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Book review: Mission invisible: race, religion, and news at the dawn of the 9/11 era

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Book review: *Mission invisible: race, religion, and news at the dawn of the 9/11 era*
Ross Perigoe & Mahmoud Eid, Vancouver, UBC Press, 2014, 315 pp.,
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Although anti-Muslim sentiment was steadily rising in Western nations throughout the 1990s, the events of September 11 drove the expansion of 'Islamophobia' into a fully fledged global phenomenon. The news media played a significant role in this process, through the propagation of common stereotypes and prejudices about Muslims in the early years of the 'War on Terror'. Open advocacy of harshly anti-Muslim rhetoric and measures in the media began to recede somewhat during the late 2000s, but unfortunately Islamophobic discourses are once again becoming a common feature of daily news reporting as a result of ever-expanding Western military interventions in the Middle East, and the introduction of even harsher anti-terrorism legislation and more intrusive monitoring of Muslim communities within Western nations. Demonization and marginalization of Muslims and Islam across these disparate dimensions is clearly inimical to the fostering of peace, security and community cohesion.

In this environment, a key avenue for peace education is the comprehension and disruption of the propagation of Islamophobia within mediated discourses. In attempting to combat the growth of repressive and exclusionary anti-Muslim discourses, is instructive to look back to the earliest days of the '9/11 Era' and consider press representations of Muslims and Islam during this critical period.

In *Mission invisible*, Ross Perigoe and Mahmoud Eid analyse a wide selection of articles produced by the Montreal-based English language newspaper *The Gazette* during the first month following 9/11, applying a comprehensive content and discourse analysis to the articles in question. Perigoe and Eid provide a dense and instructive background to issues pertaining to the representation of 'visible minorities', particularly Muslims, in Canada as well as outlining

the specificities of Quebec and its cultural and linguistic uniqueness within the Canadian news publishing and political milieu. Subsequent sections of the book explore in exhaustive detail the categorisation and analysis of different subcategories of articles from this newspaper within this period. The methodology, informed principally by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is clearly outlined and the analysis well explained, with validity of the coding exercises well established through techniques such as the commendable use of inter-coder reliability testing. Explanatory graphs or figures and summary of results would, however, have been helpful to the reader in navigating through the highly detailed analytical reporting and in highlighting the overall conclusions and significance of the study.

Perigoe and Eid outline how the Canadian term ‘visible minorities’ is a considerable misnomer when applied to the representation of Muslims within the pages of *The Gazette* during the weeks immediately following 9/11. Rather, they argue, the diverse and longstanding Canadian Muslim community was rendered largely *invisible* through the representational patterns which were documented by Perigoe and Eid. This book highlights the fact that in the weeks immediately following September 11 2001, Muslims were most commonly represented and *constructed* in *The Gazette* through the lens of white, elite perspectives and concerns. As an example, early reporting on the September 11 attacks focussed exclusively on non-Muslim victims of the attacks, and included highly inaccurate and vast overestimates of the number of casualties (74-77). In contrast, in reporting on the decision of the US and its allies to go to war in Afghanistan, ‘no reference to the potential loss of life of Muslims appeared from leaders or white victims’ (177).

The most common frames identified featured an Orientalising gaze which emphasised an unbridgeable gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and a lack of commonality between ‘Westerners’ and ‘Muslims’. Muslim voices were rarely featured and when Muslims *were* quoted, they were

predominately elite male sources, from Muslim countries rather than from within Muslim communities within the West. Perigoe and Eid further identified a pattern of repeated, grossly reductionist categorisation of Muslim actors as either ‘Good Muslims’ (victimised, apologetic, unthreatening) or ‘Bad Muslims’ (aggressive, threatening, ‘radical’) (162-164). These trends, apparent already within the early weeks following September 11, have subsequently been identified as key features of news media representation patterns in articles pertaining to Muslims and Islam, across a wide cross-section of national and international media outlets and platforms.

Mission invisible persuasively demonstrates the links between narrow, racist perspectives on Muslims and Islam, and the unquestioning acceptance of war as the most appropriate response to the tragic losses of September 11:

Journalists tended to ignore alternatives to war...in this war, the militarisation of Western countries began without a single significant Western political leader asking if there was a possible resolution in which no more lives would be taken...rather than examining the consequences of the war, opposition to it was dismissed (177).

The persistent and continued role of the media in supporting the view that there are no alternatives to violence in conflict resolution underscores the need for journalist education and media reform as a key pathway to improving the prospects for global peace.

Mission invisible concludes with the provision of some specific recommendations for editorial and journalist interventions to address the pervasive racism and conflict-oriented reporting evident in *The Gazette*. More extensive and readily generalisable intervention strategies could potentially have been developed through consideration of the actions of individual journalists as situated within and conditioned by the problematic structure and conventions of Western mainstream media. Examples of such strategies which go beyond the conditions within any one news outlet could include journalist education strategies and the

recommendation of the adoption of global standards for conflict reporting. Overall, the narrow focus upon one highly unique publication and its journalists is the book's major limitation. An attempt to contextualise the findings from this book through comparison of representational patterns in a wider variety of media outlets, for example, could have significantly extended the scope and significance of the study. Ultimately, *Mission invisible* provides an intriguing snapshot of racialised discourses within a critical time period within one metropolitan newspaper. The findings from the study therefore support, but do not significantly extend, existing research on representations of Muslims within the media and the opportunities for peace education in combating such representational patterns.

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