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Review

Ross Perigoe and Mahmoud Eid

Mission Invisible: Race, Religion, and News at the Dawn of the 9/11 Era

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Mission Invisible explores the question of how Canadian news coverage imagined, represented and generalized Muslim communities right after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, particularly focusing on a twenty-day period (Sep. 11-30) of news coverage in *The Montreal Gazette*, the only English-language daily newspaper in Montreal, Quebec, which is “read by many of Montreal’s Anglophone decision makers, including professionals, executives, politicians, and owners” (p. 25). The book is written by the late Ross Perigoe, who was an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at Concordia University in Montreal, and Mahmoud Eid, an associate professor at the Department of Communication, University of Ottawa.

The core argument of this book is that *The Gazette*’s news coverage, which mirrors the pervasive racist ideology of white supremacy and normalcy in most North American media, produced a misrepresentation of Muslim communities, which made their diversity and differences invisible and further racialised them as a homogeneously inferior, fundamentalist and thus dangerous Other threatening the civilized, superior and righteous West. The authors highlight that Muslims are racialised “not because of their physical features” but because of their religious faith, cultural membership and “their perceived ideological and socially constructed differences” (p. 54). The book demonstrates that *The Gazette* implicitly and

explicitly engaged in socially constructing the perception and interpretation of 9/11 and racialising and othering Muslim communities.

The research method and procedure leading to the authors' argument are sophisticated and persuasive. The authors organise the discourse production of what they call four voices (leaders, white victims, Muslims and journalists) into five categories (news, columns, editorials and op-editorials) along the time frame of three stages: Stunned in Grief (September 11-12, 2001), Justification for War (September, 13-19, 2001) and Ready for War (September, 20-30, 2001). They conduct both quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis to identify racist rhetorical forms, recurring discursive themes, pejorative terms and racially colored words.

What they found is interesting and convincing. Columns produced the largest number of racist statements per article, contrary to the authors' reasonable expectation that the opinion pieces would evoke critical thinking and challenge conventional ideas. In terms of voices, leaders were welcomed to speak first. They offered the early frame to contextualize and interpret the events of 9/11 even within hours of its happening. However, it was journalists themselves, not leaders, white victims or Muslims, who generated the largest volume of discourse charged with racialized constructions. In Chapters 7 (Mission Position) and 8 (Mission Envision), covering journalists' own voices, the authors demonstrate that journalists not only uncritically channeled the interpretation of leaders on the events of 9/11 declaring solidarity, the status quo and an attack on civilization, but themselves offered their own opinions, in the absence of quotations, reproducing the racism found in other voices.

When journalists quote others, the authors highlight, the abundance of quotations from what they call 'white victims' is surprisingly evident. Chapter 5 (Mission Perception) demonstrates that this abundance of quotation from white victims led to 9/11 being "interpreted as a white event, not a Muslim one" (p. 132). It also shows that plenty of quotation from whites, who in effect constitute the primary group engaged in the social construction of the perception of Muslims in Canada, contributed to the perception of whites in North America as blameless and righteous victims. On the contrary, Chapter 6 (Mission Opposition) shows that Muslim voices in Canada and the East were provided much less space. Even when heard, the Muslim voices were not fairly represented. In the case of Muslims in the East, the voices of men in authority were overrepresented, 72 percent of which were either pro-bin Laden or anti-US/West. The authors point out that they were likely to be selected because journalists presumed them to be the enemy. Meanwhile, Muslims in Canada, the authors state, were not asked to express opinions or discuss any issues, distancing them from their religious identity and its ties to 9/11. Nor were they interviewed about personal safety even after they were attacked while being members of Canadian society, which is quite different from the questions posed to the white victims. In this regard, Muslim voices in Canada monolithically appeared religious, powerless, passive and victimized.

Based on the authors' analysis, Chapter 10 (Mission Condition) discusses how *The Gazette's* unprofessional journalism quickly racialized and demonized the terrorists of 9/11, Muslim communities and Islam, rather than explaining and contextualizing the attacks of 9/11 within a larger history of "the exploitation of the East by the West through imperialism,

colonialism, and support for corrupt Islamic regimes” (p. 178). The authors conclude that *The Gazette* failed to perform journalistic leadership, given that it rarely challenged racist ideology propagated by authorities and failed to properly advocate for the rights of Muslims while implicitly supporting racial profiling and declaring war as the only solution.

Throughout the book, it is well indicated that the ideological representation of Muslim communities reproduces the predominant racist ideology of white normalcy and supremacy in Canada and is predicated on institutionalized systemic racism and thus conducted on a daily basis. In this regard, in Chapter 11 (Mission Invisible), concerning organized everyday journalistic practice, the authors validly recommend that *The Gazette* hire many more members of religious minorities to ensure varied points of view, and to have a greater editorial sensitivity to headlines, photographs and word choices.

Mission Invisible is a well-researched academic book offering an accessible explanation of key theoretical terms such as orientalism and racialization. It informs a variety of empirical studies on racism and media representation in the North American context and shows abundant examples of news reports charged with racist and orientalist perception. The book not only alerts journalists to recognize and undertake crucial responsibility in challenging political leaders’ interpretation of racially-colored social events and groups, but offers media studies scholars, who study news reports, racism or religion, a good guideline to design research, organize data and conduct analysis based on previous studies within a broader context.

The book, however, has some flaws as well as some merits. Most significantly, *Mission Invisible* tends to postulate, naturalize and reproduce what it attempts to criticize: a clear binary between whites and Muslims. Contrary to their theoretical explanation highlighting that the perception of social objects/groups and their differences are socially constructed, throughout this book the authors seem to delineate the boundary between whites and Muslim as fundamental. Their difference appears to be already given and their intersectionality tends not to be fairly considered. For instance, when the authors identify and code anti-racist statements to analyze anti-racism discourse shown in *The Gazette*, they do not count the anti-racist statements made by Muslims as examples of anti-racism because, they explain, “Muslim statements that pleaded for the white community not to attack Muslims were viewed as potentially self-serving – a sign of weakness among Muslim communities and not necessarily an example of anti-racism” (p. 99). In the above statement, the identities of Muslim and white are thought of as rigidly separated, as if they never intersect with each other. The authors exclude, in the first place, a possibility that a Canadian citizen who belongs to a Muslim community could think and speak by virtue of civil justice, not from self-serving motives, putting Canadian citizenship first over Muslim identity. A reader may puzzle over who actually terms Canadian society as “the white community” and assigns “a sign of weakness” to Muslim communities - journalists or the authors?

The unintended perpetuation of a simple dichotomy between whites and Muslims and the essentialization of their differences and boundaries are closely related to the absence of other voices except the authors’ own in making their argument. This book does not provide a space for *The Gazette*’s journalists to answer for themselves why they represent Muslims the way they do and how they respond to the criticism of their journalistic practices.

Likewise, it does not focus on the question of how a variety of readers coming from different ethnic groups and classes may interpret and react to the news reports of *The Gazette*. Their response and interpretation can be quite different from what the authors found in their textual analysis. The absence of other voices such as diverse readers (the receivers of news messages, if you like) and journalists (the producers of news messages) in making the authors' argument produces an effect of suggesting that racist white supremacy ideology almost totally dominates media institutions, readers and Canadian society. Thus, the theoretical explanation the authors offer and the empirical world they describe matches too simply and neatly, regardless of whether they intend to do so or not. In this way, ironically, the seemingly complete matching of theory and empirical analysis evident in the authors' interpretation tends to diminish the validity and persuasiveness of their main argument, which is made with methodological rigidness and theoretical and empirical richness in *Mission Invisible*.