



Muslim Women's League

MWL is a nonprofit American Muslim organization working to implement the values of Islam and thereby reclaim the status of women as free, equal and vital contributors to society.

In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful

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How Media Forms Perceptions

By: Dr. Tayyibah Taylor – Editor-in-Chief of Azizah Magazine

Now, more than ever, we need our own media. At a time when Islam has been equated with senseless violence, at a time when Muslims have been defined as terrorists, we need our own media. At a time when the expression of dissenting views is deemed unpatriotic, and objective journalism seems to be out of vogue, we need our own media. This is also a time in journalism when ratings and the bottom line are more important than content and when the media sources are merging to become mega-outlets in the hands of a few. We need our own outlets to ensure our voice is heard.

It is often propounded that two essential elements for a working democracy are critical thinking and accurate information. In times of emergency, stress or disaster, and yes, war, critical thinking is often suspended. And in this society, the main source relied upon for information is the media. I ask, what happens when critical thinking is suspended and the information received is inaccurate? What happens when information received is colored with negatives stereotypes and counterfeit images, with words and images loaded with subtle, almost imperceptible insinuations?

We have seen what happens. We have experienced firsthand the negative backlash. If one ethnicity or religion or group of people is vilified or demonized in the media, it is easy to hate them. It is even easy to attack them. This gives permission to heads of religious organizations to openly refer to Islam as an evil and violent religion. It gives elected officials permission to nominate to the board of the US Institute of Peace a man who declares that one in every ten Muslims is an extremist militant. This demonization, marginalization and inaccurate representation of Muslim in the media gives permission for the ordinary misinformed Joe Citizen on the street to feel justified in attacking Middle Easterners, or any one who they perceive to be such, in order to avenge the events of September 11th. It gives permission for Muslims to be physically and verbally assaulted in public.

I feel it is important to understand how this comes about. As a student of words and a media professional, I watch the news, listen to the radio or read a newspaper with half of my attention directed at what is being said, and the other half to how it is being said. I wonder how many people exercise critical thinking while watching the news. How many of us digest everything that is said without examination?

When people who are not of a society's dominant culture do not see themselves reflected positively in

the media, they experience a very subtle, yet very real and powerful process of internalization of inferiority. This has happened with the African American and other groups and it has happened with Muslims and certainly with the Muslim woman. For years the only images we saw of people of color in movies were those of servants. Then people of color were promoted to criminals.

You may say, "I know who I am! I don't feel inferior in regards to my identity as a Muslim." However, there is a flip side to this internalization. Negative stereotypes are internalized not only by the group portrayed, but also by other groups in the society, including those of the dominant culture. Counterfeit images are etched into all of our minds and formulate our perspectives, thoughts and opinions. Opinions and perceptions formed from stereotypes and negative images often gives other permission to dominate, feel superior, ridicule or even inflict harm.

How can you fight an enemy that is in your head? This is done by understanding how it is done and by undoing the misinformation. We can do this with our own media. In this country, Islam and Muslims are often reported on through the lens of Middle Eastern politics. It gives the impression that all Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are Arabs. Without the crucible of knowledge, the general public forms concepts from the flow of misinformation.

Let's look at the way public opinion is formed in almost subliminal ways. When you want to devalue a leader of a country, first remove his title and then call him by his first name. Can you recall the last time the leader was referred to by his official title? We are on first name basis with the leader of another country. Newspapers and TV reports have used the entire name, but stopped using the title a long time ago. When you have a whole country calling someone by his first name, you already have affected public opinion.

When you want to invade another country, but you lack the support of most other countries in the world, it is good to have a word in the minds of people that suggest that you do have support. How about the word coalition? When the government holds press conferences or issues press releases using the word coalition or 'embeds' reporters with a military unit, the press then has to decide - should we use this word or not? The more it is used, the more you and the public believe many people are backing a war that few people agree with. Some news organizations refused to use the word coalition in their reporting and instead used the phrase "US led forces" however, most simply adopted the word coalition.

Some time a word mutates – an example, the word "settlement". Students of US history know that the words "settlers" and "settlements" were used to describe the first European people to this country. There was no mention of the displacement of the native people. Rather, the word "settling" carries the connotation of a benign, quiet action. The word "settlements", was also used to describe the homes built on land illegally seized by Israel after the 1967 war This word could more easily affect public opinion than the phrase "illegal housing units in Israeli-occupied land."

However, because of all the problems generated by illegally seized territories, the usage of the word settlement has become problematic. Last year, a fair press organization reported the following:

The Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz reported last month (5/31/02) that at the

behest of a Likud party minister, the Israel Broadcasting Authority has banned its editorial departments from using the terms "settlers" or "settlements" on radio and TV. According to Ha'aretz, "it is not clear if the editors will obey the order," which was seen as an attempt by the new IBA director to curry favor with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

What does seem clear is that settlements-- housing built on land illegally seized by Israel after the 1967 war-- are such a contentious issue within Israel that the Israeli government would like to stop reporters from even saying the word.

Nonetheless, the opinion pages of an Israeli paper like Ha'aretz often show a franker debate over Israel's aggressive settlement policy than one can generally find in mainstream U.S. media. Direct government interference doesn't seem to have been necessary to convince some major U.S. news outlets to avoid any honest investigation of settlements, and sometimes even to avoid the word itself.

The use of the word terrorist is another word that has mutated. It was once used in connection with the IRA and European anarchy groups, and Middle Eastern group. But it is now reserved exclusively for Muslims. I realized it was exclusively for Muslims when the Oklahoma City bombing happened. Immediately after that incident, we heard this was deemed "an act of terrorism". Two men of Middle Eastern descent were found and arrested.

However, when Timothy McVeigh, blond hair and blue eyed, the all American boy who was arrested - he didn't fit the profile of the way we have now defined terrorist, so we had to come up with another word – "domestic terrorist." We heard a little bit about "domestic terrorism" for a few weeks, but by the time Timothy McVeigh was executed, he was no longer a terrorist. He was not even a domestic terrorist. Timothy McVeigh was being referred to as "the worst mass murderer in US history" at the time of his

death.

If a person goes to an airline counter and shoots some people and kills himself, is that terrorism? How about a person found with an arsenal of explosives and plans to blow up religious institutions – is that terrorism? In the first instance, if the person is an Arab and the airline counter is El Al, it would be considered terrorism. In the latter instance, if the person is a Jewish dentist and the religious institutions he plans to blow up are mosques then it is not considered terrorism. He is being charged with a “hate crime.”

I cannot underscore enough, the importance of heeding the power of words and images. One image that particularly caught my attention was a demonstration on FOX news. Shortly after 9/11, we were told how vulnerable we were; terrorists were everywhere and could attack us at anytime.

Terrorists were in Canada and the Canadian borders were so badly patrolled that terrorist could go into Canada and that sneak into the US and kill us all. To prove just how porous the borders were, a new FOX crew sailed a boat between several US/Canadian border points and landed unnoticed in one instance and unchecked in another, by border officials. This was to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that terrorist could travel undetected across this waters. They even made a point of saying this is a route that Russian spies took during the Cold War. I thought, let’s try this with a boatload of African American men and see how far they get without being checked!

We are all familiar with images used to depict Muslim women. She is covered in head to toe in black – oppressed depressed, ignorant and backwards. I watched the coverage of the Iraqi war to see how she would be portrayed and only saw the same peasant woman in black wandering around. The only variation was seeing her on the back of a donkey cart.

I was thinking, Iraqi is a place filled with educated women but where are they? I did happen to see a well-dress Iraqi professional woman who spoke English. However, she was either a curator or a docent in the museum of antiquities. She was standing in the looted museum, bereft of its treasures, crying and bemoaning the great loss. Understandably, she was distraught and upset. The one image of an educated Iraqi woman not cloaked in black, but weeping – this was an image to pity.

We should also be conscious how governments will use these images of Muslim women looking burdened and backwards. While one government will use them to justify invasion of another country in order to “liberate and free” these poor oppressed women, another will use them to prove just how Islamic their rule is. Both governments are prostituting Muslim women.

Many in the industry have been horrified by the lack of objectivity in the press and have gone out of their way to restore it. Some have sought to insert images of Muslims in ordinary ways – in the Canadian comic strip For Better or Worse, the creator included a woman in hijab (head covering) in strip. The content was not about Muslims, and including a drawing of a Muslim waiting in line along with other people, which spoke volumes.

During the last elections, I saw a Muslim woman included in a discussion after a presidential debate. She

was there as a citizen commenting on the ability of the candidates. Until media images such as these are commonplace, we must take responsibility to provide our own.

Undoubtedly there is great power in the word and image. I invite you to use critical thinking and listen carefully to the precise words used. When one hears a word you have an intellectual response and also an emotional response.

At Azizah magazine, our mission is to shatter stereotypes and correct the misinformation, about Muslim women, both in our minds and the minds of others. By being a vehicle for the voice of the Muslim woman, we reflect the accomplishments and issues of intelligent successful Muslim women replacing the negative stereotypes. For many, both Muslims and others, our magazine is their first encounter seeing positive portrayals of Muslim women in the media.

Without Muslim women working in the media, both behind the scenes and in front, and without accurate representations of Muslim women in the media, the public will continue to be misinformed about Islam and about Muslims. They will continue to think of Muslim women as someone to pity, shun or fear.

I am often involved in interfaith work and am frequently questioned as to why don't Muslims denounce violent acts perpetrated by other Muslims? With us lacking powerful, visible media outlets leaves others with the perception that we don't care to denounce senseless violence done in the name of Islam.

I am thrilled that the Muslim Women's League has recognized the impact and importance of the media in our lives. I am please that they are honoring, supporting and encouraging Muslim women and the media. It is a difficult business and we can use all the encouragement and support we can get!

In the evolution of the Muslim American culture, there is lots of work to be done. Besides building more mosques and schools, and solidifying our social service infrastructure, we also in need of colleges and hospitals run by Muslims.

I applaud the work done by women's groups, Islamic organizations and businesses, such as the Muslim Women's League, Muslim Political Affairs Council and the Council of American Islamic Relations.

I also applaud the media that already exists -- Islamic Horizons, Minaret, the ethnic newspapers -- the Muslim Journal, Pakistani Link and Arab news and the effort to start Bridges TV.

I encourage you to support them all. Without your support, they won't exist -- without your support we won't have a voice. Without a voice we will remain spectators to our own destiny. Now, more than ever, we need our own media.