Representing Islam in the Wake of September 11: A Comparison of US Television and CNN Online Messageboard Discourses

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ABSTRACT   *This paper contrasts the immediate representations of Islam on US television and CNN's online messageboard by focusing on the noun phrases for 'Islamic' used in both media fora from September 11 to 16. The study found some notable congruities and differences in the associations made with Islam in each context. It considers these findings in terms of previous research on the representation of Islam and terrorism in 'Western' media; the official insistence that 'we' are not at war with Islam; and media theories of 'framing' and 'reception'.*

Keywords: discourse analysis, Islam, online messageboard, television news, terrorism, media reception.

Introduction

Since September 11, much has been made—among the pundit classes at least—of the so-called 'clash of civilizations' between 'the West' and 'Islam'.[1] Yet, one is unlikely to hear such sweeping, apocalyptic rhetoric employed by anyone in official authority. In fact, with some notable exceptions (President Bush's early 'crusade' comment is one example), the official rhetorical response from the start has been to avoid stark polarities between 'us' and (the Islamic) 'them', while nevertheless firmly and paradoxically characterizing the conflict as one in which 'you are either with us or against us'. This rhetorical and political dilemma can perhaps be understood as the problem of 'naming' the September 11 attacks, which, bound as it is to an extreme invocation of an Islamic creed, consequently has the potential to castigate a whole culture or, at best, deeply polarize 'their' culture's relationship with 'ours'. It is how this dilemma was played out in two distinct media discursive contexts, television and messageboard, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks which is the subject of this paper.

Using the lexical analysis software *Wordsmith*, the cross-media comparisons are based on an analysis of the following two textual corpora:

1. a 4.18 million word corpus of transcripts from five US-based television networks: CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox;[2] and
2. a CNN messageboard corpus of 2.39 million words. This messageboard was set up to facilitate a discussion amongst CNN's 'community members' within an hour of the September 11 attacks and had a total of 30,836 individual messages posted to it between 10:06 am, September 11 and 0:00 September 17, all of which are included.

At the outset, some explanation for our concentration on noun phrases is necessary. In this case, the noun phrases studied were all two-word clusters in which 'Islamic' was used as an adjective. This has obvious limitations as an analytical approach (for instance, recording the phrase 'Islamic militant', while excluding the phrase 'militant Islamic'). However, it has the advantage of allowing us, in a simple, structured way, to analyze the use of the word 'Islamic' over the course of the week, and thereby examine how Islam was represented across two broad textual samples.

The Representation of Islam in the Aftermath of September 11

Previous research on terrorism has shown that one of the most striking features of mass media coverage of terrorist acts (we know of no previous study in a messageboard context) has been the recurrent use of certain ethnic identifiers to create a cognitive model of terrorism and, in so doing, account for the characteristics of the terrorist type (dogmatic, cowardly, superstitious, etc.) by aligning them with those of the broader culture from which the terrorists emerge.[3] Hence, they are identifiers that conform to certain cultural stereotypes: models of the 'other' propagated in one obvious way by the co-occurrence of particular identifying labels with negative evaluative terms such as 'terrorist' and 'militant'.[4]

Here we examine this feature of September 11 coverage by isolating all the noun phrases headed by the term 'Islamic'. The purpose of this cross-media analysis is twofold:

- to look at the immediate lexical company of the word 'Islamic' in US television discourse and thereby gain an impression of the cognitive map of Islam which dominates therein; and
- to compare these lexical choices with those circulating in the discourse of the CNN messageboard.

Although, this paper is effectively an amalgam of two studies—one of US television, the other of the US-hosted CNN messageboard—the results are more clearly presented under three headings:

- congruent 'naming';
- divergent 'naming'; and
- conclusions

Congruent Naming

The number of noun phrases headed by the word 'Islamic' in the television corpus was 468 and 1,582 in the messageboard corpus. Tables 1 and 2 detail the 15 most frequently used noun phrases in each corpus.

Table 1. The 15 most popularly used noun phrases from the TV transcript corpus where Islamic is used as an adjective

Noun phrase	Television corpus[a]	
	Frequency	Percentage of all
1 Islamic fundamentalists(s)	51	10.90%
2 Islamic jihad	33	7.05%
3 Islamic world	26	5.56%
4 Islamic militant(s)	25	5.34%
5 Islamic extremist(s)	24	5.13%
6 Islamic group(s)	24	5.13%
7 Islamic country/ies	24	4.49%
8 Islamic faith	17	3.63%
9 Islamic society	15	3.21%
10 Islamic center(s)	15	3.21%
11 Islamic radical(s)	14	2.99%
12 Islamic terrorist(s)	14	2.99%
13 Islamic nation(s)	13	2.78%
14 Islamic community/ies	11	2.35%
15 Islamic conference(s)	10	2.14%

[a] Singular, plural and minor mis-spelt variations of all words have been aggregated so as to give a clearer picture of the primary nouns with which Islam is associated. This is not to ignore the likely use and significance of singular and plural variations to represent either monolithic or pluralistic views of Islam (Islamic culture versus cultures for instance), but merely in keeping with our primary task of outlining dominant word associations across a broad textual sample. Where minor mis-spellings occurred, a decision was made to include the word as an additional use of the correctly spelt form—e.g. 'fundementalist' was interpreted as 'fundamentalist'. Where it was unclear which word was being mis-spelt no such change was made—e.g. fundamental.

Table 2. The 15 most popularly used noun phrases from CNN's online messageboard where Islamic is used as an adjective

Noun phrase	Messageboard corpus[a]	
	Frequency	Percentage of all
1 Islamic terrorist(s)	174	11.00%
2 Islamic fundamentalist(s)	147	9.29%
3 Islamic jihad	90	5.69%
4 Islamic fundamentalism	80	5.06%
5 Islamic extremist(s)	69	4.36%
6 Islamic countries	60	3.79%
7 Islamic world	54	3.41%
8 Islamic people(s)/persons	42	2.65%
9 Islamic nation(s)	42	2.65%
10 Islamic terrorism	38	2.40%
11 Islamic faith	37	2.34%
12 Islamic group(s)	32	2.02%
13 Islamic religion	28	1.96%
14 Islamic militant(s)	27	1.71%
15 Islamic movements(s)	24	1.52%

The most obvious congruity in the findings is that, leaving aside the question of ranking, there is a high degree of commonality across the corpora. A total of ten noun phrases [Islamic fundamentalist(s); jihad; world; militant(s); extremist(s); group(s); faith; countries; terrorist(s); nation(s)] appear in the top 15 of both corpora, accounting for a total of 53% of the television corpus and 46.26% of the messageboard corpus. These figures also indicate a significant cross-media concordance of 'descriptive' (faith, nation, etc.) and 'evaluative' [fundamentalist(s), militant(s), etc.] characterizations of Islam, though we would suggest that the value of Picard and Adams' dichotomous classification is less clear in the case of noun phrases as nebulous and politically contentious as 'Islamic world' and 'Islamic countries'.[5] The high cross-media incidence of the phrase 'Islamic world' is worth focusing on for other reasons, for it is clearly the type of 'false universal', or mythic cognitive map of Islam so consistently rejected by people like Edward Said.[6] Yet, for all the alleged academic influence of Said's Orientalist critique,[7] the kernel of its conclusions have—if these results are anything to go by—clearly not percolated through to the arena of popular discourse.

There are other notable congruities outside the scope of the top 15—particularly some interesting shared textual absences. For instance, despite all the speculation of a 'clash of civilizations', the phrase 'Islamic civilization' is used on a mere two occasions (the plural is not used at all) and both are on the messageboard. This is, we suggest, revealing, because in some manifest, though perhaps superficial way, it does indicate a reluctance on the part of participants in both discursive fora to frame the events of September 11 in such stark terms. However, the findings suggest other, more polarized pictures too, and one noteworthy cross-media void is the absence of any references to either 'Islamic moderate/moderates'—in contrast to the myriad references to 'extremist(s)', 'fundamentalist(s)', etc.

Divergent Naming

It is the differences between both media discourses which invite most analysis. We are particularly concerned with the relationship between television 'news frames' and audience 'reception' (which, although novel, is our conception of the discursive activity of the messageboard). The first striking difference is the much higher incidence of 'Islamic' noun phrases on the messageboard. The size of the messageboard corpus is significantly smaller than the TV equivalent (2.39 compared to 4.18 million words), but there are over three times as many noun phrases used on the messageboard than on television: 468 compared to 1,582. This may reflect a greater propensity for essentialist reasoning—through the use of neatly couched noun phrases—among messageboard contributors. It is a style of reasoning than can be explained by other situational factors too: such as the restrictions on the time contributors have to post messages; and their desire to express immediate empathy through the process of self-expression, which perhaps oblige them to make their point—and get to the point—a lot quicker than their TV discursive counterparts.

The most significant difference in the cross-media top 15 is the relative ranking of 'Islamic terrorist(s)': number one in the messageboard corpus with a total of 174 uses (11.00%), but used only 14 times (2.99%) in the television corpus. This suggests that irrespective of how the events were being precisely 'named' and 'framed' on US television (coverage that one would expect a high

proportion, if not a majority, of the posters to be in 'receipt' of), the recurring association of Islamic with terrorist(s) was the most popular definer amongst messageboard participants. Similarly, the phrase 'Islamic terrorism' is also used comparatively higher on the messageboard (38 times/2.4% compared to seven times/1.5%).

There is also a much higher incidence of what appear to be neutral 'descriptive' characterizations of Islam—Islamic center; society; group(s); faith; conference; community—in the television corpus. Some of these differences can be easily explained. For instance, the 15 uses of 'Islamic center(s)' are all references to attacks on US-based Islamic centers and allude to calls for tolerance from a variety of political and religious leaders. Other 'findings' can be deceptive however. For instance, while the high ranking of 'Islamic society' (15 times; 3.21%) might suggest its reference to a broader international Islamic society, 13 of these are actually references to Dr Muzammil Siddiqi, Imam of the Islamic Society of North America. Similarly, of the 11 references to 'Islamic community/ies', only one refers to a non Anglo-American community (eight US based/two British based). In this regard, the phrase 'Islamic conference(s)' (ten times) is perhaps most telling, for although it would presumably match Picard and Adams' criteria for a merely 'descriptive' term, it is actually used on a majority of occasions (six) to refer to a conference where Osama Bin Laden was the most noteworthy delegate.

What is also comment-worthy is the much higher incidence of what critical linguists would call 'nominalization' on the messageboard (i.e. the process whereby predicates and adjectives are realized/used as nouns).[8] The starkest example of this is the high ranking of the phrase 'Islamic fundamentalism' [80 times; 5.06%—used only five times (1.07%) in the television corpus]. This act of nominalization is interesting because it collocates Islam and fundamentalism in a way that is less obviously achieved by the collocation of 'Islamic' with a particular—and at least specified—fundamentalist(s). In other words, it is a device that lends itself towards abstraction, and whose relative favor amongst messageboard participants is also evident in the ranking of 'Islamic terrorism' (see above), and 'Islamic extremism', which features 15 times on the messageboard, but is not used at all in the television corpus.

Conclusions

As previous studies have suggested, our findings indicate a strong cross-media collocation of 'Islamic' with a litany of definers as unfavorable as terrorist(s); militant(s); fundamentalist(s); radical(s); jihad; struggle; extremist(s); militant(s).[9] It is a characterization of Islam that is particularly evident in a messageboard context, where it is even more frequently collocated with negative evaluative terms such as terrorist(s), extremist(s), fundamentalist(s), fundamentalism and jihad, radicalism. Of course, given the context of the discussions and the US bias of the sample, these dominant associations are hardly a great surprise: one would not expect the week's discourse to yield a catalogue of neutral and positive Islamic definers. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the dominance of a particular cultural stereotype in both media fora, and their even greater usage and virulence[10] on the messageboard, less bound, as it is, by television's obligation to frame events in official, and perhaps somewhat euphemized terms.[11]

The negative stereotypes do have their antidotes, however. There may be a dominant discursive representation of Islam, but it is not a monolithic one, and

there is a broad range of favorable word associations for Islamic in both media fora. But, as we have already suggested with regard to television, what is interesting about many of these positive definers is that they are predominantly used to represent 'our' American Muslims. Although this can be read as affirming the official insistence that this is 'not a war against Islam', does suggest other forms of it polarized representations around an American and international Islamic axis.

Broadcast and print media discourse about terrorism (and specifically the cultures to which the terroristic label is most regularly applied) is often criticized for its failure to be self-scanning; and to notice how the evaluative and de-legitimatory language it deploys colludes with the official interests of the state. What our findings suggest is that this can work in pluralistic ways too, and when it is in the interests of the state to de-emphasize what, in the post-attacks circumstances, will be an inevitable de-legitimation of the 'other', television media will work to do just that, but within what are circumscribed and ultimately hegemonic grounds. In other words, US television did not rush to explicitly cast the events of September 11 in terms of a speculative 'war against Islam', but, we suggest, that the traces of such a 'clash' are nonetheless apparent—and perhaps inevitable given the scale of the attacks, the near instant conclusion that they had been perpetrated by someone of an Islamic origin and television's insatiable desire to frame news events in confrontational terms. Where we see the clash taking a more overt form is in the interpretation of events first 'received' and then commented upon by the messageboard participants—which, given the understandably emotive response of many posters and the looser, non-litigious, discursive environment in which they communicate, should also come as no great surprise. But what they also suggest is that any official deployment of an 'us and them' rhetoric generates dangerous implicatures, which, though they aim for a different target, will invariably be used by many to defame a whole cultural entity or entities, and crystallize a popular[12] view of Islam that has little, besides *our own*, to redeem it.

Notes and References

1. Most famously advanced in Samuel P. Huntingdon, 'The clash of civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, Summer, 1993.
2. Using the search words 'terrorism OR world trade center', the transcripts were downloaded from the Lexis-Nexis database (see www.lexis-nexis.com) and subsequently 'cleaned' so as to ensure no double entry of transcripts relating to Islam. The breakdown of word counts by television network is as follows: ABC (1,212,242), CNN (1,106,712), NBC (892,807), CBS (621,588) and Fox News (347,442).
3. See: Els Volders, 'Terrorism and the media', *Communicatie 26*, 1, 1997, pp. 19–29; Gabriel Weimann, 'Terrorists or freedom fighters? Labeling terrorism in the Israeli press', *Political Communication and Persuasion*, 2, 4, 1985, pp. 433–45; Miguel Rodrigo Alsina, 'Discourses about terrorism', *Semiotica*, 81, 3–4, 1990, pp. 211–19.
4. Much research on the media labeling of terrorism has been based around the distinction between nominal characterization and descriptive characterization (see Robert Picard and Paul Adams, 'Characterization of acts and perpetrators in three elite US daily newspapers', *Political Communication and Persuasion*, 4, 1987). In the case of September 11, 'attack' would constitute a nominal characterization of the event whereas 'terrorist attack' is evaluative and judgmental and therefore a form of descriptive characterization.
5. See: Picard and Adams, *op. cit*.
6. See: Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Vintage, New York, 1997.

7. See: F. Gregory Gause III, 'Who lost middle Eastern studies?', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2002.

8. See: Roger Fowler, *Language in the News—Discourse and Ideology in the Press*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991.

9. Edward Said, 'The public role of writers and intellectuals', *The Nation*, September 17, 2001.

10. Two short examples will make the point: 'To the Islamic terrorist vermins and its supporters. USA is stronger than your filthy religion'; 'The next scenes of charred and dismembered bodies will be of Islamic terrorists and their supporters. This is grim business, but it must be done!'.

11. See: A. Schmid, 1993.

12. The use of the term 'popular' needs to be qualified in this context. We have no profile of the contributors to the CNN messageboard. We know only that they have access to a computer and that the limited demographic information which is available about daytime computer-users (as most of them were) suggests that a majority of them are white, educated office workers. On the basis of this, one could posit they are representative of an elitist discourse of their own and, consequently, have a dubious entitlement to the moniker of the 'popular'. For information of demographics of Web usage see Georgia Tech's research at http://www.cc.gatech.edu/gvu/research.html.