Islam and Muslims in the Media: Industry Challenges and Identity Responses

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of Islam and Muslims in the British press. It suggests that British Muslims are portrayed as an 'alien other' within the media. It suggests that this misrepresentation can be linked to the development of 'racism', namely, Islamphobia that has its roots in cultural representations of the 'other.' The paper presents empirical evidence from media educators in the UK that implies journalists do not deliberately write racist material. However it is suggested that this argument does not account for the cultural and ideological factors that influence media coverage of Islam that also echoes how the Western media have routinely represented non –white minority groups historically. One consequence of this is the willingness of the Western Muslim diaspora to explore alternative media and employ new /social media to challenge anti-Muslim racism. The paper finally postulates that journalists must acknowledge the influence of "hidden agendas" (Pilger, 2002) that impacts on their reporting of Islam and Muslims.

Keywords

Islam, Islamophobia, Racism, Terrorism

This article will suggest that "race" thinking feeds into what has been termed Islamophobia (Saeed, 2015a,). It will be argued that Muslims are thought of and represented as "others" (Said, 1978). Whose values are alien to "secular civilized West' (Saeed, 2015b). Recent social and political concern over Muslim minority groups can be understood as a form of cultural racism (Modood, 2007). These apprehensions over

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belonging can be understood in relation to the media treatment of minority groups. Thus the article reviews previous research into the media portrayal of minority groups concentrating on press treatment of British Muslims and/or Islam.

In many respects, the media representation of minority groups is a 'double-edged sword'. First, it marginalises the voices of minority groups and thus, they are almost overlooked or ignored (Saeed, 2007a). Simultaneously the minority groups are constructed in negative discourse such as the problems of terrorism (Hartmann and Husband, 1974). Media's role is very crucial (Van Dijk, 1991) when these frameworks are practiced to the people who don't have much social contact with minority groups (Hall, 1978). Media holds a strong position in conveying; explaining and articulating specific discourses that help represent as well as misrepresent minority groups (Cottle, 2000, 2006).

Secondly the article provides empirical evidence from journalism educators and regulators. Here open-ended interviews were conducted with members of the Association of Journalism Education in the UK (AJE), Society of Editors (SoE) and also advocacy group Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND).

The AJE The AJE represents journalism educators at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Founded in 1997, the AJE aims:
- to uphold the highest standards in journalism education
- to provide a common voice for those involved in it
- to promote and support research into journalism education and journalism.

(What is the AJE, 2008)

It also produces academic publication, Journalism Education (AJE Journal, n.d.).

The SoE represents members in national, regional and local newspapers, magazines, broadcasting, digital media, media law and journalism education. It campaigns for media freedom and is motivated by a desire to promote the public's right to know and a

commitment to high editorial standards and integrity. (Why join the society, n.d.)

MEND is a not for profit company working towards enhancing the active engagement of British Muslim communities in our national life, particularly in the fields of politics and the media. (MEND Community, n.d.).

The interviews were open-ended but the respondents were specifically asked about media representations of Muslims and if this was accurate and how/it can be improved. The participants asked to remain anonymous as they noted that their personal views did not reflect the positions of their various organizations. It should be noted that the right to remain anonymous has not compromised previous research into media representations (O'Neill & Savigny, 2014).

Concluding, it will be suggested that the suspicion of mainstream media representations of Islam and British Muslims drives many Muslim communities living in the West to employ new media to challenge "old" media representations and assumptions about Islam/Muslims.

'Race': A Dilemma

The existence of 'Race' is as a concept, yet belief in social construct affects many people on daily basis. Racism demonstrates in different shapes around the world such that people are victimized due to their hallucinatory negative biological and/or cultural trait that they are supposed to possess. Comprehensive explanation of this phenomenon is virtualy impossible (Saeed, 2015a).

The racism faced by an asylum seeker in the north-east of England by a fascist group (Saeed, 2007b) will be much different from the persecution faced by a Palestinian woman by the occupying Israeli army in Gaza (Saeed, 2009; Drainville and Saeed, 2013). Although both types have similar essential characteristics but both are also different due to epoch and institutional factors.

The concept of 'race' has become a 'floating signifier'; and has made it difficult to expel from everyday life (Hall, 1992). The important marker of 'race' is skin colour and the meanings that it places (Saeed,

2015a). Therefore, it has been suggested that the problematic ideology of racial difference will continue to exist even if the 'race' discourse is upheld. It must be remembered that the racial discrimination is not naturally inherent but socially invented (Saeed, 2015a). Meer and Nayak (2013: 13) eloquently note:

> race is very much installed in the here and now. It remains ever present in late- modernity and strangely solid in liquid times.

Thus, although the nature of 'race' is ambiguous, in contemporary modern and global society, essentialized 'race' thinking appeals to a significant sections of human society leading to racism (Saeed, 2015a).

Concepts of 'New racism' is not always covert and at times is seems to echo discredited biological assumptions about 'race' and the perceived superiority of the West (Saeed, 2007a). As Stuart Hall (1992, 318) described the colonial discourse of 'the West and the Rest'

> [...] continues to inflect the language of the West, its image of itself and 'others', its sense of 'us and "them", its practices of power towards the Rest' through 'the languages of racial inferiority and ethnic superiority which still operate so powerfully across the globe today'.

> Solomos (2003:1) notes:

> At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is clear that there has been a major transformation in this field and a noticeable flowering of theorising and research on race and racism. It is also evident that the study of race and racism is now of some importance in a wide range of academic disciplines, including sociology, politics, cultural studies, history, anthropology, geography and literary theory.

It has been argued that new forms of racism have emerged in the contemporary society (Barker, 1981; Gilroy, 1993; Mason, 2000). Goldberg (1990: xiii) states that "the presumption of a single monolithic racism is being displaced by a mapping of the multifarious historical formulations of racisms". Saeed (2015a) argues that "Thus, traditional forms of racism linked to biological difference have perhaps become out-dated as racism has now attached itself to cultural differences between racial or ethnic groups". This historical trajectory has resulted in the

development of anti-Muslim racism commonly associated with the term 'Islamophobia.'

It has been discussed by Elizabeth Poole (2002) that roots of present manifestation of racism lie in the Orientalist discourse and constructions of the concept of 'other'. The term 'Islamophobia' is introduced due to the fact that there is a new reality to be named: anti-Muslim prejudice has grown rapidly in contemporary era that a new word in the vocabulary is needed (Runnymede Trust, 1997: 4). Weedon describes Islamophobia as 'unfounded hostility towards Islam ... unfair discrimination against Muslims individuals and communities' (2004: 165).

Saeed (2015a) notes that Islamophobia came about because of a desire, by Western powers, to prolong the ideology of white or Western supremacy.

> Claims that Islam is totally different and other often involve stereotypes and claims about 'us' (non-Muslims) as well as about 'them' (Muslims), and the notion that 'we' are superior. 'We' are civilised, reasonable, generous, efficient, sophisticated, enlightened, non-sexist. 'They' are primitive, violent, irrational, scheming, disorganised, oppressive. (Runnymede Trust, 1997: 6)

In recent years, there has been a lot of discussion about the term 'Islamophobia', its definition and the social extent (Allen, 2010; Esposito and Kalin, 2011; Poynting and Mason, 2007; Sayyid and Vakil, 2011). Meer (2013) and Mossavi (2013) discuss the contentious nature of the term and state that some authors suggest the term is inaccurate. For Halliday, the term 'Islamophobia' is inaccurate because of its too much uniformity. Halliday (1999) points out that usage of this term means that there is a single Islam and all Muslims are homogenous. In short, Halliday (1999: 898) proposes that Islamophobia as a term suggests fear of Islam as a religion not fear of the people who follow Islam (Meer, 2013). However, Halliday also points that such academic debates might not prove fruitful for victims of such prejudice.

Fekete (2002) and AbuKhalil (2002) point out that after 9/11, some of the critics of Muslims have raised questions on the concept of jihad in Islam and the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad. This prejudice has

been studied from different perspectives. Willingness of politicians to employ Islamophobic statements has been noted (Mossavi, 2014). This indicates that politicians regard Muslims and at times Islam, as a threat to Western secular democracy, multiculturalism and integration (Saeed, 2010; Meer, 2010; Modood, 2006).

Saeed (2004) notes that the apparent willingness of these Muslim 'enemies within' to support terrorism abroad and to develop the ideology that appears to challenge 'Western democracy' has seen Muslim minority groups placed under greater scrutiny by governments, public bodies and judicial organisations across the West (Abbas, 2012).

In the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron has specifically targeted Muslim communities suggesting that they must abide by "British values." Indeed much policy research in relation to Muslim communities is focused on the 'Preventing Violent Extremism' agenda (Petley, 2015; Miah, 2013; Birt, 2009; Khan, 2009).

Muslims are told that they must have to make special efforts in integrate and should be collectively responsible for the terrorist activities carried out in the name of Islam (Saeed 2004: 71). For example consider the response from The Sun newspaper highlighted later in this paper. Cameron and The Sun ignore empirical research that clearly shows that Muslims in the UK feel and identify as "British" (Modood, 2007; Saeed et al, 1999). This was further confirmed in a poll commissioned by the BBC (COM RES, 2015)

Empirical work in this area underlines this, with Ahmed noting, in a series of interviews with young Muslims, that,

> [they] feel strong attachment to their society, but many feel that they are not fully accepted as British, and frequently have to prove their loyalty. Often they are faced with questions that imply a choice between their religion and their British citizenship and popular perception is that the two are somehow conflicted or incompatible. (Ahmed, 2009: 81)

It could argued that the new floating signifier is not 'colour' but religion and specifically Islam or Muslims. Although it should be noted that contemporary racisms combine assumptions about religion, class

and nation. It could be suggested that the issue of asylum seekers/refugees has been conflated with the issue of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism to create a new form of racism and thus, it may be argued, to create another dimension of exclusion. Finney describes that public surveys have confirmed that racist language is commonly used to articulate the concerns about asylum seekers. It is also verified that in some places, there is also trend to conflate them with anyone who is visibly 'non-British' (Finney & Peach 2004: 24). A study by ICAR (Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees) in 2004, by use of focus groups and in-depth interviews, supported the hypothesis that "some press coverage is unbalanced and lacking in accuracy in ways likely to increase tension." (Finney and Peach 2004: 98). A UK YouGov poll suggests that sympathy for Syrian refugees in the wake of the attacks in Paris, has plummeted. 49% of those surveyed said that the UK should not accept any refugees from Syria, or accept fewer numbers. This is a 22% increase from September 2015 (Dahlgreen, 2015)

This human tragedy unfolding on the boundaries of Europe has in some quarters been perceived as a threat and met with a degree of hostility that borders on out right vitriolic racist abuse. Despite the growing number of bodies been washed up on beaches around Europe, for some social commentators they would have preferred migrants, described as 'vermin' and 'swarms' to be machine gunned down.

The female "shock jock" style commentator, Katie Hopkins argues

No, I don't care. Show me pictures of coffins, show me bodies floating in water, play violins and show me skinny people looking sad. I still don't care. (Plunkett, 2015)

Hopkins (2015) continues that the tragic death of the Syrian child Aylan Kurdi was staged and that Muslims/Islam are/is at a war with Europe and insinuates that Muslims are essentially a problem for the West (Walters, 2015). This exemplifies, that were there is 'race' thinking, there is racism. If 'race' and racism have strong currency in today's world, then the study of their impacts upon society is of vital importance.

National and international concerns

Following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, one of the UK's leading newspapers the Daily Mail published a photo which featured caricatures of bearded Muslim men with exaggerated noses and veiled women crossing "Europe's open borders," along with scurrying rats. The implication being, they are one and the same. The cartoon was widely denounced as racist and the image reminded many observers of Nazi propaganda (The list, 2016).

Despite the plea of the President of the European Commission not to equate terrorists with refugees, the Daily Mail was unrepentant in its equation (Burgon, 2015).

Likewise the UK's most popular tabloid (The Sun) newspaper suggested a fifth of Muslims in Britain had 'sympathy" for ISIS fighters. Despite the methodology of this poll being questioned and the newspapers interpretation of findings by the pollsters themselves, (Melley, 2015), the Sun was adamant of its claim (BBC Trending, 2015b)[1]. The newspaper's former editor even suggesting that ISIS was the "beating heart of Islam" (Burnett, 2015).

Whilst the above examples are drawn from the UK press, social commentators have noted that the "Western media's" attitude towards Muslims and Islam has become further hostile. Research from Europe (Law, 2015) and the USA (Aked, 2015) indicates supports the assertion that Muslims living in the west are increasingly living under a climate of fear and suspicion (Saeed, 2015a, b).

Whittaker (2002, 55) notes that Muslim representation in the British press can be characterised by:

> four very persistent stereotypes that crop up time and time again in the different articles. These tells us Muslims are intolerant, misogynist. Violent or cruel. And finally strange or different.

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[1] It should be noted that the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) noted that the Story was misleading following a complaint from the British Muslim advocacy group Muslim Engagement and Development MEND see https://www.ipso.co.uk/IPSO/rulings/IPSOrulings-detail.html?id=331

The findings that assert that the media overwhelmingly associate Muslims/Islam with negative connotations have been reproduced in research throughout Western media (Saeed, 2007a). Karim (2002) notes that negative images of Islam dominated US media since the Iranian revolution of 1979. The Council on American Islamic Relations (2002) noted about its impact that media distortion of Islam had led to an increased number of 'hate crimes' against Muslims in USA. Gerges (1999, p. 51) notes "According to Professor Richard Bulliet of Columbia University, Americans have quite readily accepted the notion that acts of violence committed by some Muslims are representative of a fanatic and terroristic culture."

Hence the recent assertions by US Presidential candidate Donald trump to ban all Muslims following the shootings California follows a well-worn pattern of US-Muslim relations (Jones, 2015). According to the US figures since 2012 their have been 1052 mass shootings in the USA (Guardian Team, 2015).

Insightful research by (Clark, 2015) notes that out of 207 shootings since 2015 only one was committed by a Muslim. He does conceded that,

> the other 206? It's hard to tell because many suspects have not been identified. But, and here's the point, they are not identifiably Muslim and Islamic terrorism was not identifiably the motive….. Beginning with the links provided by Shooting Tracker, my analysis of the media coverage related to each mass shooting revealed a pattern. For every non-Muslim shooting suspect, the media never mentioned their religion.

However he notes that the media framed the event not as mass shooting but as an act of terrorism once the religion of the perpetrators was discovered. Hence the connection is made between Islam and terrorism or Muslims and crime. This follows a well known pattern that for many is exemplified by marking 9/11 as a 'terrorist' attack, associated with Islamic extremists, had unfortunate consequences for minority Muslim communities in the West.

Jackson (2007) argues that Islamic terrorism is a term that is 'laden with specific and unacknowledged assumptions and embedded political-

cultural narratives' with a number of discursive and genealogical origins: academic research in disciplines such as terrorism studies where a number of core texts and experts have become politically influential in international policy-making. This is further influenced by an established historical archive of Orientalist scholarship and knowledge which has shaped the relationship between Western societies and the Middle East to produce many of it's core labels and scripts: 'hostile media representations' and 'cultural stereotypes' of Muslims that associate Islam with 'violence and extremism' that have their historical origins in European colonialism and post-war Middle-East relations (Karim 2006; Abbas, 2012).

From 1980-2005, 94% of terrorist acts on U.S. soil were perpetrated by non-Muslims (FBI, 2010).   Other research has indicated that acts of terrorism carried out by Muslims (and by this they mean Muslims, including so called Black Muslim groups such as the Nation of Islam) accounted for only 2.5% of all attacks from 1970-2012 (Blog, 2013).

We see a similar pattern in Europe where, Europol reports, from 2007-2009 Islamic terror constitutes a tiny fraction of the terrorist attacks in European countries. During that period, more than 99% of terrorist attacks in Europe were by non-Muslims (Danios, 2010).

Interview material

In summary then post 9/11 has seen a dramatic increase in newspaper coverage about Islam and Muslims. This coverage includes a balanced view about Islam and Muslims. However, overall representation was not revealing positive view of Islam/Muslims (Saeed, 2007a). Karim (2003) suggests that Western media homogenises the Muslim population and fails to look at the varying traits/differences of the global Islamic 'ummah'. This misrepresentation is compounded by the attention focused on Muslim extremists/fundamentalists and therefore, it could be argued that the 'preferred reading' of these discourses highlights the 'otherness' of Muslims/Islam from mainstream society (Saeed, 2007a). It was these thoughts that were put to the participants in this study.

The initial question introduced the area and allowed respondents room to clarify positions. Academic evidence suggests a biased negative representation of Islam and Muslim communities in the West what are your thoughts on this?

According to the Association of Journalism Educators Member (interview on February 13, 2016)

Islam and Muslims are seen as not belonging and for many people Muslims and Islam are concepts that they are unfamiliar with. Unfortunately this also applies to journalists who have little idea about the religion or the communities. Then when they are told to "find" stories they follow the well-worn pattern of problems that minorities do.

The participant here suggests that journalists are following established discourses of problematizing and misunderstanding minority cultures. Thus they continue to replicate stories that follow the same pattern. They define the situation and determine how it should be debated.

Hall (1978, p. 95) says the media constitute a 'machinery of representation' determining.

> ... what and who gets represented and what and who routinely gets left out (and) how things, people, events, relationships get represented ... the structure of access to the media is systematically skewed towards certain social categories.

They are thus able to 'command the field' in all 'subsequent treatment' (Miller, 1994). It is important to note that media effects are never simple or direct (Hall, 1978). Van Dijk (1987, 1991, 1993) links the idea of 'primary definers' to the notion that media constitute an 'elite' in society. While accepting that the media have conflicts with other social actors he argues that in terms of race and ethnicity an ethnic consensus is prevalent.

Solomos (2003, p. 186) suggests that this follows a wider tradition of media representations that depict ethnic minority communities as 'endangering the cultural and political values of the nation'. The debate about 'otherness' and 'cultural clash' has been re-awakened by the focus of media on non-white immigrants in Europe. Saeed (2015a) argues

"Too often, these debates ignore the reality of the existence of marginalized groups and concentrate on the 'fear of the outsider' rather than on the contribution immigrants can make. This homogenization of 'otherness' and stereotyping, however, generates fear, contempt and hatred of the groups deemed 'other': non-whites, Muslims, asylum seekers, etc."

The AJE participant also highlighted the sources where journalists went to "get" or comment on events.

In the view of Association of Journalism Educators Member (interview on February 13, 2016)

When something happens it is easier and quicker for journalists to "tap" into existing contacts or people that have been cited before. Hence it becomes difficult to allow other voices to be heard. We also rely on stories elsewhere and just follow their leads due to lack of time. It's not right but that the nature of the game now.

This implies a series of pressures that are faced by journalists. These pressures then appear to help "frame" how the story is represented and possibly understood. It is not suggesting that journalists are Islamophobic consciously but that industry constraints and procedures play an important influence in media representations. As Brummett (1994) notes , the mass media are a dominant element of popular culture and have the ability to set the agenda (Hall, 1978). When the agenda is consistent among media sources, (Mills et al, 2009) the media has the power to create associations for people, race, culture, and religion.

For example, when representing Muslims the "diversity of Muslim identities, practices, and forms of belonging are reduced into a few reactionary cultural practices" (Semati, 2010, p. 267).

Moreover, some voices in the media are in fact quite closely connected to the authorities stemming from concerns within the intelligence and security industry (Mills et al 2011). Mills et al (2011) highlight the importance of powerful right-wing think tanks that have successfully managed to influence the mainstream media with a succession of 'Muslim scare stories' that suggest Muslims in the UK are

attempting to undermine secular democratic institutions ranging from local governments to Higher education. Abbas (2012, p. 353) notes

> In the current period, there is a degree of Islamophobia found in think-tanks that have an important role in influencing the current Conservative-Liberal coalition in England. The London-based Centre for Social Cohesion, Policy Exchange and the Quilliam Foundation have all determined that Islamism is wide-ranging and that it is the problem of our time.

What is also interesting is the AJE member suggests that negative representations of Muslims/Islam are not indicative of racist/Islamophobic personnel. Indeed the SoE participant was quick to highlight how the journalism profession has criteria to combat racism and prejudicial reporting.

SoE Member Interview (March, 03, 2016)

Journalists have to stick by strict legal considerations and their training means that they are or should be aware of stating libellous or prejudicial comments. They receive considerable able training either in their studies or "on the job" to make them conscious of such issues.

Journalists in many countries may aspire to certain values, such as objectivity, but their ability or willingness to actually abide by them is determined by the practicalities of their particular socio-political situation (Islam, Identity and Professional Values, 2011).

In the UK, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) (now defunct) sets out guidelines for the reporting of 'race' in its code of practice. The guideline on discrimination states the following:

1. The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability.
2. Details of an individual's race, colour, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story.

There are three key aspects for journalists to have in mind. First, someone's race should be referred only if it deem to be 'genuinely

relevant'. Second, if such reference is made, it must not be 'prejudicial or pejorative'. Third, the regulation only applies to the reporting of an individual and therefore does not cover, for example, references to groups or nations of people. This third aspect of the guideline is contentious and has provoked criticism of the PCC. As Frost (2004, p. 114) notes:

> The PCC's insistence that only discrimination against individuals breaches the code and that complaints about racism affecting groups of people are really a matter of taste and decency, and therefore not something on which it can adjudicate, begins to look perverse at a time when there is considerable public concern about perceived racism in some reporting of asylum seekers, the Iraq war and terrorism.

Farrington, Kilvington, Prince, & Saeed (2012, p. 5-6) note:

> A criticism of the PCC lies in the number of 'race' dis- crimination cases that it has addressed throughout its history. In 2010, just over 3 per cent of the 7000 plus complaints made to the PCC were on the grounds of discrimination. Yet, despite receiving dozens of such complaints each year, the PCC has never upheld a complaint made about discrimination in terms of 'race'.

Hence it can be assumed that religious or Islamophobic reporting would also be treated in much the same way. It is to early to tell if the newly created IPSO will be exempt from such criticism in the UK.

When this was put to the SoE member namely the lack of political will to challenge racism/Islamophobia :

SoE Member Interview (March, 03, 2016)

We do take racism seriously, we take any prejudice seriously. So much that we have invested in trying to encourage journalism to reflect the multicultural society we live in.

There is no doubt that the perpetuation of particular stereotypes around 'race' and minority groups that can find articulation in the discourses produced by journalism is, in part, enhanced by a relative lack of diversity amongst the journalism industry. In his international

overview of research into media coverage, Van Dijk (2009, p. 199) argues that the composition of the journalism profession is a recurring factor in the production of racist discourses:

> Many forms of ethnic bias ... are crucially influenced by the fact that in all white-dominated societies, ethnic journalists are discriminated against in hiring, so that most newsrooms are predominantly white. And those (few) minorities being hired will tend to be recruited not only for their outstanding professionalism, but also because their ethnic ideologies (and especially their moderate antiracism) do not clash with those of the editors.

Current figures point out that the profession of journalism, especially the print journalism, is a white dominated profession. Just 2.2 per cent of the (National Union of Journalists) NUJ's members from regional newspapers belong to black or minority ethnic (BME) journalists. For national newspaper this figure is 3.7 per cent. Broadcast journalism has a slight difference, with 13.7 per cent of the NUJ's membership classed as BME (Farrington et al, 2012, p. 33).

SoE Member Interview (March, 03, 2016)

We have invested in and tried to challenge this. In 2005 we set up the Journalism Diversity Fund to support more and train more journalists from minority backgrounds.

> But while there is clearly an issue with the number of BME students pursuing journalism as a potential career, this does not supply a complete explanation of the problem. For example, the Society of Editors' report does not account for the fact that diversity reduces towards the higher end of the journalism profession. Barriers exist not only in gaining entry to journalism, but also within the profession once entry has been gained. (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 34)

There are two schools of thought in relation to this. First, more BME writers simply equals a much needed diversity in reporting which would help to benefit how minorities are represented. But one could note that due to 'racisms', BME writers would become socialized or institutionalized within the existing norms of media production. To use

Fanon's (1986) argument, the adoption of the 'white mask' is crucial for non-whites to succeed in white worlds. Hence, BME journalists may not feel comfortable challenging 'racisms', especially covert and institutional racism, which is seen to be almost invisible and difficult to prove, when, after all, they are working in a white-dominated space. This issue, of challenging power within the media system, was highlighted by the MEND participant.

MEND interview (February, 18, 2016)

Jihad is a normal word in the religion of Islam; there are many types of Jihad. The media portrayal of Jihad is totally one sided, because it talks about Jihad being an offensive rather than a defensive. The media has taken this one element of Jihad and ignored the rest and this has led to non-Muslims also thinking Muslims are very violent. To challenge this way of thinking means addressing one's own and society's misconceptions and it is too difficult for an individual to do.

For example if we take one example that is related to reporting of Muslims, the use of the term 'jihad' conjures up images of violent, irrational terrorism. However, would a Muslim reporter feel confident enough to challenge this misconception?

All of the participants noted that the media representations of Islam and Muslim communities in the West sustained a culture of "us and them." This then meant that an increasing number of Muslims were looking elsewhere for "truth" accurate, representations and even respite from the continuous onslaught of negative characterization of Islam/Muslims.

SoE Member Interview (March 03, 2016)

Just as young Arabs did not trust their media and looked to challenge it employing social media maybe young Muslims will do that now here.

The Association of Journalism Educators Member (interview on February, 13, 2016)

I think you see an increasing number of blogs etc that will challenge mainstream media but that also creates an "us and them" mentality that might be detrimental in some respects but then again it allows a voice.

The increasing mass of research suggests that Muslims consider that the news and mainstream media is misrepresenting them which cause lack of understanding between communities (Saeed, 2011; Fekete, 2009). At the same time, the research and evidence from the Home Office suggests that violence and discrimination towards Muslims, already significant pre 9/11, has significantly increased (Allen and Nielsen, 2002; Fekete, 2009). The growth of the 'Far Right' across Europe and the return of street violence and racism directed towards Muslims (or even victims perceived to be Muslims) (Meleagrou- Hitchens and Brun 2013; Saeed, 2011; Kundnani, 2007) has seen Muslims that they are in a midst of a cultural, social and political siege (Saeed, 2015a).

Resistance and Identity

Muslims are thus identifying new reflexive spaces in various aspects of the public and social aspects (Meer and Modood 2009). For example, the rise of Muslim 'blogo-spheres' and use of social media to challenge anti-Muslim perceptions (Saeed, 2016). Also, the creation of cultural outlets like art, music, fashion, shows that a dynamic and young Muslim culture is being created. Thus it shows that Muslims are willing to integrate, adapt and to be involved in different aspects of society (Saeed, 2014a,b).

The employment of the internet to seek alternative news and viewpoints is indicative of a paradigm shift amongst young Muslims from consuming news that has been collected and reported by non-Muslim sources, to the collection and directing of specific and desired information from both Muslim and non-Muslim publications that may be geographically dispersed from the user's physical location. The use of the internet by young Muslims cannot be categorized as purely political, purely religious, or purely social. Muslims use the internet for all three purposes and may well prove to be the means by which young British Muslims integrate Islam's grand narrative and all-inclusive life principles within the precepts of Western society.

In the modern media public sphere, young people are less likely to be politically motivated, Muslims are representing the active citizens (Wayne et al, 2010). Young Muslims all around the Europe are employing new media to present the identity politics. Young European Muslims are thus challenging Islamophobic statements and re- claiming Islam from the fundamentalists (Kilvington et al, 2014).

At the forefront of this this are what Gary Blunt calls "i-Muslims" – meaning media savvy Muslims.

In September 2014 a new Twitter Hasthtag Muslim Apologies appeared and quickly gathered pace it was used almost 30,000 times within 48 hours.

The hashtag was originally a response to President Obama's speech to the UN General Assembly in which he noted, "it is time for the world – especially Muslim communities – to explicitly, forcefully, and consistently reject the ideology of al Qaeda and ISIL." (Full text, 2014)

Many of the tweets express almost anger and weariness about having to apologize for the actions of extremists who claim to represent Islam. However what was also evident was the employment of humour to tackle this assumption that ordinary Muslims must prove their "anti-fundamentalist" credentials.

The following give a flavour of the tweets sent

"Sorry for Algebra, cameras, universities, hospitals, oh and coffee too,"

"I'm so sorry for coffee, cheques, parachutes, chemistry, inoculations, soap, shampoo, cameras,"

"I'm sorry it was a Muslim woman, Fatima Muhammad Al-Fihri, that established the world's first university,". (Rehman, 2014)

The "conversation" was followed throughout the Muslim minority diaspora. An equivalent hashtag - had been used more than 5,000 in the first few days.[2]

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[2] See https://twitter.com/hashtag/LesMusulmansSexcusentPour?src=hash

Here the tweets were both serious and humorous some apologised for the French Algerian Muslim footballer Zidane.3

The employment of social media demonstrates a sense of ownership of Islam, particularly by Islamic youth.

This trend once again shows Muslim youth are rising up with pluralism, optimism, and humor to proudly write the narrative of Islam and challenge dominant hegemonic stereotypes that are fulled by Islamophobia and racism. By employing the power of social media and cyberspace they are challenging these views. In the examples discussed above, new information technologies are expressions of such hybrid identities, as they reveal the appropriation of British and Islamic, sub-cultural and religious characteristics for the creation of a Muslim youth-specific identity. They underline the reality of a hybrid identity, which dominant society has so far mainly considered in separate and seemingly incongruent parts (Hamid, 2011; Ahmed, 2009; Saeed et al 1999).

This plurality is further evident in the Hebdo incident. Grimm (2015, p. 4) notes:

> the campaign of solidarity with the heroized victims on the Charlie Hebdo editorial staff was a tightrope walk for many Muslims, who did not want to identify with the magazine's contents. The spread of #JeSuisCharlie hashtags on social media confirms this. The 25 countries with the most contributions include only three majority-Muslim countries: Lebanon, Tur-key and Indonesia. A much more prominent hashtag in the Muslim world was #WhoIsMuhammad, which allowed hundreds of thousands to emphasize the peace-ful nature of their faith. However, most tweets by European Muslims came under the alternative hashtag #JeSuisAhmed (retweeted over 290,000 times), drawing attention to the French Muslim Ahmed Merabet, one of the two policemen murdered by the *Charlie Hebdo* attackers.

What should also be stressed is that once again the Muslim online presence is again viewed by suspicion. With mainstream authorities

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[3] See https://twitter.com/Mehdiamzgh/statuses/514746782547705856

worrying that young Muslims will become radicalized and that the Internet is have for "anti-Western sentiment".

Indeed even "liberal" influential organization such as PEW Research Center, Anti Defamation League and RAND Europe have all published reports noting the use of the Internet to promote terrorism and extremism in the Muslim communities. Rather than challenge simplistic Orientalist assumptions that Muslims are associated with terrorism, it appears that these organizations are once again applying "offline" ideas to the online world. At times it seems that social media can "increase the efficiency of the existing order rather than empowering dissidents (Gladwell 2010, p. 42).

As Foucault reminds us that 'our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance' (1995, p. 217). It is evident that social media surveillance online Muslim spheres is apparent (Awan, 2014). Despite this young Muslims are continually employing the internet to express the modern and fluid nature of Muslim identity in the world. Consider the blogs of Salaam Pax and his notes on the US/UK invasion of Iraq.

Conclusion

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, raised the perception of Islam within the public discourse. This perception however appears to be mainly based on negative representations. The period immediately after the attacks and the subsequent invasion of Iraq saw a dramatic intensification in stories mentioning Islam. However, even before those attacks, there were strong critiques of Western media coverage of Islam and Muslims. Particularly in the era since the fall of the Soviet Union, Islam has been conceived as the primary adversary standing in opposition to 'the West' But contemporary media framing of Islam, in which Muslims are depicted primarily as dangerous, hostile, threatening, and untrustworthy terrorists, has been called a refraction of the lived experiences of Muslims, rather than a reflection (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). As Dunn et al. (2007: 582) have observed,

> 'the unreasonableness and defamatory effect of media portrayals of Islam [have become] a recurring theme of any contemporary ethnographic work with Muslims in western countries' (p. 582).

Unfortunately it now appears that increasing Western media representations do not acknowledge the commonalities of Islam and Muslims with Western secular and Christian society. That is the essential humanity of all people. Investigations of racism in the media have repeatedly found that ethnic or racial minorities are represented in a comparatively small percentage of press articles, and they are largely denoted in negative ways or are spoken 'for', rather than being quoted directly (Saeed, 2007b).

Despite the assertions of members of the SoE featured in this work that journalists have strict professional guidelines it is evident that the media rely on sources that reproduce negative perceptions of minority groups.

Although the SoE member is insistence on journalistic professional values he fails to acknowledge the cultural factors that influence these values. Journalists may aim to attain certain standards, such as objectivity, but their ability or even willingness to actually accept them is in many ways determined by the practicalities of their unique socio-political situation. Hence journalists look to established sources, and these sources may have specific political and cultural agendas. The AJE respondent noted that negative reporting has much to do with the sources that can influence media representation and production (Mills et al, 2011).

Another consequence of these negative discourses is that Muslim communities have responded by tuning into alternative media channels (witness the rise of Al Jazeera) for information, entertainment and as indicated earlier reflexive spaces. A times this is to challenge Western media commentators views on Islam, to raise awareness of social/political issues and even at times to challenge and ridicule fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. For example following the Paris attacks in 2015 Muslims across the world employed twitter, and online videos and social media sites like Facebook to condemn the attacks and specifically target ISIS (BBC Trending, 2015a).

Both the SoE and AJE respondent noted the new media literacy of young Muslims that echo elements of social media employment in the Arab Spring. However the MEND respondent clearly suggests that

Journalists need training and self –reflection on how the report and write about Islam.

Given the rise of alternative media outlets, so called citizen journalism and the global reach of new media it could be suggested the contemporary media landscape is one in which there exists considerable opportunity for transformation of existing mainstream and alternative media. This could mean mainstream journalists adopting a more reflexive approach in that acknowledging the cultural and political power of how they represent carries connotations and meanings. As Cottle (2006:168) notes, "Numerous studies have documented how journalism marginalizes, denigrates and even demonizes certain social groups."

A more self-reflexive approach could follow the arguments of adopting what has been called "peace journalism". For example Tivona (2011) supports broader implementation of a 'peace journalism' ideal for reform of existing media outlets, encouraging journalists to move away from representations of 'intractable conflict' – a 'war journalism' approach to reporting. Instead, she suggests, we should 'push for the strong amplification of healing and revealing news: stories of peace and reconciliation between former warriors and perceived enemies' (p. 341).

This seems to echo Fanon's call for research that would build bridges between communities:

> passionate research ... directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others. (1961:170)

Clearly narratives of violent conflict have a significant impact upon the escalation and entrenchment of Islamophobic representations in Western mainstream media. Shared interests and recognition of the wider influences in representation could lead to Muslim communities in the West feeling less like social pariahs and more like active respected citizens.

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