The Muslim Public Image Crisis

Noor Javed[1]

I was watching CBC Sunday a few months back, during the media hysteria that swept the country in the aftermath of the arrests of the seventeen alleged Muslim terrorists. The show had invited two Muslim leaders to speak about the issue and to provide insight into how the Muslim community was coping with the shock of the arrests.

But much to my embarrassment, the show quickly turned from a mediated debate to an out of control argument between the two men. So much so, that the host was unable to get a word in or even question the guests properly.

I was extremely disappointed. Instead of utilizing the opportunity, these "experts" further isolated Muslim Canadians from the non-Muslim community trying to understand us. Was this our future? Were we always going to appear as angry and emotional people on national news? When would we get proper, media-savvy leaders to represent us? And, when would we, as a community, begin to take responsibility for how we are perceived in the media?

When it comes to media relations, Canadian Muslims are often lacking the most fundamental skills. Few of our organizations, masjids and centres have a media relations person. Even less have ever had formalized media training. When it comes to conversing with the media, we rarely have a unified message, and if we do have a point, we rarely know how to effectively convey it.

Canadian Muslims have had to deal with their share of issues from 9/11, to the shariah debate and the recent terror arrests. But for many Muslims, the public actions taken by Muslim community leaders are often seen as "reactive instead of proactive."

"We simply react and the reaction itself is the story," says Naheed Mustafa, a broadcast journalist who has worked with the CBC for more than 15 years.

She says that her own experience in covering Muslim stories has been disappointing. "I find that Muslims are really insensitive – or maybe just unaware – of the needs of the media," says Mustafa.

"And these are just general observations, but they don't return phone calls; they're not always polite; many times Muslims will say completely inappropriate things which if I wasn't a Muslim and sympathetic, I'd print or report in two seconds."

Jawad Jafry, a media producer and documentarian, has worked with the Muslim community for years. He says the problem is perpetuated when immigrant parents try to streamline their children into "safe" professions like medicine, engineering and pharmacy. This, he believes, enhances the disconnect between the media and community.

Jafry says that there is a reluctance to change. "What is unfortunate is our lack of trying to deal with the issue in a proactive way, we continue to feel that we have been victimized by the media."

Media bias against Muslims is a hot dinnertime topic. Uncles, activists, and youth all argue that there are anti-Muslim elements embedded at the top of the media networks trying to intentionally isolate, humiliate, and perpetuate misconceptions about Muslims.

Sameer Zuberi, the communications coordinator for the Council on American-Islamic Relations - Canada adds that Canadian Muslims see more bias when it comes to coverage of "foreign policy issues, especially surrounding those of the Middle East."

Another media advocacy group, the Canadian Islamic Congress has been tracking bias in Canadian media for over eight years and publishes a report which holds newspapers on the "worst offenders list" accountable for their spin.

Moreover, the results of a survey released late 2006 by the Pierre Elliott Trudeau foundation, found that one in three Canadians thought that Muslims were never or rarely portrayed fairly in the media.

Even with examples like these, the idea that a systematic bias against Muslims exists in the Canadian media is difficult to prove.

The examples should inspire us to begin building relationships with the media, begin encouraging Muslim youth to pursue media-related professions and motivate us to learn how to use the media to our benefit.