



INNOCENT MISTAKES

A CONTROVERSIAL FILM FINDS JOURNALISM
CAUGHT BETWEEN IMAGE AND REALITY

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A Controversial Film Finds Journalism Caught Between
Image and Reality

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Summary

This report reviews media coverage of the *Innocence of Muslims*, a short film trailer produced by a religious activist and distributed over the Internet, which became the spark for protest and violence across the globe and leading to at least 75 deaths.

The film was, by all accounts, a low-budget and amateurish production yet it was given enormous publicity and was used to reinforce deep divisions between western and Muslim religious cultures.

Coverage of the film has raised concerns about the influence of deeply-embedded stereotypes in media reporting. In this case editorial failings, albeit inadvertently, may have reinforced prejudice and misunderstanding.

The report highlights major editorial mistakes including failure to establish the truth about the film's origins; the uncorrected circulation of false information about the film; a lamentable lack of reporting of voices calling for peaceful and non-violent protest; and a general failure to provide context which explained the reasons for violence and who was behind it.

Many responsible media sought balance in their reporting and tried to correct their errors, but many more did not. In some countries, Pakistan

for instance, some politicians openly encouraged violence and endorsed the provocative hate speech found in some sections of media.

This report, based upon extensive interviews with journalists, academics and media leaders, is narrowly focused and looks at coverage of the film in a number of sample countries - the United States, United Kingdom, Pakistan and Turkey - all of them places where terrorism and religious extremism has left its mark.

The report concludes that:

- Online media and social networks reinforced the impact of media mistakes and played a significant role in circulating false information in the first days of the crisis. Although there were many instances of restraint and caution, both online and offline, there was a general failure to correct these damaging initial impressions;
- Additionally, in the **United States** and the **United Kingdom**, media may have exaggerated the strength

Many responsible media sought balance in their reporting and tried to correct their errors, but many more did not.

of feeling in response to the film in the Muslim community. Media in both countries struggled to provide balance in their coverage and failed to provide adequate context to explain the origins of violence;

- In **Pakistan** religious parties and extremists dominated the news agenda of mass circulation, local-language media while moderate Muslim voices in the mainstream were largely marginalized.

At the same time, senior political figures supported actions designed to encourage protest and to incite violence.

- In **Turkey** media were largely uncritical as government leaders sought to use the controversy to build a platform for launching an international campaign to strengthen laws of blasphemy.

The report also highlights research that shows how minority religious or activist groups from the fringes of politics receive disproportionate attention in American media.

It concludes with some recommendations for raising awareness within media on the dangers of hate speech including proposals to:

- **Create a global databank of media best practices** to help journalists avoid hate speech and to strengthen levels of professionalism;

- **Establish a specific reporting process** that will monitor media in key countries and report annually on coverage of incidents of hate speech or acts of false, provocative or unethical journalism particularly in the field of reporting religious affairs or relations between different communities;

- **Promote more debate within journalism and the wider community** on the need to raise awareness on the dangers of hate speech arising from use of online communications and social networks;

- **Encourage more research** into aspects of media performance that have raised concern in this case including verification of potentially inflammatory information prior to publication; publication of corrections and clarifications of false information; use of extremist and minority voices; and the need for media to use more representative and relevant sources to achieve context, balance and impartiality.

Finally, although this report is not exhaustive it highlights failings in media coverage of this controversial film that should be troubling for journalists everywhere. It points to the need for accuracy and context in the reporting and analysis of events when they have an impact on the fragile relations between different cultures and communities.

Above all, it illustrates how journalism must be alert to the dangers of hate speech and the casual manipulation of media by unscrupulous political groups.

Aidan White

Director

Ethical Journalism Network



A protest against Innocence Muslim, in front of the US Embassy on September 22, 2012, Kuala Lumpur (Amir Ridhwan / Shutterstock.com)

Background

The film *Innocence of Muslims* came to prominence in July 2012 when it was uploaded to YouTube, the video file-sharing website. Arabic language versions, this time with anti-Islamic content, were added in the first days of September 2012, with post-production dubbing which changed the original dialogue without the actors' knowledge.¹

The video focused on the persecution of the Christian Copt community in Egypt, with claims of a rise in growing religious intolerance and sectarian violence from the Muslim majority against the Christian group which makes up 10% of the Egyptian population.

The film was perceived as denigrating Islam and the prophet Mohammed and its Arabic version led to widespread protests around September 11 - the 11th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York - particularly in Egypt, but also in many other Muslim nations and in some western countries.

One of those protests, in Benghazi, was used as a cover by armed terrorists for an attack on the American mission in Libya and the killing of United States Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three of his staff. In all, the protests led to hundreds of injuries and more than 75 deaths.

The film sparked new debates about free speech, internet censorship and

blasphemy and became the subject of incendiary comment. It led to the issuing of Fatwas - Islamic legal rulings, often misinterpreted as death sentences - against the video's participants and, famously, to one government minister in Pakistan offering a bounty for the death of the producer.

The film was particularly controversial because it was linked with claims reported by leading media such as the Associated Press that it had been financed by 100 Jewish investors. This report first appeared on September 12th 2012. An extensive correction was issued two days later.

While the film was eventually revealed to be the work of a Coptic Christian of Egyptian origins, the myth that Jews produced and financed the film in an effort to insult the Prophet Mohammed and Islam had gone viral. It provided a spark that militants and extremist groups used to give fresh momentum to anti-western sentiment across much of the Middle East and the Islamic world.

¹ See http://www.youtube.com/verify_controversy?next_url=/watch%3Fv%3DUDd6bine9io
The film is 13 minutes long and a trailer for a longer film that has never been completed or shown.

The Film's aim was to insult, provoke confrontation and reinforce divisions. In this sense it was of use only to a small, narrow community of political activists on both sides of the febrile religious divide.

The man responsible was Mark Basseley Youssef, alias Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, and also known as Sam Bacile, the name he used in his discussions with the Associated Press.

Two months after the film controversy broke Youssef was sent to prison by an American court but not for any offence related to the film. He was jailed for a year because of violation of his probation arising from an earlier conviction. His criminal record includes convictions for drug offences and bank fraud.

He told authorities that he wrote the script for *Innocence of Muslims* while in prison. When he was freed on probation in June 2011 he started production in California.

Actors in the film say that they were told the film was called "Desert Warrior," and say that the script contained no references to Mohammed. One of them, Cindy Lee Garcia, told ABC News, "I never heard Mohammed, I never said Mohammed." Specific references to Mohammed and Islam were added later.

Youssef originally told reporters he was an "Israeli Jew" and that the film had cost about \$5,000,000, which came from wealthy Jewish friends, but in fact Youssef is an Egyptian-

American. He later admitted the film cost between \$50,000 and \$60,000 and was shot in a little over 12 days. The money, he said, came from his wife's family in Egypt.

Although media coverage gave the impression that this was a major production, it was nothing of the sort. The video itself was widely derided as amateurish and unworthy of any serious consideration as a work of creative value.

The film's aim was to insult, provoke confrontation and reinforce divisions. In this sense it was of use only to a small, narrow community of political activists on both sides of the febrile religious divide that has arisen between mainly Islamic and Christian communities over the past decade.

Although the error-strewn reporting led to significant apologies from the Associated Press as well as The Wall Street Journal, many media organisations did not bother to correct their mistakes and few returned to the story to set the record straight when the film's producer was sent to jail.

The *Innocence of Muslims* affair is the latest incident in which media have been at the centre of attempts by political groups to manipulate public opinion to foment religious and cultural divisions between



An Indian protester kicks an image of the American flag on a wall of the U.S. Consulate during a protest against the anti-Islam film, in Chennai, India, on September 14, 2012. (AP Photo/Arun Shanker K.)

communities. This tendency has its origins in the development of the so-called war on terror following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and wider concerns over United States policy in the Middle East, particularly arising from the invasion of Iraq in 1993.

Most dramatically, in 2006, the infamous cartoons crisis led to a firestorm of protest over publications in western media of images of the Prophet Mohammed. Although, in the event, only a relative handful of media around the world ever published these controversial cartoons they served as a lightning rod for conflict over free expression rights and led to angry street protests

in which more than 150 people were killed.

The cartoons had been commissioned by a Danish daily newspaper but their publication only became a global story four months later, timing which suggests that Middle Eastern political groups fueled and shaped the controversy to suit their own interests. In particular, it provided opportunities for fresh expression of anti-Americanism in the Middle East.²

In 2008 a short film produced by the Dutch Parliamentarian Geert Wilders called Fitna (an Arabic word that is similar to tribulation and turmoil in English) attempted to illustrate

Media have been at the centre of attempts by political groups to manipulate public opinion to foment religious and cultural divisions.

² See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-mcgraw-and-joel-warner/muhammad-cartoons_b_1907545.html

how the Koran is used to promote hatred. The film argued that Islam encourages terrorism, anti-Semitism, and violence against women as well as violence and subjugation of non-Muslims.

It was published on the Internet but, in the face of broad opposition from most of his political opponents, Wilders was unable to get the film shown elsewhere in Europe. Nevertheless, it stirred a continuing debate about Islam in the Netherlands.

In 2010, Pastor Jim Jones leader of a tiny Christian community in the backwoods of Florida promised to burn the Koran on the anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks, a pledge that was widely-publicised by media and quickly became a global story prompting fresh protests. In the event Jones gave way to political pressure and did not carry out his threat.

But media, particularly in the United States, realised that the story may have received more attention than it deserved. Jones continues to seek publicity and has been burning the Koran on occasions but his actions receive little publicity. However, he returned to the limelight briefly thanks to the *Innocence of Muslims* when he publicly defended the film and showed a trailer of it to his supporters.³

In February 2012 there was fresh controversy over the burning of the Koran and religious material by United States soldiers in Afghanistan. According to the Washington Post, US troops at Bagram air base provoked public indignation in February by taking a batch of religious materials, including 500 copies of the Koran, to the incinerator.⁴ Five days of protest followed in which 30 people died, including four Americans.

Against this backdrop of discord and dispute over religion, free expression and fragile community relations the *Innocence of Muslims* posed new challenge to media about how to report manifestations of hatred.

³ See <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/guy-koran-burning-pastor-terry-jones-backs-anti-muhammad-movie-article-1.1157522>

⁴ See: www.washingtonpost.com, August 27, 2012.

(A1000 Words / Shutterstock.com)



A large crowd of Muslims rally outside the American Embassy protesting. September 18, 2012 in Bangkok, Thailand.

United States: Focus on the Foreign Angle

Anser Hassan

In the United States media were focused on the film's impact overseas, where it appeared thousands of demonstrators were taking to the streets across many parts of the Islamic world. Of much less interest was the local angle - the story of how the film was made, its quality, who was responsible and the intentions behind its production.

Certainly, the foreign story was full of promise. In Pakistan, for example, members of various government agencies at the local, state and national levels denounced the film, saying it denigrated Islam and equating it with blasphemy. The Pakistani cabinet declared a national holiday and appeared to openly encourage street protests.

Pakistan Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf said, "I intend that a message should go to the world that the federal cabinet of Pakistan strongly condemns this sacrilegious film." He directed the Ministry of Information Technology to demand that YouTube remove the video.

Pakistan's Railways Minister Ghulam Ahmad Bilour went further, offering a bounty to the person who kills the filmmaker, saying, "I announce today that this blasphemer who has abused the holy prophet, if somebody will kill him, I will give that person a prize of \$100,000."

Although the government and Bilfour's own secular party, the Awami National Party, were quick to separate themselves from his proposal, the events provided ample scope for United States journalists to see the story defined by events unfolding beyond its borders.⁵

CNN described the Pakistani government's call for a national holiday as official backing for protest and while several demonstrations in urban centres rightly made headlines (see the Pakistan section of this report) much of the story was told by United States media without context, particularly the failure of media to report on alternative and moderate Muslim opinion.

For example, few, if any, American media reported on the joint Muslim-Christian peaceful protests against the film in the city of Samundri, Pakistan.⁶ Peaceful demonstrations in Kashmir and Swat, which are both regions where religious violence has been prevalent, were not mentioned by major American media.

Much of the story was told without context, particularly the failure to report on alternative and moderate Muslim opinion.

⁵ See <http://www.news.com.au/world-news/australias-high-commission-in-islamabad-pakistan-shut-over-fears-of-violent-protests-over-anti-islam-film/story-fndir2ev-1226478948912>

⁶ See <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenewsd.php?hnewsid=3778>

The quality of the film is so pathetic that it should've been allowed to die a natural death.

Some effort to put the protests in a different context was made by National Public Radio, which in reporting live from Pakistan on September 21st included this telling exchange between NPR Anchor Steve Inskeep and reporter Jackie Northam:

• **Inskeep:** I've been following the Pakistani press and there are other voices out there. Here's a quote from an article by a man named Raza Rumi, writing in the Express Tribune in Pakistan. He argues, quote: "The quality of the film is so pathetic that it should've been allowed to die a natural death. However, trust some Muslims to be swayed by brazen provocation... All you have is a faux narrative of Islam versus the West." Are there a lot of people, basically saying, what's going on here? What's the point?

• **Northam:** You know, there are voices of reason here, certainly. And on the morning shows on TV, the anchors were appealing for calm and saying violence just won't do anything, it'll make Muslims look bad in the eyes of the world. People I've talked to over the past week have expressed the same sentiment. A lot of people, just don't understand why everybody has reacted so violently to such a stupid film - like your columnist said. But a lot of people did want to use this public holiday

as an opportunity to express their disappointment and anger, and really, hurt, about the anti-Islam video.

But what you see are crowds of young men just wantonly destroying buildings and cheering when they break a security cordon. Unfortunately - those are the pictures that the world's going to see.⁷

This failure to provide context - that is the other side of a predictable story of violent protest - was the major problem according to Javed Ali founder and editor of ILLUME media, an American award-winning, multi-media website devoted to coverage of the American Muslim community.

"I think we have to be careful before we say that certain media organisations in the West are being sensationalist," he cautions. "There is so much pressure on media to get the story out and to be first and journalism is suffering. But the mainstream media needs to be critical and sensitive in providing more space for differing viewpoints. This is not to minimize or condone the violence. The violence is real. But there is a historical and socio-political context missing in the coverage. That part is critical."

The American media watchdog organisation Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) supported Ali's call for context in reporting. They argue that US media coverage of events in Muslim majority countries is a "carnival of distortion, double standards and bigotry."⁸

FAIR criticised coverage of the film by both Time and Newsweek and were particularly critical of the pictures and headlines on the cover pages. They had no problem with the reporting of Time, but they condemned the sensationalism of the front cover headline - 'The Agents of Outrage.'

They were especially critical of Newsweek, whose front cover - 'Muslim Rage: How I Survived It, How We Can End it' - caused widespread consternation and also of the article inside by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. FAIR described her as an Islamophobe who was "repurposing her standard take on the depravity of Islam with a few new details from current events."

They claimed the article wrongly suggests such protests are supported by the mainstream public in these countries, as described by Hirsi Ali who wrote, "The Muslim men and women (and yes, there are plenty of women) who support - whether actively or passively - the idea that blasphemers deserve to suffer



Newsweek's now infamous 'Muslim rage' cover.
Photograph: Guardian

punishment are not a fringe group. On the contrary, they represent the mainstream of contemporary Islam."

FAIR retorted, "Mainstream? Hardly. Just a tiny fraction of the planet's 1.6 billion Muslims took to the streets in the alleged explosion of anger." Building on that theme, columnist Jeff Sybertz writes, "Due to the media's desire for a simple story with clearly defined protagonists and antagonists that follows the pro-American narrative, coverage has focused more on the video itself instead of uncovering why a trashy video made by an independent individual could instigate so much hatred and anger in so many people toward an entire nation."⁹

⁸ See <http://fair.org/extra-online-articles/why-do-they-hate-us-back/>

⁹ See <http://commons.trincoll.edu/tripod/2012/09/25/innocence-of-muslims-and-the-role-of-the-american-media/>

At the same time people inside the media community began to voice concern that journalists were not adequately explaining the full background to the events with little distinction being made between those who participate because they believe in the cause and those who show up just to cause problems.

The Vienna-based International Press Institute (IPI) and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) in Paris issued a joint statement which said in part: "Western media coverage of the protests has been intense, focussing on violence, anti-American statements and on security measures taken at the embassies. There appears to have been less coverage of protests by people in Muslim countries, who were condemning the attacks".¹⁰

They recommended that coverage could improve. "Western media can also better explain the reaction in the Arab world by, distinguishing between who is calling for demonstrations, and who is hoping for (or involved in) violent attacks and looting... and it demonstrates the kind of misinformation that the media should seek to address."

The frustration over media coverage was expressed succinctly by one reader writing in the Baltimore Sun on September 20th who said:

"Protests were exacerbated around the Muslim world by inaccurate, incomplete and unverified media reports. Hoodlums with weaponry had become engaged as well as everyday outraged Muslims."

Part of the problem according to political scientist Hoda Salah is that media coverage of Islam and the Innocence of Muslim film in particular was one-dimensional. She took issue with framing of the protests as "mass" demonstrations, asking "What do 3,000 demonstrators in a city of 20 million like Cairo amount to? Do they represent a majority of the country's Muslims? The reports often demonstrate no sense of proportion."¹¹

Hoda also noted that, like the analysis of radical Muslims, media failed to provide detail that would put the story in a better context. "Both the Western mainstream media and the radical Islamists generalise where they should differentiate - and thus contribute towards the escalation."

This lack of context leads media to reduce the complexity of Muslim and Arab society and the variety of their people to their religious identity. "They ignore the global, economic and political causes of alarming outbreaks of violence in the region," she says.

¹⁰ See <http://www.freemedia.at/home/singleview/article/ipiwan-ifra-editorial-at-times-like-these-media-freedom-and-independence-are-more-important-than.html>

¹¹ See <http://en.qantara.de/Against-the-Islamisation-of-Muslims/19917c21325i1p1414/index.html>

But not all journalism failed the test. One media outlet that distinguished itself was Bloomberg which on the day of the major protests provided some of the most comprehensive journalism, not just in terms of scope of coverage, but also in adding context to a larger socio-political story behind the so-called “Muslim rage.”

Reporters quoted leaders throughout the region, many who called on the US to be firm against the filmmaker, yet also calling for peaceful demonstrations. Furthermore, the Bloomberg coverage also tackled the issue of context, for example, explaining the growing anti-American sentiment resulting from increasing drone strikes.¹²

A Bloomberg news producer based in the United States admits that many reporters did not give the proper context to the events around the film but says this is more likely to be as a result of lack of access to reliable and credible sources in the Muslim community. “I refuse to believe that there is an evil conspiracy within newsrooms in the West to bring on a clash of civilizations,” he says. It is, he says, a problem of media structure rather than internal news planning. He wished to remain anonymous for the purposes of this report.

Like other mainstream news outlets CNN provided wide-ranging coverage of protests over the film. They included news and editorial updates including a perceptive piece from Aazadi Fateh Muhammad, a professor of mass communication at Federal Urdu University in Karachi, who suggested media should highlight the calls for moderation by Islamic leaders and scholars and that there should be less coverage given to hard-line political parties and leaders.¹³

However, these recommendations were rarely followed, even by CNN, although the network did produce one article which provided good background and context to the demonstrations, and even interviewing several American Muslim leaders. “There should have been no bloodshed,” said Muslim leader Maher Hathout. “As a matter of fact, there should have been no reaction to such an insignificant production.” Zainab Al-Suwaij, of the American Islamic Congress, added the telling point that those behind the protests have “a lot of other political goals” and are using the film as “just an excuse.”¹⁴

¹² See <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-09-21/pakistan-tv-airs-obama-ad-denouncing-anti-islam-video.html>

¹³ See <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/22/opinion/fateh-pakistan-islam-protests>

¹⁴ See <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/17/world/film-protests>

United States: Media Bias and the anti-Islam Message

Danica Ilic

The general failure of media to tell the full story of the *Innocence of Muslims* controversy may in part be explained by the findings of a survey published soon afterwards which suggests that media in the United States routinely give undue prominence to anti-Islam messages.

The work by Christopher Bail, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina and the University of Michigan finds that since the terror attacks on New York and Washington the media are more likely to publicise the views and actions of minority groups, even where they are driven by a divisive and hate-inspired agenda. Prior to 9/11 such groups rarely figured in the news.

Bail became interested in the public discourse surrounding Islam and studied the controversies about the faith have regularly arisen since 2001, including the publicity given to Koran-burning Florida pastor Terry Jones' and the impact of the *Innocence of Muslims* film.¹⁵

His study, published in December 2012 by the American Sociological Review, finds that anti-Muslim fringe groups are more mainstream and have increased their influence and funding since the September 11th attacks, in part thanks to their presence in the United States media.

He writes "I found that organizations with negative messages about Muslims captivated the mass media after the September 11 attacks, even though the vast majority of civil society organisations depict Muslims as peaceful, contributing members of American society.

As a result, he says, public condemnations of terrorism by Muslims have receive little media attention, but organisations spreading negative messages continue to stoke public fears that Muslims are secretly plotting to overthrow the American government. "They are now so much a part of the mainstream that they have been able to recast genuinely mainstream Muslim organizations as radicals," he told the *Huffington Post*.¹⁶

His study reveals that media-savvy extremists, representing a tiny sector of non-governmental organisations, captivate the media with their news releases, leading to major news coverage, which in turn gives them

¹⁵ See http://www.nbcnews.com/id/50008102/ns/technology_and_science-science/#.UVV2SRwaMI-

¹⁶ The Huffington Post, 2012 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/krystina-friedlander/a-look-back-at-media-coverage-of-islam-and-islamic-law-in-2012_b_2346943.html

American media almost completely ignored public condemnations of terrorist events by prominent Muslim organisations in the United States.

legitimacy, attracts donations and connects the groups to powerful conservative think tanks.¹⁷

“I’m not saying the media had a direct role in facilitating these connections,” says Bail, “but newspaper and television coverage of fringe groups with messages seeking to inspire anti-Muslim and Islamic fear and anger were given increased visibility creating the misperception they were mainstream organizations.”

As a result, he says, media contribute to helping these organisations to secure funding and to build social networks that they may not been able to do otherwise. By contrast, his study reveals that moderate groups, which make up the vast majority of civil society Muslim organisations are much less represented in news reports.

“We learned that American media almost completely ignored public condemnations of terrorist events by prominent Muslim organisations in the United States,” he said. “Inattention to these condemnations, combined with the emotional warnings of anti-fringe organisations, has created a very distorted representation of the community of advocacy organisations, think tanks, and religious groups competing to shape the representation of Islam in the American public sphere.”¹⁸

A Yemeni protester destroys an American flag pulled down as other hold a banner in Arabic that reads, “any one but you God’s prophet”

¹⁷ See http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2012/11/29/Study-News-stories-aid-anti-Muslim-groups/UPI-11341354166786/

¹⁸ See <http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2012-11/30/anti-muslim-influence-on-us-media>

at the U.S. Embassy compound, in Sanaa, Yemen, on September 13, 2012. (AP Photo/Hani Mohammed)



United Kingdom: Media Caught in the Crossfire

Danica Ilic

In Britain as the storm over *Innocence of Muslims* began to erupt the BBC immediately identified how media themselves were used to ignite the controversy in the Muslim world. On September 13th 2012 reporter Alistair Leithead commented:

*"It was the film's translation into Arabic and broadcast on Arab television stations and talk shows which sparked the violence - although investigations are now under way in Washington to establish whether the worst of the violence was not spontaneous."*¹⁹

The BBC didn't dwell on its own role in the process, although it did acknowledge in the same report that it was one of many in the mainstream media that had repeated the mistaken and highly controversial claim that the author of the video was of Israeli origin.

"The exact origin of the movie and the internet clip, and the motivation behind its production, remains a mystery," said Leithead. "But it appears not to be linked to an Israeli film-maker as was earlier widely reported, including by the BBC."

In fact, this widely-reported statement was deliberate misinformation and mischief-making by the film-maker himself who was looking to provoke and enrage Muslim activists. It was a falsehood repeated by many broadcasters and newspapers, including the Guardian, and it remained current and uncorrected for 24 hours making its way into the mainstream coverage of media around the globe.

The editor of the BBC Arabic Service, Faris Couri, agrees that media coverage lacked responsibility. "Media allowed this production deemed amateurish and insignificant to be noticed," he said. "The film caused a lot of anguish among ordinary Muslims; however, small groups used it as a pretext to launch violent attacks that led to death, injuries and destruction of properties."

Analysing his own team's reporting on the video and the protests, he is convinced the BBC's Arabic coverage was balanced and objective. "Radio conducted the first telephone interview with the Egyptian film producer from the United States," he said. "The demonstrations and associated violence across the Arab and Islamic world were covered on other platforms and there was special attention to attacks on embassies and to what was going in Egypt, especially the Coptic community where its leaders condemned the film."

Small groups used it as a pretext to launch violent attacks that led to death, injuries and destruction

¹⁹ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19572912>

Journalists and editors wage a constant struggle to deal professionally with the constant flow and rising tide of information, much of it unverified, on the Internet.

The BBC also reported the Egyptian courts verdict in which seven men associated with the film were sentenced to death, in absentia.

But did media adequately highlight those moderate voices in the Muslim world condemning violence and did it provide enough context by explaining who was behind the protests, their political nature and the numbers involved?

Couri is a mite defensive. He stresses that they were careful to carry a number of different viewpoints “including people who were equally robust in condemning the film and the violence that followed.”

He said: “The questions were asked about the groups who were behind the violence and what they represent, but there were no clear answers. It is easy to say they were groups of fanatics but it is difficult to say what was their political nature and motives. None of the countries where violence took place produced results of any investigations in the events.”

For their part media policymakers, editors and reporters, complain that the rush to judgement by readers and some parts of grassroots journalism are contributing to lowering the quality of reporting and reinforcing the trend towards less responsible journalism.

Chris Elliott, the Guardian’s Readers Editor goes further and says we are witnessing “the decline of newspapers where the news and journalism are synonymous”.

Without trying to excuse the UK and other media for irresponsible reporting on the protests in many Arab countries last year, Elliott explains how it is difficult to catch up with the world of instant tweets, social media comments and other forms of the audience’s reporting or at least spreading of the information online.

“We still need responsible, fair and ethical reporting and it is wrong to suggest that one group, whether is Muslim or some others, is to blame,” he said. “Media have to ensure that everyone gets a fair hearing and to voice the moderate views. It is important that journalists don’t demonise anyone, in this case, Muslims.”

He says journalists and editors wage a constant struggle to deal professionally with the constant flow and rising tide of information, much of it unverified, on the Internet.

“It is hard not to report on something that everyone is talking about, like in the case of the alleged chemical attack in Syria,” he says. “So therefore, many fall into trap and publish unverified reports. One of the problems of the editors is that they

²⁰ See <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/technology/micwright/100007852/google-the-innocence-of-muslims-and-the-politics-of-tech/>.



don't have the courage to say - we are not reporting on something while we don't investigate the story and while we don't check all the facts."

He highlights the need to verify information, check facts and put reporting into context. "It is absolutely the editors' responsibility to dig deeper," he says. "It is our responsibility to write stories carefully and to follow the basic rule of putting them into context. We all have to be more careful."

The Guardian's publication of the Associated Press story on the alleged Israeli origins of the *Innocence of Muslims* producer led to an appearance before the UK's Press Complaints Commission. Because AP didn't correct its report for 24 hours the Guardian's online edition kept the misinformation from the filmmaker current.

One example of irresponsible reporting was found in the London *Daily Telegraph* which, on September 27th, carried an article on Google's refusal to take down the *Innocence of Muslims* video from its YouTube site and which was illustrated by a violent photo of the protesters with knives.

This portrayal of extremism and violence was not balanced with any coverage from Muslim leaders that were at the time condemning violent protest.²⁰

The notion of global 'Muslim Rage' generated by *Newsweek* in the United States reached the UK through the pages of *Vice* magazine which published an article on a demonstration outside the United States London embassy entitled "Islamic Rage at the '*Innocence of Muslims*' reached London Today."²¹

²¹ See http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/muslim-extremists-burnt-some-flags-outside-the-us-embassy-in-london1

²² See <http://www.theweek.co.uk/uk-news/islam-film-row/49560/muslims-march-google-uk-protest-innocence-video#ixzz2NoRyKeEv>

The Guardian at the time reported a slight increase in levels of hostility to Muslims in the UK.

Similarly, the tendency to exaggerate was found in coverage of UK protests by *The Week* which reported that “Ten thousand people travelled from Glasgow, Blackburn, Manchester and elsewhere to the protest” in London according to the Daily Telegraph. The BBC put the number at 3,500.²²

While it is difficult to test the impact of media coverage, a study for *The Guardian* at the time reported a slight increase in levels of hostility to Muslims in the UK based upon the results of a poll carried out by polling agency YouGov. This examined voter perceptions of conflict and coexistence between ‘the West and the Muslim world’ and questioned respondents about the *Innocence of Muslims* film.

The poll reveals higher levels of hostility to Islam in the UK than in the US with 43 per cent of Britons agreeing with the statement ‘There is a fundamental conflict (between the West and the Muslim world); in the end one or other must prevail’,

compared to 39 per cent of Americans polled. Similarly, fewer British respondents - 41 per cent - agreed that ‘It is possible for the West and Muslim world to co-exist in peace’ compared with 47 per cent of Americans.²³

In another poll conducted in the immediate aftermath of the furore, but only released in January 2013, 24 per cent of Britons agreed that the makers of the film ought to have been prosecuted by the US authorities for committing a hate crime, while 40 per cent opposed such action.²⁴

²³ See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/26/republicans-west-islam-conflict-poll>

²⁴ See <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2013/attitudes-to-muslims/>





Police mobile set on fire by angry protesters in Pakistan on "Love the Prophet Day". (Photo/Abhar Khan)

Pakistan: Political Interference and Two Faces of Media

Kamal Siddiqi

More than 30 people died and over 300 were injured in Pakistan in violent demonstrations surrounding the *Innocence of Muslims*. As this report was compiled, more than six months after the protests, YouTube and hundreds of websites which carried the video remain banned in the country on grounds that the content hurts the sentiments of the Muslim community.

Attempts to restore YouTube have met with public resistance and the government, which has been ready to reopen the site, has backed down on at least two occasions.

These efforts are complicated, not least because although some political and religious parties have been inflaming passions, the government actively supported the protestors, who on one day went on a rampage that resulted in 26 deaths and damage to property worth millions.

Equally important is the role played by the media in stoking public anger and hostility. Led by the broadcast media, the most prominent role was played by the Urdu print media whose inflammatory stories, often displayed with troubling pictures and images, added to the climate of intolerance and violence.

In contrast, Pakistan's English media played down most of the controversy and provided generally responsible coverage. Comment articles including editorials in leading English papers like *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune* and *The News*, condemned both the movie as well as the protests that surrounded it.

It was a different story in the Urdu Press. From the beginning, on September 14th 2012 a clear line was taken.

Daily Jang, the country's biggest circulation newspaper and the most prominent Urdu paper, covered the protests against the blasphemous movie on its front page with its report highlighting how protests were sweeping the entire Arab world.

Similar sensationalist coverage was seen in *Roznama Express*²⁵, *Daily Nawa-e-Waqt*²⁶ and *Daily Jasarat*.²⁷ The killing of the United States Ambassador to Libya was covered in the context of Arab protests over the film, suggesting that the two events were linked.

However, the impact may have been not as great as some feared because the two issues were overshadowed by a local tragedy, a fire at a factory in Baldia Town Karachi which claimed the lives of around 300 workers. In the event, the protests over the blasphemous video and the killing of the US Ambassador were somewhat underplayed.

It was on September 16th that the headlines that caused possibly the most reaction were published. Simultaneously, in almost all Urdu

²⁵ Pakistan's second largest circulated Urdu paper and the largest circulated paper in Punjab province

²⁶ Largely Lahore based Urdu paper with a right of center leaning

²⁷ Official newspaper of the Jamat-e-Islami party which is a right wing political party with a limited electoral base but representation in the civil and military bureaucracy as well as in academia

newspapers across the country, banner headlines announced that the United States was planning to move troops into Muslims countries where protest were taking place. This unsubstantiated story, although credited to AFP/Reuters, ran as the lead in *Jang*, *Nawa-e-Waqt*, *Express* and *Jasarat* suggested that the US troops were on their way to take over Muslim countries.²⁸

Daily Jasarat went further and gave front page display to a call by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a banned militant outfit, urging Muslims to stand up against the film.

Not surprisingly in this atmosphere, the protests intensified in Karachi where thousands marched to the American consulate and tried to scale the walls. In this melee, two people died and many were injured. The next day, *Jasarat* ran a front page story claiming, symbolically, that the US flag at the consulate "had been replaced."

In the meantime, Urdu papers gave prominent coverage to protests around the country in which calls were also made by various religious parties - not just extremists, to come out and protest.

The mood was captured in an editorial in *Daily Jang* on September 17th, the day of the strikes in Karachi, which questioned why the US - after allowing

the release of a blasphemous film was now talking about entering the Muslims countries with its troops. The editorial, read by hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis, gave the impression that the blasphemous film was part of a conspiracy by the US to invade Muslims countries.

As protests flared, *Jang* wrote another editorial on September 18th in which it said that the test of Muslim patience "had not ended" and that anti-Islam elements were active in attacking Muslims.

On the same day, Salim Saifi, a popular columnist for *Jang* and an anchor with *Geo TV*, a sister organisation of *Jang* and Pakistan's major broadcaster, wrote in his column that the problem was that Muslims were being tested and the West "underestimated the love that Muslims had for their Holy Prophet."

As the temperature continued to rise there was news that the government had banned YouTube²⁹ on the instructions of the prime minister. Some newspapers also carried politically significant news that the army had been called out to control the worsening state of affairs in Islamabad.

This gave the impression that the government was losing control of the situation. It was under these circumstances that the government called for a strike to protest the

²⁸ Lead story September 16

²⁹ Daily Jang front page September 14, 2012

blasphemous film and declared a public holiday, naming the day “Youm-e-Ishq-e-Rasool.”³⁰

The violence on this day was unprecedented. The government admitted by the end of the day that at least 26 people had died in Karachi alone, many of them trying to protect their property from looters. There was some confusion over the number of casualties, with *Daily Jasarat* putting the death toll at 31.

The coverage of protests and the looting that went with it by the Urdu press was significantly different from other media in the country. Most did not put pictures of the destruction on their front page. Giving the death toll, most papers also highlighted how strongly Muslims had protested against the blasphemous film.

On September 22nd, the editorial that appeared in *Daily Jasarat* captured the mood of the Urdu press. It praised the strike, took into account the muted reaction of the US government to Muslim protests, and warned the government against selling its soul and concluded by warning the West that Muslims would not tolerate an attack on the person of the Holy Prophet.

In the aftermath of protests a number of Urdu papers published opinion pieces and editorials most of which questioned what they saw as the

two-faced policy of the west. On the one hand, they argued, many western countries do not allow any discussion over the Holocaust, but at the same time they give publicity to the burning of the Koran by extremist Pastor Terry Jones in Florida, and they condone the publication of blasphemous cartoons and the airing of a blasphemous movie.

An opinion piece in the *Roznama Express* by senior editor Tanweer Kaiser³¹ summarizes what most Urdu papers were saying. Titled “Kay Hail Hue”³², Qaiser says that on the one hand the west incites and on the other it does not care for the feelings of Muslims.

One political consequence of the extensive coverage of rallies, protests, strikes and statements of religious parties on the issue was that it gave a boost to marginal and extremist groups. There was a sudden rise in coverage for religious parties in comparison mainstream political parties most of which remained on the sidelines on this issue in the Urdu press.

In stark contrast, as the blasphemous movie controversy erupted the English media were focused on other issues - the Fair Trial Bill, the visit of Indian foreign minister to Pakistan and the culling of Australian sheep at a farm outside Karachi.

One political consequence was that it gave a boost to marginal and extremist groups.

³⁰ Day for the love of the Prophet (pbuh)

³¹ October 1, 2012. Opinion pages Roznama Express

³² Urdu for “What did we achieve”?

In general broadcast media, which is often criticised for sensationalism and playing fast and loose with the ethics of journalism, in this instance displayed a certain reticence

Nevertheless, most of the English papers in Pakistan: *Daily Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The News* and the *Daily Times*, reported on the film and the violent protest, but the story of the killing of the US Ambassador to Libya was overshadowed by the Baldaia factory fire, which was covered extensively in the English press.

According to journalist and media analyst Ghazi Salahuddin³³, the English media was more objective but it too was under pressure. "The English print media did the best coverage on the issue," he said, "certainly if we compare it to the other media, especially the television channels." At the same time, Salahuddin says that the English media "also operated under restrictions and was not entirely candid."

The threats issued by religious parties to the United States government and their inflammatory statements against President Zardari were largely ignored by the English media as were coverage of their activities on the issue.

In fact, *Daily Dawn* in its editorial on September 15th suggested that the issue may best be ignored, and that attacking American missions abroad serves no purpose and that such actions are done by some people and the state is held responsible for them. The paper also suggested that the US respect Muslim sentiments.

After the deadly rioting on September 21st, *Dawn* came up with its lead headline "Day of reverence or killer rage." In its comprehensive four-page report on the rioting, it showed much of the destruction that was caused in the name of religion.

In its editorial on the same day,³⁴ the paper argued that much of the damage was caused by the government-sanctioned strike. It blamed both religious parties and the government equally for the carnage.

The same line was adopted by *The Express Tribune*. Extensive coverage of the protests at the US consulate general in Karachi and the damage caused on September 21st was highlighted. Interestingly, neither the papers nor those interviewed criticised the root cause of the carnage. In *The News*, an interview with a cinema owner illustrated the problem. He said that while his cinema was burnt, the cause for which it was burnt was right.

However, all English papers also came down hard on the cash bounty declared by railways minister Bilour who pledged \$100,000 reward for the killing of the producer of the blasphemous movie. This offer was extensively covered.

A scoop for *The Express Tribune* was the burning of a church in Mardan by rioters protesting against the

³³ Interview. March 20, 2013

³⁴ *Daily Dawn* September 22

blasphemous movie.³⁵ This action was also condemned all round and these were prominently published in the English media.

While the English press kept its eye on the losses and damage caused by the rioters and those who supported action against the makers of the movie the Pakistan broadcast media played a role in shaping public opinion against the blasphemous movie with news channels covering extensively riots over the movie across the Arab world.

The first program to tackle the issues behind the protests was aired by Kamran Khan on *Geo TV*.³⁶ In general broadcast media, which is often criticised for sensationalism and playing fast and loose with the ethics of journalism, in this instance displayed a certain reticence and most coverage was guarded. Most of the networks - including *Geo TV*, *Express News*, *Dunya TV*, *Samaa TV* and other smaller news channels, gave prominence to the strikes with less commentary over the issue.

This prudent approach may be because Pakistan's broadcast media has come under fire on previous occasions for commenting on religious issues.

Nevertheless, all major news channels covered the blow by blow account of rioting in Lahore and Islamabad

as well as the attempted attack on the US consulate in Karachi. TV reporters also complained that they too were attacked by protestors some of whom accused the television networks of bias. Saad Hasan, a reporter for *Express Tribune* newspaper, for instance, said that he felt unsafe while covering the violence because a lot of the anger was directed at the media.

However, no television channel aired any clips of the offensive video or even described its content. Almost all anchors and TV show hosts took refuge in talk about how the West had double standards and how the Muslim world is under attack, particularly from the United States.

But media analyst Ghazi Salahuddin blames the broadcast media,³⁷ especially Urdu news channels, for stirring up the audience and he disagrees with the notion that only a minority of people supported the protests.

"A large number of people wanted to protest and were angered by the film," he said, "but the media was responsible for creating the environment in which violence took place." He cites the example of the murder of Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer in 2011 who was killed by a bodyguard because of his moderate approach to blasphemy. In that instance, public opinion was in favour of the killer and this was reinforced

³⁵ September 24, 2012

³⁶ Aj Kamran Khan Ke Saath: show on September 14

³⁷ Interview March 20, 2013

by the media. Similarly, the *Innocence of Muslim* film was seen as deeply offensive and unacceptable slight on Islam and media reinforced that sentiment.

For its part Pakistan's emerging social media, which is usually very vocal and not bound by the censorship and decency laws or requirements of other media, also remained largely constrained on this issue. Blogger and journalist Mehmali Sarfraz says that the social media work under certain constraints.³⁸ He says that no one questioned whether the movie was blasphemous and there was much debate on what should be done about it.

Some of the bigger names from Pakistan, like Mosharraf Zaidi and Marvi Sirmid insisted that the best way to deal with the situation is to ignore it. But at the same time several insisted that America should be held responsible for the movie and action must be taken against it.

The country's growing Twitterati is constricted by the fact that the medium is still in English. While one would have expected some sort of debate in this somewhat elitist medium, there was none that trended.

Facebook and Twitter provided avenues for many Pakistani Muslims to protest over the blasphemous movie and the manner in which the

US government had responded to protests. There was much comment, too, on the way the stories appeared in the English media, but most people were wary of commenting in any way on blasphemy, which on almost all platforms, is a taboo topic in Pakistan.

However the religious parties actively used social media to generate support for their protests and demonstrations and also to stir up anger on the internet. This was particularly evident in the actions of two Twitter-savvy religious outfits Jamat-ud-Dawah (JuD) and the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Another academic critical of western media coverage is Dr. Zafar Iqbal, Associate Professor at International Islamic University, Islamabad, and attached to the Annenberg School of Communication, at the University of Southern California as a Sabbatical Fellow.

He reviewed more than 1000 media stories on the film, mostly in the Western print media, and he finds that media were "fraught with irrelevant discussions on freedom of expression and whether the film constitutes hate speech."

In an interview for this report he said that reactions from the Muslim world were overshadowed by western media focus on "head counts and violent processions" followed by pundits and reporters defending free speech.

“Some pieces were full of polemics against Islam and Muslims,” he said. “On the other hand, in some quarters, ironically, the movie was declared it a ‘mockery of basic standards of human decency, good taste, artistic subtlety and historical discernment’ as stated by the *Jerusalem Post*, September 24th 2012, but such items were played down in most media in the West.”

His research found that reporters presented the issue in an oversimplified manner and found it easy to “tag their stories with Muslims protest or protests by the Muslim extremists.” As a result media failed to give due coverage to Muslim scholars denouncing violent protests.

He said that media coverage was problematic, not least because it appeared to be on one-dimensional, that the core issue about the film concerned free speech rights. Most media he said followed the same line, as articulated by *The New York Post* which reported ‘This is no joke. It’s a matter of free speech’ and ‘it may not be a good film, but it has every right to exist - a right guaranteed by no less than the US Constitution.’³⁹

Finally, if there is blame to be laid at the door of media in Pakistan for inflammatory coverage that may have provoked more violence it rests with the Urdu press and some of the

broadcast media. Media were particularly influenced by religious parties, not necessarily extremists, who saw this as an opportunity to regain lost political ground.

While the popular impression may be that there was a lot of anger among the Muslim community, in fact very few advocated violence or confrontation with the police or the government. By and large, most people who wished to protest wanted to express their anger and hurt through peaceful means.

However, religious parties channelled public anger, with media support, to promote anti-American and anti-government feelings. They took the lead in organising and rallies, protests, strikes and marches; they fed the media appetite for strong, confrontational language with angry statements; and they cynically used the issue for their own political gain.

This should surprise no-one given the nature of politics and communications, but the way media went along with this strategy not only helps to explain the intensity of protest and violence against the *Innocence of Muslims* film, it also raises serious questions about how some media can be manipulated by largely marginal and minority politicians and sometimes with deadly effect.

The religious parties actively used social media to generate support for their protests and demonstrations and also to stir up anger on the internet. They took they fed the media appetite for strong, confrontational language with angry statements.

³⁹ New York Post, September 17th 2012

Turkey: Limited Protest and Raging Debate

Beatrice White

When the *Innocence of Muslims* film first came to public attention in Turkey it was met with general disapproval from the public, fierce condemnations from politicians, especially those belonging to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and barely a scattering of protests.

Reports in some Western media conveyed a sense of uniform outrage across the Muslim world, illustrated by pictures of Turks demonstrating, placed alongside images of protests in countries such as Afghanistan and Libya, a small number of which turned violent. Despite these sensational images, the reaction from most of the population in Turkey seems to have been rather muted.

Nuri Çolakoğlu, veteran journalist and president of Doğan Media International, was dismissive of the reaction. "This country is 99 per cent Muslim and people are offended by such things - whether it's a pastor burning the Koran or the Mohammed cartoons - it does lead to a reaction, but nothing terribly out of proportion."⁴⁰

He admits there were protests but of little significance, "In central Istanbul, everyday there are 10 to 20 demonstrations in the centre. Every two hours a new group shows up. It's like the Hyde Park of Turkey."

It was reported that around 500 people gathered in central Istanbul's Taksim Square on September 14th 2012, chanting and burning US and Israeli flags in protest at the film's unflattering depiction of the Prophet Mohammed.⁴¹

The *Hürriyet Daily News* reported that the group, "who dubbed themselves 'Lovers of the Prophet,' left peacefully" after the demonstration. Around the same time, a smaller group of 50 protesters gathered in

front of the US embassy in the Turkish capital Ankara. Both demonstrations were described as peaceful.⁴²

Although it was difficult to determine exactly who was behind the demonstration, a connection to certain political interests seems fairly clear. Some participants in the protest held posters and placards bearing the name of the Saadet Party (Turkish Felicity Party), a religious conservative party not represented in the Turkish parliament.⁴³

Esra Arsan, a professor of Journalism at Bilgi University and media analyst, believes the sharp rise in the use of social media in Turkey may have played a role in the gatherings, "There are lots of groups like this, organising protests. With social media - which starts as a cluster of ideas and groups - people get together and organise protests under names like 'defenders of the prophet.'⁴⁴

Arsan adds that it is often difficult to tell if these crowds have any real influence in Muslim society, or if, in this case, they were composed

There were protests but of little significance, "In central Istanbul, everyday there are 10 to 20 demonstrations in the centre. Every two hours a new group shows up. It's like the Hyde Park of Turkey."

⁴⁰ Interview conducted in Istanbul on February 22, 2013

⁴¹ Film protests are peaceful in Serbia, Greece, Turkey, SETimes, 24/09/2012, (http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2012/09/24/feature-04)

⁴² Daily News September/24/2012

⁴³ Muslim Protests Spread Around the Globe, The Atlantic, Sep 14, 2012 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2012/09/muslim-protests-spread-around-the-globe/100369/>)

⁴⁴ Interview at Bilgi University on February 19, 2013

Certain newspapers were guilty of stirring up antagonism in controversial cases such as these.

primarily of opportunistic social media users.

Doğan Tiliç, journalist and professor of media and cultural studies at Ankara's Middle-East Technical University, says the reaction of the mainstream media to these kinds of controversies can generally be assigned to three factors; the stance of the government, the interests of media owners, and the feelings of the general public. If one or more of these are particularly forceful or prominent, the media generally takes that line.⁴⁵

Conversely, he says, if there is a strong wish from one of these parties to suppress an issue, the media generally complies. If all three of these interests coincide, the media treatment will most emphatic, even to the point of overriding well-established principles of ethical journalism.

Following the film's emergence in Turkey, Çolakoğlu says, "Newspapers carried stories - editorials, columns were written about it, pictures appeared, but that was the end of it. There were of course marginal Islamist papers that portrayed it in a provocative way - but that didn't cause much of a stir."

The ombudsman for *Hürriyet* newspaper, Faruk Bildirici, took a rather more sombre view of some of the

coverage. According to him, certain newspapers are guilty of stirring up antagonism in controversial cases such as these.

He referred to the example of the Turkish daily *Sabah*, which, after the offices of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie l'Hebdo* were attacked apparently publishing cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, covered the news in a celebratory and triumphal tone.

"This coverage was not right or honest," said Bildirici. "As a newspaper, we generally try to show what is happening without telling the reader what to think. In the case of the cartoons, we wrote about them without describing or showing them. I think if we had shown the cartoons, readers would be able to decide for themselves whether they were insulting or not.

"But instead we just spoke about 'the caricatures that insult the prophet.' So citizens are getting angry because in France or Denmark the prophet was insulted. But in my view these cartoons were not insulting; it was just freedom of speech." Bildirici admits however that he is likely to be in a minority with this opinion.⁴⁶

In the wake of the violent episodes in Libya, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spoke out about the film, describing it as a "provocation" and telling people not to resort to

⁴⁵ Interview conducted at the Middle-East Technical University on February 27, 2013

⁴⁶ Interview conducted at Hürriyet HQ in Ankara on February 28, 2013

⁴⁷ September/15/2012, Daily news, PM Warns Muslims of Provocation over Film (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/pm-warns-muslims-of-provocation-over-film.aspx?pageID=238&nID=30196&NewsCatID=338>)

violence.⁴⁷ This statement came shortly after the prime minister received a phone-call from United States President Barack Obama, requesting his assistance to diffuse tensions regarding the film.⁴⁸

Çolakoğlu believes Erdoğan's efforts to suppress strong reactions stemmed from his party's current position in power, despite its "pro-Islamist" leanings. "Had they been in opposition, they might have thought of taking advantage of the situation to mobilise people." Tiliç echoed these statements, adding that "no government wants trouble in the streets of a country."

Arsan believes Erdoğan was eager to take a leading role in the reaction to the film, "Although the movie has no connection to Turkey, Erdoğan likes to consider himself the leader of the Muslim community all over the world," and for this reason took it upon himself to speak up and take action to defend their rights.

Despite his calls for calm, Erdoğan's condemnation of the film was unequivocal. "Insulting the Prophet cannot be justified as freedom of expression," he said.⁴⁹ "We are observing that extreme rightist moves and racism target Muslims, this time Europe-wide; we are worried that it will escalate in Europe."

Erdoğan further pointed out that while Turkey recognised anti-Semitism as a hate crime, not a single Western country recognised Islamophobia as such, going even further to say, "the West hasn't recognised Islamophobia as a crime against humanity - it has encouraged it."⁵⁰

Erdoğan said he would address the matter with the UN General Assembly. "There should be international legal regulations against attacks on what people deem sacred." Erdoğan promised the government would immediately start working on legislation against blasphemous and offensive remarks. "Turkey could be a leading example for the rest of the world on this," he said.⁵¹

This promise was followed up with a series of initiatives, including an invitation of foreign ministers of Brazil and Sweden to the annual gathering of Turkish ambassadors from January 2nd to 9th 2012 in İzmir to discuss a joint initiative to "prevent assaults against sacred values." The initiative, "three soft powers from three continents," started working on the documents for the initiative, which they said they expected to present to the UN in 2013.⁵²

⁴⁸ Obama asks Erdoğan for help, Sabah, Sep 15, 2012, (<http://english.sabah.com.tr/National/2012/09/15/obama-asks-erdogan-for-help>)

⁴⁹ The Ministry of Transport and Communication subsequently blocked access to the video upon a court ruling, after The Ankara Chief Public Prosecutor's Office submitted a petition saying that the film could not be considered protected within the scope of freedom of expression and thought. (http://www.zaman.com.tr/gundem_turkiye-hakaret-filmine-erisimi-engelliyor_1350567.html zaman 26 September 2012) The court gave the order on September 26 to block access to links to the film, citing it as a threat to peace and stability. (26 September 2012 /TODAY'S ZAMAN)



broadcast on October 15, during which Nişanyan was a guest in a discussion about the film.⁵⁵

Arsan disagrees with Nişanyan, “In order for there to be hate speech, there must be demands for violence against a particular group or community. Because this movie targets Muslims as a community, it can be described as hate speech. And as we know, hate speech can give way to violence and hate crimes.” This being said, she also feels that, “Talking about Islamophobia in a country where 95 per cent of the country is Muslim - of various denominations - is ridiculous, because they are the majority of the population.”

The main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) requested a comprehensive law to address the problem of hate crimes after publishing its own study on the subject.⁵⁶

CHP Bursa deputy Aykan Erdemir said at the time, “the issue cannot be reduced only to Islamophobia, and we should be very careful not to limit the freedom of speech or media freedom when fighting against hate crimes. The deputy called for the establishment of new institutions and mechanisms to monitor and track

In the debate following the film’s emergence, there has been much discussion in Turkey about freedom of speech, hate speech and hate crimes, and about what is covered or not covered under each of these.

In an article about the film posted to his blog on September 29th entitled “Hate Crimes Should Be Fought,” linguist and author Sevan Nişanyan wrote that, “Mocking an Arab leader - who claimed that he contacted God hundreds years ago and who gained political, financial and sexual profit from this - is not hate crime. Almost at the level of kindergarten, it is a test case of the thing called ‘freedom of expression.’”⁵³

Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdağ said Nişanyan’s words amounted to a crime worthy of prosecution.⁵⁴ Later, the Supreme Board of Radio and Television (RTÜK) fined private broadcaster CNN Türk for “insulting the Prophet Muhammad” in a TV show presented by Enver Aysever,

⁵⁰ PM Erdoğan: Islamophobia should be recognized as crime against humanity , Today’s Zaman, 16 September 2012

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² October/26/2012 - Daily News

⁵³ October/05/2012 - Daily News

hate crimes in Turkey, and made clear the focus of the study, "For now, we must focus on hate crimes, because dealing with hate speech is a very delicate issue."⁵⁷

Arsan believes the problem of hate speech in Turkey to be particularly pernicious for some segments of society. He says, "Turkish media workers use hate speech freely against certain communities, such as Kurds, Armenians, and members of the LGBT community - the 'others' of the society."

Arsan has previously been targeted by the media herself, "for supporting BDP [the Pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party] and writing on sensitive topics, such as Kurdish issues. A newspaper singled me out as a supporter of terrorism, an enemy of the state." For Arsan, the experience was a frightening one, particularly in light of cases such as Hrant Dink, the Armenian journalist who was murdered following a campaign of hate speech against him by nationalist media, a case which shocked Turkish society and establishment into finally acknowledging the problem of hate speech in the country.

Especially when it comes to controversial topics, "the media is publishing news that shouldn't be published," says Bildirici. He believes that while this reporting does not directly cause violent acts to occur, "they

are preparing the background, the atmosphere for violence. Hate is the background for violence, and there are newspapers in Turkey that are inciting hatred."

Sharing this view of cause and effect, Arsan says she would "support a law on hate speech rather than hate crime - because it is the first step - if you stop hate speech no-one can be targeted. There is also a problem of racism and fascism in Europe - against Turks, Roma, and other minorities. So we need international legislation, through the EU, UN and so on."

"Blasphemy should be part of freedom of speech," she says, "we should be able to talk negatively about religion and criticize it. This is very different from "imposing hate speech against a group of believers that can lead to crime."

Bildirici agrees. "Hate speech cannot be regarded as a part of freedom of expression; rather it is a crime - something illegal." In the same way, "you cannot consider the insult as hate speech."

But public sentiment is in favour of restrictions says Tiliç who believes that the measures to curb so-called blasphemy would be supported by most of the population, "Probably if you asked people if they were in favour of some measure of protection

Hate is the background for violence, and there are newspapers in Turkey that are inciting hatred.

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Daily news, December/13/2012

⁵⁶ October/19/2012, Daily News

⁵⁷ Ibid

against insults to religion, they would mostly agree.”

Arsan says many have concerns that “the prime minister is trying to create a hate speech law, just to protect Islam from hate speech - not other minorities. He is not interested in protecting their rights and freedoms - only in limiting freedom of speech against Islam.” Arsan fears that “at the end of this legislative process, we might have a new law which is not defending freedom of speech, but also limiting the poor freedom of press that exists.”

Deniz Ergürel, President of the Media Association also feels that “a hate crime with existing laws would be harmful for freedom of expression,” adding that in his opinion, “These should be taken as ethical rules not criminal laws.”⁵⁸

According to Ergürel, Journalism has improved substantially in Turkey, mainly due to greater economic prosperity. “People are looking for better content and this creates a space for better journalism and greater diversity. Because there are more voices, more sources of information than before, this creates a balance, there is less chance for misinformation, and this seems to make media more responsible.”

Yet some problems remain. Ergürel believes that media ownership and

low salaries for journalists are two of the most significant issues. “The media has been seen as a business by owners, who see media as a tool to leverage their business rather than as an end in itself. When there are business interests, you cannot do proper reporting and be independent.”

He says the level of responsibility among the mainstream media is not all it could be, “We still see more emotions than facts in the news. In Turkish newspapers, even the front page is full of opinions and emotions.”

This permeation of coverage by opinion and emotion is of course not restricted to Turkey, however, but Bildirici believes that progress has been made, “In the past there was far more hate speech in the mainstream media, but in recent years it is decreasing.”

He attributes this to a greater emphasis on ethics, laid out for media workers in the form of clear written guidelines. However, “In other areas of the media, such as the local, nationalist and Islamic papers, hate speech has not decreased.”

Çolakoğlu worries about freedom of speech from a perspective of democracy. In his opinion, “tolerance in Turkey is dimming down. Lack of tolerance in society is to my mind the biggest threat - not only to freedom

of speech but also to life - you can be killed if someone doesn't like you. We have a track record of this, in the 1970s around the time of the military coup, people were killing each other for being leftist or rightist. So there is that tendency dormant out there."

It is a view that resonates with Ersan, "There is no tolerance in this country. People should have a dialogue first and then react. This is a weakness in Turkey: if we don't like what people say, we feel they should disappear from society completely. In Turkey we have a hegemonic ideology, and if someone goes against this, we try to exclude them from society. This is very dangerous. Media is the major tool of this kind of ideology in society, and the new law could be another tool for the elimination of the enemies of the hegemonic ideology."

According to Bildirici, "the heightened tensions and rise of minority Islamic groups can be traced back to 9/11. Generally speaking, we are going in the direction of more limits to and pressures on freedom of expression." Bildirici said he had witnessed a rise in the number of complaints based on perceived insults to religion or content deemed "indecent" in the media.

He believes this is connected to the religious policies of the AKP and their influence. All religions should have dialogue; we should be able to

talk about religion without arguing or causing offence. But it is becoming impossible day by day to talk about Islam in the Muslim world as it is always taken as criticism. Every day we are getting further away from secularism." When it comes to religious affairs, "In Turkey we are becoming less tolerant and understanding of each other day by day."

But generally speaking there are few stereotypes about Westerners in the mainstream media, says Colakoglu, with only a minority portraying events in a provocative manner, and these are generally marginalized by the majority of the population.

Ergürel believes the response to stereotypes on both sides lies in dialogue between communities. "Journalists have a big role in informing the public and creating bridges," he believes. "When journalists write stories based on the emotions, and feelings of the people, they stir up hatred between different groups of people."

He gives the example of Turkish news broadcasts showing extensive footage of the grieving relatives of soldiers. "This creates friction on both sides. I think in the media, we need to create the language not only of war reporting but also peace reporting.

In Turkey we are becoming less tolerant and understanding of each other day by day.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The *Innocence of Muslims* story highlights how media must be at the top of their game when reporting incidents of intolerance and hatred and particularly so when covering stories that can have a direct influence on the fragile relations that exist between religious communities.

There is nothing easier, at times of crisis, than for journalists to make sweeping generalisations and place whole groups, nationalities and religions into convenient boxes.

This is what happened in much of western media after a series of deadly protests in Muslim countries against a video mocking Islam, the *Innocence of Muslims*. The media coverage was dominated by the notion of “Muslim rage” and the suggestion of deep-seated anger and outrage within the Muslim community worldwide.

But was that really the case? Were Muslims everywhere incandescent with indignation over this crude production? Did it deserve its place on the front pages and the nightly news bulletins? Why did it catch fire in the newsrooms and did media do their job in tracking the origins of the story and correcting the misinformation that they themselves put out? Perhaps most importantly, did media put the story in its proper context by giving equal coverage to the Muslim voices calling for non-violence?

These questions can never be satisfactorily answered, but they should be addressed if media are to learn the lessons of an incident which added to the deep discontent in relations between religions, but which may have had quite a different impact if it had been reported in context.

When media get it wrong in the midst of a rush to publish, it can have disturbing consequences. One example among many is the instant reporting of the terrorist bombing of the Boston marathon in April 2013.

In that tragic event three people were killed and 176 were injured. One of them was a young man of Saudi origin who, while in the hospital being treated for his wounds, had his apartment ransacked by police “in a startling show of force.” He had been targeted solely because he was from the Middle East.

This was the basis for a report in the tabloid *New York Post* which incorrectly reported that 12 people were killed

in the explosions and, more alarmingly, that a “Saudi national who suffered shrapnel wounds” had been identified as “a suspect.”⁵⁹

Police disowned the story, which was never corrected, but it spread quickly through the usual information pipelines: within 48 hours the story had 48,000 Facebook likes and was tweeted more than 16,000 times. In fact, those responsible for the attack were two US citizens of European descent.

The social network coverage of the Boston bombing led to an extraordinary burst of speculation - some later described it as witch-hunting - in which people caught on camera around the scene of the marathon tragedy were subject to harassment as potential suspects in the bombings. Later in a surprising display of humility, apologies emerged from some social networks sites.⁶⁰

Similarly, the way the Innocence of Muslim story was handled in many countries underscored the dangers of unprofessionalism in media profiling of people and events.

Initial media coverage from agencies was highly inaccurate. This led to the wide circulation of dangerous myths about the origins of the film that inflamed passions and hardened prejudices.

The online media and social networks reinforced the impact of these mistakes and played a significant role in circulating false information in the first days of the crisis. Although there were many instances of restraint and caution, both online and offline, there was a general failure to correct these damaging initial impressions.

Of particular importance is the weight that reporting gives to voices of moderation and calm and those calling for mutual respect and understanding of the values and beliefs of others.

In this case, the most common complaint, recognised by media support groups themselves was a singular failure to provide all side of the story and to give equal space to mainstream, moderate and majority voices within the Muslim community speaking out against violence and extremism and either calling for peaceful protests, or for the film to be ignored altogether and dismissing the issue as trivial.

Other media failings included:

- a) Disproportionate focus on images of violence;
- b) Failure to properly establish the truth about the film’s origins;

⁵⁹ See http://www.nypost.com/p/news/national/authorities_under_suspect_guard_y2m8cJO29uC2PDGIjYBaO?utm_source=SFnewyorkpost&utm_medium=SFnewyorkpost

⁶⁰ See <http://www.theverge.com/2013/4/22/4253320/reddit-apologizes-online-witch-hunt-boston-marathon-bombing>

- c) Slow response to the correction and circulation of false information about the film;
- d) Widespread failures to establish the true levels of support for the film within the Muslim community at large;
- e) A general lack of informed analysis to explain the reasons for violence and who was behind it.

Many responsible media sought balance in their reporting and tried to correct their errors, but many more did not.

In some countries, Pakistan for instance, politicians encouraged a confrontational approach and gave fair wind to flagrant abuse of professionalism by major sections of media.

A measure of the lack of balance is reflected in how many media downplayed coverage of an outpouring of popular anger in Benghazi, Libya, where a few days after widely-reported protests against the film, tens of thousands of people took to the streets - many more than in protests over the film - to confront militant Islamic extremists for using a demonstration over the film as cover for a terrorist attack and the killing of US ambassador Chris Stevens.

Protesters marched on the camps of Ansar al-Sharia, the group whose Islamic fighters are believed to have been behind the terrorist attack. Although a further 11 people were killed and 60 wounded, the extremists were forced to quit the area.⁶¹

While the complexities of the story went unreported the nuanced debate, such as it was, once again highlighted the gulf of understanding in the global debate about free speech.

Although it was produced in the US there was no possibility of prosecution of the film's producers for the contentious content because of constitutional protection.

The First Amendment of the American Constitution protects free speech even where it is blasphemous and when President Obama requested YouTube to review its hosting of the video, the company said the video fell within its permissible guidelines because although it was against Islam, it was not directed against Muslim people and thus not considered in these terms as hate speech.

On the other hand, many of the film's critics across the Muslim world called for action against the film and its makers on the grounds of blasphemy. In Pakistan the government banned YouTube and joined with others,

⁶¹ See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/22/libyan-protesters-militia-benghazi>

⁶² See <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/politics/120925/muslim-nations-push-international-blasphemy-law>

including Turkey, to press the 56-nation Organisation of Islamic Co-operation to lobby at the United Nations for a global blasphemy law that would criminalise religious defamation.⁶²

The *Innocence of Muslims* film may have widened the chasm of misunderstanding over free expression, but it has once again highlighted the responsibility of media to maintain the highest professional standards in reporting such events.

Above all media must not do anything that incites violence and hostility. Journalists must embrace fully the instincts of their craft - to be truthful; to be independent; to be impartial; to show humanity; and to show humility by correcting errors and responding to the concerns of their audience.

These ethical values, which best identify journalism in the information chaos of the internet and social networking, are what separates journalism from the crowd. But as this report reveals journalism is stretched to breaking point in an age of intense media competition and by the demand for instant news, immediate analysis and rapid explanations.

Journalists and editors have little time to test the credibility of so-called facts or to verify the images and opinions raining down on newsrooms across all platforms of communica-

tions. As a result media - some of them iconic world leaders in journalism - are caught out in acts of unprofessionalism.

The capacity of journalism to influence the norms and values of society by providing news coverage and analysis that provides context, proportion and reliability in equal measure is severely challenged. As a result, there is the prospect of more bias, prejudice and profound misunderstanding between communities.

The dangers are immense and more must be done to raise awareness, both within the media industry and among policymakers, about the need for fresh actions to help journalists and media avoid repeating their mistakes. Among the measures which may be useful are to:

- **Create a global databank of media best practices** to help journalists avoid hate speech and to strengthen levels of professionalism;
- **Establish a specific reporting process** that will monitor media in key countries and report annually on coverage of incidents of hate speech or acts of false, provocative or unethical journalism particularly in the field of reporting religious affairs or relations between different communities;

- **Promote more debate within journalism and the wider community** of the need to raise awareness on the dangers of hate speech and violent provocation arising from use of online communications and social networks'
- **Encourage more research** into specific aspects of media performance that have been identified as causes of concern in this case including verification of potentially inflammatory information prior to publication; publication of corrections and clarifications of false information; use of extremist and minority voices.



Ethical Journalism Network

A coalition of media professional groups from Europe and around the world committed to building trust in media and promoting principles of ethical journalism, good governance and self-regulation in the digital age.

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