

PICTURING AFGHAN WOMEN

A Content Analysis of AP Wire Photographs during the Taliban Regime and after the Fall of the Taliban Regime

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Abstract / This study content analyzes the depiction of Afghan women in AP (Associated Press) photographs during the Taliban regime and after the fall of the Taliban regime. Analysis is based on visual subordination, point of view, social distance, imaginary contact, behavior and general portrayal. Findings suggest despite signs of visual subordination and framing stereotypes, women after the fall of the Taliban regime are portrayed as more involved, interactive, more socially intimate and symbolically equal to the viewer. Analysis shows AP photographs portray a more complex version of Afghan women's liberation. Women after the fall of the Taliban regime are depicted still wearing their burqas, reflecting the complexity of a social liberation movement in a traditional society.

Keywords / Afghan women / gender stereotypes / transnational news / visual framing / women in the media

Introduction

Ten years ago, I lived with the Tarabin tribe, in the rugged Sinai Peninsula. As I lived with the tribe, I learned to speak their language and wear their clothes. In other words, I wore the veil. After 11 months, when I left the tribe to live in Western Europe, although covering up did not represent my tradition, my culture or my religion, removing the veil felt uncomfortable. In retrospect, after years of body coverage it made sense. Afghan women did not remove their burqas once Afghanistan was freed from the Taliban's repressive rule, particularly because of the cultural significance of the burqa. Historically, female covering has been deeply rooted in Afghan culture.¹

Yet, the idea in the West has been that women in Afghanistan would be liberated from their burqas, the traditional garment made mandatory by the Taliban. Louw (2003) identifies the presence of a public relations (PR) theme that mobilized the issue of liberating Afghan women. He explains that soon after the Taliban's defeat, images showing Afghan women without their burqas at work were released.

The women's liberation idea resonated well with the media. On 13 November 2001, when American air power was at the gates of Kabul, the *Washington Post* reported, 'Let Kabul be taken as soon as possible and then

have every earthly news camera show (as has just happened in Mazar-e-Sharif) women taking off their burqas, music again being played, girls going back to school, and the Taliban gallows in the soccer stadium being torn down' (Krauthamer, 2001). During that same month, November 2001, CNN explained since the fall of Kabul and other large Afghan towns, women had begun removing the all-enveloping burqa (Stephens, 2001), and the few women who did show their faces made front pages of newspapers worldwide (Bagnall, 2001). However, months later after the collapse of the Taliban regime, Afghan women continued to wear their burqas (Louw, 2003). The media finally recognized that coverage and traditions were culturally rooted and could not easily be changed (Pazira, 2002).

This study examines the portrayal of Afghan women in AP (Associated Press) wire photographs during the Taliban regime and after the fall of the Taliban regime. The issue is of interest given the current political situation and the international involvement in the region. The focus on AP is merited because of its prestige and influence. Top US media outlets use and publish AP wire photographs on a daily basis. Apart from body coverage, this study examines further visual cues related to picturing Afghan women in the media. Taking off burqas may be liberating according to western ideas, but media scholars such as Perlmutter, Said, Shaheen and Goffman assert media can portray women in subordinate ways beyond being fully covered. Even if images are not staged, they still need to be selected in a frame (Messaris and Abraham, 2001). These visual selections then shape our interpretation of the world by creating shared perceptions, affecting and conditioning real-life understanding.

Given the presumption of veracity that readers ascribe to photographs and the role they have in producing meaning, AP wire photographs carry great weight. The focus on Afghan women in this study is very timely, considering the increasing world interest in the region after 11 September 2001, the war against terrorism, the US military involvement in Afghanistan, the fall of the Taliban regime and the assumed liberation of Afghan women. Extensive news coverage of Afghanistan and its habitants has been no surprise.

Transnational Imagery: Viewing the Orient

This study is intimately linked with western portrayal of the Orient. Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'. Said (1978) maintains that Orientalism helped define the Occident's self-image by establishing opposites and 'others'. Said writes this happens as an effort to maintain a culture by the existence of another different and competing alter ego. According to Said, Orientalism led the West to see Islamic culture as static in time and place, giving the West a sense of its own cultural and intellectual superiority. Shaheen (2001) presents similar thoughts in a study of nearly 1000 films, suggesting a tendency to portray Muslim Arabs as uncivilized 'others'.

Like Said and Shaheen, Perlmutter (1998) argues good reporting of an international event is difficult, time consuming and expensive as it requires knowledge of the culture and/or the language to provide a more complex

perspective. He writes that journalists typically find symbols that match with western ideals about appropriate social policies while most often ignoring native symbolism. News is framed into the exiting paradigm, reinforcing stereotypes and existing political and social agendas (Pavlik, 2001). For instance, in a visual content analysis study about the Tiananmen Square issues, using images in both in *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines, Perlmutter (1998) concludes that American news media oversimplify and decontextualize foreign affairs to the American public. News events happen quickly, he writes, thus journalists are often rushed in with no experience and feel compelled to produce stories. According to Perlmutter (1998), when covering international issues, most journalists often do not have the time or the space to address issues differently. This view is consistent with media scholar Wilbur Schramm, an early and continuing influence in the mass communication field, who wrote that successful communication depends on the source and receiver having sufficient commonalities such as language and cultural background. When they do not share these vital commonalities, reporting is negatively affected. Said (1978) explains journalists who visited the 'Orient' quickly developed an ill-informed opinion of the Arabs and Islam.

In sum, previous studies suggest western media often oversimplify and decontextualize international news by rarely placing news events and issues into a broader context. Reporting lacks thematic framing that allows the connection of isolated events and trends in society and their links to international developments (Pavlik, 2001). Echoing Perlmutter (1998), Pavlik (2001) concludes the reason for this is highly economic. Pavlik writes journalists are under pressure to produce news 'as a baker produces bread'. In the case of the present content analysis of AP photographs, the researcher takes into account that AP photojournalists were rushed into Afghanistan and were expected to produce visual news, likely leading to decontextualized photographs.

RQ1: Did AP wire photographs oversimplify the portrayal of the liberation of Afghan women?

To answer this question, depictions of Afghan women were examined in realistic contexts that portray the complexity of their human nature. A realistic context is based on full body coverage of Afghan women. In other words, anecdotal evidence that suggests Afghan women kept their traditional burqas was taken into account. For example, were the majority of Afghan women after the fall of the Taliban regime visually depicted without their all-encompassing burqas in an effort to depict an oversimplified version of Afghan women's liberation? In other words, was there a significant difference between the visual portrayal of Afghan women during the Taliban regime and after the fall of the Taliban regime in relation to body coverage? The complexity of human nature is represented in creating an imaginary contact. For example, did the photographs humanize the Afghan women by trying to establish a relationship with the viewer, such as portraying their emotions of happiness or fear?

Based on past studies of visual content analysis, the following two variables are used to examine the first research question:

Visual Subordination

Derived from visual analysis and representational meaning, the burqa, a garment covering the female body, represents a visual element that in western thought conveys submission. Louw (2003) explains that for westerners burqas have been promoted as icons of gender repression. Wearing of the burqa, according to western standards, signifies a dehumanization of women. Thus, based on the western perspective, one can make the point that the all-concealing garment keeps the women powerless, vulnerable and dominated.²

Imaginary Contact

Images can establish an imaginary contact with the viewer. For example, when an Afghan woman looks into the viewers' eyes, a contact is established, even if it is imaginary. The viewers will feel like they have entered into her world. Thus, images of Afghan women looking straight into the camera, either pleading or simply staring or smiling at the viewer, establish an explicit contact that can have a pungent story-telling effect. Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) explain that when subjects are depicted begging or asking for help, the viewer will perceive them as submissive, passive and with very little power over their lives. Emotions also play an important role in humanizing the subject. For example, when an Afghan woman smiles or frowns in a photograph, the viewer feels a relationship with her. When it is not known what emotion the woman is currently experiencing, no relationship will be established.

Stereotyping and Framing in Western Media

Stereotype studies have been an important topic in media studies for decades. Most of these studies used content analysis to describe the issue of stereotyping. A stereotype is an oversimplified opinion that can be identified by examining the way a particular group of people is being depicted. For example, if a particular group appears mostly within one category (e.g. teenagers as trouble makers), then we can assume that stereotyping has taken place. Stereotyping is a cognitive structure that forms the beliefs and attitudes about a particular group (Hamilton et al., 1990).

As early as 1922, Walter Lippmann introduced the concept of stereotyping. More than 50 years later, Goffman coined frame analysis theory, providing one theoretical basis for the stereotyping process. The process serves as a basis to infer additional judgments about a particular group, making it an important venue to process information (Bodenhausen and Wyer, 1985; Rodgers and Thorson, 2000; Schneider and Blankmeyer, 1983).

Because mass media outlets are heavily used to acquire information and understanding about specific groups of people, any mediated misconceptions may result in misunderstanding of the reality of an environment, especially a distant one. The news photographs that depict geographically remote subjects are almost exclusively the most important frames of reference. Most people learn

about foreign events, places and people through visual media, despite the increase in international travel and personal contacts (Perlmutter, 1998).

The visual framing aspect deserves elaboration. As images look more natural and closer to reality, it is possible for viewers to be unaware of visual framing. It is easier to overlook than the more obvious verbal framing. According to Messaris and Abraham (2001) there is evidence of the potential unobtrusiveness of visual framing. The classic experiment by Mandell and Shaw (1973) demonstrated that most participants were not even aware of the use of camera angle. The experiment assessed the use of low camera angles in political imagery in which college students were asked to make judgments about a political figure portrayed in a newscast.³ Only 13 out of a total of 78 students showed some awareness of camera angle, making the point-of-view device particularly appropriate for the attention of this study.

Another framing technique is related to photo selection. According to Messaris and Abraham (2001), selection is inevitable in the making of a photographic image and displaying it to the public. Lang and Lang (1952) investigated how television editing shaped perceptions of a real event – the MacArthur Day Parade. To show support for General Douglas MacArthur, who had just been recalled by President Truman, the country staged parades in his honor. Teams of coders were employed to rate the behavior of the crowd. On television, the crowds seemed much more enthusiastic than in person. The researchers ascribed the difference to television selectively transmitting images of people applauding and cheering, and not transmitting images of more passive behavior. Lang and Lang concluded that television broadcast may have created an exaggerated impression of the support of MacArthur. The issue in question is the simple act of selection, choosing one view instead of another, cropping or editing, or choosing to include one image instead of many others. Tagg (1988) and Bissell (2000) explain that while a camera can be neutral and while photographers emulate the real world they are representing, the final photographic product is a reconstruction of the world. A news photograph is only a slice of reality and not the entire whole; it is only a portion of what is really out there. Our interpretation of what is really out there is influenced by media logic. Media logic may include physical characteristics such as camera angles or size dimensions. And based on this media logic, the media have long been criticized for creating and perpetuating stereotypes.

Messaris and Abraham (2001) explain that whether such images are intentional or unintentional, one cannot overlook the subtle and indirect framing implications. In other words, in the stereotyping framework and also for the purpose of this study, the way Afghan women have been portrayed in AP photographs has a relationship with the later impact of the photograph in its transmission of information.

RQ2: Did the media use visual techniques to frame Afghan women in stereotypes? For example, a long shot of an Afghan woman in the background, shot from a high angle, would lead us to view her in a marginal stereotypical perspective.

To answer the second research question, the following two variables are used.

Point of View

In the book *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) explain that camera angle is an important element to map out potential meanings. For example, being depicted from above, below or at eye level, from the side or from the back, creates symbolic relations between the image, the photographer and the viewer. If we look down at something, we symbolically feel empowered in relation to what we are looking at. Similarly, if we look up at something, a symbolic power is being exercised over us. Looking at eye level, however, gives the viewer a form of symbolic equality. The way the subject is portrayed can also give a feeling of involvement or detachment (Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). For example, if the Afghan woman is depicted from a frontal position, we are actively engaged with her. Similarly, a profile or a back shot leads us to hold the Afghan woman in a marginal point of view.

Social Distance

Another important category in visual depiction is distance and focus. Close-up or medium shots suggest a social relationship. When a subject is depicted up close, the individuality of the subject is communicated, suggesting an intimate, personal relationship with the subject. Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) explain that the subject would then belong to 'our group'. The opposite is equally true. Depicting subjects far away conveys them as strangers, creating a very impersonal relationship with the viewer. Therefore, the positioning of the Afghan woman in an image is very important. For example, if the Afghan woman is portrayed in the foreground, she is obviously empowered; when she is depicted in the background, she is neutralized.

Media Coverage of Minorities: Picturing Women

In a textual study of gender stereotypes in magazine advertisements, Goffman (1976) categorized relationships between men and women in terms of expected roles and the underlying perpetuation of gender stereotypes. In *Gender Advertisements*, Goffman (1976) deals with the process of structuring reality by symbolic means. On that level, much of the analysis of symbolic events that are present in a visual representation can be helpful in clarifying what he conceives as: 'the affirmation of basic social arrangements and the presentation of ultimate doctrines about man and the world'. Goffman contributes to our understanding of how images have been incorporated into our social expectations, and to our knowledge of the way images are used to convey social information. His gender constructions of images explain that photographs represent ways by which we tend to classify others – and be classified by them. Ultimately, we tend to interact and normalize based upon those classifications. In this view, photographs can be used as strong evidence concerning the existence of a situational lifestyle. His research represents an ideal work of empirical study that treats photographic materials as data that are worthy of analysis in their own right. In that same year, Pingree et al. (1976) published 'A Scale for Sexism'.

The study showed a gradual evolution in photographs of women, from total stereotyping to freedom from stereotyping. These two major studies mark the beginning of advancement in gender stereotype research and the expansion of categories used in content analysis (Ginsburg, 1999). Later studies that dealt with stereotype issues suggest women, the elderly and minorities have been either absent or depicted in inferior stereotypical roles in which the media de-emphasized their achievement.

Rodgers and Thorson (2000), studying gender portrayal in the media, conclude in a study of news photographs of the *Los Angeles Times* that women are more likely to be seen in stereotyped sections, topics and occupations. Another biased gender representation was found in a longitudinal analysis of women in magazine photos, in which Rodgers (1999) writes that males tend to outnumber women by as much as four to one. Demarest and Garner (1992) also found that women tend to be associated with topics related to lifestyles, parenthood and relationships. In another study by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), while men were more likely to be shown in occupational roles outside their habitat, women were shown less in occupational roles and more likely to be portrayed as housewives or mothers. And even when women were portrayed working outside their homes, they were in occupations that have been stereotypically filled by women, such as a secretary or a nurse (Goffman, 1976; Johnson and Christ, 1988).

Prior research also suggests that women are consistently depicted negatively. Goffman (1976) concludes women have been portrayed as sexy, dependent, uncompetitive, passive and shy. On a similar level, Bridge (1997) writes that women appear more frequently than men in a negative form in front pages of newspapers, for example as victims who have been abused, kidnapped or killed.

Minorities in the media have received similar treatment. Messaris and Abraham (2001), in reviewing contemporary studies on subtle racism and implicit visual news imagery, emphasize the subtlety of racial appeals. They identified several types of visual cues that are consistently used to communicate subtle racism and frame other stories about social problems. In *Framing Public Life*, Messaris and Abraham (2001) suggest that racial appeals often occur through the 'unsaid', the visual imagery, where implicit meaning is increasingly used to frame messages that involve minorities in the news. Media studies suggest African Americans are often visually portrayed in negative story contexts that are perceived to be stereotypical and prejudicial. Messaris and Abraham (2001) conclude whether such images are intentional or unintentional, one cannot overlook the subtle and indirect racism implications.

Reviewing the literature on this topic, the majority of studies have employed content analysis to describe how individuals are depicted in the mass media. Previous research into gender stereotypes in the mass media suggests inferior female stereotypical roles, in which the media de-emphasized women's achievement while emphasizing the subtlety of gender appeals. The general assumption is several types of visual cues have been consistently used to communicate subtle gender stereotyping in the media.

RQ3: Did the media portray Afghan women in subordinate traditional roles? For example, were the majority of Afghan women acting in traditional roles, such as parenting and/or inferior roles such as begging and pleading?

Based on past studies the following variable is used to answer the third research question.

Behavior

According to Goffman, photographic behavioral practices are routinely associated with particular social meanings (Goffman, 1976). In social routines of Afghan women, the behavior variable is divided into the physical activity and the general portrayal of the Afghan woman. The physical activity is divided into inanimate and active. The general portrayal is examined from the broad-spectrum role of the woman. For example, a traditional portrayal includes women working inside the house, acting in a motherly role, carrying a child and/or carrying food, etc., whereas an interactive portrayal includes working outside the house, interacting with friends, shopping, etc.

Method

Two data sets were collected from the AP data archive. The first set of 142 images included AP photographs depicting Afghan women in Afghanistan from 1 January 2001 to 12 November 2001. The second set included AP photographs from 13 November 2001 – the day Kabul fell – to 31 January 2002. No images were collected after this time-period, as anecdotal evidence suggests western media tried to sell the idea of Afghan women's liberation in the early stages of the war on terrorism. Not long after the fall of Kabul, the media recognized deeply rooted cultural traditions were at play (Pazira, 2002). During the second time-period, there were 429 images depicting Afghan women, likely due to the increasing US military involvement in the region and better access for photographers. From the 429 photographs, every third image was selected from a random starting point to assure the second data set totaled 142. Thus, the images that were content analyzed in both sets totaled 284.

A content analysis was done based on five variables – explained in detail in earlier sections: visual subordination, point of view, social distance, imaginary contact, behavior and general portrayal. Chi-squares were conducted to test differences between the two sets of photographs on the five variables. Significant chi-squares would suggest that the women have been depicted differently between the two time-periods: during and after Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

Guidelines were used to provide a systematic way in which all photographs were dealt with. First, each of two coders coded a sample of 10 percent of all photographs (30 photographs) for purposes of determining inter-coder reliability. Several questions were clarified and instructions altered to address items where disagreements occurred. Inter-coder reliability across all coding categories was .87.

All images of women were coded. In the presence of more than one woman,

the majority of the women were used for the basis for coding of that image. This did not create a conflict, since most women depicted in a single image shared parallel behavior and similar activities, in other words, similar portrayal patterns. The caption was not relevant to the coding process unless the visual cues could not be determined from the photographs. In most cases, however, the body language was the basis for the coding process. Because most women were not working in office-related jobs, their workplaces included the public streets where women sold food. Similarly, working at home included both doing activities inside their homes as well as in refugee camps. Women were also coded in terms of their overall portrayal in the photograph, whether they were engaged in traditional roles or in more liberating and interactive activities such as shopping and conversing with their peers.

Results

Portrayal of Liberation of Afghan Women

Examining the first research question on the portrayal of liberation of Afghan women through the body coverage and visual subordination variables, results suggest only three photographs out of a total of 284 – only 1 percent of photographs – portrayed women revealing their face and hair. In other words, the majority of women in both data sets wore the burqa to cover up their entire bodies (see Table 1). Overall, approximately 60 percent of women in both time-periods were completely covered up.

Dissimilar to earlier print media reports that Afghan women had begun removing the burqas, AP photographs did not visually portray the liberation of Afghan women by depicting more women without their veils. Under the new regime, women were still wearing the all-encompassing garment. In Figure 1, an AP photograph taken during the Taliban regime, an image depicts an Afghan woman completely covered up and begging near a mosque as her daughter plays at right of the frame. In Figure 2, also taken during the Taliban regime, two Afghan boys and a woman wearing the burqa are portrayed riding a bicycle

TABLE 1

Comparisons of Percentages and Chi-Squares of 284 AP Photographs on Visual Subordination during the Taliban Regime and after the Fall of the Taliban Regime

	During the Taliban Regime (<i>N</i> = 142)	After the Fall of the Taliban Regime (<i>N</i> = 142)	Chi-Square
Body coverage			3.05
Cover entire body	61.3%	59.2%	
Showing face or eyes	38.7%	38.7%	
Showing face and hair	0%	2.1%	
Total	100%	100%	

FIGURE 1



(© AP Photo/Sergei Grits)

FIGURE 2



(© AP Photo/Amir Shah)

through the streets of Kabul. The third AP image (Figure 3), taken after the Northern Alliance forces took control of the Afghan capital, also portrays two women wearing the burqa that completely covers up their bodies.

The second variable, the imaginary contact variable, proved problematic. The two categories in this variable were based on establishing an imaginary contact with the viewer and identifying the emotional state of the Afghan woman. Because the majority of Afghan women wore the burqa, contact and emotion could not be identified for the majority of the photographs.

After the data analysis, results yield the following:

1. Almost 90 percent of all images – 255 photographs out of a total of 284 – failed to establish a contact with the viewers.
2. More than 60 percent of all images – 181 photographs – remained unidentifiable in the emotion category.

Stereotyping and Framing of Afghan Women

Regarding the research question that examines the use of visual techniques to frame Afghan women in stereotypes, on the point-of-view variable, only 28 images – less than 10 percent of images in both data sets – portrayed Afghan

FIGURE 3



women from a low angle giving them an impression of empowerment. Over half the photographs, 153 images, portray Afghan women at eye level. More than one-third – 103 images – depict them from a high angle. In photographs taken after the fall of the Taliban regime, the camera angle variable was significant at the 0.06 level. This is important because, although there is not much difference in the use of low angle between the two data sets, in the second time-period Afghan women were proportionately portrayed more on the equal angle and less on a high angle (see Table 2).

On the engagement variable, again over half the photographs in both data sets – 154 images – portrayed Afghan women from a frontal position. During the Taliban regime, however, there were significantly more photographs, 76 images, vs only 54 similar images after the fall of the Taliban regime, representing Afghan women from the profile or from the back, emphasizing the distance between them and the viewer. This angle, according to Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001), objectifies the woman and portrays her as the ‘other’. After the fall of the Taliban regime, however, more Afghan women were portrayed from the front angle, increasing audience identification and involvement (see Table 3).

On the social distance variable, only 42 images, less than 15 percent of both data sets, include close-ups of Afghan women. But almost 80 percent of photographs portray women in the foreground. Comparing the two time-periods, the data analysis produced significant differences with photographs in the second data set, depicting Afghan women more in the foreground and less in long shots. Also, after the fall of the Taliban regime, women are depicted significantly more in medium shots, suggesting an intimate personal relationship with the subject, in comparison to the first time-period. For example, in Figure 4, an AP

TABLE 2
Comparisons of Percentages and Chi-Squares of 284 AP Photographs on Point of View during the Taliban Regime and after the Fall of the Taliban Regime

	During the Taliban Regime (<i>N</i> = 142)	After the Fall of the Taliban Regime (<i>N</i> = 142)	Chi-Square
Camera angle			5.537
Low angle	9.2%	10.6%	
Equal angle	47.9%	59.9%	
High angle	43.0%	29.6%	
Total	100%	100%	
Engagement			7.59*
Frontality	46.5%	62.0%	
Profile	31.7%	25.4%	
Back	21.8%	12.7%	
Total	100%	100%	

* $p < .05$.

TABLE 3

Comparisons of Percentages and Chi-Squares of 284 AP Photographs on Social Distance during the Taliban Regime and after the Fall of the Taliban Regime

	During the Taliban Regime (N = 142)	After the Fall of the Taliban Regime (N = 142)	Chi-Square
Type of shot			19.2***
Close-up	15.5%	14.1%	
Medium shot	31.0%	55.6%	
Long shot	53.5%	30.3%	
Total	100%	100%	
Focus			4.8*
Background	26.1%	15.5%	
Foreground	73.9%	84.5%	
Total	100%	100%	

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

FIGURE 4



(© AP Photo/Marco Di Lauro)

photograph taken during the Taliban regime, the image depicts a profile of an Afghan woman in a long shot: the woman is shown shrouded in a burqa sitting in the trunk of a car. In Figure 5, an AP photograph shot after the fall of the Taliban regime, the image depicts a close-up shot of two Afghan women from a frontal position taken at an equal angle.

Picturing Afghan Women in Traditional Roles

Regarding the portrayal of Afghan women in subordinate traditional roles, the majority of images in both data sets, 228 photographs, depict Afghan women in inanimate positions such as sitting or standing. For example, in Figure 6, an image taken during the Taliban regime depicts veiled Afghan women sitting on the ground. While there are equal percentages of women in both data sets that appear to be physically active, only 20 percent of images in both data sets depict Afghan women as physically active. Interestingly, among those 20 percent, more women were significantly portrayed working outside their home after the fall of the Taliban regime.

Overall, findings indicate more women also appear to be acting in less traditional and more interactive roles in the second time-period. For example, in the next three images described, taken after the fall of the Taliban regime, Figure 7 depicts Afghan women shopping at a local market in Kabul; Figure 8 portrays an image of a woman reading a newscast at Radio Afghanistan in

FIGURE 5



(© AP Photo/John Moore)

FIGURE 6



(© AP Photo/Hasan Sarbakhshian)

FIGURE 7



(© AP Photo/Amir Shah)

FIGURE 8



(© AP Photo/Marco Di Lauro)

Kabul; and Figure 9 shows a group of Afghan female doctors walking through a corridor of a hospital for women in Kabul.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide a preliminary examination of how Afghan women have been portrayed in AP wire photographs and to compare their depiction between two time-periods – during the Taliban regime and after the fall of the Taliban regime. While early anecdotal evidence suggested that once the Taliban regime was toppled, the situation of women would change – and thus the visual media would portray them accordingly – results produced mixed findings. Content analysis shows the majority of women after the fall of the Taliban regime are depicted still wearing their burqas, indicating a less simplistic version of Afghan women's liberation. It is clear that AP photographs portrayed a more complex version of Afghan women and their liberation. However, despite complete body coverage, women after the fall of the Taliban regime are portrayed as more involved, interactive, more socially intimate and symbolically equal to the viewer. In other words, pictures of Afghan women taken after the fall of the Taliban regime do show significant changes in the use of visual framing with regard to visual cues of camera angles, focus, social distance and women's role, indicating a change in the western media's representation of Afghan women. Significant differences suggest the media drew themselves closer to the subject of their representation. This reflects more of a change

FIGURE 9



(© AP Photo/Marco Di Lauro)

in the attitudes of western media than in the situations of the Afghan women, as culturally rooted traditions are not easy to be changed.

While it is obvious that the majority of women in Afghanistan did not get rid of their burqas for traditional/cultural reasons, there are a few women who did. Instead of portraying numerous photographs of these women to visually depict an instantaneous Afghan women's liberation, findings suggest 1 percent of AP photographs portrayed women revealing their face and hair. In other words, after the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghan women are still depicted wearing their burqas, reflecting the complexity of a social liberation movement in a traditional society.

It is important to note that because most of the women are completely covered up, the images failed to humanize the subjects. They did not communicate an emotional state or an imaginary contact with the viewer. The overwhelming number of completely covered Afghan women in the photographs made it impossible to identify contact and emotion. Almost 90 percent of photographs in both time-periods fail to establish a contact with the viewer, and 60 percent of photographs fail to depict an emotional state for the women portrayed.

The second and third research questions examined the use of visual techniques to frame Afghan women in stereotypes and their portrayal in subordinate traditional roles. Results suggest signs of visual framing and stereotypes. For example less than 10 percent of the images in both data sets portray Afghan

women from a low angle to give them an impression of empowerment, and less than 15 percent of photographs include close-ups of Afghan women to create a personal relationship with the viewer. Yet, it is worth noting that women after the fall of the Taliban regime are portrayed as more involved, interactive, more socially intimate and symbolically equal to the viewer. Contrary to Said's (1978) conclusion that the West portrays Islamic culture as least dynamic in time and place, results suggest an attempt to portray Afghan women in a less static mode after the fall of the Taliban regime. Through the use of different visual cues of camera angle, engagement, focus, positioning and general portrayal of women's role in the second time-period, AP wire photographs framed Afghan women in less stereotypical roles. In other words, despite signs of visual subordination with regard to body coverage, the increased portrayal of involvement and intimate depictions imply an attempt to portray the slowly changing environment in the Orient. Thus, results were dissimilar to Said's claims that postulate the West depicts Islamic culture as static.

That said, the differences in visual framing identified may not be simple to explain. Because mediated messages are a continuous and complex process of negotiation, processing and reconstruction (Koivula, 1999), there are two possible ways to explain these results: (1) photographers had better access, or (2) photographers tried to portray a more subtle form of liberation to gain public support for the war against terrorism through the use of visual cues. The implicit message is, instead of depicting a liberation based on western thought – particularly when Afghan women kept their burqas on – AP photographers explored different venues to suggest upcoming social changes. This explanation builds on Louw's idea of a PR repertoire during the Afghan war. According to Louw (2003), the burqa was used as iconic material for a visually mediated war. He explains that expectations around the removal of the burqa and the saving of Afghan women from gender repression were used as a PR strategy. When the burqas were not removed however, in an attempt to rescue the discourse of women's liberation, photographers may have used subtle visual cues to communicate a relatively better environment for Afghan women following the fall of the Taliban regime

Perhaps the most important finding of this study is the overwhelming percentage of Afghan women portrayed completely covered up in AP photographs. Despite the numerous photographs of women portrayed without the burqa published in western media outlets, such as the image in Figure 10 of an Afghan woman smiling after lifting her burqa in Kabul, less than 1 percent of photographs analyzed portray women's faces and hair. Thus, we now know that photographs of Afghan women without the burqa were only glimpses of an uncommon social reality in Afghanistan. This finding suggests any picture of an Afghan woman without the veil represents only an instance record of the event before the camera.

The captured event at best shows that such an act can be performed; it does not show it is a socially diffused act. Rather, it falls into the body of instance records of rare and ungeneralized social practice. Goffman (1976) illustrates the framing analysis theory explaining that although images in gender portrayals did not correspond to the actual behavior of men and women, they did

FIGURE 10



(© AP Photo/Laura Rauch)

represent how people perceive men and women to behave. Therefore, selecting similar images for publication represents a gate-keeping issue, which is beyond the scope of this study, rather than a representation of AP visual coverage of Afghan women's liberation movement.

According to Messaris and Abraham (2001), selection is inevitable in the making of a photographic image and displaying it to the public. Lang and Lang (1952) conclude that media may create an exaggerated impression. The selection of an image depicting an Afghan woman without the burqa is supported by Lang and Lang's conclusion. The claim of women's liberation according to western ideals in American media, while most photographs still depicted them wearing the burqa, also resonates with Perlmutter's finding that American news media may oversimplify and decontextualize foreign affairs to the American public by finding symbols that match with western ideals about appropriate social policies while most often ignoring native symbolism.⁴

Perlmutter (1998) explains good reporting of an international event is difficult and requires knowledge of the culture to provide a more complex perspective. However, one should not underestimate the effort to portray the changing environment in Afghanistan. While it is true that the majority of Afghan women were depicted as inanimate, the remaining 20 percent that remain active were disproportionately depicted in less traditional roles and more interactive activities after the fall of the Taliban regime. This implies that the trend to represent Afghan women in traditional roles may be changing to include a wider variety of women's roles, as Afghan women take a more active part in their environment.⁵

With the development of transnational mass media, and mass media structures and satellite technology in Asia, the media in the US may be challenged with diverse representations and perceptions. To maintain news credibility, a more complex perspective must be mediated. Content analysis suggests 99 percent of AP photographs depicted Afghan women wearing the burqa. This raises an important question: how did US publications select images of Afghan women? Given the pool of AP photographs available, further research should examine published images of Afghan women removing their burqas as a sign of liberation.

This is crucial, not only because it scrutinizes how the media might be perceived as oversimplifying international issues, but because it introduces the importance of photo selection and understanding levels of international coverage. For issues of international reporting, media scholars and news practitioners should take these issues into account and attempt to present guidelines to assist future reporting of international news.

Notes

1. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'burqa' as a garment that is worn by Muslim women to protect them from being seen by men and strangers. The word itself is derived from an Arabic word that means 'to hide'.
2. Another variable of visual subordination that the researcher wanted to include is the head position of the woman portrayed in a photograph. Goffman (1976) writes that a bowed posture represents submission vs an erect position that communicates independence. Unfortunately, the coding category on head position proved controversial. Coders observed most women wore burqas, making it hard to determine a specific head position. It was very difficult to distinguish a bowed posture from an erect one. After negotiation, the question was removed and inter-coder reliability was then computed on the rest of the questions using percentage of agreement.
3. There were three versions of a person's image: one taken at eye level, the others at angles of 12 degrees below or above their eyes. Each student saw only one of the three versions. Results suggest judgments of how powerful the person looked were significantly higher among the students who saw the low-angle version. However, most of the students did not seem aware of the camera angle influence.
4. The burqa is a cultural phenomenon that cannot be thrown away overnight. Many women rely on it for a false sense of security under oppressive and unsafe conditions. While submission was associated with Afghan women, this does not suggest that it is innately Afghan women related, rather, a condition that has been imposed by the former regime and the present patriarchal culture. Afghanistan remains an uncompromising and patriarchal society that would like to keep its women covered.
5. If we consider stereotypes differences in the media, improvements have been noticeable. Wanta and Leggett (1989) suggest that gender stereotypes did not appear to be reinforced through tennis photographs. Klassen et al. (1993) and Kang (1997) found equality portrayals have been increasing and that traditional depictions of women have been decreasing since the 1980s. The rationale was that the equality was due to the increasing number of women in the workforce. Thus, it is safe to assume that as more Afghan women take an active role, the more equal they will be portrayed.

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