

Islamophobia in the Media since September 11th

by
Christopher Allen

EXPLORING ISLAMOPHOBIA

Deepening Our Understanding of Islam and Muslims

Saturday 29th September 2001, 9am – 6pm
University of Westminster, School of Law, 4-12 Little Titchfield Street
London W1R 7FW

A conference jointly organised by the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism, City Circle and Ar-Rum to complement the BBC's Season on 'Islam UK'. It is part-sponsored by Al-Khoei Foundation, London.

Our newspapers and television screens have again shown us images of Muslim men burning American flags whilst brandishing rifles, juxtaposed with angry young men shouting outside a north London mosque. Afghan women covered from head to toe in the burqha followed by women wearing the hijab protesting against military action outside the Pakistan embassy in London. And amongst all this, we are shown images of Muslim children holding placards bearing the face of Osama bin Laden on the streets of Islamabad.

Headlines proclaim "This fanaticism that we in the West can never understand", "Praise to Allah - dancing with joy the warrior race of fanatics born to detest the West" and "In the heart of London demands for a Holy War".

These are not headlines and images that are the exception to the rule, nor are they a result of years of studying Islamophobia in the media. Instead these are just a small sample of many similar examples that have been prolifically emblazoned across front pages and shown across our screens since the atrocities in America just over two weeks ago.

For some time now, the Muslim community and some interested others have believed that the media's portrayal and representation of Islam and been one of the most prevalent, virulent and socially significant sources of Islamophobia in this country.

This is not to say that the media are the cause of Islamophobia. However, it is fair to state that it is the most accessible and indiscriminate disseminator of such ideas in our global environment. Just looking through the 'Middle England' newspapers, the Daily Mail and the Daily Express both of whose readership Tony Blair is currently trying to woo, in the week following the attacks would no doubt convince any who might in any way question this situation.

Whilst some media sources and publications have tried to act with responsibility in realising 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, inciteful and more directly, extremely dangerous. What they have wholeheartedly reinforced is what I would suggest is the most dangerous aspect of Islamophobia; that Islam is entirely unidimensional and monolithic without any internal differentiation or opinion. Through indiscriminately saddling stories about Muslims in Afghanistan and Palestine with similar stories of Muslims in Britain, both the press and the wider media have deliberately overlooked the diversity that exists in both the British and global Islamic community. As such, it attributes to all Muslims the entire spectrum of negative characteristics that are fundamental to Islamophobia.

So whilst we are immune to reading the coupling of Islamic or Muslim with the inappropriate terms of 'extremist', 'fundamentalist', 'fanatic' and 'terrorist', its most recent repetitious usage has underlined a new development. Whilst the intimation has always been that Islam is the enemy of the West, the most recent usage of 'fanatic' and so on is confirming that these same Muslim 'threats' are not only in British society, but are now also willing to do the same to their British hosts as they did the Americans. For the majority of the British media, this has been stated and subsequently reiterated in a way that stresses that this is probable of ALL Muslims.

If we can trust the reports that say that Muslim men did hijack the passenger jets, then yes Muslims did perpetrate these crimes. However, these Muslims are limited to a specific number and until the widespread use of one's religious adherence becomes a vital and necessary factor in describing any individual or group that is featured in a news story, then the belief that Islam is being unfairly targeted will remain valid. Until we are informed that Jewish Israeli guards have opened fire on the West Bank or that Roman Catholic Basque separatists are

focusing their terrorist activities on the Spanish tourist trade, those concerned and interested parties will continue voicing their objections.

And it is this that I want to focus on; the indiscriminate nature of recent Islamophobia and the foundation upon which it was built.

In discussing this, I would like to firstly draw your attention to an observation that James Bignell made in his book entitled "Media Semiotics". He stated that the receptive audiences of news reporting generally regarded their output as being authoritative, immediate, realistic and authentic irrespective of its diversity of forms. As we look at some of these examples, it is worth bearing this in mind.

The Runnymede Trust in its 1997 report into Islamophobia stated that Islam was inherently seen as being the 'other' to the West, a situation that reinforces the 'them' and 'us' dualism. In this respect then we should not be too surprised to see such headlines as the Daily Mail's offering, "Fanatics with a death wish: I was born in Britain but I am a Muslim first". Here the Mail is merely reiterating those beliefs that are lodged at the heart of Islamophobia.

However, in the present climate, what the Mail are stating is that these Muslims, being the same ones Norman Tebbit xenophobically chastised in the late eighties over their allegiance at Test matches, are not only traitors to Britain at a cultural level, but are now also traitors to Britain because of their religion. The root therefore of the perceived problem lies now at the heart of the Islamic tradition rather than at any socio-economic circumstances that may otherwise have prevailed, for example in the recent riots in northern England. In this context where ALL Muslims become indistinguishably one, the threat from Muslims can no longer be underestimated. Not only those outside Britain are the enemy, but those born within it are too.

This enemy within and its subsequent threat can be further reinforced by two other aspects of the Mail's subsequent coverage. The first is their championing of Abu Hamsa. Beginning on the 14th September, the Daily Mail printed the same photo of Abu Hamsa on the 15th, 17th, 18th, 20th and 21st. In addition, they printed an interview with him on the 13th September that was subsequently re-used on the 15th and 18th as well. The question therefore must be why, especially when similar photos and interviews were published in the Sun, Mirror, Star, Express and Telegraph.

This repetitious use of Abu Hamsa's face and his subsequent words have brought about a situation where those reading this and who are ignorant of the Muslim community, must begin to believe that he is a significant and largely representative voice. However, what analysing his role does is highlight a series of other less apparent reasons. In Abu Hamsa's appearance, he conjures an image that is lodged right at the heart of anti-Islamic prejudice. He looks different to Western societal norms, he exists 'outside' of the West, his hooks are the scars of warfare that evoke the archetypal stereotypes of barbarism and he provides soundbites that make headlines sensationally newsworthy. He has become the press's mythical, personified construct that incorporates all the Islamophobic stereotypes that have become the pretext for much contemporary reporting. He is the Islamophobe's perfect caricature.

Add this to the complete marginalisation of those Muslims condemning the attacks and you have a fictional Muslim community that sits comfortably within the established norms of Islamophobic expectation.

What is happening in the media is that they are seeking out those with the loudest voices who fit their own agenda rather than fitting the agenda around the more significant voices, deliberately suggesting a cynicism where all Muslims have synonymous views. Not only that, but when the press are including in their reporting of these non-representative voices that they entered Britain as asylum

seekers, are claiming benefits and are abusing their rights as British citizens, the press have cleverly intertwined many other xenophobically charged issues into their coverage.

If we accept that the media's accessible audiences believe that the news is 'authoritative, immediate, realistic and authentic', then the reality of Islam becomes completely obscured by Islamophobic assertions.

This point is perfectly embodied by a cartoon that was printed in the Mail on the 20th. Below a picture of stereotypical Muslim men standing outside the Houses of Parliament holding placards saying 'death to Britain and America', the caption reads, "Parasite (Chambers English Dictionary): a creature which obtains food and physical protection from a host which never benefits from its presence". It refers not just to supporters of bin Laden, but refers to all Muslims without differentiation. Such an explicit expression of Islamophobia prompts many concerns. Islam therefore becomes the perceived shadowself of the modernised and progressive West. Such expressions also warrant serious analogies being made to the representation of the Jews in such early twentieth century literature as Hitler's "Mein Kampf", where gross exaggeration and dehumanisation had extremely dangerous consequences. In echoing this point, the German academic Gunther Grass this week stated contemporary attitudes towards Islam and the current climate of hate against it could provoke situation like the one that prompted Germany's Kristallnacht in 1938. As we saw then, once the enemy was so dehumanised and parasitical, what justification was needed to persecute and finally exterminate it?

So just how much truth lies at the foundations of the media's reporting? The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard states that media news is a hyper-realistic construct, where 'the real and the imaginary continually collapse into each other'. Considering those beliefs that are widely held about news reporting and the situation again raises further concerns.

Over the past few weeks, the media have asked the opinions of many different types of individual and organisation for their interpretation of the events. However, as I mentioned earlier with the lack of coverage given to condemnation emanating from the Muslim community, when it has come to explaining the role of Islam in these events, very few have actually been written or presented by Muslims themselves. And when they have, they have been carefully placed in a contradictory position. One example from the Mirror was an article concerning David Blunkett's call for the protection of British Muslims being placed alongside an article about a British postal worker that, I quote, "would join fellow Muslims in a war against the West". Another in the Financial Times about the role of President Musharraf of Pakistan was situated on a page that had 40% of it devoted to a photo of an Afghan woman brandishing a rifle and a Qur'an.

So when we ask what is real and what is imaginary, we must question how accurate, and indeed responsible a decision was it for news agencies to show Palestinian children dancing in the streets as the first response from the Muslim world to the terrorist tragedy? And when rumours circulate that these might have been CNN library pictures dating back to 1991 the distinction between fact and fiction becomes increasingly distorted.

Likewise with both television and press coverage, on what basis do they choose their experts that draw conclusions and assumptions with institutional authority and authenticity? Are they chosen as well because they fit a particular agenda in preference to relevant knowledge?

In the press, there have been articles demonising Islam written by Tom Clancy and Frederick Forsyth, both of whom are internationally renowned fiction writers. One must therefore ask whether as authors of espionage thrillers, can they ever present Islam accurately or in any way that is distinguishable from the enemies they create in their respective fictions?

Another type of commentator that has been prominent in the media's coverage is the academic expert. Whilst both television and newspapers have used such experts, their credentials really do need investigating. One that I did decide to question was an Islamic commentator called Professor John Casey. Although a fellow at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, his expertise is not in anything directly associated with Islam despite the article emphasising this with necessary authority. So as with the statement regarding the collapsing of reality and fiction, how can we know where the boundaries of fact lie in such media coverage?

The media itself is a largely self autonomous medium, that sets out to establish those attributes that Bignell expressed were commonly held by the general public. From news reports from various war zones to the BBC's and the Times' inextricable place as part of the British establishment; from the use of experts to the pictures in the press that purport to what authentically happened, the media bases itself, and indeed perpetuates itself on those very same foundations of authority, immediacy, realism and authenticity. Without these precepts the media is worthless.

But as we have seen, both prior to and increasingly since the events in America, the media also has its own agendas and beliefs that it too can quite inappropriately and irresponsibly incorporate into its output. As such, responsibility, accuracy, reality and truth may be overshadowed by other events and circumstances that may have a greater role in the overall scheme of both the news and media agencies, and indeed their respective governments as well.

And in this framework, the natural, almost taken for granted traits of Islamophobia can exist without causing any alarm or outcry from the majority of those that regularly engage with such sources. For them, the media has created a hyper-reality where people are alarmed at the scale of the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Centre but not the seemingly inevitable military action

that will no doubt inflict even more death and tragedy on innocent bystanders. Is this dehumanisation in practice?

Islamophobia's main distinctions amount to the fact that Islam is commonly interpreted therefore as being retrogressively backward and unidimensional; inherently separate and other to the West; the perpetual and inferior enemy to modernisation and Western values; and manipulative as an ideology to solely oppress and control. What the media has shown us over the past two weeks is that at its very core, the very heart of much of its reporting and coverage of issues connected, however remotely to Islam, is submerged in the same closed derogatory views. Whilst the Runnymede Trust concluded in its research, that Islamophobia is becoming increasingly natural, paradoxically its manifestations are becoming more explicit and extreme. As a consequence, the continuing irresponsibility that some sectors of the media have adopted over the past few weeks has seen the situation for British Muslims become ever more delicate.

Islamophobia is dangerous because it does not respect the individual. It is an indiscriminate prejudice that tarnishes every Muslim irrespective of social, ethnic or cultural orientation. And it is equally true that it has its effects on the motives and attitudes of millions of individuals, that in turn determines their behaviour to and beliefs about Muslims.

And when this becomes so socially significant that the actions of a remote and minority group of Muslims in another part of the world are enough to influence and mobilise others to attack Muslim women because they wear the hijab, paralyse men because of their religion or firebomb places of worship, the time to differentiate and apportion blame at those sources of irresponsibility must be upon us.

If a war materialises, whether against terrorism, Afghanistan, the Islamic world or indeed Muslims themselves, then as the saying goes, 'the first casualty of war is

truth'. If this is the case, then maybe the war against Islamophobia is one that needs to be fought against with truth.

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