



Portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western Media: A Study of Fox News



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Abstract: *The study is aimed to analyze the portrayal of Islam and Muslims through the content that is being disseminated by western media all over the world. Nowadays, the perception about any nation, religion, and society is building through media perspective. Media is playing a major role to bring peace, war, and alliance among the nations of the world. The mediated propaganda by western media is leading the world towards Islamophobia. Muslims are not freely enjoying their rights in many non-Muslim societies. This study is a content analysis of “Fox News Report”, “Fox News Alert” and “The Five” programs of Fox News. The data were examined to identify common terms, words, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly in context with Muslim’s portrayal in Western media. The result shows that prejudice and prejudgment are portrayed in western media against Islam by representing it as a religion of terrorism and extremism.*

Key Words: Portrayal, Islamophobia, Stigma, Labeling, Western Media

Introduction

The media has a profound effect on any society. It is also a source that reflects our society and laws. It also invites the whole world to observe it and keeps the people informed of all kinds of situations ([Grossberg et al., 1998](#)). In remote areas where there are no facilities like newspapers, TV channels, mobiles, internet, satellite phones, all kinds of news reach through radio ([Saleem et al., 2019](#)). Because of this entire situation, it can be said

that in the present era, the media has made the common man “aware” that an average person reads the news in the newspaper, or listens to the news on the radio, or watches on TV. It is as if the media has become the most important connection between the government and the people. According to Harold Lasswell, the main functions of the media are surveillance of the environment, correlation of elements of society, and diffusion of social culture

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([Alghamdi, 2015](#)). On the other hand, what are the trends in public? What is the general opinion, what do the people not think, what are the problems of the people? The media is also the one to inform the government of all these situations ([Miller et al., 1979](#)). The first duty of every institution is to put the national and public interest first. Criticism must be positive and constructive, which will give the government a chance to reform, and the people will be aware. The media is a powerful weapon in shaping public opinion. The role of the media is important in the deterioration or improvement of any country or other words; it has had many positive and negative effects on our lives.

The media of any country improves the society of that country. Due to this, contacts with any country have become impossible. Through media, we can radically change the economic situation of any country, and with its proper use, we can improve society, but the misuse of media power the situation in the country and the economic system can be disrupted ([Coyne & Leeson, 2004](#)). The media is a force, and this power should be used to create awareness among the people and not to mislead the people. Everyone wants to know about what is happening in the world, and the media is playing a great role in disseminating the news about every happening around the world. The media not only disseminates the information but also interprets the image of the societies.

According to the analysis of [Shahid \(2020\)](#), our perception of any nation, religion, and society is building through a media perspective. Media is playing a great role to bring peace, war, and alliance among the nations of the world. If we put a glance towards

the history of the world, then we came to know how the media made impacts on the friendship and animosity among the countries and nations.

[Nurullah \(2010\)](#) and [Alghamdi \(2015\)](#) briefly discussed the western media's ways of presenting Islam in their studies. They impute the western media for distorting Islam's image in the eye of the whole world. [Eid & Khan \(2011\)](#) described the monopoly of western media over other media of the world. If a media has such status on others, then that media's reporting has deep impacts on the whole world.

Previous researches about the portrayal of Muslims in western media show that how Muslims are being represented as inhuman aliens. Western Media consider the Muslims under the mark ([Hardy, 2004](#); [Poole & Richardson, 2006](#)). In this modern age, each event is disseminated through the media. As the media want, the aspects of the event or incidents have shown to us. After the incident of 9/11, Islam was portrayed as a violent religion by western media. The Muslim world is facing much hatred from the non-Muslim world ([Rehman & Qamar, 2017](#)).

[Brown \(2019\)](#) discussed two incidents that differentiate the behavior of western media among the non-white victim and white victim due to the construction of Islamic terrorists. They constructed non-white victims as an "other" while white terrorists and white victims are "us" or more relatable and sympathetic. Another recent research has proved an obvious "political parallelism" discourse in the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in international media. The previous researches have verified that the ideological

philosophy of media has a strong impact on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims ([Umer & Ghauri, 2020](#)).

In this modern age, each event is shown through the media. As the media want, the aspects of the event or incidents have shown to us. Western media has a great influence on the information which is going to pass on us. Western media has a monopoly on the other media of the world, which are known as the mainstream media. Western media and especially Hollywood has a policy to use the “Muslims” and “terrorist” as synonyms. Muslims have been represented falsely in many Hollywood movies ([Nurullah, 2010](#)).

Islam has always been grist for the gossip amongst different religions and elite officials from the Ottoman period until now. Perhaps, this long-term stereotypical belief is caused by the presence of Muslims in different societies. It has drawn great attention to itself and has been the main focus of media in the past, particularly after the post 9/11 tragic era. As per the policy report of the [Muslim Public Affairs Council 2012](#), the focus of media was fueled by the appearance of many extremist and terrorist groups claiming themselves Islamic. The western media have portrayed Islam as per their agenda and desire. This misinterpretation of Islam has provided an opportunity to western media to label Muslims as “extremist”, “terrorist”, and violent ([Charles 2011](#)). This perspective of western media regarding Islam and Muslims has a great impact on Muslim communities in the world. Muslims are bearing the consequences of the wrong interpretation of Islam by the western media. The Western media is constantly portraying Islam, Muslims, and Islamic movements as some terrorist movements. As per [Booth](#)

(2019), it is the western media’s sole agenda to defame Islam as it preaches equity and peace and equality. She also discouraged the repetitive use of the term “clash of civilizations” that is resulting in anti-Muslim sentiments among the non-Muslim communities.

Fox News and Representation of Islam

Fox News is an American-based cable and satellite channel owned by Fox Entertainment Group, with Rupert Murdoch as its chairman. Right from its beginning, it has been criticized due to multiple controversies and allegations. This channel is well known for its strategy of being an enemy of Islam and Muslims. There are many incidents on which this news channel reported falsely with biased behavior toward Islam and Muslims.

1. The most-debated episode in this scenario is the weird statement by Steve Emerson, a frequent guest who participates as an expert on terrorism in most Fox news programs said that the many Muslim majority areas in Britain, including Birmingham, are “no-go zones” for non-Muslims in Europe as the Muslim refugees have forcefully implement radical sharia law and have forbidden the entry of non-Muslims in these areas. (2015, Jan 12, Terror in Paris, Fox News Report)
2. In “fox news alert”, the guest who developed the CIA’s enhanced interrogation program and is the author of enhanced interrogation Dr. James Mitchell, brutally speaking about Islam and Muslims and calling Islam the basis of terrorism. He said that “well, the first

thing they have to do is stop being politically correct you know we the hard truth is we know how radical violent is Islam, the spread of Islamist ideology and it spreads in mosques and other religious institution; it spreads in schools and universities and colleges it spreads by Muslim outreach programs that pretend that they're doing outreach but are spreading radical ideology". (2017, June 4, What can be done to stop the spread of radical Islam? Fox News alert)

3. In another program, The Five, a co-host Bob Beckel, criticized the sharia law as a useless activity by saying, "it's a goof, and it was handed down in a bad book." (Karen Lewis, 2014, March 14, Muslim "NOAH" Backlash, The five)

After the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, Bob Beckel said in the Five programs, "I'm an Islamophobe; that's right, you can call me that all you want." In response to the Orlando night club attack, he emphasized banning the construction of mosques in America until terrorism is controlled by the authorities. "Has any Muslim out there, any Muslim cleric, any Muslim leader said anything about this, No they are coward" ("Erik Wemple, May 24, 2107, Where are the moderate Muslims in America? The Five.)

Research Question

Following are the research questions that were studied in this research.

- RQ 1:** What kind of prejudice is portrayed in western media against Islam?

- RQ 2:** Do western media portray Islam as a religion of terrorism and extremism?

- RQ 3:** What kind of labeling being associated with Islam concerning prejudice?

Research Methodology

For "Portrayal of Islam and Muslims in western media", the content analysis method was used to find out the purpose and message of "Fox News Report", "Fox News Alert ", and "The Five" programs on Fox news. The research was focused on interpreting and understanding the content of these programs of Fox news towards Islam and Muslims. The data were carefully observed to find out common words and patterns of meaning that were used repeatedly in the selected content.

Only those Fox News Reports, Fox News Alerts, and The Five programs were included in the study that was related to the Boko haram massacre in Nigeria in 2014, the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015, and Orlando Night Club shooting in 2016. In all three incidents, the killers were Muslims. The Christchurch Mosque attack in New Zealand in 2019 was also studied. This incident was selected because, in this scenario, the killer was a white non-Muslim Australian, and the victims were Muslims. The context and perspective of media coverage were studied in reporting Islam and Muslims. The data was collected through the purposive sampling technique. The data was collected from Fox news Archives and Youtube and was further analyzed by using the content analysis method. Every single detail of the selected news report and The five program was studied, including the choice of words to the descriptions. This

Table 1 shows the frequency of words used in news coverage of criminal attacks on Fox News in which the killers were Muslims. The words with negative connotations were repeatedly used against Muslims. This is very much important because, as per the [VOX report 2015](#), only 38% of Americans claim to personally know Islam and Muslims, whereas 62% of Americans depend solely on the information they get from the media. The projection of Muslims as a terrorist, extremist and fundamentalists may have a strong impact on that 62% American.

Discussion

This study has immense importance in the modern era, as it is obvious that Muslims are facing hardships because of the terrorist mark imposed by western media. Islam is fighting a war for its survival. This stigma turned the Muslim majority into a defamed minority of having a violent and extremist plus fundamentalist approach. Mosques, as the religious center of Muslims to offer prayers, were also discussed regarding terrorism and crime, which is a negative connotation. Similarly, in basic Islamic teachings, Jihad is not only a war against evident opponents, but in the true spirit, it is a war against the evils and devil. The use of the word Jihad in context with terrorism has been intensely reinforced in the media portrayal of terrorist activities ([Ramlan et al., 2016](#)). Such acts are resulting in Islamophobia that is leading the world towards hate speech and ultimately to hate crimes.

On the other hand, while covering the Christchurch Mosque attack in New Zealand in 2019, the words like terrorist, extremist,

fundamentalist were not used even for a single time in a very first news report of 3 minutes and 13 seconds on Fox News. Similarly, in all other coverage, the accused was labeled as “shooter” and “white supremacist” not “terrorist”. The headline of the news was “Mass shooting at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.” In another news report of 4 minutes and 21 seconds, the incident was labeled an “act of terror” while giving stance of White House. The word “innocent” was used for Muslim victims only. The findings are significant because, in this mosque attack, victims were Muslims, and the killer was a non-Muslim Australian.

The data analysis confirms that Fox News shows a clear prejudice against Muslims by labeling them terrorists, extremists, and fundamentalists not only in headlines but in the description too. Similarly, the words Jihad and Jihadis were also used in negative connotation; whereas, the non-Muslim killer was never called a terrorist or extremist by Fox news. There was a clear difference in the channel’s policy while discussing and portraying the Muslims and non-Muslims killers.

Islam was being presented as a religion of extremism by Fox News. One of the hosts said in a live telecast that he was sick of claiming that Islam is a religion of peace. As per [Vox report 2015](#), the chief of Fox News once expressed on Twitter that maybe most of the Muslims are peaceful, but this cannot be trustworthy until the Jihadi cancer is not destructed by them.

Conclusion

To make the Muslims progressed and developed among the other nation, there is a need to find out a solution which makes the western media to stop from presenting a false representation of Islam.

Basing their study on Dutch voters interviewed before and after the prosecution of famous MP Geert Wilders on the charges of Muslim-baiting and verbal savagery against Islam, he proves through empirical evidence that Wilder's party's appeal increased after he has tried for hate speech acts by one to five percentage points among the Dutch people who ascetically supported the amalgamation of ethnic minorities into the larger overarching Dutch culture ([Van Spanje & de Vreese, 2015](#)). They conclude by calling other researchers to replicate this study to find the effects of hate speech against religious minorities prosecution on the popularity of political parties throughout the globe so that reliable conclusions could be drawn ([Van Spanje & de Vreese, 2015](#)).

[Miro-linares and Rodriguez-Sala \(2016\)](#) analyzed the disruptive events on social media so that a violent communication and hate speech taxonomy could be built under the overarching theme of studying cyber hate

speech on social media. They focus on the attack against the Dutch newspaper Charlie Hebdo (2015) in Paris, which gave rise to a series of violent communication and hate messages on Twitter ([Miro-Llinares & Rodriguez-Sala, 2016](#)). Just within five days of the attack, 255,000 tweets were received with hateful hashtags like #StopIslam. The authors concluded that in addition to the amount of hate speech received on a day-to-day basis, disruptive events seem to further increase their number, thereby making it easier to identify different spatial, temporal, and textual patterns ([Miro-Llinares& Rodriguez-Sala, 2016](#)). Using this approach, researchers can classify messages containing violence and hatred in a very precise manner ([Miro-Llinares& Rodriguez-Sala, 2016](#)).

The problem of Islamophobia has come out because of the partial and prejudiced behavior of western media toward Islam and Muslims. Muslim communities all over the world, whether they belong to Muslim countries or non-Muslim countries, are facing obstacles on the way of their progress and interaction with other nations. There is a need to take the initiative by the Muslim community all over the world to encounter this phenomenon with true spirit.

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