



Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

The production of knowledge on women, gender, and
Islamic cultures in the field of cultural diplomacy

Other

How to cite:

Ware, Vron (2009). The production of knowledge on women, gender, and Islamic cultures in the field of cultural diplomacy. The Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures (on-line edition), BRILL, Leiden, NL.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2009 BRILL

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://brillonline.nl/public/products#ewic>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Micropedia

This entry examines the production of knowledge on Muslim women in the emerging field of public diplomacy, looking at terms such as 'soft power' where culture is instrumentalized as a tool of foreign policy. It focuses on the significance of gender and culture in mediating diplomatic relations between Anglophone and Muslim-majority countries, particularly since geo-political shifts in 2001. This phenomenon is contextualised in two ways. First, it is well established that questions of gender and sexuality have long defined antagonist relations between Islamic and Christian cultures. Second, particular constructions of Muslim women, particularly those that indicate rigid patriarchal laws and values, are shown to have played a role in mobilizing western publics to support military occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Since 2001, the strategies employed to influence foreign publics as a corollary of military force, particularly young people in Muslim-majority countries, have become ever more diffuse, summed up by the clichéd 'battle for hearts and minds'.

Subject words: public diplomacy; cultural diplomacy; soft power; international relations; representation of Muslim women; colonialism; racism; media; Afghanistan; orientalism; feminism and imperialism; Frantz Fanon; youth; facebook diplomacy; digital technology; Web 2.0

Clash of Civilizations

Feminist scholarship over the past two decades has demonstrated that the struggle to improve women's lives has played a strategic role in the history of colonial missions to civilize people marked as heathen or unchristian. In part this can be traced to one of Euro-American feminism's founding arguments: that the quality, character or level of a civilization can be measured by the way it treats its women – a view shared, incidentally, by the influential Islamic fundamentalist theorist Sayyid Qutb (Euben, 1999: 64). Today the case for new forms of imperialist aggression can be made more readily if the evil posed by the enemy is linked to their oppression of women.

The so-called 'clash of civilizations' which underpinned the 'War on Terror' instigated by US President Bush in 2001 summoned up a fundamental incompatibility between Christian and Islamic cultures. In this scenario western modern freedoms were ranged against oriental cultural traditions represented by veiled women and honour killings, relying on a notion of Islam as a timeless, homogenous religion impervious to change but in desperate need of modernisation. At the same time, indigenous women's movements in many countries, regardless of the contexts and conditions in which they develop, are often tainted by association with a Western imperialist legacy and neo-colonising agenda.

Well before the geopolitical climate shifted in 2001, factors such as the rise

of Political Islam impacted on home-grown variants of racism to produce new levels of intolerance towards Muslim settler communities in Europe and North America, and a readiness to see the entire Middle East as a hotbed of terrorism. This phenomenon is expressed in different but related ways in each country, but there is inevitably one unifying theme: the question of incompatible cultures fixed in 'tradition' on one side, and 'modernity' on the other. At the heart of this insidious 'culture talk' there is a consistent emphasis on questions of sexuality and women's rights (Mamdani, 2000).

History of Propaganda

This entry argues from a feminist perspective that it is important to track the production and circulation of ideas about gender and sexuality in Islamic cultures as an aspect of contemporary international relations. The term 'infowar' refers not just to the convergence of the military, the government and the corporate media in shaping public opinion within and across national borders. It also acknowledges the way that information is prepared and delivered as a corollary to other forms of 'strategic communication', including military action. A prime example can be found in the management of 24 hour news channels, and the application of spin, distortion, omission, and bias. Nancy Snow has been a consistent critic of this, for example in *Information War: American Propaganda, Free Speech and Opinion Control Since 9/11* (2003).

The term 'propaganda', understood as persuasive information targeted at

particular audiences, has a particular history within European statecraft. It was notably used by the British during the 1914-1918 war to expound the prospect of the 'clash of civilizations' between Atlantic enlightenment and Prussian barbarism in order to mobilize waning public support for the war. Although discredited, it subsequently became associated with the work of Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud and reputedly 'the father of spin', who proposed that propaganda had to be an essential element of governance if chaos was to be averted: 'The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society'. (1928, 37).

By the 1930s some European governments, notably Italy and Germany, were employing culturalist arguments, shaped by fascist ideologies, to assert their respective contributions to civilization. The British, alarmed that this threatened their geopolitical interests in the East and in South America, accepted the need for a cultural element in their own foreign policy, particularly if it offered a means to promote the empire as a symbol of democracy and liberty. The British Council was founded in the mid 1930s amid arguments that the country should refrain from 'propaganda wars' and follow the French example by influencing cultural institutions on the ground. It was well known that the French had long subsidised schools and universities in North Africa and the Near East as well as hospitals and agricultural institutions.

The United States did not engage significantly in this sphere of foreign policy until the Cold War. The representation of a vibrant, modern New World culture versus established Russian and Eastern European arts and civilisation was an important zone of conflict between communist and capitalist systems. This is encapsulated in Frances Stonor Saunders' book *Who Paid the Piper?* which documents the role of the CIA not only in promoting artists and performers in the service of U.S. power but also in reaching out to persecuted cultural activists in the USSR. (Saunders, 1999). At the start of the 21st century the phrase 'cultural diplomacy' re-emerged as an adjunct of foreign policy, often mistakenly confused with the term 'soft power', a concept first proposed by Joseph Nye to describe non-military or non-coercive methods of persuasion and co-option (Nye, 2004).

During the Bush administration, cultural diplomacy was officially defined as the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding. This approach demonstrates the heavy-handed, top-down approach to managing cultural relations. For example, in 2005 Karen Hughes, one of Bush's closest personal advisers, was appointed as the Undersecretary of State Responsible for Public Diplomacy, an ill-fated department headed largely by women. Along with Laura Bush, she was a founding member of the United States Afghan Women's Council (USAWC) which was set up in 2002 as an adjunct to military operations in Afghanistan. Hughes' mission consisted largely of educational exchanges and

schemes to send cultural envoys and ambassadors round the world, lecturing foreign audiences on subjects ranging from public health to exhorting the benefits of US style democracy. In one example, Hughes addressed an audience of 500 women in Saudi Arabia where she expressed the hope that Saudi women would be able to drive and 'fully participate in society' much as they do in her country. One woman responded: "The general image of the Arab woman is that she isn't happy, Well, we're all pretty happy." (Ware 2006)

In 2009 President Obama addressed the subject of relations with the Muslim world in his inaugural speech and dismantled the office of public diplomacy set up by his predecessor. He gave his first official interview to the Arab television station Al-Arabiya, emphasising that 'the United States has a stake in the well-being of the Muslim world.' (Grand & Lorde 2009; Snow 2009) While these developments have implications for many other regions of the world, including China and Africa, and are beyond the scope of this article, the next section will look briefly at the way that representations of gender in Islamic cultures have shaped imperialism in previous historical periods.

Targeting women

In his famous essay 'Algeria Unveiled' Frantz Fanon offered an analysis of the colonizers' attitude towards the veil in the context of their desire to destroy the structure of Algerian society. He wrote that the occupation forces mobilized their 'most powerful and varied resources' (1989, 37) first to explain and document the

situation of women, and then to rescue them from the domination of their menfolk. This strategy of targeting women was not new in itself. It was in fact entirely in keeping with the way that European colonizers, including feminists, regularly condemned indigenous practices that were deemed barbaric towards women and antithetical to Christian standards. However, what made Fanon's analysis more profound was his naming of the sheer array of forces focused on gender relations, starting with the collusion of academics and local administrators. Once the situation of women had been identified as an appropriate target of colonial intervention, a whole new structure of operations came into effect:

Mutual aid societies and societies to promote solidarity with Algerian women sprung up in great number... This was a period of effervescence, of putting into application a whole technique of infiltration, in the course of which droves of social workers and women directing charitable works descended on the Arab quarters.' (38)

Fanon's analysis, though now outdated in many ways, is important for two reasons. First, it offered directions for subsequent feminist and postcolonial critiques of imperialism in the second half of the 20th century. This scholarship was useful in challenging the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan which, from the very start, was inextricably linked to a program of liberating women from Islamic fundamentalism in the name of 'Enduring Freedom.' However, Fanon also recognised that the colonial project entailed a convergence of academic

(‘scientific’), political, military, governmental and ostensibly humanitarian forces directed at liberating Algerian women from ‘medieval’ and ‘barbaric’ customs. His ability to see the connection between a range of interventions targeted at women needs to be understood in the context of contemporary global security policies, specifically feminist critiques of human rights discourse and practice.

Fanon would have been well aware that since the publication of *The Arabian Nights*, novels, memoirs, travel writing and other forms of cultural production emerging from Europe and the US were obsessed with describing sexual practices and gender relations within Islamic cultures (Hopwood, 1999). However, a more precise example of the recent use of academic fieldwork by political power is provided by the book, *The Arab Mind* by anthropologist Raphael Patai, first published in 1976 and reissued in 2002. An introduction to the recent edition by retired US army colonel Norvell B. DeAtkine, who worked with Psychological Operations in Iraq in 2003, cements the conviction held by neo-imperialists that Arab culture was knowable across a range of different regional and national space, and that any attempt to intervene in the politics of the region had to reckon with the mindset of ‘the Arab’ in order to be successful. The book covered every aspect of social life and culture, including Arab child-rearing practice and ‘The Realm of Sex’. Although Patai takes pains to emphasise the wide variation of practices within the Arab world, he is able to generalise authoritatively with sentences such as: ‘Local and individual variations aside, the general situation in the Arab family is that it is the father who is severe, stern,

and authoritarian, while the mother is, by contrast, loving and compassionate.’
(2002, 27)

Most recently, popular titles such as *Princess: a true story of life behind the veil in Saudi Arabia*, the international bestseller by Jean Sasson first published in 1993, *The Bookseller of Kabul* by Norwegian war reporter Åsne Seierstad (2003), *Reading Lolita in Teheran* by Azar Nafisi (2003), and *Inside the Kingdom: my life in Saudi Arabia* by Carmen bin Ladin (2005), all of which featured heavily veiled women on their front covers, indicate an obsessive interest in the experiences of Muslim women as victims of harsh, often barbaric, patriarchal customs.

Although the commercial success of these type of books cannot be attributed to government agencies such as the CIA, their resilience provides an index of how far the interests of the global publishing industry have merged with the official business of national security. (Zine, Taylor and Davis 2007; Ware 2010) Looking more widely at the circulation of knowledge about women in Islamic cultures within foreign policy and international relations, this entry will now consider the development of public diplomacy (PD) .

The Spectrum of Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is widely referred to as ‘the influence business’ (Fisher and Bröckerhoff 2008) or ‘all that a nation does to explain itself to the world.’

(Schneider 2007: 147) The term refers to the highly complex management of relationships between countries, regions and political blocs, but it is inevitably

determined by the changing framework of world politics, as well as influenced by the development of digital communication technologies (including satellite broadcasting) and global economic patterns in the 21st century. Although this varies from one country to another, the fact that governments are now competing with privately-owned and corporate media conglomerations indicates how far they have ceded control of the flow of ideas and cultural expression. Far from abandoning efforts to influence targeted publics abroad, however, the strategies employed to represent national security interests have become ever more diffuse.

This pattern can be demonstrated in the revision of British foreign policy in the period immediately following the Bush-Blair coalition in 2001. In June 2006 an official report redefined PD to include a wide variety of operations aimed at improving understanding of, and influence for, the United Kingdom in a manner consistent with governmental goals, whether short or longer term. This new field of diplomatic activity involves the participation of organizations that are not only resolutely non-governmental, but also culturally suspicious of or even hostile to official foreign policy. These include groups linked to diasporas which are seen as providing language skills, cultural knowledge, political insight and human intelligence, despite their obviously partisan views. Institutions such as the British Council and the BBC play a particularly effective role since both are funded by the UK government but declare an 'arms length' distance in order to protect their independent status.

In the light of this new strategic policy, the British Council - which sees itself as one of the world's leading cultural relations' organisations - restructured its own sphere of operations in order to support new activities in the Gulf region (including Iraq), the near East and North Africa. The New Arabic Books project, aimed at translating Arabic literature into English and promoting reader development in the region, signalled corresponding interest from the Anglophone and Arabic publishing industry hoping to target new audiences under the auspices of cultural exchange. While the explanation for the absence of mutual translation merits an entry in its own right, the initial signs are that the new commercial and artistic interest in Arabic literature reflects a more sophisticated approach to gender relations in the Arabic-speaking world. However, it is important to view this field within the broader paradigm of PD. For instance, titles such as *Girls of Riyadh (Banat Al Riyadh)* translated and published by Penguin in the US (2007) and the UK (2008) claimed to offer the authentic voice of Saudi youth, adept at manoeuvring within and outside the local norms. As well as indicating a shift in marketing strategies, the promotion of author Raja Alsanea as cultural emissary suggests that the audience for tales of sexuality and repression within the Muslim-majority world might be changing too (Ware 2010). This development demands an ever sharper feminist analysis of the centrality of sexuality and gender in international politics.

The BBC meanwhile has also moved its resources into the region by launching the first publicly-funded global TV news channel, BBC Arabic, in 2008.

The following year saw the launch of BBC Persian, a daily eight hour service, intended for audiences in Iran, Afghanistan, and the wider region. BBC Arabic is competing with over 800 new satellite TV channels emerging across the Arabic-speaking world, mostly emanating from the Gulf, including MTV Arabia, a joint venture between MTV Networks and Dubai-based multimedia shingle Arab Media Group launched in 2007.

The proliferation of new media outlets has proved a challenge for analysts attempting to keep up with 'contemporary mediated culture' in the region, according to the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*. (Sreberny 2008). There has been a rapid convergence of form, function and technology: 'with broadcasting and narrowcasting over the internet and with mobile telephony as conduits of personal and public messages.' (8-9) Added to this, the political implications of Web 2.0. and the potential for social-networking tools such as Facebook and Bluetooth highlight the increasing agency of young people to affect change in their own environments, a development which has not gone unnoticed by the US government.

Jared Cohen is a key figure in articulating the opportunities for US public diplomacy strategies created by this rapidly changing new media environment. In his book *Children of Jihad* (subtitled 'a young American's travels among the youth of the Middle East') he argued that young people from Lebanon to Iran were using internet-based technology and mobile phones in comparable ways to their peers in the US – a particularly significant point given that 70% of the

population in the region are under 30 (2007). His book concludes: 'They are the ones who can be reached by breaking down the traditional means of communication and speaking a language so that this generation everywhere can communicate their hopes and ideals...' (274) Cohen was subsequently appointed to the US government in the Office of Policy Planning, where he was given responsibility for counter-radicalization, youth and education, public diplomacy, Muslim world outreach, and North Africa. In this role he represents one of the most consistent voices urging the US government to target public diplomacy strategy in the digital environment and is responsible for introducing terms such as 'Facebook diplomacy' or 'dorm room diplomacy', referring to transnational communication among college students.

Unlike previous diplomatic initiatives, however, Cohen's version emphasises that communication must not simply represent the interests of American youth. He argues that the new tools are invaluable to US diplomacy because they facilitate young people living with oppressive regimes in their efforts to challenging out-dated laws and values. In one post he wrote: 'In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are using online social networks to petition for driving rights and are uploading onto YouTube videos of themselves driving in the rural areas. In Egypt, young people are using Facebook to stand up for their political rights and organize nationwide strikes.' (Cohen, 2009)

The Obama administration has been proactive in making use of the digital environment in Iraq. In April 2009 the US Department of State sponsored a

delegation of representatives from the American technology industry in a mission to Baghdad in order to advise Iraqi counterparts on how to 'build local capacity, foster greater transparency and accountability, build upon anti-corruption efforts, promote critical thinking in the classroom, scale-up civil society, and further empower local entities and individuals by providing the tools for network building.' (Wood 2009). The visit was endorsed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who has claimed to be a fervent advocate of emerging new media and communication technologies in the development of US public diplomacy.

Afghanistan and Beyond

This article has sketched out the rapidly changing terrain of PD as it is currently practiced by national governments, with a particular emphasis on gender and culture as strategic areas of operation. The topic is particularly relevant in Afghanistan which continues to be occupied by a US-led multinational coalition arguing amongst themselves about effective strategies to vanquish hostile forces and promote sustainable development there under the aegis of functioning democracy and security. In terms of the politics of gender and reconstruction, the work of foreign NGOs encamped in the country are inevitably part of the military and diplomatic occupation, regardless of their political orientation. One report on the precarious state of humanitarian, post-conflict intervention cited an telling comment from an Afghan woman leader in 2005: "What I see is that most

people translate things from other languages and bring these things to Afghanistan. In Afghanistan no one asked what gender means. This word, it is different everywhere. For us, it's important to know and to find out for ourselves what gender means in Afghanistan." (Abirafeh,2005: 13.)

Since 2007 the US military has engaged the services of anthropologists and other social scientists in an effort to target local civilian populations through counter-insurgency operations. This is known as the Human Terrain System, first proposed by Robert Gates, who was retained in the new Obama administration. The aim is to improve socio-cultural literacy in the interests of 'stabilization, security, transition and reconstruction' (SSTR). Described as 'armed social work' by Australian counter-insurgency expert David Kilcullen, anthropologists are employed to work with military units, advising and interpreting on issues of tribal culture and governance, including resolving local disputes. However, the death of two young academics and numerous security issues have led to calls to abandon the programme.

The extent of the failure of the NATO occupation remains to be seen as the conflict escalates into neighbouring Pakistan and civilians continue to die as a result of predator drone attacks. However, the importance of representing the war as a humanitarian venture in which the rights of Afghan women are paramount re-emerged during the media outcry in spring 2009 when President Karzai was found to have signed a proposed Shia Personal Status Law that, according to UN reports, legalised rape within marriage and banned wives from

leaving their homes without their husbands' permission. Karzai, who was publicly linked to Laura Bush's intervention on behalf of Afghan women in 2002, subsequently agreed to review the law when NATO leaders, mindful of western public opinion that judged the success of the war partly in terms of the perceived liberation of women, pointed out that occupying soldiers could not be expected to risk their lives to defend a government that knowingly infringed human rights.

Finally, the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman is an intrinsic element of Israeli PD, especially in propaganda that depicts Israel as committed to human rights and democracy. The blog Muzzlewatch, which tracks the 'stifling of open debate on US-Israeli foreign policy' described a demonstration held outside the Durban II conference against racism in April 2009. Ostensibly a student protest against the UN sanctioned notion of human rights on the grounds that the organization is hostage to political expediency, the openly pro-Israel demonstrators held posters that read 'Demand Human Rights' with a graphic image of a Muslim being buried in preparation for being stoned. Blogger Cecilie Surasky noted that the picture was taken from publicity stills for the independent film *The Stone*, (directed by Mahnaz Tahnazi in 1994), a picture frequently used out of context to represent fundamentalist Islamic practices (Surasky 2009).

References

Abirafeh, L. 2005. "Lessons from Gender-Focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan...Learned?" Freidrich Ebert Stiftung, quoted in Ware 2006.

Alsanea, R. 2008. *Girls of Riyadh*. trans. Marilyn Booth, London: Penguin.

Edward Bernays. 1928. *Propaganda*. Brooklyn: Ig Publishing.

Cohen, J.. 2007. *Children of Jihad: a young American's travels among the youth of the Middle East*. New York: Gotham Books.

Euben, R.L. 1999. *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fanon, F. 1989. *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*. (1959). London: Earthscan

Grand, S.R. & Lord, K. M. 2009. 'To Rebuild U.S.-Muslim World Relations,

Obama Is Not Enough', Huffington Post, 26 March.

[http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/0326 muslim world relations grand.nd.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/0326_muslim_world_relations_grand.nd.aspx)

Fisher, A. and Bröckerhoff, A. 2008. *Options for Influence: global campaigns of persuasion in the new worlds of public diplomacy*. London: Counterpoint.

Hopwood, D. 1999. *Sexual Encounters in the Middle East: The British, the French and the Arabs*. Reading, UK: Ithaca Press.

Mamdani, M. Ed. 2000. *Beyond Rights Talk and Culture Talk*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Nye, J. S. 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Cambridge MA: Perseus Publishing.

Patai, R. 2002. *The Arab Mind* (1976) New York: Hatherleigh Press.

Schneider, C. P. 2007. 'Culture Communicates: US Diplomacy That Works' in Melissen, J. ed. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Stonor Saunders, F. 1999. *Who Pays the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. London: Granta Books.

Snow, N. 2003. *Information War: American Propaganda, Free Speech and Opinion Control Since 9/11*. New York: Seven Sisters Books.

Snow, N. 2009. *Persuader-in-Chief: Global Opinion and Public Diplomacy in the Age of Obama*. Ann Arbor: Nimble Books.

Surasky, C. 2009. 'OMG! Photo of repressed Muslim woman is actually movie still!' Muzzlewatch, posted 21 April.

<http://www.muzzlewatch.com/2009/04/21/omg-photo-of-repressed-muslim-woman-is-actually-movie-still/>

Ware, V. 2006. 'Info-War and the Politics of Feminist Curiosity: Exploring New Frameworks for Feminist Intercultural Studies' *Cultural Studies* No. 20:6.

Ware, V. 2010. 'The New Literary Front: Public Diplomacy and the Cultural Politics of Reading the Middle East' *Cultural Critique* 76.

Zine, J, Taylor, L. K., and Davis, H. E. 2007. 'Reading Muslim Women and Muslim Women Reading Back: transnational feminist reading practices, pedagogy and ethnical concerns' *Intercultural Education*, 18:4, 271-280.