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When religion is not to blame: The ethics of covering Muslims and Islam

Was an Islamic terrorist training camp in the heart of rural Tennessee? NewsChannel 5 of Nashville, Tenn., had reported on a new documentary claiming just that. But before viewers were told the answer, the report ended with a tease for the next day's finale:

We went to find out: Is this a terrorist training camp or simply a quiet trailer park? You'll see what we found out and you'll also hear from those in the best position to know whether or not there is any real danger. You may be surprised to see what we learned (Beres 2010).

If you tuned in the next night, you'd learn that "Islamville" was just another rural trailer park (albeit with a mosque) and that the American-Muslim community overwhelmingly rejects terrorism and suffers from discrimination in the United States (Beres 2010). But before this conclusion, as the *Columbia Journalism Review* noted:

Viewers get a lot of unanswered terror-mongering and sensationalism, and a story framed in a way that, until the very end of the two-part series, treats the supposed question of whether or not Islamville is a terrorist training ground as a matter up for reasonable debate...the truth should have been quickly highlighted, not kept away from viewers while urging them to tune back in, and not delayed while factless charges were leveled against a beleaguered minority (Hendler 2010).

Unfortunately, the "Islamville" example shows just one of many ways Muslims are represented unethically in the media. This paper further explores how Muslims are represented in the media, explains reasons for this portrayal and seeks to answer a series of questions: What are the ethical issues associated with covering Muslims? Specifically, what does a content analysis of stories involving Muslims and Islam in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reveal about the media's coverage of Muslims and Islam in an area with a small Muslim population? And finally, what obligations do journalists have when covering Muslims?

CONTEXT

What is the “Islamic World” anyway?

“Muslims represent the majority population in fifty-six countries worldwide, including Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Iraq and Nigeria” (Esposito 2002, p. 2).

Numbering 1.2 billion people, Muslims can be found in a broad spectrum of racial and ethnic groups (Esposito 2002). Theologically, many differences exist in Islam as well. Sunnis account for nearly 85 percent of all Muslims, while Shiites make up the remaining 15 percent (Esposito 2002). Within these sects, different schools of thought exist as well, dependent on geographic location (Esposito 2002). The exact details that separate different Muslim sects are not the focus of this paper, but it is important to remember that merely calling someone a Muslim, or even Sunni or Shiite, cannot communicate the fullness of that person.

Originally used to describe a movement in American Protestantism that opposed modernizing tendencies and insisted on a literal interpretation of the Bible in the early 20th century, the term fundamentalism has been used to label fringe Muslims (Poole 2002). By virtue of journalists’ use of the word, fundamentalism has become synonymous with terrorism and extremism (Poole 2002). “Fundamentalism has been inappropriately applied in the press to a variety of political groups and governments with differing goals and beliefs that go by the name of Islam, with the result that they have been homogenized under the same label” (Poole 2002, p.140).

Lawrence wrote on the subject of fundamentalism in *Nieman Reports*: “Ascribing motives or reflexes to abstract entities, such as religion, should not be done” (2007, ¶11). Lawrence warned that groups who label themselves as Islamic fundamentalists or extremists are doing so for political reasons (2007). “These institutions nurture

relationships with journalists, often generalists themselves, who too rarely question the motives of their sources” (Lawrence 2007, ¶11).

Said contended the media uses labels to cover up a lack of knowledge. “When the *New York Times* explains a surprisingly strong Iranian resistance to Iraq’s incursion, it resorts to a formula about the ‘Shi’a penchant for martyrdom.’ Superficially, phrases like that have a certain plausibility, but in fact, I think they are used to cover a great deal of what the reporter knows nothing about” (Said 1981, p. li).

Orientalism

Since the Middle Ages, the Western world has believed Islam to be a demonic religion of apostasy, blasphemy and obscurity (Said 1981). The Turkish Ottomans were a militaristic threat to Europe for hundreds of years, and in return, the largely Christian European nations demonized the Turkish Empire and its religion (Said 1981). Even after the Islamic world entered a decline, fears persisted. As Said noted in *Covering Islam*: “The Islamic world by its very adjacency evoked memories of its encroachments on Europe, and always, of its latent power again and again to disturb the West” (1981, p. 5).

In response to this fear, Said wrote in *Orientalism* that the Western world created a social construction of an Arab Muslim Orient that was subversive to Europe (1979). Said used the term ‘orientalism’ to describe this relationship, calling it a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1979). In a later work, Said added that orientalism is “that which the West is radically at odds, and this tension establishes a framework radically limiting knowledge of Islam” (1981).

Exactly how the Western world creates a social construction of Islam and Muslims is vital to understanding the ethical issues associated with covering Muslims

and their religion in the news media. For Said, the Western media, academia and governments use the term ‘Islam’ in a flippant way, which damages the meaning of the word. “Islam as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing, but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam” (Said 1981, p. 1). In short, the West uses the term Islam to characterize a whole group of people as monolithic, ignoring other cultural, societal and political factors:

Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed and apprehended either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world (Said 1981, p. 26).

Islam and politics

One of Said’s chief complaints is that Islam is blamed for problems in Islamic societies:

In many—too many—Islamic societies, repression, the abrogation of personal freedoms, unrepresentative and often minority regimes, are either falsely legitimated or casuistically explained with reference to Islam, which is doctrinally as blameless in this regard as any other of the great universal religions (Said 1981, p. lvi).

Writing for Harvard University’s *Nieman Reports*, *The Washington Post*’s Islamabad/Kabul Bureau Chief Griff Witte admitted he attributed a violent attack to religious turmoil, but after further investigation, discovered the incident was politically motivated. “The point is not that religion doesn’t matter. It certainly does. The point is that other factors matter, as well. As journalists, we owe it to the public to present a multidimensional portrait of the conflicts at the heart of our coverage.” (Witte 2007, ¶11).

Buried in the connection of Islam to societal problems is the implication that decisions are religiously motivated and not backed by the rational thought characteristic of the Western world. In *Reporting Islam*, Poole’s examination of British newspapers

found Muslim's behavior was inextricably linked to their religious identity, but because reports did not explain the religion well, Muslims "were seen to depend on irrational beliefs rather than intellect" (Poole 2002, p.184).

Religion as *the* determining factor

Christensen (2006) bemoaned the tendency of news reports to treat Muslim's religion as *the* (emphasis original) determining factor in day-to-day life decisions. Specifically, Christensen followed the Western media's coverage of elections in Turkey. A newly formed party with religious roots took control of the government—a fact the media gave disproportionate attention while ignoring other variables. "It was clear that the victory by the AKP had just as much to do with economics as it did religion" (Christensen 2006, p. 31). Christensen argued the overemphasis of the importance of religion limits the media's audience's perception of Muslims.

Muslims, this line of reasoning goes, are Muslims first, and citizens second, and make their day-to-day decisions accordingly. This process reduces these individuals to nothing more than robotic *religious* (emphasis original) subjects, as opposed to complex people with complex economic, social and political worries and opinions (Christensen 2006, p. 31).

Christensen found in a review of CNN news programs that "religious images were used regardless of the subject of the story. In many cases, the reports had nothing to do with religion, focusing rather on questions of economics, politics or sport" (Christensen 2006, p. 30).

Some scholars criticized journalists for disproportionately embracing secular Muslims. "This secular Muslim vision is highlighted because it reflects a Western outlook that Islam needs to transform and modernize" (Abdo 2007, ¶6). Riley argued that these "nationalist practices may do more to produce further racialisation of and violence

toward those that they positioned as ‘Islamists’ than to ensure any lasting claims to national belonging for those who assert themselves as being representative of the ‘good Muslims’ (Riley 2009, p. 70). Abdo wrote in *Nieman Reports* that such coverage of a “small fringe” is offensive to mainstream Muslims because it implies that the media have taken the authority to decide who speaks for Islam (2007).

Examples from the mainstream media show an analysis for how relevant religion should be in reports of terrorism or crime. In the days following the massacre at Fort Hood, in which a Muslim soldier killed 13 people, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks commented that the media’s coverage downplayed the “possibility of Islamic Extremism” and characterized coverage as implying the cause was an “isolated personal breakdown, not an ideological assault” (Brooks 2009, ¶9). Brooks complained the media was in a “willful flight from reality” and too politically correct (Brooks 2009, ¶15). “It ignored the fact that the war narrative of the struggle against Islam is the central feature of American foreign policy” (Brooks 2009, ¶15). Commenting on the same incident, John Nichols of *The Nation* disagreed with Brooks:

There was clearly something wrong with this imperfect follower of Islam. But that does not mean that there is something wrong with Islam...It should be understood that to assume a follower of Islam who engages in violence is a jihadist is every bit as absurd as to assume that a follower of Christianity who attacks others is a crusader. (Nichols 2009, ¶9, 11)

Where do Muslims appear in the news?

Before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, most American news about Muslims appeared in stories concerned with political candidates’ alleged connections to terrorist organizations in the Middle East (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). In a content analysis of New York and national newspapers and TV reports, Nacos and Torres-Reyna found that these stories did

not include many Muslim-American voices (2007). After 9/11, coverage shifted toward the civil liberties of Muslim-Americans, and, in general, the depiction of this minority group grew more positive (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). Nacos and Torres-Reyna hypothesized that appeal from public officials to better understand Muslim-Americans directly impacted the change in coverage (2007). Coverage also became more thematic, meaning reporters placed individual accounts or events in a larger context, as opposed to episodic, where coverage is narrowly focused on specific events (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007).

However, in a continuation of Nacos and Torres-Reyna's content analysis, the researchers found the positive representation of Muslim-Americans was short-lived. "Coverage retreated to the negative and stereotypical patterns of the pre-9/11 period—or worse. The news was less contextual, less balanced, and more negative...than in the immediate post-9/11 period" (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007, p. 28).

One Newspaper's Exemplary Reporting

Nacos and Torres-Reyna singled out the Long Island newspaper *Newsday*, writing that the way it "reported on the lives and activities of Muslim and Arab Americans was particularly impressive after 9/11 in terms of the frequency of coverage, the choice of topics and the incorporation of Muslim voices in a variety of contexts" (2007, p. 32).

Nacos and Torres-Reyna wrote that the newspaper did not "sugarcoat" news about Muslims and, in fact, broke a story about an imam who said he wasn't sure that Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda were responsible for the 9/11 attacks (2007). The difference between *Newsday* and their competitors was their "regular coverage of Muslim and Arab

Americans' daily lives of normalcy", which Nacos and Torres-Reyna argue was the best counter for the negative news about the imam (2007, p. 33).

Why does the Middle East appear negatively in the news?

A Middle East-based journalist who consciously attempted to avoid the colonial representation orientalism criticizes and employ more positive methods was unable to do so. "In spite of good intentions, my coverage was roughly identical to that in the rest of the western mainstream media" (Luyendijk 2010, p. 9). Joris Luyendijk argued that although journalists' ideology and ignorance are important in discerning the source of poor coverage of the Middle East, the "dilemmas inherent in the collection and the representation of information" are equally, if not more so, important (Luyendijk 2010. p. 9). Luyendijk applies this argument to several areas.

First, the western media holds exceptions to the rule as a news value. But, as Luyendijk asked, "What happens when you present exception after exception to an audience that has no picture of what 'the rule' in Middle Eastern societies may be?" (Luyendijk 2010, p. 11). Exceptions to the rule are most often negative, and are often blamed on ideology, but "part of the problem lies in the nature of news, which presupposes that its audience is familiar with its contrast, i.e., everyday life" (Luyendijk 2010, p. 11).

Second, western media in the Middle East applies journalistic codes, methods and conventions from democratic societies to societies that are fundamentally different (Luyendijk 2010). In the West, journalism norms demand verification, quoting by name and the hearing of both sides of an issue. "For democratic societies these methods, imperfect though they may work in practice, make sense. These societies are organized

around accountability and transparency” (Luyendijk 2010, p. 12). Luyendijk also notes that people in democratic societies are citizens, not subjects, who enjoy and practice freedom of expression liberties (2010, p. 12). However, in the ‘Arab world’, Luyendijk argued that:

Corruption and fear appear to be a major fear if not *the* factor determining people’s lives and behaviour. Yet the terror inherent in a dictatorship is very difficult to convey to western audiences within the classic journalistic genres of All the News that’s Fit to Print. People are afraid to talk. There are no verifiable data...to quote or public facts and statistics to check (Luyendijk 2010, p. 12).

This difficulty means that stories about corruption and fear are extremely difficult to report.

Third, the consequences of this are borne out in media’s framing of issues. Luyendijk wrote that neutral reporting could be done within a paradigm, but the choosing of which paradigm to report on is anything but objective. The complexities of framing an issue are apparent in unexpected places. “Should I have said that I was based in East Jerusalem, in occupied East Jerusalem, [or] in the eastern part of the sole, undivided capital of Israel?” (Luyendijk 2010, p. 14). Different groups use each term for their own purposes, and choosing one to be the default position taints reporting as biased (Luyendijk 2010).

The ease at which some conflicts are visualized greatly effects how they are framed. Take, for instance, the Israeli-Palestine conflict:

Every year, many more Palestinian than Israeli civilians die in violence. Yet those instances where Israelis died attracted vastly more attention. One reason was an ideological affinity between western journalists and Israel. But another reason was that terrorist attacks produce spectacular images that every viewer and editor at the desk back home immediately understands, while Palestinians mostly died away from the cameras, in

unspectacular and ambiguous ways (Luyendijk 2010, p. 15).

Guidelines for coverage

Writing in *Nieman Reports*, Gerges argued that journalists should not take the “easier, more simplistic approach of lumping Islamists and jihadists together” but instead report the nuances and detail of Islam (Gerges 2007, ¶8). “Acknowledging these complexities as a routine part of news coverage not only fulfills a professional responsibility, but it also contributes to national security and a civil dialogue” (Gerges 2007, ¶8).

Luyendijk (2010) offers the following guidelines for journalists reporting on the Middle East:

- Write more non-fiction articles and books on the 99.99999 percent of Muslims who do not and cannot make the news.
- Do not treat Arab police states as democratic societies, but rather point out the nature of these societies to the audience. Otherwise, the audience will hold the people in these societies to the standard they hold people in their own society to, an obvious fallacy.
- Media organizations should increase transparency about their choices and criteria for news reports. Rather than hiding behind promises of objectivity, it makes much more sense to embrace their subjectivity.
- Incorporate the mutually exclusive narratives typical in the media today (the Israeli-Palestine conflict, for example) into a meta-narrative.

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Society of Professional Journalists released ‘diversity guidelines’, suggesting journalists should among other things:

- Avoid using word combinations such as “Islamic terrorist” or “Muslim extremist” that are misleading because they link whole religions to criminal activity.
- Use photos and features to demystify veils, turbans and other cultural articles and customs.
- Portray Muslims, Arabs and Middle Eastern and South Asian Americans in the richness of their diverse experiences.

- Make an extra effort to include olive-complexioned and darker men and women, Sikhs, Muslims and devout religious people of all types in arts, business, society columns and all other news and feature coverage, not just stories about the [terrorism] crisis.
- Avoid using terms such as “jihad” unless you are certain of their precise meaning and include the context when they are used in quotations (SPJ.org 2001).

Conclusion

Critical scholars argued the media too often blame Islam for political feuds, which leads the media’s audience to associate the religion itself with violence and conflict. Likewise, scholars also complained that Muslims are portrayed as making decisions based purely religious ideology. Further, Said wrote that journalists in the West unfairly apply the label of Islam, ignoring the huge diversity of Muslims. Poole’s research largely supported these assertions (2002). Nacos and Torres-Reyna’s research showed an improvement in media coverage of Muslims immediately after 9/11, but soon after, coverage largely relapsed into pre-9/11 standards. These findings contradict the ethical guidelines set out by the Society of Professional journalists after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

METHODS AND FINDINGS

Research question

What does a content analysis of stories involving Muslims and Islam in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reveal about the media’s coverage of Muslims and Islam in an area with a small Muslim population?

Research Methods

My initial inquiry into the ethical issues of covering Muslims led me to read examples of ethically justifiable and unjustifiable news articles. Ethically justifiable news reports of

Muslims appeared (at certain times) in an area with a high Muslims population (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). However, I discovered a gap in research of the media's coverage of Muslims in areas without a large Muslim population. Nacos and Torres-Reyna conducted a content analysis of major New York media outlets' coverage of Muslims for the twelve-month period preceding 9/11, the six months after 9/11, and one month at the first anniversary of 9/11. The researchers found that coverage was relatively poor before 9/11, improved greatly after 9/11 and then grew worse around the first anniversary of 9/11.

I conducted a similar content analysis by reviewing coverage from the Minneapolis Star Tribune and St. Paul Pioneer Press from the week before and after 9/11 (Sept. 4, 2001 – Sept. 18, 2001), and from two weeks before and three weeks after the news broke on Nov. 25, 2008, of the disappearance of Somali-American men from Minneapolis (Nov. 11, 2008 – Dec. 9, 2008). I used the Lexis-Nexis database to conduct my research. I chose the two newspapers because they are the first- and second-largest news organizations in the state, respectively.

I chose the first set of dates because 9/11 resulted in a much greater presence of Muslims in the media than in the previous year, as Nacos and Torres-Reyna found. I chose the second set of dates because, like 9/11, it involved charges of terrorism against people who were Muslims, but in this case, the people were from an area with a low Muslim population. I extended the date to three weeks after the initial news story ran because the event did not generate coverage to the extent that 9/11 did.

I used the search terms "Islam," "Muslim," "Muslim-American" and "American-Muslim." I also kept track of where the articles appeared in the newspaper, the type of

article (straight reporting, news analysis, editorial, column, letter-to-the-editor), the geographic area (local, national or international), the topic of the article, and the source of the report (wire or staff). Also, I decided to narrow my focus to journalists' tendency to attribute conflict to Islam. I coded for conflict and not for Muslims' behavior being decided by their religion, a tendency Poole (2002) discovered, because nearly every story about Muslims in both sets of dates analyzed dealt with some sort of conflict.

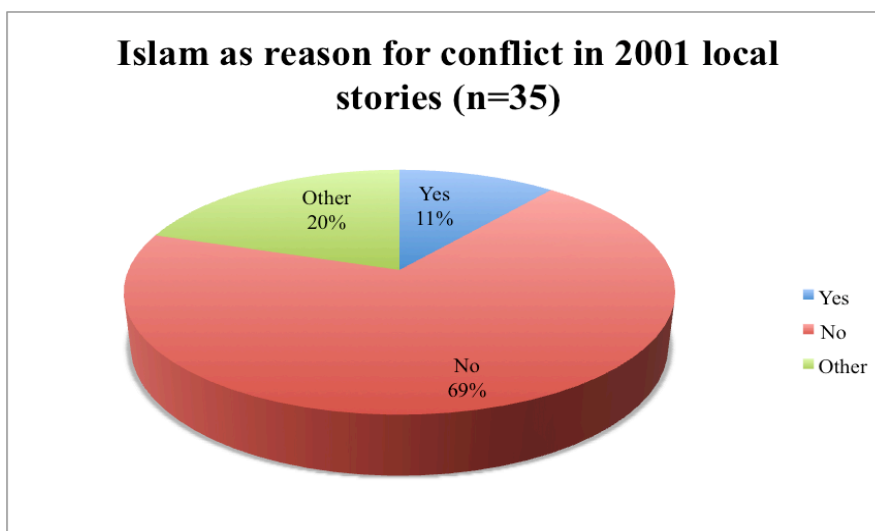
Findings: 2001

In the first set of dates (Sept. 4, 2001 – Sept. 18, 2001), I analyzed and coded 53 articles. Of these, four were national stories, 14 international, and 35 local. The vast majority of national and international stories were wire stories (Associated Press, McClatchy News Service, etc), although the papers' Washington-based reporters wrote a handful of stories. Staff reporters wrote every local story; no local wire stories were published. If a story did not include a conflict, it was coded as 'no.' The 'other' category contained stories that did not fit into either category. For instance, in a story about local Muslims bracing for a backlash in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the author included nothing to make the reader believe Islam was the reason for the terrorist attacks; it merely included quotes from imams and other Muslims community leaders expressing their hope the terrorists were not Muslim.

A few patterns emerged from the first part of my research. First, most stories (66 percent) about Muslims published on and after 9/11 were written locally, and the vast majority of these stories did not frame Islam as being the reason for a conflict.

Reactionary stories with headlines such as "Local Muslims brace for backlash" (*Pioneer*

Press) and “Minnesota Muslims denounce attacks, brace for the worst” (*Star Tribune*) were common in the days and weeks following 9/11.

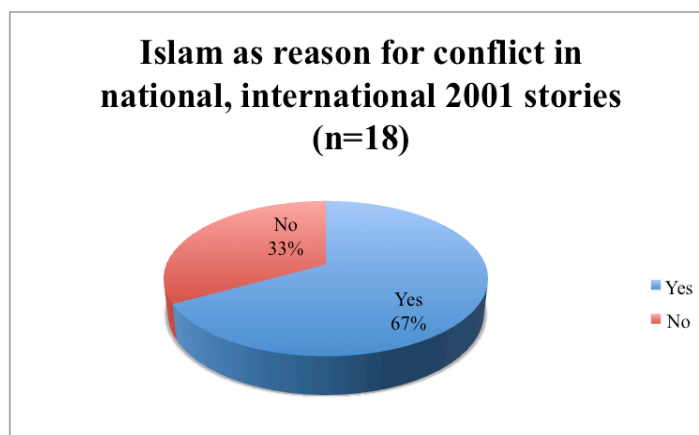


The content of these stories included quotes from Muslim community leaders—imams from local mosques, directors of other Muslims organizations, etc.—such as this quote from the imam of a St. Paul Mosque in *Star Tribune* article from September 12, 2001: “We must let others know that Islam is a religion of peace, not of violence.”

The main angle of many of these stories was the backlash many local Muslims were preparing for, and subsequently, were enduring. However, with only a few exceptions, most of these articles did not go further in depth into the ideology and dogma of Islam. Two articles, one from the *Star Tribune*'s Washington bureau with the headline “Muslims condemn attacks; extremists misunderstand teachings of Islam, scholars say” and a second from the *Pioneer Press*' editorial page ventured into this territory.

A second finding is that the framing of Islam in national and international stories is nearly the opposite. Although the number of national and international stories published was much lower than local stories (national/international n=18 versus local

n=35), the framing of these stories is nonetheless important in judging what the average newspaper reader was presented.



For instance, in an September 12, 2001 article headlined “U.S. action in Saudi Arabia sparked bin Laden’s rage,” Associated Press reporter Kathy Gannon wrote, “To fully understand how bin Laden became a world-famous suspected terrorism mastermind and an America hater, it is necessary to see how he became an Islamic holy warrior”. The article recounted bin Laden’s rise to the head of Al-Qaida, which is described as adhering to a “hardline Islamist philosophy”. Gannon continued: “Bin Laden has urged young Muslims worldwide to wage a jihad, or holy war, against the United States, and operates several training camps in Afghanistan, where he is protected by the country’s hard-line Islamic Taliban government.” This type of reporting directly contradicts Lawrence’s recommendation that journalists not ascribe motives to a religion and Gerges’ suggestion that reporters acknowledge and explain the complexity of Islam (2007).

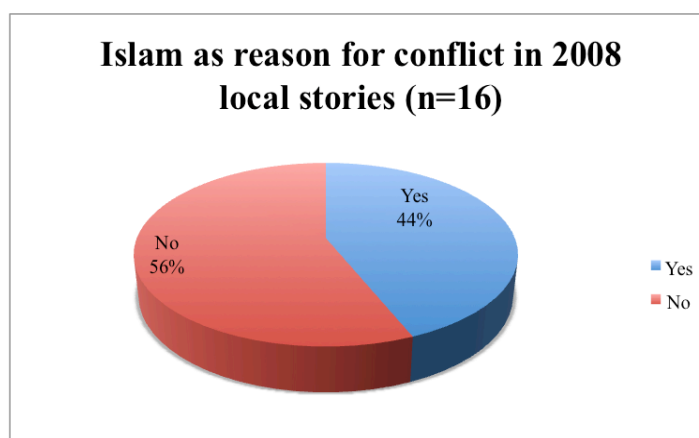
One of the few stories about Muslims that did not reference 9/11 was from Glenn McKenzie, an Associated Press reporter, who wrote on violence in Nigeria. His September 9, 2001 story was headlined “Nigeria violence explodes; army, a curfew quell Muslim-Christian strife.” The report continued: “The explosion of violence is the latest

since the introduction of Sharia, or Islamic law, in several northern states last year sparked bloody clashes between Christians and Muslims. Hundreds have died.” However, as the BBC notes, the country’s violence is “usually reported as clashes between religious groups but the underlying issues are political and economic” (BBC 2010). This example harkens back to Witte, the *Washington Post*’s Islamabad/Kabul bureau chief, who wrote that he sometimes unfairly attributed violence to religion (2007).

Findings: 2008

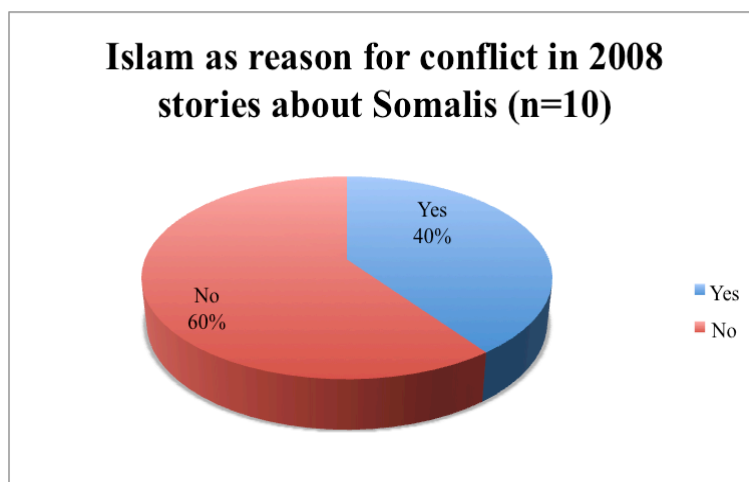
In the second set of dates (Nov. 11, 2008 – Dec. 9, 2008), I analyzed and coded 26 articles. The *n* was much lower from the first set of dates because the stories of the disappearing young Somali men were not of the magnitude that 9/11 was; the disappearance of the young Somali men eventually reached a national audience, but it was (and still is) a slow-burning, constantly-developing story.

Of the 26 stories, 16 were written locally. Consistent with the initial finding from the first set of dates researched, the majority of local writers did not attribute conflict to Islam, albeit by a smaller margin.



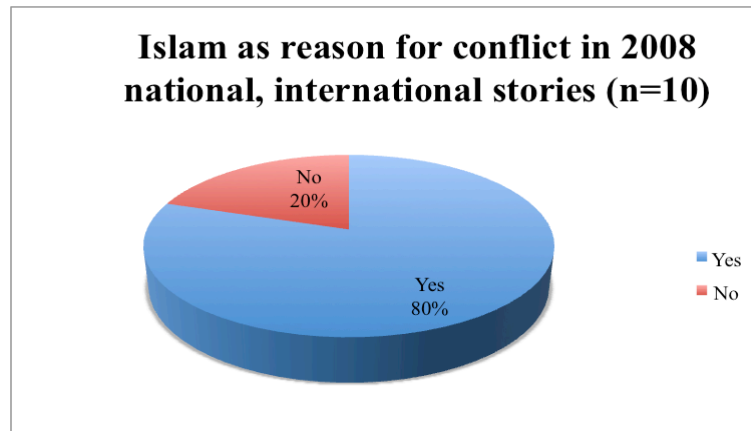
Of the 16 local stories, 10 of those included reference to Minnesota’s Somali community. While this sample size is extremely small, it does represent nearly a month’s

worth of coverage of the Somali community and thus deserves some credence. Again, the majority of local writers did not attribute conflict to Somali's religion (nearly all Somalis are Muslim), but just barely.



The first story on the young Somali men's disappearance was a *Pioneer Press* report headlined "Holy war rumors worry local Somalis" and included a blaming of the disappearances on a local mosque. The reporter, John Brewer, included an angry denial from the mosque's imam, but the only explanation of the reason for the holy war came from another local Somali man: "If they go to Somalia, take part in the jihad, they will go to Jannah, paradise." Follow up stories continued to tie the mosque to an FBI investigation, but only included quotes denying the involvement of the mosque in the young men's disappearance, not quotes explaining why Islam could or could not influence the young men's disappearance. The use of the word jihad, without any explanation, violates the Society of Professional Journalists' recommendation that sensitive words (jihad included) be used in context and with explanation (SPJ.org 2001). Further, given the importance of Islam to this story, the report does not explain any of the complexities of the religion, as recommended by Gerges (2007).

In keeping with the trend found in the first set of dates, Islam was largely cited as a reason for conflict in national and international stories examined in the second set of dates. Again, the sample size is very small (n=10). Most stories focused on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the then-recent terrorist bombing in Mumbai.



In sum, the content analysis shows the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* both do not, for the most part, attribute conflict to Islam in local stories. However, with only one exception, the newspapers never explain why Islam is not to blame, instead relying on surface-level quotes to communicate the non-violent nature of the religion. In contrast, national and international stories more often than not do attribute violence to Islam.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

After reviewing relevant literature and conducting the content analysis, it is evident that important issues are at play when journalists cover Muslims and Islam. This section of this paper attempts to further explain these issues through an ethical framework and to answer the question of what ethical obligations journalists carry when covering Muslims and Islam.

When Muslims appear in the news media, the reporters and their editors are powerful stakeholders, and can be considered the moral agent. They have the power to control how Muslims appear in the news media. Muslims worldwide are another obvious stakeholder, and can be considered the most vulnerable. This is because they often appear in a negative light, and therefore have the most to lose of any group. Public opinion of Muslims can be largely influenced by how they appear in the media, in part because it may be the only way in which some people know Muslims. The media audience is another stakeholder who holds the expectation of truth in news reports. As public opinion of Muslims is formed by news reports, the news media's audience decides upon the consequences of the public opinion. Positive or negative, these opinions should be well informed. That burden falls on the journalists and their editors.

The information revealed in the secondary and primary research shows a breadth of coverage, some of which is ethically justified, some of which is not. Journalists' obligations can be determined by consulting the ethical guidelines set out by John Rawls and John Stuart Mill. In addition to the rest of the SPJ diversity guidelines and Luyendijk's proposals, I will recommend and explain in-depth the following ethical obligations:

Recommendation #1: Reporters and editors should include Muslims in more than just terrorism news

For Rawls, the ethical decision is the one that protects those that are the most vulnerable. Journalists, as the moral agent, have an obligation to protect Muslims, who are the most vulnerable because of their negative appearances in the media. This protection, however, does not mean journalists need to cover up the transgressions of Muslims. As pointed out

by Nacos and Torres-Reyna, Muslims are better served when the news media features stories about Muslims in their everyday lives, rather than limiting coverage to negative events like terrorist attacks.

Both the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* were not varied enough in their stories about Muslims, though local stories, most of the time, did not attribute violence to Islam after 9/11 (although this practice became more common in 2008). This does not mean journalists for the *Pioneer Press* and *Star Tribune* should change their standard for news for the sole reason of including Muslims. But it does mean that they should more inclusive of the religion. For journalists covering local areas, this means they should remember Muslims when doing stories on, for example, the holidays. Human-interest stories are popular around Christmas time, which, in effect, presents Christianity and Judaism in a positive light. At Ramadan, journalists should write stories that portray Islam and Muslims in a similar fashion. These types of articles would educate the audience about Muslims and Islam by detailing the daily lives of a people usually overlooked. As my primary research shows, the national and international media is prone to attributing conflict to Islam without explaining why. This makes it all the more important for local journalists to show Muslims in more varied settings, in an attempt to present the religion in a manner more representative of reality.

Recommendation #2: Journalists should not falsely attribute conflict to religion, but should explain beliefs of Muslims

Doing so would open more opportunities for journalists to explain the ideology and theology of Islam. My primary research shows that journalists for both papers failed to do this, with only one exception (“Muslims condemn attacks; extremists misunderstand

teachings of Islam, scholars say”, from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.) If most of the media’s audience does not have an adequate understanding of Islam, then the media should be held responsible for educating their audience on the religion—especially if it insists on attributing violence to the religion.

Journalists, who should strive to live up to the guidelines set by the Society of Professional Journalists, should avoid this practice. The SPJ’s diversity guidelines require journalists to avoid words like “Islamic terrorist” that link whole religions to criminal activity and to avoid using terms such as “jihad” unless the journalist is certain of their precise meaning and explains it. Clearly, in the examples in the methods and findings section, most journalists do not live up to these requirements.

While Muslims are involved in conflict all the time, it is incumbent on the journalist to find out whether or not the Muslims’ religious affiliation is important. If religion is important, the journalist needs to present a convincing argument as to why that is so—as well as the extent to which it is important. For example, in a story about a settlement between a Gold’n Plump chicken processing plant and two groups of Somali Muslims, the attribution to Islam as reason for conflict is well placed. One group was required to sign a form acknowledging they might be required to handle pork (most Muslims believe pigs and pork products are unclean and should not be touched), and members of another group were terminated for praying during their shifts. Clearly, the reasons for the conflicts were based on the worker’s religion.

However, in many cases, Muslims’ religion does not cause conflict. The case of Nigeria, for example, shows that the AP reporter attributed the conflict to religious affiliation, while the BBC said it was motivated by political and economic factors. The

case is reminiscent of Christensen, who wrote that the media attributed a political party's success to their religious nature. "It was clear that the victory by the AKP had just as much to do with economics as it did religion" (Christensen 2006, p. 31). Given that the Christian and Islamic doctrines hold all monotheistic religions in high regard, it is false to claim that religion is the cause for violence. Yes, political entities have long used the guise of religion to promote their own agendas and incite violence, but journalists should narrow down what is motivating conflict before implying a causal relationship between conflict and religion. Doing otherwise would violate journalists' central tenants, the most obvious being accuracy.

The consequences of not explaining why Islam is important are clear: Given the plethora of terrorism stories referencing Muslims, unknowledgeable audiences may infer that Islam is an inherently violent religion. With more than a billion Muslims worldwide, this inference can be (and is) dangerous. Explaining Islam's ideology in an in-depth manner can help educate the masses that know little about Muslims other than their apparent tendency to be involved in terrorism and conflict. Doing this would indeed do much to protect the most vulnerable party, and, I believe, would meet the approval of Mill. Mill would say the ethical decision is one that promotes the greatest good for the greatest number of people in the long term. Education is the first step toward understanding and peace—two goals that clearly meet Mills' standards.

Complexity of situation

Of course, living up to these standards are difficult, as pointed out by Luyendijk (2010). Luyendijk's recommendations hinge on a reevaluation of the newsgathering process and news standard—something much more involved and difficult to address than changes on

the individual level. For this reason, I would find it unreasonable to call reports unethical that I would otherwise label as such—given, of course, that the reporter did not practice some sort of ideological bias that tainted the report. In these cases, I would call on media organizations to follow Luyendijk’s advice and reevaluate their newsgathering protocols and news standards. Further research should investigate why media organizations should move toward the model Luyendijk suggests.

Conclusion

Drawing on the ethical perspectives of Rawls and Mill, I argue that reporters and editors should (1) feature Muslims in all types of news, not limiting them to negative reports about terrorism and (2) not attribute violence and conflict to Islam where not relevant, but rather explain the ideology and theology of the religion, which would provide proof that Islam is not an inherently violent religion. If done well, these two guidelines would better protect the most vulnerable stakeholder, the world’s Muslim population, and would promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people in the long term through education and understanding.

Appendix A – Sample coding sheet

Case Number:

Date:

Given in full

Newspaper:

1=Star Tribune; 2=Pioneer Press

Source:

1=Wire; 2=Staff report; 3=Letter

Page: page on which the article starts

Section:

1=hard/breaking news; 2= Other

Article type:

1=straight reporting; 2=news analysis; 3=editorial; 4=column; 5=letter to editor

Length of story:

1=0-400 words; 2=400-600 words; 3=600-800 words; 4=800+ words

Geographic location:

1=local; 2=national; 3=international

Topic:

1=9/11; 2=Somalis; 3=War in Iraq/Afghanistan; 4=other

Conflict as religious:

1=Yes; 2=No

Headline:

Given in full

Appendix B – Coding Form

(See attached spreadsheet)

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