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Evidence and ideology: moderating the critique of media Islamophobia

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Abstract

Recent studies of British media coverage of Islam, influenced by Said's critique of 'Orientalism', appear to have established that 'Islamophobic' stereotyping is highly characteristic of that coverage.

However, a review of these studies finds that they fall into two groups. One comprises substantial empirical studies, which give grounds for serious concern but also indicate that this is a complex area in which some jour-

nalists are making efforts to avoid negative generalisations. In the other group of studies there is very little systematic empirical material, but a tendency towards polemical critique. This second group of studies has been influential in building a broad consensus about media Islamophobia. Some potentially damaging consequences of this consensus are discussed.

Introduction

Journalism training should arguably include an examination of how the profession is seen by the public, and of current debates or controversies about its role in society. This paper is concerned with the issue of how British journalists represent Islam and Muslims.

At present there is a rather one-sided 'debate' in progress on this topic, comprising frequent assertions that the British news media are deeply Islamophobic. However, the evidence for this view is less extensive than is often assumed, and the conclusions it supports are more qualified than statements which some writers on this topic have made. We find that while there are some substantial empirical studies, all of which give grounds for serious concern about aspects of media coverage of Islam, there are a number of other studies which advance criticisms of the media that far exceed their evidence and the rigour of their analyses. Media research in this area appears to be at risk of creating a self-reproducing consensus that is increasingly divorced from evidence. Situated as they are at the interface between academic research and practising journalists, journalism students and educators have a particular need to take a more informed and qualified view of media Islamophobia.

Starting point

The impetus to undertake this review of research came from a study (Brown et al., 2015; Brown and Richards, 2016) of how a small sample of international Muslim students in the UK viewed British news media representations of Islam. Their views were strongly critical of anti-Islamic coverage. However the self-reported consumption by respondents in this study of British media was very minimal or non-existent, which raised the question of how they knew that these media were Islamophobic. We speculated (Brown and Richards, 2016) that there may be a process of 'passive media consumption', analogous to passive smoking. Or had our respondents been influenced by a climate of opinion shaped by academic research on this topic? This prompted the following review of research on Islamophobia in the British media. It suggests that although there are some substantial problems in media discourses around Islam, some of which are not easily solved, there has also been a tendency for research to spin off into polemic. This carries a number of risks, which we will examine later.

Islamophobia in the media: the evidence

a) The leading research paradigm

The major starting point of the critique of media Islamophobia is Edward Said's (1981) *Covering Islam*. This is an erudite and eloquent polemic, directed particularly at influential anti-Islam intellectuals of its time (Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, Judith Miller, *et al.*). Said considers an unsystematic sample of reporting during and after the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979, mainly from the US media, but with some British

examples. He suggests that there was a strong tendency for the media to present Islam as a negative ‘Other’, a part of the Western outlook he termed ‘Orientalism’. A recurrent and central point in his analysis, and one which remains crucial today, as will be seen below, is the tendency in news contexts for Islam to be treated as a given and homogeneous reality. Said was perhaps less prescient in his support for the view that political Islam had failed, and in his scepticism about the value of the idea of fundamentalism, but that is another matter. His work rapidly gained iconic status amongst Western intellectuals, and many journalists who have been through university in the last three decades must have been influenced by or at least been broadly aware of his critique. Indeed a study of the content of British broadsheets and their French equivalents from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s concluded that by the 1990s there was a variety of media discourses about and around Islam, including some based on a media reflexivity that embodied Said’s critique of Orientalism. This research by Malcolm Brown (2006) used an unsystematic, convenience sample, and the author does not attempt to judge the preponderance or influence of different types of representation. His overall contention is that during this period there occurred a transition in the leading popular stereotype of the Muslim from exotic to fanatic. Yet alongside this move within ‘Orientalism’ there were examples of journalism which were critical of all ‘Othering’ discourses, and which sought to de-construct the homogenising of Islam. So critical media studies was apparently having an impact on journalism some time before 9/11 and its consequences for representation.

Nonetheless, just before 9/11 an article appeared which set the tone for a number of later studies in that it fixed Said’s Orientalism thesis as a critique of the British media in general. Abbas (2001) offered an application of Said’s theory to the British press. Though describing itself as a work of theory, his article made some very large empirical claims. After somewhat fragmentary discussions of the demography of Muslims in the UK and of press ownership, and a critique of the term ‘fundamentalism’, the author comes to the abrupt conclusion that ‘The West finds it unproblematic to infer that the Qur’an is a violent and extremist text. In short, “Islamic fundamentalists” are seen as the *true* Muslims and all Muslims are fundamentalists.’ (Abbas 2001: 250). While the empirical meaning of ‘the West’ may be hard to grasp, we might infer that it is the ‘press’ in general who are seeing Muslims in the manner described. This large and unsupported generalisation is illustrated with the example of the extensive media coverage given to the 1989 incident in which copies of Rushdie’s novel ‘The Satanic Verses’ were publicly burnt. The coverage is analysed as a hostile distortion of an action which was ‘a legitimate symbol of the hurt and frustration that the book had caused them [Muslims]’, and was a denial of their right to freedom of expression.

Abbas seems here to be defending a particular moment of intolerance, while criticising the media focus on the activities of intolerant extremists rather than on Islam as a peaceful and tolerant religion. Still, much later work trod the path set by Said’s critique, though with considerable variation in the use of evidence.

b) Major empirical studies

There are four projects with data of sufficient scope and quality to contribute evidence to the debate. The first of these was the work of Elizabeth Poole on print media reporting. Poole (2002) studied broadsheet reporting across three years (1994 to 1996, a total of 6507 articles). She additionally sampled the same newspapers (the *Guardian* and *Times* and their sister Sunday titles) in the following year, along with reporting in two tabloids (*The Sun* and the ‘mid-market’ *Daily Mail*). She followed up this work with a later study (Poole 2006) after the start of the Iraq War in 2003. Overall, she found that coverage of Islam tended strongly towards negativization and problematization, and that there was evidence in support of the thesis that an Orientalist discourse was to be found in the British press. Quantitative analysis of topic frequencies showed that Islam was most commonly presented in relation to problems or contentious areas – fundamentalism, criminality, educational separatism, the Rushdie affair, etc. Yet she also concluded that ‘Orientalist’ theory ‘neither embodies the diversity of representation within specific national contexts nor takes into account the distinctions made between Muslims based on national/ethnic stereotypes, which results in a more diverse though still limited and reductive range.’ (Poole, 2002/2009: 50-51). She found British Islam had a wider range of representations than did global Islam, but was still tied to a narrow range of negativising topics. This tethering of Islam to negative topics and the predictable associations it thereby acquires is a recurrent finding.

Moore *et al.* (2008) studied a large sample of newspaper items from 2000 to 2008, and found that the use of terms such as Islam and Muslim was strongly associated with themes of terrorism, extremism and controversial aspects of Islamic culture (with stories about such adverse cultural differences becoming more frequent across the period studied). In frequency counts of words juxtaposed to ‘Islam’, ‘radical’ was seventeen times more common than ‘moderate’ (Moore *et al.*, 2008: 24). They also found that visual images used in this reporting predominantly showed Muslims engaged in activities and in places associated with

extremism. Their findings applied to the broadsheet press almost as much as to the tabloid titles.

Flood *et al.* (2012) conducted an extensive study of all Islam-related items on three evening news programmes, one on each of BBC1, France2 and Russia's Channel 1. Programmes were recorded nightly for two years from November 2006, yielding a total of over 30,000 news items. In their conclusion, the authors state: 'The BBC exhibited an admirable desire to frame domestic terrorism in impartial terms which guarded against any automatic assumption of Muslim involvement in terrorist incidents' (2012: 244). In the BBC's domestic coverage, they report a tension between on the one hand a wish to stress that the great majority of the Muslim community is 'loyal', and on the other the use of a 'radicalisation' model which implied some responsibility for that community in its providing spaces for that radicalisation process to occur. This was an example of the broad tension between a 'tendency to demarcate an alien Muslim Other' and a 'European tolerance project whose mission is precisely to accommodate otherness' (2012: 248). Overall then this study 'dispels the notion of a uniformly Islamophobic European media as resolutely as it rejects the notion that news bulletins bear no responsibility for popular anti-Muslim sentiment' (2012: 255). That responsibility they saw to derive in considerable part from an adherence to conventional news values which demand conflict and damage, rather than to an ideological need for 'Islamophobic' framing.

Familiarity with Muslims in one's own country, and concerns with community relations, may make journalists and others less likely to apply Islamophobic stereotypes to domestic terrorism than to terrorism abroad. Hence Flood *et al.*'s observation (similar to one of Poole's conclusions, see above) that the effort to separate Islam as a whole from terrorism is sometimes greater in domestic coverage than in international news (as Ibrahim [2010] had found in a study of the US media).

Finally, Baker *et al.* (2013; see also Baker, 2010) used linguistic corpus analysis, a technique of quantitative analysis, on a very large body of UK print media material. They assembled over 200,000 articles from the national press between January 1998 and August 2005. Central to their method was the identification of the most frequent 'collocates', words that appear next or near to any of a list of index words, which in this case were words such as Islam, Muslim(s), and Islamic. Collocation frequencies can be interpreted to show broad patterns of associative meaning. As might be expected, words such as 'extremist' and 'radical' were found to be frequent collocates of the index words. Less predictably, however, the most frequent were words such as 'world' and 'community'. While this may seem more benign than we might have expected, the researchers see it pointing to the tendency to homogenise Islam, which of course carries the risk that all or most Muslims will be seen in the negative light of political extremism. Baker *et al.* conclude that 'British Muslims... would feel justified in claiming that sections of the British press were against them' (2013: 267). However they offer a nuanced discussion of their findings, in which they are careful not to present a simplified picture of malign media. In particular they note that it is 'difficult to assign motives' for negative stereotyping (2013: 269), and they recognise the importance of news values (here, the appeal to audiences of conflict, violence and threat) rather than ideological bias in steering reportage. They summarise the larger patterns observed by saying 'the presentation of Islam and Muslims in the UK press is anything but uniform' (2013: 66).

c) Other studies

There are a number of other articles, chapters and books published since 2001 the titles, abstracts or jacket summaries of which give the impression that they offer systematic empirical evidence. Another early study of broadsheets parallel to that of Poole was by Richardson (2004; 2006). On the face of it his dataset of 2540 items from the period October 1997 to January 1998 could have supported some well-founded conclusions. These were articles which mentioned Islam or a Muslim individual, organisation or country, or were about specific Islam-related issues such as the Luxor bombing, or Muslim schools. He coded this material for the presence of over 80 variables, and reports finding four themes in all of which Islam was presented as a threat (military, terroristic, political and social). Underlying these themes were processes involving the separation, differentiation and negativisation of Muslims. However his 2004 book does not give an overview of what the variables were nor how the coding was done. His conclusions seem to be based more on a Critical Discourse Analysis of the texts, of which a number of selected examples are given. Many of these specimen analyses are very tendentious. For example, a sports journalist is criticised (2004: 123ff.) for concealing Islamophobia, by writing about racial prejudice in cricket and not about anti-Islamic prejudice. However there is no reason from the evidence given to think that the journalist's use of the category 'Asian' was a misleading one. Richardson's analyses are generally presented in a very rhetorical way that seems to reflect the author's *a priori* views about 'Othering' and Islamophobia. He states that the most fundamental reason for the study was 'to contribute to a better understanding of ... the prevalence ... of anti-Islam racism in elite discourse' (2004: xviii).

Later, in another paper, Richardson (2006) drew on the same dataset to point out that Muslim sources are used less than non-Muslim ones in articles reporting on Islam-related topics. This may point to a problem in sourcing practices, although since these articles are probably on topics of concern to the general public it might be reasonable for a substantial number of non-Muslim sources to be referred to. Similarly, the greater frequency with which Muslims are quoted when Islam is seen as a factor in explaining the news in question does not necessarily point to a selective exclusion of Muslims on other matters: sources designated as Christian are probably not frequently called upon unless Christianity is seen as substantively linked to the story's topic.

An empirical study commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA 2007) has become a frequently-cited source on media Islamophobia. The research was undertaken by a team of nine, seven of whom had previous experience of writing about or campaigning against 'Islamophobia'. The bulk of their ninety-four page report is given over to interviews with selected Muslim journalists, a qualitative analysis of four case studies selected from the print media, a critique of one edition of the BBC current affairs programme *Panorama*, and some contextual material such as polling data. Eight pages are devoted to a more systematic study of all British national print titles in a 'chosen at random' but 'typical' week in May 2006. In the print media for that week the researchers found 352 articles which contained some reference to 'Islam', 'Muslim', 'Islamic', 'Islamist' and other related words, and classified those articles as 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral' in their representation of Islam.

We are not told how the classification of articles was undertaken, other than that it was based on the 'associated context and subject matter' of the article. Thus if the word 'Muslim' appeared in a story about the 7/7 bombings in London or about a speech by an Iranian leader, that story would be counted as a negative portrayal of Islam. The great majority of stories were about such conflict-laden topics. The week chosen saw the publication of the official report into the 7/7 attacks, although arguably such topics would in any week be those most likely to arise in conjunction with Islam. The overall categorisation of stories was then bound to be heavily negative, even though many stories may have contained no negativity whatsoever towards Islam or Muslims per se. Some of the articles did not actually refer explicitly to Islam, but were ones where a word such as 'extremist' was used in a context such that 'it was reasonable to assume that an association with Islam or Muslims would be made' (GLA, 2007: 17). Again, the operational definition of 'reasonable' is not given. So the researchers also counted in their 'negative' total those articles which did not explicitly refer to Islam or Muslims at all - but where a word such as 'extremist' may - in the researchers' view - have led readers to think of Islam. This somewhat creative approach to coding gave the project additional help in reaching its conclusion that 91% of articles assessed were negative in their representation of Islam.

This leads us to an issue at the heart of debate about allegations of Islamophobia in the media. Media content that links Islam only or predominantly with terrorism and fanaticism is going to produce an effect of 'guilt by association' at least for some sections of the audience. There will no doubt be examples of language and image which explicitly encourage that association. But it cannot be assumed that all or even most of the 91% 'negative' articles were doing this. The GLA research made no distinction between articles that wrote only of 'Islam' and those that used a terminology of 'Islamism' or 'Islamic extremism' when discussing terrorism. Some reportage and commentary may employ this terminology in order to indicate that the problem is not 'Islam' per se but fundamentalist, politicised and violent forms of it. The GLA study pays no attention to this distinction between Islam and Islamism. In fact, it states that the distinction is an 'oversimplification' (2007: 8), which - the authors suggest - can lead readers to the conclusion that all Islam is extremist. No evidence is offered to support this counter-intuitive, indeed somewhat illogical, argument.

A different but related argument is to be found in a paper by Shaw (2012) who cites a post 7/7 *Daily Mail* piece and highlights the references to 'al Qaeda', 'extremists', 'radical imams' and 'violent and fundamentalist meetings'. He argues that these are evidence of 'explosive and offensive stereotypes', on the grounds that they 'are just too easily conflated with Muslims' (Shaw, 2012: 518). However this allegedly easy conflation is simply asserted, without further analysis of how or why, and amongst whom, it should occur. While any reportage or editorialising on 7/7 is likely to have fuelled anti-Muslim feeling amongst some people with underlying prejudice, in the piece quoted it is hard to see how the text could have been more explicit in its choice of terms such as the above to describe violent Islamism, and its avoidance of general references to Islam or Muslims as a whole.

Shaw does not suggest, as the GLA researchers do, that the alleged conflation is somehow due to the attempt to *distinguish* Islam from Islamism. Instead he seems to imply that it is Islamophobic stereotyping to draw attention to the existence of Islamist extremists. This is tantamount to claiming that any reportage of the activities of self-declared Muslims is necessarily a slur upon all Muslims. If accepted, this argument

would require that the Northern Ireland conflict should have been reported with no references to the Protestant or Catholic affiliations of the protagonists.

Common to both the GLA report and Shaw's paper is the assumption that audiences will conflate terms such as 'extremism' with Islam as a whole (even when Islam is not explicitly mentioned). The charge against the media of Islamophobia therefore rests in part on an assumption about how audiences will receive media content. The assumption is that audience prejudice will cancel the efforts that parts of the media may be making to protect Islam by differentiating it from Islamism.

This question of whether Islam is distinguished from Islamism, by audiences or journalists, and if so how and with what consequences, is at the heart of the debates about Islam in the media. We lack the audience research which could tell us how much news audiences and readerships can and do make that distinction. Since politicised and violent takfiri Islamism is a prominent force in global politics, and has to be reported as such, the task of the media is to report on it in ways that clearly separate it from peaceful Islam, and that enable audiences to understand the multiple forms that all religions take. And one task of media researchers is to gather evidence on the effort and success of the news media in creating news frames which defuse or contain the potential for violent Islamism to inflame social tensions.

However apart from the four projects described earlier, there is very little systematic evidence of that type available, less than the number of publications on this topic might suggest. Shaw's paper claims to be based on a Critical Discourse Analysis of articles selected 'randomly' (2012: 517) from eight British newspapers in the three months following the 7/7 attacks. However it offers only passing references to or brief quotations from eight articles from seven newspapers, and gives no indication of how CDA or any other systematic analytic method was used.

In a number of other recent publications there is a mismatch between the strength of claims made about Islamophobic media content and the strength of the evidence adduced to support those claims. Khiabany and Williamson (2012: 134), in a strongly polemical piece, assert that British Muslims face 'demonisation in the media'. Their evidence for this is a series of selected quotations from four British commentators known for their particularly critical views (albeit differing ones) on Islam (Trevor Kavanagh, Rod Liddle, Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens).

Khiabany and Williamson also repeat the attack made by the GLA report on those who wish to distinguish Islam from Islamism. They cite the *Guardian's* Polly Toynbee in connection with the view that the threat is not Islam but Islamism, i.e. Islamic fundamentalism. This view is taken by them to be part of the problem, because, they claim, Islam is collapsed into Islamism and so opposition to Islamism becomes an attack on Islam. They offer no further description of, nor evidence for, this alleged perceptual collapse, whereby the diversity that is Islam becomes lost in the specific contemporary phenomenon of global militant jihadism. While, as acknowledged above, some media content and everyday public attitudes may be based on such a collapse, we might reason that this makes it all the more necessary to make the distinction, as much other media content continues to do (and also as many Islamists do themselves, in their contrasting of the 'jihadi' with the apostate). This distinction is arguably the key to responsible reporting. Yet following Kundnani (2008), Khiabany and Williamson (2012) imply that the distinction is made only to enable those who make it to avoid charges of racism, when their real purpose is to attack Islam per se. They present no evidence for this allegation. Moreover the authors themselves later in the article seem to *advocate* such a collapse in their statement that to differentiate Muslims according to their degree of commitment to the British state is a 'false dichotomy' (2012: 146). It is hard to make sense of this casual remark, though it does imply that, for them, a commitment to democratic politics is neither here nor there. Again, as with the GLA report (2007) and with Shaw (2012), there is some incoherence in the critique of media attempts to discriminate Islam from Islamism.

In sum then, while it makes plentiful assertions about 'a broad Islamophobic consensus in the UK' (Khiabany and Williamson, 2012: 136), this article has no new, substantial or systematic evidence to support those assertions. The same authors also have a chapter in the volume edited by Petley and Richardson (2011) which uses the same method of selective quoting, plus a few headlines and lines of copy from the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *The Times*, to contend that all debate about the wearing of the veil is Islamophobic, part of an 'ideological campaign' (Khiabany and Williamson, 2011: 199) against Islam.

Their 2012 paper does however make one important and relevant point. This is that while cases of Far Right would-be terrorism and actual violence are not uncommon in the UK, they receive much less media coverage than do those cases of jihadist plots and attacks. This may be partly due to scale and threat; the would-be Far Right terrorists are less ambitious than jihadists, and often less competent. But it is plausible that news values here are also influenced by an unconscious orientalism, by a subliminal sense that the raw

and angry faces of white working-class men are somehow more comprehensible and familiar, and therefore less suited to the role of terrorist than are faces of dark otherness carrying the menace of deep difference.

The Petley and Richardson collection includes three other chapters which offer empirical analysis, though none is additional to the studies already discussed: Lewis *et al.* report on the same substantial dataset as in Moore *et al.* (2008). Muir *et al.* (2011) provide an entertaining account of the four cases of extravagant media confabulation on the theme of 'Political Correctness gone mad' (the 'banning' of Christmas, etc.), which were part of the GLA study. This is a very promising territory for researchers wishing to establish an anti-Islamic bias, at least in the tabloid media, and case studies (even when hand-picked, as here) can provide a telling indication of the parameters of a discourse, even though they do not present an overall profile of media content.

In the same volume, Petley's essay discusses another case from the GLA study, this one offering a close study of a 2005 BBC Panorama programme which investigated the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and alleged that a number of its affiliated organisations were promoting or supporting extreme Islamism. As the MCB was at the time the semi-official voice of mainstream Islam in the UK, this allegation was a challenging one for all those who wished to separate Muslims in general from violent extremism. Petley argues that the programme was 'thesis-driven journalism': that is, was out to prove a point held before the investigation.

However, Petley's essay, though full of detail about the programme and the debates around it, is itself implicitly thesis-driven. It introduces no new material or arguments and appears to want to persuade its readers that as the journalist John Ware was clearly hostile to some of his subjects, by implication his thesis must be erroneous. It does not address most of the substantive issues which the programme raised, focussing instead on its (admittedly prejudicial) style. If Petley's critique of aggressive questioning were applied elsewhere, much of the BBC's news and current affairs output (*Today*, *Newsnight*, etc.) would face censure. One may agree or disagree with Petley, but crucially the article does not contribute to the evidence base for any assessment of the extent of Islamophobia in British media.

Massey and Tatla (2012) present a study of media reports following a riot in the northern England town of Bradford in July 2001, when Muslim youths clashed with police. They begin with the assertion that 9/11 and this riot 'resulted in increasingly polarised and negative media representations of the Muslim population' (2012: 161). The phrase 'polarised and negative' is somewhat unclear: presumably they intend to convey that the media situate Muslims in opposition to the rest of the UK population. Massey and Tatla claim to have used quantitative data from a content analysis of some national print media, covering seven daily titles and one Sunday newspaper, *The Observer*, and some unspecified local press. However they give no information about the sample period or selection criteria for articles, nor about their method of analysis. Their analysis does not offer any quantitative data, nor indeed much qualitative data either, except for a few quotes. Their study offers tendentious discussion of six themes they say were recurring in the texts, which are unsurprising ones – segregation, unemployment, racism, multiculturalism, education and the Far Right parties the BNP and NF.

The overall shape of their analysis is not clear; we may infer that they think some of the themes to be important in understanding the riot, and others less so. In particular, they critique the prominence of the 'segregation' theme, implying that the media were wrong to present this as one cause of the riot. Media responses, they say, focussed on self-segregation and the failure to integrate, which is seen to have led to the failure of multiculturalism. However even in the five quotes they report in relation to this theme, there is no statement of any kind to that effect. Some papers are criticised for using the term 'virtual apartheid', although the term 'apartheid' definitely does *not* convey the idea of *self*-segregation. Once again then we find here a study which is long on assertion, short on data and weak on logic.

Finally, mention must be made of the study by Elgamri (2008). Again there is a substantial dataset here (albeit only from three print titles) but extraordinarily this was composed of articles from the British broadsheet press selected for analysis *because* they met a pre-existing criterion of hostility to Islam. This sample was then used to support generalisations about how Islam is represented, including assertions that there is a 'purposeful conflation' of Islam and Islamism, and that phrases such as 'Muslim terrorists' are being used to 'describe all Muslims' (Elgamri, 2008: 219).

Conclusions

The overall picture in this field is one of a group of core studies which build quite qualified or complex conclusions on substantial databases, and a growing penumbra of other studies which tend to offer simpler

conclusions based on insubstantial evidence in which empirical fragments are mixed with assertions and generalisations. The consequence is a body of ostensibly scholarly work which promotes the idea that the mainstream British media news *en masse* are engaged in a concerted and sustained assault on Islam and on Britain's Muslim communities. This paper has sought to present the mismatch between statements on the extent and nature of Islamophobia in the UK news media, and the evidence offered to support them. Following Buruma and Margalit's (2004) analysis, we might say that there is an 'Occidental' bias at work, an anti-Western ideology, displacing more level-headed judgement.

However, this should not obscure the fact that while the British media may not be, for the most part, explicitly or deliberately anti-Islamic, some of their reporting conventions are likely to create or maintain anti-Islamic views and feelings. There are two main problems which arise in routine reporting, and it may be useful to clearly identify them and to examine how they might be alleviated, lest the possibility of alleviation gets lost under the blanket of critique. Both problems are linked to the tendency of at least some media content to homogenise Islam, to present it (if only implicitly) as a monolithic doctrine, and its followers as cut from the same cloth.

a) Avoiding guilt by association

Moore *et al.* (2008) make a point about the connotations of visual images used to illustrate news reports. A respondent in the author's research observed that a picture of a mosque was the constant background to an interview about Islamist extremism, linking the mosque in the mind with terrorism. The mosque may have been one attended by the extremists in question, so there may have been a justification for using its image, but nonetheless the impact on the audience of its silent conjunction with the topic of extremism may have gone far beyond any factual sense of 'this is where these particular men gathered' to a rhetorical meaning of 'mosques everywhere are gathering places for extremists'.

While more responsible reporting might at times avoid implicit association between Islam and terrorism, this association might sometimes be impossible for journalists to avoid. For example, where a militant group advocating violence or condoning terrorism or preaching hate against homosexuals is doing so in the name of Islam, it is part of the journalist's work to report that. If abortion clinics in the UK were being bombed in the name of Christianity, again that would be important to know. While some people differentiate clearly between Islam and Islamism, or between mainstream and violent fundamentalist Christianity, such distinctions are not clear to others, however much the news media may try to abide by them. Profoundly though the media affect us, there are non-mediatised sources of prejudice and hatred for which the news is not responsible. Nonetheless, it is the responsibility of news media to ensure that the distinction between Islam and Islamisms is made at every opportunity, and more generally to engender a firm sense of the heterogeneity of Islam as one of the great religions.

b) Neutralising the negative impact of news values

In relation to contemporary Islam, the problem of association with badness is exacerbated by another structural feature of its presence in the news. This is that there is very little good news about Islam or Muslims, either in national or international news. Stories about conflict, intolerance and political repression abound, while accounts of Muslims leading processes of reconciliation, liberalisation and political reform are rare. To some extent this is a problem for many other categories of people who - given the nature of news values - expect to appear only or mainly in bad news stories (politicians of all types, for example). It would be interesting to have data on images of Christianity in the news comparable to that which we have on Islam. Homophobia, sexism, forced institutionalisation of children, paedophilia, creationism and anti-abortion terror have dominated much of the media coverage of Christianity in the UK and US in recent years. But the lack of balancing material may be a particular problem around Islam, and may encourage particularly negative generalisations about it.

However it is not easy to see how a one-sided impression with its focus on conflict and turbulence can be corrected. In one way or another, most news is bad news, or about the end of bad news - which, although 'good' news, typically doesn't erase the associations stemming from the bad news ('Islamist bomb plot foiled', 'al Qaeda losing support', etc.). Yet there must be ways in which reporters, sub-editors, editors and others can mitigate this. Muslim voices against violent fundamentalism, often little more than short quotes near the end of an article, could be headlined and pictured more often. 'Tabloid' news values concerning heroism can be deployed to dramatise the depth of British Muslims' commitment and contribution to an inclusive and peaceful British society, as happened to an extent around the father of a young Muslim murdered in 2011:

But with immense dignity, Tariq Jahan, whose 21-year-old son was mown down and killed in an apparently racist murder in Birmingham, appealed for calm yesterday. (Seamark, 2011).

Another example from the Mail (usually seen as one of the most culpable purveyors of Islamophobia) would be a front page headline praising Jabron Hashmi, the first British Muslim serviceman to die in Afghanistan: 'British Muslim, British Hero' (Hickley, 2006). This kind of usage of celebratory news values could be more frequent, and could perhaps help to neutralise the accumulation of negative associations derived from the news.

Such shifts in the media iconography of Islam and Muslims will require changes over time in the default habits and reflexes of journalists. This involves a process of incremental cultural change. Though that might be supported by the formulation of some explicit guidelines, an attempt to codify good practice or somehow legislate against discriminatory framing is likely to seem overbearing and/or to be ineffective (see, e.g., Frost [2004] on the shortcomings of the now-defunct Press Complaints Commission's 1990s code on reporting race).

c) Moderating the critique of Islamophobia

At the same time as there is large scope for improvements in journalistic practice, there is a need for critics of the media to accept that in an intensively mediated world of marketised media there is no escape from news values which place a premium on conflict, terror, violence and negativity. Nothing is sacred, not even the sacred, and the mixed nature in reality of all complex social phenomena means that bad things will be said about everybody and everything. Mature audiences know nothing's perfect, and should be able to put things in perspective and proportion. Of course there is a circularity here: we need responsible media to help develop audience maturity. So the media are not let off the hook. But a more proportionate approach to media Islamophobia is called for, as there are potentially some seriously damaging effects of the disproportionate polemic about it.

a) First, there is the possibility of discrediting the field of media studies, and particularly of putting at risk the credibility of work which addresses problems of representation in a more rigorous way. As Charles (2015) pointed out in a recent edition of *Journalism Education*, a little less name-calling and more reflexivity on the part of critical researchers would be a good thing.

b) Second, the split between journalism and academia may be deepened. The belief amongst some journalists that most media academics do not really understand how the media work is unlikely to be challenged by academic outputs which present simplistic accounts of the news. And those journalists prepared to engage in critical self-reflection regarding their practices in reporting on Islam and Islamism will not be helped to do so by critiques which seem to be primarily interested in accusing them of wrongdoing.

c) Third, more broadly, the academic consensus on media Islamophobia strengthens a general sense that hostility to Muslims is always about to surface. This adds to the risk that a charge of Islamophobia may undermine legitimate concerns about intolerant fundamentalism of an Islamist variety, proscribe expressions of anxiety about social change, or simply cloud an issue which in reality is little to do with Islam (see, e.g., Allen's [2013] case study of debates around the building of a mosque in Dudley).

d) Fourth and finally, and perhaps most damagingly, it may bring another polarising pressure to bear on social divisions, by encouraging feelings of isolation and threat amongst British Muslims. It invites the perception that they are *all* under attack by and in deep conflict with the rest of British society and all its dominant institutions. There is no doubt that some anti-Muslim sentiment is now deeply embedded amongst sections of the British public, and has changed the profile of casual racism and xenophobia (see for example Abbas, 2012; Cole, 2009; Halliday, 1999). At the same time, British Social Attitudes surveys show a long-term trend towards lower levels of racism generally, despite the negative impact of 9/11 and 7/7. Yet the academic chorus of 'Media Islamophobia!' is at risk, in its indiscriminate shrillness, of gratuitously raising levels of mistrust and resentment.

The frequent conjunction throughout the news of Islam and Muslims with terror, extremism, controversial cultural practices, and so forth, is a serious problem, though not one amenable to simple correction. There is also a strand of egregious stereotyping, especially in the tabloid media. But these two features do not add up to systematic and culpable Islamophobia across the media. While journalism education should point to the toxic influences of media representations in some areas of life in British society, it also needs to develop awareness of how researchers may allow political preconception to replace evidence.

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