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Mediating Islam: Representation and Muslim Identity

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8. Mediating Islam

Representation and Muslim Identity

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Abstract

This essay argues that there is a predominant media narrative that asserts that Islam is inherently violent, Muslims are foreign and dangerous, we should remain alert and suspicious, and policies or acts of aggression against them are therefore justifiable. Routinized replication of simplistic, patterned, and easily recognizable Muslim identities leads to real social consequences. I demonstrate the dynamics at work in constructing Muslim media identities through an investigation of recent incidents, including the *Charlie Hebdo* and Chapel Hill shootings, several anti-Muslim crimes, and the media declarations encircling these events. These types of events are best understood within a context where persistent seemingly transparent anti-Muslim bias is part of social life due to the production and circulation of recognized Muslim identities. Overall, I argue that “identity” is not fixed, essential, or natural, and, therefore, examining the processes of identification rather than identity will be the most productive.

Keywords: Islam, news, social media, identity, America

Introduction

My argument at the root of this essay is simple and maybe even self-evident to many readers. There is a predominant media narrative that asserts that Islam is inherently violent, Muslims are foreign and dangerous, we should remain alert and suspicious, and policies or acts of aggression against them are therefore justifiable. Through the routinized replication of simplistic, patterned, and easily recognizable Muslim identities the media generates and perpetuates an atmosphere of enmity and mistrust. This cultural climate leads to real social consequences. While they usually do not directly inspire material or psychological violence, common media representations of Muslims substantiate fears, generate apathy, and elicit acceptance of uneven circumstances Muslims regularly face. These types of events are best understood within a context where persistent seemingly transparent anti-Muslim bias is part of social life due to the production and circulation of recognized Muslim identities.

The articulation of alternative Muslim identities disrupts audiences' preconceived understandings of who Muslims are and how they are often ignored, reframed, or diminished. I demonstrate the dynamics at work in constructing Muslim media identities through conversations in response to a few major recent incidents, including the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* (January 7, 2015), the Chapel Hill shooting (February 10, 2015), several anti-Muslim crimes committed thereafter, and the volley of media declarations encircling these events. In writing this and thinking through issues of representation and Muslim identity, what becomes clear is that "identity" is not fixed, essential, or natural. Reading the various and competing claims about Muslim identity, we can conclude, "there is no such thing as identity, only operational acts of identification" (Bayart: 92). Therefore, my objective in what follows is not to examine identity *per se* but the processes of identification: Who is identified as Muslim, by whom, and for what purposes; who recognizes those identities, and in what contexts; who contests those identifications, and how; who claims identities for themselves; and what are the benefits or consequences that extend from those identifications? (see further, Martin: 158-63).

Media Identities

It is not difficult to empathize with feelings of apprehension and uneasiness that arise from watching the evening news. The exhaustion of conflictual framing in mainstream news driven by the economic necessities of the 24-hour news cycle produces audience worry and returning-viewers seeking resolution. Between the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, the Copenhagen shootings, the Garland Texas shooting, the Phoenix mosque Biker rally, and the repeated atrocities committed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), if only in the past few months, Americans have been bombarded with reporting that informs their understanding of Muslims. Of course, we could construct a genealogy of Islamic moral panics that go back much farther.¹ Altogether, within this media context fear, suspicion, and retaliation govern how viewers encounter the Muslim. Very often the resultant stance welcomes governmental policies and aggression towards Muslims because these measures

¹ A few case studies of these moral panics are examined in Morgan and Poynting. The social factors that facilitate a politic of fear in western secular societies are outlined in Cesari. A long history of anti-Muslim sentiment through their representation as monsters is examined in Arjana.

correspond to perceptions of general Islamic identities that are rooted in violence and domination and, thus, making these measures justifiable to the audience (see Alsutany).

An initial example displays the possible negative consequences of popular media representations if they are carried through in their application. We find distinctive violent and persuasive rhetoric in the opening monologue of Fox News' "Justice with Judge Jeanine Pirro" on January 10, 2015 in response to the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings. Pirro asserts, "We Need to Kill Them. We Need to *Kill* Them. The radical Muslim terrorists hell-bent on killing us. You're in danger . . . I'm in danger. We're at war and this is not going to stop. After this week's brutal terror attacks in France, hopefully everybody now gets it" (*Fox News Insider*). This over-dramatized account goes on for seven minutes and highlights the issue with most of the examples I explore, the coupling of terrorist acts with Islam in general. In Pirro's diatribe there is the conflation of Arabness and Muslimness, the use of unidentifiable "they," "them," and "these people" (as in "You can't even reason with these people"), further threats of immanent doom (e.g. "I've been telling you for a year that they're coming for us. That there is a reverse crusade in progress, a Christian genocide"), a critique of governmental sympathies for Muslims, and assertions of a clandestine subjugation through the implementation of Sharia, immigration, and interfaith dialogue. The presentation claims that radical Muslim terrorists are an imminent threat that needs to be eradicated. Since "these people" hide their "true" identity and intentions, the audience must make the move to be skeptical of all people that are marked with a Muslim identity. And it is with this cognitive shift that the trouble lays when thinking about the social consequences of media representation.

Later that same month, there was substantial coverage of Muslim "no-go zones." These were reported to be regions in Europe where extreme Islamic practices were so pronounced that non-Muslims could not enter them, including the police. In an exchange between Judge Jeanine Pirro and Fox's Terrorism Expert, Steven Emerson, he asserted that Birmingham, England was a "totally Muslim city" (Rawlinson). David Cameron, the UK Prime Minister said, "When I heard this, frankly, I choked on my porridge and I thought it must be April Fools' Day . . . This guy's clearly a complete idiot" (Fishwick). Emerson and Fox news anchors publicly apologized for their misrepresentations, as did other prominent media personalities, like Anderson Cooper who apologized for not challenging guests' use of this idea on his own program. What may seem like a foolish case of the media getting carried away should be viewed as another example of the construction of "the Muslim" for public consumption. The Emerson-Pirro exchange intends to expose the "real" Muslim aims for the audience. Ultimately, we are presented with a narrative of domination and subjugation. And if it can happen there, in England, we need to be earnest in preparing for this immanent threat as well. We witness this readiness in a CNN interview with Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal. When responding to the (fallacious) "no-go zones," he commented, "They [Muslims] may be second, third, fourth generation, they don't consider themselves part of that country. They're actually going in there to colonize, to overtake the culture . . . If people don't want to come here to integrate and assimilate, what they're really trying to do is . . . overturn our culture" (Diamond). Here we can witness the materialization of dominant narratives about the Muslim taking shape in social outcomes. As a high level political actor, Bobby Jindal has substantial sway in structuring American policy. Stories are not just stories and they can

generate attitudes where policies repudiating the constructed Muslim or acts of hostility toward them seem rational and warranted.

Social Consequences

The products of the continued construction of Muslim identity in popular medias are tangible, as seen in both the social consciousness of the American public and resulting actions taken by a small (but substantial) subset of the population. In general, several recent polls reveal that many Americans trust news outlets that consistently represent Muslims as indistinguishable from terrorists, believe militant extremist groups are representative of Islam, and think the United States should implement strategies of increased scrutiny aimed specifically at Muslims in general. In the majority of cases, individuals know little about the tradition and, therefore, media formulations of Islam informing public opinion are their sole source of information. In 2015, a nationwide poll found that of the 1,286 registered voters questioned, 29% believed FOX News was the most trusted network and cable news coverage (Malloy; *Public Policy Polling*). This pattern has been ongoing for several years despite claims that the majority of statements on FOX News programs are false (*PunditFact*). This level of trust in the representations of reality for a public audience raises concerns about how Islam and Muslims are being presented on the station. Part of the narrative that is constructed is the questioning of the real essence of Islam, which is often merged with militant and political movements. For example, in a February 2015 issue of *USA Today* the results of two polls revealed that 27% of 1,000 Americans and 45% of 1,000 senior Protestant pastors believed that the militant group ISIS “gives a true indication of what an Islamic society looks like” (Madhani). If these types of activities are seen as representative, then Americans are justified in treating Muslims with suspicion and surveillance. Another poll conducted in June of 2014 revealed that 42% of people support profiling by law enforcement against American Muslims (Arab American Institute). Despite these well-formulated opinions about Islam, the religion and tradition of Islam remains unfamiliar to the majority of Americans and few actually know Muslims on a personal basis. Only four in ten Americans say they actually know someone who is Muslim (Pew Research Center). Overall, misinformation and general misgivings toward Muslims is largely shaped by the perpetual bombardment of negative, or at best incomplete, representations of Muslims in the media.

On occasion the perceptions of Muslims’ identity produced in the media motivate individual responses in the form of material acts of hate and prejudice. Most hate crimes involve assault, intimidation, or vandalism. According to the most recent “Hate Crime Statistics” (2013) from the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Reports, anti-Muslim hate crimes, on average 100-150 incidents per year since 2001, are five times higher than the pre-9/11 rate (Ingraham). These figures are likely partial as well since they are typically underreported because the FBI’s statistics gathering is a voluntary program dependent on police departments tracking of data and individual reporting incidents.

On February 10, 2015 the tragic murder of three young Muslims, Deah Shaddy Barakat, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina elevated media coverage on Muslims and refocused media attention on the identity of the Muslim. In response to this event mainstream media gave repeated opportunities for

family members and friends of the victims to simultaneously flesh out the victims' lives to a public audience and articulate their positions about what being a Muslim really means. The three victims were presented outside of common narratives of Islamically motivated violence or the subversion of American society, and instead most coverage highlighted their humanitarian activity, academic and professional successes, and exemplary personal qualities. To date, the debate whether the triple homicide was a religiously motivated hate crime is ongoing, but what we did witness is a ripple of actions that seemingly validate concerns about the public view of Muslims.

Following the Chapel Hill shooting a series of events aimed towards demonizing, humiliating, or harming Muslims occurred throughout America. Two days later, in Dearborn, Michigan a Muslim man in a Kroger grocery store was physically assaulted while the assailant yelled, "go back to your country" and "you terrorists." His family watched in horror and became the focus of the abuse when the attacker screamed, "take the rag off your head" to the man's young daughter (Hijazi; WXYZ-TV). The following day, portions of the Quba Islamic Institute in Houston were destroyed in an arson attack. Police found traces of an accelerant, evidence that this was a purposeful act (Dizard). The next Sunday, the Islamic School of Rhode Island was vandalized with the phrases "Allah is a pedophile," "Ragheads," "Pigs," and "Fuck Allah, Now This is a Hate Crime" (Mosendz; Noble). While the causal connections between the heightened media attention on the Chapel Hill shooting and the presentation of a new Muslim identity that did not resonate with common impressions of Islam cannot be drawn for all of these events, it seems likely that, at least in this instance, there was a conscious association between the multiple cases. Finally, on a Monday morning in Bothell, Washington the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center and a nearby school were tagged with Swastikas and "Get Out" and "Muslims get Out" (Humbert). Sadly, this demonstrates that some Americans are unable to direct their acts of hatred and intimidation towards their intended audience, further evidence that many are uninformed about Islam and confuse their Muslim and Hindu neighbors.

Intentionality is difficult to ascertain in events like these and often we cannot directly attribute anti-Muslim threats or vandalism to the effects of media representations of Muslims. Other instances are clearer in their motives. For example, on September 30, 2012 Randolph Linn entered the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo with the intentions of burning it down. He later pled guilty and admitted that he had been "riled up" after watching Fox News. When the judge asked him if he knew any Muslims or was familiar with Islam, he responded, "No, I only know what I hear on Fox News and what I hear on radio," and "Muslims are killing Americans and trying to blow stuff up. Most Muslims are terrorists and don't believe in Jesus Christ" (Wiggins). Unless a rationale is made explicit it would be difficult to directly connect an individual's actions with their mediated perception about Muslim identity. However, it seems likely that the more people actually interact with Muslims, instead of basing their knowledge on a media constructed identity, the greater chances of favorable social circumstances for Muslims.

Audience Responses²

The emerging media landscape that enables interactive audience response also reveals a persistent anti-Muslim bias within in our social life. Unfortunately, the rare instance of more full media representations of Muslims surrounding the Chapel Hill shooting was accompanied by stereotypical responses in social media venues to the unfolding anti-Muslim occurrences. For example, an announcement of the arson at the Quba Islamic Institute in Houston on Facebook received numerous comments that reproduce the repeated identity of Muslims as violent, foreign, and incompatible with American values (Quba Islamic Institute in Houston).³ Some statements were negative comments made in hateful jest, such as “We don’t need no water let the mother fucker burn,” “One down the rest to go,” or “I can donate some bacon sandwiches and a bible if you all want!” Several comments were repeated formulaic tropes about Muslims, which might be read as justification for such acts of violence against them. One user posted several comments revealing their understanding of the role of women in Islam.

What do your women think or have you stoned them to death for getting raped?

Do you always side step that you treat your women like property and that they are beneath you.

Ohhhhhh and why do you chop the hands off of women that smoke and use cell phones?

Why, why do you defend and not exterminate these folks who marry 14 year olds and all this other stuff? Why can these things happen and we hear nothing on the condemnation of their actions? All I hear is allahu akbar. Your god is not great if these things happen in his name.

Others structured the event as one that should be expected due to the perceived dichotomy between the constructed Muslim identity and America. These assertions frame the event as one of deserved retribution, including “Keep poking the bear and you will see more of it. We have taken more than enough of your shit!!!!” “About time the tables are turned! don’t feel bad for you one bit! Where were you on 9/11?” and “Your culture and beliefs are incompatible with those of this Christian united states. I suggest you return to your homeland and convert it into a fine republic like the USA with equal rights to all.” Some were marked by suspicion and questioned the positions of both Muslim and their non-

² The ethical concerns surrounding citing social media are still being debated and there is no standard policy. Therefore, I have chosen to only cite comments made on publicly available Facebook pages or Twitter, which is a public platform. I consider these unrestricted published statements. However, I have anonymized the authors to the best of my ability in order to protect their identities. My use of these public comments is intended to pose no greater threat to the individuals than their own decision to make the comment.

³ All comments have been quoted as they are written in the original Facebook post; spelling and grammar are often different from formal writing guidelines. In most cases, I have not added “sic” to indicate these idiosyncrasies. I also only cite the main page for the original Quba Islamic Institute in Houston post, not individual comments on that post. This is a further step to maintain anonymity. Some comments have been deleted since they were first written and accessed.

Muslim community supporters. For example, “Have any of you sympathizers read the Koran?? Mohammhead [sic] did not spread love or peace. Quite the opposite. Keep your heads in the sand . . . although that will not help you when they come for you to take it off. Dumb assess!!” and “any money they receive will be sent to CAIR, then on to the Muslim Brotherhood, who will use it to support terror, around the world.” Finally, some comments even seem fanatical in their perceived judgment, inherent logic, and social prescriptions, such as the following:

I call upon all loyal Americans to support a 9/11 Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: It shall be illegal for any Muslim to visit, work or live inside the United States. It shall be illegal to own or teach the Koran for without the Koran there would have been no 9/11. Further the United Nations should be petitioned by all peaceful, freedom loving peoples world wide to make it illegal for any Muslim to visit, work or live outside of an Islamic nation. Islam is not a religion and is deserving of no respect or protection as such. Islam is a crime against humanity. ISLAM = Is Satan Labeled As Muslims.

While these types of statements certainly do not represent the sentiments of average Americans, I do see them as evidence of social patterns that are accepted and reproduced on a regular basis.

We saw similar responses to the Chapel Hill shooting. Within days of the incident a Facebook page commemorating the shooter, Craig Stephen Hicks, as a hero was created, but was quickly deleted due to Facebook Hate Speech policy. Others commented openly on Facebook saying things like “Has hunting season opened in North Carolina?” “3 down . . . x many to go,” and “Muslims need to leave our country we don't want any of you here.” (Husseini; Samara). Some took to Twitter with responses like, “I'm outraged only 3 MUSLIMS were killed! Kill them all!” “fuck Muslims kill them all the goat fucker kid raping pieces of shit,” and “christ people muslims kill christians and groups everyday . . . karma bitches . . . the guy is a hero in my book . . .” (al-Azariy).

While the shooting incident in North Carolina and the attending responses on social media are horrific and reprehensible, they are seemingly natural for a public that is repeatedly told, in Judge Pirro's words: “We Need to Kill Them!” Overall, we can see that the identity of the Muslim in public discourses is in flux and contestation. Despite the numerous and persistent public condemnation of acts of violence and distancing from its perpetrators by Muslims groups and individuals many in the broader American public do not buy it.⁴ Therefore, Muslim identity will continue to be shaped in opposing ways depending on the forum, audience, and purposes for its declaration.

Identity

So what do explorations of media representations and Muslim identities add to our conversation on identity? We can conclude that identity is not an essential characteristic but a historical construct that emerges within particular political, social, and ideological contests.

⁴ The public demand for Muslims to speak out is a repeated call in the media; see the *Bridge Initiative* for a recent collection of public statements denouncing acts of violence made in the name of Islam.

Identity is not only self-attributed but also asserted and established by outside actors. Identifying processes are elastic, fluid, and debated. Overall, identity becomes part of the social imaginary through the classifications that are being made. Power structures and audience assumptions limit and shape how identities are constructed and received. Muslims today, despite their attempts to express their self-identity, are confronted with powerful dominant representations that are more likely to be recognized as authentic by many of their non-Muslims neighbors.

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