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## POLICIES OF INVISIBILITY ON GOOGLE IMAGES: THE ISLAM CASE

*Políticas de invisibilidad en las imágenes de Google: el caso del Islam*

*Políticas de invisibilidade nas imagens do Google: o caso do Islã*

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### Abstract

This article aims to study the representation of the identity Islam through Google Images searches analyzing results provided by the website. The analysis aims to comprehend the relation of an *I*, occidental identity, and an *Other*, oriental identity emerged virtually and how it produces policies of invisibility, reducing the *Other* to the place of exotic. Among the results, it was found the Islam identity frequently represented in connection with violence.

**Keywords:** Islam; Google Images; Alterity; Representation; Identity.

### Resumen

*Este artículo se propone estudiar la representación de la identidad islámica a través de las búsquedas en Google Imágenes, analizando los resultados proporcionados por el sitio web. El análisis pretende comprender la relación de un Yo, identidad occidental, y un Otro, identidad oriental que emerge virtualmente y cómo produce políticas de invisibilidad, reduciendo al Otro al lugar de exótico. Entre los resultados, se encontró que la identidad islámica está frecuentemente representada en contextos de violencia.*

**Palabras clave:** Islam; Google Imágenes; Alteridad; Representación; Identidad.

### Resumo

*Este artigo se propõe a estudar a representação da identidade Islâmica através das buscas no Google Imagens, analisando os resultados fornecidos pelo website. A análise pretende compreender a relação de um Eu, identidade ocidental, e um Outro, identidade oriental que emerge virtualmente e como produz políticas de invisibilidade, reduzindo o Outro ao lugar de*

*exótico. Entre os resultados, foi encontrado que a identidade Islâmica está frequentemente representada em contextos de violência.*

**Palavras-chave:** Islã; Google Imagens; Alteridade; Representações; Identidade.

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent period, the Google website is being criticized for some users in Social Networks due to results provided by the company to some searches. In June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the north-American student Kabir Alli, 18 years old, published on Twitter<sup>1</sup> (@iBeKabir) a video where he was searching on Google Images for results to “three black teenagers”. Comparing with a second search for “three white teenagers”, it was highlighted on the video a clear difference between the images that emerged on the screen: on the first case, most of them were related to prison, with uniforms or jails. On the second case, it was possible to see people smiling, happy and alluding to the scholar environment. Feeling outraged, many people on internet shared the video.

A similar case happened in 2015. That time, Google answered questions related to a search changing the results. The question was “Who runs Hollywood”?, the first result allocated on the Direct Answers Services (a kind of box created by the website to present the best answer to the question) used to allude to an article, published in 2014 by New Observer portal, with a very anti-Semitic content, according to users’ report<sup>2</sup>. Google deleted the “special” box.

The use of Search Engines became indispensable for browsing virtually being “maps to the exploration of the informational space on Internet” (Bruno, Leitão, Lobo, Boghossian, Albuquerque, Guimarães, & Biancovilli, 2006). Being Google this interface to look for informational content, it is important to investigate the users experience using the website. Google provide, through its profiles on Social Networks some information about how the tool is being used.

In June 24<sup>th</sup> 2016, the United Kingdom citizens decided, through a referendum, for leaving the European Union. Eight hours after concluded the election, Google provided data about the trending searches made by local citizens from UK. The searches for “what happens if we leave the EU” increased 3 times in this period. According to Google Trends<sup>3</sup> (@GoogleTrends) on Twitter, where

<sup>1</sup> Available on <https://twitter.com/iBeKabir/status/740005897930452992>. Retrieved on 23 June 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The article was about a theory of conspiracy involving Jews occupying the most powerful positions on Hollywood media companies.

<sup>3</sup> Available on <https://twitter.com/googletrends>. Retrieved on 14 July 2016.

the company usually publish data about users activity, among the five most asked questions to Google made by British people after the referendum were: (1) What does it mean to leave the EU?; (2) What is the EU?; (3) Which countries are in the EU? (4) What will happen now we've left the EU? (5) How many countries are in the EU?

Google is a territory that impacts political decisions through the constructions of representations in social imaginary. Because of this, it is necessary studying the way this content is (re)presented and how it impacts users. According to Alexa, the Amazon software to data analysis, Google.com is the most accessed website around the world. In Brazil, the first one in the ranking is the Brazilian version "google.com.br".

Trying to delineate this scenery of production of a kind of reality through the access of some information, this article aims to analyze the results provided by Google Images using the tag "Islam". Islam is the second religion with more followers in the world, according to the institute Pew Research<sup>4</sup>. The same institute<sup>5</sup> estimate a growth of this religion in 75% until 2050, which means that it would be equal to the number of Christianity followers, the first one on the list. Islam was choosing by this study because it is considered by authors like Edward Said (2007) and Ingrid Gomes (2014) as being a stigmatized and exotified religious identity, frequently represented on the mediatic discourse in a violent scenery.

## **ISLAM: THE ALTERITY RELATIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER**

Firstly, they were collected the first one hundred images provided by Google Images as result for the search using the key-word "Islam". According to the results, we produced three categories aiming to organize the images due to its aesthetics and content: (1) Violence, when was possible to identify elements alluding to guns, death, suffering, pain and mutilations; (2) Religious practices, when was identified religious symbols or rituals like people praying or holy books; (3) Others, where we allocated everything that was difficult to organize in our previously sections like landscape views or maps.

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<sup>4</sup> Available on:

[http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/explorer/custom#/?subtopic=15&chartType=pie&data\\_type=percentage&destination=from&year=2010&religious\\_affiliation=all&countries=Worldwide&gender=all&age\\_group=all](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/explorer/custom#/?subtopic=15&chartType=pie&data_type=percentage&destination=from&year=2010&religious_affiliation=all&countries=Worldwide&gender=all&age_group=all). Retrieved on 13 July 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Available on: <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050>. Retrieved on 13 July 2016.

**Table 1**

Category	Number of Images
1- Violence	0
2- Religion	55
3- Others	45

Caio Castro Mello: Results for “Islam” on Google Images. 2017.

Looking for understanding this representation in images the procedure was repeated using the key-word “Christianism”. Again, we use the same categories and keys to analyze.

**Table 2**

Category	Number of Images
1- Violence	11
2- Religion	32
3- Others	57

Caio Castro Mello: Results for “Christianism” on Google Images. 2017.

Methodologically, it is important to highlight that we are not considering Jesus in bleeding on the cross as violence because it is accepted as a religious symbol for Christianity.

It was possible to verify that is very common the presence of violent actions represented in results to the search with the key-word Islam. When we use “Christianism”, however, we could not find any reference that we could read as violent. Thus, the question is what does it produces?

In a study about the construction of representations of alterity during some periods of Brazilian history (colonial, independence and republic), Arruda (1998) identifies two kinds of manifestation of relationship between the *I* and the *Other*: “the surprising difference” and the “unusual disturbing”. The first one would be, as an example, the noble savage. The second one would be, using this study as an example, the representation of a religion simply as violent. The historical contextualization of the author’s analysis makes possible to comprehend how political, economic, social and cultural values are involved in a discursive production of the existence of any identity. The representation of Islam can be analyzed as integrating polices of visibility (and consequently, invisibility) that move these identities away socially and geographically, through an orientalism.

The orient is a version written by the occident. The Said's (2007) concept of Orientalism refers to the role of alterity in the process of cultural and political representations construction of an imaginary. The possibilities of comprehending the orient are delimited by myths, by a series of references that gives access to some faces, a fragment filtered by distance non-geographic, only, but firstly, related to the knowledge about the *Other*, about its cultural diversity and its complex identities manifestations. The non-complexification, however, as define Said (2007), belongs to a wide network of interests (European and North-American) involved in the construction of an Orientalism as a systematic strategy aiming organizing the knowledge about the orient. It promoted the production of specific polices to the Orient which include social, military, ideological and scientific strategies.

The limitation of knowledge about the *Other* is deeply related to the exotification, which according Todorov (2013) is a manifestation of a compliment to the ignorance. According to the author, the most distant tribes and most ignored are the best candidate to the exotification. Supported by Segalen, Todorov (2013) understands the exotic as being a kind of curiosity against an objectivity through which people see the difference. The exotic is the representation of identities less complex constructed in a discursive dispute for domain. The policies of invisibility work limiting the multiple possibility of meanings to specific actors and social arrangements.

## **POLICIES OF INVISIBILITY**

The results for Islam on Google Images provide for users information, being a place of reference where they have access to a very fragmented representation of the *Other's* identity. This relationship *I/Other* is constructed through the interface of a website that looks for answers among a universe of uncountable possibilities. While it is a very important and accessible tool to learn and find information, allowing users to break down the barriers of ignorance about other's identity, sometimes, it also limits, if we consider the quality of information provided and who or what organize it.

Perceval (2013) considers xenophobia as the result of hating a "behavior considered strange or hostile, what threat our society and our way of life" (Perceval, 2013, p.17, free translation). This is produced according to the author based on the ignorance about the existence of the *Other's* identity. The production of discourses using images that link an identity with violence is part of a series of policies that influences political decisions like what was documented here about the E.U. referendum.

Producing abject bodies (Butler, 1993) or bodies that does not matter is part of a strategy. Algorithms are not simply machines working to give aleatory information to users of Google but they are also actors (Latour, 2007) that contribute to the construction of reality offline being more and more central in our collective choices.

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