Strategies for Enhancing the Understanding of Islam in the Media[1]

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Abstract

During the last two decades, the world witnessed a meteoric rise in the role played by the media in influencing human perceptions of other people, places, and things. This tremendous influence has had both beneficial and detrimental consequences for individuals and communities across the globe. Muslims have experienced firsthand the harmful impact of the media and its ability to negatively influence public opinion. How has such a state of affairs come about? Why is Islam so misunderstood in the global media, and more importantly, how can this situation be remedied? This paper will examine some of the reasons for the media's misunderstanding of Islam, first in the Western world and second in the Muslim world. Subsequently, it will propose various strategies for enhancing the Western and Muslim media's understanding of Islam.

Introduction

It is hardly a secret that the global media play a critical role in influencing and shaping human perceptions of other people, places, and things. While the media are an extremely valuable source of information on a wide variety of subject matters, this information is not always completely objective and bias free.

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Many Muslims living in Muslim-majority countries and Muslim minorities in Western countries have had firsthand experience of the harmful impact of the global media and their ability to negatively influence public opinion.[2] Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, Muslims have replaced communists as the new enemy and threat to world peace. As a result, they are often vilified by the media and portrayed as fundamentalists, radicals, militants, barbaric, and anti-Western.[3] The tragic events of September 11, 2001 have only served to reconfirm the stereotype of Islam as a religion of terrorism, extremism, fanaticism, and violence—rather than a religion of peace.

While it is one thing for the Western media[4] to harbor biased feelings against Islam, one would anticipate that the media in Muslim countries would show greater fairness when it comes to reporting about Islam and Muslims. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. Instead, many Muslim journalists and editors prefer to echo the sentiments of their Western counterparts and refer to Muslims involved in conflicts in other parts of the world as rebels, fundamentalists, and/or "terrorists. Why is Islam misunderstood in the global media, and more importantly, how can this situation be remedied? I will examine some of the reasons for the media's misunderstanding and biased portrayal of Islam, firstly in the Western world and secondly in the Muslim world. Subsequently, I will examine and propose various strategies for enhancing the worldwide media's understanding of Islam.

Negative Portrayal by the Western Media

Historical

One of the primary factors which has contributed to the Western media's negative portrayal of Muslims is the historical nature of Islam's relationship with its sister monotheistic religions and the geopolitical entity referred to as "the West." Since the early Islamic period, Islam has been perceived as a threat to global political, economic, and religious interests.

After the Prophet's death, the power and influence of Islamic civilization spread far and wide. Islam's universal message and proselytizing nature won the hearts of many new Muslims, thereby threatening and curbing the influence of neighboring superpowers. During the Middle Ages, Islam, in the eyes of many Christians, came to symbolize terror, devastation, and hordes of hated barbarians.[5] From approximately the eleventh to fifteenth centuries, in an attempt to turn back the tide of Islam and regain their lost

territory and power, the Crusaders employed the sword as their instrument of choice against the Muslims.[6]

While opposition to Islam during the Middle Ages was primarily of a religiopolitical nature, Seyyed H. Nasr asserts that "open hatred of Islam, both intellectual and theological, really began with the Renaissance."[7] During this period, Europeans used various artistic forms such as theatre and poetry to portray their hatred of Islam and influence the public. For example, in Renaissance England, it was quite common to watch on the London stage a relatively large number of details in events in the history of Ottoman Islam and its encroachments upon Christian Europe.[8] Other strategies employed to discredit Islam and usurp its power and influence included encouraging non-Muslims to rebel against their fellow Muslims within the Ottoman Empire under the pretext that they were "defending minorities."[9]

During the nineteenth century, Orientalist writers—including Renan, Marx, Lane, Sacy, Flaubert, and Nerval—employed the power of the pen to depict negative images of the Arabs and Muslims. Edward W. Said states that nineteenth century European writers on the Orient differed primarily in form and personal style, rather than content, since each saw the Orient "as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction and even redemption."[10]

Despite the fact that Western powers no longer directly rule Muslim countries physically today, Islam is still perceived as a threat to Western global power. Since the West considers it own historical development as the only acceptable path for all other peoples of the globe, those who do not subscribe are branded as backward and identified with other pejorative labels. Although Islamic civilization is a mere shadow of its former military, political, and economic might, it has still refused to completely submit itself to foreign control, preferring instead "to follow its own principles, and develop according to its own inner life and dynamic."[11] Consequently, there is still a lingering fear among Western powers that Muslims (or Arabs) still desire to take over the world.[12]

Adding to the apprehensions of people in the West about Islam is the fact that many of their predictions about Islam have failed to materialize. For example, when the more rationalist approach of modern biblical criticism and critical theological scholarship resulted in a substantial reformulation of faith and belief in Christianity and Judaism, many predicted that if Islam did not follow suit, it could not hope to remain relevant to the modern generation of Muslims. However, Islamic revivalism has countered

and discredited such a uniform evolutionary view of historical change and development.[13]

When one understands the historical context of the misunderstandings between Muslims and their adversaries in the West, it is easy to see how the global media are simply another instrument employed to damage the reputation of Islam by negatively influencing people's perception of Muslims.

On one hand, the continuous negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims has served to create confusion in the mind of many who know very little about Islam. Often individuals who are less educated and innocent are the first to be influenced by the media's negative propaganda and hostility towards Muslims. On the other hand, continuous negative reporting has encouraged those with more inquiring minds to investigate whether any religion could possibly be as bad as the media portrays. Ironically some of these latter individuals have come to be more sympathetic to Islam, thereby further contributing to its growth of understanding about Islam.

Political

Political events—such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and recent terrorist attacks on the United States, England, Spain, India, and Indonesia—have also contributed to the negative image of Arabs and Muslims in the media. According to Said, the "Middle East is now so identified with great power politics, oil economics, and the simple minded dichotomy of freedom-loving, democratic Israel and evil, totalitarian and terroristic Arabs," and for these reasons, it is difficult to have a clear view of anything that goes on there.[14] Nasr adds that rarely do the Western media present the real issues of basic importance in Muslim eyes—such as the loss of Muslim lands, especially in Palestine, which are based on exclusive historical claims that deny the claims of the other side.[15]

The priority given to the view of elites in certain countries over others in the international media has been studied by Johan Galtung, a Norwegian scholar, who argues that the flow of international news is largely determined by the elites of "center countries" such as the United States, Western Europe, and increasingly, Asian countries like Japan. As a consequence, the media give the greatest news value to stories involving center-center relations, less to center-periphery agreements, and least of value, to periphery-periphery attempts at understanding.[16]

It follows that the interests and concerns of Muslims, which are primarily found in "periphery" countries, are given the least amount of attention except when their interests coincide with the geopolitical and economic

interests of the center elites, most often foreign-policy makers. The last few decades have borne witness to Muslim majority countries such as Lebanon, Iran, Libya, Algeria, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, to name a few, suddenly coming to the forefront of international headlines for a few days, weeks, months, and years, only to be "dropped" from sight when the center's interest in them dwindles.

Such a selective approach the dissemination of news serves to demonstrate that the media are not seriously interested in the welfare of the Islamic world, nor in fair reporting. When Muslims are victims in a particular conflict, the media tend to downplay their Islamic identity. For example, during the Yugoslav Wars from 1991 to 1995, the Western media constantly referred to the victims as "ethnic Albanians" rather than Muslims, thereby highlighting the fact they were part of the European community, rather than the Islamic *ummah*. In contrast, whenever Muslims take a more aggressive political stance—bymeans of Hamas, Front Islamique du Salut, Hizbollah, and others—the media never cease to remind its audiences that the "aggressors" are Muslims.[17]

One of the dangers of continuously portraying Muslims in a negative light is that it only serves to create or increase Muslim hostilities against the media and against Westerners in general. This, in turn, may encourage more radical or extremist groups to rise up in order to protect their *din* (religion). During the Toronto 18 Trial, the Crown said that the terrorist group aimed to launch an assault in which they would "cut off some heads and then broadcast victory over public radio. . . ."[18]

Stereotyping and Prejudice

A third factor which has led to a misunderstanding of Islam in the Western media is stereotyping and prejudice. Historical relations between Islam and the West, and the contemporary geopolitical realities discussed above, have both contributed to the media's tendency to generalize Muslims' characteristics and actions. Rather than critically analyzing the motivation behind the actions of various Muslims, the media often prefer to spin stories based on preconceived ideas of Islam and the cultural stereotyping of Muslims. For example, after the bombing of Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, Muslims were judged by the media and society at large as being guilty before proven innocent, even though the perpetrator of the bombing turned out to be a non-Muslim American. The media immediately lapped up the story of the Oklahoma bombing, because it fit perfectly into its preconceived beliefs of how Muslims behave.

Television, films, and most media resources have packaged information on Islam and Muslims into more and more standardized molds. As a result, Muslims are rarely seen as civilized individuals or as people; only as problems to be solved or confined. In so doing, the global media often provide Western readers with proof of their inherent superiority. Since Muslims are not quite as human as other Westerners, they are less worthy of various political, economic, or religious rights and freedoms.

While the Western media rarely resort to such stereotypes with other religious groups, when it comes to Islam, they appear only too eager to shed their thin veneer of objectivity. While some argue that the negative reporting against Islam and Muslims stems from sheer ignorance on the part of the media, Jack Shaheen argues that media personnel "can no longer use 'ignorance' as an excuse for perpetuating enmity. When slandering Arabs and Muslims, some know exactly what they are doing."[19]

What makes the situation even grimmer is the fact that academic institutions which specialize in Islam or various parts of the Muslim world have failed to dispel myths or misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims—either among their students, policy-makers, or the public at large. The Dalai Lama confirms that, "if education constitutes one of our most powerful weapons in our quest to bring about a better, more peaceful world, the mass media is another."[20]

Without a doubt, the barrage of negative stereotyping of Muslims in the media has led to low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence, particularly among Muslim youth living in a country where they are members of a minority group. In addition, it has served to heighten religious tension and discrimination between Muslims and non-Muslims. For example, subsequent to the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, there were 1,717 reported backlash incidents committed against Arab and Muslim Americans.[21]

Marginalization of Religious Viewpoints

A fourth factor which has contributed to the misunderstanding or bias against Islam and Muslims in the global media is the secular nature of the media and the marginalization of religion in general. While it would be foolhardy to state that there is no "religious broadcasting" in the Western media, generally, the religious viewpoint hardly comes into play when analyzing issues and events. The fact that individuals are considered to be motivated primarily by political, economic, social, and other factors, tends to skew media analysis of events. As far as the Islamic view is concerned,

at least at the policy-making levels, Muslims are virtually absent from information broadcasted by all the major foreign news agencies and services. Moreover, many of those who run foreign presses are unaware or insensitive to the beliefs and aspirations of Muslims. Consequently, their reports often reflect a sense of bewilderment and contempt for the Muslims' way of life.[22]

Market Forces

While Western civilization prides itself on its freedom of the press, this freedom is only for those who have access. According to Adam Hanieh, large corporations and states monopolize and shape the media, delivering information in ways that serve their own interests, rather than objectively reporting events.[23] Ultimately, only those news stories that are deemed worthy or marketable by the "powers that be" will be pursued and published. Noam Chomsky argues that the media tend to favor governmental and corporate elites, due to the fact that the media make most of their money by selling advertising space to corporate advertisers. Moreover, in much of the world, ownership of the media is becoming concentrated in a few corporations—and the managers of the media, as well as leading journalists, themselves often belong to the privileged elite.[24]

The Western domination through the mass media ensures that few alternative voices, opinions, or success stories are heard. As a result, a positive story about Islam or Muslim society would hardly make the cut, since it is far more interesting to read about Muslims involved in hostage taking, kidnapping, suicide bombing, and terroristic activities.

Glimmers of Hope

In spite of the above, there have been a few glimmers of hope through attempts by the Western media to portray a more objective view of Islam and increase the public's understanding of Muslims. For example, in recent years, the North American press in particular has begun to highlight various Islamic festivals and events, including Ramadan, Hajj, as well as human interest stories on the lives of Muslims living as minorities in Western countries. In addition to the recent America comedy film "Allah Made Me Funny," a good example of such efforts was the Canadian TV series "Little Mosque on the Prairie,"[25] which has become internationally recognized. Another American educational program was the Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) production of a 163-minute documentary film in 2001, en-

titled "Islam: Empire of Faith," and in 2002, the PBS broadcast "Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet"[26] In the same year, the PBS Frontline produced a two-hour special presentation on "A Muslim Journey though the Divine World of Islam," in an attempt to show the different ways Muslims live in the world today.[27]

In addition, some media personnel have expressed their regret that Muslims are still openly demeaned. Nicholas D. Kristof, a columunist with the *New York Times*, has recently written an apology to Muslims for "the wave of bigotry and simple nuttiness that has lately been directed at you (American Muslims). The venom on the airwaves, equating Muslims with terrorists, should embarrass us more than you."[28]

Islam in the Muslim Media

When discussing any challenging issue facing Muslim society, Muslims frequently like to point fingers at the West as the source of their problems. Blaming the West is certainly more expedient than critically examining one's self and society, and Western civilization and its technological achievements cannot take all the blame for the misunderstanding of Islam in the media. If this were true, then the media in Muslim countries should be fairer and show greater sensitivity and perceptiveness when it comes to reporting on Islam and Muslims than the Western media. Unfortunately, this is frequently not the case. The next section of this article will discuss a number of reasons for the bias against Islam and Muslims in the media in Muslim countries.

Lack of Freedom of the Press and Censorship

One of the greatest obstacles to fair and accurate reporting about Islam and Muslims in Muslim societies is lack of freedom of the press. In many Muslim countries, governments are controlled by secularly oriented elites, who lack legitimacy or popular support or both. Many such governments view the media as an appendage of the state whose function is to create the illusion of political legitimacy by supporting state interests and policies.

Since the majority of Islamists oppose such illegitimate governments, many Muslim regimes find it convenient to use the media to paint a negative picture of the goals and aspirations of Islamists, thereby strengthening their own image. In addition to controlling the media and censoring *khutbahs* (religious sermons), many restrict public assembly and movement as well. Those who refuse to comply face serious repercussions.

In order to overcome their restricted access to the media and channels of communication, Islamic scholars, activists, and political parties often play something akin to "a cat and mouse game" with authorities. Rather than directly criticize any government action or policy per se, they are often forced to talk in generalities about the ideal scenario, rather than contemporary realities. This strategy or technique has been employed throughout Islamic history, ever since the demise of the period of the Righteous Caliphs, who ruled largely on the basis of consultation.

Lack of Clarity over the Role of the Media

Government censorship has left the media in many Muslim countries in a state of confusion as to what media's role in society should be. On a domestic level, should media be a mouthpiece of the government, enthusiastically supporting whatever policies, projects, and programs the government dreams up, or should it play a more critical role and risk thereby incurring the wrath of the government and perhaps even its own closure?

At the international level, is the role of the media in Muslim countries simply to read and then repackage whatever is received on Western-controlled wire services—or should it play a more critical, educational, and facilitating role instead? For example, in covering the hostage crisis in the Southern Philippines on May 27, 2001, Muslim journalists and broadcasters simply repeated verbatim whatever was sent to them by international news wires. Here, and in other stories, the Muslim media often employed the same negative terminology as non-Muslim newspapers and broadcasts to describe Muslims, without even attempting to make an effort to see if there was another side of the subject they were covering. Although one cannot condone hostage taking, kidnapping, or other means of extortion, one would expect the Muslim media to make greater attempts to understand the reasons and motives which lead certain Muslim groups to adopt such an un-Islamic measure.

Of course, playing a more critical analytical role at the international level does have its risks, certainly as far as Muslim governments are concerned. It is in the interest of most Muslim governments to portray all Islamists as being "radical," "fundamentalist," or whatever other pejorative term they can find in order to protect their own position.

Influence of Foreign Media

A third related cause for negative attitudes in the Muslim media is the fact

that there are few international Muslim press services, due to both political and at times economic reasons. With the exception of al-Jazeera in Qatar, those Muslim press and broadcasting agencies that do exist are often hindered by financial problems and insufficient means of dissemination.

Since both Muslim and non-Muslim countries get their information (especially international) from the same news sources, Muslims are very easily influenced by non-Muslim views and analysis. Moreover, since many Muslim journalists feel weak and inferior (due especially to their conviction that they have linguistic disabilities) in comparison to their Western counterparts, they prefer to rely on Western agencies for information.

Lack of Islamic Knowledge

Another reason for the misunderstanding and bias against Islam in the Muslim media is the fact that the overwhelming majority of Muslims employed in the media have received secular training and possess little understanding of the Islamic worldview. In addition, few Islamic scholars and *ulama* (legal scholars and clergy) have access to the media or are capable of writing in a journalistic style.

Furthermore, in many Muslim countries, the English language dailies are run by non-Muslims, who tend to be more fluent in English than their Muslim counterparts. Consequently, they do not always write or select stories which reflect the Muslim point of view.

Apathy

A fifth reason for the bias against Islam and Muslims in the Muslim media is general apathy. As I stated previously, many Muslim countries are controlled by secular elites who have little interest in promoting Islam or defending Muslims, other than for political expediency. Many Muslims have become too preoccupied with worldly affairs (i.e., making money, raising children), to think about challenging prevailing views and caring about their religion.

Strategies for Understanding of Islam in the Media

Having discussed some of the reasons for the "misunderstanding" of Islam by the media in both Western and Muslim countries, I will now propose a few strategies for enhancing the media's understanding of Islam.

Educate Media Personnel

Since, as I mentioned earlier that the lack of secular training of both Muslim and non-Muslim media personnel has been a major factor behind the bias and misunderstanding of Islam, it follows that one means of rectifying this situation is to ensure that both Muslim and non-Muslim journalists have some background in Islam when covering Islamic events and news.

Accordingly, it would be of great value for both Muslim and non-Muslim journalists specializing in the Muslim world, to take introductory courses at the university educational level in Islamic thought and civilization, Shar'iah, and politics in order to obtain a better grasp of the Islamic view on issues and events. Melbourne University in Australia has designed studies to address the issue of media bias by offering a course on "Media Portrayal of Islam," which essentially introduces the historical, psychological, cultural, political, and economic reasons behind the Western perception and media portrayal of Islam as a menace.[29]

Media personnel who have neither the time nor desire to commit to a college or university level course may benefit from international conferences, seminars, and workshops designed specifically to enhance their understanding of Islam and Muslims. Such workshops and seminars should be conducted by qualified Islamic scholars in order to sensitize journalists to various issues related to Islamic faith and the customs and practices of Muslims. The workshops should stress the fact that like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is one of the great monotheistic religions.[30] In addition, they should address the use and misuse of various terminologies such as fundamentalism, extremism, and radicalism, especially as they are applied to the Muslim world. In this regard, Nasr states that such terms must be restudied and defined not in the light of immediate political interests, but in the service of truth.[31]

At the government level, Malaysia for example, has recently proposed to "help reduce and correct the misconceptions some (including media personnel) have of Islam by helping them to have some basic understanding of the religion (through introductory courses)."[32] Furthermore, Muslim diplomatic missions and overseas counselors can also play a role in enhancing the image of Islam in the Western media, by establishing contacts and links with the local press in the host country. In fact, Muslim embassies in the West can cooperate to provide information on Islam and Muslims in their countries to the public through documentary CDs and films, slides, small booklets, brochures, postcards, pamphlets, official websites, and by sponsoring workshops. By pooling resources, they can maximize their effectiveness.

On a nongovernmental level, contemporary Islamic movements and organizations should also make efforts to establish more substantial and positive links with global media networks in an attempt to use the media to their advantage. For example, Islamic groups and associations can provide the media with special kits on Islam or press releases or both on the goals of their particular organization. In this manner, they would assist the media in better understanding the Muslim point of view, and thereby becoming more objective in their reporting.

Whatever efforts are undertaken in the area of training and educating media personnel, they must be done with the objective of genuinely enhancing the media's understanding of Islam and not just for appearance's sake. Some efforts to address these issues have been undertaken by Muslim organizations such as the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia the Northern University of Malaysia, and the North American Association of Muslim Professionals and Scholars.

Expand Contacts in the Muslim World to Increase Objectivity

Secondly, Western journalists should make greater efforts to objectively portray events in the Muslim world by widening their contacts in the Muslim world. Frequently, they tend to rely on non-Muslim colleagues residing in Muslim countries for information or analysis of events, and sometimes, also secularized Muslim "friends" for their view, which ultimately results in a skewed understanding and analysis of events. For the sake of objectivity, a good journalist must strive at his or her utmost to obtain the other side of the story, even it runs contrary to vested political interests.

Create Alternative Media

As far as the Muslim world is concerned, perhaps the ideal means of ensuring that the Muslim point of view is heard both at the local and international levels is to create transnational independent Muslim news networks and agencies. One outcome of the global Islamic resurgence is that more and more time and space is being devoted to covering Islam, especially in the sociocultural and religious spheres. This is certainly the case in Southeast Asia where a number of radio and TV talk shows are devoted to Islamic subjects and views. For example Radio Televisyen Brunei the main TV station in Brunei devotes more than twenty hours a week to religious or religious-related television programming, including coverage of the weekly Friday khutbahs, the annual Qur'an competition, Muslim

festivals and celebrations, and other activities. In addition to the above, the government of Brunei also funds the religiously-oriented Nurul Islam (Light of Islam) radio station. Another example is Malaysia's Radio IKIM, which runs hourly news in the Malay language, hosts religious and academic scholars, provides daily Arabic language lessons, and covers socio-cultural events and entertainment. In Turkey, efforts have been made by various Islamic groups to create their own independent Islamic television and radio stations as well as newspapers such as *Zaman*. Other popular Islamic dailies include *al-Haqiqah* (published by al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyyah of Egypt), *Harakah* (belonging to the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party), as well as *Jasarat* and *Milat* (published by Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan). Only when coverage enters the political arena do government censorship mechanisms come into play.

Efforts are also being made to redress the imbalance in the global media by Muslims living in Western countries, where many have greater freedom to express independent opinions on issues and escape the censorship they would face in their own countries.[33] A few examples of Muslim journals and magazines coming out of the Western world include *Islamic Horizons*, *Impact International*, *Crescent International*, *al-Europiya* (in Arabic), *The Minaret*, and *Nida'ul Islam* (a bilingual magazine, published by the Islamic Youth Movement, in Sydney, Australia). In addition, a number of TV and radio broadcasts on Islam are being offered, such as those by America's Bridges TV, which aims to foster greater understanding between the West and the Muslim world, and the multilinguistic IslamWay Radio (operated by the Muslim community in Quebec, Canada). Moreover, organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America and the Islamic Circle of North America are trying to develop their own radio stations and TV channels.[34]

Perhaps one of the most successful independent broadcasters in the Arabic world to date is the bilingual Arabic/English TV satellite al-Jazeera (al-jazeera.com), which rose to international prominence during America's War on Terror in Afghanistan in 2002. During this event, al-Jazeera provided a key alternative source of information to the better known CNN and BBC. John L. Esposito argues that al-Jazeera "brought the many struggles, or *jihads*, of Muslim communities in Palestine and Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Chechnya, and Kashmir into the living rooms and everyday consciousness of Muslims around the world."[35]

Furthermore, the Internet has succeeded in breaking down some of the traditional barriers of access to the international media, due to the fact that

it is easy and virtually free to broadcast video and audio files over the Web, using platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, and others.[36] Hanieh argues that not only has the World Wide Web provided crucial access to alternative information not found in the mainstream media, but it has also engendered a qualitative shift in the nature of that information.[37] Moreover, the Internet has pushed the Muslim media to be more accountable to their public. For example, the September 2000 issue of the now defunct *Asiaweek Magazine*, stated that the online newspaper *Malaysiakini* has pushed the established media in Malaysia to be more balanced in their coverage of events.[38]

Greater Self-reliance

Even if Muslims cannot completely develop their own independent networks due to political, economic, or technical reasons, they should at the very minimum strive to reduce their reliance on foreign news services, especially when it comes to reporting events taking place in other Muslim countries. In this regard, Muslim media personnel should be encouraged to cover stories and events happening in the Muslim world. Rather than imitating the negative and sensationalist reporting style of their non-Muslim counterparts, Muslims employed in the media should make every effort to find out why such extreme approaches are used. In other words, Muslims should not completely accept what international journalists are writing about other Muslims, or anyone for that matter, without verifying and checking the facts. To merely repeat whatever has been sent via foreign press services without ascertaining the veracity of these facts means that Muslim journalists may be held responsible for slander and passing on false information.

Covering events happening in other Muslim countries is not without political risks or economic costs, however. Few Muslim countries want Muslim journalists from other countries meddling around in their internal domestic affairs. Actually, it is possible that negative reports about a Muslim country by Muslim journalists from another country, may lead to a deterioration of relations between the two Muslim countries or detention of the journalists or both. Whatever the risks and costs incurred, Muslims working in the media industry should strive to their utmost to determine the truth and speak out against injustice wherever and whenever it occurs since they will be held accountable for all that they write or speak.

Self-reliance on the part of the Muslim media can only come about if Muslim journalists develop the confidence that they can do the job as well

or better than their non-Muslim counterparts. Confidence comes from improved training, access to the latest media tools and technology, as well as the amelioration of any linguistic disabilities.

As far as economic costs are concerned, there are more than enough financial resources in the Muslim world to subsidize Islamic news networks and media programs. It is often just a question of political will on the part of the authorities.

Liberalization of the Press

The development of independent Muslim media networks and the reduction of Muslim reliance on foreign news services cannot come into being without greater liberalization of the press in Muslim countries. One almost hesitates to use the word *liberalize* since it is often equated with the word *Westernize*. In the present context, the term is used to refer to the right of all components of society, including the media, to greater freedom of expression, instead of the present monopoly of political elites seeking to justify some unjust policy.

As long as Muslim media personnel fear persecution, detainment, loss of jobs and privilege for writing on various events, it will be difficult for an independent local capacity and confidence to develop. Having said that, the press should be responsible and not a tool for destabilizing countries by promoting social unrest. Instead, it should become a platform for expressing various views on issues, including both secular and religious views.

Increased Involvement of Muslim Scholars

Another strategy for enhancing the understanding of Islam in the Western and Muslim media is to make greater efforts to consult Muslim scholars, experts, and ulama on issues related to Islam. Although some Muslim journalists may claim to know everything about Islam by virtue of being Muslim, sometimes they may present a more personal view of events than their non-Muslim counterparts.

In this respect, even non-Muslim media experts can write fairly and objectively on certain Islamic matters. For example, the late Edward W. Said, a non-Muslim Arab-American academician, was frequently a spokesperson and commentator on Islam and Arabs, despite his self-declared "anti-religious politics."[39]

Media Watchdog

One tool that might prove effective for monitoring the portrayal and reporting of Islam and Muslims in the domestic and international media is the creation of independent "media watchdogs." Such individuals or groups should not be construed or interpreted as yet another vehicle for greater censorship of the Muslim media, but rather as resources designed to respond to inaccurate, biased, or stereotypical reports on Islam and Muslims—via letters to the editor, legal action, peaceful demonstrations, and other proper means.[40]

Taking their cue from the vigilance of other religious minorities in monitoring the media, Muslims living in Western countries have also established media watchdogs to monitor and challenge inaccurate reporting and media bias. One particularly successful Muslim advocacy organization is the Washington D.C.-based Council of American Islamic Relations, which has filed defamation suits against anti-Islamic authors, publishers, and producers. It has also been successful in getting advertising deemed offensive to Muslims removed.[41]

Greater Sensitivity on the Part of Muslims

While it is one thing to encourage the media to be less biased in their portrayal of Islam, Muslims themselves should remember that they are vicegerents on earth and as such should conduct themselves in a righteous, God-fearing manner. While kidnapping, hijacking, hostage-taking, suicide bombing, and other means, may bring international attention to one's cause, this attention is almost always of a negative nature and may in fact bring more antagonism than sympathy for the perpetrators' cause. Despite the fact that many Muslims live in precarious political and economic circumstances, they should always try to resolve their problems in a peaceful manner to the best of their ability.

Conclusion

I have discussed a number of factors which have led to a misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims in both the Western and Muslim media. As far as the Western media is concerned, I maintained that historical, political, and economic factors—in addition to prejudice, stereotyping, and the marginalization of the religious viewpoint—have all contributed to the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media.

In the Muslim world—in addition to general apathy—some of the factors for the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims include lack of freedom of the press and censorship, lack of clarity about the role of media in society, strong influence of foreign media, and lack of knowledge on Islam on the part of media personnel.

In addition to examining the reasons for media bias, I have proposed a number of strategies for enhancing the understanding of Islam and Muslims in the media. These included the need for educating media personnel specializing in the Muslim world on various aspects of the Islamic worldview. I stated that a multipronged approach—involving academics, government and nongovernment organizations, and overseas embassies and consulates—should be employed to educate and train media workers. In addition, I suggested that non-Muslim media personnel expand their contacts in the Muslim world to include not only the like-minded, but also those who are not so like-minded.

As far as the Muslim world is concerned, I maintained that one of the best means of overcoming bias was for Muslims to develop their own independent media capacity, although the difficulties of doing so in light of the contemporary realpolitik were noted. At the very least, I proposed that Muslims make great efforts to reduce their dependence on foreign news services, especially for their information on events transpiring in other parts of the Muslim world. I also suggested that greater liberalization of the press (as distinct from Westernization), and increased involvement of Muslim scholars in the international media were also means for enhancing the understanding of the Islamic point of view. In addition, I proposed the creation of a media watchdog to advocate on behalf of Muslims. Finally, I argued that many of these suggestions will be futile if Muslims themselves do not try to reform and improve their conduct so as not to bring unnecessary antagonism against Islam and their causes.

Endnotes

1. This paper has been presented at the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, May 29–June 1, 2010. The initial research was conducted during the year 2001–2002. Some of the research data was included in Anuar Ab. Razak and Abu Bakar Abdul, eds., *Enhancing the Understanding of Islam for the Media*. (Kuala Lumpur: the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, 2002), 113–36.
2. For more information on the bias of the Western media against Muslims and Islam, see Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg, *Islamophobia: Making*

Muslims the Enemy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); Karim H. Karim, *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence* (Montreal, Canada: Black Rose, 2003); Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); Edmund Ghareeb, ed., *Split Vision: The Portrayal of Arabs in the America Media* (Washington, D.C.: American-Arab Affairs Council, 1983) John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Yvonne Y. Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jorgen Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 1992); Earle H. Waugh, Baha Abu-Laban, and Regula B. Qureshi, eds., *The Muslim Community in North America* (Alberta, Canada: University of Alberta Press, 1983); Azad Husain, John Woods, and Javed Akhtar, eds., *Muslims in America: Opportunities and Challenges* (Chicago, International Strategy and Policy Institute, 1996); and Amber Haque, ed., *Muslims and Islamization in North America: Problems and Prospects* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1999), to name just a few.

3. There have been a number of intellectual gatherings which have explored the subject of "Islam and the Media." Among them are the International Seminar and Dialogue on "Enhancing the Understanding of Islam and the Media," June 30–July 2, 2000, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; The International Symposium on "Dialogue among Civilisations: Theory and Practice." November 12–13, 2001, Tunis; and the International Symposium on "The Muslim World Image in Western Media; between Fairness and Bias." January 9–10, 2002, Rabat, Morocco—in addition to annual conferences/seminars organized by Muslim communities in the Western world such as the Association of Muslim Social Scientists in North America and the United Kingdom.
4. The term *Western media* used in this paper, refers to all forms of mass media that originate from Western countries and report events from a Western point of view. Examples of such media include CNN, BBC, ABC, Fox Network, and others, although admittedly some networks and new services are less biased in their coverage and portrayal of Islam and Muslims than others. genug
5. Edward W. Said. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books), 1979, 59.
6. John L. Esposito. *Islam the Straight Path*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 63.
7. Seyyed H. Nasr, "Islam and the West: Yesterday and Today." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 13, no. 4, (1996): 553.
8. Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*, p. 60.
9. Muhammad Abd. Rauf, *Ummah: The Muslim Nation*. (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991), 24.

10. Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*, 207; see also Mir Zohair Husain. *Global Islamic Politics* (New York: Longman, 2003), 307.
11. Seyyed H. Nasr, "Islam and the West," 555.
12. Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*, 59.
13. ohn L. Esposito. *Islam the Straight Path*, 176.
14. Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*, 27.
15. Seyyed H. Nasr, "Islam and the West," 555.
16. Dr. David G. Johnson, "Media Bias—Real or Imagined?" Quoted by Bruce C. Swaffield, "From Afghanistan to Zambia: Worldwide Media Struggle to Tell Truth," www.regent.edu/acad/schcom/faculty/swaffield/Proceedings_FourthForum.pdf.
17. Edward Said, "The Blind Misleading the Blind," www.apc.org.nz/pma/sesaid.htm.
18. Canada.com, www.canada.com/news/Toronto+ringleader+pleads+guilty/3008845/story.html.
19. Jack G. Shaheen, "Hollywood's Reel Arabs and Muslims," in *Muslims and Islamization in North America: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Amber Haque, (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1999), 201.
20. The Dalai Lama, "Ethics for a New Millennium," in *Ethics and Values in the Information Age*, Joel Rudinow and Anthony Graybosch, (Belmont, CA: Thomson Learning, 2002, 446.
21. "Anti-Muslim Incidents up Three-Fold in Past Year." Washington, D.C.: Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), April 30, 2002; see also, Council on American-Islamic Relations. *American Muslims: One Year After 9-11*. Washington D.C.: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2002.
22. Ridzuan Abdullah Wu. *The Call to Islam: A Contemporary Perspective*. (Singapore: The Muslim Converts Association, 1990), 49; see also Ahmad F. Yousif. *Muslims in Canada: A Question of Identity*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa, Canada: LEGAS, 2008), 114–15.
23. Adam Hanieh, "The WWW in Palestine: An Informational and Organizing Tool: Millennial Middle East: Changing Orders, Shifting Borders." *Middle East Report #213* (Winter 1999)., www.merip.org/mer/mer213/213_hanieh.html.
24. Dr. David G. Johnson, "Media Bias—Real or Imagined?"
25. Posted at www.cbc.ca/littlemosque. For an anthropological analysis of "The Little Mosque on the Prairie" and its promotion and its contribution to religious and cultural diversity, see Sandra Canas, "The Little Mosque on the Prairie: Examining (Multi) Cultural Spaces of Nation and religion [Religion {?}]." *Cultural Dynamics* 20, no. 3 (2008): 195–211.
26. Posted at www.pbs.org/empires/islam, and www.pbs.org/neighborhoods/history.
27. Posted at www.pbs.org.

28. Nicholas D. Kristof, "Message to Muslims: I'm Sorry." *New York Times*, September 19, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/09/19/opinion/19kristof.html?_r=1&hp.
29. Posted at www.unimelb.edu.au/HB/subjects/110-092.html.
30. Prince Charles acknowledged that "Muslims, Christians, and Jews are all 'people of the book,' sharing a common monotheistic vision and a common history." Quoted by Toby Aldrich, "Enhancing the Understanding of Islam for the Media: Paving the Way for Practical Solutions," in *Enhancing the Understanding of Islam for the Media*, ed. Anuar Ab. Razak and Abu Bakar Abdul Majeed (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, 2002), 89.
31. Seyyed H. Nasr, "Islam and the West," 562.
32. Zainul Arifin, "Don't Fear Islam." *New Straits Times.* September, 26, 2010, cover-page and p. 4.
33. Peter Mandaville, "Reimagining Islam in Diaspora: The Politics of Mediated Community." *International Communication Gazette* vol. 63, nos. 2–3, (2001): 177.
34. The Islamic Society of North America and the Islamic Circle of North America have been for the last three decades the main traditional representative societies to more than seven million Muslims living in North America—looking after their religious, social, and educational welfare.
35. John L. Espositio. *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.
36. Some of the sites, which provide information from an Islamic and Muslim perspective, are IslamiCity (http://www.islam.org); Alim (http://www.alim.org); Harf Information Technology (http://www.harf.com); Iqra Islamic Publications (http://www.iqra.net); SoundVision (http://www.soundvision.com); London Review of Books, (www.lrb.co.uk/v20n09/said2009.htm); Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) [www.cair-net.org], Middle East Report (www.merip.org/mer/mer213/213_hanieh.html); Public Broadcasting System (PBS) [www.pbs.org]; and many others.
37. Adam Hanieh, posted at http://www.merip.org/mer/mer213/213_hanieh.html; for more information on Islam in the Internet, see Gary R. Bunt. *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments*. (Cradiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2000).
38. "The Way Forward." *Asiaweek*, Sept. 1, 2000, 21.
39. Posted at www.lrb.co.uk/v20n09/said2009.htm.
40. Ahmad F. Yousif, "Impact of 9/11 on Muslim Identity in the Canadian National Capital Region: Institutional Response and Future Prospects." *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 34, no. 1 (2005): 64–65.
41. Posted at www.cair-net.org/etc/la_times-ad.html.