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Book Review: Muslims and the News Media

Prasun Sonwalkar


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between the US as a focal point of analysis while casting a wide net. Through various examples and counter-examples that range from the Iraqi resistance groups to the Palestinian armed factions to the Nicaraguan Contra to the Sri Lankan Tamils to the Indonesian militants, Pintak complicates our understanding of terrorism, putting into question received notions, and arguing that 'terrorism is a matter of perspective' (p. 142).

The book is informed by the author's professional undertakings, personal experience and multicultural perspective. Part journalist, part academic, Pintak is an American expatriate who lives in the Arab world and is married to the daughter of an Indonesian diplomat. Weaving together the personal, the cultural and the historical, *Reflections in a Bloodshot Lens* comes off as a thought-provoking enquiry into the current state of affairs between Arabs and Americans since September 11. It is an open-minded journey through key moments in recent history and offers reflections on a number of insistent questions that many of us face in this changing world but do not often pursue.

Mohamed Zayani
American University of Sharjah

Elizabeth Poole and John E. Richardson (eds), *Muslims and the News Media*. London: IB Tauris, 2006. £15.99. 240 pp.

It is no news to say that Muslims and Islam get a bad press in the western world. We know the reasons why this is so: racial prejudices; the sociocultural environment in which journalists function; the narrow social strata from which journalists are recruited; the circular ways in which journalism reflects and reinforces widely held assumptions in society; the influential binary of 'us' and 'them' in news discourse; and so forth. Did 'the Other' ever get a good press? September 11 has sparked off several academic studies and also debates in the popular press. Soon after the Twin Towers incident, *The Guardian* came out with a supplement with a dark veil in the backdrop and with the bold headline: 'How much do we know about them?'

The two editors of this volume have previously studied the representation of Muslims in the British media, and have now come up with a cogent collection of 17 papers that will no doubt be used extensively by future researchers. A notable feature of the collection is that it introduces some new researchers and is not confined to the usual suspects in the area under study. The editors state in the Introduction that the book 'aims to examine and elucidate the links between social and political contexts, institutional and professional production practices, the content to media outputs and the perceptions and responses of audiences in relation to the reporting of Islam and Muslims' (p. 3). This is a wide remit, no doubt, and given the complex nature of the subject, the collection at best provides a decent discussion of the key themes and issues involved.

As the editors say at the outset, there is no doubt that there is a pressing ethical and political obligation to criticize and counteract the distorted reporting that so often characterizes the coverage of Islam and Muslims. The collection of papers presents a wide range of perspectives and analyses of the subject. They are

structured over three sections: 'Context, Politics and Production'; 'Media Outputs'; and 'Audience Practices'. The idea is to attempt to reflect 'the whole cycle of the journalistic communication process and the reproduction of social meanings'. All excellent and worthy objectives, no doubt, and the editors succeed to a large extent in what they set out to achieve.

As is the case of most studies on the subject, this collection has a monolithic perspective of Islam, with hardly any mention of minorities within the religion such as the Ahmediyas or the Bohras. The assumptions inherent in the discourse of Muslims and the news media have further marginalized the perspectives of Islam's minorities. An example of determinism gone awry is Peter Cole's paper on 'Mixed Communities: Mixed Newsrooms'. The assumption that more members of ethnic minorities in the newsroom will automatically lead to better coverage may be valid to some extent but is also problematic. For the fact is that in order to 'fit in' and climb up the professional ladder in the newsroom, journalists from the 'other' communities usually internalize and reproduce the values of their 'mainstream' colleagues. This is as true of newsrooms in the non-western world as in Britain, the US and elsewhere. As any journalist will know, there are several examples of non-Muslim colleagues producing excellent copy of Muslim-related events and issues and unsavoury coverage of such events and issues by journalists who happen to be Muslims.

One of the fascinating papers in the collection is Gary R. Bunt's exposition of how the Internet is being used by Muslims across the globe to further their political, religious and cultural activities. The chapter, titled 'Towards an Islamic Information Revolution?', notes the problems of access to the Internet in several Muslim countries, and concludes: 'An Islamic Information revolution, based on the Internet, could have profound implications for Muslim societies. Some would say that this revolution is already occurring, opening up societies to new influences and forms of knowledge. The truth of this assessment depends on the measurement criteria' (p. 164).

In another insightful paper, Liz Fekete describes the techniques of racial profiling currently being used by European security services and illustrates their racist consequences, particularly for Muslims. The point the writer makes is that such profiling not only institutionalizes discrimination, it actually 'gives terror networks a formula for greater success', since by default it provides the criteria that security services do not consider 'suspicious' (p. 43). Peter Manning's paper, written in the Australian context, demonstrates how the American perspective of the so-called War on Terror has been internalized in newsrooms on an international scale.

But one cannot escape a sense of *déjà vu* and the feeling that the book falls short on the 'so what?' principle. It is no secret that the nature of the coverage of Islam and Muslims is appalling and proof of this is evident in the news media on a daily basis. We know that too well – so what can or should be done about it? Philosophers and experts interpret the world in many ways – the point is to change it. Is there any indication that this collection might lead to at least some change in the ways in which Muslims and Islam are covered? The writers include some former journalists, but a collection such as this cried out for at least one paper from a practising journalist who has specifically covered Muslim-related events. What sort of decisions do journalists in the field make while covering the

very events that the collection refers to? A first-person account from such a journalist would have added immense value to the collection.

As an academic work, the book reflects some scholarship. But as in the case of most academic works, it may not evoke much interest among journalists – the very professionals whose work it seeks to dissect. But this has always been a unique area of study, marked by a huge gap in the perceptions of journalism practitioners and journalism researchers. Journalists have no time or interest in experts analysing their work (usually critically), while researchers struggle to make sense of how the ephemeral nature of journalism can have such a powerful influence in everyday life. Perhaps in no other field is there such a divergence of world-views between practitioners and researchers. Faced with considerable criticism from academic researchers, many journalists are dismissive of research. But is the coverage of Islam and Muslims universally appalling? As a former journalist, this reviewer remembers several examples of positive news coverage about Islam and Muslims in South Asia – home to a majority of the world's Muslims – but has yet to come across an academic analysis, in this book or elsewhere, that highlights this other side to media coverage.

Prasun Sonwalkar
University of the West of England