CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This first chapter outlines the main background and problem identification as the introductory gate of the research in order to have a better a comprehension toward the research topic.

I.1. Background

In mass communication, the written culture has progressively been overshadowed by an audiovisual culture. Parsa (2004) explains that in the present day, what was previously pages worth of documentation could easily be told in a 2-hour movie or a 60-minute documentary. An emphasis on visual messages does not necessarily mean that words are less important. The most powerful and meaningful messages are combined with words and pictures. Considering the rapid developments in technology, we are gradually moving toward a visually mediated society.

The world has been caught up in an ever-flowing process, which can only be explained through the unique rules of an ‘audio-visual language’ with the invention of photographs, cinemas and televisions, which are used to record both still and moving images, although the ‘written language’ is still remains fundamental to the construction of meaning and the meaning itself. To facilitate a better understanding toward the written narratives, supporting images can be found in cinemas, newspapers, magazines, books, posters, computer screens, television screens, clothes and even restaurant menus. (Parsa 2002, 844).

Image has in fact a dual nature, being both concrete and capable of expressing larger meanings symbolically and metaphorically as it speaks within an experiential, associationistic, and holistic logic (Barry 1997, 122). Parsa (2004) tries to break down the strength of visual image that differs from written text, as quoted from Schneider & Raue:
Visual image is neither good nor bad information compared to texts. Its power to define things works quite differently from texts; it needs interpretation, addresses to emotions and creates an urge for getting more informed about the background of the moment of image’s being taken or recorded.

This nature of image makes them particularly subjective and susceptible to manipulation by political and commercial structures. In the hands of a skillful artist, the basic structure, ordering, and relationship can be mold and reorganized to transform onto a new meaning although the elements can probably remain recognizable. The media images produced by the process can be treated as texts that take many forms—visual imagery, sound, and language. The difficulties of tracking the messages in these images are compounded by the problem of layers of meaning. Images, be it still or moving, are used to imagine alternatives, to create new ways of looking at something, and to express and idea or emotion (Helmers 2006, 1). Some part of the meaning is "naturalized"—that is, it comes to us in the form of taken-for-granted assumptions. One cannot take texts at face-value since they contain subtexts; a whole set of texts may have an even more invisible metamessage (Gamson et al. 2013, 380).

We are engulfed with media-generated images of the world in our everyday lives, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. The lens through which we receive these images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it. Baudrillard (1988) argues that dramatic changes in the technology of reproduction have led to the implosion of representation and reality (Gamson et al. 2013, 374). And the special genius of this system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible (Gamson et al. 2013, 374). In regard of constructing these invisible metamessages, people use variations of symbols, labels, and stimulating descriptions in the social and professional political life to fulfill their agenda, which is winning a political campaign or to acquire public opinion. Very often in practice, such descriptions are deliberately made up
from explicit exaggerations that lead to falsifications; one of them is Character Assassination.

Character assassination is an inevitable affair of defamation that has always been around in existence and can be considered as an ad hominem argument. They aim to tarnish not only other people’s actions, but also their personality, credibility and reputation in deliberate and sustainable manner. Eric Shiraev (2010, 1) stated, “By attacking an individual's personal life, facts of a biography, and specific individual features, or characters, the attacker tries to hurt the victim politically, morally, socially, or psychologically and thus, depending on circumstances, remove him or her from a contest, sway public opinion, or achieve some other goal”. The victim or the individual whose character and behavior are targeted has to be "qualified" as a potential victim of such assassination attempts, such as: a high profile political figure who aims to seek public’s acceptance, an individual with power and reputation, a successful persona in a certain field such as business, government, science, or an artistic arena, or a representative of a powerful ideology, theory, social or political cause, party, or movement. Character assassination is used to either discredit and/or damage the reputation, to bring this individual down from the position of status, to weaken anything that the victim stands for, or to diminish support of potential followers (Shiraev 2011, 3).

One of the prominent cases of Character Assassination is the trend of an Islamophobic attitude that has been increasing to the highest number ever since the 9/11 attacks that resulted in extensive death and destruction. Islamophobia was first introduced as a concept in British Runnymede Trust Report in 1997 and is defined as the "dread or hatred of Islam and therefore, [the] fear and dislike of all Muslims" (Bunglawala 2004, 92), stating that it

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1 ad Hominem is a general category of fallacies in which a claim or argument is rejected on the basis of some irrelevant fact about the author of or the person presenting the claim or argument
also refers to the practice of discriminating against Muslims by excluding them from the economic, social, and public life of the nation. The concept also encompasses the opinions that Islam has no values in common with other cultures, is inferior to the West and is a violent political ideology rather than a religion. In an interview, Ambalavaner Sivanandan outlined the difference between Islamophobia and Anti – Muslim Racism act. Islamophobia is by any means a term related to a set of ideas that indicate an antipathy to Islam – which can range from the crude and direct demonization we find in the tabloids to the intellectual sophistry. Dekker and Van der Noll (2007), citing Heitmeyer and Zick, defined Islamophobia as a form of group-orientated enmity and a general attitude of rejection of Muslims and all religious symbols and rituals that stem from the Islam. Whereas anti-Muslim racism is the acting out of that antipathy, that prejudice – in violent attacks on the street or, when institutionalized in the state apparatus, in the impact of the anti-terror laws, and in racial profiling by the police (Sivanandan, 2010).

Whether they are televised or printed, it is not surprising that Western media reports maintain a constant distorted image of Arabs and Muslims. What is lamentably odd is that Arabs and Muslims are seen as one and unique entity with the aim to be arbitrarily regarded collectively as anti-rational, barbaric, anti-democratic, etc (Ridouani, 2011). These fabricated stereotypes of Islam are omnipresent in Western media through all means of communication, only to create a room for Islamophobic attitudes and public fear to grow even bigger. Thus, to achieve this aim the western media deliberately distort many Islamic concepts, such as the attempt to tarnish the character and personification of a public image, Muhammad being one as he is an important individual in Islamic values and traditions. The exaggerated fears built toward the Muslim community often lead to unnecessary measures and legislation and "gonzo justice”² (Fog 2013, 1-2).

² Gonzo Justice is defined as the use of extraordinary means to demonstrate social control and moral compliance, often through rule enforcement and punishment designed to stigmatize
The commitment in falsifying the record of this crucial matter reaches impressive levels. In September 2005, The Jyllands-Posten, published an editorial where it depicted the figure of prophet Muhammad in 12 different cartoons had aroused public attention in an unprecedented manner. The newspaper announced that this publication was an attempt to contribute to the debate about criticism of Islam and self-censorship. Note that although this was not reported in mainstream U.S. media, the issue was eventually surfaced in online forums. As a result, it ignited offensive demonstrations and riots around the world as it was considered as an insult to the Prophet Muhammad. In response, Danish Muslim organizations that objected to the depictions responded by petitioning for the embassies of Islamic countries and the Danish government to take action, and filed a judicial complaint against the newspaper, which was dismissed in January 2006.

Later on, this controversy keeps on stirring and eventually awakened several other affairs upon the portrayal of Muhammad in the media. In 2013, Ali Sina under the penname of Ibn Abi Sarh produced a comic book portraying the biography of Muhammad in such blatant and vulgar ways. Ali Sina also had published such as Sex in Islam According To Muhammad and individual comic strips about Muhammad’s relationships with his wives and/or companions. Another case is the Muhammad issue of Charlie Hebdo, a French satirical magazine. Charlie Hebdo published an issue of caricatures featuring a figure resembling the Prophet Muhammad. This was Charlie Hebdo’s second time in publishing Muhammad cartoons. Their first time was in 2011 when they ran a magazine cover of a bearded and turbaned cartoon figure of the Prophet Muhammad saying, "100 lashes if you're not dying of laughter" that caused their office burnt down in fire by local protesters (CNN, 2012).

publicly, e.g., the mass media, and to demonstrate the moral resolve of those mandating the punishment (Altheide, David L. 1992)

3 Abdullah ibn Abi Sarh was a scribe of Muhammad. Being more learned than his prophet he would often suggest rewording some of the verses and corrected his mistakes. The Prophet accepted the corrections and instructed him to rewrite Allah’s revelations.
Another case that brought up to the world’s attention is an anti-Islam movie entitled *The Innocent Prophet*. Terry Jones, the infamous Florida pastor who ran the “Burning Koran Day” campaign, produced the Innocent Prophet and claimed to portray the factual life of Muhammad. The *Innocent Prophet* movie mirrors Nakoula Basseley Nakoula’s, under the pseudonym of Sam Bacille, infamous parody *Innocence of Muslims*, which was released earlier in July 2012. *Innocence of Muslims* was perceived as an attempt to disparage the prophet Muhammad and became the scapegoat for widespread protests in the Middle East. On September 11 2012, demonstrations and violent protests against the video spread fast worldwide, including one that led to the death of the U.S. ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens (CNN, 2012).

I.2. Problem Identification

The initial problem lies within the ethical issues in the present-day society that as the backbone of democracy, there is a growing concern these mass media are not fulfilling their functions properly. According to Wilbur Schramm (1964), mass media have the capabilities to widen horizons, focus attention, raise aspirations and create a climate for development. Media can help only indirectly to change strongly held attitudes or valued practices, but they can affect attitudes lightly held and channelize stronger beliefs. Alas, Schramm’s assumption does not go in accordance to what is actually happening in the reality. Media too often subject to the need of the people with power, willing to bend the content to fit upon their needs more readily than the media overpower them; that the media act as much agents of diversion and influence, rather than being an independent body to create a social stability.

There is no guarantee that public interests are served well because these large-scale organizations in both public and private sectors are structured to carefully control both the assimilation and dissemination of information. The rapidly growing data-processing agencies represent overt recognition of the role of information and its control in modern social organization (Donohue et
According to this “propaganda – model”, the media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly (Chomsky 1989, 10).

In addition, the Internet as part of new media is daily changing power structures across the world and blurring the old distinctions between media and public, seeming to offer a newly minted democratized media. The Internet was seen by many as encouraging democracy, freedom, and liberty around the world. Attempts by oppressive regimes to block information were futile. It is becoming an unstoppable, open, and liberal architecture, so the citizens would be able to communicate and deliberate with each other, forming the basis for a single, vibrant global village polity. People can publish their views to a worldwide audience, communicate in an unrestricted fashion with other citizens, and create new communities of interest (Boler 2008, 139-140). This poses ethical problems when the norms abandoned are closely associated with certain relevant moral values or obligations. The extent to which this is acceptable is always a breeding ground of ethical controversy. What is at issue is not the honesty of the opinions expressed or the integrity of those who seek the facts but rather the choice of topics and highlighting the issues, the censorship, the range of opinion permitted expression, the unquestioned premises that guide reporting and commentary, and the general framework imposed for the presentation of a certain view of the world (Chomsky 1989, 12).

This phenomenon stated above inevitably contributes promoting the freedom of speech and expression and ultimately becomes the medium in raising and spreading the message they intend to convey, in this case distorting people’s mindset about the real character of prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through series of blatant statements and vulgar imageries.
Furthermore, Islam as a religion has a strong tradition of aniconism⁴, and it is considered highly blasphemous in most Islamic traditions to visually depicting the prophet Muhammad.

This research of character assassination is done by analyzing the documented records, then categorizing and interpreting this material culture of hate (frequently conjoined with humor), and, simultaneously, showing that the vicious sentiments in these fringe items were being adopted, often in coded forms, into mainstream rhetoric and imagery.

This research study is an effort to analyze the constructed reality of Muhammad made by the mass media that take place in most recent times and in different kinds of medium as one of ethical issues in mass communication. Most character assassination attempts create a link between a victim’s personal and inappropriate behavior and one’s good reputation: a collection of facts, images, and opinions related to this person’s features, appropriate acts, expressed opinions, or creations. If a character attack is effective, such a link is established. In all of these prejudicial smears, of course, the attack is directed not just at the individual named, but also at the entire group whom the individual represents. As a consequence, character assassination leaves prejudices, racism and otherwise, remains obviously strong among a portion of the populace.

I.3. Statement of the Problem

This research acknowledges the following statement(s):

What is the constructed social reality of Muhammad depicted in mass media; specifically the Innocence of Muslims movie, the Jyllands-Posten newspaper 12 Faces of Muhammad editorial caricature spread, and as well as Ali Sina’s Biography of Muhammad comic book?

⁴ Aniconism in Islam is a proscription in Islam against the creation of images of sentient living beings. The most absolute proscription is of images of God in Islam, followed by depictions of Muhammad, and then Islamic prophets and the relatives of Muhammad. Muhammad's physical appearance, however, is amply described, particularly in the traditions on his life and deeds recorded in the biographies known as Sirah Rasul Allah.
I.4. Purpose of the Study

This research acknowledges the following purpose(s):

1.) To identify what is the constructed social reality of prophet Muhammad’s characteristic depicted in mass media; specifically the *Innocence of Muslims* movie, the Jyllands-Posten newspaper *12 Faces of Muhammad* editorial caricature spread, and as well as Ali Sina’s *Biography of Muhammad* comic book.

I.5. Significance of the Study

This research acknowledges the following significance(s):

1.) Practical: This research is expected to become a consideration to the media practitioners in the future regarding the social construction of a certain individual creates a specific worldview and its relation to how it is being represented to the audience.

2.) Theoretical: The result of this study is expected to provide useful contribution on semiotics studies and its meaning-making trends as well as social construction in the mass media, specifically of the still image on the print media illustrations and as well as movies.

3.) Social: The result of this study is expected to provide media literacy and awareness for the public eyes of the meaning behind these media: The Jyllands-Posten newspaper editorial caricature spread “12 Faces of Muhammad”, and Ali Sina’s *Biography of Muhammad* comic book, and as well as the *Innocence of Muslims* motion picture, in its connection to character assassination.

I.6. Limitations of the Study

This research acknowledges the following limitation(s):

1.) Unit analyses of this study were all administered through online. The researcher intended to do the research on books and films that are physically attainable, however, it was impossible to find due to the availability. This limitation restricts generalizing the results to
other media institutions that may differ based on wide range of media content regulations and the demographics and geographic of the audience.

2.) The majority of the media content being analyzed contains explicit violence and sexual scenes making this research sensitive in a society where issues as such may make them feel vulnerable. This may have led to a possible following controversy instead of providing an opportunity to bring more depth to the issue discussed. Because of this reason, the researcher opted to not disclose the entirety of the content studied.

I.7. Organization of the Study

This thesis begins with a brief explanation of the problem background that raises the researcher’s interest in how the present days the society slowly morphed into audiovisual culture, which is also influenced the way mass media perform their functions in public. Then, the problem identification gives a more elaborate argumentation on why is this problem is relevant and so important to be studied further. These two subchapters are included in the first chapter along with the research question, the purpose of the research, the significance to provide a better introduction to the whole study. In the second chapter, the researcher mostly talks about the object of this research. Researcher chose to select information coming from in the following motion pictures: *Innocent of Muslims*, as well as the still images: The Jyllands-Posten newspaper cartoon editorial of *12 Faces of Muhammad* and Ali Sina’s *Biography of Muhammad* comic book.

Furthermore, the next chapter provides numerous of theories and literature works that later will support the analysis of the research. In this chapter, a theoretical framework is also included as a short summary to the researcher’s way of work. In the Research Methodology chapter, the researcher provides the systematic steps in the research process and it is divided into several subchapters to explain about the techniques used to collect the raw data as
well as to analyze them. The fifth chapter gives a deep and interrelated explanation about the research findings and the correlation to the theories given in the previous chapter to answer the research question. Then, in the sixth chapter, the researcher outlines the summary of the research that is drawn based on its purpose and contributes some suggestions related to the research.