Media Images of Islamophobia on Cable News Network (CNN) and Implications for International Relations

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on media images of islamophobia as portrayed by Cable News Network (CNN) and its implications for international relations. The study employed qualitative methodology. Data was collected using key informant interviews, while documentary search was done using CNN current affairs videos. The study findings indicated that the media has the power to influence human perceptions towards stereotyping Islam as a terrorist organisation and conflating the Islamic religion and the Muslim culture with terrorism. The study also found out that islamophobia really has a relationship with how Muslims are represented in the media. The study recommends that media houses should have media ethics, laws and policies which force journalists to be more accountable and objective when reporting issues of religion, race and culture as a way of eliminating offensive communication and religious intolerance.

KEYWORDS
Hijab, Islam, Islamophobia, Media Houses, Media Images, Muslims, Racism, Stereotypes, Terrorism

1. INTRODUCTION

Islamophobia is a widely used concept in the public and scholarly circles. Amjad-Ali (2006, p. 19) argues that the term islamophobia was first used in 1979 after some Americans were taken hostage in Iran. Islamophobia emerged in contemporary discourse in 1997 after the Runnymede Trust, a British race relations NGO wrote an article titled Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All. Bleich (2011) argues that the term islamophobia identifies anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments and also provides a language for denouncing them. Bleich (2011) further observes that since Edward Said’s Orientalism in the late 1970s, it has been widely accepted that the Western world associate Islam with negative images, sentiments and stereotypes. It is therefore important to highlight that the media coverage of Islam-related issues changed dramatically at the beginning of the 21st Century. Kellner (2007) posited that the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the World Trade Centre Twin Towers in New York and on the Pentagon near Washington DC were perhaps the most dramatic media spectacle in history. The event received much coverage in the international
media. Abbas (2004) notes that pro-western media institutions are now marked by an exponential increase in islamophobia grandiloquence and agendas, including calls to ban the use of the Quran, monitoring or closing of mosques, strict and tougher vetting processes at borders and airports, or halting immigration from Muslim countries and also deporting of Muslim citizens. This has negatively affected refugees from war-torn Arab states and other Muslims in general who now face hatred and discrimination all in the name of fighting terrorism. The media has the tendency of magnifying terrorist events and give meanings which are further taken into acts by the audience leading to Islamophobic attack.

2. BACKGROUND

The Fifth Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Observatory (2012, p. 3) noted that the Western media, including the social media, continued to play a key role in promoting and disseminating an anti-Muslim culture. Lack of objectivity and biased reporting combined with continuous focus on the issue of ‘Islamic extremism’ steadily consolidated negative stereotyping of Muslims. Anti-immigrant pressure groups, political and media commentators, and hardline Christian- Zionist religious leaders regularly use the media to employ hate speech aimed at Islamic religion and Muslims in general (Sayyid and Vakil, 2008). The result has been the growth of islamophobia, a widespread suspicion of mainstream Muslims and discrimination against Muslims based on their race or religion. This has led to hate speeches, crimes and other acts of violence. The American-led Global War on Terrorism endorsed in 2001 by former United States of America (USA) president George W. Bush led to an increase in islamophobia across the globe in the name of fighting terrorism. Islamophobia has been greatly connected to the international politics and specifically to the rising fear of terrorism, which some pro-western media outlets have linked to the Islamic religion. The USA witnessed an unprecedented rise in islamophobia since 2001 with Muslims falling victim to shootings, personal assaults, harassment, protests, airport searches and attacks on mosques. According to Kira, Lewandowski, Templin, Ramaswamy, Ozkan, and Mohanesh (2010) since the 9/11 attacks, increased racial and religious hatred and animosity has left Arabs, Middle Easterners, Muslims and those who bear stereotyped physical resemblance to these groups fearful of potential hatred and hostility from persons of other cultures.

CNN has not been left behind in magnifying islamophobia to the society. After the 9/11 attacks on America, CNN has been so outstanding in condemning the attacks at the same time launching a tough verbal attack on Islamic religion and Muslims in general. It is very common to watch programs and documentaries on CNN which massively link global violence and terrorism to Islamic religion and portraying Islam as the main breeder of terrorists. According to Malleus (2000, p. 10) the media are not content to simply tell an audience what is going on in the world but also provide the added benefit of interpreting events for their audience. In so doing, the audience are taught whether they should view some events positively or negatively. This has been the case of Muslims and the Islamic religion in the media. Alshammari (2013, p. 179) posits that media agencies have very strong influence on the society at large and USA is one of the countries highly influenced by the media.

The Islamic religion has long been the focus of criticism and derogatory comments. It has been perceived as representing something radically different by the ‘Western’ media. According to The Living History Forum (2013) report, CNN has been critical in reinforcing and articulating racism and in damaging ethnic cultural identities. This study explores the different factors owing to Islamophobic content displayed on CNN. It analyses contributing factors such as the origins of islamophobia, and identification of Islamophobic content on CNN, how closely the content abides by editorial guidelines and its effect on the Islamic religion. The objectives of this research are to understand the role of the media in promoting islamophobia.
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