Understanding Representation of Islam in Visual Images Online: A Preliminary Analysis of Images of Islam on www.faithfreedom.org

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Abstract

Many studies have been conducted to analyse how old media in the West such as newspapers and television practice representation of Islam and Muslims. With the advanced information and technology, the issues of how online media depict Islam and Muslims migrate online and need advanced studies. However, a few scholars have studied this issue providing useful insight into understanding the representation of Islam online. This paper attempts to contribute to this literature by examining the online representation of Islam and Muslims by focusing its analysis on visual images on www.faithfreesom.org. It asks the question of how online media conduct the representational practice of Islam and Muslims. Using the Concept of Representation as its theoretical framework, this paper argues that online media practice representation of Islam and Muslims in the form of stereotype by simplifying Islam into simple, few, and exaggerated nature and reducing Muslims to easily grasped, memorable, and widely recognized characteristics.

Key Words

Representation, online media, website, Islam, Muslims

Introduction

Many studies have been conducted to analyse how old media in the West like newspapers and television practice representations of Islam and Muslims (*e.g.* Kabir 2006; Akbarzade and Smith 2005; Faimau 2011; Baker et.al. 2013; Kabir and Bourk 2012; and Saeed 2007). With the advanced information and technology, the issues of how online media depict Islam and Muslims migrate online. However, a few scholars have studied this issue providing useful insight into understanding the representation of Islam online (*e.g.* Martin and Phelan 2002; Törnberg and Törnberg 2016; Piela 2013).

This paper attempts to contribute to the existing literature by analysing the issues of the representation of Islam and Muslims on websites. This is an important topic because the use of online media to depict Islam and Muslims in

line with the advanced development of new media technologies undoubtedly needs an adequate analysis.

Through this analysis, this paper aims to uncover how the internet-based new media depict Islam and Muslims in the digital world so that we understand better how online media work to provide meanings and representations of Islam and Muslims through constructed images and news. To do so, this paper specifically asks how internet-based new media like websites represent Islam and Muslims.

Employing Stuart Hall's concept of representation as its theoretical framework, this paper focuses its analysis on the visual images of Islam and Muslims online as represented by the website of Faith Freedom (www.faithfreedom.org). This website was chosen because it represents well the online media that provide images and ideas of Islam and Muslims, which was expected to help us understand better how new media like the analysed website represent Islam and Muslims. The paper argues that online media practice representation of Islam and Muslims in the form of stereotype by simplifying Islam into simple, few, and exaggerated nature and reducing Muslims to easily grasped, memorable, and widely recognized characteristics.

The data needed for this paper were collected through online investigation and web archiving of the selected website of www.faithfreedom.org. Postings in the forms of visual images by the web administrator and contributors were collected from the website to examine how those images give meaning to represent Islam and Muslims. The collected data were analysed through a textual analysis to reveal the representation of Islam and Muslims on the selected website. In this paper, texts comprised visual images on the website. The data analysis involved the initial reading of the selected postings of images to get a general sense of the meanings they gave and the representation they carried. Then, it generated themes of the ways Islam and Muslims were represented through those images. Lastly, the analysis involved rereading of the categorised images using the concept of representation, which was followed by drawing conclusions.

In what follows, the paper describes the concept of representation as a theoretical framework with special reference to Stuart Hall. Then, it presents an analysis of how visual images of the selected website represent Islam and Muslims by using the concept of representation. Lastly, the paper draws

conclusions answering the research question followed by a suggestion for further studies.

Representation

Representation involves how people give meanings to things through language and how they make sense of objects, events, and other people around them. It also involves how people can express and communicate their complex thought of things to other people in ways which they can understand (Hall 2003). The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* helps explain this concept. To represent something, it says, means to "describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination; to place a likeness of it before us in mind or in the senses, as in the sentence: "This picture represents the murder of Abel by Cain"". In addition, to represent means "to symbolize, to stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for, as in the sentence: "In Christianity, the cross represents the suffering and the crucifixion the Christ"". Briefly, representation can be defined as "the production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language" which results in "a link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the real world of objects, people or events, or imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events" (Hall 2003:17).

There are two systems of representation. First, it involves the development of a conceptual map or mental representations in our thought, which correlate the world of people, objects, and events. With this conceptual map, people can give meaning to the world around them meaningfully. So, the system of concepts and images in people's minds, which stand for the world, determines the meaning of the world of things around us (Hall 2004:17). Moreover, people can communicate because they have broadly the same conceptual maps and interpret the world of things in similar ways. As a result, people can build the shared meaning of things, construct a social world of their own, and belong to the same culture (Hall 2004:18).

Second, in order that people can exchange their conceptual maps and construct meanings, they need to have access to a shared language. Through language, they can correlate their shared concepts and ideas with certain spoken sounds, written words, or visual images that carry meanings, which are called signs. These signs are organized into a common language that enables people to

translate their ideas and thought into words, sounds, or images to express meanings and communicate them to other people. The language here refers to a writing system, spoken words, as well as visual images. In this sense, signs stand for or represent the concepts, thought, and ideas and the conceptual relation between them which people have in mind by which they construct the meaning system of their culture (Hall 2004:18).

The abovementioned systems form the two related systems of representation. The first, the conceptual map, provides people with meanings of the world of things, and the second, the shared language or signs which carry meanings, represent those concepts and ideas and by which people can express their ideas and communicate with other people. The relation between things, concepts, and signs result in the production of meaning and the process which connects these three elements is called representation (Hall 2003:19).

How Representation Works: A Constructionist Approach

How does the representation of meaning through language work? From the constructionist approach, neither things nor individual users of language produce meaning. Things do not mean. It is we, people, who construct meaning using concepts and signs as a representational system. The world of things does not convey meaning. Using the conceptual system of their culture and linguistic system of representation, the social actors produce the meaning of the world, make it meaningful, and communicate meaningfully with other people. The meaning of things lies not on the material quality of the sign such as the sound we make with vocal, the images we produce, or the marks we make in writing, but on its symbolic function. A particular sound or word signifies a concept; it functions as a sign, which symbolizes or represents a concept, and conveys meaning (Hall 2003: 25-26).

For example, a traffic light, a machine that produces different coloured lights. It is us, or our culture, that classifies them according to a different colour concept in our culture, and gives them names: red, yellow and green. How do we use this representational system to regulate traffic? The colours of a traffic light do not have meaning on themselves. Red is 'stop', yellow is 'get ready! Light about to change' and green is 'go' are the meanings which are ascribed to them in our culture by the code or conventions regulating the language. The colours also

do not have any fixed meaning as they can convey different meaning in other setting and cultures such as red may also represent 'danger' or 'Communism', and green stands for 'nature' or 'Islam'.

Representation, Power and Knowledge

Power is often understood in terms of physical coercion and economic exploitation. However, power, in fact, can be seen in the form of cultural and symbolic terms such as power in representation. This a symbolic power to mark, assign, and classify people, objects and events. It is the power to represent or exclude people in a certain way within a certain 'regime of representation' and through representational practices (Hall 2003: 259).

For our purpose here, this can be best exemplified by Western construction of the stereotypical images of the 'Orient' as the other, known as Orientalism. Edward Said (1978 as cited in Hall 2003: 259) argues that Orientalism "was the discourse by which European culture was able to manage –and even to produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period". This resulted in a new object of knowledge, namely Orientalism, within Western hegemony of the Orient. It is "a complex Orient suitable for the study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instance of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personalities, national or religious character".

Thus, it can be said that Orientalism is a representational practice that reflects the close connection between power and knowledge. Within the framework of Michel Foucault's 'power/knowledge', Orientalism is a discourse which produces a form of 'racialized knowledge of the other' (the Orient, Middle East and Near East, non-Western) within the operation of Western power (imperialism) over the Orient through different practices of representation (scholarship, exhibition, literature, painting, *etc*) (Hall 2003:260).

Stereotyping as a Representational Practice

Stereotyping is central to the representational practices of 'the other'. As a representational practice, stereotyping "reduces people to a few, simple, essential,

memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics, exaggerate and simplify them, which are represented as fixed by Nature". As Richard Dyer argues, people always make sense of things in wider categories; they know about a person by thinking of the roles he or she performs, assign him or her to the membership to certain groups, class, or race, and order him or her in terms of personality type. So, people's depiction of a person is built on the information they accumulate from placing him or her within these different and simple orders of typification (Hall 2003: 257).

Another feature of stereotyping is it symbolically fixes boundaries and excludes everything which does not belong. It determines what is, within, and beyond the normalcy such as behaviour which is 'normal' in a certain culture. It divides the normal from the abnormal, the acceptable from the unacceptable. And it excludes everything and people that do not fit the fixed boundaries and normalcy (Hall 2003: 258).

The last feature is that stereotyping "occurs where there are gross inequalities of power". The ruling groups normally direct their power against the excluded people - those who do not fit their own cultural boundaries- and the subordinate people. This practice brings about the "application of the norms of one's culture (the ruling group's) to that of the other" as shown in Eurocentrism. In short, stereotyping shows the practice of Foucault's 'power/knowledge' argument (Hall 2003:258).

Representation of Islam in Online Visual Images

It is suggested that in many Western media, portrayals of Islam and Muslims have become connected with violence, barbaric, intolerant, anti-democracy, backwardness, and recently with terrorism. Labelling Islam and Muslims as religiously and culturally Other has been much more common in media headlines and images since the September 11 tragedy. In this section, this essay analyses images derived from websites to uncover the representations of Islam and Muslims in online media. For this purpose, the analysis was confined to images depicted in www.faithfreedom.org, a website specifically dedicated, as it says, "to help Muslims leave their religion".

The Prophet and a Sword

From the first encounter between the West and the East, Islam has been represented as a religion of violence or conversion by force. Images that juxtapose Muslims and weaponry, the Prophet Muhammad and sword, are easily accessible in media. For example, the main image in Figure 1, under a caption, "The self-proclaimed prophet", depicts the Prophet Muhammad in his traditional Arab attire and a sword and a pole with the crescent in its top edge. His facial expression shows anger and unfriendly characters and he is in the position ready to combat. Another image of this figure is that of some naked women behind the prophet. All this is a clear attempt to imply that Muhammad is not a true prophet as he proclaimed himself as a prophet and derived his teachings from the Judea-Christian traditions; that Muhammad spread his religion with force and violence; and he is a misogynist and subservient to his sexual drive.

The Quran and Rifle

The same representation of Islam can be seen in the following images. These images depict a Muslim in his military uniform, the Qur'an (Islamic holy book) and a weapon. Figure 2 shows the viewers a Muslim man, in front of a minaret, in his military uniform, his head and face covered with a black cloth, the Qur'an in his right hand, and a rifle in his left hand. The only caption below the image says "Islamic Jihad: Qur'an and Rifle". Figure 3 depicts a more threatening representation of Islam in that it shows a Muslim military man holding a gun in his right hand and the half-opened Qur'an in his left hand. A caption of the image reads 'Book of Death'. The same depiction can be found in Figure 4: it shows a Muslim man, whose face and head is fully covered with Palestinian headscarf (kaffiyeh), was holding the Qur'an and a dagger with a caption, "Terrorist and the Qur'an".

The abovementioned images encourage the viewers to conclude that Islam teaches its followers violence; that Islamic jihad is an Islamic teaching endorsed by the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an, which uses violence and terror as its means; that the Qur'an is the only religious scripture which sanctions and encourages the use of violence, terror, and bloodshed in order to achieve its goals; that the Qur'an provides a fundamental basis of violence in Islam; and that Muslims do violence and terror based on their holy book as guidance of their acts.

Islamic Education and Terrorism

Online Western media also present the connection between Islamic education and terrorism. Figure 5 depicts some young Muslim students in white attires, their heads and faces covered with white cloth, a green headband with "*Laa ilaaha illallah Muhammad rasuulullah* (there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger)" written on it, some bombs tied on their bodies, and a young Muslim child holding a toy gun. The only caption says "Muslim Students Association". This image represents that young Muslim students support terrorism and submit themselves to do suicide bombing; that violence is one of the important elements of Islamic education; and the Muslim students are taught the importance of martyrdom which is taught at early ages.

In addition, Muslims are depicted as those who promote terrorism at home and educate their children on violence and terror since their early ages. Figure 6 shows a Muslim mother wearing a veil is dressing her little boy in a suicide bomber attire: a black mask, a turban, and some explosive materials tied on hi-waist. The caption reads "Just Muslim mother is taking care of her child". The more striking depiction can be seen in Figure 7: a baby wearing a red headband and a military uniform equipped with some bullets on his shoulders and some explosive materials on his waist. At the bottom of the image lies the caption saying "Born to Kill" and the source of the image: Israeli Defence Forces.

These images represent the connection between Islamic education and violence and terrorism. Muslims are encouraged to teach their children terrorism and violence since their early ages, even a baby should be introduced to this teaching. Besides, they stand for the eviction that Islamic education institutions, from home to schools, have become the fertile ground for breeding the terrorists.

Islam and Intolerance

Another well-known representation of Islam is that Islam is a religion of intolerance, not only to those who embrace different religions but also to minorities among Muslim society. This conviction can be represented in Figure 8. The image depicts some Muslim men, wearing traditional attire and Muslim men's cap, are killing a man, who is said as a Baha'i, with axes. It also shows some other Muslim men are viewing enthusiastically the execution. As the caption

says, it is the execution of a Baha'i, a member of a religious minority in Islam, in the 19 century Iran.

It is clear that this image sends a message that Islam endorses the killing of those who are regarded as 'infidel' or people whose religion is not Islam. Muslims are sanctioned to execute those, Muslims or not, who violate its consented teachings.

Visual Images and Representation of Islam and Muslims

Following the argument of representational practices explained above, it can be said that the abovementioned visual images represent anti-Islam and Western media convictions about Islam and Muslims. There is no doubt that a certain very small Muslim group has impacted negatively on the Western world or committed violence in the name of their religion, but it is also clear that they do not represent the Muslim majority. However, as Kabir (2006) asserts, the constant presentations of this group in forms of headlines and images in media reinforce the readers and viewers to take a mistaken conclusion about Islam and Muslims as the enemy of the West or Judea-Christian tradition. In addition, the media fail to address the root cause of these Muslims' violence and terrorist act. So, the media has stereotyped Islam and Muslims by reducing to a certain and limited character done by a tiny group of Muslim society and fixing boundaries that they are 'the other', and exercising Western power over the other: the Orient, the Muslims. Through these images, the media and the West construct the meanings of Islam and Muslims based on their own conceptual map and cultural frameworks, regardless grounded or not.

These representations of Islam and Muslims through these images are can also be explained in the context of Edward Said's discourse of Orientalism. In Orientalism, which is based on Western cultural construction of 'the Other', the West represents 'the good' and is depicted as central to modernity and progress, whereas the Orient, or non-Western, represents 'the bad', and depicted as 'the Other,' who are barbarian, backward, mysterious and exotic. Moreover, the abovementioned images and other current representations of Islam and Muslims in Western media actually represent, borrowing Dunn's term (2001), "an accumulated Western heritage of Islamophobia". The representations of Islam and

Muslims are the historical construct, but contemporary Western media constantly reinforce and reinvent them for economical and political purposes.

Conclusion

As seen on the website under study, online media conduct representational practices of Islam and Muslims. These practices took forms of stereotyping Islam as a religion of terror and violence and Muslims as men of intolerance and cruelty. In its postings, the website presents visual images that represent Islam as a religion of violence and terror as seen in the juxtaposition of the images of the Quran and a rifle, and Islamic education and terrorism, as well as Muslims as men of intolerance and anger as portrayed in the images of the Prophet Muhammad and a sword, and his followers (Muslims) with guns at hands.

Stereotyping is a common practice of representation of Islam and Muslims on online media by simplifying Islam into simple, few and exaggerated nature and reducing Muslims to easily grasped, memorable and widely recognized characteristics. Unfortunately, as a common nature of stereotype, this representational practice is mainly based on misunderstanding and misinformation about Islam and Muslims.

This representational practice of Islam and Muslims has impacted the increased movements of anti-Islam and feeling uneasy with the presence of Muslim immigrants in Europe and North America. It is necessary for offline and online media, related governments, as well as Muslims to respond properly to this representational practice in order to create peace and harmony among civilizations and different religions. Further studies are needed to understand better the question of representation of Islam and Muslims in the digital world, by analysing more online media not only in Western media, but also on online media operated in non-Western countries by non-Western people.

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