

Covering Islam:

**How The Media And The Experts Determine
How We See The Rest Of The World**

(Revised Edition)

Author: Edward W. Said.

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200 pp.

When it was first published in 1981, *Covering Islam* was the third and last in a series of books in which Edward Said attempted to:

“Treat the modern relationship between the world of Islam, the Arabs, and the Orient on the one hand, and on the other the West: France, Britain, and in particular the United States.” (p. xlix)

The first book in the series, *Orientalism*, traced the relationship between the West and the Orient from Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, through the main colonial period during the nineteenth century, up to the post-World War II period – a period when British and French imperial dominance in the Middle East was replaced by American hegemony.

The second book, *The Question of Palestine*, presented a history of the struggle between the Arab population of British mandated Palestine and the Zionist movement.

In *Covering Islam* Said’s main focus is on the American media’s portrayal of the Islamic world and the U.S. government’s response to a part of the world which was seen to be of immense importance to American geopolitical and economic interests. He also examines the connectivity between the U.S. media’s portrayal of Islam, the community of American “experts” on the Islamic world, and the influence of Israeli and U.S. political interests, and how this has reinforced the media’s depiction of Islam as a monolithic force on par with the West’s Cold War image of Communism.

In this edition, Said uses the hindsight of the previous fifteen years to re-examine the original assertions of his book, and to review some of the events which have led to further media stereotyping of Islam in the eyes of the Western world.

The 1997 edition contains a new introduction in addition to the original introduction. In

the introduction to the revised edition (which could have been a chapter on its own since it runs to 48 pages) Said notes that during the years since it was originally published, the American and Western media have used the historical events and political developments in the Muslim world as a lens to focus their sights on Islam in a manner which portrays this faith with a hostility and belligerence more intense than he had originally described in the 1981 edition. He very rationally argues that while racial or religious misrepresentations of any other cultural or religious group by the media would be found unacceptable in Western society, the media and Western academics have no qualms reviving and perpetuating discredited “Orientalist” views.

Said’s new introduction is filled with criticism of the numerous American academics, journalists and columnists who find that:

“the market for representations of a monolithic, enraged, threatening, and conspiratorially spreading Islam is much greater, more useful, and capable of generating more excitement...”. (p. xxviii)

However, he saves his sharpest barbs for Martin Peretz – owner of *The New Republic*, Princeton University Professor Bernard Lewis – a well-known “Orientalist”, and journalist Judith Miller of the *New York Times* – author of the book *God has Ninety-Nine Names: A Reporter’s Journey Through a Militant Middle East*.

In his excoriating criticism of these three individuals he:

- Accuses Peretz of having such “racial hatred and contempt for Islam and the Arabs” that he unashamedly, irrationally, and continually uses his magazine to defame a faith of almost a billion adherents, and completely “obscures the historical reality” of the Israeli-Arab/Palestinian conflict.
- Accuses Lewis of being one of the worst offenders and possessing an arrogance which makes him unable to credit the Islamic peoples with having their own cultural, historical and political practices free from his assertions that since they are not Western “they can’t be good”.
- Cites Miller’s book as an example of “inadequacies and distortions” of media coverage of Islam which is much in evidence on talk shows and seminars on the Middle East; and he goes on to castigate Miller for being “ignorant” and “unqualified” to write about Islam or the Middle-East, since her “incoherent” writings have a disdain for the facts, and are politically motivated and biased in favour of her thesis that the Islamic world is militant and hateful.

In the first chapter, "Islam in the News", Said begins with a review of the subject of orientalism where he contends that the colonial political ambitions of the European powers in the Islamic world were shaped by passion and prejudice which were given intellectual legitimacy through institutions of Oriental study. The intellectual viewpoints and interpretations about Islam, which gained favour during the colonial era, were shaped and reinforced by Europe's historic experiences, attitudes and exposure to Islam stretching back over a thousand years.

The fact that the United States lacked the colonial experiences of the Europeans meant that their consciousness of the Islamic world, and the contemporary outlook taken by the American media, academia, political interests, and the public, was shaped beginning in the mid-1970s when the Middle East oil producing states were thrust into the international spotlight due to the economic and political power they suddenly gained vis-à-vis the West. This new awareness was fuelled by an American media establishment ignorant of the historic complexities behind these actions whose ignorance and biases were revealed by the way in which the Middle East oil producing nations were lumped together under the banner of Islam. This was despite the fact that the Islamic world has the same complexities as a richly woven Persian carpet - a world divided by the complexities of historical and political experiences, numerous cultures and languages.

In the final section of the first chapter, Said deals with the production and broadcast of a PBS docudrama *Death of a Princess* that related the story of the execution of a young Saudi princess and her commoner lover. He uses the film as an example of the American media's hypocrisy in honestly reporting about Islamic practices in the Middle East, compared to coverage of the practices of orthodox Jewish communities in Israel or conservative Christian communities in Arab countries.

In the second chapter, "The Iran Story", Said dissects media coverage of the takeover of

the American embassy in Tehran and the taking of American hostages by Iranian students in November 1979. He examines how the 400+ days of media coverage of this “crisis” shaped the national psyche of the U.S., and how it came to not only symbolize American relations with the Muslim world, but also to how it came to shape a generation of public attitudes towards Islam.

By examining a range of electronic and print media coverage of the Iran hostage crisis Said brings attention to the fact that the length of the hostages’ detention in Iran caused the media to feed the American public a continuous stream of warped, confusing, or nonsensical images of Islam. Through extensive citing of print and electronic media stories, he demonstrates that these portrayals of Islam were further distorted and inflamed by coverage of the story from a “patriotic” American geopolitical perspective. Also, the demonization of Islam was furthered by the publication of books with titles like *The Dagger of Islam* and *Ayatollah Khomeini's Mein Kampf*, along with stories and articles in the mainstream media with titles like “Militant Islam: The Historic Whirlwind” and “Islam Amok”.

Although Said notes that there were limited opportunities for serious and balanced U.S. media coverage of the Iran crisis and Islam examining the complexity and diversity of these issues, the bulk of the arguments in this chapter reinforce assertions about how the majority of American society from 1974 onwards have an image of Islam that has only been gleaned through media coverage of crises related to the Middle East and Islam, presented from an Amero-centric perspective.

In the last chapter, “Knowledge and Power”, Said explores how research and writing about Islam, the Middle East and the Arab world by segments the U.S. academic community influences and shapes public policy and legislative debate about these issues. He states that:

“Knowledge and coverage of the Islamic world . . . are defined in the United States by geopolitics and economic interests on – for the individual – an impossibly massive scale, aided and abetted by a structure of knowledge production that is almost as vast and unmanageable.” (p. 154)

Despite the presence of this overwhelming politico-academic infrastructure supporting and perpetuating a distorted view of Islam, Said holds out hope for an alternative to the

“orthodox” coverage of Islam. He discusses another view called “antithetical knowledge” which refers to academics and experts that consciously oppose the prevalent orthodoxy for various reasons. These advocates of this view fall into three main categories:

- young scholars in Islamic studies;
- older scholars in Islamic studies; and
- writers, activists and intellectuals unaccredited in Islamic studies.

Said describes the young scholars as specialists in their field who are “more politically honest” than the older scholars and see their work as being connected to the political activities of the state. Of the older scholars, he notes that almost none of them belong to the establishment in Middle East studies and, therefore, few of them have consulted for governments or business thus allowing them to intellectually detach themselves from the status quo view of the Middle East. The last group is defined by their opposition to the prevailing societal outlook on the Middle East and includes anti-war activists, clergy, radical intellectuals and teachers. They are notable because despite their layman’s view of the issues, they seem to understand the dynamics of the post-colonial Islamic world in a way that eludes or is ignored by the status quo experts, and they have made a moral and conscious decision to look beyond the hostile attitudes of the media, the government and the status quo intellectuals.

Given its title, one should not be surprised at how well Said musters arguments, facts and evidence in support of the thesis that the public image of Islam is shaped by the media, and by the “experts” the media relies upon to present their stories. There should also be no surprise in the fact that many of the experts cited in support of Said’s assertions have a clear bias against presenting a balanced image of Islam. However, Said could also be accused by others that he has glossed over some of the legitimate arguments on the flip side of the issue. It could be argued that Said has his own agenda and that he, like many of the people he criticizes, is not presenting a value-free interpretation of the Islamic world.

It should be noted that although Said presents some very logical and well thought out arguments in favour of his assertion of American media bias against Islam, that this does not stem from his own religious beliefs, since he himself is not Muslim, nor from a sense of personal spirituality, since he is not a particularly religious man as he willingly admits. In addition, his area of academic specialty is English and comparative literature, which he teaches at Columbia university. However, a number of aspects of his background that cannot be ignored are the fact that he was born in Jerusalem in British mandated Palestine, that he was a participant in the Palestinian movement, that he was an advisor to PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat during the negotiations leading up to the signing of the Oslo Accords, and that he was critical of Arafat for accepting the terms of the Accord. As with most people, our experiences define our outlook on the world and it can be argued that Edward Said's experiences have shaped his opinions about the issues relating to the Middle East and the Islamic world.

Overall, Said does an excellent job of trying to simplify the details and complexities of how the West, and in particular the U.S., view Islam. He presents his arguments with the fervour of someone who is an expert in the field of Middle East or Islamic studies. He delves into the background behind prevailing Western/American hostility towards the Middle East, as well as the reciprocal hostility of the Middle East towards the West. In reading this book, however, one should examine his arguments with the same criticality that Said uses in examining the arguments of those he criticizes.

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