



Framing the Narrative: Addressing Harmful Portrayals of Muslim & MENA Communities in Western Media

Hana Saloum

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Western media landscape which spans across children's cartoons, Hollywood movies, and T.V. shows, has continued to portray Muslims and populations from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) through narrow and stereotypical lenses. The brief will cover how these pervasive media representations have continued to negatively portray these populations and how they can be combated with proper policy implementations.

II. OVERVIEW

Western media plays a crucial role in the shaping of social, cultural, and political beliefs, acting as the primary source of information for millions of children, teenagers and adults. However, Muslim & MENA populations are often forced to take the brute force of the stereotypes, name-calling and misrepresentation. In entertainment media this manifests as four dominant tropes: the terrorist, the oppressed woman, the oil-rich sheikh, and the exotic/primitive society. These depictions are especially concerning when they're found in children's media; at an age where permanent beliefs and prejudices begin to form. For example, the 1992 animated Aladdin heavily relied on

stereotypical lyrics, exaggerated accents and hostile characters, prompting a reinforcement of negative beliefs. This issue extends much further than simple lyrics, contributing to increased islamophobia, anti-Arab sentiment and prompts the public to accept biased policy attitudes.

A. Relevance

This ostracization and vilification of Arab & MENA individuals within popular media acts as an invisible barrier to social equity and fair treatment by the wider society. On a personal level, and as a young person of MENA heritage, such portrayals have directly impacted in-person interactions, and a sense of belonging to my community. On a social and political level, this is a pressing issue because media portrayals don't exist in a vacuum. They are primary factors in deciding popular opinions and even political discriminatory policies such as the 2017 Muslim Ban. Therefore, improving media representation is a quintessential step toward protecting all civil liberties.

HISTORY

Negative portrayals of Muslims & MENA in Western Media are deeply entrenched in the geopolitical events of the present global landscape, intensifying during times of conflict in the Middle East. For decades, Hollywood movies in the 1900s presented the 'Arab Enemy' as a popular character, essentially establishing the

entire region as a stage for lawlessness and greed. This pattern exploded in popularity in the post-9/11 landscape. This effectively escalated media representations of Arabs and Muslims, explicitly linking these populations to terrorism. Studies such as Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* show that these portrayals are not isolated but a continuous effort that prompts society to perceive the Muslim and MENA populations as dangerous or uncivilized.

A. Current Stances

While recent years have brought with them an increased dialogue concerning diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) within the industry, little progress has been made. There has been a visible rise in Muslim & MENA creators who are breaking into the entertainment industry, along with public discontent that has forced streaming platforms to include disclaimers on older and biased content. However, despite this symbolic change and progress, little has changed in the foundational strategies and frameworks of moviemaking and media production. Muslim & MENA voices remain severely underrepresented within filmmaking and production stages, causing producers and actors to fall back on established stereotypical beliefs when depicting Muslim or MENA individuals. And currently, any diversity standards that are implemented by major networks or film companies are completely voluntary which means that we lack the regulations and policies needed to ensure accurate and fair representation.

III. POLICY PROBLEM

The issue of misrepresentative media representations involves a complicated framework of stakeholders that have diverse motivations, responsibilities and beliefs. The primary

stakeholders are the most vulnerable. They are mostly Muslim and MENA youth, their families, and communities. For these individuals, inaccurate media representations don't exist within a vacuum. They directly impact their everyday lives, reducing job chances in the labor market and creating a constant threat to their safety.

Secondary stakeholders include major entertainment conglomerates, streaming platforms, and related businesses. Historically, these companies and groups have profited from reusing old and sensational stereotypes that exploit public sentiment. In addition to that, regulating commissions such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) also make sure that resources are responsibly used and do not feed into stereotyped norms.

B. Risks of Indifference

Keeping and believing in a position of political and social indifference towards inaccurate media representation of Muslim & MENA communities can cause severe consequences for democratic and social stability. If policymakers, company executives, and educational institutions all continue to treat media stereotyping and misrepresentations as a minor issue or oversensitivity rather than a failure, prejudices will continue to deepen.

This continuation of anti-Arab and Islamophobic misrepresentation ensures that minority populations are both alienated and ostracized simply for their identity, religion, and heritage, something the American Bill of Rights ensured for all people, regardless of their origin. This drives up rates of identity-based mental health challenges and fractures their sense of belonging.

And for the private sectors, this lack of attention brings a risk of economic losses that viewer boycotts would cause and a loss of talent when culturally-accurate creators continue to move away from toxic studio environments.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Addressing the media bias against Muslim and MENA populations is the first step in defending individuals' constitutional principles, public safety and overall equality. This issue should bridge party and political divides for several crucial reasons:

- 1) **Reduction of Domestic Violence and Educational Inequity:** The health of a local community is built directly on the foundations of safety in educational institutions. When mainstream media continues to feed the public with hostile depictions of certain people, those fictional caricatures translate into hateful speech and actions in the classroom.

Regulating and promoting cultural competency and accuracy within the media landscape can disrupt the cycle of misrepresentation and harmful stereotyping that perpetuates racial, religious, and ethnic harassment and bullying in public schools, the workplace and the community, creating a productive and equal learning environment for all Americans.

- 2) **Protection of Civil and Constitutional Liberties:** A core pillar of American democracy is the preservation of constitutional civil liberties which includes: the right to due process, equal

protection under laws, and freedom to practice any religion. However, history has shown that the erosion of these rights is almost certainly preceded by a dehumanization of a certain demographic population.

Under the influence of media-driven frenzy, a political candidate or body must become conditioned to accept and sympathize with broad public sentiment. This dynamic was especially clear in the post-9/11 era, where media stereotypes directly impacted the creation of public toleration for policies such as the “Muslim Ban” and to accept state-sanctioned, warrantless surveillance of innocent domestic communities. Dismantling these biased narratives therefore, is essential to maintaining the democratic guardrails the United States was founded upon.

- 3) **Enhanced Global Cultural Literacy:** In a global marketplace and on the international diplomacy stage, cultural literacy is an invaluable asset. Through promoting authentic and multi-dimensional media representation, national cultural diplomacy is strengthened and international economic partnerships are enhanced, especially within the Middle East and North African Region.

IV. TRIED POLICY

To start, a notable policy framework that has been implemented to address media diversity in recent years is the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences “Representation and Inclusion Standards” for Oscar eligibility. This strategy was introduced in order to foster systemic equity and it mandates that for a film to be considered for a Best Picture nomination, it must meet a certain percentage of inclusion (racial, ethnic sexual,

etc.), including in acting roles, leadership positions, and apprenticeships/internships.

Even though the mandate was well-intended, it suffers from several loopholes that limit its effectiveness. Because the group's criteria for diversity is grouped into one single category, the studios can easily fill quotas by hiring from other more common minorities. Also, a film can simply just feature a MENA actor who still plays a highly offensive antagonistic role. Even this would still satisfy the Academy's mandates. Furthermore, because this framework is solely incentive-based rather than binding through law, it serves mostly as a public relations satisfaction tool rather than a regulatory mechanism that protects viewers from harmful content.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

Cultural Competency Frameworks to State-Funded Media Projects

To prevent implicit bias from reaching individual's screens, I propose that governments should mandate that any production applying for tax credits, public grants, or filming incentives, must integrate a cultural competency review framework into their production strategies. Under this kind of policy, studios that use public funding to depict historically marginalized or cultural demographics must consult with independent cultural experts, civil rights organizations or academic advisors throughout the scriptwriting stages.

Such a regulation would create a sense of 'checks and balances' within the film industry and ensure that harmful misconceptions are flagged and corrected before production begins. And public funding will be successfully shifted away from lazy and unjust stereotypes and toward responsible storytelling.

AI Bias Regulation and Algorithmic Audits

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become increasingly popular in entertainment, political, and diplomatic environments. With it, stereotypes and misconceptions formulated by inaccurate algorithms have emerged, targeting women, and racial and ethnic minorities. Streaming and AI algorithms tends to recommend content based on user data and watch history, which can trap viewers in echo chambers that are radicalized and biased.

A policy that regulated third-party audits and mandated algorithm equity can prevent the suppression of authentic MENA creators and stop the recommendation of stereotypical tropes that harm. Such policies can be introduced by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which would serve as an independent and unbiased regulator

Modernization of Multicultural Library Resources

Local school boards and state education bodies have the ability to implement policies that fund audits of school library centers and English curriculums. Many libraries still have outdated educational books and videos that may reinforce regressive and colonialist ideas of the MENA region. Such a policy would allocate specific grants to replace biased materials with culturally accurate ones written by authentic Muslims and MENA authors.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have been able to explore the deep historical roots and modern challenges that surround Western media's harmful portrayal of

Muslim and MENA populations. This demonstrates the undeniable link between on-screen misrepresentation and harmful resources within our own classrooms. While fixing Hollywood from the outside is a slow and tiring process, we have immediate control over how our public school systems will respond to these biases.

Among the above policy options, one stands out as the most implementable and high-impact choice for remediation of the build-up of stereotypes; the integration of critical culturally-accurate media frameworks within school environments. By systematically teaching students how to understand and discern the media they consume, we can begin to dismantle deeply-seeded cultural stereotypes at their roots and build a truly safe and equal environment for all students, families and communities regardless of their beliefs, ethnic backgrounds and identities.

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