

Media Bias: Psychological Impact on Arab-Americans

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Abstract

Islam religion and the Muslim and Arab-American citizens continue to be the target of social media networks, news analysts, television anchors, politicians, and governmental terrorism experts. These citizens and their communities endure acts of discrimination and bias in many aspects of their lives including their homes, work and places of worship. This research aimed to explore the extent of media bias and its psychological impact on Muslims and Arab-Americans. Statistical analyses were applied including a chi-square test and the logistic regression techniques to help identify significant relationships between responses, and independent variables used in the study. Results indicated that a majority of the respondents were aware of the prejudicial media bias toward the Muslims and Arab-Americans communities. Further studies are warranted in an attempt to eradicate this act of discrimination.

Keywords: Arab-Americans, Media Bias, Islam, Muslim

1. Introduction

In 1776, the United States of America was founded on the ideas of equality. The constitution's basic premise states "all men are created equal". Through time, continuous immigration and assimilation has produced a diverse population representing many countries, traditions, languages, religions and cultures. To date, the United States is the third largest country in the world and arguably the most culturally diverse as well. (Zimmermann, 2015) [15].

However, the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York presented the beginning of hatred and bias toward Muslims and Arab-Americans (Khan 2013). [8] Following the terrorist attacks, the FBI reported a 17-fold increase of hate crimes against Muslims in the subsequent year (Federal Bureau of Investigation). Hate crimes are defined as crimes that are committed out of fear, ignorance or hatred of another. The 9/11 attacks were viewed by many as a personal attack on American soil by Muslims and those who practiced the Islamic religion. Unfortunately, as a result of this new fear, all Muslims and Arab-Americans were viewed as potential threats and profiled through the media and governmental agencies. Unfair biases were placed upon an entire people based on a few who committed a heinous act. Fear and hate permeated the following years.

Muslims and Arab-Americans a-like, face discrimination across America. While Muslims are followers of the Islamic religion, the distinction between religious and racist discrimination tends to be distorted (Allen and Nielsen 2002). In contrast, Arabs are an ethnic group of Arabic-speaking people inhabiting the Middle East and North Africa. The Global Research Report (2016) describes this discrimination as "Islamophobia", or fear of Islam and Muslims. This fear intensified due to global media's negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims; depicting Muslims generally as violent, fanatical, bigoted, or as extremists and terrorists.

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In a report from The New York Times, Mastracci (2016) portrays Islam more toxic than cancer. As per the report, Islam has continued to be mentioned in news outlets at an increasing rate over the last decade. This includes news at an average of 5.4 headlines per day in 2014, nearly a 1,000 percent rise from 2013 (Mastracci, 2016). Some speculate this increase is likely due to ISIL. The percentage of negative headlines regarding Islam and Muslims also jumped in 2014, to 68 percent from 35 percent in 2009. (Mastracci, 2016)

Although America prides itself with free speech, it can come at a cost for those who are presumed guilty rather than innocent. In an age where news is global, Muslims can become victims when crimes occur in another country. The innocent Muslims living in the United States have to bear the brunt of this needless, negative propaganda. According to Elmasry (2015), three Muslim-Americans were murdered in the University of North Carolina dorm room. This was not coincidental but rather reactionary due to the murder of a Paris journalist, Charlie Hebdo, that same month. The article further posits: “that studies show inconsistent coverage of violent global and regional conflicts. When Christians, Jews and other non-Muslims are killed by Muslims, Islam is identified as playing a direct role. When Muslims are killed by Jews, Christians and other non-Muslims, however, the religious identity of the violent perpetrators is downplayed or ignored. This is bolstered by the fact that there was little western news coverage on the persecution faced by Rohingya Muslims, who Human Rights Watch says have been subjected to mass killings”. (Elmasry, 2015, pg.1)

Inaccurate news coverage is damaging to the Muslim culture and undermines the general notion that we are all human beings with certain rights and freedoms in order to coexist in a diverse population. Lack of information along with an ingrained prejudice is a powerful weapon of hate. Craig Anderson, a Distinguished Professor of psychology at Iowa State University, and colleagues conducted a series of studies prior to the current presidential campaign to gauge the influence of media coverage portraying Muslims as terrorists. The results of the studies revealed a startling fact. As per the study:

“The influence of negative media stories as well as a separate link we found between political conservatism and anti-Muslim sentiments and beliefs, both suggest that U.S. political candidates who were willing to take very strong anti-Muslim stands would get a lot of support from the most active and vocal conservatives”. (Saleem, Prot, Anderson and Lemieux, 2015, pg. 1)

To further prove this point, current Republican president-elect Donald Trump demonstrated that anti-Muslim sentiment is far from forgotten across the nation. Trump called for, “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” (Trump 2015). In response to this statement, an ABC News/Washington Post poll indicated that 59% of Republicans supported Trump’s proposal (Langer Research, 2015). The support of this proposal suggests strong anti-Muslim feelings by a significant percentage of Americans. Unfortunately, by supporting the notion of a shutdown of immigration, transports America and the world to a darker time in history.

For instance, the immigration ban proposal by Trump elicits similarities to the Chinese Exclusion Act and internment of Japanese-Americans, two dark points in American history. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act banned the immigration of all Chinese people to the US. This ban was repealed in 1943, over 60 years later. This ban was encouraged by some Americans who felt that the unique culture and language of the Chinese was too different to be accepted. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the internment of all Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast, as World War II escalated. The government felt that Japanese immigrants could become disloyal to the US in favor of America’s enemy, Japan. In 1988, the US government officially apologized to those who were forcibly relocated and admitted the decision was based on racial prejudice (100th United States Congress).

Trump also called for a mandatory national database for all Muslims in the United States. According to a poll shortly after Trump’s statement, 67% of Trump voters

supported such a database. Furthermore, 44% of Trump voters agreed that the practice of Islam should be completely illegal in the US Public Policy Polling. While this poll is from 2015, it can be assumed that since the Republican's party presidential-elect is now Donald Trump, his supporters and followers have increased, thus perpetuating an increasing hatred and prejudice towards Islam, Muslims and Arab-Americans.

Since 2001, being or perceived to be Muslim and/or Arab seems to be sufficient grounds for legal, social and cultural suspicion. Misinformation, or the lack of accurate information, engendered by television and radio programs, as well as the forces of social media, play a significant role in American perceptions, attitudes, behaviors and misunderstandings of Muslims and Arab-Americans.

As a result of the media outlets, social media, inaccurate news reports, those who are Muslims and Arab-Americans who do not associate themselves with any form of radicalism face an incredible psychological burden. Negative external factors can impact one's self-esteem and shapes a negative self-image. Alibeli and Yaghi (2012) suggest that "intolerant people may not only deny their intolerance but also they may project such intolerance onto a minority group like Muslim Americans." (pg. 23) This reinforces the notion that prejudice and bias will directly impact the individual that the prejudice is perceived.

One social construct to describe the psychological impact on cultural, religion and racial bias is a universal orientation. Universal orientation describes the process by which one integrates perceptual data into a sense of oneself and others (Phillips & Ziller, 1997). According to this theory, "a person, depending on their orientation, attends to an array of potentially colliding stimuli and focuses on information that reinforces her original view of self or other. Hence, as cited in Phillips & Ziller (1997) "orientation is one of the earliest processes in the perceptual-cognitive sequence and is an interactive feature of a perceiver's personality that allows the actor to actively construe a supporting social niche for the self." (Kahn & Ecklund, 2012, pg. 4)

In view of this cultural fear and unwarranted distrust, the authors of this paper sought to explore the attitudes and feelings of a specific US region, Southeast Texas, toward all citizens of the Arab-American and Muslim communities.

2. Methodology

This study consisted of a quantitative survey using a significant sample size ($n = 513$) to determine attitudes towards Muslims and Arab-Americans. The validity of this survey is based on a previous work by Hamza et al. (2001, 2002-2006). It was conducted to explore the respondents' attitudes toward Muslims and Arab-Americans in the United States. The independent variables of *religion*, *age*, *ethnicity*, *vocation*, *area*, and *gender* were used, with pre-set questions to study the attitudinal relationships of each variable.

The data were collected and sampled from several Southeast Texas cities. A survey was completed by a random sampling of volunteers from various organizations, such as retail stores, hospitals, and restaurants. Thirty questions were answered based on a five-point Likert scale (*strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*, and *no opinion*). The survey also includes demographic variables, such as *vocation*, *ethnicity*, *religious affiliation*, *gender*, *age*, and *place of residence*. The responses indicate whether the data show any evidence of bias. The data were then analyzed with statistical techniques including the chi-square test of independence and the logistical regression method. Detailed tables and results are indicated below.

3. Data

The following tables portray the data collected for this research study. The tables below show the survey results, the chi-test results and the logistical regression results. The first table includes the survey questions and their results in percentages.

The following Table summarizes all the results from the survey. The questions were organized into three categories: *agree or strongly agree*, *disagree or strongly disagree*, and *don't know*. The authors sought to identify any evidence of bias based on the responses of these questions.

Table 1. Survey Results

Survey Questions	Agree or Strongly Agree	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
1) Aware of media broadcast bias against the Arab-Muslim community	70%	16%	14%
2) No race problem in the United States	6%	94%	0%
3) Would contribute money or time to social programs to help the Arab-Muslim community	24%	54%	22%
4) Feel film-making corporations (i.e., Hollywood) portray bad images of the Arab Muslim	48%	36%	16%
5) White civilization is the most highly developed, sophisticated culture to have ever existed on earth	37%	44%	19%
6) Are aware of bias against Arab-Muslims in their own community	54%	28%	18%
7) Do not pay attention to a person's place of origin or religion	49%	48%	3%
8) Have been in a work or collegial relationship with an Arab-Muslim	67%	27%	6%
9) Think Arab-Muslim children behave just like non Arab-Muslim children	49%	24%	27%

10) Know if Arab-Muslims have been discriminated against	46%	30%	24%
11) When an Arab-Muslim sits or stands next to them in a public place, they would move away	13%	84%	3%
12) Would listen to the use of Arab-Muslim jokes and derogatory statements when presented the opportunity	39%	46%	15%
13)) Feel uncomfortable when Arab-Muslims use their own language in their presence	41%	56%	3%
14) Their views of Arab- Muslims have negatively changed since 9/11	46%	50%	4%
15) When they think of Arab-Muslims, they think of the 9/11 tragedy	40%	57%	3%
16) Think the United States media is biased toward Arab-Muslim's culture	56%	30%	14%
17) Think Arab-Muslim communities suffer prejudice in the United States		16%	13%
18) Would mind having an Arab-Muslim as their congressman	43%	40%	17%
19) Would not mind having a veiled Arab-Muslim woman as their congressman	31%	53%	16%
20) Think Arab-Muslims are more violent than non-Arab Muslims	17%	61%	22%
21) Express their	42%	47%	11%

honest opinion when an Arab Muslim is present without worrying about whether they appear racist			
22) Think they can do something about discrimination against Arab-Muslims	30%	41%	29%
23) Arab-Muslim children are being affected by media bias	53%	22%	25%
24) Change the T.V. channel or radio station if it includes bias or discriminatory reports about Arab-Muslims	26%	57%	17%
25) Usually tend to believe much of what is being said about Arab-Muslims in the media	30%	62%	8%
26) Have never intensely disliked anyone	52%	45%	3%
27) Believe cultural knowledge affects their expectations	64%	20%	16%
28) Believe they would be uncomfortable with people who have different values from themselves	23%	71%	6%
29) Have studied the culture and religion of Arab-Muslims	21%	65%	14%
30) Media bias can cause depression in Arab-Muslim families	59%	17%	24%

There are several important findings to note in the above table. Below are the significant percentages and their results.

- **94%** of the respondents stated that racial problems exist in the United States.

- **71%** thought Arab-Muslim communities suffer prejudice in the United States.
- **62%** tended not to believe much of what is being said about Arab-Muslims in the media.
- **40%** of the respondents indicated that when they think of Arab-Muslims, they think of the 9-11 tragedy.
- **48%** of the respondents indicated that they would pay attention to a person's place of origin or religion.
- **59%** of the respondents stated that media bias can cause depression in Arab-Muslim families.
- **65%** of the respondents stated that they have not studied the cultures and religion of Arab-Muslim people.
- **57%** stated that they would not change the T.V. channel or radio station if it includes bias or discriminatory reports about Arab-Muslim people.
- **54%** indicated they would not contribute money or time to social programs to help the Arab Muslim community.
- **17%** stated that they think Arab Muslims are more violent than non-Arab Muslims, and **22%** said they did not know.
- **46%** stated that their views of Arab-Muslims have negatively changed since 9/11.
- **54%** indicated they are aware of bias against Arab-Muslims in their own community.
- **41%** of the respondents stated they would feel uncomfortable when Arab-Muslim people were speaking their own language in their presence.
- **53%** think Arab-Muslim children are being affected by media bias.
- **48%** indicated that they would not express their honest opinion without worrying about appearing racist in the presence of an Arab-Muslim.

The chi-square test of independence was calculated to determine if there were any significant relationships between the response variable and set of the independent variables used in the study. Table 2 reveals that there is statistically significant evidence of a relationship between the response variable and Vocation, Ethnicity, Religion, Gender, and Area at the 0.05 level of significance which led to the rejection of the null hypothesis of independence (since $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.05$).

Table 2. Chi-Test

Variable	Vocation	Ethnicity	Religion	Area	Gender	DF	p-value
Response	2193.90	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	6	0.000
Response	0.00	2511.25	0.00	0.00	0.00	6	0.000
Response	0.00	0.00	5060.33	0.00	0.00	6	0.000
Response	0.00	0.00	0.00	940.735	0.00	4	0.000
Response	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1703.71	4	0.000

The logistic regression method was used to study the relationship between the ordinal response variable and set of the explanatory variables used in the study. The coefficients

(Coef), p-values, standard errors (SE), and odds ratio are provided in Table 3.

Authors notice that p-values for vocation, religion, and gender are less than 0.05 the level of significance. There is statistically significant evidence to conclude that vocation, religion, and gender contribute significant effect to the model. There is insufficient evidence that conclude that the variables ethnicity and area contributes a significant effect to the model. The log-likelihood from the maximum likelihood iterations is -4088.086 with statistic $G = 34.190$ and a p-value = 0.000, indicating that there is a statistically significant evidence that at least one of the coefficients is different from zero.

Table 3. Logistic Regression

Variable	Coeff±SE	Z	p-value	OR
Constant	1.829±0.238	7.68	<0.000	
Vocation	0.065±0.021	3.11	<0.002	1.07
Ethnicity	0.016±0.028	0.59	0.555	1.02
Religion	-0.082±0.030	-2.77	0.006	0.92
Area	-0.026±0.051	-0.51	0.613	0.97
Gender	0.349±0.080	4.35	<0.000	1.42
Age	-0.002±0.003	-0.62	0.535	1.00

4. Discussion

There are several interesting results as analyzed by the survey. First, the negative impact of the media was found to be significant in certain areas. A compelling result was that 94% of those who completed this survey (referred to as respondents) agree that racial problems do exist in the United States, and specifically, 56% think that the United States media are biased toward the Arab-Muslim cultures. Additionally, 41% of the respondents indicated that they would feel uncomfortable in an environment where Arab-Muslims were speaking their own language. However, 62% responded that they usually tend not to believe much of what was said about Arab-Muslims in the media. Although this may sound like a contradiction, the respondents agree that the media uses propaganda to sensationalize its audience but still feel a strong prejudice against the Muslim and Arab-American community.

Additional results include roughly 46% respondents knew of actual instances of discrimination, but 54% had not witnessed any or were aware of any situations where that had occurred. In regards to political representation, interestingly, 40% indicated they would disagree with having an Arab-Muslim as their congressman. Furthermore, 53% indicated they would not accept having a veiled Arab-Muslim woman as their congresswoman. These results illustrate that the respondents potentially view Muslims or Arab-Americans as inferior s was the finding that 57% stated they would not change the television channel or radio station if a broadcast included biased or discriminatory reports about Arab-Muslims. Prejudice and hate is a learned behavior. By continuing to listen or watch an injustice occur is allowing the hate to perpetuate or be acceptable. Educating individuals on what to do when such information is presented can be a starting point to stopping this behavior. Alarming results continued that 54% respondents agreed that they were aware of bias in the communal treatment of Arab-Americans. Moreover, 54% noted they would not contribute money or time to social programs designed to help the Arab-Muslim community. As a final positive reflection in the results is 64% percent of the respondents indicated that they believe their knowledge of cultures affects their expectations. This means that learning about each other's cultures and educating each other on who they are can positively impact the negative outlook and discrimination on this culture.

A final fact and possibly most important to note from the results relate to the negative psychological impact of prejudice and bias. Results indicated that 59% mentioned that media bias could cause depression in Arab-Muslim families, but 24% admitted that they did not know about this. This result supports Chan's findings that Muslim children often experience discrimination from some of their non-Muslim peers (Carter, 1999). Furthermore, bigoted behaviors that encourage stereotyping can lead to problems in school for Arab-Muslim children since they may feel humiliated if observed in a different light than other students (Carter, 1999).

The psychological problems caused by the negative media bias can affect not only the individual but their entire family. This unwarranted prejudice and blatant disregard of learning the facts before judging can actually harm another's psychological state of mind. Mental illness can be the psychological result from media and social bias. SXs (symptoms) include the following: Anger, Aggression, Depression, Identity confusion, Parent-child relational problems, Separation Anxiety, Panic Attacks, Defiance, Conduct problems, Mood problems, PTSD, and much more.

According to the American Psychological Association's DSM V, the following diagnoses are outlined with their title and code that may significantly contribute to social and media bias:

1. Adjustment Disorder With mixed anxiety and depressed mood: 309.28 (F43.23)
2. Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder: 296.99 (F34.8)
3. Oppositional Defiant Disorder: 313.81(F91.3)
4. Adjustment Disorder With mixed disturbance of emotions and conduct 309.4 (F43.25)
5. Acute Stress Disorder 308.3 (F43.0)
6. Persistent Depressive Disorder (Dysthymia) 300.4 (F34.1)
7. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder 309.81(F43.10)
8. Non-rapid Eye Movement Sleep Arousal Disorders, Sleep terror type 307.46 (F51.4)
9. Intermittent explosive disorder 312.34 (F63.81)
10. Generalized Anxiety Disorder 300.02 (F41.1)
11. Major Depressive Disorder With mixed features 296.20 (F32.9)
12. Unspecified Personality Disorder With mixed features 301.9 (F60.9)
13. Panic Disorder 300.01 (F41.0)
14. Generalized Anxiety Disorder 300.02 (F41.1)
15. Cyclothymic Disorder 301.13 (F34.0)
16. Paranoid Personality Disorder 301.0 (F60.0)
17. Borderline Personality Disorder 301.83 (F60.3) (APA, DSMV, 2016)

As you can determine by the list above, the psychological ramifications are extreme which may require intensive therapeutic techniques such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Instructional Therapy, and Reframing to mitigate symptoms of depression, anxiety, emotional disturbance, and adjustment problems. Media bias harms an individual to the point of developing neurological, psychological, behavioral and potentially social disorders. Based on the current literature and findings in this study, action must take place so that people are aware of the danger they are causing to innocent victims. Bias and prejudice must take a back stage to an objective point of view when reporting facts in a news or social outlet.

5. Conclusion

According to the findings of this survey, 70% of the people were aware of media bias against the Arab-Muslim community. Yet, 57% of the respondents stated they would not

change the television channel or radio station, even if it included biased or discriminatory reports about Arab-Muslims. Thus, there is an unspoken compliance with the promotion of media bias. This is supported by the finding that only 30% felt they could do something about discrimination against Arab-Muslims (see Table 1). The greatest need in combating this misinformation promulgated by the media toward Arab Americans and Muslims is more education and understanding. This is supported by the finding that only 21% of the survey respondents indicated that they had studied the culture and religion of Arab-Muslims. For further research in this regard, one might target a larger sampling and compare the attitudes of formally educated people versus non-educated to see if there is any difference in their opinions toward Muslims and Arab Americans in the United States. There could be an added dimension of administering a survey in different regions of the United States.

Teaching about Islam and the treatment of Muslims in America are now central issues in national conversations that are occurring throughout America's major educational and political institutions (Moore, 2005). The process of change is slow, however, as Muslims and Arab-Americans are still ongoing targets of prejudice, discriminatory practices, and misunderstandings. Both the international and national media continue to attack these ethnic groups (Bayoumi, 2006).

Through the teaching of the tenets of all major religions, including Islam, students would ostensibly be more intellectually and emotionally equipped to recognize the use of stereotypes and become citizens who work toward reducing prejudice and discrimination against Muslims and other religious minorities. It would be interesting to see if any of this focus on religious and cultural education has begun to affect the responses on future surveys designed to detect bias toward Muslims and Arab-Americans.

Not only the media had been significantly bias and disseminating implicit hatred and dislike to the public against Islam and Muslims, it had also misinformed and twisted factual information against people of Islamic faith or Arab ancestry. By watching even small segments of popular US media one might have a strong dosage of hatred and dislike to these groups. While thousands of crimes are committed by criminals from all walks of life, only and we need to emphasize this word (only) those of a Muslim or Arabic backgrounds religion and belief system is called to the red carpet and broadcasted over main stream media including but not limited to Major media newscasters and movie makers.

While the Muslim and Arab community are first to suffer and endure the impact of this negative media bias (including loss of lives, aggression, anger, social segregation and despise, and the like). We need to think the long term impact of this media hostility and bias on long term basis. Ask ourselves, who is befitting from all this media bias and how?" Only by exploring the "who's" and "what's" and "purpose" from an objective lens, we are able to build a peaceful American society for all American children. It is just unwise to regress our humanity and civility to a level that once we regretted and was a dark era of discrimination in the history of our country.

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