UNDERSTANDING MEDIA STEREOTYPING

Rating:

Description: A brief description of media stereotyping, how it works and how it disseminates prejudices. This is followed by suggestions to counteract the negative effects of media stereotyping.

Category: Lessons › Social Interaction › Coping with change

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Objectives

·To understand the meaning of the word 'stereotype' and the term 'media stereotyping'.

·To learn strategies for counteracting media stereotyping.

What is a stereotype?

A stereotype is a generalization used to describe or distinguish a group of people and they are not all bad. However, the trouble with stereotypes is that they usually exaggerate or oversimplify thus leading some people to judge others based on inadequate knowledge or understanding. This results in distorted or incomplete information being accepted as fact.

We all start from a biased perspective because we only have a single view of the world; we can only see what is in front of our eyes, hear what is around us, and read what is in front of us. Therefore, when we are presented with the same stereotypes we tend to see what we expect to see. And we we have a tendency to twist and distort the characteristics of others until they fit our stereotypes.

Stereotyping can be useful; it helps us locate ourselves in the world and it helps us determine our race, class, gender, religion, or culture etc. As we grow older we should be able to move beyond our own prejudices and biases by using critical thinking skills to form more balanced opinions. We learn to process the information and draw conclusions from experience and knowledge. The trouble with media stereotyping is, that we, the audience members, are bombarded with more information than we are easily able process. We are then unable to sort the fact from the fiction because other people's biased opinions are presented and represented as undeniable truth. Human

beings like, want, and need to categorize the world around them into neat little groups, because it helps us determine our place in the world and media stereotyping taps into this need.

Media stereotyping

The media uses stereotypes to define people in ways that are easy for viewers or readers to categorize. These media stereotypes reduce groups of people to one dimension with no real variety, depth or complexity. And when the media engages in continual stereotyping, they brand certain groups of people in a way that does not portray the reality. The stereotyping of Muslims that has been rampant since the beginning of the war on terror has thrust Islam and Muslims into the global media forefront. Coverage has increased dramatically and Islam and Muslims have been framed in a very unfavorable light.

The rhetoric involved with the war on terror led to an increase in the fear and hatred of Islam which in turn led to a rise in media coverage often portraying Muslims as backwards and prone to violence, and Islam as being inherently problematic. According to an Islamophobia Roundtable held in Stockholm in 2014, the regular association of Islam and Muslims with crime and terror in the media and on the internet is vital to the spread of Islamophobia[1].   Media stereotyping allows the readers and viewers to jump to the assumption that terrorists who claim to be Muslim are somehow representing all Muslims and an entire way of life. When these generalizations are reflected onto the entire and diverse Muslim communities around the world it results in widespread anti-Muslim sentiments in the form of hate speech, hate crimes, and discrimination.

There is a difference between Islam and the actions of some Muslims, and as Muslims we are able to see and understand this.   However, those who have no interactions or relationships with Muslims are unable to see the difference especially when the media is framing world events in such a way that the words terrorist and Muslim become interchangeable. Muslims tend to be overwhelmingly framed in a negative light and Islam portrayed as a violent religion.[2] Word choice is a fundamental aspect of media framing and contributes to the spread of prejudice.   The use of inequitable language and a focus on negative references presents us with a version of reality that bears little resemblance to the truth.

What can non-Muslims do to prevent media stereotyping?

1.Fact check. Do not believe everything you read or hear. Research the facts.

2.Mind your language. Do no use expressions such as Islamic terrorism or Muslim terrorist.

3.Be informed. Make an effort of learn the basics of Islam.

4.Meet a Muslim. Try to interact with a Muslim at work or in your neighborhood.

5. Challenge stereotypes. When you hear Islamophobic comments challenge them.

6. Respect diversity. Avoid labels and allow people to be themselves with a range of cultural practices and customs.

Learn about the use of language in the media and how language can construct social realities.

What can Muslims do to counteract media stereotyping?

1. Offer resources to educate the media and the general public.

2. Distribute pamphlets and books at community centers and libraries.

3. Organize meetings with local government and media outlets.

4. Write letters and opinion pieces for local newspapers.

5. Help to organize an open day at your local mosque or Islamic center.

6. Invite non-Muslims to lectures about Islam or to mosque gatherings.

7. Invite your non-Muslim neighbors to your home or your Eid celebrations.

8. Join local charities thereby emphasizing Islam's dedication to social justice.

9. Utilize social media platforms. Publicize the extraordinary things Muslims are doing in their local communities.

10. Train Muslim spokespeople to interact with the media to ensure that comments are not deliberately taken out of context.

More than 1000 young Muslims aged 15 years and above from the UK, the USA and Australia report in interviews that negative reporting about Islam and Muslims is unfair, humiliating and frustrating.[3] And it is fair to say that Muslims of all ages suffer when they continually see their way of life being vilified, or read about responsibility being attributed to them for the many atrocities perpetrated across the globe. Being strong in the face of adversity is much easier to say then it is to do. The suggestions above will help to dispel many of the myths circulating about Islam but meanwhile we have to practice patience. We can reinforce our mental and spiritual well-being in the following ways:

1. Strengthening our connection to God; pray on time, supplicate often, and contemplate the names of God.

2. Try to emulate the patience and forbearance of the Prophets who certainly faced greater hardships than we do today.

3. Accept that all power and strength comes from God alone; He is the Most Wise and able to see the big picture.

4. Be certain that if Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, were among us we would not be ashamed of our Islamic identity and practices.

Footnotes:

[1] https://issuu.com/drchrisallen/docs/summary_roundtable_10_june_2014

[2] http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1748048516656305

[3] The University of South Australia's International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding.

The web address of this article:

https://www.newmuslims.com/index.php/articles/348/understanding-media-stereotyping