The following selection is taken from a study on how Arab and Muslim Americans were portrayed in the news media following the September 11 terrorist attacks. The author, Mary Ann Weston, found that instead of stereotyping Arab and Muslim Americans, newspapers went to great lengths to portray them as kind, helpful, patriotic, and loyal citizens. She reports that the overwhelming majority of newspaper headlines and articles cast Arab and Muslim Americans as being innocent of wrongdoing and gave many a platform through which to humanize themselves in the eyes of the American public. Furthermore, writers, editors, and government officials rallied around the Arab and Muslim community, holding them up as exemplary of what it means to be American. Weston concludes that post–September 11 coverage of Arab and Muslim Americans did not discriminate but rather offered the public a sympathetic lens through which to view a vulnerable community. Weston is an associate professor in the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.

As newspapers across the country struggled to cover the cataclysms of Sept. 11, many focused on the local Arab American community. During the month following the attacks, several themes

evolved that were remarkably uniform in papers nationwide. In the days immediately after Sept. 11 stories concentrated on Arab Americans as double victims: They suffered as did everyone at the horror of the attacks; some lost loved ones. But at the same time they were being harassed, intimidated and discriminated against—even murdered—for events over which they had no control. The images these stories presented were overwhelmingly sympathetic ones of a people bewildered and victimized.

A Community Portrayed as Patriotic and Victimized
The St. Louis Post-Dispatch illustrated the innocence of local Arab Americans in a story knocking down a rumor that some Muslims cheered the attacks. “Muslim clerks at a 7-Eleven store in St. Louis reported that they were threatened Thursday in an incident that some in the Muslim and Arab-American community say highlights the danger of blaming many for the actions of a few terrorists.” The story later quoted a clerk “who declined to be identified for fear of reprisals” this way: “People think we have the religion, so we must be like (the terrorists),’ said one employee, a 24-year-old Muslim born in Somalia who has lived in St. Louis for five years. ‘My religion doesn’t tell me to kill anybody. All those people who died were innocent.’

Many stories highlighted Arab Americans’ dual suffering in headlines, leads and quotes, as the following examples show.

Hartford Courant
“Arab Americans Deal with ‘Dual Pain’ after Attacks; While Mourning with Other Citizens, Some Feel Targeted for Their Ethnicity” (headline).

Detroit Free Press
“It was a sad, somber and tense day for Arab Americans across metro Detroit. They reacted with shock and outrage over Tuesday’s terror attacks, as other Americans did. But they also feared they would again become victims of prejudice, of a racist sense they were not part of America.” The story went on to quote an Arab American