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Covering Islam: A Challenge for
American Journalism

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Thank you very much. I'm honored to be here. I want to thank Professor Grofman, UC Irvine and the Center for the Study of Democracy for inviting me, and to thank all of you for coming out this afternoon.

Being in California always has for me the sweet sense of the familiar, since this is my home state. It's also a relief, now and then, if you can believe it, to get away from Washington.

When I flew out yesterday, I left behind in the newsroom a difficult question that had been sitting there for several days, staring out from my Inbox. I haven't come up with a clear answer yet, although I'm working on it, even today.

The question is this: should The Washington Post Stylebook, which tells us what language is acceptable for news stories in the paper and on the web, adopt usage of the word "Islamist?"

This might seem a pretty trivial question in the scheme of things. But, to steal a phrase from the presidential campaign, words matter. Words matter especially to journalists. And words like Islamist matter in a particular way: they are labels. They help define the identity of a person, a group, an idea or even a country.

In this case of this word, the arguments for and against go like this: Some editors on The Post foreign desk, including two who've spent years covering the Middle East, argue that Islamist is the best term to describe a political movement that bases itself on Islamic law. It's a more specific term than Islamic, which describes anything having to do with Islam. Islamist, they say, will help readers distinguish between Hamas, for example, and the Red Crescent Society.

But there are dissenters to this view. Among them is Sabaa Tahir, a copy editor on the foreign desk. Sabaa is a native of Kern County, a graduate of UCLA, and a Muslim. She argues that Islamist is too broad a term to be meaningful. In our internal debate, she wrote her colleagues that Islamist movements "can be extremist or moderate, pacifist or belligerent, anti-western, anti-Sunni, anti-Shiite, anti-Sufi, anti-women, anti-Israeli, anti-Russian. I worry that if we start using it, over time, we'll cease to explain it properly."

Or, as she told me, the role of journalism is to confront and explore the world's complexity. If that takes a few more words, then we should use them.

So, this modest debate encompasses two important questions of identity. The first involves the historic and monumental process to determine the nature and roles of Islam, a faith practiced by 1.3 billion people in virtually every country on the planet. The second involves the mission of the US press, and particularly its coverage of Islam, which is our topic today.

I'm going to address what strike me as the major currents -- and major challenges -- of press coverage of Islam. I approach this subject with humility, and even some anxiety. This is as broad a subject as I can imagine. And it excites intense passions and disputes. There is a fierce battle to categorize and dismiss anyone who steps into the public square to advance a perspective on these matters.

So, I'll offer one more piece of labeling information: about me. I am not a scholar or practitioner of Islam. I am also not a pundit, opinion writer, or talk radio host. I am a newspaper editor. As an editor, I make decisions about what we cover and how we cover it. I'm responsible for the fairness, accuracy and depth of our coverage. I try to be guided by the facts, and to absorb different points of view. If I have a conscious bias, it leans towards a belief in stories and storytelling. It's my job to ensure that our stories are as close to the truth as is possible, given the limitations of our medium -- and of ourselves.

I believe the natural position of a journalist is to be an outsider. In my experience, the best journalists inhabit the border between what's inside and what's outside of a situation, roaming across the space that joins and separates the parties to a conflict. I believe this is as good a vantage point as any for observing, reporting on, and understanding what is occurring within Islam, and in the relationship between Islam and the West.

This is not to say that I think the US news media as a whole has embraced this opportunity. Quite the contrary.

At a critical time, the US news media has failed to produce sustained coverage of Islam to challenge the easy assumptions, gross generalizations or untested rhetoric that shape perceptions of Muslims. There continues to be a shortage of two main staples of quality journalism: long-term, probing investigations and immersion journalism, on the one hand; and, on the other, well-informed, nuanced reporting in the routine daily stories that make up most of what we call "the news."

And yet I see several important and, I think, transformative signs of progress. At some news organizations, among some journalists, exceptional coverage of Islam and of Muslim communities has created new models for others to follow. Some of these accomplishments are signs of how far there is still to go. But they point in the right direction.

I am going to describe in a moment what I think is working. First, I want to take stock simply of the extraordinary volume (in both senses of the word) of reporting about Islam. Every day, stories are published in newspapers and magazines large and small that add to an ongoing narrative. Choosing just from magazine covers so far this year, I could cite these:

A piece in the Economist, examining whether Islam and democracy are compatible, asks, "Can rule by the people be reconciled with the sovereignty of Allah?"

Foreign Policy magazine sports a cover that imagines: "A World Without Islam."

The cover story in the current Islamica magazine proclaims: "Media Wars."

The New York Times Book Review, with an ominous gauzy cover, organizes an entire issue around the single word: "Islam." Yesterday, the cover of the Book Review had a similarly dramatic treatment, above the headline: The End of Jihad.

The cover of the international edition of Time Magazine, under a headline freighted with stereotypical assumptions, presents evidence of "Europe's Muslim Success Story."

I could cite dozens upon dozens of other pieces. And I would not have to go deeply into the archives to draw up extensive coverage, for example, of UC Irvine's contentious debate about Muslim activism on campus.

Despite all the attention, this coverage leaves many readers unsatisfied. Criticism comes from all sides. Some complain that it is too soft. Others that it is too hard. Many complain that it is incomplete. Islamica Magazine puts it this way in its current issue: "Today, despite almost daily coverage of Muslims and the Middle East, English-language media broadcasts and publications consistently fail to demonstrate a critical understanding of the region's history, culture and context."

Some critics blame inadequate coverage for perpetuating a negative and crude image of Islam among non-Muslims. An ABC-Washington Post poll in 2006 showed that 46 percent of Americans have an unfavorable view of Islam, double what the percentage was in early 2002. People's views became more favorable the more familiar they were with Islam. But six out of ten Americans confessed to lacking a basic understanding of the religion.

There is a wealth of statistics, studies and other data available to alleviate this ignorance, or color between the bold lines of our basic knowledge. Even among those of us who consider ourselves fairly well informed, some of these figures challenge what we think we know. Let me list just a few about American Muslims.

There are between 2.3 million to six or seven million Muslims living in the United States. Nobody knows for certain because the Census does not ask about religious affiliation.

A nationwide survey last year by the Pew Research Center – which arrived at the lower of these estimates -- captured the diversity of American Muslims. About 2/3 were born outside the United States, immigrating from 68 different countries.

Although in American popular culture a Muslim is likely to be portrayed as an Arab, only a little more than a third of foreign-born Muslims in the United States are from Arab countries. Almost a third are from South Asia. The third largest source of Muslim immigrants is Europe.

African Americans make up between 20-40 percent of Muslims in this country.

The Pew survey found that Muslim Americans are largely assimilated, happy with their lives, and hold moderate views of many of the issues that divide Muslims and non-Muslims around the world. The study found that Christians and Muslims attend religious services in similar percentages (45 and 40). It found that fewer Muslims than Christians said that religious institutions should express political or social views. These findings seem consistent with the work here at UCI of Professor Jen'nan Read.

The Pew study described a generation gap in which younger Muslims in the US are more likely to express a strong sense of religious identity. They are more likely to describe themselves as pious. Younger Muslims in this country are also more likely than their parents to say that suicide bombings in defense of Islam can be sometimes justified.

Overall, 75 percent of American Muslims say they are concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism around the world. But they are very skeptical that the US war on terror is effective or even a sincere effort to reduce terrorism.

Aggressive law enforcement since 2001 has resulted in 510 people being charged in the United States with terrorism related crimes through 2006, according to New York University's Center of Law and Security. About 80 have been convicted, mostly for providing material support to groups designated as terrorist organizations. Three people with ties to Islamic extremists have been convicted of planning or attempting a terrorist act in the United States. Only Richard Reid, the "shoe bomber" who tried to blow up a transatlantic flight, has been convicted of carrying out an attempt.

While immigration of Muslims to the United States declined in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, it has surged back. In 2005, more people from Muslim countries became legal permanent U.S. residents -- nearly 96,000 -- than in any year in the previous two decades.

Everything I have just mentioned has been in a newspaper story. Why aren't these pieces of the puzzle more widely known? The answer has to do partly with the framing of the conflict between Islam and the West after the horrifying attacks of September 11 and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. For most of the last six and a half years, the best journalism on this subject has fought against the tide of public perception. It has also overcome reduced resources in most newsrooms. Accomplishing this has required courage and ingenuity not only from individual journalists but also from news organizations.

On September 11, 2001 there were only a handful of American journalists capable of writing about Islam with any fluency. An even smaller number knew anything about al Qaeda. On the day of the attacks, no American television network had a bureau in a predominantly Muslim country anywhere in the world. Newspapers were better positioned -- The Post, for example, had bureaus in Cairo, Istanbul, Jakarta and Jerusalem -- but I think it's fair to say that our knowledge of Islam's political, spiritual and cultural dimensions was not as intimate or authoritative as the moment demanded.

The lack of knowledge and experience in the press, combined with the trauma of the attacks and the forceful response by the Bush Administration, invited oversimplification. An exotic and threatening new lexicon entered public discourse devoid of important context: jihad, madrassa, Sharia, hijab, Wahhabi. And not just words; photographs and video clips, cloned from the same shallow pool of understanding, were presented over and over until they lost even of the ability to startle. Irreconcilable portraits of Islam -- the Islam of peace and the Islam of terror -- became the halves of an equation that didn't add up.

For years, few US newspapers or television stations had paid much attention to their local Muslim communities. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, these communities turned further inward. Mosques were vandalized, businesses searched, individuals harassed. Under a program called "Special Registration," overseen by the Department of Homeland Security, about 83,000 immigrant men from Muslim countries were fingerprinted, questioned and photographed. More than 13,000 were placed in deportation hearings. None was charged with terrorism.

Many American Muslims felt under siege, an expression one still hears frequently. This did not put many in the mood to field inquiries from the press. When Andrea Elliott of The New York Times was assigned to write about Muslims in the New York area, she encountered one close door after another. Half-joking, she came to refer to her job as "the-no-one-will-talk-to-me-beat."

Elliott kept knocking on doors, however, and she eventually gained the trust of Sheik Reda, the imam of a prominent Brooklyn mosque. She spent six months reporting a series that revealed a world of surprises about the social, political and spiritual challenges faced by the imam in post-9/11 New York. The series was awarded a 2007 Pulitzer Prize.

So much of the power of good journalism is the power of surprise. As I read and re-read dozens of stories about Islam in recent weeks, and spoke with the authors and subjects of some of them, one thing that surprised me was how much humor was in them. Maybe my surprise was a reflection of how solemn or grim I expected the stories to be. But I think it's telling in other ways.

Sheik Reda, the immigrant imam portrayed in the New York Times, laughed while telling the story of a recent immigrant in his mosque. In an effort to adapt to her new country, dialed 911 to inform the New York City police of her suspicion that a relative back in Cairo was stealing her inheritance.

I read elsewhere, in another story, about the television producer launching the hit Canadian sitcom "Little Mosque on the Prairie."

In The Washington Post, the British writer Safraz Manzoor wrote a fiery manifesto for the Outlook section called, "It's Time for Muslim Comedians to Stand Up."

And then there are the countless wry proverbs and sayings from Muslims that journalists catch in their nets from Rabat to Baghdad to Jakarta. The Washington Post correspondent Anthony Shadid, who claims there is no funnier city in the world than Cairo, sent me this ecumenical one the other day, perhaps thinking of my trip to give this distinguished lecture: "The donkey who carries Jesus on his back to Jerusalem still comes back a donkey."

I mention this theme because humor is one path to complex truths. As we all know, there is often something behind it, sometimes something darker. Sheik Reda, so adept at breaking the ice with an amusing anecdote, collapsed from the exhaustion of ministering to his Brooklyn community under surveillance, distrust and the pressures of assimilation. The Canadian sitcom struggled at first to find Muslim actors for its cast. The Outlook piece on Muslim stand up was greeted with a smattering of applause, but also a cascade of hate mail.

The often ironic or self-deprecating proverbs of many Muslims in the Middle East are sometimes born of resignation, humiliation, suffering or hatred. Another supplied by Anthony Shadid, heard often in Iraq, says: "Since we're already in hell, why not one step further?"

These bittersweet and paradoxical insights remind me that good journalism cannot be measured by comparing the number of positive stories versus the number of negative stories, as some critics of the press insist. The accuracy and value of journalism is measured not by whether it delivers good news or bad news, but by how close it brings you to the truth.

Many models of the best US journalism on Islam are long-term projects by our leading newspapers and magazines. This was the case with Andrea Elliott, Paul Barrett of the Wall Street Journal, Hanah Allam of McClatchey Newspapers, Anthony Shadid.

But what about the more routine daily stories, especially those appearing in mid-sized newspapers and on local television where most Americans get their news? I watched two of these stories unfold recently that I'd like to talk about here briefly.

Last summer, the town of Walkersville, Maryland, home to about 6,000 people an hour's drive from the nation's capital, was informed that a real estate developer intended to sell 244 acres of farmland to the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA. The Ahmadiyya, who worship at a mosque in suburban Washington, planned to build a retreat center, gymnasium, and several homes for its membership. The land -- which, interestingly enough, currently goes by Biblical name Nicodemus Farm -- would also host the sect's annual festival, drawing 5,000-10,000 visitors to the gently sloping fields off state Route 194.

The reaction of townsfolk to news of the impending sale was swift and vehement. Over six months, more than 20 hours of hearings before the zoning board packed the Town Hall. Thousands of pages of public comments were recorded. A group calling itself Citizens for Walkersville was formed and launched the inevitable web site. One member said the Ahmadiyya would transform Walkersville into "the Mecca of America." The president of the citizens' group wrote: "Through a behavior-authorizing verse of the Koran, the Muslim concept of "deceive the infidel" can and will be used against us! You are the infidel! Folks, this is not the Walt Disney generation of the early 1960's where it was a small world after all. The ulterior motives by encroachers cannot be simply dismissed as harmless and diversifying. We must look at world geopolitical circumstances."

For their part, the Ahmadiyya launched an ambitious campaign of public diplomacy. They hosted an open house for Walkersville residents. They gave interviews and took out newspaper ads. Over ten weekends, members of the mosque went door to door trying to explain their history, their views, and the peaceful purpose of their project.

This was big local news. It attracted coverage from Canada and in the International Herald Tribune, and The Post wrote two straightforward news stories in the Metro section. But mostly it was a story for the local papers, The Gazette and the Frederick News-Post. All told more than 150 stories, letters and columns were published about the unfolding drama.

At first, the clash of civilizations narrative played well. Newspaper stories described Walkersville as an isolated hamlet, where the mayor ran the feed store and hosted a weekly dominoes game. Townsfolk protested that were not intolerant, just conservative, though many stories conveyed a veiled accusation of redneckism.

The Ahmadiyya were portrayed with general sympathy, but shallowly. Not a single story went into depth about the group, which since its founding a century ago in Pakistan has a history of persecution within Islam as a heretical sect. Who were they? What did they believe? Why did they choose Walkersville? It was noted without irony that one spokesman for the group, a 60-year-old pharmacist named Intisar Abassi, lives next door in Frederick, where he works on biowarfare vaccines at the Army's Fort Detrick.

As the case dragged on, the tactics of opponents shifted -- and so did the tone of news coverage. Instead of "world geopolitical circumstances," critics focused on traffic, water, sewage, and sprawl. Last month, citing these concerns, the zoning board rejected the sale and sent the Ahmadiyya packing. The decision was supported by editorials in the Frederick News Post.

The project director for the Ahmadiyya, Syed Ahmad, who in his day job is as a senior economist for the Federal Housing Finance Board, told me after the decision: "At the beginning it was all about Islam. And in the end it was all about traffic. They realized that they were going to lose if they talked about religion because the media was going to beat up on them. Talk about traffic and the media becomes your friend."

When I drove through Walkersville for the first time a week ago, none of the press coverage had prepared me for the look of the place. Yes, there is a timeworn main street. Yes, the Nicodemus Farm is an impressive hunk of land. But Walkersville is hardly a backwoods antique. Downtown Frederick, the largest city in this part of Maryland, is 15 minutes away. A protestant megachurch, The Calvary Assembly of God, is walking distance; it is advertising for its Easter Musical, which attracts some 2,500 worshippers each year. Even the president of the Citizens for Walkersville doesn't live in Walkersville, but in a nice, new development in suburban Frederick.

So, here you had a lot of encroachers competing for a place in Walkersville's future. Among them, the Ahmadiyya might have been the least openly afraid of assimilation. This is a story I wish I'd been able to read.

Syed Ahmad told me that in the end he had come up with what he called the 5% theory. Night after night, he said, the same 300 people showed up to oppose the sale, out of Walkersville 6,000 residents. They represented the extreme, in his view. They controlled the debate, he said, and the outcome.

Around the same time as Walkersville was having its Muslim experience, another, even more public controversy was unfolding next door to Washington, DC in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This one also resisted easy answers.

Last September, the governor of Virginia appointed Dr. Esam Omeish to serve on a new statewide immigration commission. Dr. Omeish is the chief of general surgery at a Fairfax, Virginia hospital. A graduate of Georgetown University, he moved to the US as a teenager from Libya. Now 40, he is a charismatic speaker, well connected politically, easygoing with the press.

Omeish is also president of the Muslim American Society, an organization accused on various web sites of links to terrorism because of the group's roots with the Muslim Brotherhood. He is on the board of the Dar Al Hijrah Islamic Center, which was investigated after the Sept. 11 attacks because two of the hijackers had befriended the imam and briefly attended the center.

Shortly after Omeish's appointment to the immigration commission, a state legislator called attention to a video made in 2000, and posted on YouTube, in which Omeish extolled the virtues of "jihad." Omeish resigned from the commission under pressure. He said he was the victim of a smear campaign and partisan propaganda, to say nothing of a misunderstanding of the term "jihad."

I met him last month for lunch in a strip mall in suburban northern Virginia. He had come from the operating theater, and he made me a gift of the Koran. Omeish is a highly engaging person. He has lectured about Islam to US military officers at the National Defense University, and said he meets regularly with the FBI to improve the bureau's relations with local Muslims. With a smile, he calls himself a "fundamentalist, in a good sense."

Omeish told me he thought press coverage of his resignation, and more broadly of the Islamic center was basically fair, but it was incomplete.

He said: "Islam is portrayed as incompatible with American values but the absolute opposite of that is true -- and that compatibility is not present in the press. Islam is a mechanism for Americanization. Can we inculcate our Muslim values into the mosaic of America? That would be our contribution."

He told me it would be "nonsense" to apply Islamic law in the United States, or to support the Muslim Brotherhood. "This is not Egypt!" he said. "I am not a Muslim who is living in America. I am an American who believes in Islam."

In the debate about who is a moderate Muslim and who is an extremist, what does it mean to be a "fundamentalist, in a good sense?" Would Dr. Omeish fit into a version of Syed Ahmad's five percent theory? Or is he in the vanguard of a Muslim American majority that will reconcile differences of faith and secular society to change what it means both to be Muslim and to be American?

The answer to these questions has to do with the character of a person's beliefs. This is very tricky terrain for journalism -- and one that cries out for original and probing exploration.

Before saying goodbye to Dr. Omeish I asked him why other Muslims had not spoken out about the Walkersville's case. Was it because they view the Ahmadiyya as apostates? He looked at me quizzically, and paused.

"If you ask me about the Ahmadiyya, they are not Muslims," he said. "But at the end of the day they can do what they want. If I were on the city council of Walkersville I'd approve it!"

Islam is a global phenomenon, and a global story. Most reporting in the US about Islam comes from foreign correspondents based overseas. This coverage is dominated by political and military conflict, either among Muslims, between Israel and Hezbollah and Hamas, or between Islamic groups or states and the West, particularly the United States.

For all sides, the media is itself what military planners call part of the battlespace. Osama bin Laden, Ayman Zawahiri, al Qaeda in Iraq and others all use broadcast media and the Internet to get out their messages.

US officials aim to compete in this space. Michael Leiter, the acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center, was quoted in *The Post* last month saying that "global ideological engagement, referred to by some as the 'war of ideas,' " is "a key center of gravity in the battle against al-Qaeda, its associates and those that take inspiration from the group."

Terrorists, Leiter said, "aggressively employ messages related to current events, leverage mass media technologies and use the Internet to engage in a communications war against all who oppose their oppressive and murderous vision," adding: "We must engage them on this front with equal vehemence."

We are in the midst of what officials in Washington call "the long war." The conflict is likely to permeate not only overseas reporting but also coverage of the presidential general election. Of the likely candidates, John McCain has set down the most definitive marker on this issue by saying that "the transcendent challenge of the 21st century are radical Islamic extremists."

Since the start of the decade, coverage of Islam overseas has improved greatly in depth and sophistication. The times have required it. The election of Hamas in 2006 has given a deeper Islamic character to a brutal conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The Israel-Lebanon fighting of 2006 cast new attention on Hezbollah. The election of President Ahmedenejad sharpened conflict with Iran. Changes of government in Indonesia and Turkey gave an opportunity to explore the fault lines between religion and secular states. Pakistan and Afghanistan are at the top of the news.

Gone are the days when foreign correspondents stuffed Bernard Lewis or Edward Said in their bags as they ran to the airport. Today, journalists have greater first-hand experience of the major issues from the top down and from the irreplaceable access to the richness and immediacy of daily life.

Coverage of Iraq has been pivotal in this development. This was not something we might have expected. The US invasion five years ago this month was not explicitly about Islam. Its purpose was to topple a secular dictator and presumably release the democratic (and largely secular) longings of Iraqis to create a modern state compatible with American interests and values.

But something else happened. Instead, the fall of Saddam Hussein caused a Shiite awakening, conflict, and now a Sunni awakening.

At the time, I was the foreign editor at *The Post*. Our correspondent in Baghdad during the invasion was Anthony Shadid. As I edited Anthony's dispatches each night, I was amazed by how often the word "God" appeared in his stories in the voices of Iraqis. Not just "God willing," but Please God, help us. God save us. Only God will solve our problems. If God writes that you'll live, you'll live. If God writes that you'll die, you'll die."

In the midst of the shock and awe, Anthony wrote a story about a mother taking her son, a soldier, to the bus station in Baghdad as he was being mobilized for the front to fight the Americans. I want to quote this passage directly:

"There is no god but God," Karima told Ali at their parting, uttering the first phrase of the shahada, the central creed of Islam. As he bought a 30-cent ticket and boarded a red bus, Ali completed the couplet. "Muhammad is the messenger of God," he said.

This was not traditional war reporting. Anthony's attentiveness to the role of religion made him the first American journalist to appreciate the importance of Moqtada Sadr and Ali Sistani; figures barely recognized by the architects of the invasion. Recalling that period in Iraq, Anthony wrote me last week from southern Lebanon: "I thought religion basically drove the reporting back in 2003 and 2004. In some ways, it was sad. Religion became the mechanism for redefining identity, often in parochial and intolerant ways. But it allowed us to convey a sometimes very visceral context for the ways Iraqis were making sense of the world around them."

Work like Shadid's -- and that of his Post colleague in Baghdad Rajiv Chandrasekaran -- created a new standard for depth of reporting about Islam in the US press, not just as a political force, but as a cultural, social, spiritual presence in the lives of millions of people.

The Iraq war also led to the rise of a new generation of Arab-American reporters. Shadid won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of Iraq. Last month, Leila Fadel of the McClatchey Newspapers Baghdad bureau won the prestigious George Polk award. Nancy Youssef and Hannah Allam, also both of McClatchey, and Ashraf Khalil of the LA Times have done distinguished work.

Coverage of Iraq has carried a terrible price. The war is by far the most expensive story in the history of The Washington Post. Its cost in human terms has been far greater. 32 journalists and 12 support staff were killed in 2007, bringing the total number of media personnel killed since 2003 to 174. Another local journalist was killed last week. Nine of ten deaths have been Iraqis. Among them was Washington Post reporter Saleh Saif Aldin, who was shot to death last fall while on assignment in Baghdad.

Today, almost one-third of all reporters at The Washington Post have worked in Iraq. This experience is being carried back into our newsrooms and is informing our local, national and international coverage.

Especially since the murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, first-hand reporting on terrorist groups remains a very limited field. We have been largely unable to explore in depth questions about the relationship between religious belief and political violence. Is religious fervor the cause or effect of political violence? What are the roles of political, cultural, or tribal influences in molding violent groups killing and dying in the name of Islam? In "the long war," these are strategic questions.

I have been asked whether Islamic societies are inherently hostile to a free press. In the Arab world, restrictions on journalists aim at suppressing criticism of the state or challenges to its authority. Today, the fashion in many countries is away from overt acts of violence or imprisonment of journalists towards less blunt instruments of control, such as lawsuits, regulations, and restrictive licensing.

On February 12, all but two of the 22 countries of the Arab League voted to impose new restrictions on satellite television broadcasters. The rules would require stations "not to offend the leaders or national and religious symbols" of Arab countries. Article 6 of the draft would require satellite TV stations "to refrain from broadcasting anything that would harm God, religions, prophets, messengers, sects and religious figures of all sects."

It is notable that the news of these regulations was splashed across the screens of one their main targets, the Qatar-based station Al Jazeera. The booming success of Al Jazeera, and of other stations such as Al Arabiya, has shown the huge demand by a pan-Arab audience for more varied news, more open opinion and freer debate. Jazeera is far from ideal. But it has pushed boundaries.

Not surprisingly, majority Muslim countries with more dynamic political systems tend to have a more robust and independent press. The Indonesian press is one of the freest in Southeast Asia. In Turkey, tensions continue between hardline nationalists and the press. But President Abdullah Gul, of the Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party, has launched constitutional reforms to change laws governing freedom of expression.

In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the news media has fought back against censorship, intimidation and violence to become, according to polling, the most trusted institution in the country. Despite President Musharraf's crackdown on independent broadcasters last year, the press has played a central role in holding the government accountable and, in the eyes of some analysts, the country together.

Self-criticism is a hallmark of a free society, and a function of a free press. Firas Ahmad is the young deputy editor of Islamica magazine who wrote the editorial I quoted earlier about the Western news media's failure to present a complete picture of the Muslim world. When I spoke with him recently, he also blamed the attitudes of some Muslims toward the press.

He said: "Seventy-five percent of my criticism falls on Muslims who don't understand if you don't want to be demonized that communicating your story today requires accepting an independent media and how it tells your story. Propaganda never changes anyone's mind."

Shahed Amanullah, the editor of altmuslim.com., echoed this point in a recent post addressing Muslim media. He wrote:

"The value of an independent Muslim media is greater than simply being a more effective PR machine. These voices are needed to ask tough questions and spur critical thinking within Muslim communities, and take us beyond the defensiveness, dismissiveness, whitewashing, and self-promotion that we have become so used to in our internal dialogue. Muslims in the West are savvy and voracious consumers of the Western media. So why then should the Muslim media be afraid to rise to that same level of professionalism and open inquiry?"

One way for Muslims to have greater influence on the mainstream news media -- and on society at large -- is for more to come work in newsrooms. As Firas Ahmad of Islamica wrote recently: "If Muslims do not want to suffer the indignation of political irrelevance for many elections to come, instead of giving money to politicians, they should start investing in journalism scholarships."

Two years ago, Shabina Khatri, then a reporter at the Detroit Free Press, started the Muslim American Journalists Association. Shabina grew up in Michigan and was managing editor of the newspaper at the University of Michigan. She was involved in a number of efforts to educate her non-Muslim colleagues about Islam. At the Free Press, she organized a "fastathon" for non-Muslims during Ramadan and encouraged forums where journalists could ask questions about the faith.

She told me that while younger Muslim Americans follow the news intensely, the number entering journalism remains small. Her organization has a little more than 100 members. At The Washington Post, where more than 700 journalists work in our newsroom, my Muslim colleagues say there are not more than 8 or 10 Muslims. That strikes me as a low number.

I've heard different reasons for this: American Muslims remain suspicious of the media. Talented would-be journalists prefer to work for Muslim publications. Immigrant parents steer their children away from professions like ours where job security is weakening and starting salaries are low.

The debates inside Muslim communities and the changing media landscape make this an extraordinarily dynamic period. New ways of communicating news and information are taking

shape as new actors emerge with stories to tell and a need to be well informed. Some of this discussion takes place in specialized web sites or niche publications where like-minded people feel comforted by having their own views confirmed. But there are exciting alternatives emerging.

Important new spaces are opening up in the mainstream media for story-telling and direct participation that didn't exist a few years ago. And there is an audience for them. When The Post's innovative online site, On Faith, organized a weeklong projectg entitled, "Muslims Speak Out," the essays, commentary and live discussions drew 700,000 page views.

At The Post, I want more Muslim readers, but also more Muslim journalists. I want to see deeper coverage of young Muslims coming to terms with their faith in present-day America. I want more stories about issues facing African American Muslims. Muslims in America occupy the intersection of major currents of our society: race, religion, immigration, national security and politics.

Overseas, the US press has shown that we can get beyond the stereotypes and easy markers of Islam's role in the world. We need to bore into the serious questions of terrorism and the networks and organizations behind it. We also need to give our readers genuine and authentic access to the diversity and breath of the Muslim experience, which is unfolding on a global scale.

My view is that Muslims in the US are on the march from being "them" to being "us." Journalism plays a role in transforming "others" into us. This is not necessarily a happy story; it does not mean papering over conflicts or uncomfortable truths. It does mean crossing boundaries -- sometimes on a map, sometimes in your head -- to engage honestly with how we are all influencing each other's lives.

This journey is already underway.

It's a story I want to read. It's a story that we should be telling.

Thank you.