

# 6

## A Mediated Relationship

---

### Media Representations of Arabs and Muslims as a Political Process

RACHAD ANTONIUS

The starting point of this study is the observation that dominant media representations of Muslims and Arabs are fundamentally flawed in the sense that essential aspects of their culture are misunderstood, essential facts of their history are ignored or distorted, and essential aspects of their political struggles are misrepresented. This observation has been established not only for the North American context but also for the European context (Said 1997; Poole 2002; Poole and Richardson 2006; Philo and Berry 2004; Karim 2000; Rabah 1998; Antonius 2002; Antonius et al. 2008). Such dominant misrepresentations take place within discourses emanating from positions of authority, thus conferring upon them legitimacy and the appearance of truth. These representations typically exclude minority discourses that are empathetic to Arabs and Muslims; though such discourses are present, they are rarely generated by those in positions of authority.

This chapter examines how these representations are played out in *Le Journal de Montréal* in contrast to how they are played out in *La Presse*, paying particular attention to their impact on the relationship between Muslim and Arab communities on the one hand and on Canadian society at large on the other. Media representations are one aspect of a political process that reinforces power relationships in which Arabs and Muslims are the less powerful side. The political dimension of these representations needs to be studied further as it has an impact on the citizenship rights of these groups of Canadians. Media representations are not uniform across newspapers;

therefore, this analysis has to account for a diversity of representations. Rather than trying to determine the dominant trends, we identify and make explicit the various modalities, or types, of representation.

One of the important questions addressed in this chapter is the extent to which these representations are due to the functioning of the media proper rather than to the reflection of an ideology or to discourses that are dominant in Canadian society. One of our findings is that both factors operate and that they do so in a complementary way: the functioning of the media has a specific role to play in the dominant representation of Arabs and Muslims. This fact magnifies the hostile attitude found in the dominant discourse about Arabs and Muslims, a dominant discourse that is promoted and reproduced by the media and that is responsible for the particular spin that is given to news concerning Islam. However, this attitude is not shown by all sources of public discourse, and it is articulated quite differently in civil society and among political elites. This conclusion is further developed after we present our empirical findings.

In this chapter we seek to achieve three things:

- 1 to describe media representations of Arabs and Muslims in *Le Journal de Montréal*, focusing on the debate on reasonable accommodation (which occupied the public space during most of 2007) and situating the observable trends in this newspaper within the greater trends of the printed press in Quebec (the coverage in *La Presse* is briefly discussed, as a point of comparison);
- 2 to identify and explore the underlying logic that organizes news and information about Arabs and Muslims in order to produce such representations; and
- 3 to raise some questions about the role of media representations in power relations between the Arab and Muslim communities and the rest of society.

### **Methodology**

There is a broad literature that aims to theorize the role of mass media, and this section highlights some of the key issues it raises. Criticizing the Frankfurt School, which postulated the direct efficiency of media, French media specialist Dominique Wolton (2002) writes: “The old thesis of the passivity of the receptor, adopted implicitly by Pierre Bourdieu and his school, has constantly been contradicted by facts.”

Habermas's concept of the "public sphere," in which rational deliberation takes place, has been discussed by Gingras (2006, 16). However, this concept is more useful for understanding issues that are familiar to the readers of a newspaper rather than issues that are new or foreign to them. In the case of issues related to Arab culture or to Islam, the concept of "framing," first mentioned by Goffman and elaborated by Entman and several others, is more relevant (Entman 1993; Reese, Gandy, and Grant 2001). It is closely associated with the concept of "agenda setting," which supposes that mass media determine what is considered to be the important issues facing a society without necessarily succeeding in imposing a specific view about these issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Weaver 2007). We examine how these concepts are played out in the case of *Le Journal de Montréal*.

The samples we drew upon for our analysis were collected as part of a wider study in which five newspapers were examined: *La Presse*, *Le Devoir*, *Le Soleil*, *Le Journal de Montréal*, and the *Montreal Gazette* (Antonius et al. 2008). Except for *Le Journal de Montréal*, they are all available electronically. The texts to be analyzed have been selected by using a set of key words ("Arabs," "Muslims," and some of their derivatives). The period of study spanned the whole of 2007, during which we focused on texts that dealt with local issues, ignoring those that dealt with the international context. With regard to *Le Journal de Montréal*, we only studied it from November 2006 to April 2007 as it is not available in electronic format (and it had to be read on microfilms). The sample texts are classified into one of five categories: (1) editorials, (2) columns, (3) op-ed and opinion pieces, (4) letters of readers, and (5) news. The first four categories, which reflect an editorial opinion of the journal or of a columnist, are analyzed in some detail. The visual elements in *Le Journal de Montréal* are given special attention because we looked at the actual printed page and because they play a bigger role in this newspaper than in the other newspapers. *Le Journal* does not have editorials, but the layout, the big titles of the front page, and the choice of caricatures and pictures are eloquent in terms of the themes that are being analyzed, and we treat them as editorials.

In this study we employ content analysis (see Berger 2000; Neuendorf 2002), which is complemented by two other methods. The first method consists of a statistical analysis of the texts available in digital format in order to select a small set of representative texts on which content analysis is applied. The second method develops a grid to measure attitudes towards migrants (details below). Various elements of that grid are also applied to the visual elements of *Le Journal de Montréal*, for reasons explained below.

Some of our empirical findings are presented in the following section, which focuses on *Le Journal de Montréal*, and are complemented by a political reading of the results.

### Primary Results

In Quebec, there are two primary societal issues around which negative discourses pertaining to Muslims and Arabs have developed. The first issue involves the international situation, which has provided the media with the images of violence upon which the representations of Arabs and Muslims as “terrorists” have been constructed.<sup>1</sup> These images are gendered and organized around the stereotypes of the dangerous Arab man and the subdued Arab woman.<sup>2</sup> The second issue involves the debate over how to integrate observant Muslim groups and individuals into a secular society. In 2007, in the context of the “reasonable accommodation” debate in Quebec, demands for accommodation emanating from religious conservative groups were blown out of proportion by some of the mass media and were presented as a danger to Quebec identity.

In my attempt to find the logic that organizes these representations, which gives them their coherence and strength, I have characterized two principles, or paradigms, which I labelled *the logic of the empire* and *the logic of the republic*.<sup>3</sup> Briefly stated, the logic of the empire refers to a way of making sense of the world from a perspective that seeks, consciously or unconsciously, to reproduce colonial relations of power. It is premised on Canada’s being a part of a Western-based empire that exists in continuity with the British colonial empire and in harmony with the present hegemonic role of the United States. To say that the logic of the empire informs the dominant view in Canada on the Middle East is to say that this view is generally reflected in prevailing political tendencies found within the political elite and the media. It becomes the prism through which international events and international political forces are seen and assessed. This perspective leads those who share it to consider the forces that challenge the power of this empire as a danger and to cast a negative moral and ethical judgment on them – that is, to see them as evil. The news and opinions that conform to this view are then given prominence, visibility, and authority to the degree that any facts that challenge it tend to be either ignored or explained away through spurious justifications.

The logic of the republic has at its core the notion of a common secular public space. It is an ideological orientation that is reluctant to accept – and even hostile towards – the expression of religious identity in public space.

In Quebec, this hostility is pronounced for historical reasons that have nothing to do with Islam but, rather, with the role of the Roman Catholic Church. This perspective leads those who espouse it to combine hostility towards religious conservatism and religious expression in public space with openness towards other cultures and other worldviews (including Islam, provided its religious practice is kept in the private sphere). This, of course, leads to conflict as some of the immigrant groups put religion at the centre of their collective identity and at the centre of their political action. This historically rooted, pro-secular logic is not to be confused with racism, even in its contemporary forms (i.e., cultural racism, which has replaced biological racism), as it proceeds from very different premises.

The tendencies that we describe in this analysis are not homogeneous. They are present in different degrees among the various ideological currents in Quebec society. This point is illustrated by the variations that we observed among the various newspapers and their readership. Thus, the logic of the republic is counterbalanced by tendencies that are open and inclusive. In most of the newspapers, some journalists were assigned to cover Muslims and Islam in a positive way, with the explicit aim of counterbalancing negative stereotypes. Although my focus is Quebec society, there are enough examples from English-Canadian newspapers to enable me to assert that, in this respect, Quebec is not that different from the rest of Canada. Although in Quebec there is as yet no equivalent to a Mark Steyn (an arch neoconservative who writes for *MacLean's*), some groups are working hard to import this kind of discourse. My analysis of Quebec newspapers should not, therefore, be seen as another example of “Quebec bashing.”

### ***Le Journal de Montréal***

This section focuses on the role of local issues, particularly the debate on reasonable accommodation, in the development of the discourse on Arabs and Muslims. These issues provided the context, the justification, and the source for numerous stereotypes. We focus on *Le Journal de Montréal* because, as we argue below, this newspaper and the consortium to which it belongs played a major role in both setting the agenda and framing the issues.

Titles, pictures, and other visual elements (e.g., font size and page layout) play a much greater role in *Le Journal de Montréal* than they do in other newspapers. *Le Journal* delivers its message and creates its impact through these visual and design elements rather than through the ideas it conveys in

print. Sensationalism is at the heart of *Le Journal*. The newspaper provides a place for the reactions of its readers, publishing their pictures and actively soliciting their one-sentence reactions. The “popular press” character of the *Le Journal* is based on its retaining a large audience by promoting sensational news at the expense of meaningful analysis. Sensationalism in this newspaper expresses – and apparently aims to provoke – a feeling of indignation, or even revulsion, towards the excesses of politicians and the incoherence of the system. “Normality” and conformity with the dominant Québécois culture is the implicit reference point to which people’s behaviour is compared and is the basis upon which it is assessed. *Le Journal*’s treatment of news is essentially anecdotal, leaving little space for the contextualization of events, which are treated superficially. Its iconography is extremely stereotypical.

#### **Arabs and Muslims in *Le Journal de Montréal***

The editorial orientation outlined above, resulting from *Le Journal*’s marketing strategy, particularly affects Muslims and Arabs, and in a specific way. *Le Journal* predominantly employs Islamic markers to refer to citizens of Muslim faith, thus reducing their otherness to their religious difference. The use of exotic markers fits perfectly into the paper’s marketing strategy because they convey a sense of otherness, strangeness, and imminent danger. Focusing on these markers gives the strong impression that Muslims are overwhelmingly different and that they are always demanding that rules be changed in order to accommodate them. This sensationalist discourse obliterates the fact that Muslims closely resemble the rest of Canadian society in many ways; that most are “invisible,” in the sense of being indistinguishable from the rest of the population in their daily behaviour; and that, for instance, they do not always ask to stop working in order to pray. Muslims are often mentioned as being in situations that are problematic; in such cases, the issue is framed in reference to Islam rather than in reference to factors that may be equally, if not more, relevant. This strategy can transform controversial individuals – who are not leaders in the community and who may even be marginal – into public figures or even “stars,” who make the front page of newspapers and who are presented as the “representatives” of the Muslim community.

For example, in one case, it is possible to say that a public figure was essentially created by the Québecor media consortium, to which *Le Journal de Montréal* belongs. An obscure and marginal self-proclaimed imam by the name of Said Jaziri was turned into a public figure who came

to represent the Muslims of Montreal. This was achieved through repeated coverage of Jaziri's actions, beliefs, and opinions in 2006 and 2007, and even after he was expelled from Canada later that year. The Québecor consortium repeatedly invited him to participate in shows and to offer his perspective on various issues. It reached that point at which other media, including Radio-Canada Television, ended up giving him an important place as a Muslim voice in debates about public issues related to reasonable accommodation. All this in spite of the fact that the vast majority of Muslims in Quebec did not consider him to be representative in any way and that an assembly of mainstream imams dissociated themselves from his actions and opinions, especially during the crisis over the Danish caricatures of the Prophet Mohamed (Alarie 2007).

In *Le Journal de Montréal*, if the story has anything to do with Islam, the editors generally use a picture of veiled women. Such photos usually contain the veil that covers the hair (hijab), but they often also depict the full face veil (niqab), even when the story does not deal with a veiling issue. Out of forty-four pictures of Muslim women printed during the period studied, thirty-nine were of veiled women, out of which nine wore a niqab. While this, of course, is not at all representative of reality (since far fewer than 89 percent of Muslim women wear veils in Quebec), it does feed into the irrational fear of being "invaded" by an alien culture that wants to impose its rules on Quebec society.

Another event illustrates the way *Le Journal de Montréal* constructs Muslims and Islam as a public danger to Quebec's identity. In March 2007, the members of a Muslim cultural association called Astrolabe organized a trip to a *Cabane à sucre* in order to participate in a Quebec spring ritual that consists of having a traditional Quebec meal, which includes pork served with maple syrup. They arranged with the owner to have beef sausages instead and to allow those who wanted to pray to do so in a room they had booked. The owner asked them to instead use the dance floor to conduct their prayers as it was almost empty. Between 19 and 20 March a total of eight pages were devoted almost exclusively to this issue, plus an ad on a ninth page inviting readers to express their opinions on the website *canoe.ca*, which is part of the consortium to which *Le Journal* belongs.

The front page of the 19 March 2007 issue of *Le Journal de Montréal* is entirely devoted to the incident, with a large-font title that reads: "Cabanes à sucre ACCOMMODANTES." This last word refers, of course, to the debate on reasonable accommodation and is given a spin by the subtitle as well as by the picture that accompanies it. The translated subtitle reads:



“Pea soup without pork, and prayers on the dance floor.” The photo depicts men kneeling down in prayer, taken from the side. Their faces are not visible. The picture is left with a white border, and it is displayed at an angle, as though it were a printed picture thrown on the table as evidence in a police inquiry. Over the two days, eleven pictures and one caricature were printed, including three occurrences of that very same prayer picture. None of these pictures shows the face of any one of the Muslims involved. The only faces shown are those of the angry protesters, those of the apologetic owners, and those of two politicians who are commenting on the issue. There are an additional eight pictures in the readers’ opinion section. The title of the section is very telling. It implicitly asks: Do you agree with the reasonable accommodation in *Cabanes à sucre*? Of course this has nothing to do with reasonable accommodation, which is a legal concept used in a completely different context. The editors of the paper are well aware of this because there was a controversy over their use of the term just two months earlier. The association of the notion of reasonable accommodation with a situation that is presented as controversial has the effect of delegitimizing the notion in the eyes of the paper’s readership. In view of the various elements presented here, we can say that this seems to be *Le Journal de Montréal*’s aim.

It is clear that the paper, and the consortium to which it belongs, was trying to heighten the profile of this banal non-story. Clearly, the strategy succeeded, as is evident from the fact that, despite neither *Le Devoir* nor *La Presse* reporting the story – with the latter actually printing an editorial referring to it as insignificant and undeserving of such comprehensive coverage – it was repeatedly mentioned by the audiences of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, an indication of the capacity of the Québecor consortium to set the agenda and to frame the issues of public debate.

### The Measurement of Attitudes

In order to evaluate the dominant attitudes towards Muslim and Arabs in *Le Journal de Montréal*, we developed a grid of four indicators.<sup>4</sup> The first one is about empathy, the second about polarization, the third about the positive evaluation of cultural differences, and the fourth about the attitude (alarmist or accepting) towards the presence of culturally and religiously different groups. The scales used range from -2 to +2, taking only integer values. For each of these elements, we determined whether they were very negative (-2), rather negative (-1), neutral (0), rather positive (1), or very positive (2). A total of 471 elements were evaluated in this way. By “element” we mean a text (column, opinion, or letter from the readers), a title, a picture,



**TABLE 6.1**  
**Number of elements analyzed in Le Journal de Montréal**

Category	Frequency
Editorial choices (front page, announcements, caricatures, etc.)	50
Columns	52
Letters and opinions	159
News	210
Total	471

**TABLE 6.2**  
**Average score for each category**

Categories	Empathy	Polarization	Valorization	Alarmism
Editorial choices	-.29	-1.00	-.20	-.64
Columns	.16	-.35	0	-.20
Letters and opinions	-.61	-.84	-.54	-.55
News	0	-.42	0	-.10
Overall average	-.18	-.61	-.18	-.32

or a caricature. There are no editorials in *Le Journal de Montréal* and no op-eds, but there are editorial choices: the title, the layout and the content of the front page, the pictures, and the caricatures. Each of these expresses a choice, and each can be rated on the grid. Of course, there is an element of subjectivity in attributing such scores, and, individually, they should not be taken at face value. However, the comparisons between the average scores of the various categories of texts (columns, letters, and news) are meaningful. Here are the results that were obtained:

It is evident that editorial choices score low on “Empathy.” Letters and opinions are even more hostile as they have a much lower score on that variable. Columnists show a little more empathy, in the sense that some of them try to depict the positive aspects of immigration and of the different cultures that are found among migrant communities.

The variable “Polarization” measures the extent to which the text or visual element is predicated on the existence of an essential difference between “us” and “them,” and of the extent to which it underscores such a polarization. The score given is negative if the difference is outlined and

emphasized (i.e., if Muslims or Arabs are shown as very different or alien). The score is positive if commonality is implicitly or explicitly asserted. The scores on the variable “Polarization” show that both the editorial choices and the news emphasize differences, and the letters display an extremely strong polarization that would undoubtedly be even stronger if Muslim and Arab respondents were removed from the calculation. Such perceptions can be interpreted as a reflection of how the newspaper frames the issues rather than of pre-existing biases within the readership.

The variable “Alarmism” is interesting in that the scores obtained by the editorial choices are more negative than are those obtained by the letters of the readers, and they are much more negative than the content of the columns. What this means is that, even if the columnists make some remarks in order to appear to be fair (some of them do not even attempt to appear fair), it is the visual elements that convey the impression that Quebec identity is facing grave danger from the diversity of its immigrant population and, to a lesser extent, from its more “ancient” minority communities. The difference between the scores of the explicit content of the columns and the scores of the visual and page layout elements may be an indication of the magnifying effect the media has on trends that reflect a political/ideological orientation. These orientations are also reflected in other newspapers.

In spite of a small number of texts in which immigrants are portrayed with a certain degree of empathy, *Le Journal de Montréal* has heavily contributed to transforming local and relatively minor issues of accommodation into a national crisis. It has succeeded in doing so because of its integration into a much larger media consortium that includes other newspapers, two television stations (LCN and TVA), a website (canoe.ca), and other smaller publications. *Le Journal* has the largest newspaper distribution in Quebec, exceeding *La Presse* by 39 percent according to the claims of the newspaper itself. It is available in many coffee shops and small restaurants as complimentary reading material. When an “alarm” about the invasion of public space by Muslim practices is raised by one of the components of the consortium, it is echoed in all its other components and is repeated over and over until other media sources are finally obligated to address the same issues and questions. The consortium – through its ability to select news items and put them at the centre of public discourse – plays a double role, both setting the agenda and framing the issues.

When the biases discussed above are part of a media apparatus that has the capacity to set the agenda and to affect the framing of public issues, the

influence of that apparatus goes far beyond its role as a source of information. It even goes beyond its role of reflecting a society's dominant political and ideological tendencies to influencing institutional practices and norms (such as those practised in educational systems and government bodies). A legitimate question, then, is whether such representations produce undesirable effects even from the perspective of the dominant political trends that promote them.

My conclusions with respect to *Le Journal de Montréal* can be summarized by saying that its journalistic practices, which are grounded in sensationalism, are characterized by the fact that they stigmatize immigrants (Muslims in particular), focus on religious signs as the ultimate symbols of otherness, and present Islam as the absolute otherness and as a danger that is in the process of invading public space and threatening national identity. It should be pointed out that *Le Journal* is not alone in reproducing stereotypes through the sensationalist use of inappropriate pictures. However, other newspapers, such as *La Presse* and *Le Devoir*, have made conscious and serious efforts to go beyond stereotypes and to present the positive side of Arab and Muslim communities and individuals, even if they also reproduce some of the stereotypes mentioned above.

### **A Comparison with *La Presse***

Due to space limitation, we do not conduct a full analysis of the coverage found in *La Presse*; rather, we simply mention some of the conclusions that we reached in our previous, more extensive, study (Antonius et al. 2008) in order to contrast the coverage of *Le Journal de Montréal* with other ways of covering diversity issues.

*La Presse* is a mainstream newspaper that sees itself as committed to providing quality information and to promoting open discussions on social and political issues. It is open to a broad spectrum of opinions, and it is liberal (in the philosophical sense) in its orientation. Several of its journalists are involved in field journalism on local and international issues. *La Presse* sends correspondents abroad, including to war zones. While the layout and iconography at *La Presse* are not as central in conveying its messages as they are in *Le Journal de Montréal*, as the content of news and opinions these elements do play a role, as illustrated below. Thus, it is *La Presse's* political orientation that has the largest impact on the debates rather than the sensationalism that is seen in *Le Journal*.

The coverage of international news is much more important in *La Presse* than it is in other newspapers in Quebec. However, its dominant trends are

not specific to it; rather, they reflect dominant trends in newspapers throughout North America. *La Presse's* biases – and there are many – are generally due to the omission of crucial pieces of information, which ends up favouring one particular narrative over another. Situations of violence in which Muslim or Arab political forces are involved are given prominence, while situations in which they are victimized by Western policies tend to be ignored. This pattern of omission is responsible for the association between Islam and violence, Islam and terrorism, and Islam and hatred. These biases are seen more in the editorial orientation of the paper than in its contents, where there is some (albeit limited) room for alternative narratives. *La Presse* does not display the kind of overt antagonism towards Muslim political actors or towards Islam as a religion and as a culture as do the *National Post* and *Maclean's*. It allows its columnists and its journalists to be critical of Western colonial policies, but the editorial line tends to support such policies and to justify them in the name of democracy or human rights. The processes of radicalization within Muslim communities in Europe is given some attention, and the paper makes the link between international news and concerns for the integration of Muslim communities. However, our focus in this chapter is not on international news but, rather, on local news.

Both editorial writers and journalists at *La Presse* have tended to be critical of the sensationalist coverage of the debate on reasonable accommodation in the populist media. On local issues, editorial writers, columnists, and journalists such as Rima Elkoury, Patrick Lagacé, and Laura-Julie Perreault have clearly demonstrated a concern for ethics and for objectivity in their work. In particular, all of them have challenged the “us/them” dichotomy when talking about migrant communities and, in several in-depth reports extending up to a full week of coverage, have contributed to breaking it. The reports of Laura-Julie Perreault, who is a journalist and not a columnist, deserve special mention as she has consistently covered the issue of Muslim integration with sensitivity and empathy, providing her readers with information that breaks down stereotypes.

Despite this even-handedness, readers of *La Presse* do not generally favour all kinds of accommodation. Here, the logic of the republic is at work. Antonius et al. (2008) have analyzed the arguments proposed by the readers of *La Presse* and their attitudes towards accommodating religious demands in public space. While the range of practices and demands covered by the term “accommodation” is neither uniform nor explicit across the letters we have analyzed, it is understood that this term covers the practice of religious rituals, or religious “obligations,” in public space (e.g., requiring

prayer space in a secular institution, asking to be exempted from certain courses in an academic curriculum, or demanding segregated space in sports facilities). It must also be recalled that most academic institutions in Quebec no longer provide chaplains or pastoral services: these services were simply withdrawn with the secularization of the Quebec school system. This should be taken into account when analyzing the reactions of the public to special accommodation. Of the readers who opposed special accommodation for religious practice, the majority of the thirty-two letters we analyzed (selected by a statistical randomization procedure) denounce racism and discrimination against Muslims and express the opinion that this situation should be corrected. A little more than a quarter of them centre their arguments on a denunciation of discrimination. They see the solution in economic and political integration, not in the reintroduction of religion into public space.

In spite of that sensitivity, *La Presse* does occasionally fall into the trap of stereotyping through its choice of pictures and titles. A striking example of this may be seen in its coverage of “alternative” Muslim identities. The paper had assigned journalist Patrick Lagacé to give a voice to Muslims who do not fall within the dominant stereotyped categories (e.g., the veiled Muslim woman, the conservative or fanatic Muslim man). His piece included a remarkable set of interviews with non-veiled Muslim women and with non-traditional Muslim men and women (including some veiled but non-traditional young women) who talked about their views on social and personal issues in a way that contributed to breaking stereotypes. Unfortunately, this well intentioned effort, which came with a caption that read “There are a minority who are forced to wear the veil,” was countered by an extremely stereotypical image on the cover page that announced the series: a Muslim woman wearing a black niqab that only shows her solemn eyes.

### **Hypotheses about the Role of the International Context**

The international context is a space in which some of the economic and strategic interests of the political elites in Canada are played out. The need to justify policies that serve such interests provides the logic of the empire. However, since we are living in a democracy and in an era in which human rights are constantly invoked to justify policies, the empire must appear to act in the name of human rights. Therefore, the demonization of those who resist it is at the core of its discourse. In other words, it is the interests and dominant narratives of the political elite, rather than the marketing needs of the dominant media, that play *the* major role in framing the international

issues that affect Arabs and Muslims. Here, conflicts in the Middle East are relevant, with two particular issues standing out: (1) the strategic interests related to oil and (2) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In our analysis of media discourse, it became apparent that, in the local debate on reasonable accommodation, the issues provided by the local context were presented and discussed through images and language provided by the international context. The result is a discourse based on flawed logic. The concepts and perceptions used to address local questions come from an international context, and the consequent overlap of discourses allows for the flourishing of negative stereotypes.

There is another way in which the logic of the empire and the logic of the republic intersect and reinforce each other. Two processes are at play here. The first is that the conflict in Palestine is increasingly presented by Israel and its supporters in Canada as a war on terror. In order to sustain this claim, the Palestinian resistance must be framed as, in its essence, a terrorist enterprise. This is a major source of stereotypes, and it is certainly facilitated by some aspects of the Islamist discourse of Hamas and by some aspects of its behaviour. These are singled out and put at the centre of the representation of the Palestinians, to the detriment of other aspects that are more meaningful in the context of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.

This process links up with another process, which is grounded in the historical realities of Canada and Quebec and has to do with the issue of diversity. The demands arising from conservative Muslim groups and the support that Palestinians receive in Arab and Muslim communities are conflated in a discourse that seeks to delegitimize both because they are perceived as related and mutually reinforcing. This linking up of the logic of the empire to the logic of the republic can be seen more clearly in the debates surrounding the participation of some elected Quebec politicians in the protests against the war in Lebanon (in 2006) and in the occupation of Gaza (in 2008). The protesters (and often the organizers) were accused of promoting anti-Semitism and terrorism because they were framed as supporter of Hezbollah and Hamas. The antagonistic discourse around these movements was transposed to Canada, where it became an antagonistic discourse about Canadian Muslims and Arabs. Here, the discourse of the empire meets the discourse of the republic and corrupts it.

### **The Impact of Dominant Discourses on Arabs and Muslims**

Media representations of Arabs and Muslims have been widely studied

< sorry about the orphan here >

from the point of view of their internal logic of production, of the racism they reflect, of the power relations they express, of the us-versus-them dichotomy they introduce into public space, and of how they are perceived by Arabs and Muslims (Said 1997; Poole 2002; Poole and Richardson 2006; Karim 2000; Antonius 2002; Antonius and al. 2008). As for the impact of such representations, this has been studied mostly from the point of view of social psychology, with an emphasis on identity construction/reconstruction. Several of these studies focus on Muslim women (Bendriiss 2005; Hadj-Moussa 2000; Mahtani 2001). The question of audience perception has been studied in Mahtani (2008a) with regard to Chinese Canadians and Iranian Canadians, and her paper includes a thorough review of audience studies in the literature. In *Discourses of Denial*, Yasmin Jiwani (2006a) examines the structure of the discursive denial of racism and inequality, and she argues that it sustains the reproduction of patterns of hierarchy and domination. A common idea discussed in many of these studies is that media discourses play a major role in shaping the sense of belonging of racialized minorities and, in particular, of Muslims and Arabs in Canada and in Quebec.

Thus, while insightful analyses of the political meaning of media coverage (i.e., what this coverage tells us about power relations) of Muslim and Arab issues abound in the literature, the political consequences (i.e., how this coverage is used as a tool in establishing or challenging power relations) of these stereotyped discourses have not been given sufficient attention. Media representations are at the core of political processes by which power is exerted and negotiated, and they should be studied as such, not only as social-psychological processes that Muslims and Arabs experience or cultural processes that are specific to mass media. What follows are some thoughts about this, and they are proposed as questions for research rather than as confirmed conclusions.

One hypothesis is that media discourses would not have such an impact if they were not in tune with a hostile political discourse that occupies a central position in the configuration of political power in Canada. In other words, the dominant media discourse is a reflection of the discourse of the political elites, not just the result of ignorance or misunderstanding. This convergence strengthens this common discourse but, more important, it legitimizes political actions that directly affect Muslims and Arabs. For instance, the branding of Hezbollah – an official Lebanese party with parliamentary representation – as a “terrorist organization” has a direct impact not only on Canadian foreign policy but also on local politics as those who



are associated with Hezbollah in any way are excluded from certain positions as well as from decision making. A similar argument could be made about the Canadian government's support of the colonization of the occupied Palestinian territories. In both cases, the official Canadian position would be harder to maintain if the media provided accurate information on political events in the Middle East and if the editorial position of major newspapers were more critical of Canadian foreign policy. In other words, the dominant media discourse does not simply reflect pre-existing relationships of power; rather, it is part of the process of establishing and reproducing such relationships. The social and political processes through which Muslims and Arabs participate in Canadian society are directly affected as these people are required to align themselves with the official position before even entering the political arena.

A second hypothesis has to do with the link that is established between political issues in the Middle East and the demonization of Muslim communities in Canada and the United States. Though the framework proposed by Edward Said in *Covering Islam* (1997) is still valid, it needs to be updated in order to demonstrate its continued validity and applicability in today's context. An increasingly aggressive and racist discourse on the danger of fundamentalist Islam is emerging from circles associated with neo-conservative trends and conservative Christian groups in the United States, both of which are deeply involved in supporting Israeli policies. Numerous websites, conferences, and public relations efforts are constantly deployed to demonstrate that political Islam is a danger. The discourse quickly slips from political Islam to Islam as a religion and then to Muslims in general. The perceptions, perspectives, and priorities of the groups that promote such discourses are being pushed through the media. But are they successful? The relevance of this question is illustrated by the fact that the Islamophobic discourse pushed by a pro-Israeli site based in Montreal is increasingly referred to by very popular journalists such as Richard Martineau of *Le Journal de Montréal*. A recent opinion piece, entitled "Islam: An Imperialist, Colonialist and Totalitarian Arab Ideology" and written by the directors of this pro-Israeli site, is now reproduced as information on an ecological site.<sup>5</sup> The trend we are referring to is one aspect of the rise of an overtly xenophobic political right throughout Canada and the United States. Negative media representation of Muslim migrant communities and the supposed danger they represent to liberal democracy is an important factor in the increasing audience for this rightist political trend. The extent of this influence has yet to be established, of course. Alternative discourses do

exist, but what is their influence? The dominant media discourse is not the result of ignorance or misunderstanding; rather, it reflects political interests in the Middle East, a point that needs to be further documented.

The political and social consequences of the hostile discourse regarding Muslims and Islam cannot be understood without taking into account the rise of conservative religious trends within Muslim societies as well as the rise of political Islam, including its violent forms, at the international level. In our understanding, neither political Islam nor fundamentalist Islam is the main cause of the hostility towards Muslims, but its emergence has an impact on both the dissemination and the credibility of this hostile discourse. In other words, the existence of the fundamentalist Islamic discourse, especially in its violent forms, is used as an excuse to formulate and legitimize a hostile discourse that targets all Muslims.

The dominant media discourse plays a crucial role in the processes outlined above, both in its role of reflecting dominant political discourses and in its functioning. Because of the need for brevity, the messages found in news bulletins, in headlines, and in pictures include dangerous shortcuts and amalgams. They erase all the nuances found in the detailed opinion pieces available in newspapers and contribute to the dominance of a stereotyped, hostile discourse as well as to Muslims (independently of their ideological orientation feeling that they are under constant attack).

### **Conclusion**

Two general conclusions emerge. The first is that, more than other newspapers, *Le Journal de Montréal* (and the consortium to which it belongs) has been successful in framing Muslims and Arab as a danger to Quebec identity, and this is reflected in the comments heard during the hearings of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission. The second conclusion is that the newspaper's representation of Muslims and Arabs is only marginally a reflection of what Muslims are or of what Muslims do. It is much more a reflection of conflicts in the Middle East and the anxieties of those who produce these representations. Thus, the often unjustified representation of Muslim political forces as terrorist organizations serves an important purpose: it reduces the complexities surrounding political violence, reflecting the need for imperial powers to delegitimize such forces, to avoid accurately characterizing their nature, and to marginalize those whom they represent. Representations of the Muslim threat to Quebec identity due to demands for religious accommodation are more a reflection of the anxieties of the dominant societies regarding their own identity – and a reflection of the

unresolved conflicts within and between majority groups – than an actual assessment of the likely effect of these demands. This is not to say that these representations are totally manufactured; indeed, they are based on something real that exists within Arab and Muslim groups and societies. However, factors within the majority groups and institutions explain why marginal elements are blown out of proportion and given prominence.

More specifically, we offer the following conclusions. First, there are two fundamental principles that organize the dominant representations of Arabs and Muslims. In this analysis, we label them “the logic of the empire” and “the logic of the republic.” Second, as far as international issues are concerned, it is the logic of the empire that is at work. The views and interests of the political elites have a determining influence on the dominant representations of Arabs and Muslims, just as hostile representations have an important function to play in the legitimization of certain foreign policy choices. Third, with regard to local issues of social cohesion and accommodation of religious demands, we claim that the marketing strategies of the populist media go a long way to explaining the hostile representations of Islam and of Muslims. There is in Quebec a dominant attitude that is hostile to the display of religion in a public space and that can be explained by factors related to Quebec’s history. This hostile attitude towards religion in general is exacerbated in the case of Islam as it draws upon a repertoire of images inherited from Orientalism. The media, due to the way they function, exacerbates that hostility even further. However, the media is not hegemonic, and their impact is partly counterbalanced by a discourse of openness that is found in some media outlets. It is important to point this out because it is generally forgotten in critical media studies. Fourth, words and images have been borrowed from the international context, transposed, and employed in the debates on local issues. The consequent discourse is based on a flawed logic and allows negative stereotypes to flourish. Fifth, another factor – the emergence of conservative religious trends within Muslim groups – is important but outside the scope of this chapter. These trends play an important role in creating barriers to socially integrating into a society that those who espouse them consider to be depraved. The discourse labelling Canadian society as a society of kuffars (non-believers) that must not be respected is not uncommon on Islamic websites and blogs (see, for instance, Mejliss el Kalam’s website at [www.mejliss.com](http://www.mejliss.com)). These trends are marginal, but the importance of their discourse is not negligible. And they have only been addressed from perspectives that are hostile to Arabs and Muslims as a whole. This situation has provoked a defensive

reaction that has stood in the way of academic investigations of the importance of these conservative religious trends from a perspective of solidarity and empathy with Arab and Muslim communities. Finally, the representation of the relationship between the dominant group and the Muslim minorities has a direct impact on the interaction between them, and it contributes to shaping it. It is determined, in part, by representations in the dominant media. Owing to the recent history of political and economic domination between the West and Muslim and Arab societies, dominant representations have an impact that is disproportionate, and this history gives such representations a resonance far greater than their surface meaning. If this is correct, we can conclude that the dominant representations in the media have a far greater effect on the relationship between the dominant society and Muslim and Arab minorities than do the actual interactions between the individuals belonging to these groups.