

Answers to the questions posed in the paragraph that introduces this plenary session cannot be singular and unqualified. In keeping with the heterogeneity of media and the variability of media content, too many sweeping generalisations should not be made, as this would distort the truth. Yet, inevitably and predictably, some of the observations made herein may make generalizations, but will not state untruths!

Between public opinion and the media, there is often a symbiotic relationship. Yet sometimes, there is a contrary and disconnected condition. For example, the recent mass marches across the world to call for peace even as most Western global media were promoting unilateralism and a war psychosis. Also, some attitudes persist over time. Some opinions change within weeks.

The second part of the title of this plenary session i.e. "Bridging the Islam-West Divide" should be accompanied with other formulations that are equally valid. For example: "Bridging the West - East Divide". One expression of this is the fact that, on a single day such as 19th April 2003, the leading English language newspaper of Pakistan, Dawn, carries three separate reports by people of three different faiths conveying extreme concern at the way in which Western media deal with the rest of the world, and not just in terms of covering Islam.

The eminent Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, (born a Christian) reflects upon: "Imperial arrogance in modern times". The senior Indian journalist, born a Hindu, Kuldip Nayyar writes of: "Jingoism and journalism". A Dawn staffer, a Muslim by birth. Omar R. Qureshi reports findings by a US-based media watchdog, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) about the biases of major US TV networks in the period before the invasion of Iraq.

Another formulation for the second half of the title of the plenary-session could be: "Bridging the intra-West Divide".

To highlight the gap between media in the West, and the gap between countries within the West. A fourth formulation could also be: "Bridging the Individualism - Collectivism Divide". To illustrate the polar contrasts in the two different kinds of ethos that shape the West and Islam.

If the attempt to bridge the Islam-West divide is visualised as that of a structure that connects two shores, and which has a two-way road, then the existing and actual state of media in terms of Islam and the West can only be seen as a one-way street or a lopsided bridge, with all the traffic in the form of media units and media content originating from one shore i.e. the West, to rush down to the Islamic countries on the other shore which have virtually a total vacuum in terms of global media capacity.

The lop-sided imbalance in global media and in one-way information flow is one of the major reasons for the distorted perceptions that constitute Western/US/UK policy on Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir and other similar issues.

A very open, transparent media system in the West has resulted in a curious contradiction: a compulsive desire to export information from the West to the rest of the world but an unwillingness to absorb and accept information from non-West sources, except in freak instances.

The invasion of Iraq has increased this "knowledge and comprehension gap" in the West because it has intensified prior, existing perceptions. Alienation has been reinforced, not reduced. This is despite the fact that post-Saddam, the media have given both points of view: e.g. the Iraqi opposition to the presence of US troops on Iraqi soil, the US view on the same issue, etc.

There is a need to note that public perceptions in the West about Islam are shaped, in the initial instance, by primary, first-hand, physically inter-active sources such as the family, neighborhood, community, school, college, workplace; by material such as tin-content of books read in school, by the manner and tone with

which teachers and lecturers impart the first doses of information about Islam in classrooms, by contact with Muslims living/working in their areas and by other similar formative sources.

Media do shape public opinion in the West about Islam but sequentially, media come as a secondary factor in building attitudes to Islam compared to the core primary sources mentioned earlier.

In this sense, public perceptions in the West about Islam have already been shaped before media get to further shape, or de-shape, these perceptions.

In fact, having arrived on the scene of the public mind with the initial image-formulators having already rendered their work - and fled the scene of the crime! - the media simply reinforce and consolidate perceptions and images that already exist.

In turn, these pre-set perceptions that precede media are also shaped by "previous media" which have already had a go. Such media can range from a school textbook to a cinema feature film to a newspaper report.

Which brings us to consider the wide heterogeneity of media, both in the nature and diversity of different media and the heterogeneity in the components of media content.

There is mainstream serious media. This category comprises print media such as daily newspapers and periodical magazines. There are also electronic media, comprising radio and TV channels.

There is also the medium of books, as a distinct mass medium, be they best-sellers in paperbacks or scholarly works of reference.

Another category of media may be described as tabloid media. This comprises large circulation newspapers and magazines, which either trivialise significant events and give unbalanced and populist treatment to important themes or provide disproportionate coverage to frivolous subjects. Tabloid electronic media comprises cable TV channels that 'distribute junk quality programmes which also include misleading stereotypical references to religion as well as news channels such as Fox TV which epitomizes stringent chauvinism and jingoism. Talk radio in which programme hosts voice vitriolic views, complete the composition of this category. Unfortunately, tabloid media reach the largest numbers and project the most offensive distortions.

A third slab comprises entertainment media, primarily consisting of the cinema which, unlike newspapers, radio and TV, has no "daily news" content but which often depicts stories based on real events or themes rooted in reality, or perceptions about reality. Populist cinema consolidates false stereotypes.

Then there is the fourth category, the medium that is like no other, a medium whose content is changing and expanding every second of time, a medium and an audience all rolled into the unique form of the Internet.

There is a wholly different category, the fifth type which could be called: "parallel media". This category comprises newspapers and magazines, as well as radio stations and TV channels with readerships and audiences smaller than both mainstream serious media and tabloid media. The features that distinguish such "parallel media" from other types of media is their independence and dissent from the predictable and conventional patterns followed by both mainstream serious media and tabloid media.

Some examples of such independence exist within mainstream media as well when it comes to recognising the works of journalists such as Robert Fisk or John Pilger who may not be asked to appear in mainstream serious media like the BBC World Service TV but who are able to write for mainstream serious newspapers such as The Independent or The Guardian in Britain.

A sixth category of media is ethnic or religious or cultural media in the West that caters only to or aims to reach only specific, small audiences representing recently migrated communities living within Western societies. Such media do not inter-act at all with (the bulk of) people living in Western countries. An example of such ethnic media are print and electronic media programmes in the Arabic language for Arab-Americans in USA.

With such horizontal variety in the nature of media and the categories of media, there is also a vertical variety in the content of each medium.

Newspaper headlines, especially on the front page, are read by virtually 100% of the readership. The percentage begins to decline with regard to the number of people who read the complete text of each news story. Often, the most important part of a newspaper, i.e. the editorial section and analyses published on the editorial page, or the op-ed page, are the least read, though this does not reduce their significance or the value for those who follow editorials regularly.

Different parts of a newspaper attract different types of readership levels and intensity as in sports, economics/business, entertainment, local news.

In electronic media, the duration of news headlines and the time devoted to amplifying each headline has been steadily shrinking over the past decade and more. While analytical talk / interview / discussion programmes and documentaries may compensate for the brevity of news headlines, it is a moot point as to the extent in which such detailed discussions have an effect, as formatively equivalent, as do event-based news headlines and short reports.

While mainstream serious media in the West make a conscious and deliberate effort to be fair and even-handed in their coverage of Islamic subjects and Muslim countries, they are sometimes unable to compensate for the deep-rooted and historic biases and distortions that have been accumulated over centuries of ignorance or deliberate suppression of facts or sheer distortion.

The formulation of the phrase "Islamic terrorism" and the misuse of the word "jihad" are distinct manifestations of both deliberate distortion, or careless, ill-informed bias in certain Western media about Islam.

Manifestations of Christian and racist extremism such as the Ku Klux Klan in the USA were never dubbed "Christian terrorism" and neither have the IRA terrorists been called "Catholic terrorists" in the way that Palestinian suicide bombers or Afghan Taliban have been called "Islamic terrorists".

Even with the commendable attempt by certain Western media to employ Muslims as presenters or writers or resource persons, the sheer preponderance of non-Muslims in Western media does exert a particular shade and tone to the quality of coverage.

Unlike most media based in the Islamic countries, mainstream serious media in the West strive to give a balanced view of events and themes by affording an opportunity to both points of view, or to all major points of view about a given subject. This enhances their credibility to a level far higher than mainstream serious media in Muslim countries.

For the record it should be acknowledged that Western media such as BBC World TV, CNN and newspapers such as The Guardian and The Independent in the UK and occasionally, some parts of The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Los Angeles Times have been as balanced as it is possible for them to be, despite the historical and contemporary contexts from which they operate.

The intrinsic tendency of media to compress, select, exclude portions of reality and the equally intrinsic, irreducible nature of reality produces inevitable tensions and contradictions.

What is the riddle, the enigma - or it is not an enigma?! - that whenever a foreigner, specially a Western citizen visits a Muslim country for the first time - say Pakistan! - he finds the reality substantially if not diametrically different from the way the Western media reports it.

Mr. Vince Harris, the British chief executive of the largest Pakistani electric power company known as HUBCO, reiterated this paradox during an interview on Pakistan Television on 20th April 2003. Does this reality give Western media pause to think?

Data and analyses on Western media's coverage of Islam is never, or rarely, given the time and space in Western media that this subject deserves.

Though the Al Jazeera TV channel has done path-breaking work in the Arab countries in particular in providing an independent perspective on issues, its impact on the West remains second-hand and limited because Al Jazeera is still using only the Arabic language and because comments about its content are made available to Western audiences on a second-hand basis through Western media in an extremely brief and limited form.

Whereas Western media such as the BBC Radio's External Services and the CNN TV's Spanish service use indigenous languages to reach Muslim countries and to reach audience