

## Islam in the media

### Community leaders' perceptions of how media venues have covered the Sept. 11 tragedies and Muslims in America

By EMILY PETERS  
THE BATTALION

Sept. 11 brought many changes to this nation. America was blindsided and lost its sense of security as a powerful, peaceful nation. One group of Americans feels particularly insecure and blindsided — the American Muslim population. But no planes hit them — it was the media.

Eight members of the Texas A&M Muslim Students Association met in a focus group a few weeks after the attack. They discussed how they have been affected by social paranoia in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

Through their discussion, they narrowed down the probable issues at the heart of the social paranoia: Media-fed misconceptions about Islam and its involvement with terrorism, and general ignorance about Muslims on a culturally segregated campus.

Media leaders agreed there were inaccurate and insensitive instances surrounding Muslims in the initial media coverage of the terrorism events, but each had different opinions about it.

Dr. Douglas Starr, an A&M journalism professor, said it is more important to look at how few errors there were than how many. He said considering the rushed situation in the beginning, and the few hard facts known, the media was as sensitive as it could have been in the given situation.

Starr said any generalizations about Arabs and Muslims that the public made from the media's representation were justified in the facts: people were celebrating in the streets of Pakistan, few Middle-Eastern countries initially denied responsibility for the attacks, and the term jihad being used brought religious connotation.

Focus group member Faisal Chaundry said he was surprised to see how the crisis revealed what the public knows about Islam.

"There are a lot of misconceptions about what we practice, who we are," he said.

Ron George, faculty adviser for *The Battalion*, and former news writer for the *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, said, "The real misconceptions came out of the public, and the media did their best to cover those and offer insight."

"America's ignorance of the Middle East and Islam makes our coverage of that ethnic group very superficial," he said.

Focus group members commented on media coverage of the Palestinian children celebrating in the streets.

"They showed it on TV a lot," said a focus group participant and biochemistry graduate student. "What they didn't show was a lot of other groups having candlelight vigils. Yes, they may hate the American government because their people are being killed with their bullets, but they do have peace walks and donated

neighbor who looks normal and talks to you for years, and you know him, and he will end up being a 'sleeper,'" he said. "That is a very dangerous thing. It says, 'Do not trust.'"

George said the controversy is a product of the medium of film that shows an isolated view of a much broader picture.

"TV reporters have to be good about putting an event like that into context," he said, pointing out the impact of 1960s coverage of small anti-war rallies that may have sparked an entire movement.

Starr said without covering candlelight vigils and such, the coverage of people in Afghanistan is already "too sympathetic to innocent Afghans being killed in the war."

"We are all in this war," he said. "No one is innocent."

George responded to Starr by saying the government is trying to convey to the media that innocent people will be killed.

"It's a good question for the media to ask government officials where the planes will bomb," George said. "No government will deny that there will be innocent people killed in the process of war."

The focus group discussed another sensitive media instance — a Muslim doctor from San Antonio detained by the FBI a day after the attack for possible terrorist connections. Names of his "accomplices" were released, but the people were never questioned.

One of the men in the focus group, a petroleum engineering doctoral candidate, said if the media had acted responsibly and with a general knowledge of Islam, they would have known the names were bogus because they were female, and female Muslims would never be in that line of work.

He said the media also acted unfairly by not reporting that the man was quickly released.

"They are saying you will have a

neighbor who looks normal and talks to you for years, and you know him, and he will end up being a 'sleeper,'" he said. "That is a very dangerous thing. It says, 'Do not trust.'"

George said it was "wrong and a low form of reporting" if the media coined the term "sleepers."

Otherwise, he defended the media. George said the arrest was newsworthy, and the media was relying on the FBI for information, a historically credible source.

Starr agreed with George, saying the media attributed everything.

George and Starr also commented on Muslim media issues since the focus group.

Starr was recently a panelist in a discussion on Islam and the media. One panelist, an Egyptian Muslim, spoke against the incorrect use of the name bin Laden, saying it means "son of Laden," and there are hundreds of sons of Laden.

Starr called this "hogwash" and said this is an example of the hypersensitivity of Muslims to recent events.

"People say Lincoln freed the slaves. You think of Abraham Lincoln," he said. "They are not going to confuse that with the Lincoln family that lives down the street."

Muslims' reactions to a recent *Battalion* cartoon were not hypersensitive, George said. The comic showed a veiled woman checking out a Middle-Eastern dressed man with a stick of dynamite sticking out of his pants.

"It might have been offensive," George said. "But it was not done with any evil intent."

The *Battalion* took responsibility for printing the cartoon and covered the community reaction concerning the controversy.

George gave other sugges-

tions for alleviating media mishaps about cultures.

"Do your research, take notes and let yourselves be instructed by people who know these cultures," he said, pointing out that sometimes a 10-minute interview is not enough. "Spend all day," he said. "In order to fix a problem, the media must admit their ignorance and become students of what they are covering."

George compared the media frenzy to the bombing in Afghanistan.

"We wish we hit the target all the time," he said. "When you don't, you hurt people, lose credibility and everybody loses. You don't like it when it happens, but it happens."

The other issue identified by the focus group is the lack of interaction and understanding among the varying cultures that co-exist on the A&M campus.

This problem has not just appeared since Sept. 11. A 1998 Department of Student Affairs study showed that 32 percent of all international students have a sense of belonging to A&M. Although 64 percent of all Texas A&M students wish they had more interaction with students of different culture groups, 29 percent said they had participated in an organized activity to promote diversity awareness.

Inquiry attempts were made to the leaders of multicultural and international student services to see if the departments had made any attempts to educate the campus about the cultures surrounding the events. No attempts were made by the departments to respond to the inquiries.

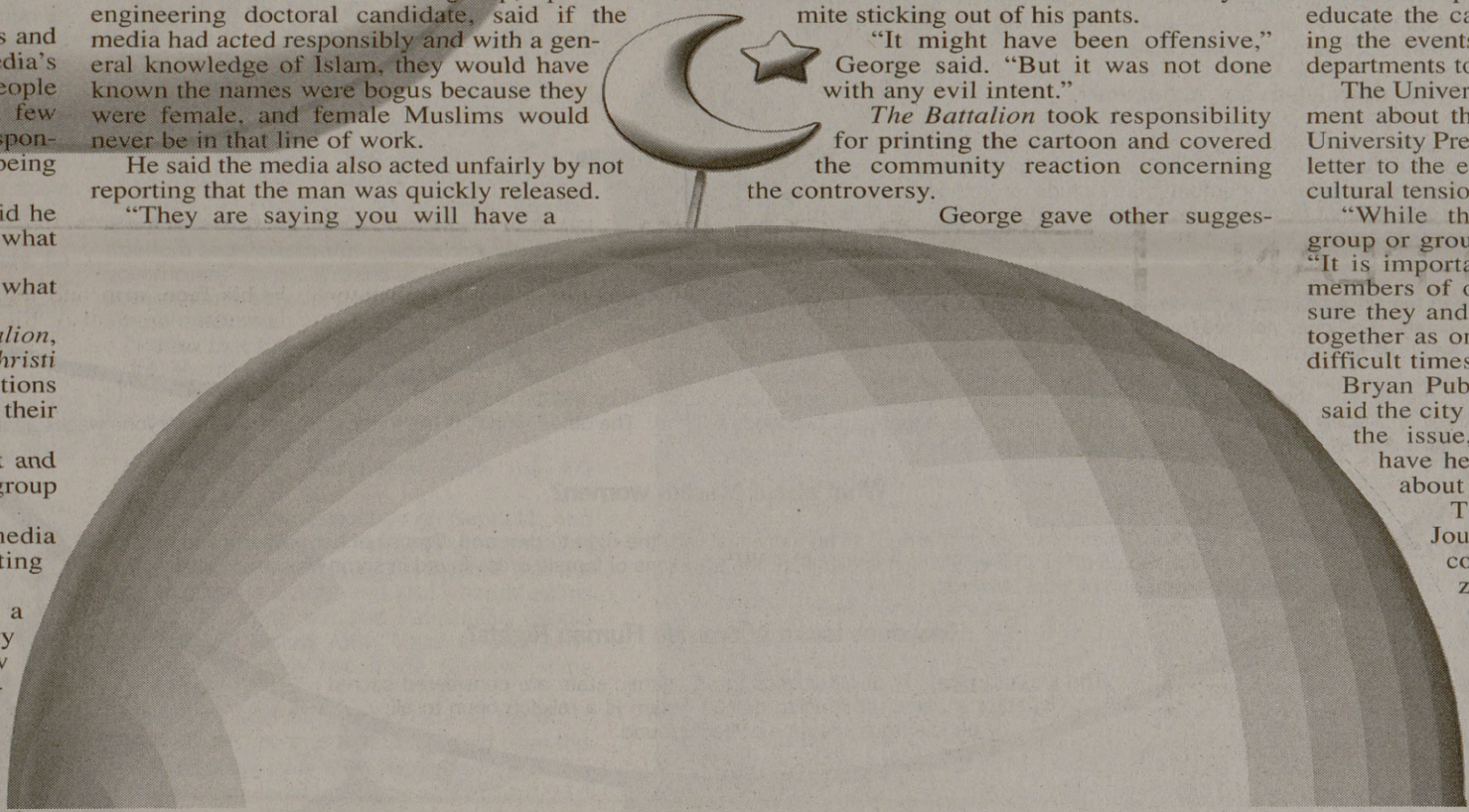
The University has made only one public statement about the issue. The day following attack, University President Dr. Ray M. Bowen released a letter to the entire University attempting to ease cultural tensions.

"While there is speculation about which group or groups might be responsible," he said. "It is important that all of us reach out to the members of our international community to be sure they and their families know that we stand together as one family, one community at these difficult times."

Bryan Public Information Officer Jay Socol said the city does not have any plans to address the issue, but various community groups have held programs to educate the public about Islam.

The Society of Professional Journalists had a speaker talk about covering the culture in the news frenzy, and the MSA held a panel discussion titled "Islam and the Media," Socol said.

The Presbyterian church is sponsoring a class in Islam, and elementary schools have requested that Mosque leaders speak to them about the culture surrounding the Muslim faith.



## Reel Critique

**Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone**  
Starring Daniel Radcliffe  
Warner Brothers Studios

Harry Potter (Radcliffe) is an ordinary boy, living a not-quite-ordinary life in the cupboard under the stairs of his aunt and uncle's home in Surrey, England. But when he is accepted into the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, his whole world changes. Suddenly famous and surrounded by witches and wizards of all ages, Harry must learn to use his powers, study for finals and save the world from the evil Lord Voldemort.

Originally intended for young readers, the adventures of Harry Potter and his friends Hermione Granger (Emma Watson) and Ron Weasley (Rupert Grint) have captivated readers of all ages and will soon captivate movie-goers, too. Like most movies based on popular books, there has been a great deal of speculation of how true to the novel the movie will be. All those fears may be laid to rest.

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is as true to the book as any movie can attempt. Subtle plots are handled with artistry, and the delicate eye of people who know that the smallest details will be important to later movies. Potter fans will be delighted to see that the wonderful world of wizardry is just as fantastic as they imagined. Diagon Alley is bustling with life, the Hogwarts dining hall glows with floating candles and the Quidditch field is just the place for a high-flying game of catch. But

the grand sets and fantastic creatures are not what make *Harry Potter* the beautifully rendered classic it will become. The little things are what will thrill old and new fans. Delightfully detailed, it will take nothing more than a moving painting to awe even the most jaded of movie-goers. While the plot moves forward, so will any number of background items that most movie makers would have been satisfied to leave stationary. It may take two, or even three viewings to appreciate fully just how much of the movie is woven into its beautiful sets.

But not all of the wondrous world of *Harry Potter* is sets. While the viewer can be sure some of the scenes use computer graphics, it can be difficult to tell where the models end and the computer graphics begin. The animation of the wonderfully battered Sorting Hat was very well done, as was the animation of the moving portraits, which manage to look both portrait- and life-like.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WARNER BROS.

First-time visitors to the world of *Harry Potter* will love this movie, as will die-hard fans. But at more than 2 hours and 30 minutes, plan on an early showing or a late night out. (Grade: A+)

—Jenni Cross

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