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The Image of the Middle East and Islam in Western Media: A Critical Reappraisal  
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It was in 1981, three years after his famous book “Orientalism”, that Edward Said published another, much less well-known book on Western perceptions of the Middle East and the Muslim world called: “Covering Islam. How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World”. When several years later I studied at Georgetown University in Washington DC I read his book and was, like most of us my fellow students were at the time, impressed by his ability to dismantle the systematic misconceptions of the Orient, stereotypical concepts of the Muslim “other”, and the longevity of the Orient-Occident dichotomy in Western culture. I think it is fair to say that after the end of communism it became clear that culturalist views of Islam somehow filled an ideological vacuum that was left in Western societies.

The amazing phenomenon for me was not Samuel Huntington’s paradigmatic thesis of the “Clash of Civilizations”, but he himself as much as millions who sympathized with him became the phenomenon for me. How could it be possible in today’s so-called globalized world to construct an often artificial mainstream perception of a dualism based on religion or neighbouring “race” that was quite like thinking in the Middle Ages or in colonial times? For me the fascination was to try to understand the communicative character of the hegemony of paternalist thinking in the mainstream of both the West and the Orient.

Unfortunately, except for Said, hardly anyone had ever studied the constructive mechanism behind popular images of the Islam-West divide and when, after my first dissertation on East German Oriental studies, I decided to do a second one on the Western media’s image of Islam and the Middle East, I read Said’s book “Covering Islam” again. I remember I was quite shocked to observe a certain structural similarity between Said and Huntington: both treated the “other” – “Islam” from the viewpoint of Huntington and the “West” from Said’s perspective – as some kind of cultural monolith. For Said it was “the media” and “the West” that were simplifying a much more complex Middle East and making it the cradle of fanaticism and ignorance. It seemed to me that Said himself failed to understand the very logic of how media discourses are constructed. As much as I agreed with Said’s critique on deformations in the Western mass media’s image of the Middle East and Islam and as much as I am still, after 10 years of media research in that field, convinced that the mainstream media’s image contains systematic deformations, I would never say that Western coverage is only made up of stereotypes and I really hesitate to agree that it is the Western “culture” as such that is the driving force behind all problems.

My critique of Said is based on the assumption that media texts produced for Western media surely contain numerous stereotypes about the Middle East, but that there is

also much more to be found in those texts. I very much doubt that media content analysis should be merely or mainly based on the socio-psychological concept of stereotypes or “bias” because that method is self-referential. If you are looking for stereotypes you will surely find them – but you won’t find the rest, the facts that are reported, and the stories that are told, because your basic analytical concept is much too limited in scope. You will understand part of the media coverage but you will not understand the fabric of news, how certain events make it into the news while others do not. And you will never understand the strange coexistence of high-quality journalism and what I would call the “boulevardization” of the Orient and the Islamic world in the mainstream media of Europe and the North America.

Above that, text centred media analysis based on concepts like stereotypes are merely speculative when it comes to the causes and effects of media coverage because the news making process itself is not observed. Societies and cultures as a whole seem responsible for media coverage while individual actors of the news making process like journalists, news organizations, politicians, governments, consumers, and of course, political cultures, remain obscure. The mere analysis of media texts without a theoretical clue to the news making process lends itself to conspirational thinking about the alleged influence of Western governments or Jewish lobbies and the like on Western media – an influence that can exist occasionally, but is surely not the whole story.

To avoid that analytical trap I have created a theoretical framework that is based on systems theory. The idea is that media output is determined by a multitude of processes that are both autonomous and open to interaction with other sub-systems and social environments surrounding it, like the politico-economic system or the psychic system of the journalist, who is both a part of the media’s professional role definition as well as his own environment. The national and international media system of newsmakers is another important reference system for journalism, because often political influences create certain views less than opinion leaders *within* journalism do . And finally audiences are factors to be reckoned with, although they exert the most disperse influences, since only small parts, often known as “lobby groups”, are organized while most of the audience is disperse and cannot be considered to be a real single “actor” .

I would like to say the following in advance: In my view, the structural deficits of Western media coverage of the Middle East and the Islamic world are mostly based on the fact that even in today’s seemingly globalized world foreign reporting is, by and large, determined by national (and sometimes regional) interaction between the media system and other sub-systems and social environments. This pre-eminence of national over international interaction manifests in various ways, for example:

1. there is a hegemony of national language communities creating there own long-term narratives of the world, and those discourses establish their own cultures and problems of intercultural understanding;
2. domestic political problems and issues often overlap international issues or, worse than that, interfere in the way the world is interpreted and start to distort the original story;
3. a primacy of national over international political influences can often be observed which has a large impact in wartimes, when pluralist and very open

- coverage of conflicts in the Middle East and the Muslim world alternates with very narrow coverage that bears the potential to reinforce international crises;
4. since in most cases foreign reporting is predominantly directed at domestic audiences national markets prevail over international markets and therefore foreign reporting often reproduces local economies by selecting news that the local audience wants to hear and can understand;
  5. probably as a result of the insulation of markets, the financial resources are often very scarce in foreign reporting: news agencies tend to be financially ill-equipped and newsrooms have little personnel, especially if one is aware that in the Middle East and the Islamic world Western media have to cover 40 or so countries; low budgets in foreign reporting make the media susceptible to the Public Relations of governments and to propaganda;
  6. Many journalists are badly educated for their jobs and in most countries there are an amazingly small number of Orientalists and other area specialists in the main newsrooms of TV, press and radio.

National media systems might be interconnected in the sense that foreign correspondents and news agencies in particular provide each nation with the raw material of information. But national media systems are not *interdependent*, since the way events are covered is not judged by those about whom the media systems report – in this case the people living in the Middle East and in the Islamic world - but by domestic audiences, who, due to their own distance from the matters reported have hardly any means of judging the quality of the foreign news they are exposed to. This is the reason why domestic narratives, stereotypes, bad education, lack of resources, political interests etc. are so often allowed to prevail over balanced information.

What at first seems to be a cultural problem is in fact an interaction between various national subsystems of the nation state. These processes are almost universal in the sense that language communities and nation states all over the world are communicative entities whose internal forces generate highly distinct news output. This news has the potential to reinforce perceptions of conflict that can easily lead to more tensions in international relations.

If I still hesitate to call these mechanisms of news making “cultural stereotypes” or “biases” it is because I consider those schemes to be part of the process; they do not completely determine the news content. The difference between such theoretical approaches is not purely academic but very important, because viewing media coverage from the perspective of systems theory makes us understand that national influences on news coverage are strong and global interdependence remains weak although occasional learning processes in the media are possible. The dangers of a lack of interdependence in news making are tremendous. Nevertheless, the relative autonomy of national media systems in Western democracies does allow for occasional changes and flexibility in internal constellations. While problematic interaction between media systems and societal forces might lead to the distortion of media images, “truthful” and “neutral” information is also possible. For example,

1. the Western media systems are not so “waterproof” that they cannot allow many truthful facts on Middle East developments to enter the news;

2. at certain times, the dynamics of public controversy allow for the so-called “little traditions” of Oriental studies and expertise to find their way into the mainstream mass media in order to clarify public misperceptions;
3. the relative distance from involvement of a country in a heated international crisis or even in war can liberalize public debates;
4. overcoming a preoccupation of a public with certain domestic issues that interfere with foreign coverage although they have nothing to do with the Middle East and the Islamic world can also change perceptions;
5. stereotypes can be activated, but they can also be altered depending on what kind of stereotype and how durable it is – some biases survive decades, others centuries or even millennia.

To sum up, the images Western mass media portray of the Middle East and Islam are often problematic, as Edward Said has rightly argued. But the image of the image is also very often simplistic because it underestimates cultural dynamics and the dynamics of the media system. It is only if you look at the real characteristic of the content and the production process that an opening up of Western systems towards the Middle East and Islam can be imagined for the future.

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I will now present a number of empirical results that I gained doing a large study on the image of the Middle East and the Islamic world in the German press.<sup>1</sup> In the process of that project around 14,000 articles were coded, analyzed and interpreted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. While it is surely not possible to generalize those German results, I believe that they are a valid case study for a Western media system covering Islam. Plus, I will add a number of results from other cases on European and US coverage.

Before we take a closer look at media narratives let's take a look at some quantitative data on what kind of topics and facts were presented over the last decades in the German press. I think these results already allow for a glimpse into the strengths and weaknesses of reporting.

### **Extent of Coverage**

The good news first: compared to other regions the coverage of the Middle East has grown continuously and the region gets more attention than other world regions, namely Africa or Latin America. The increase of coverage started in the 1970s, and today news and reporting on the Middle East have reached about the same level as on North America. What makes these results less impressive is the fact that, on average over the last decades, not more than three articles a day on the Middle East have been published in national papers– a number that must be compared with the mass of articles that are published about the Middle East in the region's own newspapers. The “density of imagination” in the West, as I would call it, is still rudimentary.

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<sup>1</sup> Complete results of the project: Kai Hafez, *Die politische Dimension der Auslandsberichterstattung*, Vol. 1: Theoretische Grundlagen, Vol. 2: Das Nahost- und Islambild der deutschen überregionalen Presse, Baden-Baden: NOMOS 2002. Preliminary results in: Kai Hafez (ed.), *Islam and the West in the Mass Media*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press 1999.

Moreover the growth in news output was achieved to a large extent through an increase of coverage about major world events, like the Six-Day-War, the oil crisis of 1973, the Iranian revolution and the Gulf wars. Coverage of those events was sometimes really massive, but it also frequently ebbed away with the end of events, which points to low degree degree of continuity in news production. It is often much easier to inform about aspects of a certain war or other sorts of political violence than it is to inform about the following peace negotiations or other signs of normalization because they are no real news in the West (I will come back to that later).

Also during the 1970s a gap grew between the increasing amount of newspaper coverage on the Middle East and the almost stagnating number of reports in political magazines. This can be seen as a sign that the German media, quite like other media systems in the West, I suppose, have allowed for a steady growth in event-centred newspaper coverage without providing the same amount of contextual information necessary to understand that information.

In the final analysis, the Middle East is a region from which the Western consumer receives much less information than about his own country and region, but a faster growing amount of bits of hardly contextualized and often discontinuous information than on other regions of the world. Since I doubt that due to the constraints of everyday life more news about the Middle East could be digested by Western audiences, I am not arguing in favour of more news. In fact, as you will see later on, certain aspects of politics in the Middle East are almost over reported. Therefore I am pleading for more *contextualized* news and information.

## **Subject areas**

About four-fifths of the German newspaper and magazine reports over the last thirty years have dealt with political issues. Economic information is below 10 per cent, and other subject areas like culture, entertainment, tourism and also religion (in the narrow sense of religious teachings and practices) do not make up for more than perhaps 2 per cent of the coverage. Given that the mass media play an important role in shaping international perceptions, the German press has paved the way for a politico-centred view of North Africa, the Middle East and the Muslim world. The normalcy of everyday life escapes the media perspective.

It is interesting to note that religion hardly plays a role, only political Islam. This is also true for Judaism of which you hear almost nothing except for its Zionist connotations. I have often asked myself whether the Jewish-Christian heritage of Europe and the Occident, a term frequently used, for example, in the debate on the inclusion of Turkey in the European Union, is more than a slogan that is, at best, based on the legacy of the Old Testament and nothing else, because contemporary Judaism is not very prominent in our mass media feuilletons. Contemporary Middle Eastern and also Muslim culture is almost invisible.

Another of the project's observations was that entertainment subjects, like stories on the Persian Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, about King Farouk or Aga Khan, for example, that were prominent front page news in the German and Western mass media in the 1950s and early 1960s, vanished completely by the end of the 1960s. This de-

velopment coincided almost exactly with the Six-Day-War of 1967. Therefore I would argue that the War was actually the first of a series of political shock waves that went through Western media, politicizing the news and changing the whole system of news making. The second shock was the Iranian revolution and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

But we should also realize that after the Second World War there was a time when entertainment and cultural aspects of the Middle East were front page news in the West. While one could argue that the absence of Middle Eastern cultural and religious reporting seems to support Edward Said's position with regard to cultural stereotyping of the Middle East by the West, I perceive it as a major methodological objection that a missing agenda is no proof for essentialist profiling of "the other". The real problem for me is not so much what journalists and the public *think* of the Middle East, but what they *think about*, which is the classical agenda-setting paradigm in communication science. Large parts of the Middle Eastern and Muslim realities are just not in the Western media. News gets rejected before it is even given a chance to be stereotyped. Moreover, the relative short-term changes in Western news media culture with regard to entertainment issues show that there might not be a long term, "Orientalist", culturally **imbibed** bias at work in the selection of topics. Perhaps in the future we will be able to find ways of reviving that old culture of diversity.

To be honest with you, if "culturalism" is, as I think, a bad explanation for those changes in media cultures, a far more plausible answer might be that great events tend to create their own news standards. In this case it was a step-by-step worsening of standards and the creation of what communication scholars call "news routines" that all players – news agencies, newsrooms and audiences – adhere to. Of course, this seems unreasonable, because despite all the problems in the Middle East, there are enough positive events to report about (for example, an improvement of university education standards in most countries during the last decades), and there would be enough reasons to treat the Middle East not *only* as a politically dangerous NEAR East. I am surely not in a position to forecast tomorrow's media images, but the past shift in German coverage of the Middle East has shown that changes are possible and future positive events – let's say a viable democratic reform movement in the Middle East – could diversify Western media perceptions. It is not that Western mass media do not react to the reality on the ground. They rather oversimplify. Learning processes in modern media seem much slower than one would expect from the seemingly fast and real-time modern mass media.

## Negativisms

Diversification of the news agenda seems all the more necessary since the enormous focus on political issues almost inevitably leads to another problem: a conflict-centered view of the Middle East and the Muslim world that has the potential to increase tensions in international relations. Having analyzed this large sample of German press coverage over a period from the 1950s to the 1990s, I found that in one third to one half of the core events of the articles (depending on the kind of newspaper or magazine) were violent events like terrorism, wars, assassination. Since this is a long-term average, it so happens that at certain times, often for weeks and months, the absolute majority of news from the Middle East has been about political violence.

Now, that really creates the image of a chaotic Middle East. Although media effects on people's opinions are hard to gauge using scientific means, it seems plausible that the concentration on negative news creates the widespread feeling in Western societies that the Middle East is a dangerous place – an area of the world where you'd better not go.

A correlation of data showed that, not surprisingly, political news contains much more violence than, for example, cultural news, because per definition violence is either private criminality or politically motivated violence. Therefore the strong focus on political news in Middle East coverage creates an image of a remote part of the world that seems in sharp contrast with the consumer's image of his or her local or national world, which contains conflicts, sometimes violence, but also many pleasures, entertainment and culture. Now, we do not need comparative studies to show that there is currently more political violence in the Middle East than in Western democracies. Yet despite all these problems, there is still a real life out there, in which people live and love, and the social reality on the ground is often not as fierce and brutal as it seems through the "binoculars" of our mass media. The reason for Westerners having prejudices against the Middle East might be deep-rooted cultural stereotypes, but they are also exposed to an almost dehumanizing image of life in the Middle East that contains politics, violence and not much else.

The high amount of negativity in political reporting is not only a result of the nature of politics, since also in the Middle East there is regular political behavior and political debate, as well as elections sometimes. When Western media report about these events they tend to prefer highly institutionalized forms of regular politics, namely elections, referenda or changes in the leadership (like after the death of King Fahd in Saudi Arabia). We only occasionally hear about ongoing political debates like in today's Egypt or Morocco, where governments are so often criticized and debated in the national press. But when German or Western news about the Middle East goes through the bottleneck of limited resources (remember: 2-3 articles a day), they tend to select news about violence. Now, the situation is not much better when other parts of the world are covered. South American revolutions and African wars are all big news. The causes for such news standards can only be inferred theoretically and not really proven empirically, because solid newsroom studies are rare and difficult to do. Some communication scholars argue that in the eyes of many consumers and journalists the main function of the news media is to act as a warning system for dangers or potential dangers that develop in the outside world. Comparative research in various media systems of the world has shown that such news standards are a universal feature. Asian media tend to report about the West in pretty much the same way as Western media do about the East. Political violence in Ireland, Spain or Islamist terrorism make for preferred news. But there is also a certain North-South gap in the sense that especially political developments in the United States and Europe often get higher attention in non-Western media, because the US and Europe are at the centre of the global news system.

### **Negativism/Topics**

If we go on with the analysis and correlate our findings about negativism with single topics *within the subject area of political news* we find that there are enormous differ-

ences that make it necessary to differentiate the assumption that the Western media hold a negative image of the Middle East. I would like to demonstrate that by comparing two long established news topics that are on the agenda of Western news: political Islam and the Arab-Israeli or Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

While in 20 to 40% of all news items (depending on the individual newspapers or magazines) violent events were the reason for German press reports on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this was the case in 40 to 70% on all reports where “Islam” was the major topic. There are obviously very different standards of reporting in various topical fields. “Islam” is the single most negatively contextualized topic in Middle East reporting. The reason for this can be discovered when looking at the chronology of news about Islam over the last four decades. It shows that prior to the Iranian Revolution in 1978/79 “Islam” was hardly part of the Western news. Starting with revolution, however, and inspired by a number of conflicts and international scandals like the Rushdie affair, and, of course, 9/11, “political Islam” became the object of public interest, not Islam as a religious or cultural phenomenon.

Underlying this are two completely different conflict perspectives in the German media. While political Islam has been more and more seen as an equivalent to terrorism rather than a political-cultural movement that, as we all know, has existed for half a century and includes various aspects from actual opposition to existing authoritarian regimes, and social activities to political violence of various kinds, the Israel-Palestine conflict is seen as a “civilized” conflict that can be solved. Or, in other words; while political Islam is basically seen as a criminal complex, the Israel-Palestine conflict is perceived as a substantial political problem with all its aspects from violence to diplomacy and regular political behavior. This reminds me of Khalid Duran’s argument that the West have never understood the difference between the broad socio-cultural streaming of the neoconservative “Re-Islamization” and Islamic fundamentalism, which is a much smaller phenomenon but receives most attention in the West. And moreover: German and probably other Western media have never understood the difference between moderates and extremists among the fundamentalists.

The irritating thing about it is that Western governments have long started to treat certain fundamentalists as diplomatic partners – think of the EU-Iranian relations or the many relations between the US and Algerian, Egyptian or Turkish Islamists. But that dialogue has never entered the media to any significant degree. Politicians occasionally do talk about “dialogue” with Islam, but it is only a side stage and the media haven’t learned to understand that there is an imbalance between political culture and the media culture in the West.

The positive aspect is that there are obviously parts of the Middle East coverage in which we are informed about every little political move. So, while news about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows the potential of Western reporting to place regular political topics on the agenda, the reports about political Islam show the limits.

My personal impression is that as long as Islamism is involved, a more balanced news agenda might not be achieved. In recent years, after Western media were immensely criticized for Islamophobia, many journalists began to pay lip service to the fact that Islam is not identical with fundamentalism. Yet they keep on making news about fundamentalism or jihadism with very few stories about aspects of moderate Islam. Con-



cerning the narrow view of “Islam” – not of the whole Middle East, as I said – I tend to support Edward Said and others who have said that there is indeed a deeply ingrained cultural bias in the West that resists learning processes. The German social psychologist Dröge once differentiated between long-term cultural, mid-term epochal and short term contemporary stereotypes. It seems to me that Islam is a long-term stereotype. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been there for 60 years and the image of Palestinians has improved or deteriorated several times (think of the positive image of leaders like Yasir Arafat after the Oslo agreement), the negative image of Islam in the Western mainstream literature and culture is more than 1000 years old.

And mind, Islam is not only a single, isolated topic, but a sub- theme that can be present in all other subject areas and topics, in politics as much as in culture and the economy. If it is true that there is a Western cultural bias against Islam, it tends to be comprehensive.

### **Negativism/Countries**

However, the image of the Middle East in the German press is not homogeneous. Analyzing which Middle Eastern countries receive attention, a specific news geography or news mapping can be made out. First, there are a limited number of “white spots” in German news, because countries like Djibouti or Mauritania hardly receive any attention at all. More important is that there is a clear focus on news about the Mashreq countries (Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria) and on Egypt, while news about the Maghreb, the other Nile state, Sudan, the Arab peninsula or about countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan are much rarer. Now, since this is the average result of a long-term analysis from the 1950s to the 1990s you might say that certain things could have changed after 9/11, which was considered by many a turning point for the West’s relations with the Middle East. However, after initial attention paid to Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2001 and 2002 the prominence of those countries in German media coverage is almost as low as it was before.

The news geography of the Middle East in the Western media certainly differs from country to country. In France, there is more awareness of the Maghreb. But the fact remains that the image of “Orient” is not a unified phenomenon but that it comprises various zones of attention and imagination. We simply have much more information available in our media systems about those parts of the Middle East that offer prior news values to us. News values are defined, for example, by international conflicts in the Middle East or cultural-historical proximity to certain countries, for example Egypt, in the case of Germany and I guess England too, or Algeria or Lebanon as in the case of France.

In comparison with extra-media data of trade relations, the news geography seems not at all determined by the economic importance of certain countries. While Germany generates about half of its foreign trade in North Africa and the Middle East with countries like Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, these countries comprise only about 20% of the media reports. A combination of political interests, international relevance of conflicts and cultural proximity determine foreign reporting – not so much economic interest or socio-demographic factors like the size of a country’s population.

Regardless of the news values a correlation of the country ranking with the topical analysis shows that the more a country is in the German news, the more balanced out the composition of subjects areas and topics is and the greater the chance of escaping the extreme concentration on political issues and nothing else. If we further correlate those results with the analysis of negativity we find there are basically three types of country in the Western news geography:

1. white spots (like Mauritania)
2. countries that are in the news because of political violence as much as with all sorts of regular mostly political events (like many Gulf states, Israel, Egypt, or Turkey);
3. and countries whose image in the West is very much confined to violent conflict: in the period up to 1995 that was Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, and Sudan.

To sum up: What sometimes seems like a stereotypical monolith – Western reporting about the Middle East and the Muslim world – is in fact a very complex news geography, that is comprised of various spheres of density of reporting and awareness and of, more or less, “moderate”, balanced and differentiated patterns of perception of political developments.

### **Framing/Discourse/Narratives**

The quantitative content analysis about the extent, the subject areas, topics, negativity and the news geography has so far revealed that the image of the Middle East in the German press is highly fragmented:

- Coverage has increased over the decades but often space is missing for contextualization;
- news is mostly confined to political issues;
- there is a lack of vision concerning other spheres of Middle Eastern life like contemporary culture;
- we have witnessed a focus on negative, violent events, especially when Islam is concerned, where the rate of negativity is so extraordinarily high that we almost cannot explain it without agreeing that some cultural bias must be at work in the West;
- but we have also seen a quite differentiated news geography, where a number of countries receive considerable coverage and a slightly improved balance between reports about negative and neutral events;
- and with topics, like the Israeli-Palestinian issue that are so high on the news agenda that every single political move is reported.

What we have not explored so far is how news stories are told, what kind of frames and narratives exist. Since that is such a vast field of exploration and since it escapes quantitative content analysis I cannot give a representative answer. Instead, I would like to elaborate on a few case studies showing how interaction processes between media narratives, the media system and the national “environments” of the media can be interpreted – in other words: how the politico-economic complex and various seg-

ments of the audience and the public can interfere with the Western media image of Islam and the Middle East. I will concentrate on cases of international conflict in the Middle East, crises of various types like the oil crisis of 1973, (an economic, non-violent crisis), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, (a long-term conflict with various phases and aspects of both violence and diplomatic activity), and 9/11 the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A crisis is by definition a turning point within a conflict that can lead to either increased tension and violence, to stagnation or to resolution and settlement.

Before we try to interpret the cases let me say a few words about the framing of those events.

Coverage of the 1973 oil crisis in the German press went through roughly three phases: an initial phase when the conflict began that was characterized by different approaches in the German press, ranging from left-liberal sympathy with the Arab countries' endeavors to narrow the North-South gap in international relations to conservative papers, which interpreted the events as a danger to German national security and welfare. At the peak of events, after the October war of 1973, the coverage changed and the leftist-liberal segment of German newspapers took over the national security and welfare frame of the conservative papers. For about two weeks when the OPEC boycotted the US and the Netherlands it was almost as if there was full consensus about the oil crisis in the German press; a consensus saying that the Arabs had no right to do what they were doing. After the crisis was over, however, the coverage changed again and the liberal magazine "Der Spiegel", to mention but one example, launched a whole series of articles on the exploitation of Arab countries through American and British major oil companies.

The next case is the German coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I did a full-text analysis for the major newspapers at major events like the Six-Day-War, the October War, the Camp-David Accord and the Lebanon invasion of 1982. On the whole, one could witness a tremendous change in the overall framing. While in 1967 Germany sided almost completely with Israel, the media changed step-by-step, applying a much more a balanced approach that accepted both Israel's right of self-defense and the national aspirations of the Palestinians, albeit with variations in different newspapers mostly depending on the political spectrum they belonged to.

I In our last example I combine my own empirical research on Germany with other results in recent literature. After 9/11 victims in almost all Western *mainstream* media almost all bemoaned the tragedy and expressed support for the subsequent war in Afghanistan war. I recall that in Germany the question of whether that war was right or wrong was not even debated, or at least that debate was not high on the agenda. That changed tremendously before, during and after the Iraq War of 2003. While in the United States during the war almost all mainstream media, the press as well as radio and TV, supported President Bush or at least did not allow for critique, Germany's media were much more pluralist in their approach, allowing for anti- as well as pro-war voices to express themselves in articles, talk shows etc. While 80% of Germans as well as the government were against the war, the media were pretty diverse. The situation seemed comparable to countries like Spain with the difference that the Aznar government was pro-war, but the Spanish people were against it, and the Spanish

media systems comprised various elements from pro- government TV to critical newspapers.

On the basis of all three, my interpretation of Western framing and story telling points in different directions. Mass media in Western countries that experience existential crises or that engage in a full-scale war seem ready to “rally round their flags” and support their governments and what they define as their interests. For short periods the media’s ability to act in a pluralist way and give weight to Middle Eastern perspectives and argumentations can be seriously endangered. This is what Hannah Arendt, the well-known German philosopher, had observed during the Vietnam war and what she labeled the “mentality of *raison d’etat*” – an absolutely serious threat to the plurality in Western democracies. The case of Spain as a country that was involved in Iraq but which still maintained diversity in the media, does not disprove this rule, because the military engagement of Spain was on a limited scale that did not activate the rally-round-the-flag-syndrome. Much more interesting seems the British example. I have done a small content analysis of several British newspapers’ coverage of the war and was quite impressed by the relative diversity upheld even at wartime. Although there were patriotic trends, this was certainly a much more distanced coverage than, for instance, during the Falklands War. Honestly, I haven’t fully understood that case, but we will come back to it later.

There are a number of reasons for the media to rally round the flag when a country is engaged in war or feels threatened:

1. Western governments have learned to walk on a tightrope between information and disinformation. Well- known are the examples of the US government’s campaign on Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction or also of the British government’s publications (I think Glen Rangwalla from Cambridge contributed considerably to a critical re-evaluation of government information policies).
2. The media system itself is highly vulnerable because one-sided government information “trickles down” through news agencies into newsrooms. The ever growing speed of news production makes checks and double-checks on the information almost impossible. (Only a few months ago I spoke to the director of the main German TV news show, “Tagesthemen”, who confirmed that).
3. As a third influential factor, the mainstream audiences in Western countries are ready to rally around their flags, and there are certainly always some powerful organized fragments of the public sphere, namely lobbyists, who support that trend.

While at regular times the mass media gain autonomy, maneuverability and diversity by playing those environments of politicians and audiences against each other, that system collapses at wartimes, because all environments press into the same direction and make the mainstream media active co-combatants of Western governments.

Now, the British case of 2003 is a bit of a miracle to me, but one could start to think along the line that perhaps British media coverage was a sign of a slow and gradual Europeanization, meaning: due to the process of integration into the European Union the national media system was perhaps losing its pre-eminence and opening up to more transborder influences from other European countries –*despite* all Euro-

skepticism in the country. However, this is mere speculation and we have no empirical evidence to support that.

Nevertheless, there are also other features of the Western media coverage during Middle Eastern crises. Apart from times in which a media system's own country goes through crisis or war, German and other Western media are very well capable of retaining a critical distance. While mass communication during crises is a real problem, Western conflict reporting taken together is much better. The cases of the oil crisis in 1973, the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the coverage of the Iraq War in 2003 in countries that were not engaged in the war alliance shows that if countries do not have to rally round the flag or if the conflict as such is of a long-term nature, as in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the potential of Western media to uphold diverse images of Middle Eastern conflicts is increasing:

1. Political lobbies and interest groups can be influential for a short time, but since they are only one factor influencing media systems they do not control the media;
2. in times of the de-escalation of conflicts right and left wing political cleavages within the media allow for more diversity in approaches (for example, the question of Turkey's accession to the EU is firmly entrenched in such party orientations that are echoed in European media);
3. apart from times of high-intensity warfare with their often tight controls of the media through the military, the visibility of human tragedies can activate humanist core values of a society (remember the first Intifadah in 1987 that improved world opinion towards the Palestinians);
4. in long-term conflicts like the one between Israelis and Palestinians the domestic political cultures of Western societies usually undergo changes that can be conducive to foreign reporting – for instance, German coverage of the conflicts was long overshadowed by the memory of the Holocaust and it was only very slowly that those issues dissociated from one another.

On the whole, under certain conditions Western foreign reporting about the Middle East can be firmly entrenched in nationalist argumentations that ridicule all talk of globalization and of global exchanges in our media systems. At other times, however, coverage is as diverse as our societies are in their views of the Middle East – a diversity Edward Said and many other critics of the Western media's coverage of the Middle East and Islam have probably not given enough credit.