SETTING NARRATIVE THROUGH INSTAGRAM POSTS: A STUDY OF BBC’S REPORTAGE ON AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract: Media organizations have an immense role to play in disseminating information and shaping perspectives across borders. Though the information revolution provides us with many new opportunities, it also helps in establishing a single narrative through the cultural cultivation of popular media over time. Orientalism, in this manner, presents an image that the West created of the Near East centuries ago and these second-hand experiences are enhanced over the years by the powerful states and media organizations to maintain the established hegemony. This current study focuses on understanding the British Broadcasting Corporation’s narrative and its ability to include and exclude certain historical facts while reporting on the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan through Instagram posts. The study found BBC portraying a favorable image for the role played by the NATO allies in Afghanistan and described the Taliban as a sheer group of terror, barbaric, and inhumane organization, following extreme Sharia laws.

Keywords: setting narratives, Taliban, Afghanistan, BBC, news coverage, Instagram posts

The world has seen, in the words of Fredric Jameson (1984), three historical junctures of capitalism, shifting from market to monopoly to multinational capitalism in the postmodern era. In this postmodern era, the electronic has become the primary cultural instrument for all (Sobchack, 1994), and superseding the industrial revolution is the information revolution of digitization (Kumar, 2011). Digitization has eased the process of maintaining archival data and this, in turn, provides an opportunity to understand cultures and events through various lenses. The information revolution can change the hegemonic understanding of events through text by moving forward to seeing and experiencing the information. But with all these developments in this new era, there exists a similarity with the previous times as power still lies in the hands of the information disseminator, the narrator of the

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story. Similarity exists between the narration and maintaining power and authority. Dissimilarity arises with a change in the narrator; media organizations have now replaced colonizers in disseminating information to a larger audience. They do not merely inform but cultivate information amongst their viewers and create stories, similar to the colonizers. The question that arises here is, are we still following the linear way of communication?

Media organizations can change the way cultures and nations are perceived. Through digitization, they can break the established stereotypes and hegemony of the powerful nations. With a technology change, we now witness a change in establishing credibility by media organizations as the 5Ws and 1H (who, when, what, where, why, how) are now succeeded by popular choice and ratings. In such scenarios, when a narrative has already been established by the ancestors, and multiple archival data support their hegemonic story, stereotyping media becomes popular media. If these popular media choose a single narrative set by the “powerful,” how are the voices of the marginalized heard? The powerful, here, are economically advanced countries and their in-house media organizations, all following the narrative established by the state to maintain a hegemony created by it. This media narrative set by the powerful is explained by Bourdieu as “negative intellectual” and “facade intellectual.” While in the former, news media align their beliefs with those of the state and serve the interests of those in power, through the latter, news media confirm their audiences’ preconceived notions and beliefs established culturally over time (Rosen, 2011). For this interplay, Bourdieu explains power to be culturally and symbolically created, which is constantly re-legitimized through a change in agency and structure. Both these narratives are commonly adopted by the powerful nations and journalists belonging to the powerful state often end up presenting the “other” groups as inferior and in need of help. Edward W. Said in his book Orientalism explains this authority over Others as a means of making statements about them, describing them, authorizing views of them, teaching them, and in short, ruling over them. He further adds, “Because of Orientalism, Orient (Others) was not (and is not) free of thought and action” (2001).

An example of the “powerful” and “other” for media and state relations will be the concept of “White Man’s Burden.” Though the concept is quite old, its significance can still be seen today. What once used to be the burden of the Franco-British colonizers is now the burden of Americans. During colonization, similar to the Africans, the Near Orient, the Arab and Islamic nations like Egypt, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, were considered to be culturally and racially inferior. They needed to be civilized by their colonizers and Balfour, a long-time member of the British Parliament, said, “Cromer made Egypt” (Said, 2001). The sense of superiority was long present and has transferred from generation to
generation, making it impossible to negate the thought of the Orient as their inferiors. This relation and cultural understanding between the colonizers and the Orient has been socially developed by intellectuals and their countrymen for centuries. Said says, “Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment” (Said, 2001). This generational material investment in today’s times can be seen with news headlines like “With the Americans Gone, Afghanistan Enters its Uncertain, Taliban-Led Future” and “Americans are Gone, Taliban has No Money—Uncertainties Cloud Afghanistan’s Future” (Reyar, 2021; Neuman and Shivaram, 2021). Further, the establishment of this burden concept amongst the citizens of the powerful is defined by Bourdieu’s power relations theory called “capitalism.” Capitalist behavior focuses on social, cultural, and symbolic capital instead of mere economic capitalism (1986). Capitalism’s social power roles provide a means for domination and hierarchy in a non-economic form (Gaventa, 2003) and this shift of domination is largely seen between countries of unequal power. This domination is created socially rather than an individual process where thoughts, views, and emotions are deposited amongst individuals over time. Here, through authority and domination, the British and Americans drive the narrative of the Near Orient for the world.

To further understand the powerful other in contemporary times, we must look at Western media and the portrayal of the Near Orient. Americans do not know much about the Orient and their perception is formed by their colonizers, books, media, and folklore and these biases are part of poisonous entertainment (Hayes, 1985, as cited in Shaheen, 1985, p.161). The poisonous entertainment comes at the cost of stereotyping cultures that are deemed, if not racially, then culturally inferior. Up until World War I, the British and French ruled Orientalism and formed narratives of the Orient through first-hand experiences or shared stories of colonizers. After World War II, we see Americans entering and taking over Orientalism and the narrative shared by them of the Orient was much similar to their colonizers. Americans believed Britshers and followed their path of White Supremacism. Walter Lippmann (1922, as cited in Shaheen, 1985, p.161) states:

The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them.

America relied on the literature written by the Britshers, leading to the creation of American Orientalism. In addition, a national poll reveals American perceptions of the Arabs and Islamists as “barbaric, cruel, treacherous, warlike, rich, and mistreaters of women” (Shaheen, 1985). The recirculation of the colonial image of
Muslim and Arab women as the “other” is still prevalent in the Westernized media (Muhtaseb, 2020). Hence, imperialism is seen to be governing an entire field of study and scholarly works, making its avoidance an intellectual and historical impossibility (Said, 2001).

In contemporary times, while understanding the maintenance of hegemony by the powerful, Hippler (2005) highlights that this narrative is carried out with a motive to divert from social problems in the homeland and towards some international conflict by many governments and media. The ability to ignore unwanted facts (Chomsky, 2014) and highlight the most suitable narratives is one of the moves of unchallenged power. Our definition of the other is defined by our own cultural beliefs and ideologies. Similarly, based on these sets of beliefs, the powerful state behaves differently from another powerful state and behaves differently with others. For example, the way the United States will behave with the British or Israel will not be the same as they will behave with the Orients like Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, or Iraq. Further, Hippler (2005) highlights that when the power is unbalanced between countries they can hardly treat each other equally. He adds: “Perception is colored by a sense of one’s superiority, by suspicion, paternalism, ethnocentrism, arrogance, mental blockades, or aggressiveness” (2005).

**America as Powerful**

America, like its predecessors over the years, has been setting narratives for many in the world. The current narrative of America for the Orient is one of hatred. Earlier, Orients were mere inferiors to the Western power but now they have become symbolic of terror, mass killings, and hate-spreading community. From the government bodies, to the news organizations, to the popular media, the West has set a single narrative of the Orient. Those in the Orient are considered to be culturally and religiously inferior, following strict ancient laws, and in need of modernization. As a means to prevent and safeguard the world from this hateful Orient, Americans adopt a new stance that entitles them as being in authority and protectors of Americanism and the world, in general. In one of his speeches, President Eisenhower highlighted the existence of hatred amongst Arab and Islamic citizens towards the US (Chomsky, 2002a). This “hatred” narrative was further carried by President Bush who, after the 9/11 attack, said: “They hate our freedom: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.” President Bush, Prime Minister Blair, and their allies’ “global war against terror” turned futile soon after the invasion of Iraq with no evidence of weapons of mass destruction. However, the government and the media organizations presented new viewpoints and justified the invasion (Chomsky, 2005). Chomsky in his work “It’s Imperialism, Stupid” quoted John Prados who was an intelligence analyst, “Americans do not like to think of
themselves as aggressors, but raw aggression is what took place in Iraq” (2005). Further, for, many in the world who were used to such atrocities by the powerful, the phrase “Welcome to the club” was most appropriate (Chomsky, 2003).

The defensive stance of the US against the Orient is discredited by an article titled “Which Country is the Greatest Threat to Peace in the World Today?” published by BBC; it reveals the United States to have triple the score of the second-ranked nation, Pakistan (2013). Chomsky (2014) adds that this American threat is understood gravely by the Orient who consider America and its close allies to be the world’s greatest threat to peace. Cuban nationalist José Martí once commented: “The further they [Latins] draw away from the United States, the freer and more prosperous the [Latin] American people will be” (Chomsky, 2014). The UN report confirms Martí’s words through reports on reduced poverty in Brazil, Venezuela, and other countries where US influence is less as compared to an abysmal increase in poverty in countries with high US domination like Guatemala and Honduras (Chomsky, 2014).

The United States has been acting as a powerful agent in countries like Iraq, Syria, Cuba, Afghanistan, and many others. Even after Japan’s unconditional surrender to the States, Nagasaki was bombed because General Hap Arnold “wanted as big a finale as possible” (Chomsky, 2005). But these crimes remain excluded from war memoirs and history which are created and maintained by none other than the powerful. The one who is in power is the narrator of the story and later, his story becomes the world’s story. Another defensive move of America was the attack on Afghanistan in 2001, leading to the threat of bombing and disruption of food supplies, making Afghan citizens flee their homes (Chomsky, 2002b). More than 71,000 civilians have been killed since 2001 (Afghan Civilians, 2021). The Western media did not talk of the death of civilians or focus on the UN Special Rapporteur’s comment about the powerful’s ability to overcome the “silent genocide” (Chomsky, 2002b). For such instances, Cohen adds: “If we do not see a story in the newspapers (or catch it on radio or television), it effectively has not happened so far as we are concerned” (1963).

The ability to exclude certain events from the bigger picture is now in the hands of media organizations. When they choose to select a particular angle and act as gatekeepers, the other side of the story remains unheard. People now know the story of the American government and troops, but not of the Afghan civilians. However, when the Taliban succumbed to the United States, triumphalist proclamations of war, victory, and justice became the narrative of the powerful (Chomsky, 2002b). No one mentions the atrocities and killings led by the US troops, and hence, they have successfully followed the footsteps of their colonizers by establishing themselves as the Messiahs and saviors of the world. They are the story creators and they are the superheroes of the world, with the Orient still in need of civilization and help.
Afghan Crisis

The Afghan crisis is an example of a framing narrative by powerful America and its NATO allies. Driving the narrative of Afghanistan as one similar to that of Syria, Americans have been winning the race. Since its early days of war under Soviet rule, Western media overestimated the quantity of military hardware and weapons and termed it as a “Soviet Threat” (Hippler, 2005). It (un)consciously exaggerated the military superiority of a bankrupt state and spread the agenda of the Soviet’s conquest of the world. Over time this wisdom of Soviet Threat became so common that individuals disregarded the pain of checking facts and confirming this threat (Hippler, 2005). Similarly, the Americans are now driving the same Afghanistan and terror threat for the world. No one likes to think of themselves as disruptors of peace, but the West has proved time and again of their intentions of power, authority, and maintenance of hegemony through their actions. Now, since the Soviet Union is dissolved, another narrative of world threat is established against the Orient. The new agenda of today’s time is highlighted by Gati (1997):

The Middle Eastern “rogue” states threaten us by maintaining programs for weapons of mass destruction, sponsoring terrorism, often targeted specifically at Americans, and by their hostility toward and active opposition to our political and social systems and those of our friends and allies.

The Afghanistan war is an age-old phenomenon with all leaders fighting, first, for power and then, for stability. From monarchy to Daoud to Taraki, all fought for power and dominance. Even when the USSR invaded Afghanistan with the Parcham faction’s support and Babrak Karmal as the new leader, the aim was to rule with Communist ideology. But with the declining power of the Soviets, the opposition from the devout Muslims provided an opportunity for a “diverse group of rebels,” pouring in from Iran, Pakistan, China, and the United States, to intervene (Taylor, 2014). The CIA, ISI, and Al-Istakhbara al-‘Ama assisted through financial, physical, and weaponry to the rebels in Afghanistan. This rebellion was led by Osama bin Laden, a Saudi elite, who actively took part in this fight against communism by employing and training volunteers supported by the powerful (Rubin, 1995). With the state at war, the civilians have lost the provision to decide their and the nation’s future.

The United States’ arrival in Afghanistan was claimed as a fight against Bin Laden and terrorism in general. But it took ten long years for one of the most advanced nations to find and kill Laden. Further, the American troops did not withdraw after the assassination of Bin Laden, and they created a sense of patriotism and Americanism amongst their citizens through the broadcast of *Zero Dark Thirty*. However, the longest American war wasn’t successful in ending the
Taliban or world terror. At the best, the Americans were able to provide fragile stability for the Afghans. The Americans left Afghanistan’s land, if not similar, then in a worse condition than it was before 2001. Further, thousands of civilians were killed by American troops in the name of terror. It is important to understand that Afghanistan has always been at war, with civilians dying due to power struggles. A similar example can be seen in the tearing of Iraq and Syria where presumably the conflict between Sunni-Shia is high. But the most common theme of US commentary on instability is the consequence of withdrawal of American forces (Chomsky, 2002a). This is not a result of “isolationism” but internal and cultural differences. The war atrocities remain the same with or without the US’s presence. The racial differences in America are quite high, but the media willingly choose to ignore certain facts from their texts. As Prados stated, Americans do not like to think of themselves as aggressors but raw aggression takes place wherever they go with the intention of saving others. With the media houses helping the Western government build and maintain hegemony, this aggression remains unreported or ignored in the name of collateral damage.

With the backdrop of the United States and the NATO allies’ presence in Afghanistan, the study aims to understand the narratives set by the powerful for the world. It aims to understand whether Orientalism exists in contemporary times or has changed by one of the oldest and prominent media organizations. The study, further, tries to answer the following questions:

1. Which facts are included and excluded to describe the past of Afghanistan?
2. How is the presence of NATO in Afghanistan portrayed by the news organization?

Methods

This is an explorative qualitative study that tries to understand the narrative adopted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on Afghanistan and its key stakeholders of the past and the present. The study tries to answer the research questions through content analysis of posts published by BBC on Instagram for 26 days. For the study, of the 42 posts published by the BBC during these 26 days, ten posts were randomly selected with a total of 32 pictures and ten captions.

The British Broadcasting Corporation of the United Kingdom is one of the world’s oldest national broadcasters, with more than 468 million viewers per week (BBC, 2020). With its presence across the globe, the BBC is a trusted news platform for disseminating information. This study focuses on understanding the news information published by BBC on a social media platform, Instagram. This social media platform is an American photo and video sharing networking site which is
used by billions in the world. With an official handle, BBC News has followers of 19.4 million people. Millions of people refer to BBC news for an understanding of events and their occurrences. The two important aspects considered in this research with regard to Orientalism are (1) the BBC news organization is of British origin, and (2) the Instagram social media platform originates in the United States of America. Both nations have been part of Orientalism and have successfully cultivated stereotypes and a sense of superiority amongst their citizens.

Taliban, a Deobandi Islamic fundamentalist political and military organization, started (re)capturing states of Afghanistan from August 6, 2021, taking over the capital city, Kabul, in the next nine days. With the atmosphere of complete unrest and terror, civilians started to flee the nation. Looking at this, the Taliban allowed expats and their constituent governments to help and allow them to leave the nation freely till August 31, 2021. People across the world were worried and praying for the Afghans and news consumption on Afghanistan became important. BBC became a trusted news platform for many. Therefore, it is of significance to understand news dissemination during these 26 days, August 6 to 31.

Analysis

The study focuses on understanding the messages published by the British Broadcasting Corporation which was established and headquartered in a powerful nation. Orientalism is a way of dealing with the peoples of the Orient, defining their culture and attributes. Those in the Occident have always recognized themselves as having contrasting images, personality, ideas, and experiences to the people of the Orient (Said, 2001). Their incorporation of ideas, thoughts, and perceptions socially and culturally has been significant and this study tries to understand the significance of these perceptions of the Orient while reporting events to the world. The United Kingdom is a part of NATO and an ally of the United States. The study focused on understanding the narrative of a news media organization headquartered in a powerful nation through its reportage of the “Orient”—the Orient, here selected for the study, is Afghanistan which was (re)captured by the Taliban. The content analysis of the 32 images and ten captions highlights the following themes:

No hope for Afghanistan under Taliban’s rule

The images used to describe Afghanistan are either of destroyed houses with broken windows and roofs or of citizens as refugees taking shelter in Kabul. It portrayed civilians with bowed heads, praying in a destroyed and deserted land. The civilians are further seen leaving their motherland for a better and safer future. They depict the broken future of Afghanistan with 80 percent of the nation facing
severe droughts and a food and water shortage. As the report highlights, the nation and its civilians are in complete chaos. These Afghans, in the absence of US troops, see no future or safety to life in their nation.

Amidst the darkness, women will have to suffer the worst at the hands of the Taliban. This new regime will hamper women’s education and their freedom. The first affected industry is the beauty and fashion industry with the posters of women being torn and painted black. The images of men and women in Islamic traditional attire also highlight the state as a complete Islamic nation in need of modernization, which will now take a back seat with the Taliban in power. Taking control over the government, the Taliban is seen to be dictating the personal choices of the Afghans, with control over everything happening within the nation. With the Americans gone, there is no “light” for Afghanistan’s development and civilian lives are in the dark.

**Taliban synonymous with terror**

The Taliban, described as an Islamic group following strict Sharia laws, are incapable of forming a government. They are depicted with guns, terror, mass killings, and as orthodox Islamists. With the Taliban slowly taking over parts of Afghanistan, civilians are fleeing in fear of them. Millions are displaced as President Ashraf Ghani conveniently abandons the Afghans. The terror image is further highlighted through closed shops and less traffic on the roads. As many are seen fleeing, there’s another faction of citizens who seem to pay no heed to the Taliban army. These Afghans are seen celebrating the victory of the Taliban’s takeover and the posts justified the actions of the Taliban through Sharia laws and portray other orthodox Islamists as believers in the Taliban’s ideology.

With the Taliban in power, there is little hope for development and soon, Afghanistan will become a hub of terror. Under Taliban rule between 1996 to 2001, Afghanistan encountered public executions, mass killings, and amputations. It had also previously sheltered al-Qaeda and Bin Laden and now is currently on a manhunt for those who worked for the US and the Afghan government. Furthermore, the deaths mentioned in these posts are dated 2001 onwards, significantly highlighting the Taliban’s efforts to regain power for the past 20 years but being unsuccessful due to the presence of NATO allies. With American troops protecting Afghans, extremist Islamic groups had no chance of winning power and, in turn, they resorted to killing innocent rural civilians. These civilians are projected to have been living in fear under Taliban rule since 1996 but lived peacefully after the arrival of NATO troops in 2001. The United States and its allies have been (and are) the only ray of hope for Afghans. They are symbolic of development, equality, modernization, and westernization while the Taliban is symbolic of terrorism and stricter Islamic laws.
USA and Allies as “Ray of Hope”

The NATO allies are portrayed as the only saviors of Afghans. With the civilians on the verge of fleeing the nation, they are left begging US officials to save and fly them away from the Taliban. The NATO allies were the only forces who were able to overthrow the Taliban and hence they can be the only ones saving the civilians and Afghanistan from becoming a dead land. With their own government abandoning them at time of need, the civilians are in a desperate effort to escape the Taliban and are shown being helped by the US troops. A particular image that caught the attention of millions was the passing of a toddler to the US soldiers standing on the boundary of Kabul airport by its parents. With the rising terror, the parents hope for a brighter future for the child in the United States.

Another post mentioned the Boeing C-17 Globemaster’s capacity, with its build and design, to transport 823 Afghans away from their motherland, acting as a promotion for the aircraft. The post highlighted how it allowed more passengers than it was built for and even a woman was able to give birth in the air. In addition, the Taliban was able to capture the land only after the United States and the allies withdrew their troops. Hence, the United States became the “light” for babies and Afghans and Taliban were spreaders of hate, fear, and terror. Furthermore, the mention of war and killings rising recently and only after the withdrawal of NATO allies highlights the absence of death and crime under the US regime. The allies are depicted as a reason for development, growth, equal opportunities, and a safe place for the Afghans in their nation.

Discussion

In the postmodern era, the information revolution supersedes the industrial revolution, marking digitization as an important element of our times (Kumar, 2011). The information revolution has made the process of archiving easier, with all having access to any kind of information at any moment. We now have multiple sources of information for a particular story. But the art of storytelling and, certainly, the script or the storyline have not changed. Most nations became colonies in the hands of the Franco-British colonizers and others knew the world through their lens. Colonizers’ lens became the world’s lens for understanding cultures. For example, slavery was started by the British and continued by the Americans. The Franco-British effectively cultivated cultures in the minds of others and, through this cultural cultivation, authority was acquired by the colonizers. Their power and authority have been continuing for centuries and their hegemonic understanding of events is now the understanding of the world. Stereotyping has become the norm for other cultures. The popular media also base their portrayal on these stereotypes and, through these media representations, people across the globe see and form images even before they visit the place. An example of stereotyping representations is of Arab and
Islamic nations which form the image of terror, treachery, destruction, barbarism, and mistreaters of women (Shaheen, 1985).

These stereotyping narratives have been passed on from generation to generation and Orientalism is one such narrative of the West’s on the Near East. As Rosen highlighted, these narratives are carried out by the media to either get closer to the government or the media confirm their audiences’ preconceived notions and stereotypes. When the civilians believe their ancestors, this also becomes the media’s narrative. Orientalism has effectively formed the image of the Orient across the worlds. In the current research, as highlighted by the scholars (Bourdieu, 1986; Chomsky, 2015; Hippler, 2005; Shaheen, 1985), the BBC acted as a powerful agent to depict a positive role of the United States and its allies in Afghanistan. Their work is portrayed symbolically through development, feminism, peace, anti-terror, a bright future, protectors, and the only hope for Afghans. Further, they are portrayed as Messiahs for saving 827 Afghans through Boeing aircraft. The BBC successfully established a Western narrative on the state of Afghanistan through Orientalism and with the explanation of “White Man’s Burden” through its posts. Afghanistan cannot experience peace and development with the absence of the NATO allies on their land.

Further, while forming the narrative on Afghanistan, BBC excluded the facts of unrest, death of millions of civilians, food shortages, and America’s failure to eradicate the Taliban and terrorism. These facts were consciously chosen to be excluded as “Americans do not like to call themselves as aggressors” (Chomsky, 2005). Americans occupied Afghan land to end terrorism, but if their withdrawal results in rising terrorism with more threats, then they failed. This failure is an important fact for the world to know. America’s longest war was not successful and the American government presented a false image of Americanism in the minds of its citizens. But as a powerful news organization, the BBC adopted the narrative set by the nation and its allies, of Afghanistan being a happy and merry land under the US regime. The facts that were consciously included were of US troops saving babies, women, and all innocent lives that are in danger under the Taliban. They are giving wings to Afghans to grow and develop in a safe place. Americans are portrayed as included in the prayers of all Afghans, and this is the reason why the Taliban and other Islamist groups hate them. But most importantly, the US and its allies are portrayed to have lost hundreds of soldiers to save Afghanistan. Their 20 years of war cost them a major economic and physical loss. The narrative set by the BBC is that their presence helped the Afghans and they did not anticipate the Taliban’s move of taking over the entire nation in a few months from their withdrawal.

The British Broadcasting Corporation did not highlight the history of the Taliban. How the Taliban was formed, and why, was not reported in these posts. The role of
the United States and its allies in the revolt against the Soviet Threat was conveniently excluded. In addition, the Taliban’s presence on Afghan land was reported only after its capture in 1996 and terror rule for the next five years. The revolt of devout Muslims against communism and Westernization is also excluded. Hence, the BBC’s reportage on Afghanistan during the Taliban’s takeover is a replica of the Western ideology of Middle Easterners and their fate without the West’s help and presence.

References


