

## Islam, Muslims, and the Media

On 26 February 2009, scholars, students, and journalists gathered at Michigan State University (MSU) to hear experts' perspectives on "Islam, Muslims, and the Media." Organized by MSU's Muslim Studies Program and the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), it was kicked off the previous evening with the short documentary "Arabs, Jews, and the News" and a performance by comedian Azhar Usman of the "Allah Made Me Funny" tour. The Social Science Research Council; the MSU University Activities Board; the MSU Center for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies; and the Michigan State University-University of Wisconsin Consortium for Middle Eastern Studies also provided support. A brief summary of the different panels follows.

*The Impact of Journalism on Public Discourse.* Introductory remarks emphasized how journalist-conveyed information needs to be accurate due to its strong reverberating effect. For example, one university administrator stated that 80-85% of all fact-based information ultimately comes from traditional news sources.

*Building Resources for Journalists.* This panel analyzed the efforts of MSU students and professors to improve journalists' reporting on Islam and Muslims. Student discussants presented "Best Practices for Reporting on Islam" ([http://imaje.msu.edu/?page\\_id=11](http://imaje.msu.edu/?page_id=11)), while Salah Hassan (MSU) said that their overarching goals are to provide a nuanced portrayal of media coverage on Islam and Muslims and enable journalists to improve their coverage despite tight deadlines. One panelist asserted that Muslims do not expect

special treatment, but only the application of established best practices to dispel misconceptions. The tendency to relate all stories on Islam or Muslims to 9/11 was also mentioned. Some audience members opined that seeking true “objectivity” is an unreachable goal.

*Two Cases of European Muslims.* This panel featured Saeed Khan (fellow, ISPU; faculty member, Wayne State University) and Ahmet Kuru (San Diego State University). Khan’s generally positive view of Muslims and Britain’s tabloid and “more balanced” media detailed Muslim representations in mainstream British media, Muslim agency in and access to them, and their role in shaping the broader national discourse. He noted that the religious perspectives portrayed in ethnic-based media outlets are informed by their ethnic orientations, named some prominent Muslim voices in mainstream British media to illustrate general Muslim access to them, and said that a paradigmatic shift occurred after the 7 July 2005 London bombings (e.g., “terrorist” was replaced with “extremist” and religious associations with acts of violence were not made prematurely). He concluded by mentioning, among other things, that further improvements will require greater efforts by the mainstream media and more Muslim engagement with the public sphere.

Kuru remarked that France’s exceptional negativity toward its Muslims could best be explained by the cross-party alliances its citizens have managed to form, something that is apparently not feasible in other European political contexts. He argued that France’s ban on veiling and its media’s seeming fixation on Muslim-related issues is largely due to its unique political landscape. After expounding upon his dichotomy of passive (the United States) and active (France and Turkey) secularism, he characterized the French political scene (pre-headscarf issue) as a typical left-right divide (with active secularists on the left and passive ones on the right). The headscarf issue, however, generated new cross-party alliances between leftist multiculturalists who collaborated with rightist passive secularists, and xenophobic rightists who collaborated with leftist active secularists.

*International Coverage of Local Events.* During the lunch discussion, Dawud Walid (executive director, CAIR Michigan) shared his perspectives on the October 2009 shooting of an imam in Dearborn during an FBI raid and the attempted Christmas Day bombing. With respect to the former, Walid stressed that most media immediately broadcast government allegations of the imam’s suspected links to terrorism as unquestioned fact. He also reiterated a common frustration with the media’s quick labeling of any Arab or Muslim individual as a terrorist, whereas there is generally a great hesitance to do so when those involved are neither Arab nor Muslim. In clos-

ing, he said that while media coverage of Muslims seems to have improved in recent years, a great amount of progress still needs to be made.

*Creating and Deconstructing Mainstream Representations.* This panel consisted of Evelyn Alsultany (University of Michigan) and Brigid Maher (American University). Alsultany, who analyzed post-9/11 television representations of Arabs and Muslims, accentuated several strategies used to incorporate such characters: inserting the patriotic Arab/Muslim American, flipping the enemy, projecting a multicultural US society, and humanizing terrorist characters. She then offered her analytical notion of a “simplified complex” – a representational model of the “post-race” era that captures the reality of how variations in contemporary portrayals of Arab and Muslim characters provide the illusion of cultural sensitivity when, in actuality, they perpetuate such long-standing stereotypes as the good/bad Muslim binary and the racialized enemy against which the state defines its identity.

Brigid Maher reflected on some of the challenges she faced while making “Veiled Voices” ([www.veiledvoices.com](http://www.veiledvoices.com)). Designed to relay the stories of three female Muslim religious leaders in the Arab world, she had to gain their trust and make a documentary that was both appealing to the public and academically credible. Choosing to focus on three women facing different personal and public struggles presented its own difficulties, such as whether depicting one woman’s decision to file for divorce due to domestic violence would reinforce existing stereotypes of docile and passive Muslim women. She ultimately included it because the woman’s status as a divorcee was important to understanding her role as a religious leader.

*Struggles for Recognition of Human Dignity and Full Citizenship in the Arab World.* During her introduction of the keynote speaker, Lou Anna Simon (president, MSU) commented upon the conference’s importance and MSU’s unique Muslim Studies Program, which transcends the traditional focus on culture, language, and history by seeking to understand more “contemporary” issues, among them the theme of this conference.

Following these remarks, Keynote Speaker Rami Kouri (director, Issam Fares Institute of Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut; editor-at-large, *Daily Star* [Beirut]) stressed that the western media have largely missed the Arab world’s central dynamic: ordinary people deprived of their full human dignity or full citizenship rights have turned to religion (read “Islamism”) to express their political grievances. Throughout his remarks, he drew parallels with the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. He also argued that 9/11 was not a tremendously notable turning point in terms of how the western media depict Arabs and Muslims.

Furthermore, Khouri posited that the only area in which the Arab Muslim world has been able to compete with the West in terms of influence is that of communications – most notably Al-Jazeera, a regional media outlet that exemplifies the region’s “digital decolonization.” In conclusion, he reiterated that the ongoing biased media coverage can best be understood as symptomatic of a deeper power imbalance between both parties – an imbalance that increases the Arabs’ desire for true self-determination and independence from foreign powers and from unjust and authoritarian national leaders.

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