Islamophobia and the Identity of the Muslim Child

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Abstract

The process of growth and development of a child is intertwined with forming a personal identity. For Muslim children, this is shaded by the messages projected in the media. How can educators, parents and the Muslim community build positive identities in children? Why is it so important to provide enriching media experiences in the lives of children?

Introduction

This presentation seeks to address the needs and rights of Muslim children in relation to the media and information they are consuming. As a television producer and educational media developer for the past 30 years, and as a practicing Muslim, the effects of the current media environment on children is always top of mind. Of even more importance is the question – what are we as a Muslim community doing about it?

The following presentation will briefly address the prevalence of negative images of Muslims in the media. More importantly it will present in Case Study format three media initiatives I have been involved in over the past decade. These projects give voice to Muslim children through the media.

It is the belief of our media team at Muslim Kids TV, that one important way to build and foster a positive and balanced Muslim identity in children is to have them become media literate and more importantly active voices in the media.

The work we have done over the past decade has had an intense level of collaboration with Muslim children. Children have been involved in almost all roles, including: writing, acting, singing, narrating, illustrating and animating. It has been our experience that by providing the means and tools for Muslim children to express themselves leads to a strengthening of the child’s identity and the building of confidence that can carry over to other aspects of the child’s life.

In the content that we have developed with children, we have fostered a safe environment. Children are allowed to express themselves and they have been made to feel that their voice and stories are of utmost importance. We believe that this philosophy will go a very long way in countering the Islamophobia children encounter, and in developing children who are comfortable and confident in their religious and cultural heritage.

It is also our opinion that when this work is shared with the broader Muslim community and the world, that the impact can be magnified. It is our hope that all children who engage with the work will experience the feelings that they are important, that their religion, culture and identity are important and worth celebrating and sharing.

Muslim children deserve to be reflected in the media. If such media does not exist, we as educators must do our part to encourage it. This is the age of democratization of the media. Within the North American context almost everyone can access cameras and computers to develop sharable digital content. The first two projects being presented were done at low cost. They demonstrate that educators, students and community members can undertake media projects that can have a wider voice through grassroots and social sharing.

Context

Many children are exposed to mainstream traditional media sources including broadcast television and newspapers. The Muslim community often perceives these media sources having a negative bias in the portrayal of Muslims. The report **Are Muslims Collectively Responsible? A Sentiment Analysis of the New York Times** (Arshad, Setlur, Siddiqui) found Islam ranked negative 57% of the time and only ranked positive 8% of the time. Islam ranked more negative than cancer and all of the other religions. Islam/Muslims had the highest incidents of negative terms throughout the 25 year period.

The report confirms that there is a negative bias in one of the most established sources of news and information in United States. Many will argue that the bias extends far beyond one news outlet and is endemic to broadcast and newspapers throughout America.

Children knowingly or unknowingly are absorbing such messages as Muslims are violent, irrational, prone to terrorism, and have values that are counter to Western societies.

A child’s identity is also shaped by the values put forward through the open market of ideas available on platforms like YouTube; Snap Chat; Instagram; Facebook or through the next most popular game or app. At best these messages are morally and ethically neutral often they are not aligned with Islamic values.

Muslim children will develop an identity that is shaped by these media forces along with what they know from their family, friends, peers and community.

Childwise a UK based agencies studying children’s media consumption habits released in its 2015 Connected Kids Report that “children ages 5-16 spend on average 6.5 hours a day in front of a TV, video game console, mobile phone, computer or tablet”.

The question arises – what is the effect of this media consumption on children? Will a media reflective of and containing Muslim children and Islamic values have a more positive effect on children?

As a media producer our role is to develop content. The projects referred to in the Case Studies below were chosen from a larger body of nearly 25 shows and over 200 episodes of Muslim children’s content that we have produced over the past decade.

The projects in the Case Studies were chosen as they illustrate what we perceive to be important areas requiring attention as a community of educators and media developers:

1. The need for positive Muslim role models in the media for children
2. The need to foster the unique voices of Muslim children through the media
3. The need for more and better digital platforms for Muslim children

The following Case Studies provide a brief introduction to each project and video links to view the projects. In the Context section we address the assumptions we held and the reasons we thought important to develop the project. In the Methods section we describe key elements in the execution of the project. In the Results we present our key findings or observations from doing the project. Finally, in the last section of each Case Study, Practical Strategies we discuss what we learned and some ideas that may be applied in classroom settings.

Case Study 1:

Ameer’s Wide World: Introducing Muslim Role Models to Children

https://www.muslimkids.tv/videos/show/3/

Introduction:

13-part TV series hosted by 12-year-old Muslim boy who discovers the possibilities of the adult world. The series addresses the need for positive Muslim adult role models in the media. The goal of the TV series was to empower children through the series host and community role models and to demonstrate the benefits of an inclusive community.

Context:

Underlying assumptions of the project were:

* Muslim children lack positive images of themselves or of Muslim role models on television
* Muslim children instead face a daily barrage of negative messages about Muslims
* Such conditions may lead to feelings of inferiority and the erosion of self-esteem
* Children need to also see Muslim role models contextualized among role models of all faiths to normalize the role of Muslims as contributing members of society
* Some Muslim children live in closed cultural enclaves. These children need to see members from the dominant culture positively interacting with members of their cultural enclave to demonstrate the possibilities and values of a pluralistic society

Method:

* The TV series was pitched to an English language Muslim TV channel and successfully received partial financing to enable production and broadcast in MENA region
* A young boy was cast as the host
* A flexible structure was set up to coach and direct the child. The child was given the full opportunity to improvise. No formal written script was given to the child. Ameer was empowered to follow his own curious instincts and ask the questions that naturally came to mind
* Environments were identified for each episode to serve multiple purposes:
  + Fascinating for children
  + Demonstrating interesting future pathways for children to take as adults
  + Showcasing Muslim role models
  + Showcasing role models from other backgrounds when no Muslim role model was found

Result:

* Ameer’s ability to understand the context, process, objective and to face the challenge and take full ownership was amazing
* Our initial hypothesis that a child of Ameer’s age could undertake the complex task of hosting a TV series was confirmed. We were convinced that when children are given opportunities and challenges they find within themselves the skills and talents to meet the challenge. We believe this is enabled by providing a safe and nurturing environment during the production. Ameer had no previous acting experience
* Children have an inherent understanding of the media. Little coaching was required. The child could envision the outcome and acted accordingly
* We had hesitancy of how the broader community would react when participating in a project specifically for Muslim children. It was done in a post-911 context. Project was received exceptionally well in a remote, predominately white city in Canada. These individuals demonstrated amazing civic pride and the desire to welcome Ameer and the TV audience as an integral part of the broader community
* Through the various exhibition channels children have commented on how much they like the show. Further research is needed to empirically demonstrate any impact on identity
* The opportunity given to Ameer was a life changing experience and helped shape the child’s identity and self-confidence through his youth. This was conveyed to us by Ameer when we met him years later as a University student.

Practical Strategies:

* Programs and initiatives that celebrate Muslim role models for children should be encouraged and supported.
* Teachers can initiate a project where children interview an interesting member of their community. Interviews can be done on video, as a mock newspaper article or as a report.
* Schools could implement a visiting role model series that celebrates and contextualizes Muslim role models among role models from the broader community
  + i.e. visiting speaker series over lunch
  + a colorful variety of speakers should be chosen that can inspire the imaginations of children
  + Muslim speakers should be contextualized among speakers from the broader community
  + Speakers should be drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds, areas of expertise, gender i.e. athletes; artists; scientists; humanitarians; adventurers; etc.
  + Speakers will be asked to make short “child-friendly” presentations about their area of expertise; what makes their area of interest so wonderful (provide a handful of examples); what inspired them to go into this area; what was their life like and influences as children; how did this lead them to their current area of interest; what awards and recognition have they received.
  + Leave room for questions

Case Study 2:

Creative Kids - Letting the Voices of Muslim Children Be Heard

https://www.muslimkids.tv/videos/show/20/

Introduction:

39-part animated TV series of stories written by Muslim children. Children sent in their stories and the best stories were turned into animations to be shared globally. The series was intended to address the lack of stories and perspectives of Muslim children in the media. The children’s stories proved to be a powerful tool to change perceptions. The stories are effective in touching hearts and breaking down barriers.

Context:

Underlying assumptions of the project were:

* Muslim children are voiceless in the mainstream media
* There were no communication channels available for Muslim children to share their experiences with their peers across the nation or around the world
* We observed within the weekend and fulltime schools we were familiar with, that creative and storytelling projects focused on an historical/religious perspective and not the personal perspective from the children’s own lives.
* We believed that Muslim children had many diverse and fascinating stories to tell given their unique social and cultural backgrounds. A story writing contest could surface these stories to share to the world.
* We observed that the stories that were being produced were remaining localized to the schools where they originated and there was no sharing beyond that context.

Method:

* Project was pitched to TV channel and partial funding was provided for production and broadcast
* Story Writing contest was held. Project administrator contacted Islamic schools across Canada (email, phone, follow up, promotion and encouragement to the schools)
* Cash reward was offered for the best stories
* Story parameters were left open - tell a story from your perspective as a Muslim child
* Project administrator was effective in gaining buy in from schools. Teachers integrated story contest as a classroom writing assignment and excellent levels of response were achieved from several schools across Canada
* Best stories were selected representing a range of experiences. Children also participated in developing artwork to illustrate the stories and as voice actors to read and record the stories. Production team animated the stories in a simple way
* First season was broadcast on TV and streamed on the internet with a call to action at the end of the animation asking any willing child to email their story
* Response was overwhelming with thousands of stories sent from around the world. 2 additional seasons were produced with 39 stories in total

Results:

* Muslim children have a wealth of experience and perceptions as attested to by the variety and volume of stories
* Muslim children were very comfortable integrating their religious worldview in their stories and their perceptions of life
* Stories depict in the most wonderful way, the world through the eyes of Muslim children.
* The emotional appeal of these stories has been effective melting the hearts of everyone and building a much better sense of community between people of all faiths. This feedback has been received from non-Muslim educators across Canada
* Project was successful because of the cooperation of key stakeholders: Islamic schools running the contest for the first season; parents encouraging and facilitating the participation of children in season 2 and 3
* Children are invigorated to tell their stories and empowered to see themselves celebrated to the world. We are still receiving stories until today nearly 1 decade later.
* The modality of a contest to invigorate children is highly effective. There is also the need for a shared platform to share these stories. Such sharing celebrates community and builds a child’s self-esteem through even the act of participating and celebrating the success of others.

Practical Strategies:

* Similar contest can be held throughout the year - we are launching 2 Ramadan contests (Tell your favorite Ramadan story; Share your insights about the Quran)
  + Project administrator will contact Islamic schools (email, phone, follow up, promotion and encouragement to the schools)
  + Cash reward is offered for the best stories
  + Schools are requested to integrated story contest as a classroom writing assignment
  + Educator’s are a key to empowering the children to participate and thereby critical to the success of such initiatives
  + Schools will be notified of the contest winners to celebrate the accomplishment of the child
  + Stories will be narrated by children and animated in a simple way
  + Stories will be shown on Muslim Kids TV on each day during Ramadan.
* Schools in a city or a state or as participants at forums like ISNA Education Forum can run similar contests to build a collective Muslim identity among children
* Partnerships can be made with external specialists with technical skills to facilitate similar projects i.e. older youth in the community with media skills; NGOs focusing on education; local educational TV channel. The partnerships can open new experiences in the classroom and provide a broader depth to student learning and engagement

Case Study 3:

Muslim Kids TV - Providing a place and voice online for Muslim children

https://www.muslimkids.tv/

Introduction:

Muslim Kids TV is a digital platform developed to address the severe shortage of digital resources for Muslim children. There are only a handful of quality web sites, apps or other digital resources available internationally for Muslim children. There are even fewer which address religious themes. The Muslim Kids TV digital platform brings together the best Islamic and values based videos, games, educational and interactive content from media developers around the world.

Context:

* Children cannot escape the ubiquitous presence of media. Children in North America have on average 6-7 hours of screen time per day - television, web, games, social media
* There is little if any positive reflection of Muslims or Islam in this media thus leading many to believe there will be an erosion of Muslim identity and values.
* There are few controls over the content served to children through social media - YouTube for video content and their other instant social channels
* Parents are at a loss on how to counter this influence other than to curate content that will be beneficial to their children.
* Muslim countries and communities are lagging in transferring the rich picture of Islamic heritage and culture to children. There are few if any media outlets that have been effective in capturing the hearts and minds of children using the digital channels children communicate through everyday

Underlying assumptions of the project were:

* A globalized media effort can be undertaken given the ability of technology to leverage audiences worldwide.
* A sustainable economic model can be developed to ensure coming generations will have access to Islamic heritage in digital formats
* Parents seek to preserve their children’s Islamic identity and will see such a project as beneficial enough to pay for such a service
* Digital content celebrating Islam will also be beneficial to Muslim schools by introducing such rich media content in learning environments

Method:

* Subscription site launched with premium Islamic content and interactive features
* Videos were considered the backbone on which to add additional services: Quran recitation; contests; user generated content; avatars reflecting Muslim identity, etc.
* Children are encouraged to have their own identity and voice on the site through unique accounts; personalized avatars; features to upload and share content and comment and engage with the content of others
* KidSAFE child safety certification completed – site listed as child safe, 100% of user generated content on the site is reviewed before posting
* New content is added on a weekly basis to ensure engagement
* Increased levels of gamification of the platform are in development

Results:

* Reaching families around the world - 61 countries
* Content has proven to be highly engaging for children including daily commenting and user generated content
* Attracting programming from around the world reflecting the rich diversity of a globalized Muslim community
* Attracting interest from educators of all backgrounds – subscribers from 2 recent Teacher’s Conventions in

Practical Strategies:

* Implementing the platform in learning environments provides easy access to the highest quality Islamic videos i.e. no more long searches on YouTube
* Recitation Buddy feature allows educators to easily track student Quran practice
* User generated content sections of the platform allow teachers to assign activities online; showcase student work with a world audience; create a community of learners from anywhere
* We are very open to collaborative development and the input of educators on content and design

**Using Media Projects in the Classroom**

The following are suggestions for introducing media projects in educational settings.

Media projects are amazing team efforts that can introduce variety and highly relevant methods of communication that will engage students. Because of the collaborative nature of media projects, students can choose tasks that align with their interests. Some students will gravitate to the planning and logistics; other to being the “talent” in front of the camera; some students will like the technical and creative aspects.

As an educator, you must consider why and how to introduce media to your school. Is your school setting up a dedicated program or elective? Is this a pet project YOU are interested in? Are you increasing the value of a curriculum objective by introducing a small media project? There are also technical considerations. Does the school have additional resources for dedicated equipment or is the project a BYOD (bring your own device) with the students or educators providing the tools to undertake the project.

Digital tools have a wide range of applications in the classroom. Cameras and recording devices can be used to document scientific processes. In an art or drama class video can be used as a tool to document a performance or a means to construct a “dramatic short”. In social studies – analysis of a news item or production of news features are excellent ways to increase media literacy. In language arts, various “motion picture” narrative forms can be examined and you can discuss how to construct a story through words and pictures. Media can also be introduced as an extra-curricular activity like a video year book or a weekly news report about school activities.

It is always important to consider the age-appropriateness of whatever type of digital activity you undertake with your students. For example, high school students may be tasked with using video in a “crisis-communications” setting e.g. forming a message and doing a mock video interview about a news worthy event in the community; whereas, working with elementary students writing and staging a puppet show for video is much more appropriate.

**Quick Tips**

Media project can be both fulfilling and frustrating

* What areas require research
* What additional planning is required – permissions; etc.

Set the proper expectation

*We are surrounded by digital content produced by highly skilled professionals that spend thousands if not millions of dollars to produce. Your first go around will likely not match this level!*

Plan the project scope

* Start small to get familiar with how to handle a media project
* Plan how the technology component will be handled
  + What cameras will be used?
  + How will you deal with recording sound?
  + Will you edit footage?
  + How will everyone get to see the footage?
* Assess how the students react and respond

Some students are already highly media literate and know how to use the technology like a pro. These students can be excellent assets to the group.

Do you need to partner with an outside media specialist i.e. a community member that is a media professional; a student studying media.

**Phases of a Project**

Concept and Planning

* Defining parameters for the students – format; genre; duration; deadlines
* Ideation, Brainstorming, Creative Collaboration in the classroom
* Group sizes – entire class; large groups; small groups
* Writing; storyboarding; shot lists
* Planning – where, when, how, who, etc.

Production

* What equipment is needed – often a cellphone or tablet camera is all that is required
* Sound is as important as video
* What are the roles of each student?
* Who is managing the footage and how will it be saved?

Post-Production

* How will the video footage be edited?
* Does the educator need to learn how to do this?
* Are there a few students that have these skills
* Do the students need to learn this

Delivery

* Video files can be very large this can create unexpected issues (hard drives too full, memory sticks too small, file formats not compatible, etc.)
* BEWARE OF **YOUTUBE AND SOCIAL MEDIA** – these content sharing platforms are often off limits for educational setting (there are privacy and child safety issues that must be considered)

**Themes and Styles**

Choosing the right type of project is key to engaging and maintaining the interest of students. Age appropriateness must be considered. Research typical formats for the type of project you are interested in.

*Suggested Formats*

**Early Elementary**

Early childhood “streeters”

“Streeters” are the term for impromptu interviews with “people on the street”. The idea is to elicit the opinions of the people being interviewed. Doing “streeters” with early elementary kids can be tremendously fun. Kids will be entertained seeing themselves on camera. Parents and school community will love to see the crazy things young kids will say.

Educators must manage all technical aspects for this age group.

**Late Elementary**

Late Elementary “streeters”

Children in late elementary may be able to handle a phone camera or small video camera. An easy media project is to have students roam the school on lunch and interview other students on a relevant topic to the school.

Photo/Video Science Diary

Children can be asked to document a scientific process on a day to day basis using photos or video. An example could be documenting the stages of a germinating seed or using video as a part of a science fair project.

Video Art Project

As an Art project, children could be tasked with creating an abstract video painting. Using extreme close-ups or out of focus camera lens children can explore color, pattern and rhythm visually. Using only found sound, recordings of the noise at school, the birds outside, the roar of traffic they can compose the sound track to create mood and atmosphere for the video. These projects are excellent ways to have children become more observant of their surroundings.

**Middle School and High School**

Deconstructing and Reconstructing the News

Students can be asked to choose a current news story. They can watch the story numerous times identifying:

* Major theme of the story
* Overarching message or conclusion
* Underlying assumptions and indications of bias
* Factual accuracy – opinion provided as fact; sources of empirical information; etc.
* Level of balance and multiple view points
* Etc.

Students can then be tasked with planning and shooting their own news item on the same topic. Students can be asked to provide a more objective news item or a more biased account.

Practice in Crisis Communications

Students can be asked to research “how to speak with the media”. How do professional spokes-persons and politicians develop and convey messages to the public? How do people speak to the media in times of crisis? What is ethical, responsible and accountable communications?

Students can be divided into two, role playing groups.

1) Media reporters

2) Spokes-persons (the leaders that must speak to the media in a crisis situation)

The groups can then be given mock crisis situations where the media reporters interview the media spokes-persons to get to the bottom of things.

Sample crisis situations

1. You are the mayor of a city and your utility company has created an environmental disaster. Your Council knew of the events leading up to the situation and did not act to prevent it. How do you as mayor address the public?
2. You are the principal of a school and there have been several cases of reported racism against an ethnic group in the hiring practice of the school. A human rights advocacy group is now investigating and there are protests outside the school. As the principal you are ultimately responsible for the hiring committee actions, many of whom are your long time colleagues.
3. Etc.

This project is an excellent way to build future media spokespersons as well as nurturing the critical thinking and objectivity of the students.