When Arsalan Iftikhar stepped in front of the microphone Monday evening in the Grand Hall of the Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center, he asked members of the audience to raise their hands if they had heard someone say President Barack Obama is Muslim. Almost every person in a crowd of about 100 people had a hand up.

Iftikhar, an international human rights attorney, author and media commentator, headlined a panel discussion at Indiana University titled “Covering Islam 2015: Muslims, Politics and the Media.”

He was one of four panelists who discussed the negative perceptions of Muslims in America today and how the best hope for change is to humanize Muslims.

Iftikhar used his opening remarks to illustrate the country’s attitude toward Muslims since Sept. 11, 2001.

He talked about how people have begun to use the word Muslim as a derogatory slur, in reference to his question about Obama. He talked about how U.S. Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., once recommended arresting every Muslim who crossed the state line. He talked about how Rev. Jerry Falwell said he thought the Muslim Prophet Muhammad was a terrorist.

Iftikhar then pointed out how those types of statements don’t exist in a vacuum. He cited a 2006 USA Today poll that found 46 percent of Americans felt Muslims should carry special IDs on them at all times. He cited a Gallup Poll that found 22 percent of Americans would not want Muslims as their next-door neighbors.

“Muslims are now the most despised demographic in America,” he said later in the discussion.

Rosemary Pennington, managing editor for Indiana University’s Muslim Voices project, told about her visit to a rural Indiana town to ask people about their views on Islam for a podcast on stereotypes. She said people physically recoiled when she started to ask about the subject.

“It happened over and over again,” she said.

Part of her research involves exploring how young Muslims are using social media such as Tumblr. She
said one thing that shows up in conversations repeatedly is media portrayals.

“Young people watch the news and they’re not seeing themselves, they’re seeing criminals,” she said.

Pennington said as part of her research she analyzes the results of Google searches. She said 85 percent of the search results for the word “Islam” are related to violence.

While the media has made things worse for Muslims in many ways, it can still have a positive effect.

Matthew Tully, opinion columnist for the Indianapolis Star, talked about columns he’s written on U.S. Rep. Andre Carson, D-Ind. As a Muslim and member of the intelligence committee, Carson shatters many of the negative stereotypes of Islam.

Tully also made a comparison to the gay marriage debate and how, as more people have realized they know people who are gay, it’s become a lot harder for people to continue to hold negative stereotypes about homosexuality. Iftikhar agreed.

“I wish everyone had a Muslim cousin,” he said. “We’re less likely to demonize if we know people.”

Pennington added that a media representative can be a stand-in for a personal connection.

Nazif Shahrani, professor of Near Eastern languages and cultures, Central Eurasian studies and anthropology, pointed out media isn’t the only place where portrayals of Muslims must change. He advocated for change through curriculum. He said if the only time Islam is mentioned in textbooks is in the context of an enemy, there is no hope that things will get better.

He compared the situation to the civil rights movement. He said Obama’s election to the presidency would not have been possible without the civil rights movement being taught in schools.

“We have to educate young people,” he said. “We have to humanize Muslims like the rest of the population. As long as this vicious cycle of dehumanization continues, there is no hope.”