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Big-screen aftershock: How 9/11 changed Hollywood's Middle Eastern characters

Matthew Dana

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The Rochester Institute of Technology

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College of Liberal Arts

Big-Screen Aftershock: How 9/11 Changed Hollywood's Middle Eastern Characters

by

Matthew Dana

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of
Matthew Dana presented on April 2, 2009

_____

Bruce A. Austin, Ph.D.
Chairman and Professor of Communication
Department of Communication

_____

Rudy Pugliese, Ph.D.
Professor of Communication
Coordinator, Communication & Media
Technologies Graduate Degree Program
Department of Communication
Thesis Adviser

_____

Babak Elahi, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts
Thesis Adviser

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BIG-SCREEN AFTERSHOCK: HOW 9/11 CHANGED HOLLYWOOD'S
MIDDLE EASTERN CHARACTERS

Name: Matthew Dana
Department: Communication
College: Liberal Arts
Degree: Master of Science in Communication and Media Technologies
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Abstract

Did the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, carried out by extremists from the Middle East,

affect the way Hollywood portrayed Middle Eastern characters in films? This content analysis

compares Middle Eastern characters in films from the five years before September 11, 2001 to

those in films from the five years after. On average, Middle Eastern characters in post-9/11 films

were found to be significantly darker-skinned, less intelligent, more likely to wear traditional

(non-Western) clothing, and more likely to commit acts of terrorism.

Keywords: *middle eastern characters, film, hollywood, portrayals, stereotypes*

Big Screen Aftershock: How 9/11 Changed Hollywood's Middle Eastern Characters

Hollywood Arabs: Images Cast in Film

"What is an Arab? In countless films, Hollywood alleges the answer: Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women."

 - Jack Shaheen (2001, p. 2)

In July 2001, just two months before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs*, a film-by-film assessment of more than 900 Hollywood films that include Arab or Muslim characters, was published. Shaheen concluded that the "vast majority" of these films "portray Arabs by distorting at every turn what most Arab men, women, and children are really like," amounting to a "systematic, pervasive, and unapologetic degradation and dehumanization of a people" (p. 1).

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, perpetrated by extremist Arab Muslims, left many people of Middle Eastern descent who lived in the U.S. fearful that in the eyes of neighbors, Hollywood's longtime representation of their ethnic group had now been validated. President Bush made an appeal on their behalf: "The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends" (2001, para 21). Many other political leaders, including New York mayor Rudy Giuliani (perhaps most importantly, given his popularity at the time), urged Americans to refrain from lashing out at Arabs and Muslims (Edgecliff-Johnson, Hoyos, & McNulty, 2001).

Bush and Giuliani were clearly aware of their role as opinion leaders, and of the effect their messages could have on Americans' perceptions of, and actions toward, Arabs and Muslims in a potentially hostile social climate. There is evidence to suggest that film can also significantly

affect audiences' attitudes and perceptions about people of Arab descent after 9/11. Salazar (2004) conducted an experiment in which two groups of participants were shown different sets of film clips. After taking a pre-test on their attitudes toward Arabs, the first group saw a series of movie scenes with negative portrayals of Arabs, while the second saw only positive portrayals. After the clips were viewed, a post-test was administered, and the results indicated that the first group felt significantly more negative about Arabs than they did before the experiment, and the second group felt significantly more positive. This strongly suggests that Hollywood films, especially popular movies that are seen by many millions of people, may have a direct effect upon public attitudes toward Arabs.

In what way, if at all, did Hollywood's messages about this group change after 9/11? Specifically, how have Hollywood films portrayed the people of the Middle East since September 11, 2001, and to what degree has that portrayal been different than it was in the years immediately preceding the attacks? This study will examine a random selection of Hollywood films from the five years before and the five years after 9/11 that contain at least one character of Middle Eastern descent. The identification of characters for the study will require a three-step process, as described in the Method section below.

Research Questions

The objective of this study is to determine whether Middle Eastern characters were portrayed differently in Hollywood films after 9/11 than they were before. As such, the research questions set up a comparison between the two time periods. The first three questions each investigate a content category. The variables in each category are loosely based upon the character attributes Mastro and Greenberg (2000) utilized because they were "the attributes the

literature suggests as primary components of image formation and stereotyping" (p. 693). The

fourth content category investigates whether the characters were affiliated with terrorism.

RQ1: What differences are there in the **physical attributes** of Middle Eastern characters

in Hollywood films in the five years before September 11, 2001 and the five years after? These

include weight, height, skin color, hair color, and accent.

RQ2: What differences are there in the **behavioral attributes** of Middle Eastern characters

in Hollywood films in the five years before September 11, 2001 and the five years after? These

include intelligence, aggressiveness, laziness, altruism, and likeability.

RQ3: What differences are there in the **appearance attributes** of Middle Eastern

characters in Hollywood films in the five years before September 11, 2001 and the five years

after? These include attire (traditional versus Western) and grooming.

RQ4: How likely are Middle Eastern characters in Hollywood films to commit **acts of**

terrorism, defined as any violent attack on non-military civilians, in the five years before

September 11, 2001, and to what extent are they more or less likely are they to do the same in the

five years after?

Social Rationale

The unfortunate circumstance faced by Arab Americans living in a nervous post-9/11

nation offers an opportunity to investigate whether a major event in the "real world" can have a

social effect in the fictional realm. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor may be the only

comparable event of the past 100 years, and its effect on the American media was immediate and

profound. According to MacDougall (1999), "Hollywood studios charged into the fray with such

patriotic fervor that the Office of War Information… was soon fighting a losing battle to tone

down the 'Jap bashing' of films…" (p. 61). This study may help determine the degree to which

Hollywood's reactions to 9/11 and Pearl Harbor were similar or different.

Scholarly Rationale

While the portrayal of this ethnic group in motion pictures has been the subject of

numerous essays, very few related content analyses have been published. Shaheen's *Reel Bad*

Arabs (2001) is the only significant published investigation of the subject, and is frequently cited

as evidence by the authors of related articles in news publications and scholarly journals. For

example, Akram (2002) bases most of her argument that American Arabs and Muslims suffer

from "deliberate mythmaking by film and media" (p. 61) on *Reel Bad Arabs*, stating that "Jack

Shaheen's meticulous work… is the most convincing evidence of deliberate vilifying of Arabs

and Muslims by the movie industry" (p. 66). Akram cites no additional studies to bolster her

case; this may be because they simply do not exist. However, *Reel Bad Arabs* must be treated

with some skepticism as a content analysis due to its unknown reliability. Shaheen served as the

lone coder, while his wife assisted in compiling the list of films to review (p. 12). The

interpretations of the films' content are completely his own; therefore, it is impossible to know

the extent to which bias may have affected the results. Finally, because the book was published

prior to the events of 9/11, it cannot reflect the impact of those events, as is the intended purpose

of this study. The complete absence of any published content analyses on the subject of Arabs in

film since 9/11 is enough to justify this study; that it will seek to determine the impact of the

9/11 attacks on the same subject lends it additional justification.

Personal Rationale

As a communications scholar, I have frequently noticed that studies focused on ethnicity are often carried out by researchers with what some might call an automatic bias – namely, they share the ethnicity of the group they are studying. While it is unlikely that most of these researchers would sacrifice their objectivity in order to aid a political cause, the way the general public views a study may well be affected by the surname of its author. While the fact that I am not Arab, Persian or Muslim certainly does not make me any more (or less) qualified to study this topic, I hope to be able to contribute to the discussion from the perspective of a dispassionate, albeit curious, observer.

Review of Literature

The portrayal of ethnic minorities in American mass media has been the focus of numerous content analyses, the majority of which examine television. A common finding is that the percentage of non-White fictional characters is much lower than the actual percentage of minorities in the American population. Greenberg, Simmons, Hogan, and Atkin (1980) examined television programs from 1975-1978 to describe "the demographic composition of TV's fictional population" (p. 37), and found that Blacks were the only minority to be represented in numbers similar to the actual percentage of the U.S. population that they represent. The authors state that no other minority is portrayed "in sufficient frequency to enable an intensive quantitative analysis" (p. 45). Similarly, Atkin (1992) found that between 1950 and 1991, 80% of the minority television characters with leading roles were black (p. 345), and that the other two most frequently represented minorities, Hispanics and Asians, were significantly underrepresented as

lead characters. Hispanics may be the most underrepresented group relative to share of the U.S. population. Greenberg and Baptista-Fernandez (1980) found that Hispanics constituted less than 1.5% of the speaking characters on television, and noted that at the time, the Census Bureau estimated that Hispanics accounted for 6-9% of the population (pp. 6-7). Twenty years later, Mastro and Greenberg (2000) found that Hispanics accounted for only 3% of all characters and 1% of all major characters. They observed: "The pattern of inclusion of African Americans and the near exclusion of all other ethnic minorities has been continued" (p. 695).

Perhaps because they have long been the most present minority in American media, many more studies have examined the portrayal of Blacks than that of any other ethnic group. Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg (1980) analyzed the portrayal of Blacks in prime time and Saturday morning television programs broadcast in the fall of 1977. They coded several attributes for each character, including age, body type, employment, and whether the character was predominantly "good or bad" (p. 16). Blacks were found to be less likely to hold high-level jobs and more likely to be classified as having low socio-economic status, but much less likely to be portrayed as "bad" (p. 17); the authors note "an avoidance of portraying them as villains" (p. 19). In a similar television content analysis, Donagher *et al.* (1975) found that "the black male is [usually] portrayed as a 'good' person" (p. 1032), and is generally altruistic. However, because black males were not generally portrayed as aggressive, they tended to seem "neither forceful nor powerful in the traditional ways of our society" (p. 1032). The sampling procedures used by the authors are questionable, however. The sample size is much smaller than most other studies of this nature; only a total of nine episodes were reviewed. Also, shows were only included in the sample if "at least one black character regularly appeared in the series" (p. 1026). Unless all the

other shows on television at the time also regularly featured Black characters (which is highly unlikely given that it was specified as a criterion for inclusion in the study), this is not a representative sample.

The portrayal of Hispanics in American mass media has been much less researched than that of Blacks. Greenberg and Baptista-Fernandez (1980) analyzed one week of programming from each of three television seasons, 1975-76, 1976-77, and 1977-78. In addition to their previously-noted finding that the percentage of characters of Hispanic origin was very small, they also found that they were almost exclusively male; none of the Hispanic characters with lead roles was female. Strangely, the authors do not provide any charts or tables in the results section, nor do they share their quantitative findings for many of the variables they specify in the methods section. Instead, they describe the few Hispanic characters with lead roles and provide a "personal qualitative summary" on the results (p. 11). While the authors' methodology is sound and very similar to that used by many of the other content analyses described in this section, the lack of specific results limits the usefulness of the study for researchers who intend to build upon its findings. The aforementioned similar study by Mastro and Greenberg (2000) updates the 1980 study's findings by examining similar character attributes in the same types of shows (prime time fiction) from a six-week period in 1996. Hispanic characters were more likely to be motivated and respected than White characters, but were also more likely to be short and to speak with a heavy accent. A potential problem with the study, however, is that the sample only included shows from the major non-cable networks. According to Lin and Jeffries (1998), the broadcast networks' viewership shares had dropped to 53% by 1996. While Mastro and Greenberg unfortunately do not define a specific research question or hypothesis in their article, the

introduction suggests that the goal of their study was to determine whether "the most prevalent

television stereotypes of Latinos… [have] changed in nearly two decades" (pp. 692-693).

However, they examine only approximately half of the evidence available on the subject in 1996.

In a content analysis similar in structure to the present study, Baker (2000) compares the

portrayal of an ethnic group during different eras of the group's history. He examines the

portrayal of Blacks in films produced during three American eras: "Jim Crow" (1915 to the late

1950s), "Civil Rights" (late 1950s to mid-1970s), and High-Tech Global (late 1970s to 1990).

Nine films are analyzed, three from each era. The author defines eight common "negative black

images" used by Hollywood (such as the "brute," an out-of-control, violent, and sexually

repressed Black man, and the "mammy," an overweight Black housewife), then examines each

film for the presence of this imagery. The study finds that while the form of the negative images

of Blacks has changed over the years due to "the economic and political changes of the periods

and the changing role of Black labor and social position" (p. 125), each of the eight negative

character types can be identified in films from all three eras. However, Baker's methodology –

seeking out specific stereotypes that he had personally defined – is much less objective than it

should be. A better method for comparing portrayals from the three eras would have been to

examine character attributes similar to those used by Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg (1980).

The study by Ramasubramanian (2005) is the only published content analysis focused on

India and people of Indian ancestry in film. The study consists of an analysis of 24 Western films

that include portrayals of the nation of India and/or ethnically Indian people and was released

between 1930 and 2000. Attributes of scenes and characters were coded as either "stereotypically

Indian" or not. As defined by the author, stereotypical attributes of Indian characters include

occupations such as thief and magician, residences such as huts, palaces or temples, and speaking in broken or heavily accented English. The study found that "[c]haracters portrayed as poor, having traditional occupations… living in stereotypical places… and speaking exaggerated English were more likely to be Indian as compared to non-Indian" (p. 259).

On the topic of the portrayal of Arabs in film, Jack Shaheen is easily the best-known and most-cited researcher, despite the aforementioned questionable objectivity of his primary work, *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001). In the book, he summarizes over 900 films in which Arab or Muslim characters are cast as villainous, stupid, fanatical, or otherwise undesirable. Shaheen and his wife compiled their list of films to review by searching libraries, national archives, movie/video guidebooks, museums, and the Internet for movies related to "dozens of keywords such as Bedouin, Egypt, Algiers, desert, and sheikh" (p. 12). Shaheen defines five Arab "character types" used in these films. "Villains" are the antagonists, whether they be "buffoons, stumbling all over themselves" (p. 14), bandits "trying to rape, kill or abduct fair-complexioned Western heroines" (p. 16), or terrorists. "Sheikhs" are rich, conniving Arabs, often portrayed as "oily, militant, [and] ostentatious" and "aspiring to buy up chunks of America" (p. 21). Arab women who "are humiliated, demonized, and eroticized in more than 50 feature films" (p. 22) fit into a character type Shaheen refers to as the "maiden." The "Egyptian" character type generally appears in films about mummies or the undead; Shaheen notes that Hollywood has little use for Egypt and its people beyond this much-recycled plotline (pp. 24-25). "Palestinians" are portrayed almost exclusively as Israel-hating terrorists. Interestingly, "more than half (28) of the [films featuring the negative Palestinian stereotype] were filmed in Israel" (p. 27), which suggests that Israeli interests exert significant influence over Hollywood's portrayal of the

ongoing Arab-Israeli struggle. Of the nearly 1,000 total movies with Arab characters Shaheen

was able to find, he states that only about 50 of them portrayed those characters in a neutral or

positive light, rather than as one of the classifications above (p. 34). Shaheen's methodology

shares the same flaw as Baker (2000): Both studies assume certain stereotypes exist and then

seek them out, rather than objectively analyzing the content for the way it portrays the group in

question. One might ask Baker and Shaheen if there are not also common *positive* stereotypes

about Blacks and Arabs, and if so, why they did not also seek those out.

Elayan's 2005 Masters thesis is a content analysis of the portrayal of Arabs and Arab-

Americans in Hollywood films released between 1994 and 2000. A total of 108 scenes from six

films were coded by the way they portrayed Arabs, such as whether the characters had noticeable

accents, committed acts of violence, or were affiliated with terrorist groups. Elayan is somewhat

vague about the selection process, which is explained in just one paragraph, and seems to be

heavily dependent upon Shaheen's research. The study found that the films examined "did

contain stereotypical portrayals of Arabs and Arab-Americans in connection with hostility,

aggression, speech patterns, traditional/native dress, and victimization" (p. 52). However, the

seemingly arbitrary sampling techniques used likely did not produce a representative sample of

the Hollywood films released during the time period.

Method

Films featuring first-billed characters of Middle Eastern descent and produced during the

time periods in question were identified via a three-step process. The goal of this process was to

determine whether each character would be identifiable as Middle Eastern to American audiences.

First, the preliminary sample was selected by the primary coder, who utilized a paid subscription to the *IMDBpro* online movie database to examine all films from both time periods with that grossed over $50 million in the U.S. Using the "advanced search" option in *IMDBpro*, the researcher executed a Title Query with two defined variables: **Release date** from 9/1996 to 9/2006 and **box office total** equal to or greater than $50,000,000. From the resultant list of 456 films, those with characters that potentially fit the study were identified by examining the photographs, character names, and actor names of the first-billed cast in each film, all of which are provided on the individual movie pages, which can be accessed by clicking the film's title in the list. A very wide net was cast in this step – any film with an actor or character name that appeared to be of Arabic, Persian, or Muslim origin was included, along with any film with a character that, judging by his or her photo, appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent.

Second, each film on the resultant list was obtained and viewed by the primary coder, who determined whether he considered any of its characters Middle Eastern. Because of the broad nature of the first step, several films were removed from the list during this phase.

Third, the secondary coder (who was not informed of the topic of this paper) was directed to a Website with a page for each character like the one pictured below:

The coder was asked to watch the provided clip from the film, which contained one or more scenes featuring the character in question. They then selected the ethnicity that "best describe[d]" the character. The options provided (in alphabetical order) were:

- African/Black

- American Indian

- Arab/Middle Eastern

- Asian/East Asian

- European

- Hispanic/Latino

- None of these

If the secondary coder selected any ethnicity other than "Arab/Middle Eastern," the character was removed from the list.

Once the final list of characters was assembled, both coders watched each film (the second viewing for the primary coder) and recorded the attributes of each character using Content Coding Sheet 2. Both coders were asked to wait until the end of the film to fill out the coding sheet; this was to prevent the coder from recording any early impressions about a character that might change after watching the film in its entirety. Attributes were coded on a five-point bipolar adjective scale, with three exceptions noted in parentheses in the list below.

The following is a list of the content categories, subcategories, and values of each subcategory. Where necessary, definitions of each subcategory value are provided on the content coding sheet; these descriptions are provided below (example: "1 = Dark"). Also where necessary, the sub-categories themselves are described on the content coding sheet, as indicated below in *italics*.

1. **Physical Attributes:** The following attributes are relatively self-explanatory; no description will be provided on the coding sheet.

    a. Skin color

        i. 1 = Dark

        ii. 5 = Light

    b. Hair color

        i. 1 = Dark

        ii. 5 = Light

    c. Height

      i. 1 = Short

      ii. 5 = Light

  d. Weight

      i. 1 = Heavy

      ii. 5 = Thin

  e. Accent (five-point ordinal scale)

      i. 1 = Speaks no English

      ii. 2 = Heavy

      iii. 3 = Moderate

      iv. 4 = Light

      v. 5 = None

2. **Behavioral Attributes:** Because these measures are not as straightforward as physical attributes, a short explanation was provided on the content coding sheet for each characteristic, indicated in italics below.

  a. Intelligence: *How smart was this character?*

      i. 1 = Very unintelligent

      ii. 5 = Very intelligent

  b. Aggressiveness: *How willing was this character to resort to aggressive and/or violent means to achieve his or her objectives?*

      i. 1 = Not at all aggressive or violent

      ii. 5 = Very aggressive and/or violent

    c. Motivation/laziness: *How determinedly did this character pursue his or her needs*

    and/or wants?

        i. 1 = Not at all motivated

        ii. 5 = Very motivated

    d. Altruism: *To what extent did this character tend to put the needs of others above*

    his or her own?

        i. 1 = Not at all altruistic

        ii. 5 = Very altruistic

    e. Likeability: *How likeable did you find the character to be (regardless of how the*

    other characters in the film appeared to feel about him or her)?

        i. 1 = Not at all likeable

        ii. 5 = Very likeable

3. **Appearance Attributes:** These are similar to physical attributes, but they are under the

character's direct control and can vary from scene to scene. Explanations were provided

on the content coding sheet, indicated in italics below.

    a. Attire (five-point ordinal scale): *Did the character wear traditional Middle*

    Eastern clothing or Western-style clothing?

        i. 1 = Always Western attire

        ii. 2 = Usually Western attire

        iii. 3 = Often wears one or the other

        iv. 4 = Usually Middle Eastern attire

        v. 5 = Always Middle Eastern attire

    b. Grooming: *How much care did this character appear to put into his or her*

        appearance?

        i. 1 = Very poorly groomed

        ii. 5 = Very well groomed

4. **Terrorism** (binary measure)**:** The purpose of this measure is to find out whether the

    character was involved in terrorism in any way.

    a. *Did this character commit, assist someone else in committing, or help plan an*

        attack on non-military civilians? (circle one)

        i. Yes

        ii. No

Two coders were used to analyze all films. Since the ratings consisted largely of interval-level

scales, reliability was assessed using a Cronbach alpha estimate. The coefficient alpha was .90.

<div align="center">Results</div>

RQ1

        T-tests indicated that characters did not differ significantly in **weight** ($t = .63$, $df = 20$, $p =$

.54), **height** ($t = -.85$, $df = 20$, $p = .41$), or **hair color** ($t = -.71$, $df = 20$, $p = .49$), but the average

skin color of characters in post-9/11 films was significantly darker ($t = 2.57$, $df = 20$, $p = .02$). A

Mann-Whitney test found no significant difference in **accent** ($u = 44$, $p = .24$).

RQ2

        T-tests indicated that characters did not differ significantly in **aggressiveness** ($t = -1.20$,

$df = 20$, $p = .24$), **motivation** ($t = 1.26$, $df = 20$, $p = .22$), **likeability** ($t = 1.18$, $df = 20$, $p = .25$),

or **altruism** (t = .59, df = 20, p = .56), but characters in post-9/11 films were significantly less

intelligent (t = 2.91, df = 20, p = .01).

RQ3

A Mann-Whitney test found that the **attire** of post-9/11 characters was significantly more

likely to be traditional rather than Western (u = 29.5, p = .02). A T-test indicated that characters

did not differ significantly in **grooming** (t = -.93, df = 20, p = .37).

RQ4

A Chi-Square test indicated that characters in post-9/11 films were significantly more

likely to commit acts of **terrorism** (χ = 18.18, df = 1, p = .000).

Discussion

This study found that Middle Eastern characters in post-9/11 films were darker-skinned,

more likely to wear traditional (non-Western) clothing, less intelligent, and more likely to

commit acts of terrorism than their pre-9/11 counterparts. If we were to construct a new

composite character based on these four attributes, we might end up with something similar to

the "villain" character type identified by Shaheen (2001). As previously mentioned, Shaheen said

that these types of characters tended to be terrorists and/or "buffoons, stumbling all over

themselves" (p. 16). Dark skin and foreign-looking clothing might be used as subtle indicators to

an audience that this character is different and not to be trusted. The lower intelligence of the

post-9/11 characters might point to a desire on the part of the Hollywood studios to diminish the

perceived real-life threat posed by this ethnic group, while still maintaining them as a useful

villain.

Limitations

A clear limitation of this study is its scope. In order to keep the number of films to be reviewed for the presence of Arab characters to a reasonable number, films were only included if they grossed over $50 million in U.S. box office sales. However, there may be many films with Middle Eastern characters that do not meet that criterion, so a large portion of the available data is ignored by this study. Another difficult-to-avoid limitation is the accuracy of the classification of characters as Middle Eastern. Unless a character's ethnicity is specifically addressed in a film, this is a subjective measure. This limitation was tempered somewhat by the three-step process described in the Method section, but could be better addressed by the inclusion of additional coders in that process.

Future research in this area could extend in multiple directions. This study examined only films produced by American film studios; researchers could analyze films from "Bollywood" or other markets. A content analysis of Middle Eastern characters in television, Broadway shows or popular fiction could extend this study's methods to other media. Further studies similar to Salazar (2004) on the impact of negative and positive portrayals of Arabs in a post-9/11 world could further explain the effects of films on audience perceptions and attitudes about this group. While this content analysis cannot examine on its own the effect these films have on members of this ethnic group in American society, it can serve as the first step for research with that objective.

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Appendix

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- ABI/INFORM Complete (ProQuest)
- CIOS/ComAbstracts
- Communication & Mass Media Complete (EBSCO)
- Project Muse
- JSTOR Arts & Sciences I Collection

Keywords used:

- arab AND Hollywood
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- arab AND depiction
- muslim AND depiction
- Hollywood AND portrayal
- arab AND content analysis
- muslim AND content analysis
- television AND content analysis
- minority AND content analysis
- Hollywood AND content analysis
- character AND content analysis
- portrayal AND content analysis
- depiction AND content analysis
- film AND influence

All databases and keywords utilized between December 23, 2006 and January 8, 2007.