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## **Media Coverage of Pakistan Stokes Global Terrorism Fears: UM Study**

COLLEGE PARK, Md. – The top newspapers in the United States failed to challenge the Bush administration’s representation of the dimensions and immediacy of the threat of terrorism in their coverage of one of the major theaters of the “War on Terror,” according to a new study from the University of Maryland.

“Too many journalists from the most important newspapers in the country are still validating President Bush’s conflation of different types of terrorism into a single category of threat,” says researcher Susan D. Moeller, a journalism professor at the University of Maryland. “Reporters are not adequately distinguishing between state terrorism—such as that formerly practiced by the Taliban—and terrorism by distinctive terrorist groups—such as al Qaeda, which operates globally or Lashkar-e-Toiba, which is focused on Kashmir.”

Based on a systematic content analysis, the study found patterns of coverage in major US newspapers in the year following September 11, 2001 and five years later in 2006 that may still be contributing to public confusion over the need for a global “War on Terror” and the public’s perception of the global terrorist risk. The study documented that:

- Many news stories used a range of terms interchangeably in a single article, among them “terrorist,” “militant” and “extremist,” further obfuscating real differences in tactics, motives, history, politics and culture among different terrorist groups
- Journalists too often used other terms such as “madrassa” and “jihadist” without defining them, making it appear that Pakistan is virtually awash with terrorist training camps masquerading as schools for boys.

But the study also concluded that the press’s coverage of Pakistan was more independent and more balanced than its coverage of Iraq. The perfunctory patriotism that swept the United States following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon did not entirely blind reporters on the ground in Pakistan to what was taking place in the region in the administration’s conduct of the “War on Terror.” In both time periods investigated, the study found that journalists assumed the centrality of Pakistan in US foreign policy, but offered contradictory perspectives on Pakistan’s role that were more blunt than the official line from Washington:

- News stories did represent Pakistan as a Western ally but they also emphasized that it was a base of operations for Osama bin Laden, the Taliban and “terrorists” in general,

- News stories represented Pakistan as a regional model of moderation but did not hide that it was also a tinderbox for regional conflagration.
- News stories represented Pakistan as a relatively stable state under the control of a progressive military leader but did also report on the shocking religious and tribal excesses—that were on occasion artfully managed by that military dictator.

“The generally strong coverage of the Pakistan-Afghanistan theater in comparison to the poor coverage of Iraq up through 2003 may be due to the fact that by early 2002, the administration’s failure to capture Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar caused reporters to look critically both at the conduct of the war and the rhetoric of the White House,” Moeller suggests.

The study also documented how the press covered Muslims and Islam post-9/11 when it seemed like every talking head was asking plaintively “Why do they hate us?” The most surprising finding of the study was who the press decided were “our” Muslim friends—the “good” Muslims were women:

- Stories depicted women as the “peacemakers” who the West could use to find the solution to terrorism at the family, the tribal or ethnic and the national level.
- Stories depicted women as “saviors.” Multiple tales of women struggling to gain an education for themselves or to facilitate the education of others, for example, spoke about the transformative power of women at the local level.
- Women, rather than children became the most notable “innocent” victims of indiscriminate violence. Certain children were not innocent, articles made clear—indeed they were to be feared. Boys, even very young boys were part of the terrorist matrix, in large measure because of their indoctrination at madrassas.
- Articles about women’s “victim” status at the hands of men validated the binary idea that Muslim women are “good” and Muslim men are “cruel,” perhaps even “terrorists.”
- Women’s clothing was a subject of intense interest. “Taking off the veil” was both a real and metaphorical statement and articles measured women’s freedom by how “uncovered” they were and how close their clothing approximated Western dress.

This study *The “Good” Muslims: US Newspaper Coverage of Pakistan* evaluated news coverage of Pakistan by thirteen major agenda-setting US newspapers: *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Miami Herald*, *The New York Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Seattle Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*. Two time periods were considered: September 11, 2001 to December 31, 2002 and January 1, 2006 to January 15, 2007.

The study is the most recent report released by the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda (ICMPA), a center of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism and the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, College Park. Earlier research conducted by Susan Moeller, director of the Center, includes her study of “Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in March 2004, released by the university’s Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM).

The study is available online at <http://www.icmpa.umd.edu>

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