

# Potential Role of Alternative Media in Reducing Islamophobia: A case study of unrest in the southern provinces of Thailand

*Assistant Professor Dr. Sawut Aree*

Director,  
Muslim Studies Center,  
Institute of Asian Studies  
Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

*Professor Dr. Jaran Maluleem*

Department of International Relations,  
Faculty of Political Science  
Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand

*Dr. Mohd Faheem*

Head,  
Indian Studies Program,  
Pridi Banomyong International College  
Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Media plays important role to develop a perception in a society. In this regard, there is growing consensus among the media specialists and academicians that certain mainstream media representation of Southern Thailand turbulence has been generating Islamophobia in Thai society. This trend is not in isolation from the global media obsession in negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims, and depicting Muslims as violent or as extremists. Lack of 'media awareness' about the underlying ethnic and cultural dimensions of the Southern Thailand turbulence often causes them pertaining Islam to the unrest. **Methodology:** This article design by the help of media orchestra in Thailand combines with the violent conflicts in Middle East constructs a simulation in viewer's perception. Ultimately, this could potentially generate long-term hatred against Thai Muslim population. **Findings:** This article contends that alternative media has a potential role to disseminate factual news in a biasfree and popular fashion. It has the ability to reach massive audiences and act as the real 'broadcaster'. **Implications:** The article argues that this might help reduce the current hatred towards Islam and Muslims. It describes that the alternative media utilized three modes in their reporting on the Southern Thailand turbulence; those are (a) providing sufficient space in presentation, (b) accessing the in-depth news sources, and (c) choosing words and images in a fair way. **Originality:** This could challenge the power of the mainstream media, which usually sets the social agenda. Thus, alternative media could potentially reduce the propensity of Islamophobia in Thai society.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, Alternative Media, Mainstream Media, and Southern Thailand unrest etc.

## INTRODUCTION:

Unrest in the three southern border provinces of Thailand has been continuing for decades. The mainstream media that influence a large number of people, such as newspapers, radio and television, has consistently followed up this turbulence. But most of the reports exhibit mainly information from state officials such as the scene, number of deaths and the list of suspects. It also reproduces the same discourse by choosing

negative words stereotyping the southern Muslims, such as the "Southern Bandits" or "Muslim extremists". When combined with violence conflicts in Middle East on Thai media pages, the Islamophobia has become intensified in Thai society throughout the last decade.

However, in the midst of mainstream media, "alternative media" have emerged both inside and outside the conflict area, trying to "make a difference" by presenting other aspects about the situation in the southern border (by going into investigating the background of the conflict, talking to the local people to reflect the Muslim ways of life so that the outside society can get to know them and to open the public sphere for them to communicate and share their stories) which the mainstream media often ignore.

This article seeks to point out the importance of alternative media in the conflict areas acting as "broadcaster" for the people in the area in order to open up new perspectives about Muslims in the southern border provinces of Thailand, make the correct understanding, reduce the current hatred towards Islam and break the power of the mainstream media which remain "the monopoly" on the truth of the situation in the southern border provinces of Thailand.

### **Islamophobia in Thai Society:**

Since the end of 1990, both the academicians as well as ordinary people are widely using the term 'Islamophobia'. In some aspects, Islamophobia is a newly created terms of the concept that had already been presented by the famous work of Edward Said in the end of 1970, Orientalism, in which 'the West' had constructed 'the East' as extremely different and inferior (Edward Said, 2003). Islamophobia appeared as contemporary discourse when in 1996 the Runnymede Trust, an independent research and social policy agency, established 'the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia' and issued the report entitled 'Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All' (Gordon Conway, 1997).

The term Islamophobia as explained by The Runnymede Trust's report is 'an unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims'. This report further characterized 'Islamophobia' as a constellation of eight aspects of 'closed' views towards Islam, including the perception of Islam as a monolithic, static bloc; as separate and 'other'; as inferior to 'the West'; as violent and engaged in a 'clash of civilisations' with the West; and as primarily a political ideology, rather than a religious faith. The final three dimensions were the dismissal of criticisms of 'the West' made by Muslims, the justification of discriminatory treatment of Muslims, and the normalization of anti-Muslim hostility. This explanation is useful for assessing the presence of 'Islamophobic' aspects of media discourse.

Al-Qaeda's attack on the United States of America in September 11, 2001 was one of the causes of Islamophobia. The attack shocked the world. It was horrifying to witness the broadcasting of the aircraft crashing into the world trade centre building. In a very short time, the incident was aired across the world; spreading the long-term hatred. This encouraged the Islamophobic attitude against Muslim pulling a significant chunk of young Muslims to reply this situation by exhorting terrorist activities. Thus, the act of Islamophobia also served to form cause for Islamophobia. It is indeed formed a vicious trap. Recent emergence of the barbaric Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is an example of such practice.

In Thai society, Islamophobia started by the renew unrest in the three southern border provinces in early of 2004. Due to the fact that most of people in this area are Muslims; the violent images that have been presented through the mass media constantly make people become more afraid of Muslims in society, for example, if they see a woman with Hijab or a man with Muslim style hat walking in the street, the need of extra cautious will arise in their mind. Moreover, combining with the violent images of ISIS portrayed in the reporting have led ordinary people fearful towards Islam. This simple phenomenon generates Islamophobia in Thai society.

The objections to the construction of a mosque in Nan province in early 2015 or the objection to the Halal Food Industrial Estate project in Chiang Mai in mid-2016 are the evidence for it. Without effort to rectify the situation, it may lead to religious conflicts that are difficult to heal.



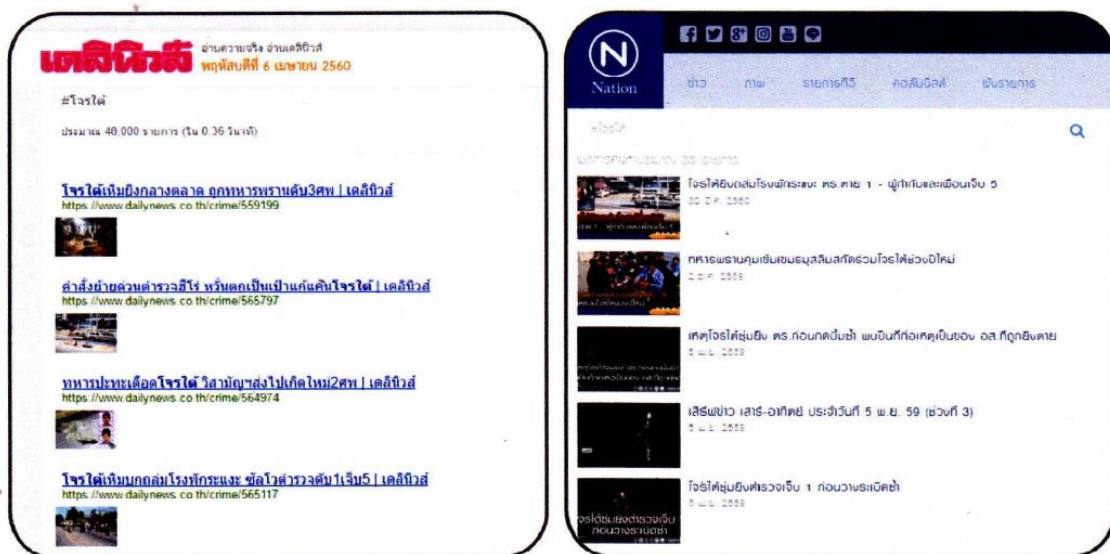
*Pictures of demonstration protest against the construction of a mosque in Nan province in early 2015 (Left) and the objection to the Halal Food Industrial Estate project in Chiang Mai in mid-2016 (Right).*

**"Mainstream media" and the strengthening of a sense of Islamophobia**

Although Islamophobia flows from diverse factors viz; political, social or cultural backgrounds, it cannot be denied that "the media" have become one of the major institutions that have fostered Islamophobia. "The mainstream media" (Noam Chomsky, 1997) – including newspapers, radio and television- have repeatedly replicated Islamophobia and made it to spread across the society. It almost becomes normal in the mainstream media industry in Thailand.

During 13 years of unrest in the three southern border provinces, experts on mass communication and peace studies often criticize the mainstream media on the negative side. At the seminar on "Southern bandits: rebels, separatists, Jihad warriors in the eyes of Thai media", was held on March 6, 2013, the mass media from various agencies have collectively concluded that Thai mainstream media act as the media that promote more conflict than peace.

This is because they often report events through the viewpoint of state officials and the opinion of "outsiders" who look into the conflict areas and they lack "insiders' viewpoints", which is an important factor in understanding the background of the conflict. In addition, the mainstream media have also created a number of discourse terms on the media, such as "territorial separatists," "extremist Muslims," or "southern bandits," which further intensify the problem of Islamophobia.



*When searching for the word "southern bandits" on the mainstream media websites, a lot of these words are shown - both in headlines and news details.*

**Alternative media: Creators of differences in the area of conflict.**

When the reports by mainstream media are viewed problematic, the new media have emerged to counterbalance the power of conventional media. 'Alternative media' is now getting recognition as a

popular tool to collect and disseminate reports. Alternative media, as defined in the ‘Introduction to Mass Media’ by Chulalongkorn University, is a media that aimed to present the new ideas, challenging the old beliefs or values of society. They usually choose one issue or story and go for an in-depth investigation of all aspects of the issue or story. Alternative media are usually a small media that have a particular media audience and are not intended to be commercially profitable (Ubonrat Siriyuwasak, 2007).

With the different nature of the media and the core concepts, the approach in presenting unrest in the three southern border provinces of alternative media differs significantly from the mainstream media. In its operation, alternative media distinctively emphasizes on three principle aspects; 1. providing space to all sides in presentation 2. The access to news sources and 3. The unbiased selection of words and images.

**The space of presentation:**

With regard to the space of presentation, it is found that the mainstream media have a responsibility to present the "news' space" that covers the whole country. A lot and different types of news are sent to the central office, editorial staffs need to allocate news to suit the time and the space - which is limited in nature. As a result, the news of unrest in the southern border, which has been so long (and the value of the news is dropping by the time), is often squeezed into a small area. There would be reports only on the violence on the scene; such as where it occurred, how many people were injured or killed. No efforts were made to delve deeply into the surrounding environment before the violence took place. The process of allocating such news reflects the power of agenda-setting of the mainstream media. They can determine the direction of "issues" circulating in society. Issues, in which the mainstream media give a lot of space and ongoing presentation, will be recognized by people in the society as important and they will discuss those issues broadly. While the issues presented in small areas may be ignored and disappear from the society, though, they may be important for the people in the society to consider about. Consequently, the mainstream media become the covert power that can subtly impact on the society. However, the power of agenda setting by the mainstream media may be challenged by alternative media in the conflicting area. This is because these media often specifically focus on the unrest in the three southern border provinces. They always make space for full presentation and focus deeply in every unrest event. This phenomenon can be noted from the unrest in the southern border area on April 7, 2017, one of the most widespread eruptions in this year and it is considered as an important violence that the people of the country should recognize and understand it in all aspects. However in the morning of April 8, 2017, just one day after the violence, it was found that most mainstream media such as the ‘Daily News’ chose other issues in the country to be presented instead of this news. There remained only a small frame for this violence; making it nearly lost its importance. Unlike the alternative media, such as “Isra news agency”, that still give the space with such a full page of web pages, and have many in-depth analysis to present. Therefore, it is challenging to dilute the power of the mainstream media, and open up new perspectives to let people understand the deeper incidents.



The space for news presentation on the Southern border provinces in “the Daily News website” (red bottom right) vs. “the Isra news website” (Full red frame) on April 8, 2017.

**The access to news sources:**

With regard to the access to news sources, it is found that the workflow of the mainstream media always focuses on speed. This due to the fact that the news must be produced for publication or broadcast on a daily, half-day or hourly basis. It is no time to be very careful about the production process. News sources selected by mainstream media are often a source that can be contacted and got access to it easily especially from police officers and military personnel. It is only rarely to go deeper into the affected villagers and Muslims.

As a result, people outside the conflict area receive only information from the government side and lack of human aspects of the locals and Muslims in the affected area. This may further increase the Islamophobia. The process of accessing such news sources reflects the concept of “primary definers” who see the conflict as a form of "discourse". If a party has the opportunity to speak or comment publicly, it will control the definition or "truth" of the conflict. When most mainstream media choose state officials as the "primary definers" about the unrest in the southern border provinces, the "truth" of the incident, will also be monopolized by the state, and can direct public opinion as desired. For example, if a military officer gives an interview to the media that a particular Muslim is a terrorist, without a source from the other side to dispute, the public will immediately stamp this person as a terrorist and give consent to the authority to expedite the prosecution.

However, the process of accessing news sources that seemed to be a problem may be resolved by alternative media that are often associated with people in the area. Their journalists eat food just like the local people and many of them can speak Malay thus they are trusted by the locals. This is enough to make them open their mind and talk about many subjects conveniently. The alternative media are a slow journalism (Le Masurier, M. 2015) because they do not have to accelerate day-to-day production. The journalists have more time to refine the issues; resulting in the discovery more of interesting hidden issues. The works are more dimensional and can be linked to local news sources than the mainstream media.

One of the most prominent case studies being talked about in journalism is the case of extrajudicial killing of ‘Maroso Chantravadi’ - a leader of RKK Group - by Marine Corps on February 13, 2013. The mainstream media such as “Kom Chad Luek” newspaper presented a special report on this issue under the name of “Maroso Chantravadi; This name is scared all over Bajok district” (Maroso Chantravadi, 2015). It used a high-ranking officer under the Narathiwat Special Operation 32 as the informed source to describe Mr. Maroso' s various terrorist actions, thus, so many arrest warrants were issued on him. The officer further said that "The peace will be guaranteed for this area, if without Mr. Maroso."

Unlike the mainstream media, the alternative media such as the website “the Patani Forum” offers a special report on this issue under the title "Maroso Chantravadi: From a Victim to the RKK Leader" (Maroso Chantravadi, 2017). Its approach was to talk to the family of Maroso, both his mother and wife, to reflect the background and the origins of each attack. Although this special report had been criticized for exaggerating the insurgent as the hero, but it can be considered as the specialty of alternative media that are able to launch new sources of information from the area and reduce the monopoly of the main definer. If people outside the conflict area have read, they would understand something more about the person whom the state called a terrorist from the aspect of humanity.



*Special report on the Moroso from the “Kom Chad Luek” published in February 14, 2013 (left*

*picture) and special report on the website of "the Patani Forum" published in 15 February 2013 (right picture)*

### **The choice of words and images:**

With regard to the choice of words and images, it is found that the mainstream media and the alternative media have different selection criteria for words and images. Most mainstream media in Thailand earn their revenue from the sale of commercial ads (except public media like Thai PBS). These media often view their audience as the consumers and they produce a product that meets the needs of the market. Consequently, most of the news selected seems to arouse human interest, for example, they play with conflict issues and violence and use overwhelming and flamboyant wordings that can stimulate the public interest. To report the unrest in the southern border area, the mainstream media often focus on the aspects of violence and cruelty and link them to the symbol of Islam. For example, they choose a picture that reflects the damage and loss of life from unrest, along with the depiction of a suspect who is a bearded man or a man wearing a Muslim style hat. They also use words that have negative connotations, for example, "Southern Bandits", "Muslim Bandits kill monks," (Thairath Newspaper, 2009) "Arresting Imams who give confusing news," (Matichon Newspaper 2004), "Ridicule the state power," (Thairath Newspaper, 2005) "Ustaz involved in police decapitated case" (Thairath Newspaper, 2005) and so on. This becomes a repeating production of the same discourse that creates stereotype of Muslims in the south as the villains and simultaneously further fosters the Islamophobia in the society.

The effect of using such words and images reflects the theory of news framing, (Dietram Scheufele, 1999) which considers the use of words and images in news could affect the attitudes and feelings of media recipients since people often create networks in the brain and link similar things together into one category. When one word appears in the mind, it will think of other words that are linked in the same category. For example, if the media is framing news by using words or images that depict violence along with the symbol of being Muslim, it often causes people to combine these two things together. Then, when they find the word Muslim or meet with a Muslim, the violent images will appear in an instant memory. Hatred or suspicion will also erupt instantly. However, if we consider in the context of the alternative media, we will significantly notice different approach used in selecting words and images unlike the mainstream media. This is because alternative media often look at media recipients as citizens who are having potential power to change the society. The selected issues of news are for the public interest. This encourages people in society to change their behavior or attitude about a given issue. Moreover, the operation of the alternative media does not often focus on commercial profits. Therefore, it is not necessary for them to attract recipients of the media with words or visuals like the mainstream media. The alternative media can offer content in the right direction without having to focus on the advertising market.

A case study of the impact of word choice on the news is the definition of the 'Mara Patani', a Muslim network that get together for negotiating peace with the Thai government at this time. Many mainstream media choose to use the term "Four representatives of the separatist movements" or "A cluster of the separatist movements," (Wassana Nanuam and Achara Ashayagachat, 2015) which are linked to the negative feelings of the Thai people. These negative words reinforce the myth that Muslims in the South want to separate the country. While most alternative media, for example, the "Isra news agency", the "Deep South Watch" or the "Fatoni online " use the term "The Organization of the Different Opinions to the State" which is neither negative nor positive and reflects the ideas that it may be reasonable enough for the two parties to negotiate. So, it totally reflects the different way of the news framing.

Another case study that reflects the framing of the news through image selection is the arrest of the last two accused of bombing at the Lee Garden Hotel in Hat Yai district, Songkhla on 5 and 13 February 2013. Many mainstream media choose to portray the accused in such a violent arresting manner such as the accused were being ordered to raise their hands and sit down to the ground or being handcuffed. Some of them also include the Muslim identity with the accused, whether it is done intentionally or not, such as wearing a Muslim style hat, or Muslim clothing. It reinforces the stereotype that Muslims are dangerous that the authority must forcefully suppress.

While many of alternative media put forward pictures that convey neutral meanings; for instance they show the condition of the house of the accused and the arrests of officials that are not as serious and strictly as the mainstream media. This is a news framing with clearly different meanings that implicitly affect the attitude of different media recipients.

### Mushroom of Peace in Southern Border Provinces:

With “the difference” that many alternative media are featuring, it leads to the formation of many alternative media in the three southern border provinces throughout the 14 years of conflict. It can be comparable to a mushroom of peace that gradually grows amidst a field of conflict and hatred. These new alternative media’s aim is to reflect on new aspects that the mainstream media do not care about, and to reduce the current of Islamophobia in the society.

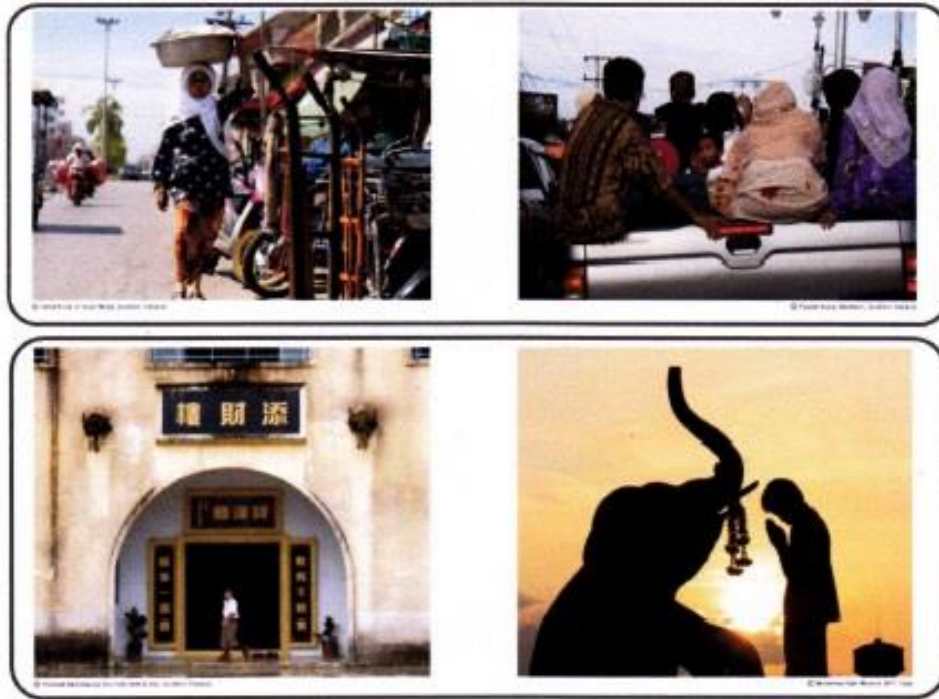
It is undeniable that with a low price and portability, radio is one of the most accessible media in the southern border area. The stations of community radio are found more than 50 stations in the southern border area to communicate with people in conflict areas (Titinop Komolnimiti, 2014) . Those radio stations that play a prominent role are the “Media Selatan” radio station (which produces its programs both in Thai and Malay languages to create a better understanding of the situation in the area), the “Bicara Patani” radio station (with its main objective to talk about what all that the Pattani people want), the “We Voice” radio station (that tries to reflect the voices of Muslim women), the “Ta-arwul” radio station ( a community radio for Muslim world society”) and the “Suara kita” radio station ( that communicates with Muslims in Malay language for 24 hours a day) etc. All stations have gathered together to become the "Southern Neighborhood Radio Network" to spread the peace at different radio frequency wave.



*Illustration of the arrest of the accused by the mainstream media (two figures above) as compared to the alternative media. (two images below)*

In addition to traditional media like radio, new media - like websites and social media - are another channel used by the alternative media in the South. The prominent websites like “Patani Forum site” (Pataniforum.com) focuses on exchanges how to resolve conflicts in the area. “Fatoni Online website” (Fatonionline.com) tries to present new aspects of the Muslims of the South. “The Women's Civil Society Network” (Civicwomen.com) reflects the power of Muslim women in the southern border area. The website “Southern Surveillance Center” (Deepsouthwatch.com) produces academic works in order to end violence in the southern border and to create citizen journalists in the area to reflect different aspects of their area. There are also alternative news agencies that communicate via Facebook fan pages, such as the “Aman” news agency (Facebook.com/amannewagency) and Southern Peace Media Group (bit.ly/2p2LFHA) and etc.

In addition to the use of voice and text to communicate. There are also some alternative media that utilize visual communication through various photographs such as "Southern Border Photographer Network" where a group of photographers who work together to portray the stories of Muslims in the area and reflect on aspects of humanity of southern people who live like ordinary people in other parts of the Thai society. Moreover; they also gather photographs to be compiled as an album called a "Photo Essay". This is to convey those images to people across the country. Among such works are the books “In Between; Restive South” or “Pattani Retweet Plus” of Prince of Songkla University students, Pattani Campus.



*An example of story telling through photographs in the book entitled “In Between; Restive South”*

In addition to the alternative media available in the Southern border area, there are also alternative media that focus on the unrest in the south from the state, for example, the “Isra News Agency” (that contributes one part of its news desks for the southern situation (South.isranews.org) or the “Prachatai News Agency” (Prachatai.com) that presents a special report on human rights and abuses against Muslims in the South.

#### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

"Giving full area of presentation", "getting access to in-depth news sources" and "choosing words and images in a fair way." These are three highlights that the alternative media have reflected through their reports on the unrest in the three southern provinces until they become a "difference maker" challenging the power of social agenda setting, the monopoly of the truth and the media framing of the mainstream media from the central authority. Thus, it is difficult to deny that the alternative media in the southern border are a mechanism to open up new perspectives and create the correct understanding about the Muslims. If these alternative media are given proper encouragement and growth, they will lessen Islamophobia in Thai society.

However, only producing good contents may not be enough. This is because the significant limitation of the alternative media is to get people reach to their contents in a wider circle unlike the mainstream media. Therefore, the communication to create proper understanding is restricted to a limited circle. It will be difficult to achieve its target at the national level. Consequently, the synergy with the mainstream media is very crucial for the local alternative media and need to be done immediately.

Nowadays, there are the mainstream media - such as Thai PBS - that allow the alternative media and people to share space to communicate their views and concerns in the South, such as “community TV show” and “citizen journalist programs” and there are also several mainstream media outlets that have begun to take part in the press conferences held by the southern border alternative media. This can be considered as a good starting point which should be continually strengthened.

More importantly the communication of stories from people in the conflict area may not necessarily be integrated into the alternative media structure with today's rapidly evolving communication technology. It makes smart phones in everyone's hands convertible into small alternative media.

The communication in the form of multimedia through social media is easier and more cost-effective. The hope that everyone will turn into a “citizen journalists” and cooperatively create the proper understanding of the Muslim world will be growing as well. Lastly, the reduction of Islamophobia will not only become a mission of the alternative media or a particular agency in the society but it is something that everyone should cooperate with.

If the mass media from all agencies changes its approach to become peace journalism, by not framing or creating stereotyped image for a group of people and all people in the society being aware of getting information in all aspects and getting rid of the bias, Islamophobia will easily disappear from the society. This condition will consequently become an important landmark for bringing back peace to the three southern provinces of Thailand and the "Muslim world" as a whole in the future.

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