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# Islamophobia in the United States How American News Coverage and Social Media Perpetuate Fear & Hate Against Islam

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Islamophobia in the United States  
How American News Coverage and Social Media Perpetuate Fear & Hate Against Islam

By Rida Kazmi

Master of Arts in International Studies

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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in

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by

Rida Kazmi

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Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

APPROVED:

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Date

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## Abstract

In recent years, Islamophobia in the United States has risen to levels never seen before. While 2016 marks the 15-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, hatred and fear of Muslims and Islam has reached an all-time high instead of steadily decreasing. The rise in Islamophobia is due in large part to the news coverage that people are exposed to, with media stories on terrorist attacks often conflating Islam and violence in both subtle and other ways. Furthermore, we see that similar coverage of acts of violence committed by non-Muslims is often markedly different, both in tone and language. Through American news coverage, Muslims have become the “other,” something that is proving problematic in how Americans see and portray Muslims both domestically and internationally.

Another media form that has also played a crucial role in the spread of Islamophobia is social media. The use of hashtags that promote negative views of Islam and Muslims have risen in the last five years. The use of Facebook profile filters has also called into question who deserves solidarity and sympathy, often marginalizing Muslim countries and lives. So far, use of the filter has favored Western nations effected by terrorism, yet there are many Muslim-majority countries that face terrorism as well. Muslims have begun to learn how to combat the use of negative hashtags by creating their own; turning these hashtags into responses that find humor and that challenge incorrect or ignorant ideas of their religion. They have also used their social media platforms to protest Facebook’s “selective mourning” through national profile filters.

More importantly, Islamophobia has had deep consequences and effects in people’s day-to-day lives. This research seeks to show how Islamophobia impacts people from various walks of life and how it is crucial to continue to understand and challenge it.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
• Research Focus.....	1
○ How is Islamophobia International and not just Domestic?.....	2
• Fieldwork & Methodology.....	4
○ Internship and Field Research.....	4
○ Media Analysis.....	9
○ Social Media Analysis.....	10
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	12
• The Islamophobia Industry: Fear Sells.....	12
• The Consequences of Stereotyping Islam & Muslims.....	18
• Solutions to the Problem of Islamophobia.....	21
Chapter 3 Content Analysis: News Media-Case Studies Paris 2015 Attacks & Orlando Pulse Nightclub Shooting.....	23
• Introduction.....	23
• Paris November 2015.....	25
○ CNN.....	26
○ Fox News.....	27
○ Al Jazeera.....	29
• Orland Pulse Nightclub.....	30
○ CNN.....	30
○ Fox News.....	31
○ Al Jazeera.....	32
• Conclusion.....	34
Chapter 4 Social Media Analysis: Changing All the Rules & Reaching More People.....	37
• Hashtags.....	38
• Facebook Profile Picture Filters.....	41
• Conclusion.....	44
Chapter 5 Personal Narratives.....	46
• News Coverage: Skewing Perceptions of Islam & Muslims in America.....	47
• “More Should be Done to Paint an Accurate Portrayal of Muslims” & the Muslim Voice Should Be Used.....	50
• How Islamophobia Has Effected People’s Lives.....	55
• Social Media.....	57
• Conclusion.....	59
Chapter 6 Conclusion.....	60

Bibliography.....66

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

Islamophobia has become an important part of the framework of the United States, especially after September 11, 2001. The rise Islamophobia in the American public sphere is often linked to the growing number of terrorist attacks throughout the world as well as the rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric that has proliferated through political rhetoric and media. This chapter introduces my research focus and interests around Islamophobia and its relationship to American news media and social media, and how it affects people, specifically Muslims living in the United States. In this chapter I introduce my research methodology, and also consider how American news media perpetuates Islamophobia through the stories that are covered, as well as how social media platforms can address Islamophobia, but also aid in perpetuating it as well.

### **Research Focus (purpose, scope & significance)**

Islamophobia has always been a prominent part of my life as I grew up during the post 9/11 years. To this day, I remember seeing the images of the Twin Towers coming down, the firefighters and police officers covered in dust, American flags on every corner of every neighborhood. At the time, I did not understand the enormity of what happened that day or how it would change so many things for so many people. With the 15-year anniversary of that tragic event falling in 2016, it is important for people to recognize just how much more Islamophobia exists today than it did in the weeks and months following September 11<sup>th</sup>. Many would argue that Islamophobia existed prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>, but not to the extent that it exists today. I wanted to research an important topic that is constantly finding its way into our thoughts because it is crucial to recognize its effect on the past, present and future.

With the current political climate, Islamophobia has been a topic of keen interest for many people curious about how the 2016 American Presidential election will turn out, especially

given that anti-Muslims sentiment has been prevalent in some campaign rhetoric. I think that many people are concerned with the amount of violence our world faces today, and this is shaping their views on Muslims and Islam, as many see the religion and its followers as a key common denominator in acts of violence that have occurred post-9/11. One hypothesis I would like to explore through my research is how the mainstream American media narratives are perpetuating the link between Islam and terrorism through how and what they report. Additionally, how is Islamophobia also being perpetuated through the circulation of certain discourse and rhetoric on social media platforms? A second hypothesis I would like to explore is how public figureheads in American politics are using fear tactics and employing xenophobic behavior to explain violence to garner support.

The scope of my research is primarily based in the United States, but it is also important to recognize how the United States is just one case study among many that can be further researched when it comes to the topic of Islamophobia in Western countries. With the rise in Islamophobia in many parts of the world, I believe that examining Islamophobia in the United States would add to the growing research because we live in a connected world, and the United States as a global power certainly influences how other countries treat Islamophobia in their news and social media.

### **How is Islamophobia International and not just Domestic?**

For the purposes of this research project, I would like to examine how Islamophobia may be perpetuated in American media and what people say and think about it. My definition of Islamophobia is “an irrational fear of the religion of Islam and of Muslims” (“Defining Islamophobia”). The importance of studying Islamophobia lies in the fact that it is rampant in today’s world, and many remain unaware of just how Islamophobia can effect people and what it

means for American society and culture more broadly. I also want to explore the conversations that people are having with regards to Islamophobia, as well as how Muslims (and others) living in the United States attempt to cope with and combat it. Social media has become a driving force in how information is received and shared, and it allows a wide platform through which people not only share stories but also let their own opinions be known. People engage with others on social media, either sharing the same opinion, or allowing for debate with those who disagree. Thus, examining the ways in which discourses on social media both perpetuate and challenge Islamophobic sentiment is key to understanding the current political climate.

As we can see, the current presidential election will have a major impact on Muslims. With the amount of Islamophobia that candidates, such as Donald Trump, are employing, this rhetoric is causing much concern among Muslims not just in the United States, but throughout the world. Many people are more paranoid about their Muslim neighbors. Some even take their paranoia to the extreme and act violently against people that are Muslim or who “come across” as Muslim. In addition, Trump has claimed that if he were elected, he would not allow Muslims to enter the country and would make Muslims carry identification cards. This is important because tactics such as these are direct violations of the United States Constitution. If we are unable to uphold our constitution, then what grounds does democracy stand for in the United States?

The research I conducted is important when thinking about the repercussions of Islamophobia at an international scale. For example, with the war in Syria ongoing and with no end in sight, many people are trying to flee the conflict. Because many of the refugees are Muslim, there is great concern that they will not be able to find asylum in countries such as the United States, England, and Germany because of their religion and its conflation with terrorism.

With individuals such as Donald Trump calling for intense screenings of not only Muslim refugees, but Muslims already living in the United States, Islamophobic discourse is swaying the public's opinion towards increased anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiment. This all has to do with the rise and growth of Islamophobia in the West.

## **Fieldwork & Methodology**

### *Internship & Field Research*

In order to conduct research for this project, I first started looking for an internship that would help me gather information and hands on experience with instances of Islamophobia in American media, social media, as well as every-day life. In my search, I accepted a position with the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) San Francisco Bay Area office. The CAIR mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, and encourage dialogue while protecting the civil liberties of American Muslims and empowering them to promote justice and mutual understanding (CAIR Vision, Mission, Core Principles). Founded in 1994, there are currently thirty-one CAIR offices across the country. While working with CAIR SFBA, I was able to follow more closely the events that were taking place on a domestic level, as well as globally, with regard to Islamophobia. According to CAIR, Islamophobia is a fear or hatred of Islam and Muslims (CAIR 2016 Islamophobia report). Getting hands-on experience of how the CAIR SFBA office, as well as CAIR National, dealt with the events that occurred during my internship, such as the shooting in Orlando and the attack in Nice, allowed me to further explore how Islamophobia is ever present in both the United States, as well as internationally. While I was interning with CAIR SFBA, I was given permission to conduct research throughout my time as an intern.

Working with CAIR SFBA helped me develop and consider important questions around how a local organization, like CAIR SFBA, deals with Islamophobia. For example, during my research I considered: What support is out there for Muslims and non-Muslims to better educate themselves on fighting Islamophobia? What kind of outreach is CAIR SFBA engaging in? Was CAIR SFBA engaging with communities other than Muslims? Did CAIR SFBA only respond when hate crimes or terrorist events took place? These were the questions I needed to ask and pay attention to throughout my internship.

As the Operations Intern at CAIR SFBA, I had to complete a minimum of 150 hours over the span of ten weeks. Completing the internship meant that I was working at the CAIR SFBA for two days a week in full eight-hour shifts. In my role, I assisted the Operations Manager in creating donor campaigns to encourage people to support the work that CAIR SFBA engages in, specifically the promotion of civil rights and education about Islam and Muslims. The most important aspect of my internship was building the donor family as CAIR SFBA needs the support of the community to offer the civil rights services and education that it does. An important example is the 'Know Your Rights' campaign, held in mosques after major prayer times. The campaign helps people gain an understanding of their rights in case the FBI shows up to their homes, they are stopped by police, etc. In addition to presentations, education pamphlets are printed so that they can be given out at various outreach sites and events that include the information provided during the presentation.

While interning at CAIR SFBA, I was always conscious of the work that the entire team was doing in order to educate Muslims and non-Muslims alike on why it is so important to combat the rampant Islamophobia. For the purposes of my research, I listened to first-hand accounts from staff members to learn how CAIR deals with various forms of Islamophobia and

the different environments they can take place in. For example, if an employee is facing Islamophobic rhetoric and behavior in his or her place of work, CAIR SFBA can come to the assistance of that person and let them know of their rights. Because of the current social and political climate, CAIR SFBA realized how important it was to do community outreach, offering important advice on what to do if experienced everything from school bullying to targeted federal investigations. Being present at these outreach sites allowed me to learn how much the services and knowledge given by CAIR SFBA have helped Muslims across the Bay Area overcome racism, unfair treatment in the workplace, as well as dealing with issues like traveling.

While participating in outreach events that were coordinated by the CAIR SFBA office, I was able to engage with many Muslim communities in the Bay Area-an experience that allowed me to fully engage with the people who have been or are currently being affected by Islamophobia daily. One thing that was interesting for me was just how diverse Muslims communities are throughout the Bay Area. I have only been to a few *masjids* throughout the Bay Area, but CAIR SFBA allowed me to widen my reach as far as accessing more mosques and meeting so many different and wonderful communities. For example, the Lighthouse *Masjid* in Oakland was a predominantly African-American Muslim community; this was something I had never experienced before, and quite honestly, I had no idea that a large community of Black Muslims existed in the Bay Area, so close to where I have grown up and spent my entire life. I was also able to visit multiple different *masjids* in areas such as San Francisco, San Jose and Santa Clara. When outreaching with these different communities, the environments were always extremely welcoming and I was able to learn a lot from the various *Khutbas*<sup>1</sup> I was able to listen to. Outreach was always my favorite part of the week because I truly enjoyed helping the CAIR

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon preached by an imam (religious leader) in a mosque at the time of the Friday noon prayer

SFBA staff and volunteers by offering materials for community members to take and read so that they can be better informed in combatting Islamophobia. By simply setting up a table and being open to engaging with community members and answering any of the questions they might have, such as what they should do if the police stopped them or they were being heckled at work, I was able to witness how supportive the various Bay Area Muslim communities are of one another and the intense will to combat the Islamophobia that they encountered.

When the attack on the Pulse nightclub occurred on June 12, 2016, masjids across the United States called upon their members to pray for those affected and to combat and condemn the acts of individuals who associated with ISIL. I attended an outreach at the Muslim Community Association in Santa Clara during *Jummah*<sup>2</sup> prayers, and the *Khutba* was about acceptance of difference, standing together in solidarity, and standing united against those that wanted to portray Islam in a negative way.

It was during my outreach each week on Friday that I was able to take field notes that would reflect my experiences at the masjid that day, as well as my interactions with community members and leaders. Although I was not allowed to record anything, I was allowed to take notes on what the khutba was about for the week and small conversations I was able to have with members of the masjid. I generally wanted to make note of what was going on around me, especially as it pertained to Muslims all around the world and fighting Islamophobia, both domestically as well as globally.

It was experiences such as these that helped me focus in on what case studies I would select for my news research, as well as the social media aspect of my thesis, because conversations surrounding events were not only taking place at masjids, but across many social

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<sup>2</sup> Friday prayer that usually takes place around noon

media platforms as well. Although many unfortunate events have taken place in the past few years to spike Islamophobia, these events have added to the conversations people are having. Focusing on the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting was something I knew I wanted to include as a case study in my research because it took place at the time that I was interning at CAIR SFBA. Experiencing how CAIR SFBA reacted to the tragedy in Orlando was eye opening for me as I was on the ground, so to speak, to witness just how important it was for the entire country to see a united front against those who would turn around and use the attack as a brush to paint all Muslims under the same umbrella. It also shed light on how important it was for the Muslim communities in the Bay Area to show solidarity with another minority community-the LGBTQ community-during such a difficult time.

When conducting my research, although I had a lot to work with as far as news coverage and events, I knew that I would like to have a personal aspect to the research. I wanted to supplement my fieldwork with individual narratives and interviews that went more in depth from what I was observing in the field. I did not just want to focus on what has already been written or only focus on case studies to support the research I was gathering on Islamophobia in the American media. Because of this, I decided I wanted to conduct ethnographic interviews to gather a more personal approach to the research I was conducting. After all, Islamophobia affects many people, whether they are Muslims or not, and I knew that people would have a lot to say about this subject.

I conducted three in-depth interviews so that I could gain insight on what others have to say about Islamophobia in the United States. I interviewed three adults, two females and one male, all of whom identified as Muslim. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. I wanted to get the Muslim perspective on Islamophobia in the United States, thus I decided to interview

people that are Muslim. Questions I was looking to answer included: What types of media are you most exposed to? How do you think mainstream media covers Islamophobia? What do you think is the root cause of the growth of Islamophobia in the United States? When conducting the interviews, I set up my tablet so that I could have the interview questions in front of me as well as allowing me to take notes while the interview was taking place. I made sure to record my interviews because I knew that I would not be able to type everything out fast enough to make sense and to ensure the notes were following the interview itself and not getting jumbled. I recorded the interviews on my phone so that I could have them for transcription purposes. My interviews lasted about one hour each because I had quite a few questions, some of them even having sub-questions. Additionally, I wanted to give the interviewee enough time to gather his or her thoughts and make clarifications if necessary. Once the interviews were completed, I began to transcribe the interviews so that I could pull important quotes from them for my paper and analysis. I also listened for patterns and trends, as well as differences, that came up across the three interviews that were conducted

### *Media Analysis*

The main component of my research involved content analysis of American media covering stories on terrorist acts and Muslims and how such coverage may perpetuate Islamophobia. At the time of my research, the majority of which took place during the summer of 2016, a number of events occurred both in the United States as well as internationally that involved the conflation of Islam and terrorist attacks. I had to narrow down which events I would focus on for the purposes of my research as I did not want to broadly cover events. Instead, I wanted to use a few events as case studies to get a more in-depth focus of Islamophobia in the media and how people react to it. Since I wanted to garner a response of how people view

Islamophobia and their opinions and perspectives, I thought that picking specific events would be a good place to start for the research.

For my case studies, I selected the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting and the attacks in Paris on November 30, 2015. After deciding on which case studies I would primarily focus on, I began collecting articles that had to do with these events. I wanted to get a general picture of how these events were covered, as well as what analysis could be drawn out of the coverage of these events. Once I had examples of both written and visual coverage of news for each case study, I began my content analysis of identifying which trigger words were used, the slant of the story, and the perspective it was coming from. I wanted to also focus on why the story was being delivered in a certain way, as well as how the coverage was received by various audiences.

I picked these two events because of how much coverage was given to them when they occurred, both from news media and social media. Coverage was immense during these events from major sources of news, such as CNN, Fox, MSNBC, BBC, and many other widely viewed sources. Patterns I wanted to focus on were why these events triggered so much coverage, as compared to an attack not perpetrated by a “Muslim,” there was barely a week’s worth of coverage. I also wanted to follow what conversations were coming about from these events. I think each example shows just how real Islamophobia is when terror attacks occur and how Muslims have to immediately go on the defensive to not only condemn the actions of terrorists, but also to protect themselves and their communities in case someone or a group goes after the entire Muslim community as a form of “revenge” after the attacks.

### *Social Media Analysis*

In addition to looking at news sources, I felt that it would be important to examine the spaces where such news circulates the most in today’s world, namely social media. When

considering which social media platforms I would like to cover, I had to go through different trending topics and see what could really add to the research, as well as what would be relevant to talk about in relation to Islamophobia. I decided that I wanted to focus on two different aspects of social media: Facebook profile picture filters and hashtags. More specifically, I wanted to see how both Muslims and non-Muslims were using social media in relation to Islamophobia in terms of showing solidarity, sharing their “perspective” on the attack and the ensuing media coverage, and discussing the effects of the media coverage on their community or them personally.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

This literature review covers research that focuses on Islamophobia in the media, the reasons behind why the media chooses to cover Islam and Muslims in a certain way, as well as the reaction to this coverage. The scholarly authors featured in the literature review focus on how Islamophobia has been spreading through different platforms and how it has increased rapidly in the U.S. Islamophobia has drastically taken a different turn after the events in September 11 and has seen an upsurge as a direct response to how people react to the rise of terror groups such as ISIL and the increase in terror attacks that occur globally. In addition to this, the literature review examines how stereotypes perpetuated by news media and social media can also increase Islamophobia and why it is important to bring attention to how Islamophobia is portrayed.

### **The Islamophobia Industry: Fear Sells**

There has been a growing amount of research on how Islamophobia has become an industry, and how this industry has stirred Americans to fear Muslims. Millions of dollars are being spent on a creating an environment where Americans are turning against each other and claiming that Muslims do not belong to the American community. The Islamophobia industry is also aided by political figures and legislation that perpetuate ideas about Islam and Muslim that are grossly misinformed. With an increase in fear comes and increase in backlash against Muslim communities throughout the U.S. *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Fear of Muslims* by Nathan Lean was one of my main sources during my research as he is a writer and researcher on Islamophobia. Lean's definition of Islamophobia is a "prejudice and hostility towards Muslims" (Basu, "What Does 'Islamophobia Actually Mean?"). Lean argues that because fear sells, the political right in the West has manufactured Islamophobia so that it can produce irrational fear among so many people not just in the United

States, but around the world. Lean clarifies that a lot of Americans became skeptical of Muslims based on the rhetoric they heard in the post-9/11 environment, stating, “Between Bush’s recurring insistence that Islam is a “religion of peace,” and the Islamophobic rhetoric that came to characterize much of his administration’s policy makers and military leaders, was an embedded distinction: there were “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims.” Furthermore, as Mahmoud Mamdani points out, until the roles were clarified, Americans were led to be skeptical of all Muslims:

President Bush moved to distinguish between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims”... “bad Muslims” were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that “good Muslims” were anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and would undoubtedly support “us” in a war against “them”. But this could not hide the central message of such discourse: unless proved to be “good,” every Muslim was presumed to be “bad”...Judgment of “good” and “bad” refer to Muslim political identities, not to cultural or religious ones” (Lean, 143).

Lean argues that after eight years of the Bush administration and the rhetoric and terminology used during that time, Barack Obama wanted to move away from “language that could be construed as divisive” (Lean, 143). Lean states, however, that even though Islamophobic terminology was being moved away from, the damage had been done. A link between all Muslims and extremism had been made, especially during the War on Terror, so it was not surprising the Islamophobic rhetoric continued.

To conclude his book, Lean writes:

“The Islamophobia industry is a growing enterprise, one that is knowledgeable about the devastating effects of fear on society and willing to produce and exploit it. They may be a relatively small group, but the scope of their reach and the consequences of their program engender anti-Muslim hate within vulnerable groups of people who, once tuned in to such propaganda, join their ranks” (Lean, 184).

Lean recognizes the dangers that falling for Islamophobia places on societies and groups of people, going so far as to say that Islamophobia is a “poison” that Western politicians and the media have used to justify their political and economic agendas. With the rhetoric we receive from the political right, more and more people are becoming susceptible to this poison, and it will only grow the more people buy into the fear that is a direct product of the Islamophobia industry. Looking at Islamophobia as an “industry” or an “enterprise,” or something to sell, makes it more about money and profit than about a moral or ethical war against Islam.

The last words of the book reflect today’s political climate as well when Lean ends his analysis by foreshadowing the current political climate in the U.S. He warns about the “danger of escalation” and the deeply ingrained prejudice that the “Islamophobia industry” has helped to facilitate. Lean’s comments could not ring more true today. For example, the campaign for Donald Trump’s run for the presidency has been a campaign of fear and xenophobia. In particular, Trump has called for a complete ban of Muslims from entering the United States, and has insisted that Muslims living in the U.S. need to register or carry ID. With more terrorist attacks than ever before, and the rise of groups such as ISIL, the Trump campaign has used these events to target Muslims, making more people fearful of Muslims and Islam. Lean argues that in order to combat Islamophobia, people must come together in order to stop the “fear factory” of Islamophobia

John L. Esposito is one of the most prominent writers on Islamophobia today. As the Professor of International Affairs and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University, Esposito has written extensively on the challenge of being a Muslim in the West and the challenges that Islam faces in the 21st century. Esposito writes, “Today, Islam and the Middle East often dominate the

negative headlines. Despite the fact that Islam is the second largest religion in the world and the third largest religion in the United States-as well as the fact that American Muslims are an integral part of the American mosaic in the twenty-first century-the acts of terrorists over the last three decades have fed the growth of Islamophobia...” (Lean, x). Esposito goes on to say that “Islam and Muslims have become guilty until proven innocent, a reversal of the classic American legal maxim” (Lean, x). Esposito defines Islamophobia as “an unfounded irrational fear that tends to lead to bias, discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes” (Hinton, “Q&A With Islamic Studies Scholar John L.”). He critiques the American media in promoting Islamophobia because of the rhetoric they use that reaches millions of people, such as describing all Muslims as terrorists, but not doing the same when a white male or non-Muslim commits a similar crime. Esposito states that one of the main problems he sees with American media is the lack of facts or evidence the commentators have when they are presenting stories on Islam. Because of this lack of knowledge, it continues the cycle of ignorance and bigotry that feeds Islamophobia.

In his book *The Future of Islam*, Esposito explores how Islam has evolved in its interpretations and why there are so many negative portrayals of the religion. Esposito works to dispel these negative theories by offering insight into what Islam and Muslims are like behind the negative stereotypes. Esposito writes, “The relationship of religion to extremism and terrorism, at home and abroad, will remain critical in the twenty-first century. It will be important to recognize that the primary causes of global terrorism, political and economic grievances, are often obscured by extremists’ use of religious language and symbolism.” (Esposito, 156-157). Esposito argues that the media and public in the West need to distinguish between “violent extremists” and regular Muslims who choose to practice the religions proper

teachings and who do not believe in engaging in violence and do not accept the actions of groups such as ISIL.

Another leading scholar on Islam in the United States is Reza Aslan. In Aslan's first book, *No god but God*, he discusses the origins and evolution of Islam and the religion's symbolic position on a globalized stage, especially after September 11. In an article written for The New York Times entitled, "Bill Maher Isn't the Only One Who Misunderstands Religion," Aslan states, "critics of religion tend to exhibit an inability to understand religion outside of its absolutist connotations. They scour holy texts for bits of savagery and point to extreme examples of religious bigotry, of which there are too many, to generalize the causes of oppression throughout the world" (Aslan, "Bill Maher Isn't the Only One Who Misunderstands Religion"). Aslan goes on to explain how pundits like Bill Maher may be correct in condemning religious practices that violate fundamental human rights, but that he must also recognize that religion is embedded in culture and that by labeling an entire religion as violent or radical is very problematic (Aslan, "Bill Maher Isn't the Only One Who Misunderstands Religion"). Aslan further wants to debunk how people believe that religion solely influences the behavior of terrorists. Aslan states, "The notion that there is a one-to-one correlation between religious beliefs and behavior may seem obvious and self-evident to those unfamiliar with the study of religion. But it has been repeatedly debunked by social scientists who note that "beliefs do not causally explain behavior" and that behavior is in fact the results of complex interplay among a host of social, political, cultural ethical, emotional, and yes, religious factors" (Aslan, "How strong is the link between faith and terrorism?").

Reza Aslan has been a prominent commentator on news outlets such as CNN and has been instrumental in trying to understand Islamophobia and dispel negative portrayals of

Muslims and Islam in the United States. In doing so, he is challenging the ideas that are promoted by the Islamophobia industry that portray Muslims as being a group of people who should be feared. One of his most noted interviews occurred on CNN when a commentator asked if Islam is a violent religion. Aslan responded by saying that a religion is violent by the people who bring their violence to it. He thus argues that to say that an entire religion is inherently violent is incorrect, but yes, there are people who claim to follow a religion who bring violence to their individual interpretation of that religion. By doing so, Aslan is essentially challenging ideas which foster bigotry against Muslims based on reactions to and explanations for violent extremism. Aslan is making it clear that the majority of Muslims do not agree with the violence that groups such as ISIL participate in, and that those actions are not what the religion of Islam promotes.

Ranya Tabari Idliby, author of *Burqas, Baseball, and Apple Pie* also discusses how news media in the United States promote negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam. Using the Boston Marathon bombings and the Fort Hood shooting as examples, Idliby writes that American news commentators need to be more conscious of the language they use so as not to perpetuate Islamophobia and perpetuate the fear that the Islamophobia industry relies on. For example, when Mike Huckabee painted Muslims and Islam with a broad brush of being violent and “uncorked animals,” Idliby stated that he should have noted that there are Muslims who choose to be violent in the practice of their religion, yet the majority of Muslims do not act violently (Idliby, 135). Idliby draws a parallel between the use of Islamophobia in news coverage as similar bigotry against Jews and black people stating, “One takes a group, a minority in one’s midst, and recasts them as a collective: a group without individual beliefs, traits, qualities, personalities, emotions, and tendencies... This effectively strips them of their humanity. Once

they are stripped of humanity, no crime or hate or allegation seems too far-fetched or inconceivable” (Idliby, 135). In stripping one of their humanity, it is not only un-American, but also inhuman (Idliby, 136). Muslims have been stripped of their humanity because of the Islamophobia that has been pervading the country.

### **The Consequences of Stereotyping Islam and Muslims**

In the book, *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy*, Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg discuss how stereotyping Muslims and Islam have become the norm for Americans. Gottschalk and Greenberg state, “A stereotype of Muslim men relies on the characteristics of the beard and mustache, kaffiyeh or turban, and brown skin. In the week immediately following the September 11 tragedy, scores of incidents involving police arrests and public harassment of not only Muslims but also Sikh men occurred throughout the United States” (Gottschalk, 67-68). Stereotypes about Muslim men tied to outward appearance portrayed in the media have led to incidences of hate crimes. What a Muslim looks like and how those stereotypes become something to fear is problematic because Muslims can “look” different in many ways. To target certain individuals based on their appearance continues the cycle of Islamophobia and fear. This has led to the murder of Sikhs who fit the stereotype in the media of the “turbaned” Muslim terrorist.

Another example of stereotyping Islam is the use of negative portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims strongly condemn the use of the Prophet’s image. In some interpretations of Islam, it is expressly forbidden to depict any images of holy figures like the Prophet as a way to prevent people from worshipping religious idols in place of God. Gottschalk and Greenberg comment, “Stereotyping figured also into the 2006 controversy regarding the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, first by a Danish newspaper and later by other news

outlets. The cartoon at the heart of this scandal—a portrait of the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb as a turban—might appear to be caricature and not a stereotype. If the cartoon portrayed Osama bin Laden it would be taken as such. However, because Western audiences recognize Muhammad as a symbol of Islam, they cannot but read this specific caricature as a claim that all Muslims are essentially violent” (Gottschalk, 68-59). The Prophet is an important symbol within Islam and the cartoons are an offensive portrayal because not only is the Prophet given a face, something strictly forbidden by Islam, but also because he is pictured with a bomb. This is one example of many instances in the media whereby not only is the depiction of an important symbol in Islam done in an offensive manner, but also Muslim’s angry response is received as reasserting the stereotypes of Islam as a violent and angry religion. An example of this latter point would be the attack on the satirical French magazine, Charlie Hebdo on January 7, 2015. The attack was led by two brothers who had pledged their allegiance to Yemen’s Al Qaeda branch and said their purpose was to deter the magazine from producing images of the Prophet.

Reza Aslan analyzes the negative portrayal of the Prophet by commenting on how Islam has been seen as a “warrior religion.” Going back as far as the Crusades, Aslan explores how the stereotype of Islam being a violent, enemy religion has evolved over time in the West. Now, instead of a Muslim army depicted as heathens during the Crusades, this image has been replaced by “the Islamic terrorist, strapped with explosives, ready to be martyred for God, eager to take as many innocent people as possible with him” (Aslan, 80). Aslan notes that what has been a constant factor in stereotypes of Islam is the fact that many see Muslims as followers of a religion that is constantly seeking holy war, or jihad. Aslan also clarifies that the terrorists of today have distorted the word jihad to mean something more violent and terrible. However, the Prophet himself never conceptualized the term in relation to violence. Rather, jihad is supposed

to be the struggle to avoid the sins that would push someone away from God. As we can see, the stereotype of war, violence, and jihad has greatly impacted the perception of Islam and Muslims in the West.

Ranya Tabari Idliby adds how disturbing it is that the most insidious stereotype of Islam is that it is inherently a violent religion. Even when there are 1.6 billion Muslims around the world who do not engage in violence, the West remains skeptical of Muslims and Islam (Idliby, 1378-18). Idliby argues that any religion can be violent if a follower chooses to bring violence to their interpretation of their religion. Using an example of Christian extremists killing doctors who perform abortions, Idliby states that it is problematic that while Christianity is not labeled as a violent religion, if a Muslim were involved in killing the aforementioned doctors, people would assume that violence is inherent in the religion. Raymond William Baker, author of *One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds*, also notes that the idea that Islam is inherently violent is one of the most damaging lies that is promoted about Islam because it has become a myth that the American media has built open in order to maintain Islamophobic rhetoric.

Evelyn Alsultany is another academic whose research focuses on Islamophobia, U.S. cultural and racial politics, media representations and Arab and Muslim Americans. In her op-ed “Arab and Muslim stereotypes influence thought, policies,” Alsultany confronts why it is difficult for people to relate to Muslims who have lived in the United States for years and consider themselves just as “American” as anyone else. She notes that when a terror attack occurs, it is easy for people to turn against their neighbors and look at them as the ‘other.’ Alsultany writes, “Certainly there is greater fear and suspicion of Arabs and Muslims since 9/11, but given that we live in a society that has made great strides in disavowing racism and harmful stereotypes, why are Arab and Muslim Americans still the targets of bias and negative

perceptions?” (Alsultany, “Arab and Muslim stereotypes influence thought, policies”). Alsultany focuses her work on how negative stereotypes keep Islamophobia alive because of how prominent they have become in American media, particularly TV shows and films.

### **Solutions to the Problem of Islamophobia**

In his book, *Islam Beyond the Violent Jihadis: An Optimistic Muslims Speaks*, Ziauddin Sardar argues that violence is not the answer to more violence. A London-based scholar who focuses on Muslim thought and the future of Islam, Sardar has witnessed the growth of violence perpetrated by people claiming to be Muslims, something that has become an everyday occurrence since September 11. He writes, “I have watched in agony the horrors of 9/11, 7/7, Madrid, Mumbai, Charlie Hebdo and the Paris attacks unfold before my eyes. And I have cried endlessly at the slicing of Iraq, the annihilation of Afghanistan, the drone killings in Pakistan, the destruction of the Arab world—the ‘war on terror’ that terrifies me and has produced nothing but more terror” (Sardar 2016, 163-164). Sardar notes that because of the continued violence that targets Islam, there has been an upsurge in violent groups that self-identify as “Islamic,” such as ISIL, Boko Haram, and the Taliban. Because of these violent reactions, real conversations that could lead to understanding and peace get pushed aside. Sardar believes that Muslims need to do more in order to rethink Islam, and not solely rely on interpretations of the past; interpretations that are hundreds of years old. Instead of following the age-old argument that Islam is a religion of peace, Muslims all over the world need to be more hands on as far as promoting their own communities, values, and practices. Instead of condemning an act of terrorism and then moving into the shadows, Muslims need to be willing to have conversations about why Islam is being abused in such as way and how to reverse the lack of knowledge and stereotypes that people have about Islam and Muslims.

Esposito agrees to a certain extent with Sardar's methods on combatting Islamophobia. He agrees that Muslims need to be more open to linking past interpretations of Islam to new, more reformed interpretations. As he states, "Islam has always recognized the need to reinterpret its sources in light of current cultural and social realities" (Esposito, 95). Esposito also quotes Tariq Ramadan as saying, "Faithfulness to principles cannot involve faithfulness to historical models because times change, societies and political and economic systems become more complex, and in every age, it is in fact necessary to think of a model appropriate to each social and cultural reality" (Esposito, 95). Essentially Esposito would like to see more Muslims willing to interpret Islam in how it fits into the world today. Aslan would agree that Islam needs to cleanse itself of bigotry and fanaticism in order to have reformation that will be able to mold itself into this new era (Aslan, 292). This is a difficult task because there are those groups that are tarnishing the religion with their interpretations of Islam. However, for Muslims who are following the religion's practices for the betterment of humanity, a willingness must be made to ensure Islam speaks to current-day issues and prospers for future generations.

## **Chapter 3 Content Analysis: News Media (Case Studies: Paris 2015 attacks & Orlando Pulse)**

### **Introduction**

Exposure to current events today occurs through many methods of access and media platforms. Whether we access news coverage from our televisions, or the quick ability we have to pull up a news app on a smart phone, choosing to engage with domestic and international news is not difficult to do and has been made easier with advances in technology. You can even access news in real-time from your social media sites, a novel development that seemed unthinkable not so long ago.

But how does this ease of access to news coverage inform our knowledge of what is really going on in the world? How does the news we consume shape our opinions? I wanted to explore questions such as these when researching how Islamophobia can be perpetuated by the news coverage we view, especially the coverage in the United States. Why do certain news channels cover topics around Islam and Muslims through one lens versus another? Why do certain words always appear in new stories covering Muslims, but not covering other groups of people? In this chapter, I wanted to research these questions so that I could complete content and media analysis of three news sources and their coverage of the Paris attacks in order to see how Islamophobia could have been perpetuated. I completed the same type of content and media analysis for the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting. By completing content and media analysis, I was able to see how each articles ton, framing and use of trigger words could proliferate Islamophobia.

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When three students were killed in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, mainstream American media barely covered the murders in the news. On February 10, 2015, Deah Shaddy Barakat,

Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha were killed in their condominium complex by their neighbor, Craig Stephen Hicks. The murders were a result of an alleged parking dispute according to those media outlets that did cover the story. There was a lot of outrage from both Muslims and non-Muslims because the news coverage did not ever refer to the crime as a hate crime, despite the fact that all evidence led to suggest that it was in fact a hate crime. People questioned if the headlines focusing on the parking dispute was perhaps a distraction from the real reason behind the murders. Many wondered if the coverage of this tragedy would have spread more quickly and would have been more of an “enticing” news story, one that would have angered more people, had the victims been non-Muslim and the murderer a Muslim.

Already frustrated by the lack of coverage on the tragedy, the families of the victims were extremely bothered and angered by the fact that not once did the media use the term “terrorism” and “terror” to describe the actions of Hicks. This caused many to question if the media is one-sided when it comes to depicting what qualifies as terror and terrorism, but also how the media perpetuates Islamophobia by framing news coverage such that acts of violence committed by Muslims are the only ones labeled as “terror”. It is cases like the murders of the three Muslim victims and the mainstream coverage around them that informed my research interest in the relationship between news media, social media, and Islamophobia.

My research involves content analysis focusing on two major events that took place within the last two years that were covered by the mainstream media in a particular way and that garnered an Islamophobic backlash in their aftermath: the Paris attacks in November of 2015 and the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting that occurred on June 12, 2016. These two events have

been selected to consider how Islamophobia may be perpetuated through the ways in which various media cover events of this nature.

For the content analysis of each event, I selected an article from Fox News, CNN and Al Jazeera. I chose these three news sources to provide an overview of the type of media coverage that many Americans are exposed to and how each covers news stories involving Muslims and Islam. Fox, a traditionally conservative, politically right wing news source, was a source I wanted to use to see how a more conservative news outlet would cover Islam and Muslims. CNN has been known to be the opposite of Fox as it is considered more liberal or left-leaning. Al Jazeera is an independent source that I wanted to use as well to get a look at how Islam and Muslims are discussed. I wanted to look through each article and analyze what trigger words were used and what type of tone the article took as well as what information was being given for each event. I define 'trigger words' as words that causes someone to react in a certain way, incite an emotional response, or influence how a particular topic is viewed. I also included in my content analysis such aspects of news coverage as intended audience, the kinds of voices represented, and whether coverage from these sources changed as new information emerged about each incident.

### **Paris November 2015**

On a quiet Friday evening in Paris, many Parisians were out and about enjoying the start to their weekend. Little did anyone know that that evening of socializing would turn into one of the deadliest days in Paris in recent history. Attacks throughout the city began to occur under an organized group of people, who would later be recognized as members of ISIL-which claimed responsibility for the attacks. From suicide bombers in stadiums to shooters in restaurants and a

concert hall, by the evening's end 130 people were killed. Some began calling the event the "9/11 of Paris."

Turning on the news in the United States, one saw images of ambulances everywhere, police cars racing through streets with sirens, roses in bullet holes, and Parisians coming together to mourn. One of the images I remember was a young Muslim man going to a main square in the city and offering hugs to people because he wanted people to know that Muslims should not all be lumped into the category of terrorist. The only reason I came across it was because a friend had shared the video from AJ+, an online news and current events channel run by Al Jazeera Media Network, on Facebook. The majority of coverage on mainstream American news channels focused on how the attacks were an "act of war" and that those responsible would be hunted down and would face the highest forms of the law. The media's coverage of the attacks could have been mistaken as a desire, or hunger for war, an issue some commentators brought up. In an interview with CNN, Glenn Greenwald stated, "Well, I think that CNN has actually unfortunately led the way in this. You've had one intelligence official with the CIA or formerly with the CIA after the next, gone on air and able to say all kinds of extremely dubious claims that print journalists have repeatedly documented in Bloomberg News and The New Yorker, on the New York Times editorial page [that] are totally false" (O'Connor, "GreenWald Goes After CNN"). What Greenwald is alluding to is how the news coverage of Paris portrayed images of chaos and barbarity, inciting an emotional response in its viewers.

### *CNN*

In the CNN article entitled, "Paris massacre: At least 128 killed in gunfire and blasts, French officials say", trigger words such as "terrorist", "bombs" and "ISIS" are used within the first paragraph of the article. When one of the main organizers of the attack was found to have

escaped Paris, articles were using terms such as “manhunt”, “fugitive” and “terror suspect” to describe the desire to find the person who had spearheaded the crime. Words such as ‘bloodbath’ and ‘carnage’ are used to describe the locations where suicide bombs or gunmen were for the duration of the attack. The tone of the article was somber, with all the descriptors of what happened during the tragedy, but the tone also includes a sense of urgency in locating all those involved in the crime. The sense of urgency also ties into letting the world know how dangerous the terror suspects were and to be on high alert. Usually, when an attack happens, countries take on heightened security measures. This is what comes across in the news article. The intended audience is for the average American to know what occurred in Paris, and to be reminded that this could happen on American soil. What was missing from the story was a Muslim’s voice. Nowhere in the article is a Muslim person interviewed to voice what they thought about the attacks or how they were affected by yet another attack by individuals claiming to be Muslim. This is important to note as two of the victims from the evening were Muslim, Halima and Houda Saadi, among a few others. There is no statement from their families included in the article, leaving only the voices of a French male to sum up to tragedy of the night.

#### *Fox News*

Fox’s news coverage of the Paris attacks was widespread as well. In the article titled, “No Mercy: France’s Hollande responds to Paris attacks that leave at least 129 dead,” the first line has trigger words such as ‘ISIS’, ‘suicide belts’ and ‘terrorists.’ After declaring three days of national mourning, Hollande stated that ISIS was “a terrorist army...a jihadist army, against France, against the values that we defend everywhere in the world, against what we are: A free country that means something to the whole planet” (Fox News World). Analyzing the language Hollande uses, his choice of the word ‘jihad’ which many associate with Islam and view as

violent suggests a prevailing trend in political and media rhetoric. Because jihad is misinterpreted as a call to violence or holy war, often associated with male Muslim identity, it appears that Hollande is stating that Islam itself is waging a war against France. This is problematic because there is a large population of Muslims in France. Because of the large number of French Muslims, the claim that Islam is external to France or antithetical to French/Western values is problematic. The article then goes on to continue using the terms ‘extremist’ to describe the ISIS fighters who perpetrated the attacks. While ISIL might accurately be described as an “extremist” group, many people reading the article might assume that ISIL equates with Islam as a whole rather than understanding it as a fringe segment that many Muslims would see as utterly un-Islamic in their actions and ideology. The article proceeds to outline how the terror unfolded that night, describing witness accounts from individuals who were in the surrounding areas when the attacks occurred. The article appears only to have accounts from male, non-Muslim French voices. The article even includes videos of people who had taken shelter nearby when gunfire rang out. Further down in the article, the writers also include that terror had struck near the same area when “two Islamic radical gunmen stormed the offices of satirical magazine Hebdo, killing 12 and wounding 11” (Fox News World). Again, the terms “Islamic” and “radical” are used together, so if someone were to read this, they would associate radicalism with Islam. This is problematic because it reinforces the idea that radicalism is somehow inherent to Islam, rather than a phenomenon present in all religions or ideologies. More importantly, the statement that Islam is radical is broadly painting *all* Muslims as being violent, insinuating that *all* Muslims interpret their religious beliefs to allow them to engage in violence. With the repeated use of these words together, an image is being painted that makes it appear to fit all Muslims, not just the individuals involved in the attack.

*Al Jazeera*

Al Jazeera covered the Paris attacks on its many different country platforms. The article I analyzed is entitled “French police search for clues after attacks kill more than 120 in Paris”. Immediately, one notices the different words used throughout the article. Instead of using words such as “terrorist” and “ISIS” within the first few lines of the article, we can see how words such as “assailant” and “gunmen” are used. The article actually does not include the words “ISIS” or “terrorist” in the story, but chooses to use words such as “attackers” throughout. The story, just like CNN and Fox News, outlines the events of the tragic evening, but the tone appears to be less certain of who the attackers are and the motives behind the attack. The article does note that eyewitnesses heard some of the attackers shouting “Allahu Akbar” when they began shooting. Like Fox’s coverage, this would most likely make a reader deduce that the attacker was Muslim. Although it is clear that the attackers were Muslim, based on the information provided in the article, this information can easily also imply a fear of anyone who says “Allahu Akbar”. Because this is a common phrase used among Muslims, which translates to “God is great,” using this term to note what the attackers was saying without clarifying the context leads to a simplistic understanding of the phrase’s significance. This is problematic because if anyone walking down the street were to hear this, they might immediately think of that person as violent. We have seen this play out already in America specifically, when Muslims have been on planes and if they say something like “Inshallah”, which means “God willing,” they have been kicked off the plane for causing fear among passengers and even making airplane staff feel unsafe. We can see how a Muslim person using everyday spiritual language can cause people to get upset, feel unsafe, or have fear, because they associate something they have read a terrorist will say during an attack

and they tie this back to any Muslim. This example represents the deep and unfortunate consequences of growing Islamophobia in the U.S. and elsewhere.

### **Orlando Pulse Nightclub**

The deadly shooting at the Pulse nightclub received much coverage for many reasons. The night of the shooting was Latino night. Additionally, the Pulse nightclub was a known club for the LGBTQ community. But another reason, that I have chosen to analyze here, was the fact that the attacker was Muslim. The media picked up on this fact quite quickly as reports were coming in that the attacker had dialed 911 to inform the police about his allegiance to ISIS. I have chosen this domestic event to analyze the widespread coverage it received, not only in considering how Islamophobia may have been perpetuated by the media at this time, but also how it compared to the coverage of an international event such as the Paris attacks discussed above.

#### *CNN*

CNN covered the Orlando shooting in an article entitled, “Orlando shooting: 49 killed, shooter pledged ISIS allegiance.” The details of the shooting are presented early on in the article, stating that the man who committed the crime had “pledged allegiance to ISIS” and had “gunned down” 49 people in the deadliest mass shooting, and the nation’s worst terror attack in the United States since September 11. Prior to the Orlando shooting, the shooting in San Bernardino had been the country’s worst terror attack since 9/11. Again, the use of the terminology, “terror attack” is being used repeatedly. Throughout the article, words are enlarged and bolded reading ‘An act of hate’ and ISIS is mentioned multiple times. Mateen’s family history is also written in to further complicate things because his parents came from Afghanistan. Mateen’s family had told reporters that Mateen had been angered when he saw two men kissing. Instead of simply

writing, “Mateen’s parents said he’d expressed outrage”, the article states, “Mateen’s parents, *who are from Afghanistan*, said he’d expressed outrage.” This immediately triggers the assumption that anyone that originates from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan-is a terror suspect or could possibly commit terrorism, which is often linked to geopolitical intervention by Western nations. Muslim majority countries, such as Afghanistan, Syria, and Pakistan have been labeled as being more likely to produce terrorists because of the influence they may have had from groups linked to terrorism. This is the argument that political figures, such as Donald Trump, use to justify why Syrian refugees should not be allowed to enter the United States. At the very end of the article, the reader is briefly exposed to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) denouncing the crime. The statement from CAIR came for the National Communications Director, Ibrahim Hooper, and was very short, only reading “This is a hate crime, plain and simple. We condemn it in the strongest possible terms.” What the article does not include was how many members of CAIR offices across the country voiced their condemnation against the attack as well as verbalized the American Muslim community standing in solidarity with the LGBTQ community during such a dark time (Ellis et al).

#### *Fox News*

When Fox news U.S. was covering the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting, the main headline read, “49 killed in shooting at Florida nightclub in possible act of Islamic terror”. The use of the words “Islamic terror” in conjunction with each other reassert prevalent assumptions that Islam promotes terrorism. The article begins by talking about how the shooter “pledged allegiance to ISIS” and committed the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history. Further on, the article does mention that it is not clear if Mateen was “directed by the terror group or only inspired by it” (Herridge et al). This is significant because the article is making it known that the

motive was not completely clear at the time the article was published, nor did ISIS even confirm to what extent the group was involved in this crime. The article also mentions that the shooter shouted “Allah Akbar,” again without providing context to the significance of the term in everyday Muslim parlance. Another interesting point that the story covered was that Mateen was a citizen of the United States. I found this interesting because certain politicians, such as Donald Trump, have recently argued that refugees or immigrants entering the United States are the riskiest because they are coming from countries where terrorism is a daily occurrence and they can easily be recruited to the “ideologies” of extremists. The fact that Fox specifically mentions that Mateen was from the United States challenges this claim, although this point is not further articulated in the article.

#### *Al Jazeera*

Al Jazeera, again, was a source I went to see if I could get a different perspective on the coverage that was taking place after the shooting. I immediately came across an article that addressed a point of view that neither of my previous two examples of news coverage did. The article title read, “Florida shooting: Outpouring of love in Orlando.” This was an example of an article that did not criticize all Muslims for the action of one man or insinuate that Islam was inherently a violent religion. You do not see words such as terrorism and radical in the first few lines. Al Jazeera did have coverage of the shooting, but did not cover it as in depth as the other two sources. Most stories were timelines of what occurred during the shooting. Instead, the story focuses on the immense amount of humanity that poured into the Orlando community after the tragedy. In the article, we are exposed to Patty Culhane’s experience as she is covering the story from Orlando. She writes, “I have covered my share of tragedies, but there is something happening here worth noting. There seems to be an absence of hate and of anger that is usually,

understandable, always present. I haven't heard that expressed by anyone that I've talk to and I've talked to a lot of people" (Culhane). Just these few simple sentences bring a different angle to the story to show that even in the face of such tragedy and horror, people can come together and still be kind and supportive of one another. The article is recognizing how communities were coming together in order to show solidarity, rather than implicating an entire community based on the action of one person or calling for revenge. It is articles such as this one that stand out from mainstream narratives in the face of immense sadness.

The Orlando shooting will always remind me of my time with CAIR SFBA, as I was interning there when the attack occurred. The day after, when I walked into the office, I could feel how quiet and still the office was. Everyone was trying to process what had happened and how yet another person claiming to be Muslim was the individual who committed such a horrible tragedy. But with the shock and dismay of what had occurred, there was also work to be done. CAIR Florida, CAIR National and our own office at CAIR SFBA, along with other CAIR offices, gathered together to condemn the crimes committed by Mateen. There was a call to come together in solidarity with the LGBTQ community as well as letting it be known that Muslims stood against any kind of violence.

The experience of working with CAIR SFBA during the Orlando shooting is something I will never forget because I could see just how real Islamophobia was, especially in the days after an attack. A few days after Orlando, our office received a hateful phone voice message from a man who believed that all Muslims should leave America, that Muslims hate women, gay people, and basically everyone that was not Muslim. To hear the message was an out of body experience because it was a direct result of what had occurred in Orlando a few days prior and the ensuing media coverage. I never thought I would have to hear such hate coming from

someone, but it was definitely a learning experience. At that moment, I also was proud to be working with CAIR SFBA because I witnessed the Muslim community not only coming together for itself, but also ensuring support, comfort, and solidarity when reaching out to other communities in need.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the research I have been conducting, I was able to recognize a pattern in the different ways in which American media reported terror events perpetrated by people who claimed to be Muslim as opposed to attacks that either involve Muslim victims or perpetrators who are not Muslim. For example, when a café in Bangladesh got attacked by local militants, there was very little coverage. When a school in Peshawar, Pakistan was massacred on December 16, 2014, there was minimal coverage. When looking at how these stories receive little coverage in American media, it appears that on an international level, unless a Western country is affected by terrorism, the media does not otherwise take note of the attacks.

Another pattern I noticed was how various news outlets covered events differently. Prior to conducting content analysis, I assumed that Fox would be more conservative slanting, CNN more liberal and Al Jazeera more of an independent source. When analyzing each event and how the news outlet covered the story, I noticed that CNN was more similar to Fox's news coverage than it was to Al Jazeera. For example, as mentioned in the above analysis, CNN's coverage of the Paris attacks used similar narratives and words to those of Fox in describing the attack.

These patterns can be problematic for many reasons. The media we are viewing should not just cover what happens on "our soil" or in a country that is our ally. It is also important to acknowledge the events happening around the world and seeing that a common enemy is also perpetrating the same crimes against others. Muslims and non-Muslims alike have recognized

that the majority of people killed and terrorized by groups such as ISIL are Muslims. GlobalResearch has shown that between 82% and 97% of victims of terrorism by ISIL are Muslims (Global Research: Centre for Research on Globalization). This fact is rarely mentioned in news coverage of terrorist attacks in the West. This fact serves to perpetuate an “us versus them” narrative that defines a Western worldview.

When looking over the coverage of the two case studies I have chosen, there are also some apparent differences in how these stories were covered by each news source. Al Jazeera, although it did cover a timeline of the Orlando shooting, offered a different angle on the story by focusing on how communities were coming together in order to offer support the Orlando community, but more importantly, the LGBTQ community. Both CNN and Fox covered the story from an angle that focused in on the shooter’s origins and family background, reinforcing associations between immigrants, certain countries, Islam, and terrorism.

In addition, coverage of the Paris attacks and the Orlando shootings differed markedly from, for example, the coverage of the Charleston church shooting that occurred on June 17, 2015 when Dylann Roof opened fire on a small gathering of people who were engaged in prayer and bible reading. Media coverage of that shooting did not involve trigger words such as ‘massacre’ or ‘terrorist,’ and the shooter was referred to as ‘the accused.’ When Roof was led out of the police office to a waiting patrol car, he was wearing a bullet proof vest and was not handcuffed. I remember seeing the image of Roof walking without cuffs to a waiting patrol car. I remember being puzzled that someone who had just committed such a heinous crime was not cuffed and was even wearing a bullet proof vest. What I also remember was thinking about how a white male could be led to prison in this way, but had he been a man of color, claiming to be a Muslim, the entire scenario would have been completely different. In the case of Roof, there was

no mention of his religious affiliation, something that is always mentioned if the perpetrator is a Muslim (or claiming to be one).

It is an example such as Dylann Roof, and the case studies I have analyzed here, that makes it clear that coverage of Muslims has followed a certain trend in the United States; a way that fits the common narrative that if a Muslim commits an act of violence, it is considered more heinous or may deserve more attention and is linked to the person's religious identity. These types of repetitive patterns in news coverage aid in painting *all* Muslims as evil terrorists, ready to destroy not only the United States, but any Western country with their radical, extremist influence. I, by no means, am stating that the individuals who committed the terror events in Paris and Orlando are not guilty and that they should not be portrayed as the killers they are. What I am arguing, however, is the clear double standards that the American media has in differently portraying Muslim perpetrators versus non-Muslims or white individuals. News outlets need to be held responsible for considering the consequences of their coverage on minority communities such as Muslims living in the United States. As a result of more and more people linking terrorism to all Muslims due to media portrayals, Islamophobia has become rampant and led to a growing number of anti-Muslim hate crimes and sentiment.

## **Chapter 4 Social Media: Changing All the Rules and Reaching More People**

The ways we receive our news, our interactions with one another, and our formulation of opinions have changed quite a bit with the introduction of social media, particularly for the younger generation. More and more people rely on their access to social media to get through many aspects of their life, such as maintaining relationships and keeping in touch with people all over the world. It has become normal for everything to be posted, shared, and discussed on social media and people are willing to have various aspects of their lives available for people to see. One of these aspects that people share is the news they are getting and their opinions on what coverage they are being exposed to. Many individuals in the U.S. get their news from social media outlets, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, and use such platforms to share and discuss issues covered in the news.

One of these issues is Islamophobia and its growth all around the world, particularly in the United States. Scrolling through my newsfeed on Facebook, for example, allows me to gather information on an attack on individuals because of their faith. I am allowed to follow groups such as CAIR National and keep track of information there. I can also choose to follow news outlets that I feel provide a broad range of coverage of both domestic and international events. But how might social media play a role in the perpetuation of Islamophobic sentiment? I wanted to explore this question in my research because I wanted to see if social media has played a role in contributing to the rise of Islamophobia in the United States, and if so, how.

In this chapter, I consider whether the use of hashtags and the Facebook profile filters have played a direct or indirect role in spreading Islamophobic sentiments. I analyze how the use of Facebook profile filters for specific countries or commemorating specific events, along with the negative use of hashtags can proliferate Islamophobia. I think both examples are important to

how social media functions, and I believe that their use contributes to Islamophobia, but can also influence a different reaction to Islamophobia: fighting against it.

## **Hashtags**

You see them everywhere: hashtags. Whether you add them to a status or a picture, hashtags have become an effective way to get people involved in a movement or keep them informed on an event or protest. A hashtag is a word or phrase followed by the pound sign that is used on social media to identify messages on specific topics. Hashtags have been an important method for people to track Islamophobia, as well as perpetuate Islamophobia, and tweeting and the use of hashtags has greatly increased over the last few years. So why have hashtags become so popular? Why does the success of a hashtag foreshadow the success of a movement?

According to MediaPost, “The hashtag serves a dual purpose for the millennial generation, which has grown up with constant connection to technology. Whether it’s to track a post, or to play into a larger international conversation, the hashtag serves as a utility to aggregate millions of user posts. But for millennials, the hashtag has become a cultural phenomenon...” (Urban).

As a cultural phenomenon, hashtags reflect popular sentiment and meta-commentary on social issues. For my research, I tracked hashtags that were used to negatively describe Islam and Muslims, fueling the fire of Islamophobia on social media platforms. For example, hashtags such as #StopIslam, #AntiMuslim and #KillAllMuslims have been largely trending due to the rise of political rhetoric targeted against Muslims. Republican presidential hopeful, Donald Trump, has made numerous comments about Muslims and Islam that have spiked the use of hashtags. After Trump’s call to deport all Muslims following the San Bernardino shootings in December 2015, the hashtag #DeportAllMuslims saw an increase with Twitter users. Political figures such as Donald Trump have made xenophobic sentiment acceptable, open and even rewarded in

American society, and as a result the use of social media hashtags have allowed prejudices to circulate frequently and openly.

These hashtags also start spiking in popularity when a terrorist attack occurs and the perpetrator is known to be Muslim. After the Orlando shooting occurred in June of 2016, the hashtag #NoMoreRefugees started trending because Trump made a comment that refugees from Syria were like a Trojan horse if they were to be let into the United States (Bailey). This occurred despite the fact that commentators noted that the Orlando shooter was born and raised in the United States, and had not migrated to the country.

Even though hashtags have been used to negatively depict Islam and Muslims, there has also been a different use for hashtags. Between Muslims and non-Muslims alike, hashtags have become a powerful way to counter Islamophobia and get more people to talk about the importance of double standards and fear that contribute to Islamophobia. Just this year, events involving Muslims have garnered even more attention as a result of hashtags. When an imam and his assistant were shot dead in Queens, New York, many Muslims became fearful that they would be harmed going to religious spaces. As a result, the hashtag #IllWalkWithYou emerged. This hashtag was meant to allow people to support the Muslim community and walk with them to keep them safe. When a French politician asked for Muslims to adopt “discretion” when in public, the hashtag #DiscreetMuslim was born. Many compared the call to be “discreet” to Nazi-era policies. During the Nazi era, Jews had to remain in their own communities and they were victimized because of their faith. When a man claiming to be Muslim and yelling “This is for Syria” wielded a knife in a London tube station, one onlooker shouted, “You ain’t no Muslim bruv!” This led to the hashtag, #YouAintNoMuslimBruv as people were wanting to make the point that Muslims do not want violence and that they stand against it in any form.

Following up on the content media analysis of the Paris November 2015 attacks, many Muslims used the hashtag #NotInMyName to respond to the Islamophobic backlash that occurred. Twitter even posted an article under their Social Action page for this hashtag because it was being used by so many people on the site. Twitter acknowledged that Muslims were facing “higher-than-average levels of criticism and hatred” and that by using #NotInMyName, Muslims were speaking out against terrorism and defending Islam (Twitter, Social Action).

In addition, a study conducted by researchers at the University of Washington Information School and the Qatar Computing Research Institute reported that seven hours after the attacks in Paris, about 900,000 tweets related to Islam and Muslims were posted. Out of these tweets, the researchers found that the majority of tweets were positive towards Muslims and Islam. These tweets were defending Muslims and disassociating them from the attacks. This is quite powerful since the Paris attacks were seen as especially heinous and deadly and mainstream media’s depictions of the events served to perpetuate stereotypes relating Islam to terrorism. Thus, the statistics on Twitter demonstrate how social media can serve as an alternative space to respond to how the media covers terrorist attacks and allows tweeting to be used as a positive force against the spread of Islamophobia (Kelley).

Through the abovementioned examples, we can see that Muslims particularly like to use hashtags as a way to cope with the events going on around the world. Instead of just using condemnation as a way to react to violence that occurs throughout the world by individuals claiming to be Muslims, Muslims use hashtags to also speak out and use their voice for other purposes, such as standing up for their religion and taking away the power that groups such as ISIL have to depict what they want through acts of terror. The use of hashtags has increased circulation of what Muslims are saying and how they are responding to Islamophobia, and this is

increasing the visibility and networking that can occur because of the efforts to show not only solidarity with victims, but also solidarity with Muslims combatting Islamophobic backlash. It is interesting to see how hashtags become part of the voice for Muslims who want to speak out about what they see going on in the world, but how this might also play into the Islamophobia that persists. Because Islamophobic rhetoric is especially on the rise within Western political discourse in the last few years, Muslims react in a way that will get a response from people. But are hashtags really the answer to the Muslim community needs whenever a terrorist attack occurs? From what has been shown in the research conducted for this thesis, it appears that for now, this is the best way for Muslims to even be heard.

The powerful thing about hashtags is also how non-Muslims use them as a way to stand in solidarity with Muslims who they know will face backlash because of terrorism. Using hashtags have also allowed for humor to come forth during difficult times. The hashtag #DiscreetMuslim was a humorous way to react to something that is unconstitutional. For example, French Muslim tweeted, “Don’t say, ‘I don’t eat non-halal meat’. Say, ‘I’m a vegan’ while another tweeted “Why do you disappear five times a day? To eat my fruits and vegetables quietly”. Similarly, the hashtag #MuslimApologies provided social commentary on how farcical it is to implicate over a billion people that belong to a single religion for the acts of a few individuals who decide to make their interpretation of religion a violent one. As the Huffington Post notes, the use of hashtags as a “pushback approach promotes the complexity, diversity and positive contributions of Islam and Muslims” while the use of hashtags also “offer sarcasm in service of the same message” (Grossman).

### **Facebook Profile Picture Filters**

Facebook reaches billions of people all over the world. It is an easy and popular social media site that is widely used because it gives people the ability to share pretty much anything: how you are feeling, where you are, pictures, as well as news stories. Throughout the years, Facebook has made changes to make users profile pages more personal and it has become easier to share exactly what you are feeling or thinking so that your friends and followers can be in tune with your life. One of these personalization's is the profile picture filter. I first noticed the new addition when I was offered the chance to add a filter to my profile picture in support of the Golden State Warriors heading to the NBA championship. What I would never have guessed was that Facebook would also start using national flags to represent countries that suffered tragedies from terrorist attacks that is, a Western country that suffered a terrorist attack.

Facebook has been caught in controversy due to the limited options of national flag filters that have been offered to users after an attack. For example, when Paris was attacked in November of 2015, Facebook offered users a chance to edit their profile picture to have a filter of the French flag in order to show solidarity and mourn with France and its people. The same thing occurred when Brussels was attacked. Tom Galle, Moises Sanabria, and Slava Balasnov, a group of digital design artists, decided to create an app called All Flags, which gives you a wider array of choices for a patriotic overlay, stating, "We felt that Facebook's tool to express emotions [or] condolences to France by blending the French flag felt problematic on a few levels" (Molly McHugh, "Facebook's Tragedy Features and Outrage They Inspired"). They offer it to people at their most vulnerable and thus receptive moment, making every French flag profile photo a mini-ad for Facebook as a company. Over 20 countries are hit by ISIS on a regular basis, and none of them were given representation by Facebook flag filters in order for people to express their emotions or condolences, or to notify that they were safe. If they are as 'good' as

they claim to be, then why did they forget all the other countries hit by ISIS?” (Molly McHugh, Facebook’s Tragedy Features and Outrage They Inspired). The article goes on to explain that the action that people take to change the filter on their profile is a human reaction. However, Facebook has delved into dangerous waters. McHugh writes that there are many events that could catch Facebook’s attention, but they do not, such as school shootings and hurricanes. Because Facebook has not made a point to respond to all kinds of tragedies, it positions itself in a biased way, potentially alienating some users. In responding to some tragedies and not others, “Facebook has put itself in the business of ranking human suffering, and that’s a fraught business to be in” (Molly McHugh, Facebook’s Tragedy Features and Outrage They Inspired). McHugh argues that although Facebook’s brand is to rank how much something matters over another, it is disturbing to rank tragedies and death on the same type of scale by offering solidarity to a few, but not all.

The use of such filters on Facebook is problematic and perpetuates Islamophobia because Facebook is deciding which tragedies deserve the most attention and where grief should be placed. When Muslim majority countries are attacked by ISIL, or the majority of victims are Muslim, there is no solidarity shown with filters of flags. As of yet, Facebook has not released a filter with the Syrian flag, even though that civil war has been ongoing for the last five years. Many Facebook users have spoken out against this “favoritism” because they can see how problematic it is when only certain countries are allowed to have profile picture filters. People have noticed that if the perpetrator of an attack is Muslim, there is more of a response to that attack than if the perpetrator was not Muslim. This follows up on how mainstream media reports, and how these reports are circulated on social media, and how these reports focus more on attacks perpetrated by Muslims. This echoes the use of hashtags such as #PrayForParis. Because

of this clear bias towards allowing solidarity for certain countries, or people, versus others, some Facebook users have decided not to update their profile picture with a filter.

One of my research interviewees, Adnan, mentioned the Turkey Attaturk Airport bombing as an example of how when news coverage is not covered in the mainstream media, it finds its way onto social media platforms as a form of protest. He used the example of an image of many media people standing under a French flag, but only two or three standing under the Turkish flag. Adnan mentioned that it is images like that that make him more aware of just how solidarity and sympathy are unevenly distributed depending on where a tragedy is located and who is affected by it.

## **Conclusion**

As we can see, the use of social media can be a positive outlet for Muslims, but it can also be used to perpetuate Islamophobia. Hashtags, although an important resource that Muslims use in order to combat Islamophobia, are also used for the opposite effect. Through my research, I have demonstrated how hashtags are an important way for Muslims to recognize their power and fight back against the pressures of Islamophobia, either through challenging prevailing stereotypes perpetuated by the media or using humor and sarcasm as a way to cope with xenophobia. Furthermore, my research demonstrates how the use of Facebook filters is problematic because of how they categorize tragedy and sympathy. Through the examples I have presented, it is clear that both mainstream media and social media play a problematic role in dictating who deserves sympathy, and who does not, promoting Islamophobia by leaving Muslim nations and victims outside the scope of solidarity. The example of the French flag filter after the Paris 2015 attacks show that more people are recognizing the inequality that tragedies are given, and because of this, there is hope that Facebook makes more of an effort to include other

countries that are suffering from terrorism, inequality, and injustice just like Paris did in November 2015.

## Chapter 5 Personal Narratives Chapter

The main purpose of my research was to understand Islamophobia and how it affects people's perceptions and lives. I know that my life has been affected greatly by the Islamophobia I have experienced and I know that because of what I have experienced, I am more aware of the news media that I am exposed to and how it can serve to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, my mother did not want my sister and I to tell people we were Muslim because she feared for our safety. At the time, I did not understand her concern. When presenting a family tree project for one of my classes, I proudly stated that my maternal grandfather's name was Muhammad Husain. From the back of the classroom, a classmate shouted, "Oh, your grandfather is Saddam Hussein!" I was horrified. Not only was this classmate comparing my grandfather to a cruel dictator, but he had no problem voicing what he associated with the name 'Husain'. As a young child, I was traumatized that just by a "Muslim-sounding" name, another person could target someone with such hate and disdain.

In this chapter, I wanted to ask people what they thought about Islamophobia, and how they perceived and interpreted the ways in which social media and news coverage perpetuated Islamophobic sentiment. This chapter provides an in depth look at how my interviewees are affected by the Islamophobia they encountered, particularly after major terrorist attacks. In my interviews and surveys, I was told that Islamophobia affects many different aspects of people's lives, in the sense that they felt they were constantly having to defend themselves, their community and their religion. It is clear that the news media and the social media that Muslims in America are exposed to has an affect on how they receive and react to mediated rhetoric and how it effects their lives.

The interviews revealed four major themes which I will discuss in this chapter. The first is that news coverage skews perceptions of Islam and Muslims. The second was the belief that the incorporation of Muslim voices and perspectives in mainstream American news is crucial. The third theme illustrates how Islamophobia has affected people's lives and the last theme explores how social media plays a role in perpetuating Islamophobia. One of the most poignant points that emerged from my interviews was a deep concern that millions of Americans consume news that perpetuate Islamophobia without ever being exposed to alternative approaches or the perspectives of Muslims.

### **News Coverage: Skewing Perceptions of Islam and Muslims in America**

The rise of Islamophobia through media discourse seems to be based on certain trends and default connotations between Islam and violence. For example, when Reza Aslan was interviewed by CNN, the CNN commentator asked questions such as "Does Islam promote violence?" and "Does Islam mistreat women?" Although Aslan did his best to explain that individuals bring violence to any religion if that is how they think of their religion, the commentator continued to ask leading questions that presented Islam as a religion that promotes violence.

Misunderstanding and a lack of knowledge regarding Islam and Muslims in news coverage seems to be a contributor to the rise of Islamophobia. After speaking with my interviewees, it became clear to me that they were aware of patterns that major news outlets tend to follow as far as the types of questions they ask scholars, such as Reza Aslan. The interviewees also were aware of the notion people have of Islam and Muslims based on the coverage they are exposed to, such as the misconception that Islam is a religion of violence and that all Muslims believe in the violence being used by some individuals claiming to be followers of Islam. My

interviewees understood how this type of coverage can confuse people and subsequently lead them into thinking what they are watching on the news is true. However, they also acknowledged how more can and should be done in order to prevent these incorrect notions of Muslims and Islam, something I explore later on in this chapter.

Adnan, an eighteen-year-old student who attends the University at California, Davis, and who has grown up in a large Muslim community in Santa Clara, stated, “It angers, saddens, and frustrates me all in one. It angers me, because like any person, I am angered when someone attacks beliefs and traditions that I love and have strong faith in and want to devote my life to guarding” (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016). He went on to mention how frustrating it gets when even condemnation of terror attacks are not enough to “prove” to people that all Muslims are not violent or that ISIL does not represent Islam. Adnan stated, “It saddens me because I know so much of this ridicule is fueled by ignorance and misunderstanding, and it makes me sad that so many people will hate and learn to hate based on wrongful, erroneous views of such a beautiful faith. It frustrates me because I know such ridicule simply fans the flames for further Islamophobic incidents and that means those who do so are often complicit and instigators of potential violence” (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016). Using violence as an example, Adnan notes that Islam has been made out to be a violent religion, and he finds it frustrating that people will go so far as to say that mosques encourage Muslims to engage in violence, when instead, mosques are used as community gathering locations that encourage the opportunity to be more involved in practicing faith. He also notes how biased media coverage is partly responsible for hate crimes against Muslims or people who are perceived as Muslim

When asked how he would describe Islamophobia, Adnan defined it as, “the constant atmosphere of fear and ignorance surrounding the religion of Islam and its practitioners. To me,

Islamophobia is an atmosphere that has both been actively and passively built up over centuries, supported by Orientalist thought and neo-colonialist attitudes that help shape the way Islam is thought of in Western countries today (made worse by violent extremist Islamic groups)” (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016). In explaining his point, Adnan cites Edward Said, the scholar who is known as the father of Middle Eastern studies and whose main area of interest, Orientalism, can be used to understand how Islamophobia has become so prominent today. Orientalism is a concept which explains how the Western world perceived the Middle East. We can see that with Orientalism, there was an inherent separation of East and West with the East being seen as the other. This same thinking pertains to how Islamophobia is being used to make Muslims appear as the “other,” separating Muslims from others in the country as un-American because there are individuals attempting to use the religion to justify their acts of violence.

I wanted to know how Adnan would interpret this statement: Islamophobia is perpetrated or encouraged by the mainstream American media. Adnan responded,

“To a certain extent, yes. This is both for the above reason (using the existence of Islamophobia simply as a political tool rather than a broader moral or societal lesson), and also because of the utter lack of complexity and understanding when talking about Islam. Again, the lack of basic competency in the media in understanding the rules and philosophies of Islam often cause a terribly simplistic picture of the religion to be established and then relentlessly perpetuated as if the truth” (Adnan interview, July 30, 2016).

Ultimately, Adnan believes that the core basis of largescale Islamophobia has to do with the combination of the recycling of a “few empty soundbites” within political and media rhetoric coupled with active ignorance on the part of the general population.

When asked what he thought of the American media’s portrayal of current events, Adnan answered, “The media is riddled with biases, both on the individual level and an institutional one. Individual levels may often be personal biases that cover both how reporters may report a

certain situation and, perhaps even more importantly, which situations they *choose* to report (and thus which ones they choose to ignore and not cover)” (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016). Adnan continued by stating that “At an institutional level, the media often takes a certain globalist, Eurocentric bias and perspective that colors the way topics are covered. There is often a hostility to religion, a tendency towards establishment, etc.-a combination of both common ideologies shared by among those who end up in the media industry *and* a lack of proper representation from traditional communities.” Adnan said that as a result of personal and institutional biases in mainstream media, he had little trust in traditional media sources, even ones he actively subscribed to in the hopes of getting a more “balanced” perspective.

I then followed up by asking Adnan what he meant by “fair and unbiased”. He responded by saying the he felt that Islam and Muslims were always being “spoken for” rather than having their perspective represented in the news. He recognized that although there is not a singular “Muslim perspective,” that there could at least be more representation of what Muslims have to say. Adnan believes that including Muslim voices can help provide a better understanding of Islam and Muslims when it comes to balancing news coverage that might come off as biased and unfair. Many Muslims, along with Adnan, feel that Islam and Muslims are only talked about in mainstream media in relation to violent acts of terror, and thus, the association between the religion and violence is persistently reiterated.

### **“More Should be Done to Paint an Accurate Portrayal of Muslims” & the Muslim Voice Should Be Used**

I asked Adnan if he followed coverage of hate crimes or racist incidents against Muslims on the news and he replied, “To a certain extent, yes. I think it’s important to know what’s going around you and your community. I’ve come across multiple reports of masjid vandalism, egging,

riots, assaults, hate calls, anti-Islam rallies, taunting, bullying reports, and other sad, unsavory reports that prove the thick layer of Islamophobia pervading the world” (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016).

Sameena, a middle-aged woman who works closely with local government officials on legislative issues affecting the Muslim community in California, as well as throughout the United States stated, “No I don’t. I find [the news] it’s definitely more conservative slanting. You can see how the media has been portraying the Black Lives Matter movement in a negative light. And more law-enforcement oriented rather than people-oriented. So I don’t necessarily trust the news and that’s why weeding through a lot of articles and then finding the statistics, I think that’s helpful” (Sameena Interview, July 13, 2016). With this example, it is evident that people see mainstream media as biased in their misrepresentation or negative portrayal of many minorities, not just Muslims. This is important to recognize because the news is where many turn to in order to stay informed on what is happening within the country, as well as globally. If the news is only geared to focusing on certain majorities, entire voices are being left behind and are not being covered to show what struggles and accomplishments they are going through.

Sameena also mentioned that Islamophobia could be perpetuated by the media because news outlets might not want to push back against a narrative that many have come to accept. She stated many are okay with accepting that all Muslims are a problem and having this general fear of Muslims and Islam, stating, “Unfortunately, people use Islam to commit violence and it continues this narrative of being fearful of Muslims and Islam. It doesn’t help that people, such as elected officials, people we should look up to, perpetuate these ideas and it becomes difficult for the media to push back” (Sameena Interview, July 13, 2016).

Sameena also reflected that since there have been so many terrorist attacks committed by individuals claiming to be Muslim, and people in the government who often use terms that associate Islam with violence when talking about these attacks, the general public is more inclined to believe this conflation, even though Islam really has nothing to do with an attack. The last thing Sameena noted is her belief that the media perpetuates Islamophobia because media corporations see Islamophobia as a money maker that brings in high numbers of viewers. She said that most news outlets do not want to cover stories that involve Muslims that are “nice and fine and dandy” because you would not get as much viewership compared to a news story that talks about ISIL and terrorism. Media corporations have gained more viewership when talking about terrorism and ISIL because this continues the “us vs. them” narrative, showing how strong the United States is and using the fear elicited by this narrative to justify various policies domestically and abroad.

In the book, *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith*, many Muslim voices are brought forth in order to dispel the misinformation that has become common “knowledge” among Americans. Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid, who is on the board of advisors for the Islamic Studies and Research Association (ISRA) states:

“We have seen how dangerous longstanding resentments, cultural biases, and prejudice can be-how they may be usurped by opportunists and power-hungry egotists who grasp a bit of the truth, then culture it in the petri dish of discontent into a toxic weapon of mass destruction. So deadly is the weapon they devise that it destroys both its intended target and those that create or employ it” (Wolfe, 46).

What Rashid is stating is that the more misinformation or ignorance that is spread about Islam and Muslims, the more people will flock to that type of thinking because they might believe that it is actually true. If this is the case, more people are falling prey to these ideologies. In doing so, they are contributing to the downfall of the targeted group, in this case, Muslims,

because their defenses will only hold for so long. I think this ties into my interviewees' statements that after some time, condemnation does not seem to work for people after a terror attack, so what other options do they have? A possible solution to this would be to include more Muslim voices in the media.

It is common for Muslims to feel that they are portrayed negatively because people tend to know and believe what they see in mainstream media without further researching such portrayals. Adnan stated he believed Islamophobia is perpetuated by the media and that there were "many reasons" as to why. When asked to go into more detail as to the reasons why Islamophobia is perpetuated, Adnan stated, "One would be a sheer lack of competency and knowledge about the religion, which itself comes from strong biases and rampant misunderstanding and misinformation. Another is the political and financial benefit media outlets get from bashing Islam-an easy scapegoat that often wins millions of viewers. Yet another could be the constant need in the media for quick soundbites (especially in an ever-rapid media, where stories are written minutes after events) that discourage thoughtfulness and disincentives complex coverage" (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016). Ali Minai, a Pakistani born professor at the University of Cincinnati, states, "Those who lament the fact that Islam today wears the face of militancy in the eyes of the world should keep this in mind: When those who are moderate do not speak as loudly as the militants, the militants speak for them too. The only way to reclaim the enlightened aspect of Islam is to pursue it aggressively. Call it extremism in the pursuit of moderation. And that is no voice" (Wolfe, 10).

When it comes to condemning the actions of groups such as ISIL and Al Qaeda, Muslims have to react the world over to keep reiterating the fact that they are not to be associated with a violent group and that these groups are not representative of Islam. When asked how one could

raise public awareness about the origins of ISIL and make people understand that ISIL is not a representative of Muslims, Zahra, a 30-year-old woman who works with the Muslim community throughout the Bay Area, responded, “I think the united condemnations are an important part of that, right? And so raising awareness of that [...] part of what’s so concerning about the phenomenon of ISIS is this singular and narrow focus on their violence as opposed to all violence and how all violence plays into that” (Zahra Interview, July 13, 2016). I asked Zahra to clarify what she meant by a singular focus on ISIL’s violence as opposed to all violence. Zahra explained that people choose to focus on the violence that is being committed by ISIL, but that no one is discussing how our own country’s military causes violence as well. She noted that she believes that ISIL is a direct response to the United States’ violence in the Middle East. Zahra continued by stating, “And so for me a huge issue with the ISIS situation is that people are reactive and um, I think emotional and can’t understand that all violence is bad. And that violence is not the response to violence. Unfortunately we’re in an era where we push back against ISIS with sound bites. And simply saying that I condemn ISIS may satisfy an anti-Muslim person today but doesn’t actually solve anything” (Zahra Interview, July 13, 2016). Zahra clarified that when she says people are emotional and reactive, that she thinks people have been conditioned to react to acts of violence by ISIL, but they do not react as strongly if they hear about violence committed by our own country, using police officers and Guantanamo as examples. Zahra offered advice on how to possibly solve the problem of not just using condemnation, but also having people engage with the Muslim community. She stated that there is a lot you can learn by simply engaging with a community you might see as different, but is, in fact, more similar than you would think.

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was people's belief that it is important to make use of "authentic" Muslim voices in the media and to provide alternative perspectives on media coverage of events. Adnan said, "Use the Muslim community. Understand their tradition and their ideals. Devote some time to actually studying the religion (at the very least, its basic tenets and history) and some common terms. Encourage Muslim voices to speak out and up-not just Muslim voices or individuals you may already agree with in terms of biases and ways they see the world, but the traditional, religious Muslim voice as well; something that may be more comfortable for you to hear, but equally if not much more important" (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016). Adnan also noted media can prevent perpetuating Islamophobia through the news coverage by being "self-critical in their use of language and the fair treatment of crimes committed by and against different people. To include authentic Muslim voices in their decision-making conversations as well as their coverage" (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016). Sameena had suggestions on how to include more of a Muslim voice by stating, "Have a diverse group of people who you can come to for quotes rather than people who are Islamophobes. Like Steve Emerson should not be getting a spot on TV. Like he should not be interviewed. Steve Emerson or Robert Spencer or any of those Islamophobes should not be getting any air time because they have been proven to be liars and not trustworthy. So find the right sources, you know, get the research to get the information straight and talk to average people rather than just making assumptions" (Sameena Interview, July 13, 2016).

### **How Islamophobia Has Affected People's Lives**

In completing my research, I wanted to know how Islamophobia has affected people's lives as I knew this would be an important contribution to the research findings. I know that in my own life, Islamophobia has greatly impacted how I choose to practice my religion while

educating others who might not be familiar with it or who might have a limited outlook on Islam or Muslims.

When speaking with Adnan, he stated Islamophobia has pushed him to be more religious and be more involved in the Muslim communities he is a part of, both at home in Santa Clara and with the Muslim Student Association at the University of California, Davis. Adnan reflects:

“I was pretty little when 9/11 happened, but even though I was just a child, it has definitely impacted my life because I think that really was when Islamophobia became almost a norm for the country and I had to grow up with that. I credit my parents for allowing me to embrace Islam in my own way, which really entailed me asking about prayer, wanting to read the Quran, and other things. But I also feel like the more I have gotten older, and I am more aware of what is going on in terms of how Islam is being portrayed, I myself am wanting to do more to educate people on the true meanings of the religion and just let people know that not all Muslims are terrorists” (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016).

Adnan spends a lot of time working with and promoting events and conferences that the Muslim Student Association puts on, not just at UC Davis, but around the Bay Area. When asked why he feels the need to be involved, Adnan stated, “I think we as a Muslim community must respond using the Prophetic model-empathy, patience, beautiful characters, and strong resistance. We must sympathize with the ignorance of people, be patient with their attacks, respond to mudslinging and hateful insults with that which is better so that we are not shaken in our faith or beliefs” (Adnan Interview, July 30, 2016).

When asked how Zahra has been affected by Islamophobia, she noted that it has definitely become a large part of her advocacy efforts when she works with many different Muslim communities throughout the Bay Area. Zahra reflected, “Every day, I deal with Islamophobia. It is not just work to me and it does not just affect me. It is something that is deeply affecting our communities and this country. I worry that this election cycle has helped to normalize and make socially acceptable, public, anti-Muslim sentiment. I believe that in order to

combat what we are seeing right now, we can challenge this hateful rhetoric and come together in order to work against Islamophobia and those who would like to continue the negativity and hate that it spreads” (Zahra Interview, July 13, 2016).

Sameena noted that she is more aware of Islamophobia because she has two children and she is worried about how it will affect them, as they are still young. She states, “I worry that they are going to be targeted for being Muslim. Whether it’s their names or the color of their skin, or if my daughter decides to wear the hijab when she is older, I am concerned that my children will not be able to be proud of their faith, that it is something they will have to hide, when in fact, it is something I want them to be proud of and something I want them to fight for” (Sameena Interview, July 13, 2106). When asked what she believes can be done in order to combat this fear that Muslim parents have of Islamophobia tainting their children to be fearful associating with their faith, Sameena stated, “Education and leading by example. I think what needs to be focused on right now is switching the narrative and informing people about the true tenants of Islam and focusing on how Islam should not be seen as this horrible thing. We, as Muslims, need to actively work on changing how things are portrayed by some who do not truly understand Islam and our communities. By leading by example, as a parent, I need to let my children know they have nothing to be ashamed of when it comes to who they are, because being Muslim is part of what makes them who they are” (Sameena Interview, July 13, 2016).

It is clear that no matter how old you are or what background or walks of life you come from, Islamophobia has impacted people in many different ways. I think the most important lesson to take away from this portion of my interviews is to never forget that there is a need to combat Islamophobia and that doing so will help future generations continue this work.

## **Social Media**

Accessing news coverage through social media was something that all of my interviewees said they did in order to gather news coverage, especially on topics they were interested in. My interviewees all agreed that when it comes to Islamophobia, you can get a lot of information on social media through connecting with friends with common interests as well as ‘liking’ and ‘following’ people, news outlets, and organizations that also report on Islamophobia. Zahra mentioned, “I think social media outlets are important because they help consolidate other outlets into an easier and more user friendly space” (Zahra Interview, July 13, 2016). Adnan shared that as a college student, he spends a lot of time online and he prefers the accessibility of using his phone or laptop to look up news. Time also plays a large part in why he chooses online news outlets and social media to gather his news. When asked which social media platform he prefers to access news, Adnan responded that Facebook was his choice. He noted that he likes to scroll through what his friends are posting or sharing, as well as see what is trending. By using the trending section as a tool, Adnan is able to follow stories he has a keen interest in. Zahra also commented on how she prefers to use social media in order to get her news. As it is part of her job to follow stories on Islamophobia, Zahra also noted that she comes across social media postings of people who have experienced Islamophobia in some sort of personal way (such as their hijab being pulled off or being egged). Zahra also noted she is more aware of hateful rhetoric that exists from elected officials, media personalities and other famous people because if they say something negative about Muslims or Islam or both, more times than not, it finds its way onto social media platforms. From there, Zahra shares these stories to make more people aware of what is being said because as she notes, “The media is not going to critique itself. I think that’s part of the organizing that has to happen in the Muslim community because we

cannot just complain about the media, we have to hold them accountable. The media is not going to produce stories about the problems with the media” (Zahra Interview, July 30, 2016)

Sameena also agreed that a lot of her exposure to news comes from social media and that she sees it as a good way to get a lot of different perspectives and coverage, but also find articles or stories that appeal to her interests. For example, Sameena uses Facebook to keep up with what her friends are sharing because she feels they have similar interests. Using Facebook helps her “weed out” articles and coverage that might not appeal to what she is more interested in following, such as news on Islamophobia and the current political climate. As we know, Facebook and other social media apps use algorithms to filter information onto people’s newsfeeds based on what you have liked and shared. While this can be seen as a good thing, it can also be dangerous because you only are exposed to points of view you agree with. This might serve to reassert Islamophobia because an individual who does not pay attention to non-mainstream news regarding Islam will not be as in tune with stories involving Muslim perspectives because the algorithm will filter them out.

## **Conclusion**

With the interviews I was able to conduct, I gained personal perspectives on just how impactful Islamophobia is in American media and the social media that we have access to. I think it goes to show that even Muslims who do not directly experience Islamophobia in their workplaces or personal lives remain very well aware of how the news media perpetuates Islamophobia and how this can have an impact on their lives. With my interviews, I think I was able to add a lot of insight to the personal aspect of fighting against Islamophobia and the media that aids in perpetuating it.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

The rise of Islamophobia has been steadily increasing since the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>. I do not think even then, as a young child in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, that I could have imagined just how Islamophobia would come to dominate politics and the every-day lives of American Muslims, as well as Muslims around the world. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> signaled the beginning of the rapid spread of Islamophobia in the West. This is because media coverage of 9/11 set the precedent that any person claiming to be Muslim, who had committed a terror attack, would represent the entire religion of Islam. Thus, over a short period of time, Islam came to be seen as inherently violent by the American public.

Islamophobia has also increased due to the political rhetoric we have seen in the United States, as well as the increase and rise of terror groups, such as ISIL, who have claimed that the violence they use is in the name of Islam. The steady rise of terrorist attacks, from Paris in 2015 to Orlando in the summer of 2016, has thus aided in the spread of Islamophobia across the country and the world.

Unfortunately, these recent events have not helped how Americans perceive Islam and Muslims because of what Americans are exposed to through mainstream and social media. As analyzed in the case studies of Paris and the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting, the media tends to cover terrorist acts committed by individuals claiming to be Muslim in a particular and patterned way. This coverage, with its use of trigger words, specific tones, and fear-mongering, enables Islamophobia to persist because viewers tie Islam and Muslims to the violence that has occurred during any given attack.

At the beginning of this research project, I was interested in trying to pinpoint why Islamophobia has become the major industry it has become through news media coverage as well

as social media. What became a really important aspect of the research was the personal stories behind what Islamophobia has done to individuals: how people are constantly combating Islamophobia and how it has also affected their own life experiences. The interviews I was able to conduct added the personal element I wanted in the research because Islamophobia is something that is affecting Muslim Americans, arguably more than ever before in this country. Through the research and the personal narratives, I strongly feel that Islamophobia is shaping people's lives in many different ways, such as how children are being raised as well as how people are trying harder to educate Americans on what Islam is really about.

In reading through the interviews that I did to aid in my research, I could see how both news media and social media were affecting how Muslims were dealing with Islamophobia in their day to day lives and what they would like to see change in how news coverage handles topics surrounding Islam and Muslims, as well as how social media can be used as an effective tool for the Muslim voice if there is not one present in mainstream conversations taking place on various social media platforms. Social media platforms allow for an alternative perspective and a space for different voices to be heard. By using social media, Muslim Americans are able to address what is not being covered in the news and bring to light issues that they feel are important in challenging Islamophobia. Although social media can be an effective tool, it can also perpetuate Islamophobia, as we have seen with the examples of negative hashtags and the use of Facebook profile filters to show support for certain events or groups of people. These interviews, although only from a few people, give a glimpse into how Islamophobia is a very real issue that needs to be taken very seriously in communities, in politics, and government.

So how can we change the way the media covers Islam and Muslims? Gabriel Arana of The Huffington Post wrote an article on five ways that journalists can avoid Islamophobia in

their coverage of events. The five ways in which to do this, Arana writes, are: visit a mosque, be careful whose views you give a platform to, challenge prejudice and debunk outright lie, choose your words carefully, and provide context. Based on the interviews and research I conducted for my thesis, I agree that these suggestions would be helpful to those providing news to Americans, as well as internationally, in a way that does not portray Islam and Muslims in a negative light, based on the actions of a few.

With the anti-Muslim and anti-Islam rhetoric that we have seen in the recent election, there has also been an increase in the number of hate incidents against Muslims and their communities. More mosques have been vandalized than ever before, and more children are facing bullying due to their religion. Islamophobia is a very real threat to the values that the United States holds dearly as a democratic society where people are treated equally and with respect. If Islamophobia is allowed to continue to prosper in this country, many more people will be affected by the negativity and hatefulness that such sentiment breeds. We can already see this happening with the Syrian refugee crisis. Millions of people have become displaced, yet they are not being allowed a second chance simply because they are coming from countries that have been touched by violence from ISIL and other groups. Instead of providing the understanding and humanity that we should be, political figures and commentators are using this as an excuse to discriminate and feed into the “Islamophobic industry.”

The use of social media is also a tool that can be employed in order to promote an understanding of Islam and Muslims, not just a tool to tear it down with dangerous and divisive hashtags such as #StopIslam and #KillAllMuslims. More understanding and dialogue needs to occur on social media platforms so that they can be used to facilitate a better fight against Islamophobia. Another suggestion is that social media platforms need to be more conscious of

how they perpetuate Islamophobia when using Facebook profile filters that only support Western countries that have suffered tragedy via a terrorist attack. There have been many instances where Muslim majority countries have faced tragedy at the hands of terrorism, but Facebook did not enable a profile picture filter as a show of solidarity. As of today, a filter with Syria's flag has not been implemented to show support for the millions of refugees who have suffered many years of violence and tragedy due to the civil war.

With the rise of Islamophobia, we have already seen how Muslims across the United States are banding together in order to combat the rise in Islamophobia. Groups such as CAIR, which I had the privilege of working with, works hands on with Muslim communities to ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge to know how to defend themselves against those who wish to treat them differently based on their faith and even those who belong to government agencies that are seeking to further paint all Muslims as being a group that is most likely to commit acts of terrorism.

As Colin Wolfgang wrote in his blog "Fighting Terrorism Starts with Ending Islamophobia," "All-out war against the Islamic State will not defeat terrorism; nor will the mistreatment of American Muslims. Instead, we must use tolerance, inclusivity and above all, institutional investment in the Middle East to our advantage in slowing recruitment efforts of terrorists and keeping the U.S. safe" (Wolfgang, "Fighting Terrorism Starts with Ending Islamophobia"). Wolfgang further explains why faith and hope in good, not fear of evil, will be what wins the fight against groups such as ISIL and which will allow the United States to move towards a more accepting society, one that does not engage in a smear campaign based on the actions of a few. Although he believes that terrorism will not completely disappear, the U.S. must also make efforts to contribute to a more peaceful society by not allowing erratic political

candidates to run for the presidency, to stop engaging in foreign affairs with the use of violence and focusing on the battles at home such as racism, inequality, etc. This is a difficult path to take, given the current climate the United States is in, however, it is a move that must be done in order to truly fight against terrorism and those who would want to do harm to the entire world by engaging in violence.

It is my hope that more knowledge and understanding can grow out of a time of fear and uncertainty, and that instead of continuing this, Americans can move forward with a better understanding of Islam and Muslims. This fear and uncertainty has garnered support because of the political rhetoric that we have seen coming out of such political figures such as Donald Trump. My hope is that people will be more conscious of the type of speech they are engaging in, and instead, find better ways to disagree, but also to be more open to learning about Islam and why Muslims are devoted to a religion that does not fit the narrative that is being portrayed.

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This thesis was completed before the election of Donald Trump to the most sacred office this country has: President of the United States of America. November 8, 2016 will forever be a day that I will look back on with not only disbelief, but also fear and uncertainty.

I flew to Washington, D.C. the day after the election. I did not know what to expect after such an important day in the nation's capital. During my time in D.C., I was able to explore the history of the United States. From the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture, to the older monuments such as the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, I was able to get a closer look at the heritage of the United States. It was not until I was in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum where I felt an overwhelming amount of sorrow. All around the museum was the call to reflect on what you had seen throughout the

museum and to make the promise to never let something like the Holocaust happen again. When reflecting on the sadness I was feeling, I realized that what occurred during the early years prior to the Holocaust is what is occurring now to Muslims in the United States. When viewing how Jews were made to wear the yellow star as a way to enforce identifying the “other,” my mind raced to Donald Trump’s call to register all Muslims in the United States and to ensure that they carry identification cards. I could not help but worry that our country is headed in the same direction that Muslims will be the “other” that is forced to only stay in their communities, who will be treated so differently from everyone else.

With this realization, I feel that this research needs to be shared and it needs to be advocated for. There is no time to hide in the shadows and cower with fear and uncertainty. It is not just the Muslim community that needs to band together in order to combat Islamophobia. There must be a willingness from both the Muslim community and other minority communities to come together and support one another. An injustice against one is an injustice for all. It is my hope that going forward, Americans will be able to acknowledge that this country is made up of difference, that difference should be celebrated instead of feared, and that no one person or group is superior to another. I hope that this country will be able to bridge the divides that have come as a result of the election, and that all groups of people will be able to move forward together.

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