Bias or Imbalance?

Bias, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Prejudice may be the eye itself. Drawing the fine line between the qualities that most self-respecting journalists vouchsafe not to have—bias, prejudice or being guilty of stereotyping others—and addressing the cause and effect of these, is the prime objective of a fresh set of dialogues among forty influential U.S. and Arab journalists meeting as professional colleagues.

That this difficult exercise is taking place at the time of the ongoing war in Iraq, the Israel-Palestine-Lebanon conflict and random acts of Al-Qaeda terrorism around the world—all of which bring the U.S.-Arab relationship into stark relief—is no coincidence.

The meetings are based on the recognition that often unconscious stereotyping and bias in the media contribute to social and cultural divisions and misunderstandings. The working premise is that this bias, evident in print, broadcast, photo and cartoon journalism, must be addressed in its many dimensions and openly challenged to be overcome.

Explaining or Encouraging “Murderous War”

By Hani Shukrallah

William Randolph Hearst, the bête noire of American journalism, purportedly boasted of having set off the Spanish-American War of 1898; he was certainly accused of having done so—ostensibly for no greater reason than to sell more newspapers. In “The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism,” published in 1919, Upton Sinclair charged that Hearst journalists were “willing by deliberate and shameful lies, made out of whole cloth, to stir nations to enmity and drive them to murderous war.”

It is unlikely that the Arab and American journalists who have taken part in the series of dialogues, initiated and organized by the Aspen Institute

Critiquing Is Easier Than Changing Mindsets

By Crocker Snow Jr.

It is no easy task to hold a mirror up to oneself, one’s very soul, about inherent prejudices and try to determine how this affects one’s balance and objectivity as a professional journalist and chronicler of events. It is harder still at a time of open conflict between parts of the West and Islam, when even cartoonists are held to task for inciting misunderstanding by their overtly extreme characterizations and caricatures. But this is just what the Arab and American journalists, publishers, editors, broadcasters, columnists and cartoonists involved continue to engage in as the focus of separate meetings in Luxor, Dubai and the Washington D.C. area over the last two years.
(MIS)representing Arab and Muslim Americans

Recurring Patterns in U.S. Print Media

By Suad Joseph

- The Rev. Dr. Fahed Abu-Akel sat between Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mrs. George Bush, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, 10 a.m. on January 21, 2002. The program for the annual service honoring the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. noted his name, “Rev. Fahed Abu-Akel, Presbyterian Church.” As he spoke his Christian devotion—“God Almighty, God of non-violence, I come to you in prayer, in the name of Jesus, the Holy One, that Martin Luther King Jr. served”—National Public Radio announced to its listeners that this Presbyterian Palestinian-American was a “Muslim cleric” (Rev. Dr. Abu-Akel, Nov. 12, 2005).

- “Signing up for Arabic means you will be deployed to Iraq or some place equally dangerous. How do you feel about that?” Darin Kagan (CNN, June 16, 2005, 8:19 a.m. PST), asked a soldier at the Monterey Lan...
found numerous errors of representation of Arabs, Muslims, Arab-Americans, Muslim-Americans, and Islam in the most prestigious of American newspapers. Some might have been errors in the rush to title a headline; some demonstrated a genuine lack of knowledge; some, written by highly experienced journalists in leading newspapers, left me wondering about intentionality; and most left me deeply concerned about how they were read, received, and contributed to shaping public knowledge of these critical citizens of the United States and the world. Are the journalists and teacher only recipients of misinformation or do they participate in a systemic pattern of cultural misrepresentation?

In 2003, I assigned students in one UC Davis class a project to each read one major U.S. newspaper and news magazine—revealed an overwhelming pattern of misrepresentation of Arab women and Arab men. It started as a pedagogical exercise in critical reading, but my students’ findings stimulated my interest. In 2003, I began a secondary project to study the representation of Arabs, Muslims, Arab-Americans, Muslim-Americans and Islam in leading U.S. newspapers.


The project is in process, with only one piece of the analysis written—the qualitative content analysis. I argue that there are significant errors in all the print news media I studied with my research assistants. The errors occur frequently. More significantly, the errors, taken together contribute to a composite “lens” through which Arabs, Muslims, Arab-Americans, Muslim-Americans and Islam appear to be misrepresented and received. This lens may help explain NPR’s mistaken identification of an Arab Presbyterian minister as a Muslim cleric and the high school teacher’s mistaking my cross-bearing, blond, blue-eyed adopted daughter as a Muslim.

To put it simply: If there is a lens, a pattern, a gaze or a template found recurring in leading U.S. news print media which misrepresents Arabs, Muslims, Arab- and Muslim-Americans, and Islam, it is our responsibility as scholars, journalists, publishers, and producers to study it, understand it and change it. ❖

Suad Joseph, an anthropologist, is director of the Middle East/South Asian Studies Program at the University of California, Davis.

PARTICIPANTS

Equal numbers of Arab and American journalists took part in the Dubai and Wye Plantation meetings, with several resource persons and observers invited by the sponsoring organizations.

Media Participants:
Naif Al-Mutawak
Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Teshkeel Media Group, Kuwait City
Emad El Din Adeeb
Chairman & CEO, Good News Group, Cairo
Lamis Andoni
Consultant, Al Jazeera Satellite, Doha
Ralph Begleiter
Rosenberg Professor of Communication, University of Delaware
Khaled Duvoud
Correspondent, Al-Ahram International, Washington, DC
Taghreed Zuhair El Khodary
Nieman Fellow, Harvard University, Cambridge
Mohamed Elmenshawy
Editor in Chief, Taqrir Washington, Washington, DC
Mona Elthawy
Columnist, Ashraf al-Awad, New York
Steven Erlanger
Bureau Chief, The New York Times
Barbara C.B. Ferguson
Bureau Chief, Arab News, Washington, DC
Daniel Hertzberg
David Ignatius
Associate Editor and Columnist, The Washington Post, Washington, DC
Ali Jaber
Consultant, Dubai Media Inc., Dubai
Loren Jenkins
Senior Foreign Editor, National Public Radio, Washington, DC
Ossama Kamal
Anchor and Presenter, Egyptian TV, Chairman, Mercury Communications, Cairo
Daoud Kuttab
Director, Al Quds Educational TV, Ramallah, Amman Net, Amman
Mike Luckovich
Editorial Cartoonist, Atlanta Constitution Journal, Atlanta
Mirette F. Mabrouk
Publisher, The Daily Star Egypt, Cairo
Michael Massing
Hisham Melhem
Bureau Chief, An-Nahar and Senior Analyst, Al Arabiya, Washington, DC
Jamal Mroue
Editor-in-Chief, The Daily Star, Beirut
John J. Oliver
Publisher and CEO, Afro-American Newspaper, Baltimore, Maryland
Lawrence Pintak
Director, Asham Center for Electronic Journalism, The American University in Cairo
Chris Peck
Editor, The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Tennessee
Salama Ahmed Salama
Columnist, Al Ahram Daily, Cairo
Hussein Shobokshi
Journalist/Media Consultant, Ashraf al-Awad and Al Arabiya, Jeddah
Hani Shukrallah
Research Consultant, Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo
Kevin Sites
Kevin Sites in the Hot Zone, Yahoo! News
Barbara Slavin
Senior Diplomatic Reporter, USA Today, Washington, DC
Terence Smith
Special Correspondent, The New Hour with Jim Lehrer, Arlington, Virginia
Crocker Snow
Founder, The World Paper, and Director, Edward R. Murrow Center, The Fletcher School, Boston
William K. Spindle
Middle East Editor, The Wall Street Journal, Rome
Paul Szep
“The Daily Sze,” Syndicated Writers of America, Largo, Florida
Jonathan Wolman
Editorial Page Editor, The Denver Post, Denver

Resource Persons:
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Dean, Annenberg School of Communications, University of Southern California, Los Angeles
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J.B. & M.C. Shapiro Professor of Media and Public Affairs, The George Washington University, Washington, DC

Akrum E. Farag
Chairman & Managing Director, Digital Systems Middle East SAE, Cairo
Emad Gad
Secretary General, Arabs Against Discrimination, Cairo
Suad Joseph
Director, Middle East/South Asia Studies, University of California, Davis
Jane E. Kirtley
Director, Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and Law, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

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Director of Journalism Projects, Communications and Society Program, The Aspen Institute, Washington, DC
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Special Advisor for Global Affairs, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Menlo Park, California

Being an imbalance?
Each asks, “Why do They Hate Us?”

One significant effect of the atrocity of 9/11, and the U.S.-led “war on terror” that came fast upon its heels, has been to spotlight this “dark side” of the media. U.S. officials, talking heads and experts of all sorts, rushing to provide answers to the “why do they hate us?” question put by President Bush soon after 9/11, pointed accusing fingers at the Arab media as a major culprit.

As the “war on terror” unfolded further, in Afghanistan and later in Iraq, the Al-Jazeera satellite TV channel (once hailed as a new and revolution-
tone of incitement in some of the Egyptian press
against the nation’s Coptic minority.

In dealing with the U.S. media, American par-
ticipants were no less self-critical. Unlike their Arab
counterparts, American journalists are privileged
to pursue their profession within one of the oldest
democracies in the world; they don’t pay for their
freedom of expression with their lives, as did Leba-
nese journalist Samir Kassir (assassinated in 2005,
allegedly by intelligence bodies close to the Syrian
regime). Nor do they commonly face imprisonment
as hosts of Arab journalists do. They may very well,
however, lose their jobs and be stifled and gagged by
their editors and publishers.

**Pandering Press—Poorly Informed Public**

The U.S. media is not free of constraints. American
journalists cited a host of forms: pandering to the
publishers’ corporate and government links; to the
public mood; to the media marketplace (telling the
public what it wants to hear, and giving the advertis-
ers what they wish to see); even submitting to vari-
ous forms of governmental pressure (the famous
Condi Rice phone calls to publishers and editors
were cited).

While the constraints under which the U.S. me-
dia operates are immeasurably more subtle and so-
phisticated than those we see in the Arab world, the
American media was no less guilty of reductionism
and expressions of bigotry and intolerance towards
the Arab and Muslim “Other.”

Since 9/11 the American public, insular and
largely ignorant of the world outside, has been ex-
posed to a deluge of “information” about Arabs and
Muslims. That this outpouring of news, analysis and
commentary has not led to greater understanding
(most Americans still cannot place Iraq on the map),
but rather to a much more bigoted, ill-informed
view of hundreds of millions of the world’s peoples
is an indictment of American media failures that
cannot simply be shrugged off by the trauma of the
twin towers.

How, then, can we as media professionals help
repair the damage on both sides? Through these
and previous sessions we came up with various
concrete suggestions (see back page). Clearly there
are no easy solutions. Certainly, we’re in for the long
haul. The dialogue itself has provided us with an in-
valuable gateway.

The Arab and American participants may not be “representative” of the general ignorance, bias
and narrow-mindedness in both media. But neither
are they marginal. Invariably, the participants are
leading, highly visible and influential members of
the profession in both the U.S. and the Arab world.
Their exposure to one another, and the ongoing
links of dialogue and cooperation that continue to
evolve, are as much part of the solution as any con-
crete ideas we may pursue.

Conscientious objectors in a bigoted and grow-
ingly insane “clash of civilizations,” we can, and
should, provide a voice of reason and mutual under-
standing.

Hani Shukrallah, the former

**ARAB TV VARIATIONS IN DEPICTING “OTHERS”**

For three weeks during Ramadan in
October 2005, two Canadian researchers
surveyed the news reports at the same
morning news hour of the pan-regional broadcast
outlet Al-Jazeera, and the Lebanese Broadcasting
Company International. Their objective was to
determine how political, ethnic and religious
“Others” were portrayed in the news stories of this
sample.

According to Karim Karim, associate director
doctorate of Carleton University’s School of Journalism
and recipient of the 2004 Robinson Prize for
excellence in communications studies and Aliaa
Dakrouy, a Ph.D. student who won the Canadian
Communication Commission’s 2005 prize for
a paper on Al-Jazeera, LBCI was established by
Maronite Christian entrepreneurs and “positions
itself clearly within the state of Lebanon as a
national Lebanese broadcaster.” By contrast, Al-
Jazeera positions itself as “a pan-Arab channel
focused primarily on the Arab region which does
not identify with any particular Arab country.”

A total of 263 news stories from Al-Jazeera
were compared with 264 from LBCI with 57 from
Al-Jazeera and 64 from LBCI having content
pertaining to political, ethnic and religious others.
Shorn at right is an abridged tabulation.
If a picture is worth thousands of words as the Chinese proverb has it, then cartoons and caricatures in the sometimes incompatible Western and Arab idiom can be worth a multitude of misunderstandings.

The controversy that sparked slowly in fall 2005 and then burst into full flame in early 2006 with the publishing of twelve cartoons about the Prophet Muhammed in a small Danish newspaper serves as proof positive.

The drawings, solicited by the editor of Jyllands-Posten (circulation 40,000) in response to what he perceived to be excess political correctness in coverage of local Muslims, eventually triggered the boycotting of Danish goods in several Gulf States and rioting and looting in some other Arab lands.

Most critically, it prompted recognition of a fundamental rift between principles of religious respect in Islam and freedom of expression in the West, obscuring the canon of tolerance in the process.
At the Forum, two American Pulitzer prize winning cartoonists, Paul Szep and Mike Luckovich discussed the role of the cartoonist and exposed raw cultural and religious sensitivities when asked to ink a drawing as Arab illustrators might have responded in openly sacrilegious terms to the Copenhagen controversy.

“A lot of times a cartoonist has to break glass. You do this with a pretty blunt hammer. I think you have to offend some people. I have done Arabs, Jews, Blacks, Whites, Irish and I have criticized—and been criticized by—everybody. I’m worried that there is a trend now (in cartooning) to do gags. The stuff that I see reprinted—a lot of it is gags and you don’t really know what the key issue is. It’s more of a joke. I think a good editorial cartoon does say something beyond that. The Copenhagen cartoons seem much ado about nothing—not about satire or caricature so much as pure politics.”

—Paul Szep, former editorial cartoonist for The Boston Globe, is Canada’s only two-time Pulitzer Prize winner.

“You have to be careful of your symbolism, because symbolism can overrun whatever message you’re trying to make. And I think it (can be) counterproductive. I think I can be hard-hitting and hit the Christian Right (for example) without using an image of Jesus Christ to do it. I want to make people angry, but I want to make them angry because of my message. I look at those Danish cartoons not necessarily as a message, but as a provocation. I think there’s a difference.”

—Mike Luckovich, editorial cartoonist for The Atlanta Constitution, has won the Pulitzer prize and the Overseas Press Club’s Award for “Best Cartoons on Foreign Affairs.” His work is syndicated in 350 daily newspapers.

The fact that Arabs like others, engage in cultural and political double-standards, was lost in the coverage. There was not much anger or a sense of loss in the Arab world or the Muslim World when the two great statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan were destroyed by the Taliban, and very little outrage over anti-Jewish cartoons in some Arab newspapers and negative portrayal of Jews on some Arab television stations....”

From a paper written for the Forum by Hisham Melhem, Washington based correspondent for the Beirut daily An-Nahar and host on Al-Arabiya television.

Sticks and Stones May Break Bones—Drawings Too?

Less deadly than the rocket exchange between Hezbollah and Israel during their August 2006 war, cartoonists on both sides of the religious divide have volleyed barbed and sometimes sacrilegious images back and forth since the Copenhagen provocation.

Two hundred such went on display this summer at the Palestine Contemporary Art Museum in downtown Tehran. They were the winners among 1000 submissions from artists in 60 countries to the museum’s “Holocaust International Cartoon Contest.”

As described in a New York Times report, most of the winners lampooned a connection between the Holocaust of sixty-five years ago and contemporary Israeli and American militarism. Some went further, almost echoing Iran’s president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in questioning Holocaust history and Jewish suffering altogether.

Still others were near mirror images of the Copenhagen cartoons, in this case depicting Jews, Zionists or notable Christian icons in the most threatening or unflattering of circumstance: a Jew martyred on a cross formed by the letter “T” in the word Holocaust, and the curator’s own work depicting a rabid dog collared with the Holocaust and labelled with the Star of David.

“It is not that we are against a specific religion,” Seyed Massoud Shojaei, the curator, stated to the Times’ Michael Slackman. “We are against repression by the Israelis.”

Some of the art on display was a graphic contradiction of his words.
Assuming the Other’s Perspective

Professional Roles in Reverse

The Arab and American reporters and editors participating in the dialogues showed sound understanding of—even empathy with—the difficult practical issues faced by each in reporting “the Other.” If anything, the continued exchange about the pressures on freedom of expression and the impediments to this had many speaking with almost one voice.

But not so fast. To make the fundamental differences in their respective world views and professional circumstances starker and to illustrate the ultimate effect on coverage, participants were put through a role-reversal exercise. American journalists were asked to be Arab editors and Arabs to be Americans in response to a made-up news bulletin provided to all:

**BREAKING FICTIONAL NEWS**

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3, 7:00 A.M.**

Hypothetical: The AP News Wire sends out the following bulletin:

**Iraqi Bodies Found in Kuwait Desert**

A cache of 14 charred and desecrated bodies have been discovered by Kuwaiti desert tribesmen in a shallow desert grave 3 miles inside Kuwait over the Iraq border and an equal distance from a U.S. military staging camp, Camp Korea, situated in Kuwait. Based on papers found on them, the bodies appear to be Iraqi.

Kuwaiti authorities have issued the following statement: “The Government of Kuwait has confirmed the discovery of 14 Iraqi citizens inside our borders near the Iraqi border. We have no knowledge how these bodies arrived in the country. An investigation of their deaths is underway.”

Kuwaiti authorities have mobilized a pool of six journalists—three from the U.S. media and three from Arab media—to visit the site.

U.S. military authorities informally deny any knowledge of the situation. They confirm that the site is near a practice firing range used by Camp Korea.

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3, 9:00 A.M.**

A statement from Al Qaeda has been received by all major news outlets:

“Al Qaeda deplores the ‘desert killing field’ which the United States invasion and occupation of Iraq has brought to this region of the world. This is another violation of the very Geneva Accords that U.S. authorities promote. It fuels our desire to drive the infidels from all Arab lands.”

**SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3, 12:00 NOON**

The pool report from the first Arab and American reporters on site is released:

The bulletin confirms the charred bodies, and includes some new information based on several items uncovered in the immediate area and documented with accompanying photos. These were:

- Some U.S. small arms casings and an American baseball hat
- A charred Quran in English which appears to have been new
- A copy of the Geneva Accords on prisoner treatment in Arabic

**SWITCHING ASSIGNMENTS**

With this made-up information in hand, participants were divided into six groups, with all American journalists assigned to one of three thinly disguised Arab media and all Arabs to American media:

- **Group 1** works for a pan-Arab satellite channel (independent)—**Group 2** works for an American 24-hour news channel (conservative)—**Group 3** works for Arabic-language Egyptian daily newspaper (pro-government)—**Group 4** works for a daily newspaper in a major Midwestern city in the U.S. (liberal)—**Group 5** works for an Arabic-language weblog (jihadist)—**Group 6** works for an English-language website (independent).

**CHARGE TO THE WORKING GROUPS**

Each Group will design a news package for its particular news organization. The political leanings of the organizations are indicated. Each package, depending on medium, will include:

- News assignments for the next news cycle;
- Headlines of the main stories (or teasers in case of TV) with bullet points, regarding expected coverage;
- A 100–150 word analysis piece which takes a position on who is responsible for the massacre and why.

**MORE BREAKING NEWS**

While at work, each Group was provided additional information “from a variety of news sources”:

- A month earlier, U.S. authorities released a captured e-mail message reportedly authored by Al-Zawahiri urging insurgents to emphasize U.S. atrocities on Arab prisoners to heighten U.S.-Iraqi tensions.
- An Iraqi prisoner released from Abu Graib was identified by U.S. sources as a confirmed recipient of the Zawahiri e-mail directive.
- In late October, a Military Police unit from the Al-Khobar Police station, in Saudi Arabia, a recipient of the Zawahiri e-mail directive.
- On November 8, a dozen or more Shi’i contract workers for British forces in Basra went missing, with some speculative reports that they were kidnapped by Sunni insurgents.

**Mocking the Made-up News**

The news teams mocked up news budgets, packages and editorials to present to the Forum. All assumed the role of “the Other,” sometimes with tongue firmly in cheek. An agitated Arab Gerardo Rivera made a dramatic appearance in the presentation for **Group 2** (read Fox News) in the desert of Kuwait.

The editor from **Group 3** (read the Egyptian daily Al-Ahran) drew approval for its perceived authenticity:

“It’s a lot easier being biased.”

The presenter for **Group 6**, the independent English-language website, acknowledged that her team had difficulty concocting a believable editorial compared to the other less independent media because “It’s a lot easier being biased.”

The Enduring Shame of Abu Graib

They were only humble Iraqis. But as President Hosni Mubarak has said, for the Arab nation, ’every life is precious.’ The Arab League must immediately investigate how the bodies of 14 innocent Iraqis came to rest inside fraternal Kuwait, three miles from a U.S. military camp where guards from the infamous Abu Graib prison were stationed. The excesses of the American intervention—the failure to plan or control—has been bitter fruit. Is this what Thomas Friedman meant when he...
In the late 1990s, I was working on my doctorate in clinical psychology while training at New York’s Bellevue Hospital’s Survivors of Political Torture Unit.

Being a native Arabic speaker, many of the patients assigned to me were those who had been tortured in Arab prisons. I treated people who had been systematically tortured for all sorts of reasons, not necessarily in search of information, but in punishment for what they were: their religion, political beliefs, even their tribal heritage.

Sadly, many of those who were responsible for the torture were cast as heroic public figures. The disconnect for so many of the torture victims and their extended families was that the leaders they had been taught to respect as children were the same people who offered them ruthless responses as adults.

My people, it seems, were all too often provided the wrong heroes.

In the summer of 2003, after completing my MBA, I made a decision to combine the two very distinct parts of my educational life in a search to create new superheroes for the children of the Islamic World.

The result of my search is The 99. The 99 is a series of traditional superhero comic books geared to the imagination of children and young adults. The 99 name is taken from the ninety-nine attributes of Allah. These attributes—strength, honor, truth, mercy, invention, generosity, wisdom, etc.—combine to become the superpowers of my superheroes. With the caveat, of course, that no one hero has more than a single power and no one power is expressed to the degree that Allah possesses it.

My superheroes are built neither on the Western style of individual heroes like Superman, Batman, Spiderman and the like, who typically come down from above, nor on the Eastern mold of Pokemon, where teamwork and shared values overcome all. Rather an amalgam of East meets West—an appropriate compromise given the foundation of Islam and the geography of the Middle East.

Countering Western Cultural Imperialism

My goal, in part, is to overcome the self-stereotyping that takes place in much of the Arab and Islamic world, prompted by a variety of historical, political and economic factors. It is to counter the powerful cultural hegemony, if not imperialism, of the Western world in this age of globalization. It is also to counter the ideological and instinctive fight-or-flight reaction from the Islamic World in response to this onslaught.

The 99 may serve, I hope, as a boost to Islamic pride and sense of history. It is an attempt at creating a popular culture that is from the people, for the people, and not simply adopting one of the two most prevalent choices in the age of globalization—the Western hegemony or the ultraconservative Islamic approach. This is about creating a gray area that is safe to relegate one’s allegiance to, without feeling like one has abandoned the principles one grew up espousing.

Our original financing came from 54 investors in eight countries on four continents, including a sizable portion from my classmates at Columbia University’s School of Business. Our hope is that The 99 will serve more than the one-quarter of the world’s population who subscribe to the basic beliefs of Islam. Our characters intentionally transcend all language and cultural barriers. They offer the most commonly shared ideals of all people as the basis of heroic figures.

Today, three years in, The 99 comics appear regularly in five newspapers in four countries, and an animation and separate comic book division has been formed. We are currently preparing a second round of investment through an Islamic investment bank whose Sharia Board has approved the concept for Islamic audiences.

But our overall goal is to stimulate the psyche more than the purse strings. We have approached a topic that to anyone’s mind would have been considered taboo a few years ago and are making a business of it. The Sharia Board’s approval is a sign of hope for the future.
Simplifying Spells Stereotyping

The first issue for participants was achieving overall agreement about the magnitude of “Intolerance and Bigotry in the Arab and American Media” as the initial gathering was titled. Aspen Institute moderator Charlie Firestone cut to the chase in opening remarks with the question, “Is stereotyping in the nature of journalism?”

The responses were direct, and replete with mea culpae:

“The nature of journalism is to oversimplify and try to find a pattern,” stated Steven Erlanger, Jerusalem correspondent for The New York Times. His conference counterpart from The Washington Post David Ignatius, a columnist not a correspondent, took it further: “The rule for a columnist is to simplify and then exaggerate.”

Kevin S. Sites, the sole international correspondent for the online Yahoo! News pointed to TV’s reliance on visual clichés regarding Islam (nuzz zein at prayer, a prison door clanging shut) as a part of media stereotyping. Prize-winning political cartoonist Paul Szep upped the ante in referring to his own medium: “A cartoonist’s job is to break glass. You do this usually with a pretty blunt hammer.”

Some Arab participants were slightly more nuanced in their views:

“A good reporter humanizes the other side. A bad reporter demonizes the other side,” said Lamis Andoni, an Amman-based consultant for Al-Jazeera.

Robert Entman, professor of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University translated Joseph’s “templates” into “schemas.” “It revolves around empathy; do you have it or do you not? Lack of empathy means lack of interest, and this is based on what I call ‘schemas’ in our minds about the status and character of things.”

Both researchers seemed to agree that individual and professional biases derive almost equally from lack of direct contact and experience.

Such insights were verified in practical terms by former CBS television reporter Larry Pintak, now a professor of journalism at the American University in Cairo, and former CNN Correspondent Ralph Begleiter, Journalist in Residence at the University of Delaware.

Each presented stark examples of actual imagery used by Arab and American media depicting the exact same event or news story from the war in Iraq.

The documentary evidence was indisputable: as the point of view and access to news sources of the Arab and American media differed, so too did the selection, presentation and cropping of photographs that comprised the coverage. With slide after slide, the two former TV correspondents illustrated how the professional perceptions and expectations of national media impacted and distorted its coverage.
Economic Determinism and New Media

Fully objective coverage of any important news event—certainly of any cross-cultural one—is virtually impossible. Where do you begin? Which source to use ahead of others? What tone is set by the headline?

Reasonably balanced coverage is almost as difficult. Most journalists regard lack of time or space to tell the full story as their biggest impediment. But one of the Forum sponsors identified something deeper.

Smita Singh, representing the Flora and William Hewlett Foundation, observed that stereotyping by Western media of another country diminishes as the economy of that country or culture advances. Western coverage of Japan, Korea, China and India, for example, is today more grounded. In part, the perception playing field has been leveled by economics.

Reporting not just on Coup and Earthquakes (to apply the fitting title of a 1979 book by Mort Rosenblum) of developing countries, but moving on to the trade and business interests which generate the links of globalization is just what Singh had in mind.

Another “aperçu” to which most participants agreed is the positive impact of technology in mitigating media bias. The advent of interactive media, e-mail responses to newspaper articles and blogging all challenge the assumed authority of traditional media in shaping stories and images and setting public agendas. The instantaneous nature of see-it-now, sweeping feedback loops, the ascendance of pull-over-push media and the checks and balances that come from the blogosphere diminish the role of the editor or anchor from even the most powerful print or broadcast outlet to drive the news and associated public impressions.

New media technologies and access make it more difficult for a culturally inaccurate or misguided profile to survive indefinitely and to prevail. The time-honored, self-fulfilling nature of journalism with reporters turning to the same bank of accredited experts to interpret international events is being channeled into an equal, if opposite, self-correcting dynamic. All courtesy of the Internet.

Framing the Death of Zarqawi

Tellingly, the dialogue about the framing of stories in June was marked by the death of insurgent leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq. All participants were attentive to just how their own media played the story in the context of balanced or biased reporting. It was noted that U.S. military authorities in Baghdad were more than aware of this process, displaying the photo of the dead Al-Qaeda leader inside a gold-colored frame.

The Washington Post saw the significance, headlining a story in its Style section “A Chilling Portrait, Unsuitably Framed.” Writer Philip Knomicott concluded his essay: “Zarqawi is gone and good riddance. But there’s nothing in the image of his face that deserves a frame. It’s a small thing to be sure. But it suggests a cynicism about this war that is profoundly distressing. Our political and military leaders simply can’t resist packaging the war and wrapping it up in a bow.”

The framing of the dead Zarqawi was all too real and relevant to the self-consciously self-critical discussions. Talk about wrapping the dialogue up in a bow.

Crocker Snow Jr., founding editor of TheWorldPaper, is director of the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy at the Fletcher School.

The Arab-U.S. Media Forum was conceived in the Cairo offices of the Ford Foundation in the aftermath of 9/11. It is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation, supplemented with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation of Menlo Park, California.

How Western Publics View Muslims, Christians and Jews

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<th>Muslims</th>
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<th>Christians</th>
<th>Favorable/Unfavorable %</th>
<th>Jews</th>
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Pew Global Attitudes Project, Spring 2005

credible

CREDITS

The Aspen Institute organizes and administers the dialogue through its Communications and Society Program headed by Charles Firestone, with assistance from Amy Garmer and Tricia Kelly.

“Framing the Other” was prepared and edited by Crocker Snow Jr., with editorial assistance by Hani Shukrallah, layout by Sid Hall of Hobblebush Books and printing by Purnan Press of Hollis, NH.

The Media Forum is an ongoing initiative.
The Arab and American media participants came up with a number of specific ideas to help generate more balanced news coverage of their two cultures and societies. The key recommendations from recent meetings in Dubai and Aspen Institute’s Wye plantation:

- **EXCHANGES**—Fostering internships and increased exchanges among working journalists, editors, commentators, camera crews and even cartoonists of the media properties engaged in the Forum and others to build better understanding and empathy.

- **TRAINING**—Programs to encourage more cross-cultural training for junior journalists and media professionals in America and the Arab world.

- **JOINT REPORTING**—A major reporting assignment to be undertaken by U.S. and Arab journalists from participating media on a subject of mutual relevance. A “Tale of Two Rivers” comparing the political, economic and cultural roles of the Jordan and Mississippi Rivers respectively was proposed as a possible series to be jointly reported and published by print media in the Midwest and the Jordan River basin.

- **CARTOON JOURNALISM**—A collection of political cartoons by a select number of Arab and American cartoonists on identical subjects to illustrate and highlight different political and cultural perspectives. The collection could be presented as an exhibition in Washington and Arab capitals and gathered into a book for additional public exposure.

- **PHOTO JOURNALISM**—A volume based on contrasting pictures and other visual images appearing in the U.S. and Arab media depicting the same charged, contemporary events (e.g. 9/11, the war in Iraq and Israel-Lebanon) to illustrate different perspectives presented through the media to their respective populations.

- **ARAB JOURNALISM REVIEW**

A new professional journalism review to highlight the best and most balanced reporting of U.S.-Arab events, and critique the worst. The Review could feature original studies focusing on U.S. and Middle Eastern media performance and provide a weblog for exchange and clearinghouse for reliable sources. The Review would be undertaken by the Adham Center for Electronic Journalism at the American University in Cairo.