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## **Orientalist Representations and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election: *The New York Times, the Washington Post, and CNN.com***

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In the Western media Iran is regularly described as a land of abnormalities. The media's representations of the country are for the most part stereotypical and regularly dishonest. The media regularly constructs caricatures of the country, exaggerating by means of often preposterous distortion, the politics and everyday reality of the country. When confronted with these representations of Iran, one is regularly reminded of Orientalism and the debates surrounding its critique.

The term *Orientalism* describes the various schools of thought and methods of investigation through which Europe came to know 'the East.' According to critics of Orientalism, such as Edward Said, it was and still is through this discourse and its construction of

knowledge that the ‘West’ has been able to legitimize and maintain its hold over the uncivilized ‘Eastern Other.’ The underlying thesis of all Orientalist analysis is that the Orient is primitive, mysterious, exotic, and incapable of self-government. However, Orientalism should not be seen merely as a post-hoc rationalization for colonial rule. Far more important is how it knowingly or unknowingly justifies imperialism and colonialism even in advance of their actual manifestations.

Attending to the ways Orientalism functions as a determinant discourse in the construction of knowledge allows critics to consider numerous ‘Western’ texts, from apparently separate intellectual disciplines such as politics, media, history, linguistics, and literature, among others, as belonging to a single discourse. What unites these texts together is the common culture and ideology intrinsic to the discursive practices through which they produce knowledge about the Orient. As Ania Loomba notes, these discursive practices thus “make it difficult for individuals to think outside them—hence they are also seen as exercises of power and control.”<sup>1)</sup> However, it should be kept in mind that this does not mean that a discourse is static or cannot contain internal contradictions.

It is often the case that Orientalist modes of thought and representation are actually able to survive contact with the reality on the ground, even when their governing principles are at odds with this reality. One reason for this may be that the need to create an overall consistency in discourse may come before the goals of

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1) Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 39.

objective analysis and ‘truth’. The stronger the discourse becomes, the longer it lives and the better it is able to bring about consistency within its domain. This process is helped through the continued repetition and adaptation of the discourse’s central motifs. Another explanation for Orientalism’s persistence can be found through Said’s concept of latent and manifest Orientalism. Manifest Orientalism is comprised of openly stated ideas about Eastern civilization, history, government, and literature produced at different historical junctures. Latent Orientalism, however, is an “almost unconscious and certainly an untouchable positivity”<sup>2)</sup> that:

contains the basic ‘truths’ of the Orient, so that while, for example historians might disagree about particular interpretations of the history of the Orient, underlying assumptions of oriental backwardness would remain unquestioned. As such latent Orientalism has strong affinities with certain concepts of ideology, particularly the ‘negative’ version of ideology as false consciousness, and the durability of ideological formations, especially when allied to strong institutions such as Orientalism, would also help to explain the survival of Orientalist attitudes.<sup>3)</sup>

An important aspect of the critique of Orientalism is that it explains the methods through which ‘the Other’ was constructed by the West as its barbaric, irrational, despotic, and inferior opposite or alter ego. The ‘Other’ thus functions as a type of surrogate and underground version of the West or the ‘self.’ What may be even more significant, however, is that through its position of domination,

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2) Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (Essex: Prentice Hall, 1997), 101.

3) *Ibid.*, 101-102.

the West is even able to tell the ‘truth’ to non-Western cultures—in this case Eastern cultures—about their past and present conditions, as the West is capable of representing the Orient more authentically than the Orient can itself. Such a ‘truthful’ representation not only aids the colonizer or imperialist in justifying his actions, but also serves to weaken the resistance of ‘the Other’ by changing the way in which ‘the Other’ views itself.

When one hears of the concept of representation in the media, the first thing that comes to mind is the idea of truthfulness. Some probably think an appropriate representation of an event in the media comes about when the presenter tells the truth. However, there are things other than telling or not telling the truth that make up the process of representation, especially when it comes to representing the Orient. The context in which a certain story is presented as well as the wording and the language of the story is also of importance when encountering representation. This is exactly where the power of the media lies. Hence, the problem is not merely whether or not the truth is told, but how the truth (or, as the case may be, non-truth) is told by the media.

One element that helps explain this point is the role that simplification and emphasis play. When something happens somewhere in the world, different media outlets present it with emphasis put on different aspects of the event. In one media outlet only a shadow of the event is described, while in another the description is more colorful than the event was in reality. This is what we may call a distortion of the truth, whether intentional or not. Emphasizing certain elements of an event and deemphasizing

other elements can often be in line with the interest of the owner or owners of a particular media outlet. That is one reason why different versions of “truth” are created or constructed to serve different interests and purposes.

The form of “truth” or distortion that is of concern here is an ideological one rather than a technical one; that is, one in which emphasis of any kind regularly backs a specific interest. The distortion may not always be intentional, because the expert or analyst, whatever his or her background, could have been trained under the illusion that knowledge and education are essentially neutral and are not tools that can also be used by contending centers of power, nations, or races. This can easily be seen in the discourse of the mainstream media in the ‘West’ and its support for Saddam Hussein’s brutal regime in the 1980s, even while the regime was using weapons of mass destruction against Iranian and Iraqi civilians and combatants. The same can be said about the western media’s relative silence and indifference towards the Israeli regime’s siege of the Gaza Strip and the atrocities committed there in the name of Zionism. Such crimes against humanity are regularly accepted as appalling yet somehow still necessary in order to protect the interests of the so-called Free World.

The media’s treatment of Western governments, politicians, and other Western or Westernized figures of influence in comparison to that of their victims or antagonists, whether they are Iranian politicians, Afghani villagers, or Palestinian children, is regularly influenced by ‘national interests’ and the interests of the so called free world. In other words, the mainstream media takes for granted

that Western actions are a necessary evil to ward off a greater evil. Hence, history and the present is told from the point of view of Western governments, conquerors, and diplomats, because they deserve universal acceptance in the face of the uncivilized Other.

The story of Iran's presidential election was intensely covered in the websites of the three news outlets mentioned in this paper's title and seems to be an appropriate example of Orientalism at play. From June 1 to July 18, CNN published 130 articles, *The New York Times* 142 articles, and *The Washington Post* 72 articles. This is an enormous number, a total of 344 articles and an average of more than 2 articles per day per website. However, in order to come up with a more in-depth review this paper covers the first 20 days of June, so as to include both pre-election and post-election events that took place in Iran. In this period of 20 days, a total of 152 articles were published on the CNN, *Washington Post*, and *New York Times* websites together.

A wide range of issues and events were focused upon in these websites but this paper discusses four main topics:

- The candidates and their supporters
- Speculations on the election before it was held
- The election as rigged
- Polls that predicted the election results

## **The Candidates and their Supporters**

The way candidates and their supporters were described is

interesting. However, as most of the attention was given to two of the candidates, here we only talk about these two candidates and overlook the other two. Obviously, the best person to start with is President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The word that most often followed his name was “hard-liner” and his alleged failure in managing the Iranian economy was the topic that was emphasized. Throughout this period, these websites mention almost no positive aspect of Dr. Ahmadinejad’s leadership, whether domestic or foreign. The overall picture given was of a “hard-liner” who threatens the world with his alleged denial of the Holocaust, who insists on pursuing the Iranian nuclear program, and who had ruined the country with his “military-backed” government. He was regularly presented as having little support among religious scholars, clerics, the youth, women, and the educated. Hence, according to these news outlets, nearly all of the population was excluded from the list of his supporters. The only people these websites named as supporters of the President were the poor and those who lived in rural areas. Just like the term “hard-liner” that was widely used to describe the president, the word “poor” was often associated with his supporters. Below are a few examples of how Ahmadinejad’s supporters were described:

*The Washington Post*: A long column of provincial, working-class Iranians, clad in black and walking in flip-flops, streamed into a highway underpass, heading for a reelection rally for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.<sup>4)</sup>

CNN’s website: But Ahmadinejad—despite being blamed for Iran’s economic

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4) Thomas Erdbrink, “A Polarized Iran Prepares to Go to Polls,” *Washington Post*, June 12, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/11/AR2009061104106.html>.

turmoil over the past four years—maintains staunch support in rural areas.<sup>5)</sup>

*The New York Times*: Mr. Ahmadinejad has bought political support among the poor and lower middle class...<sup>6)</sup>

Mr. Mousavi and his supporters, however, were described very differently.<sup>7)</sup> Unlike with Ahmadinejad, a very positive picture of Mousavi was regularly presented. Some of the key words that described him in the articles were: reformist, intellectual, calm and mild, a “lovely architect,” and (in an op-ed) “the anti-Ahmadinejad.”<sup>8)</sup> In many instances, he was also praised for handling Iran’s economy during most of the 8 years of war. This is interesting because during the Iran-Iraq war Mr. Mousavi was himself presented as a “hard-liner” by the western media. One of the many positive images of Mr. Mousavi comes from *The Washington Post*, which published an article by Thomas Erdbrink claiming, “Those close to Mousavi, who is also an architect, describe a worldly intellectual who is not hungry for power but who thinks that Iran’s bad economy and international isolation require him to try to effect change.”<sup>9)</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, in an article published in *The New York Times* on June

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5) “Ahmadinejad hails election as protests grow,” CNNwebsite, June 13, 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/13/iran.election/index.html>.

6) Robert Worth, “As Iran Gets Ready to Vote, Economy Dominates,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/10/world/middleeast/10iran.html>.

7) Mousavi is spelled either as *Mousavi* or *Moussavi*. I have used the former throughout, but have preserved the latter spelling when it appears as such in a quoted news article.

8) Roger Cohen, “Iran Awakens Yet Again,” *The New York Times*, June 11, 2009, [www.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/opinion/11iht-edcohen.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/opinion/11iht-edcohen.html).

9) Thomas Erdbrink, “A Polarized Iran.”

17, quotes Gary Sick, who for years worked in the U.S. National Security Council, as saying, “Mousavi was around in some tough times, he has not shown any signs of being intimidated by all this.”<sup>10)</sup> Even in articles where his previous background as a “hard-line revolutionary” is discussed, the authors emphasize that he is no longer a revolutionary or a hard-liner; but rather that he has turned into “a pragmatic manager.”<sup>11)</sup>

It was not only the candidate himself who was portrayed by these media outlets in such a positive light, but his wife too was regularly praised. She was admired for “sporting a floral hijab that taunted grey-black officialdom”<sup>12)</sup> and for being “a prominent academic,”<sup>13)</sup> or “a much-admired academic.”<sup>14)</sup> In addition to Mousavi and his wife, his supporters are also represented positively. They are the educated, the young, the better-off, and the female; thus suggesting that nearly everyone but the poor supports him in Iran. Below are a number of other examples depicting the way Mr. Mousavi and his supporters were constructed:

*The New York Times:* Mr. Moussavi, a former prime minister with a reputation for honesty and competence, has emerged as Mr. Ahmadinejad’s

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10) NeilMacFarquhar, “Iran’s Latest Protests Seen as the Toughest to Stop,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 2009, [www.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/world/middleeast/17tehran.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/world/middleeast/17tehran.html).

11) Erdbrink, “A Polarized Iran Prepares to Go to Polls.”

12) Cohen, “Iran Awakens Yet Again.”

13) Thomas Erdbrink, “Iranian Leader, Rival Express Sharply Divergent Views in Debate,” *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/03/AR2009060301359.html>.

14) MoniBasu, “Women in Iran march against discrimination,” CNN website, June 19, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/19/iran.protests.women/index.html>.

strongest challenger. In recent weeks his campaign has gained tremendous energy, and huge rallies by his supporters have packed the streets of the capital day and night.<sup>15)</sup>

*The New York Times:* The world has watched as voters in the streets of Tehran rallied for the reformist candidate, Mir Hussein Mousavi, demanding “a government of hope.”<sup>16)</sup>

*The Washington Post:* Mousavi’s political foot soldiers, in turn, are disgruntled middle-class youths, intellectuals, artists and academics who have been alienated by the current government’s radical rhetoric and pervasive restrictions on personal freedom, such as police controls on the way people dress, the banning of books and the disciplining of dissident students.<sup>17)</sup>

*The Washington Post:* But he entered the race on a main promise to stand up to Ahmadinejad, which has earned him the support of influential clerics, politicians and young people alike.<sup>18)</sup>

## Speculations on the Election Before it was Held

In many of the articles, speculation on the results of the election can be found. Although in the early days of coverage, articles on all three websites had admitted the existence of large support for the president, as the election neared, newer articles reported that the supporters of Mr. Mousavi had increased dramatically. A good

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15) Robert Worth, “In Iran Race, Ex-Leader Works to Oust President.” *The New York Times*. June 11, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/world/middleeast/11iran.html>.

16) CameliaEntekhabifard, “Tehran’s Eternal Youth,” *The New York Times*, June 12, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/12/opinion/12entekhabifard.html>.

17) Erdbrink, “A Polarized Iran Prepares to Go to Polls.”

18) ThomasErdbrink, “A Relative Unknown Leads Challenge in Iran,” *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/07/AR2009060702542.html>.

example can be found in an article by Robert Worth for *The New York Times*, published on June 12, in which the atmosphere of voting on the day of the election is described:

Less than two months ago, it was widely assumed here and in the West that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's hard-line president, would coast to another victory in the elections on Friday. Many of the reformists who sat out the vote in 2005 seemed dejected and unlikely to raise a strong challenge. As voters went to the polls Friday, that picture has been transformed. A vast opposition movement has arisen, flooding the streets of Iran's major cities with cheering, green-clad supporters of Mir Hussein Moussavi.<sup>19)</sup>

A *Washington Post* article, written by Erdbrink and William Branigin and published on June 12, tells the story from a similar viewpoint: "Long lines formed at the polls Friday in Tehran's uptown, more cosmopolitan neighborhoods, believed to be strongholds for Mousavi. In the city's poorer areas, where Ahmadinejad has deeper support, lines were much shorter."<sup>20)</sup> Regardless of whether lines in "the city's poorer areas" were really shorter or not, CNN follows the same trend in an article, written by Ashly Fantz, titled 'Moussavi: Painter, Architect and Possibly Iran's Next President,' which was published one day before the election and describes a situation that favors Mr. Mousavi; the article expressly claims that he had a greater

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19) Robert Worth, "As Iran Votes, Talk of a Sea Change," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/12/world/middleeast/12iran.html>.

20) Thomas Erdbrink and William Branigin, "Ahmadinejad, Opponent Claim Election Victory in Iran," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2009, <http://www.redcafe.net/f13/iranians-go-polls-253972/>.

chance of winning the election than he did previously.<sup>21)</sup> The overall picture that was being presented for the readers of the websites was a situation that would lead to only one expected result: the victory of Mr. Mir Hossein Mousavi.

## Representing the Election as Rigged

When the election ended, the three news outlets reported adamantly that the election was rigged. In June 15, CNN put “Q & A: Was the Iranian election rigged?” an article consisting of questions posed to two analysts, on its website. In a part of this article, one of the analysts—Amir Taheri, who was an influential pro-Shah journalist before the Revolution and is now based in Europe—claims that: “Many voters are illiterate and officials help them fill in their ballot papers, so the possibilities for rigging are immense.”<sup>22)</sup> This is an extraordinary claim, because for over three decades and after the Islamic Revolution, universal education has been implemented and, unlike during the Shah’s reign, today almost all males and females under the age of thirty are literate.

The same analyst, when answering the question, “So is it possible that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did win the election?” answers, “I’m sure he did win the election but it’s impossible he won 63 percent

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21) Ashly Fantz, “Moussavi: Painter, architect and possibly Iran’s next president,” CNN website, June 11, 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/11/iran.moussavi.profile/index.html>.

22) “Q & A: Was the Iranian election rigged?” CNN.com, June 15, 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/15/iran.elections.qa/index.html>.

of the vote. The results probably exaggerated the scale of his support.”<sup>23)</sup> However, he provides no evidence to back up this claim. The other analyst who was asked to provide an answer to the same question was Karim Sadjadpour. He also claims that “There are a lot of signs there were major improprieties. First of all there were 40 million votes cast and just two hours after the polls had closed they announced Ahmadinejad’s victory: and these votes are hand counted in Iran...”<sup>24)</sup> This claim, which is false, is dealt with along with many others in a series of articles written in English by former US National Security Council staff members Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett<sup>25)</sup> as well as in two detailed articles on the election results, the first by Reza Esfandiari and Yousaf Bozorgmehr<sup>26)</sup> and the second by Eric A. Brill.<sup>27)</sup> However, as all three of the news outlets in question here had reporters in Tehran during the elections, one would expect that their reporters would know these claims are false.

Other evidence of fraud suggested by Sadjadpour is “that Mousavi, who is an ethnic Azeri Turk, lost the province of Iranian Azerbaijan.”<sup>28)</sup> While Glen Kessler and Jon Cohen did point out in *The Washington Post* that “Native sons do not always prevail, of course. Vice President Al Gore lost Tennessee, his home state, in the 2000 presidential election,”<sup>29)</sup> most articles imply that the election

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23) Ibid.

24) Ibid.

25) <http://www.raceforiran.com>.

26) <http://www.raceforiran.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Iranian-election.pdf>.

27) <http://www.campaigniran.org/CASMI/index.php?q=node/9757>.

28) “Q &A: Was the Iranian election rigged?” CNN website, June 15, 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/15/iran.elections.qa/index.html>.

29) Glenn Kessler and Jon Cohen, “Signs of Fraud Abound, But Not Hard Evidence,”

process in Iran was beset by fraud. None of the articles mention that President Ahmadinejad was a former governor in one of the key Azeri provinces and that he is a fluent Azeri speaker.

Interestingly, three polls were conducted inside Iran by western organizations during the election period in addition to a number of polls conducted by the University of Tehran. All of these polls suggested that Ahmadinejad would win a strong majority of the votes throughout the country.<sup>30)</sup>

On June 15-reporters Worth and Nazila Fathi reported for *The New York Times* that the “state news agency announced that Mr. Ahmadinejad had won by a vast margin just two hours after the polls closed. The timing alone provoked deep suspicion here, because the authorities have never before announced election results until the following morning.” In the same article, the writers quote an unnamed supporter of President Ahmadinejad who suggested “There might be some manipulation in what the government has done...but the other side is exaggerating, making it seem worse than it really is.”<sup>31)</sup> By quoting an unnamed supporter of Ahmadinejad, not only does the article present itself as balanced and objective but also the whole notion of fraud is presented as something accepted by all sides. The alleged “deep suspicion” over timing and vote count is mentioned in *The Washington Post* as well. In the article “What Do Iranians

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*The Washington Post*, June 16, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/15/AR2009061503235.html>.

30) <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/bmiddleeastnafricara/652.php>.

31) Robert Worthand Nazila Fathi, “Ahmadinejad, Rejecting Strife, Hints of Arrests,” *The New York Times*, June 15, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/15/world/middleeast/15webiran.html?scp=1&sq=%22Ahmadinejad,%20Rejecting%20St rife,%20Hints%20of%20Arrests%22&st=cse>.

Want,” written by Jeffrey Gedmin and published on June 16, it is reported that “The government began announcing results before the votes could have been properly counted.”<sup>32)</sup> The doubt and suspicion that these words spread is so clear that it requires no explanation—except for the fact that this claim was not true and that the election results came out only gradually.

The June 18 *New York Times* editorial, “Iran’s Non-republic,” again emphasized the early vote count as a proof of fraud: “Government authorities bulldoze the results of last week’s presidential election—declaring the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the winner by a landslide before the votes could be credibly counted.”<sup>33)</sup>

The significant point here is that no published article by these three media outlets questions how Mr. Mousavi declared himself the winner before the polls closed. No article on these sites asks how he had been able to count the votes in no time. Below is the story of victory claims made in *The Washington Post* on June 12:

In a news conference held before the balloting was completed, former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, the main challenger of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, claimed a decisive victory. But minutes later, the official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) announced that Ahmadinejad had won reelection.

“In line with the information we have received, I am the winner of this election by a substantial margin,” Mousavi, 67, declared. An aide said the

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32) Jeffrey Gedmin, “What Do Iranians Want?” *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/15/AR2009061502399.html>.

33) “Iran’s Non-republic,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/18/opinion/18thu2.html>.

moderate candidate had won 65 percent of the vote.<sup>34)</sup>

Mr. Mousavi's claim of victory is not really questioned and it raises no suspicion or question, especially as he is repeatedly portrayed as a pro-Western and thus "moderate candidate." In addition, even before the election ended, an article in *The Washington Post*, written by Erdbrink, quoted Morteza Alviri, Karroubi's representative on the committee as saying, "We will have our results before the Ministry of Interior does."<sup>35)</sup> Here again the three news outlets analyzed here demonstrate no skepticism or disbelief in response to the numerous claims made by Ahmadinejad's opponents.

## The Polls that Predicted the Results

There are three groups of polls: the polls allegedly conducted by the opponents to the Iranian president, polls conducted by foreign organizations in Iran, and polls carried out by Iranian academic and research institutes. The reaction to these polls were very interesting. The first group (if they actually existed) was presented to be more reliable than the others:

*The New York Times*: [A] new unofficial poll suggests his support has markedly increased, with 54 percent of respondents saying they would vote for him compared with 39 percent for Mr. Ahmadinejad.<sup>36)</sup>

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34) Thomas Erdbrink and William Branigin, "Ahmadinejad, Opponent Claim Election Victory."

35) Erdbrink, "A Polarized Iran Prepares to Go to Polls."

36) Robert Worth, "In Iran, Harsh Talk as Election Nears," *The New York Times*,

*The New York Times*: The university's campaign team has developed its own software for doing election polls, and has given 1,000 phones equipped with it to campaign workers who fan out across the country to do face-to-face questionnaires. They type the answers directly into the phones, and then transmit them back to the Tehran headquarters by text message, Mr. Rafsanjani [the son] said. The surveys are being done almost continuously, and the latest show Mr. Moussavi with at least 56 percent of the vote, compared with a maximum of 42 percent for Mr. Ahmadinejad, he said"<sup>37)</sup>

**CNN website**: All the polls and all the predictions were saying that Moussavi was going to win, and Ahmadinejad won with such a landslide, which was something that no one even thought about," Bandari [a University of California student] said. "Even Ahmadinejad supporters didn't think about that. And then the way that they gave out the news was very fishy."<sup>38)</sup>

*The New York Times*: The landslide victory for Mr. Ahmadinejad, an intensely divisive figure here and abroad, came as a powerful shock to opposition supporters, who had cited polls showing that Mr. Moussavi had a strong lead in the final days of the campaign.<sup>39)</sup>

As these examples show, articles on these websites regularly spoke of numerous polls ("All the polls...") that had predicted the victory of Mir Hosssein Mousavi but they never gave any specific information about the supposed polls. In fact, to date there is no evidence that any meaningful polls were carried out by Mousavi supporters; after the elections such claims were not repeated. In fact, only one known poll was carried out by a research institute that was headed by a

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June 8, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/08/world/middleeast/08iran.html?scp=1&sq=%22In%20Iran,%20Harsh%20Talk%20as%20Election%20News%22&st=cse>.

37) Worth, "In Iran Race, Ex-Leader Works."

38) "Clashes in Iran reveal deep divide," CNN website, June 14, 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/14/iran.protests.scene/index.html>.

39) Worth and Fathi, "Rejecting Strife."

Mousavi supporter. The Jahade Daneshgahi polling center (ISPA) did not release the results of the poll which was carried out near Election Day. In fact, the results were leaked by some of the people who were involved with the polling a few weeks after the election and they showed Ahmadinejad to be well ahead of his rivals. ISPA never denied the authenticity of the leaked results.

Nevertheless, the way these websites represented the polls that predicted Ahmadinejad as the winner was very different. These polls were often referred to with suspicion and reporters for the three news providers were clearly attempting to undermine them even though they were carried out by American institutes:

**CNN Website:** [In response to Ken Bellen on a poll that predicted a massive victory for Ahmadinejad] “That does not mean that he would have won the election, and we never said he would,” Bellen told CNN’s “Newsroom” on Tuesday. “Many people think there was a late surge for Moussavi, and our poll does not reflect that.”<sup>40)</sup>

**CNN Website:** “The assumption that the government has rigged the election has become a ‘social fact’ that millions of Iranians believe.”<sup>41)</sup>

**The New York Times:** [The speaker quoted is Shane M, a student in Iran ] Let’s also forget the polls, carried out in May by Terror Free Tomorrow: The Center for Public Opinion, that have been making the rounds this past week, with numbers that showed Mr. Ahmadinejad well ahead in the election, even in Mr. Moussavi’s hometown, Tabriz. Maybe last month Mr. Ahmadinejad was indeed on his way to victory. But then came the debates.<sup>42)</sup>

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40) MattSmith, “Analysts pore over ‘ambiguous’ Iran results,” CNN website, June 16, 2009, [http://articles.cnn.com/2009-06-16/world/iran.election.questions\\_1\\_sampling-error-president-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-poll?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2009-06-16/world/iran.election.questions_1_sampling-error-president-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-poll?_s=PM:WORLD).

41) HamidDabbashi, “Rigged or Not, Vote Fractures Iran,” CNN Website, June 16, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/17/dabashi.iran.regime/index.html>.

The examples clearly show how articles published by these news providers tried to degrade the importance and validity of the polls that had predicted Ahmadinejad's victory. The quote from the CNN website belonged to Hamid Dabbashi, a traditional opponent of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who had not visited the country in years and knows very little about Iranian society. In addition, contrary to the claim made above, according to numerous polls (referred to earlier), the debates were largely seen as working to the advantage of the sitting president.<sup>43)</sup>

## Conclusion

Today people have access to many different sources of information in order to know what is happening in the world around them. However, this diversity and the existence of large numbers of sources do not necessarily mean that people have access to truth and reality more than they did before. The fact is that reality is regularly being represented based on different interests and that the powerful Western media plays a major role in shaping global public opinion. By emphasizing and deemphasizing (or deleting) parts of reality and truth about an event, different pictures can be created, each serving an interest. This very thing happened in the case of the Western media and Iran's presidential election. Both before and after the event, the three major American news providers studied here for the most part

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42) Shane M, "A Different Iranian Revolution," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/19/opinion/19shane.html>.

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gave a highly distorted image of the election and the general situation in Iran. The three websites offered massive coverage of the election; however the reports were biased and at times completely one-sided. The candidate and his supporters that were perceived to be more Western-oriented were presented as honest and enlightened, while the candidate that was seen as critical of the West, along with his supporters, was without any real justification presented as incompetent, reactionary, and dishonest.

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■ 논문 투고일자: 2011. 4. 5

■ 심사(수정)일자: 2011. 4. 20

■ 게재 확정일자: 2011. 5. 13

## Abstract

# **Orientalist Representations and the 2009 Iranian Presidential Election: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and CNN.com**

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The 2009 presidential election in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which resulted in a landslide victory for the incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was extensively covered by the Western media. Three leading American news providers presented the two main presidential candidates very differently. One was portrayed as enlightened and moderate, while the other was depicted as crude and irrational. While in the United States it is widely believed that the media is relatively credible in the way it presents the news, critics often believe that the U.S. media is Orientalist in the way it approaches non-Western countries and especially Muslim countries. According to critics, countries that are politically at odds with the United States, such as Iran, are presented in an almost completely negative light. In this article, election coverage from the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, as well as the CNN website is analyzed to determine the approach these news agencies took to the presidential election as well as the degree to which they stuck to the facts on the ground. The paper concludes that all three media outlets were highly biased in their coverage and that they regularly dismissed or ignored facts while repeatedly making claims that were unsubstantiated.

## Key Words

Orientalism, Iran, President Ahmadinejad, Media, Iranian Election