How do the media fuel Islamophobia?

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We have to acknowledge that the media, more often than not, shape and actively craft public opinion rather than mirroring it. We still live in a time where the majority of people assume they are being fed facts as opposed to opinions or editorialised facts. They take the media, particularly the news, as the truth.

Most people accept such narratives unquestioningly. So, if the papers say that we have a problem with Islamic extremism, it means we have a problem with Islamic extremism. If non-violent extremism is the same as violent extremism, then it is the same. If we are now left to define extreme ideas, what could that mean? For example, the idea that Jesus is going to come back defies the very laws of nature; so, in theory, surely that idea is extreme? Not to mention the belief in miracles which would require us to suspend the physical laws of the universe.

By this logic we are left with an infinite list of what could possibly constitute "extreme", owing to its subjectivity and ultimate indeterminacy. This brings us to a critical question: what falls under politically charged categories like "extremist" and "fundamentalist" – and what is the role of the media in legitimising these categories?

The media and Islamophobia

What makes an extremist, "extreme", is his or her recourse to violence (or the propensity to do so) as a means to get a point or message across. How can there then be such a thing as a non-violent extremism? It treads on common sense. But what are the indicators according to which this propensity is determined? In other words, when does a Muslim become an extremist, i.e. a "threat"? Conveniently, there are no pre-established standards that define what it means to be a "threat". More often than not, the definition is pragmatically employed by opportunistic politicians and Islamophobes who are unable to contribute any explanatory scope or power.

But in our day and age, the aura of fear perpetuated by politicians and the media obscures our reality and produces an artificially construed representation of that reality. To appreciate this we must understand that the very process of constructing a discourse (in this case the discourse surrounding "extremism" and "fundamentalism") is a reality-defining process or, what some scholars have referred to as "world-making". In a politically charged environment marred by the looming "threat" posed by "Muslim extremists", objectivity is virtually impossible.

The media no longer serve to challenge hegemonic narratives and discourses disseminated by governments; in fact, they often now act as a fourth branch of the government and a mouthpiece through which these narratives are normalised and brought into our homes.

There are several ways in which the mainstream media go about fulfilling this role. Stephen Schwartz laments that:

> "We have reached the fourth anniversary of the terrible attacks of September 11, 2001. I am sorry to say that, in my view, the U.S. and Western media have completely failed to meet the challenge of reporting on Islam in the four years since then, or in reaction to the atrocities that followed, including the extremist violence in Iraq which I would not dignify with the titles "insurgency" or "resistance"; the Madrid metro and London underground bombings, and the terror assaults in Indonesia, Morocco, Turkey and elsewhere."[1]

The myth of the "Muslim Tide"

The media vastly overestimate the number of Muslims living within their country's borders. In a study conducted about Muslims in the West, a number of myths about Muslims are addressed with regard to, among other topics, population,

immigration and patriotism.[2] In a recent "Ipsos Mory" study, the average French person overestimated that Muslims accounted for 31% of the French population, when in reality it is closer to 5%. The root cause of such gross misconceptions is due to the constant publication of content in the press highlighting and, indeed, hyperbolising the country's "Immigration Crisis".

When the media make these egregious "errors", they manifest and become a direct cause of the physical brutalisation that is visited upon Muslim citizens. A most notable example is the recent French Islamophobic attack on a Moroccan man who was stabbed 17 times, whilst his killer screamed "I am your God, I am your Islam."[3] In other incidents, 26 mosques around France were attacked with firebombs, gunfire, pig heads and grenades. According to the French National Observatory Against Islamophobia, a total of 60 Islamophobic incidents were reported.[4]

The very fact that such a gross miscalculation and estimation can occur highlights the extent to which the media can obscure a reality rather than presenting it. This is despite the media's ostensible objective to supposedly create "informed citizens" without which there can be no healthy, political engagement within society. More importantly, the purpose of nurturing informed citizens is to create social cohesion – yet the media's bias and passive adoption of the Islamophobic narrative only serves to create deeply entrenched social and political antagonism and fuel an aura of hate. The rise of right-wing movements in the West is perhaps the best testimony to the media's failure to live up to its most basic duties. In short, mainstream media are facing an existential crisis.

The lack of any meaningful balance to countervail a prevailing opinion also heavily contributes to the rise in Islamophobic sentiment. Edward Said calls this the "Islam as News" phenomenon. One of the more prominent instances of this occurred in Canada in 2006. MacLean's magazine, a Canadian version of *The Times*, published a polemical and Islamophobic article by Mark Steyn. The article opined that Muslims breed faster than mosquitos and that they would eventually constitute the majority of Europe, or what he sardonically calls "Eurabia". When several Muslim Law students requested space in

MacLean's magazine to respond, MacLean's stated that they would rather "Bankrupt the magazine" than afford the aforementioned Muslim Students any opportunity to provide balance to Steyn's inflammatory point of view.

Let us examine an article published by *The Telegraph* newspaper to emphasise this point. In September 2014, Camilla Turner wrote an article entitled "Government donation to Muslim Charities Forum denounced as 'Madness'."[5] The article insinuated the MCF's "alleged" connections to the Muslim Brotherhood. The author appended the term "alleged" to any allegation that she could not substantiate, but nevertheless wished to hyperbolise in order to create the impression that mainstream Muslim organisations were working hand-in-glove with "terrorists". How did she make it stick? Take a look at the following quote:

"According to a report by American think tank Nine Eleven Finding Answers, five of these charities – Muslim Hands, Human Appeal International, Human Relief Foundation, Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief – were early participants in the Union of Good, a fundraising body with close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, created to raise money for the terrorist group Hamas".

In order to understand the subtleties of these tactics, the choice of words needs to be scrutinised. Notice the term "Early Participants"? Obviously, the author was implying that these charities no longer have a relationship with the impugned "Union of Good" charity, but they did at one time; most likely when nobody was aware of any connection between the Union of Good and the Muslim Brotherhood. This is known in logic as the Historian's fallacy – the analysis of historical information by relying on information that is available today but was not available to the party you are trying to smear at the time. Clearly, the author would claim that she was not accusing Islamic Relief of being involved with a "terrorist" organisation, but was simply presenting a historical fact – the purpose of which is to create a false impression in the mind of the reader that Main-stream Islamic organisations have had dealings with odious "terrorist" groups, thereby affirming the "Muslims are a fifth column" narrative.

What is all the more puzzling was the author's reference to so-called expert, Sam Westrop – a right-wing pro-Israeli, pro-UK Independence Party activist. This logical fallacy is known as the Appeal to False authority – the use of an "expert" of dubious credentials to peddle an idea. What are Westrop's credentials?

He is a 22-year-old music graduate who appears as a "Director", "Member" or "Founder" of half-baked "Think-Tanks" that lack the academic rigor of any bona fide think-tank, and whose purpose is mainly, and almost exclusively, to advocate for attenuated interests on the right.[6] These interests include reactionary, reflexive pro-Israel lobbying, as well as anti-immigration and Euro-sceptic activism. Westrop has worked closely with an organisation called Student Rights, which is banned from a number of universities in Britain. The irony is completely lost on the journalist here, who relies on someone with ties to organisations that are themselves banned across the UK, in order to pontificate on the "dangers of Islamism".

Here is a select sampling from Westrop's venomous diatribe in 2011:

"[We] need to aggressively attack the very root and cut the head off the network of groups and ideologies that work against Israel. We cannot be insular and solely Jewish, but we must work with conservatives. It is about being on the offensive – advancing with a spear rather than trembling behind a crumbling shield."

Sam Westrop's hostility is seemingly not directed to fringe extremists per se but is grounded in a far more venomous radical discourse:

"I did not find the Arabs romantic. I found them interestingly hostile. A mentality of very irrational hatred mob mentality."

One can say that it is unfortunately quite traumatising, witnessing first-hand how the media can be the right-hand of State fascism.

With Islamophobia at an all-time high, we also see journalists, such as the likes of Cathy Newman,[7] playing on the fear of the general public and "stoking the fire" with their misrepresentation of Muslim communities.

The employment of inflammatory and reactionary headlines, and the ever-rising dishonesty in news reporting, leaves us all with a sour taste. A word of caution to the wise; take all with a pinch of salt, as today's news reporting is indicative of a much wider issue; the media prioritises ink over blood.

Sordid attempts at continuously inciting hatred towards such a significant minority will surely result in physical manifestations and the Muslim community ends up bearing the brunt of this severe injustice, as illustrated with the recent Chapel Hill Shootings.[8]

The reader becomes saturated with a certain image of the Muslim and Islam while being completely ignorant of any opposing perspective or narrative, and therefore naturally believes that this lack of contestation is evidence of the truth-value of the anti-Islam/anti-Muslim narrative.

Muslims and terrorism: An inextricable relationship?

When does an act of violence become an act of terrorism? And who determines when this re-characterisation occurs? The difference between the two terms is political; the term "violence" is a neutral and descriptive term whereas the term "terrorism" is politically charged and ideologically defined. The criterion, according to mainstream media's standards, revolves around one fundamental question: was the act of violence perpetuated by a Muslim? It does not matter what the ideological motives or justifications for this act of violence are. Christian right-wing extremist, nationalist movements and other violent acts of racism are excluded from the category of "terrorism" – Muslims are excluded from this general rule of thumb. In fact, the loosely defined and politically charged narrative of "war on terror" serves as a masquerade through which any idea, discourse or action which falls outside the orbit of secular-liberal ideology is suppressed.

In reality, the biases which inform the media's coverage of Islām are not the product of a post-9/11 phenomena, nor are they based purely on misinformation. Rather, the roots of this bias date back to the development of an anti-Islamic orientalist discourse, which constituted the identity of the West and continues to shape its discourse. This discourse is premised on the idea of Western superiority and the inferiority of the "rest". This is because the West has democracy, rationalism and science whereas the "rest" does not. The West has matured whereas the "rest" are dependent on the "West". The late Edward Said dealt with this orientalist bias at length in his book *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world.*[9]

The inability of mainstream media to live up to their obligations has had major implications on Muslim communities. A domineering "war on terror" has stripped Muslims of any outlets through which they can express themselves, which in turn exacerbates the rise of "extremism" – and thus, we are left in a vicious circle.

Edward Said famously observed that "nations are narrations".[10] Narratives are a reflection of structures of power. This is particularly true of how Muslims have been depicted in the mainstream media, and it therefore becomes a very important site of engagement. There are a number of things that Muslims can and, indeed, should do in order to resist these narratives, thereby resisting the aforementioned structures of power.

The first is to engage in a critical reading of news stories and to not simply accept everything without equivocation. Sifting through the facts, separating them from editorialising, and scrutinising the so-called experts relied upon. One will often find that the average news story embodies a confluence of agendas and interests.

Secondly, Muslims need to advance a counter-narrative by using all the means available to them. This includes social media, blogs and perhaps community-run media installations.

Finally, Muslims need to concentrate on being both politically aware and savvy. Understanding the political factors at work is instrumental and also leads to self-awareness, as is learning to place what is seen and read in its proper context.

This includes historical, historiographical, ideological and philosophical contexts. If one is able to fathom these contexts, learning to respond adequately and commensurately will surely follow. ∎

Source: www.islam21c.com

Notes

1. Four Years after September 11th: The Failure of Western Media, Stephen Schwartz http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_7863-1522-2-30.pdf?090211042544
2. 10 Myths about Muslims in the West, Doug Sanders, http://www.loonwatch.com/2012/09/10-myths-about-muslims-in-the-west/
3. http://www.5pillarsuk.com/2015/01/18/man-stabbed-to-death-in-france-as-wife-watched-in-horrible-islamophobic-attack/
4. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/firebombs-and-pigs-heads-thrown-into-mosques-as-antimuslim-attacks-increase-after-paris-shootings-9977423.html
5. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/11114599/Government-donation-to-Muslim-Charities-Forum-denounced-as-madness.html
6. http://powerbase.info/index.php/Sam_Westrop
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8. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/chapel-hill-shooting-three-young-muslims-gunned-down-in-north-carolina-at-their-family-home-10037734.html
9. Said, Edward (1997). *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world.* New York: Random House.
10. Said, Edward (1994). *Culture and Imperialism.* New York: Random House.

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