

Through the Media's Eyes Promoting Mutual Respect for Cultures

Media can "serve to repress as well as to liberate, to unite as well as fragment society, both to promote and to hold back change."

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The power of the media in determining how people see the world and our perception of other cultures is undisputed. Media is powerful because it shapes our attitudes around world events and the many "others" across the globe. For example, when news journalists report on a "clash of civilizations" there is a self-fulfilling prophecy with negative portrayals of certain, different cultures.

While the media are often criticized for producing generalizations (of individuals, ethnic or religious groups, and societies) they can also be a potent force in challenging stereotyped perceptions and acting as a catalyst for new ideas and perspectives. It can stimulate a dialogue within and between cultures that leads to increased tolerance, understanding and empathy.

What is "media"? Simply put, media is any form of mass communication (i.e., any means—journalistic or

entertainment—to reach and influence a large number of people). The original forms of mass communication were print: newspapers, magazines and journals, collectively called publications. Then radio, television and movies were added to the mix, and "medium" (plural: media) was the omnibus term adopted.

Media has more recently been expanded to include the Internet and other digital (including satellite) communication technologies, which has even wider reach and global influence. "Old media" (i.e., legacy media) describes the traditional forms of printed and broadcast communication and "new media" includes a wide range of digital and satellite communication technologies including mobile telephony.

The surge in digital communication technology cannot be overlooked or underestimated, particularly as we consider the power of the media to influence our understanding, tolerance and appreciation for different ethnic, religious and cultural groups because these tools:

- » alter the impact of geographic distance
- » allow for a huge increase in the volume of communication
- » provide increased speed of communication
- » facilitate interactive communication, and
- » enable separate forms of communication to overlap and interconnect.

Given the proliferation (increased accessibility and decreased cost) of various forms of digital communication media in the past two decades, people from dissimilar and even remote parts of the world are in contact as never before. It is felt by many that this “connectivity” has further strengthened the influence of media.

So, the key question is: whether the increased influence of the media has been advantageous in fostering an era of cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding? Information and knowledge (generated by and distributed through various media) is essential to the development of the “global village”. We need to know how media influences the members of the global village to think about other “villagers” on the planet.

Whether the result is positive and constructive or negative and destructive, the media influences the views of people by:

- » attracting and directing public attention
- » being persuasive in matters of opinion and belief
- » influencing behavior
- » structuring definitions of reality
- » conferring status and legitimacy, and
- » informing widely and rapidly

When the media is able to exercise its power as a positive and factual tool—for example educating and enriching citizens in the global village—it can bridge the “awareness gap” between cultures. Through

balanced and objective coverage, as well as thoughtful analysis and debate the media can ensure that a broad diversity of opinions are heard on potentially divisive issues and reduce cross-cultural tensions between people around the world.

At the same time, the media can have the opposite effect—fueling collective biases and negative stereotypes, sensationalizing stories, and deepening divisions between communities. There is a widespread feeling that the media has had a polarizing effect and created a schism between the western and Arab worlds. The impact of seeing demeaning images of one’s culture feeds humiliation, resentment and even rage among Arabs. This is because individuals often derive part of their self-esteem from media images of themselves or people like themselves.

Given that the media is such an important tool in influencing public opinion, what can be done to ensure the media is used as a positive force to encourage mutual respect—for the western world toward the Arab world and for the Arab world towards the western world? Where are there opportunities for Arab youth to get involved as empowered citizens within the global village?

One response has been to prevent media bias (and expose those responsible for it) and to make readers aware of the negative consequences that come from stereotyping and sensationalism. This approach has resulted in the creation of organizations whose mission is the pursuit of objective media treatment of Arab issues, be they political, economic, cultural or social. In the UK, the Council for Arab-British Understanding (CAABU) assists the media in its coverage of the Middle

East and Arab issues by providing credible, up-to-date information as well as commentators and speakers and information officers who can assist journalists in their work.

In the United States, organizations such as the Arab Anti Discrimination Center (ADC) combat defamation and negative stereotyping in print and broadcast journalism by taking a balanced approach to media surveillance: responding to instances of discrimination and conversely, by applauding examples of positive and educational programs about Arabs and Islam. The ADC calls upon the editors of major American publications to maintain consistent standards and ensure that their publications are not a platform for prejudice.

It is not uncommon for grassroots organizations to develop in response to concerns about the media. Notwithstanding the impact of these organizations, the issues take on increased credibility when there is a more research-oriented, academic approach to the discussion. Arab Media & Society is a peer-reviewed journal (produced at the American University in Cairo) and exists as the primary reference for understanding the role of media in shaping Arab societies and the broader Muslim world.

The Centre for Arab and Muslim Media Research (CAMMRO) is an independent international scholarly institution based in London, which brings together experts from various parts of the world to engage and develop strands of research on Arab and Muslim media

and culture. CAMMRO conducts academic research and provides training and consultancy, hosts conferences and sponsors both internships (for students and researchers) and PhD theses annual prizes.

An additional method to stimulate the power of the media as a positive force is to allow sharing, through cross-cultural exchange. Despite vibrant entertainment industry (film and television) in Muslim countries there are tremendous barriers to penetrate a global market, particularly in the west. Not only are there regulatory limits on the exchange of media (e.g., Al Jazeera cannot obtain a broadcast license or channel to air in North America) but the environment is not conducive for donors and organizations to support exchanges. Even press freedom, which is often restricted in the Arab world and is increasingly being affected by consolidation in the western world, impacts the objectivity of media to foster cultural appreciation.

Youth (in Arab nations and beyond), can leverage the power of the media, in particular “new media” to foster positive interaction with other cultures. For example, youth-oriented dialogue and exchange through social networking sites (e.g., My Space, etc.) has grown by millions, who share information, music, and videos to reduce the differences between geography and culture. Youth can also participate in formalize, organized opportunities to promote intercultural exchanges to increase awareness and global consciousness. Schools can provide “media literacy education” so that young people are more

aware of the power of media and take a critical appraisal approach to balance information that is presented to them.

Why is the issue of media item of focus for Young Arab Leaders (YAL) and part of the agenda for the Global Action Forum: Arab and American Dialogue? Examining media and its role in promoting cultural understanding is a tangible example of YAL's commitment to challenge the cultural and social divide with a new model of cooperation focused on building bridges, nurturing connections and cementing partnerships not divisions.

The Global Action Forum will feature a number of invited panelists who will address media and global markets from multiple perspectives, sharing experience and presenting findings, which reinforce the media as both a positive and negative force. The input of panelists will stimulate the participants at the Global Action Forum to identify specific, action-oriented initiatives that foster collaboration with the media sector that will result in bridges being built between cultures.

The initiatives generated through the Global Action Forum in the US (like those from other forums) are based on concrete strategies for inspiring, innovative projects and dialogues which mobilize leaders on both sides for a better, more connected peaceful globe.

A better, more connected peaceful globe can only happen if the media is used in a productive and constructive way; fostering dialogue rather than

confrontation between various groups. Because of its ever-increasing reach, the media is the ideal tool to diminish prejudices and overturn the ignorance that leads to an "us" and "them" perception. Through the media's eyes we can have a highly focused and extremely accurate lens on the world's peoples.

"Youth will facilitate the global shift from print to electronic media. Television has transformed the world into an interconnected tribe, a global village. There's an earthquake and no matter where we live, we all get the message. Today's youth (the future global villager) will bring our tribe even closer together."

Marshall McLuhan,
Canadian Author

Originally broadcast May 18th, 1960

Questions

1. How can educational programs in mass communication, journalism, etc. in the Arab world and in the US best prepare future media leaders to promote mutual respect for each others culture?

2. Few of us could have imagined the prophecy of Marshall McLuhan's views, almost 50 years ago. What will the "global village" look like 50 years in the future and how will new media (and even newer media to come) foster global consciousness raising?

3. If a priority goal for the YAL Global Action Forum: Arab and American Dialogue is to—deepen the understanding of cultural diversity by leveraging media—what concrete recommendations should participants develop?

Additional Reading

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)
<http://www.adc.org>

Marvin Wingfield and Bushra Karaman, "Arab Stereotypes and American Educators", originally published in 1995 in *Social Studies and the Young Learner* and updated following September 11th, 2001.

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR)
<http://www.fair.org>

Arab Media Watch <http://www.arabmediawatch.com>

The James M. Cox Jr. Center for International Mass Communication Training and Research
<http://www.grady.uga.edu/coxcenter/>

Fatima Ageel, "Arab Youth Need Positive Images in Media", published in *Arab News*, June 20th, 2003
<http://www.arabnews.com>

10th Annual Conference Arab Media in the Information Age – The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research. 9 – 11 January, 2005. Abu Dhabi. <http://www.ecssr.ac.ae>

New American Media (The First and Largest Collaboration of Ethnic News Organizations)
<http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/>

Arab-US Association for Communication Educators
(AUSACE) <http://www.gsu.edu/ausace>

Society of Professional Journalists
<http://www.spj.org>

The Council for Arab-British Understanding
<http://www.caabu.org>

Arab Media and Society (formerly TBS journal) <http://www.arabmediasociety.com>

The Centre for Arab and Muslim Media Research
<http://www.cammro.com>

Benjamin Barber, "Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World" (1995): Ballantine Books

Jack G. Sheehan, "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People" (2001): Olive Branch Press