

Content Analysis of Depictions of Terrorism in U.S. Major Motion Pictures: A Social Constructionist Perspective

Authors : Raleigh Blasdell, Amanda M. Sharp Parker, Lauren Waldrop, Brigid Toney

Abstract : It has been demonstrated that fictional media sources have persuasive effects on public beliefs; this study contributes to the social constructionist literature by conducting a content analysis of U.S. major motion pictures involving terrorism. Using the Unified Film Population Sampling Methodology, the top-grossing films were identified to examine the frequency and context of several constructs of terrorism, including terrorist demographics, type of terrorism, country of origin, organizational affiliation, crime typology, and victim demographics. Comparisons of these constructs, as depicted in the films, were then made with the extant academic literature on terrorism. The data provide notable information regarding the representation of terrorism by the film industry, as well the discrepancies between the scholarly literature and depictions in popular films. The results indicate vast differences between fiction and reality, emphasizing a 'Middle Eastern Islamic male' terrorist stereotype. Using the theoretical foundation of social constructionism, the findings provide insight into how inaccurate depictions in film can influence society's beliefs about terrorism and terrorists, which subsequently can translate into public support for legislation and policies that are often fueled by misinformation.

Keywords : film, media, social constructionism, terrorism

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