

## In the Eyes of Media: The World as We are Made to Believe It

**N**o single event in contemporary history has drawn as much attention from the world's social institutions and actors as the September 11 attack on New York and Washington. In addition to massive media coverage, various efforts including intergovernmental dialogue, international meetings, public fora, conferences, academic discussions, even annual reports, and fund raising initiatives focused on 9/11.

How were 9/11 and succeeding events framed in the media? What has been deemed right and wrong? Who are framed as the winners and losers? Who are the perceived good guys and bad guys? The media tradition for a good story seems to require a dichotomy. Saddam Hussein is bad; Pervez Musharraf is good. Iraq is bad; Saudi Arabia is good. Israel is an ally; Palestine is not. If you are not anti-terrorist, you are a terrorist. The ominous statement of Bush rings loud "you're for us or against us." There is a clear and present danger in this kind of reportage—it reinforces stereotypes, and breeds intolerance and xenophobia.

Why has this become the dominant practice that defines how media operates? It is because fewer and fewer people today control the information we get, and they are setting the agenda for the rest of the world? Media is now treated as a commodity like any other, in part because of globalisation, though even before globalisation became the order of the day, media had already increasing shed its public-service garb to show its pecuniary, for-profit underbelly. For the multimedia conglomerates, media is just another business. Entertainment, news and current affairs are products to be manufactured as cheaply as possible, and distributed as widely as possible for maximised returns. Responsibility and accountability towards society; diversity, pluralism and tolerance; global interdependence and the realities of

underdevelopment are not important. Creating and highlighting an enemy image has become a consumable that is really peddled, rather than promoting global cooperation to eradicate poverty, fight environmental degradation, and bring about peace and justice for all.

Our initial aim for this issue was to deconstruct the changing images of the "enemy" projected in the media. We solicited contributions from around the world to validate from different contexts whether those that have been tagged as "the enemy" by international media are perceived in the same light at home. For instance, we would have wanted a Chinese media practitioner to write about the image of the Chinese communist during the Cultural Revolution and in present-day China. We would have wanted a Vietnamese journalist to tell us about of the accuracy (or inaccuracy) in the representation of the anti-American Viet Cong. We would have wanted to include a contribution from an Arab journalist on the Arab perception of Saddam Hussein. However, due to time constraints set by production deadlines, or perhaps due to the "recentness" of the 9/11 tragedy, almost all of the contributions have sought to analyse and rectify the pervasive negative, stereotyped images of Muslims as fundamentalists/terrorists. From Zambia to Egypt, from America to India, our writers refute the images painted by the media that cast Islam as being synonymous with terrorism.

Newton and Sibanda write about how media's failure to maintain its independence in its coverage of religious conflicts has fanned hatred against Muslims in Zambia. Susan Muaddi Darraj, in her article "Blaming the Victims: American Media and the Israel/Palestine Conflict," talks about how the American media justifies violence against the Palestinian people by portraying them as terrorists.

The military and political policies

of a government dictate who the enemy is, says Tehmina Ahmed. She cites the example of the Pakistani government, once a loyal supporter of the Taliban but recently, a major actor in the U.S.-led campaign to overthrow the same government in Afghanistan. The same policy shifts have been observed in the way the U.S. government has dealt with Osama Bin Laden, the man who reportedly admitted engineering the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington D.C. Before he became America's public enemy number 1, Bin Laden was the U.S. government's strong ally in the Afghan resistance against Soviet invasion in 1979. All these policy turnarounds have been reported and magnified in media, giving rise to the question is: is media really independent of the workings of governments?

While this issue condemns Islamophobia in the media and regard it as a major form of discrimination based on religion, we also give space to recognise the marginalisation of non-Muslims in predominantly Islamic countries and territories. Zohra Yusuf, our contributor from Pakistan, tells us about the attacks against a non-Muslim journalist in her country. It is hard, of course, to conceive of another view of events, such as 9/11, when the information reaches us is incomplete, slanted and basically a product of other interests—commercial ones included. Clearly, the media not only defines for us what significant events are taking place. The ways in which the media selects what events to report about, what to focus on and what to omit, influences us profoundly in constructing the meanings of these events, including the images of our allies and our enemies. Our sources of truth may not be all that unimpeachable.

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