



2009 WISE Conference “Change through Communication”

Beliefnet: New Media and New Understanding of the Muslim Dress Code

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A study of how www.beliefnet.com, a popular multifaith, inspiration and spirituality website has utilized all angles of new media to create a cache of content demystifying the Muslim dress code for women.

Background:

One of the biggest and most persistent issues that Muslim women face in how they are viewed and perceived by the Western (non-Muslim) world still is how we choose to dress. Some Muslim women wear the *hijab* (or headscarf) with their clothes, others wear *abayas* or *burqas*, or *chadors*, some add a *niqab* (face veil) to the ensemble, while still others choose not to cover up and view modesty as an inner quality and not dependent on their outerwear. The *hijab* story never seems to go away, whether three years back when British politician Jack Straw created a stir when he requested his *niqab*-wearing constituents to remove their veils before speaking with him (because it would create a more open line of communication, he said), or whether it was the novelty of Muslim women wearing the *hijab* and competing in the last summer Olympics, to the latest story out of France, where in June French President Nicolas Sarkozy made a major policy speech in which he criticized the *burqa*, likened it to “enslavement” and advocated for legislation to ban it. (“The issue of the *burqa* is not a religious issue. It is a question of freedom and of women’s dignity,” Mr. Sarkozy said. “The *burqa* is not a religious sign. It is a sign of the subjugation, of the submission, of women.”) See this link for full article:

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/world/europe/23france.html?_r=1

Non-Muslims are still plagued by misconceptions about the various forms of Muslim dress, about why some women choose to cover up and some don't, and about the different variations in the dress. Is it mandated by the Qur'an? Does covering your hair but wearing form-fitting clothes constitute modesty? Why do some women shroud themselves so much? Are they forced to do so by the men in their lives? Why don't men cover up? Does it get hot and uncomfortable when one covers up? These questions persist amongst non-Muslims, making the symbol of the *hijab* one synonymous with the simultaneous visions of liberation and subservience—depending on where you are coming from. Among Muslim women themselves there is debate on whether the *hijab* is mandated in the Qur'an, and if the way you dress reflects on the kind of Muslim you are. The question for me was, how do we take the power of new media and create a comprehensive package of content that addresses these questions from all angles?

Strategies for Change:

If you look on the internet, do a simple Google search on the term, “*hijab*,” you come up with more than **6,030,000** hits. But in my search for a comprehensive, easy-to-digest package of material covering the topic of the *hijab* and Muslim women’s dress styles, I found too much unwieldy information. With the idea “change through communication,” I decided to harness Beliefnet’s new media tools to create a package of content that addressed this big issue from a variety of angles: We created a slideshow/gallery about the different types of dress that Muslim women wear (and the issues around these styles of dress), a FAQ about the *hijab*, an essay from a woman who decided to stop wearing the *hijab*, the promotion of some discussion groups on our social networking site about various problems (and successes) women have with wearing the *hijab*, and continuous posting on our various blogs about these issues.

Our theory was that by addressing this evergreen topic from all angles of new media (slideshows, essays, blogging, social networking), we could facilitate a change in the perception of this topic amongst our majority non-Muslim readership as well as create a platform for Muslims to have deeper discussion about this topic and be able to share these links with each other. After creating this content, we promoted it on the Islam page at Beliefnet.com, on Beliefnet’s homepage, and in our various newsletters. We sent it out to

a vast range of media outlets for their use, and we posted it on sites like Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter. By zeroing in on the widespread sharing of information backed by Beliefnet's strong editorial reputation, we feel we've been able to provide answers to many questions that our readers have about this topic.

URLS developed by Beliefnet about the topic of *hijab* and Muslim women's dress:

- Social Networking: in Beliefnet Community -- "My Hijab or My Job?"
http://community.beliefnet.com/go/thread/view/43861/13155619/My_hijab_or_my_job and
[http://community.beliefnet.com/go/thread/view/59723/15284583/Banning the Burqa in France Is Sarkozy going too far](http://community.beliefnet.com/go/thread/view/59723/15284583/Banning_the_Burqa_in_France_Is_Sarkozy_going_too_far) (two of many others)
- Essay: "Taking off My Hijab": <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/2008/08/Taking-Off-My-Hijab.aspx> and "Girls Just Want to have Fun":
<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/2004/05/Girls-Just-Want-To-Have-Fun.aspx>
- FAQ: "All You Want to Know about the Hijab":
<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/2008/07/Your-Hijab-Questions-Answered.aspx>
- Gallery/Slideshow: "What are the Hijab and Muslim Dress All About?"
<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/2008/09/What-is-the-Hijab-and-Muslim-Dress-All-About.aspx>
- Blog Posts: "At the Beijing Olympics the Hijab Emerges":
<http://blog.beliefnet.com/idolchatter/2008/08/at-the-beijing-olympics-the-hi.html>
- Other Blog Posts about the Hijab: <http://blog.beliefnet.com/cityofbrass/2008/09/french-hijab-ban.html>, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/windowsanddoors/2009/06/freedom-of-religion-includes-w.html>

Challenges and Successes:

The challenges, as always with new media, are sheer size of the Internet and social networking sites, and how to spread information to the greatest audience possible. It's all about search engine optimization, proper headlining of content, and reaching out to the right media outlets, advocacy groups, and bloggers to spread the word about what we've created. We've taken a full-bodied approach to spreading our *hijab* coverage, by reaching out to our own bloggers and other well-read blogs to link to our content, and we've shared our content with a variety of media outlets as well.

We've had moderate success in dispelling myths and explaining facets of the *hijab* story, or *hijab* issue, call it what you will. Traffic numbers, which will be discussed in the powerpoint presentation, have been average, and not nearly as high as some of our other Beliefnet faith galleries and content. Anecdotally we've heard much positive feedback about how the content we've created and the variety of platforms we've used have facilitated good discussions and the sharing of information. Anecdotes and pageviews are what we have to go on at this time, and that remains the challenge of creating content in new media – such content never dies, such content is ever growing, and such content is increasingly unedited. Our challenge remains to separate our well-researched and edited content from the other stuff out there, and to move such content to the top of search engines for maximum viewing.