

# Women and Media in the Middle East

From Veiling to Blogging

*Edited by*  
**Nahed Eltantawy**



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# Women and Media in the Middle East

The traditional image of the Middle Eastern woman, as portrayed by the Western media, has tended to be one of a woman oppressed by men and religion. Veiling intensifies this image of supposed powerlessness and imprisonment. However, the Arab Spring uprisings have introduced the West to women in the Middle East who do not conform to this stereotype, and have shown the Western media that Middle Eastern women cannot be categorized altogether as one oppressed, powerless group.

This book investigates the diverse realities and complexities of women in the Middle East in terms of their relationship with media platforms old and new. Contributors offer a range of perspectives that discuss everything from media portrayals of the veil to women in film and television, from women's involvement as activists on the street to the role played in the Arab Spring by cyber activism. The collection provides insight into how some women in the Middle East are utilizing traditional as well as new media for purposes of self-expression, activism, and democratization, while also investigating media portrayals of women at home and in the West. This book was originally published as a special issue of *Feminist Media Studies*.

**Nahed Eltantawy** is an Associate Professor of Journalism at High Point University, North Carolina, USA, where she teaches a variety of convergent journalism courses as well as women and gender studies. Her research interests include the media's representation of women, the role of the media in the Middle East, social media and cyber activism, and critical and cultural studies. Her work has been published in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Feminist Media Studies* and the *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*.

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Nahed Eltantawy

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## Chapter 1

*Veiled Threats: Decentering and Unification in Transnational News*

*Coverage of the French Veil Ban*

Barbara Friedman and Patrick Merle

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## Chapter 2

*I Am Just Doing My Bit to Promote Modesty: Niqabis' Self-portraits on Photo-sharing Websites*

Anna Piela

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## Chapter 3

*They Call Me Muslim: Muslim Women in the Media Through and Beyond the Veil*

Jennifer Sotsky

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## Chapter 4

*Finding a Place for a Muslimah Heroine in the Post-9/11 Marvel Universe: New X-Men's Dust*

Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus

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**Chapter 5**

*Selfish, Vengeful, and Full of Spite: The Representations of Women Who Have Abortions on Turkish Television*

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*Mediated Piety in Contemporary Syria: Women, Islam, and Television*

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*A Right to Exist: A Palestinian Speaks*

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Courtney C. Radsch and Sahar Khamis

*Feminist Media Studies*, volume 13, issue 5 (November 2013) pp. 881–890

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# Notes on Contributors

**Julie Davis** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the College of Charleston, South Carolina, USA. She has written about such popular culture icons as Dilbert and Scooby-Doo.

**Elaine Drainville** is a lecturer in Digital Film and TV Production at the University of Sunderland, UK. She has worked in the UK film and TV industry for over twenty-five years, documenting the miners' strike and the women's peace camp at Greenham Common as a member of Amber, a franchised film workshop. Her research focuses on participatory practice in multi-platform media production, concerning issues of representation in areas of conflict, cultural displacement, and identity with a particular emphasis on child-led learning and access to technology for disadvantaged groups.

**Nahed Eltantawy** is an Associate Professor of Journalism at High Point University, North Carolina, USA. Her research interests include media representations of women in the Middle East, social media and cyber-activism in the Arab world, and critical and cultural studies. Her work has been published in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, the *International Journal of Communication*, and the *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*.

**Hande Eslen-Ziya** is an external visiting fellow in the Institute for Society and Social Justice at Glasgow Caledonian University, UK. She received her doctorate degree at the Polish Academy of Sciences IFIS PAN, Warsaw, Poland. Her research is theoretically informed by social psychology, feminist psychology, and sociology, as well as gender role strain, and conceptions of femininity and masculinity. She has been the project coordinator of the two-year project "Construction of Femininity and Masculinity in Friday Prayers in Turkey." Her most recent publication on domestic work, gender, and migration in Turkey was published in *The Discourse of Politics of Migration in Europe* (2013).

**Barbara Friedman** is an Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA. A former journalist, she focuses her research on historical and contemporary representations of gender and race in mass media.

**Asemeh Ghasemi** is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Nottingham, UK. Her thesis explores the experiences of women working in



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

the Iranian broadcast media. Before beginning her postgraduate studies, she worked in the Iranian broadcast media for several years.

**Elza Ibroscheva** is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Mass Communications at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL, USA. Her work has appeared in the *Howard Journal of Communication*, the *International Journal of Communication*, *Sex Roles: Journal of Research*, and in a number of edited volumes. Her research interests focus on media developments in Eastern Europe, including gender representations in the media.

**Sahar Khamis** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA. She is an expert on Arab and Middle Eastern media. She is the co-author of the books *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace* (2009) and *Egyptian Revolution 2.0: Political Blogging, Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism* (2013).

**Patrick Merle** is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication at Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA. A former international reporter, he pays attention to cross-national perspectives, political communication, and public relations.

**Mary Lou O'Neil** is an Associate Professor and Director of the Gender and Women's Studies Research Center at Kadir Has University, Istanbul, Turkey. Her research interests concern gender, law, public policy, and popular culture.

**Kenza Oumlil** recently joined Al Akhawayn University, Ifrane, Morocco as Assistant Professor in Communication and Gender. She received her PhD in Communication from Concordia University, Montréal, Canada.

**Anna Piela** is a Researcher based in the School of Education at the University of Leicester, UK. Her main research interests are gender, new media, and Islam. In addition to the monograph *Muslim Women Online: Faith and Identity in Virtual World*, she has published articles in several peer-reviewed journals.

**Tatiana Rabinovich** is a PhD candidate in the School of Middle East and North African Studies at the University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA.

**Courtney C. Radsch**, Advocacy Director for the Committee to Protect Journalists, is a journalist, researcher, and free expression advocate with more than 13 years of experience in the United States and the Middle East. Radsch holds a PhD in international relations from American University and is turning her dissertation, "Digital Dissidence & Political Change: Cyberactivism and Citizen Journalism in Egypt," into a book. She holds a master's of science in foreign service from Georgetown University.

**Amir Saeed** is a Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Huddersfield, UK. He researches race, racism, and media influence. His recent publications focus on Islamophobia, racism after 9/11, Muslim hip hop, Malcolm X, and social media in relation to the Palestinian occupation.



**Jennifer Sotsky** is a second year medical student in the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University, New York City, USA, and a graduate of Columbia's MS in Narrative Medicine Program.

**Robert Westerfelhaus** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the College of Charleston, where his teaching focuses on American popular culture. He is a 2009–2010 Fulbright recipient. His research on comics has appeared in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, and other peer-reviewed journals.

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# FROM VEILING TO BLOGGING: WOMEN AND MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

**Nahed Eltantawy**

## **Introduction**

The traditional image of the Middle Eastern woman that has long dominated Western media is one of an oppressed and exoticized creature, controlled by men and religion (Leila Ahmed 1999; Malek Alloula 1986; Rana Kabbani 1986; Myra Macdonald 2006; Edward Said 1979). Veiling<sup>1</sup> intensifies the image of supposed powerlessness, creating the stereotype of a helpless, imprisoned woman in desperate need of Western liberation (Abu-Lughod 2002; Said 1979).

It is fair to claim that the Arab uprisings that commenced in 2011 introduced the West to a new image of women in the Middle East: women who are courageous, independent, and technologically savvy. These uprisings, popularly referred to as the “Arab Spring,” introduced women who defied traditional Orientalist stereotypes, such as Yemeni Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkol Karman and Egyptian activist Asmaa Mahfouz, who are both veiled and far from helpless. At the same time, the “Arab Spring” exposed the diversity and complexity of women in the Middle East and showed how women from the Middle East cannot be lumped into one monolithic group, as they are sometimes categorized in certain Western feminist discourses (C. Cayer 1996; Amani Hamdan 2009; Chandra T. Mohanty 1991).

The purpose of this special issue of *Feminist Media Studies* is to investigate the diverse realities and complexities of women in the Middle East in terms of their relationship with old and new media platforms. Contributors offer a range of essays that discuss everything from media portrayals of the veil, women in film and television, to women’s involvement as activists through mobile and social media. The collection provides insight into how some women in the Middle East are utilizing traditional as well as new media for self-expression, activism, and democratization. Authors also investigate media portrayals of women at home and in the West. For purposes of clarity, they are grouped into three sections based on common themes: veiling, media, and superheroes; women, television, and film; and, finally, women, media, and resistance.

## **Veiling, Media, and Superheroes**

In the first section, there are four papers surveying the theme of women, media, and the veil. In “Veiled threats: decentering and unification in transnational news coverage of the French veil ban,” Barbara Friedman and Patrick Merle conduct a cross-cultural analysis

of French and US newspaper coverage of the French ban on the veil. The authors explore the relationship between framing and the reinforcement or destabilization of shared values and consensual views. It is quite common to find that the Western media offer a reductionist image of Muslim women who wear the veil. Journalists frequently paint a picture of a passive veiled woman who is merely a victim who reacts to events instead of actively participating in them (Gema Martin Munoz 2010). Challenging this trope, the next two contributors offer alternative representations of Muslim women. In "I am just doing my bit to promote modesty: niqabis' self-portraits on photo-sharing websites," Anna Piela conducts a visual rhetoric study on the self-representations of niqabis (Muslim women who cover their face in public) in online photo-sharing websites. The paper compares mainstream Western media representations of niqabis with those of the women themselves. Piela argues that, through posting self-portraits, niqabis manage to disrupt the normalized associations of the niqab with passivity, otherness, and violence through the establishment of a certain level of intimacy with the audience.

In her analysis of the 2005 Diana Ferrero documentary *They call me Muslim*, Jennifer Sotsky draws upon the work of medical anthropologist Arthur Frank to reveal certain tensions around gender and religion in the film. In her article "They call me Muslim: Muslim women in the media through and beyond the veil," she argues that while Ferrero offers the two marginalized women represented in the film a space to speak about their veiling choices, these women are also forced to be objects that are "unveiled" and pathologized by Western viewers. While some viewers may sympathize with the women, claims Sotsky, others are drawn to the film's "voyeuristic lure" and the fact that they are not the ones suffering.

The fourth and final paper in this section, "Finding a place for a Muslimah heroine in the post-9/11 Marvel universe: New X-Men's Dust," considers the portrayal of the first observant Muslim female in Marvel's New X-Men comic book series. Authors Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus examine how attention to Dust's Islamic faith and dress mark a significant shift from conventional depictions of superheroes in US pop culture. The authors discuss how Dust, a devout Sunni Muslim from Afghanistan who always wears a burqa in public (Marvel Universe Wiki online), functions as a liminal character, bridging the worlds of Islam and the West.

### **Women, Television, and Film**

The next four contributors turn their attention to Muslim women and traditional media. In "Selfish, vengeful, and full of spite: the representations of women who have abortions on Turkish television," Mary Lou O'Neil considers the portrayal of women who have abortions in four Turkish television series that aired between 2005 and 2011. O'Neil's study reveals that women in all four series are portrayed negatively and blamed for failing to conform to family and society's gender expectations. The analysis verifies prevalent anti-abortion sentiments in Turkish society, which culminated with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's reference to abortion as "murder" in 2012. O'Neil asserts that negative portrayal of Turkish women who have abortions is informed by discourse on Turkish womanhood and discourse on Republican womanhood, where "motherhood" has historically been central to a woman's nationalism and citizenship.

From there, Tatiana Rabinovich's "Mediated piety in contemporary Syria: women, Islam, and television," assesses the influence of Syria's most prominent female preacher, Dr Rufayda al-Habash. Rabinovich argues that while the media typically feature well-known

male Muslim preachers (Robert F. Worth 2009), it is rare for them to include any female Muslim preachers. By exploring Al-Habash's television show and her personal website, Rabinovich underlines the skills that enable this religious female to succeed in both the male-dominated religion and media. Drawing from media studies and women's piety movements, her study contributes to discussions on the Islamic revivalist movement, offering insight on women's preaching, public performance, and utilization of social networks.

Next is "A right to exist: a Palestinian speaks," by Elaine Drainville and Amir Saeed, in which the authors analyze film footage made by one of the authors of Palestinians living in a refugee camp in the West Bank, which was recorded by an all-female crew of Western and Palestinian filmmakers. The study demonstrates how the documentary is able to challenge mainstream Orientalist discourses and dramatized stereotypes of Palestinian life. Footage moves the viewer away from images of Palestinian women as "grieving victims" to reveal the reality of the lives of Palestinian women and men, with candid discussions of their desires, experiences, and ambitions. Through interviews with Palestinian female refugees, the film offers viewers a glimpse into everyday activities, ones which are often rendered "extraordinary" due to the Israeli occupation. The fact that the crew was all-female facilitated their access to a wide number and range of women and girls who openly discussed their personal histories, joked about their daily lives, as well as future aspirations.

In Elli Lester Roushanzamir's (2004) analysis of the portrayal of Iranian women in US media, the author found that the majority of stories focused on the image of Iranian women dressed in the "impenetrable" black chador. This symbolic image of the veil, that relies on Orientalist images of the "poor Muslim woman," is perhaps the prevailing one of Iranian women in Western media (Sylvia Chan-Malik 2011, p. 116). This is why Asemeh Ghasemi's paper, "Women's experiences of work in the Iranian Broadcast Media (IRIB): motivations, challenges, and achievements," is significant in its offering of an alternative representation of the Iranian woman, one that is more complex and goes beyond simplistic dichotomies of traditional versus modern or oppressed versus liberal. Her study follows several Iranian women who work in broadcasting and documents how they resist family and social constraints and reconstruct new identities for themselves. The paper provides insights into some of the ways in which Iranian women challenge the status quo, combat rigid regulations in the Iranian broadcast environment, and work to improve the representation of women in the media.

## **Women, Media, and Resistance**

The final section of this special issue surveys social media, empowerment, and peaceful resistance. Kenza Oumlil's "Talking back to power: the poetry of Suheir Hammad," examines Hammad's influential poetry as a form of resistance to structures of domination. Using personal interviews with the poet and a textual analysis of her poems on the September 11 attacks and the Arab Spring, Oumlil maintains that the poems propel Hammad into the public sphere, moving her from the position of object to that of subject. Drawing on bell Hooks (1989) seminal notion of "talking back," Oumlil concludes that Hammad's poetry is constitutive of a discourse of resistance to forms of domination, and points to potential possibilities for Middle Eastern womanhood.

Moving on to "Social media and Turkish feminism: new resources for social activism," Hande Eslen-Ziya examines Turkish women's social media activism. Given recent political developments in the region, including Turkish protests that began in May 2013 and

continued throughout the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, it is imperative to develop a clear understanding of women's role and their utilization of diverse media platforms for democratization. Through interviews with ten lawyers, journalists, and activists involved in the Turkish women's movement, the author evaluates the evolvment and impact of Turkish women's activism over the years, and the women's utilization of old and new media for political expression.

In Elza Ibroscheva's "The First Ladies and the Arab Spring: a textual analysis of the media coverage of the female counterparts of authoritarian oppression in the Middle East," the author offers an alternative view of women and the Arab Spring. Ibroscheva conducts a textual analysis of Western news coverage of Tunisia and Egypt's former First Ladies, Leila Ben-Ali and Suzanne Mubarak, in newspapers, magazines, and prominent blogs, arguing that Western coverage is often too simplistic or driven by a desire to exoticize the Middle East. In covering the First Ladies of the Middle East, Western media often infuse them with political roles and forces of power, while an oriental gaze transforms them into exotic political novices and/or manipulative extensions to their dictatorship spouses.

The final paper, Courtney C. Radsch and Sahar Khamis's "In their own voice: technologically mediated empowerment and transformation among young Arab women," offers up the findings from a qualitative feminist study of Arab female activists. The paper draws on in-depth interviews with over twenty Arab female bloggers, citizen journalists, and activists to argue that these female activists utilize social media to make their voices heard and create new forms of leadership and empowerment. Arab women's cyberactivism has proved to be a valuable alternative source of news for journalists around the world who are interested in more nuanced insights into the Arab Spring uprisings.

The collection of essays offered here provides an important opportunity to better understand the lives of women in the Middle East through a range of media forms, practices, and institutions which break from dominant Orientalist discourses of the Middle Eastern "Other" by highlighting the diversity and complexity of the lives of women in the region. They variously explore women's relationship with old and new media platforms including the ways in which women are portrayed, the modes and reasons they utilize media for diverse social and political endeavors, as well as women's active participation in media production. It is hoped that, as such, they offer a compelling and progressive array of alternative voices to those of many mainstream, Western media and challenge some of the stereotypical assumptions that are often made about the lives of Middle Eastern women today.

### NOTE

1. Veiling here refers to various forms of head coverings adopted by Muslim women, including headscarf, hijab, or chador as well as full-face veils, known as *niqab* or *burqa*.

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# VEILED THREATS: DECENTERING AND UNIFICATION IN TRANSNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE OF THE FRENCH VEIL BAN

**Barbara Friedman and Patrick Merle**

*In October 2010, France approved a law banning the Islamic veil in all public areas, asserting the republican principle of laïcité. This cross-cultural analysis applies Muhlmann's theoretical framework to French and US news coverage from March 2004 to October 2010 in order to discern whether coverage featured unifying frames invoking shared values; or decentering frames challenging consensual views and presenting alternative contexts.*

## **Introduction**

In April 2011, France became the first European country to impose a ban on full-face veils in public areas. French President Nicolas Sarkozy cited the veil's "threat to the dignity of women" (*Herald* 2010) and its "unacceptability in French society" (Steven Erlanger 2010a). Public debate exacerbated concerns over immigration, nationalism, secularism, security, and sexuality, with various interests, including news organizations, taking part. Veils were "quite literally the sites of a power struggle over national, cultural, and religious identity" (Bradford Vivian 1999, pp. 116–117).

In 2004, the French national assembly overwhelmingly approved a ban on Muslim headscarves and other "conspicuous" religious symbols in public schools (*Los Angeles Times* 2004b). The measure was preceded by school officials' repeated efforts to force Muslim girls to remove their headscarves, even after France's State Council upheld the right of religious expression in public schools (*Le Parisien* 2003). Critics of the veil viewed the garment as a symbol of Muslim society's refusal "to engage in what were taken to be the 'normal' protocols of interaction with members of the opposite sex" (Joan Wallach Scott 2007, p. 154). Additionally, Interior Minister Claude Gueant said the ban represented an effort to defend the principle of secularism and the principle of gender. Opponents accused Sarkozy of fostering Islamophobia and using the law for political gain (Alison Culliford 2010).

This study examines news coverage of France's veil ban in US and French newspapers, adopting the novel framework of journalism's unifying and decentering tendencies (Geraldine Muhlmann 2008). A cross-national comparison is appropriate since France has the largest Muslim minority in Western Europe and by 2030 the US will have a larger number of Muslims than any European country other than Russia and France