



(Re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation

# Storytelling 2.0

for the American Muslim Community

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## About The Author



### **Maria M. Ebrahimji**

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Maria Ebrahimji is journalist, strategist, speaker, and independent consultant. Her clients include media organizations, academia, and non-profits. As a former executive at CNN Worldwide, she led a team in guest coverage, newsgathering, and story planning for CNN's special events, breaking news, and multi-platform programming. While at CNN, she was involved in the coverage of groundbreaking news stories including four Presidential elections; 9/11; the Iraq War; Madrid train bombing; Pakistan and Haiti earthquakes; 2011 Arab uprisings; Royal Wedding; Boston Marathon bombing, and the deaths of Yasser Arafat, Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Benazir Bhutto, and Pope John Paul II. She has produced live events with luminaries and newsmakers – during breaking news and in the backdrop of major global events such as Davos, CGI, and the Fortune Global Forum. Ms. Ebrahimji played an instrumental role on CNN's Diversity Council, serving as its Vice Chair for several years and shaping diversity strategy in the areas of marketplace, content, workplace, and workforce. In addition she launched and executed CNN Dialogues, a three-year partnership between CNN, the National Center for Civil & Human Rights, and Emory University's

Johnson Institute for the Study of Race & Difference. In 2012, Ms. Ebrahimji co-founded I Speak for Myself, Inc. (ISFM), a book and multimedia enterprise that publishes narrative collections on interfaith and intercultural issues. The company has published five volumes in the series, with many more forthcoming. She has also served as an advisor to the International Museum of Women's 2013 online exhibition, "Muslima: Muslim Women's Art & Voices," and as an advisor and panelist on the Aspen Institute's Inclusive America project, a nonpartisan effort on pluralism and interfaith coordination. She was recently named a one of 100 Most Influential Muslims in Georgia by the Islamic Speakers Bureau of Atlanta and is currently working with the University of California's Humanities Research Institute on a project entitled, "Sharia'h Revoiced," exploring California Muslims' interpretation of Islamic law in daily life. Ms. Ebrahimji is on the Board of Directors of the Atlanta Press Club, serves as an advisor to Tau Chapter, Alpha Chi Omega, Inc., and is a member of the Marketing Committee for the Board of Directors of Girls Inc., Atlanta. Her community affiliations include the World Affairs Council of Atlanta, the Georgia Diversity Council, and Refresh South - an events series in Atlanta featuring innovators and global thinkers. She holds a B.A. degree in Mass Communications from Brenau Women's College and a Master's of Arts degree in Political Science & International Affairs from Georgia State University.

*On Friday and Saturday, April 11 and 12, 2014, the Alwaleed Islamic Studies Program at Harvard University hosted a two-day workshop (Re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation to discuss the ways in which American Muslims define themselves, and are defined, in the twenty-first century. The workshop brought together a diverse slate of American Muslim activists, artists, scholars and advocates in a constructive dialogue on a wide range of issues affecting Muslims in the United States. In five sessions over two days, the group addressed challenges regarding the ideas of American Muslim identity and representation while encouraging a discussion of the opportunities and a broader view of the communities encompassed in the umbrella term 'American Muslims'.*

*What follows is Maria M. Ebrahimji's presentation from Session 2 of the conference that explored the topic of American Muslim Storytellers.*

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## Introduction

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As storytellers, we often get so absorbed with the stories we are telling that we become unaware of the changing dynamics around us. I think this is the case with the American Muslim community, post 9/11. In the immediate weeks/months/years following the horrific events, we collectively gathered, unified, and endeavored to do whatever it took to defend and protect our Islam. With greater understanding came the need for more context and nuance, much of which our community was unwilling or unable to provide, and most of which the general mainstream media was unwilling to go searching for.

The reality is, we are not a monolithic community and we never have been. By attempting to unify in the aftermath of a tragic event, we created an impression that there are only two kinds of Muslims: US and THEM (the good ones and the bad ones). In its most simplistic sense, this may be the case, but our reality as a community is that we are navigating nuance and differences every day. The more open we are about these differences and the more we embrace them, the more the general public will accept and appreciate us for who we are. In that sense, our unity IS our common belief in one faith and a common acceptance and respect towards all who follow (and don't follow) in our beliefs.

Storytellers have a great role to play in illuminating and creating appreciation and respect for diversity and difference. In fact, I believe our role is most important of all because we are able to garner such reaction from our audiences in a non-political, benign way- a venue through which each audience member comes to their own appreciation of our art and our message at their own pace. While there are many messages that can be interpreted, the universal message of storytelling is to emote and share – and by doing more of this, I am confident our community will prosper and sustain itself.

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## Challenges and opportunities for storytellers in our community

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Lack of profitable and widely read platforms in which to share content and stories (HuffPo cannot be the clearinghouse for our messaging and often dilute the message; niche American Muslim publications like Illume, Muslim Observer, and Islamic Monthly do not offer the wide audience).

Lack of career-track compensation for talented Muslim American writers and artists producing content about the community and lack of available funding to launch projects. (Muslim American publications do not have the financial resources to pay writers well for their content, resulting in inconsistent submissions and little investment by the writers/artists themselves in the

long-term success of the publication.) One solution and opportunity would be to support and financially back Muslim crowd funding startups (LaunchGood, Muslim Giving Project) – encourage more storytellers to use these platforms to fund their work.

Create more teaching tools and workshop programs for next generation (middle and high school) budding artists and storytellers. While there has been a real focus in empowering and lifting up young Muslim professionals (AMCLI, CAMP, etc.) there is a real need for such empowerment during a Muslim teen's most formative years. Our storyteller community could form speaker bureaus and/or design workshops that could be taught to Muslim youth groups across the country. This would enable these youth to have mentors in the field to aspire to and to create an appreciation for storytelling and creative arts in them that will ideally allow them to contribute (through art and financial support) as they grow older.

Lack of national platforms and venues in which Muslim American artists can gather, display and showcase their work. Aside from Taking It To The Streets, there have been no nationally inclusive festivals. Solutions might be to create partnerships with regional organizations, which then rotate hosting an event annually. Another solution would be to create online festival competitions for aspiring filmmakers, photographers and visual artists.

Create more storytellers and op-ed writers. At this moment I could count on my hand the number of consistent op-ed writers in our community. They respond to current events regularly and are strong voices of reason and provocation. However, we have to develop a pipeline of others. One solution is to create a partnership with the Op-Ed project to offer a workshop specific to the Muslim American community – a weekend session that would garner attendees through nominations from all Muslim American organizations.

A final challenge I would outline involves what I call the detrimental aspects of #hashtag activism. I worry that our community has taken to social media to tell stories and campaign vs. thinking about long-term sustainability of these messages and stories. I have seen many social media campaigns, twitter chats etc. inviting people to share ideas online – however these conversations are taking place in vacuums and are forgotten as instantly as they pop up. We must together work to create ways to sustain our conversations and elevate them to levels that invoke meaningful responses. While there is no real solution to address this concern, I wanted to point it out as a matter of reflection. We must be more than hashtags in our storytelling.

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*Muslims are  
Diverse nationally  
and globally;  
we are not  
monolithic.  
We have much to  
learn from each  
other and must  
engage in the  
storytelling of  
Muslims in all its  
forms and beauty.*

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## Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding

ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan research organization specializing in addressing the most pressing challenges facing the American Muslim community and in bridging the information gap between the American Muslim community and the wider society. ISPU conducts objective, empirical research and offers expert policy analysis on some of the most pressing issues facing the United States. In addition, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines and built a solid reputation as a trusted source for information about American Muslims and Muslim communities around the world.

ISPU scholars provide insight into the major debates taking place across the country. They offer context-specific analysis and recommendations to journalists, policymakers, and the general public through reports, policy briefs, articles, op-eds and books. ISPU disseminates its publications through a variety of channels and holds regular congressional briefings, policy events and academic conferences.

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