The Application of Us vs Them in Representations of Terrorism Threats
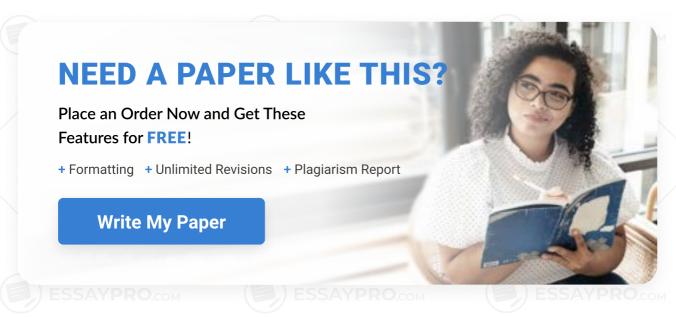
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The threat of terrorism, which in the US perception largely stems from the Middle East region, is a topic that has received much attention in the Western media in recent decades. Even though Islam is the second world religion in terms of reach in many Western countries, Muslims and their representation are sometimes blind to principles of tolerance and unbiased media representation. In contrast, Islam is often associated with violence, terrorism, and extremism. Respectively, it is presented in the media as something threatening, dangerous, anti-governmental or something "other" and alien. The following study intends to explore the mechanism of this process and reveal its peculiarities.

The broader **theoretical framework** of the following study is related to the field of discourse analysis, which explores the structures and functions of text and talk in terms of social, political, and cultural contexts. In turn, the **methodological basis** of this study is a critical discourse analysis (CDA) that explores how society represents social groups and analyses the power relations of subordination and domination between them. In this respect, a prompt tool is an opposition of Us and Them as a part of the ideological discourse approach, which was actively developed by one of the founders of CDA - Teun van Dijk (Ramanathan and Hoon, 2015, p. 57). Hence, the research utilises Van Dijk's *"ideological square"* model and analyses two US news reports on the threat of terrorism.

Overall, the analysis indicates that the media and politics have become more interrelated in recent years, and *Us* vs *Them* is commonly used to enhance the persuasion effect, to achieve goals and interests of the state, as well as to rally society around a common threat of Islam.

Respectively, media discourse actively utilizes principles of contrast and opposition in its texts, where one side is a society of peace, friendship, and advocates for freedom, while the second is an opponent of peace, security, and justice. All in all, the framing of *Us* and ***Them*** is a critical tool for political and social influence, as it has a wide application, especially in the context of geopolitical issues and confrontations. Meanwhile, a striking example is the opposition of the United States (*Us*) and the radical Islam as a terrorist threat (***Them***), which gradually led to a negative representation of not only fundamentalist Islamists, but Islam as a religion and Muslim people overall.

Literature Review and Methodological Background

CDA is a branch of discourse analysis that goes beyond how and why discourse cumulatively contributes to the particular perception of social structures. According to Ramanathan and Hoon (2015), CDA deals with "the reproduction of macro-structures and highlights the traces of cultural and ideological meaning as well as power in society, hegemony, and resistance" (p. 57). Other scholars, including Mahboob and Paltridge (2013), stated that CDA reveals the tools by which the domination group exercises power upon the oppressed (p. 213). In this regard, it occurs through the opposition of *Us* and ***Them***. Van Dijk (2003) also stressed that CDA focuses on the ways of how power abuse, dominance, and inequality are reflected in the social and political discourse (p. 352). Moreover, a prominent place of how these discourses originate belongs to ideology.

Indeed, ideology represents an essential element that controls the public thought, and more specifically, the ideas about a social group. Eventually, this universal pattern then represents the basic social characteristics and perceptions of groups based on their "identities, goals, norms, values, positions, and resources" (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 32). The presence of the term *Us* versus ***Them*** is an essential component in the ideological representation of a particular group, and here, *Us* represents positive characteristics while ***Them*** is related to bad properties (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 18). Eventually, the control of social group representation allows organizing, monitoring, and controlling attitudes towards a social group.

Van Dijk made a prominent contribution to discourse studies with the creation of a theoretical framework that reveals how this process of control occurs through the so-called "ideological square".

Hence, the scientists crafted four major principles which enable subtle ideological discourse to express different ideological stances. These four principles are the following:

• Emphasise positive things about *Us*;

• Emphasise negative things about *Them*;

• De-emphasise negative things about *Us*;

• De-emphasise positive things about *Them*. (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 44)

Overall, these four elements play an essential role in a broader contextual strategy of positive self-presentation of *Us* and negative presentation of *Them*. This critical contrast is a direct contributor to group conflicts (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 8). Moreover, according to Wodak (2011), *Us* and *Them* opposition stands for 'Inclusion and Exclusion,' and is equated to racial discrimination intended to project negative or unfavorable consequences for particular groups (p. 54). In turn, the reason for such structuring of these concepts is that political discourse is primarily concerned with the struggle for dominance and power, which leads to inequality (As cited in Wirth-Koliba, 2016, p. 29). Meanwhile, the ideological square is a means by which it can be legitimized, while the media is a sphere where ideological square operates perfectly, as it enables the wide dissemination of ideological stance, and immense possibilities to shape and manipulate representations of various social groups. Media is also suitable for political affairs. In fact, scientists highlight that in recent decades, there was the emergence of so-called "medialized politics," which is considered as "the colonization of the media by politics" (Ghachem, 2014, p. 551). This issue is quite probable provided the scale of how politics uses media as a tool to achieve its interests and shape public opinion through the appeal to ideology. The following section will consider two such examples.

Results

The first article by Kean and Hamilton (2018) from *USA Today* portrays the problem mainly through the positive self-presentation of the US that should save the world from an Islamic threat. The linguistic content of this strategy is to use positive-value tokens in describing its actions: ***the United States has effectively carried out the first two elements of this strategy; we provide security assistance to nearly every country in the Middle East; our military has been effective*** (Kean & Hamilton, 2018).

At the same time, the responsibility for terrorist actions lies entirely with the countries or on terrorists: ***They [terrorists] have drawn us into an expanding fight against terrorism, at a cost $5.6 trillion since 9/11, with no end in sight; poor governance and failed economies leave large segments of society disaffected and susceptible to extremist influence*** (Kean & Hamilton, 2018). However, the report does not indicate that the US in many respects contributed to the fragility and instability of these regimes in the course of its military intervention in the region, which is de-emphasizing of negative about us.

On the other hand, when appealing to the universal human value of peace, the US interprets this series of events in a positive way: ***we are proud to lead this important new effort; we must help strengthen these countries*** (Kean & Hamilton, 2018). At the same time, there is a particularly positive role of the United States: ***U.S. leadership will be critical to mobilizing collective action toward a common goal*** (Kean & Hamilton, 2018). Some examples highlight the threat of terrorism and draw parallels between the source of terrorism and Muslim countries: ***violent extremist groups have gained footholds in 19 countries across the Middle East, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel*** - all of which are predominantly Muslim countries (Kean & Hamilton, 2018). At the same time, the report emphasizes negative things about ***Them: the scourge of terrorism will continue to plague us; we need to curtail the extremist threat and keep America safe*** (Kean & Hamilton, 2018). On the whole, the image of the problems of the Middle East represents it as a region that is incapable of peaceful coexistence, which justifies US intervention in the affairs of this area.

In turn, in the second article by McFarland (2016) from Fox News, there is more emphasis on the strategy of disapproving Islam and radical terrorism though rather explicit and negatively evaluative comments. Therefore, there is plenty of stylistic evaluation means, including metaphors ***(end-times caliphate)***, appeal to civilizational conflict ***(Global Islamist jihad is at war with all of the Western civilization; Violent jihad and Western civilization are NOT morally equivalent)***, appeal to emotion and fears ***(Islamists want to brutally kill a significant percentage of the world; they're setting off bombs)***, which helps to create a negative image of militaristic Islam (McFarland, 2016). At the same time, metaphors and appeals to emotions intensify the effect of persuasion, as they create strong images that arise in consciousness and cause defense reaction. This allows the author to use even radical statements on the part of Us: ***We promise to hunt down and kill anyone who kills our citizens*** (McFarland, 2016). Words with explicit semantics that appeals to fears of the people ***(savage, violent, brutal)*** also facilitate the negative description of the terror (McFarland, 2016).

Overall, the goal of such persistent emphasizing of negative things about ***Them*** is the correction of the reader's worldview, the use of ideology for shaping the opinion, and eventually the transformation of the system of values of the mass audience. As is seen, all four elements of Van Dijk's "ideological square" are used in these reports.

Discussion: Implications of Us vs Them in Political and Social Discourse

As is seen, the analysis provides clear examples of how politics and media shape public opinion through ideological tools. The more significant problem is that this process is already so rooted in the US society and media discourse that particular scholars claim the presence of constant media-bias, stereotyping and xenophobia concerning Muslim people. This phenomenon is called Islamophobia, and it represents the negative representation of Islam, the positioning of it as a threat to security and welfare, which results into discrimination, mass suspicion, and exclusion of Muslim people from society (Beydoun, 2016). According to the consensus of scholars, this phenomenon largely enhanced in Western Hemisphere after the 9/11 terrorist attack (Mandaville, 201, p. 236). After these events, Western political discourse has undergone significant changes in relation to Muslims, identified by authors as "securitisation of Islam" (Mandaville, 2013, p. 236). This concept implies the perception and public discussion of the problem of Islam within the framework of national security of the state. If before 9/11 the world perceived Islam and its radical branches as an external threat, after the attack the fear of internal threat largely intensified while also enhancing fears of radical organizations and movements in the United States. This aspect resulted in the deployment of an entire political intelligence campaign, the culmination of which was the "Patriotic Act," a law that greatly expanded the ability and duties of intelligence services to monitor people, primarily Muslims living in the United States (Beydoun, 2016). Meanwhile, at the social level, the result was a wave of discrimination and xenophobia towards Muslims. This indicates the scale of racialization of the Muslim problem, which is clearly evident in the US conventional political discourse even today. For instance, recent President Trump's scandalous directives concerning the ban on the entry of citizens of certain Middle Eastern countries is a prompt illustration (Mindock, 2017). Hence, it denounces contemporary Islam not only as an external threat of terrorism, or a threat to national security, but also an ideological aspect of the problem. Accordingly, Mandaville (2013) points to the emergence of "double securitization" of Islam (p. 236). The author explains this term as a complex two-sided discourse in which Islam and Muslims are perceived at the same time as a threat to the physical security of the United States and as a threat to vital national values.

In this regard, modern Islam as a security construct is mostly similar to Communism during the Cold War, which simultaneously strikes both, the US security and American lifestyle (Mandaville, 2013, p. 236). Consequently, this perception is also projected on foreign-policy and media discourse.

Also, another important implication of the US approach to Muslims is a particular attitude in foreign policy. This is evident in the fact that the term "Muslim" began to function as a distinct political category, which grabs more than one billion people together while disregarding any national, ethnic or religious differences. Thus, in contrast to the classical approach of US foreign policy when citizens of other states were perceived as members of individual nations, this approach shaped and strengthened the new transnational religious identity. On the other hand, this may be supplied by a Clash of Civilizations given by Samuel P Huntington and his civilizational view (Al Mannan & Shamrir Al-Af, 2017, p. 425). This kind of consideration is particularly relevant, especially considering that the United States is a leader of the West, and many experts focus on civilizational contradictions between the West and Islam that may give momentum to further intensification of *Us* vs *Them* conflict in political and media discourse.

For instance, Reich notes religious differences and their influence on the activities of political leaders, which may lead to some degree of bias (Reich, 1984, p. 19). Restad (2015) cites the example of the "War on Terror", which was presented by President Bush as a civilization battle in which the United States, as the leader of the Western civilization, represented "good" and radical Islam embodied "evil" (p. 6). After the CDS of media reports, it is also possible to agree with the conclusion that dominant portrayal of Muslims in the media is the contributor to the global rise of Islamophobia and Xenophobic attack against Muslims (Al Mannan & Shamrir Al-Af., 2017, p. 424). Overall, these examples reflect broader concepts that explain "othering" of Muslims. Thus, Edward Said (1978) is a prominent author who developed the concept of American Orientalism. Said notes that "the sense of Western power over the East is perceived as a sure thing and has the status of scientific truth" (p. 46). As is seen, *Us* vs *Them* is a very problematic matter with major implications for international politics, social, and media discourse.

In conclusion, the portrayal of a terroristic threat in the US media discourse is an acute issue. The critical discourse analysis reveals the bias and the sophisticated use of ideology and manipulation in order to shape public opinion. Through the utilization of Van Dijk's "ideological square" model, the analysis has shown how the opposition of Us vs Them is developed in terms of the US vs the Muslim world.

Hence, the media use the negative representation of radical Islamists and the Muslim region overall while the US is represented as the savior involved in positive deeds. Nonetheless, this tendency has plenty of negative implications that project to media, social, and political discourse. Firstly, it distorts the principles of unbiased and independent media, as it is evident how the texts appeal to emotions, use literature means, and try to convince and transform the point of view. Secondly, it distorts the society, as it enhances public fears and defensive reactions, including xenophobia and discrimination, resulting in Islamophobia as a particular social problem of the US. Finally, this opposition of 'good' US and 'evil' Muslim world threatened with civilizational and geopolitical confrontation, which put millions of people in danger.

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