Islamophobia in the American news media

Introduction

Media, the sister of democracy, was born as the voice of public opinion. According to Murata (2007), "the press is prioritizing the readers' interest" and the same can be said for news programs on television: they have no way to survive but to feed off the interests of their audiences. In recent years, however, the media has noticeably grown into an independent entity of its own. Its relationship with the public has been reversed; now, the voice of the media has the ability to become the opinion of the public. While the degree of influence the media exerts over the public is hard to measure, "it is indisputable that the mass media plays a major role in the communication and transmission of social values" (Lippi-green, 1997). There is no doubt that media is responsible for shaping many of the norms prevalent in today's society. And Islamophobia is certainly a prime example.

Islamophobia—irrational fear against the Islamic religion—involves prejudice toward Muslims, and have led to hate attacks across the world. United States especially has seen a nationwide spread of the term in the wake of 9.11. Even a decade later, the notion still persists. There are various factors behind the prevalence of Islamophobia;

but when one considers the significant rise after the attacks in the attention paid to the Islamic world on newspapers, televisions, and Internet alike, one can assume that the media plays a large role in propagating Islamophobia within the country.

First, let me set the framework in which various studies have been conducted in relation to the construction of prejudice and perception of media.

Literature review: racial, cultural, and news discourse

In this section, I examine three frameworks of social-psychological research: racial discourse, cultural discourse, and news discourse. Some racial discourse studies do not directly approach racism itself, but rather aim to reveal its presence by focusing on the methods used to conceal and deny racism. For example, a research conducted by Augoustinos and Every (2007) has shown that the recent increase in social awareness toward overtly racist sentiments has led to the development of speech patterns that enables the speaker to convey negative views without being accused of racism. The strategic measures taken by the speakers emphasize their awareness toward racism.

There also have been studies that illustrate a close relation shared between racial discourse and cultural discourse. Durheim and Dixon (2000) note how "white South Africans use cultural discourse to justify racial segregation". They dub this

"cultural racism", a concept which captures racism as a natural and inevitable phenomenon by writing off racial differences as cultural differences. These studies indicate that people have adopted a more discreet approach to negative talk about other races and ethnicities; by employing such tactics, speakers are able to conceal the nature of their talk, allowing them to avoid being openly racist while simultaneously projecting negative messages.

News discourse, which is an extensive collection of studies addressing the causes, effects, and structure of news report, overlaps in many ways with topics and issues associated with racial and cultural discourse. An example of this is Murata (2007), who focused on the connection between news context and "cultural assumptions and values" found within the audience.

The three discourses—racial, news, and cultural—are key players in the critical discourse analysis, "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political concept" (Dijk, 1998). Critical discourse analysis, which can be useful in the exposure of "the 'taken-for-grantedness' of ideological messages" (Dellinger, 1995), allows for an in-depth examination into the impact the media has on the public.

In the next section, I introduce the data and methods I used to examine the specific forms of propagation within Muslim-related news reports.

Data & Method

The media I examine in this paper is limited to mass media in the form of television. I based my study on talk shows, specifically at political commentaries on news channels, which gives the commentator more leeway to express his or her views and a more direct approach to the public audience compared to daily news reports. I focused on *The O'Reilly Factor* from Fox News, a talk show that addresses controversial political and social issues. The host, Bill O'Reilly, is a political commentator known for his conservative views. I collected the data accessing the online video archive of The O'Reilly Factor on FOXNews.com, and typing in the search word "Muslims". For my analysis, I focused on two videos, both discussing current controversial news event related to Muslims in America. I will give a brief summary of each.

The first one is titled "Is Media sympathizing with NY Bomb?" The video is based on the case of Fasial Shahzad, an American of Pakistan origin who was accused of planting a car bomb in Times Square. The news attracted much attention due to the

fact that the bomber was an American citizen with an MBA degree, a secure job and a family. In his show, O'Reilly mainly focuses on the homegrown aspect of terrorism and features two guests to provide their outlook on this incident.

The second video, titled "Gruesome Epidemic?", is based on the murder in Buffalo, New York by a Muslim man named Mo Hassan, who has been accused of beheading his wife after she filed for divorce. O'Reilly introduces the man's achievements in the United States, which include the founding of a cable TV station that promoted understanding of Muslims. As a guest, the show featured Dawn Perlmutter, introduced as a ritual murder expert. Together, she and O'Reilly focused on the role of beheading in the Islamic religion, the significance of the messages the act carries for Muslims, and the tolerance toward beheadings in the Muslim world. While the first video was mainly composed of studio shots of O'Reilly and the commentators, and still pictures of Fasial Shahzad, the second video featured images of jihadists pressing knife into a hostage's throat, along with other similar beheading gestures.

I analyzed the data from two standpoints: context and deliverance. For context, I focused on the words used by the commentator and searched for patterns: the frequency at which certain words were used, and appearance of keywords strongly associated with Islamophobia. For deliverance, I looked at the overall structure of the

show, on the conversing style between the commentator and the guests, and the use of visual aids. The next section will explain the findings based on this procedure of analysis.

Findings

The analysis of the video revealed three methods used by O'Reilly in which the findings can be categorized.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is a common method associated with racism and prejudice, and O'Reilly attempts this through keyword and generalization. In the first video, O'Reilly is seen repetitively using the words "Islamic jihadists" and "terrorists". Although the words terrorism and terrorists are general terms with broad meaning, ever since 9.11 they have come to be associated strongly with Muslims. Other words that appear continuously are "kill" and "thousands", both of which appeared throughout his speech in sentences referring to Muslims. "Thousands" was repeated in succession, especially when expressing the number of "terrorists" wanting to "kill". Such repeated usage of negative words in describing controversial news events reinforces the Muslim

stereotype even further.

O'Reilly also uses generalization to perpetuate stereotypes of Muslims. Both videos carry this distinctive structure: the show begins with a focus on the shocking attempt at bombing or beheading carried out by individuals who happen to be Muslim, and gradually expands the discussion to include Muslims in general. As a result, negative images and emotions formed toward the specific event are transferred along with the discussion. By applying the actions of an individual to the majority, O'Reilly oversimplifies the image of Muslims—leading to the assumption that the negativity applies to all of the Islamic population

In the case of Islamophobia, such ways of stereotyping are exacerbated by the lack of actual knowledge amongst the audience. According to a poll by Gallup (2009), "a majority of Americans (63%) say they have either 'very little knowledge' (40%) or 'none at all' (23%) of Islam. Thirty-four percent of Americans say they have 'some knowledge' and 3% report having 'a great deal of knowledge' about Islam." Despite—or perhaps because of—this lack of knowledge and familiarity, "Americans are more than twice as likely to express negative feelings toward Muslims as they are toward Buddhists, Christians, and Jews". Survey results show that people have nearly as little knowledge about Buddhism as they do about Islam, yet the negative views elicited

toward Buddhists are much lower than that of Muslims. These facts indicate that the stereotypes encouraged by the media have stepped in to fill the gap left by audience's limited knowledge.

Us and Them

O'Reilly's speech patterns indicate the construction of a world in which there is a clear distinction between "Us" and "Them". In the second video, O'Reilly shrewdly constructs the structure of "us" the Americans and "them" the Muslims through the topic of beheading. The calm explanation by the guest on the significance of beheading in the Muslim community is followed by an emotional, shocked response of incredulity by O'Reilly—a conversing style that is repeated several times. The message here is clear: 'They' the Muslims are irrational, barbarous, and crazy because not only do they accept and tolerate beheading, they consider it honorary. 'We' the Americans on the other hand, are compassionate and humane because we do not do these things. Hence, Muslims are dangerous, the reasoning goes.

This method of "positive self-representations…typically accompanied by negative other presentations" is also identified by Augoustinos and Every (2007) in their study of racism toward other ethnicities. The dichotomization of "us" and "them" works

exceptionally well in promoting Islamophobia: by enunciating the differences between "our" civilized way of life and "our" reasonable way of thinking, and "their" savage way of life and "their" unbalanced way thinking, the American audience falsely assume that they are given an excuse to reject, fear, or dehumanize the Muslims.

In the book *The Psychology of War*, LeShan (2002) states a dualistic perception of reality as one of the common psychological states people enter during a war. He describes this state as one in which "'we' and 'they' are qualitatively different, so different that the same actions are 'good' when we do them, and 'evil' when the enemy does them." This mythic reality, in which the world is divided into good and evil, is strikingly similar to the framework O'Reilly creates within his show. There have been Americans who have tried to bomb buildings; Americans husbands that have murdered their wives. Yet when these two are done by Muslims, O'Reilly implies, they take on a completely different meaning altogether—one that is far more evil and unforgivable.

The assertion of mythic reality is even more effective against the backdrop of an actual war; the existence of the "War on Terror" raging in Iraq and Afghanistan has made the "Us" and "Them" perspective much more credible and acceptable, further fueling the fire of Islamophobia.

Humans respond strongly to fear. This emotion is activated when we feel threatened, and often we sense such threats on a subconscious level. The context and the deliverance of the two talk shows reveal that O'Reilly takes great advantage of this human nature in promoting Islamophobia.

The first example is the choice of words by O'Reilly. He uses the word "kill" and "terrorists", strong words that stir ripples of anxiety in the listener's mind. He also repeats certain words for a stronger effect, by saying how "thousands and thousands and thousands of terrorists wanting to kill us". The threatening implications behind the sentence, and the sense of urgency these words convey, are clearly intended to induce fear.

O'Reilly also exploits certain phrases to evoke negative images of Muslims. "Islamic jihadists" and "preaching hatred" appear several times in both videos. Although these phrases are commonly used to depict Muslims, the individual words used in these phrases usually have no negative connotations of Islam on their own. Yet by cleverly combining them together, O'Reilly presents the words in ways that rob the words of their neutrality and instead instill in them a tone of threat and danger.

"Madrasahs" is another word that bears strong, negative connotations of Islam.

It is often falsely associated with the education of future radical Muslims and potential terrorist, but—as with the case of many other words—the word itself simply means educational institution, both secular and religious. But because of the misleading reports of this term, when, for example in newspapers, "articles mentioned 'madrassas,' readers were led to infer that all schools so-named are anti-American, anti-Western, pro-terrorist centers having less to do with teaching basic literacy and more to do with political indoctrination" (Moeller, 2007). O'Reilly exploits these already established misinterpretations in order to generate in his audience a sense of danger.

The second video strategically employs visuals, which possess an even greater efficacy in evoking fear than words. O'Reilly's commentaries are accompanied by images of jihadists holding hostages and pressing a knife to their throat. The notion of beheading is enough to cause fear and disgust; the video reinforces those emotions even further by featuring foreign hostages, blindfolded and at the mercy of the jihadists. But it is important to note that the majority of the victims of honor beheadings are Muslims, not foreigners—a fact O'Reilly himself clarifies with the expert. The images, then, are actually irrelevant and misleading, since they seem to imply that the main targeting of beheading are non-Islamic people. Despite this, they have been heavily incorporated into the show because they are more likely to incite fear amongst the audience.

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Conclusion

In this essay, I have examined the specific ways O'Reilly promotes Islamophobia in his talk show. I identified three methods—stereotyping, construction of "Us" and "Them", and appeal to fear—by which O'Reilly promulgates negative views on Muslims and the Islamic faith.

Repetition of words such as "kill" and "terrorists", and generalization of the beheading by a single individual reinforces the negative stereotype of Muslims based on fragmented knowledge of the audience. Depicting the Islamic tolerance toward beheading as a mark of savagery and inhumanity create a mythic reality in which there is a significant difference between "us" the Americans and "them" the Muslims. Keywords with strong negative connotations and misleading visual aid are used to provoke a false sense of alarm and fear.

The extent of influence such methods have over the public opinion can be speculated on the internet: in the comments section on www.youtube.com to the video of the second show, 'Gruesome Epidemic?', there is onslaught of violent and hateful words toward the Islam religion and Muslims.

This thesis based on the detailed analysis of two talk shows by the conservative political commentator Bill O'Reilly has revealed deliberate and implicit attempts to

promote prejudice against Muslims and perpetuate Islamophobia amongst its audience.

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