

TRT
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forum**
2018

Closed Session

Western Mainstream Media and Coverage of the Muslim World



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The TRT World Forum 2018, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 3rd- 4th at the Swissotel in Istanbul gathering together over 600 esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of 8 public sessions, 11 closed sessions and keynote speeches delivered by some of our most esteemed guests, this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the future of the Middle East and the European Union to the growing trend of Islamophobia, refugees, Turkish foreign policy in an age of crisis, the crisis of new media and female leadership in a world of conflict. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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Background

On October 4, 2018, TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting on Western Mainstream Media and Coverage of the Muslim World. This was part of a series of roundtable meetings forming part of the two-day TRT World Forum 2018, which included eight public sessions and 11 closed sessions.

This roundtable meeting was held in English under the Chatham House Rule. This rule stipulates that 'when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

The focus was on the coverage of the Muslim World during the Post-9/11 period that was characterised by the exacerbation of conflicts – such as the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – intrastate conflict in Syria, civil war in Libya and general political instability in the Muslim world. As a consequence, Islam has come to be associated with violence and terror in the coverage of the Muslim world by mainstream Western media. Instead of delving into the complex historical, geopolitical, political, economic, and social dynamics underpinning the conflicts in the Middle East, Islam has been depicted as the core reason behind the prevalence of anti-modernism, exclusiveness, and hostility to outsiders. This disjunction between the roots of the current conflicts in the Muslim world and their portrayal in the mainstream Western media were discussed in this session.

Discussion themes of the session:

The specific objectives of the meetings were to:

- How does western media construct the discourse of religious violence?
- How have journalism and media evolved in the post-9/11 world?
- Does the media in the Muslim world have a role to play in challenging the narratives of mainstream Western media?

A Deep-Seated Historical Legacy

At the start of the session, the first speaker highlighted the main trends surrounding media coverage of Muslims in the West. This coverage, which tends to be negative, is derived from an institutional endeavour, which has misrepresented Muslims since the colonial era. Therefore, at the roots of Western media bias is the fact that media outlets do not allow every component of the political landscape to have an equal share of the media coverage.

To this end, French media, according to the speaker, creates “fake elites” and embellishes the profiles of Muslims who say exactly what the West wants to hear. Examples of these include the good learned Muslim, the good stupid Muslim, and the clownish Muslim who will be invited to the television sets to express “themselves” and consequently get prime time coverage.

A specific example was given for a Muslim individual called ‘Nasir’, a self-appointed representative of the Muslim community in France who is regularly invited on French prime-time news. According to the speaker:

I found out that Nasir has access to prime time because he met certain conditions - he was talking about some of the main components of the Palestine conflict and referred to them as ‘factions’ and ‘militants’, which lowered their status considerably. The French media only welcomed Nasir when he met this condition. Political engagement is denied. The investigation is limited to the ‘hows’ and not the ‘whys’ when the news is about Muslims. Why Muslims are upset is a question that is never asked. Western media denies political dimensions, overestimates ideology. It is definitely important to condemn radical ideologies but very important also to understand why they are effective. If that happens, and we are able to question the ‘whys’, we can move away from biased coverage. We create the good Muslim and the bad Muslim. There is an incredible dichotomy as there is no grey area.”

According to the first speaker, the biased coverage of Muslims in Western media is not new. The relationship between the US and Islam has been negative since the formation of the American state. In fact, the US Navy was created to fight Muslims – the pirates of Barbary (North Africa). Islam has always been portrayed as the ‘other’ – only increasing in recent decades. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam became portrayed as the number one enemy of the West. There is a disconnect between the worldviews of Americans and Muslims, who correspondingly view the same words and images in fundamentally different ways. Reference was made to a book by Arundhati Roy “Public Power in the Age of Empire”, in which the author explained this difference in perception.

Such dichotomy is exacerbated by the media and by leaders on both sides, who do not care what impact their words and policies have in the world at large. Media coverage has still a narrow worldview and operates on a binary mode “us” vs “them”. However, the speaker regretted that the US is not listening to what is said in the Middle East. Due to the new Trump administration, the first speaker worried, the new narrative of his that ‘Islam hates us’ is very troubling for the US and Muslims.

In addition, the first speaker pointed out the deep cooperation between the ruling elites in the West, the Muslim World, and Israel. Some of the cheap accusations targeting Muslim communities or associations in the West emanate from the ruling elites in the Muslim World. The criminalisation of Islamic parties and movements started during the Sharm El-Sheikh Summit (13 March 1996), also known as the “Summit of Peacemakers.” The latter was attended by Western, Arab, and Israeli leaders. The narrative that emerged during this summit is that all attendees have a common enemy, namely Islamic fundamentalism.

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Factors Exacerbating Media Bias

According to the second speaker, there has been some improvement in Western media coverage. For instance, there are many more efforts to improve representation in Western media. More Muslims are now working as reporters and anchors in US news organisations. In addition, there are numerous US reporters who are Arabic speakers. This increases understanding, inclusiveness, and representation.

Nonetheless, issues of bias remain entrenched in Western media coverage about Islam. For example, the Quran was translated merely 700 years ago in Europe. Before that, Europeans had no idea about Islam and what it teaches - and that led to much fabrication. During the colonial era, this problem of fabrication was never addressed. Subsequently, many of these misrepresentations are regurgitated in today's western media. This also means that the Western media's education about Islam is limited.

While there are two kinds of media, news and non-news media, both have issues of balance and tone of voice when it comes to Islam and Muslims. With news media, misrepresentation is clearly prevalent, but even in the case of non-news media such as the Hollywood productions, which makes about 80 percent of global film revenue through about 200 films a year, there are recurrent stereotypical depictions of Muslims. Imagery is powerful, and it affects the way Muslims are perceived.

There is also the omnipresent issue of media ownership, news and non-news. Some of the more balanced media on Muslims are in the West such as the Guardian and NYT- and that is because the Guardian is owned by a Trust. BBC is another example, also not entirely commercialised.

Sensationalism is an issue that was also highlighted. A huge change is affecting the broader pattern of modern communication, as traditional methods of communications have been more and more substituted by social media networks and other forms of digital communication. This shift is changing professional journalism as there is much more competition on the economics side, and reporters are pushed to be much more sensational in their reporting, which has turned reporting into emotional doping.

Media sourcing is an additional cause for concern. A participant contended that when the attacks of 9/11

happened, the world's news media focused on downtown New York, as graphic images displayed panic scenes of wounded and dazed people fleeing. In parallel, American television news drew upon the discourse of patriotism to describe the atrocity. Consequently, US news media relied heavily on elite sources, and the frames that they conveyed, to mobilise public support. Initial U.S. news coverage did not even open a debate about whether or not to go to war or how best to respond. The outcome was that political agendas from the highest echelons of power determined the editorial lines of the media without question. That became the norm, and from that time onwards the Islamophobia industry emerged.

The last point triggered a discussion about ideology and its bearing on news and newsworthiness. A participant referred to a previously mentioned argument about the emergence of Islam as an enemy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to this viewpoint, the Islamophobic discourse was boosted after 9/11, and it became very difficult to put the genie back in the bottle because the masses had already accepted the Islamophobic narrative. As a result, the narratives that were circulated in the past by populists or right-wing parties have become normalised as mainstream media themselves became the vehicle for this discourse.

Moreover, as the participant contended, then Prime Minister Tony Blair said in the aftermath of the War on Iraq that God would be his judge over the decision to go to war. Similarly, President George W. Bush often used God to justify the so-called "war on terror" as a religiously blessed and righteous campaign against "evil doers." According to this viewpoint, the problem with the media today in general and not just Western media is that ideological and political agendas are being transmitted through the media. Whether and how this issue can be tackled is the real predicament.

Double standards were additional sources of concern. In the coverage of the Israel-Palestine issue, Muslims are always the villains, with their supposed villainy being rooted in Islam itself and not the prevailing political circumstance. Exactions and abuses from Jewish protagonists, on the other hand, are never traced back to Judaism.

Furthermore, military propaganda is also a major contributor to the negative framing of Islam and

Muslims. In the post 9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the associated propaganda described the war as a fight against the bad Muslims 'over there', leaving audiences to connect the dots about Muslims at home. This propaganda, which depicted Muslims in Afghanistan as misogynists, left room for viewers around the world to assume that Muslims everywhere are misogynists.

Hence, the extremely important role of editors in shaping coverage was highlighted. According to this viewpoint, every human being has intrinsic biases, something journalists are not exempt from. However, it is important to have competent and unbiased editors, who can navigate the different issues while being acquainted with different cultures and worldviews. This factor was deemed critical to prevent prejudice and oversimplification.

Finally, it was also pointed out that the Muslim world itself should face up to its responsibilities. The Muslim world is rife with dictatorships and religious extremism. For example, when Hezbollah first started its bombing campaign against Western interests in Lebanon in the early 1980s, the name of the group was at that time "Islamic Jihad." How can Western journalists know that these acts do not really represent Islam? Likewise, today there is the so-called "Islamic State." Hence, it was argued that the very fact that militant organisations do use Islam in their names influences coverage as well as perceptions. Besides, the Muslim world's schisms (e.g. the conflicts between Saudis and Iranians) have also contributed to the negative way Muslims are covered in Western media. Nevertheless, this doesn't absolve Western media from their obligations to engage with the issues according to rigorous journalistic standards.

The Role of News Agencies

A participant went on to comment on the important role played by news agencies. They tend to be very precise in the use of terminology which is important as words matter. For example, after the attacks of 11 September 2001, Reuters refrained from using the word "terrorist," and editorial decision for which they received backlash from the American press. The reason is that "terrorism" is a word, which tends to be deployed rhetorically and selectively for the purpose of propagating particular political agendas.

This participant also highlighted that news agencies try to stay objective and impartial. In this quest, they tend to hire journalists from the country they cover. In Pakistan for example, Pakistani journalists will cover the country's affairs in addition to journalists from other nationalities, thereby ensuring local voices are heard. The BBC does the same as do the Times and the Guardian. This is done to make sure that the news outlets understand the culture and context from which they are reporting.

The latter point was highly emphasised. An attending academic mentioned that he remembered sitting at breakfast with the head of BBC and a noted Egyptian columnist and the BBC world editor said that he would never have grasped the impact of these cartoons if he was not posted in the Arab world and he would have never understood why people are upset. Exposure to and knowledge of the region, is thus demonstrated as being central to good reporting.

Lastly, some good deeds from Western organisations were also highlighted. Some news agencies have established foundations that help independent news outlets in the Global South, indicating that there are some efforts underway that aim support good journalism in many countries around the world.

While there were many positives that were said about news agencies, a journalist in attendance mentioned that the kind of coverage news agencies are producing does not end up - for the most part - in mainstream American news coverage. Hence, its impact is marginal.

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Not a Monolithic State of Affairs

Another contributor went on to comment that the Western world, like the Muslim world, is not monolithic. The conduct of international affairs in Italy is very different from France or the Anglo-Saxon world. There are nuances in the Western world and in Western viewpoints. The participant gave the example of the French view of terrorism being very different from the Italian view of terrorism as a way of illustrating this point.

Reference was then made to the example of Pakistan, whose image has been distorted by years of biased coverage. A journalist presented his experience of inviting friends and colleagues to visit him in Pakistan. Every time, the guests would comment that their experience of the country was totally different than what they had imagined - and much more beautiful. The journalist used this example to illustrate that prejudice can affect Western-Muslim relations, leading to a drop in journalistic standards when covering complex issues.

Another perspective highlighted that Western nations continue to undergo dramatic social and political changes. For example, Italy used to be a very homogenous country with strong traditions and one single religion. Now, Italy is facing waves of migration from Africa and the Middle East, and this is creating anxiety and fear. In cases like this the media has an ethical responsibility to not promote fear and xenophobia. They should instead spread awareness and knowledge and this will in turn decrease bias and prejudice as people will come to know each other more.

Finally, it was mentioned that realism is needed when approaching this subject. According to this stance, no media organisation has the resources to cater to all audiences and cover all possible perspectives. It is wishful thinking to believe that media can represent everyone.

Were There Projects that Could have Impacted the Narratives of Mainstream Media?

In 1982 Saudi Arabia purchased United Press International (UPI), an international news agency whose newswires provided news material to thousands of news outlets for most of the 20th century. However, this project failed.

Another more recent failure was Al Jazeera America, which was unsuccessful because it failed to understand how the cable industry operates in the US and subsequently became too expensive and rigid.

On the other hand, there are more emerging voices from the Global South like Al Jazeera, TRT World and other news organisations that promote an alternative discourse.

A journalist highlighted that his primary source of information nowadays is his mobile phone. He went on to say that Twitter in particular, and social media in general, are competing with conventional mainstream media as the main source of information for the masses around the world. However, it is also a double edge sword, as it

has also become a major disseminator for bigotry, hatred, and Islamophobia. Besides, the shrinking attention spans that social media have produced only lead to more media superficiality.

An additional intervention highlighted the need to inject hard cash to boost independent media in the Muslim World.

One final opinion centred on the need as journalists to educate. If journalists and reporters can educate the world and themselves, this is the way change can happen, and the cycle of negative news can be broken.

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