



**Interview with  
Asad Butt, Rifelion Media**

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*(podcast clip playing)*

KHAN: For those of us that came of age during that time, it's hard to overemphasize that it wasn't just another tragic historical event, but literally the event that changed our lives forever.

It was almost like hitting a reset button, reminding us all how globalized and vulnerable we are, how none of us exist in a vacuum, that our place in the world as individuals is also defined by things that happen to people we may know nothing about.

That day also changed how Americans looked at each other, and for many, created a sense of national identity and patriotism that was stronger than ever before.

*(end of clip)*

KENNEALLY: Welcome to Velocity of Content. I'm Christopher Kenneally with CCC.

Hosted by Shahjehan Khan, the *King of the World* podcast recounts his journey through addiction, identity, creativity, and what it means to belong as a Muslim in America in the 20 years after 9/11. An actor and musician, Shahjehan Khan explores with sound and voices the challenges that can be part of the American Muslim experience.

In December, *King of the World* won the 2021 Golden Crane Award for Best Production from the Asian American Podcasters Association. *King of the World* is produced by Rifelion Media, based in Portland, Oregon. Asad Butt is founder and producer with Rifelion. Welcome to the program, Asad Butt. *As-Salaam-Alaikum*

BUTT: *Wa-Alaikum-Salaam*. Thank you so much for having me.

KENNEALLY: Well, we're really happy you can join us. Congratulations, again, on the Golden Crane award. *King of the World* is the first podcast series from Rifelion, so you are off to a terrific start. I guess the question to ask you is about what kinds of stories and whose voices are you hoping to share?



BUTT: Yeah, sure. So Rifelion Media was founded two years ago to really elevate diverse voices. For us, that means people and stories that aren't really being told in mainstream media. And for us, we're starting with stories from the American Muslim community, because that's where my background is, and that's where Shahjehan's background is as well. Those stories, we find, just aren't out there. When I was growing up in Boston – just outside of Boston, a child of the '80s – there were few if any American Muslims on TV, radio, or in movies. And if they were, they tended to be very negative portrayals – terrorists, villains, swarthy characters.

So what we're trying to do at Rifelion is to provide more content – more diverse content. We're first starting with the American Muslim community. And then from there, we'll expand to other groups – marginalized groups or groups whose stories aren't being told in many ways.

KENNEALLY: All right. So you and Shahjehan Khan have much in common, as you mentioned. You grew up, as he did, in predominantly white, suburban Boston, an area both of us know pretty well. (laughter)

BUTT: (laughter) Yeah.

KENNEALLY: So I have to ask you about how much of your own Muslim American story is a part of what you're doing?

BUTT: Yeah, so much of it is a part of it. I think for me, like you mentioned, I grew up in a very white, very Christian suburb of Boston. There were a couple other Muslim families that were in my town and one other Muslim student in my grade – or two, actually, in my grade of 100. So there was some solidarity there. But it was still very much the – I was definitely an outsider. And when I went to college up in Maine, I was definitely an outsider. I was at a small liberal arts school up in Maine.

I think so much of my experience just isn't being told in media. That story is someone who – a group in a predominantly white, liberal world whose trials and tribulations that I've had to go through through work, through relationships, just in the business world, the challenges that we've faced. So Rifelion is definitely – what we're trying to do is share stories like myself, like Shahjehan, and like others that have had the similar experience that we've had.

KENNEALLY: So you've reflected on it a lot. What role do you think media plays in shaping attitudes toward Muslim Americans? Is it a predominantly negative force, do you think?



BUTT: Yeah, I would say it's negative and probably inaccurate. I think that there have been studies that have been done both here and the UK that show mass media on a regular basis negatively portrays Muslims and Muslim stories. That could be through headlines. That could be through the content that is written. That can be stories. This has a huge impact on people's day-to-day lives, policy, culture, you name it. It is getting better. The last 20 years, we've seen a little bit of an improvement as access to media and the ability to publish and get out there has been easier. But it's definitely been a challenging road for a lot of American Muslims in getting our stories out there.

KENNEALLY: And you've been on that road for a while. In 2004, you helped launch Bridges TV, which was the first American Muslim lifestyle network. You were its first news director, producer, and anchor. And you briefly mentioned it, but I want to ask you about the way you feel the media environment for Muslim Americans has evolved over the past two decades. There's some improvement, and perhaps there's also some backsliding.

BUTT: There's no doubt. I think that in the early 2000s, a lot of the media that was coming out that had to do with American Muslims was this kind of black-and-white, good-or-bad type of thing. So you had stories and portrayals of Muslims that were either those kind of negative terrorists, and that was kind of the predominant thing, or the good guy that was challenging the terrorist or the terrorist trope. And I think what we've seen over the last 20 years, especially in the last five, is more nuanced stories, stories of people that are just regular people that have challenges like any other person of any other faith. That's really exciting to see, because I think that that helps showcase the people – that Muslims are just like any other American. They're just like any other person. They go through different challenges on a day-to-day basis, just like you do, just like anybody else.

I think one other big thing over the last 15 years since when Bridges TV launched was that – I mentioned this before – just the access to be able to create your own content and put it out there is a lot easier. Bridges TV launched in 2004, which was pre-YouTube. (laughter) It's hard to imagine a time when YouTube didn't exist. But the way that we were trying to reach our audience was through cable television. So Muslims who wanted to get this content had to not only have cable, but then pay another \$10 for this channel, and then they were able to get our content. I would just say that it was a business model that was doomed from the start.

I think you're seeing more and more people come up with this type of business model now, which works because you have things like podcasts, you have things like YouTube. You can create a website a lot easier and put content up on there. So yeah, I think the environment has changed just in terms of the ability to access this kind of content and the diversity of content that's out there.



KENNEALLY: And it's not just the content. It occurs to me, Asad Butt, listening to you that it's more than the stories. It's also the voices. So we have prominent Muslims who are delivering the news. I'm thinking, for example, of Asma Khalid with National Public Radio – is the first person that comes to mind. There are many others. That makes a difference as well.

BUTT: As the Gen X Muslims have come of age, we've diversified into the types of careers that we've gone into. The stereotype is that Muslims will become doctors, lawyers, or engineers or whatnot. Twenty years ago, we went into journalism. We went into movies. We went into – you name it. Now, a lot of us are coming to the top of our careers. As you mentioned, Asma Khalid is a great example. There are just dozens of other people. Even our comedians – Hasan Minhaj, journalist/comedian. He's at the top of his game.

KENNEALLY: And you're paving the way at Rifelion. So give us the pitch – why should we listen to King of the World? What are we going to get from it?

BUTT: That's a great question. I think that there's a couple different audiences for *King of the World*. I think the first is certainly other American Muslims who came of age in a post-9/11 world. So I think for other American Muslims who listen to this podcast, you'll feel a sense of solidarity with other Muslims and realize just – I don't know if I can swear – but all the crazy stuff that we have gone through over the last 20 years. It's a celebration of the fact that we've survived all this stuff. And not only have we survived, but we're still thriving.

I think the second audience I like to imagine in my head is my wife, who is a white American atheist, essentially, who has married into a Muslim family, and her family has accepted me and loves me as well. But maybe they want to understand a little bit more about our journey as American Muslims over the last 20 years. I think this story will enlighten them about the trials and tribulations and highs and lows about being an American Muslim in the last 20 years and all the – what it was like to have our identities challenged, what it was like to go through when Trump was elected, the fact that government has been and is spying on Muslims on a regular basis.

I think the third audience is just one that really likes a good story. I think that Shahjehan's story, his personal journey of coming of age in a post-9/11 world and then the highs and lows that he's had to go through personally – he attempted suicide once, he started an internationally renowned punk band, he struggled with his identity with addiction, you name it – I think anybody who likes a good story will really love to go along this journey. I wonder – what did you find appealing about it? (laughter)



KENNEALLY: Fair enough. I think, first of all, it's really beautifully produced, so it's engrossing in that way as an oral and aural experience. That's, I think, the first thing you need with any kind of quality podcast.

But it was also hearing about a character and experience that just was at odds with everything I thought I knew about Muslim Americans. I mean, a Muslim American punk band – it just knocked me back.

BUTT: (laughter) Totally, yeah. That's exactly right. And time and time again, I think Shahjehan's personal story – like people are trying to pin him down into a certain thing, whether it's people in the Muslim community or people in the white suburban community that he grew up in. They're all trying to say, Shahjehan, because you are a Pakistani American Muslim, you are this. And time and time again, he's challenging that. And then there's a struggle because of that. So yeah, thank you for saying that.

KENNEALLY: And it's also a story about family. I thought that was really important as well.

BUTT: I did not know this going in. I mean, I've known Shahjehan's family forever, for my entire life. But they are just some of the best storytellers, and it's amazing the honesty and the humility and the humor that they bring to this podcast. Really, I think without them, this story wouldn't have gone as far as it did.

You hear in the first episode Shahjehan going to his mother and saying, how do I wipe this brown skin off of my hands? And Shahjehan's mom doesn't miss a beat and says, they haven't invented soap like that yet. You know? Yeah, her family and even Shahjehan's friends who shared their experiences about him growing up I think was really enlightening and helpful to making the podcast so impactful.

KENNEALLY: Right. So for non-Muslims in the audience, any tips for helping us be more critical consumers of media when it comes to covering Muslim Americans?

BUTT: I think not all Muslims are alike. I think that understanding – it has gotten better, the coverage of Muslims and whatnot. I think that if you're reading something in the newspaper about Muslims, just understanding who the voice is that they've asked. Who are the experts that they're asking to comment on it? A lot of times, you'll read stories about Afghanistan or Palestine, but you'll hear experts that aren't from that region espousing their thoughts on it. So I would say seek out content that is created by people from the regions that you're interested in and know that even that perspective is just a unique perspective and that there are countless other stories from that perspective.



I don't think I mentioned this to you, but we are actually creating a database that should go live later this month of all the content that is being created by American Muslims – podcasts, movies, TV shows – and when they're being released. So if you have an interest in what American Muslims are producing, you can go to this and find content that will appeal to you.

KENNEALLY: And how should Muslim Americans respond, do you think, Asad Butt, when confronted by misrepresentations and prejudice?

BUTT: I think that's a really great question. One way is to really call it out and call out why they think that misrepresentation is negative or untrue. And I think you see a lot of that happening on Twitter, on Instagram, a little bit of it on LinkedIn. But I think that's really powerful for people's friends and people's colleagues to see, OK, wow, this portrayal of a Muslim in *Wonder Woman* is so negative. Why is that? Even though that image was only on there for 20 seconds. For Muslims, I think also just sharing with their non-Muslim friends these kind of opinions is important as well. Yeah, I think that it's a constant battle that we have to go through.

I think there are other things that Muslims can do, and that is support the good content that's out there and promote that good content and why that's also good content as well.

KENNEALLY: Asad Butt with Rifelion Media, thanks so much for joining me today.

BUTT: Thanks, Chris. That was great.

KENNEALLY: Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me on Velocity of Content from CCC.

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