



# Ipsos Reid Public Affairs

**Report for:**

**Centre for Faith and the Media**

***Representation of Muslims in the News  
Media Study***

***Final Report***

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## Appendix A: Discussion Agenda



## **SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION**

Ipsos Reid is pleased to present to the Centre for Faith and the Media the findings of a qualitative research study conducted among Muslim Canadians.

### ***A. Background and Objectives***

The Centre for Faith and the Media, whose mandate is to inform and assist media in creating more accurate portrayals of various faiths in Canada, commissioned this study to help address the issues of representing Muslims in mainstream Canadian news media. The Centre is taking steps to bridge the communication between the Muslim community and media creators. Initiatives include providing a database of resources and contacts to the media and conducting media relations and training workshop initiatives at the local level. With the support of the Muslim Students' Association, the Centre also hopes to engage Muslim youth.

This research study will help to inform these initiatives and will be publicly available to all stakeholders including the community, media and journalists, policy makers, etc. It will provide baseline knowledge for the Centre for Faith and the Media moving forward as it develops its workshops to encourage dialogue between news media and the Muslim community.

The main objective of this qualitative research study, specifically, was to gain an understanding of current attitudes and perceptions about the representation and portrayal of Muslims in mainstream news media and the impact these representations have on self-identity and social integration on the individual, as well as broader community level. It also sought to provide insights into initiatives that could be explored further in the workshop sessions.

**B. Methodology**

A total of 12 focus groups (77 participants) were conducted in three major markets (Toronto - January 22, 2008, Montreal - January 23, 2008, Calgary - December 3, 2007).

The groups were comprised of a mix of participants from various ethnic backgrounds, including predominantly South Asians, West Asians and Arabs, and North Africans, among others. In the youth groups, participants included those who were born or raised in Canada and those who had recently immigrated. All groups were conducted in English.

All participants were screened for a minimum of two days of news viewing on a national Canadian news channel, in addition to usage of at least one other media source for local, national or international news (newspaper, radio and Internet).

Please refer to Appendix A for the Discussion Agenda.

The group alignment in age and gender in each city was as follows:

	Toronto	Montreal	Calgary
	2 groups (18-25yrs) Young Adults Male Young Adults Female	1 group (18-25 yrs) Young Adults mixed gender	1 group (18-25 yrs) Young Adults mixed gender
	2 groups (25 yrs+) Adult Females	1 group (25 yrs+) Adult Females	1 group (25 yrs+) Adult Females
	2 groups (25 yrs+) Adult Males	1 group (25 yrs+) Adult Males	1 group (25 yrs+) Adult Males
<b>Total: 12 groups</b>	<b>6 groups (41 participants)</b>	<b>3 groups (21 participants)</b>	<b>3 groups (15 participants)</b>

This study is qualitative and exploratory in nature. It is important to note the very subjectivity of the inquiry does not provide statistically reliable data that can be extrapolated to the wider population.

## **SECTION 2: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Unanimously, the participants in these groups had a very positive image of Canada and its attitude towards diversity. It is considered to be open and tolerant to differences in religion, race and ethnicity. Upon further discussion, however, many in the groups, noted that they have experienced some discrimination and have been subject to stereotyping, particularly those of Arab background.
- Many blame the media for perpetuating stereotypes through frequent and dominant images of Muslims as terrorists, religious fundamentalists and veiled women. Muslims have been portrayed as a homogenous group and have become synonymous with a single region – “Middle East” and with Arabs. The media, they said, do not recognize the diversity of cultures, traditions and practices within the religion itself. Painting all Muslims with one broad brush ignores the diversity of those belonging to this group.
- Both women and men in the groups were angered at how the veil has become a symbol of anti-western values. The adoption of the veil by women, many said, is in fact a choice and not a symbol of oppression, as the media have often portrayed it to be.
- While some did say that there has been a raised awareness of the Middle East as a region and of Islam among the general public in recent years, most agreed that there has been little change in the representation of Muslims in the media since 9/11. CBC was considered to be doing a relatively good job in providing more balanced reporting, but considering the approach taken by American media (i.e. CNN) and the fact that many Canadians watch CNN, many agreed that it was paramount for all Canadian media to take on the responsibility of helping to educate the public and countering this negativity.
- The impact of media representation cannot be underestimated. The discourses created by the media influence public opinion and shape social attitudes and behaviours. Many said they feel their religion and their identity are virtually under attack. In reaction, there appears to be a growing religiosity among some Muslim youth - some noted that more teens are attending mosque and speaking up in groups, and more young women are wearing the hijab.
- Many believe strongly that more cultural and sensitivity education or training is needed not only in media outlets, but also in schools and in the workplace to help counter negative stereotypes and racialization.

## SECTION 3: ANALYSIS

### **A. Context - News Consumption Habits**

Participants in these groups were recruited based on their consumption of Canadian national news on television (at least two days a week) and consumption of news from at least one other media source including radio, newspaper or Internet. They were thus a group of individuals who were relatively up-to-date with current affairs and news.

While their consumption of local and national news media broadly reflects that of the general population, it is in their consumption of international news that these participants perhaps differ. Many said they needed to seek different perspectives on news events and relied on international news sources that stemmed from their home countries to act as a counterbalance to those viewpoints offered on Canadian and US newscasts. These sources were either accessed online or through ethnic or satellite broadcast services such as *ART* (Arab Radio and Television), *ZeeTV* (India-based satellite television channel), *MTA International* (Muslim television based in the UK), or *TRT* (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation), among others. Some commonly mentioned media outlets included *Al Jazeera*, *Al Arabiya* (Arabic-language television news channel), and International: *The News* (Jang Group of Newspapers, Pakistani newspaper - <http://thenews.jang.com.pk/>).

A few Muslim youth in these groups said they were in some ways more informed about international politics and news than the average person their age, since it was often a topic of discussion within their families.

- *“Politics is very strong and very common in Muslim community. You go to someone’s house, talk about politics, not just Middle Eastern [politics]. We were raised that way always talking about politics.”*
- *“My family has lots of conversation, very educated, read a lot, I watch TV, so I will take it as it is, whereas others are not like this. They are more one sided.”*

## ***B. Self-identity and Attitudes towards Diversity in Canada***

### **i. The Question of Self-Identity**

The question of self-identify posed in the groups was a complex one to answer. In a country such as Canada, which embraces multi-culturalism as policy, self-identification is dependent upon many factors including level of integration into Canadian society, visible minority status, identification with one's ethnic background in the family, etc. The sole purpose of the question was to act as a warm-up discussion for participants to consider their identity (ethnicity, nationality versus religion) and sense of belonging in Canada. As expected, answers varied: many of those not born in Canada and who were older identified with their ethnicity first, often followed by religion; many of those younger identified with their ethnicity and nationality - Canadian (not necessarily in this order); a few in the groups identified themselves first as Muslims.

- *“It’s difficult because you have all these factors. Are you Canadian, are you Iraqi, are you Muslim?”*
- *“If I say I am Canadian, people look at me funny. It is not enough to say I am Canadian if I am visibly not white.”*
- *“I say I am Canadian. Then I say I was born in Africa.”*
- *“You do find there are indirect associations with our names and religion.”*
- *“I will call myself Canadian eventually. I say East African, Somali, then I say I was raised in Canada. I’m 21 now, been here since 2. I was kind of raised two ways. At home I am Somalian, and at school I am Canadian.”*

### **ii. Attitudes towards Diversity in Canada**

When asked about attitudes towards diversity in Canada, the unanimous response across all groups was very positive. Many said that Canada is openly accepting of differences in culture, ethnicity and religion, particularly in the larger city centres, where diversity is an everyday visible reality. When compared to other parts of the world, including the US and Europe, Canada was described as a country of great tolerance and a desired place to live.

- *“Canadians are very welcoming people, I feel at home here. I don’t feel a stranger here, it is a great place to live, only place in the world where we have freedom to practice our culture.”*
- *“The big cities are more accommodating, accepting. I think people are afraid sometimes...In small towns, like Peterborough or St. Catharine’s, you get a look. Attitudes have changed, but in small towns, they don’t have as much exposure, in the big cities, we all work together.”*
- *“If you only stayed in Montreal, you probably haven’t experienced racism. If you’re in Laval or past Laval, it’s different. And they tell you that they are afraid of different people.”*
- *“Good attitudes towards minorities. It is not 100% perfect, but definitely better than other countries out there.”*
- *“I have travelled to the UK and USA and have not found anyone as lenient as Canadians. We are much better here.”*

Despite this very positive attitude, however, and upon further discussion, many Muslim Canadians in the groups made light of their personal experiences with discrimination in day-to-day life. This was particularly true among those who were visibly of Arab origin, who wore visible signs of Islam such as a hijab, or who had Muslim names. Many also said that racial profiling has become a frightening reality.

- *“Not only the scarf. I went with a friend to cottage way up north. Everyone was staring at me, because I look and talk different.”*
- *“When I say I’m Arab and people ask me what’s my religion, I expect some prejudice.”*
- *“They’re very open to new restaurants, carnivals. But when it comes to serious stuff, there’s prejudice. But it’s not like in France where they’re racist and they know it. Here it’s underground.”*
- *“You experience much more especially if you have a name like Mohammed.”*
- *“All my friends who wear a hijab cannot get job with university education, and others with high school education get jobs.”*
- *“I think it has changed since 9/11. My kids have had experiences with the police because of their names, they get stopped by the police even if they are not speeding, or like at the airport....it has happened several times – it is all suppose to be random, but we are selected!”*
- *“I lived in a white suburban town, and after the September 11<sup>th</sup> I would walk in the halls and they would sing Bombs over Baghdad.”*

### ***C. Perceptions of Representation of Muslims in the Media***

#### ***Dominant images of Muslims in the media: terrorists and militant fundamentalists***

Participants unanimously agreed that the period following 9/11 saw a dramatic increase in levels of discrimination. Years after the events, many said they still feel the aftereffects. The majority in the groups criticized the media for perpetuating stereotypes that have influenced the attitudes and behaviours of mainstream society. Across all groups, participants said the predominant image of Muslims in the media was a militant one - a monolithic portrayal of terrorists, suicide bombers, and religious extremists, seen as “regressive” and “backward.” One commented that these images (particularly on television) of Islamic fundamentalist terrorists reinforce stereotypes that stay in minds long after stories are forgotten.

- *“It is very scary. We say Canada is very tolerant. We get bombarded by the news. It is very scary. The tolerance level can do down. It comes down to small town effect. In a small town, you don’t have as many minorities. In the big city, we can clarify some people’s perceptions.”*
- *“The attitude is positive in Canada but when 9/11 occurred. My friends who are Lebanese and Egyptian said there was so much tension with people with dark hair and Arabs, they said they were afraid to go out. A lot of that had to do with media. So much propaganda. On CCN the images, they repeat images over and over again.”*
- *“When they show you Pakistan. They never show the highways, only villages, no foundations, kids have no shoes...”*
- *“It also depends on how much the average person has knowledge about what they hear, they read. If they take everything from the news, everyone is bad, a terrorist.”*
- *“I feel everyone is afraid of Muslims now....I think we are looked down on, there are discriminations. I have been here 20 months. I work in an organization of mostly whites. They are very tolerant. You can’t blame anyone really. There is a misconception because of the media.”*
- *“Media makes it look much worse for us.... ‘watch out for the Muslims!’”*
- *“Again it [TV] is visual. You hear about something horrible, but if you see it, you can’t get it out of your mind. The media is very important, they influence the majority.”*
- *“Media are biased. They create fear; they take certain aspects and bring out the negative of it”.*

***Discriminating discourse: “Muslim” synonymous with “Middle East” and “Arab”***

Many noted that “Muslims” have become synonymous with “Arabs” in the media and fear that news stories that involve Muslims are always tied to terrorist activities, al Qaeda, jihad or fundamentalist behaviour. After 9/11, Muslims have been targeted by the news media as a group. Many mentioned that news media are quick to point to Muslims and religion first; rarely are other groups, such as Hindus or Catholics, identified so negatively by their religion. Most agreed that the politicization of religion has led to many misunderstandings and misconceptions of Islam and its people, leading to a “racialization” of Muslims in the news.

- *“And terrorism should not be mixed up with us (Muslim).”*
- *“For example, in Ireland those people are very strong about their Catholic background. If I was to show those people as representing Catholicism how would you feel about the rest of the Catholic religion. This is representative of social conditions that pushed people to do things, this is not about religion.”*
- *“When a Muslim does something, it is pushed more by the media.”*
- *“The assassination of Benazir Bhutto...the western world just flipped it from white to black. She got assassinated, they jumped on jihad and Osama bin Laden behind the assassination when they can’t find him and don’t know where he is...”*
- *“Bothers me to associate politics of government with the people. For instance, Israel and Palestinians, or Iran, when they talk about Hamas, people associate these people who look like us, the mix of politics and religion.”*
- *“You must remember, everyone does not look at just the Canadian media. Most watch the US news too. When a plane goes down, I think, I hope Muslims are not involved.”*
- *“We are not perfect, we have traditions also not just religion, our culture is based on both, but here everybody that looks like they are Arabic, they associate with Muslims.”*
- *“Extremist, what they always mention is that they pray all the time. ‘So you pray? You must be radical!’ Many people associate prayer with being radical.”*
- *“You mention the word Muslim on TV and they are associated with the Taliban.”*
- *“I agree with the fact that when a Muslim commits a crime, the first thing that comes into play is the fact he is Muslim. It is not about the crime, but about his religious affiliation. It has gotten worse.”*
- *“Whenever media tells something about a belief of Islam (true or not) they always compare it with western culture. When we are comparing we should compare with Christianity or Judaism etc. Secular society is not based on any religion We shouldn’t compare to this. True comparison is to compare to other religions.”*

***Dominant images of Muslim women - veiled, oppressed and passive***

Muslim women are subjected to their own gendered stereotypes, constructed and reinforced by the media. Both men and women were strongly offended at how the veil or hijab has come to be a symbol of oppression and passivity, portrayed as an inequitable practice of a severe and backward religion. Many of these stereotypes are driven by a lack of knowledge and understanding of the varying cultural practices within the religion itself in different countries.

- *“Misogynist images have been around for hundreds of years, not even new. After 9/11, the way they were talking would make me so mad. It’s as if we were all the same...Muslim women are most targeted.”*
- *“CNN shows you that women are forced to wear the hijab. They are not. My mom wears one; my wife does not.”*
- *“Deprived Muslim women in full head gear...they think women are forced to do it, not allowed to leave house, not allowed to work, arranged marriages, not allowed to live.”*
- *“For women: not independent, not an individual attached to someone else who is a man. I consider myself as a feminist, a Muslim feminist. I went to this lecture and the guy asks: “Who identifies herself as feminist?” I wanted to raise my hand, but didn’t because I knew they would think: ‘How can you call yourself a feminist when you’re wearing a veil?’”*
- *“Some people assume poor thing she has got a hijab...”*
- *“It is not about the religion; it is about the culture.”*
- *“We hear stories about other countries, like Saudi Arabia, women do not have rights, so people see women here in a hijab and think she is being forced to wear them, they are not.”*
- *“The media exaggerates...they make it seem like it is part of the religion.”*

***The hijab - a symbol of anti-western values***

The hijab has been a current theme in the news media. Many were disturbed at how the hijab has become a symbol of “non-assimilation”, “otherness” and “extremist”. The construction of these images, they said, has had some impact on their day-to-day lives in school and work where at times they are singled out and asked to take off the hijab. Many participants were quick to note that the media rarely talk about the historical context of the hijab or that to wear one is a personal choice.

The mere fact that the hijab is brought up in the media repeatedly, one person remarked, “is making it into racial issue.” Stories with headlines that read “*Father killed daughter for not wearing hijab*”, many commented, are sensational and reflect one-sided news reporting. To many this story was about a domestic issue that turned into a “Muslim issue” by the media.

- *“Media only shows the dark side. The guy kills his daughter because she wouldn’t wear the hijab.....but I read she was living with her friend, not at home. There were other issues.”*
- *“...like girl in Montreal kicked out of soccer game. There is no case that it is a safety issue. I understand if you are going to vote you have to see under the hijab, but not allowed to wear head gear in soccer?”*
- *“They are painting them as being extremists. Who knows who killed that girl? Maybe her brother did. I like my wife to cover her head, but I am not going to kill her, I cannot force her.”*
- *“In Toronto the media wrote about a daughter refusing to wear the hijab and the father killed her, but it was not about that. A week before that a French father killed his daughter but they didn’t make a big story. I had to go online to get the whole story.”*
- *“It’s a cultural thing, not a religion thing. I was watching the thing in Nigeria and she was completely satisfied with the decision. But in the US they were saying that’s not right but she was completely satisfied with the decision.”*

### ***Improvement in representation of Muslims has changed little since 9/11***

When asked if the representation of Muslims in the media has gotten better or worse since the events of 9/11, many perceived there that has been little change, or, in some cases, that it has gotten worse. A few others did express, however, that there has been a raised level awareness of the issues of the Middle East and Islam, albeit characterized by a shallow knowledge of the region, religion and its people. Most agreed that more education was necessary and that the media should play a lead role in this regard.

- *“When I first arrived in Canada in ‘92, you would never hear about Islam. After 9/11 it all changed! It changed from the better to the worse.”*
- *“Think now, after 9/11 people are curious, people learning more about Islam now, wasn’t such a big thing before, but now TV, books, movies, people didn’t know so much about the culture.”*
- *“There are obviously people who write about the cultures....but not a lot.”*

### **Canadian news perceived to be more balanced than American news**

Many participants noted, however, that the portrayal of Muslims in Canadian news media was much less negative than in American media. The CBC is seen as more balanced and less sensational in their portrayal of Muslims overall than CNN or FOX, which were considered the worst. However, given that many Canadians are exposed to American news (i.e. CNN), most agreed that Canadian media should assume responsibility to present more accurate and well researched stories of Islam and the conflicts of the Middle East as a counterbalance. In Montreal, Radio Canada was seen as providing a more balanced perspective than TVA or TQS. *BBC* news, *Omni* and the *Toronto Star* were also mentioned as being more balanced in their reporting.

- *“Worst is TVA – sensationalism. They make a big story. TVA is for some kinds of people, low education people.”*
- *“Canadians are under the influence of American media. We can not detach ourselves from the US media and since that incident took place in the States therefore now the innocent Canadians are being provided coloured information.”*
- *“When 9/11 happened, I think that Canadian media was more objective because they were not involved directly. I think that the people in the States are ignorant. When you mention Muslim, they fear. That’s how people get their education, through the media.”*
- *“Local news like CBC knows what they are talking about. There are different types of media. TQS, TVA bashes Muslims because they don’t know anything about them.”*
- *“CBC is fair, they present the facts, they are respectful.”*
- *“In Canada, there are more checks and balances. They are more inclusive. They are more accepted in society. People are more respectful, they don’t want to offend anyone.”*
- *“CNN it is very accessible to us. I don’t have problems with accurate info, but on CNN, when they interpret the news...CNN portrays every Muslim as al Qaeda.”*
- *“FOX TV is much worse!”*
- *“Like FOX is so biased, always exaggerating things about Muslims, stereotyping us. They should not be biased. CNN is so biased as well. Here, CBC National news is not biased, they are in between. I would like to focus on the media. “Rogers cable, multicultural channels, unbiased. Omni is more cultural.”*
- *“I think they [CBC] do a good job but not up there with BBC. BBC is more international, more unbiased. CBC is more from a Canadian perspective.”*

### ***CNN ‘God’s Warriors’ characterized as sensational, biased news***

The clip from God’s Warriors exemplified, for many, the biased and negative slanted news typical of the CNN news and documentaries they spoke of in the groups. Many reacted in frustration and anger after viewing a short clip about the story of a suicide bomber. The graphic images of guns, of a woman wearing a bomb, of the Koran placed in the context of a suicide bombing story, among others, were considered sensationalistic. A few reacted saying they felt their religion and their identity as Muslims was under attack. The story, which many said should have been political in nature, was distorted within the context of religion.

- *“Unbalanced, very unbalanced, need to show more truth, they are not showing what is actually making them the suicide bombers, show the whole background, show the woman who is wearing a bomb....but say, she is wearing it because her family died a week before.”*
- *“Need to show both sides of the story. Let us know why someone chooses to be a terrorist. They do it for themselves, not for the whole Muslim community.”*
- *“Did they have to show the old woman rotating on a platform so we can enjoy the dynamite?”*
- *“People do this if they are brainwashed, most normal people would not do this.”*
- *“Once again you see Islam associated with fire and blood, barbarism, and you see Israel and there’s some order there.”*
- *“It’s showing Islam – all about suicide, killing, don’t talk about the mental health of the man.”*
- *“They are making it a Muslim issue. It is not a Muslim issue.”*
- *“This is I believe is one that feeds the fire vs. putting it out. I could list many things that have occurred in many countries that have been put aside not looked at.”*
- *“They always show the Koran, and I hate that. You have the image of guns and bombs and the Koran together. You don’t think about the context people are going through there if you see these images.”*

### ***CBC story of adopting Iraqi village seen as positive change***

Many called for more balanced representation of stories - stories that don’t just focus on the negative aspects of the religion - its association with terrorism or with what is portrayed as “medieval” values symbolized by the hijab – but also on stories of everyday Muslims. The CBC clip shown in the groups about a man adopting a village in Iraq was regarded as a refreshing departure from dominant negative images in the news.

- *“Think an Iraqi citizen is trying to help people there. Shows positive image.”*
- *“Inspirational. Sense of community.”*
- *“It is positive; Canadians are trying to help in their little way.”*
- *“This is not the type of news I watch on TV, usually it’s always bad, and there is something about guns and bombs. This is a good guy, and there are a lot of good guys here but you never see those people on TV.”*
- *“It shows that we are just people: it doesn’t matter if we’re Muslim or whatever.”*
- *“What’s surprising is that there’s a white guy next to him helping. If it was two Muslims, they would be like “oh! They didn’t do anything bad this time”. What did they do?”*
- *“The Iraqi guy was very well spoken..”*
- *“More peaceful, completely different, this one shows other people not wanting this war to happen, portray Muslims in a better way, instead a guy with gun.”*
- *“Not negative portrayal, humanitarian. Put a human face to it.”*

### **D. Impact of Media on Shaping Attitudes**

While many acknowledged that there is a commercial imperative at play and that ratings are a key driver in the creation of news stories, many more said that the news media should be held accountable for more objective, unbiased and responsible reporting since it has the power to influence and help shape public opinion, thereby affecting social attitudes and behaviour.

- *“Media is big corporate business, has something to do with politics. Who owns CTV and Globe.”*
- *“Their goal is to sell to viewers. That is why they cover stories in certain ways....not to present facts.”*
- *“They should be objective. That is their only responsibility.”*
- *“Who are the Muslims, what is Islam, they are ignorant about this here, and they, the media needs to focus on this, and they need to educate people.”*
- *“I mean media is a vital link between us and general public. It should bear in mind whatever we are feeding the minds of our coming generations.”*
- *“The media downgrades Muslims. The news story about the Muslim girl playing soccer and wasn’t allowed because of the Hijab. I think the media really affects what people believe in Muslims.”*

- *“It has gotten worse. They pinpoint Muslims right away if anything goes wrong, especially after 9/11. They are never portrayed in a good way. After 9/11, one of my friends actually feared me. He was very scared of my background.”*
- *“People are afraid of us, and it’s going to be harder for our kids, the segregation. People are afraid to be your friends, and afraid to talk to a [Muslim] girl because her dad or brother are going to do something.”*

When asked how these media representations of Muslims in the media impact them personally, participants expressed a range of responses and emotions: many revealed anger and/or sadness, especially upon viewing the CNN clip; some said they felt a sense of helplessness at the consistent negative images proliferated by the media; and, others (more youth), who had not given the topic much thought previously, came to a realization that they often find themselves justifying their religious beliefs or pre-empting perceived negative images/comments to other Canadians.

- *“The impact [of media] is negative because you have to justify yourself all the time when talking to people.”*
- *“After 9/11 we have this fear of being Muslim. It’s because we are under the spot light.”*
- *“If we look at history, Hitler was a Christian and we never blamed Christianity. Similarly we should be blaming Saddam etc. instead of the whole religion/faith. We now blame not the person but the belief system. This is a general perception that media is not being able to distinguish. I have to defend Islam.”*
- *“Like at work, when someone say go for coffee and you say no, they say ‘why because your husband doesn’t let you – automatically they think it is your husband’.”*
- *“When I say ‘I’m Muslim’ I say that I’m modern. And I feel bad for doing that because in a certain way I’m ashamed and I shouldn’t be because it’s who I am!”*

Most of the young men and women in the groups identified themselves as moderate Muslims, but they spoke of a polarization in attitudes among Muslim youth towards religion - while some have turned to religion in search of meaning, identity and community, others have chosen to turn away.

- *“I would say there are two extremes [among young people]: some have become very religious. I would put myself on the other extreme. I had a faith crisis, I read a lot about religion but because I was investigating it. I have friends that hate Islam,*

*but some even converted! They can't handle the burden of being under the spot light. I'm somewhere in the middle."*

- *"I have friends that don't talk to me any more because I'm a "bad Muslim" because I don't have the veil. Youth is all about being a rebel and right now Islam is "the big bad wolf" so some youth turn to religion for all the wrong reasons. Not all Muslims are together: There's fighting between Sunni and Shia. All the Catholics are together, all the Jews are together. We're not as united."*
- *"When they see negativity, it hurts and it's offensive and they adopt these ideas about Jews or "us against them." With their ignorance and innocence, and with media attitude, they are making terrorists."*
- *"My friends are becoming more conscious, more religious because of war. People want to be closer to god."*
- *"Every weekend, my friends and I go to Eaton Square. We clear up all the misconceptions. We have videos, books, people that can speak. We educate the non Muslims at universities. There are ways to educate the non Muslims as long as people are willing to listen if you have something worthwhile to say."*

A few of the young women in the groups said they have taken an individual stance and adopted the hijab to make both a religious and political statement about their identity as Muslims.

- *"More girls are adopting the hijab. Now it is crowded with teens in the mosques."*
- *"It's a new phenomena – lots of young women girls in the last 5 years are becoming more religious. You can't imagine how many times I had to explain why my daughter is wearing the hijab and I am not."*
- *"Not every Muslim that's religious is extreme. After 9/11 I was: "Oh my god! What do I do? Do I read what my religion is all about or do I go with the mainstream?" Certain Muslims have become more religious. My friend prays more. She's not more religious but practices more. Some girls follow their mothers and wear the veil because their mother does."*
- *"Younger generation that don't come from religious background, because of the negativity are connecting with Islam. Maybe they're wearing hijab - even though it's a religious statement, it's also political. Not until my 20s a Muslim group reconnected me with my religion."*
- *"I was the same way, my sister wears a hijab and my dad was like 'What are you doing'. She started dressing more modestly and my Dad was 'Oh My god you are going to be a target. I'll see you on CNN', and then I started wearing a hijab. This is who we are, whereas my parents are more fearful."*

### ***E. Giving Voice to the Muslim Community***

The issue of media representation was considered a very important one for the majority of Muslim Canadians in these groups. Many said, at times, they have felt the need to explain or justify their religious beliefs to other Canadians. Many were glad to have the opportunity to discuss the issue in a public sphere (in focus groups). Being given a voice to help in improving the representation and portrayal of Muslims in the media instilled a greater sense of belonging within society among many. While only a few (primarily youth) in the groups were less engaged, most said they would be very interested in participating in workshops with the media and becoming a part of the process.

- *“This is first discussion I have ever had like this – it is positive.”*
- *“It is the situation that makes it urgent for us to explain ourselves.”*

While the majority had criticized the media for creating and reinforcing stereotypes, they also agreed that change in society could only happen if education is implemented at all levels from media, to government to schools. A few said they had taken action at the individual level by showing their friends pictures of their home countries that are contrary to images (poverty or war-torn) perpetuated in the news media.

- *“I am working against the media. The images in the media are wrong and we have to change that. People judge by their eyes not what they hear.”*
- *“Somebody asked me if they have any washing machines in Jordan, so I made a presentation and sent it to everybody – this is who we are and where we came from.”*
- *“Most people don’t know there are 72 different types of Muslims. That’s our responsibility to let them know.”*
- *“In the public sector everybody needs to go to some cultural training program, for everybody. It’s just ignorance. Not that they’re bad. They just don’t know better.”*
- *“We can tutor people about Muslims and where we come from – you can educate your neighbour and that’s how it starts.”*

- *“I know they teach Holocaust in school, why not genocide in Rwanda. I think education should be more open to other religions and cultures.”*

When asked what steps could be taken to help improve the representation of Muslims in the media, the participants offered the following:

### ***Provide cultural and sensitivity training to news staff***

- *“Teach or have a presentation of Islam, go to someone that knows about Islam. Don’t look for the beard and that’s it! And that often hurts us because they often represent us like that but it’s not true.”*
- *“Basically they need education, differentiate terrorism and Islam.”*
- *“Needs to be clear distinction between what is culture and what is religion.”*
- *“They need to stop using the word “terrorism” because it’s always in the same context. A Canadian can do a certain act that get be identified as terrorism, but because he’s not Muslim, it’s not classified as terrorism.”*

### ***Hire news staff with Muslim background, both behind the scenes and in front of the camera***

- *“I want to see a news anchor wearing a hijab.” - “But I have issues. There’s tokenism. You have Black, Asian and a woman and you’ve covered your bases. So politically correct it’s scary. You can have woman wearing a hijab but she is going to say something?”*
- *“Have more Muslim journalists in mainstream to give their point of view in front of camera representing Muslim people. Omni TV doing a great job of that.”*
- *“Media should have more Muslim representation, newscasters for example moderators for open discussion on TV.”*
- *“If his name is Mohammed, I will trust more what he is saying.”*

### ***Consult with a broader range of spokespeople and knowledgeable experts***

- *“They should choose someone that can talk to the media, an expert on the matter. They usually get an average guy and label him as “extremist”.*

- *“Let us give our views, and don’t call the extremists - they will say kill this and that. Don’t call them - show other people.”*
- *“They should choose more appropriate people when they want someone representing Muslims. They should be little more selective.”*
- *“We have educated people, people who have been to university, who can answer real questions! So when they talk about Islam, they are not bashing this person.”*
- *“People on TV supposedly representing Muslims are not getting to the people, the people supposedly representing Muslims don’t know Islam.”*

### **Include more coverage on positive Muslim activities**

- *“Cover Muslim activities. That’s when you get the real image of Muslims. Lebanese have a center in Mt. Royal and have activities all the time. Sometimes it’s covered, but not all the time.”*

### **Focus on interfaith activities**

- *“Show an issue with opinions from different faiths together.”*

### **Potential challenges in developing media workshops...**

While the majority of participants thought the idea of workshops between the community and the media was a very positive step moving forward, a few participants did note that there could be potential challenges and barriers in these workshop groups due to divergent agendas within Muslim groups or sects.

- *“I think that modern people will not go. But more radical people would. People don’t want to be judged.”*
- *“People have to understand Muslims are diversified, many places, many backgrounds. We are all Muslims from different countries. We have our own associations from our countries, our own opinions. We are identified by our origin, not our religion.”*
- *“I think it’s going to be hard to do these workshops. There’s so many sects, different political agendas, ethnicities. It’s hard to get all of them to sit together. For example you have the Sunni and the Shi’a which have their own issues. It’s a very*



*complex issue. When you put ethnicity and religion and different sexes together, you'll always have clashes, like in politics - one is pro-something the other is against it."*

## **Appendix A: Discussion Agenda**

### **Introduction**

- Our subject this evening is about media. Specifically, we are going to discuss the representation and portrayal of people of diverse backgrounds in the media.
- Role of Moderator and Participants. Confidentiality. I work for an independent research firm and am hired to conduct this research on behalf of our client which is a not-for-profit organization. We use first names only. And all findings will be reported in aggregate form only, meaning that no one is identified in the report. The only thing I ask is that you respect each other's opinions in this session and that you be open and honest.
- EXPLAIN Microphones, videotaping and one-way mirror.

### **Warm-up – Self Identity**

- Introductions - very general discussion first about your individual backgrounds, where you were born, where have you lived if not born here - how long you have lived in Canada and in which cities...
- How do you personally identify yourselves? (religion vs. ethnicity vs. nationality).

### **News Media Habits**

- As a background, could you tell us a little about your consumption of news media in terms of local, national and international news? Let's start with...
  - Local news – could you list all the sources you turn to most for the local news, in terms of radio, newspapers, TV, internet (one at a time).
  - National news – which media do you turn to for national news?
  - And what about international news?

PROBE: non-traditional sources – streaming overseas news, Youtube, Web 2.0 sources like Facebook, and blogs among younger age groups etc. for news

### **Attitudes toward Diversity in Canada and the Role of the Media**

- How would you describe Canada's attitude toward diversity and multiculturalism?
- PROBE: attitudes towards religious diversity in Canada
- Has it changed over the past 5-10 years? For better or worse? In what ways – explain.
- How, if at all, do you think attitudes vary between different regions across Canada? What are the differences?
- What is the role of the media in the forming of these attitudes?
- Which media do you think is the most influential in shaping public opinion? TV vs. newspaper vs. radio vs. internet? Why?

### **Portrayal of Muslims in the Media**

For the remainder of the group, I would like to discuss more in detail about the how Muslims, in particular, are portrayed in the media.

- What is the dominant image of Muslims in the media? Is it a negative, positive or balanced portrayal? Provide examples. **MOVED ONE BULLET UP**  
PROBE: Gender portrayals – women – perceptions of beauty, hijab in public places, terrorists, absence of Muslims in mainstream television to balance negative news images.
- Do you feel that the portrayal of Muslims in the media has improved or gotten worse over the past 5 years? How so?
- Which media do you think does a good job at representing Muslims fairly? Which do you think are doing a terrible job? **PROBE FOR NAMES OF MEDIA OUTLETS**

### **Presentation of Clips**

Now I am going to show you two clips and after each one I'd like to discuss your thoughts on them.

**ROTATE TAPES IN SESSIONS.**

- What were your initial impressions when you saw this clip? How did it make you feel?
- Would you consider this a positive or a negative portrayal or a balanced portrayal? How so?

- If negative, how do you think it could've been more positive?
- What do you consider a fair representation of those in your religious community?

### Impact of Media on Attitudes towards Muslims (15 min)

- What kind of influence or impact do these kinds of representations have on...
  - You?
  - Your family?
  - Your community?
  - The country overall?
- How do you think the media impacts how others perceive...
  - You?
  - Your family?
  - Your religion/faith?
- What do you think is the responsibility of the media as it relates to this issue?
- To what extent do you feel that the media is reflecting the attitudes among the public versus leading them?
- How do you think the portrayal of Muslims in Canadian media is different than in other parts of the world? Explain...
- How are Muslims perceived within Canada compared to other parts of the world?

### Working with the Media (10 min)

- Given that this is a complex issue, how could we work towards improving the representation of Muslims in the media?
- Have you heard of any initiatives that are open to you as individuals to engage with the media? (workshops and/or some engagement with media, educational programs, etc.)
- What are some of the key issues the news media have to overcome to make improvements?
- How important would you say this issue is within your community?
- Is it the kind of issue that your community would want to be actively involved in?
- How important would you say this issue is to you personally? PROBE: Would you yourself take action to make any changes?



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- Do you feel that Canadians would benefit from a better understanding of your community? How so?
- Say 5 to 10 years from now, when you're watching TV or reading the newspaper what do you hope will be different from what you see now?

### **Wrap up**

If you have to give the media in Canada ONE KEY PIECE OF ADVICE on this issue, what would it be?