

Media Framing of the Muslim World: Conflicts, Crises, and Contexts

Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart, and John Martinkus
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A succinct and accessible book, with many chapters that can stand alone as readings for undergraduate or graduate classes, *Media Framing of the Muslim World: Conflicts, Crises, and Contexts* is a welcome addition to the literature on Muslims and the media. The authors build on three key concepts: the idea that the media should function, but often does not, as the fourth estate (an independent and critical press); Edward Said's *Orientalism* (the West as the perpetually superior Other who must represent the Orient, which is incapable of doing so itself), and in its modern form, Islamophobia; and the importance of history and context in understanding key events in the Muslim world (as distinct from religious determinism).

The book is divided into eight chapters with an introduction and a conclusion: "Islam and the Muslim world," "Media-Generated Muslims and Islamophobia," "Image and Reality of Reporting War and Conflict in the Muslim

World,” “Asylum Seekers,” “Covering Terrorism Suspects.” “The Arab Spring,” “A Clash of Civilizations?” and “Moving on from 9/11?” The chapters are not an extended study of a singular type of media representation of Muslims, but rather a bringing together separate elements into a whole so that we can look at the issues from several viewpoints. I will mention three of those that cover topics not often found in academic studies of Muslims and the media.

Chapter 3 relates the personal experiences of John Martinkus, a professional journalist trying to cover the Iraq war over the last decade for a book and later on SBS (Special Broadcasting Service), an Australian broadcast company. His story highlights how the increasingly dangerous on-the-ground situation eventually interfered with proper reporting. Not only did it become very expensive to hire security, but western journalists were largely confined to reporting from safe hotels and subcontracting to local Iraqis or being embedded with the military. Martinkus notes that the only Iraqis they could interview were those employed by the US military/media or who had a US military gun pointing at them. Journalists living in fear tended to support Washington’s view as to why they were there and the efficacy of the mission itself.

When Martinkus, who had been taken hostage and then released, tried to report on Iraqi perspectives (e.g., the US was losing and Iraqis were joining the insurgents out of disaffection), he experienced his own version of “cut and paste attack journalism” by being quoted out of context and accused of supporting terrorism. He notes that to report something other than the official US version of events was “professional suicide (p. 48).” In addition, editors would not publish his stories about the lives of people who had been mistreated in Abu Ghraib.

This chapter was extremely insightful not only because academic work on Muslims and the media rarely include the insights of professional journalists, but also because professional media often are unmoved by an academic analysis of media representation on the grounds that it is unrealistic and not in tune with the daily demands of the media. On the contrary, his personal experiences as a professional journalist confirm precisely the academic critiques that highlight how structural issues affect representation.

A second example of the diversity of topics covered is chapter 6, which examines the role of social media in the revolutions and mass protests that have swept the Arab world since 2010. The co-authors look at data of Facebook and Twitter users in key countries and examine some of the key blogs, tweets, and data from professional and citizen journalists. They also analyze the historical, political, and geopolitical context of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria in an attempt to assess social media’s role in motivating and helping shape the revolutions and protests. They conclude:

There is no positive correlation between levels of social media penetration and the emergence of social movements calling for political reform and regime change. Rather, the uprisings occurred in response to adverse social, economic and political conditions endured by people across the region, including decades of authoritarian rule, corruption, socio-economic injustices and a lack of rights, freedoms and opportunities. Social media enabled direct and relatively constant channels of communication for the diffusion of ideas to occur [and helped facilitate and sustain collective action]. (p. 133)

The last chapter I wish to highlight is chapter 8, “Moving on From 9/11?” again, because it covers a topic important to understanding Muslims and the media, but one that is under-researched: audience reactions to media coverage. The authors conducted four focus groups (two non-Muslim and two Muslim) in Australia during May 2012; however, neither the city(ies) nor the number of participants are mentioned. Participants were asked to discuss their reactions to media coverage of the tenth anniversary of 9/11 and compare it to what they remember of the initial coverage. The chapter begins with a summary of the five free-to-air TV news stations in Australia for September 11 and 12, 2011, and their coverage of the 9/11 anniversary ten years later.

The co-authors found significant differences between the 2001 and 2011 coverage, with the tenth-year anniversary focusing on honoring the victims and moving forward through reconciliation. Islam and Muslims were not mentioned *per se*, and the Taliban and al-Qaeda were mentioned as not being part of mainstream Muslims. This gave the co-authors hope that the media had learned some important lessons and was moving in the right direction as far as portraying Muslims is concerned.

In their audience interviews they also found a marked difference between Muslim and non-Muslim groups. Muslims routinely blamed the media for their negative portrayal and the direct cause of discrimination they experience in Australian society. Many non-Muslims, however, felt that the media had improved, and a few had even become aware of sensationalism and negative stereotyping. On the other hand, many non-Muslim interviewees did express their doubts about the Muslims’ ability to integrate into Australia, thereby confirming the idea that “media representation of Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11 made them suspicious of Muslim people” (p. 173).

Due to their desire to stress the importance of context in explaining Muslim behaviors rather than religious determinism, the co-authors frequently do more than just analyze the media. This approach was very useful and is one of the reasons why several of the chapters could be assigned as readings in Middle East/Islamic studies courses beyond simply media topics.

Chapter 1 presents a brief history of Islam and the Muslim world, discusses the Pew surveys of what Muslims “really think” (this is very useful for contrasting media coverage of what Muslims are meant to be like), and a short section on issues of integration for Muslims in western societies. Chapter 2 provides a handy history of the representations of Muslims in western society from the earliest times of Christian apologetics (which allows them later on to connect to some contemporary themes such as “Muslims as violent”). Chapter 4 talks about asylum seekers with sections on trends in asylum seeking, growing public opinion and public policy against them, and a largely negative media representation that replicates government/public opinion, rather than highlighting, as the “fourth estate” should do, the negative effect of punitive policies that re-victimize many of those fleeing persecution. Chapter 6 reflects upon different definitions of terrorism, anti-terrorism laws, and how they affect journalists’ coverage of terrorism suspects. Chapter 7 discusses Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis and looks at freedom of expression, the Danish cartoons incident, and the “Innocence of Muslims” movie in relation to these.

All in all this is an excellent book, with key concepts clearly explained and coherently discussed. This, along with the unique aspects mentioned above, make *Media Framing of the Muslim World: Conflicts, Crises, and Contexts* a valuable book for undergraduates, graduates, professional journalists, and a literate general audience seeking to understand the media’s portrayal of Muslims.

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