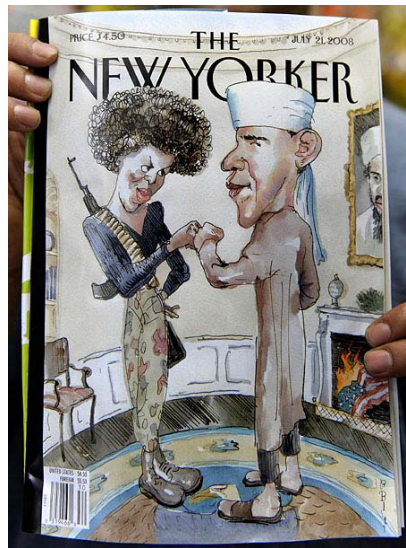


Barack Hussein Obama: Campaigning While (Allegedly) Muslim

Aisha Tariq & Mia Moody

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This textual analysis looks at how the media have fused Arab ethnicity, Islamic faith, and the evils of terrorism and war post-September 11 so that association with one of these factors inevitably leads to implication in the others. Specifically, the paper looks at how diverse news outlets incorporated the rumor that Sen. Barack Obama is Muslim into their coverage of the candidate during the 2007-2008 presidential campaign. Common framing tactics were the use of Arabic words, concealment of information and highlighting specific parts of Obama's biography that seemed foreign. This study provides a historical look at media coverage of Arabs and Muslims, the influence of September 11 on this coverage and the power of it to influence an event as extensive as a national campaign. Furthermore, it looks at why suggesting that a U.S. presidential candidate is an Arab or a Muslim translates into a sinister accusation.



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Introduction

Former Illinois Sen. Barack Obama made history in 2008 by becoming the first African American elected President of the United States. Undoubtedly, the appointment was a historical milestone. However, Obama's victory did not come into fruition without its obstacles. Religion was a prominent one. Many rumors and misrepresentations emerged, but perhaps the biggest one was that Obama is Muslim. Commentators carried out this frame by mentioning his middle name "Hussein," depicting him in Arab garb and associating him with Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan. The framing tactic provided valuable insight into the nature of American attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims and suggested that depicting a U.S. presidential candidate as Arab or Muslim translates into a sinister accusation.

For example, on Oct. 10, 2008, 25 days before the 2008 presidential election, Republican nominee Sen. McCain fielded a question from an audience member during a town hall debate. "I can't trust Obama," a woman confessed. "I have read about him and he's not... he's an Arab." McCain quickly recaptured the microphone from her hands. "No, ma'am. He's a decent family man, citizen." Though his statement served as a respectful defense of his opponent, McCain's words unwittingly revealed a significant undercurrent in the American consciousness—Muslims are bad. To counter the woman's claim, McCain did not state that Obama was of Caucasian and African heritage. Nor did he address the implicit allegation in the comment—that as an Arab, Obama must also be a Muslim—by informing her that Obama was a Christian and a longtime member of the United Church of Christ. Instead, he refuted the accusation of "Arab" with the words "decent family man, citizen," as though the two labels were mutually exclusive.

The September 11 terrorist attacks are undoubtedly the most significant incidents to have occurred in the United States so far in the 21st century.¹ Citizens living in the United States endured changes in their lives both physically and mentally, economically and spiritually after witnessing the vulnerability of their country at the hands of terrorists (Moody, 2008). According to Said (2001), since September 11, an organized media campaign imposes the Israeli vision of the world on Americans, with practically nothing to counter it. The main themes of this school of thought are the notions that Islam and the Arabs are the true causes of terrorism; Israel has been facing such terrorism all its life, and Arafat and Bin Laden are the same thing. Moreover, he asserts that most U.S. Arab allies, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have played a clear negative role in sponsoring anti-Americanism, supporting terrorism, and maintaining corrupt societies.

Table 1. Timeline of Media Coverage of Arabs and Muslims

The Arab-Israeli wars	(1948, 1967, 1973)
The Arab oil embargo	(1973)
The hostage crisis in Iran	(1980)
The Palestinian intifada	(1980s, 2000s)
The Gulf War	(1990)
The World Trade Center attacks	(1993, 2001)
The Iraq War	(2003)

Less than a decade after the worst terrorist attacks waged in the name of this religion, Obama has felt its affects in spite of his real and imagined ties to a faith that many Americans have come to associate with enmity and violence. In the current atmosphere, it is not difficult to imagine why opponents of Obama promote these untruths. In the words of scholar Shaheen (2008), "...they believe that by falsely proclaiming that Obama is an Arab Muslim, they can destroy him" (*para. 5*).

While Obama's links to Islam exist through his extremely limited contact with his father, who was born a Muslim but had become an atheist before his son's birth, and a few childhood years Obama spent in Indonesia with a non-practicing Muslim stepfather, these facts have sufficed in creating a palpable attitude of fear and distrust among a segment of the electorate. Obama's efforts to distance himself from Islam and Muslims are best understood in this context, as evidence of his awareness that even weak links to the religion could cost him heavily in the political arena.

This textual analysis looks at how the media have fused Arab ethnicity, Islamic faith, and the evils of terrorism and war post-September 11 so that association with one of these factors inevitably leads to implication in the others. Specifically, the paper looks at how diverse news outlets incorporated the rumor that Sen. Barack Obama is Muslim into their coverage of the candidate during the 2007-2008 presidential campaign. Common

¹ On September 11, 2001, terrorists carried out a series of suicide attacks against civilians of the United States. Nineteen men simultaneously hijacked four U.S. domestic commercial airliners and crashed them into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon and a field.

framing tactics were the use of Arabic words, concealment of information and highlighting specific parts of Obama's biography that seemed foreign.

This study provides a historical look at media coverage of Arabs and Muslims, the influence of September 11 on this coverage and the power of it to influence an event as extensive as a national campaign. Furthermore, it looks at why suggesting that a U.S. presidential candidate is an Arab or a Muslim translates into a sinister accusation.

Review of the Literature

The Framing Effect

A media frame is a particular way in which journalists compose a news story to optimize audience accessibility (Edelman, 1993; Entman, 1992, 1993). News stories send viewers, readers and listeners hidden messages that suggest a story's importance, and ultimately people's importance within society. In their exploration of news narrative structures repeated over time, Bennett and Edelman (1985) argued that most news stories maintain the status quo by presenting social problems within comfortable cognitive frames that disallow the entry of alternative renditions. Others applied the notion of myth making to news-framing theory. According to Frye (1957), myths are not intentional fiction, but socially and culturally recognizable stories that reassure and attempt to impose order on chaos. News tends to reduce complex phenomena into neat mythical packages that reflect the ideological practices of news-making structures (Bird & Dardenne, 1988).

Gitlin (1980) applied Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony to deconstructing the news-making process. Hegemony does not refer to a deceitful plan crafted purposefully by those in positions of power to manipulate the system to serve dominant interests. Instead, hegemony is "manufactured consent" (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). The process aims at building consensus among the masses that a certain ideology is normal and that any contradictions to it are deviant (Berger, 1995; Schiller, 1973). Gitlin (1980) explicated that those in positions of power do not directly maintain the status quo: "The task is left to writers, journalists, producers and teachers, bureaucrats and artists organized within the cultural apparatus as a whole" (p. 254).

The frame of reference with which Americans perceive Middle Easterners today began forming in the mid-19th century when Western historians, geographers, ethnographers, and Western Christian missionaries visited Palestine. They conveyed their impressions of the land and its peoples to readers and congregations in Europe and America (Christison, 1987). News style in the U.S. embraces objectivity yet professional intent is not always reflected in the mass media. For Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. media this is especially true.

Cross-Cultural Transmission

The cross-cultural transmission between the U.S. and the Middle East is inhibited by a number of communicative and cultural barriers. The relationship between the two regions is fraught with misunderstanding and now with mistrust. One of the most basic elements of culture is worldview. Porter and Samavor (1999) write that worldview concerns, "culture's orientation toward such things as God, humanity, nature, the

universe and other philosophical issues that are concerned with the concept of being.” Islam is entrenched in Arab societies and has undoubtedly been one of the greatest dividers between the Christian West and the Middle East.

Islam has been demonized as a religion that worships Mohammad, other gods and promotes violence. Three factors helped to form the anti-Arab ideology in the U.S.: First, Puritan perceptions of Israelites to the new land and later as modernized Israelis pioneering;²second, the ideology of savagism where those who would not be Christianized were conquered or eliminated; third, failed missionary attempts at converting Muslims to Christianity.

A history of ethnocentrism in the U.S. has further contributed to the misjudging and misunderstanding of Middle Eastern cultures. This is exemplified most especially in Hollywood where, as columnist Jay Stone (1985) argues Arabs and Muslims are depicted as nothing more than billionaires, bombers and belly dancers. Esposito contends the motivation behind such negative portrayals stem from the current national security paranoia:

“Fear of the Green Menace may well replace that of the Red Menace of world communism...Islam is often equated with holy war and hatred, fanaticism and violence, intolerance and the oppression of women.” (p. 35)

Arabs and Muslims first gained national attention in the late 1890s and early 1900s when immigrants began appearing in mainstream publications (Pulcini, 1993). Initially characterized as peddlers and beggars, Arabs soon became the villains of choice for the motion picture industry (Shaheen, 2001). Historians speculate that the stereotype of Arabs that began with Rudolph Valentino in “The Sheik” has developed into the transnational villain of television and film and culture in general (Barsamian, 2000). Establishing such otherness has historically been a fluid undertaking applicable to any number of racialized groups. Although Americans probably did not have a clearly defined perception of Arabs, they used their exposure through the mass media to form a vague sense of Arabs as distasteful (Christison, 1987).

Even today, the media usually portray Arabs and Muslims on TV or in movies as evil or foolish. Hollywood movies both reflect and perpetuate these stereotypes: Arabs are often villains or financial backers of espionage. For example, the plot of “The Siege,” portrays the U.S. military declaring martial law and imprisoning American Muslims and Arab Americans following a series of terrorist bombings. In addition, the “Mummy” includes negative stereotypes such as the comment: “I’ll trade you my two sisters for a camel” (Saito, 2002). By using such representations in news, movies, and magazine stories, the media have fostered the construction of an evil Arab stereotype that includes a wide variety of people, ideas, and religions (Merskin, 2004; Shaheen, 2008). These negative portrayals and stereotypes coupled with the circumstances surrounding September 11 add to the noteworthiness of this study.

Susan Akram (2002) attributes the demonization of Arabs/Muslims to “deliberate mythmaking by film and media” and purposeful stereotyping by government officials and independent polemicists who seek to justify the United States’ agenda abroad. She claims that these actions prey upon a vulnerable public, growing evermore fearful of the “unwelcome ‘other’ in our midst” (p. 61). When describing the media’s treatment of Arabs/Muslims in further detail, Akram explains how members of this group are never depicted as “ordinary people, families with social interactions, or outstanding members of communities.” Instead, Arabs/Muslims conjure images of “holy war,” terrorism, and oppressive patriarchy among the American public (p. 66).

Media Views of Muslims Post September 11

Although stereotypes existed prior to September 11, Arabs were more often invisible in the Western press. In fact, researchers have generally found the media ignored them all together; when not ignored, they are usually presented unfavorably. Arabs and Muslims have historically been characterized in a negative manner, yet the advent of the War on Terror has added new dimensions to the established stereotype by which even slight association with the ethnicity or religion has come to signify membership or sympathy with the “enemy.” A number of studies have been conducted dealing with the media’s portrayal of Arabs and Muslims after the events of September 11. In popular American usage, the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” have been conflated so that either word may refer to an individual who belongs to the religion and is necessarily non-Western in ethnicity. These studies generally agree that perceptions of Arabs/Muslims have grown increasingly negative after the attacks, due at least in part to the media’s coverage of this minority group.

Other studies explore how the media participates in the construction of “enemies” during times of crisis, such as the aftermath of September 11. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr (2005) outline the phases of backlash faced by minorities who are of the same ethnicity or religion as the enemy group: first, the general public scapegoats the minority group; second, the media promotes existing hostile stereotypes, or creates new ones; finally, the government undertakes a systematic regime of “scrutiny and repression” (p. 7). In a related study, Merskin (2004) addresses how the spread of false information contributes to the process of “enemy image construction.” Like Akram, Merskin cites film and media, in addition to government authorities, as the parties responsible for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims among the public. She stipulates, as do the others, that these media behaviors function as a means of legitimizing and expanding political power (p. 158).

Violence against Middle Easterners and Muslims heated up across the country after September 11. In fact, agencies reported more than one thousand bias incidents against Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians during the weeks following the tragedy. These crimes included damage to businesses, homes, and places of worship as well as harassment by law enforcers.

Not surprisingly, September 11 increased national awareness of the potential for terrorism, and the stance the government took during the aftermath of September 11 ignited a broad range of reactions. For example, federal officials arrested hundreds of Arab and Muslim aliens, then questioned, detained, and deported many of them. Officials subjected others to special registration procedures. Also, in the first two years after September 11, the United States created immigration laws that, by design, applied almost exclusively to Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians. The final regulation issued in August 2002 required all male non-citizens over the age of sixteen, from twenty-five countries, to report to the local Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) office for registration and fingerprinting³ (Chon & Artz, 2005).

Illustration 2

Nailing Down a Group



Arabs come from 22 different countries, and are of many different ethnicities and races. Arab are from a country where Arabic is an official language.

Identifying groups by religion presents a problem for officials after September 11. For example, Arabs and Muslims are often lumped together but are fundamentally different identity groups. In fact, the majority of Arabs in the United States are Christian, and Arabs constitute a minority of Muslims worldwide (Chon & Artz, 2005). Because census reports do not track religious affiliations, the number of Muslims in the United States is difficult to assess. The best estimate is six to seven million (Chon & Artz, 2005).

³ The domestic registration program included citizens or nationals from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Lebanon, Morocco, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. However, to date, individuals from more than 150 countries have been registered in the National Security Entry/Exit Registration System NSEERS program.

The various ethnicities of Muslims also presents a challenge. For example, many records indicate that more than two-thirds of persons of the Muslim faith are African American, and a study by the American Muslim Council indicates that Blacks make up as much as one-half of all Muslims in the United States and are the fastest growing segment (Bellinger, 2002). The group's interpretation of Islam includes nationalistic and separatist theology that boasts of the virtues and superiority of the Black race. For example, many of its followers believe the white race, through its own wickedness, faces impending extinction, and that the Black man will one day rule the world (Bellinger, 2002). For many of the members of the Nation of Islam, September 11 was a double-edged sword because they were now marginalized for reasons related to their religion, in addition to their race (Eisenberg, 2005). In a January 24, 2005, *Newsday* article, Eisenberg provides the following example of sentiments during this period. A young African-American Muslim who was asked what it's like living in America after September 11, responded: "It's like being black — twice."

Religion and Politics

In recent years, interest has grown in the advantage (or necessity) of appearing sufficiently religious while running for office. Such studies have compared the modern importance of religion in elections to earlier campaigns' relative unconcern towards the matter. Masciotra (2008) describes how presidents faced "no pressure to appear extremely devout," as one's individual adherence to religion played little to no role in debates or press conferences (p. 8). He contrasts these past circumstances to the present, in which candidates who deviate from the religious mainstream must prove themselves to the public, as evidenced by Mitt Romney's comments on the campaign trail that he would "follow Jesus" if elected (p. 8).

Domke and Coe (2007) explored the same phenomena by researching the volume of presidents' "God-talk", i.e. direct verbal invocations of God, since Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. In addition to findings that God-talk had increased dramatically starting from Reagan's election in 1981, they also examined the influence of three factors that might explain the spike in God-talk during the last four presidencies: war, party affiliation, and re-election. Domke and Coe establish that while the presence of war or a Republican president has historically been correlated with a 20 and 29% increase in God-talk respectively, the level by which God-talk has increased over the last four presidencies is 116%. This study reveals a dramatic shift towards "religious politics," highlighting the growing relevancy of candidates' religiosity in getting elected and maintaining public support.

Certainly, association with a non-mainstream religion effects the public's selection of political officials. Campbell (2006) conducted a study on the influence of religious "threat" on voters' decision-making. Based on an existing theory of the "threat effect" – which states that "whites are more likely to vote for racially conservative candidates as the percentage of African Americans in their community rises" – Campbell stipulates that people will act in a similar manner when the critical issue is religious, in lieu of racial, identity. Applying his notions to a modern context in which evangelicals constitute a significant voting bloc, he argues that the perceived threat of secularism, (and,

implicitly, the absence of Christianity), could have a significant impact on the group's voting decisions. Campbell adds that the threat is no longer conceived in a strictly geographical sense, but can also be conveyed through "pop culture" as disseminated through the media (p. 104-106). Thus, a cultural threat as relayed by the media could play an important role in national elections.

Olson and Warber (2008) investigated the relationship between the public's religiosity and presidential approval ratings. In examining how three dimensions of religion—affiliation, commitment and belief—influence an individual's view of the president, they found that commitment and belief play a much greater role than affiliation (p. 192). In other words, the degree to which people adhere to their faith (in both belief and action) has a more significant effect on presidential approval than the religion one belongs to. The "religion gap" does not exist along a "Protestant-Catholic-Jew" framework, but in terms of those who are religious and those who are not (p. 194).

This was the case in the coverage of Obama during the 2007-2008 presidential Primaries. Commentators often discussed what they called some of Obama's questionable associations with Muslims and donations by his church to Louis Farrakhan. In addition, pundits referenced his middle name, "Hussein," often depicting him as foreign or dangerous. Candidate Mitt Romney's Mormon faith also presented a problem for him in his bid for the U.S. presidency. Pew Research Center found that a quarter of Americans and more than a third of evangelicals stated that they were "less likely to vote for a Mormon (cited in Larison, 2008, p. 21)."

Methods

This paper undertakes a textual analysis of print/online and broadcast media addressing the rumors that Sen. Obama is secretly a Muslim. Three newspaper articles from various key sources are examined, followed by a review of six broadcast transcripts. A qualitative analysis is suited to this study because of the possibility that a single news item could have solidified or dispelled the accusations in the minds of the readers. While the original rumors spread via the Internet and word-of-mouth, newspapers were selected for this analysis as they contained more measured, detailed responses to the allegations. Individuals who sought this type of information were more likely to be influenced by it than those who believed the rumors without further investigation. In other words, newspapers are one of the "trustworthy" sources that could make or break the opinion of an undecided public.

As it is unlikely that all or even most individuals exposed to the rumor investigated the matter in greater detail, this study also undertakes a textual analysis of broadcast transcripts from two major news networks. In addition to first alerting some portion of the public to the news item, these networks' coverage influenced the context in which it was viewed by those who had no other exposure to the rumor. Broadcast news is generally less detailed than print or online news; however, even the broad strokes in which these news stories were painted may have had a significant impact on how the public viewed the issue.

The first article, “Hillary’s team has questions about Obama’s Muslim background.” It is from the online conservative magazine, *Insight*, and is the original piece that broke the “news” to the public. It was widely quoted by other media outlets, including FOX News, as they developed their own stories. The next article, entitled “Islam an unknown factor in Obama bid,” was posted on Obama’s official Web site, under “Religion” in the “Know the Facts” section. This piece was published in the *Los Angeles Times*, and was taken as representative of the campaign’s official stand on the issue. The final article, “Campaign allegation a source of vexation,” appeared in the *The Washington Post*. This story was selected as an example of a major, national newspaper’s treatment of the subject. All of the articles were printed within two months of each other. The first, which was published on Jan. 17, 2007, introduced the allegations that are the focus of the subsequent stories.

Researchers retrieved the transcripts included in this textual analysis from LexisNexis Academic. CNN and FOX News were selected as the latter is commonly thought to represent a conservative viewpoint, and the former is regarded as either neutral or slightly liberal. Both networks were searched for transcripts that included the terms “Obama” and “Muslim” in their headlines or lead paragraphs, between the dates of Jan. 17, 2007 (when the story first broke) and Election Day, Nov. 5, 2008. Three major occurrences that reignited media interest in Sen. Obama’s relationship to Islam were identified. Then, one transcript was selected from both CNN and FOX for its discussion of the rumors within the broader context of that particular event. The three incidents are, in chronological order: 1) the “revelation” that Obama had attended a madrassa (i.e. Islamic school); 2) the removal of women wearing Islamic headscarves from a visible position behind Sen. Obama during a rally; and 3) the publication of *The New Yorker* magazine cover with a satirical cartoon of Obama dressed in traditional Muslim clothes.

Hypothesis

Among the three articles, it is expected that the *Insight* story will demonstrate the heaviest use of Arab/Muslim stereotypes to discuss the rumors that Sen. Obama is covertly a Muslim. In addition, this story will convey the least amount of established facts about Obama’s personal life, which would mitigate his connection to Islam. It is also anticipated that the tone of this article will be the most credulous in addressing the allegations. Because this piece comes from a conservative source, it will naturally highlight those elements of the story, which undermine Obama’s bid for the presidency.

The article taken from Obama’s Web site is expected to refute the accusations that Obama is Muslim, and to do so without any attempt to condemn the general hostility implied towards Arabs/Muslims in these accusations. Researchers believe that this story would studiously avoid inflammatory, stereotypical terms, and instead will focus on those events and facts which prove that Obama is a Christian. These expectations are based on previous exposure to Obama’s handling of allegations that he is Muslim.

Finally, the story taken from *The Washington Post* is anticipated to be neutral in tone, but containing many of those loaded terms that will be freely used in the *Insight* article, and totally eschewed in the story from Obama’s Web site. As a major, national

newspaper with a wide readership, this source will seek to minimize bias yet will include the controversial aspects of the rumor due to the interest they generate among readers.

In terms of the CNN and FOX News transcripts, it is expected that FOX News will spend a greater amount of time than CNN on the truthfulness of the accusations that Obama is Muslim. As a conservative news outlet, FOX News will act more aggressively to explore an issue that could harm the Democratic nominee's bid for the presidency. FOX News' general tone will be suspicious and credulous of the rumor, whereas CNN's will be neutral or disinterested.

Analysis of print/online articles

The first article examined is "Hillary's team has questions about Obama's Muslim background" from conservative, online magazine, *Insight*. As anticipated, this article most frequently links Sen. Obama to Arab/Muslim terminologies and concepts. In addition to basic statements quoted from an unidentified source that contend Obama was and possibly still is Muslim, the author employs a number of different methods to strengthen the association. One technique is repetition. Some particularly loaded accusations are reiterated multiple times. The fact that Obama attended a madrassa, or Muslim school, is brought up thrice. The phrase "raised as a Muslim" appears two different times. These repetitions do not clarify context or serve any other structural reason; they are included just for the sake of being there. Another manner in which the author emphasizes Obama's link to Islam is through the inclusion of information that is both irrelevant and inflammatory. For example, the story states:

Although Indonesia is regarded as a moderate Muslim state, the U.S. intelligence community has determined that today most of these schools are financed by the Saudi Arabian government and they teach a Wahhabi doctrine that denies the right of non-Muslims (*Insight*, 2007, *para.* 12).

The simple question that this statement inspires is what any of the aforementioned facts have to do with Obama's enrollment in a Muslim school forty years ago. Why does the reader need to know that where he used to study may now espouse an intolerant form of Islam? This quote also demonstrates another technique by which Obama is linked to Islam, and that is the continual use of Arabic words such as "madrassa" and "Wahhabism." While the other articles define such words and use their English translations to discuss them subsequently, this article employs the foreign terms throughout. Gradually, Obama becomes as alien as the terms that are used to describe him.

It was also hypothesized that the *Insight* article would downplay the established facts about Obama's personal life, particularly those that serve to mitigate accusations that he is Muslim. Over halfway into the article, during which Obama's "life-long relationship with Islam as a faith and Muslims as a community" (*para.* 15) is examined, the author writes:

Mr. Obama attends services at Trinity United Church of Christ... However, he is not known to be a regular parishioner (*para.* 14).

It is important to note that the article never states Obama is Christian – he “attends services” (even that irregularly) and at best “characterizes himself as a Christian” (*para.* 18). The author clearly attempts to diminish Obama’s association with Christianity in the midst of a tremendous amount of information that tries to link Obama to Islam. The last fourth of the article does contain two quotes from Obama’s autobiographies addressing his parents’ religiosity and his educational experiences in Indonesia. The late appearance of this information suggests that Obama’s own comments on the subject of his religion are nonessential, or unimportant to understanding the issue. It is questionable whether most readers would make it that far into the article, and obvious that the information linking Obama to Islam is given precedence by the author.

Finally, it was expected that the *Insight* article would exhibit a credulous attitude towards the supposition that Obama is a Muslim. While the author gives weight to the contention in a number of ways, (as described above,) the striking feature of the article is its accusatory tone towards Obama’s supposed concealment of his past. It is not just that the article gravitates towards believing the allegations, but that it participates in the denouncement of Obama for his “hiding” of the truth. The article describes how he “does not expand on his Muslim background” (*para.* 8) in either of his autobiographies, and then mentions how Obama doesn’t publicly use his middle name, “Hussein” (*para.* 9) – incidentally, another example of irrelevant and inflammatory information. The accusation of concealment is palpable, and fits easily into the broader narrative of Obama as a devious individual.

While the article in the conservative magazine matched up to previous expectations, a close examination of the article taken from Obama’s Web site disproved several elements of the original hypothesis. It was supposed that the story – specifically chosen as it was by the Obama camp to provide a solid negation of false rumors – would aggressively refute the claims that Obama is secretly a Muslim. This was expected to be achieved through the avoidance of inflammatory Arab/Muslim terminology, and the active promotion of Obama as a Christian. The opening paragraph dispelled at least one of these notions:

As a boy in Indonesia, Barack Obama crisscrossed the religious divide. At the local primary school, he prayed in thanks to a Catholic saint. In the neighborhood mosque, he bowed to Allah (Watson, 2007, *para.* 1).

It is somewhat shocking to see the word “Allah” in the article at all, (particularly in the context of Obama bowing to Him,) let alone in the story’s lead. “Allah,” the Arabic name for God, is no less charged a word than “madrassa,” yet its presence in the article immediately signals that there will be no attempt to ignore, hide, or even mindlessly shoot down the allegations; rather, the inflammatory elements of the accusations are incorporated into their refutation. This is the basic structure underlying the entire story: the inclusion of a false and controversial piece of information, followed by a response that negates untruths, creates a broader context and ultimately seeks to humanize Obama.

For example, following a quote from a childhood friend that “Barry was Muslim. He went to the mosque,” the author relates a statement from Obama’s half-sister:

“My father saw Islam as a way to connect with the community. He never went to prayer services except for big communal events... He was not religious” (*para.* 19)

After acknowledging that Obama spent time in mosques, the author diffuses the potential damage in this fact by relating the context in which Obama must have visited mosques and further adding that his stepfather – commonly acknowledged to be the only person in Obama’s family who self-identified as a Muslim – was not religious. Another example is found in the follow-up to the revelation that the young Obama partook in Koranic study:

“In the Muslim school, the teacher wrote to tell my mother that I made faces during Koranic studies,” Obama wrote. “My mother wasn’t overly concerned. ‘Be respectful’ she’d say” (*para.* 13).

Again, one can see how the author includes information that rules out any negative connotations that might arise from mention of “the Koran,” all the while reminding the reader that Obama was but a child when he had these experiences. The chief effect of this method is the depiction of Obama as an individual whose life experiences do not differ so greatly from those of the readers’.

Though it was anticipated that the Obama campaign would choose an article that put heavy emphasis on evidence that Obama was a Christian, there was only one mention of it in the whole text. Furthermore, the story contained only one reference to the Muslim rumor as a “smear,” as stated by the campaign. The tendency to discuss the allegations as though they are offensive originates from the campaign itself; since this article was written by an independent source, it did not contain such comments.

The final article was taken from *The Washington Post* as representative of mainstream, national coverage of the issue. The story was expected to be neutral in tone yet inclusive of the charged terminology surrounding the rumor that Obama is Muslim. While the article includes information and perspectives from both sides of the controversy, and is in that sense balanced, the author clearly framed the contention that Obama was/is Muslim to make its proponents look ridiculous. The second sentence of the story reads:

The allegation... raised questions about whether the Illinois senator had been schooled in Islamic radicalism when he was all of 6 years old.

The writing reveals the author’s skeptical attitude towards the accusations, yet simultaneously includes the loaded references that were correctly anticipated. For example, after including in capital letters the headlines from *The New York Post* – ‘OSAMA’ MUD FLIES AT OBAMA – the author goes on to comment how the allegations lack “a single named source.” Thus, unlike the previous two articles – each of which utilized methods in line with its end purpose, whether it was to condemn Obama or

clear his name – this article contains conflicting techniques. On the one hand, the author paints the accusations as foolish; on the other, the incorporation of content such as speculations whether the Muslims at Obama’s school were “the kind that want to blow us up” may play on the reader’s suspicions and actually cause them to escalate rather than diminish.

Analysis of broadcast transcripts

The first incident for which CNN and FOX News transcripts were examined involved the publication of the *Insight* article, whose content was disseminated through other media outlets and first raised the question of Sen. Obama’s connection to Islam in public discourse. Both of the transcripts examined were broadcast on Jan. 19, 2007, two days after the story appeared in the on-line magazine. Perhaps because CNN referenced FOX’s earlier coverage within its own segment, the two outlets’ treatment of the subject was surprisingly similar. Rather than the veracity of the rumor, the suspected involvement of candidate Hillary Clinton was the main focus of both networks. FOX opened with the comment: “...the gloves are off—Hillary Clinton reported to be already digging up the dirt on Barack Obama” (“Interview,” 2007). CNN introduced the story as follows: “Is the Clinton camp bashing Senator Barack Obama?” (“Is Hillary,” 2007).

Though the rumor is mainly treated as an aside to a broader discussion of political mudslinging, there are slight indications of bias in the wording used by the different networks. FOX, for example, refers to the insinuation that Obama is Muslim as a “dirty little secret” (“Interview,” 2007), whereas a CNN anchor describes it as “an outrageous claim” (“Is Hillary,” 2007). This conforms to the expectation that FOX would be more credulous of the rumor; however, CNN’s reaction goes beyond neutrality to qualify more as a defense. Another relevant example is how FOX quotes Democratic insiders saying, “He concealed it” (i.e. his time spent in an Islamic school) (“Interview,” 2007), while CNN’s conservative commentator states “Barack has been very forthcoming about his past” (“Is Hillary,” 2007). Again, there is consideration of the rumor by FOX, and dismissal of it by CNN. Overall, FOX spends a greater deal of time discussing the details of the rumor and the Obama camp’s refutation; CNN, on the other hand, emphasizes that the claims were unsubstantiated.

The second major event, which garnered media attention for Obama’s connection to Islam, occurred in June 2008, when women wearing Islamic headscarves were removed from a visible position behind Obama during a campaign rally. As with the first incident, the rumor was a mere side note to discussion of the background and the fallout of the specific occurrence. Both networks quote the volunteers who had forced the removal as having done so in response to the “political climate” (“Just in,” 2008), and include details of the Obama campaign’s subsequent statement and apology.

However, the two networks’ interpretations of the significance of the event were revealingly different. FOX frames the incident as a failure of the “post racial America that Senator Obama is promising us” (“Just in,” 2008); in other words, that restricting the Muslim women from visibility in the rally demonstrates the hollowness of Obama’s calls

for inclusion. FOX commentators went on to insinuate that Obama's popularity and race enabled him to get away with offensive behavior, calling on viewers to:

Imagine if the McCain campaign pulled something like this... Sharpton and Jackson would be holding candlelight vigils outside McCain campaign headquarters ("Just in," 2008).

In a complete contrast, CNN includes comments from an Obama aide that the incident was an "anomaly" ("Obama apologized," 2008), going on to describe other rallies where Obama had been photographed with individuals wearing headscarves. Unlike FOX, CNN addresses the Muslim community's reaction to this event in particular and the Obama campaign's dealings with Muslims in general, noting how "...this is a very sensitive topic for Barack Obama" ("Obama apologized," 2008). Again, the tones of FOX and CNN's coverage are respectively critical and defensive, with the latter addressing mitigating factors to the event, and the former focusing on the inappropriate nature of the campaign's actions.

The final event under consideration as having caused the media to reevaluate Obama's connection to Islam was *The New Yorker* magazine's July 2008 publication of a satirical cartoon cover depicting the senator in traditional Islamic garb. Among the three incidents, this story generated the greatest amount of discussion regarding the persistence of the rumor, and its implications for Obama's candidacy. FOX initially approaches the issue in terms of how the Obama campaign was "quite furious" at the occurrence, then delving into the intentions of the magazine, the public reaction, and whether either was justified ("America's election," 2008). CNN opens its segment with discussion of "a serious problem... More than one in 10 Americans still believes something about him that simply isn't true" ("Obama cover," 2008). Both networks cite this poll, categorically stating that the rumor is false; this undercuts the hypothesis that FOX would spend a greater deal of time exploring the veracity of the rumor.

The greatest difference between CNN and FOX regarding this event was the depth of coverage. While FOX touched on many of the same issues, CNN devoted a whole panel of analysts to explore the issue and interviewed ordinary people for their input. Overall, CNN's commentators went into much greater detail on the mostly negative implications of the magazine cover, frequently using very emotional language:

We have this raw, open wound [racism, disguised as Islamophobia]. And all this does is just pour salt on it, especially from a candidate who started off this campaign with trying to find common ground and to bridge the chasms we all face ("Obama cover," 2008).

Commentators make numerous different comments regarding how Obama should conduct himself in order to safeguard his candidacy, ranging from recommendations to aggressively counter the rumors to suggestions not to make a big deal out of the situation. The tone of the analysis is far from the neutrality that had been expected, but instead conveys a clearly supportive attitude towards Obama.

Conclusion

A close reading of the new stories that were disseminated to convey, counter, or consider the rumor that Sen. Obama is a Muslim provides insight into the nature of American attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims, and the power of these attitudes to influence an event as extensive as a national campaign. In our current atmosphere, Arab ethnicity, Islamic faith, and the evils of terrorism and war have been fused together so that association with one of these factors inevitably leads to implication in the others. Thus, suggesting that a U.S. presidential candidate is an Arab or a Muslim translates into a much more sinister accusation.

The print and on-line articles that were examined revealed three completely different approaches to the issue. Both the *Insight* article and the Obama Web site had an agenda to promote, while *The Washington Post* tackled the subject in the absence of a vested interest. All three stories utilized inflammatory terms, though to very different ends. The *Insight* story used these charged words to strengthen the readers' association of Obama with Islam, while the article from Obama Web site incorporated them into its refutation of the rumor. *The Washington Post* story included these terms to present a balanced account of the controversy, yet may have simultaneously spread or escalated the suspicions about Obama. The tone of these articles also varied between accusation and ridicule, with the Obama Web site story revealing itself the most neutral in its commentary.

An examination of broadcast transcripts from CNN and FOX revealed a less direct approach to the rumors that Obama is Muslim. The first two pairs of transcripts, which addressed the issue of Obama's connection to Islam, included the rumors as background information to the more newsworthy event at hand. Only the last event involving *The New Yorker* cartoon—perhaps because of its greater proximity to election day and the fact that the public had personal access to the relevant material—focused specifically on the persistence of the false belief that Obama is Muslim. Even so, consideration of the rumors did not involve exploration of their legitimacy; instead, attention was largely given to their effect on Obama's bid for the presidency. While FOX News' attitude towards Obama was, as predicted, generally critical—quick to highlight his weaknesses and failures—the most unexpected finding of these transcripts' analyses was the degree to which CNN defended Obama. It had been hypothesized that CNN would be neutral while looking at Obama's association with Islam, but the network's coverage was repeatedly found to go beyond the requirements of fairness to take a defensive stance regarding Obama's character and actions. Legitimate criticisms, which may have been discussed with undue vehemence on FOX, were largely omitted from CNN's coverage.

None of the stories discussed how the accusations that Obama is Muslim, (as well as some of the defenses,) demonstrate an inherent hostility towards Muslims and Arabs. In an editorial on the subject, Naomi Klein (2008) describes how Obama was quick to condemn anti-Semitic comments from Louis Farrakhan, but has remained largely silent

as one “scandal” after the other – the pictures of Obama wearing a turban, the email rumors that he was educated in a madrassa or sworn in on the Koran – reinforces public animosity towards Arabs and Muslims (p. 10). While it may have been politically expedient for Obama to deal with the issue in this manner – or simply unavoidable if he wanted to maintain a viable bid for the presidency – the wider implications of this issue should not be overlooked. The media’s silence on this issue reveals that though Obama was on trial, Arabs and Muslims had already been condemned.

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