

# **‘Aisha in the Spotlight’**

Representing Islam in the Danish News Media

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HUM

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## I. Introduction

### Statement of problem

Consider the following citations, taken from articles and editorials of the Danish daily press (see the appendix for English versions)

”Kort og brutalt sagt: Giv en rigtig rettroende muslim en stemmeseddel. Han vil straks stemme på en diktator, der afskaffer demokratiet.” (*Berlingske*, 11 May 2009).<sup>1</sup>

“Dér gør religionen selv krav på at ville foreskrive lovene. Den kræver, at lovene skal begrundes ud fra Koranen eller fra overleveringer om Muhammed. Og den modsætter sig derfor den sekularisering af det politiske, uden hvilken demokrati og religionsfrihed ikke kan forenes” (*Information*, 26 July 2007).<sup>2</sup>

”Den eneste brugbare reaktion på muslimers angst for ytringsfriheden er at vise, hvor dyrebar den er for os.” (*Jyllands-Posten*, 12 February 2009).<sup>3</sup>

One might perceive how these assertions aim to label Islam and Muslims within a specific representation, which appears contrary to the majority of the Danish population’s view of liberal democracy and its commonly associated values of political freedoms. During recent years, a question in Danish news media has been whether Islam practiced in the Middle East is compatible with open-minded Western culture and liberal politics. So far, the dominating discourse on Islam has – as indicated by the citations referred to above - been characterized by widespread skepticism with respect to the potential for aligning Islam and liberal democracy in the Middle East; a region of the world whose political systems are broadly characterized by a lack of political freedoms, one-party rule, a lack of checks and bills in politics and a stark element of religious supremacy of Islam (Cole 2009).

This project seeks to evaluate the widely distributed representations of Islam in Danish news media discourses following the Arab revolutions in 2011 to determine whether the dominant discourses on Islam have shifted in the aftermath of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’. This event refers to the civil uprisings against the authoritarian regimes and autocratic rulers in North Africa and the Middle East. Accordingly, Islam has, once again, entered the spotlight of the media and is making headlines with variations of the question: ‘Can Islam democracy?’

A 2007 poll<sup>4</sup> revealed that some 79% of Danish respondents found increasing interaction between the Muslim and the Western world more likely to be a ‘threat’ than a ‘benefit’ (WEF 2008:25). The same survey stated that about 40% of the Danish media coverage of ‘the Other’<sup>5</sup> had a ‘negative’ tone and hardly ever a ‘positive’ tone (WEF 2008:105). Numerous sociological studies indicate (Hjarvard 2008; Hussain 2000, 2003 and van Dijk 2000) that media exposure seems to play a decisive part in the socialization and formation of individuals regarding the perceptions of foreign issues and international politics, which the above-mentioned survey also suggests. Consequently, the discursive representations of Islam within the majority of news media appear to be a crucial area of research. Not only does news media provide its consumers with knowledge, but also to a substantial extent does it determine their conceptions and comprehensions of the rest of the world (see for instance Said 1997).

There is currently a body of research on the representations of Islam in Danish and other Western news media. The Danish anthropologist, Peter Hervik (2002, 2003), argues that the news media diffuses a neo-nationalist and neo-racist discourse, which started as a reaction to an increasingly globalized world and the sudden loss of an ‘adversary’ following the end of the Cold War. Throughout the 1990s, representations of Islam and Muslims have been elaborated in the Danish

press, in which Islam and what is regarded ‘Muslim values’ have been contrasted the Danish culture and values, and hence portrayed as the ‘Other’.

Another contribution of the Danish news coverage of Islam is given by the sociologist Mustafa Hussain (2000, 2003). He argues that news media has an imperative role in the construction of human social cognition and therefore also for the mainstream perceptions of Islam and Muslims. He criticizes the hegemonic press discourses for being prejudiced and representing Islam as a monolithic religion, forming a counterpart to Danish and Western democratic and cultural values.

To summarize those approaches to representations of Islam and Muslims in Western news media, similar studies dealing with neo-racist, neo-nationalist and discriminatory discourses on Islam and Muslims have been conducted by foreign scholars in the U.S. (Said 1997; Jiwani and Richardson 2011 and van Dijk 1995 b and c) and Britain (Jiwani and Richardson 2011; van Dijk 1995b, 2000).

### **Focus of the study**

With the intention of limiting the dimensions of this project and focusing the analysis of the news media discourses, the evaluation of the representations of Islam will be based on Danish daily newspapers. The reasons for delimiting the analysis to the print media as one example of a news medium are obvious and twofold. First, newspapers are consumed by a relatively wide part of the population<sup>6</sup>. Secondly, much of the current research on the phenomenon has been focusing on the press, whereby comparisons of results are more justifiable. Alternatively, the analysis could have been conducted upon other news media, such as television, radio broadcasting or internet publications, which might have resulted in different representations than the fore. The choice of the corpus of empirical data will also have a major impact on my choice of approach and methodology, as written language differs widely from spoken language.

### **General research question**

The objective of this project is to answer the following main research question, which based on the introductory elaboration, can be stated:

“By applying a socio-cognitive discourse analytical approach, is it possible to determine whether the dominating discourse on Islam within the Danish press, i.e. the way the majority of print media represents Islam, is changing after the recent civil uprisings in the Middle East and Northern Africa?”

## **II. Theoretical Approach**

### **The socio-cognitive approach**

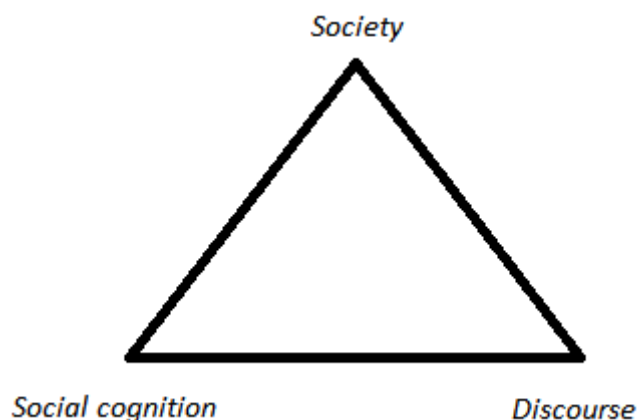
As implied in the general research question, the representations of Islam within the hegemonic press discourses will be approached via a socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse analysis<sup>7</sup> (henceforth CDA), seeing that the intention is to determine how Islam is portrayed in the language used in the daily print media. The general CDA is based upon the assumption that

“the increased importance of language in social life has led to a greater level of conscious intervention to control and shape language practice in accordance with economic, political and institutional objectives” (Fairclough et al. 2011:360).

The theoretical framework of this inquiry shares this conception of discourses and their potential effects. Rooted in this conception, the following core concepts abstracted from the socio-cognitive approach shall be introduced: (1) the triangle of discourse, social cognition, and society (see figure 1); and (2) the thesis of symbolic ‘elites’.

1) The socio-cognitive approach conceptualizes society as a frame or environment, composed of social structures and groups in which individuals belong. These social groups share internal *social cognitions*. Those are defined within this theoretical approach as systems of mental representations of group members, which partly consist of socio-culturally shared knowledge (e.g. language); however, beliefs, opinions, identity and social attitudes related to a social group or an institution may also be shared via social cognition. Conversely, the *personal cognition* represents experiences (or mental models, see van Dijk 2001, 2006) of one particular individual; although, these may not be shared with other members of the same social group (van Dijk 1995a).

Discourses are regarded structures of text and talk, which are partly controlled by social cognition and to some extent by the *social knowledge* about the contextual social practice (van Dijk 2001, 2006). Thus, discourses control and shape social practices, and vice versa; however, discourses may also express opinions, wishes, identities, social relations ect. and are therefore produced by the social cognition (van Dijk 1995a).



**Figure 1:** The three core concepts *society*, *social cognition* and *discourse* form a triangle in this theoretical framework. The social groups within the society share social cognitions, which are expressed via discourses and distributed as ideological group characteristics. Finally, discourses are shaped by the society or social practice in which they are expressed, and vice versa.

Ideologies, another core concept, are here understood as mental structures, which state the social cognitions and attitudes of social groups and institutions. Members within social groups appropriate such ideologies in complex processes of socialization. Similarly, ideologies are (re)produced and distributed through discourses to mentally represent the basic social characteristics or properties of a specific group, e.g. identity, activities, goals, norms and values, group relations and resources (cf. van Dijk 1995a and c, 2005, 2009, 2011).

2) Lastly, the concept of symbolic elite groups is a major concept within this line of approach. ‘Elites’ are considered those leading groups in the socio-political power structures that dominate political, economic and/or academic resources in society. Thus, elites may have a preferential access to mass media channels, authority to change or set the agenda of the public discourse and opinion making, or power to either influence political processes (van Dijk 1995b). In that respect, it seems relevant to classify which groups “produce” and lead dominant discourses and how these hegemonic representations serve the interests of the elite groups.

For theoretical and methodological reasons, a socio-cognitive discourse analysis is conducted on three fundamental levels based upon the triangle of discourse, social cognition and society: 1) *discursive*, 2) *socio-cognitive* and 3) *social* (van Dijk 2011). In sum, to accomplish an adequate and representative discourse analysis one should first take the general properties of discourse into account (see instance Gee 2011, van Dijk 2005 and van Eemeren 2011). Secondly, at the socio-cognitive level the analysis ought to focus on ideological discourse structures that express or (re)produce social group properties. Thirdly, the social environment or *context* in which the discourses are expressed should be further analyzed, as discourses are controlled by the context, and vice versa.

### **Discussing the approach**

Applying the socio-cognitive approach appears most feasible, as the inquiry seeks to determine potential changes in discursive structures. In order to fully understand these discursive structures, the socio-cognitive aspects must be included, because discourses are produced by social cognitions and (re)producing ideological group characteristics. It is thus a foregone conclusion that discourses are expressed through language practices which are influenced by social cognitions and distributing ideologies as according to the theory. Moreover, there is general consensus that the context must be included when analyzing discourses, because language is controlled by the context in which it is produced (Fairclough et al. 2011; Gee 2011; Graesser and Millis 2011 and van Dijk 2009, 2011). For that reason, the socio-cognitive approach is again feasible, as it asserts that there is a connection between the social cognition, the specific context or social practice and the way discourses are expressed (van Dijk 2001, 2006).

Nevertheless, if other theoretical approaches were employed, e.g. Fairclough's dialectical-relational model (2009) or Gee's CDA (2011), other results than the fore may have been inferred, as the theoretical basis of the analysis and hence the methodology would have been different.

One might object that the selection of a critical approach to discourse analysis already contains a choice that will produce deliberate results and thus introduce a bias into the project beforehand<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, the study will have a somewhat subjective standpoint which seems to contradict postulates of objectivity within academic science. Nonetheless, the critical aspect is a necessity, as the socio-cognitive feature must be included to conduct an adequate analysis as argued above. A purely descriptive approach would not be sufficient, since it solely explains how the language used by the press functions to define Islam in the discursive distribution process of social goods. To the contrary, a critical approach also allows to reveal the power relations or interests that seek to control the language produced (Fairclough et. al 2011).

## **III. Methodology**

### **Empirical data**

The representation of Islam within the hegemonic press discourses will be analyzed through an assessment of newspaper articles<sup>9</sup> from the following four leading Danish daily newspapers: *Jyllands-Posten*, *Berlingske*, *Politiken* and *Information*. Articles from these four newspapers are foremost selected as empirical corpus for the study according to the criterion of numbers of circulation, which have to be of least 100.000 copies a day. Additionally, these well-established newspapers traditionally stand for common electorates' orientations within the Danish political spectrum: *Jyllands-Posten* and *Berlingske* represent the conservative and moderate right-wing part of

the spectrum, *Politiken* represent the social-liberal and *Information* stands for the central-liberal spectre of the Danish political spectrum. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the broad political views of the Danish population, as represented in the Danish Parliament, are represented in this research, as newspaper readers have a propensity for preferring a daily paper, whose 'political orientation'<sup>10</sup> corresponds with their own political views (Hjarvard 2008:84-89).

## Methodology

The study will be conducted in three successive steps:

- 1) Selection of empirical data
- 2) Analysis of the data
- 3) Evaluation of the analyses

1) As the study aims to determine prospective differences in the dominating representation of Islam within the press discourses following the Arab Spring, empirical data from before and after the event is collected. Therefore, the empirical corpus will consist of data gathered from one randomly selected time span of three weeks before the outburst of the Arab Spring and once more after its occurrence.

The criterion of selection is that the data must deal with Islam within the Middle East from a given perspective, as it is the representations of Islam in that particular context, and not the specific progress of the Arab Spring, which is relevant for the study.

2) The analysis process of the empirical data will proceed via the indicated discourse analytical method, composed of three levels of analysis: the discursive, the socio-cognitive and the social level.

3) In the last step, the results of the separate analyses will be compared in order to determine whether the dominating representation of Islam has shifted. Furthermore, the discourses of the respective newspapers will be juxtaposed, compared to and contrasted with results of other studies conducted. Thus, an extensive evaluation of the discursive representation of Islam will be conducted.

Presumably, the implementation of the project will have no appreciable expenses, seeing that newspaper databases and much relevant literature are accessible in public libraries. However, it may be necessary to acquire some academic literature.

The study will be conducted at the Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies at SDU under the supervision of PhD fellow Erik Mohns. The realization of the project will spread over a time period of 3 months, as I will have to compose it in my spare time.

## Discussing the methodology

The method is inductive, given that the study seeks to construct general inferences based on a corpus of empirical data abstracted from the Danish press<sup>11</sup>. This implies that several dimensions of the methodological approach are open for criticism. First, one may call attention to the *problem of induction*. Although my results may well be in consensus, it is plausible to find representations and opinions of Islam, contradictory to my findings. On the other hand, the emphasis of the study is to determine the *dominating* discursive representation, whereby subtleties are acknowledged. Secondly, the time period from which the empirical data is selected might be atypical compared with an alternative empirical corpus from a longer time span. It is a recognized fact that conclusions inferred via induction are rendered more probable as several studies show similar results; however, it is beyond the scope of this study to conduct a solid theory due to the limited extent of resources and current research on the field. Though, it may prepare the ground for further research.

## IV. Concluding remarks

In this brief synopsis I have constructed an argument that it is possible to determine prospective differentials in the dominating representation of Islam within the Danish daily press following the Arab Spring, by applying a socio-cognitive discourse analytical approach. The premises are, thus, that the socio-cognitive aspects of discourse production must be included to analyze how discourse structures are (re)shaped in different contexts. As argued, the emphasis of this evaluative study is not to conduct a solid theory, but merely to enact a thesis via an inductive methodology that may prepare the ground for further research on the Danish media coverage of Islam.

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## VI. Appendix

English versions of newspaper citations:

1)

"In short: Give a truly faithful Muslim a voting paper, and he will instantly vote for a dictator, who abolishes the democracy." From *Kommentar: Islam udelukker demokrati*, by Jesper Langballe, 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2009, *Berlingske*, my translation.

2)

"The religion itself [Islam] advances a claim of prescribing laws. It demands that the Quran and the sayings of Muhammad must be the foundations for these laws. And it opposes thus the secularization of politics, without which democracy and freedom of religion are not compatible." From *Islamistisk terrorisme og vestlige værdier*, by Kai Sørlander, 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2007, *Information*, my translation.

3)

"The only useful response to Muslims' fear of freedom of speech is to show how precious it is to us." From *Pittelkow på nettet: Muslimer mod frihed*, by Ralf Pittelkow, 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2009, *Jyllands Posten*, my translation.

## VII. Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Found at <http://www.b.dk/debat/kommentar-islam-udelukker-demokrati> (10.10.11).

<sup>2</sup> Found at <http://www.information.dk/110988> (10.10.11).

<sup>3</sup> Found at [http://jp.dk/indland/indland\\_politik/article1600498.ece](http://jp.dk/indland/indland_politik/article1600498.ece) (10.10.11).

<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum (WEF), *Islam and the West: Annual Report on the State of Dialogue*, Geneva, Switzerland, January 2008, at [https://members.weforum.org/pdf/C100/Islam\\_West.pdf](https://members.weforum.org/pdf/C100/Islam_West.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> In the report, the 'Other' (in a non-Muslim majority country) was defined as Muslim individuals and individuals from Muslim-majority countries.

<sup>6</sup> A survey related to the research project "Changing Borderlines – Mediatization and Citizenship" (2008-2011), led by Professor Niels Ole Finnemann (AU), showed that 73% of the respondents received news information from newspapers and that 41% read newspapers daily. Found at <http://ong.au.dk/index.php/da/arkiv/29-aktuelt/67-danskernes-mediebrug> (30.10.11).

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<sup>7</sup> There are contradictory views on the theory and method employed in this approach to the representation of Islam, as some scholars consider critical discourse studies to be a part of the linguistic field within the humanities while others regard it a part of sociological science. I myself find it unjustifiable to label critical discourse studies as either humanistic or social science, but tend to perceive it as a multidisciplinary approach, combining the two major faculties. I have, though, chosen to hand in the project within the humanistic group, as I find the linguistic aspects of the study to be dominating; nevertheless, it could be argued to consider this study related to social studies.

<sup>8</sup> Leading scholars in the discipline of discourse studies argue that to accomplish a critical discourse analysis, the element of critique within the analysis itself needs to address a 'social wrong' beforehand (for instance racism, sexism or power abuse). For further details see Fairclough 2009, Fairclough et al 2011 and van Dijk 2007.

<sup>9</sup>The study will primarily be founded upon analyses of traditional newspaper articles, but, some relevant leaders or editorials might additionally be included as empirical data with the purpose of determining the complete representation of Islam within every daily newspaper selected.

<sup>10</sup>Hjarvard deduced from two studies (the first conducted in 1997 and the second one was carried out in 2007) that the majority of the respondents to the survey read a daily newspaper, whose political orientation *they* found to be similar to the political orientation of the party that they had voted for at the previous election.

<sup>11</sup> The definition of induction was given by Anne Marie Olesen, associate professor in philosophy at AU in her lecture "Videnskabsteori" at Brandbjerg Højskole on September 10<sup>th</sup> 2011.