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A Violent Reality: Hollywood's Influence On Violence Against Muslims

Leah Balter · Wednesday, June 5th, 2019

I heard the call to prayer for the first time in the United States this Friday. But it was not the familiar, sweet call to worship that I so fondly remember from my time abroad; this was a call to come together as a community—to mourn. I gathered in the courtyard with countless others in a demonstration of support for our Muslim community at Stanford and across the world. Less than twenty-four hours prior, a white-nationalist terrorist [murdered](#) at least fifty innocent Muslim worshippers in two different mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. This is not the first time that I have attended such a vigil; I suspect that it will not be my last. It did not take long for me to form easy connections between the devastating loss in New Zealand and anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. It is with great anguish, confusion, but also hope that I reflect on the state of hate-based violence in America. Islamophobia is the culmination of many factors at home and abroad; each American must critically evaluate the media they so willingly consume, and ask themselves in what discrete ways their sentiments are being swayed.

Great tales of heroic pioneers defeating “savage” Native Americans in Western frontier literature once served as the pinnacle of mass entertainment in the United States. Justifying and encouraging westward expansion, [the frontier myth](#) set the stage for entertainment to play a distinct role in establishing stereotypes and prejudice in American society. With time, this literature was replaced by minstrel shows of the late 1800s. Black Americans were disparaged by [stereotypes](#) that endure to this day. Eventually, Hollywood was born and [perpetuated](#) these myths of white supremacy through film and television.

Hollywood's establishment gave way to a well-structured vehicle of producing entertainment. Just as other minority groups have fallen prey to the mass media's great distortions, specifically in the Hollywood industry, Muslims have faced mounting negative stereotypes since the devastating terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As noted by author Jack Shaheen in his book *The TV Arab*, Arab and Muslim depictions in Hollywood entertainment have been historically limited to “billionaires, bombers and belly dancers.” In the post-9/11 world, however, Arab and Muslim representation has predominately [shifted](#) to portrayal solely as terrorists. The American political agenda has bolstered this narrative.

Launched in September 2001, the ongoing War on Terror, a military campaign against (Islamic) terrorism, ignites fear of Muslims in the American public sphere. Hollywood has played a role in

heightening this fear while [justifying](#) American military force at home and abroad, a role that many scholars label [propaganda](#). No matter the relationship between the military and Hollywood, blockbuster films such as *American Sniper* (2014) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) are exemplary demonstrations of Hollywood's engagement with such topics as the War on Terror. The popularization of the War on Terror has correlated with increased violence against Muslim individuals and communities. The Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism at the California State University at San Bernardino published a [report](#) stating that in 2015 alone, "anti-Muslim hate crimes" increased by 78% for the twenty states, ranging from California to Missouri, included in the study.

Extreme prejudice can [materialize](#) as violent acts. In partnership with various forms of media, Hollywood plays a role in manifesting dangerous stereotypes in the American mind. Even when based on true events, films and television shows tend to generalize and exacerbate stereotypes, as in the case of post-9/11 war movies and series. Hollywood productions support military action, nourish intolerance and fear, and have links to increases in violence against Muslims. Hollywood as a military propaganda mechanism is complicit in post-9/11 violence against Muslims.

HOLLYWOOD'S INFLUENCERS AND INFLUENCES

HOLLYWOOD AS PROPAGANDA

It is no secret that the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has strong ties with Hollywood. Key to [protecting](#) the DOD's financial interests and plans to send troops abroad is American public opinion. Through Hollywood entertainment, military intervention is normalized and glorified.

Hollywood productions wishing to utilize military props, ranging from sea vessels to Marines' uniforms, must first gain approval from [Phil Strub](#), head of the TV liaison office at the Pentagon. Strub maintains that in cooperation with the military, "Hollywood [gets] realism" and "the military [gets] the chance to show the American public something important about military people, equipment and missions." While military involvement in Hollywood has been publicized as an effort to show "[realistic]" images of military endeavors, the flipside to its agenda is revealed in that films are refused Pentagon support if they "[show the military in a negative light](#)." This "negative light" includes showing military members engaging in drug use, sexual assault, or torture, among other actions. Cherry picking military images renders Hollywood part of the military propaganda machine.

An ever-present government necessity, propaganda is [defined](#) as "ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause." Military intervention is not uniform or necessarily positive, as many Hollywood films would suggest. Members of the military have [engaged in illicit drug use](#) on active duty, [raped foreign women](#) during wartime, and committed acts of [torture](#). This is not to say that the military has no positive value; however, [withholding](#) government support, money, and equipment for films that portray negative, but equally true aspects of the military constitutes "deliberately" spreading images to "further one's cause."

The claim that Hollywood is an apparatus of military propaganda is not new. In February of 1990, Lieutenant Colonel Bob Osborne published a [report](#) entitled "Propaganda Tool: The Hollywood War Movie and Its Usurpation By TV." In it, he writes that Hollywood has "played a unique role in molding the American public during a national crisis" and that the Hollywood film has a "role as

a propaganda machine to influence the national will of the American people.” The emergence of Hollywood as a “weapon” traces back to President Roosevelt’s wartime efforts in the 1940s. The newly established Motion Picture Committee Cooperative for National Defense would “coordinate, censor and clear government and armed forces film efforts while...[planning] films to ‘inform and instruct the public during war.’” As Osborne predicted, Hollywood has proved to be a sustainable propaganda machine.

The abundance of Hollywood’s war-glorification films are found alongside a host of anti-war films. Many anti-war films were produced in the wake of the Vietnam War era, including *Coming Home* (1978), about veterans’ and army wives’ struggles, and *First Blood* (1982), about the enduring trauma of being a prisoner of war. They catalyzed Hollywood’s shift towards liberalism. These films capitalized on resounding sentiment of frustration and anger about a seemingly endless and pointless war; the films portrayed war realities and directly criticized the government. While the anti-government sentiment grew out of anti-war movies, no one could have suspected the events of 9/11 or the profound impact that these attacks would have on the American public.

HOLLYWOOD AND THE WAR ON TERROR

On the night of September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush [addressed a joint session of Congress](#), famously coining the term “War on Terror” and warning that, “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.” According to Terrence McSweeney in his book *The ‘War on Terror’ and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second*, this call to action permeated Americans’ hearts and minds; the War on Terror [transcended military operations](#) to become a war of the American *people* as well. Hollywood productions in the years following 9/11 “[came to be largely defined by the War on Terror](#).”

Film and television play particularly important roles in how American society remembers the events of 9/11. Hollywood films are [key](#) to the “process of enculturation and frames how a society develops an understanding of a traumatic event, not just for the generation that experienced it, but just as significantly, for those generations that follow.” Post-9/11 war productions create a “[master narrative](#)” of the terrorist attacks. This narrative [provides](#) an overly simplistic and unperceptive view of American victimization, a disregard for geopolitics, and “even an elaborate erasure of political and historical context.”

The Hollywood construction of the War on Terror was founded in direct coordination with former President George W. Bush, whose top political strategist, soon after the attacks, “[\[met\] with an array of entertainment executives...to discuss the war on terrorism and ways that Hollywood stars and films might work in concert, in ways both formal and informal, with the administration’s communications strategy](#).” The new “war” gave Hollywood the perfect opportunity to expand on one of its favorite recurring [themes](#): the “triumph of good over evil,” specifically with regards to Western exceptionalism. Hollywood’s endorsement of the War on Terror [aligns](#) with the industry’s routine promotion “that the United States...unleashing its military strength overseas has positive results for humanity.”

Productions like *American Sniper*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and “Homeland” are among the most extreme examples of War on Terror propaganda in Hollywood. *American Sniper* humanizes the protagonist Chris Kyle, a Navy SEAL sniper in Iraq, while, in the backdrop, it “[dehumanizes almost all Muslims, portraying \[them\] as terrorists, savages, evil, without humanity](#).” *Zero Dark Thirty* [sends the message](#) that “brown Muslim bodies are [] second class or even lower” and focuses on

separating the American from the Other. As Jack Shaheen [argues](#), “the ‘other’ poses a threat – economic, religious, and sexual – to our way of life...Incapable of democracy, the ‘other’ is projected as a violent primitive mass opposing world peace and religious tolerance.” Likewise, “Homeland,” a thriller television series about CIA operations in the Middle East, “[peddles] a dangerous set of lies about terrorism, American omnipotence and the very nature of international politics,” [according to](#) Michael Cohen of *The Guardian*. Grossing over \$445 million between just *American Sniper* and *Zero Dark Thirty* in the U.S. alone, Hollywood has profited considerably from depicting Western triumph over Muslim terrorists.

Islamic extremism has been considered the “[bread and butter](#)” of popular media since 9/11. On IMDb, an online movie database, there exists an entire [page](#) of movies called “War on Terror Movies”—twenty-four out of twenty-nine of which star Muslims as terrorists. Hollywood’s depiction of the War on Terror [does not include](#) instances of white terrorism that have plagued the nation. “Terror” may as well be [synonymous](#) with “Islam.” Hollywood has been [complicit](#) in constructing the myth that all terrorism is rooted in Islam and that all Muslims are terrorists. Hollywood’s obsession with the War on Terror and 9/11 traps the American mind in a vicious cycle of fear, prejudice, and Islamophobia.

HOLLYWOOD AND PREJUDICE

HOLLYWOOD AS A POWERFUL MEDIUM

Film is an especially powerful tool of persuasion because it can entrance viewers in “[pseudo-experiences](#).” These “pseudo-experiences” are specific to film and television because “[the visual image is encompassing, immersing. It allows for the total suspension of disbelief](#).” As audience members, the events in which we are immersed through film are likely experiences that will never become personal realities. The astronauts, bombers, and special agents seen on screen become the general public’s primary point of contact with these professions; similarly, diversity of characters in film can be the only “contact” that an individual has had with members of a certain demographic. Film thereby becomes a channel for [social learning and shaping](#).

In a study published by the journal *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Michelle Pautz, Ph.D., [writes](#) that, “regardless of the content, a film has the power to shape perceptions of moviegoers on a range of subjects from love and marriage to the work of the government.” Furthermore, film is an enduring and accessible American art form, making its effects particularly sustainable. Not only can film reach vast populations, but its very nature allows it to “[reflect and exaggerate](#)” reality; fiction depicted in film “plants its seed in a ground of truth which the viewer can identify,” making film stereotypes even more lethal. Likewise, Dr. George Gerbner, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, [says](#) in *The TV Arab*, “Television more than any single institution molds American behavioral norms and values,” even though its content is often grossly misconstrued.

HOLLYWOOD AND VIOLENCE

Movies and television not only shape perceptions, but studies have additionally [found](#) that “violent programming increases the aggression of viewers.” In their article “The Immediate Effects of Media Violence on Behavior,” Russell Geen and Susan Thomas discuss competing theories pertaining to the effects of media violence on real-world behaviors. Geen and Thomas [conclude](#) that media violence becomes the premise on which actualized violence occurs for three

predominant reasons: media is capable of rousing, inspiring, and justifying various forms of violence.

Roger Schank and Robert Abelson's script theory, posited in 1977, proposed the idea that human behavior is understood as it falls into patterns known as "[scripts](#)." A script consists of a sequence of short, encoded events represented by an image and a "[conceptual representation](#)" of the event. These scripts, in turn, "[define situations and guide behavior](#)." Geen and Thomas [apply](#) Schank and Abelson's script theory to the influences of media violence:

[W]e may consider the violent episode appearing in the media as a script defining a "proper" method of dealing with interpersonal conflict. Such a definition is likely to be formulated if the violence is placed in a context of social approval and justification. Subsequently, the observer may activate this script as a guide for behavior in some personal situation of conflict and, moreover, place [themselves] in the participant role of the aggressor.

Thus, media violence may incite aggression as a normalized response. Observers of media violence may now add various forms of violence to their toolbox of solutions to real-world problems.

Critics of Geen and Thomas's work [refute links](#) between media and real-world violence, citing that media violence is not necessarily replicated by observers. However, Geen and Thomas [recognize](#) that the observation of violence is often followed by "aggressive behaviors different from those observed in the media." Violence that has been influenced by media is not always a direct replication. This seeming gap in identifying a direct link between media and real-world violence is [explained](#) by the phenomenon that violence seen in the media "activates other ideas, emotions, and behavioral tendencies" associated with said aggression. Geen and Thomas [write](#) that "[this analysis] may also explain why aggression against a target person following observation of media violence is enhanced when the target shares some characteristic with the victim of media violence." Media has the capacity not only to inspire violence, but to strengthen that inspiration against people of certain demographics—demographic groups that are routinely stereotyped and shown as rightful victims of justified violence on screen.

VIOLENCE AGAINST MUSLIMS

VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIVIDUALS

On February 10, 2015, three Muslim students were murdered inside their home in Chapel Hill, NC. Craig Stephen Hicks, a 46-year old white man, was charged with three counts of murder. The murders prompted a debate about motive. Hicks is yet to face a jury in what may become a federal death penalty case. Friends, family, and university officials of the victims say that the murders [constitute a hate crime](#). Hicks has stated that his motive was an ongoing parking dispute, which police have corroborated.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the American box office hit *American Sniper* was released a mere two months prior to Hicks's crime—a crime that was [described](#) by some as a "slaying of three young Muslims in North Carolina who were shot in the head sniper execution style." One month before the shooting, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) [wrote](#) to Clint Eastwood, director of *American Sniper*, about concerns that a "majority of violent threats [they] have seen over the past few days are [a] result of how Arab and Muslims are depicted in *American Sniper*." Following the murders, Abed Ayoub, legal director of the ADC said that the film industry bears some responsibility in increasing anti-Muslim sentiment, [referring to American Sniper](#) as "the

turning point.” Though some dispute the direct link between a crime like Hicks’s and *American Sniper* – after all, no evidence of Hicks having seen the movie has been released to the public – Mr. Ayoub of the ADC [made a point](#) to recognize that “[the Chapel Hill shooting] may not be directly linked to the film, but the overall way that Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiment are moving in this country is portrayed in the words of those who watched [*American Sniper*].”

The Chapel Hill shooting exemplifies Geen and Thomas’s [theories](#) of scripts that guide behavior as well as violence being enhanced when “the target shares some characteristic with the victim of media violence.” *American Sniper*’s backdrop of demonizing Muslims and, in turn, killing them, classifies murder as a legitimate way to deal with hatred of Muslims. While Hollywood does not bear sole culpability for anti-Muslim sentiment turned violent, it has played its part in influencing acts of violence against them.

VIOLENCE AGAINST COMMUNITIES

Violence against Muslim communities is not always sensational. Rob Nixon, author of *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, [writes](#) that there exists a plague of “slow violence.” Slow violence, as he defines it, is “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.” As misconstrued Muslim images are projected through Hollywood and other mass media, incremental violence seeps into Muslim communities across the United States.

In a predominantly Muslim community in Brooklyn, NY, such “slow violence” is stifling the community’s ability to self-protect. Hate crimes’ prevalence spawned the creation of the Muslim Community Patrol & Services (MCPS), a “civilian patrol organization” [created to protect](#) its citizens and bridge the gap between the local police and community members. Unfortunately, “backlash has been swift” against the MCPS, even though groups like the Shomrim, which patrols predominantly Hasidic neighborhoods, and the Brooklyn Asian Safety Patrol have watched their neighborhoods [without such controversy](#). Some far-right groups have called the MCPS “a [stalking horse for Shariah law](#).” The media’s terrorism narrative exclusively labels Islam the religion of terrorism, failing to accurately portray terrorists’ other backgrounds. Even at a time when Muslim communities are [under threat](#) of far-right terror plots, one message is clear: Muslims are deemed unworthy of self-protection.

Violence in Hollywood productions sends the overwhelming message that Muslims are not in need of protection, but rather that America is in need of protection from Muslims. The television series “Homeland” [contributes to this trope](#), suggesting that “Muslims will always be a threat to America because Islam itself is a threat.” The portrayal of Muslims’ unbounded danger teaches viewers that the threat of Islam [persists](#)—that “there is always someone who wants to hurt America.” Though it may seem insignificant, especially in comparison with the murder of three young Muslim students, the incremental violence faced by Muslim communities renders them vulnerable to violence that is in many ways inspired by Hollywood productions themselves.

CONCLUSION

As the vigil for victims of the New Zealand massacre drew to a close, members of the religious community reminded us to sit with our anger, sadness, confusion; to lean on one another during this trying time; and most importantly, to stand back up together and fight hatred at home and abroad.

Hollywood productions have played an unfortunate role in mounting violence against Muslims in the United States. Its glorification of the War on Terror has resulted in disastrous public opinion regarding the value, surveillance, and banning of Muslim bodies. Capable of exciting both positive and negative outcomes, it is important to be wary of the potential for greatly devastating impacts. In post-9/11 America, Hollywood's propaganda productions are defined not just by military glory, but also by Muslim terror. Although war movies do exist that display American military action against a number of different minority groups, their overrepresentation of Muslims as perpetrators of America's security is predominant.

Just as Hollywood has the capacity for prompting violence, it would make sense that it could also be used for good. Recent blockbusters like *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians* not only empowered viewers of each movie's respective demographics, but also sent predominantly positive messages to the public regarding these minority groups. *Inshallah* positive images of Muslims will sweep through the media in the coming years, as violence against them becomes more vitriolic and visible. The transfer of ideas from Hollywood to the American public constitutes a great echo chamber—each repetition slightly different and just a bit more resounding than the last.

Immediately following the New Zealand attacks, the spokesperson for President Erdogan of Turkey released a [statement](#) citing that, "We have seen many times Islamophobic discourse against Islam and Muslims turning into a perverse and murderous ideology." As we mourn for our Muslim brothers and sisters, we must also evaluate our, perhaps subconscious, complacency in consuming such vile discourse, even across the world from the attacks, be it in a newspaper or on our favorite Netflix show. Hate may be random, but violence is not. As Omar Aziz [wrote](#) in the New York Times, "Racism begins with ideas. It ends with violence."

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