

## **Media Opinion - Counteracting Misconceptions about the Arab World from the Popular Media with Culturally-Authentic Teaching**

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**Abstract:** The popular media has not represented the Arab world and its people accurately for many years. Two researchers who have documented this poor portrayal are Jack Shaheen and Marvin Wingfield. Shaheen is one of the leading scholars on this topic and has written numerous books and articles, and Wingfield has also contributed to this area with several convincing articles. This article describes their writings and discusses how educators can respond to their concerns. Some of the suggestions this author recommends for fighting the stereotypes about this region include emphasizing the contributions that people from the Arab world have made to society and using lesson plans that focus on where the first great civilizations of the world originated.

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The way different groups of people are represented in the popular media is a topic that educators need to address. If a particular group is portrayed poorly, it will influence students in schools to develop misconceptions and unfavorable attitudes about that group. The popular media has a great deal of influence on students and has portrayed many groups unfavorably in previous years, including Native American, German, Japanese, and Russian people (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). The popular media has also represented people from the Arab world very poorly, and today, they seem to be targets of some of the strongest forms of misrepresentation, which originates in television shows, movies, and news reporting.

Two researchers who have documented the inaccurate portrayal of the Arab world and its people are Jack Shaheen and Marvin Wingfield. Shaheen is one of the leading scholars on this topic and has written numerous books and articles, and Wingfield has also contributed to this area with several cogent articles. This article discusses their writings and describes how educators can respond to their concerns.

### **The Negative Image of the Arab World on Television Shows**

People from the Arab world have historically been represented very poorly on television. Shaheen (1980) discusses that as a result of this “most Americans do not view

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Arabs objectively” (p. 1). In the 1970s, many TV shows, which are still shown today as reruns, portray men from this region as evil millionaires with harems who mistreat women. Some of the shows Shaheen (1980) refers to include *Vegas*, *Fantasy Island*, *Charlie’s Angels*, and the *Bionic Woman*.

In *Charlie’s Angels*, the highest-rated TV series of the late 1970s, for example, Shaheen provides detail showing how a few demeaning episodes portray Arabs. In one of these shows, “Angels on Ice,” Arabs are depicted as having intentions to kill each other and innocent people. In one scene, a group of Arabs is shown eating with their hands, without any table manners, and licking food from their fingers. Shaheen also mentions how one episode of *Fantasy Island* portrays a group of Arabs as evil and foolish.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people from the Arab world continue to be portrayed poorly in television programming. Shaheen (2008) discusses that many TV series, like *West Wing*, transmit fear and hatred to the new generation of viewers. In addition to *West Wing*, some of the recent TV programs that Shaheen considers to be stereotypical, for suggesting that people from the Arab world are evildoers, include *Law & Order*, *The Practice*, and *Sleeper Cell*. Shaheen (2008) also discusses that the popular media fails to present many of the contributions of people from the Arab world:

Though the vast majority of Arab Americans are Christians, TV programs present us as evil Muslims and link the Islamic faith, a religion of peace, with violence. Besides being dangerous, post-9/11 TV shows continue ignoring real Arab-American accomplishments. Arab Americans, like their African American brothers and others, died in combat serving their country. Yet, Hollywood continues to ignore their military sacrifice and heroics. (pp. 52-53)

What is even more disheartening for many Arabic-speaking people is that TV show producers often create content, in the form of cartoons, which depicts people from the Arab world negatively to provide children with entertainment. Banks (2009) mentions how damaging this is to young children and discusses how a child’s first exposure to a given cultural group will contribute greatly to the child’s views of the group for her/his entire life. Unfortunately, some stereotypic cartoons produced in previous years are still shown today as reruns (Shaheen, 2000).

In many cartoons, heroes defeat evil Arab rulers, dumb Arabs on magic carpets, and monstrous genies. Some of the shows Shaheen (1984) says do this include: *Bugs Bunny*,

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*Popeye, Porky Pig, Heckle and Jeckle, Plastic Man, Woody Woodpecker, and Fonz and the Happy Days Gang.* Wingfield (2002) describes how the cartoon show *Batman*, on Fox's Children's Network, depicted dark-complexioned Arabs who were plotting to take over the earth with the help of "alien" allies. Shaheen (2000) writes that since 1975, more than 60 cartoons appeared on television that have depicted this group negatively, showing them as swine, rats, dogs, magpies, vultures and monkeys. Michalak (1988) discusses that even *Sesame Street*, a children's show that usually promotes respect for different cultures, once used an Arab to clarify what the word "danger" meant.

Banks (2009) discusses that news reporting has also contributed to the stereotyping of people from the Arab world. In 1979, for example, NBC nightly news announced that the United Nations Human Rights Commission had voted to condemn the destroying of the homes of Arab "terrorists" when the UN commission had condemned the demolition of Arab houses (Shaheen, 1980). Although many people who have ancestry from the Arab world currently challenge this type of broadcasting, in previous years, it occurred with little opposition.

### **The Negative Image of the Arab World in Movies**

Wingfield (2002) discusses that the most harmful stereotypes of people from this region are those portraying them as terrorists and believes that the film industry has for years perpetuated this image. Although Shaheen (2008) discusses that a slight improvement occurred after 9/11, many films produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still depict people from the Arab world as terrorists. The most egregious example of this type of portrayal in recent years, according to Shaheen, is *The Kingdom* (2007). In this movie, FBI agents arrive in Saudi Arabia to kill Arabs, and this film portrays the region as an extremely evil area, where Arabs are waiting to shoot Americans. The plot suggests that if the FBI agents do not kill the evil Arabs, including the women and children, they will kill the Americans. Shaheen criticizes this movie for not including the viewpoint that Saudi leaders expressed when they condemned the 9/11 attacks, shortly after this horrific event occurred.

Historically, many of the most popular movies ever made have depicted people from this region poorly. Wingfield (2002) discusses how high profile films such as *Rules of Engagement, The Mummy, True Lies, Executive Decision, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Back to the Future, and Patriot Games* have portrayed people from the Arab world poorly.

Similar to cartoons seen on television, many movies, consisting of cartoons, are made

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for children, and unfortunately, many children from a Middle Eastern or Arab background will not likely see their cultural heritage in a positive way in these movies. Many people from the Arab world are familiar with a blatant example of a cartoon movie made by Disney, which caused them to speak out about its demeaning portrayal of this area. The original version of this movie—*Aladdin*—featured a song at the beginning of the film that offended many people from the Arab world:

Oh I come from a land  
From a faraway place

Where the caravan camels roam  
Where they cut off your ear

If they don't like your face  
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home

Wingfield (2002) discusses that the lyrics were not the only problem with the film; the heroes in the movie, Aladdin and Jasmine, have light skin and Anglo accents, but the villains have darker skin and Arabic accents. Although the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee persuaded Disney to change some of the lyrics, Wingfield (2002) discusses that problems remain with the movie and does not recommend it for classroom use.

Movies and television shows produced in the U.S. provide entertainment to people from all over the world, and in many cases, their popularity is greater overseas than in the U.S. For example, Blakly (2001) reports that one of the most popular TV shows in the world—*The Bold and the Beautiful*—has 500 million viewers, in 98 countries, and that in 1999, the top four grossing movies at the international box office made more money abroad than domestically. Furthermore, popular culture is one of the United States' largest exports to other countries, and in the 1990s, the majority of the world's most-attended films were produced by U.S. based companies (Kendal, 2012). Thus the damaging effect of stereotypes about the Arab world from popular culture is not just an American problem but a global concern.

### **Misconceptions About People from the Arab World**

Many people have misconceptions about who Arabs are. Although the term “Arab American” is usually used by organizations that fight for the rights of people coming from the Arab world, such as the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and the Arab American Institute, it can be a misleading term because it is often used to refer to anyone having ancestors in the Arab world. However, a person who has cultural origins in what is today known as the “Arab world” is not necessarily an Arab. Although Egypt, for example, is located in the Arab world, and its people speak Arabic, Egyptians, as Haeri (2003) explains, generally do not view themselves as Arabs:

Historically, Egyptians have considered themselves as distinct from “Arabs” and even at present rarely do they make that identification; “*il-‘arab*” as used by Egyptians refers mainly to the inhabitants of the Gulf States....That Egypt’s inhabitants spoke Coptic before the arrival of the Muslim armies, that the lengthy Pharaonic civilization flowered there, and, more important, the fact that unlike other Arab states Egypt has historically had the same territorial boundaries are all in part reasons for the perceptions of a distinctly Egyptian identity. (p. 47)

In addition to equating people from the Arab world with Arabs, many students have other misconceptions about this region of the world and its people. Many people, for example, mistakenly believe that all Muslims are Arabs and that all people from the Arab world are Muslim (Al-Hazza & Lucking, 2007). Although most inhabitants of the Arab world are followers of Islam, there are thousands of Jews and approximately 12 million Christians who reside in this region (David & Ayoubi, 2005). In addition, not all Arabic-speaking people come from the Middle East; they also come from countries such as those in the western part of North Africa, which include Morocco and Algeria. Ameri and Ramey (2000) include an accurate map of the Arab world in the *Arab American Encyclopedia*, and an accurate map of this region is also available online at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab\\_world](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_world)

In contrast to some of the demeaning portrayal of the Arab world in the popular media are the many positive aspects of their culture and the contributions they have made to American society. In politics, for example, Samhan (2001) discusses that four Americans

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who have heritage from Arabic-speaking countries have held public office in the U.S. Senate, including George Mitchell (1980-1995) of Maine. Other Americans from the Arab world have held positions in the offices of republican and democratic administrations. For example, John H. Sununu worked, as chief of staff, under president George Bush, and Donna Shalala served under president Bill Clinton, as health and human services secretary. Under the administration of George W. Bush, Spencer Abraham served as energy secretary, and Mitchell Daniels worked as director for the office of management and budget. Samhan (2001) discusses how Americans with heritage from the Arab world have also made contributions in other areas of American culture, such as entertainment. Famous Americans in this field include Danny Thomas, Tony Shalhoub, Paul Anka, Casey Kasem, and Paula Abdul.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching about the Arab World**

The negative image of the Arab world in the media and society leads students from this region to have negative experiences in school. Wingfield (2002) discusses how negative stereotypes influence many students to mistreat others who have ancestry from this region and mentions how Dr. Jack Shaheen, the author of much of the research used for this article, was taunted at as a student at his school, when his peers called him a “camel jockey” and a “greasy Leb.”

Fortunately, through culturally responsive teaching, opportunities exist that should aid students from this region to have better experiences in school than in previous years. In areas where large concentrations of people from the Arab world live, for example, some schools have successfully implemented programs that use Arabic language and literature. Using bilingual programs is beneficial because these programs help students whose first language is not English learn English and also helps these students feel welcome.

Other strategies educators can use include assigning students to investigate the contributions that people from this region made in the world during previous eras. Teachers can explain that at one point in history, while Europe was in the Dark Ages, the areas in what is known today as the Arab world had one of the most advanced cultures in the world. As Burns and Fulder (2002) explain:

It was the Arabs who, more than a thousand years ago, helped to preserve, promote, and develop further the medicine and cultural accomplishments of the Greeks and Romans, which are the bases of

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Western civilization and medicine. Their role was vital because, in the early medieval period in Europe, for 5 centuries, medical knowledge and advancement languished and was largely forgotten although some knowledge was preserved in Christian monasteries. (p. 409)

During the golden age of Islamic rule, between the seventh and fifteenth centuries, many Arabic scientists were responsible for discoveries, ranging from medicine to astronomy, which had considerable influence on the West (Shetty, 2011). For example, Ibn Firnas, an Andalusian, discovered that glass could be used for magnification to enhance vision in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and Ibn Sina, a Persian polymath, wrote some of the earliest texts describing an empirical approach to medicine. Ibn Sina's five-volume text *al-Quanun* was at one point used as the main medical text in European schools (Burns & Fulder, 2002).

The Arabs also translated Greek and Roman texts, added commentaries, and wrote original texts, and these works were to become the basic writings used in Western medical schools and continued a tradition originating with the Greeks (Burns & Fulder, 2002). Additionally, the Arabs created a hospital system and integrated pharmacy and chemistry into medical practice. The knowledge of the Arabs was so important that several notable scientists, including Edmond Halley, learned Arabic in order to comprehend important texts. Halley's research led to our current knowledge on the acceleration of the moon (Shetty, 2011).

Another strategy educators can implement is the use of lessons focusing on where the first great civilizations of the world originated. Ancient civilizations located in the Arab world today, such as Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, were the most advanced civilizations in ancient times. Teachers can assign students to develop projects in order for students to gain awareness of these cultures.

Teachers can also organize lessons on famous people whose ancestral homeland is in the Arab world. In addition to the politicians and entertainers mentioned previously, there are other famous people who trace their ancestry to Arabic-speaking countries such as Ralph Nader, a consumer advocate, and Doug Flutie, a famous athlete. Teachers can use the list in appendix 1, which contains more names of famous persons whose heritage is from the Arab world to create lesson plans that focus on racial and ethnic stereotyping.

Teachers can invite parents and community members from the Arab world to discuss their history, food, music, and language. This usually turns out to be very rewarding for students and teachers and helps lead students in school to believe that people from this region are more similar to other groups than the negative characters the popular media often makes them out to be.

For younger children who are in the elementary or middle grades, teachers can take advantage of children's books that portray people from the Arab world favorably. In previous years, it was very difficult to find such books, but today more of these books are available. Using these books with children from Arabic-speaking families is important because it helps them develop their cultural identities (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008). The following children's books are recommended by leading specialists and scholars in the field of children's literature on the Arab world, such as Tami al-Hazza and Elsa Marston.

### **Fiction**

Heide, F.P., & Gilliland, J.H. (1992). *Sami and the time of troubles*. New York: Clarion.

Lewin, T. (1998). *The storytellers*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

London, J. (1997). *Ali, child of the desert*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

Marston, E. (2008). *Santa Claus in Baghdad and other stories about teens in the Arab world*. Bloomington, IN : Indiana University Press.

Schami, R. (1990). *A hand full of stars*. New York: Dutton.

Stolz, J. (2004). *The shadows of Ghadames*. New York: Delacorte.

### **NonFiction**

David, A. (2006). *Lebanon in the news: Past, present, and future*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: MyReportLinks.com Books.

Dutton, R. (1985). *An Arab family*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner.

Harkonen, R. (1991). *The children of Egypt*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda.

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Haskins, J. (1987). *Count your way through the Arab world*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda.

Sheheen, D. (1985). *A child's picture dictionary, English/Arabic*. New York: Adama Books.

Winter, J. (2005). *Librarian of Basra: A true story from Iraq*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

## **Conclusion**

The negative stereotypes about people from the Arab world in the popular media continue to occur and are harmful to students who come from this region. Shaheen (2008) reports that these inaccurate ideas about this region lead young students to be humiliated, excluded, and harassed. As a result, many students who come from Arabic-speaking countries deny their cultural heritage, by coloring their hair blond and not telling their friends they are from the Arab world but that they are Italian or Spanish (Shaheen, 2008). Young students from Arabic-speaking homes also often change their names, from Hussein to Howard, for example, to prevent others from finding out about their culture.

In previous years, many school resources were also stereotypic and led students to falsely believe that the majority of people from this region live as desert nomads, when in fact, no more than 2% of the Arab population live this way. Although today school textbooks and other curricular materials are much improved, errors continue to be made (David & Ayoubi, 2005).

Teachers therefore need to provide accurate understanding about the Arab world for their students. It is very important for students to understand this group of people and their culture because so much of what happens in the Arab world influences society on a global level. This understanding will help students to perceive the world more accurately and will also guide them to develop tolerance toward people from the Arab world, the majority of which are peaceful people.

Educators can begin culturally responsive teaching about Arabs at an early age, through the use of culturally authentic children's books. In addition, teachers can implement lesson plans focusing on the contributions of the Islamic Empire during its golden age. Other strategies educators can use include teaching about great ancient civilization located in the Arab world today and inviting members of the Arabic-speaking

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community to share knowledge of their culture. Teachers can also organize activities based on exploring famous people from the Arab world. Through these activities and similar lesson plans, students will likely gain a more accurate understanding about the Arab world and its people.

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**Appendix 1: Famous People from the Arab World (Adapted from the Arab American Institute, 2012)**

**Academics**

Elias Corey, Chemistry Professor at Harvard University (1990 Nobel Prize winner)

Michael E. DeBakey, Cardiovascular Surgeon

Philip S. Khoury, Professor of History and Associate Provost at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](http://www.mit.edu)

Edward Said, Former Professor at Columbia University

**Performers**

F. Murray Abraham, [Academy Award](http://www.oscars.org) Winner

Paul Anka, Singer

Jamie Farr, Actor

Casey Kasem, Radio Personality

Kristy McNichol, Actress

Tony Shalhoub, Emmy Award-Winning Actor

Vic Tayback, Actor

Danny Thomas, Actor

Marlo Thomas, Actress

Frank Zappa, Musician

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**Politicians**

James Abdnor, U.S. Senator (1981–1987)

James Abourezk, U.S. Senator (1973–1979)

Spencer Abraham, [U.S. Secretary of Energy](#) (2001–2005)

Victor G. Atiyeh, Governor of [Oregon](#) (1979–1987)

John Baldacci, Governor of [Maine](#)

Mitchell Daniels, Governor of [Indiana](#)

Pat Danner, U.S. Congresswoman (1993–2001)

Darrell Issa, U.S. Congressman

Chris John, U.S. Congressman (1997–2005)

Abraham Kazen, U.S. Congressman (1967–1985)

Ray LaHood, U.S. Congressman (1995–2009)

George J. Mitchell, U.S. Senator (D-Maine) (1980–1995)

Ralph Nader, Consumer Advocate

Mary Rose Oakar, U.S. Congresswoman (1977–1993)

Nick Rahall, U.S. Congressman

Donna Shalala, [U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services](#) (1993–2001)

John E. Sununu, U.S. Senator (2003–2009)

John H. Sununu, Governor of [New Hampshire](#) (1983–1989) [Chief of Staff](#) to George H.W. Bush

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