This is the published version (version of record) of:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30033491

Reproduced with kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 2005, M/C
Re-ordering Iraq

Minors and the Media in Times of Disorder

- Ben Isakhan
- Respond to this Article

Volume 7 | Issue 6 | Jan. 2005

During times of disorder the mainstream media tends towards propaganda by homogenising its representation of the ‘other’. This reduces rich histories, diverse cultures and a myriad of languages and religious beliefs down to sweeping statements, broad generalizations and inaccurate assumptions. This paper seeks to explore the representation in the media of the rich array of minority groups that make up the people of Iraq, the epicentre of today’s greatest disorder. In the interest of establishing a liberal, democratic and culturally diverse Iraq, this paper argues that the media must re-order its representation of the many peoples that make up Iraq.

1 Historically, Iraq or Mesopotamia has been ruled by a vast array of kingdoms and empires. From the ancient Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians and Seleucids through to the spread of Islam under the rule of the Caliphs and later the Ottomans, this part of the world has seen more than its share of war, bloodshed and domination. However, history also tells us that despite the disorder, this area has mostly celebrated diversity since the ancient cities of Ur and Nineveh. Later, Ottoman sultans generally believed that a strong, civilized state was a cosmopolitan one (Mostyn and Hourani 192). After the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, however, much of the Middle East plummeted into an unparalleled level of disorder. A territorial crisis ensued and the fighting between a surfeit of ethnic and religious groups went unchecked. Britain and France moved into much of what are now Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Israel with an emphasis on curtailing chaos by imposing order. Nation-states were hastily designed (Jordan was famously drawn by Winston Churchill in the back of a taxi), ancient peoples were divided and new identities were born. In 1920 the many different peoples of the three previously autonomous regions, or vilayets, of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul became Iraqis (Cordesman and Hashim 60, 71).

2 In essence, Iraq is a created or ‘imagined community’ (Anderson) that was not even imagined by the people of the region. This is, of course, common throughout the Middle East and forms the basic premise of Said’s work on Orientalism (Said) – that the Middle East does not exist other than as a powerful European ideological construct designed to help the West better categorize the ‘otherness’ of all things Eastern.

3 Today, Iraqi society is considered “the most spiritually diverse in the Middle East” (Braude 65) and while much Western scholarly and media attention has been given to the plight of the Kurds (Robinson 20) and the rebellion of the Shi’ites (who form the majority within formerly Sunni controlled Iraq) (Keeble 12), little attention has been paid to other Iraqis. In fact, Iraq is home to “numerous racial and religious minorities...(including) Turkomans, Persians, Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Jews, Yazidihs, Sabaeans, and others” (Batatu, as cited in Cordesman and Hashim 71). To put things in perspective, Hourani identified approximately 40 distinct minority groups that dwell within the Arab World (Hourani 1-2). Each of these groups has their own language, their own culture, their own religion, food, history, dress and customs.

4 However, it seems that since the 11th September 2001 – and the political and militaristic disorder that has ensued – the Western mainstream Media have portrayed events involving the Middle East and its people by fusing Orientalism and propaganda in order to further homogenize these ‘others’. The current reporting of the war in Iraq (including the search for Weapons of Mass Destruction, the invasion of Iraq, the toppling and later capture of Saddam Hussein and the ongoing war against insurgents / terrorists / car and suicide bombers / kidnappings and beheadings) has rarely made reference to the plight of Iraq’s minorities. This trend therefore serves to reduce and homogenize these groups into an all-encompassing Middle Eastern ‘other’. Their rich array of religions, cultures, languages etc become one. We know them only through disorder and opposition: non-white, non-western, non-Christian, non-civilized.
The lack of minority representation in the mainstream media and its role in constructing minority identity has been discussed, to varying degrees, by a number of academics with a variety of approaches and results. This has included research into the people of the Acquitaine region of France (Scrivan and Roberts), the Flemish in Belgium (Van den Bulck), African Americans in the US (Goshorn and Gandy) and the Oka Indians in Canada (Grenier) to name a few. What appears to be common amongst this research is the notion that the lack of representation and the homogenization of the ‘other’ negatively influence these minority groups. By investigating the representation of the Sami people of northern Finland in the Finnish press, Pietikainen and Hujanen interpret the relationship between Sami identity and the way that it is played out in Finnish news discourse. Essentially, they argue, “news representations…contribute to the construction of identities of the people and region in question” (ibid 252).

While the above research does suggest that the lack of representation of minority groups in the mainstream media have serious implications for the identities of these peoples, it does not seem to address the extent to which this is effected by times of conflict, war or disorder. Nor does it address the compound result of a lack of representation in both the media of one’s homeland and the global media. More scholarly attention is therefore needed in order to understand the relationship between a lack of representation of minority groups in the media (both domestic and international), how this constructs minority identity and to what degree this shifts during times of disorder. Here, the minority groups of Iraq serve as a near perfect case study.

Beyond this, there is also a need for a re-ordering of what is considered newsworthy during times of disorder. Here Arnot (as cited in Coole 847), in discussing the media representation of asylum seekers claims that journalists often fail in reporting the complexity of such situations and need to seek the truth and report on what is real. Unfortunately, journalists often omit important pieces of information “that will shock, sadden and compel readers to sympathise with victims of such atrocities in the world…” (Coole 847). In this way, an accurate representation of the many different peoples of Iraq in the mainstream media would not only serve to positively construct minority identity but may also lead to a better understanding of the conflict, and the peoples trapped within it.

While the best possible scenario would obviously be the reconstruction of Iraq’s infrastructure, followed by a peaceful withdrawal from Iraq and the development of a multifarious yet harmonious Middle East, this paper has addressed the issues surrounding the mainstream media’s lack of representation of Iraq’s minorities during this time of disorder. Here the media have homogenized the many peoples of Iraq and effectively unified them under the ‘imagined’ banner of Middle Eastern ‘other’. This opens up new areas of concern regarding the relationship between the media and disorder and the consequences this has for the identity of Iraq’s minority groups. Furthermore, this paper calls for a re-ordering of what is considered newsworthy during times of disorder in an attempt to encourage a more accurate representation, construction and understanding of the many different peoples involved. By telling a more complex story, the media can play a positive role in the development of a liberal, democratic and culturally diverse Iraq.

References


Citation reference for this article

MLA Style


APA Style