

**Research Title:** The Impact of Mainstream News Consumption on Individual Attitudes Towards Arabs.

## **Introduction**

Following the tragic 9/11, which was a focal point for forming attitudes toward Arab and Muslim people generally, the U.S. government began pursuing communities of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Arab descent as potential threats to national security. The result was strengthened public narratives that were xenophobic and Islamophobic (“Racial Profiling,” 2023) that remain prevalent to this day, especially reflected in highly consumed news sources through certain language and repetition, as a more subtle method of enforcing an unfavorable narrative. Upon heavy reliance on mainstream news sources, the effects of a lack of credible information have contributed to Americans’ negative perceptions of Arabs. This represents a challenge for not only support for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, but also problems in domestic politics and civil society, as we’ve seen in a rise in anti-Arab sentiments and hate crimes since 2001 (Kishi, 2017). Ultimately, routine consumption of mainstream media plays a large role in shaping cognitive patterns that affect everyday attitudes towards ethnic groups depending on their respective portrayal. My research will specifically be based on *the impact of mainstream news consumption on individual attitudes towards Arabs*.

Given the immense exposure to especially television news (likely for convenience purposes or having it as background noise), what is fascinating is the nature of which people ultimately choose to trust these sources – that could rather be looked at as unreliable or profit-maximizing – and if they do not, the instinct to consume it anyway. Evidently through current events in Gaza, there exists discoveries and raw footage that would otherwise remain unseen upon heavy reliance on only television news. This also applies to historic events that date way

back, and there likely remains so much that was left unseen or untold. The effects of a lack of information and disinformation are observed to be disturbing and pose a heavy threat on our ability to coexist.

With regards to Americans' main sources of news, a poll conducted by the Arab American Institute in late 2015 portrayed a correspondence between the news source and favorability toward Arabs, and in the case of the poll, Muslims as well. "Our polling found that respondents that listed CNN as their primary news source had the highest net unfavorable rating of Arab Americans, while those that listed Fox News as their primary news source had the highest unfavorable rating of American Muslims." The polling had also determined that Americans who resort to alternative news sources are less likely to have unfavorable views toward Arabs ("American Attitudes," 2015). This is a deeply problematic observation, as it can be applied to attitudes toward other ethnicities as well, that are similarly being unfairly portrayed on mainstream news.

## **Literature**

The ordinary mind may wonder why mainstream news corporations function the way they do in the first place. "Disinformation creates chaos. The public finds itself confused about what is true and reality suddenly becomes murky. Without clear and reliable information, people revert to visceral tribalism based on the narrative they like the most. Cleavages deepen. The mission of the disinformation campaign is accomplished." (Chatterjee et al., 2020) Furthermore, patterns of media propaganda often carry the mere purposes of confusing, separating, and instigating. To profit-maximizing news outlet corporations, division is the utmost goal that provides fertile ground for both profit and power growth.

There is no doubt that this dilemma impacts our entire globalized and interconnected world; or at least the world that consumes or is consumed by the media daily (ties to Hannah Arendt's Modern Public Sphere). But, the reason for a specific focus on the United States is because it is evidently affected by internal biases toward different identity groups that arise from historical and cultural contexts. For instance, Americans may have a certain viewpoint on Jews because of the Holocaust, and similarly, a certain view on Muslims because of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. According to the Pew Research Center (Tevington, 2023), "Far more Americans express favorable than unfavorable views of Jews (mainline Protestants and Catholics). At the other end of the spectrum, more Americans express negative than positive attitudes toward atheists, *Muslims*, and Mormons (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)."

Similarly, other identity groups sustain stereotypes towards Americans. This is not to say that all Americans, Jews, Muslims, or any other identity group have *only* those ideas in their heads. However, it is important to acknowledge these biases, as they could lead to people seeking and finding comfort only in the information they want to hear. This concept is also referred to as selective exposure, which can be unintentional, and ultimately applies to the type of news coverage people are drawn to. Moreover, corporations feed into these internal biases, and simultaneously capitalize on them. "Narratives, to some extent, play an effective role in creating a conflict and perpetuating it. The way narratives are constructed, fashioned, and disseminated in society through socialization agents and through the political elites produce stereotypical images instead of creating a climate conducive to peace. The conflict continues because the negative narratives continue." (Daoudi et al., 2013) And these narratives ought to be consumed by somebody out there.

## **Alternate Causes**

Now, we transition into the several variables other than mainstream news that may influence American attitudes towards Arabs. According to preceding scholars, demographics play a major role in the way in which these attitudes lean. In a study by Pedersen (2005), researchers utilized the Attitudes Towards Asylum Seekers Scale (ATAS) to demonstrate the differences in gender, age, education, political affiliation, religious affiliation, and national identification, and their influence on attitudes towards those seeking asylum specifically. This scale may apply to attitudes towards anything. The findings of similar studies carried out after reveal that negative attitudes towards refugees tend to be held by certain demographics, being male in gender, elders in age, nationalists, conservatives, those religiously affiliated, and those with less valuable education. Moreover, opposing demographics tend to carry relatively fewer negative attitudes towards the same group(s) (Cowling et al., 2019).

## **Theory**

Public opinion is formed, influenced, and solidified by a variety of variables in the context of media, including the attempts made by journalists, advocacy organizations, fact-finding missions, and regular citizens to gather, disseminate, and comment on information (where internal biases come to play), as well as the efforts of the state to control information flows (because not every country is a perfect democracy, therefore not every country has the freedom of press). This intricate combination creates a volatile environment for media conflict that has enormous ramifications for both the legal system that oversees wars (Walzer et al., 2017), and how those legal systems and countries involved in wars are perceived by the people.

Such perceptions are important to look at because they determine the levels of legitimacy the people will grant their own governments and other governments as well.

Furthermore, the use of certain language to characterize a group or general informational gaps that can highly influence attitudes and opinions are classified as a type of propaganda. Over the decades, it has been emphasized that propaganda is a powerful tool because we are all prone to consuming it somehow, but it becomes too overpowered when we fail to recognize that we are exposed to it, because of how deeply embedded (or normal) it becomes within our society. The “why” this occurs in the first place lies within institutional structures that allow for this phenomenon to go unnoticed by ordinary people. Mass media, which serves the overall populace, convinces its consumers that it is on their side by occasionally critiquing what the masses seem to be against at that very moment. However, though this critique is well-balanced to gain the people’s trust (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, 61), it must be limited enough to disregard any pathway leading to the destruction of our dominant capitalist system in which we operate.

When looking closely at the channels through which we are exposed to propaganda (which are considered “mainstream”), an appropriate way to analyze this consumption is through *social cognitive theory*, and its relation to attitude formation. This exhaustive stereotype framework combines elements of media content (such as message repetition and simplicity) with motivations (such as positive or negative reinforcements in the content) and specific viewing audience characteristics (such as cognitive ability, past reinforcement, and character identification) with the social environment to address the mechanisms through which media may influence consumers (Mastro, 2009). The framework assumes that the extent to which different races/ethnicities are depicted or represented in the media is how stereotypes are born within those consuming that media. Studies maintain that negative sentiments against minorities are

mostly caused by the media's portrayal of them. For instance, when minorities are continuously linked with crime or terrorism, it becomes cognitive practice for one to assume the next individual of that minority group must have committed one of those acts, crime or terrorism. The brain creates a shortcut – association. It has been persuasively shown through content analysis of news reports that minorities are negatively characterized and linked to unfavorable concerns such as the examples used above. Consumers of mainstream media may then develop unfavorable racial prejudices as a result of these portrayals (Schemer, 2012).

Noting that media stereotypes are so ubiquitous, they may often be quickly and easily accessed as cognitive shortcuts that shape future assessments. Racial stereotypes are so persistently accessible that even minute racial cues in the media can trigger racial attitudes that affect judgment without conscious thought. Stereotypical beliefs can undoubtedly be formed or reinforced by the media, but in terms of attitudes, it also has a significant impact on how viewers understand and retain information in ways that align with their preexisting beliefs and schemata (Rabasubramanian, 2010), as well as how they act out these interpretations when interacting with ethnic groups – more especially, Arabs.

Looking back at Cowling's study of refugees as an example (2019), the results indicate that these negative perceptions and attitudes are being driven by unfounded fear and false beliefs that are fueled by media misrepresentations of refugees as a threat to society because of their alleged illegality and ties to terrorism. People who believed that refugees posed both realistic and symbolic threats to Australia were more likely to hold negative opinions and support harsher policies regarding refugees.

Thinking of digital media as a potential sphere in which the line separating the private and public spheres has become indistinct, there is a trend toward the typecasting of individuals as

symbols of movements, ideas, positions, or viewpoints. The intricacy and ambiguity of every person's life, and the opaqueness and mystique of our inner selves are being progressively stripped away as we are reduced to basic social, cultural, and political roles that are instantly identifiable to a viewership (Benhabib, 1997). The pathway linking what we consume from the media to the human brain is made much smoother due to technological and media advancements, thus making it *easier to classify and stereotype*. It is concerning that these advances in the media that we devote much of our time consuming do not serve the characteristics of mind (which Seyla Benhabib refers to using Kant's concept of "the enlarged mentality") that much of public sphere theorists – Hannah Arendt included – emphasize (Benhabib, 1997). This pattern becomes ever so problematic in the sense that it hinders the process of forming an individual political opinion, and only further feeds into the dilemma of generalizations and shortcuts made on political/social topics. As a result, the victims of such patterns become easy targets of media propaganda.

The extent to which the mass media operates as a public sphere that is inclusive, accessible, and represents the populace (which is a very important indicator of democracy) is how it continues to multiply in popularity. It also acts as an intermediary between governing powers and their respective constituents. With that in mind, the concept of democracy becomes highly relevant. Within democracy, the flow of information is a defining characteristic that establishes the level of which the populace may hold the government responsible and act on well-informed judgments (Gillwald, 1993). However, through the media especially, it is not trusted how well-informed one might be, as I've established several times that the flow of information is frequently impeded by many circumstances, making the public information somewhat faulty and leading to the manifestation of political propaganda. Generally, it is crucial

to link mental and physical behaviors to what had caused them: the information that had been perceived. In the case of stereotyping and acting upon mental stereotypes (hate crime being an extreme example), these behaviors are surely, to an extent, caused by exposure to certain types of information flows. It would be safe to say that the media (an umbrella that *does* include television broadcasting), being our new public sphere, is the primary medium through which this information is usually displayed or communicated. This general linkage has had and continues to have tons of political implications.

The media is a *crucial* sphere of communicating political ideas and beliefs. However, it further feeds into the danger of generalization due to the tendency to follow trends that we sometimes mistakenly think of as ones being followed only in a fashionable sense. Unfortunately, these “trends” can dangerously extend to influencing individual political and social affiliation (demographics obviously play a large role in the extent to which media can influence opinion). It is a matter of how these political trends are intentionally created and highlighted by algorithms, who controls those algorithms and the general flows of information, and why exploring such questions is important to understanding why we are easily susceptible to these tactics of division as well as the threats caused by misunderstanding other identity groups and stereotyping against them. It is also of relevance to understand the implications of monopolistic media supply and presence in our daily lives, and how a predicament of such massive size (allowing monopolistic news sources to shape what we know) can be tackled in a manner that is fair for all in terms of honest news portrayal.

## **Data & Methods**

### **Study**

Scholars have continuously examined how what we consume as a people may potentially (and dangerously) impact and undermine our ability to coexist but have done so in a more general manner and have not necessarily focused on the extent to which the *type* of news coverage we are exposed to affects our overall views and sensitivity toward a religious/ethnic group. More specifically, the type of consumption I am concerned with is that of the common news sources in our present day, such as televised news channels/networks, and how it inflicts imperfect information about the Middle East/North African region specifically, that may undermine American democracy and living standards of Arabs in the West.

*H<sub>1</sub>: As consumption of mainstream news sources increases, so does negative American attitudes towards Arabs.*

### **Methodology**

Amazon's Mechanical Turk, which Alexandra Samuel has described as the pathway leading to the "golden age of survey research" due to its prompt access to responsible, varied, and non-student pool of survey participants, is a tool I plan to utilize when surveying to find a correlation between type of media consumed and attitudes toward Arabs. Holding all other variables constant, my survey will mainly attempt to collect data on how much the respondent consumes mainstream news sources such as BBC News, Fox News, CNN, etc., to what extent they trust those sources, and their views on Arab people (if applicable). Then, the IBM SPSS Statistical Tool will be used to evaluate the results. The mainstream news sources consumed and what they portray relative to other sources not consumed by Americans, would be the

independent variable, affecting the dependent variable of the study, which is attitudes toward Arabs. I will be attempting to conduct causal, applied research on the micro level using mixed methods.

### **Sampling and Limitations**

My survey being put through the crowdsourcing Amazon M Turk will attempt to collect 500 randomized respondents. Combined with the fact that the sample size does not account for 1,500 respondents (which is typically the target number for making accurate generalizations for the U.S. as a whole), a concern with the tool is that in comparison to the United States' population, which is the population I am seeking to generalize upon using a sample, MTurk participants are typically younger, less religious, educated on a higher level, and politically less diverse. This poses a limitation on the reliability of the data's interpretation at the population level (Litman, 2024).

### ***Measures***

*Consumption of Mainstream News* According to the Pew Research Center, Americans classify the following seven outlets as mainstream media: ABC News, MSNBC, Fox News, CNN, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Post (Shearer et al., 2021). Respondents will be asked to select however many of these television outlets they are familiar with or consume daily, what they believe their main source of news is mainly between social media platforms or television media (presumably, answers will vary most depending on age), and how long they spend on each of the following options respectively, ranging from social media, newspapers, television, etc.

Demographics These variables would affect direct exposure to and consumption of the mainstream news sources I am exploring. They will include age, race and ethnicity, gender, and employment. The fulfillment and combination of any of these variables will likely influence whether certain persons would be attracted to mainstream news channels in the first place. For instance, a member of generation Z may resort more to social media platforms to retain global news than they would TV channels.

Survey questions attempting to gather this data will be rather straightforward. Age will be measured through generational categories of options ranging from “Generation Z: 18-29,” “Millennial: 30-44,” “Xennial: 45-49,” “Generation X: 50-59,” or “Baby Boomer: 60-78,” (Robinson, 2024)

Race and ethnicity will be measured through a survey question similar to that of the Census Bureau’s (except for the separation of “Middle Eastern/North African” from “White” for the purposes of this study as well as the addition of “Hispanic/Latino) asking which race the respondent best identifies with, with the options being: “White,” “Black or African American,” “American Indian or Alaska Native,” “Asian,” “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander,” “Hispanic/Latino,” or “Middle Eastern/North African,” (*About the Topic of Race, 2022*)

Gender will be measured through a survey question borrowed from the Census Bureau asking whether the respondent identifies themselves as “Male,” “Female,” “Transgender,” or “None of the above options,” (File, T., and Lee, J.H., 2021)

Employment will be measured through a question asking what the respondent’s employment status currently is, with their options being: “Full-time,” “Part-time,” “Seeking opportunities,” “Retired,” and “Prefer not to say,” (*15 Demographic Questions for Surveys, 2023*) This will largely determine the respondent’s availability in terms of time, which ultimately

has an effect on their daily consumption patterns. Another implication of employment status is the extent of exposure to diverse workforces, which a full-time employee would face over an unemployed person.

*Explicit Contact With & Perceptions of Arabs* Similar to a measure in research carried out by Brown, C. S., et al. (2017), in order to assess the respondents' explicit knowledge of what it means to be "Arab," each participant will be asked if they had ever heard the term before, with the option to respond affirmatively or negatively initially, then explaining in an open-ended question. The following codes will be applied to the responses to the open-ended question: (i) a reference to religion (even if the details are incorrect); (ii) a reference to culture, ethnicity, immigration, or language (even if the details are incorrect); (iii) a reference to something entirely unrelated, like "body image" or "facial hair"; or (iv) a response of "do not know." Furthermore, participants will be asked if they directly know, know of, or associate with any Arab/Middle Eastern/North African person, by answering yes or no.

*Attitudes Toward Arabs* Due to stereotypes, it is crucial to identify who would be classified as 'Arab', which in this study would be anybody from countries that are members of the Arab League. Furthermore, perceptions of Americans towards Arabs with regards to news consumption will be measured using a five-item index with the following statements (Shami, 2020): "TV news outlets truly present Arabs' personality characteristics as they really are in life," "TV news outlets give me somewhat of an insight on personality characteristics of Arabs," "If I see something about Arabs' personality characteristics on TV news outlets, I can't be sure it really is that way," "TV news outlets portray positive stereotypes of Arabs," "TV news outlets present Arabs with positive stereotypes as they really are in life," and "If I see Arabs with positive stereotypes on TV news outlets, I can't be sure that the stereotypes are really that way."

Following that would be a scale attempting to compute general opinion toward Arabs: 0 = “Not familiar enough to make a judgment”, 1 = “Very unfavorable”, 2 = “Somewhat unfavorable”, 3 = “Neutral”, 4 = “Somewhat favorable”, 5 = “Very favorable”

*Personal Interactions with Arabs* This is a rather straightforward measure that will involve two components. The first will be if the respondent has ever had any direct interaction with an Arab individual. Responses could be yes or no. If the question was answered yes, the respondent will be asked whether that was a singular occurrence, or whether they interact with an Arab person over a duration of time (can vary from daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, etc.) Moving forward, the respondent will be asked to describe the overall timbre and subject of the interaction based on a set of responses varying from “Non-significant interaction”, “Neutral/Casual conversation”, “Negative/Contradictory”, or “Positive/Constructive.” These categorical labels are subject to change.

*Religious Affiliation* Borrowed from the Pew Research Center, respondents will be asked “What is your present religion, if any?” with the options being "Protestant," "Roman Catholic," "Mormon," "Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox," "Jewish," "Muslim," "Buddhist," "Hindu," "Atheist," "Agnostic," "Other," or "None” (*How Does Pew Research*, 2018).

Thereupon, they will be asked how Arabs may be perceived (generally) by their respective religious affiliation, with responses ranging from: “Positively”, “Negatively”, “Neutrally/Not perceived”, or “Not sure”.

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