

# Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

June 2017

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## Snake and Stranger: Media Coverage of Muslims and Refugee Policy

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HARVARD Kennedy School

**SHORENSTEIN CENTER**  
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## **Table of Contents**

1. “A Total and Complete Shutdown”	4
2. Methodology	4
3. Muslims on American Television News: Negative, Violent, and Voiceless	5
4. Why the News Coverage Matters	8
5. Acknowledgments	11
6. Endnotes	12

***For Jo Cox and Aylan Kurdi, who still remind us we have far more in common.***

Take me in, for heaven's sake  
Take me in oh tender woman, sighed the snake  
But instead of saying thanks,  
That snake gave her a vicious bite

*Al Wilson, "The Snake," as read by then President-elect Donald J. Trump,  
January 13, 2016*

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
MOTHER OF EXILES.

*Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," 1883, as engraved and mounted inside the Statue  
of Liberty*

## “A Total and Complete Shutdown”

In late 2015, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on.” Trump claimed Muslims were “a dangerous threat to America.” “Our nation,” Trump said, “cannot be the victim of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad, and no sense of reason or respect for human life.”<sup>1</sup> An ABC News/*Washington Post* survey found that 36 percent of Americans, and 59 percent of Republicans, believed that Trump’s proposal “was the right thing to do.”<sup>2</sup>

Refugee organizations were stunned by Trump’s proposal and the public response it elicited.<sup>3</sup> The screening process for resettling refugees was rigorous, requiring an average of 18-24 months and involving countless security checks and investigative steps.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, according to State Department figures, nearly three-fifths of the Syrian refugees admitted to the United States were children.<sup>5</sup>

Why was it easy for so many Americans to accept Trump’s claims about the threat Muslims pose to America? Analysts have attributed religious prejudice, images of terrorist attacks, and a digitally-supercharged extremist “alt-right.”

There’s yet another possible major explanation, one that’s been there all along, hiding in plain sight. It’s the day-to-day news coverage of Muslims. To be sure, the media have been criticized for their portrayal of Muslims. However, the criticism has been leveled largely at the entertainment media, with a constant depiction of Muslims as terrorists in popular U.S. TV programs like *Homeland* and *24*.<sup>6</sup> This paper will examine the possibility that daily mainstream media news coverage has also contributed to Americans’ negative view of Muslims.

## Methodology

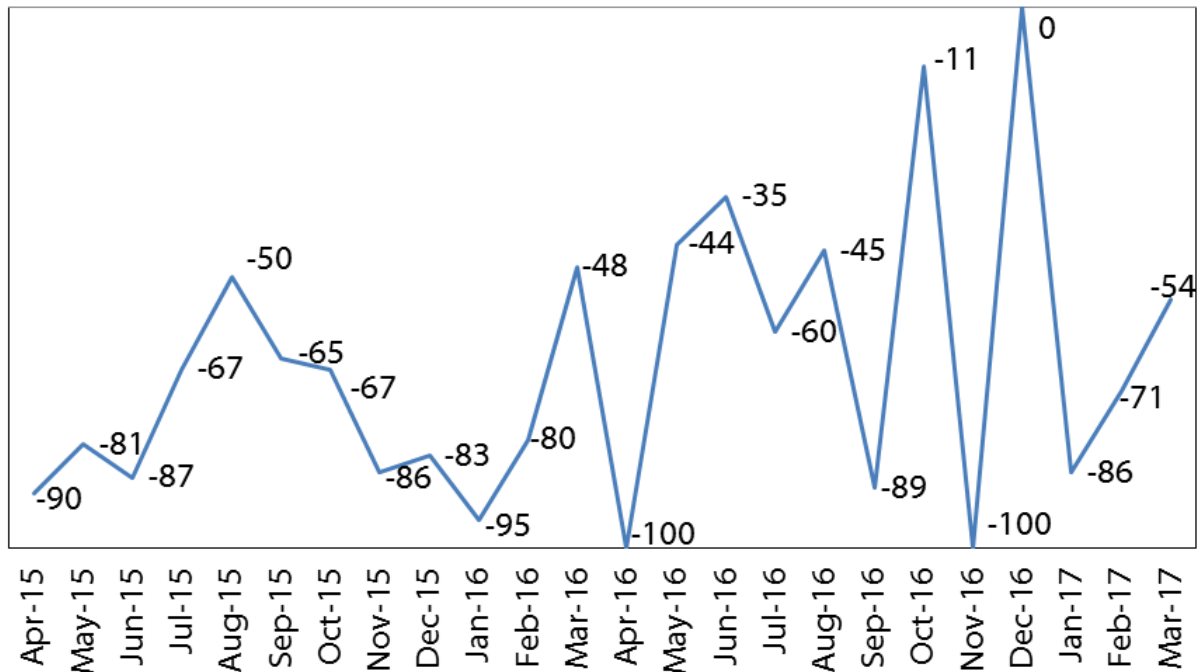
My analysis is confined to news reports where Muslims were the main protagonist on the major newscast of three television outlets—*CBS Evening News*, Fox’s *Special Report*, and *NBC Nightly News*. Each news report was evaluated for its tone—positive, neutral, or negative. Negative stories include stories where the protagonist is criticized directly, as well as stories where an event, trend, or development reflects unfavorably on the protagonist. Except where individual news outlets are identified, the percentages presented in this paper are the combined averages for the three outlets.

The research is based on data provided by Media Tenor, a firm that specializes in collecting and coding news content. Media Tenor’s coding of news stories is conducted by trained full-time employees who visually evaluate the content. The news stories evaluated for this paper are those which were five seconds or more in length.

## Muslims on American Television News: Negative, Violent, and Voiceless

American television news coverage of Muslims is negative in tone. How negative? Over the two-year period from April 1, 2015 to March 31, 2017, there was not a single month where TV news stories with Muslims as the protagonist was more positive than negative (see Figure 1). And in more than 40 percent of those months, negative stories outnumbered positive stories by four-to-one or more.

**Figure 1. Tone of Muslims' Coverage: CBS, Fox, and NBC**  
tone of coverage  
(percentage positive coverage minus percentage negative coverage)

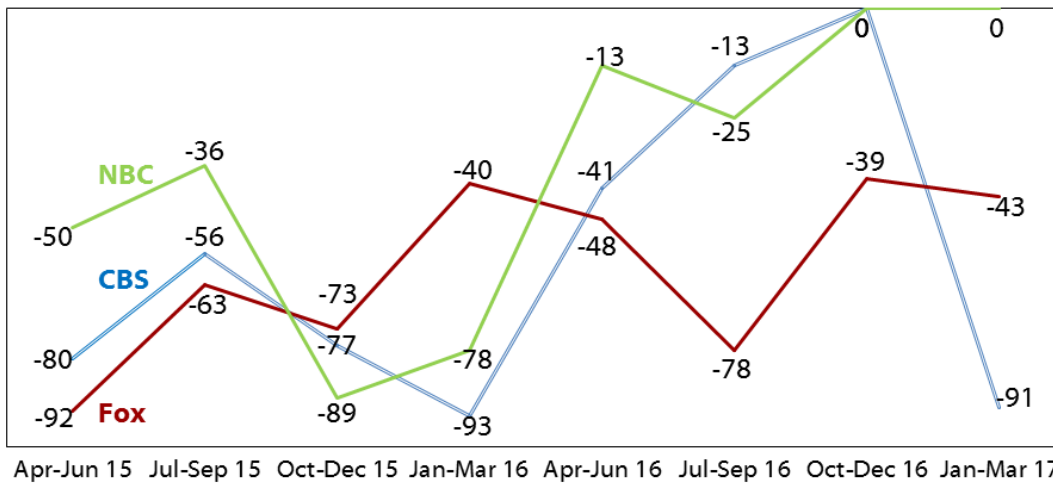


Source: Media Tenor. Figure based only on news reports that were positive or negative in tone. Excludes reports that were neutral in tone, which accounted for approximately 20 percent of reports.

When the coverage is broken down by news outlet, Fox's coverage was the most negative (see Figure 2). During the two-year period being examined, Fox's coverage was the most negative in five of the eight quarters, compared with two quarters for CBS and one quarter for NBC. Nevertheless, the three networks did have one thing in common. There was not a single quarter on any network where the positive stories outnumbered the negative ones.

**Figure 2. Tone of Coverage by Network**

tone of coverage  
(percentage positive coverage minus percentage negative coverage)

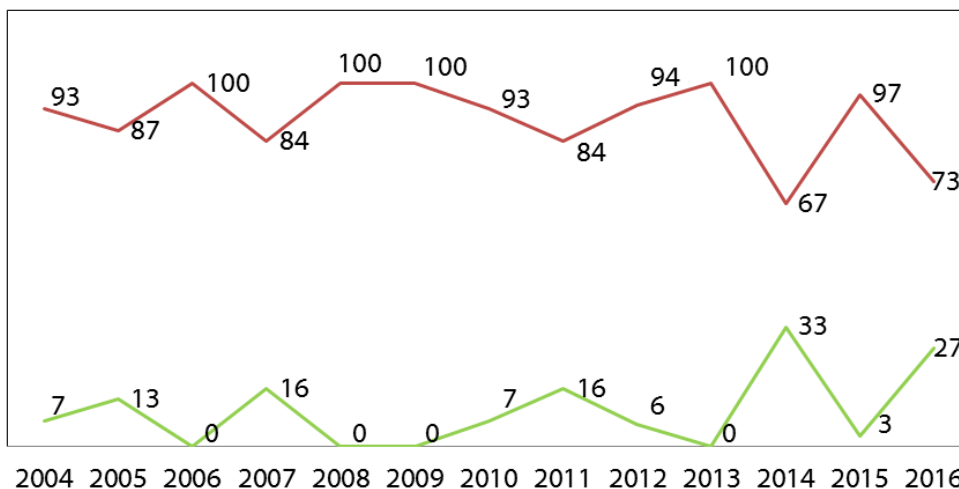


Source: Media Tenor. Excludes reports that were neutral in tone, which accounted for approximately 20 percent of reports.

Coverage of Muslims during the past two years is consistent with the longer trend, as Figure 3 indicates. Since 2004, there has not been a single year in which television coverage of Muslims has been positive on balance. That is true of each network in our study. Every year, whether it was on CBS, Fox, or NBC, the coverage was more negative than positive.<sup>7</sup> Fox's most favorable coverage of Muslims coincided with the years of Republican George W. Bush's presidency. After Democrat Barack Obama became president, Fox's Muslim coverage plunged deeply into negative territory, and stayed there. For CBS and NBC, the most favorable coverage occurred in the final years of the Obama presidency.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 3. TV Coverage of Muslims, 2004-2016**

tone of coverage (in percentages)  
— positive — negative

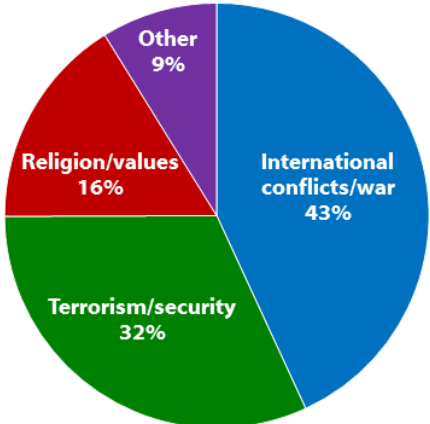


Source: Media Tenor. Percentages are the average for CBS, Fox, and NBC. News stories that were neutral in tone are excluded.

When Muslims are covered in television news, what topics dominate? To address that question, we examined news coverage during a 13-month period in 2015-2016. War and terrorist activity stand out as the focus (see Figure 4). Together, they accounted for roughly 75 percent of the coverage. Such stories focused primarily on ISIS/Daesh. It was the protagonist in roughly three-fifths of all Muslim-centered stories. The Taliban and other militant groups accounted for most of the rest.

**Figure 4. Topics of Muslim News Coverage**

percentage of news coverage

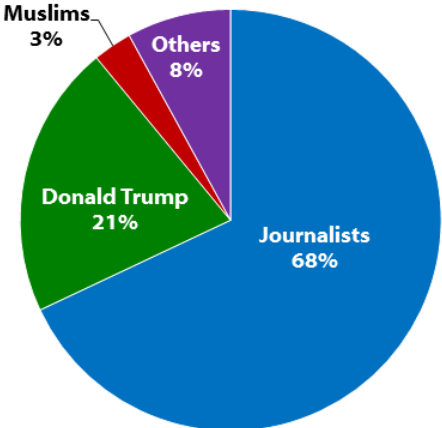


Source: Media Tenor. Based on 1,382 reports on Muslim protagonists on CBS, Fox, and NBC from July 1, 2015-August 31, 2016.

Who speaks for or about Muslims in the news? During the same time period, we found that Muslims themselves accounted for only a tiny proportion of words that were aired (see Figure 5). They spoke a mere 3 percent of the time. Donald Trump was afforded seven times that amount of exposure, accounting for 21 percent of the words spoken about Muslims. Journalists had the largest say. Their sound bites accounted for 68 percent of the words.

**Figure 5. Voices Heard When Muslims Were in the News**

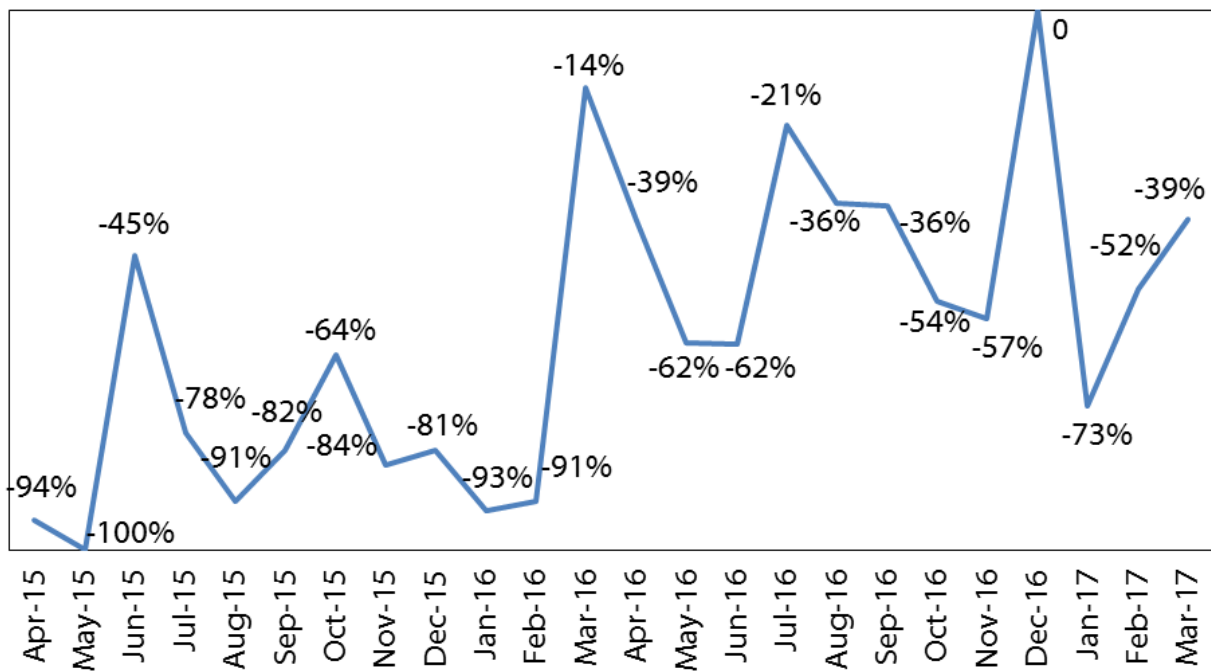
percentage of air time



Source: Media Tenor. Based on 1,382 reports on Muslim protagonists on CBS, Fox, and NBC News from July 1, 2015-August 31, 2016.

Of the roughly 21 million refugees worldwide today, more than half are Muslims. News stories where the protagonist was simply “refugees” rather than “Muslims” were also negative in tone. During the two-year period from April 2015 through March 2017, there was not a single month where the combined coverage of refugees on CBS, Fox, and NBC was more positive than negative in tone (see Figure 6). Refugees received substantially more negative than positive coverage on all three networks, although there was one small but notable difference. Whereas CBS and NBC ran a few human interest stories on individual refugees, Fox carried virtually no stories of this type during the two-year period.

**Figure 6. Coverage of Refugees on CBS, Fox, and NBC**  
 tone of coverage  
 (percentage positive coverage minus percentage negative coverage)



Source: Media Tenor. Figures are the average for the three networks. Excludes reports that were neutral in tone, which accounted for approximately 20 percent of reports.

## Why the News Coverage Matters

Public affairs is a secondhand experience for most Americans. Only a tiny fraction of them have the opportunity to directly witness policymaking or those impacted. To be sure, they are not hapless recipients of the media’s images. Yet, as political scientist Bernard Cohen put it, the press “is stunningly successful in telling [people] what to think about.”<sup>9</sup>

The media are particularly influential when the subject is beyond people’s direct experience, which is the case for most Americans with Muslims. A February 2017 Pew Research Center survey found that only 45 percent of Americans say they



personally know even a single person who is Muslim.<sup>10</sup> Those who do know a Muslim are substantially more likely to have a favorable view of Muslims.<sup>11</sup> A Brookings Institution study found, for example, that 59 percent of Republicans who know a Muslim have a positive view of Muslims, compared with a mere 22 percent of those who don't know a Muslim.<sup>12</sup>

So, whether they want the duty or not, American news outlets carry a large share of the responsibility of informing the public about the Muslim community. Research indicates that “parasocial contact” through the media contributes, for better or worse, to what people think of those—the “others”—with whom they have little or no direct contact.<sup>13</sup>

And what do Americans think of Muslims? Large numbers of them are suspicious of nearly everything about them. The Gallup organization defines Islamophobia as “an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life.” Gallup tracking surveys show an increase in such sentiments.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, FBI statistics show assaults against Muslims in the United States to be at a level not seen since the wake of 9/11.<sup>15</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center has reported a near tripling of the growth in anti-Muslim hate groups and a significant increase in Muslim hate crimes since Trump's election.<sup>16</sup> A recent Pew survey found that 49 percent of Americans believe that “at least some Muslims in the U.S. are anti-American” while 11 percent claim that “most” or “almost all” Muslims in America are anti-American.<sup>17</sup>

The facts tell a very different story. Out of a global Muslim community of over 1.6 billion people, the United States has resettled 784,000 refugees since 2001. Of those, only three refugees have been arrested for terrorist activities. Of the three, two were planning terrorist activities not in the United States, but in Iraq. The last refugee, who was from Uzbekistan, had a plan that was described as “barely credible.”<sup>18</sup> All three are currently in prison.

Islamophobia is directly fueled by interests seeking to capitalize on Americans' anti-Muslim opinions.<sup>19</sup> In their “Fear Inc.” analysis, the Center for American Progress lays out a damning investigation of the fringe network of think tanks, religious groups, and elected leaders who manufacture a constant churn of xenophobic conferences, inaccurate reports and “civilization jihad” media appearances.<sup>20</sup>

The mainstream media are not fueled by animus toward Muslims, although the hyping of terrorist acts on cable television might contribute to it. Arab American Institute research found that Americans whose primary news source was CNN had the highest negative rating of Arab Americans.<sup>21</sup> The report also found that Americans with the highest unfavorable views of American Muslims relied on Fox News as their primary news source.

Nevertheless, the media's shortcoming is more in what they don't do than what they do. They cannot be faulted for covering breaking news stories, which can at times

stem from conflicts in the Middle East or terrorist attacks. And there's no question that Americans need to be told about the violence perpetrated by groups like Daesh, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab. What journalists underplay are positive developments in the Muslim community and the efforts of that community to forge a place in America, which includes combating those in their community who hold extremist ideologies that do not reflect their values or faith.

In December of 2015, Muslim activists held a public march against ISIS and terrorism. The organizers of the march summarized the news media's response to their effort in one word—"silence."<sup>22</sup> Why did television news not deem that march as worthy of its time? Why do tragic stories like 3-year-old Syrian refugee Aylan Kurdi's small body washing up on a beach in Turkey break through powerfully, but then lose resonance?<sup>23</sup> Why, when the high-profile reporting of alleged sex assaults by Muslim refugees in Frankfurt was debunked, did the debunking get meager coverage?<sup>24</sup> Why does Donald Trump get seven times more speaking time on television news when the subject is Muslims than do all Muslim voices combined?

The stakes could not be higher for millions of Muslim-Americans and refugees—some of the world's most vulnerable people—who could stand to gain considerable legal outcomes, justice, and safety from shifts in media coverage. In the choice between political fear or a welcome to Muslim refugees, the fate of America's civil liberties and ideals is also intertwined.

## Acknowledgments

All my gratitude to the Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center for the honor of this fellowship and opportunity to conduct research inspired by work with Malala Yousafzai and the gifted Malala Fund team. I'm thankful to the Center's leadership especially, Nicco Mele and Nancy Palmer. They created a deeply meaningful experience for me and my esteemed fellows Adam Berinsky, Helen Boaden, Farai Chideya, Zack Exley, and Rick Stengel.

I'm grateful for my talented research assistants, Kaitlin Klaustermeier, Dyah Ramadhani, and Shanoor Seervai. These emerging women leaders represent the Harvard Kennedy School community at its best—diverse, bold and dedicated to change. All my appreciation to the incredible Roland Schatz and Racheline Maltese of Media Tenor, who were the best in partners and assembled the data.

I'm indebted to the MIT Media Lab's Ethan Zuckerman and Anushka Shah, and Harvard Berkman Klein Center's Nikki Bourassa as well, for helping explore how this research could be extended to digital platforms and tirelessly developing research tools for us all.

My special thanks to Thomas Patterson, Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. His constant generosity in time, wisdom and guidance will remain the most treasured part of my fellowship. Tom's feedback and direction have made me, and this paper, immeasurably better.

## Endnotes

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 13.

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