



**Is Coverage of Arabs, Islam Good?
Western Media Under Scrutiny**
Presentation “Reporting on the Islamic World”
at IPI World Congress
& 54th General Assembly
Organized by the International Press Institute
Nairobi, Kenya
May 21-24, 2005

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,
It gives me great pleasure to be with you today and I'd like to extend a special thanks to IPI and our hosts here in Nairobi for having invited me.

Since 9/11, 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and terror-related events worldwide, Western media have generally failed to provide fair and balanced reporting of Islam, the Arabs and have often mixed up the two.

The output has often been negative portrayals, sensationalism, jingoism and misperceptions about the fastest growing religion in the world.

Introduction:

There have been countless assumptions that Arabs are Muslims, and vice versa, not taking into account that the largest Muslim country is Indonesia, which is not Arab. Or that Christianity didn't begin in the Midwest or Deep South of the United States, but in the Middle East.

How can journalists be so ignorant, callous and irresponsible about such geographic and historical facts?

Laziness, deadlines, budgets and ill intent, sometimes all rolled into one.

If you were an Arab or a Muslim in America on and after 9/11, you would have felt outrage, shock and fear. You would also have become a suspect, especially if your first name were Osama or Jihad (a much misunderstood term).

Mosques were attacked, people wearing veils or turbans were assaulted and even an Indian Sikh mistaken for a Muslim was killed. That closely followed President George Bush's remarks about the “crusade” against terror, something that leaves a bad aftertaste in Arab and Muslim mouths.

Thanks to stereotypes, already long established by Hollywood movies and TV programs for young and old, we've had our share of belly dancers, greedy oil billionaires and bombers, Ali Booboo the desert rat, rag heads, Ay-rabs, camel jockeys, etc. The Walt Disney movie Aladdin's opening lyrics were:

*“I come from a land, from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam.
Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.”*

Thank you very much. But where I live, SUVs, BMWs and Mercedeses roam, not camels, we don't cut off ears and my residence is a modern apartment/flat with all the latest amenities.

I can just imagine the distorted image planted in many people's minds after seeing and listening to such a "cute" cartoon film.

What also worries me is the editorializing, pseudo-expert pontificating by TV "talking heads" and so-called reporting by journalists covering a region about which they may know very little and don't have the time or desire to learn about.

Foreign correspondents covering Arab and/or Muslim countries often lack knowledge on issues they report. But perhaps equally at fault are Arabs and Muslims who have failed to provide adequate, correct and reliable information to promote their cause.

Media Agenda?

What is the media agenda? Why do some stories get covered and others covered up?

On May 1, 2005 the Times of London published confidential minutes of a July 23, 2002 meeting between British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his cabinet members showing that Blair and U.S. President George Bush secretly agreed to wage war on Iraq for "regime change" nearly a year before their invasion of the country.

British and U.S. officials insisted for months after that they had no plans to invade. Why weren't U.S. media more probing all along?

The Washington Post reported in April 2003 that the Pentagon had no plans to count civilian casualties in Iraq. Did U.S. media react negatively? No. Why not?

Had dismembered Iraqi civilians been printed on playing cards like the Iraqi leadership's "Most Wanted List" that was all the rage at the start of the war, would they have received more attention?

Don't we all know the number of victims from the horrible terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a Pennsylvania field where one of the planes crashed on that fateful day? Are the lives of innocent civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine worth less?

Did reporters ask questions of officials like: "Why did the U.S. edit the 12,000-page Iraqi weapons report to the U.N. Security Council removing all names of U.S. firms that had previously sold weapons materials to Iraq in the past?"

While media in the Muslim and Arab worlds have opposed the war in Iraq and in other Muslim countries, their reports and editorial lines can hardly be viewed as monolithic. It is important to understand the nuanced handling of news coming from these sources.

Because of their reticence, or outright criticism of the Iraq war, channels like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya came under attack by U.S. officials and their neoconservative supporters. The U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority and the subsequent Iraqi Governing Council had temporarily shut down Al Jazeera's bureau as punishment.

Al Jazeera has accused U.S. forces of deliberately targeting its bureaus in Kabul and Baghdad, and killing its Baghdad-based correspondent, for bringing the plight of the Iraqi people to the attention of the Arab and Muslim worlds, which Washington said was instigation to violence and terrorism.

Journalists have faced untold dangers in covering wars and disasters but the numbers have jumped dramatically since the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, with both Western and Arab/Muslim correspondents, cameramen and women being targeted by kidnappers, assassins' bullets and tank shells. The last three years have been the most deadly, according to various media-related organizations.

Reuters Gulf bureau chief Samia Nakhoul, an alumna of our university, was lucky to have survived with serious head and body wounds the U.S. Army tank assault on the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad, that targeted alleged snipers on the rooftop – something all hotel residents denied. Her cameraman died. Was her reporting an irritant?

In January 2004, author David Miller wrote in *The Guardian* that “information dominance” came of age during the war in Iraq, adding that the U.S. government’s strategy was integrating propaganda and news media into the military command structure more fundamentally than ever before.

“Embedding” journalists with U.S. and British troops may have provided striking images, but they were short on context. “Unilateral” correspondents often got meatier stories.

The high-tech media briefing center set up by the Pentagon’s Central Command in Qatar was big on plasma screens and fancy production facilities but short on substance, according to reporters at the scene.

In November 2003, BBC Director General Greg Dyke attacked U.S. TV coverage of the war in Iraq, saying: “News organizations should be in the business of balancing their coverage, not banging the drum for one side or the other.”

“Shock and Awe,” was the one of the war’s catch phrases. Media headlines and video graphics referred to “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” “Line in the Sand” and other such marketing gimmicks.

If, God forbid, Kenya were to meet the wrath of Pentagon planners, would the media trumpet the “Line in the Savannah?”

Do you remember seeing American TV anchors wearing flags in their lapels? Were they advocates or journalists?

Information, Infotainment or Cyber Wars?

New York Times media critic Frank Rich wrote in March 2004 that real journalism may be reeling, but faux journalism rocks, given the use of celebrities to interpret hard-hitting news. Remember the “heroic rescue” of Private First Class Jessica Lynch from an Iraqi hospital, or President Bush’s made-for-TV landing on an aircraft carrier, with a “Mission Accomplished” banner as a dramatic backdrop?

The last time anyone checked, there were still troops in Iraq.

Rich’s article was headlined: “Operation Iraqi Infoganda.”

It wasn’t until much later, when reports of prisoner abuses, misappropriation of defense funds and yet-to-be-found weapons of mass destruction, or mass deception, that U.S. media began a chorus of mea culpas for having rolled over and played dead, as veteran Washington journalist Helen Thomas has accused them of doing. She said the press failed to hold the White House accountable.

The fact that countless websites and blogs revealed reports of misinformation, stereotyping, anti-Muslim and anti-Arab venom, indicates new media are a double-edged sword that have also made traditional news outlets increasingly irrelevant.

On the flip side, the battle for Muslim minds is not being fought by radicals in Falluja or in the mosques, wrote BBC Community Affairs correspondent Dominic Casciani, but on the Net. He quoted a European expert on Islam as saying governments must rethink how they are going to win that war.

Adding fuel to the fire, faith-based news from U.S. evangelical Christians have further damaged the Arab/Muslim psyche, already bruised by attacks in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and America itself thanks to the USA Patriot Act.

According to the Columbia Journalism Review's May/June 2005 issue, pro-war U.S. conservative evangelicals control at least six national television networks, each reaching tens of millions of homes, and virtually all of the nation's over 2,000 religious radio stations.

Their world view, lobbying power in Washington and adherents, including senior Pentagon officials who believe Islam is an evil religion, sets off international alarms.

The U.S.' faltering public diplomacy and attempts at democratization in the Arab/Muslim worlds is further being hobbled by these holier-than-thou false prophets.

A poll sponsored by the Council on American-Islamic Relations found 25% of Americans believed negative stereotypes about Muslims to be true and that Muslims "teach their children to hate."

Orientalism, extensively researched by the late Columbia University Professor Edward Said, seems alive and well in the 21st Century. It just fits into glib 10-second sound bites and clickable links with downloadable PDFs or MP3s.

Recommendations:

We need to rethink our coverage of Islam and the Arab world. It's not just good PR, it's good business. Responsible journalism can go a long way towards minimizing the artificially juiced-up "clash of civilizations."

Some efforts to promote better understanding of Islam have included a primer called "100 Questions & Answers About Arab-Americans: A Journalist's Guide" published by the Detroit Free Press in the wake of September 11, 2001 (<http://www.freep.com/jobspage.arabs.htm>). It's something we can use and build upon.

USA Today ran an article entitled "Q&A on Islam & Arab Americans." (<http://usatoday.com/news/world/islam.htm>).

The Poynter Institute in Florida (www.poynter.org) came up with a series of online articles about "Understanding Ramadan," "Covering Muslims in America," improving cross-cultural reporting, and has provided guidelines for cultural competence. I think that's a step in the right direction.

The Seattle Times also came up with useful articles entitled "Understanding Turbans" (<http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/news/lifestyles/links/turbans>) and "Interpreting Veils" (<http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/news/nation-world/crisis/theregion>) to help readers and browsers of their site decipher the significance of head coverings in the Muslim world and beyond.

A U.S. census report on Arab ancestry is helpful in educating the American public (and anyone else for that matter) on the integration and contributions of Arab-Americans.

It highlights educational, professional, economic and social trends, thereby "focusing constructive attention on a community that has been the subject of public suspicion and policies of racial profiling," said an Arab American Institute press release.

Maybe more Western countries should issue such reports about their Muslim and Arab communities.

Increasingly, American universities and colleges are hiring Muslim clerics to minister to Muslims and to organize activities that explain Islam to the non-Muslim community at large. Some institutions have also been offering courses in Arabic and Islamic studies.

Why not have joint religious activities that extol the virtues of the different faiths and help bring people together?

There's merit to interfaith and cross-cultural gatherings. Start small, think big.

But more should also be done in newsrooms to help reporters, editors, producers, and webmasters provide the proper context for their stories. Preventive medicine is always best.

Likewise, we mustn't lose sight of media ethics in coverage of events, notably in war situations.

When are pictures of POWs considered propaganda? Should journalists be versed in the Geneva Conventions?

Should reporters cover up official misdeeds? Should they use close-ups of "local" victims but not of Western troops? Should they report on the mishandling of veiled Muslim women and turbaned men, or consider raids into people's homes as self-defense by troops? Are there double standards?

I think the Abu Ghraib scandal was an example of hesitant and below-par journalism. I know correspondents covering Iraq for European media who had complained about mistreatment of prisoners but whose reports were dismissed for months before CBS' "60 Minutes" show broadcast the first pictures of man's inhumanity to man in the U.S.

"Media Literacy in a Time of War" is a valuable guide produced by the Media Education Foundation and is available at <http://www.mediaed.org>. I recommend it highly.

Conclusion:

The use of terms like "smart bomb" (many are dumb and miss their targets), "decapitation" of enemy leadership, "dismantling of terror networks" (often a euphemism for crushing anyone who disagrees with the speaker) and other conveniently parroted clichés are examples of sloppy writing, bad editing and misinformation.

That's why it's important to have a multitude of sources for news reports -- with war coverage being a prime example of what can go wrong if one is limited.

The availability of dozens of Arabic language satellite stations supplementing the existing fare in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, etc., as well as print media and websites galore, may be time consuming for Western journalists to consult, but well worth the effort if they wish to be considered credible and fair reporters.

The Arab and Muslim worlds are undergoing various degrees of reform but still have a way to go. Since gaining independence from their former colonial masters, it's been a rough ride with mostly autocratic regimes supported and backed militarily by the major powers.

There's much soul searching about religion, fundamentalism, terrorism, education, the media, and more. The three Arab Human Development Reports published to date are good examples of this exercise and a stepping stone to what we hope will be a more enlightened future for countries in the regions we're examining today.

But if leadership is by example, they will need better examples of press freedom, fair and balanced reporting and professionalism from those who should know better.

Anti-Semitism, long considered anathema in Western society, notably following World War II, should be fully understood to include anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments, since millions of Arabs and Muslims are Semites, too.

You're looking at an Arab-American Christian Semite who traces her roots 2,700 years to the original Semitic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. And I'm about as globalized as they get.

There are many articulate Muslim and Arab women who can bridge this false divide. Provide them with a platform and you'll be pleasantly surprised. You'll beef up your bottom line, enlarge your constituency and bring down barriers.

You may read about some of them in this book: "Women & Media in the Middle East."

The late Pope John Paul II, in his message marking the 39th World Communications Day in 2005 quoted the General Epistle of St. James that said: “Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My bretheren, these things ought not so to be.” (Jas 3:10)

He added that words have an extraordinary power to bring people together or to divide them, to forge bonds of friendship or to provoke hostility.

Journalists should remember these words when reporting on the Islamic world.

Thank you.

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