

Study: ‘NYT’ Portrays Islam More Negatively than Alcohol, Cancer, and Cocaine

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A [study](#) released in November 2015 by [416 Labs](#), a Toronto-based consulting firm, reveals that the New York Times portrays Islam/Muslims more negatively than alcohol, cancer, and cocaine among other benchmarked words.

Based on a sentiment analysis of online and print headlines spanning 25 years of coverage, the study found “strong evidence that Islam/Muslims are consistently associated with negative terms in NYT headlines.” Key findings pertaining to 2,667,700 articles include:

- “57% of the headlines containing the words Islam/Muslims were scored negatively. Only 8% of the headlines were scored positively.
- Compared to all the other benchmarked terms (Republican, Democrat, Cancer and Yankees, Christianity and Alcohol), Islam/Muslims had the highest incidents of negative terms throughout the 25-year period.
- Not once over the examined period does the aggregate negative sentiment of headlines related to Islam/Muslims go below the NYT aggregate (29%) for all headlines.
- The most frequent terms associated with Islam/Muslims include “Rebels” and “Militant.” None of the 25 most frequently occurring terms were positive.”

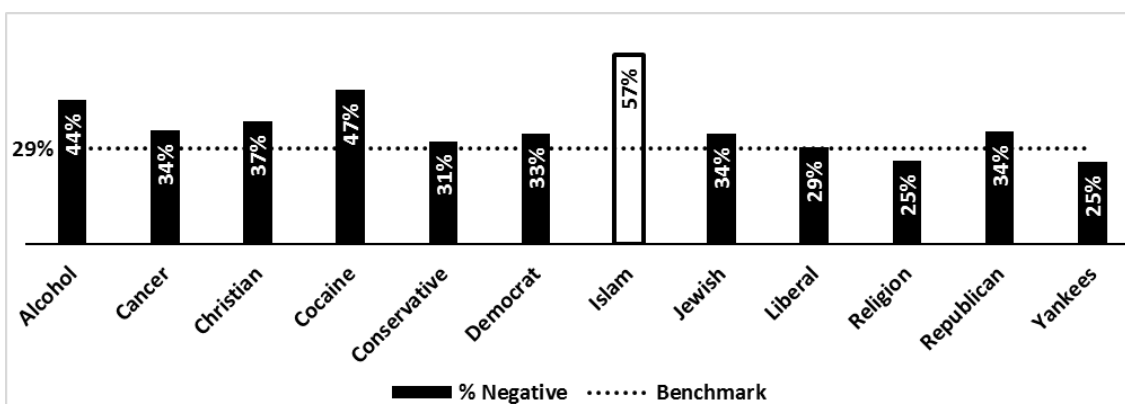


Figure 4 of the study showing percentage of NYT headlines with an overall negative score. (Image: 416 Labs)

To put these findings in perspective, the study notes that “despite causing more fatalities

than violent acts by Jihadist groups [throughout the covered period], the negative sentiment for alcohol and cancer remains significantly below the sentiment shown in headlines for Islam and Muslims.”

In a phone interview, co-author Steven Zhou, who is in charge of Investigations and Civic Engagement at the recently established consulting firm, explained the reasons behind their inaugural study:

“Since 9/11, many media outlets began profiteering from the anti-Muslim climate. Though you could probably trace a similar trend back to the Iranian Revolution. We talk a lot about media and Islamophobia, but no body has done the math. So, we thought it is long overdue to have a quantitative investigation of an agenda-setting newspaper.”



Given that media organizations have a powerful role in influencing public perceptions, the study concludes that “the overwhelming sentiment associated with NYT headlines about Islam/Muslims is likely to distort perceptions,” suggesting “that the average reader of NYT is likely to assign collective responsibility to Islam/Muslims for the violent actions of a few.”

While the results may not be surprising to many readers, co-author Usaid Siddiqui who is in charge of Communications, Outreach and Partnerships [said](#) “when we went into it we didn’t think it would be surprising if Islam was one of the most negatively portrayed topics in the NYT...What did really surprise us was that compared with something as inherently negative as cancer, Islam still tends to be more negative.”

Though the study was published four months ago, it has received little attention. Zhou explains this is because “it’s the first study of a recently established firm. You know, we all worked on it while also having different full-time jobs and obligations.”

Nonetheless, given the spike in vitriol against Muslims in an election year, these findings are a timely wake-up call. Especially when voices like Robert Spencer’s, author and founder of the infamous Jihad Watch, a program of the David Horowitz Freedom Center, [blast](#) the study as:

“A classic example of how Leftists are out of touch with reality...the insidious agenda here is to silence even the slightest (and the New York Times is about as slight as you can get) critical word about anything related to Islam and Muslims. This would have the effect of silencing all opposition to the advancing jihad. It would be a recipe for defeat and surrender.”

Zhou said that he doesn't "see [Spencer's view] as an assessment of our substantial study, because it doesn't address the raw statistical analysis and empirical evidence our work clearly highlights." Zhou's defense of the study is not only grounded in empirical evidence, but also in light of a conversation surrounding what could only be described as the [Ayan Hirsi Ali Problem](#): "fringe Muslim [and non-Muslim] Americans, pushing an anti-Islam agenda are promoted as legitimate experts, thus mainstreaming ideas that are both offensive and incorrect."

Spencer is yet to "demonstrate his qualifications to explicate this topic," said Zhou. In fact, according to a [report](#) by the Muslim Public Affairs Council, Spencer, along with many other so-called "experts" on Islam, lacks crucial qualifications on the subject matter, and "mostly engages in internet-based polemics that he tries to pass off as serious scholarship." In 2014, Carl W. Ernst, professor of Islamic Studies at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, said that Spencer's views "have no basis in scholarship," with "no academic training in Islamic studies whatsoever." Incidentally, UNC-CH is where Spencer earned his Master's focusing on early Christianity.

Though the study keenly recognized that its findings are not necessarily the result of intentional choices by decision makers at the *Times*, it clearly points to an institutional tendency by many agenda-setting newspapers and organizations to paint Islam and Muslims with a single brush: war, violence, and terror.

Zhou said the study's empirical approach "sets an example" for many other topics because "critical rhetoric and slogans can only be effective with supporting evidence and crunching the numbers." One topic that undoubtedly serves as fertile ground is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The NYT is a standout case for several reasons: [at least 3 sons of NYT editors assigned to cover Israel and Palestine served, or continued to serve, in the Israeli occupation forces](#), evident [manipulation](#) and [biased](#) coverage, as well as a trend of accommodating official Israeli perspectives far more than Palestinians', all of which pose a serious conflict of interest to fair and balanced coverage, inviting a similar empirical investigation.

Several recommendations are offered by the authors of the study to "help represent Islam/Muslims in a more accurate way." These include educating reporters on the nuances of Islam, engaging local Muslim voices, and greater activism by Muslim organizations among others. Zhou said the most crucial tool for these recommendations to be taken up by people is "through creating spaces for Muslims beyond the mosque and home to talk about and engage with civic life.

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