

Lesson Plan: Is All Press Positive?

Analyzing Media and Propaganda about Muslims in Post 9/11 America

Grades

6-12

Subjects

Civics, Current Events, Language Arts, Media Studies

Overview

In this lesson, students will examine and evaluate the role of the media in depicting Muslims and Islam in post 9/11 America by comparing oral history perspectives and examples from current media.

Materials Needed

- *This Is Where I Need To Be* -- Chapters 4, 7, 8, 9, 13, and 16 connect most strongly to this lesson.
- Old issues of news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report* and/or newspapers.
- Reproducible: "Tabs on the Media"

Activities/Procedures

1. WARM-UP/CONVERSATION STARTERS:

The following questions were asked in a 2006 *Washington Post* poll:

- a. Do you feel you do or do not have a good basic understanding of the teachings and beliefs of Islam, the Muslim religion?
- b. Would you say you have a generally favorable or unfavorable opinion of Islam?
- c. Every religion has mainstream beliefs, and also fringe elements or extremists. Thinking of mainstream Islam, do you think mainstream Islam teaches respect for the beliefs of non-Muslims, or not?
- d. Do you think mainstream Islam encourages violence against non-Muslims, or is it a peaceful religion?
- e. Compared to other religions, do you think there are more violent extremists within Islam, fewer, or about the same number as in other religions?
- f. Have you recently heard other people say prejudiced things against Muslims, or not? IF YES: Have you heard that kind of thing a lot, or not much?
- g. Do you have any close friends or relatives who you'd describe as prejudiced against Muslims, or not?

According to the 2006 *Washington Post* poll where the above questions were posed, 46 percent of Americans have a negative view of Islam. This view has been sharpened since the attacks of 9/11

Prompt your students to answer the questions asked in the 2006 *Washington Post* poll with one of the following responses: (a) Yes (b) No (c) No opinion. You may choose to conduct the poll by having students raise their hands in response and by keeping track of their responses on the board, or by asking students to answer the questions on a separate piece of paper and tallying their responses.

Share the results of the poll with students. Ask: Why do you think this might be the case? Tell them how their responses measure up against this national poll.

Ask students to reflect on the possible sources of the public's negative perceptions about Islam:

- Are they fact-based?
- Are they based on something they saw in the news, in a film, or on television?
- Are they based on current events?
- Or, are they based on something that a loved or trusted person has told them?

Use this conversation to get students thinking and talking about the connection between perceptions and the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media since 9/11.

2. QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION:

As a class, read and discuss the related chapters in *This Is Where I Need To Be*, focusing on the following:

- a. Make a list of the words and “stereotypes” that the authors of these oral histories feel are repeatedly used to describe them. What event, in their opinion, spurred such depictions?
- b. What symbol of peace is “stripped of its intended meaning,” according to Adam? Why might this be so upsetting to him?
- c. On page 48, Sabeen Sheikh expresses her frustration with “the news.” What is it about the news that bothers her?
- d. On page 57, Hagar Omran says that he thinks “that Muslims are not depicted correctly here in America, especially through the media.” What is the effect of such depictions, according to him?
- e. On page 15, Hussein talks about his dream of becoming an international journalist. What does he hope to accomplish through this dream?

3. CLASS PROJECT:

Share with students that they will be investigating the assertions, as read in the oral histories, that the media has been unfair in its depiction of Muslims and Islam.

Explain to students that they will be reviewing assorted print and online media for articles, speeches, or political cartoons featuring Muslims or Islam, keeping an eye out for positive or negative images, representations or biases. Divide them into small groups and provide each group with a selection of news magazines and/or newspaper articles that you have collected. If your class has Internet access, you may also wish to direct students to some of the websites listed in the “Related Resources” section below. Have students skim and scan these sources and use the reproducible “Tabs on the Media” to record and analyze their findings.

When students have completed their assignment, reconvene as a large group to review their conclusions. To wrap up the activity, ask students to discuss their answers to the “So What?” question (found at the bottom of “Tabs on the Media”) and to evaluate whether they better understand the perspectives of the authors of *This Is Where I Need To Be*.

4. HOMEWORK OR LONGER-TERM ASSIGNMENTS:

- a. Students watch and compare a single night's episode of BBC News (on PBS) and World News Tonight (on ABC), and take notes on the differences in terms of headlines, geographic coverage, visual images, and words used to describe Muslims or Islam (if any). They can use "Tabs on the Media" for this assignment.
- b. Students research and analyze the representation of Muslims in the media since 9/11 by collecting editorial and political cartoons. Possible sources for research include cartoonstock.com and cagle.com. Students might create a classroom gallery and write a statement in response to the question: What are some typical misperceptions and stereotypes Westerners hold about Islam and the Middle East, and vice versa?
- c. Students investigate the presence of an anti-Muslim bias in the election campaign of 2008. They collect quotes from politicians, public citizens, and journalists to develop a case study on election propaganda and public opinion.
- d. Students research biases against minority groups over time. They create a timeline that connects major world or national events with an upsurge of violence or bias against a cultural, ethnic, or religious group.

Related Resources

The following websites take an unfiltered look at media bias in post 9/11 America, offering examples and statistics that your students may find useful for the class project or longer-term assignments.

Muslim While Flying

Award-winning short video by Ali Ardekani, a video blogger, about stereotypes and media generalizations towards Muslims.

<http://tinyurl.com/6lx9u8>

Negative Perception of Islam Increasing

Washington Post article about Washington Post/ABC News 2006 survey results.

<http://tinyurl.com/nff8b>

Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)

The website of CAIR provides a thorough look at the rise of Islamophobia—unfounded fear or and hostility toward Islam—in the US post 9/11.

<http://www.cair.com/Issues/Islamophobia/Islamophobia.aspx>

FAIR Smearcasters

This 2008 report documents examples of Islamophobic references in the media. Compiled by the nonprofit "Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting."

<http://www.smearcasting.com/>

Obsession with Hate

This site created by the nonpartisan community coalition, Hate Hurts America, looks at the distribution of 28 million copies of the anti-Muslim DVD "Obsession" during the 2008 election campaign.

<http://www.obsessionwithhate.com/>

CNN's Campbell Brown "So What if Obama is a Muslim?"

CNN's Campbell Brown speaks out about media bias during the 2008 election campaign

<http://tinyurl.com/3o6dz5>

Colin Powell on "Meet the Press"

During his appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" during the 2008 Presidential campaign, former Secretary of State Gen. Colin Powell questions the bias against Barack Obama due to his middle name "Hussein" and asks, "Is there something wrong with being Muslim in this country? No, that's not America. Is there something wrong with some seven-year-old Muslim American kid believing that he or she could be president?"

<http://tinyurl.com/59sang>

Media Matters for America

The not-for-profit research and information center dedicated to monitoring, analyzing, and correcting misinformation in the U.S. media keeps track of media-based attacks on Muslims and Islam.

<http://tinyurl.com/fgxob>

Islamophobia Watch

A non-profit online project to document material in the public domain which advocates a fear and hatred of the Muslim peoples of the world and Islam as a religion.

<http://www.islamophobia-watch.com/>

Assessment

Teacher evaluation of classroom participation. Teachers may wish to develop additional rubrics and measures for class projects and longer-term assignments.

National Standards

These academic standards are drawn from the *Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning's "Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education: 3rd and 4th Editions."*

Grades 6-8

- Civics Standard 19: Understands what is meant by "the public agenda," how it is set, and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media.
- Geography Standard 13: Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth's surface.
- Language Arts Standard 1: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
- Language Arts Standard 7: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of informational texts.

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- Geography Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.

Key Terms

stereotypes, media bias, Islamophobia, 9/11, Islam, Muslim, propaganda