

The Perception of Islam and Muslims in the Media and the Responsibility of European Muslims Towards the Media

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Global and regional political, economic and social development, in recent years, has troubled the relationship between Western, European and Islamic societies strongly and manifold. Throughout the world, people are witnessing unsettling changes. Non-Muslims and Muslims alike became victims of terror and violence by people pretending to act "in the name of Islam". Misunderstanding and prejudice seem to grow on both sides even though information systems and means of communication are highly sophisticated.

In the era of communication, wars begin, continue and end with media war. The Media shapes public opinion and covers realities by their censorship. The mass media are used as the most important weapon. There is a connection between the role of media and post-modernity. The media shapes the world how we see it.

It is a common observation that crises such as wars, recessions, stock market meltdowns, ethic scandals, and natural catastrophes often drive the public policy making process. A crisis reveals a problem and then a public consensus emerges that policymakers must do something about it (Snider2006:1). These crises reveal broadcasters' important role in communicating crisis information. They provide emerging information to the public in times of crisis. But choosing negative and frightening names for people or groups that powerful policymakers dislike, or using positive names for describing wildly acts - are parts of media tricks.

Nowadays, numerous media campaigns are going on against Islam and Muslims. Most Western media with considerable financial resources and multiple channels try to show a rough picture of Islam to their public. At the same time Muslim groups through various media outlets are trying to convey their messages, but in comparison to the global dominance of the western media, their efforts are somehow in vain. In this regard you can visit the website of the Islamic community in Croatia www.islamska-zajednica.hr and many others.

Most western media are using the September 11th event to capitalize its political gain. These media depict Islam as "fundamentalism", "extremism" and "radicalism". Of course, in the modern world where the role of media is central, the image of reality can be manipulated to misrepresent the actual facts. The media have tried to represent Muslims as "terrorists" posing a threat to the western security. By doing so, they try to justify the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In recent years, this approach has led to the emergence of "Islamophobia". However, little effort has been made to respond to these negative campaigns. On the contrary, the act of terrorist groups who kill people, especially western hostages, help their media to show that they are collectively victims of terrorism.

Despite the explosion of media coverage and publications on Islam and Muslims, the major challenge today involves getting accurate and verified information. The politicization of scholars, experts and media commentators in the post 9/11 period has created a minefield for policymakers and the general public as they search for answers to questions like: "What are the causes of radicalism and anti-Americanism?", "Why do they hate us?", "What do Muslim

women think about their status in Islam?” “Is Islam compatible with democracy?”, “What are the causes of global terrorism?” and many others. Too often, a reader is caught between the contending positions of seemingly qualified experts as well as a new cadre of Islamophobic authors who engage in a revisionist reading of Islam and Islamic history. So, what we should do? Suddenly a new empirically grounded tool emerged to get us beyond the limited interpretations and opinions of experts when answering the question: What do Muslims think and what do they care about?

The sense of threat to the Muslim cultural identity is enhanced by a predominant feeling that a secular and powerful West imposes its values upon the Muslim world. When asked the open-ended question, “In your own words, what do you resent most about the West?”, the most frequent response across all Islamic countries for both moderates and political radicals was “sexual and cultural promiscuity”; followed by “ethical and moral corruption” and “hatred of Muslims”. Another source of resentment comes from the depiction of Muslims in the Western media. A survey by Jack Shaheen in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, found that the vast majority of Arab characters in 900 American films were outright racist characters. Images of common day life and ordinary Muslims in their countries are almost non-existent or distorted in the western media. Moreover, the western media which are most popular in the Muslim world encourage emulation of Western fashion, personalities and values.

TV news are the most important source of public knowledge about world events. Approximately 80 percent of population relies on it as their main source of news (Philo and Berry2006:199). Western media with considerable financial resources try to show a rough picture of Islam to their public.

Some scholars believe that there is a direct connection between terrorism and modern global communication. Their studies show that most terrorists' acts are propaganda. Terrorism is an indirect psychological strategy which avoids direct contact with opponents. So, without media coverage terrorism disappears. After 9/11 the terms "Muslim" and "Terrorist" became synonymous in many western countries. Since this event, many experts and activists in the field of human rights have warned of the escalation of Islamophobia and racism against Muslims in many western countries.

The representation of Muslims in the media relates to the lack of acceptance of differences. The media creates public panic around the terrorist threat. As one scholar said the War on Terrorism is a war of images, and the most effective images are those of terrorists' victims. But on the other side we see discrimination associated with "Islamophobia". This phenomenon tries to show that Muslims are a threat to security. The focus on terrorism unifies TV coverage of Muslim news and the dominant image is "Islamic Terrorism". This belief leads to the production of anti-islamic films like "Fitna" by Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders. What is clear is that after the September 11th attacks, most experts talked about security matters, while the social and political causes of the attacks were forgotten. This stream continues in the Iraq war. Here too, the economic and political causes of the invasion were forgotten. It is obvious that the West has to review the idea of its own “Self” and the “Other”. The representation of Muslims in the western media has to change and **Interculturalism** has to replace Islamophobia.

To improve the image of Islam in the West it requires a strong and persistent effort from Muslims themselves, both in the Islamic world and in the Muslim communities in the West.

These efforts should include a comprehensive process of reforms. Muslims will never be able to improve their image in the world if they fail to appear as a nation of culture and civilization. Effective initiatives must also be undertaken to educate non-Muslims concerning correct Islamic concepts of peace and tolerance and to clarify the incorrect views of Islam held by some.

Tensions between Muslim immigrant communities and the majority populations are increasing in many European countries. Muslim immigrants are faced with discrimination and intolerance, wherever their identity became affiliated with their religion. It is certain that the political, economic and social challenges of integration can only be met by efforts on both sides and that these challenges are not necessarily linked to religion in the first place. Another challenge can be seen in the prevention of young people becoming radicalized. For many young Muslims, Islam seems to have become a substitute for their homeland which they can not find in the societies they live in. Non-Muslims and Muslims alike, state and religious organizations are equally challenged by these developments. Pluralism and the opportunity to develop and live multiple identities are an essential characteristic of the European model of life.

The starting point of our dialogue initiatives is the conviction that although religion and religious identity have increasingly gained importance, regional conflicts must not be understood simply as culturally or religiously motivated. Lack of mutual understanding must be overcome by dialogue. Strengthening pluralism within societies and reducing prejudices and foe images be it in Europe or in Muslim countries – also play a crucial role. Dialogue, therefore, must not refrain from controversies, must endure open debates in order to make the complexity of the issue at stake transparent and enable different perceptions still safeguarding the universal acceptance of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Real dialogue is possible only in the presence of mutual knowledge and acceptance of cultural and religious values. Accepting others must mean more than tolerance—it should mean accepting them as members of the community without necessarily any loss of their unique identity.

Such mutual acceptance should integrate both sides' values into a culturally richer community. Where there is respect, there will be willingness and even readiness to integrate some of those values to enrich one's own cultural and religious values. Such respect for others requires certain knowledge of the others' history and culture, ways of life, and other factors. Thanks to developments in communication technology, such knowledge is now easily available.

Interfaith and intercultural dialogues seek to reach a better mutual understanding and to engage in common activities. Its main attitude is reconciliation in order to create a better and more peaceful world, to share the world's resources more equally, and to help the underprivileged. Doctrinal, communal, or religious union should not be the real aim; rather, we should work for union in collaboration to do something together, to rise above discussions on doctrinal and ceremonial similarities and differences. Such union in collaboration is possible only in diversity and in conserving as much as possible of our own identity in an increasingly homogeneous world. These are converging not contradictory developments. This is true for nations and countries where borders are becoming less important or even disappearing, and also for religions. It seems evident that such a union can be realized only by collaborating with each other in a common global range of activities.

Some scholars say that intercultural dialogue is one of the major medicines to overcome humanity's common ills. Our world's durability depends, to a great extent, on the promotion of intercultural dialogue. We at the Islamic Community in Croatia also believe that establishment of dialog environments is a means to appreciate diverse opinions and eliminate the stereotypes often assigned to “Others”.

In that respect, we need to educate non-Muslims about Islam and Muslims about other faiths to establish mutual understanding and tolerance. To achieve this end, we invite and encourage sharing of various perspectives, partnership with other religious and cultural organizations and we organize educational activities such as seminars, lectures and discussion panels, all of which inspire and illuminate us in our endeavor to fulfill our mission.

As I am not an expert on internet and the new media, at the end of my presentation I would like to refer once again to the website of the Islamic community in Croatia – www.islamska-zajednica.hr – which has recently, and in connection with this roundtable, published an article on Islamophobia in Europe by Mr. Janko Bekić, who is research assistant at the Institute for International Relations in Zagreb. As this is the first time that an article written by a non-Muslim is published on the website of the Islamic community in Croatia, we consider it as a concrete example of intercultural dialogue in the digital sphere.