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THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE UNITED STATES

Dr. Navid Ghani

Professor of Sociology

Hofstra University

Hempstead, New York, United States of America

E-mail: nghani1000@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study examines the role of the mainstream media's coverage of anti-Muslim sentiments or Islamophobia in the United States and establishes its significant growth across the country in recent years. The focus is on violence directed against Muslims and Islam as their religion, the way that incidents develop, and the role of media during specific stages of incidents. The analysis is guided by the following questions: *How does media coverage facilitate hate crimes and support perpetrators? And how does exposure to violence in the media lead to an increase in violent behavior?* In addressing these questions, the aim is to address the issue which media describes as racist and Islamophobic. Qualitative methods are adopted in the analysis, focusing primarily on the recent media coverage of Muslims and Islam, including social media initiatives, websites, advocacy initiatives, and NGO work and legal campaigns. These findings are complemented by interviews with two individuals who were chosen because of their ongoing contribution to counter-narratives to Islamophobia and other forms of racism. While the U.S. media increasingly reports on Islamophobic incidents, a biased coverage of Islam and Muslims can be observed. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Muslim, Islam, hate crimes, stereotypes, media coverage, Islamophobia, terrorism, violent Islam.

Introduction

Polarization of American society can be easily observed in media reporting, as we have seen in recent years. The U.S. social media are increasingly critically engaged in this endeavor with their contribution in spreading negative stereotypes of Muslims and other minority groups. Anti-Muslim hate crimes often have distinctive features that differentiate them from other types of hate crimes. These hate crimes target people or property associated, or perceived to be associated, with Muslims such as mosques, religious and community centers, Muslim families' homes, Muslim cemeteries, and schools. There are also numerous incidents in which, for example, women wearing headscarves are the victims of assault. Such anti-Muslim hate crimes take place across the United States and their prevalence has increased significantly in recent years, easily surpassing the peak reached in 2001, the year of the September 11th terrorist attacks. According to the Pew research Center, in 2016, there were 127 reported victims of aggravated or simple assault, compared with 91 the year before and 93 in 2001. These attacks have ranged from trashing mosques, to death threats, to arson and vandalism. However, a very limited number of these attacks have been covered in American mainstream media. Attacks where the perpetrator is Muslim, on average, are covered twice as often as those committed by non-Muslims or where the victims are Muslims (Katayoun, 2017). This alarming statistic shows that there is discrepancy between the role that media takes when it comes to different types of hate crimes. The most common explanation for this bias centers on the perceived link between Muslims and terrorism, as well as the role of media in reinforcing this association in public perception. Ample studies have revealed that Muslims are frequently associated with extremism and terrorism in various media outlets, and that these media portrayals influence public opinion of both Muslims and Islam as their religion. For example, Panagopoulos (2006) and Ciftici (2012) argued that members of most Western societies are becoming increasingly anxious about Islam's compatibility with the "Western" values of tolerance, acceptance and civility, and individuals who believe that Muslims remain culturally distinct are more likely to have negative attitudes about them. Unfortunately, it is not just American Muslims who are impacted by Islamophobia (fear or hatred of Islam).

It is the American society at large that, by virtue of prejudice against Islam and Muslims, comes to imbibe a display of lies and distortions, which is contrary to American creed of equality and justice and is thus detrimental to social harmony and social inclusion. In addition to fueling hatred for Muslims, Islamophobia in the media can seriously impact the well being of Muslims in the United States. It can make peaceful and law-abiding people feel unwelcomed in a place that is meant to be their home. Many Muslims may also be reluctant to speak up about the effects of Islamophobia on them and their families, and this is worrying, as staying silent and not reporting Islamophobic incidents to authorities can further exacerbate an already difficult situation.

Muslims in the United States

Before examining the role of U.S. media in the negative public perceptions of Muslims, appropriate context must be provided. For example, according to the U.S. Census (2016), approximately 5 million Muslims were living in the United States in 2015, which is equivalent to 1–2% of the U.S. population. It is further estimated that their number will double by 2050 because of immigration and the high fertility rate among Muslims. The U.S. Census (2016) further suggests the U.S. Muslim population will grow faster than the Hindu and Jewish populations in the coming decades, which will make them the second largest religious group in the U.S. by mid-21st century.

American Muslims come from various backgrounds and are one of the most racially diverse religious groups in the United States. According to the study conducted by the Institute for Social Policy (ISPU, 2017), American Muslims are the only faith community surveyed with no majority race, with 25% identifying as black, 24% as white, 18% as Asian, 18% as Arab, 7% as mixed race, and 5% as Hispanic.

The Muslim population of the United States includes Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, Turks, Palestinians, Syrians, Kurds, Moroccans, Iranians, Iraqis, Bosnians, Kosovo Albanians, Somalis, and Afghans, as well as converts (mostly women who have married Muslim men). Estimates of the African-American Muslim population have ranged from about one-fifth to one-third of all Muslim Americans (ISPU, 2017). However, most U.S. Muslim immigrants were born in Pakistan. It is also noteworthy that the experiences of Muslim immigrants and African-American Muslims in the United States are unique in the sense that, while they share a common identity as Muslims, their racial, cultural, and historical contexts differ widely because of their diverse backgrounds and experience. As a result of this increasing Muslim demographic diversity, the overall number of mosques in the United States has increased in recent decades. For example, in the 1970s, approximately 100 mosques were constructed in the United States, but many more were since built because of increased immigration of Muslims. According to Judy Tene, the author of the article, *“Mosque Construction Continues to Attract Opposition Across the U.S.”*, the construction of traditionally designed mosques in the United States rose to 2,106 in 2011, and the construction continues in recent years (Stainburn, 2012). Another study published by Sinclair Broadcast Group (SBG) in 2016, which includes Fox, CBS, and NBC among others—reports that Islam is now the fastest growing religion in the United States, which has led to a rapid proliferation of mosques, whereby almost 2,600 were operating in 2016. The largest mosque, the Islamic Center of America, is located in Dearborn, Michigan.

Defining Media

Media is exerting increasing influence on the today's society. Media is a collective term that refers to the main modes of broadcasting and communication used in the present-day. The development of mass media through technology has enabled an easy access for people to the most recent events and news at the click of a button. Media can range from television to news articles to the Internet and social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and many more. Media coverage tends to focus on the most pressing social issues and events, including Islamophobic hate, which is the topic of this paper. Mass media can be broadly classified into the print media (newspapers and magazines) and the broadcast media (radio and television). Although most Americans used to obtain their news from newspapers and magazines, electronic journalism, particularly TV and online journalism, has become dominant in the last 50 years. Today, technological advances have facilitated rapid access to information via Internet and social network platforms that reach large numbers of people in a very short time.

The media narratives promoting anti-Muslim rhetoric are some of the main causes of Islamophobia amongst the general American public today. The negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam plays a significant role in shaping the misguided beliefs regarding Islam and Muslims in broader civil society.

Social media, as well as highly rated TV channels, reproduce such stereotypes by engaging in a debate on cultural explanations for violent attacks on Muslims. For instance, Fox News's Bill O'Reilly stated Islam "a destructive force and that the United States is in a holy war with certain groups of Muslims" (Fisher, 2015). Thus, the impact of media and negative beliefs held by the general population fuel more biased viewpoints towards Muslims that, in turn, incite violent behavior and support perpetrators. Below, some official statistics and underreporting of hate crimes by the media and the victims themselves is discussed.

The Islamophobic Media: Official Statistics and Underreporting

The role of the media in the rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric in the United States is obvious. In the past few years, the American media have subjected groups and individuals to hate crime. According to the Center for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR, 2015), the horrific mass murders in San Bernardino, Paris, Belgium, and the UK—perpetrated by people claiming affiliation with the militant group ISIS—has sparked a widespread backlash against Muslims in the U.S., even though virtually every major Islamic group in the country condemned these attacks. Figures released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2017) in November 2017 show that between 2015/16 and 2016/17 the number of hate crimes against Muslims increased to 307, i.e., by more than 100% compared to less than 150 before 2014. This begs the question if media does more harm than good in preventing incidents such as hate crimes. It seems that the media is always portraying these situations in biased ways and takes sides mainly to keep the viewers entertained. It is even more worrying to note that hate crime is underreported in the official figures. This can happen because of race or the fact that people could fear going to the police and be charged or accused wrongfully if they belong to a minority group.

The Department of Justice (DOJ, 2017), a major regular monitor of these trends, anticipated that many incidents of hate crimes were not reported to the police between 2011 and 2015 and that hate crime rates were the highest in urban areas, especially in the west (Yadidi, 2017). The DOJ defined hate crimes as those that manifest evidence of prejudice based on race, gender or gender identity, religion, disability, sexual orientation or ethnicity. On the contrary, Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, 2016) found that many immigrants who were victims of hate crime chose not to report the incident to the police because they were afraid that their claims would not be taken seriously, or could even result in incarceration because they are a minority group.

These trends are truly worrying. As discussed in the section below, Islamophobic hate crimes are presented in the media in a way that can sometimes instigate hate crimes and support perpetrators.

The Manifestation of Islamophobia in the Media

Media coverage of Islam and Muslims in the Western world has changed dramatically since the beginning of the 21st century. The events of September 11th, 2001, thrust Islam into the global media forefront, due to which not only coverage of Islam drastically increased, but the way in which Islam was framed by the media changed as well. The use of the term "Jihad" and calling terrorists "Jihadists" was promoted by the media. The same bias is present when naming terrorists "Islamist militants" or "Islamist fundamentalists," creating an impression that Islam is a violent religion. Media has drawn attention to the issue, but has often incorrectly portrayed people and events in biased ways. In 2009, Mehdi Hasan, a British journalist and broadcaster, criticized Western media for over-reporting a few Islamist terrorist incidents but underreporting the much larger number of planned non-Islamist terrorist attacks carried out by white perpetrators (The New Statesman, 2009). According to a study published in *Justice Quarterly* in 2017 by students at Georgia State University, "controlling for target type, fatalities, and being arrested, attacks by Muslim perpetrators received, on average, 357% more coverage than other attacks". The study highlights one-sidedness in news coverage, such as the sheer amount of coverage granted to the small number of domestic terrorists who were both Muslims and from outside of the U.S. The authors further noted that, in the United States, members of the public tend to fear "Muslim terrorists" while ignoring other threats (Kearns, Betus, & Lemieux, 2019).

Muslims, as a minority in the United States are often singled out and discriminated against on the basis of their religion and ethnicity. According to Parillo (2015), in 2012, Americans felt least socially associated with and therefore socially distant from Arabs and Muslims. Over the past few years, there has been an increase in hate crimes and prejudice against Muslims in the U.S. owing to the terrorist attacks, the election of President Trump, and the long-existing stereotypical images of Muslims (Edwards & Rushin, 2018).

Similarly, in another recent study conducted on representation of Muslims in media from 2000 to 2015, Ahmed and Matthes (2016) found that Muslims are generally negatively framed, whilst Islam is characterized as an intolerant and violent religion. British scholars Egorova and Tudor (2003) cited other European researchers in suggesting that expressions used in the media such as “Islamic terrorism,” “Islamic bombs,” and “violent Islam,” while not using the same terms relating to non-Muslims, have resulted in a negative perception of Islam. There have also been examples in the movie industry in which Muslims were associated with terrorism, such as in the 1998 movie *The Siege* and the 2018 popular TV program *Bodyguard*, which focused on Islamic terrorism. Some critics have stated that the manner in which Islam is portrayed in the entertainment industry only furthers the stereotype that Muslims are correlated with terrorism and savagery.

The American media began adopting the term “Islamophobia” after 9/11 attacks in order to describe the rise in negative feelings towards the Muslim community. Since then, the term “Islamophobia” has been in prevalent usage both in academia and in the public discourse. Islamophobia operates by creating static “Muslim” identity, which is associated with negative terms and generalized for all Muslims. Erik Bleich (2011) described this harmful rhetoric as indirect promotion of harmful actions against Islam and Muslims in Western democracies. The American doctrine on “War on Terrorism” led to an increase in Islamophobia in the United States and across the globe. This was in turn reflected in the way media outlets portrayed and stereotyped Muslims and Islam. This is especially problematic because of the growing influence the media has on the population’s perception-forming process. While some media deliberately frame Islamic coverage positively in an attempt to counter Islamophobia, many of the portrayals of Muslims contribute to the formation of harmful Islamophobic stereotypes. Hate crimes are presented in the media in a way that can sometimes incite hate crimes and support perpetrators. This was the case for Antonia Martinez, who called himself Muhammad Hussein, and was allegedly a Muslim man planning to blow up a Baltimore military recruitment center. He pleaded guilty and sentenced to 25 years in federal prison (Bishop, 2012). Extensive articles were written about this case in the national media.

The coverage of his trial spurred further Islamophobia in the United States and seemed to legitimize existing prejudice against Muslims. Because of the widespread reporting on Martinez’s case, Many Americans were exposed to message about “terrorist Muslims” and was led to believe that they are threat to the national security. The influence of social media in instigating widespread develops social prejudice against Islam and the Muslims will be discussed next.

Social Media and the Online Factors

Social media plays a significant role in everyday life of majority of people. The online media outlets allow for a new way to reach a large number of users, as well as to target specific individuals. As a result, campaigns of prejudice and harassment now have online as well offline dimensions (Miller, 2015). The fact that one does not even have to know or be in physical proximity to the person to be able to abuse or harass them makes social media so popular among those promoting hate crimes (Goldman, 2018). As online communication has become so ubiquitous, individuals inclined toward racism or homophobia have found niches that can reinforce their views. Social media platforms also offer these perpetrators the opportunity to publicize their acts. According to Laub (2019), strong correlation exists between online hate speech and hate crime incidents caused by social media websites such as Facebook and YouTube. For example, a hate group can specifically target those with similar interest, thus facilitating recruitment. In addition, social media users can access videos and websites that promote their racist ideologies. In that sense, social media supports or catalyzes hate crimes. Individuals that already hold racist or homophobic beliefs find content and other like-minded people that reinforce their views, which can eventually lead them to violence. As a part of this investigation, Laub (2019) conducted a comparative analysis of the relationship between social media and hate crimes in different countries. He found that, in several domestic terrorist attacks, social media played a significant role in bringing the perpetrator closer to realizing his goals. For example, in the United States, white supremacists often circulate in online racist communities. In instances such as the Charleston Church shooting in 2015 and the Pittsburg Synagogue shooting in 2018 in which several innocent people died, the perpetrators had spread their beliefs online and had been led to believe that violence was the ultimate requirement of white supremacy, mostly through viewing online content that reinforced their prior beliefs (Laub, 2019). Social media also acts as a tool of inspiration, as illustrated by the 2019 mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, which was broadcast live on Facebook, Twitter, and other media outlets.

The perpetrators had posted their manifesto online that had reached a global audience. Fortunately, after this incident no more hate crimes of significant nature occurred in New Zealand or the United States. This analysis highlights the significant role that social media plays in facilitating hate crimes. It provides perpetrators with easy access to like-minded individuals, increasing the pool of people willing to act on their beliefs. As perpetrators can rapidly disseminate their manifestos via online platforms, social media has provided the means to inspire others. For example, Patrick Keogan from Massachusetts threatened to burn down a local mosque on Facebook because he was inspired by other terrorist attacks in the United States in which local mosques were burned down or attacked. In his Facebook post in response to an attack on Islamic Center in Missouri on July 14th, 2013, Keogan posted, "Somewhere out there is an unknown hero. The people's champion, a true God amongst mortal men. May your days be many and trouble be few my good man" (Main, 2018). This Islamophobic rhetoric and praise of a terrorist shows that Keogan felt inspired by the media coverage to copy prior terror attacks against Muslims.

How Media Outlets Promote Social Prejudice?

Biased media coverage and social prejudice contribute to the negative portrayal of minorities in the U.S. Media outlets promote hate crimes and support perpetrators by creating false perceptions of minorities, making a distinction between the portrayal of victims and the perpetrator, and exaggerating crime rates among minorities. The way in which the media portrays minorities creates a perception that puts a target on certain groups, ultimately leading to perpetuation of stereotypes. Using the terms "terrorism," "fundamentalists," "terrorists," "extremist," and "backward" in connection to Islam and Muslims incites prejudice against Muslims and their religious congregation. This is aptly exemplified by the case of Marq Vincent Perez from Texas who burned down the Victoria Islamic Center in 2017, the only mosque in his hometown Victoria. Perez had believed that the members of the mosque were terrorists and were planning a terrorist attack in the near future (Lichtblau, 2017). Of course, Perez had no evidence of the Muslim community planning another attack, but his suspicion turned him into a radical terrorist, which led him to commit act of terrorism against the Muslims in his hometown.

Perez's unfounded hatred of Muslims and Islamophobia was likely instigated by the media that continuously reports on ISIS and Jihadist Muslims, which stereotypes Muslims as dangerous and radical terrorists. This stereotype has incited fear among Americans like Perez whose intense distrust of all followers of Islam prompts them to act out of fear and hatred. Ted Hakey of Meriden from New Hampshire similarly fired gunshots at a local mosque in November of 2015, motivated by learning of the terrorist attack in Paris in which 130 people lost their lives. This demonstrates that the way minorities are portrayed in the media has a strong effect on societal perceptions of those specific groups, which can ultimately lead to an increase in hate crimes.

According to the report published by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Hate Crimes (APPGHC, 2018), negative portrayal of minority groups in the media qualifies as "abuse, and as cause of abuse". In other words, when a specific minority group that is already portrayed negatively in the media, whether through enforcing stereotypes or otherwise, this gives perpetrators an excuse and ultimately a justification to commit a hate crime against said minority.

The news media plays a key role in shaping societal values and has a significant influence on individual attitudes and behaviors. In the United States, Muslims are discussed more negatively than other minority groups across different social spheres. Muslims and Islam are often associated with terrorism and aggression, especially after 9/11 attacks, and this has led to an increase in negative sentiments and the enforcement of stereotypes and discrimination. According to Howard (2019), this incites anti-Muslim sentiments and thus increases hate crimes against this group. In sum, the media plays an important role in promoting prejudice against Muslims by portraying them negatively, as it inspires already prone perpetrators to increase harmful activity, using those negative portrayals as a justification for their actions.

Media Coverage of Islamophobic Bias: Some Main Trends

The way in which Islamophobic offenses are reported in the U.S. media is also highly problematic. Instead of focusing on the majority of offenses that occur in the U.S., media tends to report on attacks that seem to be committed by Islamic groups or individuals who affiliate themselves with Islam. Generally, perpetrators perceived as Muslims receive twice the media coverage as their non-Muslim counterparts for being involved in hate crimes or other violent acts, whereas for cases of terrorism they receive seven and a half times as much media coverage (Rao et al., 2018).

In his article on Islamophobia in the U.S. media, Oded (2018) highlighted that terrorist attacks committed by Muslims received 105 headlines in national news outlets, compared with merely 15 covering attacks committed by non-Muslims.

Similarly, in their more recent study on news coverage on all terrorist attacks committed in the United States between 2011 and 2015, Kearns et al. (2019) found that attacks by Muslim perpetrators received 449% more coverage than attacks carried out by non-Muslims. It is evident that, by giving more publicity to attacks committed by Muslim perpetrators, the media is implying that these incidents are much more common.

The terms used to describe acts of violence of non-Muslim and Muslim perpetrators are also very different. For example, when a Muslim individual has been involved in an act of violence, this is invariably described as a terrorist attack stemming from Islamic ideology, which is then attributed to the entire community. When a non-Muslim is involved, the act is typically blamed on the individual and their state of mind. Similarly, Christian rightwing extremist and other violent acts of racism are excluded from the category of "terrorism." For example, the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh was tried for domestic terrorism and sentenced to death but the trial coverage did not focus exclusively on his crime against humanity. Media focused on McVeigh's social life and his supposed loneliness, inability to fit in, and problems with girls in high school, as well as his military career. In short, there was an odd aspect of sympathy for the perpetrator of this immense tragedy. The media portrayed him as a troubled white teen with serious volatile issues that made him upset, which is in stark contrast with Antonio Martinez's (alias Muhammad Hussein) case mentioned earlier who was described as a terrorist and a violent person who wanted to harm Americans.

In his article about the detrimental effects of Fox News racial reporting, journalist Brian Powell stated (2013), that Fox News racial crime coverage is hurting people because they perpetuate harmful racial stereotypes. As pointed out by Powell, Muslims are constantly being portrayed in the news as suspicious or affiliated with terrorism and its sympathizers, the social consciousness shifts to favor the more prevalent negative image of Islam and the Muslims.

Most News Coverage of Muslims in American Media is Negative

In his book, *Islamophobia in the Media since September 11th*, Allen (2010) cited a sample of news that emerged after 9/11, which clearly indicated that Muslim viewpoints were underrepresented and that issues involving Muslims usually depicted them in a negative light. Such portrayals, according to Allen, include the depiction of Islam and Muslims as a threat to Western security and values. As the author noted, "Whilst some media sources and publications have tried to act with responsibility in realizing the implications of such discrimination, certain specific and often predictable sources have been actively incorporating the most explicit expressions of Islamophobia into their coverage deeming their actions irresponsible, prejudicial, insightful and more directly, extremely dangerous" (Allen, 2010).

Bill Maher, a popular media personality and a host of the political satire program "Real Time with Bill Maher" on HBO consistently demonizes and stigmatizes the Muslim community despite his claim to hold progressive and tolerant opinions. He has frequently spoken against Islam and its believers, saying, for example, "Islam is the motherlode of bad ideas, the Quran is a hate-filled holy book and the Islamization of Europe is underway" (Cohen, 2017).

CNN has for a long time promoted a kind of "he said, she said" conception of Islam, suggesting that it is valid and worthwhile to debate whether Muslims make for inferior people and societies, thus mainstreaming more overt bigotry. CNN host Chris Cuomo, for example, called Muslims "unusually violent" and "unusually barbaric." The network has run chyrons such as "Is Islam Violent? or peaceful?" When CNN came under fire for asking if Islam promotes violence, several hosts countered that they were just following their journalistic responsibility to "ask the question." In other cases, the media has spread stories based on half-truths and distorted facts, often uncritically accepting or misrepresenting "facts" provided by the law enforcement agencies, politicians, or Islamophobic groups and individuals. Other U.S. TV networks and some of their anchors and presenters have often produced images, which are liable to incite fear and anxiety among many Americans. For example, Mike Huckabee, one of the Fox News Channel hosts, falsely claimed that Muslims believe that "Jesus Christ and all the people who follow him, are a bunch of infidels who should be essentially obliterated." Huckabee also referred to Islam as the "antithesis of the gospel of Christ" (William, 2013). Fox News has taken this media treatment of Islam to the next level by repeatedly telling millions of its viewers that Muslims are a threat that must be feared and dealt with forcefully, even violently. For example, Bill O'Reilly has declared that "Islam is a destructive force", and that the U.S. is in a holy war with certain groups of Muslims (Fisher, 2015).

The Myth of “Islamization”: Political Rhetoric

In the U.S. and other Western countries, Muslims tend to be associated with “Sharia laws,” “jihad,” or “holy war against the West. Many examples of this kind of rhetoric can be found in recent political discourse. President Donald Trump in his 2016 election campaign called Islam as a threat to American values and suggested surveillance of mosques and ban on entry to the United States for all Muslims. Such anti-Muslim rhetoric works to exacerbate the fears and misconceptions among U.S. citizens, as they are led to believe that all Muslims are a threat to national security.

In 2016, Ben Carson, a former GOP presidential candidate, in an interview given to the nonprofit news organization *Mother Jones*, referred to a discredited conspiracy theory about “jihad”—a fantastical plan about a Muslim plot to take over America. When Syrian Muslim refugees became a campaign issue, Carson said, “Bringing in people from the Middle East right now carries extra danger and we cannot put our people at risk because we are trying to be politically correct” (Caldwell, 2016). While giving an interview on CNN in November of 2015, Ben Carson compared Syrian refugees to rabid dogs stating, “If there’s a rabid dog running around in your neighborhood, you’re probably not going to assume something good about that dog, you’re probably going to put your children out of the way. That doesn’t mean that you hate all dogs” (Scott, 2015). “As Carson was in favor of extreme vetting process for Syrian refugees, he added, “We have to have in place screening mechanisms that allow us to determine who the mad dogs are. Quite frankly, who are the people who want to come in and hurt us and destroy us” (CNN, 2015)? Among his many false claims, it is worth noting that Ben Carson argued that, according to the Islamic law, people following other religions must be killed.

John Bolton, senior fellow at American Enterprise Institute, also made a blatantly false and misleading statement regarding refugees, claiming, “It’s not merely this wave of hundreds of thousands of refugees into Europe and ultimately into the United States that poses the threat. It’s even if they’re not radicalized when they leave they can be radicalized at a distance” (Nazarian, 2015). Newt Gingrich, another established politician and the former speaker of the United States House of Representatives, believes that Sharia is the “mortal threat to the survival of freedom in the United States and we should deport any who believe in Sharia law” (CAIR, 2016).

Why do editors and newscasters allow such words to be published or spoken without question? The simplest answer probably is that the stories that play on the public’s fears and feed their prejudices are popular. As freelance writer and blogger Woolfe (2018) argued, “the media uses bold and harsh language to promote this kind of fear because bad news sells”. The media is often biased and the coverage of anti-Islamic hate crimes is often not highlighted. Muslim viewpoints are underrepresented and issues involving Muslims are usually depicted in a negative light. In his book *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*, Said (1997) commented that, in reality, the biases which inform the media coverage of Muslims and Islam 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” because the West is portrayed as the birthplace of democracy, rationalism, and science. In other words, as West is highly advanced in every respect, the “rest” are dependent on the “West” (Said, 1997).

Evaluation of Media Coverage of Islamophobia

MediaTenor, a research institute that evaluates data for NGOs and governments, analyzed the reporting practices of Fox, NBC, and CBS in the 2007–2015 period to determine how Islam was represented by these major media outlets. Their findings revealed that over 80% of the media coverage on NBC and CBS was negative, while over 60% of the coverage on Fox was unfavorable, with stories about international terrorism and conflict getting the most airtime (Habib, 2016). In addition, the researchers found that, in most cases, Muslims were not included in the TV programs as featured experts on Islam. This perception towards Islam and Muslims is closely linked to media portrayals of Islam as an irrational, primitive, and violent religion. Media reports in recent months have indicated a continued flow of attacks, often against victims wearing traditional Muslim garb or seen as Middle-Eastern. James Nolan, a former FBI crime analyst who teaches about hate crimes at West Virginia University, stated that the available data seemed to show “a real spike” in hate crimes against American Muslims, caused in part by political and social discourse (New York Times, 2016).

Mark Potok, a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which monitors hate groups and extremism, went further to assert, “I don’t have the slightest doubt that Trump’s campaign rhetoric has played a big part” in the rising attacks (SPLC, 2016). In her article, Vox Journalist Ezra Klein examined how the media portrays president Donald Trump’s blatant racist attitudes. Transparency, as Klein (2019) suggests, is extremely valuable, as public needs to be conscious of the political attitudes of those in power. This idea, when examined at its most basic form, shows how important it is to cover news in understanding manner. It is noteworthy to many Americans that Trump is racist and has certain biases against minorities. His policies are a clear reflection of his ideas about other people unlike him. But there is another more sinister consequence of such transparency, as broadcasting Trump’s negative views can serve as a constant signal to racists that their views are condoned by the U.S. society at the highest level.

Countering Islamophobic Media Representation at Both Institutional and Civil Society Level

Although the number of incidents of Islamophobia in the United States is steadily growing, the country is also engaged in counter-Islamophobic initiatives by organizations and groups at the institutional as well as civil society level. Some of their activities to tackle this widespread and growing problem of Islamophobic hate crimes, such as creating awareness in the media about Islam and the Muslims and helping them to learn their rights and develop the necessary skills to combat hate crimes through positive and objective involvement in the media, are highlighted in the next section.

Countering Islamophobia at the Institutional Level: Federal and Local Efforts

Although no new state institutions have been created to combat Islamophobia in recent years, the FBI and the DOJ are increasingly making an effort to connect victims of hate crimes to their respective institutions. Both institutions define hate crime as a criminal offense against a person motivated by an offender against religion, race, and ethnicity and fueled by media (DOJ, 2017; FBI, 2017). The New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo announced on November 20th, 2016 that an “explosion” in hate crimes since the November 8th presidential election has prompted the creation of a special police unit to fight the uptick in New York state. His announcement coincided with an address at Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church, where he called for an end to the divisiveness that has gripped the country. “The ugly political discourse of the election did not end on Election Day. In many ways it has gotten worse, turning into a social crisis that now challenges our identity as a state and as a nation and our people,” the Governor said in his address. He also announced a toll-free hotline to connect New York residents with the State Division of Human Rights to report any incidents of bias and discrimination and said that New York state’s tolerance will lead the way for the rest of the nation to combat hate crimes of all kinds (CNN, 2016).

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has also been very active in combatting Islamophobia. This institution is based in Washington, D.C., and describes itself as America’s largest Muslim civil liberties and advocacy organization. It is actively involved in planning rallies and marches and other events nationwide to build awareness about Islam and Muslims in the United States under the agenda “Stop Islamophobia, Defend the Muslim Community.” Their first rally was held in February 2016 and those in attendance marched through the Cedar Riverside community, which is home to the nation’s largest Muslim community of Somali refugees. CAIR supporters have participated in several protests and demonstrations against anti-Muslim bigotry and other forms of oppression. CAIR (2015) has consistently maintained that, “The mainstreaming of Islamophobia by a number of nation’s political and religious leaders has encouraged the latest hate-filled actions of anti-Muslim bigots, now is the time for those leaders who are concerned about traditional American values of religious inclusion and tolerance to speak out against Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crime”.

On April 24th, 2019, the CAIR hosted a conference about Islamophobia at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minnesota. The conference began with the remarks by Minnesota Governor Tim Walz(D), who announced that he would like to open human rights office in his state to fight Islamophobia. He encouraged media to follow Muslim artists, thinkers, writers, and activists, share their work, and portray Muslim voices in the stories they share online.

The CAIR platform also monitors manifestations of Islamophobia in the United States, and collates Civil Rights reports concerning issues such as hate crimes, discrimination, and profiling on an annual basis. It also provides assistance to Muslims in overcoming difficult situations and making complaints against Islamophobic perpetrators. Rallies and protests initiated by CAIR also gripped Atlanta, Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, San Francisco, and other cities across the country throughout 2016 and 2017.

Countering Islamophobia at the Civil Society Level

Civil society activism against Islamophobia has also shaped the current affairs regarding Islamophobia, and has been motivated by the growing number of media reports covering Islamophobic hate crimes. For example, in September of 2017, the Carter Center convened an international symposium of scholars, journalists, civil society actors, and religious leaders to develop a strategic and sustainable response to Islamophobia in the media and promote positive reporting on Muslim communities. While speaking to the audience, former president Jimmy Carter said, “when we turn a blind eye to discrimination against our Muslim neighbors, we cannot claim to remain true to our American values, and if we tolerate discrimination against those of another faith, we undermine our own cherished religious freedom” (Carter Center, 2017). The Carter Center is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter in partnership with Emory University to advance peace and health.

Interviews with Two Muslim Leaders

To further shed light on the findings that emerged through a review of media content, Nayyar Imam, an interfaith activist, was interviewed to gain his insight into strategies that could be adopted to counter Islamophobia and the role of interfaith dialogue in changing the narrative about Muslims in the West. Imam explained that the Islamophobic perpetrators are engaging in acts of passion due to racial and religious scapegoating. He was of view that, particularly after the 2016 presidential election, things have been more fearful for Muslims in the United States. Some of the media perpetuates highly Islamophobic views, which are mobilizing far-right people to attack Muslims. Thus, the Imam opined that the mainstream media should have more balanced and positive coverage of religious and ethnic minorities as a way of promoting peace and harmony in our society. Imam also believes that the openness of religious communities to the media and their resolve in preventing deviant versions is necessary for achieving the goals of this process.

Do you consider Islamophobia a major challenge in the United States today? There are periodic assaults on mosques and other forms of prejudice against the Muslims that are investigated by government agencies. Does that mean that there is systematic Islamophobia in America?

Yes, I believe that Islamophobia is systematic in the United States. There has been surge in Islamophobic incidents in the United States since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. We have some reporting from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a nonprofit organization that supports Muslims and advocates against Islamophobia, which indicates that the Trump rise has resulted in a backlash against Muslims and other minorities. As a response, American Muslims have sought out assistance from the Department of Justice (DOJ), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Center for American-Islamic Council (CAIR) seeking to advance equality and racial justice. This offers an opportunity for the Muslim Americans to combat Islamophobia both within the Muslim community and from outside of the Muslim community. I also believe that Islamic religious institutions and Muslim rights organizations such as US Council of Muslim Organizations and Islamic Society of North America have a major responsibility to educate the public about Islam as a faith and the contributions of Muslims to their societies. That’s why we’ve always encouraged meetings with interfaith community leaders to discuss intercultural relations, but this is not enough, we need to do more.

What do you think about the role of the media in portraying an accurate image of Islam and Muslims in the United States?

It is unfortunate that Muslims tend to be negatively framed, while Islam is dominantly portrayed as a violent and aggressive religion. Look how media portrays white mass shooters and Muslim mass shooters. If you look at white shooters who are mass shooters typically in the United States, that is a form of domestic violence and perpetrators tend to have mental issues. But if you brought forward somebody with a brown face, then they are labeled as Muslim terrorist. So it’s really the label that they’re putting on these people and making them look bad.

The media’s depiction of Islam leads to a general climate of mistrust and hatred against Muslims and their religion Islam. Media should be acting as a watchdog of what society is getting itself into. But I think there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of this situation. In addition to interfaith dialogue and social networking, Muslim institutions and their academics have to work actively to change the media’s negative narrative on Islam. The work of Center for American-Islamic Council (CAIR) as well as other institutions on Islamophobia is one good example of this activity, argued Imam.

Interview was also held with Moez Ahmed, a Pakistani-born Muslim who was secretary of the Muslim Students Association at Stony Brook University, who said that Islamophobia tends to surge after Donald Trump makes an Islamophobic remark, highlighting that “Trump phenomenon is recent, but the media has been circulating these narratives for a while.” He further shared, “Our problem is how to reach an audience outside of interfaith meetings and to convey to them that Islam is a peaceful religion and that the Muslims in the United States are peace loving and law abiding citizens. The people who come to the interfaith meetings and events usually understand the issue and have respect for each other’s religion. Misinformation about Islam was a factor in influencing people to develop Islamophobic views, and the media has created a perception that radicalism in Islam is the norm rather than the exception.” He further pointed out that NGOs must address Islamophobia by establishing forums in which active opinion makers, religious leaders, and theologians take part, and their messages against Islamophobia must be spread on social media and networks.

Ahmed emphasized that the media needs to transform its overall philosophy whereby it understands the pervasive problem of Islamophobia in its representation, including its lack of objective representation of Islam. Ahmed also emphasized the importance of educating younger people about different faiths and cultures. In his view, “it is important for people of all faiths, and of no faith, to educate children about respecting people of various religions, and teaching them to respect people who may be different from them. Education is key to stopping hate crimes against Muslims and other vulnerable groups, and with so many ugly ideas gaining traction, it’s more important than ever.”

Other Muslims were contacted to share their views and thoughts on the topic. A sample of what they said about Trump and his Islamophobic rhetoric is presented below.

“A lot of us Muslims, we don’t feel safe here anymore. Islamophobic behavior is bad for Muslims.” – *Muslim man in 20s*.

“Donald Trump is a racist, OK? I’m a Muslim woman. He’s not for us. He’s nationalist and egocentric and is dangerous for the country this is what I believe.” – *Muslim woman in 30s*

Several other Muslim respondents discussed their experiences with the media portrayal of Muslims, from being called a bomb threat to terrorist, or Osama lover, but due to the limitations imposed on the length of the paper, these interviews cannot be discussed further.

Conclusion

To conclude, news media coverage of Muslims and their religion Islam is one-sided and often echoes the policies of the present government. This paper has analyzed the role that the media plays in Islamophobic hate crimes, focusing solely on Islam and the Muslim community in the United States. The analysis was driven by two questions: *How does media coverage facilitate hate crimes and support perpetrators?* And *how does exposure to violence in the media lead to an increase in violent behavior?* The findings revealed that social media acts as a source of inspiration and makes it easier for perpetrators to associate with terrorist attacks stemming from radical Islamic ideology which is attributed to the entire community. As Muslim minorities are portrayed negatively, this ultimately serves as a justification for hate crimes against Muslims and Islam as their religion.

Islamophobia has been on the rise in the West due to the negative impact media has had on stereotyping Muslims as a safety threat. The increasing violence has consequently shifted the public perception of Islam as an extreme religion that emphasizes violence. The continuing cycle of biased reporting style and victimization of perpetrators will only worsen this issue. As the U.S. society begins to treat hatred with less seriousness, it will sink deeper into the pit of ignorance. Initiatives aimed at addressing this problem need to start with our government and public figures to warn of the risks of rightwing extremism and the reliance of perpetrators on social and electronic media as a safe space for spreading terrorist or extremist content. As indicated earlier in the paper, media coverage can have both positive and negative influence, as it can frame Islamic coverage favorably in an attempt to counter Islamophobia, or it can use expressions such as “Islamic terrorism,” “Islamic bombs,” and “violent Islam” which contribute to the formation of harmful Islamophobia stereotypes. The fact is that fear of Islam is based on the lack of knowledge of this religion and its teachings. We need continued efforts from politicians and policy makers to ensure that their work and remarks are not divisive or contribute to the alienation of Muslims in the United States. Thus, factual information and constructive debate in the media will help to stem the growth of negative attitudes among Islamophobes and population in general.

It is also important to acknowledge the role media plays in persuading or discouraging the actions of perpetrators, so it is crucial that media outlets are conscious of the messages they put out. The media itself can contribute significantly to fostering common ethical values by adopting an objective approach and not employing sensationalism which gives rise to different phobias and damages peace and stability. Today, as people get much of their information from social media, the largest social media companies should have policies against hate speech on their platforms and take actions to remove Islamophobic content. Openness of religious communities to the media is also necessary for achieving the goals of this process. Finally, Muslims also need to advance a counter-narrative by using social media, blogs, and perhaps community-run media connections, such as Islamic Channels, Islam TV, or local radio, which could present an accurate picture and try to counter the anti-Muslim bias prevalent in the mainstream media.

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