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# Summary Brief

## Reframing the Discourse: Advertising Rhetoric Fails to Combat Islamophobia

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*It can be argued that the rising tide of crimes against Muslims and mosques, and the increasing level of discourse on Islamic issues can be pointed to as evidence of a rise in Islamophobia. In response, the Council on American-Islamic Relations has initiated an advertising campaign to reframe the discourse to "Muslim as American." Instead, using terror management theory as a base, and relying on the qualitative method of applying literary criticism to advertising critique prescribed by Stern (1989), this qualitative research finds the ads reinforce cultural worldviews that frame Muslims as "other" and may result in a deeper divide between Christians and Muslims.*

### Introduction

In an interview, the legislative director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) argues that anti-Muslim sentiment is pervasive in American culture (National Public Radio 2010). CAIR has tracked vandalism and arson committed against mosques, the Muslim place of worship, and found it has climbed from a one incident-per-month rate at the beginning of 2010 to 12 crimes per month by that fall (National Public Radio 2010). At the same time, political rhetoric has heated up. Most notably, the potential construction of a Muslim community center two blocks from the site of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the burning of the Qur'an, the Islamic holy book, by Christian clerics, and Congressional hearings on the radicalization of American Muslims.

With anti-Islamic sentiment seemingly on the rise, CAIR produced two public service announcements (PSAs) to position Muslim-Americans as principally Americans (Council on American-Islamic Relations 2010). The ads feature Muslim-Americans reflecting on the terrorist attacks of 2001. CAIR's legislative director said, "We felt it was really important to do something that would humanize Muslims to our fellow Americans and then also remind everybody that on 9/11 Al-Qaeda attacked the United States, not Islam" (National Public Radio 2010).

The question becomes, then, will the new marketing communications effort by CAIR have the desired effect on everyday Americans? The qualitative analysis presented in this paper concludes they do not. To support the thesis that the ad campaign developed by CAIR does not achieve its purpose of changing the discourse on Islam in the United States, but rather, reinforces a worldview that Muslims are inherently un-American and a threat to Americanism, this qualitative research brings together concepts of rhetorical articulation of politics (Ivie 2007; Murphy 2003), discourse analysis of media-based rhetoric (Aly and Green 2008; Merskin 2003), and complicity theory related to

racism (McPhail 1991), to understand contemporary political framing of Islam. It then relies on literary analysis of advertising (Stern 1989) and terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986) as a framework for a critique of the CAIR ads. The paper concludes by offering direction to reframe the discourse on Islam in a more effective method.

### The Framing of Islam

In his first words to a stunned American people on the evening of September 11, 2001, then President Bush attempted to frame the day's events, and all future violence of a similar nature, whether against the West or initiated by the same, as a struggle between good and evil. Not long after that initial speech, Bush reiterated that the United States was in a protracted conflict between the two (Ivie 2007). Bush could frame the discourse in that manner because he had already established his authority to shape public interpretation of the September 11 events as well as the American military response (Murphy 2003). In doing so, Bush crafted the affective response Americans were to have (Murphy 2003) and shaped American response of war framed in a religious dogma (Ivie 2007).

The framing of followers of Islam fits into McPhail's (1991) definition of complicity as a theory of negative difference in which a belief in separateness is accompanied by a rhetoric that perpetuates the "other" in terms of race, gender, culture, nationality, and religion. Today, the politics of complicity favors a rhetoric that discredits and disregards the words of anyone who does not fit within one's cultural worldview (McPhail 2002).

Some critics argue the characterization of Islam by the media also has reinforced the idea of "other" within the worldview of Americans (Merskin 2003). In a 2007 survey, 32 percent of Americans said the media had the most significant influence on their views of Muslims, and 48 percent said the media had contributed to negatives views of Islam (Pew Forum 2007). In their meta-analysis of studies of U.S. media coverage of September 11, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Aly and Green (2008) found common media constructions around good versus evil. According to Merskin (2003), the framing of Middle Eastern Americans as "other" is made complete by visuals that highlight images focusing on the violent and sensational.

### Terror Management Theory

According to terror management theory (TMT), individuals reminded of their own mortality or feel their safety is jeopardized

experience an increase in negative evaluations of those who do not share their cultural worldview (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986). Negative reactions to moral transgressors occur because the transgressors threaten the validity of the individual's beliefs and values (Rosenblatt et al. 1989). When given the choice between discrediting their own worldview or disparaging someone or some group that threatens the values of that worldview, most individuals choose to dehumanize the outgroup (Rosenblatt et al. 1989). Because reminders of an individual's vulnerability increases the negative reactions toward the transgressor, the CAIR ads describing the horrors of September 11, 2001 from eye-witnesses play into the effects of TMT on Americans who adopted the worldview prescribed by Bush and the mass media.

Empirical studies have shown the significant relationship between mortality salience and reformation of individual established perspectives (Rosenblatt et al. 1989). Descriptions of September 11, therefore, not only provide recall of an individual's memory of those events but their feelings of diminished safety, increased fear, and human mortality, as well as closely held beliefs about Islam and Muslims. If it is true that ads simultaneously reflect and influence behavior (Stern 1989), then TMT provides the framework to reinforce a worldview that Muslims are inherently un-American and a threat to Americanism.

## Advertising that Freezes the Discourse

Stern (1989) advocates a four-step methodology to advertising critique: 1) analytical accounting of the text; 2) analysis of the context through sociocultural and historical perspectives; 3) structural and semiotic analysis; and 4) consideration of who the audience is and what the desired outcome is of the message originator. Examining the text of the CAIR ads finds a narrative approach that attempts to place the viewer in the personal context of the narrator. But the ad's content opens the door to counter-interpretation. The person in the ad, initially a hero in the eyes of the viewer, concludes by saying "I'm a clinical pharmacist, a first responder in 9/11 ... and a Muslim." This act of establishing the faith of the narrator reminds the viewer of the dichotomous framework in American culture of Muslim and Christian. The narrator has become the "other" and the cultural worldview of good and evil is confirmed. The second ad provides similar contrasts when it ends "I'm a New York City firefighter, and I responded to 9/11. And I am a Muslim."

Islam has maintained its presence in the public discourse with every anniversary of the September 11 attacks. The CAIR ads are an effort to quell the rise of Islamophobia by affecting the discussion of Islam in the United States. However, the recalling of the terrorist events has the effect of establishing mortality salience and emotions of fear and lack of security. Ads designed to connect American and Muslim instead confirm Muslims as "other," and Islamophobia is perpetuated. Research has found providing factual information to combat a cultural worldview also entrenches that worldview, while staking a contradictory position does not work much better, and often makes the subject resist changes to the ideologies that existed prior to the correction (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Instead of a Muslim narrator reminding viewers of the events of September 11, a third-party narrative using a Christian describing Islamic friends whom he or she has learned to trust is one advertising strategy that could combat such a challenge.

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