



BEYOND FLAK ATTACK

A New Engagement
with the Newsroom



Nazim Baksh

TABAH ESSAY SERIES

NO. 2, 2010

ISBN 978-9948-15-577-5



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TABAH ESSAY SERIES | NUMBER 2 | 2010

ISSN: 2077-4850

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ISBN: 978-9948-15-577-5

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P.O. Box 107442

Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.

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🕌 *Tabah Essays* consist of short conceptual presentations by well-known authors, focusing on the elucidation of ideas to inform and stimulate new Islamic perspectives on the contemporary world.

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About the Author

Nazim Baksh is a broadcast correspondent with the CBC and a Canadian Journalism Fellow at Massey College, University of Toronto. He has most recently been producing and reporting for news documentaries focusing on the root causes of terrorism. During the last year, Baksh has worked on the production of two full-edition documentaries, “Nuclear Jihad”, and “Land, Gold and Women”.



Summary

THIS ESSAY is written for Muslim activists and scholars who are alarmed at today's headlines and would like to engage the mass media in the hope of balancing its predominantly negative reporting with positive stories pertaining to Islam and Muslims.

The essay begins by providing a historical synopsis of how Muslims in the West and the Middle East have attempted to strategically alter the mass media's role in fostering a climate of Islamophobia.¹ It is the author's observation that except for sporadic cases of balanced and fair coverage, the Western media have been unresponsive to Muslim pressure.

One possible reason for this lies in the traditional mode of Muslim engagement with the mass media. In the United States, Canada and Western Europe, the dominant mode of Muslim engagement with the media is characterized by the author as "flak attack".² When Muslims sense that news reports or docu-

1. *Islamophobia* is a neologism that refers to prejudice or discrimination against Islam or Muslims.

2. Flak, originally a German acronym for antiaircraft artillery, is generally used to refer to any strong criticism. It is commonly used in the me-

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mentaries are even slightly negative, they will assume that bias is at work and immediately launch letter-writing campaigns, file complaints to the media-licensing bodies or the Ombudsman, and initiate boycotts and protests which occasionally involve the burning of effigies. A strategy of confrontation and accusations has only served to deepen the chasm between Muslims, whether they live in majority or minority societies, and the Western mass media.

Muslim-style media flak has eaten up millions of dollars in the last 30 years with nothing to show for it other than the complete collapse of a constructive relationship with the mass media. There is not a shred of trust or goodwill between the newsroom and the Muslim community.

To get past this impasse Muslims must abandon a media strategy that targets journalists with allegations of bias, lies, bigotry, racism and prejudice. Such accusations are usually interpreted as deeply personal in nature and perhaps will, more often than not, force journalists to defend their reports, even when they contain a mountain of factual mistakes, innuendos, generalizations, and stereotypes.

The author is not advocating an end to media flak. Flak should be encouraged, if only to let media executives know that the public is alive and kicking. Flak is a sign of civic life in free societies. But instead of a knee-jerk response to negative media, Muslim leaders and activists need to closely examine the systemic constraints that produce “news values” which are in turn embedded in the media environment.

The constraints that give rise to news values are derived from a set of “filters” through which raw information percolates before reporters transmit it to the public. For example, media

dia world to refer to unfavorable public response or outright hostility. “Flak attacks” are meant to influence media coverage when an interest group perceives media bias is at work.

sources are among the most powerful filters because they directly affect the way events are reported. Also, size and ownership in the media industry are important “filters” that determine the product media consumers receive.

It is true that some journalists who harbor ill-intent toward Muslims will conveniently blame deadlines and shrinking budgets to mask an epidemic crisis of laziness and a deficit of knowledge when it comes to Islam and Muslims. It is also true that media filters are so fundamentally powerful that they compel the majority of journalists, particularly those with integrity and good intentions, to follow the pack and stay within a defined set of news values. Nevertheless, the study argues that by engaging the mass media with an understanding of how filters impact the lives of reporters, new approaches will open up for Muslims to engage the media and break the standoff that currently plagues their engagement.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



Beyond Flak Attack A New Engagement with the Newsroom

REGARDLESS of where they reside, Muslims strongly believe that the mass media routinely stereotypes them as terrorists, murderers and followers of a vile religion. This belief holds true whether Muslims are rich or poor, black, white or brown.

For example, Muslim men complain bitterly that they are often portrayed as aggressive male chauvinists and women cite a litany of examples where they are routinely stereotyped as a weak and oppressed class forced by their fathers and spouses to wear the hijab.

This is generally true whether the media platform is radio, television or print, or whether it is news, current affairs or entertainment.

Since the publication of Edward Said's seminal 1981 work titled *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the World*, to the 2006 study com-

missioned by the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, there can be no denying the charge that the Western mass media has been overwhelmingly negative in its coverage of Islam, Muslims and Arabs.

Livingstone's report was titled *The Search for Common Ground* and it involved nine leading academics and professionals from the media industry and experts on Islam. The study concluded that 90% of 352 articles pertaining to Islam and Muslims printed in London newspapers between May 8 to 14, 2006 were "negative".¹

An interesting detail of the study is that 96% of tabloid coverage was assessed as negative compared to 89% of broadsheet reporting that was deemed negative. The fact that the margin of difference was not much higher is shocking.

The report also found that Muslims in the national press were portrayed as being a threat to traditional British customs, that there was little or no common ground between the West and Islam, and that the tone of language in many articles was emotive, immoderate, alarmist or abusive.

Flak Attack

Beginning in the 1970s, Muslim groups in the West such as the Muslim Student Association (est. 1963) relied on a strategy of "flak attack" to counter-perceive media assault.

There is no doubt that flak campaigns have forced the Western media to grudgingly issue partial corrections and half-hearted apologies.

As far back as the early 1980s Muslim leaders realized that flak alone was not going to suddenly change the media's negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims.

1. *The Search for Common Ground: Muslims, Non-Muslims and the UK Media. A Report Commissioned by the Mayor of London* (London: Greater London Authority, 2007).

This realization seemed to have occurred at the same time that the Western media had reached a position of global information dominance and it could therefore afford to brush aside flak attacks that had little or no legal, moral, or advertising bite.

A sense of desperation was widely felt among Muslim leaders and some media activists viewed Muslim reliance on flak a pointless exercise. In order to address this growing concern the World Muslim League held its first Asian Islamic conference in Karachi in 1978 and agreed to assist Muslim journalists and media representatives to counter “the Zionist-controlled western monopoly over a mass media” which they deemed to be “antagonistic towards Islam and Muslims”.²

The tenor of their discussion reflected an approach to the mass media that circumscribed its role to advancing or inhibiting the political and ideological goals of the Muslim-Arab world. Even to this day, Western and Arab broadcast media are evaluated by the viewing public almost entirely on the basis of their passion and determination in exposing the crimes of the State of Israel against the Palestinian people.

Further developments occurred in September 1981 with the first international conference of Muslim journalists and media representatives held in Jakarta. An impressive 250 Muslim journalists from 50 countries were in attendance. They ended the meeting by endorsing a covenant for Muslim journalists.

The covenant, designed for Muslim media professionals, emphasized that “Islamic rules of conduct should form the basis for all Muslim media practitioners in their journalistic endeavours”. It was further stated that the consolidation of Islamic values and ethical principles in the faith of the Muslim individual should be the main obligation of Muslim media. While this might have been

2. Aslam Abdullah, “The Muslim Media: Present Status and Future Directions”, *Forum Komuniskai*, vol. 1, no. 2, (January 1988).

a simple re-casting of modern journalistic ideals – honesty, integrity, fairness, transparency, etc. – within an Islamic framework, it somehow resulted in a publication flurry. Tens of Muslim-owned magazines and newspapers emerged in the early 1980s.

Muslim leaders in North America believed these publications could improve over time if properly nurtured and supported, but even when millions of dollars had been invested in them, that conviction proved to be wrong.

If flak gave way to Muslim-owned and controlled print media in the 1980s, it returned with renewed vigor when the vanguard of the Islamic movement in the West launched the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in 1994. Endowed with an excellent funding package, CAIR picked up where the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) had left off.

CAIR, and its many chapters, have since earned a laudable reputation among North American Muslims for their diligent monitoring of the mass media and for consistently protesting bias and the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims. Today, CAIR is the master at the helm of Muslim flak campaigns.

For instance, when television producer Steven Emerson aired his notorious documentary “Jihad in America” on PBS in November 1994, CAIR published “A Point-by-Point Analysis of the Documentary”. This type of probing content analysis would become CAIR’s trademark.

In addition, following the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, CAIR polished its strategy and published a report titled *A Rush to Judgment*. Over the years it has released several media content analyses. It is not yet evident what impact, if any, CAIR’s flak attacks have had on media coverage of Islam and Muslims.

There is evidence, however, of media institutions in America and Canada taking concrete steps to provide accurate information about Islam and Muslims to reporters and readers alike.

Shortly after the attacks of 9/11, the Detroit Free Press printed a primer titled “100 Questions and Answers About Arab-Americans: A Journalist’s Guide”. USA Today ran a “Q and A on Islam and Arab Americans” and the Poynter Institute in Florida published a series of online articles on “Understanding Ramadan”, “Covering Muslims in America”, and “Improving Cross-cultural Reporting”. Even the Seattle Times published a series of articles with interesting titles such as “Understanding Turbans” and “Interpreting Veils”. There is no evidence that CAIR or its subsidiaries had anything to do with these initiatives.

While these have been commendable efforts, the giants of the television and print industries remain unshaken. They squabble over or ignore every allegation CAIR makes about an offensive line, sentence, word or phrase.

Although Muslim community leaders and Imams in the West have vigorously encouraged first- and second-generation Muslims to pursue careers in journalism since the early 1980s, and while some have, their numbers are insignificant compared to those that have pursued careers in medicine, engineering and teaching.

According to veteran British journalist Fuad Nahdi, “more and more of our young people are going into the profession of journalism – they are learning the skills, asking the questions and putting the pressure on their colleagues and the system”.³ However, the future impact Muslim journalists will have on the Western mass media landscape remains to be seen.

Nothing Muslims have done in the last three decades seems to be making a quantifiable difference and the consequences resulting from negative media are getting worse by the day.

Statistics of racist and violent attacks against Muslims in

3. Fuad Nahdi, “Islam and the Media: The Slow Starvation of Balanced Coverage?” A talk given to the Foreign Press Club on 27 February 2003.

Western Europe and North America have been increasing year after year, particularly after 9/11. Is there a direct or indirect correlation between the negative images in the mass media and the targeting of Muslims with acts of hateful rage? The answer is undeniably “yes”.

Balance Not Bias

To determine when the use of flak is appropriate, Muslim activists have used the yardstick of bias in assessing media content. There has never been and there will never be a bias-free media. Bias, in its varying degrees, is a fact of life, and it is the daily reality of the media industry. Those who cry bias do so when they disagree with the perspective that is being presented. When they agree, it is apparently fair and balanced.

FOX News accuses CNN of bias and CNN in turn accuses FOX of being ridiculously absurd. Al Arabiya accuses Al Jazeera of imitating FOX News and senior executives at the former describe themselves as being like CNN. To them, FOX is biased and CNN is balanced. They all believe they are telling the truth and are accurately reporting “reality”.

The fact is that they are all, to some degree or another, guilty of bias. Bias is built into the media environment. Unfortunately, Muslim activists tend to focus on individual bias while ignoring the media environment that manufactures the bias.

If the task of Muslim leaders and activists is to address the sweeping generalizations, negative depictions, and stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs by the mass media, perhaps a more useful tool of analysis and intervention is what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky have referred to as “media filters” in their epic 1988 book titled *Manufacturing Consent*.

According to these authors there are five major media filters:

- Size and Ownership: the profit orientation of media compa-

nies.

- Advertising: the primary income source for most mass media companies, unless they are public broadcasters such as the BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).
- Sources: the flow of raw data from a variety of sources into the newsroom.
- Flak: a means of disciplining the media
- Anti-Communism: a control mechanism. Surely Herman and Chomsky would replace anti-Communism with anti-Islamism if they were writing today.

These filters interact with and reinforce each other, producing a set of news values that demarcate the boundaries of interpretation and impose on journalists a definition of what is and is not newsworthy. Media filters are much like a series of irrigation canals that divert and control the flow of water from a gushing river. In the context of the newsroom, filters are the canals of the information highway.

Editors, writers and reporters ingest raw material from multiple sources around the world, carve out bite-size portions, and interpret and feed them back to media consumers. Associated with the filter of sources is the filter of technology which plays a vital role in the gathering and dissemination of information.

Take the example of small fishing villages in El Salvador that were destroyed by a tropical hurricane. For editors working on a nightly television newscast in a major North American market, there are no pictures to tell the story, which is thus relegated to “copy”. There are other pressing stories that come with pictures in the lineup and time is short. Producers decide to drop “El Salvador” from the newscast.

Viewers launch a flak campaign accusing the newsroom of bias. But what kind of bias is it?

There were no cameras, satellite uplinks, feed points, or internet access to FTP images anywhere near ground zero. A lone freelancer had pictures, but the time it would take to get them to an uplink point would make the disaster yesterday's news.

Bias could still be a factor if pictures existed and were ignored or even rejected due to budgetary restraints. If cost were a factor, an obvious question would be whether editors were guilty of placing a monetary value on pain and suffering. They might have been willing to buy the visuals, but penny-pinching managers have informed them that they've exceeded their weekly budget on buying freelance visuals.

Perhaps bias was behind the decision not to dispatch a television crew to the region ahead of the hurricane. Maybe sending a crew there was much too dangerous and the decision not to proceed was deemed prudent.

The point of all this is that if you lift the curtain on a newsroom on any given day, you will witness an intricate web of filters in operation. To those unfamiliar with the media environment these filters are not always evident and media executives hate having to explain them to outsiders.

The remaining parts of this essay will focus on how the filters of sources, size and ownership define today's newsroom culture.

Navigating the Newsroom

The newsroom is the hub of all media institutions. Anyone who desires to understand and change media behavior should have an intrinsic knowledge of how a newsroom operates.

Journalists will occasionally talk about the "culture of a newsroom" and by this they mean many things, all of which pertain to how well the newsroom performs on the information highway.

The flow of information through the newsroom is the lifeline that keeps its heart beating. Anyone who works in the news-

room is there to serve a function in the gathering, processing, or dissemination of information.

They are all expected to work seamlessly every day of the week, 24 hours a day. It is a nearly impossible task. The intense time constraints, and the sheer volume of information flowing in and out of the newsroom, make it a cauldron of stress and anxiety.

The people working in a newsroom can be grouped into three main categories.

1. Senior Editors

At the top end are the senior editors and they usually have considerable experience in the media industry. They begin their days scouring radio, television, newspapers and news wires via the internet or their Blackberries for “new” information and perspectives, particularly from competing media institutions in the same or similar markets.

For example, an editor with CNN will pay careful attention to BBC and SKY news, and likewise BBC will tune into CNN and Al Jazeera’s coverage. The reason for this is that CNN, SKY, BBC and Al Jazeera are competing for the same or similar market shares.

Senior editors will also monitor national and international broadsheets – *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The LA Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Guardian* – and national radio newscasts such as that of NPR in the United States, Deutsche Welle in Germany, or the BBC, both in the United Kingdom and its World Service.

This used to be a daunting task ten years ago, but today these editors can program their email inbox to receive RSS feeds from a variety of online sources.

News executives will ask themselves the following questions: What are the three top stories of the day? What stories or perspectives did we miss the previous day and how do we make it up? How can we advance yesterday’s headlines, or did the

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stories receive adequate coverage? Are we following or leading in our coverage of the top news events? How can we trump our competition?

At the start of the morning editorial meeting, foreign and domestic correspondents or reporters, bureau chiefs and producers would have had an opportunity to feed story ideas to assignment editors to whom they report. By the time the editorial meeting ends, the newsroom will have about a 70% of the day's major international and national stories. The remaining 30% will come from a batch of story ideas that are developing or in research-investigation mode.

Assignment editors move rapidly to match teams of correspondents, producers and camera crews to stories. Depending on the complexity and importance of a story, more resources might be assigned to it.

Between the first and a second editorial meeting, held before or right after a lunch break, the list of news items is revised. Senior editors will voice concerns about some stories or raise new ones for consideration.

At the second meeting, new stories may be added, and others may be dropped because they turned out not to have been what they appeared to be in the morning. Some stories are allocated more time and resources, and some might be moved to a "futures" list, perhaps because the persons integral to the story is unavailable.

In the event that major news breaks out later in the day, even the best-laid plans are discarded and the editorial team re-jigs the line-up of the evening newscast. The evening newscast is important primarily because it attracts the largest audience and audience shares translate into advertising revenues.

If you are on the outside and trying to get a story covered, the best time to introduce a story idea that must run that day is between 9:00 AM to 12:30 PM. If the story is for the following day, the best time is from right after the lunch break to about

4:30 PM, or up to an hour before the end of the day's shift. If your story ideas are getting rejected, it could mean you need to learn how to pitch a story idea. That requires some training and is not within the scope of this essay. A story might be rejected due to a budgetary or a resource issue. If you have eliminated the above factors and your ideas are still getting rejected, you need to turn your attention to the senior directors or executives making decisions in the newsroom.

There are many issues that will dominate a newsroom in Dubai or Doha that will never ever arise in a newsroom in Toronto or Atlanta. For example, there are no prayer rooms in a North American newsroom and no media outfit in the West offers an open microphone to a cleric as Al Jazeera gives to Shaykh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi. Israel's war with Hamas is treated as one of many important stories, and not as the *raison d'être* of its existence.

A surprising similarity is the common socio-political outlook of senior executives and journalists whether they operate in the East or the West. They are more likely to be secular liberals who cherish the ideals of Western democracy, whether they happen to be Jewish, Christian or Muslim.

Knowing the people who determine the direction of the newsroom is vital to understanding the kind of coverage consumers are going to receive. If you are concerned about the direction the news is taking, assemble like-minded and influential citizens and request a board meeting with the editorial team. This is not an opportunity to debate them, but a chance at a reasoned presentation of arguments about news values which includes the selection and ranking of what is and is not newsworthy.

Rather than present anecdotal information or perspectives, it might be advantageous to present the results from polls and studies that have been independently commissioned. Media executives respond positively to polls, particularly from reputable pollsters. If a poll demonstrates that there is a direct correlation

between coverage of a particular issue and public behavior, executives will be forced to radically re-evaluate their news values.

2. Reporters and Producers

The second tier of the newsroom consists of correspondents/reporters, producers/directors, camera crews, writers, researchers and editors with various tasks depending on whether the newsroom serves a print, radio or television platform.

Reporters and producers are deadline-driven and will focus all their attention on the story they are assigned. They are not particularly concerned about tomorrow's story or even that of yesterday; their task is to "bag" the required elements for today's story. If they determine that an opinion is vital to their story they will "chase" someone they believe to be the leading authority. If that person is not available they will move to the next available person on their list.

When they are not assigned to a story, producers and correspondents will pursue story ideas on their own. When they feel confident they have a story, they will introduce it to assignment editors who will introduce it at the appropriate time to senior executives for approval.

Reporters and producers know that their bosses will want to know whether a story has a long or short "shelf life" or whether it has a "peg". The shelf life of a story means the time during which it can be aired before it becomes stale. A "peg" is a specific event connected to the story without which the story will make no sense to viewers.

3. Support Staff

The third and final tier of the newsroom consists of everyone else. Some are assigned to monitor the news wires and feeds for breaking news or developments in the day's top stories. Some are desk editors assigned to vet incoming scripts and help re-

solve editorial questions such as balance and fairness.

Lawyers are on standby to answer legal questions and managers to coordinate human resources. Accountants stay on top of finances, and travel agents are constantly busy booking flights, hotels and vehicles when required.

The task of this group is to ensure that the news product offered to the public reaches the highest standards of journalism regardless of the platform they serve. Members of this group are responsible for layout, design, photography, visual editing, filming and/or recording, coordinating satellite feeds, web layout, computer technicians and receptionists to distribute incoming faxes and mail. Without this group's talent and contribution the newsroom would not function.

Sources

The "sources" of raw information processed into news are one of the most important newsroom filters. The three major international news agencies and global wire services today are: Associated Press (AP) and its affiliate AP-Television News (APTN), Agence France-Press (AFP) and Reuters. Most of the news, even what you hear, read or watch on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya comes from one of these sources.

Reuters has over 16,900 staff in 94 countries across the globe, and is the world's largest international multimedia news agency, with 196 bureaus serving news to approximately 131 countries. In 2006 Reuters filed over two and a half million news items, including 656,500 alerts, from 209 countries around the world, published in 18 languages.

AP is an American news agency. As of 2005, AP news is published and republished by more than 1,700 newspapers, in addition to more than 5,000 television and radio broadcasters. Its photography library consists of more than 10 million images. It operates 243 news bureaus and serves 121 countries, with a

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diverse international staff drawn from all over the world. AP also operates The Associated Press Radio Network, which provides newscasts at the top and bottom of the hour for broadcast and satellite stations. AP Radio also offers news and public affairs features, feeds of news sound bites, and long-form coverage of major events.

AFP has bureaus in 110 countries and transmits news in French, English, Arabic, Spanish, German and Portuguese.

United Press International (UPI) was once a giant. However, when it was sold in 2000 to News World Communications, a media company owned by Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, its decorated White House correspondent Helen Thomas resigned after 57 years with UPI. For the first time in nearly a hundred years, the service was without a reporter among the White House press corps.

UPI once had 6000 employees and 223 news bureaus around the world. It had 7,500 customers in 100 countries. In August 2007 the company reduced its employees from 50 to five reporters in its Washington DC headquarters. Today it relies on several dozen stringers and a handful of editors stationed in various cities in the United States and elsewhere.

Studies show that 90% of the coverage media organizations operating in Muslim capitals offer to consumers is based on information provided by the three above-mentioned news agencies.

As far back as 1972, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) tried to break the Muslim world's news addiction to AP, AFP, UPI and Reuters by establishing the International Islamic News Agency (IINA). It is now thirty-six years old, but still cannot be compared to AP, AFP or Reuters.

From its headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, IINA transmits news in Arabic, French, and English and receives its funding from OIC member states. Although one of IINA's objectives is "to consolidate and safeguard the rich cultural heritage of Islam", its Islamic news content is relatively low.

Even with powerful institutions such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya that maintain thriving bureaus in most, if not all, the major cities of the Middle East, the monopoly of news is solidly in the hands of the big three. Most of the countries in the Middle East have their own independent news services like Canadian Press (CP), but today there is no Arab news agency.

Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and others are certainly in a more advantageous position to re-source and double-source information received from AP, AFP and Reuters. They can do this because they have reporters in locations where they can verify the integrity of information and quickly establish themselves as direct recipients of information from primary sources.

These giant carriers of news position themselves to be the primary recipients of a daily tidal wave of press releases, alerts, reports, polls, studies and expert opinions provided by an army of public relations geniuses representing multinational corporations, stock markets and powerful institutions, including all levels of governments.

It is not difficult to imagine the impact these three providers of raw information have on the media product that consumers are served every day. The information stranglehold they enjoy determines a set of mass media behavior regardless of whether the newsroom is in the Middle East, Far East, Asia, Western Europe or North America.

A reliance on these sources for the last several decades has produced a hierarchy of what is considered safe to report. If Reuters, AP or AFP reports a bit of news, it is accepted as having more weight on the truth scales than if the Caribbean News Agency (CANA) reports it. Newsrooms reward conformity, knowing that deviation can often lead to error, embarrassing apologies, retractions and sometimes costly lawsuits.

Similarly, an expert, whether a bureaucrat, scientist or pollster, is deemed to be a “safe” source and thus will always be ranked higher than someone who is not. An expert that is tested

or quoted by a reputable source is always preferred to one that is not. That is often why viewers will see the same experts appear in print, on radio and television answering the same questions with the same tired answers.

Given the current state of the Arab-Muslim media industry, it is safe to say that a global Arab- or Muslim-owned news agency is not on any foreseeable horizons.

A possible strategy to get alternative perspectives into the mainstream media is to establish the Muslim equivalent of the Institute for Public Accuracy (IPA). In the late 1990s, IPA recognized that mass media resources were shrinking and that huge budget cuts to newsrooms left fewer journalists straddled with larger workloads.

Instead of setting up more flak attack machinery, IPA cleverly set their sights on the media dependence on a body of experts to provide sound bites. Established in 1997, IPA took a two-year \$100,000-per-year Public Interest Pioneer grant from the Stern Family Fund and established its media office in the National Press Building in Washington. IPA's objective is to ensure that issues of public policy – environment, human rights, foreign policy, economic justice – are addressed by the mainstream media.

To accomplish this, IPA compiles a detailed and constantly updated database of producers, commentators, and journalists at media institutions across North America. IPA then uses this database most effectively when there is breaking news to send out a list of experts.

Over the last decade, IPA has made it possible for numerous policy analysts, scholars and other independent researchers to be heard. It is estimated that IPA news releases have promoted analysts from more than 1000 different organizations doing work on a wide variety of public-policy issues.

A Muslim Institute for Public Accuracy (MIPA) would similarly shape stories and catapult its own body of experts into the

mainstream media.

Effective use of the world-wide-web could soon become a major front as well for Muslims to open up in their battle against the Western monopoly of new sources. This is now beginning to occur naturally rather than as a result of any thought-out plan.

Ownership and Size

In the media industry, market size is measured according to audience reach. Reach, in turn, determines the amount of advertising revenue a paper or TV/radio station will attract and, thus, whether it will ultimately survive in the long run.

Since a newspaper with declining readership is not worth much at the end of the day, news executives are more likely to be risk-takers. What they will almost never do is overtly challenge the dominant perspective of their core audience.

Editors at media outfits in small towns or cities are likely to be less willing to take chances with stories that challenge popular perceptions. If readers get upset, advertisers get nervous because they know it can result in a backlash against their interest. Muslims campaigned worldwide to boycott Danish products following the publication of what is now referred to as the “Muhammad cartoons” by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.

In a free and open society, journalists can be held accountable and they often are, but the perception persists that if you really want to discipline the media, you target its income. This is much easier to accomplish if the media is relatively small and dependent on a limited number of advertisers. News executives are now fully aware, thanks to the cartoon controversy, that the internet can transform small campaigns into global firestorms.

Size also impacts story selections. If a story is taking place in Darfur, small media with limited financial resources obviously cannot afford to send their own reporters and will likely rely

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on news from the major suppliers or on a network of freelance journalists.

Size also determines the kinds of stories that editors will feel confident enough to print. Executives will tell producers and reporters that “readers have had enough of that story”, or “I don’t think that story will have much traction with our audience”. Size tells journalists what they can safely exclude and what stories they can’t afford to ignore.

An important consequence of size is that small media outfits are likely to imitate the editorial positions of large media. This relationship has not only produced what many analysts have described as the incestuous character of today’s media, but it has often kept negative stories in a repetitive cycle. In other words, “if enough big media outfits say it is so, it must be true”.

Small media outfits that are owned by larger companies have little or no editorial autonomy. Their operations are limited to repackaging news and entertainment from their parent company with some local items inserted. Media monopoly is always a frightening idea to civic organizations in Western liberal democracies.

Muslims are well aware of the conundrum media ownership presents. But even with over 500 Arab-owned TV stations dotting capitals from Morocco to Lebanon and from Cairo to Islamabad, the Western media continues to portray Islam and Muslims much the same way it did 30 years ago.

The meteoric rise of two Arab media giants – Al Jazeera, available to well over 60 million households worldwide (except North America), and Al Arabiya, a subsidiary of Middle East Broadcasting Corporation trailing a few steps behind – has done very little to nudge aside Western control of the global information highway.

Al Jazeera would not exist had it not been for the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani. In 1996, he issued a

decree establishing Al Jazeera and then bankrolled its first five years with a grant of \$137 million. As of 2006, he was still footing the bulk of the channel's annual budget.⁴

When contrasted with media ownership in the West, there is nothing about Al Jazeera's funding that should compromise its journalistic integrity so long as the newsroom functions independently of the Emir's palace.

According to Lorne Manly: "Since its debut in November 1996, Al Jazeera has offended multitudes with news and commentary that do not necessarily conform to the views of rulers or kings. Guests have questioned the right of the Saud family to rule Saudi Arabia. At some time or the other nearly every country in the Middle East – save Israel – has banned or curtailed its reporters".⁵

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), for example, is a public broadcaster that is allocated an annual budget by the federal government. The government in turn has absolutely no say in the CBC's editorial policy and the CBC takes appropriate measures to comply with its charter and the rules of Canada's regulatory broadcast body.

But while multiple newspapers, magazines, television and radio channels flourish in Muslim majority societies, Muslim-owned media do not seem to have done all that well.

In his 2003 talk to the Foreign Press Club in London, Fuad Nahdi's glum assessment of Islamic media in the Middle East and Asia is that "it is boring, partisan, judgmental and pedestrian".⁶

But Nahdi, who launched *Q-News* magazine on the eve of the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict, believes "the future belongs to a dynamic, relevant and professional Muslim media produced

4. Lorne Manly, "Translation: Is the Whole World Watching?" *The New York Times*, 26 March 2006.

5. Ibid.

6. Nahdi, "Islam and the Media".

and based in the West”.⁷

However, the debris from fledgling, decrepit and dead Muslim magazines plucked from the author’s personal archive tells a very different story.

- *EMEL* (currently published in the UK and purportedly heavily subsidized with funds from Gulf States).
- *Illume Magazine* (a vibrant youth initiative from the West coast of the USA. Irregular, looks promising, but currently struggling financially).
- *Q-News International* (a once independent and insightful British publication, now on hiatus).
- *Islamica Magazine* (a top-of-the-line intelligent publication, currently suspended).
- *Crescent International* (pro-Iranian propaganda popular among radicalized youth in South Africa and the Far East. The paper fosters and nurtures a hatred for everything Western).
- *Insight* (describes itself as “Europe’s biggest Islamic bi-monthly magazine”, defunct).
- *The American Muslim* (published by Muslim American Society or MAS, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. Appears to be defunct or irregular).
- *Islamic Horizon* (published by the Islamic Society of North America, irregular).
- *The Message* (published by the Islamic Circle of North America, defunct).
- *The Minaret* (California, USA, defunct).
- *New Dawn* (magazine for Muslim Youth, defunct).
- *The Muslim Tribune* (defunct).
- *Impact* (published by the Islamic Foundation in the UK, defunct).

7. Ibid.

- *At-Talib* (The Muslim Magazine at UCLA, defunct).
- *Living Islam* (defunct).
- *The Right Path* (defunct).

In the mid-1980s, the giants on the Muslim magazine scene were *Afkar Inquiry* and *Arabia: The Islamic World Review*. *Afkar* published consistently for five years with fiscal support from the clergy who governed Iran. When the magazine decided to condemn an Iran-led protest at the Hajj of 1987, Iran pulled the plug on funding and the magazine was buried.

Arabia too enjoyed five years of uninterrupted publication. Funded by the former Saudi oil minister Zaki Yamani, the magazine flourished. However, when funds dried up, it sunk into the abyss of history.

In the field of broadcasting we see similar difficulties. For example, the Islam Channel in London, Islamic Broadcast Network (IBN) in Washington, and Bridges TV in New York are all experiencing an arduous programming patch. They are popular with stay-at-home moms, retired parents, grandparents and the unemployed. They have been dismal failures in offering any intelligent or thoughtful news and entertainment programs.

It took the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), not Islam Channel or Bridges TV, to commission what is today a highly successful sitcom called *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, now in its third season.

Recently a number of online television stations and shows have popped up on the media landscape. While they should be welcomed, it is impossible at this time to assess the impact, if any, of Link-TV, the Iranian owned Press-TV, Salam Cafe in Australia, or the MuslimCafe TV show in the UK.

Conclusion

Flak campaigns aimed at disciplining the media will continue.

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A recent poll sponsored by CAIR found that 25% of Americans believed negative stereotypes about Muslims to be true and that Muslims “teach their children hate”.

The Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC) obviously believes the numbers are similar in Canada. It complained to *Maclean's* magazine about an article written by Mark Steyn titled “The Future Belongs to Islam”. When *Maclean's* refused to censor Steyn's highly inflammatory allegations, CIC filed a charge against *Maclean's* with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

The Commission declined to hear the case on the grounds that it lacked jurisdiction. In its letter to the CIC and *Maclean's*, the Commission said it “strongly condemns the Islamophobic portrayal of Muslims” and that the “media has a responsibility to engage in fair and unbiased journalism”.

When it comes to television, flak has an even harder task, but it has a greater chance at disciplining the media if and when it targets the institutional bodies that are set up to regulate broadcast media.

In the United States, the regulatory broadcast body is the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) and in Canada it's the Canadian Radio and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC). The European Commission has the European Convention on Transfrontier Television and UNESCO, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA), now has Guidelines for Broadcasting Regulation.

In 2008, the Arab League adopted an Arab Charter for Satellite Television Broadcasting and ignited a huge controversy over freedom of the press. Lebanon and Qatar, home bases of Al Jazeera, refused to sign the broadcasting code. Doha said it needed more time to assess its potential impact.

Journalists are concerned that the Charter will increase government control over TV channels and curb political expression, bringing an abrupt end to open debate and a level of social

change that accompanies freedom.

A more real concern is the fact that the 250-plus Arab TV stations depend on two satellites – Egypt’s NileSat and Saudi Arabia’s ArabSat – and if these governments believe a station is in violation of the Charter, they could unilaterally confiscate equipment and revoke broadcasting authorization.

A counter-argument is that with power comes responsibility. While the Charter might be vague on the issue of criticism of cultural symbols and leaders of states, it does not stifle dissent or opposition voices. Rather, it calls for the responsible exercise of freedom of expression by demanding broadcasters provide facts to the public, and refrain from defaming or libeling public figures or promoting terrorism or violence, including the violent overthrow of governments.

Recognizing the secular, pro-Western trend of the Arab broadcast media, both in the areas of news and entertainment, and the fact that the Western mass media routinely maligns Islam and Muslims, the Arab Charter contains an article calling for the regulation of content that would offend not only the adherents of Islam, but also other religions as well.

The Charter contains a provision against programs that portray criminals as heroes or that encourage racism and other forms of discrimination. Like the European Convention, it restricts advertising of drugs, alcohol and cigarettes and forbids the broadcasting of pornography.

It is worth recalling that in 2005, the US Congress signed into law the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act which increased the penalty that broadcasters must pay for violating FCC standards tenfold. In passing the law, members of Congress said that indecency complaints had risen from hundreds per year to hundreds of thousands per year and that broadcasters had a responsibility to reflect common standards of decency, as defined by their communities.

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Similarly, the Arab Charter prohibits yellow journalism, opinions disguised as news, violations of intellectual property rights, and programs that promote terrorism, hatred or superstitions such as black magic.

The aim of the Charter is to allow the media to build a sane civil society based on respect and common decency. If the Arab media can achieve this, perhaps it can set an example for the Western media to reciprocate by bringing an end to their overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims.

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