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Using PSAs (Public Service Announcements) to Alter Perceptions About Islam: Students in “Arabs & Muslims in the Media”

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Lack of awareness about what Islam is and how its followers are religiously motivated to act, coupled with heightened tensions during the 2016 presidential campaign about the patriotism of American Muslims, led me to offer “Arabs and Muslims in the Media” as a first-time offering this semester. The twenty-one students who registered for the seminar include seven who have yet to declare a major, nine who registered for credit through the Critical Identities Studies (CRIS) Program, first-year Beloiters, graduating seniors, an exchange student from Ireland, and four born into Muslim households. Both of my teaching assistants had taken a minimum of one course with me that featured at least one section on the teachings or rituals of the world’s fastest growing religion.

“Arabs and Muslims in the Media” was the first exposure to Islam, or to any of the daily realities of Muslims, for the majority of the class. We opened the seminar by engaging with Linda Martin Alcoff’s “The Problem of Speaking For Others,” an essay that challenged students to reflect upon their own positionality and privilege as they approached the two major assignments: a 200-word entry for this blog and a PSA about Islam and/or Muslims. Later in the first week, the class raised questions about the essay and their own insecurity about appearing to “speak” for followers of Islam. The sentiments of one student sums up the concerns of the rest: “I never thought about the impact of my own words on this level before, or how wrong we can be about what we think we know. I’m worried that I am not qualified to

complete the final assignment.”

To address such concerns, students received a brief survey of Islamic history and the emergence of Muslim communities in the U.S., along with an introduction to beliefs and practices, and the role of gender and sexuality, in Islam. Throughout the seminar, we critiqued a variety of visual and written representations. Guiding our journey were two primary texts: Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, and Moustafa Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel to be a Problem: Being Young and Arab in America*. Students reflected on the readings in various ways. Ryan, for one, noted, “By reading [Bayoumi’s work], I was opened up to the realities of young Arabs in America. I was able to read the real struggles they face from these negative stereotypes.”

We watched a number of films, Youtube videos, and documentaries including “Frontline: Muslims,” “Persepolis,” “Jihad for Love,” and “The Kingdom of Heaven.” Students were also directed to analyze and review a film, selected from a list of more than 100, whose plots/characters featured Muslims and/or Islam. Interestingly, nearly half the class zeroed in on four: “Malcolm X,” “Slumdog Millionaire,” “The Battle of Algiers,” and “Dirty Pretty Things.” Our TAs, Grace Gerloff, and Joshua Randolph, also created a demo PSA that unpacked the concept of jihad. Their efforts helped students visualize what they could accomplish. While I focused on potential content for both the blog entry and PSA, Grace and Joshua mentored students on technical aspects and how to focus on a single idea. Students will present their PSAs during a public forum on May 5.

Here’s a selection of student blog entries.

Some students focused on the content of what they learned:

Nikki: “Many Americans seem to view the hijab as a plea for help by its wearer, as though it were a sign of oppression rather than religious expression.”

Constance: “The Qur’an states that both men and women should dress modestly, but what modesty means is up to interpretation.”

Sasha: “Many people think that hijab refers to a specific style of garment worn by Muslim women but in reality, the concept of hijab is present in both Christianity and Judaism as well as other religions and cultures, just under different names.”

Alberto: “In the Qur’an, Muslims are reminded that they are not the only people of God.”

Diego: “The term “Allahu Akbar” is an Islamic phrase that translates to ‘God is Great.’ This is a phrase that is used in celebration, prayer, happiness, and many other occasions to thank God. However, the phrase is commonly tied only to terrorists.”

Charlie: “The Angel Gabriel made me reevaluate the way that I was looking at Islam. Though the connection of Islam to Christianity and Judaism was something I had talked about before,

this was the first explicit example I had seen that explicitly linked the three Abrahamic religions.”

Chris: “The religion we have been told is the ‘enemy’ of the West, is in actuality more similar to our Christianity than we would currently like to believe.”

Joe: “In high school, I enjoyed a series of action novels where the protagonist was an American special forces operative fighting to protect American interests from his Muslim enemies. These books contained blatant generalizations about the violent nature of Islam. I didn’t necessarily believe these statements, but I never questioned them.”

Ryan: “By taking this class, I have been given great resources about the Muslim religion and the Quran which have allowed me to be able to pick apart what I have been taught and relearn the truth about Muslims and their beliefs.”

Seamus: “This course taught me that no matter how many statistics you may know, they are not nearly as valuable as discourse, and the various identities involved, and the perspectives that they bring.”

Jessica: “I personally knew nothing about Islam or any of its teachings before this class and the one thing I was very interested in was the hijab. In papers and stories, it is almost portrayed as a sign of oppression, which is not the case at all. I learned from this class the power of personal identity.”

Other students reflected upon their own socialization:

Kirsten: “There has been a call in the West to ‘save the oppressed Muslim women’ because of the belief that Islam is an oppressive religion. When I was younger, I fell for this ploy and believed that Islam required women to dress in a specific way.”

Katlyn: “I grew up in a conservative household, I heard considerable stereotypes of Muslims. It narrowed my idea of women in Islam.”

Diane: “I took this course because I thought it would be a great way to reflect and dive into how I might be able to navigate stereotypes and deep-rooted, false narratives as an aspiring journalist.”

Hana: “I’ve learned that being Muslim and Anti-Zionist should not automatically qualify me as being anti-Semitic.”

Still, others reflected upon the impact of technology on their new knowledge:

Hoodish: “This class taught me that censored media is indeed very destructive. I intend to confront these people by making them acknowledge their biases towards Islam.”

Ashley: “Video, specifically, has allowed me to learn about the different struggles that Muslims

face depending upon their class, nationality, sect, immigration status, gender, sexuality, age, race, and family status.”

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