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## Authorizing Others: Portrayals of Middle Eastern Destinations in Travel Media

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### Introduction

Media analysts have long discussed the powerful role of media in discursively constructing realities pertaining to foreign conflicts (Price and Tewksbury, 1997). According to Tumber and Webster (2006), media are central to the debate on how to comprehend international conflict. Media representations are thought to be particularly influential when an audience has limited or no contact with the portrayed population (Fujioka, 1999). Scholars have examined the dominant media portrayal of the Middle East, which they claim is most often articulated via frames of terrorism, fanaticism, Islamist radicalism and an overall threat to Western society (Hashem, 1997; Slade, 1981). The 9/11 tragedy and subsequent US-led wars in the Middle East are currently central to the framing of this region (Steiner, 2007; Timothy and Daher, 2009). As Wang, Ding, Scott and Fan (2010) argue, 'The watershed events of September 11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent worldwide war on terrorism have exacerbated an already distorted attitude towards Muslims and the Islamic regions' (p. 118). Post 9/11, Kumar (2010), for instance, outlines five central frames used in dominant American media constructions of the Middle East: hideboundness/inflexibility, gender discrimination – male dominance/oppressed women, irrationality, violence and terrorism. The ideology underpinning these frames regards the 'West' as a leader of democracy and enlightenment and the Muslim world as mired in backwardness and intolerance (Kumar, 2010). Framing the Middle Eastern World in this way expresses the binary opposition – 'us versus them' – outlined in Said's (1979) notion of Orientalism; in his analysis of an American-produced television documentary, Said (1979) notes the absence of Muslim sources to challenge this opposition.

Tourism scholarship has also engaged in examining the unique circumstances in this politically volatile area. There exist a number of studies that focus on the Middle East from a destination image and marketing perspective and from a management standpoint (see Al-Hamarneh and Steiner, 2004; Al Mahadin and Burns, 2007; Schneider and Sönmez, 1999; Sönmez and Sirakaya, 2002; Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2010). Some have focused particularly on the seminal edited text by Scott and Jafari (2010), *Tourism in the Muslim World*. The prolegomenon offers details regarding the nature of the tourism industry within states like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iran and discusses the adverse influence of negative news coverage on the destination image of these states. As Steiner (2010, p. 185) explains, some 'Muslim destinations [within the Middle East] extensively depend on the generating markets of the Western ... world whose tourists seem to be particularly sensitive to violent political unrest' and tend to view the region homogenously and as uniformly plagued with political conflict.

Most media or tourism analyses that interrogate media coverage of the Middle East typically focus on news journalism (Santos, 2004). However, studies of traditional media content, although useful, are not sufficient, particularly considering that audience interest in 'hard' foreign news is diminishing. Consequently, many audiences receive information on foreign countries in popular media and other journalistic forms such as travel journalism (Fürsich, 2002a; Yoo and Buzinde, 2011). The US media industry produces increasing numbers of televised travelogues that offer audiences multi-sensory experiences of foreign people and places, some of which feature the Middle East. One simply has to turn to programs aired on US cable networks for proof of the popularity of televised travelogues. Much like news media, televised travelogues actively participate in the symbolic construction and dissemination of information on Middle Eastern nations. TV travel programs often combine journalistic styles of reporting – to enhance the reliability of the featured information – with entertainment strategies that engage viewers. Given the globalization of media content, audiences could include both tourists and members of the featured host nation and, in this way, televised travelogue depictions could influence both how the former perceive the latter and how the latter perceive themselves.

Since travel journalism must be 'alive to the cultural expectations and experience of its consumers', we can expect that the discourse will serve to reassure its audience of both the 'otherness' and safety of the destination (Cocking, 2009, p. 65). Given the prolonged US–Middle