



Public Media 2.0 Field Report:

New Muslim Cool:

Engaging Stakeholders in the Filmmaking Process

Nina Keim, Research Fellow

Center for Social Media, American University

Updated: March 2010

*The [Center for Social Media](#)'s field reports profile innovative media for public knowledge and action. Published as part of the Center's Ford Foundation-supported [Future of Public Media](#) project, these case studies explore how publics form around participatory and multiplatform media projects. This field report is the last one in a series of six conducted between 2007 and 2009. CSM Research Fellow Nina Keim analyzes how the feature-length documentary film *New Muslim Cool* engaged stakeholders in the filmmaking process, resulting in a film that inspires young American Muslims, promotes an interfaith dialogue and helps users overcome prejudices about the Muslim youth community in the United States.*

Briefing

The feature length documentary film, *New Muslim Cool*, demonstrates community engagement in multiple stages. From development to production to distribution and outreach, all stages of this media project are characterized by a strong connection to the community portrayed in the film. Most notably, *New Muslim Cool* worked with community stakeholders early on in the production process in order to create an accurate, engaging film that would be sure to resonate with young American Muslims. Driven by an interest in the American Muslim youth and hip-hop culture, filmmaker Jennifer Maytorena Taylor brought national and international attention to commonly held prejudices against the Muslim community in the United States. After a short but successful festival run, a national PBS broadcast and multiple awards, the documentary continues to build a loyal, diverse audience via the film's national and international screening tour.

Background and Mission

Jennifer Maytorena Taylor first discovered the Muslim hip-hop scene in 2003. Working as a producer at San Francisco's PBS affiliate KQED, Taylor produced multiple pieces on the South Asian youth culture in the San Francisco Bay Area. As a newcomer, she was introduced to this thriving scene through her production research. Young Muslim artists were using music to create work and practices that both expressed their faith and reaffirmed their identity as Americans. Especially in the post 9/11 period, Taylor found it striking that the musicians were leveraging pop culture to advance individual expression and to build a community that furthered the evolution of a shared national identity.

By 2004, Taylor had decided to produce a feature-length documentary film on American Muslim youth culture. She received a development grant from the Ford Foundation that allowed her to conduct background research, including in-depth interviews about Muslim culture in the United States, prior to shooting the film. Through this research, Taylor identified key individuals within the community that helped her to understand the community more authentically and bolster her credibility as a documentarian.

As a next step, Taylor put together a team that included two co-producers, Kauthar Umar and Hana Siddiqi. Together, they raised additional funds and started filming in June 2005. Thinking of other cultural and musical moments, Taylor chose the be-bop inspired title *New Muslim Cool*. During the 1940s and 1950s, in the U.S., be-bop jazz music helped to form a unique black consciousness influenced by religion, music and social justice. Facing the laws and practices of the Jim Crow legacy, many African American jazz musicians used music to express their desire for a dignified existence in the United States, creating a community feeling similar to the one portrayed in *New Muslim Cool*.

Initially, the project was designed to be a survey-style film featuring multiple intersecting characters on the road with a small Muslim hip-hop label. But with the introduction of one pivotal member of the American Muslim community, the film took a different turn than originally anticipated. To elicit the deeper meaning of the story, the filmmakers decided to focus entirely on Hamza Pérez and his family and community in Pittsburgh.

New Muslim Cool takes viewers on Hamza's ride through the streets, projects and jail cells of urban America, following his spiritual journey from a drug dealer who converted to Islam at the age 21 to a hip-hop artist and father, who must confront the realities of the post-9/11 world. "Hip-hop culture became less the focus of the film and more the context, and Hamza and his wife Rafiah's day-to-day and spiritual life

became the real heart of the film,” says Taylor.¹ Taylor deliberately chose a journalistic approach to tell Hamza’s story, allowing viewers to form individual interpretations of the issues presented in the film, including Hamza’s past as a drug dealer.

The core mission of *New Muslim Cool* is to promote interfaith dialogue in order to overcome commonly held stereotypes towards the American Muslim community. In order to spur as much discussion as possible, the film's producers embarked on a rigorous screening schedule. *New Muslim Cool* first screened at film festivals in April 2009, leaving only two months for a festival tour before the film premiered on PBS's *P.O.V.* on June 23, 2009. Festival screenings included the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Rooftop Film Festival, the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, the Al Jazeera International Film Festival, and the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival. In September 2009, *New Muslim Cool* made its Russian premiere in the Documentary Competition of the Golden Minbar International Film Festival, the world’s biggest showcase of Muslim-themed films. In October 2009, it was featured at the 12th Annual Religion Today Film Festival in Trento, Italy. Fall 2009 also brought *New Muslim Cool* to larger audiences in the United States through a campus and community screening tour. The screenings, all of which include discussion sessions, are organized in cooperation with the academic institutions and other partner organizations.

Funding model

Similar to other feature-length documentary films airing on PBS, the production and distribution of *New Muslim Cool* was budgeted between \$450,000 and \$500,000. The project relied almost entirely on fundraising from larger nonprofit and governmental organizations. In addition to larger grant applications, the project has established a [tool on the New Muslim Cool Web site](#) that encourages small donations. The project has successfully raised funds from the following organizations:

- Anthony Radziwill Fund/Independent Feature Project
- Center for Asian American Media
- Ford Foundation
- Hartley Film Foundation
- Latino Public Broadcasting
- LEF Foundation
- Nathan Cummings Foundation
- National Endowment for the Arts
- Nu Lambda Trust
- Paul Robeson Fund

¹ Jennifer Maytorena Taylor: Filmmaker Statement:
http://amdoc.org/pressmaterials/newmuslimcool/newmuslimcool_statement.pdf

- Sundance Documentary Fund
- Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation

Fundraising is still an ongoing endeavor connected with the screening tours of *New Muslim Cool*. The goal is to continue to generate additional funds in order to create educational materials and expand the film's outreach and engagement campaign.

Project Partners

New Muslim Cool's strong partnerships during the production, distribution and outreach have enabled the project to increase its scope as well as reach its goal to promote interfaith dialogue.

Striving to authentically portray American Muslim youth culture, Jennifer Maytorena Taylor partnered with members of the American Muslim community, including respected academics in the fields of anthropology and Islamic studies. Especially during the post-production phase, core senior advisors played a central role in fine-tuning the final cut of the film. They provided feedback on early clips, assisted during the editing process and helped shape the film's message.

Given that all of the senior advisors were members of the featured community, their feedback was crucial to communicate an authentic message about American Muslim culture. Senior advisors included Zaheer Ali, a doctoral student in history at Columbia University focusing on twentieth-century African American history and religion; Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Princeton University exploring the ways Chicago Muslim youth negotiate their religious, racial and cultural identities through hip-hop; Novera King, a second generation African American Muslim filmmaker and television producer; and Munir Jiwa, the founding director of the Center for Islamic Studies and Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Additional project advisors included:

- Shahed Almanullah, editor-in-chief of *AltMuslim.com*, an online newsmagazine covering issues related to Islam in the West;
- Dr. Ibrahim Farajajé, dean of the faculty and professor of Cultural and Islamic Studies at Starr King School for the Ministry at UC Berkeley;
- Dr. Marcia Hermansen, professor of Theology and World Religions at Loyola University in Chicago and author of *The Evolution of American Muslim Responses to 9/11* and *"Identity" Islam and Muslim Youth Cultures in America*;
- Nadia Roumanian, an international development policy analyst who has worked as a fellow at USC's Center for Religion and Civic Culture;
- Dr. Diane Winston, Knight Chair in Religion and Media at the Annenberg School for Communications at USC.

In addition to providing feedback and issue-related insights during the production and post-production of *New Muslim Cool*, the advisors have supported the distribution of the film. By hosting film screenings at academic institutions, participating in panel discussions related to film screenings, and assisting in organizing a campus screening tour, the partners have helped to introduce the film to a larger audience.

The film's production team has also established a base of partner organizations in the field of community engagement. [Active Voice](#), an organization that provides communications strategy for documentaries, launched a community engagement campaign in cooperation with [P.O.V.](#) and *New Muslim Cool*. The campaign is designed to spark critical conversations among diverse American publics, especially youth and interfaith groups. The campaign team organizes sneak-preview screenings, a campus tour and "watch parties" around the country, co-hosts interfaith dialogue events by youth- and action-oriented groups and helps to promote the film, events and critical online discussion through active social networking platforms including YouTube, Ning and Facebook. Active Voice and *P.O.V.* have also created a discussion guide for screening facilitators and a "watch party" guide that provide suggestions for how to host a film screening, lead discussions and tap into the issues raised by the film. Moreover, *P.O.V.* offers a lesson plan about Muslim culture in the U.S. as well as a multimedia resource list available for download on its *New Muslim Cool* Web site.²

At so-called "braintrust meetings," Active Voice brought together community organizers, youth engagement specialists, and experts on Islam, hip-hop, religious pluralism, cultural identity, and interfaith dialogue to discuss the community building potential of *New Muslim Cool* and to sharpen the scope of the community engagement campaign. These meetings also enabled Active Voice to gather feedback on the film while it was still in production and develop strategies for community engagement, including target audiences, optimal framing and potential applications for the film.

Active Voice also assisted the filmmakers to form strategic partnerships with national and local organizations to engage audiences including youth, communities of color, people of faith, and civic leaders. The partnerships helped to get the word out about the film broadcast premiere, connecting multiple publics to the film and deepening community engagement with the campaign. Active Voice specifically looked for partner organizations with local chapters in order to strengthen the bond on a local level. Outreach and engagement partners include:

- [Auburn Media](#)
- [The Center for Asian American Media](#)
- [The Hip-Hop Summit Action Network](#)
- [The Inner-City Muslim Action Network](#)

² *P.O.V.* Web site for *New Muslim Cool*: <http://www.pbs.org/pov/newmuslimcool/>

- [The Interfaith Youth Core](#)
- [Intersections International](#)
- [Islamic Networks Group](#)
- [Latino Public Broadcasting](#)
- [Light of the Age Mosque \(Hamza's Community\)](#)
- [The National Coalition-Building Institute](#)
- [The Pluralism Project at Harvard University](#)
- [Rights Working Group](#)
- [Voto Latino](#)
- [Words, Beats & Life](#)

Publics for this project

While the main goal of this film was to spark interfaith dialogue, an additional goal was to build community among young Muslims living in the United States. To accomplish these objectives, the filmmakers engaged a core group of Muslim American experts who constitute the primary audience for this film. Members of this particular group have only rarely seen young Muslims adequately represented in broadcast media before and were excited to help shape a realistic representation of their culture in *New Muslim Cool*.

Reaching beyond this core public, Hamza's emotionally appealing story was intended to reach young Muslim Americans by allowing them to personally connect to it. The realistic representation of young American Muslims in the film was the first step in building dialogue, and the second and more important step is to form an active public interested in counteracting negative stereotypes against Muslims. The film's outreach and engagement campaign was designed accordingly, aiming to encourage this public to come together through their music, faith, and a shared interest in social change. The project's Facebook page, viral video campaign, and Web and mobile media projects have created a platform that allows the public to work together on shared issues, although online responses through autumn 2009 were small (see the "Impact" section below). Other opportunities to engage this group included collaborations with poetry workshops and a multi-faith concert tour. In the initial outreach phase, offline engagement has been more successful than online.

In addition to American Muslims, *New Muslim Cool* was also designed to generate connections and mobilization opportunities among young non-Muslims who are interested in social issues. Throughout the strategic planning process and at the "braintrust" meeting that Active Voice convened, experts identified the potential to appeal to and motivate college students to take action, given the pop-culture approach of the film. The primary engagement strategies to connect and motivate this group of users to take action are similar to the ones targeted to young Muslim Americans: social networks and local events. At the campus screening tour and discussion sessions

throughout the U.S., young Americans were provided with a platform to speak up. The Facebook and YouTube pages as well as the film's Web site were designed to appeal to younger audiences and allow for easy sharing of information.

In addition to the groups mentioned above, the campaign team analyzed the “beyond-the-choir” potential of the film. The “beyond the choir” audience – as the director and Active Voice call them – is not directly connected to the issue of American Muslim youth and hip-hop culture; however, the storyline still attracts their attention. Whether they are older Muslims, or individuals with a different faith or with a different taste in music, the filmmaker and the campaign team have found that the compelling story can successfully reach out to this audience segment. However, the lack of funding has hindered the ability of the campaign team to tailor the community-building and engagement opportunities to this “beyond-the-choir” audience.

Impact

Awards and Film Screenings

At its international sneak preview screening in April 2009, *New Muslim Cool* was awarded the Feature Film Freedom Award at the 5th Annual Al Jazeera International Documentary Film Festival in Doha, Qatar. Receiving this award not only reflects the success of the film itself but also demonstrates the potential of *New Muslim Cool* to reach Muslim audiences outside of the U.S. The film was also named the Opening Night Selection for *P.O.V.* on PBS, as well as Official Selection at the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Rooftop Film Festival and at the Lincoln Center Independents Night, which was co-sponsored by Human Rights Watch Film Festival. In addition to the festival run, through October 2009 *New Muslim Cool* had been screened at approximately 60 events. About 45 of these events included discussion sessions with one of the film's principals or a community partner.

DVD Sales

With approximately 500 to 600 *New Muslim Cool* DVDs sold to individuals by October 2009, the home DVD film distribution remains very low. While acknowledging the slow sales, the filmmaker remarks that the clear focus of the project is the educational component rather than DVD distribution.

Social Media Outreach

Although anticipated as an integral part of the film promotion, responses via social media were not very promising. As of October, *New Muslim Cool* had only 225 followers on Twitter³, 302 fans on Facebook⁴, and 2945 members in their Facebook group.⁵ In addition, the project team did not leverage all of opportunities social media

³ New Muslim Cool on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/newmuslimcool>

⁴ New Muslim Cool Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/New-Muslim-Cool/49930203605>

⁵ New Muslim Cool Facebook group: <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=49492496247>

offer. The time span between two posts to the Facebook page, for example, was too long to keep audiences interested in the page. On April 30th, 2009, a video was posted to the Facebook page, but the next update was not made until more than five months later on October 8, 2009. This lack of continuous updates represents a lost opportunity for Facebook fans forward or “like” links and posts during the festival and broadcast period of *New Muslim Cool*.

On the other hand, YouTube has proven to be a popular source of online information for a larger audience. The *New Muslim Cool* trailer had 29,882 views on the online portal. The large number can be traced back to the fact that many official online sites including the official *New Muslim Cool* Web site, Facebook page and group, and Active Voice’s Web site liked to the trailer on YouTube, thereby increasing the chances of being clicked.

YouTube has also been actively used as a platform for discussion about the film. For example, using the commenting function of the video portal, members of the Muslim community are discussing to what extent Islam allows the use of music as a communication channel. The arguments raised throughout the commenting thread appear to reflect the conflicts between more conservative members of the Muslim community with more liberal ones. While “[infinitedimension1](#)” – a 24 year-old the YouTube member from Turkey – argues that “this music is haram⁶... the actions, behaviours and lifestyle that rap brings contradicts with the nature of muslim[s]”⁷, a 21 year-old YouTube user from the United Kingdom argues: “we need to look at the bigger pix what this brother is doing is amazing the fact how hard he is working to bring ppl to the deen and how he spreading the word of god through his lyrics plz plz just stop saying music is haram look at the bigger picture may allah guide all the muslims and non muslims.”⁸ The discussion is still ongoing, demonstrating that the *New Muslim Cool* YouTube video has achieved its goal in giving young American Muslims a voice and a platform to speak up.

Interfaith Dialogue

In face-to-face settings, *New Muslim Cool* has successfully spurred conversation about prejudices and commonly held stereotypes of the American Muslim youth. With discussion session attendance ranging from 50 or 60 at the low end to 500 at some festival, large university and community screenings, the film has motivated its audience to actively engage in a discussion about Muslim culture in the U.S. Bolstered by these discussion sessions and extensive email and Facebook message feedback, the filmmaker and the senior advisors to the film strongly believe that *New Muslim Cool* has the potential to start an open-minded discussion about American Muslim youth culture among members of the American Muslim community as well as among American

⁶ “haram” = forbidden by Islam law

⁷ Comment by [infinitedimension1](#) on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leMWi2asGPw>

⁸ Comment by [nfarooq88](#) on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leMWi2asGPw>

youth. The ultimate goal of the dialogue initiated in these settings is to overcome the negative stereotype of the community by showcasing the true face of American Muslims, thereby creating a basis for mutual understanding.

In addition to the interfaith dialogue, *New Muslim Cool* screenings have taken public discussions about social issues to a new and unexpected level. The moving story of Hamza Pérez has motivated many members of the audience to talk about their own personal stories and relate them to Hamza's experiences. Such reactions reaffirmed to the director that documenting the journey of one single community member rather than producing a survey-inspired film was the right decision; Hamza's background is ideal for a feature-length documentary film, given that he represents various subcultures of American life in the 21st century and serves as a role model for personal achievement. Young people, parents, Latinos, and Muslims all find themselves at some point represented in the ups and downs of Hamza's story.

Community Engagement

New Muslim Cool has also received a great deal of praise from the wider Muslim community. The community was open to hearing Hamza's story and used the film to learn about new facets within their community. This impact is reflected in the Al Jazeera Feature Film Freedom Award as well as in the establishment of partnerships with core Muslim community organizations. *New Muslim Cool* was also discussed at the 46th Annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America on June 3-6, 2009 in Washington, DC.

Inspired by the project, approximately 30 local organizations have hosted *New Muslim Cool* screening events. Half of these events were offered free to the public and funded by the local partner organizations. The Pittsburgh Area Jewish Committee has taken its engagement even a step further and set up a Muslim-Jewish dialogue group. At the first meeting in early October 2009 the group established plans for joint community service projects. This effort was initiated by the Pittsburgh-based interfaith organizers Carol Elkind and Luqmon Abdus Salaam, both of whom appear in *New Muslim Cool*. Given that the community engagement campaign and the screening tour are still ongoing, it will take at least another year to evaluate the long-term impact of the film. However, the participation in discussion sessions as well as the first follow-up actions by local communities demonstrate that *New Muslim Cool* has successfully created an active public around the media project.

Obstacles

As with many public education projects and social-issue documentary films, funding was one of the major challenges this film project faced. Although *New Muslim Cool* has acquired enough funds to produce the movie and to promote it through film festivals and broadcast, the major challenge ahead is to finance the community engagement activities that are central to the overall strategy for the film.

Having only two months between the film's festival premiere and its broadcast on PBS did not leave much room for publicity to introduce the film to an insider audience and promote the broadcast. At the same time, the period in which the film could be screened at film festivals was reduced to a minimum. This decision was mainly caused by the schedule of PBS's *P.O.V.* series, since *New Muslim Cool* was selected to broadcast on the opening night of *P.O.V.*'s 2008 season.

A third challenge the producers faced was sustaining discussion about and reactions to the film. The project team has had to find ways to continue to generate conversations that engage audiences on a long-term basis. All material used throughout the community engagement campaign was designed to encourage further applications after the film screening or broadcast, creating a basis for a sustainable project. However, the long-term goal of ongoing community discussions after-the-fact can only be measured anecdotally.

While Active Voice program director Shaady Salehi reports several community inquiries for additional film screenings and newly created coalitions between campus initiatives and local communities, there is no body of evidence demonstrating ongoing public discourse following the screenings and discussions. This dearth of evidence can be traced back to a lack of funding for extensive evaluation methods. The project was forced to scale back on engagement opportunities and events due to missing funds, leaving no budget for evaluation.

However, the high level of engagement and contribution of project partners during the production and outreach phases has enabled local partners to integrate the material and the project effectively in local initiatives, thereby encouraging communities to take ownership of the project.

New Muslim Cool's major challenge was to tie a broadcast project to online and offline engagement efforts. While the film itself features a strong emotional appeal, the "ask" is unclear. Durable publics did not form because there were not clear next steps to take. Although social media outreach efforts have been developed to supplement the film, the comparatively small response rate suggests a missing link between reporting and action.

Documentary films without specific advocacy goals often face this challenge to motivate publics to form.

Next Steps

With its premiere in Russia and Italy in October 2009, *New Muslim Cool* began to be introduced to an international audience. Moreover, *New Muslim Cool* was invited to screen in the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival's (IDFA) Best of Fests section in November 2009 and will also be at IDFA's Docs for Sale market.

Screenings in Sweden, Finland, Germany and Holland were also in the planning stages. In addition, a screening tour through the United Kingdom was planned for March 2010, including screenings and discussion sessions in six cities with large Muslim communities. The project team will also continue to expand the community and campus screening tour in the United States while they work to generate additional funds.

Lessons Learned

1. **Active involvement in the community is important to authentic storytelling:** Through extensive pre-production research, and active engagement of advisers and the protagonist in the outreach campaign, the film has gained credibility not only among its audience but also among members of the larger community. Especially for social-issue documentary films depicting a specific culture, it is crucial to involve community representatives early on in the process.
2. **Community involvement does not preclude the distance needed to tell a subject's story.** The decision of the filmmaker to choose a journalistic approach to tell the story rather than clearly taking Hamza's position has successfully fostered lively discussions.
3. **Partnering is essential:** Coalition-building is fundamental to long-term sustainability for public media makers; knowing how to partner well is key to successful outreach. It is important to select and involve strong partners from the start; they know how to make the film useful in their community. Choosing national organizations that have a wide reach in their communities is important, but it is equally important to identify smaller organizations that can attract and mobilize targeted publics face-to-face.
4. **Social media tools need to be used strategically to be effective:** In today's media environment, leveraging the potential of social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube is an easy and cost-effective way to interact with audiences. However, it is important to use these tools well and frequently. Failing to do so can lead to missing out on contacts and engagement with key publics.

Appendix

New Muslim Cool Web site

<http://www.newmuslimcool.com>

New Muslim Cool on Twitter

<http://www.twitter.com/newmuslimcool>

New Muslim Cool Facebook group

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=49492496247&ref=ts>

New Muslim Cool Facebook Fan Page

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/New-Muslim-Cool/49930203605>

New Muslim Cool: P.O.V. Web site

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/newmuslimcool/>

New Muslim Cool: Active Voice Web site

<http://activevoice.net/newmuslimcool.html>

New Muslim Cool: Watch Party Guide

http://www.scribd.com/full/15704927?access_key=key-d1v8frswgvnv8chnydy

New Muslim Cool: Lesson Plan for Educators

http://www.pbs.org/pov/film-files/lp_newmuslimcool_lesson_plan_0_1.pdf

New Muslim Cool: Facilitator's Guide

http://www.pbs.org/pov/film-files/guide_newmuslimcool_action_discussion_file_0.pdf

New Muslim Cool: Multimedia Resource List

http://www.pbs.org/pov/film-files/dd_newmuslimcool_reading_list_0.pdf

Interviews

- Jennifer Maytorena Taylor, director of *New Muslim Cool*
- Su'ad Abdul-Khabeer, senior advisor for *New Muslim Cool*
- Munir Jiwa, senior advisor for *New Muslim Cool*
- Shaady Salehi, program director at Active Voice