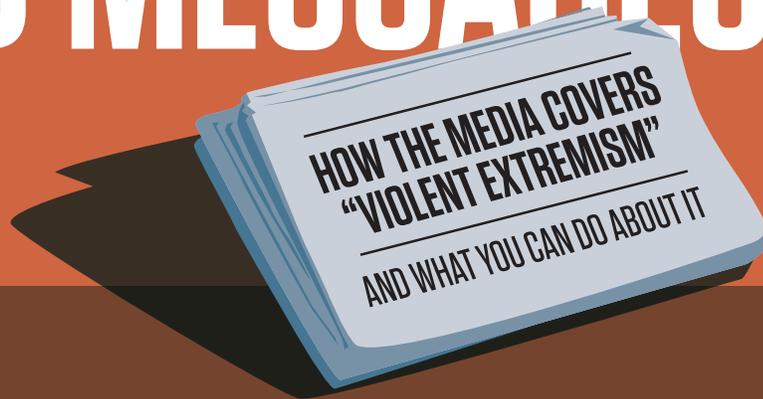


MIXED MESSAGES

SUMMARY DOCUMENT



American Friends
Service Committee

By Beth Hallowell, American Friends Service Committee

Every day, the U.S. news consumer is bombarded with images of spectacular extremist violence and increasingly aggressive and bellicose rhetoric from politicians and pundits. This coverage warrants a close look, as public discourse sinks to new lows in justifying violence against entire racial and religious groups. In this public conversation, the stakes are high; lives are on the line.

How is the media helping or hurting our public discussion about political violence? What are they covering when they cover extremism? Ninety percent of the time they also mention Islam, even when it's not part of the events covered, and three-quarters of the time journalists report on violent responses to conflict. And they also amplify voices promoting and stories depicting military intervention far more than peace building or nonviolent resistance to violent extremism—solutions to conflict that research has shown are more effective.

How can the U.S. public be expected to do anything *but* support further military intervention in the Middle East and other Muslim-majority countries, given this framework for covering violent extremism?

In *Mixed Messages*, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) shares the results of its original content analysis of three months of media coverage of extremism sampled from 20 U.S. news outlets. We sampled articles from 15 national media outlets as well as five major “influencer” outlets that reach a high-level audience of policymakers and government staff.



This analysis of over 600 news items shows trends. These patterns of news coverage frame all Muslims—and many other ethnic and religious communities—as a monolithic, homogenous group of potential extremists, rather than as complex individuals living in diverse communities that have nothing to do with the organized, politicized violence wielded by groups like ISIS and Boko Haram. By framing political groups as both crazy and highly orchestrated—sometimes in the same news stories—and by predominantly covering violent responses to conflict, media outlets frame these groups as natural military targets.

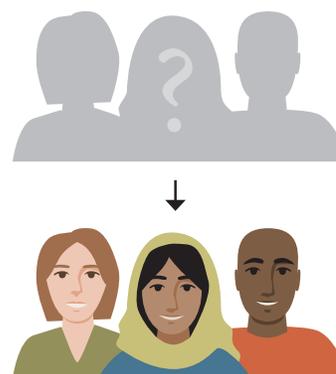
Based on these findings, we offer three recommendations to advocates and journalists interested in changing this narrative, by bringing important and underreported facts to light. Specifically:

1. Tell stories that highlight everyone’s humanity, especially that of historically marginalized groups—including Muslims

Taking a chapter from our friends at Race Forward, we echo a recommendation that they make to journalists covering race and racism in the U.S.: When covering any social group and especially when covering historically misrepresented groups, highlight individuals’ humanity. In this sample, we saw so much coverage of many personal narratives from people who were victims of violent extremism or other violent actors. While journalists have a responsibility to bear witness¹ to events that readers would not otherwise be able to see, so that they may take action or at least understand better, there are plenty of opportunities to, as Race Forward puts it, “cultivate discourse that centers the humanity and leadership” of historically misrepresented groups.²

To shift this discriminatory media narrative that Muslims are incommensurably different and potentially extremist, we invite advocates to work with us to develop messaging that highlights shared values from which we can all act to overcome the problem of racism in general and Islamophobia in particular.³ At the same time, we invite journalists to shift their focus to the humanity and leadership of Muslims and other groups bearing the brunt of Islamophobia, like Iraqis and Syrians of many faiths.⁴

Humanize subjects



1 Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 27–8.

2 Race Forward. 2014. “Moving the Race Conversation Forward: How the Media Covers Racism, and Other Barriers to Productive Racial Discourse.” 2. <https://www.raceforward.org/research/reports/moving-race-conversation-forward>. Accessed on March 7, 2016.

3 We are also indebted here and throughout this report to the thought leadership of the Opportunity Agenda. See especially: Opportunity Agenda. 2013. “Vision, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit.” http://opportunityagenda.org/files/field_file/oa_toolkit.pdf. Accessed February 16, 2016.

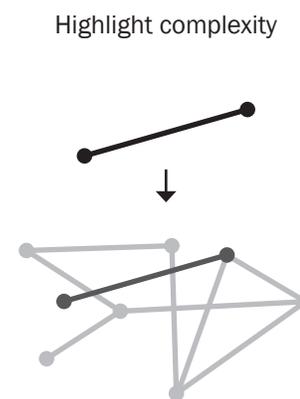
4 Race Forward, 2014.

Journalists can play a positive role by covering both the leadership of Muslims across arenas as well as the everyday lives of individual Muslims, and by avoiding imagery or language that portrays all Muslims as a homogenous, monolithic group, and especially as potential extremists. Articles that show everyday people from all faiths and backgrounds doing everyday things is one place to start. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding has an excellent list of starting places in its report *(Re)presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation*.⁵ Featuring real people living their everyday lives, as Walter Thompson-Hernández does in his series on Latin@ Muslims, is another example of this kind of coverage.⁶

2. Tell stories that highlight the history and complexity of politicized, organized violence, without resorting to stereotypes like “crazy” or “coldly calculating” extremists

We don’t keep “stumbling” into war, a New York Times editorial included in our study suggests. Many people—in this case, policymakers, military leaders, and extremist groups—make deliberate choices that take nations and non-state actors into violent conflict. Reading current coverage of ISIS in particular, the U.S. public could be forgiven for thinking that we do not have any alternative but to go to war with this group. After all, with every news cycle and every social media feed, readers are bombarded with the frameworks that we have described above: Muslims as potential extremists, extremists as crazy yet also well-organized, and the U.S. as limited in its potential responses to conflict.

Like The New York Times, however, we agree that the process for going to war should be open to public debate and scrutiny, and that journalists have an important role to play in bringing such decisions to the public. Advocates have a responsibility and desire to bring facts about war to the table—for example the failure of American military interventions and military assistance to solve problems over several decades—and journalists have a responsibility and desire to help build a public knowledge base. In this way, both groups have an opportunity to bring new and different facts into public view: facts that, if better understood, could save lives.



5 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. 2014b. “(Re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation.” Conference at the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Islamic Studies Program of Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 11-12. Pp16. http://www.ispu.org/pdfs/Harvard_Representing_American_Muslims_Report_Final.pdf. Accessed February 1, 2016.

6 Thompson-Hernández, Walter. 2015a. “Four Muslim Latinas Open Up About their Journeys to Islam.” Fusion, December 7. <http://fusion.net/story/241983/the-muslim-latinas-of-southern-california/>. Accessed February 17, 2016; Thompson-Hernández, Walter. 2015b. “It’s beautiful: How Four Los Angeles Latinos Found Peace in Islam.” Fusion, December 22. <http://fusion.net/story/247869/muslim-latinos-on-how-they-found-peace-in-islam/>. Accessed February 17, 2016.

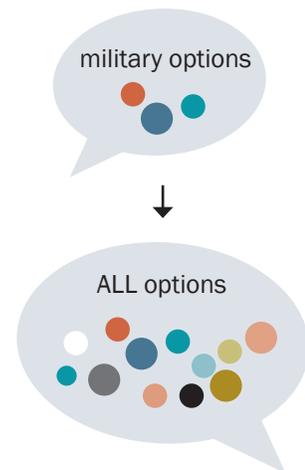
3. Cover nonviolence and peace building that work

As this report went out for review in December 2015, the U.N. announced that it finally developed a roadmap to peace in Syria. Whether the contents of the peace plan are the kind of effective, substantive, thoughtful measures we would like to see in place for lasting peace with justice is hard to say, because the peace plan barely made the U.S. national news at all. Drowned out by coverage of two presidential primary debates and holiday shopping news, the U.N.'s plan for peace in Syria is unlikely to receive the kind of U.S. public attention and debate it deserves, in part because there is so little thoughtful coverage of it in the national public sphere.

Advocates have a responsibility to lift up the facts of these and other peace-building measures. Journalists have an opportunity to authenticate, make sense of, and then curate⁷ those facts in ways that invite rigorous public scrutiny and debate. Coverage of the Iran nuclear deal is one example of this kind of coverage. AFSC's work on preventing political and organized violence in Indonesia and Somalia are additional examples. We invite advocates to bring other examples to the attention of journalists, and we invite journalists to bring the same level of scrutiny and rigor to covering these examples.

Advocates and journalists—along with readers—have an opportunity to make a crucial choice. Wars on terror, extremism, or other nations do not happen by accident. Islamophobia in the media and in our communities does not happen by accident. It may seem like both are entrenched or inevitable. But we have been able to create lasting social change in the past and make great strides forward toward peace with justice. We can do it again today.

Cover nonviolence
and peacebuilding



► Read the full report at afsc.org/MixedMessages



⁷ Kovach and Rosenstiel, p27-8