Panel at IU Bloomington will discuss U.S. news media’s coverage of Islam and Muslims

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Millions worldwide join the Japanese people in mourning the latest victim beheaded by Islamic State, also known as ISIS. Muslims in France and elsewhere decry the recent attack on satire magazine Charlie Hebdo by extremists.

Arsalan Iftikhar, an international human rights attorney, author and media commentator, will be one of the speakers.

Militant Islamist group Boko Haram has created havoc in Africa’s most populous country, Nigeria, through a series of bombings, assassinations and abductions.

Hilary Kahn, director of the Center for the Study of Global Change and assistant dean of the School of Global and International Studies, and Rosemary Pennington, managing editor of the award-winning Muslim Voices project, see these stories and worry that coverage of extremists’ terrorist activities misrepresents Islam in general and stirs misunderstanding.

“Historically, media narratives have tied Islam to violence,” Pennington said. “That misses the diversity of experience and creates a monolithic understanding of all Muslims as bad guys.”

Kahn is one of several organizers of a timely symposium on Monday, Feb. 9 at Indiana University Bloomington, “Covering Islam 2015: Muslims, Politics and the Media.”

The event, which will be from 4 to 6 p.m. in the Grand Hall of the Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center, 275 N. Jordan Ave., is free and open to the public.

“The Center for the Study of Global Change has been involved in helping media practitioners and the public understand the diversity of Islam through its Muslim Voices Project since 2008,” Kahn said.

Covering Islam will “not only highlight the troubling framing of Islam, but also will provide a venue for an honest conversation about the issues inherent in covering Muslims and Islam,” Pennington said. “Too often, news coverage of Muslims treats them as a singular mass, we hope our forum will help humanize Muslim experience.”
Kahn and Pennington point to a research study released last summer by the Pew Research Center, which said that many Americans view Muslims very coldly when asked to rate them on a “feeling thermometer.” Forty percent of those surveyed rated Muslims on the coldest part of the thermometer with an average rating of 40 (compared to the 60s for Jews, Catholics and Evangelical Christians).

“There clearly needs to be a continued public conversation about this complicated issue,” Kahn said.

Indianapolis Star columnist Matt Tully

Among the presenters at “Covering Islam 2015” will be Arsalan Iftikhar, an international human rights attorney, global media commentator and author. You may have seen him on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” CNN, Fox News, MSNBC and Al-Jazeera America.

You may have heard him on National Public Radio and the BBC or read his perspectives in The Economist and the Washington Post.

On Twitter, Iftikhar is simply known as @TheMuslimGuy.

He is a senior editor of The Islamic Monthly. His most recent book, “Islamic Pacifism: Global Muslims in the Post-Osama Era,” which Pulizer Prize winning columnist Eugene Robinson said “should be required reading for anyone tempted to equate the real Islam with the atrocities committed by unholy zealots in the name of one of the world’s great religions.”

Other participating journalists and scholars will include Indianapolis Star reporter and columnist Matt Tully, who has been covering the controversy over congresswoman Andre Carson’s becoming the first Muslim named to the House Intelligence Committee.

Pennington and Nazif Shahrani, professor of Near Eastern languages and cultures, Central Eurasian studies and anthropology, will round out the panel. School of Global and International Studies Dean Lee Feinstein is expected to offer remarks as well.

The Center for the Study of Global Change is hosting the event and has housed the Muslim Voices project, along with partner WFIU. Muslim Voices’ Twitter account has nearly 77,000 followers from around the world and also has won awards.
“We are very proud of this social media site, as it allows us to dissect stereotypes and explore Islam in all of its social, political, representational, spiritual, and regional complexity,” Kahn said.

The School of Global and International Studies, the Media School, the Islamic Studies Program and the Center for the Study of the Middle East also are sponsoring the event, which has support from several other units at IU Bloomington.