

Portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the Talk Shows of CNN and BBC

NOOR HAYAT¹ & JULIANA ABDUL WAHAB²

¹University of Lahore, Pakistan

²Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

This study explores the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the western media talk shows, CNN and BBC from January 2012 to December 2012 and draws the required data from their online editions. It is a content analysis of 50 programs focusing on Islam and Muslims from Piers Morgan Live, Fareed Zakaria GPS, HARDtalk and Newsnight. The findings show that rather than economics, religion and war on terror both news channels were more focused in discussing the political shifts and regional transformations of the Muslim world. Mostly the geopolitical issues of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were given immense coverage in the discussions and Muslims were framed as politically fanatics. The findings also established that western media differs from the previous rhetoric by not framing Muslims as terrorists, violent and threat to western democracy.

Keywords: Islam, Muslims, talk shows, CNN, BBC, portrayal, media framing

The masses generally rely on the media as the sole source to other sources of information about current events. As Walter Lippmann (1922) examined, representations and pictures in our heads are primarily reflected in 'pseudo reality' from media coverage. In this context, media plays a significant role in articulating, conveying and explaining particular discourses which help in representing and misrepresenting the certain minority groups (Cottle, 2006). Likewise van Dijk (2000) also stated that media discourses are the most important source of people's ideologies, attitudes and knowledge. Whenever such discourses are particularly target minority group that has limited contact with these groups, the role of media as the sole source of information becomes even more important (Ameli et al, 2007).

It's a common perception that the image of Muslims in the western world is being shaped by the negative and stereotype media coverage through news, cartoons, movies, talk shows and other media contents (Said, 2007; Sattar, 2013). In most cases, Muslims are represented as 'other' within the media. It indicates that such distortion of Muslim's image can be associated to the increase of bigotry, namely Islamophobia that has its deep roots in cultural representations of the 'other' (Said, 2007).

The enmity between the West and Muslims is not a new phenomenon (Reza, 2011). The history is witness to the fact that the war of words and weapons between Islam and West can be traced back to Prophet Muhammad's era in the 17th century, the Spanish reconquered, the fall of Constantinople, the crusades, the periods of colonial and national independence, cold war era and post cold war era (Bernard, 2001). Today various stories

regarding Islam and Muslims in the media are perceived from historical depictions. In the 12th century C.E. European historians gained knowledge about Islam and Muslims for different inimical reasons. These historians circulated information about Prophet Muhammad's death stating that he was killed by swine or passed away while drunk. He is also portrayed as a heathen 'idol who is worshiped like a Greek God' from the French song of Roland. Another report contends that he was a false cardinal who strayed from the Catholic Church and subsequently founded a new religion called 'Islam' (Ernst, 2003).

The incident of September 11, 2001 changed the course of history. It was a terrible event, like the murder of President John F. Kennedy or the assault on Pearl Harbor (Glant, 2012). Islam and Muslims became the newsworthy subjects especially in a post 9/11 world. In most cases, American and western media generally associate Islam and Muslims with underdevelopment, illiteracy, homelessness and failed states. It is also viewed as a threat to liberal, secular and democratic societies in the world (Richardson, 2004). Therefore in the breaking news of 9/11, CNN used flashing titles in its coverage i.e. "Attack on America", "Strike against Terror" and "War on Terror". Reynolds and Barnett (2003) observed that in the initial 12 hours of CNN's coverage of 9/11 incident, the word 'war' was used to explain the attacks 234 times. Symbolic comparison to the historic attack on Pearl Harbor was also made. CNN correspondents described the attackers as madmen and cowards. In general, stories of sacrifice, bravery, camaraderie, patriotism and the love for America shaped the basis of CNN coverage. It was also the first TV channel to display patriotic icons of U.S. flag flapping in the breeze, while Lou Dobbs was the first anchor to wear an American flag lapel pin (Aday et al 2005). This kind of coverage gave little space to the huge antiwar protests in the U.S. and Europe (Chattarji, 2004). The mainstream media in America and its counterpart, UK such as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) played an important role to influence the world especially western countries to support America in curbing the menace of terrorism (Yousaf, 2013).

After the 9/11 attacks, mainstream American and western media started linking Islam with fundamentalism and terrorism to differentiate enemies from friends and to reinforce the constructed connection between Islam, Muslims and terrorism. So when President Bush openly declared "You are either with us or against us", this message was translated in context by the media by expending the conception of the "enemy" to all Muslims, whether living in America or Middle East (Ruigrok & van Atteveldt 2007). It is said that this term was designed by American policy makers and western media conglomerates (Werner et al, 2000).

The so called threat by Muslims was given hype by mainstream American media to an extent that now Americans and westerners recognize Muslims as an enemy of the world's peace and modernization. The West also perceives Islam as perhaps its most dangerous adversary after the demise of international communism (Dawisha, 2009). For instance, in an interview to CNN an outspoken opponent of Islam, Geert Wilders who made the short film *Fitna* said that ideology of Muslims is a threat to freedom and western society and claimed Quran as a fascist book. It's a common perception that through such discussions American news media has played an important role in stereotyping Islam and Muslims negatively. Therefore, such propaganda and misinformation is reshaping the opinion of non-Muslims about Muslims as prejudiced and negative. After an eventful one decade passed since the incident of 9/11, it is now significant to investigate that how CNN and BBC are portraying Islam and Muslims through the discussions of talk shows. It is also important to identify some of the dominant themes that were discussed in the talk shows of CNN and BBC's framing of Islam and Muslims.

Research Questions

- (i) What are the dominant themes in the talk shows of CNN and BBC's portrayal of Islam and Muslims?
- (ii) How these themes are framed to portray Islam and Muslims in the talk shows of CNN and BBC?

Methodology

This study is about the content analysis of BBC and CNN to examine the portrayal of Islam and Muslims through their talk shows. The universe for this study constitutes the talk shows of CNN and BBC broadcast from January 2012 to December 2012. Two talk shows were selected from each television channel including 'Piers Morgan Live' and 'Fareed Zakaria GPS' of CNN and 'HARDtalk' and 'Newsnight' of BBC. Through content analysis, the major themes of talk shows were identified. Additionally, content analysis helped in gaining an understanding of the nature of the portrayal. This is important because of the media's role as both a source of information as well as a source of cultural or ideological reinforcement and influence.

Sampling

In this study researcher selected all the episodes of Piers Morgan Live and Farid Zakaria GPS from CNN and HARDtalk and Newsnight from BBC broadcast from January 2012 to December 2012. In this time period total number of episodes of Piers Morgan Live and Fareed Zakaria GPS on CNN were broadcasted 240 and 47 respectively. Similarly the total number of episodes of HARDtalk and Newsnight on BBC were broadcasted 288 and 48 during the said time period. In this context, after counting all the episodes of these talk shows, researcher got 623 programs in total for the above said time period of one year. Out of these 623 programs, through purposive sampling, the researcher selected 50 programs where the major focus of the program was Muslims or Islam.

Thematic Categorizations

Thematic categorization and analysis is measured as proper and the most appropriate for any research study conducted to determine using portrayals and interpretation (Marks & Yardley 2004). Researcher decided to use a form of thematic categorization as a means of organizing the data. Each theme had a number of sub-themes, which are common to the main theme but should each be considered separately. These sub-themes were what allowed the researcher to examine what kinds of portrayals were made by CNN and BBC.

In essence, they showed what general themes the key terms were associated with. These subthemes were also frames, but were more specific in nature. To examine that what themes concerning Islam and Muslims were covered, themes were coded into 5 categories: Religion, Political, Human Rights, War on Terror and Economic. These categories were developed on the basis of existing literature review. The subcategories under each theme list the focus of the discussion. The categories of above said themes are defined as follows:

Theme 1 (Politics): This category covers issues engaging politics in Muslim countries such as political parties, political figures, elections, government and foreign affairs.

Theme 2 (Economic): This category covers topics such as unemployment, investments, economic growth, national expenditures, inflation, poverty and development.

Theme 3 (Religion): This category covers religious teachings, religious rituals, religious festivities, sectarian tension and religious discrimination.

Theme 4 (Human Rights): This category includes subcategories such as minority rights, child labor, gender equality and refugees.

Theme 5 (War on Terror): This category includes subcategories such as terrorism, drone strikes and military operations.

Results

Table 1 shows the amount of coverage given by CNN and BBC pertaining the issues and events of Islam and Muslims. It shows that from January 2012 to December 2012, all the selected talk shows conducted only 50 programs where the focus of discussion was either on Islam or Muslims. Results show that HARDtalk conducted considerably larger number with 27 programs, representing 54.0 per cent followed by Fareed Zakaria GPS (24.0 per cent), Newsnight (12.0 per cent) and Piers Morgan Live (10.0 per cent). Findings reveal that BBC and particularly HARDtalk were very keen to discuss and cover issues concerning Islam and Muslims. As shown in Table 1, there is a significant difference in the amount of coverage between CNN and BBC. This finding also illustrates that BBC seemed more interested than CNN in discussing the issues about Islam and Muslims. It can be reason for this coverage that Islam is one of the largest and fastly growing faith both in United Kingdom and United States and being dominant news network in globe it's their professional obligation to cover and discuss such issues. Islam has become third largest religion in US after Judaism and Christianity followed by 0.6 per cent of the overall population. On other hand, according to UK Census 2011 Islam is the second largest religion in United Kingdom having 2,786,635 (4.4 per cent) of the total population. The majority of Muslims in UK lives in England: 2,660,116 (5.02 per cent) followed by 45,950 (1.50 per cent) in Wales, 76,737 (1.45 per cent) in Scotland and 3,832 (0.21 per cent) in Northern Ireland. Apart from ratio of Muslim population in UK and USA, ownership of the CNN and BBC can also be one of the factors. The prejudiced representation of Islam and Muslims in mainstream media also serves the interests of the centers of power in the West because they have many political, economical and strategic interests in the Muslim countries. The mutual interests of government and corporation come first and eventually become the voice which speaks to the public about world events.

Table 1. Overall stories covered by the talk shows of CNN and BBC in 2012

Talk Show	TV Channel	Frequency	Per cent
HARDtalk	BBC	27	54.0
Newsnight	BBC	6	12.0
Piers Morgan Live	CNN	5	10.0
Fareed Zakaria GPS	CNN	12	24.0
Total		50	100.0

Predetermined coding is used for this study and researchers examined 5 themes; religion, politics, economics, human rights and war on terror. Table 2 shows that out of 5 categories of themes, Politics was most frequently covered and discussed with 66.0 per cent followed by Human Rights (14.0 per cent) and Economics (8.0 per cent) in the talk

shows of CNN and BBC. Interestingly, Religion and War on Terror were given minor focus with only 6.0 per cent. This is because in 2012, both CNN and BBC gave an exclusive coverage to Arab uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen and some other parts of Middle East.

Table 2. Total number of themes covered by talk shows of CNN and BBC

Themes	CNN	BBC	Total	Per cent
Politics	15	18	33	66.0
Economic	1	3	4	8.0
Religion	1	2	3	6.0
Human Rights	3	4	7	14.0
War on Terror	2	1	3	6.0
Total	23	27	50	100.0

Table 3. Frames used in talk shows of CNN and BBC

Frames	CNN	BBC	Total	Per cent
Terrorists	0	0	0	0.0
Threat to democracy	2	2	4	8.0
Fanatics	9	11	20	40.0
Educated and intelligent	0	3	3	6.0
Conservative	3	5	8	16.0
Innocents and Victims	3	6	9	18.0
Peace lovers	0	1	1	2.0
Others	2	3	5	10.0
Total	19	31	50	100.0

Table 3 indicates that talk show discussions of both CNN and BBC framed Muslims as fanatics (40.0 per cent) followed by innocent and victims (18.0 per cent), conservative (16.0 per cent), threat to democracy (8.0 per cent), and educated and intelligent (6.0 per cent) in the talk shows. Only 10.0 per cent programs used the frame of others. Most surprisingly, none of the talk show of CNN and BBC portrayed Muslims as Terrorists in their discussions. These findings illustrates that flow of discussion tends to be less on the positive mode than the negative by the themes covered and discussed by these talk shows by an explicit margin.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the nature of portrayals of Islam and Muslims in the western media after an eventful decade of 9/11. This study has presented a content analysis of 50 episodes of talk shows on CNN and BBC about the representation of Islam and Muslims. The findings outline that instead of religion, human rights, economics and war on terror both news channels were found more inspired by talking about the political shifts and regional transformations of the Muslim world, particularly the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. Interestingly, minor scope given to the issues like the war on terror and religion, advocate that after one decade past 9/11, image of Islam and Muslims changes in western media as such issues were dominant in the past research studies conducted on the portrayal of Muslims. It gives an impression that America has shifted its previous rhetoric and strategy about Islam and Muslims, which demonstrates that toward the start of the new decade stress of war on terror is somewhere left behind.

It might be argued that the time period of this study is very significant as in 2012 numerous political events were being unfolded due to the Arab springs in the MENA region and 'politics' was the hotly debated topic to discuss either in the news or in talk shows. The western countries, particularly United States of America has various political, economic and strategic interests in the region and as indicated by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1995) western media always play a 'system supportive' role to safeguard their interests.

In the content analysis, it's significant to examine the different framing of the themes. The second research question was asked that how the themes are framed to portray Islam and Muslims in the talk shows of CNN and BBC. The findings establish that American and western media hold contradicting perspective from the longstanding discourse by not portraying and framing Muslims as terrorists, violent and menace to western democracy. In spite of the fact that, in the most recent two decades the American and western public was constantly exposed to a negative image of Muslims as 'terrorists and fundamentalists' and Islam was portrayed as next adversary after the communism (Khalid, 2003; Qureshi, 2006; Said, 2004 & 2005). These outcomes demonstrate towards a new political precept and doctrine of America in the Muslim countries, especially in the MENA region.

This shift in the portrayal refers to one of the major premises of framing theory that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations. This process of framing influence people to develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue (Entman, 1993). Such portrayal by the CNN and BBC, gives an impression that perhaps America and western countries have accomplished their objectives by portraying and framing Muslims as terrorist after the catastrophic episode of 9/11 and now they have embraced a different approach by taking immense interest in the political matters of Muslim countries and practically applying 'democratic regime change' strategy. 'The Case of Democracy' written by Sharansky and Dermeralso likewise describes that in future American foreign policy would be to establish democracies in the Muslim countries. But here the question arises, why America is not attempting to break the old authoritarian paradigm and set up a new system based on democratic norms and social justice and equity in its old time friend Saudi Arabia.

Because, Saudi Arabia has been America's top client in military weapons since 1990, as in 2014, America sold up to the \$60bn worth of weapons and military aircraft to Saudi Arabia, and it is the largest American arms sale ever to any Muslim country (Telegraph, 13 September, 2014). Surprisingly, Israel made neither diplomatic rumblings nor political thundering over this US-Saudi arms deal. It entwines other significant narratives in the region, including an apparent retooling of Israeli policies to tacitly support a stronger, American-armed Saudi Arabia because of common worries about Iran. This military equipment is primarily to give Israel a "better feeling" confronting the Iranian threat. Ironically, in the current political scenario, Saudi Arabia is in the same strategic boat as Israel is in confronting the Iranian military threat. Iran is clearly the top perceived threat to the Gulf Arabs (Theguardian, 20 September, 2014). In this way, Saudi Arabia does become some sort of buffer between Israel and Iran. This proposed arms deal is obviously aimed at countering Iran's rising military might and efforts to extend its influence in the MENA region. Moreover, America is also helping Saudi and allied Gulf states to establish a unified military force for the collective sovereignty.

While framing Muslims as fanatics does not imply that western media is not criticizing Islam and Muslims. The framing of Muslims as fanatics demonstrates a relationship with Muslim's political views and decisions, gender equality, minority rights, sectarianism, religious extremism and human rights etc. Muslim rulers and elites were framed as dictators as during and after the Arab Spring certain opposition leaders, human

rights activists, writers and many other people were targeted and victimized by the ruling elite. The main demands of the Arab revolts focused on dictatorships, widespread corruption, destitution, poverty, high youth unemployment, total media control, social justice and very limited political space for any opposition. The revolts have led to a change of status of Arab populations as effective and active agencies in the political landscape, where formerly they were considered the missing equation in power relations, with a legitimate usurped by Arab dictators and authoritarian regimes. The shift of power to the people is manifest in the fact that they are now conscious of their ability to mobilize, rebel, and finally vote and that they supposed that this would lead to change and bring improvement in the power and capacity of Arab societies.

References

- Bernard, M., Erler, R.J. (2003). *Television talk: A history of the TV talk show*. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Entman, R.M. (2004). *Projections of power: Framing news, public, opinion, and U.S. foreign policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ernst, C., 2003. *Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. The University of North Carolina Press, pp: 16.
- Glant, T. (2012). *Terrorism and Anti-Americanism: 9/11 ten years after*. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 18. pp. 507-521. Retrieved from http://ieas.unideb.hu/admin/file_4783.pdf
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Marks, D. and Yardley, L. 2004. *Research methods for clinical and health psychology*. SAGE.
- Poole, E. and J.E. Richardson, 2006. *Muslims and the News Media*. Palgrave MacMillan, pp: 1, 4.
- Reza, M. S. (2011). *Representations of Islam and Muslims in press coverage*. *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization*, 1 (4). 234-241.
- Richardson, J.E., 2004. *(Mis)representing Islam: The racism and rhetoric of British Broadsheet Newspapers*. John Benjamins B.V. pp. XIX, 10, 17.
- Said, E. (1996). *Covering Islam. How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. New York: Vintage.
- Sattar, T. (2013). *A discourse analysis of political talk shows as a medium of structuring political opinion of people in Multan district (Pakistan)*. *British journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 1(5), pp 1-16.
- Shoemaker, P. J., Reese, S. D. (1996). *Mediating the message: Theories of influences on mass media content* (2nd ed.). London: Longman.
- Timberg, B. (2002). *Television talk: A history of the TV talk show*. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Tolson, A. (2001). *Television talk shows: Discourse, performance and spectacle*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Van Dijk, T. (2000). *New(s) racism: A discourse analytical approach*. Retrieved from [http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/New\(s\)%20racism%20-%20A%20discourse%20analytical%20approach.pdf](http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/New(s)%20racism%20-%20A%20discourse%20analytical%20approach.pdf)
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1998a). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. London, England UK: Sage
- Werner, J. S., James. W. T. (2000). *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods and Uses in the Mass Media* (5th ed.). New York: Addison Wesley INC. P-223

Dr. Noor Hayat is an assistant professor at School of Creative Arts, University of Lahore, Pakistan. His research interests are qualitative research, international communication, political communication and media framing.

Dr. Juliana Abdul Wahab is a senior lecturer at School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her research interests are political communication, qualitative research, film and television studies.