

Covering the

Muslim

A primer for reporters and producers

By Bob Papper

Jsn't covering the local Muslim community just like covering any other local community? Undoubtedly, it should be. But it's not. First, newsrooms generally know less about the local Muslim community than about most others. With a few exceptions, the Muslim community probably hasn't been established for as long, and it may well have cultivated a lower public profile than other groups. Second, there isn't *one* Muslim community. Depending on your region, there may very well be several Muslim communities, and those groups may not interact extensively with each other. Third, in a post-9/11 world, no other group has been so negatively labeled.

"A lot of Muslims don't trust the media," says Furhana Afrid, a reporter with India West newspaper, based in California.

"It's a challenge as a local broadcaster," says Andrea Parquet-Taylor, news director at WXYZ-TV in Detroit, home to probably the largest concentration of Muslims in the U.S. "We have to figure out ways to be relevant and to be true to the communities we cover."

Even nailing down the most rudimentary statistics on Muslims is next to impossible. The U.S. Census is prohibited from requiring religious information, so estimates of the Muslim population come from projections of other studies. Depending on methodology, demographers figure there are somewhere between 2 million and 9 million Muslims in the U.S. The best bet is probably in the middle of that range, but there's really no way to know for sure.

Complicating the population estimates are some fundamental misunderstandings about who is and who is not Muslim. The Arab population in this country is about half Muslim and half Christian, and most Muslims in this country are not Arab American. So it's important not to confuse the two terms. About two-thirds to three-quarters of Muslims are immigrants, but maybe a third are converts, primarily native-born African Americans, although a majority of those are not affiliated with Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam.

As with most immigrant populations, the Muslim community tends to be young, but demographers also estimate that it's overwhelmingly male—maybe even 2:1. Part of that is the traditional pattern where males immigrate first, get jobs, make some money and send for the women later. But the particularly high male/female disparity is also a result of the African American Muslim conversions being overwhelmingly male.

Parquet-Taylor says along with understanding the community, it's important not to simply do "special coverage" and put Muslims "in a box." She says it's about covering all the various communities in the area day in and day out. In the Detroit area, the Muslim community is primarily Lebanese, Iraqi, Palestinian and Yemeni.

But the country of origin for Muslim immigrants varies extensively across the U.S. The

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largest concentrations are from South Asia (primarily Bangladesh, India and Pakistan), Iran and Arabic-speaking countries.

As with most other immigrant groups, Muslims are most likely to be found in the largest cities. The highest population areas are thought to be in the corridor from New York to Washington, and, on the West Coast, Los Angeles and San Francisco. Although the Detroit area has the highest concentration of Muslims, Chicago might actually have the largest number, and there are also sizable pockets in Texas, particularly in Houston and Dallas.

Texas has more South Asians; the Midwest is higher in Arab Americans and African American converts; California has an especially large Iranian population.

San Francisco is an enclave of numerous groups, including Muslims, and ear-

lier this spring, KPIX-TV produced a one-hour special on Islam as part of its ongoing coverage of the many groups that make up the Bay Area. "We can't do justice to the news or the community we serve if we don't reflect the diversity of audience in our story selection and our newscast," says Dan Rosenheim, vice president for news.

"How do you cover Islam?" That's the question Octavia Nasr posed to attendees at the recent RTNDA convention session on covering the Muslim community. The senior editor for Arab affairs at CNN in Atlanta said you cover it "just as you cover any other religion." This means, among other things, recognizing its many variations.

"Don't use words like 'jihad' loosely," says Nasr. "Find out the differences between the different sects of Islam ... and don't link the religion of Islam with terrorism."

"The best thing we do is to tell stories about the people who live in our community," says Parquet-Taylor, "and we have to be real and true about those stories." She also notes that working with the various communities is a two-way street. Stations can't expect access and response when something bad happens if the station is never there to report the positive and everyday life. Parquet-Taylor says her station's dialogue with the Muslim community started long before 9/11.

Especially since that milestone, people in the Muslim community "are not going to open up right away," says India West reporter Afrid.

What has really helped WXYZ-TV and others in Detroit learn about Muslims—and other minority populations—has been a 15-year-old program at Wayne State University. The three-day program teaches journalists and others

Let's Be Clear

■ Muslims and Arabs are not the same. About half of the Arabs in the U.S. are Muslim; the rest are Christian. Fewer than half of U.S. Muslims are Arab. Worldwide, only about 12 percent of Muslims are Arab. It is incorrect to use the terms interchangeably.

■ Although there is some disagreement about the numbers, Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in the U.S.

■ Muslims share a common lineage with both Christians and Jews, believing in one God, Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, Abraham, Isaac and Jesus. Muslims do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God and do believe that another prophet, Muhammad, came after Jesus.

■ Just as various groups interpret the Christian Bible in a variety of ways, Islam's holy book, the Quran (or Koran), is also subject to various interpretations. And just as you can find seemingly variable tenets in the Bible, so too can you find that in the Quran. "It's open to interpretation," says Octavia Nasr, senior editor at CNN. "Each cleric's interpretation is different."

■ While "jihad" has been commonly



interpreted in the West to mean "holy war," a better interpretation is probably a quest or a struggle, as in the quest or struggle to be a good person.

■ Allah means God in Muslim; it's one of almost 100 different terms that mean God.

■ Most African American Muslims are not affiliated with Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. And many Muslims who have immigrated to this country do not view Nation of Islam members as "real" Muslims.

■ The Ahmadiyya—one of the largest Muslim missionary movements in the U.S. in the last century—have been branded as apostates now by orthodox Muslims. Thanks go to Jane Smith, pro-

fessor of Islamic studies and co-director of the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Hartford Seminary for help on Muslim population patterns and trends. See <http://macdonald.hartsem.edu>.

■ Iran is not an Arab country and has a different language and culture from Arab countries, although it is an Islamic country.

■ Although the Middle East has a shortage of democratic governments, there are democratically elected governments in several primarily Muslim countries, including Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia.

■ The treatment of Muslim women is neither simple nor uniform in the Muslim world. A number of scholars also note that where women occupy a secondary position in society, that role is not sanctioned in the Quran and probably predates the Quran in that society.

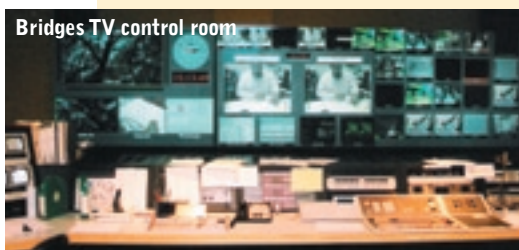
■ Like many of the world's religions, Islam works on a lunar year rather than a solar year. Unlike most other religions, however, Islam does not adjust for the seasons, so the Muslim calendar, at 354 days, will, over time, cycle through the entire solar calendar.

Information and Story Ideas

■ Joe Grimm at the *Detroit Free Press* put together “100 Questions and Answers about Arab Americans: A Journalist’s Guide.” Keeping in mind that it’s about Arab Americans and not Muslim Americans, the extremely useful tool is available at www.freep.com/legacy/jobspage/arabs.htm.

■ Details on Wayne State University’s Detroit Orientation Institute are at www.doi.wayne.edu.

■ San Francisco State’s Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism is at www.ciiij.org.



Bridges TV control room

■ Bridges TV is an English-language Muslim television network that started at the end of 2004. It’s based in Buffalo, NY, and is available by subscription on cable television. In addition to news, the channel runs programs “focused on celebrating the American Muslim lifestyle and culture.” Go to www.bridgestv.com. Thanks go to Ahmed Soliman, senior anchor and producer at Bridges TV, who made many helpful suggestions for this article.

■ Aljazeera, the Dubai-based Arab newsgathering network, is set to launch its English-language channel this fall. You can get a different perspective on the news and story ideas at english.aljazeera.net/HomePage.

■ Most sizable campuses have a chapter of the Muslim Student Association. It’s a good way to get in touch with young Muslims in your community. Go to www.msa-natl.org.

■ There’s a new Muslim sorority called Gamma Gamma Chi. Get information and see if it’s on or coming to a campus near you at www.gammachi.org.

■ Because devout Muslims cannot be involved in charging interest for the use of money, it forces some unusual career choices and ways of doing business for Muslims. Some Muslims at business schools have set up seminars specifically for Muslims on how to conduct business without violating religious teachings. Check with your local business school or with Muslim business leaders.

■ Halal food and Sharia mortgages are up-and-coming businesses in America. Halal food, which is similar in dietary requirements to Kosher, is popping up at some chain restaurants and on college campuses. Sharia-compliant mortgages are also becoming popular in areas like Detroit and New York City. HSBC Bank offers them.

■ The RTNDA website has information on diversity and how to develop it in your newsroom, as well as links to a number of Arab organizations that can supply information. Go to www.rtna.org.

■ The Stanley Foundation, which sponsored a session on covering Muslims at RTNDA@NAB, has various materials on its website about diversity and Muslims. Go to www.stanleyfoundation.org.

■ The Muslim Public Affairs Council has useful material at www.mpac.org.

■ The Islamic Circle of North America has a toll-free number to report bias and hate crimes against Muslims. Go to www.icna.org/icna.

■ The Council of American-Islamic Relations also tracks hate crimes against Muslims. Go to www.cair-net.org.

■ The National Conference for Community and Justice used to be the National Conference of Christians and Jews and still works to promote understanding among various groups. Go to www.nccj.org.

■ You can find a searchable English translation of the Quran at www.hti.umich.edu/k/koran.

about the people, cultures and issues facing the city.

Ann Slawnik, director of the Detroit Orientation Institute, figures that 1,200 to 1,500 people have been through the program since it started in 1991. Slawnik isn’t aware of anything as comprehensive available anywhere else in the country, but it’s something that a station or a group of stations could probably put together with a local university in most television markets.

Rosenheim worked with San Francisco State’s Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism to conduct an audit of the station’s newscasts, including the use of experts and other people in regular soundbites. “Does our air look like the Bay Area?” Rosenheim wanted to know.

The station also has a newsroom diversity committee that meets monthly to discuss story ideas and better ways of doing their jobs and covering their audiences.

In fact, a station’s local universities may well be the best source of information about many of the ethnic and religious groups in a given community as well as diverse story ideas and people. Most sizable schools have a wide range of experts on religion, ethnic groups and culture; student organizations include almost every conceivable interest group; and diverse interns could bring cultural expertise and contacts into the newsroom.

“The bottom line is just telling stories about people in your community,” says Parquet-Taylor. “In the end, everybody wants to be treated with dignity and respect.” And every group is interested in the quality of their kids’ education, health care and the economy. Along with whatever religion or ethnic group they may represent, they’re also Little League dads, soccer moms and concerned parents and taxpayers.

“It’s three steps forward and two steps back,” says Rosenheim. “It’s not a straight line, but if we don’t make a concerted effort, we tend to do what we’ve always done.”—Bob Papper is professor of telecommunications at Ball State University and oversees the RTNDA/Ball State University Annual Survey of radio and television news.