Halim Rane, Jacqui Ewart &John Martinkus

Media Framing of the Muslim World: Conflicts, Crises and Contexts

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Media have always played a role in shaping opinions and restructuring perspectives. Since the 1990s, analysts have widely acknowledged media influence on world politics due to the advancements in global communications and the end of the Cold War. Through image portrayal and coverage, media present a version of reality that can either facilitate contacts or trigger conflicts whether on the national or the international levels. It seems that this is the main message of Halim Rane's, Jacqui Ewart's and John Martinkus' book.

Many studies have demonstrated how international media tended to negatively depict Islam and Muslims after September 11 attacks. This book "examines how the Western media frames the Muslim world and the implications of this for Islam-West relations, both intercommunity and international" (p.1). The former aspect is particularly understudied and constitutes one of the main contributions of this monograph. Drawing on three important concepts in media studies—news value, framing and agenda sitting— the book shows how media affect Western public opinion and audiences' perceptions and understanding of Islam and Muslims.

Challenging the dominant frames representing Islam in Western media—a monolithic religion whose adherents are violent and uncivilized— the authors provide an overview of the teachings of Islam distinguishing between Islam and the practices of Muslims "highlighting both the factors that unify and those that contribute to the diversity of Muslim life" (p. 12). They trace this monolithic negative frame back to the medieval Christian thought that continued to influence the mediated version of Islam until today. They raise an important question in chapter two: "how widely such images are accepted and what the implications are for intercommunity and international relations" (p. 29). In answering this question, the authors reflected upon Western public opinion of Islam and Muslims and the role media played in raising fear and prejudice against Muslims, i.e. the rise of Islamophobia.

Challenging media dominant frames becomes more difficult when reporting on a contentious issue where its reality contradicts "the image that government and media seek to proclaim" (p. 47). The book's third author reflects upon his personal experience in reporting the war in Iraq in chapter three. Despite the rich information and details provided, there are many times when the reader felt that the chapter was more about fending off the accusations directed at the author by the Australian government at that time. The chapter was more about criticizing the Australian government, and the then Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, than scrutinizing media coverage of the war and its subsequent developments.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the interplay among media coverage, public opinion, political discourse, and national politics. Chapter 4 focuses on the issue of asylum seekers who are mostly Muslims to show the implications of media coverage on intercommunity relations. Meanwhile chapter 5 examines two cases of media coverage of terrorism—Dr. Haneef and the Holsworthy Army Barracks plot—to demonstrate how anti-terror legislation can limit media freedom, and curtail the democratic process by restricting the public's right to information about national security-related issues. It also discusses the impacts of media reportage on Muslim communities to consolidate its argument about intercommunity relationships.

Moving to examine media effect on international relations, the authors devote chapters 6 &7 to Muslim world-related events and Islam-West relationships. In chapter 6, they examine the

relationship between social and mass media in the context of the Arab Spring, and elaborate on their role in informing Western audience about the events. The role of *Al Jazeera* was not neglected in this discussion as a "primary news source for both Arab and Western audiences" (p. 13). Contextualizing the Arab uprising within the socio-political conditions in selected Arab nations, the authors reach a conclusion that there is "no positive correlation between levels of social media penetration and the emergence of social movements calling for political reform and regime change" (p. 133). On its part, chapter 7 discusses the clash of civilizations theory in the context of two cases: the offensive Danish newspaper's cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005, and the posting of *the innocence of Muslims* film on YouTube in 2012. According to the authors, the clash of civilizations does exist among a "significant minority on both sides, because of their failure or inability to be more discerning in their view of the other and a preoccupation with blaming the monolithic other" (p. 153).

Chapter 8 is the most clear, robust and well written chapter in the whole book. It presents the findings of a research done to examine whether news media have moved on from 9/11 and, whether public opinion has, consequently, evolved. It uses Australian television news coverage of the tenth anniversary of 9/11 and Australian public opinion as its case study. The first part focuses on the framing of the event, and the second presents the findings of focus groups conducted with Muslim and non-Muslim participants with regard to their reactions to the 9/11 coverage over the past decade and the evolution of their perceptions and understanding of Islam and Muslims over time" (p. 154). The authors found that media coverage of the tenth anniversary were not about terrorism, blame or enmity. They were particularly about "remembrance of the victims and reconciliation" (p. 163). Such a finding shows how the mass media representation of Islam and Muslims has undergone some evolution. Not only did the authors find an evolution in media representation, but they have also detected a change in non-Muslims' perceptions towards Islam and Muslim-related issues. This change, however, has not been detected among Muslim participants.

Some aspects of the book left the reader unsatisfied. Starting with the title— *Media Framing of the Muslim World: Conflicts, Crisis and Contexts*— it does not accurately reflect the content of the book. Rather than focusing on the Muslim World in its geographic sense, much of the discussion is related to conflicts, crisis and contexts within the West, particularly Australia, that have to do with Islam and Muslims. This raises the question of what actually the authors mean by the "Muslim World" and whether Muslim minorities are considered part of the Muslim world or part of Western societies. Moreover, public opinion occupied a considerable part of the discussion and the examples provided. Nevertheless, the title did not refer to it. It is also important to ask how representative Australian media is to Western media in general.

The second, and the most crucial, problem with the book is its methodology. It largely lacks clarity and robustness. For this reason, the cases chosen and the examples provided appeared to be highly selective. For example, in chapter 6, it was never clear enough how including *Al Jazeera* in the discussion would consolidate the overall argument of the book, which is mainly about Western media. In addition, while most chapters dealt with western public opinion, the Australian one in particular, the authors in chapter 6 referred to PEWS survey's results on American public opinion to prove their point that media, and consequently public opinion, have changed attitude towards the Arab Spring from enthusiasm to skepticism. Lack of methodology resulted in poorly connecting certain parts to the rest of the book. This is the case with chapter 5, which discusses institutional and legal frames of the media.

Thirdly, the book perceives the relationship between public opinion and media as a one-way relationship: media shapes public opinion. However, with the development of social media, and the rise in citizen journalism, what influences could public opinion have on media? If social media are competing with the traditional ones and, in many times, present a different version of reality, how would that be reflected on public opinion?

Fourth, there are some details and methodological issues that needed more elaboration. For example, the authors claim that "[w]hen Morsi was overthrown in … a military coup in July 2013, the Western media generally followed the lead of Western governments in raising little objection and even avoiding the term 'military coup' to describe the events" (p. 123.). They, however, did not provide any examples on media coverage of the event to support this claim. For many observers of media coverage of the political events in Egypt, this is simply inaccurate.

Furthermore, in chapter 8, the authors asked the members of the focus groups to reflect on media coverage on 9/11 in a decade. It was not clear how they did that: relying on their memory, watching samples of the coverage in ten years or what? This is particularly significant since one of the quotes contained factual mistake. The quote reads "it was American fault too. They shouldn't have gone into Iraq, pushed them around you know. This was a big mistake" (p. 167). The Iraq war took place in 2003, which means that it was two years after September 11 attacks. Moreover, many of the participants' comments were about their first reaction towards the attacks, not necessarily their reflection on media coverage of it.

Fifth, the book left some important questions unanswered. It did not explain why Australian media coverage has taken a different course in covering 9/11 and whether that was a gradual or a sudden change. The reader has not seen the evolution in media coverage but only a comparison between 2001 and 2011 coverage. The book also left us wondering: why do Muslims still feel targeted? And what explains the perceptual gap among Muslims and non-Muslims regarding media coverage?

Otherness has become a central issue in many academic and political debates. This book definitely contributes to these debates by unpacking many of the assumptions and truisms used in stereotyping and framing Islam and Muslims. It constitutes a useful reading for those who are interested in media studies, public opinion, politics and international relations.

Marwa Fikry Abdel Samei

Assistant Professor of Political Science

Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University

marwa_mfikry@hotmail.com