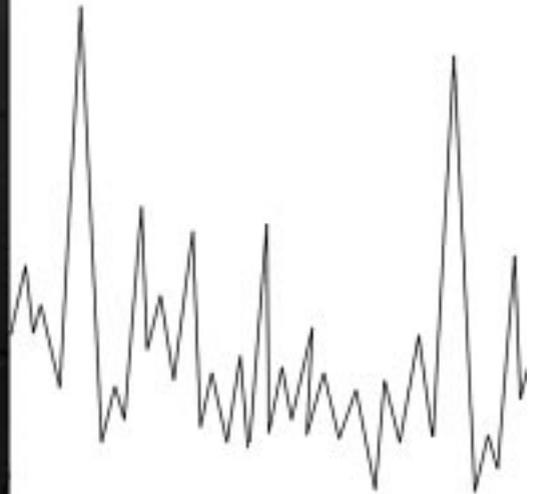


Lost in Transit

Narratives & Myths of the Crash of Egypt Air Flight 990 in Egyptian and American Newspapers

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Lost Realities

The contemporary world witnesses the transmission of a very large amount of information every day by transnational mass media. This large volume of information is generally represented in a dizzying variety of ways. The sheer scale of this volume and variety of information makes it difficult for audiences to perceive the reality of the events and situations that they are confronted with. We can think of an audience faced with 'lost realities'. In fact, audiences come to know about events mainly through the filters of 'news-worthiness' that the media deploy to introduce them into public consciousness. The media not only cover and focus on events, they also explain events' consequences and analyze their significance. Any event may give rise to several different explanations, and these interpretations may directly and strongly contribute towards shaping the political, economic, or social consequences of the event. The question of the influence of the mass media on audiences becomes all the more sensitive when we consider controversial events, conflicts, crises, or disasters that require accurate and precise explanations and analyses.

It has become quite obvious that the media often adopt quite a sly technique while covering markedly controversial events. Generally, in such cases, media organizations will tend to diffuse their biases, attitudes, and beliefs indirectly through 'both-sided', or apparently 'even-handed' coverage. Journalists sometimes claim that they are absolved from allegations of bias if they, or the news that they create, are criticized by people on both sides of a sharply divided political scenario over contentious political issues. Actually, they are simply choosing to remain in a position where they can keep 'playing it down the middle' (Karlberg and Hackett 1996:1).

Generally speaking, it is important to consider that journalists, like scientists, may often have hypotheses in mind while working on a story. However, journalists, unlike scientists, carry both explicit and implicit hypotheses. Moreover, journalists find themselves poised uneasily between what they see as two impossible ideals: 'the demands of indexing reality', which they see as reachable through objective strategies, and the 'demands of narrativity'. This makes it important to look at the narrative qualities of news. Although the most significant role of media during conflicts, disasters, and crises is to provide information, the mere purveying of facts is not something that completely satisfies an audience's needs for information about such events. Morgan, Lewis and Jhally's study about the US Media and George Bush's decision to use military force against Iraq in the 1990/1 Gulf War concludes, "[T]he US media failed quite dramatically in their role as information providers. Despite months of intense coverage, most people did not know basic facts about the political situation in the Middle East or about the recent history of US policy toward Iraq ... [Moreover,] the media also failed in their 'duty to be objective' because they largely communicated facts that supported the administration's policy and played down those that did not" (1992:229:230).

The mass media react to, narrate, and report the events that they look at in very particular ways. In this they are often influenced by the way such an event has already been framed through prior reportage, or external considerations. The standard practice is to rely on specific sources of information that are considered, for one reason or

another, 'useful' or 'reliable'. However, sometimes the nature of the event makes for an alteration in these 'sources'. It is the interaction between journalists and this changing body of 'sources' that shapes the news. The nature of this interaction is not the same for every situation; rather, its representation and even how it is narrated is mediated by the context it finds itself located in (Berkowitz and Beach 1993:4).

The Dilemma of the Egypt Air Flight 990 Crash

In November 1999, the tragic crash of the Egypt Air Flight 990 during its return trip from New York to Cairo saw the American and the Egyptian media influencing the reading of the event with the deployment of 'myths' in their representations of the story. These myths were in addition to various rumours and conflicting explanations. Basically, the Egyptian media were influenced by the myth that Israel is the prime mover behind any incident or crisis in the Arab world, and the American media were influenced by the myth that Islam provokes violence. Karim H. Karim in *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence* (2000:136) explains, "The renewed image of Islam as enemy has developed in dominant global discourses despite the military cooperation between the US and governments of countries with Muslim majorities like Egypt [among others]". Myth controls mass media professionals' ways of thinking, analyzing, and representing events, disasters, or incidents; there is no difference as to the extent of the influence of such myths on news and reportage, regardless of whether we look at media in 'developed' or 'developing' countries.

Narratives on either side (in this case, Egypt and the United States) tried to present the discourse in the terms of what van Dijk (1998:317) calls "Positive Self-Presentation" and "Negative Other-Presentation". The problem that concerns us here is to see how both the Egyptian and the American media used 'strategies of representation' in the course of reporting the tragic crash. Strategies of argumentation, according to Wodak (1997:73), involve the connecting of discrete but related contents in a certain text that serve to convey prejudice even as they simultaneously seek to disguise it.

Strategies of justification, for example, enable speakers to make evaluations and to assign responsibility and guilt, while aiming at the same time to present the speaker as free of prejudice or even as a victim of reverse prejudice. Strategies of group definition and construction, another type of strategy of argumentation, construct a discourse of difference, a 'we/they' or 'us/them' discourse, whose essential function is the rejection of responsibility of guilt and its displacement onto the 'Other' group.

Researching Media Representations of the Disaster

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which two major Egyptian and American newspapers represented a specific argumentative story differently. It is important to determine strategies of representation which both sides followed, and the sources on which they depended. By examining the different forms of discourse that were deployed by both newspapers, we can also define the myths that lay behind the reporting.

Both quantitative and qualitative content analyses are conducted to illustrate the representation of the crash in both the Egyptian and the American newspaper. Due to the nature of the story under analysis, this paper uses the technique of 'Purposive Sampling'. The sampled items are the specific story, newspapers, and duration. The specific story under analysis is the crash of the Egypt Air Flight 990 into the Atlantic during its return trip from New York to Cairo on Monday, November 1st, 1999. The Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* and the American newspaper *The New York Times* are selected because the former is the main national or official newspaper in Egypt, and the latter a major newspaper and news authority in the United States. Analysis includes all news of the crash in both newspapers during the period from November 1st, 1999, to November 30th, 1999, in order to include the most significant as well as the most (apparently) trivial items, charges, justifications, and rumours. A total of 222 news articles are analyzed in both newspapers. The majority of these articles (77.9%) are in *Al-Ahram* and only 22.1% are in *The New York Times*. The coverage of the former is apparently, and logically, more intensive given that Egypt was more affected by the event. Dates have been counted in order to compare the average coverage of the disaster in both newspapers throughout the period of analysis. The average coverage in both newspapers is more or less an equal variable distribution consistent with the development of events, surprises, and estimations.

In terms of attention, the location (in the pages of the newspaper) of the news coverage of the crash is examined. Unsurprisingly, *Al-Ahram* focused more attention on the crash than *The New York Times*. News about the crash appeared, or was indicated in an indirect manner constantly in the front page of *Al-Ahram*, while more than three quarters of the news covering the crash appeared only in the inside pages of *The New York Times*. The significant ($P \leq 0.001$) and strong (Contingency Coefficient = 0.65) relationship between the newspaper and the location of the crash news in the newspaper is reflected in the value of Chi-Square (161.87). However, the percentage of photos used in *The New York Times* is much higher at 74.6%, three times that of *Al-Ahram* (25.4%), with a higher average number of photos (Mean = 1.5000 and 1.3636 respectively) in news stories.

While there are some differences in the percentages of specific photos and content between the two newspapers, as illustrated in Table 1, families, relatives, and friends of Egyptian victims were the main subjects for both. Also, representations of American coast guards, rescue boats, marine ships, robots, helicopters, and reconnaissance teams searching for victims are highly concentrated on both sides, especially in *Al-Ahram*. (One could argue that this was in order to try and reduce readers' anxiety, and thereby the level of tension prevailing in Egypt at that time, by focusing on the rescue operations and attempts at salvage at the crash site). The most significant difference is reflected in the lack of appearance of Egyptian government officials in the American newspaper, which only showed Egypt Air officials.

Table 1: Content of Photos in *Al-Ahram* compared with *The New York Times*

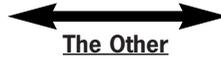
Contents	Al-Ahram	The New York Times
1. Families, relatives, and friends of Egyptian victims	22.4	30.6
2. American coast guards, rescue boats, marine ships, robots, helicopters and reconnaissance searching	22.4	13.9
3. Maps showing scenario of the crash and explanations	2.0	13.9
4. American officials	10.2	11.1
5. Egyptian victims (passengers & crew)	12.2	8.3
6. Black box (data recorder of the Flight 990)	6.1	5.5
7. Debris from Egypt Air Flight 990 and passengers' items retrieved from the Atlantic	4.2	5.5
8. Egyptian citizens	6.1	2.8
9. Egypt Air officials	4.2	2.8
10. 1998 photo of the Egypt Air Boeing 767 that crashed	0.0	2.8
11. American victims (passengers)	0.0	2.8
12. Egyptian officials	10.2	0.0

As to the news sources, *The New York Times* did not rely on news correspondents from Egypt to reflect the other side's point of view. Instead, it depended largely on its reporters (78.9%) for most of its information. Its use of news agencies as sources (*Associated Press* 8.8%, *Agence France Press* 7.0%, and *Reuters* 5.3%) was limited to photos only. On the other hand, *Al-Ahram* depended on various sources in a more balanced way. Although the sources of 37.8% of news stories were not specified, *Al-Ahram* relied on its correspondent in the United States (22.7%) to follow latest developments. In addition to its reporters (10.3%), it also used a variety of international news agencies (23.2%), and its own news agency, MENA (5.9%). Percentages show that both *Al-Ahram* and *The New York Times* were similar to each other in that they never negatively represented the 'Self' and clearly tended to represent it in a positive way (86.7% and 87.8% respectively), rather than neutrally (13.3% and 12.2% respectively). Also, both newspapers were fairly similar in negatively representing the 'Other', albeit *The New York Times* was more negative (31.8%) than *Al-Ahram* (34.7%), given their compared positive (20.4% and 26.0% respectively) and neutral (44.9% and 42.2% respectively) representations of the 'Other'.

Table 2 illustrates the different perceptions of both newspapers of the 'Other', the strategies of 'Self' and 'Other' representations, and the discourses diffused through the coverage of that disaster. While *Al-Ahram* cited the Boeing company, the American administration, and the Israeli intelligence agency *Mossad* as the 'Other', *The New York Times* foregrounded terrorism, Islam, and the crew of Egypt Air Flight 990. Despite the fact that both newspapers positively represent the 'Self' and routinely represent the 'Other' in a negative manner, both newspapers have, on occasion, represented the 'Other' in a positive way. In fact, both newspapers did so before the charges and counter charges with regard to locating responsibilities and culpabilities for the crash were made. While representing the 'Self', both newspapers depended on attempts at logical justifications for everything that they said. The Egyptians also concentrated on portraying the tragedy and its victims in terms of the 'human dimensions' of the incident.

The New York Times

Al-Ahram



The Other

- > Crew of crashed Egypt Air Flight 990
- > Terrorism
- > Islam

- > The Boeing Company
- > The American Administration
- > Mossad (Israeli Intelligence Agency)

Self-Representation

Positive

- > Effort in search and rescue attempts
- > Fair investigations
- > US was not obliged to run the inquiry
- > Dedication to finding the cause of the crash

- > Victims of a disaster and calamity
- > Tragic human stories
- > The competence of the Egyptian pilots
- > Safety record of Egypt Airlines
- > Egypt Airlines credibility in the West
- > Crew of Egypt Air Flight 990 took the correct course of action to try and avoid the disaster
- > Pilots of Egypt Air Flight 990 are religious and family men

Other-Representation

Positive

- > Aircraft with a good record
- > Victims of disaster
- > Good record of the crew
- > Families of victims get to see the airplane wreckage

- > Efforts for search and rescue
- > Good Egyptian-American relations
- > Apologies for the incorrect surmise of suicide
- > Hospitality towards Egyptian victims' families and friends

Negative

- > Suspicion about the cryptic nature of the words uttered by the co-pilot and their intent
- > Egypt Air has had 3 fatal crashes in the past 3 decades
- > Islamic fundamentalists and terrorism
- > Information gap present when it comes to Islam and Muslims

- > The defect of Boeing 767 industry and similar crashes
- > The American media's criticism of the Egyptian crew
- > Mysterious and opaque procedures of the American administration during the investigations
- > Irrational, illogical, and incorrect explanation of suicide as a motive for the incident
- > The Americans' ignorance of Islam and the Arabic language

Discourses

- > The co-pilots suicide
- > Terrorist act

- > Israeli plot (conspiracy)
- > American military's fault
- > Explosion of the plane's tail due to serious manufacturing defects
- > Bad weather

It is useful to consider Karim's (1993:4-5) general conceptualization of struggles between four forms of discourses – “dominant, oppositional, alternative, and conservative populist” – while considering the discourses deployed within the coverage.

Dominant discourses construct the parameters of meaning within which certain terms are used in public discussions of particular issues; oppositional discourses may take exception to aspects of specific terms but do not question their fundamental validity. The ideological bases of terminology networks and meanings proposed by dominant discourses may, however, be challenged more seriously by alternative discourses. New words expressing alternative ideas or new meanings of existing terms may appear through deconstructive processes, and may even be enshrined in legislation. But ultimately, and often with the collusion of conservative populist discourses manifested in daily conversations, dominant discourses reconstruct the previous meanings of the older terms or place the newer ones proposed by alternative discourses into ideological frameworks of the status quo.

Applying this framework to the case at hand, we see that on the Egyptian side the explosion of the airplane's tail due to a serious manufacturing defect was the dominant discourse, and the bad weather experienced during the flight was the alternative discourse. At the same time the oppositional discourse was that the American military was at fault, which was justified by pointing to similar previous crashes in the same region. The populist discourse, which could not be adopted by officials, was the 'Israeli Plot'.

On the American side, the dominant discourse was, is, and will continue to be 'the terrorist act'. Subsequently, the alternative discourse came to be a questioning of the intention of the relief pilot, veering towards an explanation that tried to centre on his purported suicide. This discourse based itself upon the Islamic invocations which the pilot uttered before the crash. One of the interesting findings, that reflects the lack of accurate information or representation, is the presence of contradictory statements on both sides. For example, *The New York Times* reported that the Egyptian officials “authorized” the United States to conduct the many-sided investigation of the disaster. Meanwhile, *Al-Ahram* reported that the Egyptian officials “accepted the request” from the United States to conduct an investigation.

Inescapable Evidence?

Myth was the hidden motivating factor and the main reason behind all the strategies of 'Self-representation', 'Other-representation', and the diffused forms of discourse. Both sides were influenced by a specific myth. In either case, it was myth that controlled its behaviours, beliefs and attitudes towards its 'Other'.

Despite the fact that each side's myth was probably unacceptable at the global level and inconsistent with the other side's version, it was influenced, even if indirectly so, by that which it rejected. The Egyptian side was influenced by the myth that every violent action against any Arab country is definitely supported by, or has the backing of, Israel. The strong relationship between Israel and the United States is seen as the basis for any conspiracy against the Arabs. This myth makes the Egyptian side cautious when considering the American side's explanations and investigations, and makes

the Egyptian side suspicious about every procedure. On the other hand, the American side is influenced by the myth that Islam is the base for terrorism and violent actions to the extent that they (the American media) believe that the co-pilot tried to commit suicide. The Americans believe that what the relief pilot said before the crash suggests an Islamic 'martyrdom' ritual, and that this reveals the motive behind the violent action that resulted in the crash. In this way, neither side can escape the implications of being the shadow of its 'Other'. The evidence that it offers and the arguments that it presents are always about the conspiracy hatched by the 'Other'. By reporting the event this way, each side is inevitably tied up with the existence of the very 'Other' that it seeks paradoxically to reject.

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