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Research conducted by the International Center on Media & the Public Agenda (ICMPA), at the University of Maryland (USA), and the Gabinete de Comunicación y Educación of the University Autònoma of Barcelona (Spain); in partnership with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC)

“The media representation of Islam is repeatedly linked to controversial events and conflicts. One such example is the controversy of the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque,” a local New York City debate that became a US national issue, then a global issue, catalyzing international media attention around this contentious label.” – excerpt from the study

This study is intended to be an initial step towards a deeper analysis of how concrete media messages (in time and location) facilitate cultural perceptions that deliver political language, ultimately channelling policy (locally and globally).

For the UNAOC, research such as this is immensely valuable since the main goal of the organization is to support constructive intercultural dialogue between different cultures and religions of the world. What an individual believes as true knowledge about “the other” is of paramount importance for the establishment of open communication and sincere understanding

among different groups. In contemporary societies media messages are the main providers of the information that develops (for the individual as well as for the group) into the perceived truth, understood as unbiased knowledge, of what “the other” is and represents.

The media representation of Islam is repeatedly linked to controversial events and conflicts. One such example is the controversy of the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque,” a local New York City debate that became a US national issue, then a global issue, catalyzing international media attention around this contentious label.

The goal of this study was to observe and analyze the impact that this “non-event” had on media. To do so, the research teams analyzed online and printed media from the US, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East.



Tom Toles, Washington Post – published Aug. 10, 2010

The story and the story telling

Park51 is a planned Muslim community center to be located two blocks from the World Trade Center site in lower Manhattan. The proposed plan includes a performing arts center, a fitness center, a bookstore, a culinary school, a September 11 memorial, and a prayer space for the Muslim community. It is intended to be a platform for multi-faith dialogue. The plans were reviewed and approved by the local community board in May 2010.

Conservative bloggers affiliated with the group “Stop Islamization of America,” launched a campaign against the project, renaming it the “Ground Zero Mosque,” which prompted a national controversy.

The story attracted national media attention, which discussed the mosque set to be erected in the heart of Ground Zero—a much more sensational story than that of a Muslim cultural center located “two blocks away.” Politicians started using it as a political campaign issue for the 2010 US midterm elections.

The story became so controversial that President Obama made the statement: *“As a citizen, and as president, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country...that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances .”*

Results

The research shows that in the US different political interests set the media agenda. Internationally, news outlets that similarly labeled the story consciously understood the harmful nature of this misuse of terminology, as evidenced by warnings of bigotry and Islamophobia. However, their reports still focused on confrontation. Media concentrated on the sensational part of the story. Drawing an emotional connection with readers is seen as more effective than the information itself.

Additionally, international media told the story through the US media lens: journalists used information elaborated by other journalists as a primary source, which helped to produce perceptions of fear and threat. Insufficient knowledge and the misuse of terminology, therefore, may create a disinformation effect that can threaten peace in multicultural communities.

The importance of media literacy

Citizenship education should address questions relevant to the role of media in multicultural societies. Individuals should be aware of how the media deal with migrants, multiculturalism, and, in this particular case, Islamic culture and religion. They should be enabled and encouraged to develop critical thinking skills in order to differentiate media messages and identify stereotypes, Islamophobia, radicalism, and racism within the media discourse.

For more information about *Uncovering Media Bias: The “Ground Zero Mosque” Case Study*, please visit:

<http://uncoveringbias.wordpress.com/>

Or, contact Jordi Torrent, Project Manager of Media Literacy Education at the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, at torrent@un.org