

Conference Report

The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media

The Department of Communication, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia organized an international conference on “The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media (ICORM08)” which was held on July 29 and 30, 2008 at the Putra World Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The Opening

The conference was opened by the Minister of Home Affairs Dato Seri Syed Hamid Albar who delivered a keynote address focusing on the theme of the conference. The Minister said the conference is both critical and timely in view of the fact that Islam is the fastest growing religion and perhaps the most misunderstood religion especially in the West. He stressed that in the present postmodern time mass media have played and continue to play a significant role in asserting and sustaining stereotypical visions and conceptions about Islam and Muslims. “Evidently, this has given rise to a significant amount of confusion and distorted imagination in the mind of the public at large. Thus, labels such as jihadists, extremists, terrorists and fundamentalists are increasingly becoming more and more popular descriptions of Islam in both the mainstream and the non-mainstream media, particularly in the West,” he added.

The Minister lamented that the status of Islam as a religion of peace is seldom reported upon or promoted: “That dimension of Islam is never considered perhaps because it does not fit into the commercial and political economic logic of the media industry. Or perhaps it may partly be due to the history or politics of the past which fuels the fantasy of a misunderstood Islam.” The Minister, in particular, emphasised the need for the media to provide positive

representation of Islam. In this regard he suggested that IIUM should set up a mass communication research centre to generate requisite intelligence and scientific scholarship to salvage this situation as input to the mass media. "The setting up of the research centre is very important as it can be a platform to uphold the positive image of Islam globally," he added.

Participants

More than 150 scholars, academics, officials from both government and non-governmental organizations, and media representatives from more than 20 countries participated in the conference. Participants and paper presenters include those from Canada, U.S., U.K. Poland, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Indonesia, Sudan and Algeria. In all, 36 papers were presented in a number of parallel and plenary sessions. Of interest to participants was the concluding session where a number of questions were raised and observations made on the issues discussed in various sessions of the conference. The participants unanimously voiced the need for a response-strategy from the Muslim world to tackle the problem.

Papers

Papers presented ranged from studies on the coverage of Islam and Muslims in the Western media such as the *Times* and *Newsweek*; psychological warfare & neo-crusaderism in the mass media; orientalism, the reportage of religion and journalism education; the representation of Islam and Muslims via the new media; the reportage of Islam in different environments such in Africa, the Middle East and Indonesia; the representation of Islamic values through various media such as magazines, dramas, books and photography; the linguistic (mis)representation of Islam and challenges of a response strategy.

Some of the papers were based on empirical data while others were primarily theoretical. For example, the paper by Dolana Mogadime, Sherry Ramrattan Smith, and Alexis Scott, from Brock University, Ontario, Canada titled "The Problem of Fear Enhancing Inaccuracies of Representation: Muslim Male Youths and Western Media" supported the view that the Muslims youths were negatively stereotyped in the Western media. Through combining ethnographic

analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the group argued that popular print media gravely misrepresented Muslim youths as troubled and violent. Through CDA of one hundred articles from newspapers and magazines, they looked at such question as: which are the sources that are given credibility in discussion of Muslim youths, alienation and national security issues? The popular image of the press thus constructed was juxtaposed with the data from the life of Muslim youths. Their conclusion was that the counter narrative of everyday life of Muslim youths who are striving to live as responsible citizens are presented as contradictions to a fear-enhancing popularised public image. The paper called for a critical re-examination of the representation of Muslim youths in the Western public forums.

Another paper that combined CDA with quantitative content analysis techniques was presented by Bushra Rahman from Lahore Pakistan. Her paper, "A comparative study of the Arab and Non-Arab Muslim Women in international magazines: A case study of *Time* and *Newsweek* 1979 to 2002," examined how and in what contexts *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines constructed the image of Muslim women. Her conclusions were supportive of the viewpoint that the images of Muslim women in these magazines were largely restricted to topics of veils and patriarchy and promoted an image of Muslim women as hapless and passive beings. Nevertheless these images were cast as a potential threat and used to malign Islam in general.

Not all the studies however, examined the coverage of Islam and Muslims in the Western media alone but some went a step further by juxtaposing the Western media's coverage with that in the Muslim world media as well. For example, Mahmud Gallender's paper titled "Darfur in the Western media, Darfur in the Muslim media: A discussion of cross-cultural media framing" compared the major frames portrayed in the Western media with the media frames in selected Muslim press. He focused on the issue of cross-cultural transfer of images and concluded that sensationalism-driven Western news sources continued to dominate the news scene and were thus largely responsible for passing a negative characterisation of Islam and Muslim to the world through a process of cross-cultural media framing.

Another paper that provided an analysis of a generalised Western discourse about Islam and Muslim was Atallah Bogdan Kopanski's "The Siege of Islam: Psychological warfare and new crusadism in the era of mass communication (info war)." Kopanski identified seven levels of Islamophobia and their corresponding appropria. The levels were: marginalisation, derision, intimidation, denigration, vilification, criminalisation, and de-humanisation. He dubbed this as Western newspeak which was aimed at creating inimical stances in the Western masses. The Muslim response, according to Kopanski, remain confined to periodic instances of protest rallies, non-violent resistance, civil disobedience and armed uprising. It woefully lacked any intellectual finesse in the form of counter strategy.

Some of the papers had a more generalised and philosophical focus and somewhat tangentially related to the theme of the conference. For example, Janet Steele from George Washington University took a philosophical tack in her paper titled *Forbidding Wrong: Justice, Journalism and the Indonesia Mud Volcano*, took a philosophical view of the journalistic profession and the role of journalist.

Contribution of the Department

These papers apart, one of the important contributions to the theme of the conference was made by a team from the department in their paper titled "Global media image of Islam and Muslims and the problematic of response-strategy." The paper tried to identify theoretical and conceptual problems of a response-strategy in two broad areas. The areas were message system production and distribution in the global public sphere as an alternative construction of Islam and Muslims. The need for a theoretically grounded policy initiative was highlighted.

Conclusion

The Conference was a success in that all its themes were very well debated. The general view was that the media representation of Islam and Muslims has been negative most of the times. Labels such as terrorists, extremists and fundamentalists are increasingly becoming more and more popular descriptions of Islam in both the mainstream and the non-mainstream media, particularly in the West. That

dimension of the religion is almost never considered perhaps because it does not fit into the commercial and political-economic interests of the media industry. Muslim governments and leaders need to pool their resources to ensure that Islam and Muslims receive fair and unbiased coverage in the media.

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