

The Stanley
Foundation



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More information on the US-Muslim World Initiative is available online at stanleyfoundation.org.

This Policy Bulletin summarizes the primary findings of the conference as interpreted by the rapporteur and program officer. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this bulletin. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

The US Media and the Muslim World

As part of the US-Muslim World initiative, the Stanley Foundation convened a working group in Atlanta to identify ways of strengthening media coverage of the Muslim world for audiences in the United States and the American Midwest in particular.

US Media Coverage of the Muslim World

In the United States, coverage of international affairs is usually the weakest section of the “news hole.” This is particularly true for local media outlets, both print and broadcast, which rely heavily upon wire services and an ever-dwindling group of suppliers of video footage and foreign reportage.

Participants noted that the amount of international news coverage as a proportion of total coverage is cyclical, historically increasing during wars and then declining when external threats diminish. The problem is not that international coverage is disappearing, but rather whether existing coverage promotes deeper public understanding of US-Muslim relations. Participants also noted significant differences in quality among various materials used as sources for local coverage of US-Muslim relations. For example, several participants noted that when newspapers rework wire stories to address local interests and concerns—or reprint articles from leading national papers that have already

undergone intensive editing—the end result is generally both more comprehensive and more interesting to readers.

Despite some outstanding journalists and instances of excellent coverage, participants generally agreed that much of the coverage of news in the Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world tends to be framed in ways that reinforce stereotypes and hinder effective dialogue. With existing coverage, it is difficult for the public to make informed evaluations of US foreign policy with the Middle East and across the Muslim world.

Some of the misperceptions that need to be questioned include:

- The casting of Islam as the enemy of the United States.
- The association of Islam with terrorism.
- The presentation of Muslims within the United States as suspect “others” who need to be controlled and contained.

Participants noted that these misperceptions persist in large part because existing media coverage of the Muslim world:

- Is often framed in terms of the agendas set out by politicians.
- Typically minimizes the input of Muslim community groups and policy

experts on the Middle East and the Muslim world in order to avoid accusations of bias and suspect political agendas.

Why Focus on Local Coverage?

Despite the fact that ownership of television stations, radio stations, and newspapers is increasingly concentrated among fewer owners, participants held that local and regional media markets are important areas to focus on regarding US-Muslim relations.

First, US audiences are accustomed to looking for “local lenses” through which they can relate to international affairs. Irrespective of whether this is a cause or consequence of the way the media traditionally covers world events, this is unlikely to change.

Second, local media outlets are under significant pressure to cover diverse local communities. For US-Muslim relations, Muslim community groups are an important vehicle for providing “local lenses” to the media, generating community demand for international news and organizing constituent pressure. Only a few of these groups at present work with media representatives in order to educate the public.

Obstacles to Improved Local Coverage

One of the primary constraints that hinders coverage of the Muslim world in the media is a lack of information and context among journalists, editors, and newsroom directors. There is also a perception that international news doesn't attract and hold audiences. Participants disagreed about whether this view is accurate or whether it is a consequence of weak international news coverage that does not attract new audiences.

Various features of contemporary broadcasting and newspaper publishing also make it difficult to cover the Muslim world well. Good

international affairs stories usually require a commitment to covering stories in both column inches and over time in order to adequately describe complex events and causality. Such stories also require a reporter to maintain relationships with sources even in times of low public interest. These points both contribute to the large investment in “human capital” needed for good local coverage of the Muslim world. More specifically, such coverage of the Muslim world is limited by:

- Tight deadlines and short on-air segments.
- Frequent staff turnover and reassignment.
- Pressure to run stories from a news outlet's own media syndicate.
- Inadequate funds to support either in-house foreign reporting or freelancers with desired expertise.
- A lack of management support for journalists who would like to take advantage of fellowships and other opportunities for professional development.

Even where there are linkages between the local media, policy experts, and community groups, a number of hurdles exist, including:

- The “local” angle is often limited to tourist experiences, natural disasters, and other episodic or exceptional experiences.
- The Muslim community perspective is not brought in on an ongoing basis, but only when there is a catastrophe in another part of the world that requires comment. This can unintentionally reinforce the image of Muslims as “others” who are more concerned about overseas affairs than what's going on in the United States. Journalists are also often hesitant

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- The polarization among national “think tanks” and advocacy organizations means that organizations compete to “frame” a story in certain ways. Some are far more successful at this than others, which can be a problem because journalists do not always know how to adjudicate between competing perspectives and framings.

Some Promising Approaches

Many participants focused on the need to provide journalists with overseas experiences and local resources and contacts. Various participants suggested expanding or creating new programs focusing on Midwest local and regional media producers. Suggestions generally fell into two categories: supplying journalists with overseas experience and contacts or supplying them with local linkages to experts and Muslim community groups.

Several participants advocated expanding opportunities for “study abroad” training stints for journalists. Some participants noted that despite a lack of widespread support for training journalists in international affairs, some local papers have been able to send their journalists abroad for training sessions and education. These journalists are then able to bring their experiences back with them, relay it to their audience, and attempt to continue that interest in international affairs in their work. Several avenues were proposed for this kind of work:

- A “small grants” program to provide overseas airfare and other necessary expenditures for local journalists. This could be administered on a competitive basis.
- Organizing exchanges and joint projects with journalists and media outlets from

Muslim countries. One participant summarized this approach to working with regional partners as “joint planning for joint benefit.”

Other participants focused on providing journalists with local resources and contacts and rewarding local initiatives. These proposals included:

- Providing local or regional resource guides to experts and community groups, and designing follow-up activities using this information after it has been distributed. Starting points: most universities have expert lists, and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations is beginning a Web-based list of foreign policy experts. But such a resource list should include cultural and religious organizations, not just policy experts.
- Contacting professional organizations to establish hiring goals and policies to increase representation of Muslim journalists and editors. Professional associations could also be valuable allies in creating new networks and creating regular tip sheets, as done weekly by the Association for Environmental Journalists.
- Increasing basic background knowledge of the Muslim world in curriculums of journalism schools, and increasing Muslim representation in journalism schools.
- On the model of a prize given by Columbia, funded by the Ford Foundation, identifying and distributing excellent stories on the Muslim world produced by local papers for further dissemination and recognition.

The other significant area of work identified by participants focused on building networks and coordination between Muslim

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community organizations, the media, policy experts, and other community organizations at the local level. Representatives from Muslim community groups highlighted their efforts in this regard and suggested that considerably more needs to be done to facilitate links between Muslim and other community groups with local media outlets.

Participating journalists also highlighted the importance of engaging with local communities to improve coverage of the Muslim world. As one participant noted, “Local stories about local communities can demystify Islam and help deepen perspectives.”

Participant List

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Consistent with its vision of a secure peace with freedom and justice, the foundation encourages public understanding, constructive dialogue, and cooperative action on critical international issues. Its work recognizes the essential roles of both the policy community and the broader public in building sustainable peace.

The foundation works with a number of partners around the world, including public policy institutions, nongovernmental organizations, schools, media organizations, and others.

The foundation does not make grants.

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