Media and Teaching about the Middle East

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Abstract
This qualitative study was conducted in 2006-2007 and found that teachers relied on a variety of readily available media to stay informed about the Middle East and used some of them in their teaching. Teachers tried to explain to their students that every Middle Eastern Muslim is not a terrorist and Iraq was not behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The guiding questions were: (1) What are the sources of news that teachers use to teach about the Middle East? (2) How do teachers use the media to teach about the Middle East in the post 9/11 schools? Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data and teachers' instructional plans were examined. The Uses and Gratification theory provided the conceptual framework and data were analyzed using the grounded theory.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the influence of media on what and how high school social studies teachers teach about the Middle East, a region that is constantly featured in the news. Despite all the talk about the importance of the Middle East, people and politics of that region remain a mystery to most Americans. Social studies teachers find themselves at the forefront of introducing the Middle East to their students and try to contextualize the stream of violent reports from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine.

In order to gain an initial understanding of the intersection of media and the Middle East in social studies classrooms, a qualitative study was conducted in 2006-2007 that included ten high school social studies teachers in Washington State. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the grounded theory approach. This study deployed the uses and gratification theory to understand what and why teachers used media materials in their lessons.

Uses and Gratification Theory

A primary purpose of this study has been to investigate teachers' use of information from television, radio, newspapers, internet, and other sources for their own use and find out the reasons for incorporating some portions of what they learn into their lessons about the Middle East. It is important to acknowledge that before these adults chose to become teachers, they were consumers of news and had developed certain dispositions toward certain sources of information. The uses and gratification theory (U&G) has been used by many social scientists to study newspaper, radio, television, and internet use by people (Owen, 1991; Ruggiero, 2000; Chatman, 1991; Alrajehi, 2003). This theory was popular with scientists who studied early voting behavior. According to Owen (1991) "It grew out of analyses of readership and viewership conducted during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s" (P. 3). Therefore, it is an appropriate theory that can be applied to teachers' curriculum decisions, because U&G is situated in a social context and is "concerned with explanations of the antecedents and consequences of audience use of the media and media content" (Dobos, 1992, p. 29). According to this theory, media use is "a rational, goal oriented activity" (Liebes, 2003, p. 48). In this paper, media and mass media are assumed to be synonymous. In the realm of mass communication and entertainment, mass media includes an array of institutions that are involved in producing films, television and radio programs, magazines and newspapers, in addition to things like emails, and internet that have become popular today. When U&G is applied to social studies teachers' curriculum decisions, it assumes that teachers make rational decisions when choosing what to teach from the range of information available to them.

U&G has five basic assumptions. First, the audience "is assumed to be goal directed" and active (Katz et al., 1974, p. 21). In the context of teachers' media use, this means that teachers decide what sources of information to tap into, what magazines to read, and so on. Second, the initiative to use a medium like television for information or entertainment lies with the audience member. In other words, teachers use television and not the other way around. Third, "The media compete with other sources of need satisfaction" (p. 22). The level of media consumption varies

with the range of needs individuals have. For example, some teachers may watch two hours of television news per day while others may watch only two hours per week. Fourth, people are capable of expressing themselves and saying what they want in specific situations. For example, Brandon, one of the teachers in this study, read the online British publication, *The Independent* and looked for articles about the Middle East politics that were written by Robert Fisk. Fifth, "Value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communication should be suspended while audience orientations are explored on their own terms" (Katz et al., p. 22). Thus, U&G can be useful in explaining people's behavior in a variety of situations, including teachers, when they make curriculum decisions.

There are several empirical studies that have utilized U&G (Greenberg, 1974; Brown et al., 1974; Kline et al., 1974; McLoed and Becker, 1974). Some researchers have argued that because this theory relies upon individuals' self reporting, such data are suspect, because people cannot be trusted to accurately identify "their own feelings and behavior" (Infante et al., 2003, p. 282). Keeping this criticism in mind, we still can learn a lot about teachers' media use and their rationales for consuming certain news.

Media has shown to have a powerful influence over individuals. Starr (2004) argues that World War I served as a turning point in highlighting the importance of control over "communications circuits" as code-making and code-breaking became increasingly more complicated (p. 222). Starr argues that during this period "Mass propaganda, while hardly new, developed into a far more substantial enterprise, aimed at mobilizing a state's own citizens, demoralizing the enemy, and swaying the public in neutral countries" (p. 222). By World War II, Hollywood giants of Disney and Warner Bros. were producing propaganda films for the war effort. *Cartoons Go To War* is the name of one such films that features a rabbit, two ducks, and a host of other characters showing how people can help the war effort (Baker, 1995).

Today, Hollywood and television are much more sophisticated in the way they craft and present their movies and news programs. Jack Shaheen's book and his movie by the same name, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* provides a powerful example of this phenomenon. The Hollywood produced movie *300* is another powerful example of such vilification that targets Iranians. The Iranian American community and the Iranian Parliament protested strongly about this gross misrepresentation of history (Farrokh, 2007; *Iran expects UNESCO to condemn measures distorting its history*, 2007; Sarmast, 2007; *Iranian-Americans Rally against movie 300 in New York*, 2007).

*Figure 1: Iranian Americans during the Norooz Parade in New York City,
March 25, 2007.* This photo was published in Payvand.com.
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In one of my classroom visits, one of the teachers in this study (Mindy) told me that over half of her students had seen this movie and liked it. Clearly, the influence of this movie on young minds is more powerful than a few paragraphs that students may find in their textbooks about the ancient Iran. The political backdrop is worthy of note. There has been a continued absence of direct diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States since 1979. Also, the Bush Administration claims that Iran is building a nuclear bomb (Tremblay, 2007). Mr. Bush's rhetoric about "World War III" if Iran possesses the necessary knowledge to produce nuclear weapons is another indication of the seriousness of this political dilemma in the U.S.-Iran relations (President Bush threatens World War III, 2007). Continued U.S. sanctions on Iran point to a hostile attitude toward an old ally that is not benefiting either sides (Parsi, 2007).

Focusing on how the news media behaved during the post 9-11 terrorist attacks, Domke (2004) argues that the media did not challenge President Bush's "War on Terror" rhetoric as his Administration carefully crafted a moral argument that reflected the conservative religious views. Others who have studied media present a similar argument (Massing, 2005). Domke believes that the news media play a "crucial role…in the everyday process of shaping people's perceptions of reality" (2004, 183). We can see that other actors like the terrorist sympathizers and extremist groups are producing their own videos and broadcasting them on various websites or getting exposure through television stations like *Al-Jazeera* (Nasrawi, 2006; Worth, 2008). In other words, the monopoly of defining "news" has been broken and "news" has become more competitive and controversial.

Television and internet as visual mediums are clearly powerful and influential tools for mass communication and propaganda purposes (McLuhan, 1994; Carey, 1992). Management of news is a fact of political life, as documented by release of the recent video-tape of Saddam's execution. The official version that I watched on CNN Headline News was shown several times and it was silent. It ended at the point where the noose was placed around Saddam's neck. However, the unauthorized version had sound and provided more details of the execution (Burns, 2007). Another example is the controversy over the detention of 15 British marines and sailors by Iran in March 2007 (UK sailors detained 0.5 km inside Iranian waters, embassy confirms, 2007). Iran claimed that the British forces violated Iranian sovereignty by entering into

Iranian waters and the British argued that they were operating in the Iraqi side of Arvand Rud. The news conferences that were staged by both the Iranian and British regimes indicate the importance of managing the news (Panja, 2007). These examples confirm O'Heffernan's (1993) argument that media have accelerated the pace of international politics today and politicians are under increasing pressure to quickly respond to issues.

Today's teachers are also under pressure to answer their students' questions about the fast-paced developing stories that are reported in the news (Kaviani, 2006). The reality of teaching environment is such that teachers have limited time to surf the net for up-to-date information about the Iraq war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other issues related to the Middle East. Nonetheless, many teachers try to expose their students to competing viewpoints on multitude of issues. For example, Risinger (2006) recommends teachers to visit the web site associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran and warns the reader that the web site is a "truly anti-U.S. site" where teachers can read and listen "to the reasoning of why Iran should be able to design and build nuclear power plants" (p. 36). Having this type of access to information allows teachers to do away with outdated textbooks when it comes to teaching about today's Middle East. In addition, there are internet-based radio sources that teachers can use to identify and hear competing viewpoints on important historical, political, ecological, social, and economical issues.

As for the influence of television in society, Cortes (2005) considers it to be so powerful that our sense of free will gets overwhelmed. He believes that even if social studies were to be eliminated from school curriculum, American children would continue to receive social studies lessons through the mass media. He acknowledges the complex role of media in our society and its influence on social studies curriculum. The tragic death of Sergio Pelico, a 10-year-old boy who died by hanging himself from a bunk bed was attributed to him mimicking the execution of Saddam Hussein (Rendon, 2007). This tragic and unusual suicide by a fifth grader illustrates the power and influence of media on young people.

In light of the examples provided, it is necessary to acknowledge the susceptibility of individuals to news and call for a rigorous media literacy curriculum. The perspectives that news present and the values they advance are not neutral. When people choose to be informed, they become vulnerable to influences that may reinforce or challenge their thinking. Teachers and students are not immune from media's influences (Otto, 2005). Classroom discussions that are about a given headline news is a manifestation of media's agenda-setting power. How teachers use such information is worthy of investigation. Next, let us review the sampling and data sources before discussing the findings.

Rationale for the Selection of Teachers

The theoretical sampling intended to maximize opportunities to compare events while looking for similarities among them (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). For this study, I chose a sample of ten secondary public school social studies teachers who taught about the Middle East in their Contemporary World Problems, U.S. History, or World History classes and some of them had additional training about the Middle

East, too. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of these teachers (see Table 1).

Table1

Social Studies Teachers Interviewed for This Study

Teachers	Basic Background Information
Bob	38-years old, male, White, with a BA in sociology and MA in education. Bob teaches 9th grade in an urban high school and has 7 years of teaching experience.
Amber	53-years old, female, White, MA in international studies. Amber teaches U.S. and World History classes in an urban high school and has 19 years of teaching experience. She has extra training on Middle East.
Mindy	36-years old, female, White, MA in education. Mindy teaches Contemporary World Problems in a rural high school. She has 13 years of teaching experience and has extra training on Middle East.
Laura	28-years old, White, female, MA in Education, has 6 years of teaching experience in a rural school. Laura teaches senior classes of Global Studies and American Studies.
Brandon	42-years old, White, male, MA in education, has 9 years of teaching experience and teaches in an urban alternative high school. Brandon teaches Contemporary World History to seniors.
John	43 years old, White, male, MA in education, has taught for 9 years, and teaches Contemporary World Problems and geography in an urban high school.
Fred	40 years old, White, male, BA in geography ecosystems and almost done with his MA degree in education. Fred has been teaching for 8 years and teaches history classes in a rural school district.
Larry	37 years old, White, male, BA in history and political science, has been teaching history in a private Catholic school in an urban school. He has extra training on Middle East.
Sherry	42 years old, African American, female, has a BA in history and French, and almost done with her MA degree in Education. She teaches 9th grade World History and 12th Grade US Government. She teaches in an urban high school.
Rose	37 years old, White, female, teaches 9th and 10th grade World History and US government courses. She has a BA in International Studies with a focus on foreign policy, peace, and diplomacy. She has 7 years of teaching experience in an urban school.

Data sources came primarily from audio-recorded and transcribed interviews and teachers' instructional materials. Grounded theory and constant comparative method were used to analyze the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1999). The conceptual framework of needs and gratification theory ran through the entire analytical portion of the study. According to the grounded theory method, differences and similarities among the participants in sample selection can lead to the discovery of new

categories. A more diverse sample of teachers was chosen based on the location of schools (urban, rural), their training about the Middle East, and their differences in socio-economic backgrounds. On the other hand, by focusing on the similarities, the differences among teachers were minimized when I chose teachers based on their content area (Middle East) that they taught. Similarities in teachers' responses to a set of questions verified the existence of particular categories that could be supported by the data. It was through the similarities that initial categories were generated and my findings illustrate the result of that process. Next, let me illustrate the process of data analysis.

The first teacher interview was with Laura and involved questionnaire, think-aloud task, and additional questions about teacher's role and related issues. I began to code and analyze the transcribed data from this audio-recorded interview. Laura came from a conservative Republican family and saw herself as a "democrat." She explained how little her students knew about the Middle East and what they often knew were mostly inaccurate negative information. She said:

> So they come to class with this image of the Middle East being completely poverty-stricken and everybody lives in sand huts and all of these people are planning attacks on the U.S. and that's their, I mean when they think Middle East if I could get into their heads I think that's the vision that they would have, not the wonderful parts about it.

This was an important piece of data that was distinct from what she had talked about before. Therefore, I coded this piece of data as "Students Closed-Minded" and put them under the category of "Challenges Teachers Face." Consistent with the constant comparative method, everything in the data that was similar to this piece of information was coded accordingly and grouped together.

As I moved on to the subsequent teachers, I took this category with me to see if it would repeat again. It did. In other words, I was looking for similarities in subsequent teachers' responses. For example, Brandon said: "A lot of them [students] don't have a bloody clue what's going on" and later specified that his students see the Middle East as a violent place where Arabs are engaged in killing each other. He summarized his students' thinking this way: "It's a bunch of Arabs killing one another." The third teacher interviewed was Fred and he also mentioned the stereotyped image that his students had of the Middle Eastern people: they wore turbans and were all Muslims. He said, "…that every person in the Middle East wears a turban. Every person in the Middle East is a Muslim. Every Muslim from the Middle East is a terrorist. The usual stuff here in the good old U.S. of A." Similar comments were echoed by other teachers like Bob who talked about how his students referred to the Middle Eastern men as "the rag-heads that are trying to kill us." These data were so similar that I grouped them under the same category. Of course, as the transcription of each new teacher interview was being analyzed, I continued to search for new categories. Many of the categories were similar enough that were combined together to make the management of data feasible. For example, these teachers taught map skills, the Iraq war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other topics. I combined all of these into "What Teachers Teach."

In phase three, I combined the significant and relevant categories and reduced them to what later became my main findings. In this delimiting phase, findings were solidified and the need for modifications decreased as the list of categories stopped growing, reflecting theoretical saturation of data. Consequently, I set aside categories that did not integrate well. For phase four, Instead of offering hypotheses or writing a general theory, I simply discussed the common responses by these teachers in this study in the next section.

As the person responsible for this study, it is important to acknowledge my background and my influence on the interpretation of the data.

I was born into a Zoroastrian family in Tehran, Iran and came to the United States in 1979, after the Iranian Revolution. The Middle East and particularly Iran have been my interest. As a former social studies teacher with 13 years of classroom and administrative experiences I identified with my subjects in this study and could relate to what they were sharing with me about their students and their curriculum. I understood the challenges they faced when their students asked them questions about the news of the day.

In addition, I was hearing stories from my Iranian American friends about the negative experiences some of their children were having in schools in the Puget Sound area after 9-11-2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. In one case, my friend asked for some advice about what to do in a case where his nine year old son was questioned by his teacher in front of the class: "You are a Muslim! Tell me why did the Muslim terrorists attack the United States?" Asking a nine year old boy to speak for terrorists and Islam is a daunting task! Similarly, I, as a math and social studies teacher at that time, was experiencing very uncomfortable situations at my workplace too. This research exposes the negative stereotyping that continues to exist in schools to varying degrees.

Findings

Perhaps not surprising, the analysis revealed that the media influenced these social studies teachers' curriculum decisions. It also revealed that most of their students already had negative images of the Middle Eastern people and that region. Teachers tried to undo this negative stereotyping. The final section of this paper discusses the implications of this study on education.

Using Media as Curriculum Materials

Consistent with the uses and gratifications theory, teachers in this study consumed a variety of print and electronic media to stay informed about the world events and used some of them in their lessons (see Table 2). They consumed the news according to their own preferences and provided context and background for the topics they taught. The big news of the day was brought into their classrooms to generate interest and to be learned as content knowledge.

Table 2

 Newspapers, Magazines, and Radio Programs Used by Teachers

Teachers	Personal Use of News
Bob	New York Times, Seattle Times, Seattle PI, Time magazine, National Public Radio (NPR)
Amber	Seattle Times, Seattle Post Intelligencer, NPR
Mindy	Seattle Times, New York Times, Economist, Newsweek, Time, New Yorker, NPR
Laura	New York Times, New York Times Learning Network, "The Week", Newsweek, NPR
Brandon	Seattle Post Intelligencer, Seattle Times, Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, King County Journal, New Yorker, Atlanta
John	New York Times, Wall Street Journal, NPR, Democracy Now 91.3 FM, POD casts (i-tunes, Al Franken Show)
Fred	Seattle Times, New York Times, News Sources like CNN, CBS online, NPR
Larry	Christian Science Monitor, Mosaic TV for news from the Middle East, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy Magazine, The Atlantic Monthly, New York Times, NPR
Sherry	YES Magazine, The Economist, New York Times, Guardian, Afrique (in French), Africa and the Middle East, Rethinking Schools, NPR
Rose	PBS, Local News, New York Times, Seattle Times, The Economist

Media provided rich sources of materials for these teachers. It is common to find the Contemporary World Problems (CWP) classes are without a regular textbook. Therefore, high school teachers are compelled to use other sources of information as curriculum materials. Specific examples in Table 3 show what these teachers used to teach about the Middle East. In this paper, I will focus on six of these teachers to illustrate what media they used and how their background influenced what they taught.

Table 3

 Teachers' Television, Videos, and Internet Used for Teaching

Teachers	Television Programs, Videos, and Internet Sources
Bob	Videos: Promises, Osama, 20 Years Old in the Middle East (This video is about Hejab) New York Times, Google or CIA Fact Book, Lonely Planet
Amber	Television: Assign a specific program like the 6 o'clock news, PBS

	programs, Videos: CNN for Iraq War New York Times, German Newspapers, Web Sites for Cartoons, Google, images online
Mindy	Frontline: "Looking For Answers", Frontline: "Islam" Web Sites about Terrorism, BBC News, CQ Researcher
Laura	PBS, Major News Broadcasts (NBC/CBS – Major News Clips), Video: Frontline "Muslim Rage" by Thomas Friedman
Brandon	Television: CNN Student News Videos: Prentice Hall video on the Middle East, Thomas Friedman documentary on 9-11-2001 and the Wall separating Israelis and Palestinians in Palestine. New York Times, New York Review of Books, The Guardian, Juancole.com, Informed Comment
John	Link TV, PBS, NOW (a PBS Program), documentaries
Fred	News Sources like CNN, CBS, PBS Frontline, 60 Minutes, Google News, Lexis-Nexis online data source, various Journal articles Videos: "The Century" Narrated by Peter Jennings/ABC
Larry	Christian Science Monitor, New York Times, Mosaic TV (News footage from the Middle East) National Public Radio (Transcripts), Middle East Media Research Institute(English translated speeches) Video: Living Islam (BBC)
Sherry	PBS, CBC (Canada), BBC World News, UW-ERIC, Peace Corp Listserv, Critical Teacher Listserv, Rethinking Schools, Fulbright Lesson Plans, Friends of Morocco, NPR, PBS.org, French Language Sources, Choices Curriculum (Brown University) Videos: prefers videos that have subtitles and are produced in Africa or the Middle East, Battle of Algiers, Time Life Legacy the Lost Civilizations Series, Islam in America, and movies about religions
Rose	Pro-Quest data base, World Press Review, Al-Jazeera Online, iEARN Web Site, Choices Curriculum (Brown University) Videos: Documentaries and films like Promises, Battle Ground: 21 Days on the Empire's Edge, And Paradise Now

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John, who came from a conservative Republican background, was a self-proclaimed "left-winger" who was anti-war and felt an affinity with the underdog and the oppressed people. He had travelled to Europe, Canada, and South America and was interested in an anthropological take on what was going on in the Middle East. He wanted to help his students appreciate the people of the Middle East and their traditions without attaching negative labels to what they studied. He questioned the motives and legitimacy for the invasion of Iraq and his lessons reflected his values. He described one of his typical lessons: "Here's an article, go read it at home and then come back, and we talk about it, or we'd read in class." For his senior class, articles from print and electronic sources made up most of his curriculum. He said, "…in my senior class, that's probably how I'd spend 70 percent of the class, the other 30 percent is them researching a topic and then presenting information, the kind of more

group type work." In John's case, majority of the class time was spent on reading articles and talking about them.

John also used documentary videos for about "20 minutes at a time" on topics that he had chosen for his lessons. He taped some of the *History Channel* shows and PBS's *NOW* programs. He considered the PBS's *NOW* programs to be more sophisticated than the *History Channel* shows and a bit above the grasp of his students. However, he justified using them in his class by arguing that those programs were "more the level" he was "trying to get them [his students] to think at." John did not like the *Military Channel* on cable station and considers it "disturbing that we have a channel devoted to blowing stuff up, you know, like it says a lot about America that we have a channel devoted to the military."

Fred, who taught in a technologically-rich school, was an avid computer user. He considered himself a pacifist and opposed the Iraq War. He felt that his own undergraduate educational experiences did not prepare him well enough about the Middle East. He used the internet to visit various web sites to learn about events in the Middle East. He exposed his students to various sides of the Iraq War debate and used newspaper editorials (pro and con) to teach about this controversial topic. He said, "I use the Internet to get those articles and I'm always looking for new articles." Fred's students completed a "magazine project" too where they spent about a week and a half on researching a topic related to the Middle East and presented their work to class. His students began their magazine projects by looking up information on the internet and finding maps and pictures from the region. As Fred described:

> So they do a contents page where they describe what the article is about. So it's almost like an annotation of what an article would be about on certain topics in the Middle East and they have to find that information on the Internet.

Fred made PowerPoint presentations on various topics like "terrorism" and used them to create interest in his classes. In the context of the post 9-11, it is understandable how misinformation may spread and take a life of its own. For example, prior to the invasion of Iraq, the current Bush Administration alleged that Iraq and 9-11 terrorist attacks were linked (Poll: 70% believe Saddam, 9-11 link, 2003). This research found that teachers were frustrated to find most of their students still believing that Iraq was responsible for the 9-11 attacks.

All the teachers in this study complained about the lack of a good comprehensive textbook about the current Middle East that would be appropriate for their students. For Fred, this meant relying on CNN, as "a middle of the road" political orientation news agency, plus using other documentary programs like *Frontline*. In addition, he used online sources of news like *MSNBC* because they had "a lot of articles" about the Middle East for his students. He taught about the Iraq war because about ten percent of his students joined the military and his students had a high level of interest about the situation in Iraq and the Middle East. As a pacifist, he viewed using the news as a way of getting his students to think about the seriousness of waging wars. He wanted his students to truly understand that the consequences of wars are death and destruction. Fred also used internet news sources to create

assignments for his students that discussed the importance of oil and the tragic sides of the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

Another teacher, Mindy, used stories from the news to keep her students excited about learning. She credited her travel experiences and some of the people she had met in her life as the key influences that shaped her "internationalist" worldview. She believed that the United States could not isolate itself from the rest of the world and needed to see things from other peoples' perspectives too. Consequently, she taught with a goal of exposing her students to viewpoints that were not heard in the mainstream media and went beyond a surface treatment of an issue. This meant that when she taught about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, she exposed her students to the viewpoints of the Israelis and the Palestinians. When her students dismissed Iran's current President Ahmadinejad, as "crazy" and Nassrollah's Hamas as the leader of a terrorist organization, she encouraged them to go beyond the label and dig deeper to investigate the facts and try to see things from new perspectives. Mindy's sense of her role was closely tied to using up-to-date news when teaching about the Middle East. Mindy believed that it was "all about trying to build context…to understand what's really happening in the world today."

Another teacher, Laura who was raised in a middle class family came from a small homogeneous White community of about fourteen thousand people. She had not travelled abroad and felt that her own high school education did not prepare her to understand the Middle East politics because of the lack of exposure to diverse people and ideas when she was growing up. She was determined to give her students the opportunities necessary to experience diverse viewpoints through inquiry, discussion, and other effective teaching methods that were not lecture based.

Laura taped the *NBC Nightly News* and played clips of it in her class because she believed that the power of "connection by visual" should be used in addition to reading about an event. She believed that her students could better understand the lesson and its connection to their out-of-school world. For example, Laura included Dubai in her Middle East unit "just because of the Dubai ports deal" that was getting extensive coverage in the national media and the local press. Her students could learn about it in the news. Eventually Dubai gave control of its port operations to an American company and the leaders of the United Arab Emirates considered this controversy as a sign of "racism and hypocrisy" that discouraged future investments in the United States (Watson, 2006). In her lesson, Laura showed pictures of a ski resort in Dubai and asked her students to guess what they were looking at and if they could locate it. Her students thought that the pictures showed Vegas. She wanted her students to see citizens of the United Arab Emirates as regular human beings who had a lot in common with the Americans. Her goal was to "get the kids to care" and break the negative stereotype that her students had of the Arabs. Here we see the uses and gratification theory in action when she selects this story about Dubai to not only teach content knowledge, but also help students develop a broader perspective to shatter negative stereotyping of the Middle Easterners.

Brandon, who came from a working class background, identified with the democrats who opposed the invasion of Iraq. He challenged the false perception that there was a link between Iraq and the terrorists who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. In his lesson, he reviewed the Bush Administration's reasons for

going to war with Iraq and discredited the legitimacy of the invasion and discussed the consequences of that policy decision for the Middle East and the United States. He said, "Gulf War, I just basically go over it, the reasons why we went in there: Weapons of Mass Destruction so called. The alleged link between al-Qaeda and Iraq. I just sort of blow that apart." He explained that he did not go "too much in-depth" because his students would lose interest. In addition, he was concerned that the articles written on this issue were beyond the reading and comprehension range of his students. To mediate this situation, Brandon used recorded television news to teach. He said, "We watch *CNN Student News* everyday, it's a ten minute news program." This program airs every weeknight at 12:12 A.M. during the school year. Brandon taped the shows daily and used them for his next day's class. Brandon taught in an alternative high school that was designed for students who had not been successful in a regular public school setting. After the morning announcements, he started his class by showing the taped news program. Worksheets and answer keys were provided via CNN website. His rationale for taping the shows was that his students were not "big readers" and this was a way for him to inform them about important world events. From time to time, he provided more information on a particular conflict and involved his students in a discussion about the pros and cons of the U.S. foreign policy and the roots of various conflicts in the world, including the Middle East. He also used the *CNN Student News* daily. Brandon Said,

> …as a way to make sure that they arrive promptly, 'cause we've had tardiness issues. So if they arrive late they don't get credit for it, and if they don't get credit for it then they have to make up the work on Wednesday.

In this case, we see the news program being used to encourage student attendance and expose them to a summary of some news that they would have otherwise missed. In addition, Brandon used selective news clips from the Middle East to talk with his students about the unresolved conflicts between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Amber was an experienced teacher and considered herself to be a "news junkie." She watched the local news, national news (CNN), and PBS news regularly. Amber had a large collection of videos that she had accumulated over her 20 years of teaching. For her Contemporary World Problems class, she used newspaper and magazine articles and surfed the internet for news that "pushed the button." She looked for current high profile controversial issues that had graphic images and made a deliberate effort to include them in her lessons. She believed that images were very important in telling a story because students could "grasp really easily" what was going on. Her students visited a photo bank of images on the internet, showing Muslim women in various degrees of body covering and they compared those images to clothing for traditional Catholic women and other religious groups in the Middle East and Europe. She tried to show the similarities among them and explained how traditions influenced fashion and in turn, the Islamic fashion could be seen as a form of political statement. She also taught about the Iraq war, and the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians "because they're in the news and kids need to be able to understand what they're listening to."

PBS *Frontline* special, *the Muslim Rage*, narrated by Thomas Freedman, and other PBS documentaries were favorite sources of information that informed these

teachers and their students about the Middle East. On the whole, *Frontline* programs on the Middle East were popular among these teachers. Fred summed up the feeling of these teachers the best when he said, "PBS *Frontline* has a couple of really good ones on Iraq this year that are just awesome." All the teachers interviewed listened to the NPR radio news. They also complained about not having enough time to cover the Middle East the way they really wanted to.

These examples of teachers' media use not only show the important role print and electronic sources of information play in providing content and context for what teachers teach, but also highlights the influence of their own background on what and how they teach too. Teachers serve as mediators between the news and the adolescent youth by socializing them into the world of politics. The incorporation of news programs like *CNN Student News* as an updateable curriculum material show their effective reach into social studies classrooms where captive audiences consume the news that teachers have allowed into their classrooms. Teachers select what they want their students to know and provide explanations to help their students make sense of complex issues.

Knowledge is not neutral and these teachers' explanations of the events in the world are influenced by their beliefs. The quality of mediation that occurs in the classrooms between the videos and students influences what students get out of such lessons. Depending on a teacher's own political stance on the Middle East conflicts, we can expect the views presented by the videos to be reinforced or challenged.

"Every Muslim from the Middle East is a terrorist."

Teachers in this study tried to counter their students' negative stereotyped image about the Middle East. I was struck by the unanimous opinion expressed by these teachers about their concerns for the "ignorance and misguided information" their students had about the Middle East and the idea that "Saddam Hussein launched the 9/11 attacks." How can this state of ignorance be explained in terms of media influence on people?

Postcolonial media theory scholars argue that the legacy and domination of colonialism and imperialism in the world hinges upon successful representation of noble and competent Western countries versus weak and incompetent non-Western countries (Said, 1978, 1981; Suleiman, 2001; Foucault, 2001; Fernandez, 1999). In short, in order for the Western-centric worldview to take hold, oppressive knowledge in all its forms need to be internalized by people in order to ensure the domination of one over another. When skin color or other characteristics become the factor to negatively stereotype certain people in the Middle East, one can argue that Orientalism has triumphed.

The Middle East appears to baffle many people. For example, on November 8, 2006, the outgoing Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, referring to the situation in Iraq claimed that the American public simply did not understand the situation there (Baldor, 2006). The teachers I interviewed expressed a similar dilemma. However, they were dismayed by the existence of such persistent ignorance among their students. Laura who taught in a town with a population of about 14,000 people, considered her students to be "fairly close-minded." She attributed that to the lack of

exposure her students had to news "from a Middle Eastern perspective." She argued that this "lack of quality understanding of culture" was due to the perceptions students had picked up from their families. Laura believed that her students were not "cognitively capable of disagreeing with their parents" and consequently adopted their parents' stance on issues as the legitimate one. Laura considered her responsibility to "teach" her students about other ideas and perspectives, because if she did not, they would "probably go on living like that."

Laura considered the "complexity of Middle East" a deterrent to her students' ability to understand that region; particularly because it was so "detached from the realities they live." Laura said that she heard frequently from her students: "Who cares? Why do we need to care about them?" and "Let's just go bomb them all." This situation motivated her to use the Dubai story to show her students another side of the Middle East and move beyond the stereotypes.

Fred who taught in an affluent (middle to upper middle class) school district with 80% white student population believed that his students were not exposed to alternative viewpoints at home and they had a negative image of the Middle Eastern people. He considered negative stereotyping to be the number one challenge he faced when teaching about the Middle East. Fred said:

> Number one, stereotype, absolutely! The stereotype is that every person in the Middle East wears a turban. Every person in the Middle East is a Muslim. Every Muslim from the Middle East is a terrorist. The usual stuff here in the good old U.S. of A.

Lack of background knowledge about the Middle East by students was seen as another major concern that Fred had about his students that led him to challenge their thinking by assigning roles that allowed them to be "journalists for a world affairs magazine." For this assignment, students worked in teams of three or four to report on an issue or a personality from the Middle East and presented their magazine cover to the class.

Sherry was an African American who had spent a few years as a Peace Corp volunteer in Africa. She taught in an urban high school that served students with low socio-economic status. She said that she did not like hearing from her students this question: "Why do they hate us?" She would explain to her students, "That's not the focus of my teaching, but getting at what's happening in the contemporary era, is." She exposed her students to other viewpoints by using primary documents and foreign films. She emphasized map skills and highlighted the contributions of the early African and Middle Eastern civilizations to human development, before teaching about contemporary problems.

Bob, who also taught in an urban high school that served lower socio-economic status students, was encountering a similar problem. In a class discussion, his students were saying: "Those are the rag-heads that are out trying to kill us!" This was a teachable moment for Bob. Bob, ideally, wanted to give his students articles written about the Middle East that were from *The Economist* magazine. However, he did not; because his students had low reading skills. They ended up talking about the situation in Iraq and students did some research on the history of that country.

Brandon, who taught at an alternative high school, expresses a similar problem and to counter his students' ignorance, he required them to "find two news articles from a reputable newspaper, news magazine, or the internet" that he had chosen. He provided a variety of web sites to his students and an easy to follow format that students used for nine weeks to create a "Press Book."

Bob remembered how his views on the Middle East changed by a course he took as a college student. He said, "… I read the book about how the Middle East really isn't all desert, and that's how Hollywood has painted it, or how the Middle East does have cultural diversity, how it's not this one group of people living across the Middle East." At this point in his career, he was encountering a persistent ignorance about the Middle East that appeared to be part of the dominant culture. To counter this ignorance, he showed the film *Promises* and provided a variety of readings about the religions in the Middle East, the Code of Hammurabi, and other old and contemporary issues related to that region.

Rose taught in an urban high school and said that her students came to class with the image of the Middle East as "pretty much violence and desert." She was "happy" when she saw her students' perceptions changed and they started learning about "people's faces, modern cities, variety of cultures and countries there."

These examples show that teachers in this study are faced with a situation where their students do not know much about the Middle East and what they know is negative stereotyped information. This is consistent with the image of the Middle East as a place where oil and religious extremism are found (Wiseman, 2006). These teachers tried to broaden their students' understanding of a few key conflict of interest issues that continue to cause violence and destruction in some parts of the Middle East. To what extent these teachers' efforts are successful, in light of the constant reports of car bombings and killing that happen in Iraq, is questionable. The lack of political will, lack of trust, and absence of compromise to reach lasting peaceful solutions to outstanding grievances in the Middle East will only brew more violence for years to come and the image of Muslim terrorists will not erase any time soon from the public consciousness.

Implications

This study suggests that the persistent ignorance about the Middle East and the negative stereotyping are reflections of the dominant culture and the media plays a major role in perpetuating this phenomenon. We have seen examples of the effective reach of the media into American schools where social studies teachers are mediating between the headline news of the day and their students. In order to better understand the nature of teachers' mediation (enforcing the news or interrogating it) further studies are needed.

Through the lens of uses and gratifications theory we have seen what teachers self report about their media consumption. In addition, we have seen the influences of their background and experiences on their news selection as curriculum. This study has clearly shown that these social studies teachers are fighting an uphill battle in their classrooms to replace the superficial stereotyping of the Middle Eastern people and culture with a new knowledge that is grounded in promoting understanding and

taking multiple perspectives that may include Middle Eastern views as well. The lasting effect of these teachers' efforts is uncertain at best.

Demystifying the Middle East appears to be a herculean task for teachers in a 24/7 news environment that reports negatively about the Middle East. Are social studies teachers engaged in a futile effort to teach about a cradle of human civilization that is mystified beyond reason and comprehension?

Some have good reasons to feel discouraged after seeing years go by with no lasting peace agreements between the Israelis and the Palestinians and worry about escalating violence in Afghanistan and Iraq or even be alarmed about a potential military conflict between Iran and Israel or the United States. What happens in the Middle East has ramifications in places like Indonesia that has the largest Muslim population outside the Middle East (Hunt, 2006). Indeed, the big picture appears to be gloomy.

The silver lining in this picture is the fact that these social studies teachers take their work seriously and promote inquiry to uncover the roots of the problem that are buried in the sensationalized headline news of the day. Teachers' ability to access and interrogate official and unofficial knowledge, whether it comes from the White House or foreign web sites, is an important pillar of democracy that ought to be safeguarded in these uncertain times. Social studies teachers continue to interpret and explain the news to their students as best as they understand the situation. Implied in their work, these teachers promote informed decision making that are essential for effective citizenship in a liberal democracy. So long as inquiry for the truth is not sacrificed in favor of a dogma, whether in the classroom or at the United Nations Security Council by Americans, then there is hope for advancing the cause of liberal democratic education in the United States.

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