

Seen, but not known:

A postmodern analysis of media coverage of the Minnesota Somali community

By

Nathaniel Minor¹

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ABSTRACT

Although the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul are home to the largest Somali-American population in the United States, members of the community have not assimilated into Minnesota society with the same success that previous Diasporas in the area have. In this paper I use literature relevant to provide a fuller insight into the status of the Minneapolis/St. Paul Somali-American community, including media reports, a needs assessment from Hennepin County and other works from area academic institutions. Using postmodern social theory, this article suggests the media's presentation of the Somali-American community is simple and narrow. Too much coverage goes to stories of crime and terrorism, which lead readers to believe the Somali-American population relies on welfare, are Islamic extremists, and other damaging stereotypes. I offer recommendations to the media for covering the Somali-American community in a more comprehensive, culturally competent and accurate way based on this postmodern analysis.

¹ Please direct comments to Nathaniel B. Minor, University of St. Thomas, Mail # 1930, 2115 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105-1096 or nbminor@stthomas.edu.

INTRODUCTION

Although the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul are home to the largest Somali-American population in the United States, members of the community have not assimilated into Minnesota society with the same success that previous diasporas in the area have. The Somali-American community's relationship with the greater population was strained further in late 2008 when the news broke that a young Somali-American man from Minneapolis (who had been missing) had in fact returned to Somalia to and carried out a suicide bombing in the country's bloody civil war. Though not representative of all Minnesotan's views, internet comments on news reports regarding this and other incidents involving the Somali-American community have largely been disparaging, racist and ethnocentric.

In this paper I use literature relevant to provide a more full insight into the Minneapolis/St. Paul Somali-American community, including media reports, a needs assessment from Hennepin County and other works from area academic institutions. Using postmodern social theory, this article suggests the media's presentation of the Somali-American community is overtly simple and narrow: too much coverage goes to crime and terrorism stories, which lead readers to believe the Somali-American population relies on welfare, are Islamic extremists, etc. I offer recommendations to the media for covering the Somali-American community in a more comprehensive, culturally competent and accurate way based on this postmodern analysis.

SOMALI-AMERICANS IN MINNESOTA

The first Somali refugee came to Minnesota in 1990, on the eve of Somalia's civil war. Since then, thousands more have arrived from Somalia as the country's interim governments have come and gone with little peacemaking success. Many Somali-Americans that initially immigrated to other U.S. cities have since made Minnesota home. Minnesota's Somali-American population estimates vary from 15,000 to 75,000, depending on the source (Robillos 2001). Many Somali-American immigrants live in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, though a growing number are moving to St. Paul, Owatonna, Rochester and Worthington, among other places (Robillos 2001).

A University of Minnesota study found that "Cultural differences turned out to be the overarching problem that affected the Somali-American's experience living in Minnesota and their ability to integrate into mainstream society" (Robillos 2001, p. 6). While this is no surprise, the interaction between the Somali-American community and mainstream Minnesota society is important when analyzing media representations. The study used focus groups to gain insights into the Somali-American community and found that employment, housing and education were the three most important issues facing the group (Robillos 2001).

Focus group participants said a visible cultural difference—a hijab—was a common reason Somali-American women were denied employment. Though some women conceded and did not wear the hijab (a veil), the majority of the women indicated they would rather be unemployed than betray their religion (Robillos 2001). Cultural

differences are also evident in housing issues. Most Somali-Americans families prefer to live with their extended families under the same roof—a stark contrast from America’s nuclear family (Robillos 2001). Many Somali-American families live in small, 2-bedroom apartments in Cedar-Riverside, so to live in the traditional manner is actually illegal. It has other consequences as well: “For seniors living in one-bedroom apartments, this can create feelings of boredom, isolation, and even depression” (Robillos 2001, p. 7). Among other education issues Somali-American children face, their parent’s lack of English language skills means the parents can not help their children with homework or other school related issues (Robillos 2001). These are just a few of the major issues the focus group participants mentioned, and there are surely more: transportation, religion, etc. It is essential to keep these issues in mind when discussing media portrayal of the Somali-American community—especially because the root of the conflict between mainstream society and the Somali-American community is cultural differences.

Given these differences and the density of the Somali-American community within the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, it is no surprise that members of the Somali-American community have less contact with the mainstream culture than comparable minority groups in the Twin Cities (Layman and Basnyat 2003). Alienation from the mainstream culture has led to interesting phenomena. For instance, though many Somali-Americans came from different clans in Somalia that traditionally did not mingle, those barriers have now been broken down (Darboe 2003).

Another important factor is time. The first Somali refugee arrived in the Twin Cities only two decades ago—comparable groups like a significant Hmong and Hispanic population have been in the metro area for years longer. A survey of the Hmong population indicates more interaction between that ethnic group and the mainstream population (Layman and Basnyat 2003). While other reasons undoubtedly contribute to this, the additional time must be given substantial consideration.

THE MISSING SOMALI-AMERICAN YOUNG MEN

Located in the Horn of Africa, Somalia has been war-torn since the collapse of the country’s last stable government in 1991 (Elliott 2009). Peace briefly reigned in Mogadishu in 2006 when an Islamic government took control of the country, promising to unite the country. But in Washington, Bush administration officials believed the new government was harboring terrorists and that it had declared a jihad against neighboring Ethiopia, a Christian nation. Ethiopia invaded Somalia with help from the U.S. shortly afterward, which caused Somalis worldwide to regain a sense of nationalism (Elliott 2009).

This is the main impetus for the travel of up to 20 Somali-American men to Somalia since 2007 (Elliott 2009). In November 2008, Shirwa Ahmed became the first American citizen to carry out a suicide bombing, killing 27 in northern Somalia. Shortly afterward, the Federal Bureau of Investigation indicated they had been investigating the young men’s disappearance for some time. Since November 2008, six Minnesota men have died in Somalia and 14 more disappeared. Three returned to America and were arrested on terrorism-related charges. These stories shocked the Somali-American

community in the Twin Cities; they had fled Somalia to escape war and now their own were returning to die.

One of the FBI's top concerns was that the young men were recruited by al-Shabbab – “youth” in Arabic – to fight in Somalia's war and then return to the U.S. to carry out acts of terrorism. The U.S. considers al-Shabbab, an extremist movement affiliated with Al Qaeda, to be a terrorist group. In Minneapolis, a large Somali mosque has repeatedly denied fostering any extremist thoughts the youths may have had. Leaders of the Abubakar As-Saddique mosque denied any connection to the missing men, but the FBI believed the young men were indoctrinated somewhere in Minneapolis. Families of some of the missing men implied a link between the mosque and their sons' departure.

MINORITIES IN THE MEDIA

The communication literature on the representation of minorities in the mass media suggests recurring ideological shortcomings in the timing of coverage of minority groups, the portrayal of minorities and what types of stories were *not* being produced about minority groups.

Alia and Bull (2005, p. 94) divide the representations of Roma (Gypsies) in European Media into three categories: “Roma as victim; Roma as menace; or Roma as exotic exhibitionist Other. The news consumer is hard pressed to find links between these categories, or more nuanced representations.” News coverage of this minority has gaping hole when it comes to stories of daily life (Alia et. al. 2005). Oversimplifying the nuance of a minority was also a concern: “Many fictional and journalistic representations ignore Romanies' Indian origins, cultural and religious practices and contemporary living conditions in the various countries they inhabit and visit”(Alia et. al. 2005, pp. 94-95).

Where minorities appeared in newspapers is also of concern. Larson found that blacks commonly appear in crime and sports stories, but not in economic, foreign and political news (2006). Further, analysis of a New Orleans daily paper found that 96 percent of the photographs in the society section were of whites (Larson 2006). “Even in predominantly black cities, news coverage puts whites in the dominant roles in stories” (Larson 2006, p. 95). Using the Los Angeles riots of 1992 as an example, Larson also says “Newspapers focused on the law and government, reaction and the aftermath far more than it did on the causes” (Larson 2006, p. 97).

Larson also found that stories addressing the social problem of poverty tended to focus on the issue in urban, black neighborhoods—ignoring that more whites are poor and more whites are on welfare in America (Larson 2006, p. 98). In Minnesota, the poverty rate for minorities is higher than for whites, but the number of poor whites is nearly three times the number of all impoverished minorities (statehealthfacts.org 2008).

Of particular interest is Kate Warner's article documenting the media's coverage of gang rapes that occurred in Sydney, Australia. Lebanese-Muslim Australians were perpetrators of some of the crimes, which targeted Euro-Australian women, but the media and police inflated their incidence (Warner 2004, p. 344).

The story of the gang rapes reveals common characteristics

of a moral panic: a high level of concern over the behavior of a certain group or category of people, an increased level of hostility towards the group regarded as a threat, and disproportionately or an exaggeration of the threat. (Warner 2004, p. 345)

Police and the Australian government insisted on using the term ‘Lebanese gangs’ to describe the suspects, citing the public’s safety as a prime concern (Warner 2004, p. 352). The use of such general and simple terms had ramifications in the area’s Arabic community; the Australian public linked the gang’s religion and ethnicity to the crimes, believing that perhaps their cultural beliefs allowed such behavior (Warner 2004, p. 355). Warner admits that to say culture and race had no bearing on the crimes would surely be false, but she noted that because the press only presented the out-of-context facts of Lebanese perpetrator and Euro-Australian woman victim, the audience would likely infer that the crimes were racially motivated. Warner’s deeper analysis reveals that perhaps the perpetrators targeted Euro-Australian women simply because they were *not* Lebanese. That is, there would be less chance of being recognized and caught. This is an example of the type of explanation the media rarely gives: one that goes beyond the obvious facts by presenting them in a culturally competent way (Warner 2004, p. 353). Presenting out of context facts is widely viewed as one of the most important and common problems in the media’s coverage of minorities.

POSTMODERN SOCIAL THEORY

Since it emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, postmodernism has been a divisive set of ideas. It is not constrained to the sociological discipline; rather, its ideas are seen throughout art, architecture, literature, as well as social theory. Thus, debate exists as to what the term ‘postmodern’ actually means. In postmodern social theory, a few commonalities characterize the word. First, postmodern theory is a rejection of modern social theory and its pursuit of a universal, ahistorical, rational foundation for its analysis and critique of society (Ritzer 2008). Postmodernists tend to be relativistic, irrational and nihilistic—effectively abandoning the pursuit of a grand narrative of social interaction, which many modern social theories provide (Ritzer 2008). From this point on, however, postmodern theorists disagree on many things. For purposes of this paper, elements of the postmodernism Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson espoused will be used.

Conceptual framework: Postmodern analysis

Baudrillard and other postmodernists contend that a radical rupture has replaced modern society with a ‘postmodern’ one (Ritzer 2008). Jameson says superficiality and lack of depth characterize this new society—visible, he says, in cultural products that are satisfied with surface images and do not delve into non-obvious meanings of them (Ritzer

2008). Baudrillard’s concept of *simulacrum* describes the history of simple images: First, simple images reflected a basic reality. Second, they masked and perverted a basic reality. Third, they masked the *absence* of a basic reality. Now, they bear no relation to any reality at all (Baudrillard 1985). In sum, Baudrillard says the simple image has evolved to a point where it no longer represents what it claims to.

The other useful insight postmodern theory can offer is its concern with technology. Jameson believed that production in postmodern society has moved beyond useful items like automobiles to ‘reproductive’ technologies: namely, the media. The media’s image contains no intrinsic value, but rather “implodes carrying its flattened image surface within itself” (Jameson 1991, p. 37). The effects of this, as Baudrillard explains, are that the supposed reality the media presents is not the reality we are accustomed to (Baudrillard 1981). “It is no longer a question of imitations, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (Baudrillard 1985, p. 12).

DATA

Although this is not a research paper, I collected a minimal amount of quantitative and anecdotal data to provide some evidence for my arguments. For purposes of this paper, I tallied media reports containing the word ‘Somali’ and ‘Somalia’ in their headline or story body (requiring more than just a passing mention) between November of 2008 and the present from the St. Paul Pioneer Press (daily newspaper) and Minnesota Public Radio (local public radio outlet. Disclosure: The author is an intern in MPR’s newsroom.)

Coverage of the community since the news of the suicide bomber in November 2008—regardless of subject matter—could be a good indicator of the mainstream societies current impression and knowledge of the Somali-American community. The two outlets were chosen because of availability of archives and because they are two of the largest media organizations in the state. Notably missing is the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the largest newspaper in the state, which was not analyzed because stories are not archived in an accessible manner.

Coverage of the Somali-American community in the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Minnesota Public Radio, accurate as of Oct. 5, 2009:

Crime	Social issues	Human interest
101	16	1

A breakdown of coverage reveals 101 articles about the missing Somali-American men; a Somali pirate incident and local violence involving Somali-Americans. 16 stories did not specifically address the previous incidents, but described some other hardship the community faced. One story—about a Somali-American girl’s basketball team—fit in the human-interest category.

Reader comments are allowed on nearly every story on the Pioneer Press' website. While comments are not allowed on Minnesota Public Radio stories, a few blog posts with interaction concerning the representation of local Somali-Americans also contain reader comments, many of which are insightful.

Reader comments on a September 2009 story about the new President of Somalia visiting the Twin Cities were a good representation of readers' responses to a story in the Pioneer Press (Forliti 2009). Commenter 'Fruit Bat Alert' wrote:

Dear Som. Pres.

Please take back your freeloading, unadapting, unassimilating, complaining, demanding, unwashed, over breeding, woman/dog/pork hating anti-american group of Twin Cities Somalis back with you.

Thanks so much,

From the Overtaxed and FED UP Citizens of the Formally Great State of MN. (Fruit Bat Alert 2009)

Commenter 'No Spin Zone' added: "I was going to say a ship, but they love the pirate thing so much it would just add more troubles. My point is getting (sic) them out of here!" (No Spin Zone 2009). Other comments touched on other stereotypes of local Somali-Americans: men are taxi drivers; they are here to collect welfare checks, etc. Out of 80 comments, more than 70 were disparaging in nature.

In February of 2009, the Minnesota News Council, whose membership consists of staff from mainstream local media, sponsored a panel trying to repair the perceived damage to the Somali-American community. The audience was mostly Somali-Americans (Collins 2009). The week previous to the panel, news had broke questioning a local mosque's connection to the disappearance of the young Somali-American men. Both local and national news media covered the story, which led to a public relations crisis for the mosque and Somali-American community.

A Minnesota Public Radio blog post titled 'Why Somalis don't trust the Twin Cities media' summarized the panel discussion (Collins 2009). Duchesne Drew from the Minneapolis Star Tribune—the largest news organization in the state—said it is a "hole in our organization that we don't have a lot of Somali people in the newsroom" (Collins 2009). Julia Opoti from Mshale, a Minneapolis-based African community newspaper said the mainstream media only covers the community when "there's a disaster or crime" (Collins 2009).

Hassan Mohamud, from the William Mitchell College of Law, singled out a National Public Radio story that had run on MPR, saying it had damaged trust between the Somali-American community and the media.

Coverage is not beneficial to the community; it is damaging. (It) paints the most important institution -- which is the mosque -- in the worst light...They never showed the good in our community. They used military language about how we line up. Instead of talking about the positive statements that are made, they talked about my face...We cannot trust these people. (Collins 2009)

The panel also discussed the role an often-quoted Somali-American man played in the media's coverage. Omar Jamal, director of the Somali Justice Advocacy Center, is often reporter's first call when news breaks in the Somali-American Community (at least before he left the Twin Cities for a position at the United Nations. Mohamed Hassan, the president of the Somali-American Institute for Peace and Justice, made clear at the panel discussion that Jamal is not a representative of the entire Somali-American community and should not be portrayed as such (Collins 2009). Drew, from the Star Tribune, said Jamal was one of few Somali-American sources that returned phone calls, leaving reporters with little choice Hassan, the president of the Somali Institute for Peace and Justice, said ultimately, many Somali-Americans do not want to speak to the media because they fear being labeled as terrorists (Collins 2009).

DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper is to give a general understanding of the Somali-American community in Minneapolis/St. Paul, the media's representation of the community, a brief introduction to postmodern social theory and the mainstream media's coverage of minorities in general. I analyzed the anecdotal evidence of coverage collected and, using postmodern social theory as a framework, explained the attached vitriolic comments, apparently authored by Minnesotans. In addition, I made recommendations for future coverage of the Somali-American and minority communities in general.

In my brief tally, the vast majority of mainstream news articles about the Somali-American community were about violence in the community or in Somalia, by a count of 84 out of 101 total stories in a ten-month period. The stories of local violence were nothing out of the ordinary; daily newspapers like the St. Paul Pioneer Press have long had a 'cops and criminals' or public safety beat. The media covers crime because it sells papers, but also because the responsible reporting of crimes cuts down on false rumors that may spread otherwise (Zelezny 2006).

That said, Alia and Bull's criticism of minority's appearances in the media as victim, menace or exhibitionist could be extended to Somali-Americans in Minnesota (Alia et. Al. 2005). Articles of Somali-Americans focused on a hardship or obstacle and rarely represented them as integrated members of society. This one-dimensional coverage may tell the story of one or a small number of Somali-Americans, but attempts to extrapolate stories to the whole diaspora should be avoided. Likewise, images and references to the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood in Minneapolis as the hub of the Somali-American community should be used carefully. This may be technically true, but to say it

alone ignores the growing population of Somali-Americans in outstate Minnesota. *Simulacrum* can be applied here: if the average reader reads in a news story that most Somali-Americans in Minnesota live in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood and if the story makes no further mention of other areas of residence, the reader will believe this one statement of truth to be the only statement of truth, especially because such lines are repeated in story after story. The concept can explain many of the stereotypes mentioned by commenters on the Internet: Somali-Americans are all on food stamps, housing vouchers, etc.

Where Somali-Americans appear in the newspaper and the media in general is important. Larson's finding (2006) that 96 percent of photographs in the New Orleans daily paper's society section were of white people tells an insightful story: the cultural events promoted and covered in a positive light in the media are typically mainstream, American and/or Christian. To illustrate: consider the coverage of the Minnesota State Fair. Many local TV station broadcast nightly from the fair; Minnesota Public Radio even sponsors an 'MPR' day at the fair. This isn't to say that these cultural events shouldn't be covered, but if the local media wants to fully serve its audience, they need to realize their audience is not as homogenous as it once was. Positive, regular coverage of local minority groups' cultural events and traditions might even grow their audience.

One caution: just as people should not extrapolate the facts presented in media reports, people should also not think of the racist and hateful comments as being representative of most Minnesotan's views toward Somali-Americans. This paper does not try to explain the views of most Minnesotans toward Somali-Americans, but rather tries to explain the views of the internet commenter. Reader comments on news Web sites have been notoriously vitriolic in many areas of coverage.

Culturally competent reporting

The disappearance of Somali-American youths and subsequent reappearance in Somalia with al-Shabbab has proved to be the most lasting story in the local media. While coverage has largely been accurate, it has suffered from lack of contextualization. Consider a National Public Radio story about Andrew Liepman, deputy director of intelligence for the National Counterterrorism Center's presentation to the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. Liepman provided a summary to the committee, much like the one provided in this paper, including the following:

I also want to emphasize that we do not believe that we are witnessing any form of community-wide radicalization among Somali-Americans. Many Somali-Americans came to the U.S. to get away from the type of anarchy, chaos and heartbreak that violence breeds. The overwhelming majority of Somali-Americans are or want to be contributing members of American society, trying to raise their families here and desperately wishing for stability in their ancestral home. (Liepman 2009, p. 4)

But the story NPR correspondent Dina Temple-Raston filed ignored this part of the story entirely. Because this part of the statement was not seen as breaking news, it was left out, either by Temple-Raston or her editor. The story instead focused on Sen. Joe Lieberman's assumption that some recruiters or leaders in the Somali-American community "are responsible, at least in part, for the movement of people" (Temple-Raston 2009). This is obviously the headline news that came out of the story, and rightfully so. Homegrown terrorists and their sympathizers should be subject to investigation. But when news reports ignore the important disclaimer from authorities that the radicalization of Somali-Americans is not community wide, generalities soon follow. Baudrillard would say that Temple-Raston's story, although factually true, is errant and false because it only presents the newsworthy parts of the story, not the full story. Although journalists are meticulous at including non-absolute language like 'many' or 'some', Baudrillard would say it does not matter, because people cannot know what is merely inferred: in this case that there are Somali-Americans who are not extremist.

Using Warner's analysis of the Sydney gang rape case and the anecdotal evidence collected via hateful reader comments, it can be inferred that American readers linked the missing young men's ethnicity with their behavior. Ethnicity obviously played a factor in the case (although it should be noted that one of the men who was killed in Somalia was white and not Somali). Warner warns that coverage should not pretend ethnicity and culture are meaningless in reporting crime, but she also states that when included, it should be contextualized (Warner 2004). Temple-Raston's story, with the lack of context and use of ethnic descriptors is a double whammy.

More human interest stories shedding light into the lives of non-extremist Somali-Americans and better context for stories about the missing youths would go a long way to present the diaspora in a manner more representative of the population. However, because the news media is largely built to cover breaking news, this cannot be expected to happen overnight, if at all. However, other practices like the hiring of Somali-Americans in the newsrooms of the Twin Cities could have an immediate impact on the cultural competence of news reports. Duchesne Drew of the Star Tribune noted this was an ethnicity that was underrepresented in the largest newsroom in the state, as mention above.

CONCLUSION

The Somali-American community in the Twin Cities is facing the crisis of losing their own children to a war some had fled years before. The community has not assimilated into the greater Minneapolis/St. Paul community as successfully as previous immigrant groups, which probably has played a part the media's culturally incompetent representation of the diaspora. This, in addition to the physical estrangement of much of the community from mainstream society, has resulted in the widespread revilement of Somali-Americans, as least on Internet comment pages. If the media can do a better job of providing culturally competent reports of the community, as well as expand their coverage to more than crime, this new, more comprehensive representation could go a

long way to repair the relationship between the Somali-Americans community and the rest of Minnesota.

Baudrillard's concept of *simulacrum* explains much about this topic. In effect, it says that people can only know what they see, hear and experience; and because the media does not present a full representation of the Somali-American community and because the Somali-American population is largely physically alienated from the mainstream society, most Minnesotans only know the diaspora as a troubled, violence-prone, poor, quasi-terroristic, Islamist people. Of course, the Minnesotans who keep Somali-American friends and do not rely on media reports know better.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Much research exists that explains why the mainstream media does not cover minority communities with the same veracity and thoroughness it gives to breaking news and other regular beats. Further research should be done to link the lack of cultural competence and context in media reports to the alienation of minorities. A more thorough quantitative study of news stories would add much credibility to this paper, which largely relies on anecdotal and a small amount of quantitative data.

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ENDNOTES

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