated, is that life under Israeli occupation is so brutal that the notion of dying a martyr can be more attractive than life itself – and that before death claims the physical body a process of dehumanization claims the soul. This chilling logic is echoed in Muhammad’s answers to the writer’s question of what he would buy if he had money. “A gun,” comes the initial reply. Then, upon further prodding, what would the boy buy if he could afford more than just a gun?

“I’d buy a tank,” Muhammad says. “But what if there were peace,” the writer persists. “Then what would you buy?” A glimmer of the boy’s youthful humanity shines through:

“I’d buy a bicycle. A mountain bike. I’d buy a cell phone. I’d buy a bed, and a bedroom, and a disk, and a soccer ball. And a TV. And chocolate. I’d buy a lot of chocolate. I love chocolate.”

But is the occupation so dehumanizing that it affords only Muhammad and his mother the ability to articulate their humanity? At a funeral for three of the boys thought to have been martyred, a mullah stands over the corpses shouting not once but three times “With our soul, with our blood, we will sacrifice ourselves for God,” and the crowd joins in. Then, the writer observes,

After the bodies were covered, the mounds atop their graves were a collage of palm prints, and everyone was still chanting, even the smallest of children, who wandered about the cemetery dazed from the excitement, repeating the words softly to themselves.

Similarly, the boys featured in the piece fade in an out of automaton mode, the writer noting in these two separate passages that

When they tried to explain exactly why they were throwing stones, everyone said the same thing – not approximately the same thing, but exactly the same thing. ... Every sentence was taken, verbatim from messages played and replayed on Palestinian TV.

Every student I spoke with, in the hallways, the classrooms, in the courtyard, insisted that he, too, wanted to be a martyr. “I don’t fear the bullets,” one boy informed me. “I want to be with God,” said another. “I will avenge Ahmed and Ibrahim’s deaths,” announced a third. This was, I suspected, a form of adolescent bluster, but no one would dare say anything different, especially in front of his friends.

The piece does impart a sense of compassion if not sympathy for its endangered if not doomed young subjects, describing their environment in masterful detail. Yet it falls critically short of the mark in providing much factual context for their predicament. The beginning of the piece does note that 40 percent of the Gaza Strip is controlled by Israel and is home to 6,500 Israeli settlers, while 1 million Palestinians, half of them refugees, must make do with the remaining 60 percent. But then the Karni crossing is described as “a place where Arabs
are not considered equal citizens” – when in fact no Palestinian from Gaza can claim citizenship of any sort due to the absence of an independent Palestinian state. Historical context of how Gaza became home to a half million refugees is virtually is glossed over to the point of virtual absence, the single exception being a one-sentence explanation that Muhammad’s family … left Hamman [on the Israeli side of the Green Line] in 1948, soon after Israel declared its statehood, a period during which tens of thousands of Palestinians relocated to Gaza, which was then under Egyptian control.

The use of the term “relocated” is the single reference, made in passing, to an issue of primordial importance – how the refugees got that way. A pattern of other unfortunate word choices likens the refugees to animals: in Beach Camp 75,000 Palestinian refugees are “corralled” into a half-square-mile block at the northern end of Gaza; the three boys’ funeral saw “a thousand hands pawing at the graves.” Down in the trenches of Karni, “Muhammad curled himself into an insectlike ball”; in a vacant lot at Beach Camp “small children, many of them barefoot, ran about in hyperkinetic herds.”

Like their counterparts in Ein el Hilweh, the Palestinian refugees depicted in “Playing War” emerge multiple losers. Gone not only are their original homes and most of their hope but their collective humanity as well.

**Depictions of Jordan and Egypt**

Newspaper coverage of the death of King Hussein of Jordan in February 1999 revealed first and foremost a characterization of him as a wily yet compassionate leader who had the nerve to make peace with Israel, which served a key U.S. strategic interest in the region. According to *Newsday*

Hussein’s nerve in the face of powerful enemies and strong resistance was always steady, culminating in 1994 when he took the bold and widely unpopular step of signing a historic peace agreement with Israel when most of the Arab world was unwilling even to engage in discussion with the Jewish state.51

The *Chicago Tribune* reported

But it was more than luck that enabled Hussein to rule for more than 46 years, longer than any Arab leader in modern times, holding together a country cobbled from diverse people and throwing aside years of Arab distrust and anger to make peace with the Israelis. … Hussein was an astute strategist who showed great insight in reading political fortunes and shifting at the right time.52

Reports of Hussein’s death also noted the mixed record of his domestic popularity. *Newsday* reported
But though symbolic flourishes made him popular around the world, his gamble never fully paid off at home: The peace process between Israel and the Palestinians stalled, and the economic dividend for Jordanians never materialized, leaving his subjects feeling betrayed by his optimism. Although the king remained firmly in control and basically popular, he faced bitter criticism from Islamic radicals, from ordinary Jordanians and from the more than 2 million displaced Palestinians who make up more than half of Jordan’s population.53

The Los Angeles Times characterized the challenge facing Hussein’s son and successor Abdullah in similar terms:

But before long, he [Abdullah] must begin to cope with challenges that include Jordan’s severely troubled economy, high unemployment and anger over endemic corruption. Many Jordanians also remain uneasy, or resentful, over Hussein’s internationally praised but internally unpopular 1994 peace treaty with Israel, which has not yielded the economic benefits that many expected.54

Notably absent in the coverage, however, was a historical analysis of how Hussein’s tenure was viewed by his peers in the Arab world – particularly regarding Jordan’s relationship with Israel – while the king was alive. The only mention of Hussein’s relations with his Arab neighbors during his lifetime to appear consistently was his siding with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Persian Gulf war and the temporary damage it did to U.S.-Jordanian relations.

If Hussein made one significant political blunder in recent years, it was his decision to back Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War, a strategic miscalculation that badly, if temporarily, damaged Jordan’s relations with the United States.55

Even when his political calculations were faulty, such as when he refused to side with the U.S. against Iraq in the 1991 Persian Gulf war, he quickly maneuvered himself back on Washington’s good side to become once again an indispensable player in the region’s diplomacy.56

Thus at the time he died, the biographical narrative of the Middle East’s most enduring leader – Hussein ruled Jordan for 46 years – was disconnected almost entirely from the Arab context in which he lived. Instead, the king’s life was reported primarily through the prism of his relationship with Israel and the United States. These shortcomings were noted by Edward Said in an acerbic commentary that focused on how U.S. cable network CNN, among other “world media,” covered Hussein’s funeral.

... the perspective provided by CNN and the others is that this was an event that had mostly to do with the passing of “a man of peace,” as if a rich, often tragic and contradictory human life, a story of power, struggle, historical collisions and conjunctures, achievement and error, could be reduced simply and neatly to that of someone who served the US peace process as a wise and gifted partner. In other words, the local context was totally removed. Very little, if anything, of Jordan’s history as a country was referred to. ... According to the coverage, what seemed most important in
the end about Hussein was that he served others (i.e. the United States and Israel) more than he thought about himself. 57

To mark the one-year anniversary of King Hussein’s death, The New York Times Magazine published an 8,000-word piece chronicling Abdullah’s first year on the throne. 58 The piece gave brief attention to the young king’s “problems on the political front”: the disenfranchisement of the kingdom’s majority Palestinian population, Islamic fundamentalism inside the kingdom and beyond, relations with Israel, and economic and political reforms. It also noted Abdullah’s efforts to cement his kingdom’s ties with the Arab world by visiting every Arab country except Iraq and his preference for strengthening ties with fellow Arab states before visiting Israel. And it described his vision of a U.S. doctrine that would give “modernist, outward-looking” Arab states including Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Bahrain and Qatar incentives to counter anti-Americanism in the region.

But the piece focused primarily on Abdullah’s Western-leaning and apparent America-centric cultural tendencies. The reporting provided more details of his public-school education in England and Massachusetts prep-school days – the latter of which, according to the author, “shaped Abdullah into a bit of a Yankee” – than it did details on his method of building relations with other Arab leaders. Repeatedly using metaphors steeped in American cultural references, the writer described how Abdullah disguised himself for an undercover visit to offices of the Jordanian Finance Ministry in a costume that rendered his appearance similar to that of “Samuel L. Jackson in ‘Pulp Fiction,’” replete with a wig styled into “a sort of Bedouin Jheri curl.” Abdullah, the reader is told, was more interested in relationships with U.S. corporate magnates Bill Gates and Steve Case (“these are the friends he wants”) than with Middle Eastern leaders Mubarak, Arafat and Assad (whom the writer infers that the young king considered “yesterday’s news”). Descriptions of the cultural orbit in which Abdullah and his “highly Americanized royal court” dwell were replete with references to Elvis Presley, Superman, the ABC sitcom “Dharma and Greg” and the film “Star Wars.”

This Disneyland approach to reporting the first-year learning curve of a strategic U.S. ally, a man among “men who inherited their countries from Daddy,” as Abdullah and some of his Arab peers were described in the piece, was not without its moment of near-gravity. Not until near the end of the piece did the story provide the crucial missing piece in the funeral coverage of King Hussein:

All Hashemites, it seems, find their way to America. The American influence in Jordan cannot be overstated. The United States is Jordan’s biggest benefactor and most important ally. They agree about almost everything, except Iraq. … The level of intelligence cooperation between the two countries is extraordinary: the effective and, by Middle Eastern standards, elegant Jordanian intelligence service has become perhaps the C.I.A.’s most important partner in the fight against Islamic terrorism, far more important than the Israelis. 59

Thus the piece imparts, through the writer’s observations and commentary, much more about how Abdullah is “like us” and serves U.S. interests than it offers solid reporting on conditions in Jordan and the sentiments of Abdullah’s subjects.
The story of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, an Egyptian sociology professor at the American University in Cairo, made headlines throughout the U.S. press at the time of his arrest in July 2000 and again when a seven-year guilty verdict was handed down against him in May 2001. According to reports in *The Christian Science Monitor*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*,

Ibrahim was convicted on charges of accepting a $250,000 grant from the European Commission to monitor and encourage participation in parliamentary elections in the fall of 2000 without permission from the appropriate government ministry; forging voter registration cards; and defaming Egypt in reports on relations between Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt. The newspapers reported that it took a three-judge panel of the Supreme Security Court less than 90 minutes to reach the verdict after Ibrahim’s lawyers finished presenting his defense in a six-month trial.

The story had appeal for American readers for several reasons. First, as all five papers reported, Ibrahim has dual Egyptian-American citizenship. He wife, Barbara, is American-born, and he earned his master’s degree and Ph.D. at the University of Washington in Seattle. Second, the papers reported that Ibrahim, as director of the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Developmental Studies, a sociological research center at AUC, was active in researching issues related to democratic values that Americans hold dear: free elections and minority rights. Third, Ibrahim’s reaction to his sentence was shot through with heroic overtones befitting the climax of a television courtroom drama. All four papers except the *Monitor* reported verbatim Ibrahim’s assertion, made on a cell phone to the Associated Press as police escorted him from the courtroom, that “This [trial] is politically motivated, and the sentence is politically dictated. It is a struggle and it will go on. I do not regret anything I stood for.”

The point of interest in analyzing the five papers’ coverage of the story is the manner in which they diverged in reporting U.S. reaction to the verdict – especially in light of the fact that for many if not most of the years since Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, it has received the second-largest U.S. foreign aid grant of approximately $2 billion a year. The fact that Egypt is considered the No. 2 U.S. ally in the Middle East after Israel seems as if it would be germane to the story of its treatment of a dual U.S.-Egyptian citizen being sentenced to seven years’ hard labor for pursuing two of the underlying values of American-style democracy. But curiously enough, the *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* reports made no mention whatsoever of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship. *The New York Times* offered a boilerplate diplomatic quote:

In Washington, the American government voiced disquiet about the verdict. “We are deeply troubled by the outcome and we have some concerns about the process that resulted in this sentence,” said Gregg Sullivan, a spokesman for the State Department’s Near Eastern Affairs bureau.

*The Christian Science Monitor* offered a diplomatic quote and quoted a local Egyptian source on the strategic implications of the verdict.
“We’re still gathering all the facts about the court’s decision,” says U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher. “Based on these initial reports, though, we’re deeply troubled about the outcome.” …

… “At this juncture Egypt needs to rally the greatest support possible to isolate [Israeli Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon,” says prominent Egyptian commentator Mohamed Sid Ahmed. “[This verdict] is only a way to antagonize the United States at a time when Egypt needs its backing.”

Only The Washington Post report came close to directly addressing the troublesome implications of a key U.S. ally acting against the civil rights of an American citizen in particular and against the interests of its own citizens in general.

The verdict comes at a sensitive time in U.S.-Egyptian relations. The reputation of the United States has been damaged here by Israel’s use of F-16 fighters and other U.S.-supplied weapons to quell a Palestinian uprising, while U.S. officials have criticized Egypt on issues ranging from anti-Semitism in the press to the status of the Coptic Christian minority.

The next day the Post editorialized on the matter, focusing a glaring spotlight on those implications and their implied consequences.

Normally there’s not much the United States can do about such outrages, which tend to happen in countries like China and Cuba. In this case, however, the violation of the basic human rights of a U.S. citizen was carried out by Egypt, a country that has grown accustomed to receiving some $2 billion in U.S. military and economic aid every year. This affront need not and should not go unanswered. Saad Eddin Ibrahim is the kind of citizen who makes Americans proud.

Less than a month after the verdict, The New York Times Magazine ran a 7,000-word piece on the case and the state of Egyptian civil liberties in general. Richly contextual and balanced, the piece implied yet another irony in the reporting of Ibrahim’s story. Similar rights violations of Egyptians at the opposite end of the social and political spectrum – namely Islamists – have gone largely unreported in the U.S. mainstream press, while Saad Eddin Ibrahim – whose secular and democratic tendencies served to neutralize his “otherness” -- became a cause célèbre.

In the 1990s the courts played a crucial role in [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak’s successful campaign to crush a rebellion by Islamic militants. Thousands of Islamists, alleged Islamists and would-be Islamists were summarily arrested under emergency law and paraded in and out of these courts and their cages, and they continue to be. Even today, between 15,000 and 16,000 Islamists – not all of them militants – remain in
prison. Many have never been charged or tried. Under Mubarak’s emergency laws, his regime is not even obligated to release their names.

As long as the courts were employed – ostensibly at least – against Islamic militants, the West was more than happy to look the other way. But with the arrest and trial of Saad Eddin, Egypt’s increasingly powerful security services seemed to have widened their brief, dangerously. … [H]e was not only a liberal but also the West’s favorite Arab intellectual and his country’s most prominent human rights and democracy advocate, arguing passionately for an opening to democracy, civil rights and the rights of Egypt’s Christian Copts, a minority suffering frequent discrimination.66

Other international coverage of Arabs: interest vs. U.S. interests

It is not unusual to find mainstream American newspaper reports about Arabs in the Middle East and elsewhere abroad that are neutral if not positive in tone, give fair access to Arab voice and point of view and include relevant historical context. However, often the subjects of such reports are members of communities that have little if any strategic and/or political import for American interests abroad.

In November 2000 the Chicago Tribune published a report of how Muslim immigrants in the town of Lodi, Italy, had encountered strenuous local opposition to their efforts to build a mosque in the town.67 While the focus of the story was on Muslim immigrants – a group comprising Arabs and non-Arabs alike – the primary point of view conveyed in the piece was that of two Egyptian brothers, the Shahats, who had immigrated to Italy from Cairo. The story noted how Islam – with approximately 600,000 adherents among a total Italian population of some 58 million – had become the country’s second religion, and as such was stirring “a widening national debate on the limits of cultural and religious tolerance.” Although the story was very balanced in conveying immigrant and anti-immigrant points of view, it nevertheless carried a subtext of sympathy for Arab and other Muslim immigrants.

Similarly in September 2001 the Tribune carried a story on village elections in the south of Lebanon, the first such balloting in decades.68 The story was played prominently at the top of page 3 and its theme was that after 15 years of civil war, nearly 20 years after the Israeli invasion and some 15 months after the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon ended, the local political landscape was beginning to return to normal. Importantly, since 1982 U.S. press coverage of Lebanon has focused on its adjunct role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even in the decade since the Ta’if accords formally ended the Lebanese civil war and the rebuilding of Beirut got underway in earnest, the U.S. press reported on Lebanon almost exclusively through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict up to the end of the Israeli occupation of the south in May 2000. Thus the Tribune report’s subtext of “Lebanon for the Lebanese” is encouraging.

The stark contrast between the tone of reporting on Arabs abroad who do not have the potential to affect U.S. interests and the tone of reporting on those who do can be seen in an example of pre-Sept. 11, 2001, coverage of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network. In mid-January 2000, several weeks before the trial of alleged conspirators in the 1998 bombings of
U.S. embassies in Kenya and Nairobi opened in New York, The New York Times published a 12,500-word, three-part series on Bin Laden and his network of supporters and operations.69 Reported principally from Afghanistan and Jordan, the series’ strength was its extensive detailing of how American and allied Middle Eastern governments have investigated Bin Laden’s activities and prosecuted his followers. The series did not succeed, however, in explaining what lies behind their anti-American agenda. Muslim sentiments expressed by Arabs in the series were superficial and clichéd: Bin Laden’s supporters “view the United States as their enemy, an imperial power propping up corrupt and godless governments”; “many were agitated about the plight of their own homelands”; the United States is “hostile to Islam”, “the whole world was ripe for jihad.”70 A former inhabitant of a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan was quoted as saying that jihad is a Muslim’s “most important religious duty ... whenever and wherever our rights as Arabs and Muslims are being denied.”71 Further, he said, “There are 500 verses in the Koran alone about the need to wage jihad.”72 In the series a former FBI counter-terrorism official observed of al-Qaeda that “local politics drives what they’re doing.”73 But the Times gave no clue as to what drives those local politics.

In a similar vein, a December 1998 news report in the Chicago Tribune focused on unease of Arab countries over the deepening and strengthening of economic and military ties between Turkey and Israel.74 The article’s readout headline stated: Arabs have watched with dread as Israel and Turkey have moved closer against common rivals. Four paragraphs from the top, the “nut” paragraph of the story reported that

Since February 1996, when Israel and Turkey signed the first of several cooperation agreements, the developing friendship between the region’s two military “superpowers” has stirred high anxiety and deep dread in Arab capitals.

Despite the piece being a bylined news report, not a signed opinion piece, the narrative voice of the writer was pre-eminent throughout. Direct quotations came from only two sources: an unnamed “Western military attaché in the Turkish capital,” and Alon Liel, identified as a “former diplomat” of no specified national identity (although Israeli nationality can be inferred from the name). Writing from the Turkish capital of Ankara, the writer quoted no Turkish sources. The most glaring omission, however, was the total absence of Arab sources to either confirm or negate the story’s premise of Arab “anxiety and deep dread” over the Turkish-Israeli relationship. Two paragraphs near the end of the story analyzed this anxiety from the Syrian perspective by way of the writer’s own narrative without quoting a single Syrian source.

Conclusion

The contrasts between Detroit Free Press coverage of Arab Americans and various newspapers’ coverage of Arabs abroad is clear and striking. While many factors – some obvious, others subtle – are involved, a key is the concept of proximity. Proximity has long been understood to be a classic value of traditional news judgment. And it appears to be a key factor in determining what images of Arab Americans and Arabs in the Middle East appear in the U.S. mainstream press, and also how and why these images differ. In the context of the present discussion, the concept of distance is both physical and psychological. The latter refers to Arab subjects’ perceived social relation to either the local community or strategic relation to U.S. interests abroad.
In the local context, the examples cited from the *Detroit Free Press* indicate that in general local coverage of Arab Americans can impart a sense of balance, fairness and inclusion, especially when they are reported on in the context of their participation in mainstream political and economic activity. In the examples cited, Arab Americans are participants in some of the meta-narratives of American diversity: gaining political power, struggling as other immigrants have against discrimination and hardship. Yet in other stories describing socio-cultural and/or religious practices in which customs of Arab Americans and the larger community differ, insinuations of “otherness” are often present, thus distancing Arab Americans from the mainstream.

In the international context, the examples cited from a variety of sources show that Arabs who do not represent a challenge or threat to U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East or beyond can be covered with a similar sense of balance and fairness, neutrality or even sympathy. In such stories physical, i.e., geographic, distance is erased by framing the stories in ways that make them emotionally accessible to American readers. This is true whether the subject is a member of a Muslim community in Italy, a resident voting in a village election in southern Lebanon or a Western-oriented Jordanian monarch or Egyptian academic. But reporting on Arabs whose political and cultural values directly challenge U.S. interests in the region – Palestinians in particular – routinely makes use of stereotypical devices including lack or muting of voice, biased framing of issues and lack of appropriate historical context.

A partial answer to the question of why this dualism exists may be that the American journalistic goal of objectivity is confronted by two realities. Domestically, American society, while relatively inclusive and tolerant of diversity (when compared with other Western industrialized nations), accommodates certain ethnic and religious groups and communities more easily than it does others – and this uneven accommodation is reflected in press coverage of those groups and communities. Internationally, U.S. foreign policy has been and continues to be at odds with the majority of nations and peoples in a region whose majority populations are Muslim and Arab. This, too, is reflected in U.S. press coverage of the region. Though the press often falls short, it publicly endorses the ideal of diversity – fair and accurate treatment of all racial and ethnic groups – in domestic news coverage. In international coverage this ideal often gives way to coverage driven by and reflective of U.S. foreign policy interests.

Technology’s ability to close geographical distance is one of the hallmarks of the age of globalization. Globalized media with U.S. media at their forefront have ridden waves of technological advancement to bring their readers and viewers near-instant access to events unfolding around the world. Based on the textual analyses presented in this article, however, it appears that the journalistic practices that would close the gap in perception and bias between journalist and subject have not caught up to the technological advances that have rendered physical geographical distance nearly irrelevant.

The implications of stereotyping of Arabs in domestic and international news coverage would appear to be exponentially greater in the post-September 11, 2001, world. In this changed and fluid set of circumstances that comprises aspects of international law, domestic civil rights, foreign and domestic intelligence policy and terrorism – all of which have direct bearing for
Arabs at home and abroad – how the U.S. press reports on these communities can have even greater impact on public opinion and public policy than ever before. Thus consideration of the issues presented in this article are not just a matter for academic discussion. They are a matter of vital importance to the lives and well-being of Arab individuals in the United States, the Middle East and around the world.

2 Gans, p. 182.
3 Gans, p. 197.
5 Said, p. 50.
7 Tuchman, pp. 21-24.
8 Quoted in Tuchman, p. 138.
10 Gans, p. 201.
13 Said, Orientalism, p. 67.
15 Ibish, 120.
16 Said, Orientalism, p. 57.
17 Said, Covering Islam, p. li
18 Said, Covering Islam, 16, 28.
21 Based on interviews with Free Press reporters and editors David Crumm, Ron Dzwonkowski, Peter Gavriloich, Joe Grimm and others, September 5, 2001.
22 Detroit Free Press, Oct. 18, 1990, section E
23 Detroit Free Press, "100 Questions and Answers About Arab Americans," (Detroit, 2000).
41 Said, Covering Islam, p. 51.
47 See, inter alia, Kathleen Christison, Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy, University of California Press, 1999.


