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Research Abstract

Along with many other non-Muslim individuals on campus at the University of Illinois, I know that I may have misconceptions about Islam. The media and popular culture, and particularly television influence much of my opinions concerning Muslims. Its serialized nature and ready access in the home provide the most regular exposure to portrayals of Islam, removed from its origins and fictionalized to suit a narrative. I would like to explore how other non-Muslim students views on Islam have been influenced by what they see on TV, and how that effects their personal interactions with Muslim students. Do they believe overtly negative representations of Muslims in fictional situations? Do they believe there to be accurate portrayals of Islamic characters? And how does it influence their interpersonal relations with Islamic students?

Non-Muslim Students' Perceptions of Islam, as Influenced by Television

I'm supposed to be in bed. It's 11 pm, on a school night during finals week, senior year of high school. This is not the time to be watching television. But the cable man came today and brought our household the blessing of premium channels, and with them the holy grail of TV: HBO. The screen flickers, the music swells, and I am transported to Oswald State Correctional Facility, otherwise known as the TV series "Oz."¹

"Stay out my business," says an intimidating inmate to a man sitting on a prayer mat, wearing what I now know to be a kufi.

"Is this what you want?" he replies to his aggressor.

¹ Fontana, Tom. "God's Chillin'." *Oz*. HBO. 21 July 1997. Television.

“Huh?”

“Is this really what you want?”

“To bust your ass? Yeah.”

“We Muslims believe in non-violence. We believe in respecting our neighbor,” the man counters.

“Well we don’t.”

“I will give my life for you. Brother,” he beckons a fellow prayer mate, “Hit me. Now I told you to hit me, now hit me. Hit me! Hit me in the face brother. Again! Harder!” The aggressor stares as the man forces his friend to hit him in the face.

“You crazy, you know that?” the previously intimidating man says, finally walking away.

“As-Salamu Alaykum. Peace be unto you,” the kufi wearing man replies.

This is the first time I can personally remember encountering a self-identified Muslim character on television. He was completely different from other Muslims I had seen on the news. Here was an articulate, African-American, English speaking male. Sure he was in prison, but he was finding redemption, and not through Christianity.

Through my interviews with other students, I found that they all had similar moments of realization concerning the depiction of Muslims on TV. “Justine,” “Madeline,” and “Peter” were my three subjects for this project. They were selected on the basis of their television viewing habits – they watch a fair amount every week – as I wanted interviewees who knew the medium and were regular viewers.

Both Madeline and Peter had similar experiences with understanding Islam as it was shown on TV at home. Their family watched similar shows, such as *24* and *Lost*,

which featured a number of characters who were labeled as Muslim. In his viewing experience, Peter says:

“*Lost*, definitely, with Sayid, for sure. He’s a torturer. Of all the things he could have done, he’s in the army, and he’s a torturer. So, of course they made him Arab, and he’s Iraqi or something. *24* has terrorists up the wazzoo. All the terrorists were Arab. (Interviewer: *Arab or Muslim?*) I don’t think they made that distinction, that exact reference. They’re like speaking Arabic, blowing stuff up. I think that’s what your mind first jumps too, cause of all the suicide bombers, and the people who are saying stuff like ‘Allah hu Akbar’ and all that stuff. Those are the people who tend to be Muslim.”²

Peter’s description of Muslim characters on television today is characteristic of the many negative portrayals that seem to depict only one-dimensional characters. The FOX show *24* has fallen under particular criticism for this. The Museum of Television and Radio held a panel discussion in 2007 called “Arab and Muslim Characters in Prime Time TV: The View From Hollywood,” in order to discuss Islam on TV. An executive producer of *24*, Howard Gordon, opened the discussion with the topic of political correctness, addressing the fact that the show has been accused of promoting misogyny and torture, stating, “Political correctness doesn’t enter much into the discussions.”³ Torture as a means of interrogation is often used on *24*, by both the protagonist, Jack Bauer, and the implied enemies, Muslims. Gordon explained that when counter-terrorist agent Bauer tortures someone on the show, the assumptions are that, first, the terrorist has the information, and

²“Perceptions of Islam Through Television.” Personal interview. 1 Apr. 2010.

³ O’Hare, Kate. “TV Museum Looks at Muslim Portrayals.” *Zap2it*. 23 May 2007. Web. 07 Apr. 2010.

second, that torture works. “That’s wish fulfillment.”⁴

Islam and terrorism are linked in *24*. During its eight-season long run, Islamic terrorists are the central antagonists to Jack Bauer in five of those seasons. A particularly gruesome character is Abu Fayed, played by Adoni Maropis. Fayed is a senior leader of an Islamic terrorist group whose goal is to launch suitcase bombs in suburban areas of the United States. Bauer ultimately kills him, strangling him with a hydraulic chain hanging from the ceiling. 11.45 million Americans tuned in to watch his death.

Islamophobic racism is grounded in the fears of social and economic deprivation elicited in the complex relationship of Islam to the West, including the history of the European secretarian wars, the Crusades, and the Inquisition – all integral to the formation of Western capitalism and modernity.⁵ This explains why Jack Bauer is such an appealing and successful character to most American audiences: he literally fights for the audience’s subconscious desire for Western dominance, taking down America’s proposed enemy, Islam.

Television’s conception of what a Muslim looks like is integral to connecting to the audience. The contemporary Muslim in the U.S. is first what Nadine Naber has referred to as the “Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim,” a conflation of Arab American with Muslim, but also significantly South Asian American, and is as evident in so-called terrorist-related arrests in the U.S.: white, Latino, and African Americans.⁶ My interview subjects echoed this system of classification. When asked “What does a Muslim look like?”, Madeline answered:

⁴ O’Hare, Kate.

⁵ Rana, Junaid (2007) “The Story of Islamophobia.” *Souls: A critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 9, 1-14. p. 149

⁶ Rana, p. 159

“If I was going to resort to stereotypes, a Muslim looks like they are of Middle Eastern descent. That’s probably it. Some ladies wear headscarves. All maybe? Probably some. If it’s a man they wear a turban, or sometimes a white dress, linen looking thing. But that’s me resorting to stereotypes.”⁷

It’s interesting that she says the phrase “But that’s me resorting to stereotypes.”

This shows a level of awareness concerning contemporary portrayals of Muslims on TV. People are shown mainly “stereotypical” characters with little to no personal depth. The television show *Lost* has attempted to rectify this pattern with their character Sayid Jarrah, an ex-communications officer in the Iraqi Republican Guard. On his character, interviewee Madeline says:

“Sayid is a good guy, but his background is in torture for the Iraqi military, which is a little bit intimidating, but he can be a real sweetheart. He has a violent background, but it can be subdued if he likes you.”⁸

His “sweetheart” tendencies are brought out mainly by female characters and romantic subplots, though his darker violent side can be summoned at a moment’s notice. These types of alpha male characters are the main representations of Islamic males on television in America. The most notable of these would be Darwyn Al-Sayeed, from Showtime’s *Sleeper Cell*. Debuting in 2005, the show followed the actions of a fictionalized terrorist sleeper cell led by a Muslim extremist in L.A. Al-Sayeed, known as Darwyn al-Hakim by the terrorist cells, is an African-American Muslim FBI agent assigned to infiltrate the sleeper cell. Although the perpetuation of showing Islamic characters as terrorists is less than desirable, the show was commended for showing an American

⁷“Perceptions of Islam Through Television.” Personal interview. 1 Apr. 2010

⁸“Perceptions of Islam Through Television.” Personal interview. 1 Apr. 2010

Muslim with positive intentions and for drawing the distinction between Islamic extremists and peaceful Muslims who are simply living their lives.

The “softer side” of Muslims on television is mainly seen in comedies on network TV, such as *Community*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Chuck*. Of all my interviewees, Justine was the only one who thought there were positive portrayals of Muslims on TV. This is partly because she chooses to watch these more moderate programs. When asked if depictions of Muslims on TV were accurate, she said:

“Favorable, I think they make a point to say things like ‘They’re just people,’ to make them more digestible for everyday America. It’s good to incorporate a minority into something that gets a lot of viewers that sends some sort of message of equality. It’s educational. It integrates them into a show. Television is so dominated by white people. There are like, ‘black comedies’ and maybe George Lopez, but that’s it for minorities. There is no Muslim Tyler Perry. Even having one character shows effort.”⁹

One such character is Abed Nadir, seen on the NBC comedy *Community*. Very little is known about his personal life, but the audience knows his father is from Palestine, and his mother is of Polish descent. In one episode his cousin Abra visits him at college, wearing a full niqab. In another he declines participating in a Christmas celebration, citing the fact that he is Muslim, and he feels it wouldn’t be heartfelt. And in another he gets drunk with a friend, which goes against the non-alcoholic practices of Islam. He is not an idealized Muslim, yet he is not a caricature either. Of this Justine says:

“Most of the characters are very Americanized already, they just happen to be of Muslim descent. They’re just portrayed as Westerners. There isn’t necessarily an underlying religious message. It’s not in the way where it’s like, ‘This is the Jewish

⁹ “Perceptions of Islam Through Television.” Personal interview. 2 Apr. 2010

character, and we're going to talk about Passover,' you know? There's no religious part of it. It's just a factor. It doesn't affect the story lines."

Such a character goes against the macho heroes seen in hour long dramas, replaced instead with a normal teenager, trying to reconcile his college life with his family's faith.

More positive portrayals of Muslims have been found in the UK and Canada. These characters aren't terrorists, they aren't stuck on an island, and they aren't working undercover. These Muslims show a more pedestrian side of life: Everyday Islam. Shows like *White Teeth*, *Skins*, *EastEnders* and *Shameless* portray the day-to-day existence of being in a Muslim family in Britain. These characters pray, work, hang out with friends, and somehow avoid the American cliché of blowing anything up on the way home. Two of these shows, *Eastenders* and *Shameless*, depict gay male Muslim characters on primetime television in a non-exploitative way. Before airing the episode where the character Syed Masood kisses an openly gay white man on the show, the BBC was sure to release a statement saying that they consulted Dr. Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip, associate professor at the school of sociology and social policy at the University of Nottingham, who has led research into the area, and Adnan Ali, head of Al-Fatiha, an international organization for gay Muslims.¹⁰ Although homosexuality is generally considered haraam (forbidden) in Islam, the attempt to explore this facet of Muslims on television is a step in the right direction, and helps to facilitate discussion.

The show that has garnered the most support for its Muslim characters in the Canadian program *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. Created by Canadian Zarka Nawaz, it depicts the lives of a congregation at a rural mosque in the fictional town of Mercy. "It's

¹⁰ McLean, Gareth. "EastEnders: Muslim Character to Have Gay Love Affair." *The Guardian*. Guardian.co.uk, 28 May 2009. Web. 20 Apr. 2010.

not making fun, but using humor to talk about some of the things that are important in Muslim lives,” says Nawaz., adding “It has fictionalized characters that are not terrorists, but rather ones that reflect Muslim participation in the fabric of Canadian life¹¹ People on the show try to make Halloween Halal, worry about the right swimming attire at the local pool, in addition to the everyday concerns like school and work.

So why do so many Americans have negative opinions of Muslims? Interviewee Peter says:

“I think if they were making these shows of Islamic people blowing up things, I don’t think they are gearing it towards Islamic people. I mean, because it’s not accurate. At least we know that like, the KKK is wrong, and we’re willing to learn from our mistakes as Christians, or we realize that those are the radicals, that’s not how people should be treated. First off, these things are probably not being made by people who are aware enough about Islam to depict it accurately, so they wouldn’t be doing an accurate representation of Islam or Islamic people, if that’s who it was directed towards. So I don’t think that would make sense, if they were marketing it towards Islamic people. That’s stupid. They’re doing a bad job. An awful job. I think it’s generally being marketing towards the ignorant white majority that’s not going to question watching something negative.”¹²

Interviewee Madeline had similar opinions:

“I mean, I know better, but still after watching them it’s very easy to make the assumption that all Muslims want to kill you. And that they’re just angry people with a bogus religion since it makes people want to kill themselves. Even though

¹¹ Reddy, Mrinalini. "TV Muslims Get a Much-Needed Makeover." *The Initiative on the Future of Journalism*. Faces of Faith in America, 24 Aug. 2007. Web. 07 Apr. 2010.

¹² “Perceptions of Islam Through Television." Personal interview. 1 Apr. 2010

I'm pretty sure normal everyday Muslims don't do that, with like jihad or whatever. It could just be like any cult where they make them think a certain way, dying for a specific cause that's specified in the religious teachings, but I don't think that's actually portrayed well on TV."¹³

From these interviews it is clear that many non-Muslim students are fully aware of the stigmas that surround Islamic characters on television today. They are conscious of the fact that these portrayals are not fully accurate, and need to be updated for a more contemporary audience, along with their expectations. A religion that has long been thought of as foreign to the United States is now fully ingrained within our society, and has been for many years. It was surprising to me that not one student could name a character who was in the Nation of Islam or the Moorish Science Temple, though there are some. Ultimately these students think Islam should become more domesticated and appreciated in the United States, both on TV and in the real world. The more realistic the depictions, the more accessible the religion, which eventually opens up a dialogue to greater understanding.

¹³ "Perceptions of Islam Through Television." Personal interview. 1 Apr. 2010

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