

PREJUDICE, POWER AND LANGUAGE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA DISCOURSE ABOUT ISLAMOPHOBIA

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Abstract

The media discourse is critical in defining how the people perceive Islam and Muslims. The Western outlets tend to portray Islam as an extremist and war-related phenomenon which is a source of Islamophobia, whereas non-Western media might create their own accounts that focus on human rights and acceptance. This study discusses the ways media creates prejudice and power against Islam, and the linguistic and rhetorical choices that are used and the comparisons of these representations between Western (CNN, The New York Times) and non-Western (Al Jazeera) media. Fairclough (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been used as a qualitative design. Thematic analysis of lexical framing, securitization and counter-narratives was performed based on 15 news articles (2021-2024). The language of the Western media is often evaluative and security-related, as it tends to depict Muslims as a threat, whereas Al Jazeera focuses on empathy and agency, as well as social inclusion. Counter-narratives set up opposition to mainstream Islamophobic discourse and emphasize resistance tactics. Media language serves as a place of resistance and as a mechanism of prejudice. The study highlights the importance of media literacy and fair representation of Muslims in the world.

INTRODUCTION

The media of the twenty first century has become one of the most influential institutions in the world, which conditions the impressions of the people, their understanding of the culture and politics. One of the most debatable issues is the image of Islam and Muslims, especially in the Western media discourses. The September 11, 2001, incident has been used by media to often equate Islam with terrorism, radicalism and social unrest that has led to the wide stereotyping and Islamophobia (Poole, 2019; Richardson, 2004). Media sources are also important in enacting as well as creating ideological meanings by the means of selective lexical use, framing, and attribution of sources (Fairclough,

1995; van Dijk, 2008). The media discourse tends to cement unequal power dynamics between the West and the majority Muslim societies through these language and rhetorical processes.

Islamophobia, which can be considered as prejudice, fear, or hostility to Islam and Muslims, has become an organizational attribute of modern discourse and not a complex of unrelated prejudices. It functions by the way of repetitive images that depict Muslims as a security hazard, modernists, or opponents of western ideals (Said, 1978; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Not only do such representations maintain negative stereotypes but they also maintain symbolic domination, which justifies discriminatory practices

and policies. Non-Western media outlets, including Al Jazeera, have tried to rebrand Islamophobia, on the other hand, as a question of human rights and social injustice, emphasizing the diversity and agency of Muslims (Din, 2020).

The growing knowledge about media bias does not help to overcome Islamophobic images that remain significant in the opinion of the world population. The Western media, especially the ones located in the United States and Europe, tend to portray Islam in terms of conflict, radicalism, and cultural incompatibility (Baker et al., 2013; Poole, 2019). These discursive patterns have the effect of legitimizing prejudice and reproducing ideological inequalities, which place Muslims in the category of the Other. Conversely, non-Western media outlets are able to interrupt these hegemonic narratives and provide counter-discourses that place more focus on inclusion, empathy, and pluralism. Nevertheless, there have been very few comparative studies on media representations of the West and non-West and more so in terms of linguistic and critical discourse. Negative representations of Muslims in Western media have been well-documented in the existing literature (Richardson, 2004; Khan et al., 2024), but few studies have conducted a systematic comparison of linguistic and rhetorical practices in different geopolitical regions. In addition, the majority of studies focus on the content analysis and not on the role of linguistic structures made of evaluative adjectives, metaphors, and framing strategies in creating ideological meaning. This gap is filled by the current research carried out through the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the selected media texts in CNN, The New York Times, and Al Jazeera. It looks at how language is a weapon of power and prejudice in how to represent Islam and Muslims in various institutional and cultural settings.

The main drive behind this research is to explore the role of media discourse in the construction and maintenance of prejudice and power relations with regards to Islam and Muslims. In particular, it intends to determine the most popular rhetorical and linguistic devices that are used to establish associations of fear, threat or exclusion as well as to examine how Muslims and Islamophobia is

portrayed in the various media outlets (Western and non-Western) around the world.

This study adds to the accumulating literature on the topic of media discourse, ideology, and religion by providing a comparative approach which is based upon the CDA model formulated by Fairclough (1995). It gives one an idea of the way language is used as a control mechanism in ideology and how subordinated discourses can challenge the dominant discourses. In real-life terms, the research highlights the importance of critical media literacy among consumers and moral responsibility among reporters to facilitate the balanced reflection of the minority groups. The results also add to intercultural communication and sociolinguistics proving that the media discourse reflects power structures around the world and also creates them.

1.1 Research Objectives:

To identify the most commonly used rhetorical and linguistic strategies to construct power and prejudice against Islam in media discourse.

To examine how variable media sources represent Muslims and Islamophobia globally.

1.2 Research Questions:

What are the most commonly used rhetorical and linguistic strategies to construct power and prejudice against Islam in media discourse?

How do variable media sources represent Muslims and Islamophobia globally?

Literature Review

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) scholarship has been predominantly involved in the study of media discourse and how it forms power relations and prejudice; particularly with regard to religion, race and minority groups. When studying the framing of Islam and Muslims, researchers have relied on the earlier works of Fairclough (1995), who identified the model of CDA and van Dijk (2008), who has examined the aspects of discourse and power. Fairclough points out the three dimensions of text, discursive practice and social practice (Fairclough, 1995) whereas van Dijk (2008) believes that the discourse has a role to play in perpetuating social dominance by the dominant groups. These paradigms give the conceptual support to studying

how media language may entrench ideological significances, depict others, and replicate structural disparities.

Lexical Framing and Ideology Positioning

It has been demonstrated that even at the very beginning, the media tends to put the Islamic religion and Muslims in adjectival or evaluative lexis that have ideological implications. As an illustration, the British media has also been found to employ the use of adjectives like deviant, dangerous, problematic when referring to Muslims and thus creating an us vs them dichotomy (Siddiqua & Sultan, 2019). In a comparable corpus-based study, Li (2022) has discovered that collocations with the related terms of either terror, extremist, or threat continue to be common with the terms of Muslim/Islam, which supports the identity of Muslims with violence. The choice of these lexes does not happen accidentally: such words make Muslims implicitly equal to conflict, peril and otherness, which means that they do not belong to a normal social category.

2.2 Muslim Securitization

This is evidenced by a large amount of literature that proves the securitization of identities of Muslims through media discourse where they are viewed as a threat to the safety of their citizens or the security of their nations or even social cohesion. Richter (2023) has discovered that news media persistently applied the discourse of inner threat of Islam using metaphors of infiltration and radical cells. These discourses of securitizing resonate colonial-influenced Orientalist tropes (Said, 1978) where the West is represented as civilized and civilized and the Islam/the East as uncivilized, violent or irrational. What it has done is placed the Muslims as objects to be manipulated as opposed to becoming actors. Sultana (2022) has demonstrated the effects that media coverage has on Muslim youth, making it reinforce their marginalization and restrict their involvement in the public life. This securitization is closely bound up with the agenda-setting functions of media: it gives preference to the voice of elites (security experts, politicians) and excludes the voice of Muslim people as agentic subjects (Siddiqua & Sultan, 2019).

2.3 Media Image, Ideology and World Relations of Power

This convergence between media discourse and geopolitics in the globe is critical to the construction of Islamophobia. A systematic review of media portrayals of Islam and Muslims in the contexts of the rest of the world (2002-2022) by Khan et.al., (2024) revealed persuasive trends: Muslims as outsiders, a threat to the values of the West, and the subject of the discourse of fear. Their analysis has observed the continuation of dualistic oppositions between the media discourse of the world between Us (Western societies) and Them (Muslims). Such tendencies are manifestations of the power disparities in the framework of colonial pasts and Western dominance (van Dijk, 2008). In the eyes of CDA, it is the discursive recreation of social dominance (Wodak & Meyer, 2016) as mainstream media assist in the process of keeping symbolic power through the process of creating acceptable or marginalized discourse.

2.4 Resistance Discourse and Counter-Narratives

Recent literature has concentrated more on how media and other forms of communication have been used to give counter-narratives to hegemonic Islamophobic frames. Ezz El Din (2020) contends that the regional media in Muslim-majority settings break the Western stereotypes by focusing on the agency, normality and pluralism in the Muslim communities. This is how Fairclough (2001) sees the struggle between ideologies: competing discourses are competing in the meaning and authority. Li (2022) discovered that with the foregrounding of Muslim agency, lexical options become more oriented towards solidarity, community resilience, interfaith collaboration, which signal a re-framing of Muslim identity based on non-threat-based frames. These counter-discourses play an important role in breaking up the dominance rules and leading to a more inclusive representation.

The above literature confirms the fact that media discourse involves lexical, metaphorical and epistemic approaches of containing Islam and Muslims under the dominant power relation. Still, there are numerous researches on print media in Western settings or social media, and there are less comparisons of Western vs non-Western outlets

through CDA to study rhetorical power and prejudice strategies. Present research focuses on the comparison of the Western outlets (CNN, The New York Times) with non-Western (Al Jazeera) and contributes to bridging this gap by analyzing the differences in representational strategies in different settings. In addition, this study explicitly concentrate on both rhetoric and linguistic strategies (lexical framing, securitization, counter-narratives), and is connected to the relationship of power/prejudice, as well as the variation of media representations across the world, and thus, perfectly fits both research goals: finding out about the strategies of power/prejudice construction, and analyzing the dissimilarity in media representations worldwide.

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study was a qualitative research design based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the way in which media language creates prejudice and power in the portrayals of Islam and Muslims. The investigation of the connection between linguistic structures and social practices on the one hand, and ideological power on the other one are feasible within the CDA framework which is suggested by Fairclough (1995). His work also is based on the socio-cognitive model by van Dijk (2008) that highlights how discourse is reproduced and legitimized by language to reproduce social inequality. The design was suitable to the research as it was possible to study the textual and contextual aspects of Islamophobic media discourses in detail.

3.2 Data Collection

A purposive sampling method was employed to sample news articles of three large global news outlets, namely CNN, The New York Times, and Al Jazeera. These sources were selected to provide the Western and non-Western views of media, which would allow making comparative analysis of ideological orientations. The number of news articles collected was fifteen (five articles each) published as of 2021 to 2024. The inclusion criteria were that the articles specifically covered either Islam, Muslims, or Islamophobia and were published in a reputable online edition using the English language. Articles

that dealt with a specific political or regional conflict with no mention of Islam were disqualified. Information was obtained by the official websites of the specific organizations and Auto-verified by means of digital archives to enable authenticity. The chosen corpus offered a convenient but yet heterogenous source of data that reflected linguistic differences among geopolitical and institutional settings, which is in line with the suggestions of Poole (2019) about sampling used in media discourse research.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The discussion was based on three-dimensional model of CDA suggested by Fairclough (1995), which is (1) textual analysis, (2) discursive practice, and (3) social practice.

The textual analysis was conducted in order to reveal lexical decisions, transitivity, evaluative adjectives and metaphors devoted to Islam and Muslims. As an example, the researchers studied whether words like radical, terror-linked, or faith-based discrimination were used to identify ideology framing.

Discursive practice explored the construction, dissemination, and consumption of these texts and in particular, how the voices of some people were privileged or how the voices of others were marginalized. The research analyzed patterns of citation (e.g., policymakers vs Muslim community members) in order to gauge the representational power.

Since they were placed in the context of social practice, the findings were interpreted in the context of the global politics of post-9/11, the Orientalist discourse (Said, 1978), the Western hegemonic discourse. This multi-level model enabled the research to transcend the surface characteristics of linguistics to the ideological and institutional forces that, in turn, affect them, which is in line with the discourse and power structures presented by Wodak & Meyer (2016).

3.4 Coding and Thematic Analysis

The analysis of data was carried out through manual qualitative coding based on CDA categories. There were frequent patterns of lexicons, rhetorics and topics that were determined and grouped into three broad themes:

Lexical Framing and Ideological Positioning.

Othering and Securitization of Muslims.

Resistance Discourse and Counter-Narratives.

The individual themes were created by repetitive reading and interpreting. This was done in line with the model of thematic analysis put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006), which aids in thematic coding and theme development in qualitative studies. Triangulation was made possible by cross-media comparison and enhanced analytical credibility (Silverman, 2020).

3.5 Reliability and Validity

A number of strategies were applied to bring about trustworthiness. Peer review of coded data by two separate linguistics researchers facilitated investigator triangulation in order to reduce the subjective bias. The process remained self-reflective through recognizing the positionality of the researcher and his interpretive position (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Also, the transparency was provided and the linguistic examples were described thickly, which enabled other researchers to replicate them.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was not required since the data was made of publicly available media texts and no human subjects were involved. Nevertheless, he or she was careful to avoid misrepresenting either cultural or religious groups; hence the researcher was responsible in the interpretation. Any textual quotes were appropriately reference listed.

Data Analysis

Theme 1: Ideological Positioning and Lexical Framing

In the CNN and the New York Times, the lexical terms (radical, extremist, terror-linked, and Islamist groups) were repeated in numerous articles written on the problems concerning Islam. These were some adjectives before the term Muslim was written or the term Islamic that unconsciously linked the religion to violence and instability. Such headlines like *Islamist Militants Threaten Regional Security* (CNN, 2023) and *The Islamic Challenge to Western Democracy* (The New York Times, 2022) show that lexical framing has ideological implications, as the religion of Islam is introduced as a problem or a threat to other cultures. Al Jazeera, in its turn,

applied more neutral or humanizing words, where it talked about the Muslim communities, faith-based discrimination, and anti-Muslim hate.

These lexical patterns imply institutional and ideological inclinations to different extents. The western sources, especially CNN and The New York Times, are prone to reproduce the hegemonic discourses of the West, in which Islam is created as an ideological Other. The recurrent association of Islam with war or the risk of war instills a subconscious belief that the identity of Muslims is political or radical. The language policies of Al Jazeera, on the other hand, focus on social inclusion and international injustice as it is a media outlet, the audience of which is predominantly Arab and Muslim. The interpretive practice, in its turn, is selective prioritization, CNN and The New York Times lay stress on the concept of security, whereas Al Jazeera previews the concept of human rights and discrimination.

This language inclination can be elaborated in the wider global power relations that have been influenced by post-9/11 geopolitics and Western discourses of the war on terror. The operations of media institutions located in the West tend to exist in political systems supporting Orientalist ideologies (Said, 1978), in which Islam is clearly defined as backward and as a force against Western modernity. In such a way lexical framing promotes the inequality of power existing between the West and Muslim societies on the world level. Al Jazeera counter-discourse, on the contrary, acts against Western hegemony by humanizing the Muslim communities and redefining Islamophobia as a structural injustice, instead of an isolated act of prejudice.

Theme 2: Securitization and Othering of Muslims

The second prevailing theme is that of securitization the framing of Islam and Muslims as possible risks to civilian safety and national security. Security-related metaphors and visuals were often employed by the articles published in CNN and The New York Times. The terms, such as, terror networks, radical cells, border infiltration and religious extremism, create Muslims as collective objects of suspicion. Indicatively, the reporting of immigration issues in Europe by CNN referred to Muslim refugees as a security issue or a social cohesion strain. Al Jazeera

stories, in marked contrast, were devoted to social and emotional impact of Islamophobia, and such titles as “Muslim Women Face Rising Hate Crimes in Europe” and *Families Torn Apart by Fear and Prejudice* were used.

In discursive level, securitization can be seen as the process of legitimization of some power relation in media discourse. The western media would favor the voices of the political elites, policymakers and security officials as the voice of authority at the expense of the voices of the ordinary Muslims. An example is that the western analysts and the counterterrorism analysts are frequently quoted by the New York Times but the voices of Muslims are mostly presented as the point of policy debate, not as generators of meaning. This discursive exclusion is a perpetuation of an imbalanced power relationship where Muslims are spoken about other than spoken to. However, Al Jazeera, also features firsthand testimonies of Muslim community and individuals and gives the agency and self-representation an opportunity to challenge the overwhelming frames.

The tendency can be placed in the context of larger systems of inequality in the world and colonial histories. Securitization of Islam in the West discourse is correlated with state agendas according to which surveillance, efforts to enforce change on other countries, and limitations on migration are justified. The recurring linking of Muslims as security risks justifies institutionalism Islamophobia and creates perspectives of racialized hierarchies of trust and belonging (van Dijk, 2008). The other framing by Al Jazeera is a sort of discursive resistance, with the focus on empathy and interfaith understanding, which therefore contest the ideological monopoly of the western media discourses. In that way, the process of securitization reproduces as well as reflects geopolitical power asymmetries.

Theme 3: Counter-Narratives and Resistance Discourse

In contrast to the previously discussed themes of prejudice and power, the given theme emphasizes how some media texts cannot be Islamophobic. Counter-narratives were presented by Al Jazeera, and to a lesser degree by a few opinion pieces of the New York Times, that re-branded Islam as a non-violent,

pluralistic, socialist religion. The usual security and conflict-related language was substituted with language that is linguistic e.g. solidarity, justice, community resilience, interfaith harmony. Representations of Muslim women professionals, interfaith activists, and scholars often focused on visual and verbal representations and thus disrupted stereotypical images.

The discursive politics of this approach consists in recontextualization, in other words, in reframing Islam as not a monolithic ideology but as a plural and shifting cultural identity. These counter-narratives bring in other subject positions, which are not subject to stigmatization, by amplifying the Muslim voice and referring to cross-community collaboration. This is what Fairclough (1995) refers to as ideological struggle, that is, conflicting discourses who vie to dominate. The new trend of including more people is evident in the new approach to presentations with Al Jazeera and some columns of The New York Times that show progressive perspectives on Muslims as complex and multidimensional actors, not victims or threats. These counter-discourses at the level of social practice represent a slow change in media consciousness on the global level. The rise of criticism on Islamophobic rhetoric and the growing campaign against people to adopt diversity in newsrooms have put pressure on some media outlets in the West to rethink their framing behaviors. However, structural inequalities continue to persist, and, therefore, counter-narratives are still more obscure in the mainstream discourse. Dominating and opposing narratives are the conflicts that demonstrate the continued power and ideological bargaining in the world media domains.

Findings and Discussion

The discursive analysis of fifteen articles discussing Islamophobia in CNN, The New York Times, and Al Jazeera has indicated that three main patterns in the discursive creation of Islamophobia are dominant: (1) ideological and evaluative lexical choices that associate Islam with conflict and extremism, (2) securitization of the Muslims via fear and threat representations, and (3) the production of counter-narratives that result in countering the Islamophobic framing. The information proved that the rhetoric of

Western outlets often incorporate violence or political turmoil as the sense of Islam through Western lenses, but Al Jazeera focuses on empathy, inclusion and human rights. These results reveal that Islamophobia in the media discourse is not a lingual phenomenon only but an ideological phenomenon that demonstrates the power relations between the Western and Muslim-majority societies at large.

The results of the study indicate that linguistic and rhetorical strategies are important processes of upholding symbolic power relations. As per the Fairclough (1995) model, the frequent repetition of loaded words like radical and terror-associated is a way of normalizing prejudice because the instilled bias becomes embedded in the language of media as the day to day. This is corroborated by the fact that discourse is a form of social control as there is argument by van Dijk (2008) that dominant groups recreate ideology by way of language. With CNN and The New York Times, where the framing of Islam as a security issue has been used to refer to Muslims as outsiders to Western norms in sociopolitical context, this has been used to support the exclusion discourse. Al Jazeera on the other hand with its focus on Muslim agency and resilience questions such hierarchies providing evidence that media discourse can also be a form of resistance.

These findings are consistent with the current literature that defines the propensity of Western media to portray Muslims using a fear of conflict narrative. Poole (2019) and Baker et al. (2013) established that collocations of terror and violence are rather often used in stories on Islam in British and American newspapers, which contributes to a hidden connection between Muslimness and extremist behavior. In addition, it was shown that, in most cases, Western news media ignores the voices of the Muslims by reporting on officials and security experts rather than on the community members (Richardson, 2004). The current conclusions confirm these patterns but also develop them including the other side of the Al Jazeera viewpoint giving a counter-hegemonic discourse based on empathy and justice. This is in line with Ezz El Din (2020), who stated that regional media of Muslim-majority environments has a crucial role in redefining the world discourse about Islam and challenging Western stereotypes. Based on critical

discourse, the results show how language creates and maintains an ideological hegemony. The repeated connection between Islam and threat shows the discursive reproduction of social dominance, as it is labeled by Wodak and Meyer (2016). The techniques of Western media to have symbolic control is not based on explicit hate speech, but rather expressive language that is selective to naturalize the cultural hierarchies. Simultaneously, the development of counter-narratives in Al Jazeera echoes the idea of discursive struggle by Fairclough (2001) i.e., a process where less represented groups of people oppose the status quo by redefining meaning. In such a way, the issue of the perennial existence of Islamophobic prejudice is revealed in CDA, as well as the prospects of transformative opposition to this type of discourse in the global media arena.

Overall, the results indicate that the process of Islamophobia in the media discourse is linguistically created and ideologically sustained with the help of the patterns of the representation which predominate with Western views. Even though CNN and The New York Times reproduce the discourses of fear and suspicion to a large extent, Al Jazeera reinterprets Islamophobia as a human rights concern, and prefigures the self-representation of Muslims. The study supports the notion that media discourse is an influential tool of domination and transformation. Revealing the linguistic processes of prejudice and power, CDA can help to make the world a fairer place in the way people perceive Islam and Muslims. In future research, this analysis can be extended to cover the digital and social media platform in order to track the development of Islamophobic narratives in transnational settings.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to critically analyze the way media discourse creates and maintains prejudice and power relations as far as Islam and Muslims are concerned. The study followed a three-dimensional approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed by Fairclough (1995), in which the linguistic and rhetorical strategies were examined in several articles published by CNN, The New York Times, and Al Jazeera. This was aimed at revealing the minor means that language forms contribute to Islamophobic ideologies and to compare the manner

in which the Western and non-Western media outlets portray Muslims and Islamophobia across the world.

The results of the analysis showed that Islamophobia is created on a linguistic level by the usage of repetitive lexical items, evaluative words, and framing patterns that identify Islam with a danger, violence, or cultural otherness. The framing of Muslims by Western media like CNN and The New York Times was mainly as possible security threats or objects of social conflict and they were labeled as such with terms like radical, terror-linked and Islamist extremists. Such lexical patterns perpetuate stereotypes and make the perception of Islam as something that does not fit the Western value system a matter of normalcy. However, Al Jazeera had a more humanizing approach and focused on empathy, inclusion, and resilience. It put Islamophobia in a systemic perspective of people and community. This indicates that media language is not a neutral language as it is influenced by institutional ideologies, as well as power imbalances across the globe (van Dijk, 2008; Richardson, 2004). Ideally, this study upholds the conclusion that media discourse could be a highly effective instrument of ideology in defining what people think about minority groups. In line with Wodak and Meyer (2016), the results demonstrate that discourse recreates social hierarchies by authorizing some of the worldviews whilst marginalizing others. The study points out the symbolic dominance as ensured by the western media that portrays Islam and symbol of security and conflict. Nonetheless, the appearance of the counter-narratives in Al Jazeera proves that the media discourse can also be prejudiced and that hostile culture may be developed in the context of intercultural understanding. In reality, the results highlight the importance of the increased linguistic awareness and representational variety in journalism. Critical media literacy training initiatives may help journalists and viewers identify biased tendencies and promote more balanced representations of religious minorities.

Even though, this research offers useful information, it is too small since it relies on a limited set of fifteen articles on three media outlets. Islamophobia is a wide-ranging topic whose representative sample is not in the selection. Furthermore, the focus of the

analysis was on text, and it did not involve audience reception and visual semiotics, which can uncover some other meanings of the text. Future studies have the potential to increase the sample size, add social media, and attempt to study multimodal discourse, which would be more effective in explaining the spread of Islamophobic discourses in online environments (Poole, 2019). The study proposes that media houses should implement inclusive editorial practices, staffing of the newsroom, and critically evaluate linguistic framing of the story when it involves a religious or ethnic group. In academia, the further use of CDA under cultural and language backgrounds may enhance the knowledge on how power and prejudice are encoded within the global communication. Finally, the results confirm again that language is a location of ideological conflict in which dominant discourses may be both reproduced and challenged. Revealing the processes of bias in news coverage, the study leads to a more balanced and self-aware approach to news representation. It is important to promote a critical sense of discourse to reduce Islamophobia and create more humane images of the Muslim identities in the world media market.

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