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Anti-Muslim narratives within the US Media

Historical background of anti-Muslim sentiments in the US

In January 2016, the Pew Research Centre estimated that there were 3.3 million Muslims living in the US, out of a total of 322 million people.[1] The study also estimated that the percentage of Muslims in the US will double by 2050.[2] However, alongside such steady growth, attitudes towards Muslims have been deteriorating further in the US over the last fifteen years. Since the turn of the millennium, notably 9/11, anti-Muslim sentiments rose significantly, and Muslims became the key 'other' in Western societies around the world.[3] The wars in Afghanistan, in 2001, and Iraq, in 2003, and the resulting American deaths, can also be linked to the rise in anti-Muslim sentiments over the course of the first few years of the millennium. By 2008, the multi-cultural potential, and hope for a national acceptance of Muslims, in America looked optimistic, with the appointment of Barack Obama, a half-Muslim African American, as President. Yet the rise of Islamic State in the Middle East, their persistent presence on social media and their frequent attacks in Western countries has arguably destroyed the potential of multi-cultural peace in America which Obama's election originally gave hope for. While the time period, since the turn of the millennium, is important to acknowledge due to the terrorist activity in these years, the unique geographical position of the US must also be discussed. Compared to Europe and the Middle East, the Atlantic Ocean ensures that America is physically disconnected from the 'migrant crisis' and is situated geographically further from the central terrorist threat. This is what makes the influence of the media in the US even more striking, as, being so removed from the central terrorist threat, the picture the media paints is ever more influential, and subjective. This study will therefore explore the prevailing narratives in the US media which, since the turn of the millennium, have consistently depicted Muslims as incompatible, outdated and, sometimes, as a dangerous religion.

Terminology

I will refer to the narratives of some forms of US media as 'anti-Muslim', yet the term 'Islamophobic' will also be interchangeably used. The literal interpretation of this word would of course mean 'a fear' of Islam, yet the definition of the term has been debated amongst scholars. When used in this study, it's use is based on Stephen Schwartz's definition, for this interpretation acknowledges a persistent habit of some forms of media to relate terrorism to the entire religion of Islam:

'Islamophobia is a reality that abolishes distinctions between the small minority of Muslims engaged in terrorism and the overwhelming majority who repudiate fundamentalism, decline to support jihadism, and practice Islam as a normal religion'.[4]

The reality of global Muslim involvement in terrorism

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[1] Besheer Mohamed, 'A New Estimate of the US Muslim Population', *Pew Research* (2016) <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=65c3bb5fd7-Religion_Weekly_Jan_7_2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-65c3bb5fd7-400104481> [accessed 1st April 2016]

[2] *ibid*

[3] Christine Ogan, and Lars Willnat, Rosemary Pennington, Manaf Bashir, 'The rise of anti-Muslim prejudice: Media and Islamophobia in Europe and the United States', *the International Communication Gazette*, 76 (2014), 27-46 (p. 28).

[4] Stephen Schwartz, 'Islamophobia: America's New Fear Industry', *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, 90 (2010) 19-21 (p. 20).

The attention that the US media has dedicated to portraying the Islamic community as a threat to both Western culture and, in some cases, even a threat to the lives of Westerners, has risen significantly in this time period, with scholars such as P. Seib arguing that Muslims have filled the vacuum of the threatening 'other' previously filled by the Communists.[5] Yet the media does not represent the overall reality of Muslim and terrorist relations. For example, in 2011, Charles Kurzman found that fewer than one in 100,000 Muslims across the world have been involved in terrorist activity since 9/11.[6]

Outline of dimensions of Islamophobia

My study focuses on important aspects of the US media which influence those who absorb the information transmitted to create, as Schwartz argues, a 'fear industry'.[7] I will first assess the overall coverage of the mainstream news in the US through analysis of various studies since 2001. It is important to acknowledge and assess the overall picture that the mainstream news in the US paints, as it is the most accessed form of information, and thus it most likely to influence popular public viewpoint. I will secondly assess the political rhetoric in the US news, to show how the media are providing a platform for, and thus legitimising, anti-Muslim policy suggestions from politicians. Analysis of how political suggestions are presented by the media is incredibly important, as it demonstrates how the American public understand who and how they think America should be governed. I will thirdly assess a specific mainstream news network, Fox News. Fox News has been acknowledged by various scholars for being conservative, with a study from RP Jones (et al) showing that 68% of respondents who trust Fox News also tend to believe that Islamic values are incompatible with American values.[8] Jones also found that 60% of Republicans who trusted Fox News believe that Muslims are attempting to establish Shariah law in the United States.[9] Both statistics, and the high level of those who believe each statement, demonstrate a trend with Edward Said's 'Orientalism' theory that the 'Orient' culture is a threat to the Occident culture, and thus imply that Fox News influences the public's viewpoints surrounding Muslims, specifically making them mistrust Muslims living in America.[10] Lastly, I will analyse how users of social media, namely Facebook and Twitter, contribute to Islamophobic attitudes in the US. The development of social media is incredibly important for two reasons. It firstly allows anyone to publish opinions to the world, rather than having to go through a publication, and it secondly is largely unmonitored. On one hand, Islamic State have used social media, namely Twitter, to spread messages of terror by posting execution videos, and also to recruit Muslims from countries across the world. Ironically, on the other hand, social media has also been harnessed by those wanting to discriminate against all Muslims and, as by Schwartz's definition, generalise all Muslims as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. It is important to acknowledge the existing Islamophobic representations of Muslims in the media prior to 9/11, for example through Hollywood films which Eric Love argues specifically depicted the 'racialized image of a villainous Middle Eastern "oil sheik"' and later the '"terrorist" stereotype'.[11] However, this research project will focus on the post-9/11 period, which Love argues was the time when multi-culturalism forced Hollywood to abandon the portrayal of this stereotype, which was 'no longer acceptable'.[12] In acknowledgement of the abandonment of Hollywood stereotyping, and in acknowledgement of the development of new media, it is therefore incredibly important for this study to analyse the impact of social media on how Islamophobic viewpoints have been transmitted since 9/11 as a whole new platform for anti-Muslim sentiments.

Mainstream news coverage

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[5] P. Seib, 'The news media and the clash of civilizations' in *Parameters: US Army War College* (2004), 34(4), 71-85
[6] Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 11.
[7] Schwartz, p. 19.
[8] RP Jones, Cox D, Galston WA, et al. (2011) 'What it means to be American: attitudes in an increasingly diverse America ten years after 9/11', *Governance Studies at Brookings and the Public Religion Research Insititute,* p. 19.
[9] *ibid*
[10] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995)
[11] Erik Love, 'Confronting Islamophobia in the United States: framing civil rights activism among Middle Eastern Americans', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43 (2009), 401-425 (pp. 410-411).
[12] Love, p. 412.

The coverage that the US media have attributed to stories involving Islam has been overwhelmingly negative in the time period from 9/11 until the present day. Schwartz argues that the negative coverage stems from a general poor knowledge of Islam within the US media industry, elaborating that 'most Americans seemed to have discovered the existence of Islam and Muslims in the aftermath of one day of fear [9/11]'.[13] Speaking in 2010, Schwartz specifically said that ''few media representatives have acquired the detailed knowledge of Islam that would help them better define, for the global public, radical and moderate Islam'.[14] While this is an important point, the Islamophobic nature of the media cannot be attributed to naivety or lack of education in that area, as most stories about Muslims have been negative. A Pew study from 2009 revealed that, out of all the religion-related news in the US press from 2008 and 2009, the main focus was negative, with the most popular stories being on the ban on minarets in Switzerland and the shooting at Fort Hood in Texas by a Muslim Major.[15] Similarly, Media Tenor, based on a study of US media coverage in 2010, found that coverage of Islam was mainly based on international conflict, with nearly 130 negative stories in a year, compared to approximately 20 positive stories.[16] There were many more stories, numbering around 260, classed as 'no clear rating', but the distinct lack of positivity in the media regarding stories surrounding Islam demonstrates the untrusting narrative which is echoed in many types of US media. The persistent lack of positive stories about Muslims in the media across these years demonstrates that, despite many years passing since 9/11, the US media were (and still are) demonizing Muslims through their general news coverage. To use a specific example of a news story written and broadcasted from a negative and suggestive angle, Christine Ogan (et al) argues that the strong opposition to the building of the Park51 Islamic Community Center near the site of Ground Zero, and the media's 'predominantly negative' coverage of the plans, demonstrates a strong anti-Muslim attitude nearly a decade after 9/11.[17] The media's negativity demonstrates a habit in America to typify all Muslims, for example those spending time in Park51, as linked to the prior attack a few blocks away. Through their generalisation and consequent opposition, we see Schwartz's definition of Islamophobia manifesting itself in popular America headlines, and influencing those with little knowledge about Islam. The negativity surrounding a news story naturally creates an untrusting narrative, but the persistent coverage of negative stories involving terrorism creates a narrative of hysteria based on the construction of Muslims as a scape-goat, a position previously occupied by the Communists. Schwartz argues that, as a result of such scape-goating, 'the books and other media embodying this view [Islamophobia] could accurately be called artefacts of the new American "fear industry"'.[18]

Islamophobic political rhetoric

The US media, while not allowing a full coverage of Muslim-related stories, also give a platform to some politicians who propose anti-Muslim policies. By reporting on their policies, and implying support for their ideas, the media has in part legitimised the Islamophobia behind such policies in the eyes of the public who absorb the news. Beinart uses context to further Schwartz' point, arguing that the 21st century generalizing of Muslims within the US as a threat to the country is reminiscent of McCarthyism and demonstrates, once again, the influence that 'hysteria-peddling politicians' can have:

'During the Republican presidential primaries, Herman Cain said he would not appoint a Muslim to his cabinet. Newt Gingrich warned incessantly about Sharia being imposed upon the United States. In July, Michele Bachmann and several other members of Congress insinuated that Huma Abedin, one of the few American Muslims in a high-level government job, was an agent of Egypt's Muslim

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[13] Schwartz, p. 19.
[14] Schwartz, p. 20.
[15] Pew Research, 'Religion in the News: 2009', *Pew Forum* (2010) <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/03/25/religion-in-the-news-2009/> [accessed 2nd April 2016]
[16] Media Tenor, 'Ground Zero is more than Just a Location', *Media Tenor* (2011) http://ch.mediatenor.com/de/bibliothek/fallstudien/politics# [accessed 10th April 2016]
[17] Ogan et al., p. 41.
[18] Schwartz, p. 19.

Brotherhood. John McCain, Marco Rubio, and John Boehner criticized Bachmann's smear campaign, but Gingrich, Rush Limbaugh, Eric Cantor, and Romney adviser John Bolton defended it.'[19]

Ogan argues that 'right-wing conservative politicians who spout anti-Islamic rhetoric have gained a foothold and increasingly feel comfortable to speak out'.[20] The case could not be more true in the current 2016 Republican Presidential elections. Donald Trump, who was named 'Islamophobe of the Year' by the Islamic Human Rights Organization in March 2016, is a key example of a Islamophobic politician who is being given a platform by the media.[21] Trump has vowed in campaign speeches to stamp out ISIS, but he consistently fails to acknowledge that his speeches are demonizing all the Muslims in America. For example, after the San Bernardino shootings, Trump promised to ban all Muslims from entering the US if he is elected as president.[22] The promises were broadcast worldwide, and the promises Trump made demonized Muslims as a whole, and legitimized the thoughts of anyone who agreed that Muslims as a whole as dangerous. As a result of Trump's allegations, he is enhancing the revival of McCarthyism, and the media's significant coverage of his words are giving his platform to do so. Similarly, Ben Carson, former Republican candidate, told the news platforms that he would "not advocate that we put a Muslim in charge of this nation".[23] Yet again, we see the words of a politician being broadcast and influencing Americans, if not the whole world. The publication of these allegations made by politicians are particularly influential on those who may not know any Muslims, so are much more likely to believe what a politician tells them. In his study on what role emotions play in anti-Muslim politics in the US, Michael Charles Grillo argues that 'pre-existing negative attitudes about Muslims, and perceiving Muslims as a threat were associated with support for discriminatory policies against that group'.[24] Here, Grillo emphasises the influence of the media on the public response to anti-Muslim policies. Perhaps, however, the actions of politicians cannot be entirely blamed for the anti-Muslim sentiment in the US. Grillo says that 'nationalist leaders do not have to create or rouse negative emotions, but simply need to tap into pre-existing negative attitudes about the rival group'.[25] On one hand, Grillo's point that politicians (note, only some politicians) need only tailor their policies to the pre-existing attitudes about Muslims to win votes is clearly understandable. Donald Trump's current success in the Republican Presidential elections demonstrates that, despite some media backlash to his anti-immigration policies and America-First proposed plan of action, he has appealed to a large group of Americans who already view Muslims with suspicion. However, I do not believe it is a case of anti-Muslim sentiment stemming from either public opinion or proposed policies. Instead, I believe it is a complex formula and a vicious cycle, where politicians legitimise existing anti-Muslim sentiment through policy suggestion, and encourage further public Islamophobia, yet they do so on the basis of winning elections to appeal to the pre-existing Islamophobic sections of the public. Ultimately, though, the connection between the politicians and the public is the media, who provide the platform for politicians to legitimise anti-Muslim sentiment, and encourage further Islamophobia, yet politicians are able to understand the high proportion of anti-Muslim sentiment through the high level of polls created by the media in the US, many of which distinctly show a dislike and mistrust for Muslims.

Fox News as a tool of Islamophobia

Fox News are renowned for their conservative viewpoint, yet this regularly strays into racism and, as Muslim are the key 'other' at the moment, Islamophobia. Fred Vultee, in his analysis of Fox's output, said: 'A visit any day to the website of the Fox News Channel is likely to offer yet another piece of a

[19] Peter Beinart, 'A Quiet Campaign of Violence Against American Muslims', *News Week* (2012) <http://europe.newsweek.com/quiet-campaign-violence-against-american-muslims-64443> [accessed 20th April 2016]
[20] Ogan et al., p. 34.
[21] Tara John, 'Donald Trump named Islamophobe of the Year by Muslim Group', *Time* (2016) <http://time.com/4245957/donald-trump-islamophobia-award/> [accessed 6th March 2016]
[22] Ed Pilkington, 'Donald Trump: ban all Muslims from entering US', *The Guardian* (2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/07/donald-trump-ban-all-muslims-entering-us-san-bernardino-shooting> [accessed 25th February 2016]
[23] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34385051
[24] Michael Charles Grillo, 'The Roles of Emotions in Discriminatory Ethno-Religious Politics: An Experimental Study of Anti-Muslim Politics in the United States', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 15 (2014), 583-603 (p. 584).
[25] Grillo, p. 603.

sinister puzzle: the looming threat of Islam to everything the West holds dear'.[26] In terms of to what extent Fox is responsible for creating the sinister puzzle, Vultee summarises the situation perfectly:

'*Fox News does not create the pieces of that puzzle. Even the ones that appear to be made up from whole cloth are carefully attributed to the organizations they originate from. What Fox does is act as a collator, a clearinghouse of unrelated and often quite unremarkable developments that, taken together, create a clear ideological dialogue with its audience about how to relate to and interpret the Islamic world.*'[27]

It is not difficult to see why Vultee focused on Fox in his 2009 study. The news channel, owned by Rupert Murdoch, is notoriously right-wing and have consistently contributed to the revival of McCarthyism in the US since 9/11. Vultee even closely highlights certain terminology, such as the consistent use of the terms 'they' and 'us', to represent how Fox News is sat as living proof of Said's theory of Orientalism.[28] Seven years later, in 2016, Fox are still notoriously Islamophobic and, with the development of ISIS and their propaganda execution videos, Fox are able to stir up hysteria through their news, to create fear and anger in the public towards Muslims in general. This paragraph will develop Vultee's study of Fox News articles through analysis of some of their more recent news. In April 2016, Fox published an article reporting that some abandoned areas in Massachusetts might be used as a burial grounds, and how local residents were unhappy about this. The angle of the article, however, held a strong theme. Firstly, the headline included the word 'Muslim', as if to insinuate that this was a problem in itself : 'Plans for Muslim cemeteries across US met with worry, disappointment'.[29] Secondly, the angle of the article fell heavily on the 'dismay', 'worry' and 'disappointment' of the local residents. Yet the most striking part of this article was the last line. Fox used a quote from the head of the Islamic Society, to allow them to share their viewpoint on the matter. However, they used the following quote as the last line: 'Amjad Bhatti, president of the Islamic Society, said some of the comments have hurt because he considers the U.S. his home after moving from Pakistan 20 years ago and raising his family here. They belong to this land now," he said. "This is our country"'. Using the quote of 'this is our country' could be interpreted as threatening to non-Muslim Americans and was not doubt placed there to incite anti-Muslim feelings among Fox's mainly conservative readers. In a point that ties in with the last paragraph, Fox's coverage of Donald Trump has been vast, and has legitimized the anti-Muslim comments and plans he has made. For example, Trump's 'foreign policy' plans, of which have already been described as including a plan to block Muslims from entering the US, were described by Fox as 'a bold new vision'.[30] The terminology used makes it clear that Fox are showing approval for Trump's plans. To further legitimize Trump's aims, Fox even interviewed a small number of American Muslims who are supporting Trump's campaign, almost to imply that, as the few they interviewed agree with him, he is not being Islamophobic. The opening paragraph of the article said: 'As a Donald Trump supporter, Nedal Tamer feels he's in the minority among Muslim-Americans, comfortable with his choice yet somewhat confounded that he doesn't have more company'.[31] Later in the article, Fox used the mutual agreement points of traditional marriage and opposition to abortion to argue that Muslims and the Republicans have a lot in common. This, however, is short-sighted and does not appreciate the complexity of two different cultures. Evidently, Fox's anti-Muslim narrative has continued over the past fifteen years and, through both their support for Trump and the implications they regularly make about Muslims, they are helping the continuation of Islamophobia in the US.

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[26] Vultee, Fred, 'JUMP BACK JACK, MOHAMMED'S HERE', *Journalism Studies*, 10 (2009), 623-638 (p. 623).

[27] Vultee, p. 623.
[28] Vultee, p. 627.
[29] Fox News, 'Plans for Muslim cemeteries across US met with worry, disappointment', *Fox News* (2016) < http://www.foxnews.com/us/2016/04/27/plans-for-muslim-cemeteries-across-us-met-with-worry-disappointment.html?intcmp=hplnws> [accessed 1st May 2016]
[30] Fox News, 'Walid Phares: Trump lays out a new vision for American foreign policy leadership', *Fox News* (2016) < http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2016/04/27/walid-phares-trump-lays-out-new-vision-for-american-foreign-policy-leadership.html> [accessed 2nd May 2016]
[31] Fox News, 'Small number of Muslims backing Trump see past his blunster', *Fox News* (2016) < http://www.foxnews.com/us/2016/04/25/small-number-muslims-backing-trump-see-past-his-bluster.html> [accessed 2nd May 2016]

Prevailing anti-Muslim narratives adopted through social media

Maleiha Malik, in her analysis of Western anti-Muslim prejudice, details that viewpoints must be considered within the political, educational and media sphere, and from a local, national and transnational level.[32] She develops by saying that changes within the contemporary use of media may caused 'prejudice to proliferate more rapidly', and, in reference to the 21st century development of social media, there can not be a more relevant change to touch upon. As spoken about, 9/11 was an immense turning point in bringing Muslims in to the forefront of the public's, and media's, eye. However, as explained, the prejudice has persisted over the last fifteen years, despite the appointment of Obama, a half-Muslim black president, in 2008. This is no doubt due to the rise of Islamic State, and the media's uneven coverage of the crisis in the Middle East over positive stories about Muslims, but the development of social media has undoubtedly allowed ideas, both from the media and straight from the minds of the public, to spread more rapidly. The power of the internet, and the applications created through it, must not be ignored. It is this development of social media which makes 2016 profoundly different to 2001. On one hand, social media allows Islamic State to spread messages of terror and recruit, but it also allows other people to express views, some of which are ironically anti-Muslim. It also allows news outlets to share their stories to a further audience on new platforms- for example, Fox, as of May 2016, has 9.09 million followers on Twitter, and over 12.3 million 'likes' on their Facebook page, which demonstrates the immense coverage they have. However, there are figures on social media whose accounts do not exist to create more 'shares' and 'likes' for mainstream news channels. They are instead there to express their own opinion to as many online followers they may have. Rupert Murdoch's twitter account is an example of someone with a significant online presence, without directly posting stories on behalf of a news channel. Murdoch's account is highly political, but has occasionally made comments about Muslims which are not consistent with his twitter history, and thus his demonizing of Islam is painfully evident. For example, on the 17th December 2015, Murdoch tweeted 'In UK prisons 5% Muslim, but Muslims 32% of "most dangerous". Govt worried'. The tweet was both inconsistent with his usual feed, and insinuated that a high proportion of Muslims are dangerous. Murdoch, who has 763,000 followers on Twitter and owns News Corporation, has a lot of influence over the media's output and to see a very generalized depiction of Muslims through such a tweet is indicative of the power that social media can have on getting these ideas across to the public.

Conclusion

'Islamophobia remains a problem for the West as well as for Muslims in that it leaves Americans ignorant of the real situation in the Islamic world, and cuts the West off from potential allies in defeating radical Islam.'- Stephen Schwartz.[33]

Schwartz' comment reflects the situation in America, where Islamophobia still persists despite the decade and a half since 9/11 and the appointment of a half-Muslim president in 2008. Here, and no doubt as a result of the recurrent theme in some American media that Muslims are a threat to the country, and the external events in the Middle East, it does not seem hopeful that the anti-Muslim narratives within the media will cease any time soon. My major finding is that, since 2001, Islamophobic attitudes expressed through the media have not lessened. Coverage is mainly negative, and anti-Muslim political rhetoric is frequently supported through consistently negative news coverage. A key aspect of development since 2001 has been the growth of social media, which has allowed Islamophobic news outlets such as Fox News to spread a message through yet another platform. Social media is also allowing key Islamophobes in the US another platform to make their narrative clear from, and it is unlikely that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter will disappear any time soon. As print journalism dies out, and online journalism becomes more influential, we will see stories hitting our screens faster, and ideas about Muslims being spread much easier. Ultimately, the US seems unable to function without having a significant 'other' in society. It was once the Communists, and such overwhelming suspicion created hysteria within the country. We now see a revival of McCarthyism with Muslims. Sadly, with the crisis in the Middle East, and the high number of refugees leaving the area, the pressure of external events will not help the situation of blame in the

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[32] Maleiha Malik, 'Anti-Muslim Prejudice in the West, past and present: an introduction', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43:3-4 (2009), 207-212 (p. 211).
[33] Schwartz, p. 20.

US. While the general US media should be treading carefully around stories which could indicate blame, I feel this won't happen, as hysteria-filled stories interest the public and the fictional, generalized villainous Muslim figure will create endless stories for some of the US media when angled in a certain way.

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