JOURNALISM AND THE MUSLIM NARRATIVE

POWER, RESISTANCE AND CHANGE

Nadia Haq

Journalism and the Muslim Narrative

Journalism and the Muslim Narrative presents an empirical analysis of how modern-day journalism practices contribute to the negative bias against Muslims in Britain, to provide an in-depth investigation of how we can better re-conceptualise journalism for our increasingly multicultural societies.

For more than 20 years, media activists and academic scholars have highlighted a bias in British newspapers where Muslims are portrayed as the problematic 'Other' of British society. This book draws on the representation of Muslims to contribute a critical, empirical analysis of contemporary journalistic practices in multicultural societies. This includes a deeper insight into media audiences and the public, journalism norms and values such as objectivity, balance and freedom of speech, the wider implications of the increasing digitalisation of the media and the tensions between media structures and journalistic agency. As competition with social media heightens pressures on journalists to produce even more sensationalist and polarising coverage about Muslims, this book further offers a critical evaluation of how journalism needs to be re-imagined to realise its civic role in our progressively digitalised and diverse societies. Drawing on the first-hand accounts of newspaper journalists and editors, the author challenges our understanding of journalism and the role that journalists play in uniting, rather than dividing, our diverse societies.

This book builds a critical appraisal of academic perspectives from journalism, media and cultural studies, sociology, postcolonial theory and the study of race and religion, and how journalism practices can either perpetuate or challenge discriminatory and divisive narratives about Britain's Muslim communities. It will be of value to journalism practitioners as well as academics studying journalism, media and communications, cultural studies and race and ethnicity studies.

Nadia Haq is a Research Fellow at Cardiff University, UK. Her interdisciplinary research intersects journalism and media studies and sociology, with a focus on media reform around marginalised and minority communities, including Muslims. She worked as an international business journalist for nearly a decade.

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Power, Resistance and Change

Nadia Haq

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First and foremost, all praise and gratitude to the Almighty for easing me through this path and without whose guidance this book would not have been possible.

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Introduction

Introduction

What percentage of the population of Britain do you think is Muslim?

In 2024, market researchers IPSOS Mori[1] posed this question in a survey to the British public. People in Britain thought 21% of the population – that is, *one in every five people* in the UK – were Muslim. The actual proportion of the population of Muslims stands at 6% – less than a third of what the British public had estimated.

Why is there such a big discrepancy between perception and reality when it comes to Muslims in the UK? In a press release following the report, Bobby Duffy, managing director for IPSOS Social Research Institute at the time of the 2016 survey, provided the following thesis to explain this significant gap in public perception. "We are often most incorrect on factors that are widely discussed in the media, such as the proportion of our population that are Muslims", Duffy stated. "We know from previous studies that this is partly because we over-estimate what we worry about".

When it comes to British newspapers, Muslims certainly have a disproportionately outsized presence – and one that really plays on public insecurities. For more than 20 years, media activists and academic scholars across disciplines have called out anti-Muslim bias across British newspapers where Muslims and Islam are represented in extraordinarily negative ways. Extensive research in this field consistently shows that Muslims are portrayed as the 'Other', as the outcast of British society and in opposition to the British majority and its liberal values (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008). As we speak, British newspapers are brimming with stories about Muslim 'grooming gangs', 'small boats' full of Muslim immigrants swarming Britain and Muslims at 'hate marches' as protestors take the street to protest against Israel's relentless attacks on Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

It was perhaps not surprising, therefore, when Sir Alan Moses, then the chair of the UK press regulator IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation), described the representation of Muslims in the British press as one of 'the most difficult issues' the regulator has faced (Nilsson, 2019, para. 1).

Representations come with serious consequences. They position Muslims as a problematic part of British society, the 'Other' to be feared and shunned. The impact of representations is played out in subtle forms of routine everyday

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hostilities against Muslims or more overtly as anti-Muslim hate, violence and harassment (Frost, 2008). One recent poll on Islamophobia in Britain finds Muslims to be perceived as the second 'least liked' group in the UK (Jones and Unsworth, 2022). Meanwhile, Home Office (2022) figures reflect that Muslims are more likely to be the victims of religious hate crimes than any other religious group.

Setting the Context

The book does not contend that stories involving Muslims should not be reported or that they are monolithically misrepresentative or problematic. Of course, we should expect news stories involving Muslims that report on events such as terrorist attacks, criminal gangs or honour killings to be framed in 'negative' ways. But what happens when these negative connotations become the dominant association with Muslims across other sorts of newspaper coverage? It then becomes not about what stories are being reported, but about how Muslims are represented more generally across newspapers.

For more than two decades, scholars from across academic fields have analysed media coverage to explore how Muslims have become the favoured 'folk devils' of the Western media (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). This now considerable field of research consistently underscores the over-prevalence of disproportionately negative media representation of Muslims (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Bleich et al., 2015; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010; Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008; Morey and Yaqin, 2011; Poole, 2002, 2019).

Media representations often reproduce historical Orientalist stereotypes (Said, 1997) and depict oversimplified, homogeneous images of diverse Muslim communities (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017). Ahmed and Matthes' own meta-analysis of 345 studies of Muslim representation in the media points to a shared consensus that the dominant tendency of the media is to negatively frame Muslims while portraying Islam as a violent religion. Others have described how the repertoire of Muslim representations oscillate between being framed as a terrorism threat, a problem (in terms of incompatible differences); or generally in opposition to British values (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008).

Muslims have become increasingly represented as a cultural threat to the Western liberal way of life (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017). Newspaper coverage is often dominated by an over-arching theme of 'Othering' (Said, 1997) where a reductive image of British Muslims is juxtaposed as a confrontational 'Us' against 'Them' framing narrative set against an imagined self-image of what constitutes Britishness. The critical shift in the newspapers' scrutiny of the 'Britishness' of Muslims is even more pronounced after the London terrorist attacks of 7/7 as news stories become increasingly framed as 'a project of national repair and cultural retrenchment' (Morey and Yaqin, 2011, p. 66).

Recent analyses of major British newspaper stories evidence this shift to a discourse of cultural incompatibility where Muslims are framed as the problematic minority group within integrationist models of citizenship (Poole, 2019, p. 480). Muslims are more likely to be portrayed as a 'problem' than other

ethno-religious groups (Bleich et al., 2015), and often as easily offended, alienated and in conflict with non-Muslims (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). Homogenised as cultural outsiders, Muslims ultimately have been relegated as a separate imagined community to the rest of British society (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013).

Other studies concentrate on specific high-profile news events, such as the Jyllands-Posten controversy (Meer and Mouritsen, 2009); the Charlie Hebdo incident (Jenkins and Tandoc, 2019; Luengo and Ihlebæk, 2019); the Trojan Horse Affair (Poole, 2018); the UK ban on anti-Islamic Dutch MP Geert Wilders (Poole, 2012); the wearing (and banning) of the Muslim veil (Khiabany and Williamson, 2008; Williamson, 2014) and the grooming gangs scandals (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). Debates about all these events reflect the growing preoccupation of British newspapers with questions of citizenship, national identity, Britishness, multiculturalism and liberal values – or more broadly, whether Muslims even *deserve* to be part of British society?

Yet hidden amongst this dominantly negative media discourse, contradictions and counter-narratives about Muslims find a foothold in newspaper coverage to present some more contextual and nuanced interpretations of news stories involving Muslims. In this book, I contend that by considering the contradictions that appear in British newspapers alongside the more dominant negative representations, we understand representation as a much more complex process than a one-sided effort to spread negative narratives about Muslims. So how can we make sense of this picture of continuity and contradiction, of reproduction and contestation within the representations of Muslims in British newspapers?

Unravelling the Puzzle of Muslim Representation

In order to consider this puzzle, this book presents three core propositions.

Firstly, empirical research on this topic usually draws on newspaper coverage to uncover *how* Muslims are represented. These studies rarely provide a direct explanation for *why* journalists represent Muslims in these ways. We are left oblivious to the meanings of these representations, the intentions behind them and their wider social implications or why journalists sometimes frame stories about Muslims in unpredictable ways. Existing research also struggles to empirically explain why this coverage at times appears conflicted and contradictory, even within the same article. This leaves a significant knowledge gap in the study of Muslim representations in the media.

Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013) proffer that these types of contradictions reflect a ‘tension in journalism’ (p. 256) when it comes to coverage of Muslims and Islam. It is true that we do not always know empirically how any news story about Muslims came to be reported in particular ways, whether the journalist who produced the story would see it in the same way as the researcher, or the ‘behind-the-scenes’ tensions that might underlie the way the story has been framed. Neither is it possible to understand the motivations or intentions that lead to negative (or positive) representations of Muslims without directly asking journalists

themselves. It is for these reasons that the research underpinning this book is so insightful.

My research focuses on the accounts of journalists and editors as the ones who write and produce news stories involving Muslims. This is important as journalists often sit as arbitrators amongst the multiple representations on offer, making sense of conflicting accounts and how a story should be framed (Said, 1997). Yet little is known about how journalistic practices and judgements contribute to the production of specific representations and meanings in media discourse (Baden, 2019).

Secondly, we cannot understand why newspapers frame Muslims in disproportionately negative ways without also considering the wider cultural and socio-political contestation around Muslims and their role in British society. This is particularly important since so much coverage about Muslims is constructed as a discourse of the nation demarcating the "insiders and outsiders within a polarised identity politics" (Poole, 2012, p. 164). The contested aspects of Muslim representation need to be viewed through the lens of cultural politics, where it is the 'cultural meaning of citizenship' itself which is being contested (Nash, 2001, p. 86). Under this perspective, the media (including British newspapers) is the arena where this cultural politics is thrashed out. Yet to appreciate the role of cultural politics, it is imperative to recognise that the process of representation is always subject to power inequalities. There may be many different interpretations of news stories involving Muslims on offer, but not all are seen as equal in the eyes of the British newspapers.

Finally, bringing these two key aspects together necessitates a deeper analysis of how journalists produce news stories within complex cultural institutions that are themselves central to contestation. I draw on several interdisciplinary theorists throughout the book – from politics, sociology, journalism and cultural studies – to provide some insight into how journalism both contributes to an enduring anti-Muslim bias within British newspapers and acts as the terrain for counter-narratives and contestation. These include cultural academic Stuart Hall, Orientalism scholar Edward Said, together with sociologists and political philosophers like Anthony Giddens and Charles Taylor amongst others.

The Book's Methods

The book is primarily based on 24 original, in-depth qualitative interviews carried out between January to October 2019. This included interviews with journalists working across a variety of newspapers, both print and online, in a freelance capacity or working for a news agency that provides content to mainstream newspapers. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the book to anonymise the journalists interviewed for consistency, as some expressed concerns about being identified while being critical of the newspapers they worked for. Occasionally, I use the term 'interview with anonymised journalist' where I have judged that there is a potential risk the interviewee might be indirectly identified by what they are saying. In addition, one of the interviews was with a high-profile media campaigner Miqdaad Versi who has played a significant role in raising the issue of how Muslims are portrayed with

British newspaper editors and agreed to be named. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and then analysed using thematic discourse analysis.[2]

I expected that journalists working for the newspapers receiving the most critical scrutiny for the way Muslims were portrayed would be least likely to participate in the study. Right-leaning newspapers, and particularly tabloids, have come under significant criticism for the way they portray Muslims. Similar studies have found that journalists working for these newspapers are more hesitant to take part in this type of research (Holohan and Poole, 2011). In an attempt to overcome this potential limitation, my study adopted a more complex iterative sampling technique comprising multiple stages of recruitment and interview rounds to engage a broader cross-section of British journalists.

To start with, a selection of journalists who had covered Muslim-related subjects was collated by shifting through hundreds of online articles from various newspapers. After identifying this pool, journalists were contacted in successive waves to reach a balanced representation across the sample spectrum. If an initial tranche yielded more left-leaning newspaper journalists, for instance, the subsequent tranche would prioritise right-leaning counterparts and vice versa. This iterative approach entailed four recruitment and interview rounds in total (for sample breakdown, see Table 0.1).

These efforts led to a range of journalistic experiences on the issue of Muslim representation in the British press that informed the key ideas in this book. As expected, journalists from the right-leaning newspaper titles were much more difficult to recruit, but I managed to secure roughly equal numbers of journalists working for newspapers on both sides of the political spectrum. There were more broadsheet newspaper journalists than tabloid reporters, and more men than women in the sample.[3] The proportion of male to female journalists is nonetheless reflective of the general gender bias in the make-up of British newsrooms with a male/female ratio of around 3:2 (Andi, Selva and Nielsen, 2020). In recognition of the changing conditions that journalists now work under, the sample further included news agency journalists and freelance journalists who wrote for newspapers but were not employed by them. My research also benefitted from the distinct experiences of both local and Muslim journalists.

Table 0.1 Sample breakdown

Gender (Total 23)		*Religion (Total 23)*	
Men	**Women**	**Muslim**	**Non-Muslim**
14	9	5	17
National Journalists (Total 13)			
Tabloid	**Broadsheet**	**Right-Leaning Newspaper**	**Left-Leaning Newspaper**
5	8	7	6
Other Journalists (Total 10)			
Local	**Freelance**	**Online**	**Agency**
5	3	1	1

Throughout the book, I often refer to the journalist both by the type of newspaper they work for and sometimes the newspapers' political leaning (e.g., *Brendan, a right-leaning broadsheet journalist*) if it is relevant to the quote. If there is a risk of identification, this reference is removed. In the UK, the press industry is skewed politically to the right. Audiences similarly recognise the political leanings of different newspapers in this way, with the *Daily Mail* (and its components) seen as Britain's most right-wing newspaper, and the *Guardian* and *The Mirror* as the most left-leaning newspapers (YouGov, 2017). Left-leaning broadsheet newspapers in the UK are significantly less likely to portray Muslims as negatively as right-leaning newspapers and are more likely to present counter-narratives that also draw on Muslim voices. Although these newspapers also have issues with how they report on Muslims (as I discuss in Chapter 1), this is an important distinction to make as I often refer to the British press as an overall entity rather than always distinguish between newspapers. This is partly because right-leaning newspapers are far greater in numbers and have a greater reach and circulation than their left-leaning counterparts. In the UK, *The Mail* titles, *Express* titles, *Sun*, *Telegraph* and *The Times* newspapers have a combined circulation of around 2.2 million copies. In comparison, left-leaning titles *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror* have a combined circulation of 300,000 (Ponsford, 2024).

The interviews specifically sought to investigate the tensions between journalists' conceptualisation of their professional role and identity and the practical execution of news production around stories that involved Muslims. For this reason, the interviews included a dialogue about published articles authored by the journalists which involved Muslims and Islam, covering diverse topics including terrorist attacks and 'grooming gangs', to discourse on Islamophobia, controversies regarding the Muslim veil and local or regional matters concerning mosques or charitable initiatives led by Muslims. The rest of the interview was split into three separates sections, starting with questions about participants' personal journeys into journalism, then general questions about journalism as a practice and ending with questions about the general debate on the negative representation of Muslims.

As it proved very difficult to recruit the most senior of newspaper editors, the research also drew on documentary analysis of the oral evidence transcripts from a Home Affairs parliamentary inquiry into *Hate Crime and its Violent Consequences*. The inquiry included two relevant panel sessions of oral evidence specifically focusing on the issue of Islamophobia in the British press.[4]

The first session took place on 20 February 2018 and involved the presenting of evidence by mainly journalism bodies and regulators.[5] The participants were Rt Hon Baroness Warsi of Dewsbury; Professor Chris Frost, Chair of the Ethics Council, National Union of Journalists; Rt Hon Sir Alan Moses, Chair, Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO); Nazir Afzal OBE, Member, Complaints Committee, IPSO; Anne Lapping, Board Member, IPSO and Jonathan Heawood, Chief Executive Officer, Independent Monitor for the Press.

The second session took place on 24 April 2018. Here, the editors-in-chief and managing editors of the largest national newspapers in terms of circulation and presence (including *The Mail*, *The Mirror*, *The Sun*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *Metro*

and the *Express* newspapers) were questioned on the issue of Islamophobia in the British press by the parliamentary inquiry panel made up of British politicians. The participants were Paul Clarkson, Managing Editor, The Sun; Lloyd Embley, Group Editor-in-Chief, Trinity Mirror; Gary Jones, Editor-in-Chief, Daily and Sunday Express; Peter Wright, Editor Emeritus, Associated Newspapers; Ian Brunskill, Assistant Editor, The Times; Ian MacGregor, Editor Emeritus, Telegraph Media Group and President, Society of Editors; Ted Young, Editor, Metro; Neil Benson, Chair, Editors' Code committee; and Ian Murray, Executive Director, Society of Editors.

The Guardian newspaper was not present at the session but submitted written evidence to the inquiry committee. In addition, representatives from the Editors' Code committee (part of IPSO) and the Society of Editors were also present. In the book, data taken from the documentary analysis of both these oral evidence sessions is, respectively, marked with the inquiry participants' name and title at the time of the Inquiry (as per above) and as Home *Affairs Inquiry data, February 2018* and *Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*.

A Critical Intervention in the Representation of Muslims

Moving the focus to the journalists themselves requires a shift from envisioning the media as a unitary, ideological apparatus to viewing it instead as the institutions where the practice of journalism takes place (Carey, 1997). Journalists are seen to operate *within* the news system, rather than acting as the operators of the system (Morrison and Tumber, 1988). It then becomes possible to capture the tensions that journalists face, using the push and pulls of structure and agency as a mechanism through which to problematise and theorise (Marsden and Savigny, 2009) the link between journalism and Muslim representation.

When asked why he did not use direct interviews with journalists for the groundbreaking book *Manufacturing Consent*[6] back in 1988, Edward Herman (1999) replied, "Are reporters even aware of the deeper sources of bias they may internalise? Will they not tend to rationalise their behaviour?" (p. 106).

Yet it is only by analysing the often-dissonant attempts to make sense of negative Muslim representation that the conflicted and complex nature of this issue emerges. On the one side, journalists are a central part of a media structure that reproduces these representations. On the other, journalists may feel compelled to critique this structure and seek out ways to redress any anti-Muslim bias. This leads to a dialectic between the agency of the journalist to contest the ways in which Muslims are represented and the structures within which these representations are reproduced. It would not have been possible to gain this insight into the tensions and conflicts that journalists and editors experience from the analysis of newspaper coverage alone.

The objectives of this book are important because it is through critical intervention that spaces for change become realised. By viewing negative Muslim representation through the lens of the critical consciousness of journalists themselves, the book presents a 'behind-the-scenes' analysis of why these representations are so enduring and what needs to be done to redress this. It highlights how

a critical re-conceptualisation of some of the central ideas about journalism, such as the importance of common-sense understandings, perceptions of audiences, commercial and organisational drivers and the norms and values underlying its professional practices, shifts the balance of negative representation away from its reproduction and towards more complex and nuanced ways of reporting on Muslim-related stories.

Cultural scholar Stuart Hall (1974) highlights why media representations matter so much:

> The mass media cannot imprint their meanings and message on us as if we were mentally tabula rasa. But they do have an integrative, clarifying and legitimating power to shape and define political reality, especially in those situations which are unfamiliar, problematic or threatening.
>
> (pp. 19–20)

Representations matter because they "call our very identities to question", and define "what is 'normal', who belongs and who is excluded" (Hall, 1997, p. 10). If Muslims are regularly represented as 'different', as the 'Other', as the perpetual outsider of British society, then this has serious repercussions not only for Britain's Muslim communities but for wider British society.

Chapter Summaries

Why have Muslims become the exceptional target for British newspapers? **Chapter 1** explores how British newspaper coverage reflects a preoccupation with questions relating to the loyalty and belonging of British Muslims, their inability to integrate and adhere to mainstream British values and their difference to the rest of Britain's citizens. These representations have become increasingly amplified through media digitalisation and an increasing reliance from journalists on social media to reach readers. But what do journalists themselves think about the issue of Muslim representation in the media?

Rather than reflecting a direct and overt anti-Muslim bias, I discuss how common-sense ideas of Muslims as a problematic part of British society act in more implicit ways to justify why Muslims are represented in more negative ways compared to other minority groups. Interviews show how bias against Muslims is found in how journalists frame news stories, their choice of language, sources and news angles, as well as their own unconscious biases. Yet both editors and journalists' accounts simultaneously reflect the view that this level of anti-Muslim bias would be a serious problem for the British press. How do we make sense of this contradictory need to accommodate Muslims as part of British society while projecting representations that exclude and marginalise them?

Drawing on deeper analysis of the media-audience relationship, I investigate how journalists' 'sense' of their audiences and the common-sense views they hold contribute to the way that stories on Muslims are reported in **Chapter 2**. Commercial pressures, including the need to compete with social media, lead to the

privileging of negative representations of Muslims that generate fear and anxiety. The perceived popularity of narratives that reflect and appeal to readers' own prejudices and anxieties about Muslims further strengthen this commercial imperative. This is also evidenced in the high visibility of quite visceral anti-Muslim opinion columnists and their commentaries being given space and legitimacy across mainstream newspapers. Negative representations of Muslims are seen to reflect the common-sense ideas of both audiences and the wider British public.

The chapter considers how these negative representations of Muslims become increasingly amplified through the digitalisation of the news media and an over-reliance on audience metrics. Yet even though online news stories about Muslims often receive negative and toxic Islamophobic comments, we find pushbacks from newspaper audiences that challenge anti-Muslim narratives. There is also evidence of a critical reception from both journalists and audiences to the rise of media commentators who produce the most vitriolic and unrestrained representations of Muslims. Instead of viewing audiences as passive news consumers, the chapter argues that 'imaginary' constructions of audiences need to be challenged and re-articulated in line with the multicultural societies of today.

Chapter 3 turns an introspective eye towards journalism itself where I address whether key ideological norms and values actually reinforce, rather than challenge, the negative bias against Muslims in newspaper coverage. In line with Stuart Hall's (1974) conceptualisation of the relative autonomy of journalists, I discuss how the norms and practices that legitimise journalism's truth-telling role contribute to the favouring of certain representations of Muslims and the devaluing of others. By positioning journalists above and separate to their audiences, professional ideals play a critical role in legitimising journalists as independent public servants with no agenda or interests of their own beyond reporting on the news. But do journalists ever really write themselves out of the stories they report on and their possible consequences? To answer this question, the chapter calls for a re-conceptualisation of the rigid and ritualistic way that journalistic ideals are applied to one that aligns, rather than clashes, with the vision and values of a multicultural society.

Moving away from a focus on audiences and journalism practices, perhaps the most critical question is *why* has anti-Muslim bias within newspapers endured for so long? Drawing on sociologist Anthony Giddens Structuration Theory, **Chapter 4** considers the relationship between journalists and the media institutions they work for as a dialectic between agency and structure. Interviews show that while individual journalists as agents may want to challenge the bias against Muslims, media institutions themselves are often structured in ways that privilege negative representations of minority communities. At the same time, powerful structural imperatives (whether commercial, organisational or professional) disempower journalists from presenting counter-narratives to the dominant negative media discourse about Muslims. Unpacking the dialectic between structure and agency in the first-hand experiences of the interviewed journalists sheds light on the macro-micro dimensions of a structural anti-Muslim bias, and in particular, the push and pull between often ideological ideas of what journalism is and what journalism should be in a democratic society.

In **Chapter 5**, I investigate the contradictions and counter-narratives that are found in British press coverage about Muslims alongside the more dominant negative framing. Drawing on real-life examples from journalist interviews, the chapter shows how some journalists proactively create spaces for change by challenging the bias against Muslims through their newswork.

To make sense of why these spaces are created, I position Muslim representations in the British press within the context of cultural politics where the media acts as the arena where cultural debates about the position of Muslims in British society are played out. By viewing journalists as part of the same social and political contestation, rather than as detached observers of cultural politics where they "stand above conflict and judge it impartially" (Hall, 1974, p. 10), it becomes possible to consider how they too influence change when it comes to Muslim representation. At the same time, there are many external stakeholders that seek to influence how British newspapers report on Muslims – from politicians, far-right figures, media campaign groups, Muslim community organisations and even audiences themselves. In reality, however, this serves to highlight the uneven nature of contestation where certain interpretations are privileged while others (particularly, the voices of Muslims themselves) are dismissed or delegitimised.

So, what can be done to redress anti-Muslim bias within British newspapers? In **Chapter 6**, I examine how many of the equality and diversity solutions adopted by media institutions, such as unconscious bias training or 'equal opportunity' recruitment practices, fail if they are not applied as part of a wider cultural change within newspaper institutions themselves. These solutions can instead reinforce certain ideas of the problematic and homogenised nature of Muslim communities and their culture. Interviews with Muslim journalists reflect how some experience the burden of representation where they are pigeon-holed as that journalist who 'knows' Muslims or take on that burden themselves to redress how their own communities are portrayed. Others hold the same critical views as their peers when it comes to Muslims – serving to reproduce, rather than balance, the same negative narratives about Muslims.

Drawing on Charles Taylor's concept of social imaginaries, a potential reimagining of diversity comes from the experiences of the local journalists I interviewed. Here, ideas about both journalism and citizenship became re-articulated towards a much more inclusive representation of Muslims in British society. Rather than adopting frames of 'Othering', where Muslims are placed as outsiders to British society, these local journalists reflect a social imaginary of their audiences that includes local Muslim communities. This inclusive social imaginary becomes reflective of the practices of local newspapers, in terms of both their media outputs and their own journalistic identity (Haq, 2025).

The concluding chapter brings together all the themes discussed throughout the book to consider the normative implications for how journalists can report more fairly on issues involving Muslims. I discuss the implications and limitations of the research study, and areas for potential future research, while highlighting the important contribution of this book to our understanding of the disproportionately negative representation of Muslims in the British press and how it can be challenged.

Notes

1 Ipsos has been exploring the gap between people's perception and reality on a range of issues over the last ten years. Based on over 200,000 interviews across more than 40 countries, the global surveys consider the common public misperceptions and why they happen. Ipsos Perils of Perception 2024 – A 30-country Ipsos Global Advisor Survey (https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-11/ipsos-the-perils-of-perception-2024.pdf).
2 This version of thematic analysis overlaps with discourse analysis in its consideration of the broader assumptions, structures and meanings underpinning of the themes emerging from the data (see Braun and Clarke, 2006 for more details about this analytical method).
3 A note for those unfamiliar with British newspapers. Broadsheet newspapers tend to be larger in size and focus more on national and political news, with a writing style tending towards more educated, middle-class audiences, while tabloids tend to have large, short attention-attracting headings and focus more on celebrity gossip targeted more at working-class readers (Baker, 2023). This is a very simple distinction between the two, particularly as Baker points out, this demarcation is not always so clear-cut in practice.
4 Both oral evidence sessions were recorded and a transcript of proceedings provided on the parliamentary website and can be accessed on the following links: Home Affair Inquiry February 2018; https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/7610/pdf/ and Home Affairs Inquiry April 2018 https://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/hate-crime-and-its-violent-consequences/oral/81930.pdf.
5 Note that these job titles and positions were accurate at the time of the Home Affairs Inquiry and so will be used throughout the book, although many of these participants will have changed positions since then.
6 *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* is a highly influential media analysis of how elite forces shape the mass media published in 1988 by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky.

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1 Why Muslims?

Introduction

Baroness Warsi of Dewsbury was one of the key figures presenting evidence at the first of the Home Affairs Inquiry sessions focusing on Islamophobia in the media. During her time as the co-chairman of the Conservative Party, Warsi recalled that she had previously spoken about how prejudice against Muslims had ‘passed the dinner-table test’ to become socially acceptable in the UK.[1] The reaction at the time from government officials and parliamentarians had been to ask whether Islamophobia truly existed.

In the transcript from the Home Affairs Inquiry, Warsi lists case after case where British newspapers demonstrated how normalised and widespread Islamophobia and anti-Muslim discrimination had become in Britain. “It gives me no comfort to do this, but this is a daily occurrence when you pick up the papers”, she told the committee. Warsi reminded them that the Leverson Inquiry that took place in 2011–2012 had itself addressed how journalists were put under pressure to find ‘Muslim stories’ because they sold papers. “Unfortunately, because of the climate that we live in and because of this rise in Islamophobia over time, a shock jock Muslim story on the front page sells papers. This is nothing new,” she added (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, February 2018*).

So why have Muslims become the exceptional target for the British press? The chapter juxtaposes the first-hand experiences of editors and journalists of reporting on stories involving Muslims for British newspapers with academic literature to investigate how Muslims have become framed as the favoured ‘Other’, portrayed as the outcast ‘folk devils’ in opposition to Western society and its liberal values (Morey and Yaqin, 2010).

Consistently, research on Muslim representation in the Western media reports the dominant, shared tendency to negatively frame Muslims and to depict Islam as a violent and uncivilised religion (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017). Muslims are portrayed as a threat (in relation to terrorism), a problem (in terms of differences in values) or both (Muslim extremism in general) (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008). Interviews with journalists, together with testimonies from the editors-in-chief of the UK’s leading mainstream newspapers, show how the bias against Muslims presents in the ways that journalists frame news stories, their choice of language, sources

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and news angles, as well as their own unconscious biases. The chapter builds on these findings to explore how newspaper coverage reflects a preoccupation with questions relating to the loyalty and belonging of British Muslims, their inability to integrate and adhere to mainstream British values and their difference to the rest of Britain's citizens.

Orientalism and Muslim Representations Today

Edward Said's (1978, 1997) work on Orientalism within media representations of Islam and Muslims provides the underlying theoretical direction for much of the research in this field. Said reflects on how Orientalist representations stemming from the perspective of the Occident (or the West) have led to the reductive media discourse on Islam and Muslims today. The media reproduces Orientalist representations by drawing on what he describes wearily as "the same time-honoured caricatures of Islam" (Said, 1997, p. 6). Muslims themselves are reduced to a handful of rules, stereotypes and generalisations that reinforce a very specific narrative about Islam and "its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities" (p. xvii). This type of Orientalist discourse, he argues, has become part of the cultural canon, serving as a priori touchstone for any and all references to Islam or Muslims (Said, 1997).

The process of 'Othering' is central to Said's theory for understanding why Muslims are represented in these ways. Said argues that the reductive image of Islam is constantly juxtaposed with the civilised self-image of the West in a confrontational political situation that pits 'Us' (the Occident/West) against 'Them' (the Orient/Islam). Islam and Muslims are represented as aberrations from normalcy and rationality, disconnected from liberal Western society and its position of enlightened modernity (Said, 1997).

We find similar articulations in more recent British newspaper coverage that lend support to Said's assertions about the enduring nature of these kinds of recursive representations of Muslims. Newspaper coverage of the 7/7 London terrorist attacks across British newspapers, for example, often depicts Islam as a "'lunatic', 'barbaric', 'violent' and 'uncivilised' culture set in a tug-of-war against the 'peaceful' and 'civilised' western culture" (Shaw, 2012, p. 519). From a socio-psychological perspective, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) point to how exposure to the type of 'Othering' discourse that positions Muslims as a physical and symbolic or cultural threat to the dominant ethno-national ingroup impacts upon the identity-forming processes of the readership of British newspapers. Further examples of Orientalist tropes of Muslims have even been found in usually apolitical reporting of sports events (Malcolm, Bairner and Curry, 2010).

Of course, Said's work on Orientalism has not been without critique. His one-directional focus of representation (the way the Orient is represented by the Occident) has itself been critiqued as a narrow conceptualisation of how representation works (Valbjørn, 2008). There appears to be little consideration of the perspective of the 'Other' (i.e., Muslims) in how these representations are received and contested, or even reversed. Representations in terms of contestation are rarely uni-directional in

this way. As I highlight in Chapter 5, they also exist within what cultural scholar Stuart Hall describes as "a cultural politics designed to challenge, resist and, where possible, to transform the dominant regimes of representation" (Hall, 1996, p. 443). Orientalism by contrast appears as an all-defining discourse with little space for resistance or change. Despite his extensive analysis of literary and historical texts, Said often brushes over those instances where tensions and contradictions take place regarding the frames of representation of either the Orient or the West (Ferguson, 1998).

When dissecting the underlying cultural processes involved in the creation of representations and the construction of 'Otherness', Said's framework does however provide a good starting point for the question 'Why Muslims?'.

Muslims as the Exceptional Case

Orientalist imagery combined with narratives of Othering work to target Muslims in ways where similar media discourse about other ethnic and religious communities would be unacceptable. In his introduction to *Covering Islam,* Said (1997) warns of a startling revival of previously discredited Orientalist ideas within the Western media, characterised by an even "more exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility" towards Muslims (p. xi). These representations come at a time when misrepresentations of other racial, religious and cultural groups are no longer seen as acceptable. Indeed, as Said point out, "what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians" (Said, 1997, p. xi).

Towards the end of all my interviews with journalists, I asked them more directly about their thoughts on the wider issue of Muslim representation in British newspapers. By then, most of the journalists had become more introspective about the issue, reflecting on how both their newspapers and others (particularly the more right-leaning ones) positioned Muslims within media debate. Across interviews, journalists would often directly compare representations of Muslims to those of Black, Irish and Jewish communities. In one example, a senior journalist, who himself identifies as Black, compares current representations of Muslims to that of Black communities in the 1980s:

> I think it's just as vicious now about Muslims as it was about Black people in the 80s. The difference is Black people are seen as just inferior human beings. Whereas with Muslims it's like their culture is inferior and they are a sort of danger, an enemy. I mean Black people are seen as a danger as well, but it's their [Muslims] religion, their political beliefs that are the danger. It's wrapped up in sort of cultural fears. Muslims seem to have a primitive culture in most people's view, they do halal, they slaughter sheep and all that kind of stuff. And Black people are sort of just primitive human beings. But it's similar. Although the difference is that because Black people have been here longer to a certain extent, those stereotypes have mellowed, and the hate isn't there like it was.
>
> (*Interview with anonymised journalist*)

This journalist acknowledges that Black communities, like Muslims, were also victims of negative representation in the press. Unlike Black communities, and in line with Said's Orientalism, Muslims are seen to be targeted due to the perception of what Patrick refers to as their 'primitive culture'. Black communities are no longer seen to be at the receiving end of this negative coverage due to their greater acceptance and integration into British society.

Similar comparisons were found in terms of past media representations of the Irish community. One of the journalists I interviewed with an Irish background attempted to make sense of negative Muslim representation through their own experience of how the Irish community was portrayed during the 'troubles':

> I saw the way that Irish people were portrayed in the media. I think the Muslim community gets a lot of that treatment as well. My other side would say it's almost understandable because the Irish community, not so much here but back home, sheltered, gave support and a kind of comfort blanket to Republican terrorists. I think the Muslim community suffers a lot of that prejudice too, but on the other hand I can see where the terrorists from the jihadist groups have by and large come from that community. It is inevitable that the suspicion will fall on that. I think maybe communities don't do enough to help themselves.
>
> (*Interview with anonymised journalist*)

In line with studies mapping British media coverage of both Irish and Muslim communities, the journalist is alluding to the similarities in the portrayal of both groups as 'suspect communities' through press coverage (Nickels et al., 2012, p. 27). The journalist sympathises with their shared plight and, like the previous journalists' account, demonstrates a certain sense of solidarity. In both accounts, however, there is a strong indication of how negative representations of Muslims are closely linked to ideas of belonging and Britishness. In the first account, the journalist indicates that Black communities are no longer the recipients of negative representations as they (unlike Muslims) have become more accepted in British society. Similarly, the account from the second journalist indicates that both Irish and Muslim communities hold responsibility for the 'inevitable suspicion' that they receive from the British press.

A similar underlying 'blame discourse' has been highlighted in other studies, where Muslims are themselves to blame for their negative representation due to 'their own antiquated practices' (Poole, 2002, p. 82). Following his interviews with Austrian journalists, media scholar Benjamin Opratko (2019), for example, finds that Muslims appear as immature and non-contemporaneous subjects in Western media discourse about Islam. This perspective reflects how: "they are not yet where 'we' have arrived; they have not yet learned the lessons of what are assumed to be the defining historical 'markers' that constitute the cornerstone of European civilisation" (p. 171). Indeed, this description very much reflects the Orientalist standpoint which sees Muslims being compared against the West as the 'Other' in a crude form of a confrontational Us-versus-Them relationship (Said, 1997). Opratko (2019)

similarly concludes that media representations of Muslims reflect the 'historicist racism' at the heart of 'Othering', where 'Their' perceived backwardness is set against 'Our' own liberal progress (p. 160). Furthermore, he sees the internalisation of this common-sense narrative by journalists themselves as directly contributing to the reproduction of liberal Islamophobia in their newspapers.

Ultimately, if journalists themselves view Muslims from starting point of 'difference', whether explicitly or implicitly, or even positively or negatively, this will inevitably influence how they represent them. As Baker (2023) points out in relation to the framing of terrorist or extremist acts depending on the religion of the perpetuator:

> British journalists writing about Muslims would be advised to perhaps consider how their articles would appear if equivalent words relating to Christianity replaced the ones about Muslims and Islam.
>
> (p. 104)

The underlying narrative of blame that Muslims are somehow responsible for their own negative representations reflects a particular threshold of intolerance that appears to be reserved for Muslims alone. Certainly, newspapers are only expected to be tolerant of Muslims up to a certain point (Richardson, 2004).

The Threshold of Tolerance and Its Boundaries

Similar themes of blame, deservingness and tolerance in comparisons of media coverage of Muslims and Jewish communities were found across journalists' accounts. These references were mostly framed in critical terms around how anti-Semitic media coverage was considered less tolerable than anti-Muslim coverage. In his interview, tabloid journalist Stephen, for example, expressed his dismay that anti-Muslim stereotypes were allowed to prevail where anti-Semitic tropes were punished. "The fact that they are Muslim means that there is zero interest in anyone. Also, with the portrayal of Muslims, you can go into facial stereotypes", he told me. "If you did that to Jews, you would be finished. You'd never write again ever in this country". In another interview, Karen reflects:

> You know you hear about anti-Semitism, anti-Semitism all the time. You never ever hear newspapers tackling Islamophobia in the same way. If people wrote the headline and you substituted the word Jew for Muslim in 80% of headlines, you'd be horrified, absolutely horrified. I don't understand how that's become okay.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist, Karen*)

In British newspapers, Muslims are systematically portrayed as a 'problem' in a much more negative way than other ethno-religious groups (Bleich et al., 2015). In contrast, Jewish communities are much less likely to be reported on in a negative manner and more likely to be portrayed as victims. This is not to say that media

bias is absent when it comes to reporting on stories involving Jewish communities. Baugut (2022), for example, finds that Jewish people living in Germany believe that the national media tend to frame stories involving their community in unhelpful ways. This includes over-sensationalist reporting on minor cases of antisemitism, over-playing links to the Holocaust, stereotypical portrayals of Jewish life and the equivalence of Jews with Israel (particularly when being critical of Israel's policies) (pp. 429–430). Just as Muslims worry that their communities are positioned in an offender role by the media, many of the Jewish people Baugut interviewed felt uncomfortable being typically portrayed in the victim role.

Why do journalists feel that anti-Muslim stories appear to be so much more tolerable than anti-Semitic ones? American political scientist Anne Norton (2013) puts forward a compelling analysis on the remarkable similarities between representations of Jewish and Muslim communities, albeit at different points in history. Echoing present-day narratives of Muslims, Norton highlights how past narratives about Jewish people focused on questions of "citizenship, religion, difference and belonging, integration and the preservation of culture" (p. 2). Like Muslims, the Jewish community was also seen to be a political threat.

Today, it is Muslims and no longer Jewish communities that are presented as the perceived threat to the liberal values of Western civilisation (Norton, 2013). Others argue that much of the media's reluctance to categorise anti-Muslim prejudice in par with antisemitism stems from a general anxiety around Muslims (Meer and Modood, 2009). Muslims generate greater anxieties about immigration and cultural diversity than any other ethnic minority group and this anxiety feeds into representations that portray them as threatening and disloyal towards a tolerant Britain.

The claim that there is no such thing as anti-Muslim racism because Muslims are a religious group rather than a race is often invoked in denying Muslims the same protections against racism afforded to other ethno-religious groups (Modood, 2019). Jewish communities, for example, are protected against race and religion-based hatred, discrimination and harassment under the Equality Act 2010. Furthermore, the UK government and many other public bodies have adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism to allow sanctions against actions believed to be discriminating against Jewish people. Yet for Muslims, a definitive definition of Islamophobia continues to be a source of socio-political contestation, relegating them to a position of precarity when it comes to the same afforded protections.

As a result, newspapers do present discourse on Muslims that would not be acceptable for their ethno-religious contemporaries. This point was raised in the interview with broadsheet journalist, Patrick, who compared the representation of Muslims to other racial groups, and particularly Black communities. He told me:

> The overtness of it has gone. It's no longer polite, whereas it's still polite to insult Islam because you can say it's not Muslims I hate, it's just the religion. I'm just criticising the religion, I'm a free-thinking person and so on. But

> obviously the inference is anyone who adheres to that religion is a primitive thinker in some sort of way, misguided at the very best.

Again, we see that Patrick's account highlights a sense of blame in that Muslims have become an acceptable target for the newspapers due to their own choice to follow the wrong religious ideas. Indeed, Islam in Western media is generally reported on as an ideology rather than a religion (Richter and Paasch-Colberg, 2023).

In my interview with Francesca, she commented on how these ideas about Muslims are reflected across the political spectrum of newspapers, albeit in different ways:

> On the left, it gets framed around women's rights and gay rights. You know you'll get a left-wing person who's mild on this or you might get a right-wing person who is just, you know, scratch them a bit and they explode and we're still talking about the Crusades […] [Islam] makes it problematic on both sides. One because they are Christian and the other side because they actually think religion is complete rubbish and this is nonsense and people have been brainwashed. It's all, you know, they need to be liberated from their false consciousness.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist, Francesca*)

Even though left-leaning broadsheet newspapers are much less likely to represent Muslims in disproportionately negative ways compared to their right-leaning counterparts, Francesca's account reflects how both sides frame Muslims in problematic ways but on completely different terms. As Edward Said (1997) himself recognised, whether it is the 'barbaric nature' of Islam for the right, or the 'medieval theocracy' for the left, or the 'distasteful exoticism' for the centre (p. lv), Muslims are left in a particularly precarious situation. The one aspect shared across the political spectrum of newspapers, Said would argue, is that "even though little enough is known about the Islamic world, there is not much to be approved of there" (p. lv).

Unlike Jewish and other minority communities, Modood (2019) believes that their increasing assertiveness has led to Muslims becoming seen as "the illegitimate child of British multiculturalism" (p. 122). This, he argues, has led to the following conundrum for the 'secular, liberal intelligentsia' (p. 122) who are left with only two choices if they want to be consistent in their values:

> They can repudiate the idea of equality as identity recognition and return to the 1960s liberal idea of equality as colour/sex/religion […] Or they can argue that equality as recognition does not apply to oppressed religious communities, perhaps uniquely not to religious communities. To deny Muslims positive equality without one of these two arguments is to be open to the charge of double standards.
>
> (Modood, 2019, p. 124)

This is often referred to as 'the liberal dilemma' when it comes to Muslims.

The Liberal Dilemma around Muslims

The liberal dilemma around Muslims becomes most visible in my interviews with journalists working for left-leaning newspapers, and in particular the broadsheets. These newspapers usually give more space to a greater diversity of Muslim voices and provide a critical counterpoint to negative representations in other newspapers (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). However, they also reflect a particular bias against Muslims when compared to their championing of other minority causes. Studies indicate that the left-wing press can be critical of Muslims due to the perceived anti-liberal traditionalism of Muslims (Sobolewska and Ali, 2015) and the newspaper's own pro-secular and often anti-religious stance (Poole, 2002).

One of my interviewees, Francesca, has worked for the same left-leaning broadsheet newspaper for more than 20 years. Her experiences reflect how the liberal dilemma within British newspapers works when it comes to coverage about Muslims. "I think the [left-leaning newspaper] was a very, very idealistic organisation to work with […] there was a tremendously clear sense of the value and importance of social democracy", Francesca told me. "Where I felt it was kind of falling short, I was licensed to challenge. And you could argue Muslims and Islam was an example where I thought [the newspaper] had some blind spots".

In one specific recollection, Francesca shared how this conflict materialised in newsroom discussions, where one of the other journalists recounted his personal experience with a burka-wearing (full face and body covering) Muslim woman on the street.

> I remember after one of the terrorist attacks, a gay guy who was a prominent figure on the newspaper said "I was walking down the high street, and I saw this woman coming towards me in a burka. And you know I just felt profoundly threatened by her". I remember that being a sort of early morning conference where all the journalists are in the same room. They discussed the stories of the day and often debates kind of emerge. I remember that occasion it was very interesting because I think there was a lot of sympathy for him in the room that, you know, he's got a point – that woman could be hiding a bomb under her burka.

The burka was often a sticking point for journalists that would normally be strong advocates of the anti-racism their newspaper championed. Yet Francesca recalled how frequently the debate of Muslim women's choice of burka came up during editorial meetings as a source of contention:

> [the] issue cropped up with real regularity. But what I find sort of curious about that debate – for all I know it's not even finished yet – it's how it didn't really shift. It's not like people learnt; it's not like people change their minds. Their positions stayed very stuck. So, you think well in a sort of highly educated liberal environment where lots of people are very open to argument and discussion, one should see a shift in the viewpoint. But no, no, viewpoints remained really quite stuck.

Media representations of Muslim women often evoke those found in colonial discourses about veiled women and a contradictory mix of fear, hostility, derision, curiosity and fascination (McDonald, 2006, p. 8). They are often portrayed as 'victims' in need of liberation, juxtaposed against Muslim men as potential aggressors (Dreher, 2020). This framing reflects a sense of salvation in terms of the "liberal western feminists who wish to rescue" Muslim women (Morey and Yaqin, 2010, p. 153) – an issue that Patrick, another left-leaning journalist raised in his interview. "We've had writers not necessarily in [our newspaper], but certainly in the liberal press fighting in the past that it's the job of white women to tear off hijabs and face coverings of Muslim women", he told me. More recently, this narrative has become more antagonistic within newspaper coverage, where the burka is now symbolic of Muslim women's ingratitude towards Western feminism and their defiant rejection of British values (Williamson, 2014).

When it comes to the liberal dilemma, what turns journalists who would normally champion minority causes towards this level of exceptionalism of Muslim minorities? One explanation has been offered by British political theorist and multiculturalism advocate Bhiku Parekh. Parekh discusses how the liberal anxiety around Muslims and the defence of liberal values and practices leads to what he calls a 'veritable panic' about how to negotiate their relationship with Muslims who may not always subscribe to these values:

> Despite much agonised reflection in recent years, the more self-critical liberals realise that they cannot make a transculturally compelling case for some of their cherished values. Compelling others to live by the latter therefore gives them an uneasy conscience. Since Muslims precipitate it, they become a moral irritant, an object of fear and resentment.
>
> (Parekh, 2008, p. 25)

This returns us to the idea that newspapers justify the representation of Muslims in disproportionally negative ways since they are so different from 'Us' and our values, without appearing illiberally racist. It is Muslims' own choices and their own beliefs and actions that lead them to be represented in these ways. However, such a perspective is encroached in contradiction – it elevates the universalist ideals behind the 'liberal way' of living while dismissing calls from racialised groups for equal recognition and justice (Lentin, 2019). At the same time, the same journalists fail to recognise that they may also hold problematic 'common-sense' understandings about Muslims that parallel (albeit in a different shape and form) those held by others they criticise for their prejudicial and discriminatory perspectives.

Poetics of Muslim Representations

How do internalised ideas about Muslims as the 'Other' become produced within media coverage? British linguist Sara Mills (2004) highlights how these common-sense features represent much larger, knowledge and belief systems legitimated through historical power relations and reproduced through discursive

frameworks. The discursive frameworks serve to distinguish the negative image of the 'Other' from that of the positive, civilised image of British society (Mills, 2004, p. 107). Over time and through their repeated use and increased familiarity, these frames take on truth-values, informing common-sense ideas about Muslims.

The ways journalists frame Muslims stories through discursive frameworks and language is central to understanding how negative representations of Muslims are reproduced in newspaper coverage. As mentioned earlier, different newspapers, whether in format (broadsheet, tabloid or local) or political inclination, have their own editorial style that guides journalists on the focus, tone and language with which to frame news stories for their audiences.

There are some general (although by no means exclusive) patterns to this when it comes to Muslims. British tabloid newspapers, for example, are more likely to adopt discourses that link Muslims to terrorism and conflict, and to show Islam as a dangerous religion (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). Tabloids tend to use more emotive forms of language around Muslims (e.g., words like 'fanatic' or 'hate preacher') (Baker, 2010). Broadsheets tend to focus either on a 'clash of civilisation'-type narrative placing Muslims in opposition to liberal values, or as evidence of the failure of multiculturalism (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008, p. 15). Although left-leaning broadsheet newspapers tend to be less negative about Muslims overall, tabloid and broadsheet newspapers share an underlying tendency to present Muslims as a homogenous population associated with conflict and difference. This argument often presents very differently according to the newspapers' political leanings (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013).

In one interview with a tabloid journalist, for example, he described how his newspaper drew upon a shared stock of phrases to resonate with readers around certain stories:

> The problem with language is that every newspaper seems to have its own vocabulary and, you know, it doesn't just do it with articles on Muslims. It does it with women, it does it with transgender. It uses a particular vocabulary that it believes is a patois of their readership. If you're talking about those stock phrases and cliched phrases, that won't go away. It is the language of the media.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist*)

The language used by newspapers about Muslims can have seriously pejorative connotations. For example, the use of terms like 'swarming' and 'swamping' to describe Muslim refugees and asylum-seekers by sections of the British press was raised at the Home Affairs Inquiry committee. Others have highlighted how Islamic terms such as jihad, hijab and Sharia are stripped of their original religious or cultural meanings in British tabloid newspapers and reframed with negative connotations of dread and peril (Miladi, 2021).

Another journalist I interviewed recalled her experience of working on the Daily Star newspaper (a British tabloid newspaper focusing predominantly on celebrities, sports and gossip as well as news) where the word 'Vile' was repeatedly used

to refer to Muslims in headlines. In another interview, Brendan spoke about British newspapers' frequent use of the term 'jihadi bride' to refer to Shamima Begum, the British-born woman who joined the Islamic State aged just 15 in 2015:

> Well, it's a style thing as much as anything. You can't say Shamima Begum all the time. It's a bit slang, it's a bit colloquial, it's a bit journalese. It's a bit mechanical, but we are always looking for ways to say words because you have a limited amount of words. So, you think how can I shorthand this basically. That's where phrases like that come from. They sum up the whole story in three words. She is the ISIS bride or the Jihadi bride.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Brendan*)

Editorial language is often about attracting audiences to a story. It also reflects how writing and the use of language are viewed as a tool of the journalistic trade. Journalists become skilled in the poetics of language to suit the purpose of their work, whether it is to titillate readers, to evoke fear and anxiety or just to tell a story as concisely as possible. Yet language itself embodies a social practice of representation and signification, reflective of social forces and relationships (Hodge and Kress, 1993).

In the case of Shamima Begum, the use of the term 'jihadi bride' played a central part in both the state and the media's construction of her as a folk devil whose pleas to return to Britain should be rejected by the British public (Williamson and Khiabany, 2024). A 'jihadi bride' is the media term used to describe women from the West who have travelled to Syria (or elsewhere in the Middle East) usually to marry an Islamic State fighter (Kilby and Staniforth, 2023). However, the term relies upon gendered racism to build a specific imaginary – what Williamson and Khiabany describe as 'the bride of terrorism', portrayed "not as an object of fear, but of disgust, to exemplify what is 'wrong' with 'unassimilated' Muslim women" (p. 349). This imaginary used to depict Begum as a remorseless traitor fed into state-led narratives to justify calls for a legal framework for conditional citizenship. Instances of the term 'jihadi bride' were repeated in Home Office communications, drawing on the media's framing to garner public support for its own securitisation and citizenship agenda (Williamson and Khiabany, 2024).

It is worth pointing out here, as Williamson and Khiabany do, that not all newspapers consistently adhered to this narrative, nor all showed support for the governments' proposals around conditional citizenship. Although the overall representation of Begum was negative, some newspaper coverage (particularly in the left-leaning broadsheets) depicted Begum as a vulnerable, groomed child who needed to be afforded British citizenship and a fair justice process. The case echoes the complex Othering of Muslim women discussed earlier, where they are represented synchronously as a victim of oppression but also a symbol of defiance and ingratitude in their rejection of British values.

Framing the Muslim 'Other'

The process of 'Othering' is in itself deeply embedded in newspapers' choice of language and framing practices. Framing in this way acts as a purposeful selective

representation that guides audiences on how to make sense of a particular issue, object or situation (Baden, 2019). The preferred language adopted by newspapers when reporting on Muslim-related stories tells us much about how news production processes work to reproduce negative representations. News stories are not simply about reporting what has happened, but fundamentally about the exercising of power to give meaning to complex situations.

Journalists are very aware of the power invested in language and how this influences the framing of actual news content. As *The Telegraph's* editor emeritus Ian MacGregor reflected during the Home Affairs Inquiry "are we aware of the power of words and words that are chosen carefully? Absolutely" (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018).* In practice however, there is a tendency to draw on catchy phrases and well-worn stereotypes to make news stories more engaging. In her interview, Francesca shared how journalists become "very good at manipulating words", and often resort to using the same tired tropes and stereotypes in their work:

> It comes to glib, witty conclusions. and falling back on the stereotypes. I mean it's a terrible problem in journalism because the pressure of success is so intense and has become even more so that journalists all the time are just kind of falling back into platitudes or stereotypes or conventions.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Francesca*)

As a signifying practice, stereotypes act to naturalise difference, creating symbolically constructed boundaries that segregate 'Us' from 'Them' (Hall, 1997). From an Orientalist perspective, stereotypes keep the separateness of the Orient intact by reinforcing its connotations of eccentricity and backwardness (Said, 1978, p. 206). Coming from a place of both desire and fear of the 'Other', stereotypes further require constant reinforcement. As postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha (1994) explains, the stereotype is "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (p. 66).

Journalists' accounts of the framing of Muslims stories so far serve to highlight how representations are constructed from a basis of separation and differentiation (Richardson, 2004). Yet it is often Muslims themselves that are seen to be at blame for this differentiation. When asked during her interview why her newspaper might choose to frame stories on Muslims this way, Karen's following conflicted, introspective response during her interview reflects her understanding of how fear and anxieties about Muslims drive this discourse:

> I don't know! You've got the terrorism and, you know, going right back to 9/11 […] It's just the 'Other' isn't it. You know, I suppose it is the dress. I don't know! The burka, the hijab and all that. It's just sort of whether it's because it looks alien. […] I find it really hard because I do realise that people need to discuss various things, so whether it's immigration or integration of different communities and fears of communities that are changing beyond recognition.
>
> (*Interview with right-leaning broadsheet journalist, Karen*)

Karen's account further reflects how Muslim-related stories appear within a framing narrative that centres on ideas of nation, citizenship and belonging. But underneath all this lie anxieties about Muslims and a particular fear of their difference. They are seen as a danger to 'our' way of life, or as Karen indicates, for changing British communities 'beyond recognition'.

In her interview, Leila maintained that this type of perspective had become embedded within the media to such an extent that it no longer required a conscious decision to frame Muslim-related stories in this way. She stated:

> I'm not saying it's a clear ideological crusade. I think the problem is a lot of those ideas have become common sense. So, this idea that Muslims are a threat to the nation or are a threat to British culture, that is such a common-sense idea now. It is woven into so much of the coverage and that is what needs to be challenged. It is this insidious.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist, Leila*)

Even more concerning was the claim from some journalists that these common-sense views were also embedded in the minds of their peers. In his interview, tabloid journalist Stephen recalled the conversations he had with colleagues when he questioned their journalism about stories they had written involving Muslims:

> They absolutely refused to accept they're behaving in a racist or an unethical way. And you say why do you portray Muslims like this, and they say because that is what they are like, that they are violent. I mean they genuinely believe it and there is evidence you know they are terrorists. So, you just see a Muslim go into a shopping centre or something with a knife shouting Allahu Akbar and it is symbolised, and they don't ground it anymore. It's the same with the grooming gang thing, you know, you concentrate on the grooming gangs, and you forget that the overwhelming majority of abuse against young boys and women is conducted by white men.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist Stephen*)

To borrow from French semiotic theorist Roland Barthes, we can interpret the use of this type of vivid imaginary as acting as an almost mythical interpretation of what Muslims *are*. Barthes ([1957] 2000) saw myths as serving to reduce social explanations to an essentialist form, to empty 'reality' of history and instead fill it with nature (p. 142). In the grooming stories referenced by Stephen, for example, the contextual aspects of the criminal acts shift to the background as the myth of the cultural backwards and barbarism of Muslims takes the foreground. Barthes ([1957] 2000) elaborates that myths do not replace real-life events but instead distort them by taking away their context and essentialising connotations as 'facts'. He himself remained a critic of the way myths were used in news coverage, complaining how "the press undertakes every day to demonstrate that the store of mythical signifiers is inexhaustible" (Barthes [1957] 1973, p. 126).

To date, British journalism remains largely a white and middle-class-dominated profession, and these biases within newspapers are invisible to many journalists. It was only after she left her job that journalist Karen realised the extent of these views within her right-leaning broadsheet newspaper. “It was when I sort of took a step back that I started seeing things that I really didn’t like in a much wider context”, she shared. “And I often wonder now how much was actually going on at the time, but you’re so caught up in it that you don’t actually realise what you’re perpetrating”. As I discuss in Chapter 4, if anti-Muslim bias is embedded within the very structures of newspaper institutions, then often journalists themselves become socialised into thinking there is nothing wrong with the way that Muslims are represented within their newspapers.

Grooming Scandals and Terrorist Labels

From the discussion so far, we see the centrality of framing and how the use of certain language and common tropes (or myths) work together to set up repeated connotations of Muslims as the problematic ‘Other’ within newspaper coverage. This common-sense framing means how any individual wrong doings by someone from the Muslim community becomes reframed in terms of their religion or culture, representative of what Muslims ‘are’ rather than what they do (Said, 1997). Stories covering ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ are viewed as a case in point with their focus on the culture and religion of Muslims as being at fault more than the criminality of those involved. Any criticism of the foregrounding of culture rather than criminality within these stories is dismissed as a means of silencing the ability of newspapers to speak on the public’s interest. An example is seen in *the Mail’s* editor emeritus Peter Wright’s testimony to the Home Affairs Inquiry committee:

> We go to great lengths to avoid any articles that could possibly contribute to Islamophobia, but you still have to report difficult issues. There have been claims of Islamophobia surrounding the reporting of sex grooming gangs in Rotherham and elsewhere. You cannot ignore the fact that these crimes appear to have a cultural background to them. You try to report them in a way that is even handed and sensible, but if you lean over backwards too far, you get to the point where you are not telling people about what is going on in our society.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018)*

In the past ten years, stories of ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ have attracted huge amounts of British press attention. The central narrative of these stories relates to claims of the ‘disproportionate’ number of Muslim men across towns in the North and Midlands regions of England involved in organised grooming of white British girls for sexual abuse (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). News stories often frame the case as an issue with Muslim culture and religion, and a fear of those in authority of upsetting Muslim sensibilities. The media term ‘grooming gangs’ has

become synonymous with Muslim men of Pakistani-heritage sexually exploiting white British girls. While these cases remain of serious concern and need to be investigated thoroughly, research shows that group-based child sexual exploitation in Britain is most commonly committed by white men (Home Office, 2020).

Compared to Peter Wright's account above, several of the journalists I interviewed were more critical about how these cases had been reported within right-leaning newspapers. In his interview, Patrick felt that the grooming gang reportage had been one of the worst for normalising and reinforcing the far-right view that all Pakistani Muslim men were potential child sexual abusers. He told me:

> If you show some facts without showing others, then you're giving a distorted picture. If you only talk about ethnicity of a criminal and it's a Muslim grooming gang, then it's like they're the only people who are criminal. You don't talk about sexual abuse [in this way] when it's to do with Jimmy Saville or children's homes or the rape of young footballers or altar boys or whatever […] What does this say about the Muslim community of two million or three million people in Britain when less than one in 1000 people [sic] are actually committing these crimes. And yet it's seen as a stereotype of a whole religion and whole communities across the country.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Patrick*)

Comparing media coverage of child sexual abuse cases where the offenders are either white or Asian, Muslim or Pakistani, British criminologist Waqas Tufail (2015) finds that white offenders tend to be framed as paedophiles without the racial and religious signifiers characterising cases involving Muslims. Reflecting Orientalist imagery, the image of the Muslim paedophile in the media coverage takes on a more discursive, generalised signification of "the Muslim male, sexually charged, violent, refusing to integrate and serving as an embodiment of a backward religion and dangerous, inferior culture" (Tufail, 2015, p. 39). This also reflects the circular nature of representations (Hall, 1997), where the signification of these events starts from the basis of already established fact(s) about Muslims. By establishing an equivalence between the criminal act and the religion and culture of the perpetuator, this signification then serves to reinforce these 'facts' through how these events are interpreted. As Amanda shared in her interview about the coverage of the story:

> One of the lines that got sort of amplified was that it was in their culture, that women were sort of passed around and raped. That was a line that kind of really spread. You know they said that in Muslim culture this is what always happens. I feel like if it had been another group or a white group, it would have been reported completely differently. Basically, you wouldn't say oh they said it was in our culture.
>
> (*Interview with news agency journalist Amanda*)

The different ways in which newspapers report on news events depending on the ethnicity or religion of the perpetuator were further highlighted with regard to

terrorism stories. In his interview, Patrick, for example, questioned why an act was more likely to be labelled as a terrorist attack when applied to Muslims rather than other extremist individuals and groups.

> Lots of things terrorise people, a guy waving a machete around on the train platform yesterday or whatever has terrified people. But that's not terrorism. I think, you know, if it is part of a wider political campaign then I don't have a problem giving that label. But I think somehow, it's become a sort of a cliché now that people treat white and Muslim crime differently. I think there is a reason that they're treated differently.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Patrick*)

Research on media reporting of mass acts of violence similarly reflects how terrorism framing is most often used when the main perpetuators are Muslim, compared to the humanising frames used when perpetuators are white, non-Muslims (ElMasry and El-Nawawy, 2020). Terrorists themselves are also framed differently when the perpetuators are Muslim compared to when they are white. As one journalist observed in her interview:

> I think those stories regardless of the group would still be written but it's always handled differently depending on the group. For example, if it's a white terrorist – it tends to be male – he's usually humanised. They are giving the person certain sorts of characteristics, they are described in kinder, nicer words.

Whether terrorist attacks, child exploitation or other crimes, there is an overwhelming tendency for British newspapers to place the blame on the Muslim community as a whole. Muslim communities are expected to hold collective responsibility for the crimes due to their perceived cultural deficiencies or failures to adhere to British values (Tufhail, 2015).

An Asymmetry between Positive and Negative Stories

Whether news stories are about terrorism or grooming gangs, the religious and cultural characteristics of the perpetuators when Muslim are foregrounded when compared to coverage of white perpetuators. Yet when the actions of Muslims are to be praised, a diametrical relationship is found where inherent religious or cultural differences become downplayed, and instead it is their Britishness that becomes foregrounded. In contrast to stories of terrorists or criminals, stories of Muslim celebrities such as Somali British former long-distance runner and Olympic champion Sir Mohamed Muktar Jama Farah (Mo Farrah) often centre around their identity as British heroes, blurring any Muslim identity.

The need to include more 'positive' stories about Muslims came up often in my interviews with journalists as a means of 'balancing out' anti-Muslim bias in British newspapers. This was often accompanied by good intentions to seek out

more diverse stories about Muslims, or as local journalist Ben told me in his interview to find "community stories showing ethnic minorities in a positive light". Similarly, during the Home Affairs Inquiry, the Society of Editor's Ian Murray believed that having far more positive stories from the Muslim community could balance legitimate debate and offset or neutralise more negative representations. He stated:

> you always need to balance that with, "But where is all the positive news coming from any community, any area of life? Are you ensuring that that balance is there?" Obviously, the statistics you are giving show that there isn't. Rather than clamp down on the one side and say, "We must not discuss this," how can we get the positive there to be getting the headlines as well?
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018)*

Having more alternative, diverse representations of Muslims across newspaper coverage is undoubtably an important and central aspect for redressing the overly disproportionately negative ways in which they are portrayed in British newspapers. It is important to note, however, that positive representations of Muslims do not necessarily displace negative representations (Hall, 1997) for two key reasons. Firstly, newspapers are generally more reluctant to produce positive stories than negative ones. At the Home Affairs Inquiry, for example, *The Sun's* managing editor Paul Clarkson tells the committee:

> The articles that we produce that are about building community ties and putting a positive light on the Muslim community do not get picked by social media commentators or critics […] They just get ignored and wither on the vine, just within our own readers, so you don't actually change perceptions of *The Sun's* coverage in the Muslim community.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018)*

Clarkson's testimony points to the commercial imperative to sell negatives stories about Muslims that I return to in Chapter 3. Even though most journalists also felt that audiences desired to read negative stories about Muslims, others actively challenged this viewpoint by demonstrating how positive online stories could engage (and to some extent educate) audiences by presenting an alternative perspective that reflected Britain's diverse Muslim communities. The assumption that positive stories do not achieve the required reach through social media sharing was directly challenged in my interview with local journalist Mark. He had managed to persuade his sceptical editor to cover a story of a local community iftar via Facebook live on the newspapers' website. The live video received record online viewing figures, as he explained:

> We were quite worried that nobody would watch it on Facebook when we broadcasted live. The honest truth was the news desk did not think it was going to get that sort of reception, and it just blew our minds. Just to get

> a better understanding about what iftar is about, or why people practice Ramadan.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Mark*)

Mark's account indicates that positive media coverage on Muslims does attract readers and provides a more nuanced interpretation of Muslims and Islam for audiences. Often, however, these stories are *just* relegated to events such as Ramadan or Eid rather than providing a broader picture of Britain's diverse Muslim communities.

The second difficulty with positive stories relates to their framing and how they end up reinforcing the very same exceptionalism of Muslims they claim to balance out. As Karen highlighted in her interview:

> I do have a problem when people say you should portray us in a positive way. I just think we should treat people for what they do and how they behave, rather than you know sort of some tribute whether it's a positive or negative trait or whatever. I think if you are writing about an individual, then you look at them as an individual and don't categorise them. We are obsessed with categorising people.
>
> (*Interview with right-leaning broadsheet journalist Karen*)

Karen asserts that by deliberately seeking out positive stories, journalists continue to marginalise Muslim communities, categorising and marking them off as different. A closer review of some of the positive story examples given by journalists and editors reflects a framing pattern that mirrors negative representations. For example, *The Telegraph's* Ian MacGregor asked the Home Affairs Inquiry committee to look at the 'very positive articles' in his newspaper about "the difficulties facing Muslim people, or Muslim women, in society" (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*). The Metro's editor Ted Young's examples of positive stories included the 'You ain't no Muslim, bruv' statement going viral following a terrorist incident in Leytonstone tube station. He also mentioned a front-page story entitled 'True Brit' about a Muslim baker who took down one of the terrorists in the London Bridge attack (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*). Rather than counteracting the negative images of Muslims in the press, these examples are seen to consolidate Muslim stereotypes, whether that Muslim women are oppressed and face difficulties, or the newsworthy mention of finding the exceptional case of the 'True Muslim Brit'. In another interview, a journalist shared an inspirational story of a Muslim Syrian refugee family whose father had just won a local award:

> They are a Syrian refugee family who are Muslim, and they came over as refugees. It was such a breath of fresh air to cover that story because it was so lovely and positive. I just wish there were more […] It's been hugely well received by everyone [and] just made me think this is how we can do it. It doesn't have to be all negative, you know talking about people coming over here and refusing to settle and not speaking English and all that. You can actually be more positive.
>
> (*Interview with journalist)*

The journalists' positive attitude to this story is warming and she clearly believes that it provides a positive slant against negative Muslim representations. However, this story is again framed in terms of an exceptional Muslim who wants to integrate as being a positive, or more importantly, an unusual news event, rather than part of the everyday experiences of the majority of (British) Muslims in the UK. However, Poole and Williamson (2023) find that representations of British Muslims during the COVID crisis tended to omit any reference to their Muslimness in news stories that portrayed them in a 'positive' way as either heroic health workers or as fallen victims of COVID. This suggests that the use of 'Muslim' as an identifier is more likely to be applied in the context of difference or to denote exceptionalism (Poole and Williamson, 2023).

Often what we find is an asymmetrical relationship between the recurring archetypes of Muslims that appear in positive and negative stories. Positive narratives act to strengthen and validate, rather than mitigate, negative representations of Muslims (Bowe and Makki, 2016). For instance, Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013) identify the common archetypes in what they classify as negative media coverage as representing Muslim women as victims, Muslim men as potential aggressors and young Muslims as vulnerable to illiberal practices, often in the context of radicalisation

In the parallel framing of positive stories, we see empowered, 'modern' Muslim women, Muslim men as peace-loving British soldiers and young Muslims as opting for a more liberal lifestyle, for example, in their choice of sexual partner. Rather than acting to balance, these 'positive' representations can be seen to work ideologically to reflect 'our' positive self-representation (i.e., our tolerance towards those Muslims who are more like 'Us' or championing those who have been civilised through 'our' influence) and reinforce the negative representation of the 'Other' (those not like 'Us') (Van Dijk, 2000). Simply adding positive images to a more normalised negative repertoire of representations may increase the diversity of ways in which Muslims are represented, but it does not displace or disrupt the negative (Hall, 1997, p. 274).

The Good Muslim versus the Bad Muslim

Rather than displacing negative representations, Hall (1997) points to how positive representations can be based on the same binaries that differentiate Muslims from the rest of British society. Journalists and editors' accounts of positive stories tell us more about how 'good Muslims' are constructed within media coverage in juxtaposition to bad Muslims. This can be seen, for example, in *The Times'* assistant editor Ian Brunskill's account of positive stories during the Home Affairs Inquiry:

> There are also quite a lot that do precisely the kind of thing people have talked about, in which we are really just reporting Muslim life. We have done pieces on Muslims in gay marriages, mosques being given listed status or not—just treating the stories as stories.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018)*

What is important to note is that while Brunskill is talking about everyday Muslim issues, the first 'positive story' he highlighted refers to 'Muslims in gay marriages' – an issue often associated with the illiberal beliefs held by the Muslim communities. In her interview, another journalist similarly points to positive stories on Muslims as being those about the "fantastic young activists now fighting FGM, fighting forced marriages, the role of women, gay people – the activists that generate the stories". Underlying this good Muslim/bad Muslim dichotomy is a sense that Muslims can be categorised as either 'fundamentalist' (bad Muslim) or as 'moderate' (good Muslim), even though these categories themselves are both subjective and context specific (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010). Either way, references to 'radical' Muslims in British newspaper coverage far outnumber those of 'moderate' Muslims (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008).

Rather than as individuals, these types of representations code Muslims according to their degrees of difference from the universal white male (Tyrer 2010, p. 102). In this way, representations of 'good' Muslims also act as a form of 'Othering', where the positive framing of those more like 'Us' is used to reinforce the negative representation of those more like 'Them' (Van Dijk, 2000). Muslims who appear furthest away from the Orientalist conceptions of threatening versions of Islam, and closest to 'our' own liberal way of life, are championed.

In Stuart Hall's *The Spectacle of the 'Other'*, he explains how the cultural process of stereotyping draws upon a strategy of 'splitting' where the normal and acceptable is separate from the abnormal and unacceptable (Hall, 1997). Any representation that does not fit within these boundaries is excluded or simply discarded. In this way, negative stereotypes and the call for positive representation are 'inherently dialogical' as they both contribute towards reductive representations of Muslims (Morey and Yaqin, 2010, p. 148). As Morey and Yaqin emphasise, there is not a situation where a bad stereotype of a Muslim meets a good stereotype and results in some form of synthesis or 'accurate' representation. Instead, the representation of the good Muslim is given meaning through the same racialised discourses that demonise the bad Muslim for their 'Otherness'.

The following excerpt from my interview with Muslim media campaigner, Miqdaad Versi, illustrates this point further:

> There is also another element of trying to put good stories out there to try to balance [this]. I have a slight challenge with that because it creates this idea that you have to be an amazing Muslim to be good. […] You have to be slightly careful about having just role models out there because it creates a dichotomy which is problematic. It creates a feeling that you have to politically be a good Muslim. You know I'm very conscious of the potential application. But there's an element of at least we get something positive which may balance the overall negative flow of things.
>
> (*Interview with Miqdaad Versi*)

In this excerpt, Versi is cautious but also careful not to dismiss the merits of positive stories in totality. As I discuss in Chapter 6, positive and more inclusive stories

about Muslims do play an important role to challenge the more negative representation if applied appropriately.

Returning to postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha, his concept of mimicry in colonial discourse adds further depth to the 'good Muslim' concept as a way of understanding how Muslims are simultaneously accommodated and rejected within British press coverage. The notion of a 'reformed, recognisable' Muslim stem from what Bhabha (1984) describes as the desire for the 'Other' "as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (p. 126). These 'positive' images are implicitly juxtaposed against the 'Other' Muslim as the "menace – a difference that is almost total but not quite" (p. 91). Mimicry in media representation, therefore, involves the accommodation of the good Muslim who favours liberal values while rejecting their own Muslimness. Academics have argued that the distinction between 'radical' and 'moderate' Muslims has been used to discipline and police Muslim populations (al-Azami, 2023). It further serves to reinforce the image of Islam as a problem that needs to be fought *within* the Muslim community by 'good Muslims' (those more liberal and secular) against the more religious 'bad' Muslims (Mamdani, 2002).

From Print to Digital Representations

The aim of this chapter has been to provide a detailed insight into how Muslims are represented in British newspapers, using the first-hand experiences of editors and journalists. I demonstrate how this is embodied in the ways that journalists frame stories and their choice of language, sources and news angles that often position Muslims as the problematic Other, particularly when compared to other ethno-religious groups.

Undoubtably, the biggest change experienced by British newspapers in more recent times has been the move towards digitalisation. This is set to have a significant impact on how stories about Muslims are reported. As newspapers often serve as agenda-setters for social media platforms, it is likely that the same negativity against Muslims found in print newspapers will be mirrored on newspaper online sites and social media accounts.

So far, very little is known about how patterns of digital representations of Muslims reflect or differ from those found in the traditional newspapers. Of equal importance, there has been scarce academic debate about how the digital transition of the news media impacts on the practices of journalists when it comes to the reporting on stories involving Muslims. One preliminary insight has been provided by an analysis report produced by the Centre for Media Monitoring, a Muslim-led media campaign group striving for fairer treatment of Muslims in the British media. After analysing over 48,000 online articles, the report discovered that almost 60% associated Muslims and Islam with negative aspects or behaviour. Online news coverage continues the patterns of disproportionately antagonistic stories about Muslims and Islam, most often associating Muslims with negative rather than positive actions (Hanif, 2021).

The parallels in traditional news media narratives about Muslims and those found on social media point to deeply symbiotic relationship, where negative representations of Muslims and Islam are reinforced (Törnberg and Törnberg, 2016).

Törnberg and Törnberg find that negative representations traditionally produced in the traditional Swedish media were replicated in much more aggressive, derogatory and directly racist forms on social media. Other studies show how social media explicitly extends and promotes mainstream media narratives of the Muslim as the 'Other' and Islam as being 'at war' with the West (Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez, 2016). The shift from traditional news media to online media has further been implicated in the growing normalisation of hate speech towards Muslims on social media in Poland (Soral, Liu and Bilewicz, 2020) and China (Luqiu and Yang, 2020).

Across my interviews with journalists, there was some acknowledgement and sense of responsibility for how representations of Muslims reproduced over decades by the British press fed the more distorted, derogatory content found on social media. In particular, the language used by newspapers was seen to be reflected and amplified in social media discourse. In his interview, Patrick, for example, recalled watching in horror as a woman presented a tirade of Islamophobic abuse on YouTube:

> For me, the video was really shocking. It wasn't the fact that she was ranting, it was the specifics that she was coming out with. It was clearly language that she'd picked up from the press. But it wasn't just I hate you, you're Muslim. It was using all those stereotypes that the tabloids churn out every day. That was the thing that just struck me, that she really has taken all this in. The fact that it had seeped so much into her and then the repetition, that drip, drip, drip. So, she just started to regurgitate all these stories.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Patrick*)

This type of mirroring between social media and newspapers is part of a 'feedback loop', where representations that originated in the news become amplified in social media (Törnberg and Törnberg, 2016).

Social media can be particularly polarising when it came to issues involving Muslims, encouraging groupthink and echo chambers amongst online audiences. Across interviews, journalists worried that online audiences were compromised in their ability to separate fact from fiction, and that this could lead to an increase in Islamophobia and hate against Muslim communities.

Indeed, social media platforms have become a breeding ground for Islamophobic prejudice and hate speech across the West. In the UK, research on the normalisation of Islamophobia on Facebook (Oboler, 2016), and the proliferation of anti-Muslim social media messages by organised far-right groups (Copsey et al., 2013) epitomise how social media has become a space where negative representations of Muslims are intensified. Studies show rising numbers of online virtual communities and hate groups using Facebook to propagate violent, Islamophobic and racist narratives and encourage violence against Muslims (Awan, 2016). Concerningly, studies also show how online hate victimisation leads to increased Islamophobic attacks and hate crime in the physical world (Williams, 2020).

Journalists generally tend to hold negative views about the dominance of social media platforms and their role in reducing trust in traditional news practices (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). In several of my interviews, this critique often framed social media as the anti-thesis of what 'real' journalism represented. In his interview, Roger, for instance, commented:

> People used to get their views and opinions formed from good articles written in newspapers and from television and radio. Now they're getting them from bitesize tweets on Twitter from, in the main, mostly idiots and that's helping to form their opinion.
>
> (*right-leaning tabloid journalist, Roger*)

Competition for clicks, likes and shares contributes to increasingly sensationalist and polarising content about Muslims to attract audiences from other social media platforms. Stories that amplify the fear and anxieties of audiences are particularly seen by journalists as social media 'traffic gold', making Muslims an easy target for a journalism that seeks to entertain the masses. I return to the role of audience metrics in Chapter 2.

Conclusion

The chapter has examined how negative representations of Muslims are reproduced through journalists' own common-sense understandings of what Muslims represent. This leads Muslim-related stories to be framed in specific ways, drawing on particular language and imagery to privilege certain interpretations of Muslims while marginalising others. These structured forms of framing have become almost invisible, "so taken for granted, so deeply embedded in the very communication forms which are employed" (Hall et al., 1978, p. 67). These taken-for-granted, common-sense representations of Muslims highlight their position as illiberal and flawed, the potential potentially treacherous and problematic 'Other' within British society.

The discussion also points to a general sense of the 'deserving' nature of negative representations that are at least partially due to the actions of Muslims themselves. Rather than reflecting a direct and overt anti-Muslim bias, these ideas lead to the justification for representing Muslims in more negative ways than other minority groups. Yet the accounts of both editors and journalists simultaneously present negative representations about Muslims to be problematic and unacceptable in a liberal and multicultural British society. This reflects the contradictory nature of negative Muslim representations as driven by the concurrent need to accommodate Muslims as part of British society while also rejecting them.

'Common-sense' ideas about Muslims play an important role in normalising negative representations. They are not about the individual racism of the journalist (well, not always). Instead, these representations reflect how racialised discourses are produced systematically in newspaper coverage through what Holohan (2014) describes as "the stream of narratives that emerge from a particular perspective" (p. 41). These embedded ideas provide journalists with a consensus about what

they can and cannot say about Muslims, compared to other ethno-religious groups. This consensus acts as "an outer horizon, a set of boundaries to 'what is normal, expected, understood, taken for granted'" (Hall, 1972, p. 12). As Hall points out, journalists need not actively seek to reproduce anti-Muslim representations as they remain entrenched within their own common-sense ideas which underwrite and guarantee their reproduction. As I discuss in Chapter 3, when this common sense is also seen to be favoured by the audiences they write for, it further acts as a warrant for this reproduction (Hall, 1972).

Note

1 See Baroness Warsi's full Sternberg Lecture speech here: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/baroness-warsi-s-sternberg-lecture-speech (Accessed 22 May 2023).

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2 Shaping the Narrative

How Journalists' Perceptions of Audiences Influence Muslim Representation

Introduction

Ideas about audiences, and what audiences want when it comes to stories involving Muslims, have a significant influence on how journalists report on stories. At the first of the Home Affairs Inquiry sessions focusing on Islamophobia in the media, Professor Chris Frost was questioned about the likely impact that newspapers' disproportionately negative representations of Muslims could have on the British public. As chair of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) Ethics Council, Frost is no stranger to media ethics and holding journalists to account. The NUJ Ethics Council had been set up in 1986 initially to receive public complaints about journalists' behaviour before its role evolved to a wider mission of improving standards of journalism in the UK. In response to the question, Frost expressed his concerns that for a significant part of the public, their main source of knowledge about Muslims comes from the British press.

When it came to stories involving Muslims and Islam, Frost was clear that newspapers have a responsibility to audiences to report accurately and fairly, as he told the Home Affairs Inquiry committee:

> What is worrying is if they are getting all their information about Islam from the press and if that press is basically dripping small doses of inaccurate knowledge into their ears, they are not going to get any further information. It is vitally important that newspapers […] choose the right stories that talk about the right issues, that they are not manufacturing those stories in order to get sales among an audience that does not fully understand what it is that they are talking about.
>
> *(Home Affairs Inquiry data, February 2018)*

In this chapter, I similarly turn my attention to how journalists' preconceptions about their audiences influence how they report on Muslims. In particular, I investigate how commercial pressures, including the need to compete with social media, often lead to the privileging of negative representations of Muslims that generate fear and anxiety. Much of the insights in this chapter came from the contradictions that arose across my interviews with journalists between deeply held ideas of what

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journalism *should be* in relation to audiences and how audiences are conceptualised in practice when it comes to stories involving Muslims. By delving into the complexities of the journalist-audience relationship, the chapter begins by asking how journalists conceptualise today's audiences and their expectations around Muslims.

Perceiving the Public: Newspapers' Interpretation of Its Audience

According to cultural scholar Stuart Hall (1974), the media is most consistently regulated by a sense of its audience and what journalists believe this audience want to hear. Echoing the common-sense representations of Muslims discussed in Chapter 1, there is an argument that newspapers are simply repeating the agreed common-sense beliefs about Muslims held by British society at large. The idea that newspapers produce stories to fit in with their readers' perceived prejudices is likewise reflected across research on Muslim representations in the media (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Lashmar, 2019; Poole, 2011). Many of the journalists I interviewed, and particularly those from minority or Muslim backgrounds, also strongly believed that British newspapers represented Muslims in ways that reflected the existing prejudices of their readers.

One of the journalists I interviewed expressed his concern that this perspective had become normalised with stories involving Muslims:

> I don't think they [newspapers] necessarily do it just because of their own prejudices, although that will play a part in it. But I think what every newspaper does is they put things in that their readers will want to know. All newspapers will almost exist to confirm their readers' prejudices.
>
> *(Anonymised interview with journalist)*

A similar perspective was shared in the interview with a journalist working for an online newspaper website:

> I don't think they're sort of like puppets that are just saying whatever they think people want to hear. I do think to some extent these writers do have to believe what they are sharing but also it does appeal to a lot of British readers. I think Britain is, sadly to say, still very dominantly racist.
>
> (*Interview with online journalist*)

In these accounts, both journalists make some very serious indictments not only about readers but about wider British society and the prejudices they hold about Muslims. Yet they also raise questions about the agency of the journalists who reproduce these narratives. Journalists are neither seen as 'puppets' nor as necessarily acting according to their own prejudices but are compelled to produce coverage that feeds the prejudices of their readers. As Andrew commented in his interview:

> It's about confirmation because I don't think newspapers really can persuade people that much, or that a newspaper columnist persuades people that much.

> People buy them [their newspapers] to have their prejudice confirmed more than anything else.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist, Andrew*)

This suggests that the desire for negative Muslim-related stories stems primarily *from* audiences, rather than from journalists pushing these narratives into the minds of a passive audience.

Meeting Expectations: Understanding Audience Needs and Desires

Journalists often argue that stories on Muslims lend themselves to these prejudices as they most often involve fear-generating topics such as terrorism. During his interview, one Muslim tabloid journalist spoke about how 9/11 had changed the language of the media, pushing Muslims into the media spotlight. "Because of this the Muslim community was perceived as a security threat, a real security threat not an imagined one", he told me. "I'm not saying it wasn't exaggerated but it was not imagined. As a result, this community had unprecedented scrutiny and unprecedented negativism".

There is, however, a significant commercial imperative that leads to the salience of these types of stories and the often sensationalist reporting that accompanies them (Poole, 2011). This serves to intensify a climate of fear and suspicion of the Muslim 'Other'. In several interviews, journalists similarly commented on the commercial, 'entertainment' value associated with stories involving Muslims that served to amplify the existing fears and anxieties of audiences. Brendan, for instance, spoke about the fear factor that made news stories on Muslims more appealing to readers:

> It (is) all about inflaming the prejudices and playing on the fears of the readership because people want to read this stuff. And it (is) very much that kind of ramp up the fear factor, what people are most afraid of. Stoke their fears make them afraid, make them want to read, make them prejudice, all that kind of stuff.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Brendan*)

Other examples of this type of fear-framing were found across interviews. When talking about terrorism stories, for example, one of the tabloid journalists I interviewed highlighted how "there is fear, and that fear needs to be accentuated. It grips the readers". Stephen, another tabloid journalist, discussed how newspaper coverage about Muslims was "clearly digging in very deep into anxieties about immigration".

After 30 years of working in British newspapers, a very senior journalist I interviewed told me that there was something instinctively wrong about a journalism driven by the fact that people will respond more to fears.

> If you stoke the fears of readers, you know, Muslim invasion of Britain, immigration, house prices to go through the roof. It's stirring up those fears,

> crime waves all these things are the kind of things that make people more likely to buy your newspaper.
>
> (*Interview with journalist*)

Media scholar David Altheide (1997) refers to this type of reporting as the *problem frame*. The problem frame acts to reinforce the audience's common-sense understanding of the nature of the problem being reported on through fear. But more than this, the problem frame sets up complex events into a type of morality play to deliver more exciting, entertaining news. Stories about Muslims are often constructed around this type of problem framing. As Altheide elaborates:

> A story about fear is produced and packaged in a process that formulates social complexities as simplistic problems. The cumulative effect is to produce a discourse of fear that then becomes a "resource" for the audience to draw on when interpreting subsequent reports.
>
> (p. 665)

Using the problem frame to report on stories involving Muslims leads to complex events being repackaged into simplistic problems that trigger visceral emotions.

Returning to Professor Chris Frost's testimony to the Home Affairs Inquiry, he similarly highlights how people are far more likely to buy newspapers when they perceive a threat or risk. Frost maintained that newspapers would often amplify fears by focusing on a visible minority group to generate compelling stories.

> One of the easiest ways to do that is to pick a group which is an 'Other' group, a small minority of the community, and at the moment a good one is Muslims. It is very easy to say, 'This is a group of which you should be fearful', ignoring the fact that the percentage of terrorists in the Muslim community is no larger than in any other community. They are easily identified, and you can say, "That is a Muslim", and it makes for easy stories.
>
> *(Home Affairs Inquiry data, February 2018)*

Even though certain stories about Muslims may be associated with a real feeling of fear and apprehension, as Frost points out, this fear has been amplified out of proportion in an attempt to feed the perceived insecurities of audiences.

Applying the problem frame to stories consolidates the position of Muslims as a 'problem' for the wider British society. This creates an exclusionary effect, where British Muslim communities are segregated from the British public that the newspapers claim to serve. Muslims become framed as the exceptionalists, as those making unreasonable demands, or as responsible for their own segregation. In her interview, broadsheet journalist Karen shared her frustration at all the different headlines that she had seen portray Muslims in these ways. "So, there are toilets only for Muslims, swimming pools only for Muslims, Muslim only kitchen equipment [...] it's absolutely extraordinary!" she told me. Once this association is embedded, even a story involving Muslims that has no terrorist threat or danger

associated with it can be reported using the problem frame. As one tabloid journalist told me:

> Sometimes what happens with journalists is that they cannot find a story on an extremist group or on an extremist hate preacher. Those stories are not that many, so then the focus goes onto Islamic schools, or Shariah thought or Muslim women in general. That's because they can't find stories, real stories. And that's where I have problems, because once you cannot get the story you want, you then look at secondary issues and then it becomes a bit gratuitous.
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist*)

Even though many of the journalists I interviewed agreed that these types of stories were often 'gratuitous' in feeding audiences prejudices, there were increasing pressures to produce these types of stories that attract clicks and shares.

Reinforcing the Relationship between Audiences and the Newspaper

The problem frame plays an important function for reinforcing the relationship between newspapers and their audiences. Its format works around a central narrative to bring the journalist and the reader together in the shared conclusion that "'something is wrong' and we know what it is!" (Altheide, 1997, p. 654). The cumulative effect of using the problem frame is to produce a discourse of fear so that newspapers then become an essential resource that audiences must draw on to make sense of the news story being reported.

In the face of uncertainty and public insecurities about Muslims, the newspaper becomes the voice of reason and reassurance. Newspapers become aligned with audiences against the Muslim threat. Muslim-related stories further reinforce 'Othering' in a way that is synchronously reassuring for readers (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010). As highlighted by one tabloid journalist in his interview, "it becomes like a signal to say we are on your side, you are under threat, but you know we will always stand by you". This reflects the diametrical relationship between newspapers and their audiences when it comes to stories involving Muslims. On one side, newspapers flame the fears and insecurities of audiences to attract their attention and on the other, they soothe that these fears are justified as long as they keep reading.

Altogether, this tells us something about how audiences are conceptualised by journalists – as thrill-seeking, wanting to be entertained, anxious and fearful, but wanting to confirm their fears are real. The problem frame relies upon the reinforcement of audience's familiarity with negative common-sense narratives about Muslims to deliver what Altheide (1997, p. 655) terms "an attractive fear-package". In reality, this is not simply about clever or catchy headlines but the real consequences of these types of fear-baiting stories. In his interview, media campaigner Miqdaad Versi stated there was definitely an element of knowing what sells behind newspaper reporting on Muslims. Coming up with clever headlines to attract readers' attention was one thing but he worried about how

these stories would cross the line into amplifying fear and hatred about Muslims, as he told me:

> Sensationalising is one thing, creating hate is another. I want to distinguish between trying to encourage people to read because you've used a clever title, or you've done something smart and actually feeding into the innate fears and hatred and almost developing or creating it. Then that's a problem.
>
> *(Interview with Miqdaad Versi)*

As the problem frame shifts into a discourse of blame onto Muslims themselves, the selling of fear becomes central not only to the process of the Othering but to absolve newspapers of any claim that there might be something Islamophobic about how they report on Muslims.

Representations often involve a cultural or emotional connotation, as well as their literal meaning. When it comes to Muslim-related stories, it is often through the media that the shared repertoires of emotion that accompany representations are both articulated to, and elicited from audiences (Wahl-Jorgensen, K., 2019, p. 9). Just as 'Othering' brings with it connotations of exclusion and negativism, representations will always have a similarly emotional and moral component. Hall (1997) speaks about fears and fantasies, desires and revulsions, and ambivalences and aggressions as central to the process of meaning-making in representation. In newspapers, the strongest examples of this are found in comment pieces and opinion columns.

Speaking for the British public? The Role of the Commentator

Returning to how common-sense ideas influence Muslim representations, Hall et al. (1978) highlight how the news media will often code events using the language, rhetoric, imagery and common stock of knowledge shared by the audiences to strengthen the sense of reciprocity between the news producer and the reader. This form of address, what Hall et al. refer to as the '*public idiom*', reflects how the media take the language of the public and return it to them "inflected with dominant and consensual connotations" (p. 65). In the same sense, newspaper coverage about Muslims may be built on a foundation of genuine concerns or worries that the public may have (about terrorist attacks for example) but amplify these real concerns to distort public fears.

Within newspapers, the public idiom is most directly communicated through opinion columns or comment pieces where a particular writer speaks directly to the public to influence their opinions on a particular news event or issue. These columnists have been described as "print media public intellectuals (PMPIs)", public commentators who hold authoritative positions in the British press based on their abilities to set agendas for public debate under a veneer of journalistic intellectualism (Meer, 2006, p. 36). Some of these commentators have taken a particularly muscular stance towards Muslims. Although the position they write from varies (for example, as a secular liberal or as a conservative nationalist), their columns

ultimately serve to reinforce exclusive accounts of belonging and Britishness to the exclusion of Muslims (Meer, 2006).

In her interview, Francesca presented a similar critique regarding one of her work colleagues – a well-regarded secular liberal journalist who falls into Meer's characterisation of PMPIs:

> She is a very good columnist; she does an immense amount of research and has a fantastic network. She definitely has deep instinctive responses which you can see in her work again and again […] Islam was a very interesting one because she was not going to budge on that. She couldn't get her head around the idea that religion could be an important part of human experience and from that came all kinds of prejudices, so she was never going to get very far on Muslims.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Francesca*)

Francesca had a lot of respect for the journalist's writing style and her professional instincts and diligence at research. Yet when it came to Islam and Muslims, she felt her colleague simply could not get over her personal biases.

The British press industry has witnessed an expedited growth in the popularity of the most controversial of columnists (Greenslade, 2018), including those who provide the most vitriolic commentary on Muslims. The move to digital journalism has transformed the role of high-profile news media commentators into celebrities in their own right. Building on techniques of self-branding, politicised persona construction and social media interplays with audiences, they have become celebrified "epicentres for opinion spectacle" (Usher, 2021, p. 2838). Some have even built career reputations as those 'willing' to speak the hard truths about Muslims on behalf of the British public. They frame themselves as pseudo-experts and are invited to speak and debate authoritatively across the mainstream media about Muslims. For those in British society who have little every-day contact with Muslim communities, these commentators and their views become the audiences' dominant means for 'knowing' Muslims.

By featuring in mainstream newspapers, the anti-Muslim views of these commentators enter public discourse using the public idiom in their claim to speak authoritatively on behalf of the readers and the wider public. This serves to stretch the boundaries of acceptable narratives about Muslims, presenting Islamophobic representations as reflective of the common-sense positions of readers.

In his interview, broadsheet journalist Andrew made a similar observation of how highly controversial newspaper commentators offered some kind of mainstream 'safety-valve' to throw out far right, extremist Islamophobic views:

> These views are now expressed through legitimised and legitimate high-profile columnists. Therefore, that's a safety valve in some way and that view is now expressed in the mainstream press, and those people will feel happy about being represented in the media.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Andrew*)

Andrew maintains that it should be possible for newspaper columnists to write critically about Islam and Muslims without necessarily pushing often toxic and divisive views into mainstream public debate. He stated:

> It's the quality of the commentator, isn't it? So, some are in the business of trying to tell you stuff they'd found out, new insights and new perceptions, compared to [others] and this industry of manufactured outrage. Personally, I think that [they] debase the newspaper as a title. I think there have been times where [they] do cross that line.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Andrew*)

For Andrew, these commentators served to debase both the journalistic profession and the newspaper they write for. Rather than fostering trust, propagating this type of 'manufactured outrage' within newspapers was actually pushing audiences away.

A similar critique was shared amongst journalists from different types of news outlets – questioning the value of such commentators at times of increasing audience disengagement. In her interview, news agency journalist Amanda similarly expressed her strong criticism for columnists whose openly virulent opinions of Muslims had a negative impact on the reputation of journalism.

> You want to say not in my name, that's not what we are about. I don't know how you mitigate that because if you make it clear that this is a column, which it is, but it's in a paper that people read, and it's written in a persuasive way and it's giving a voice to them. People like, you know, Katie Hopkins, they're given a platform. I think that's just wrong when they are clearly racist and clearly untruthful. I don't think it does our profession any good to have us aligned with those people because people don't think of some columnist, they think of *The Sun* newspaper.
>
> *(Interview with news agency journalist, Amanda)*

Even though many newspaper commentators are not professional journalists, they draw on the legitimacy of newspapers and their fellow journalists to mainstream their toxic views into public debate.

As Hall et al. (1978) point out, the columnist as voice of the British public represents the media in its most active, campaigning role or "the point where the media most actively and openly shape and structure public opinion" (p. 66). As the opinion of one columnist is rarely the view of an entire public, it is here that the ideological concept of 'audiences' as representing some form of unitary British public acts to both marginalise alternative interpretations about Muslims and to legitimise others as reflective of the common-sense views of the public itself. The claim of 'taking the public voice' to say what British people are supposedly thinking affords columnists a public legitimacy for a view the newspaper itself is expressing.

Rather than being informed by the public, this filtering of opinion through the legitimacy of newspapers acts as a top-down process – where media commentators

(like other elite actors)– actively shape and construct public opinion through a process of mediation that elevates certain narratives while obstructing others (Mondon, 2025). Mondon points to how this top-down process has been used to legitimise reactionary politics, including far right, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim rhetoric, while silencing the views of minorities, including Muslims.

From the interviews, a tension emerged in terms of how the concept of audiences related to the responsibilities of journalists and how they reported on stories. While an Islamophobic commentator may claim to speak in the public's interests, other journalists view these types of columns as the antithesis of public interest, contributing instead to misinformation, hatred, and discrimination against Muslims. Some of the journalists I interviewed shared how they themselves had written opinion columns to directly challenge such views, and to present to audiences a much more nuanced and considered approach to issues involving Muslims. Leila, for example, would often write column pieces that challenged discriminatory stories about minorities. In her interview, she told me how opinion pieces could be used in this way to provide the more detailed context often missing from news articles on Muslims:

> you can give something a broader context and situate it in a historical or social context that maybe the news doesn't do. Or try to make sense of why something's happened in the way that it's happened. It can be critical of what has happened. There is also a role for opinion as a kind of tussling over how we should interpret pieces of news, what should be done next. Also, there is a role for giving the people who are the subject of the news a voice to speak about what has happened to them and to give a human side to it.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist and columnist, Leila*)

Similarly, in his interview Brendan reflected on the variety of columnists at his right-leaning broadsheet newspaper, describing them as a diverse group with often opposing viewpoints. "You know every time I read some stuff, I want to tear my hair out. But I think it should be there because it's about debates", he told me. "We have some brilliant columnists who write really challenging stuff and fostering that level of debate is really important". This type of rich diversity across opinion columns was seen to challenge readers' perceptions, particularly if they presented a perspective that ran counter to their existing beliefs. It also demonstrates that it is possible to produce opinion columns critical about Muslims and Islam without descending into virulent anti-Muslim rhetoric.

"We just seek that traffic gold": Audience Metrics and Muslim Representation

The discussion so far has shown how the journalist-audience relationship can have an impact on how newspapers report on stories involving Muslims. If audiences are seen to want existing prejudices confirmed, or as hungry for sensationalist and fear-generating content, then journalists will be more obliged (on a commercial level at least) to reproduce negative Muslim representations. As the discussion on

opinion columns shows, a different conceptualisation of the journalist-audience relationship, one where the journalist consciously attempts to provide more nuanced and diverse perspectives on Muslims (including critical ones), helps balance out anti-Muslim bias in the British press. Despite the best intentions of individual journalists, the choice of which path to choose has become increasingly restricted by the commercial imperative to sell stories, particularly when newspapers must compete with social media.

In Chapter 1, I examined how the transition to more digital forms of news production has altered the traditional journalism model of newspapers, creating an interdependence with social media. Digital news-sharing has become the currency of journalism as commercially struggling newspapers are drawn into a world of audience analytics and metrics where news values are measured in views, likes and shares (Steensen and Westlund, 2021). News media is not only empowered by social media platform companies such as Facebook and Google but increasingly dependent upon non-proprietary platforms such as Twitter and YouTube for their audience reach and advertising revenue.

Within today's media landscape, the distinction between traditional journalism and digital journalism has become blurred. Journalism is becoming increasingly dependent on its digitalised formats. Yet this shift is not only about technology and format but reflects the embodiment of digitalisation within the ideals, roles and practices of journalism as we know it (Duffy and Ang, 2019). As well as its increasing reliance on audience analytics and metrics, digital journalism means shifting revenue models (from newspapers to platform companies) and changing distribution patterns in favour of non-proprietary platforms outside the news media (Steensen and Westlund, 2021). All of this has serious implications for how stories involving Muslims are reported in newspapers.

The pressures on journalists to supply exciting content was seen across my interviews to be particularly exacerbated by digital news-sharing and competition from social media. This experience was consistent across all interviews, no matter which type of newspaper the journalist worked for. Local journalist Thomas, for example, reflected on how the shift to digital had resulted in an increased focus on online interaction and generating shares of his work. "I write in a way that will make [the story] engaging or make people read it, and so I'll be able to find people on social media who will share it", he stated. "It's all about sharing, it's all about engaging people online". In another interview, Catherine similarly emphasised how journalism had become about selling an online product:

> The headline tells a story, and you want someone to click on it and that adds a whole other layer to it. Especially with the amount of news information that people are bombarded with, you need to make yours stand out so that people will choose to read it. There's a monetary value to that as well, and that's now your job too.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist, Catherine*)

The capital value of anti-Muslim media coverage also appears to be increasingly realised by commercially struggling news outlets drawn into the socially mediated world of audience metrics where news values are measured by page views, likes and shares (Dean, 2014). Audiences' preferences, and the ensuing popularity of certain types of stories, are monitored through web analytics. All the journalists I interviewed were feeling the impact of this. Broadsheet journalist Patrick, for instance, described how stories targeting Muslims are often seen as highly effective for driving online traffic, what he referred to as 'traffic gold'.

Journalists now receive real-time data on every single story, creating pressure to focus on content that boosts ratings. As broadsheet journalist Patrick stated in his interview:

> We're told how it's done over the last one minute, what's doing well, what the attention time is, where are the clicks, who's tweeted what. We get so much information that almost inevitably there will be more of a drive towards a rating sort of game where we compete in ratings terms. This would risk having the most damaging effect on modern journalism, on what we do, that we just seek this sort of traffic gold.
>
> *(Interview with broadsheet journalist, Patrick)*

By providing live information on how audiences are interacting with their content, those stories with most online traffic are seen to reflect what audiences want to read in their newspapers. Online audiences are defined through demographic data gathered through metrics (such as their page views, time on site, social media engagement with news stories or pages per visit) utilising a range of metric tools and platforms such as Google Analytics, Tweetdeck, Chartbeat, Facebook Insights, Sprout Social, Social Flow and Hootsuite (Whipple and Shermak, 2018). As Patrick added: "in the age of social media and the internet, you know it's all about the clicks. If you say certain things, then more people will click on that piece".

Even though journalists appear to hold a deep ambivalence towards the role of data analytics in news production, the increasing reliance to track and monitor the preferences of audiences has a significant impact on reporting and editorial practices (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015). For instance, web performance metrics act as gatekeeping mechanisms to help journalists and editors decide which news content to prioritise on the homepage (Whipple and Shermak, 2018).

At the same time, the dependence of digital journalism on social media news-sharing analytics has come under increasing criticism as an effective method of measuring audience participation. While metrics show what stories audiences are clicking on, for example, this data cannot give a definite answer for why they have clicked on this story. Rather than reflecting a genuine deeper engagement with particular types of news content, other factors have been linked to audience clicking behaviour, such as the personal relevance of a story, emotional responses, or even practical considerations such as slow loading times or data usage (Kormelink and Meijer, 2018). Likewise, there is growing recognition that the use of audience

analytics to assess news values can lead to a harmful cultural expectation of 'anything goes' (Chadwick, Vaccari and O'Louglin, 2018), particularly when it comes to Muslim stories as easy targets for clickbait.

When Profit Meets Principle: Balancing Journalism and Ethics

The pressures to produce news as clickbait often manifests as a contradiction between journalism's communitarian ideals and their submission to the market rationale (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015). For the journalists I interviewed, this was particularly the case with the socially mediated sharing of fake news on Muslims, and the risk of audiences not being able to distinguish between news and disinformation. Part of this concern related to how newspapers themselves had given mainstream platforms to polarising public figures to get more clicks. As Patrick highlighted:

> So even in a mild way, we know that if we put Donald Trump in a headline, then that's going to attract more readers. At the same time Nigel Farage is going to attract readers in different ways. They are hate figures [but] you end up building up these people. You end up creating this myth, you create this big, huge character. If you do it too much, then they get to say what they like, and they will get followers. The logic and reason which you think that people will respond to will just fly out of the window because [journalists] will try to present people with facts, and they will just say I don't believe you.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Patrick*)

Rather than encouraging informed public debate, the drive for this type of content often leads to dysfunctional and divided communities and increasing distrust in newspapers. Muslim journalists in particular expressed concerns that this would have a specific impact on Muslim communities, building on years of negative representations in the media and increasing Islamophobia across British society. "In this point of time there are issues with representation and Islamophobia. There aren't many diverse representations of Muslims in the media that can help with what's going on in society", Muslim freelance journalist Hasina stated in her interview. "And there is a link between what people view. Unfortunately, there are people who can't tell the difference that something's fiction and they get messages from the images they see in the media. They use that to feel hate".

To rationalise their critique of social media, nearly all of the interviewed journalists would draw a distinct demarcation to separate social media from 'real' journalism. Even though social media users were seen to overlap with digital news audiences, their mediated consumption practices were seen to contaminate the purity of the news. Most journalists were highly critical and scathing of social media platforms and viewed them as being responsible for what broadsheet journalist Brendan described as "completely twisting the news". Social media was seen to be particularly polarising, encouraging groupthink and echo chambers. Despite these concerns, the distinction between 'journalist' and 'digital journalist' has become increasingly redundant due to the hybridisation of print and digital content. As a

result, all the interviewed journalists had produced content involving Muslims that appeared in an online format and was shared through social media platforms.

Most were resigned to the realities of journalism in the social media age, where market competition pushes newspapers towards increasingly sensationalist and polarising ways. "Some news organisations are pandering to that", admitted one of the tabloid journalists I interviewed. "[My newspaper] does pander to a certain extent to that populism, it often regurgitates stories that have taken form in social media, that when investigated may not be true". This perspective – neatly summarised in the quote from Sarwat below – was echoed across the interviewed journalists.

> Public discourse has gone really ugly. I think we are in a very, very bad place at the moment. Part of the problem is social media. Social media is a very savage space. They are the competitors to mainstream media. Mainstream media feels it has to be as savage, looking for those kinds of extremes in order to compete.
>
> (*Sarwat, freelance journalist*)

This drive for more 'savage' and sensationalist stories also makes it difficult for journalists to find spaces where counter-narratives on Muslims can be published. Journalists struggled to reconcile their own journalistic ethics with the social media capital that came with these types of stories. Raj, for example, spoke about his own first-hand experience of this dilemma when writing stories (including comment pieces) on Muslims and how it had made him feel:

> A lot of the stuff that I published in the immediate aftermath of the ISIS attacks one or two years ago was very much 'click-baity'. I felt a little bit empty after writing because I thought oh, I hate that kind of stuff. So, what happens is that you become polarising, but as a result of that you become very popular and develop a certain face. Then as a result of that, you feel that you are justified saying what you're saying, and your views harden a lot.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist Raj*)

Clickbait reporting is seen as the pariah of professional journalism within the industry, with critiques of overselling stories through over-sensationalist or misleading headlines leading to the loss of trust from readers (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020). As I discussed in Chapter 1, the pressures faced by journalists to adopt similarly populist and polarising styles to maximise audience engagement can lead to the further amplification of negative representations of Muslims in the digital form.

Why Journalists and Audiences Are Out of Sync

While journalists generally will frame news to generate drama and draw in audiences, they remain highly conflicted about this practice, believing it to be to the detriment of other journalistic norms (Bartholomé, Lecheler and de Vresse, 2015).

The journalists I interviewed sought to position themselves separately from, and ethically above, social media. Yet they too remained vulnerable to the commercial pressures to conform to more populist narratives about Muslims. This created a conflict for several of the journalists between how they viewed the ideological role of journalism against its more economic constraints. As Amanda reflected:

> There's this horrible kind of struggle for balance because publications have to make money. They need to get advertising. They need to be shared. They want to create content that's going to be interesting and to make people retweet it or share it, to bring up the number of people who interact with that content. You know you have to have the kind of click bait headlines, but actually a lot of them are really inappropriate when you look at them. It seems to be tailored to certain people in society, rather than just a general reflection of what is actually happening.
>
> (*Interview with news agency journalist Amanda*)

Amanda worries that that the commercial drive for advertising results in clickbait reporting that does not engage with audiences in the way that journalism should. It is much easier to justify news selection using technical tools to measure engagement, rather than engage directly with audiences (for example, through community forums or focus groups; Karlsson, Ferrer-Conhill and Ornebring, 2023). Yet such a metrics-based process of news selection builds a reductionist view of audience engagement.

This prioritisation of market demands leads to the media's existing discourse of 'Otherness' around Muslims to continue to be reproduced and unchallenged (Marsden and Savigny, 2009). Digital journalism's focus on providing audiences with the sensationalist content they are seen to desire panders to the worst impulses of audiences (Perreault, 2022). The 'hyper-responsiveness' of news-sharing via social media platforms often intensifies racial controversies (Titley, 2020), turning the most Islamophobic media commentators into celebrities. As negative stories that stimulate audience emotions such as anger or fear are more likely to create a reaction on social networks, journalists are more likely to frame news content to attract these types of reactions. This leads to a real disconnect in the journalist-audience relationship where the imagined audience becomes even more separated from the public interests of the communities that journalism purports to serve.

The majority of the journalists I interviewed worried that such a market-led approach would be to the detriment of journalism's more civic responsibilities. Freelance journalist Raj, for example, reflected on the decline of traditional newspapers long-standing societal mission, and how powerful media institutions were being undermined by their focus on maximising clicks and revenue. As Raj elaborated:

> If you lose that trust, and they think that you are a force for evil or just trying to create trouble or disrupt or whatever, then you will get a lot of hits and a lot of people sharing your stuff. But you won't necessarily be able to build a loyal audience. You start thinking much more about media trust and about

> your role in the media ecosystem. And you suddenly realise that the problem is much greater than anyone admits to. The loyalty isn't there as it used to be because it [the media] is no longer a cultural institution. It doesn't have a cultural message anymore; it doesn't know what to say anymore.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist Raj*)

As Raj's introspective account shows, it is perhaps not surprising that these deeply felt tensions have resulted in significant pushbacks from journalists against the relentless pursuit of 'clickable' news stories that prioritise a datafied version of the audience (Dodds et al., 2023). There have been growing calls from both scholarship and industry for a journalism that pushes against clickbait reporting and distinguishes itself from social media by drawing back on the values and norms of professional journalism (Crilley and Gillespie, 2019). Similarly, several journalists I interviewed agreed that this was not in the best interests of the British public and often resulted in increasing polarisation, hatred and discrimination against Muslims.

Rather than being at the mercy of platforms for news distribution, news institutions have been looking at other ways to produce, distribute and monetise their content. This includes setting up paywalls, courting paid subscribers and using editorial analytics that go beyond the standard metrics to target an audience that is moving away from traditional print and broadcast news towards the digital (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, B.E., 2023). Audience-orientated editors have been recruited to combine metrics with a more editorial interpretation of news stories (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, 2018).

Journalists in general express concerns that digital strategies privilege the quantity of content (in terms of audience metrics) rather than its journalistic quality. This leads to tensions between how digital strategies are institutionalised at an operational level and how they are enacted at more individual and routine levels of news production (Whipple and Shermak, 2018). Often, this presents a conscious dilemma for journalists of how to reconcile their ethical and professional commitments with the demands of the digital market. Even though audiences choose what media content to consume, journalists have a responsibility as part of their communitarian role to conform to ethical standards, mitigating civic atrophy and hatred of minorities rather than adding to it (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015). Ultimately, as Tandoc and Thomas ask: "should journalists serve consumers, who sustain journalism through their purchasing power? Or should journalists serve citizens who occupy a central role in the conception of journalism as a form of public service?" (p. 248). When it comes to stories about Muslims, are today's audiences consumers hungry for the next sensationalist story or citizens requiring more informed and nuanced reporting about often complex and difficult events?

Defining the Audience: Who Are They Really?

Journalists' 'sense' of their audiences and the common-sense views they hold contribute to the way that stories on Muslims are reported. The popularity of

narratives that appeal to readers' own prejudices and anxieties about Muslims strengthen their commercial imperative. This is further reflected in journalists' accounts of the popularity of Islamophobic opinion columnists and stories shared through social media. These negative representations are seen by journalists to reflect the common-sense ideas of audiences and the British public when it comes to Muslims.

Nevertheless, a contrasting narrative also emerged in the data from the Home Affairs Inquiry which constructed readers as not only unprejudiced towards Muslims but also highly critical of any anti-Muslim bias found in press coverage. In particular, the concept of 'readers' was actively used to support the editors' arguments against anti-Muslim stories in their respective papers. "I have a responsibility to reflect and amplify the views of my readers", Lloyd Embley, group editor-in-chief of *The Mirror* told the committee. "My readers, as a general rule, come from a left-of-centre perspective and if I carried some of that stuff, I would lose readers; it would not be very sensible" (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*).

A more detailed explanation of the role that his readers played in challenging any potentially Islamophobic content was provided by *The Times'* assistant editor Ian Brunskill:

> We haven't got a mechanism that records how many Muslim stories we have done, but we would know at any given point what kind of signals we might have sent out on any of these topics, not least because readers will tell us, and they will tell us quite quickly and quite fiercely. If you go and look at the comments online on some of the stories that I imagine you will want to talk about and that have attracted all kinds of criticism, some of the most fierce criticism was from not just readers but paid-up subscribers [...] Go and look at some of those comments. They are still there, and they are taking us to task very fiercely. In that sense, we have an overview of where we are.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018)*

These accounts provide an interesting contrast to many of the journalists' earlier claims that readers' prejudices themselves played a significant role in newspapers anti-Muslim coverage.

This can be interpreted in two conflicting ways. Firstly, there is some evidence that news audiences have become much more discerning when it comes to trusting news sources. Rather than passive recipients of disinformation, audiences have become much more critical in their consumption of media across different platforms (Kyriakidou et al., 2023). Other studies report that audiences trust information in the news media much more highly than on other platforms (Mont'Alverne et al., 2022), and either way associate less credibility and connection to news that appears to be more market-orientated (Banjac and Hanusch, 2022).

An alternative view is that by framing the readers as a mechanism for holding the newspaper to account for any discriminatory or misleading articles, the editors are attempting to deflect questions from the Home Affairs Inquiry committee about how they are monitoring their own newspaper content for anti-Muslim bias. Here,

the editors draw on the public to protect and defend their legitimacy, and to resist scrutiny and criticism for any anti-Muslim bias within their newspapers.

Either way, these accounts suggest that readers are more literate and nuanced in their news consumption instead of simply seeking out entertaining, sensationalist content on Muslims. Edward Said (1997) himself similarly points to this concept of the good critical reader – one who asks the right questions and seeks the right answers to “disentangle sense from nonsense” when it comes to representations of Islam (p. lix). A significant proportion of the journalists I interviewed, however, remained unconvinced of this argument, drawing on the comments sections that appear at the bottom of Muslim-related stories as proof of the more prejudiced nature of British audiences. In his interview Martin expressed his strong criticism regarding the comments section beneath one of his articles involving Muslims:

> I mean obviously the comments are the most extreme furnace of hate that you can imagine. It is a shame that below the line, you can guarantee that any story about immigration, Islam, anything along those lines, the cultural flashpoints that rile up a certain type of person, you can just guarantee that the comment (section) will be flooded with those types of comments.
>
> *(Right-leaning tabloid journalist Martin)*

It is worth pointing out here that Martin observes that this experience is not unique to the right-leaning tabloid he currently worked for. He had noticed similar patterns in the comments section of a local newspaper where he had been previously based.

Similarly, in her interview, local journalist Catherine shared the backlash she received from readers in the comments section of stories about Muslims. “It’s difficult because as soon as you put something like that out, the comments underneath would be incredibly racist and that’s just really sad”, she told me. “When you see that, and it’s really awful, one way is to turn the comments off. You could do that but then there is an issue of freedom of speech”.

Much of the audience’s digital participatory turn within newspapers began when readers were given the freedom to comment instantly under online news articles. Digital audiences could comment and participate in the news process anonymously. Their comments appeared mostly unfiltered on news organisations’ platforms and how they were used and viewed depended on the newspapers themselves (Nielsen, 2020).

At the time, giving readers the option to participate in the news process through comments was seen by journalists as a positive way to stimulate public debate. Yet online comments from British newspaper readers posted in response to news columns on immigration, race and religious difference tend to be shrill and reactionary, frequently drawing upon racist assumptions and failing even basic standards of reasonableness (Richardson and Stanyer, 2011). Stricter governance and moderation had to be introduced by newspapers to manage the more toxic and abusive comments, with fewer articles opened to comments and the banning of repeat offenders (Gardiner, 2018). Newspapers now resort to the tight moderation or even shutting down of comments sections for those news stories most likely to generate racist vitriol and abuse.

How then do we account for this contradictory picture of newspaper audiences as holding prejudicial and negative views about Muslims while also being critical of newspapers that display this same bias?

Breaking Out of the Audience Silos

Throughout the book so far, I have highlighted how news stories relating to Muslims are framed to carry a connotative meaning beyond the events they report on. This message is often foregrounded in line with common-sense ideas about the nature of Muslims discussed in Chapter 1. We could conclude that journalists build upon their audiences' own sense of difference from Muslims to produce (often sensational) selective and connotative versions of news events that feed into existing audience ideas about Muslims. In my interviews with journalists, however, the discussions around how readers themselves are constructed in relation to Muslim representation reflected considerable ambivalence and contradiction and this requires further investigation.

Firstly, it is noteworthy that the readers' comments on articles referred to by both Catherine and Martin previously were not from negative stories but from stories attempting to show Muslims in a positive light. The negative comments received were therefore not necessarily reflective of the stories they appeared under. Secondly, other journalists highlighted the presence of 'pushbacks' to these anti-Muslim comments from other readers. Local journalist Elliot, for example, shared a story he had written about Muslim refugees becoming more integrated within the local community. Despite the positive angle that the story had taken, Elliot observed how many hateful and Islamophobic comments the article received, many which the newspaper had to hide. But there were also comments from other members of the local community calling out those negative, Islamophobic views. This indicates that the positions that readers take in response to anti-Muslim stories, or indeed any Muslim-related stories, are much more complex than simply reflecting inherent prejudices.

The difficulties in defining audiences have long been acknowledged within media research, and there has been a call to move away from ideas of audiences as unified entities (Ang, 2006). This call recognises that the role of the media is not simply to inform the public about what is happening in the world but to determine how citizens might position themselves within the communicative space that is constructed through news production (Martin, 2013). Newspapers often use of rhetorical strategies around what constitutes 'the public' and public interest. In hailing the public into the newspaper's own identity, they exercise their distinctive rhetorical power. This further blurs the boundaries between newspaper and audience in their claim to speak objectively in the public's interest (Martin, 2013). Yet tangible definitions of the 'public' remain just as elusive as attempts to define how newspaper audiences read and interpret Muslim-related stories. Media scholar John Hartley (1992) explains how:

> media audiences have often been subjected to strategies designed to turn them into something else, something more organised, more recognisable as

> a community, more responsible, responsive, biddable. Chief among these is the attempt to turn the audience into the public.
>
> (p. 119)

This imagined audience plays such a significant role in journalistic practices, content decisions, and how journalists view their role in society. Yet, a construction of an assumed audience (Hall et al., 1978) and an imagined British public that already holds prejudiced ideas about Muslims drives the reproduction of negative representations and their perceived appeal.

The ambivalent concept of 'the public' helps us understand how newspapers' misconceived assumptions about the prejudices of audiences act as drivers for negative, essentialist representations of Muslims discussed in Chapter 1. In his interview, tabloid journalist Ryan highlighted the reluctance of some news outlets to cover positive initiatives from Muslim organisations.

> I've got press releases from the MCB [Muslim Council of Britain] about 'come and visit your mosque day'. Well, that's a fantastic feature. There are stories around it, you can attach news stories onto it and that kind of thing. But we won't do it. We won't touch it because the prevailing wisdom is that our readers won't be interested which I think is wrong.
>
> *(Interview with tabloid journalist, Ryan)*

Ben's interview similarly highlighted the dangers of assuming readers were only interested in negative stories that stereotyped Muslims. He felt that this was to the detriment of the journalist-audience relationship, as he told me:

> I think just lazily writing this thing up like this will just reinforce lazy thinking in your readers. How could it fail to? I'd be surprised and I'd love to hear any argument that you've heard that goes against that thinking because I think it's based on the relationship of what you put out into the world with your readers.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Ben*)

Ben's account points to the responsibilities of journalists to ensure that their readers do not have a limited, essentialist view of Muslims through news reporting. Rather than seeing this as a unidirectional relationship of influence – whether of readers over journalists or journalists over readers – it is important to reconsider the complexities of this relationship in terms of negative Muslim representation.

A Different Sort of Audience?

So how can newspapers reposition the journalist-audience relationship in a way that fosters more nuanced, fairer reporting of stories involving Muslims?

To start with, we need to develop a more nuanced view of British audiences. For this, I turn to Hall's encoding/decoding model to reflect on how audiences

react in different ways to news content. The model was seminal in counteracting the 'hypodermic-needle theory' of mass media effects which saw audiences as mindless, passive media consumers. Under the model, audiences consume news stories in a variety of ways from accepting the newspapers' own interpretation of an event to opting for a more negotiated or oppositional interpretation (Hall, 2006).

The encoding process does involve some influence of 'taken-for-granted', common-sense ideas but news texts can be decoded independently from the wider ideological framework within which they appear. The model further reflects how media messages are historically and contextually contingent and open to contradiction (Hall, 2006). In her interview, Leila offered a similar perspective on the relationship between journalists and their audiences in the context of news stories involving Muslims:

> I think there's like a two-way relationship between readers and the media, right? As in that they form opinion, and they also say they are responding to opinion. There are also political actors involved who want to try to engage with the media and shape that narrative.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist Leila*)

Leila believes there is scope for journalists' engagement with audiences to guide debates about Muslims in more progressive directions. "I guess it depends on how you see your audience because I think they can push the boundaries of the debate to be more radical. There is space for that, and it is sometimes done", she added. "Maybe there's an element of thinking what people know, reinforcing what they already think. Then I think also sometimes they show a slightly different perspective". Even though she recognises that journalists often reproduce negative tropes and ideas about Muslims that reinforce readers' existing beliefs, Leila's narrative reflects that there is scope to push the boundaries of that debate and introduce more nuanced interpretations and counter-narratives.

Hall's polysemic starting point for the way news is consumed by audiences has been criticised for underestimating the power of the media to legitimise and rationalise certain interpretations as common sense (Philo, 2009). Even if journalists put forward alternative counter-narratives about Muslims, audiences may still actively choose to interpret them using the same tropes about Muslims that have circulated for decades (to borrow Leila's phrasing). This could help explain why negative comments are just as likely to appear under positive stories about Muslims. As audiences can often be critical of how newspapers frame stories about Muslims, this suggests that the power and influence of the media over public understandings and debate acts implicitly rather than explicitly (Philo, 2009).

In her interview, one London-based Muslim journalist reflected on how audiences' interpretations of news stories can vary significantly depending on their direct interactions with Muslims. "London is thankfully quite diverse, and the average reader might have Muslims as neighbours, as friends, whatever, and know they're not like this. So, they might have the luxury of understanding", she asserted. The journalist worried that in more rural areas or areas with lower Muslim

populations, audiences were overly reliant on newspapers' own interpretations, and this could be their main source of information about Muslims. "Of course, they're going to think that Muslim men are radicalised to become terrorists or whatever", she told me. "They are going to think that it's a massive problem. Or like grooming gangs, it's a huge problem and the numbers are far bigger than they are". Other journalists echoed this sentiment, including Karen, who stated:

> You know places where they've got no immigration, they've had no diversity, and they are absolutely terrified of it. So, it's the unknown, isn't it? Going back to the media, this is all fostered by an irresponsible press to further a different agenda. That's what makes me so uncomfortable.
>
> *(Interview with right-leaning broadsheet journalist Karen)*

Both journalists make an important point. Studies show that positive intergroup interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims lead to reduced prejudice, mediated by lower perceptions of realistic and symbolic threats and decreased intergroup anxiety (Alemi and Stempel, 2023). Others have found that while news consumption levels do not always directly influence feelings towards Muslims, other factors, including knowledge about Muslims and personal engagements with Muslims, can have some impact (Ewart and Walding, 2022).

These studies suggest that journalists can play a role in either perpetuating negative representations about Muslims in the public's 'common sense', or indeed in challenging and countering them by providing a much wider range of perspectives. While audiences may decode or interpret media texts in their own ways to some extent, this will inevitably be influenced by whether they only have access to a limited set of interpretations through the media to start with (Toynbee, 2008). This argument further highlights the reverse, hierarchical nature of the journalist-audience relationship, where it is journalists who are in a more privileged position to define social reality rather than their audiences (Toynbee, 2008) as claimed earlier in this chapter.

Redefining the Journalist-Audience Connection on Muslim Representation

Rather than seeing representation in the media as a one-way transmitter, it should be understood as a form of dialogue that is sustained through shared cultural codes between the media and its audiences (Hall, 1997). It is through these "cultural 'maps' of the social world" that journalists define what significant events are happening for audiences and provide interpretations of how to make sense of them (Hall et al., 1978, p. 57). If these cultural maps position Muslims as problematic and potentially dangerous 'Others', then it seems inevitable that negative Muslim representations will continue to be reproduced unchallenged. This view was presented by Leila during her interview:

> We do need to see it in a social context in which people are reproducing things or norms, but toxic norms. Right? I think the problem is a lot of those

> ideas have become common sense, so this idea that Muslims are a threat to the nation or are a threat to British culture. That is such a common-sense idea now that it is woven into so much of the coverage and that is what needs to be challenged.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist Leila*)

In line with Leila's comments, Hall (1997) maintains that our sense of belonging to British society comes from a sharing of cultural knowledge. When news events are mapped by newspapers, it is on the assumption that their readers share the same cultural frameworks to make sense of stories. Not all audiences will interpret Muslim-related stories in the exact same ways. However, a basic consensual framework often underlies these interpretations – namely the difference between 'their' culture and 'our' culture. A similar position is shared in my interview with Patrick and his call to fellow journalists to find other ways of telling Muslim-related stories. He argues that journalism has the power to either reinforce cultural maps that discriminate against and exclude Muslims, or that include them:

> If you want to have your bigotry reinforced, then newspapers can do that [...] People who are not like us can be seen as an outside threat. So, things like fears about crime, fears about people who are not like us, are just there dormant in people but ready to be exploited. It's up to a journalist whether we want to exploit those fears and stoke those fears, or whether we think we want to get along better and work together and have a more harmonious society. But in some cases, people prefer conflicts, they prefer domination, they prefer 'Us' against 'Them' because they get some kind of kick out of it.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning journalist Patrick*)

Patrick leaves the choice of whether to align with a journalism that plays up to fears and polarisation, or with one that works towards a more 'harmonious society', to each individual journalist. His call is essentially a question about journalists' responsibilities to their audiences. This also implies that a reconceptualisation of what the British public wants could lead to ways of reporting that move away from positioning Muslims as the problematic 'Other' in British society. This is an important finding, which I return to in Chapter 6.

Conclusion

The focus of this chapter has been to understand how journalists' preconceptions about audiences influence how they report on stories about Muslims. A closer examination of journalists' ambivalent conceptualisation of 'audiences' suggests that negative representations of Muslims become justified in line with the perceived demands of an imaginary 'public'. Even though journalists are placed under pressure by the commercial imperative to sell newspapers that appeal to this imagined audience, their commitment to public interest can over-ride this imperative by considering what the public need. It is likely, however, that the commercial

imperative for increasingly sensationalist stories about Muslims is only going to grow in the age of clicks and shares driven by audience metrics.

Journalists are only too aware of growing mistrust and increasing news avoidance by audiences, driven by a number of factors, including the view that the news can be overly sensationalist, biased and negative. In the face of increasing mainstream media distrust and news avoidance, audiences have become more sceptical of journalism's commercial priorities. There are concerns that journalism is becoming overly market-orientated, prioritising advertisers needs over those of the public (Banjac and Hanusch, 2022). Audiences find too much negative news leads to feelings of stress, confusion and anxiety, leading to news avoidance (Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2022). Others have reported how audiences have developed a pragmatic sceptism to mainstream news media and its potential for disinformation – opting for a more critical reading of news media both as texts and institutions (Kyriakidou et al., 2023).

Serving the best interests of audiences, as well as the British public overall, is a central component of journalism's more ideological mission. It is linked to journalism's perceived importance in democratic society and the ethical responsibility to the public to produce objective and balanced stories. Yet, as I turn to in Chapter 4, the very norms and routines that journalists rely upon to achieve this role can also stifle journalistic agency and enable the reproduction of negative representations of Muslims in the British press.

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3 Rethinking Journalism

Roles, Norms and Values[1]

Introduction

In 2021, the Centre for Media Monitoring released the findings of their extensive analysis of reporting on Muslims in the UK (Hanif, 2021).[2] The report found that almost 60% of online news articles about Muslims were negative, with one in ten articles misrepresenting Muslims and Islam. At the core of its recommendations, the report highlights that high journalistic standards are key to the fairer reporting of Muslims in Britain.

In the foreword of the report, Alison Phillips, then Editor-in-Chief of left-leaning tabloid newspaper *The Mirror,* shared her view that adhering to journalism practices that stayed true to the profession was imperative for fairer, more accurate reporting on Muslims. She wrote in the report:

> What drives so many to enter journalism; the desire to shine light in the darkest of corners, to hold power, in all its forms, to account and to give voice to those who are too often ignored. Yet all journalists who accept the responsibility of our work being a force for good must equally understand the damage we are capable of doing […] Everyone who works in the media has a duty to ensure the content they create is fair and responsible.
>
> *(Alison Phillips, cited in Hanif, 2021, p. 13)*

Rather than diminishing journalism or undermining the concept of journalistic objectivity, Phillips maintained that having some sensitivity towards others can only enhance the quality of fair and responsible journalism.

Journalists draw on professional norms such as objectivity and balance to build public trust and provide a non-interventionist, detached account of reality (Hanitzsch, 2011). However, these same collective norms of journalism practice can also act as a structural imperative that reinforces, rather than challenges, media bias against Muslims. Instead of neutralising bias, norms such as objectivity and balance can propagate existing biases (Raeijmaekers and Maeseele, 2017), acting counter-productively to reproduce negative interpretations when more nuanced journalistic judgements are called for. By positioning journalists above and separate to their audiences, professional norms further play a critical

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role in legitimising journalists as independent public servants with no agenda or interests of their own beyond reporting on the news. But what if, rather than challenging misleading media narratives about Muslim communities, the same norms and values act to the detriment of civic debate by reinforcing the very biases they claim to counter?

In this chapter, I investigate how journalism practices and norms impact on the ways that stories involving Muslims are reported. My interviews always began by asking journalists about their personal journeys into the profession. The narratives they shared gave a rich insight into what journalism meant to them, and what they believed to be its role in society. This was followed up by a discussion about journalism practices and norms, which was central to uncovering the tensions between the ideals of their profession and their actual practices when it comes to reporting on Muslims.

Journalistic Integrity and the Pursuit of Truth

Andrew has had an illustrious career spanning many decades working at a national British broadsheet newspaper. At the start of our interview, I asked Andrew to share why he decided to become a journalist:

> There are those who want to get involved in intervening with society. They use journalism as a way of documenting and chronicling society and highlighting change as a form of social action. That's what attracted me to journalism in that sense. The way you changed things was to find evidence, uncover and document and give voice to people. Showing the facts to people in that 1970s kind of belief in truth and honesty and wisdom, shining sword of truth and all that sort of stuff. It's almost journalism as revelation.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Andrew*)

The imagery evoked in this interview highlights the common association of journalism as the inheritor of enlightenment values (Anderson, 2019) with a mission to actively seek out truth through knowledge. In line with Andrew's vision, journalism scholar Marcel Broersma (2010) observes how this promise of truthfulness forms the basis of a social code shared by journalists and their audiences. As a trustee for the public, journalists professionally report and investigate social reality, distinguishing "facts from fiction, lies and biased comments" (Broersma, 2010, p. 25).

The concept of truth is closely articulated with journalism's responsibilities to public interest. Journalists rely on certain professional norms and conventions to persuade the public of their ethical commitment to get to the truth or at least strive to get as near an accurate picture of social reality as possible. In today's post-modern, digital societies, some may argue that the concept of truth has become unstable, relative and elusive. Journalists are increasingly challenged for their representational accuracy and political orientations, complicating their claims to journalistic authority (Carlson, 2018). Others point to the current 'crisis'

of journalism and the rise in fake news to be symptomatic of the challenging of traditional news hierarchies in the digital age (Waisbord, 2018). Fake news itself is not a particularly new phenomenon, but it has reach unprecedented scale in terms of speed and reach due to digital platforms such as X (Waisbord, 2018).

At the same time, many newspapers have returned to the close association between truth-telling and journalism to become even more guarded about fact-checking. In one interview with a high-profile broadsheet journalist, he emphasised the importance of truth for his profession.

> You've got to get your facts right and you've got to believe in truth, without inverted commas incidentally. You have to believe it, and it's very clear and everyone sort of knows the journalists who don't. The journalists who are writing to satisfy their readers' prejudices or to push a party line. You can sort of tell that straight away.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist*)

Journalism itself has roots in modernity and positivist ideals regarding the seeking out of the truth. Nonetheless, it takes its power from persuading the public of the truthfulness of its interpretation of the news, and as a result, turns this interpretation into an approximation of social reality (Broersma, 2010). Some journalists may narrowly align the concept of truth with an obligation to accuracy alone, but most recognise that a completely mimetic semblance of truth is not realistically obtainable (Zelizer, 2004). It is for this reason that Zelizer (1992) recommends journalism be viewed primarily from an interpretivist epistemological position, and as rhetorical rather than 'truthful'. Afterall, as she points out, "much of journalists' interpretive authority lies not in what they know" but rather in "how they represent their knowledge" (p. 34). Rather than truth-tellers, others argue that journalists should be seen as professional 'truth brokers' in the acknowledgement that 'truths' themselves are often the unstable outcome of media debate itself (Michailidou and Trenz, 2021).

When it comes to stories involving Muslims, journalist's judgements influence how a story is framed, what aspects are emphasised or downplayed, how sources are used, and the language and phrasing of the story. All these factors contribute to the role that journalists play in terms of the meanings are offered to their wider audiences (Baden, 2019). This does not mean that journalists should downplay their commitment to facts and accuracy, especially at a time of growing disinformation online. In my interview with Francesca, for example, she emphasises the importance of establishing facts in the reporting of terrorist attacks:

> You know if there's a terrorist attack, you try to work out how many people have been killed. So, at that level, it is trying to establish the truth. You know one would hope that our institutions in terms of news organisations are rigorous enough to make sure that their journalists are checking their facts.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist, Francesca*)

Francesca recognises that even a factual account of the news can become compromised as a by-product of the news production process. For this reason, she felt very nervous of any journalist who said that they were producing the truth.

> [We] spend a lot of time trying to get as close to a truth as possible – […] trying to establish as much of the facts as [we] can find. But I don't actually believe that you ever get to the truth. Any journalist must be aware that they are always arranging those facts in a way that is likely to strengthen the story. And by strengthening the story, it means make it more dramatic, more interesting, and more readable. I mean you've got to get people to read it.
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist, Francesca*)

Francesca's account highlights how many journalists struggle with thinking of meaning within newswork in terms of truth and even in terms of objective accuracy.

Stuart Hall and Journalists under Media Hegemony

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997) maintains that media discourse should be viewed as a process of translation and exchange, where cultural communication takes place within an imbalanced circuit of difference and power (p. 11). Rather than truth as having some kind of universal meaning, meaning in media discourse is the product of cultural practices at a given time and space, influenced by prior discursive positions. For Hall, the starting point when it comes to representations of Muslims is the recognition that the media defines, rather than reproduces, reality. Representations are not immutable reflections of what a particular person or community 'are' but instead involve the active process of signification, of "selecting and presenting, of structuring […] [of] making things mean" (Hall, 2006, p. 118).

Even though most journalists are aware of this central aspect of news production, news coverage continues to be presented as a discourse that should be able to accurately mirror social reality (Broersma, 2010, p. 26). Broersma describes this as one of the key paradoxes of journalism where news work is understood as a descriptive discourse, i.e., a mimetic recounting of events in a detached and objective manner. Instead, he argues, journalism should be seen as a performative discourse where journalists strive to persuade readers that their produced news story is a 'truthful' account of reality. It is through this 'performance' that journalism acts to "transform(s) an interpretation into truth – into a reality the public can act upon" (p. 21). An example can be seen in the link between negative media narratives of asylum seekers and migrants as 'bogus', 'super-calculating and unscrupulous individuals' and public support for the 'tough stance' against immigration justified by politicians (Moore, 2015, p. 1).

Certain media representations of ethnic minorities appear as 'truths' even when they are interpretations adapted to editorial agendas with different political and

social angles. In his interview, Roger, for example, tells me about how different newspapers would present stories associating knife crime with Black young people:

> If you look at the knife crime stuff today, there's a feeling of, you know, we need to crack down hard on this, we need to stop and search, we need to seize knives, that sort of attitude in a lot of papers. But you see in *The Guardian* they're saying spend money on them, they're highlighting that angle, spend money on youth clubs for kids and stop school exclusions and all that. Now the truth is that one is just a different political viewpoint, and you go for whatever you go for.
>
> (*Interview with right-leaning tabloid journalist Roger*)

Roger's account embodies the concept of news values by which editors and journalists determine what is newsworthy (Bednarek and Caple, 2014). It highlights that while news values in terms of what stories are worth covering might be shared across newspapers, how these newsworthy stories are then delivered to audiences differ significantly. Different newspapers impose their criteria on the 'raw materials' of news events to actively transform them into a news story that fits in with their own 'social personality' and audience needs (Hall et al., 1978). When it comes to representations of Muslims, studies show that British newspapers represent Muslims and Islam according to particular editorial values, styles and audiences, dictated by different political and social positions (Poole, 2002). Right-leaning newspapers (tabloid or broadsheet) are generally more negative towards Muslims than left-leaning broadsheets, but this is not always so straightforward. As I discuss in Chapter 1, the left-leaning press is also more critical of Muslims than other minority groups due to the perceived anti-liberal traditionalism of Muslims and Islam and the newspapers' own anti-religious, pro-secular position (Poole, 2002).

Recognising journalism as a performative discourse in this way introduces some ambiguity to journalism's own procedures concerning representations as reliable and truthful depictions of Muslim communities. Hall (1997) points out that representations do not embody truthful images of a reality that exists outside of cultural practices. Rather than a single, fixed, and unchanging meaning, representations encompass evolving and complex frameworks of interpretation that depend on the much wider cultural and socio-political contexts in which they are set. Instead of reflecting accurate or inaccurate images of reality, representations are contingent on the ideological work that goes into their creation and reproduction. In her interview, Leila similarly shared her concerns about news-reporting on Muslims:

> We need to realise that the media and journalists shape public opinion. It's not just reflecting what is happening neutrally, it is creating meaning. You create meaning by giving certain forms of representation. I think that can reinforce existing meaning, or it can create new meanings, or embed certain ideas in the public imagination. To claim that there is some objective truth is often not true, or journalism can go beyond that. If there is some kernel of

truth that needs to be communicated, as in 'X' event happened on 'X' day, it will often add onto that and give an interpretation or give a particular slant.
(*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Leila*)

It is for this reason Hall (1974) contends that news values should be viewed as a form of professional ideology or, as he puts it, "news values are […] a man-made, value-loaded system of relevancies" (pp. 24–25). Rather than reflecting the neutrality of newspapers, news values embody an ideological structure that ensures the reproduction of the dominant ideas of the major social, political and legal institutions of society (Hall et al., 1978). For news to be viewed as legitimate and unbiased, it needs an infrastructure around it that convinces the public that a particular representation of reality is a truthful and reliable one (Broersma, 2010). When it comes to news stories involving Muslims, the media's interpretations of news events must authoritatively *appear* as trustworthy reproductions of those events. Journalists cannot appear to be biased in any way that could contaminate the way stories about Muslims are told.

The reproduction of negative representations of Muslims can be aligned to the need to reinforce dominant, often exclusionary perspectives on the position of Muslims within British society. Hall (1974) asserts this type of media hegemony does not necessarily imply direct pressure or control over journalists, but that journalists' orientation towards dominant definitions becomes realised through the more routine practices of news production. Under Hall's framework, news production reflects a structural process in which specific journalistic practices reinforce dominant assumptions about society and how it should operate, while keeping journalists themselves in a position of relative structured subordination (Hall et al., 1978).

Norms such as objectivity and balance give journalists what Hall (1974) terms a 'normative dignity' as validated and authoritative sources of knowledge rather than performers who serve to engage their audiences (p. 276). Journalists draw on professional norms to distance themselves from the stories they report upon. However, the same norms play an aversive role in the reproduction of negative representations of Muslims and other ethnic minority communities.

By subconsciously deferring their own judgements in favour of detachment, journalists end up reproducing hegemonic interpretations of the news that inherently reproduce inequalities in terms of how marginalised communities are represented. Recognising that journalists perform within relatively autonomous codes of their own (Hall, 2006) – while still operating within a structure of legitimations that narrow their interpretations of the news in practice – offers some explanation towards the enduring reproduction of negative Muslim representations in the British press. Journalists need not actively seek to reproduce anti-Muslim representations as this reproduction is systematically entrenched within their own ideals and practices.

Objectivity as Professional Retreatism

A key premise behind objectivity as a journalistic norm is that an unbiased and true account of reality is obtained through the depersonalisation and

rationalisation of journalistic practices (Broersma, 2010). When it came to stories about Muslims, many of the journalists I interviewed saw objectivity as a way to separate themselves from the stories they reported. In her interview, Hasina, a Muslim freelance journalist who covers stories involving Muslims across different newspapers, links the idea of objectivity to the separation of her personal identity as a Muslim and her professional role as a journalist. "When you're being objective, you're playing a role", she explains. "You're being professional, and you are kind of just basically trying your best to fill the role without having any bias. We have to present the facts whether we like it or not, whether we agree or not".

In the words of Hasina, it is possible to see how objectivity serves as a means for the journalist to both professionally and psychologically detach themselves from the stories they write involving Muslims. At its core, it is seen as a negative concept for journalism as it implies the negation of overt bias through a focus on external facts rather than personal judgements (Carson, 2018). Hall (1974) refers this distancing as a form of professional retreatism. Objectivity in this sense acts as what Tuchman (1972) referred to as a 'strategic ritual' that protects journalists from any negative consequences to what they write. As Amanda stated:

> On being objective, at least I can sleep at night. I don't feel guilty about what I'm doing, I'm not ruining somebody's life today. I'm just telling the truth and it's so empowering and reassuring.
>
> *(Interview with news agency journalist Amanda*)

Amanda's belief in objectivity reflects the power of journalism's professional ideology, where procedure mechanisms such as objectivity lead journalists to social truths and ensure the legitimacy of journalism as a public institution is sustained (Anderson, 2019).

In practice, news production never adheres to such elevated standards of objectivity. News stories are ultimately socially contextual and selective, whether in terms of how a story is framed or what language is used, or even which stories are told. When writing her comment pieces, for example, Leila is particularly critical about the claim to objectivity made by her peers:

> I think it's really important to be upfront about that. It's different if you're writing straight news, that is if you're giving an opinion. For me there is a clear distinction. But even if you're writing news, there is an ideological pinning and to claim that there isn't, is somewhat disingenuous.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist and columnist, Leila*)

Even though columnists are unlikely to make the same claims of objectivity as their news-reporting peers (an issue I raised in Chapter 2), Leila's account highlights how objectivity obscures to news readers that what they are consuming is one interpretation of an event. A similar perspective was echoed by Sarwat in

her scathing indictment of the truth values of news compared to those of opinion columns:

> I don't think news is unbiased in this country, that's just a lie that our press is objective. At least with opinion pieces, you know, people read it, and they know that's what she thinks, that's what he thinks. Whereas you can read a news article in [a mainstream broadsheet newspaper], and it looks so imperious and establishment and reliable and the typesetting everything, and it's stuffed full of misinformation in the guise of news.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist and columnist, Sarwat*)

Sarwat raises some interesting points about the blurring of commentary and news within newspapers. Like most columnists, she recognises that an opinion piece does not fall under the same rules of objectivity as straightforward news-reporting. What she ignores, however, is that having a platform on a mainstream newspaper lends some of that legitimacy to those commentators, particularly if they have regular columns. Similarly, she questions whether news as a legitimate form of journalism itself is immune to misinformation and bias.

Knowledge linked to power has the authority of being legitimised as the truth but, more importantly, it holds the power to persuade others that it is indeed 'true' (Hall, 1997). Even though truths about Islam and Muslims are relative according to who produces them (Said, 1997, p. lviii), journalism's legitimatised relationship with knowledge serves to reinforce and consolidate certain ideas about Muslims as unbiased representations backed by objective analysis. As the public judges the news as truth through the norms and standards they expect from professional journalism, objectivity allows journalists to put forward authoritative representations of Muslims that are seen by audiences to be fair and legitimate.

By virtue of their profession, journalists hold a certain status as knowing subjects and are placed in powerful positions from which to speak (Mills, 2004, p. 115). Yet objectivity curtails journalistic agency to challenge biased reporting on already marginalised, ethnic minority communities, or to intervene in societal affairs through their news work. Where journalists may want to intervene, for example in redressing the way a particular story about Muslims has been told, objectivity dictates that they adopt a strict non-interventionist approach where personal judgements are potential contaminants to the veracity of a news story.

In this way, journalistic norms such as objectivity serve to self-police how stories about Muslims are reported, ensuring that the same negative narratives are reproduced in a never-ending cycle. This reflects a socialisation process where specific journalistic practices reinforce dominant assumptions about society and how it should operate, keeping journalists themselves in a position of relative 'structured subordination' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 59). By focusing on objectivity, it becomes easier for journalists to raise themselves above any problematic content they produce (Hall, 1974). In an interview with a journalist who sometimes wrote quite

contentious comment pieces, I asked whether he ever worried about the potential consequences of some of the articles he writes involving Muslims:

> If asked rationally I would say well, I just put stuff out there and I have no idea of whether it will have any impact. Even if it does have an impact, you can't control the consequences. You can't control how people will read [it] and what lessons they will draw from that.
>
> (*Anonymised interview with journalist and columnist*)

When it comes to writing comment pieces, this journalist upholds his responsibility to write literately, passionately and accurately but his responsibility ends when he lays down his pen. By denying any real consequences of his work, he becomes free to write whatever he likes with little accountability beyond producing well-written articles. In contrast, several of the journalists I interviewed were very conscious of how their reporting might have detrimental consequences for Muslim communities – a point I return to later in the chapter.

Rather than providing vulnerable groups with protection against bias, norms such as objectivity can act counter-productively to reproduce negative interpretations. At the same time, as a homage to journalistic detachment, objectivity serves as a barrier for those journalists who wish to challenge any existing negative bias within newspapers. When journalists become legitimised as independent public servants with no agenda or interests of their own, newspapers also become immune to accusations of racism or Islamophobia in how they report on ethnic minority communities.

In practice, the contradictory nature of objectivity when it comes to reporting on Muslims remains problematic. My interviews with journalists uncovered a clear tension between how the norm of objectivity was understood in theory, and how it was applied in practice, particularly when reporting on an already marginalised community. While objectivity does not appear to hold the prestige it once did in journalism circles (Ruotsalainen et al., 2019), most journalists I interviewed did believe that objectivity was important in preventing personal biases from impacting on the stories they reported involving Muslims. At the same time, a more reflexive conceptualisation of objectivity can be imagined in line with the vision of a liberal, multicultural society, as reflected in the following case study of local newspaper journalist, Catherine.

Case Study: Local Journalist Catherine

Catherine is an ambitious local journalist who writes for a newspaper in a multicultural British city with a significant Muslim population. Like many journalists I interviewed, Catherine struggled with the concept of objectivity in principle and in practice when it came to reporting on Muslim-related stories. She told me during her interview:

> I think it's essential, you should be as objective as possible. There were a lot of times where I would interview somebody, and my personal beliefs

> they completely contradicted that. I try to be as fair and neutral as possible. Obviously, I press them to get the answers, but I am aware that everyone has unconscious bias. I don't really know how I can retreat from that. I assume the technique I use is just to ask myself how would I see this from somebody else's eyes. Just trying to be as objective as possible but I don't know if true objectivity *is* ever possible, if that makes sense.

For Catherine, the premise that journalists draw on objectivity to completely detach themselves from the stories they write appears to be an impossible quest. While she maintains that she should strive towards objectivity as much as possible, Catherine recognises that she cannot entirely remove her own lens from the stories she tells. Journalists cannot totally detach themselves as they inevitably will make judgements on how a story is framed, what aspects to foreground, what connections to make with other stories, what sources to use and therefore what meaning to offer to audiences (Baden, 2019). Just as Catherine worries about her unconscious bias when reporting on stories involving Muslims, it is not always possible for journalists to completely separate their own moral and personal beliefs from the stories they report. The best way for Catherine to reconcile this dilemma is to rely on her own agency in the form of her conscious judgement on how best to report on the story (in her case, by trying to see it from another perspective than her own). Rather than passively detach herself from the story, Catherine recognises that she herself may have biases that impact on how she reports on Muslims and consciously decides to challenge her own interpretations.

By taking a reflexive approach to objectivity, Catherine is forced to reject a strictly non-interventionist approach where her personal judgement as a journalist is seen to be a potential risk to the veracity of the news story. By accepting this judgement as strength, she instead engages in a process of self-reflexive assessment that leads to better, less biased reporting (Carlson, 2018). Since research consistently shows the disproportionate bias against Muslims in British newspapers, this reflexive approach becomes a necessary measure to balance media coverage and counteract existing biases. As media scholar John Budarick (2022) points out, "maintaining the (selectively applied) norm of disinterested non-involvement risks not only failing to challenge racism but legitimising existing systems of inequality and oppression" (p. 7).

Catherine's case highlights the contradictory nature of journalistic norms such as objectivity when it comes to reporting on Muslims and other already marginalised communities. But what happens when journalism's norms stand in contradiction of other important liberal values such as anti-racism, social equality and civic responsibility?

In a later interview extract, Catherine reflects on the tensions she experienced in the reporting of an incident that took place in April 2018. Anonymous letters had been distributed amongst the public, labelling the 3rd April as 'Punish a Muslim' day.[3] The letters encouraged recipients to attack Muslims to be awarded points for the acts (BBC News, 2018). These ranged from 25 points for removing a Muslim

woman's headscarf to 500 for murdering a Muslim. In this extract we discuss how she described the 'Punish a Muslim' letters as 'vile' and 'disgusting' in her article:

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about the background to the story?

Catherine: I saw a story online. I didn't actually have anyone come to me and say you know I've received this letter, or I've seen this letter. The use of the word vile I would defend in the sense that it is hate speech. I guess it's just trying to reaffirm that these things are wrong. I think because this was so abhorrent and so clearly wrong, that's how this came about.

Interviewer: You also said 'disgusting' that's quite strong language, what were you trying to convey to your audiences?

Catherine: I guess it's just trying to reaffirm that these things are wrong. I think if I'd put it into any other context, if it was a woman or a transgender person, I would still use those adjectives because these are illegal acts which I think any reasonable member of society would think are abhorrent. I completely see that if it was purely objective, then you take out the vile, you take out the descriptions. But I think today when you have so much fake news and when you have such a huge gambit available to you – sometimes you need to point people in the direction maybe? Whether that's truly objective journalism, probably not.

In this account, Catherine's sense of responsibility for exposing hate speech shapes her professional commitment to objectivity. Throughout her interview, a different, imaginary of objectivity emerges for reporting on stories involving already vulnerable communities. Rather than being something that distances the journalist from the story, objectivity here serves to reconnect with her wider responsibilities in a multicultural, anti-racist society. Instead of detaching herself, Catherine recognises her important role as part of the society she reports on, and as such, has a responsibility to challenge actions that are harmful to that society. Whether it is to check if their own unconscious biases have impacted a story or to make a judgement on when to 'take sides', this form of reflexive objectivity involves an active judgement on the part of the journalist with the wider goals of an inclusive society in mind.

Rethinking Objectivity: A Reflexive Perspective

Media ethics scholar Stephen Ward (2020) refers to this as a form of situated objectivity – an 'objectivity with a human face' (p. 5) – where the journalists' own beliefs are held up to personal and public scrutiny. Such an approach involves viewing journalism in terms of engagement rather than detachment. As Ward highlights, "journalism needs an explicit and philosophically grounded ethics of democratic engagement that is neither a biased, partisan form of engagement nor a mincing neutral journalism". Instead, "journalists are objectivity advocates for plural, egalitarian democracy" (Ward, 2020, p. 5).

Central to this type of reflexive practice is the recognition of agency as a direct intervention to the professional retreatism often advocated in objective journalism. Rather than personal biases impacting on how news stories about Muslims are told, agency here refers to journalists' willingness to make judgements about how best these stories are told. American sociologists Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998) view this type of agency as a dynamic interplay of routine, purpose and judgement. The norms and values Catherine draws upon in her work are products of her engagement as an actor with her audiences in ambiguous and challenging circumstances. As Emirbayer and Mische explain:

> Norms and values […] emerge when individuals experience a discordance between the claims of multiple normative commitments. Problematic situations of a moral and practical nature can thus become resolved […] when actors reconstruct the temporal-relational contexts within which they are embedded and, in the process, transform their own values and themselves.
>
> (pp. 1012–1013)

I return to the complex structure-agency dichotomy that lies beneath much of the experiences of the journalists I interviewed when reporting on stories involving Muslims in Chapter 4.

Objectivity as an ideal is not problematic in itself unless its application in practice represses journalists' own judgements while justifying and reproducing existing biases within the media. Reconciling the gap between objectivity as an ideal and its application in practice requires considering how journalism practices disguise that objective news stories about Muslims are socially (and often politically) contextual and selective. Studies of journalistic role performance interpret this as the gap between objectivity as an ideal and as a practice. Harlow and Brown (2022), for example, observe how the normative professional ideal of objectivity over-rides journalists' personal judgements in the reporting of protests. Journalists believe they are acting objectively by treating the protests as any other breaking news events by disregarding the rationales behind the protests. Rather than protecting journalists from bias, Harlow and Brown find this often has an opposite delegitimising effect for certain protests such as those about racial injustice

For now, objectivity continues to be a highly contested concept amongst journalism scholars and practitioners, particularly when set against the increasingly digital media landscape, the growth in online disinformation and fake news, and rising populism and polarisation. There have been calls for journalists to double down on their commitment to objectivity (Anderson, 2018) and the non-interventionist image of the journalist has been put to the test in recent times. For example, US journalists and commentators challenged the norm of objectivity to actively advocate for social justice following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Schmidt, 2023). Studies of journalistic role performance across different countries report on the tensions that journalists face between the ideal of objectivity and values orientated around advocating social action to redress inequalities (Hartley and Askanius, 2021 in the reporting on the #MeToo movement in Denmark and

Sweden) or avoid potential social harms (Mellado et al., 2012 with reference to journalists in Chile, Brazil and Mexico).

Rather than neutralising possible bias in newspaper discourse, norms like objectivity can reinforce existing systemic biases against ethnic minorities that are already entrenched within media structures and journalism itself (Budarick, 2022). By acknowledging the limitations of news production in terms of its truth-seeking role, it is more difficult for journalists to legitimise negative representations of Muslims under the veneer of this ideological function.

A Flawed Pursuit of Balance?

Like objectivity, balance is viewed as an integral component of journalism. The two norms are sometimes used interchangeably, but the general working definition of balance points to the traditional 'seesaw' metaphor (Mindich, 2000, p. 7) where opposing voices are given space in a news story. The journalist is committed to providing different perspectives on the same news event or issue, with a view of fostering wider civic debate. In his interview, Ben explains to me why balance is so important in his news work:

> Personally, for me that is simply a quality control issue. Having a balanced debate within the piece, I need to be doing that. I always find it uncomfortable if a deadline comes along for one of my pieces and there is only one voice in it. I hope that I'm going to be attempting to achieve a plurality of voices, if not within a single article, then hopefully in the range of articles across an issue. Hopefully within that I'm going to be capturing voices that won't be heard, often simply from putting the effort into not putting out unbalanced, one-sided stories.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Ben*)

Ben's application of balance is premised on a Habermasian model of rational civic debate, where the journalist provides citizens with access to a fair, open arena for public debate by providing a plurality of different perspectives (Karppinen, 2007). The journalist puts forward different sides to a news event, and it is left to audiences to decide the normative implications of the story (Anderson, 2019). From the perspective of Muslims, balance provides space to those voices that might not otherwise be heard. In his interview, broadsheet journalist Andrew similarly spoke about the importance of giving a fair and accurate, open-minded hearing or a chance for the reader to at least witness a different perspective on an issue. "Minority voices should be given a chance to present themselves and be accurately seen for what they are, rather than for what they may be portrayed as", he stated. "It's about giving that chance to the readers to understand those different points of view fairly, rather than forever delegitimising some voices".

As Muslims are already portrayed in disproportionately negative ways in newspapers, the principle of balance should – in theory at least – create the space for more Muslim counter-narratives to enter media debate. For contested news

topics involving Muslims such as the wearing of the Muslim veil by women, for instance, Catherine emphasised the need for a balanced reporting where voices from all sides of the argument are heard:

> I think the conversation needs to be had, but you just have to be so careful. It is very easy to say women who wear the burka are oppressed and this is why, but you definitely need to have the other voice. In the present day, it has to be very carefully presented to make it look like you aren't favouring one over the other. You're not making statements, that its nuanced, that the reader has the opportunity to make up their own mind.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Catherine*)

As it stands, some media debates about the burka do represent examples of more nuanced and balanced media coverage about Muslims in the British press (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013).

Scottish journalist and academic Myra Macdonald (2006) reports on the tendency of press coverage to reflect the veil as an "iconic symbol of cultural difference" (p. 7). She also finds some openness and diversity in its wider representation, particularly from the more liberal, national newspapers. A similar ambivalent and at times contradictory position in the British press on the veil has been reported by Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010) in their analysis of press coverage of Labour MP Jack Straw's request to female Muslim constituents to remove their veils during consultations. A range of critical perspectives on Straw's comments (i.e., supporting the choice of Muslim women to wear the veil) were presented alongside the more negative representations about the veil itself. A broad range of Muslim voices were given space in the British press, coming from both men and women, both in defence and in criticism of the veil. This level of diverse balance leads Meer, Dwyer and Modood to conclude that the inclusion of diverse Muslim voices reflected some heterogeneity of Muslim views on the veil in British newspapers.

Outside of the UK too, Golnaraghi and Dye (2016) find that Muslim women have actively contributed to Canadian press debate on the veil, often counteracting the more dominant narratives of oppression with alternative ones centred on empowerment and resistance to Western representations of themselves. Yet despite the efforts to include a wider range of voices in the burka debate, it continues to be associated with negative connotations in UK newspapers, fluctuating as a symbol of oppression to a symbol of defiance and the rejection of liberal values (Williamson, 2014).

As Hall (2006) points out that even if a variety of interpretations are put forward in a news story, they are rarely equal amongst themselves. Instead, those interpretations closer to the interests of the dominant cultural order and to existing common-sense ideas about Muslims will dominate newspaper discourse. All interpretations put forward through the media are hierarchical, with the viewpoints of marginalised communities holding less power to define and influence how they are represented. This makes it very difficult to achieve balance in an already tilted playing field where Muslims are forced to 'defend' their position against a more

dominant ideological narrative. Muslim women who wear the burka, for example, must defend their personal choice against the wider ideological force of Western feminism. Whenever there is a terrorist attack, Muslim communities are to condemn the attack over and over again or justify their faith against the violence of an extremist minority (Green, 2018).

Balance here serves as a disguised form of inequality, as even if Muslims are given a voice in the media, the boundaries of what they can say have already been set by the dominant narrative. Any competing definitions of reality within a news story remain fixed within its parameters (Hall, 1997). In her interview, Leila highlighted this point in terms of the unequal ways in which debates around Muslims are framed:

> People think they cherish freedom of speech, and they think those ideas need to be debated, but the problem is that they are debated within an unequal framework. It's not as if everyone are equal players. It's not as if a non-Muslim and a Muslim are debating, that they have an equal status – the way that Muslims are already perceived by the public.
>
> (*Left-leaning broadsheet journalist and columnist, Leila*)

Leila's account suggests that while journalists may include Muslim voices in their attempt to produce a balanced story, these voices are often positioned from a starting point of disadvantage against the more dominant ways in which they are negatively portrayed. Studies of the relationship between balance and choice of sources further demonstrate that journalists rely on the voices of elites to set the framework of news stories, while ordinary people are often used as passive sources, responding to the agendas set by the elite (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017). Despite the concept of balance appearing to champion a diversity of voices, it becomes subject to the same criticisms faced by the Habermasian model of civic debate itself by failing to consider the power asymmetries and inequalities inherent in public life (Raeijmaekers and Maeseele, 2017).

Similarly, in newspaper discourse about Muslims, the struggle over meaning does not take place in an idealised discursive sphere between different, balanced ideological positions. Rather than balance as a means of levelling the field when it comes to Muslim representation, balance in journalism often results in a 'false symmetry' by ignoring the unequal relative weights set by the power-relations of those involved (Hall, 1974, p. 22).

Balance and Its Inequalities

Media debate of Muslim-related topics, whether about Islamophobia, the wearing of the burka or terrorism, and Muslim participation in these debates is confined to the frames chosen and set by media producers. Representations of Muslims in newspaper coverage are expected to conform to existing 'common-sense' ideas based on historical, Orientalist preconceptions of Muslims juxtaposed against a more liberal and progressive Western world. Modern-day newspaper

representations of Muslims, for example, continue to be framed in a narrative of cultural incompatibility (Poole, 2019). Representations built upon historical premises are particularly difficult to disarticulate from their negative connotations as they have been powerfully embedded in public common-sense through the weight of history (Hall et al., 1978). This means that any counter-narratives to more negative representations of Muslims must work even harder to be afforded any space within newspapers.

This argument becomes particularly important in terms of how journalists select their sources to achieve balance within a particular news story. Access to, and success in, getting your message across through the media requires considerable cultural capital to have any kind of significant effect on constructing or disrupting a particular public agenda (Schlesinger, interview with Slaatta, 2016). Muslims in Britain have become much more politically visible both as individuals and as groups, leading to a greater variety of Muslim voices in media coverage. Muslim organisations in particular have developed effective strategies for pushing forward their positions through the media (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010).

On a national level, organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) have actively campaigned to change the way Muslims are represented in the mainstream media. MCB's campaign has achieved such a high profile that it now has a separate, evidence-based organisation, The Centre for Media Monitoring, dedicated to redressing the negative representations of Muslims in the media. Even local Muslim community groups and leaders are seeking out positive relationships with local journalists, so that their voices are heard in local coverage (Munnik, 2018).

Multiculturalism scholar, Tariq Modood (2020), views this type of assertive agency as a critical element for the rearticulation of negative representations and 'misrecognitions' of Muslims (p. 36). Muslim communities have been key to the process of dislocating negative representations from holding the privileged common-sense status of what 'everybody knows' about Muslims. Yet even as Muslim organisations have become increasingly vocal on the issue of negative media representation, organisations such as the MCB often end up being marginalised themselves and delegitimised as potential sources for British newspapers.

The MCB is the UK's largest Muslim umbrella organisation, with over 500 members, including mosques, schools, charitable associations and professional networks. As part of my research, I interviewed Miqdaad Versi, MCB's media spokesperson and executive director of its Centre for Media Monitoring to discuss why the organisation's status as a voice for Britain's Muslim communities is sometimes dismissed by the media:

> We are a representative organisation, [but] we don't represent everyone. What's really interesting is they [newspapers] often get us to justify our representative nature again and again. We are transparent, we don't represent everyone – we are an important voice, not *the* only important voice. We keep getting asked can you justify this. The same question is not asked for other

> organisations, but it's always asked of us. All [organisations] are accountable fully. But in reality, some are held to a much higher standard and that's something that we need to recognise.
>
> (*Interview with Miqdaad Versi*)

Even when Muslim leaders are used as a source in British newspapers, they are often portrayed as being "hostile, easily angered and undeserving of the title of leader" (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013, p. 256). Even though MCB is sometimes used in the media as the 'moderate' Muslim spokesperson, this has often been very context dependent on how closely their viewpoint on a particular subject has aligned to the dominant media narrative at the time. In line with Miqdaad Versi's interview, when journalists do draw on Muslim organisations such as MCB as sources, they often question the representativeness of these sources (Holohan and Poole, 2011).

The issue of the representativeness of MCB was specifically mentioned in my interview with broadsheet journalist Andrew. He held a generally good opinion of the organisation and had consistently worked with them when required. "The Muslim Council of Britain has its own history, it has its ups and downs when it's more representative and when it's not so representative", Andrew told me. As national organisations in general (and not just MCB) often had 'agendas' of their own, he believed that it was better to cast the net wider in terms of Muslim sources:

> I mean the Muslim community is very fragmented, every mosque is independent and an organisation on its own in that sense. The most important Muslim voices are perhaps those who are in the local community where the attack is taking place, or in the communities that are connected to those who have carried out the attack in that sense. And that's probably the Muslim voices that you as a news journalist are most interested in getting to understand.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist, Andrew*)

In theory, Andrew makes a point in favour of a more nuanced interpretation of balance by seeking out a diversity of voices that are often not heard in national newspapers. In reality, decades of compounded media distrust together with an over-estimation of the willingness or ability of Muslim communities to engage with national journalists make this no easy task. One of the right-leaning tabloid journalists I interviewed told me that a Muslim source refused to talk to him once he found out the newspaper he wrote for. A similar concern was confided by Amanda in her interview:

> I think about some of the narratives around coverage of stories and actually when you look back to the Brexit referendum, it was open Islamophobia really. It was really uncomfortable as a journalist especially when you then go out to communities and they're thinking well hang on a minute are you just going to screw me over with it? It makes it quite difficult when you're

> trying to say that I'm not like that and they say, "yeah I'm not sure that is necessarily how I see it."
>
> (*Interview with news agency journalist Amanda*)

Amanda's account reflects research about how marginalised groups often perceive national journalists to be out of touch or prejudiced, disinterested in their communities' concerns and instead seeking out overly negative or sensationalist stories (Ross Arguedas et al., 2023). As I discuss in Chapter 6, it also means that journalists need to do more to win back the trust of these communities if they want to engage beyond the usual spokespersons for Britain's Muslim communities.

The Spectacle of Balance: The Ratings Game

There has been a positive shift away from the traditional gate-keeping model when it comes to choosing Muslim media sources (Munnik, 2018) but the case of MCB indicates that even when Muslim groups achieve the necessary cultural capital for media access, their involvement as sources is rarely on their own terms. In contrast, research has pointed to the increasing legitimacy given to anti-Muslim, far-right figures within the mainstream media (Mondon and Winter, 2020).

Media scholar Baerts Cammaerts (2018) finds that, despite their critique of these extremist views, journalists have often been complicit in providing an amplifying platform for extreme far-right discourse. Many of the journalists I interviewed similarly saw the concept of balance to be at least partially responsible for far-right anti-Muslim figures in the British media. Even though many of these extreme far-right figures often present both Islam and multiculturalism as the biggest threats to Western society (Cammaerts, 2018), their popularity in terms of viewing figures has made them commercially attractive to the mainstream media. The controversial hosting of Nick Griffin, then leader of the far-right British National Party (BNP) on political debate programme BBC Question Time was watched by more than eight million viewers, three times the usual audience figures (Deans, 2009, cited in Anstead, N. and O'Loughlin, B., 2011). On the other side of the extremism spectrum, British newspapers have been criticised for giving a mainstream platform to the Islamist extremist Anjem Choudary. This media exposure led the head of counterterrorism at Scotland Yard at the time, Dean Haydon, to protest in news coverage that "we have watched Choudary developing a media career as spokesman for the extremists" (Dodd, 2016). In my interview with Ryan, he similarly expresses his incredulity at the broadcast media's platforming of anti-Muslim hate figure, Tommy Robinson, the former leader of the far-right English Defence League:

> the growth industry that is Tommy Robinson, it's just obscene! You know I wouldn't put the guy on TV, but as far as TV is concerned, he's box office – everybody would tune in to watch him be taken apart or watch him do well. So, he's kind of an irresistible draw.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist Ryan*)

Commercial pressures to provide more sensationalist, exciting stories have led to a rise in anti-Muslim voices gaining platforms in newspapers, justified through a journalistic commitment to both balance and freedom of speech. Even though most coverage on far-right groups tends to be negative, mainstream media access has given additional exposure to the far-right's anti-Muslim messages, leading to their positions and ideas to become legitimised (Mondon and Winter, 2020). In the name of balance, it could be argued that the political successes of some far-right parties dictate that their leaders have as much of a right to a mainstream media platform as other political leaders. The journalist still has an important obligation to ensure that any potentially harmful messages of those receiving a mainstream platform are put under critical scrutiny. This point was made in the interview with Leila in relation to the BBC's failure to do this with anti-Muslim, far-right French politician Marine Le Pen:

> When Marine Le Pen was interviewed on the BBC, I didn't see her held to account. There is this discussion around freedom of speech, but I would always question the journalist what do you want to achieve with it. I'm not saying that kind of 'gotcha' journalism is the solution. But if they are not going to be held to account, then it becomes just a platform for them to air their views. I think it does need to be put in a context in which minorities are at risk. When they are advocating things that are going to be harmful to particular parts of the population, then there is a real question to ask editors, producers, presenters, why? Why does it need to be done?
>
> (*Left-leaning broadsheet journalist and columnist, Leila*)

Leila's account returns us to the question of journalistic judgements and how a ritualistic adherence to balance (like objectivity) can perpetuate negative Muslim representation rather than challenge it. Her comments also reflect the wider conflict between the ideal of balance in journalism as the hearing of all sides in the interest of freedom of speech, and the need to consider the potential harm of this speech on minorities.

Legitimising Anti-Muslim Far-Right Voices

When it comes to far-right discourse, Cammaerts (2018) asserts that journalistic concepts such as objectivity, impartiality and balance need to be challenged in the context of protecting democracy and liberal values. He calls on journalists to minimise the media spotlight given to right-wing populists and mainstream politicians to peddle their "politics of provocation" (Cammaerts, 2018, p.7). In the words of Cammaerts, "[t]he media cannot simply be a neutral 'platform' through which extreme right-wing populists and the mainstream politicians that copy them are able to freely pander their politics of fear" (p. 17).

Cammaerts' message could not be any clearer. Yet journalists are often compromised to provide these platforms due to the public attention that far-right, controversial figures attract. The concept of balance and freedom of speech

further complicate the issue for journalists who believe that all sides should be heard in public debate. In his interview, Andrew expressed his concern about the consequences of platforming far-right figures in the name of freedom of speech:

> I've always felt that those kinds of choices had to have consequences, and that atmosphere can lead to an increase in racial attacks. But I think it's about the challenge, rather than no platforming and excluding people or not discussing particular issues.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Andrew*)

It is possible for journalism in a multicultural society to reject this perceived "dichotomy between professional interests and cultural interests" in ways that does not contravene professional standards nor stifle freedom of expression or balance (Glasser, Awad and Kim, 2009, p. 73). Journalists need to exercise a considered and critical approach that acknowledges the power that comes from a mainstream media platform, together with a much more rigorous and critical examination of the viewpoints being put across in line with the social responsibility that comes with that power. A case in point is found in the interview of Miqdaad Versi who contrasted how BBC journalist Emily Maithis held the Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó to account for his anti-migrant views with her passive platforming of far-right UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) Brexit spokesman Gerard Batten.

> She was very good at challenging the Hungarian minister, obviously in a way that let him speak but challenged him properly. But with Gerard Batten of UKIP, what ended up happening was that he just got a platform and that's the problem. When you give someone like that a platform, you need to ensure that if they say a lot of things that are incorrect, you are able to challenge each one of them [...] The problem that happens is that sometimes they [journalists] have all the will in the world and then they may think oh it's fine you know it's done. But the damage is done, I mean like literally the biggest Islamophobes in the world are being given almost free platforms on national TV.
>
> (*Interview with media campaigner, Miqdaad Versi*)

Versi's example highlights that even if far-right figures are given mainstream news platforms in the name of freedom of expression or balance, this does not mean that journalists also give them a free reign to share undemocratic, and often divisive and discriminatory rhetoric.

When used ritualistically, without the critical judgements of journalists themselves, both objectivity and balance permit the recursive reproduction of negative representations of marginalised groups by ignoring existing inequalities in how minorities are perceived. Journalists' acceptance of objectivity and balance as a neutral structure leads to a form of professional retreatism, where they believe they must be distanced from the stories they report on to produce an untainted, non-interventionist and detached account of the news (Hall, 1974).

Yet research shows how tensions surface when these procedural norms stand in contradiction with other important liberal values such as social equality and civic responsibility (Anderson, 2019).

Media scholar Claudia Mellado (2021) maintains that these tensions often arise from the relationship between the normative conceptions of journalism and the practice of journalism itself. This is reflected in the gaps between what journalists think they should be doing (journalist role conception) and the news stories they produce within the media institutions they work for (journalism performance). By unravelling journalism as a social practice and as an institution (Hallin, 2016), the tensions between its ideals and practices can help to shed light on both the reproduction of negative Muslim representations and the contradictions that the journalists experience in the reporting of stories about Muslims.

Equally importantly, journalistic role performance helps to contextualise the power-relations that underlie journalism practice, i.e., how journalists use role performance to legitimise their work and position in society and their relationship with the publics they serve. Rather than view journalists in a position of relative subordination to higher forces, a journalistic role performance perspective approaches journalists' roles as "a complex process of negotiations between the journalists and the different forces that influence their work" (Hellmueller and Mellado, 2015, p. 7–8). Journalists are then seen as individuals embroiled in constant negotiations between the demands of their media institutions and their responsibilities to the audiences they serve. For the journalists I interviewed, tensions arose when the professional norm of balance appeared to act to the detriment of civic debate and to cause potential harm to an already marginalised community. As they became increasingly aware of how a more ritualistic application of balance could perpetuate negative Muslim representation, some of the journalists considered how to engage more reflexively with balance in their practice.

Disrupting Balance: Challenging the Status Quo

When it comes to debates about race, multiculturalism scholar Tariq Modood (2020) points out that racialisation cannot be seen as a normatively neutral topic with two sides since its very starting point is 'built to be a concept that picks out something negative' (p. 30). This was something that Miqdaad Versi also highlighted during his interview in relation to Muslim-related newspaper coverage:

> Your newspaper can have different political views, but you shouldn't have a racist and an anti-racist view. It's almost like racism isn't something that there are two sides of.
>
> (*Interview with media campaigner, Miqdaad Versi*)

Indeed, the opening up of the concept of racism to different interpretations in the name of balance makes it once again subject to challenge and contestation, rather than being a now unacceptable part of British society (Billig, 1996).

When it comes to media debates, there are moral boundaries around which positions are acceptable and unacceptable in civil society. There are not always two equally valid and acceptable opposing positions to be put forward, a stance often attributed to the BBC. "I don't really believe in that BBC balance thing", broadsheet journalist Brendan similarly pointed out in his interview. "I think you should call it – this is wrong, and this is right. Not just go on the one hand and on the other hand. There are things that you have to clearly call out, you know dangerous, mad things". The norms of balance in journalism promises to offer marginalised groups an opportunity to put forward their own voices but this type of 'seesaw' approach to debate shifts the perceived status of racism from a fixed normative concept (for example, 'racism is wrong') to a debatable controversial belief ('racism is wrong but…') (Billig, 1996, p. 151).

A much more reflexive perspective of objectivity, balance and freedom of expression around the issue of racism and the far-right is again found in my interviews with local journalists. In one interview, I asked local journalist Ben how he would cover far-right protests in his city:

> For me, it's about highlighting issues that are relevant to the [local] people [in my city]. I'm sure there is a vanishingly small minority of dangerous extremist voices [in my area]. I would argue in terms of relevance. I don't think that giving a platform to the leader of a potentially violent extremist far right group is a voice that I would necessarily need to give space to. For me it would be important to report on the facts that it is happening [but] if you're calling for violence then you're beyond the pale.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Ben*)

For Ben, it is the local public interest that drives his journalism. He admits that if a significant section of his local community had begun to vote for far-right parties, this would be something that Ben *would* report about, including the views of the candidates. Nevertheless, the need for public interest and to protect local Muslim communities from hateful (and potentially violent) perspectives would always be at the forefront of his approach. As Ben continued in his interview:

> It all comes down to your own editorial choices in terms of what you choose to report. If you're not going into it with an attitude of attempting to humanise and to give a platform to the vulnerable, then I think very quickly your choices of what you're going to be reporting on can magnify or reinforce toxicity in the discourse.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Ben*)

Journalists' interpretation of balance as the norm of letting 'all sides be heard' stifles them from taking a purposeful stance in favour of truth and democracy (Örnebring and Karlsson, 2022, p. 295). All too often the value of freedom of expression is allowed to "overstep the realities of all other values" (Billig, 1996, p. 252). Yet it is often in the tensions that journalists experience between ideals and practices

that they can move towards a much more reflexive, considered implementation in their everyday practices. Such an approach does not mean rejecting the merits of important journalistic values such as objectivity and balance (Morrison and Tumber, 1988). Instead, it is a call for journalists to exercise their own judgements as to how they can be applied when reporting on Muslims in the best interests of all the publics they serve.

Conclusion

When it comes to Muslims, the application of journalism's norms and values is subject to enormous contradictions in terms of who can and cannot speak, and on what terms. Rather than mitigating bias, this serves to ensure that institutionally prescribed biases are able to permeate throughout newspaper coverage on Muslims. These norms can also serve to underplay journalism's commitment to other liberal values such as public interest and avoiding harm to already marginalised communities in society. A tradition of disengaged objectivity and balance sits uncomfortably against rising populism and polarisation in society (Ward, 2020).

For now, objectivity and balance continue to be highly contested concepts amongst journalism scholars and practitioners (Anderson and Schudson, 2019). Journalistic judgements are always implicated within the practice of news production, whether in their choice of whose perspectives are represented, how a story is framed or the interpretation they want to put out to the public. Yet by detaching from the stories they report on, journalists lose sight of the more reflexive ways in which the ideal of objectivity can be engaged in practice for the wider, civic benefit for all society.

The exception to this appeared in the accounts of the local journalists I interviewed. As Mellado (2021) argues, journalism's professional roles can evolve and be redefined, particularly in light of the commitments that journalists have to their audiences and public interest. By understanding the dilemmas and tensions that journalists experience in reconciling the ideal of objectivity and balance within their everyday practices, it can be argued that a non-interventionist position built on a premise of professional retreatism may not always be aligned to the principle of wider public interest when it comes to the reporting of stories involving marginalised groups, including Muslims.

An engaged approach to journalism does not necessarily have to contravene professional norms and standards, nor stifle freedom of expression or press freedom. In my interviews, journalists felt conflicted when their valued professional norms acted to the detriment of civic debate when it came to stories involving Muslims. Yet the same norms act as a control mechanism for curbing journalistic agency, where the depersonalisation and rationalisation of accepted practices leads journalists to a disaffected resignation about challenging the negative bias within the newspapers they write for. In this way, journalistic ideals such as objectivity and balance can self-police how stories about Muslims are reported, ensuring that the same negative narratives are reproduced in a never-ending cycle.

Wahl-Jorgensen et al. (2019) suggest that it is very difficult to change cultures of journalism practice from the top-down. Instead, such a transformation must come from the bottom-up. This process is driven by the desire for change from journalists themselves but also requires the agency to instigate that change. In the next chapter, I discuss the struggles between journalistic agency and media structures in redressing the negative representation of Muslim in British newspapers.

Notes

1. Parts of this chapter are reproduced from: Haq, N., 2024. '"Whether that's truly objective journalism, probably not". Professional retreatism and professional dilemmas when reporting on Muslims', *Journalism Practice*, 18(9), pp. 2357–2373. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2323063.
2. The Muslim Council of Britain's Centre for Media Monitoring monitored 34 media outlets via their online websites and 38 television channels (including all regional channels) between Oct 2018 – Sept 2019, analysing over 48,000 online articles and 5,500 broadcast clips. See https://cfmm.org.uk/cfmm-report-british-medias-coverage-of-muslims-and-islam-2018-2020-launched/
3. For more information on this news event, see https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/11/world/europe/uk-muslims-letters.html.

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4 Why Are Media Structures So Hard to Change?

Introduction

In 2021, British tabloid newspapers found themselves in the media spotlight for the controversy around the racist coverage of the Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle. In an interview with the US talk show host Oprah Winfrey, her royal husband Prince Harry stressed the dangerous societal implications for the discriminatory ways that newspapers reported on ethnic minorities. "The UK is not bigoted, the UK press is bigoted, specifically the tabloids", he told Winfrey. "But, unfortunately, if the source of information is inherently corrupt or racist or biased then that filters out to the rest of society" (BBC News, 2021).

A statement issued in response by the Society of Editors denying that the UK press was bigoted led to a considerable backlash. In turn, an open letter signed by more than 240 working journalists, writers and academics heavily criticised the statement. "The blanket refusal to accept there is any bigotry in the British press is laughable, does a disservice to journalists of colour and shows an institution and an industry in denial", the letter stated (Tobitt, 2021). A follow-up survey of journalists conducted by the Press Gazette found that two-thirds felt that the UK media was bigoted or racist to some extent, and this was not limited to the tabloid press alone (Majid, 2021). Amongst the list of criticisms were how the UK media treats racial minorities in its reporting and the lack of diversity within newsrooms. Examples of particularly problematic coverage included stories involving Muslims such as Boris Johnson's 2018 Telegraph column where he references Muslim women who wore the burka as 'letter boxes'.

In my interviews with journalists, I did not always directly ask if there was an Islamophobic tendency within British newspapers. However, nearly all the journalists I interviewed agreed that there was some level of anti-Muslim bias within the British press. This bias was rarely seen as an explicit and overt drive to promote Islamophobia (with the notable exception of certain well-known opinion columnists). Instead, the bias manifests itself much more implicitly through the very structures of British newspapers in a press industry which remains in denial about the extent of its anti-Muslim bias. But why is it so difficult to challenge this bias?

To answer this question, this chapter positions the relationship between journalists and their news institutions as a dialectic between agency and structure, drawing

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on British sociologist Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. With his emphasis on the duality of the structure-agency relationship, Giddens argues that structures are both constitutive and constituted by agents. Media structures shape the practices of journalists, and the repeated actions of journalists as agents reproduce but also potentially alter those structures (Giddens, 1984). Unpacking the dialectic between structure and agency sheds light on the macro-micro dimensions of anti-Muslim bias within newspapers – between the push and pull between embedded ideas of what journalism is and what journalism should be in a democratic, multicultural society.

Through the structure-agency lens, it becomes possible to critique how established journalism practices contribute to the very inequalities they claim to redress. We can then consider normative indications of the cultural change needed to tackle the negative bias against Muslims in British newspapers. This shows the centrality of the structure-agency dichotomy to debates about journalistic autonomy and how journalists are able to shape their work against the structural constraints of the newspaper organisations they work for.

Is Islamophobia Structurally Entrenched within the Media?

In 2018, the editors of the leading British newspapers were asked by the Home Affairs Inquiry committee if they believed that Islamophobia was a significant problem in Britain today. All without exception acknowledged what they saw as the wider societal problem of anti-Muslim racism and the troubling presence of Islamophobia in Britain. *The Times'* assistant editor Ian Brunskill, for example, declared "Islamophobia in society – yes definitely. I think none of us would dispute that". Ian MacGregor, editor emeritus at *The Telegraph*, added:

> The scale of Islamophobia in this country is appalling […] I believe, to your point about Islamophobia being a real problem—and the scale of it is, without question—that we have a responsibility to deal with it in a responsible, accurate way, which is what our readers and the British public want.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

Rather than contributing to societal Islamophobia, the editors positioned themselves as part of the solution for redressing the problem through responsible journalism. Any suggestion of a potential anti-Muslim bias within their own newspapers was strongly rejected. The very idea of a conscientious effort to propagate Islamophobia was seen as an affront to the liberal values they themselves held as representatives of British journalism. As Ian Murray of the Society of Editors told the Home Affairs Inquiry: "there is no conscious Islamophobia there. They [newspapers] would recoil from that" (*Home Affairs Inquiry, April 2018*).

Out of the seven editors presenting evidence to the inquiry, only one confessed to his growing realisation that his newspaper may have issues with its coverage of Muslims. In Chapter 5, I further explore this surprisingly candid reflection from Gary Jones, the then editor-in-chief of the *Daily and Sunday Express*

newspaper – one of the most criticised tabloids when it comes to Muslims. More commonly, any insinuation of a deliberate anti-Muslim prejudice within their newspapers' coverage was shut down. I have never heard an editor say, "Right. Let's run this story because it attacks Muslims", *The Mail's* editor emeritus Peter Wright told the committee. "I would say exactly the same thing. That just does not happen", agreed *The Telegraph's* Ian MacGregor. "I have never heard of it happening […] We do not go out to get Muslim stories" (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*).

The purpose of this quite detailed recount of the Home Affairs Inquiry is to set up the structural nature of the media's anti-Muslim bias against a backdrop where direct Islamophobia is seen by the most senior of newspaper editors as an unfavourable attribute for British society. But they refuse to acknowledge that it directly exists within their own liberally tolerant newspapers. Instead, editors would downplay any suggestion of Islamophobia within their ranks, dismissing any criticism of how they report on Muslims as being due to "misunderstandings, misjudgements and mistakes". As Ian Brunskill, assistant editor of *The Times*, told the committee:

> I also wouldn't recognise the deliberate agenda bit [...] It seems to me that there are news stories that tackle difficult subjects, and there will be problems around them. There are opinion columns that offend, and there have been problems around them. There are certainly misunderstandings, misjudgements and mistakes, but I don't recognise the picture of deliberate dishonest manipulation of information in order to stoke Islamophobia.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

The differentiation between how Islamophobia is an endemic concern within wider British society but not for newspapers belies the role that the media hold in shaping and influencing public opinion about Muslims. Echoing the earlier discussion about tabloid newspaper coverage of Meghan Markle, Titley (2019) reflects how racism – or in this case Islamophobia – appears to be both everywhere and yet nowhere – pervasive within British society but absent from the British press industry. This manifests in an almost automatic inclination to deny the presence of racism in an "intensive process of delineation, deflection and denial" (Titley, 2019, p. 2). Others refer to this as a form of 'aversive racism' where editors might hold up claims of their lack of prejudices and commitments to anti-racism while harbouring internalised negative beliefs about minorities stemming from their own anxieties and sociocultural influences (Noon, 2018, p. 201). Noon elaborates:

> As a consequence, their actions and behaviour manifest a subtle racism that becomes evident where there are ambiguous social norms, where discrimination against a particular ethnic group can be rationalised by reasons other than race (for example, business needs) or where there is opportunity for prosocial behaviour to their own group.
>
> (p. 202)

Similarly, the editors at the inquiry bench any criticism of a potential anti-Muslim bias within their newspapers. By thinking that these charges do not apply to them, the editors become inoculated against this criticism and any attempts to change the ways they report on Muslims.

To explain the enduring nature of Muslim representation in British newspapers, cultural scholar Stuart Hall would argue that this reproduction is the product of a set of structural imperatives (Hall et al., 1978, p. 63). To some extent, we have already witnessed how these structural imperatives play out in the arena of Muslim representations in different ways. Chapter 1, for instance, highlighted the centrality of embedded common-sense conceptions of Muslims as problematic outsiders in British society and how this contributed to the reproduction of anti-Muslim bias in the British press. Commercial pressures and ideological constructions of imaginary audiences and publics discussed in Chapter 2 were seen to drive journalists to reproduce representations of Muslims that drew on conflict, anxiety and 'Otherness' to sell narratives of fear and difference. At the same time, as Chapter 3 concluded, journalism's professional norms and values obscure the tendency of British newspapers to favour certain representations of Muslims while devaluing others. In their own distinct ways, each of these chapters has presented a greater understanding of how structural imperatives incline British journalists to reproduce negative representations of Muslims, without requiring any overt direction or inclination to do so.

Underlying all these chapters, however, have been the tensions that come up again and again in my interviews with journalists and their experiences when reporting on stories involving Muslims. In this chapter, I juxtapose those tensions against the push and pull of the structure-agency dichotomy. Media sociologists have commented on how this dichotomy lies beneath the roles and professional identities of journalists and their relationships with the institutions that they work for. While news is viewed as the outcome of structure (i.e., the product of the news institution), journalists often view news production as a product of their agency through professional judgements and values (Sjøvaag, 2013). Theoretical approaches to this dichotomy (such as Hall's media hegemony or a political economy position) have tended to side with a more structuralist position on the media's role in society. Journalists themselves are often sidelined in these approaches. Although they have some level of autonomy at an everyday practice level, journalists are ultimately seen to reproduce the news according to the demands of the institutions they work for.

Everyday Autonomy of Journalists

As I discussed in Chapter 3, for Hall (1974), the relative autonomy of the media does not act as a 'mere cover' for hegemonic power (p. 21). Instead, it is indicative of power and ideology at work through the different conditions that systematically constrain journalists to act within a framework of limited interpretations. In contrast, rather than acting as agency-free disseminators of dominant, hegemonic interpretations, the journalists I interviewed demonstrated a clear consciousness of

the tensions between their own 'free actions' and the 'systematic inferential inclination' of the institutions they worked for (Hall, 1982, p. 84).

All the journalists I interviewed were asked what they saw as the role of journalism in society. Many admitted that they had started out with quite idealised views of the potential of journalism to shape a just and fair society but had gradually become more pragmatic as their careers progressed. "When I first entered journalism, I wanted to do only stories which were really worthy", local journalist Catherine told me in her interview. "But in reality, the newspaper does have to make money, so you have to write some stories which you think 'Jesus Christ, this is like a little bit of me has died'". A similar position was related in the interview with Roger:

> So, it's important for us all to you know fly the flag for good journalism. But again, there are cuts galore, there are fewer of us doing the job, there's more pressure on time and we're fighting against stories coming out of the Internet and social media ripping off our stuff and using it for free.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist Roger*)

In line with Chapter 2, both of these journalists struggled to reconcile the gap between what they thought their journalism would be and the commercial imperatives that work against that vision.

When it came to how much autonomy they had over their day-to-day responsibilities, the journalists believed that they had some autonomy as long as they operated within what Örnebring (2009) describes as "an accepted system of occupational hierarchies, standards and values" (p. 569). This autonomy gave them some freedom – for instance to pitch story angles and sources and, to a lesser extent, the narrative frames they used when reporting on Muslim-related stories. Ultimately, however, it is the editors who control decisions about media content and have the last word on how a story is reported. "In practice what ends up happening is that your take on [a particular story] is sometimes sort of heard, but it's often decided by people above you", one broadsheet journalist told me in his interview. "They are meant to tell you what the line is or agree on the line".

This influence was particularly strong when it came to more contentious topics involving Muslims. If journalists wanted to take a different angle to a news story that moved away from a more typical negative framing, this could be vetoed by the editors above them. Rather than an infringement to their autonomy, journalists often saw this as a welcome and protective aspect to their work by distancing themselves as individuals from the story.

When asked how much autonomy he had when reporting on a story involving Muslims, Mark told me in his interview:

> You can pitch your angle, you can picture the headline, but that will not necessarily always be the right way. That's something that all journalists find irks us because we think that we know this story best. At the same time, it means that if we get too involved in this story, we can tend to be biased.

> So, the news editor comes in, says that is not the angle, well that is not the headline I want.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Mark*)

Even though these accounts point to some disagreements within newspapers, organisational hierarchies and newsroom routines often place restrictions on journalists by enforcing rules and standards that confine their autonomy (Sjøvaag, 2013). Mark, for example, concedes to the editor to know what's best in terms of how to write or frame a story.

While research indicates that those in higher positions in the professional hierarchy have more autonomy than lower-level journalists (Sjøvaag, 2013), this compromised autonomy to exercise journalistic judgements became more of a cause of consternation for the senior journalists I interviewed. Despite being very senior in his newspapers' hierarchy, even tabloid journalist Stephen had to admit:

> I write for [a newspaper with] a particular readership, a particular audience and a sort of worldview and you have to write within those parameters. You can challenge your editors, but […] you know there's a lot of stories they won't want to write about.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist Stephen*)

There were times when journalists felt uncomfortable or conflicted about a story they had written involving Muslims. It was acknowledged that they had to follow the newspaper's particular editorial line – even if this might go against their own personal judgement. As tabloid journalist Martin reflected on his editor's instruction to re-write an article from a less sympathetic angle:

> He said, 'you need to completely rewrite this, this is too sympathetic'. I was like 'yeah, I know, but that's what I think about this issue'. and he was, like, 'but that's not our line, that's not how we're going to do it'. So, there is very much a correcting influence that you need to basically write this how we want you to.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist Martin*)

A similar position was discussed in my interview with local journalist Mark in terms of challenging fellow journalists who produced what he felt was racist content:

> I would argue is un-British if you are spewing racial hatred. I would argue that that's not acceptable but again you know I'm not the editor. If another one of the journalists were to write a story that spewed racial abuse, I would have a word with them. But if they still go ahead and do it then I have very little say.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Mark*)

This type of concession acts as an effective "trans-organisational control mechanism", enabling editors to curate the willing submission of journalists – and in particular junior journalists – in the name of professionalism (Soloski, 1997, p. 143). By controlling any potential conflict between editors and journalists about how to report on certain stories, it ensures a consistency in how particular types of stories are told, with little leeway to report them from an alternative angle.

The Editorial Voice of Newspapers

The editorial stance of a newspaper influences how a particular story is reported, highlighting the interpretative nature of media coverage. While the underlying facts of a news event involving Muslims may be shared across newspapers, each conveys a different interpretation through its framing and language choices, use of sources and selective emphasis and omission (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006). Each newspaper has its own 'social personality', depending on its organisation, sense of audience, language, format and so on (Hall et al., 1978, p. 63). There may be some general consistencies or shared framing but the different angles that newspapers might push for regarding Muslim representation, the type and genre of the title, and how closely this aligns with the worldview of the journalist, further impact on the autonomy of journalists (Sjøvaag, 2013).

In Chapter 1, we saw that different styles of newspapers with different political leanings impact on how stories involving Muslims are framed. The left-leaning newspapers (and the broadsheets in particular) are generally seen to be more balanced in their reporting on Muslims than right-leaning tabloids and broadsheet newspapers. From an objectivity perspective, it should not matter if a journalist's own political beliefs do not align with the editorial stance of the newspaper they work for. However, journalists felt more at ease when there was a closer alignment between their own political and social values. In his interview, Martin shared his experience of working for a newspaper that clashed with his personal and political views:

> if anything, there's the overarching feeling of, you know, I don't write about the things I would necessarily hope to […] I would imagine that if you want to speak to many of the young people who are starting out in the tabloid press, they probably feel somewhat similarly. Ultimately you can't just expect that everything that comes out of it is going to be directly conversant with your own views, just sometimes the gap seems a bit wider than it ought to be.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist, Martin*)

For any journalist, this type of misalignment leads to considerable tensions, particularly when it involves a topic that the journalists themselves feel strongly about (as an example, see the experiences of the Muslim journalists I interviewed in Chapter 6).

Returning to structuration theory, Giddens (1984) highlights how the ability to act as an agent within a social structure depends on the rules and resources of

the structure itself. Journalists higher up in the media hierarchy often have more negotiating power as well as greater authority and autonomy to challenge existing practices, including how stories about Muslims are reported. Yet to get to that position of greater autonomy, junior journalists must conform to the existing rules and conventions of their institutions, contributing to the recursive nature of anti-Muslim bias.

Vocalising one's own judgement of how a story ought to be reported – particularly if it goes against the grain of the newspaper – could open the journalist to the risk of professional precarity. Why then would they risk this to challenge how their newspaper reported on stories about Muslims? "I do think we have these pangs of conscience, but it's often a little bit further down the agenda than we really need to sell newspapers you know", confided tabloid journalist Ryan, adding:

> British journalism's being decimated over the past few years by businesses shutting local newspapers, sacking journalists, making people redundant, streamlining the entire process. That's gone all the way through the chain by the way, that's national down to locals. There's no movement anymore. So, if you're in a job you hang on to that job and you're pretty conservative with a small C. Everybody in that chain is risk averse.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist, Ryan*)

Coupled with the process of journalistic socialisation, Gans (1979) argues that the career desires of journalists contribute to their conformity. Journalists will focus on those tactics that promise the best career progression while decreasing any likelihood of criticism or professional failure (Niven, 2005). As Sir Alan Moses, the former chairman of press regulator Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) admitted to the Home Affairs Inquiry committee, "I think inevitably the journalists who get on are those who are taking the line that the editor of the newspaper wants them to take" (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, February 2018*).

Sir Alan Moses' words were in response to an important point raised by Professor Chris Frost chair of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) ethics committee. Frost recalled how at the time of the Leveson Inquiry, the NUJ had presented evidence about how journalists experienced bullying and pressure to write stories in a particular way:

> If they are not written in that particular way they are not used and if your stories are not used over a period, you gradually get demoted and then eventually, of course, you are sacked. […] It is appalling that people are in a workplace being told to do those kinds of things, but they have mortgages to pay for, they have children to bring up. They have two choices: they either do as they are told or they quit their job, and it takes quite a brave person to say, "That's it, I'm just quitting my job". What do you do?
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, February 2018*)

As Frost's testimony reflects, the employment market for journalists has become increasingly precarious with an increase in part-time, temporary and casual work

replacing permanent jobs with salaries and benefits (Wahl-Jorgenson and Hanitszch, 2019). Many journalists and editors worry about losing their job and what will happen next in their careers (Deuze, 2019). Even for those in a permanent job, journalists face increasing exhaustion and burnout in the race to compete with social media (Bossio and Holton, 2021; Mathews, Bélair-Gagnon and Carlson, 2023). All these factors contribute to an environment where journalists are likely to avoid challenging the ways stories about Muslims are told, out of fear that this might be damaging to their careers.

For those unable to compromise their personal and ethical values for a newspaper that misrepresents Muslims, the only other option seemed to be a freelance career. This was the route taken by Muslim journalist Hasina, an award-winning mainstream journalist with strong industry career prospects. Despite the work precarity that accompanies a freelance career, she chose this route as she could no longer tolerate the representation of Muslims in the newspapers she worked for. It was not an easy decision as she explained:

> I've known some cases where journalists felt they had to compromise on their ethics and morals. I wouldn't really want to be in that situation to be honest because it's really difficult, isn't it? But then when you're doing your job […] you have to be professional. It's that dilemma.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist, Hasina*)

From early in their careers, it appears that many journalists are socialised to concede their own judgements (either willingly or unwillingly) to editors. Challenging this directly often feels like a wasted endeavour. Professional hierarchies and other organisational factors such as time pressures and economic constraints also limit how journalists exercise their agency, leaving little space for introducing new ideas or approaches to reporting (Nölleke, Maares and Hanusch, 2022). By understanding how much autonomy journalists have in their everyday practices, we become privy to the spaces where journalists were able to exercise their agency to influence how stories about Muslims are told.

Even though journalists do have some autonomy over aspects of their work, this is often restricted by structural factors, including those at the economic and organisational levels of news production (Sjøvaag, 2013).

Press Freedom and the Autonomy of Newspapers

Journalistic autonomy is seen as part of a larger institutional framework where newspapers operate within political and social structures and closely tie their independence from state control and commercial interests to the concept of civic responsibility (Sjøvaag, 2013). Journalism as a societal institution and as a practice is meant to be independent from the influence of others – whether this be the state, the market or other interested parties. This independence grants newspapers the

means of occupational control while demonstrating to the general public they serve that they can be trusted with self-regulation (Frost, 2024).

Founded in the aftermath of the 2011 Leveson Inquiry, IPSO is the UK's largest press regulator whose role is to uphold press standards and practices. The predecessor of IPSO, the Press Complaints Commission, was disbanded after receiving heavy criticism during the Leveson Inquiry for its inadequate oversight of the press. A new press regulatory system was proposed in the Leverson report and today, IPSO regulates around 95% of national daily newspapers by circulation and most magazines and local and regional newspapers. The most important aspect of this is the Editors' Code of Practice which sets out the rules that newspapers and magazines regulated by IPSO agree to follow[1].

In the introduction chapter, I spoke about how Sir Alan Moses, the now former chair of the UK press regulator IPSO, admitted that the portrayal of Muslims in British newspapers had been one of 'the most difficult issue(s)' the regulator had faced (Nilsson, 2019, para. 1). Since its inception in 2014 to 2018 at the time of the Home Affairs Inquiry, IPSO has received around 18,700 complaints on grounds of discrimination (Mayhew, 2018). Only seven of these have been upheld as a breach of its code of practice, representing an upholding rate of less than 0.04%.

IPSO itself has come under scrutiny for failing to hold British newspapers to account for how they report on Muslims. In response to the pressure, the regulator produced a guidance on the reporting of Islam in 2020[2]. The guidance seeks to provide advice to editors and journalists on the reporting of Muslims and Islam within the Editors' Code. It asks newspapers and magazines to take care to report accurately and not make pejorative or prejudicial remarks about an individual based on their religion. The guidance does little to address one of key criticisms of the Editors' Code, namely that its discrimination clause[3] applies only to named individuals and not to groups such as Muslims. While welcomed by some, the guidance has been criticised for not being fit for purpose, or as academic and expert in the field, Michael Munnik puts it, "The substance of this is to say: 'Don't worry – you can still be nasty to Muslims in general'" (Munnik, 2020).

In contrast, the second biggest press regulator IMPRESS (The Independent Monitor for the Press) does include Clause 4.1 under discrimination within its Standards Code, stipulating that publishers must not encourage hatred or abuse against any group based on their characteristics.[4] IMPRESS is the approved regulator under the conditions set out in the Royal Charter under the Press Recognition Panel. Compared to IPSO, however, it regulates significantly fewer and smaller news outlets. During the Home Affairs Inquiry, Jonathan Heawood, then the CEO of IMPRESS, was asked by the committee why IMPRESS's standards clause protects groups such as Muslims from discrimination. He explained to the committee his belief that the goal of press regulation must be to encourage news publishers to uphold high journalistic standards, rather than allowing unchecked freedom of expression without accountability, adding:

> This is particularly important in a context where any of us can go online and share our views […] In this day and age journalism seems to be about

> something slightly better than that, so it seemed important for us to address these issues about anti-Muslim discrimination.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, February 2018*)

For those wishing to complain about newspapers' coverage of Muslims, accuracy is the main criteria through which IPSO judges whether an article fails the editorial standards of the British press industry in terms of anti-Muslim discrimination. As Jonathan Heawood, former CEO of IMPRESS, told the Home Affairs Inquiry:

> If you look at some of the areas in relation to discrimination where they have gone down the accuracy route […] They allowed Trevor Kavanagh to write in his piece about what he called "Muslim sex crimes" in relation to so-called honour killings and FGM, whereas I think, as most people would say, these are not Muslim in any way—these are cultural, or simply criminal, offences. But again, they said that is a statement of opinion. I think where you find the latitude is in where they seem to be quite relaxed about truth claims being made under the guise of opinion.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, February 2018*)

The column that Heawood refers to is where the former political editor of *The Sun*, Trevor Kavanagh, declared Muslims and Islam as being disproportionately responsible for sex crimes across Europe, stating that "it is acceptable to say Muslims are a specific rather than a cultural problem" (BBC News, 2017). Kavanagh ended his column by asking "What will we do about the Muslim Problem then?". The article led to many complaints being submitted to IPSO – linking Kavanagh's characterisation of Muslims with the Nazi preoccupation with the 'Jewish Problem'. As well as complaints from Muslim and Jewish groups, an open letter signed by more than 100 members of parliament condemned the article for its use of Nazi-like language about Britain's Muslim community (Ruddick, 2017). Still, IPSO rejected the complaint on the ground that the article did not breach the editor's code as it had not discriminated against a named individual and, as an opinion piece, could not be mistaken for fact.

Following the Leveson Inquiry, IPSO was to play a more significant role in investigating and holding the press to account for breaches of press standards. However, the self-regulating nature of IPSO has led to significant criticism as to whether the regulator is fit for the purpose. As Frost (2024) points out, IPSO's credibility hinges on its claims of autonomy and yet complaints against newspapers are adjudicated by a committee of editors from the same newspapers. Ironically, at the time of the complaint discussed above, Trevor Kavanagh himself was a board member of IPSO, although not part of the adjudication process. "Discrimination against Muslims, despite being rampant within sections of the media, appears not to be of concern to our press regulator or the editors' code committee, despite protection for groups being a recommendation of the Leveson inquiry", Miqdaad Versi, the then assistant secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain (the UK's largest Muslim representative body) complained to The Guardian newspaper.

"However, what is truly astonishing is that regardless of the specifics of the code, IPSO does not seem to have any concern that one of its board members used this Nazi-like phrase about Muslims" (Ruddick, 2017).

In their book *Journalistic Autonomy: The Genealogy of a Concept,* Örnebring and Karlsson (2022, p. 4) describe this type of self-serving autonomy as an invocation of journalism rather than a reality. Instead, it is often used "by all types of institutional actors to defend against criticism and perceived encroachment by other actors and institutions" (p. 277). Indeed, when it came to stories about Muslims, IPSO's low record for upheld complaints were used by editors during the Home Affairs Inquiry as a measure to show that there was very little anti-Muslim bias within the British press. *The Telegraph*'s Ian MacGregor, for instance, was able to downplay and reject claims that his newspaper had any anti-Muslim bias by declaring:

> 0.08% of articles merited any kind of correction [by IPSO last year]. That is *The Telegraph's* view of the scale of the issue. We pay great attention to detail; accuracy is very important, and we are passionate believers in the importance of the code, correcting mistakes, apologising for them when we get things wrong – thankfully that is very occasionally.
>
> *(Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018)*

Örnebring and Karlsson point out that when the normative understanding of 'independence from' is used as a means of legitimisation, this also legitimises an existing, unequal social order (p. 278). In the case of press regulation, the same newspapers that routinely discriminate against Muslims in their coverage are also the adjudicators for whether the disproportionately negative representation of an already marginalised group is an issue at all.

Challenging Autonomy: The Case of Freedom of Expression

Journalism scholar Helle Sjøvaag (2013) draws on Gidden's concept of the duality of structure and agency to reflect on the complex nature of journalistic autonomy. Rather than viewing autonomy as a static concept, Sjøvaag shows it to be restricted and negotiated at different levels – from the overarching political, economic and organisational levels to the more localised editorial and practice levels. But how does this negotiation work in practice when it come stories involving Muslims? Let us consider an example in relation to newspapers' cherished value of freedom of expression.

Freedom of expression is often seen as a controversial issue when it comes to stories involving Muslims, manifesting as a conflict between liberal Western values and the intolerance of Islam (Wetherly, 2012). High-profile events such from the 1988–1989 Rushdie Affair (Parekh, 1990) to the 2005 Danish cartoons controversy (Craft and Waisbord, 2008), the UK ban on anti-Islamic Dutch politician Geert Wilders (Poole, 2012) and more recently, the Charlie Hebdo cartoons (Jenkins and Tandoc, 2019) have fuelled intense media debates around freedom of expression on the one hand, and for religious tolerance towards Muslim communities on the other.

When it came to news stories involving Muslims, a particularly robust stance on freedom of expression could be found from editors in the Home Affairs Inquiry. Freedom of expression was upheld by editors as a "fundamental pillar of our democratic system" (Lloyd Embley, group editor-in-chief, *The Mirror*). Editors were unwilling to compromise on freedom of expression, even when it came to the more offensive articles about Muslims. As the Lloyd Embley elaborated to the committee:

> There are several examples of things that you may or may not talk about today that I personally wouldn't like or find offensive […] I would be committing commercial suicide if I carried some of the more offensive, insulting articles that other papers have carried, but I would still defend the right to carry them.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

To protect public interest, journalists were seen to have a duty to report on 'difficult' stories involving Muslims as otherwise, as *The Mail's* Peter Wright told the committee, "you can get to the point where you are not telling people about what is going on in our society". Similarly, Neil Benson, chair of IPSO's Editors' Code committee, contended: "We believe it would have a chilling effect on freedom of expression, because in that sort of climate, editors would be bound to think 'Well I'm not going to publish this story because I know what the reaction is going to be'" (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*).

The editors' stance was most closely echoed in my interview with Roger, who stated:

> Without fear or favour, you've probably heard that phrase many, many, times. But you know, you should do something without doing somebody a favour. At the same time, not be frightened of writing something because you feel that you are under pressure not to.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist, Roger*)

To a similar extent, other journalists I interviewed held strong views on freedom of speech when it came to critiques around how stories about Muslims were reported. "The worst thing you can do is write with one eye over your shoulder", one broadsheet journalist told me. "You're thinking how are people going to react to that? Will X be upset or will Y be upset?" Similarly, freelance journalist Sarwat – herself a vocal Muslim columnist – maintained that writing without self-censorship enabled her to openly discuss controversial topics in the interest of Muslim welfare:

> If I sit around being afraid, that's the problem. Let's move it away from Muslims. Black people sometimes say don't talk about single parent households because you encourage racism. Well, if we never talk about that how is that going to change? Are we always going to be looking over our shoulders that people are going to call us racist or disloyal?
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist, Sarwat*)

In these interviews, both journalists who are paid for their (at times, controversial) opinion writing, rebuked the notion of self-censorship with regard to Muslim-related stories as constraining their ability to present a critical perspective on the stories they wrote. In both cases, they believed that their freedom to criticise Muslims was necessary in the public's interest. But does an absolutist position to freedom of expression still stand where the potential of harming an already marginalised community outweighs freedom of speech?

We debate this by considering the high-profile and contentious case of the Danish Cartoons Affair.

Case Study: The Danish Cartoons Affair

On 30 September 2005, Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. The editors explained that the cartoons were commissioned as an experiment to challenge what they viewed as self-censorship amongst illustrators hesitant to depict the Prophet. These images deeply offended many Muslims, as Islamic tradition generally prohibits visual representations of the Prophet. Several of the cartoons were perceived as highly derogatory, including associating the Prophet—and by extension, all Muslims—with violence, barbarity and terrorism. This led to protests from Muslim communities in Europe and across the world against the publication of the cartoons and the failure of the government of Denmark to act against the publishers.

Although Jyllands-Posten received bomb threats in response to its publication of the cartoons, the newspaper continued to defend its right to publish the material. Many newspapers in Europe and around the world reprinted the cartoons in a show of solidarity with Jyllands-Posten and to defend freedom of expression to publish material that offends religious beliefs. The British press, however, showed considerable self-restraint by not reprinting the cartoons (Meer and Mouritsen, 2009). Comparing British and Danish newspaper reactions to the cartoons, Meer and Mouritsen found that British newspapers justified this stance as the need to strike a balance between freedom of speech and causing religious offence to Britain's Muslim communities.

Amongst the examples of editorials that accompanied this stance was the leader column of left-of-the-centre broadsheet newspaper *The Independent* which read:

> The right to free expression is one that this newspaper defends uncompromisingly. But it would be false to present this solely as a debate about freedom of speech. The media have responsibilities as well as rights. There is a deceptive borderline between controversial and irresponsible journalism. Especially in these troubled times, we all must take care that it is not crossed.
> (Press Gazette, 2006)

Similar, perhaps surprising positions were adopted by two of Britain's tabloid newspapers, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, often amongst the most criticised for

the sensationalist and discriminatory ways in which they report on Muslims. *The Sun* explained its decision to not publish the cartoons by stating: "the cartoons are intended to insult Muslims and *The Sun* can see no justification for causing deliberate offence to our much-valued Muslim readers" (Press Gazette, 2006). *The Mail* echoed "[w]hile the Mail would fight to the death to defend those papers that printed the offending cartoons, it disagrees with the fact that they have done so. Rights are one thing. Responsibilities are another" (cited in Meer and Mouristen, 2009).

Meer and Mouristen contend that British newspapers centred their stance around the responsibilities of the press itself, drawing on rationales of journalistic responsibility, restraint and toleration. This decision caused some internal conflict from the wider press industry, with some critics arguing that self-censorship out of fear or appeasement of Britain's Muslim communities – or even self-censorship out of social responsibility – came at the expense of the right to freedom of expression.

Nearly ten years later, on 7 January 2015, the same debate was brought to the spotlight again following the attacks on the offices of French satirical weekly magazine Charlie Hebdo. British media discourse around the protection of free speech shared many parallels with the Jyllands-Posten affair. The key difference, however, was that the Charlie Hebdo attack resulted in the deaths of journalists amongst others, raising the stakes for solidarity and defiance from the journalism community (Jenkins and Tandoc, 2019). Jenkins and Tandoc examine the ethical decision-making processes by US news organisations on the decision of whether to republish the images from Charlie Hebdo. This process involved redefining their position from a universal liberal-fundamentalist defence of freedom of expression to a more liberal-pragmatist and multicultural consideration of balancing freedom with social and civic responsibility to avoid harming an already marginalised community.

My interviews with journalists highlighted the conflictual nature of this debate, where freedom of expression had to be balanced with religious tolerance and preventing the scapegoating of an entire community. "It is difficult because we have free speech in this country, free press, freedom and independent free press", local journalist Elliott told me. "I think it's important that, you know, we are not scared of criticising a certain group who has done wrong, but that shouldn't spill over into demonising a whole group like I believe some right-wing papers have done over the years". This tension was further reiterated by tabloid journalist Ryan:

> Fundamentally yeah of course, freedom of speech trumps everything […] But there are so many examples of just reprehensible things that have been published that you think well if there's no self-regulation – it's very difficult isn't it! How would you even begin to arbitrate?
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist Ryan*)

Some academics would argue that this level of preoccupation with the impossibility of the freedom of expression debate serves as a detraction from the real consequences of media coverage on Muslim communities in Britain (Gabriel, 1994).

Similarly, some of the journalists I interviewed felt that the concept was often weaponised to justify negative representations of Muslims within mainstream press discourse. "We have freedom of speech so you're using it as a device for, you know, saying something filthy about the Prophet", tabloid journalist Stephen observed. "It's obvious that it's an attack on the people who believe [in Islam], you know it's not testing freedom".

Despite her supportive stance towards freedom of expression, Sarwat was also highly critical about what she saw as the targeted weaponising of freedom of expression against Muslims:

> What you are getting under the umbrella of freedom of speech are some sinister and unacceptably undemocratic attacks on Muslims. You can see that I walk a tightrope here. I think we should have honest journalism, but I can see how people weaponise freedom of speech and use it against groups. I think at the moment the group they most use it against is Muslims. […] I have never believed in absolute freedom of speech, it's just where the line is and who draws the line.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Sarwat*)

Sarwat's confession about how she 'walks a tightrope' encapsulates the dilemmas experienced by journalists in balancing the value of freedom of expression with that of journalism's responsibility to social equality. Her question about where the line is between freedom of speech and potential hate speech, and who draws that line, echoes the book's earlier discussions about relations of power and subordination that determine who sets these lines, and to what extent discriminatory representations are tolerable and for which communities. As Sarwat herself stated in her interview:

> I believe more freedom is much better than less and striving towards greater freedom of expression makes for a better society. But at the same time words can really disable and hurt, wound, create mental distress, much more than blows can, right?.
>
> *(Interview with broadsheet journalist Sarwat)*

Sarwat's last point highlights the dilemmas that journalist face when it comes to reporting in a climate of increasing polarisation and disinformation about marginalised communities. These particular types of news events (whether Jyllands Posten or Charlie Hebdo) present a case for the complex nature of autonomy for journalists and for newspapers overall. Rather than being fixed and rigid, autonomy should enable journalists to reconsider how to define and apply their professional norms and values, particularly when faced with problematic news events (Jenkins and Tandoc, 2019). In the case of US newspaper coverage of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, Jenkins and Tandoc point out that those newspapers opting not to republish the images recognised the importance of freedom of expression. But they placed it secondary to the value of avoidance of harm to both their own journalists and

Muslim communities. Other news organisations published the cartoons, using their autonomy to make a stand against the potential threat to freedom of expression.

Autonomy for Change

Earlier, I contended that when individual journalists as agents may want to challenge the bias against Muslims, media institutions themselves are often structured in ways that privilege negative representations of minority communities. Structural biases can disempower journalists from putting forward counter-narratives to the dominantly negative media discourse about Muslims while implicitly silencing dissent and criticism about how Muslims are portrayed. Yet the structure-agency dialectic also opens spaces for contestation and change both within journalism and the wider socio-political and cultural environments that newspapers are embedded within. The differences in how newspapers chose to report on the Danish Cartoons Affair reflects that a more nuanced understanding of autonomy can lead to some consideration of the impact that news reporting can have on already marginalised communities. How then do we reconcile the power and influence of media structures with the possibilities for change?

When it comes to unravelling this complex interaction between structure and agency in the work of journalists, we need to return to Anthony Giddens' structuration theory to break down how both media structures and journalists' agency contribute to how stories about Muslims are framed.

Giddens' contends that there is a duality within the structure-agency relationship, where structures are *both* constitutive and constituted by individuals, constructed through the rules and resources of social practices as they are reproduced (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). Media structures shape the practices of journalists, but at the same time the repeated actions of journalists as agents reproduce but also alter those structures (Giddens and Sutton, 2017). This indicates that there is space for journalists as agents to challenge and redress long-standing biases, even when negative bias against Muslims is embedded within newspaper institutions.

Moving the focus to journalists as agents in either propagating or challenging structural biases requires a shift from envisioning the media as a unitary, ideological apparatus to viewing it instead as the institutions where the practice of journalism takes place (Carey, 1997). From this position, it becomes possible to capture the conditions under which journalists reproduce *and* challenge negative Muslim representation. As Marsden and Savigny (2009) argue by drawing on Giddens' theory to advocate a more interactive structure-agency relationship:

> As such agents act within, or action may be constrained by, structures, but crucially that (in)action within those structures serves to reinforce and reconstitute those structures. This reconstitution is dialectical and ongoing, so that those reconstituted structures then provide alternate courses of action, within which agents act (or not), and then reconstitute and reshape those structures. (p. 147)

Accordingly, to understand the role of autonomy in reproducing (and challenging) bias against Muslims within the British press, it is useful to think differently about how to re-institutionalise journalism in a way where institutional actors themselves (i.e., journalists) work collectively to redefine their own institutions (Örnebring and Karlsson, 2022). British newspapers stance on the Jylland Posten affair could be construed as an example of this, where the dissonance experienced in republishing the cartoons that would potentially harm Muslim communities led to a redefining of the boundaries of freedom of expression within newspapers. As Sjøvaag (2013) points out:

> Journalistic autonomy may be restrained by the structuring properties of its modes of production, but […] the rules and resources of the news media structure remain open and negotiable. It is within the permeability of this profession that the agency inherent in journalistic autonomy can assume its influence in the duality of structure. The level of autonomy enjoyed by journalists is therefore a fluid and moving concept – continuously adjusted according to what is needed to perform the task of reporting the news
>
> *(p.164)*

Through this approach, it is possible to see opportunities to create change around how journalists report on stories involving Muslims. The relationship between agency and structure is one where each presupposes the other. Structures not only constrain journalists but enable conscious, proactive agents to creatively engage in structural change (Sewell, 1992), *when they are motivated enough to do so*. This means that even though negative bias against Muslims may be endemic to British newspapers, there should still be spaces for journalists as agents to contest and redress this long-standing bias as long as they recognise it as problematic.

Conclusion

So, what drives this motivation for change when it comes to how British newspapers represent Muslims? There are two key factors that need consideration. Firstly, journalists are constantly having to navigate competing pressures and expectations from different stakeholders, all who have a vested interested in influencing their work (Banjac, Juarez Miro and Hanusch, 2024). By recognising the relational dynamics and diverse modalities involved, Banjac et al. assert that we can better examine how different expectations impact and challenge journalistic autonomy, influencing how journalists redefine their practices and perceived role in society. Depending on the power dynamics and forms of pressure from different stakeholders, journalists will adapt their work to meet or resist these expectations.

Secondly, by viewing the relationship between journalists and these diverse stakeholders as a constant negotiation of journalistic role performance, we also become open to the possibilities for contesting any anti-Muslim bias. As Banjac, Juarez Miro and Hanusch (2024) elaborate:

> Confronted with the inability to realise potentially contradictory expectations that stem from various stakeholders, journalistic actors may ascribe

> different worth or urgency to expectations depending on whether these fulfil an economic or social imperative, and their relative force within the journalistic field.
>
> (p. 67)

It is important to remember, as I discuss in Chapter 5, that some stakeholders have much more power to shape journalism in terms of their expectations than others (Banjac, Juarez Miro and Hanusch, 2024).

By considering the tensions inherent in journalism's structure-agency dichotomy, this chapter has investigated how a tendency towards negative Muslim representation in the British press can be challenged. In line with Hall's claim that journalists have only 'relative autonomy', structural constraints whether commercial and organisational pressures, or cultural and ideological understandings, limit the autonomy of journalists to challenge the reporting of Muslim-related stories. As the result of these constraints, journalists also experience considerable tensions between ideas of what the role of journalism is (and should be) in a democratic, multicultural society. These dilemmas are central to the process of social transformation within newspapers as they act to put an anti-Muslim bias embedded in a 'structure in dominance' 'to the test' (Hall, 1972, p. 16).

British newspapers in the structural sense are durable but not completely fixed. Due to the contingent nature of the socio-political environments in which they operate, newspaper institutions and journalism as a profession itself is open to structural change. Even though newspaper institutions structurally constrain and confine journalists, it is also possible to see where spaces for agency can be made to challenge how newspapers report on stories involving Muslims. In line with Giddens' concept of the duality of agency and structure, this suggests that journalists' agency should over time have some influence in changing how Muslims are represented in the British press.

As the proportion of anti-Muslim hate crimes continues to climb, it becomes even more critical for British journalists to consider their role in democratic society. As Örnebring and Karlsson (2022) argue:

> An autonomous journalism […] should not be afraid to appear biased in favour of democracy […] If journalism cannot reliably determine what is true, it would be enough not to perpetuate or amplify that which is not true and not to allow wilful distortion or misrepresentation of facts [and] at the very least not perpetuate and amplify that which is obviously non-democratic.
>
> (p. 300)

Unpacking the dialectic between structure and agency from the everyday experiences of the journalists I interviewed, together with the testimonies from the editors to the Home Affairs Inquiry data, presents an insight into the push and pulls between embedded ideas of what journalism is and what journalism should be in a multicultural, democratic society. The tensions that journalists face between contradicting values and demands from different stakeholders about how Muslims

should be represented can lead to the creation of spaces for challenging anti-Muslim bias within newspapers. In this way, as I argue in Chapter 6, contestation and resistance, both external and internal to journalism, has the potential to challenge the issue of negative Muslim representation and contribute to its potential reformation by exposing and challenging entrenched practices.

Notes

1 A second press regulator IMPRESS is recognised by the Press Recognition Panel and works under the Leveson report recommendations. To date however, it regulates mainly independent publishers and not the highest circulating British newspapers.
2 The guidance can be found here: https://www.ipso.co.uk/resources/guidance-on-reporting-of-islam/
3 Clause 12 which prohibits “prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual’s race, colour, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability”. See https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/
4 See https://www.impressorg.com/standards/impress-standards-code/our-standards-code/ for the IMPRESS Standards Code.

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5 Cultural Struggles and the Dynamics of Change

Introduction

Representations rarely have a single, fixed, and unchanging meaning. Instead, they encompass evolving and complex frameworks of interpretation that depend on the much wider contexts in which they are set (Hall, 1997). Rather than reflecting accurate or inaccurate images of reality, representations are contingent on the ideological work that goes into their creation and reproduction. Representations are never disinterested. Instead, as Howarth (2006) points out, they are "actively constructed by social agents who speak from different positions and who have different 'social stakes' […] in maintaining and/or challenging the hegemonic social representations that invade their realities" (p. 77).

One of those social agents is Miqdaad Versi, who I also interviewed for my research. As the founder of the Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM), an organisation set up by the Muslim Council for Britain to specifically monitor and challenge inaccurate and discriminatory reporting on Muslims, Versi is certainly kept busy. He first came across IPSO's complaints process after reading an inaccurate and unsubstantiated story in *the Mail on Sunday* about 'Muslim gangs' back in 2015 (Versi, 2023). This connection snowballed into meetings with newspaper editors to discuss the problems with some of their stories about Muslims. For more than ten years now, Versi has pushed for constructive dialogue and engagement with editors and journalists to work towards fairer and more accurate reporting on these stories. Although press reception to Versi's efforts and CfMM's tireless monitoring has been mixed to say the least, there have also been some wins along the way. As he himself wrote recently:

> The number of complaints we have had to submit has fallen markedly in the past few years. There could be a number of drivers of this—but my hunch is that accountability and constructive dialogue can have a positive impact, and that our approach has had some part to play.
>
> (Versi, 2023, p. 24).

When it comes to instigating change in British newspapers, Versi is open to ruffling 'the right people's feathers' (Versi, 2023, p. 24). In this chapter, I discuss

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the attempts of CfMM and others to challenge how journalists and editors report on stories involving Muslim. Afterall, contestation about Muslims as the 'Other' does to some extent permeate through the more negative media coverage, creating spaces for alternative representations and counter-narratives. Alongside the more dominant tendencies towards negative representations of Muslims, we see examples of representations that are more ambivalent, contradictory, and even positive about Muslims. This suggests a much more complex process at play than a one-sided effort to spread negative narratives about Muslims.

Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013, p. 256) proffer that these types of contradictions reflect a 'tension in journalism' when it comes to coverage of Muslims and Islam. We can only understand this tension by directly asking journalists about their experiences. This is important as we do not always know empirically how any news story about Muslims came to be reported in particular ways, whether the journalist who produced the story would see it in the same way as the researcher, or the 'behind the scenes' tensions that might underlie the way the story has been framed. Neither is it possible to understand the motivations or intentions that lead to negative (or positive) representations of Muslims without directly asking journalists themselves.

Building on my interviews with journalists, this chapter charts these more complex aspects of Muslim representation in the British press through the lens of cultural politics where it is the cultural meaning of citizenship itself which is being contested (Nash, 2001). This requires adopting the view of the media as a site where struggles for definitions and interpretations around events involving Muslims take place between different groups in society. Social plurality leads to considerable contestation over certain problems or dilemmas involving Muslims, exposing the multiple and varied perspectives of the polis itself (Finlayson, 2007). At the same time, it is impossible to examine Muslim representation from such a framework of cultural politics without recognising the significant role that hegemonic 'power at work' plays at the heart of contestation (Nash, 2001, p. 85).

Contradictions and Counter-Narratives in Muslim Representations

To a disproportionate extent, British newspaper discourse routinely and negatively represents Muslims. Yet counter-narratives and contradictions are also found across newspapers, a point that sometimes gets neglected in face of the overwhelming empirical evidence of a bias towards framing Muslims in more negative ways. For instance, Chapter 3 discussed some of the contradictions across newspaper coverage about Muslim women as including both critical and supportive perspectives of their choice to wear the veil. Representations of veiled Muslim women also show contradictory negative portrayals from an "oppressed victim without agency who needs to be 'saved' by the West" to those of an "aggressor who has been granted too much agency by western liberalism" (Williamson, 2014, p. 76). Others point to the 'paradoxical tendency' of the British press "to simultaneously cast Muslim women as the main vehicles of integration as well as the first victims of the failure of integration" (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010, p. 229). Muslim women's choice

of clothing, and particularly the niqab (full-face covering), has become a contested signifier across different parts of British socio-political life (Piela, 2021), not least due to the significant struggles of Muslim women themselves at the forefront of challenging the reductive image of the veil within newspaper coverage (Bullock, 2000).

Similar contradictions appear when newspaper coverage of terrorist attacks allocates responsibility for the violent actions of a few Muslims to the whole Muslim community while simultaneously countering this claim by arguing that the majority of Muslims are peaceful (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). Newspaper coverage at times appears to wilfully conflate Islam and Islamism as part of a rhetorical strategy to encompass wider British Muslim communities as holding values not compatible with the British public (Brookes, McEnery and Clarke, 2023). Brookes et al themselves recommend British newspapers move away from using the term Islamist for this reason. The saleability of stories where the threat appears to be a lot closer to home, however, means that "UK newspapers are currently unlikely to take this advice, instead representing Islamism as 'spreading' and on the 'rise', and placing responsibility on ordinary Muslims to stem this" (Brookes, McEnery and Clarke, 2023, p. 78).

There is also evidence of contestation in the reporting of high-profile events involving Muslims mentioned elsewhere in this book, including the Jyllands Posten and Charlie Hebdo cartoons incidents, the 'grooming gangs' scandal (Tufhail, 2018), and debates about Shamina Begum and her request to return to the UK (Williamson and Khiabany, 2024). Evidence suggests that press coverage of public debates on religious rights are often more positive towards Muslims, with the voices of the advocates of Muslim religious rights more strongly represented than the opponents (Vanparys, Jacobs and Torrekens, 2013). Vanparys, Jacobs and Torrekens find that this more positive stance around the accommodation of Muslim religious rights remains unaffected by more violent and contentious events involving Muslims (including the 9/11 terrorist attack, the Madrid and London bombings and the cartoons affair).

While the representation of Muslims and Islam in the British press may be biased towards the negative, we need to also acknowledge its fluid, and sometimes contradictory nature. Studies of newspaper coverage have been key to the mapping out of the dominantly negative ways in which Muslims are portrayed in the British press. Yet it is not always possible to interpret the meanings of behind these portrayals, their wider social implications or why media discourse is shaped in unpredictable ways.

As mentioned previously, the UK press is not monolithic and instead reflects different political and social positions as well as editorial styles. The more nuanced counter-discourse on Muslims as the 'Other' often comes from the left-leaning *The Guardian* newspaper, an assertive presence within the British press despite the industry's disproportionate leaning towards the right of the political spectrum. An example of this can be seen in the reporting of the London Bridge attack in June 2017, where terrorists killed eight people and injured another 48. Examining coverage of the attacks in two UK broadsheet newspapers – *The Telegraph* and

The Guardian, Ekström, Patrona and Thornborrow (2022) found that while *the Telegraph* coverage enacted a 'politics of fear' discourse that scapegoated Muslim communities, *The Guardian* displayed a counter-discourse in its opinion pieces and some news articles. This counter-discourse criticised the weaponisation of the politics of fear against Muslim communities, drawing on representations that countered the more typical 'us' and 'them' framing of the event.

Even though most British newspapers routinely represent Muslims in disproportionately negative ways, 'slippages, ambivalences, and contradictions' in news stories involving Muslims are found across newspapers, within the same newspaper and even within the same article (Poole, 2002, p. 100). How then do we make sense of this picture of continuity and contradiction, reproduction and contestation within the representation of Muslims in the British press?

The Cultural Politics of Muslim Representation

To even begin to address this question, it becomes necessary to extend beyond newspaper coverage itself to consider the more complex, shifting, social, political and cultural contexts in which news stories involving Muslims are situated.

Representations do not have a 'true' meaning to start with as they are built upon the meanings that people assign to them. In this way, representations are the product of a cultural and socio-political process – or more specifically as Poole (2019) puts it, "products of both their social environment (the political and economic context) and the way they are produced (the media context)" (pp. 469–470). How the media represent certain groups will always be contextual, shifting over time and across the media (Poole, 2019). At the same time, Poole highlights how newspaper coverage of British Muslims often constructs 'a discourse of the nation', leading to the creation of "insiders and outsiders within a polarised identity politics" (p. 164). This reflects the playing out of differing interpretations and assertions of 'Britain' and 'Britishness' across different social and political groups in the UK.

By considering these more contested aspects of Muslim representation through the lens of cultural politics, the media (or newspapers in this case) is positioned as the arena where the cultural meaning of citizenship itself is being contested (Nash, 2001, p. 86). Representations of Muslims in press coverage, including the reproduction of, and contradictions to, negative representations, are linked to how social plurality itself leads to considerable contestation over the interpretation of particular societal issues. Where there is a contentious topic, there will be competing interpretations of events that reflect the wider conflicts and divisions within the society in which they arise (Philo, 2007). When it comes to news stories about Muslims, the language and definitions adopted by newspapers are the very weapons of the battleground for competing groups. As the boundaries around representations are challenged, it is likely that how Muslims are referenced in newspaper coverage will itself evolve and broaden (Poole, 2019).

During my interviews, several journalists spoke about how the language of newspaper reporting on stories involving Muslims had changed after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. As one Muslim tabloid journalist stated in his interview:

> I started journalism before 9/11, so I know how the language of the media changed. If you browse through articles about the Bradford riots and the Oldham riots and all those other incidents where predominantly Muslim Pakistani youths were involved but they were referred to as Asian gangs or the Asian troubles. The language of Muslims versus others wasn't there. 9/11 changed that. It changed the world; it changed the organising principle of the world. It changed the language of the media so Muslim became at the forefront.
>
> (*Interview with right-leaning tabloid Muslim journalist*)

The journalist's account highlights the increasing media spotlight on Muslims after the 9/11 attacks, and the ensuing separation of Muslims from the category of British 'Asians'.

There is some suggestion that the language around Muslims used in the British newspapers is evolving for the better. An example was presented at the Home Affairs Inquiry Committee by Lloyd Embley of *The Mirror* in relation to the interchangeability of the term 'Muslim' and 'Islamist' in earlier newspaper coverage:

> When I became editor of the *Daily Mirror* in 2012 […] I thought it was true that we used the word "Muslim" to describe individuals or circumstances when we shouldn't have. We should have used "Islamist" or "fanatic". I absolutely said that, from then on, that is how it would be. That is no great thing, but it is a minor example of how I believe we have moved over the last decade, as a generation, in our attitudes towards how we cover the news.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

For Miqdaad Versi, even this small concession represents some progress. In an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper (Subramanian, 2018), he told the journalist:

> At one point, every used the phrase 'Muslim terrorist', and now they use 'Islamist terrorist', which is still not great, but it's better than 'Islamic'. How did that happen? Because an understanding developed that it was the wrong term to use. So, I think it'll happen. I think history tells us we can make it happen.

But how much has the language around Muslims *really* changed? Comparing UK newspaper coverage in the ten-year period after his original extensive corpus linguistical study of the representation of Muslims between 1998–2009 (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013), Paul Baker (2023) reflects upon the changing picture

of representations of Muslim beliefs and ideology in the period 2010–2019. He finds that there has been a gradual distancing from labelling Muslims as extremist, devout or liberal. Overall, however, there is mixed picture of this 'progress', suggesting that while journalists do now avoid problematic uses of language like Muslim terrorist, ideas of extremism and terrorism are still very closely associated with Islam as a religion.

During the Home Affairs Inquiry, Ian Murray of the Society of Editors emphasised that the British press industry took the complaints it receives about the language used to describe marginalised communities very seriously. He noted how reporting on the gay community and people with disabilities had adapted over time, moving away from language once commonly used which society now deemed unacceptable. He advocated for a similar position on Muslims:

> It is not a cavalier attitude that I believe is going on in newsrooms. The lessons have been learned. In the same way as the language that was being used to describe the disabled, shall we say -"wheelchair-bound" and things like that—lessons were learned that, through unconscious bias, you are using language that is insulting people. The lesson is learned of whether we can take advice.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

Part of the impetus for the British press to pay attention to these lessons has come from external actors challenging how newspapers report on Muslims. This pressure has led to IPSO releasing its guidance for reporting on Islam (IPSO, 2020) which opens by conceding that "the reporting of Muslims and Islam in the UK is of significant public interest". While some have complained that the guidance does little to really address anti-Muslim bias within British newspapers (Munnik, 2023), it does request journalists to take care to report accurately on Muslims, recognising the diversity of beliefs and cultures that come under the religious category. Any reference to the 'Muslim' identity of an individual should be only made if genuinely relevant to the story, and unaccompanied by any pejorative or prejudicial remarks about an individual based on their religion.

Journalist approaches to reporting on terrorists' attacks have also evolved in some ways – moving away from the priority of being 'the first' to break the story to a more cautious and accuracy-based practice (Rupar and Murrell, 2019). This has involved developing closer relationships with the police, including waiting to publish the motivation of a terrorist attack until it has been confirmed by the authorities. While editors remain highly motivated to get the news story out quickly, they exercise more caution with the information they publish to avoid harming or misleading the public.

In 2019 following the Christchurch attack in New Zealand, Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, Head of Counter Terrorism Policing in the UK, issued an open letter urging the British media to exercise greater care when reporting on terrorism, including far-right attacks targeting Muslims (Basu, 2019). He highlighted the dangers of amplifying extremist content, warning that national media

exposure could extend its reach to tens of millions of people, causing significant harm to society. In the case of the UK's Finsbury Park attacker, Basu points out that he was primarily radicalised through far-right narratives on mainstream media platforms rather than the shadowy corners of social media or the dark web. The attacker went on to target Muslim worshippers nearby Finsbury Park Mosque shortly after evening Ramadan prayers in 2017. In his call to journalists, Basu states in his letter:

> Journalists often respond to such claims by talking about what is 'in the public interest'. I would argue that the safety of UK's citizens is surely the most important 'public interest' of all. We cannot simply hide behind the mantra of freedom of speech. That freedom is not an absolute right, it is not the freedom to cause harm.
>
> (Basu, 2019)

Since the Christchurch attacks, others have pointed to a greater depth in the reporting of Muslims in New Zealand's newspapers, including narratives conveying a strong sense of social inclusion and mutual understanding and solidarity (Hopner et al., 2023).

This example returns us to the concept of cultural politics to question whether dominant representations embedded within structures of power can ever be truly challenged, contested, or changed? Hall (1996) sees cultural politics as the means for making space for resistance and the challenging and possible transformation of dominant regimes of representation. For this to happen, he asserts that two important conditions need to be met. Firstly, there must be access to the means of representation (or counter-representation) through the media. Second, there must be some space for positive representation that contests the marginality and stereotypical nature of negative representations (Hall, 1996).

Some of this counter-representation comes from the greater diversity of Muslim voices now being represented in newspapers, driven to a significant extent by an increased media assertiveness from British Muslim communities. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, Muslim voices are often restricted or silenced by other, highly vocal, dominant groups such as far-right groups, politicians and media commentators – and even by journalists themselves in terms of how they interpret and present Muslim perspectives. As Poole (2002) highlights, it is often at the point of media production that Muslim groups lose control of the meaning they want represented in the media, particularly as the media itself privileges "a dominant ideological framework based on an agenda of maintaining and protecting sacred values and institutions" (p. 99).

Muslims and the Politics of Contestation: Who Are the Stakeholders?

Earlier in the chapter, I mentioned that Muslim communities have become much more politically visible as individuals and as groups, leading to a greater

heterogeneity of Muslim voices in newspaper coverage. Chapter 3 discussed how organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain's CfMM and MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) have directly challenged how the British media reports on Muslims at a national level. Local Muslim community groups and leaders have also increasingly been seeking out and building positive relationships with local journalists (Munnik, 2018).

Returning to CfMM founder Miqdaad Versi, as his name came up again and again in my interviews with journalists, I decided to include a formal research interview within my data. Versi had built productive relationships with newspaper editors to instigate change on how they reported on Muslim-related stories. As mentioned, he particularly drew on IPSO's own complaints procedure to painstakingly report inaccuracies in newspaper coverage on Muslims and Islam.

In his interview, Versi recalled how his efforts began when he realised that there was something called a press regulator that he could formally complain to about some of the stories he had read in newspapers involving Muslims. As he stated:

> So, I sent a complaint to IPSO. This was about a Mail on Sunday article that was very poorly written about Muslim gangs and there was no Muslimness associated with it. Suddenly from that I got a meeting with the managing editor of *the Mail* on Sunday. I thought this is quite interesting, maybe there is a willingness to engage in a constructive way. Now I have relationships with many of the managing editors of newspapers. I directly go to them first. I go through their own internal complaints process first. If it's a major thing, then I'll go to the managing editor and say what are you doing kind of thing. But that's very much on the reactive side, responding to things that happen.
>
> (*Interview with Miqdaad Versi*)

This type of assertive Muslim agency has been central for the rearticulation of negative representations and misrecognitions around Muslims (Modood, 2020). Through the sustained efforts of Versi and others, newspapers had become obliged to place the issue of Muslim representation high on their agendas – a point that came across very strongly in the testimonies from the Society of Editors at the Home Affairs Inquiry Committee. "All I can say is that you have heard today from a number of people who take this subject very seriously. I have seen it myself in newsrooms", Neil Benson, chair of the Editors' Code committee, told the Home Affairs Inquiry. "This isn't something that is taken at all lightly. I think it is higher on the agenda now than it has ever been".

This view was echoed by the Society of Editors' executive director, Ian Murray:

> We are actually saying that we take advice, even to the point of putting the story in front of representatives of those communities and basically saying, "Is this right or is this wrong?"
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

The extent to which these views reflected a genuine commitment to structural media change is debatable. Nevertheless, it is possible to see how contestation leads to the potential for change, dislocating negative Muslim representations from their (un)privileged status as the favoured 'Other' of British newspapers.

To consider which groups might win over journalists at any given moment, it is imperative to again consider which groups have the most influence in terms of how our social worlds are defined, ordered, and classified (Hebdige, 1979). As I discussed in Chapter 3, access to, and success in, attracting mainstream media attention depends on how much cultural capital any group has to challenge or disrupt a particular public agenda.

As Muslim groups struggle to accumulate that capital, US scholar Nathan Lean's (2012) '*The Islamophobia Industry'* explores in detail how different political and media elites have gained mainstream media success in propagating opposition and fear about Muslims and Islam. Similarly, Chris Bail's (2014) research on US anti-Muslim civil society organisations reflects how they were able to create a gravitational pull or 'fringe effect' that shaped mainstream media discourse on Islam and Muslims after the 9/11 attacks. These organisations had access to financial resources that allowed them to develop lucrative and powerful networks. This strengthened their capacity to influence the media and challenge the boundaries of public consensus about Muslims. In contrast, those groups without elite connections or those furthest away from power are least likely to influence media coverage that favours their interpretations (Poole, 2012). The US fringe organisations were able to position themselves as official sources for journalists writing about Muslims and Islam, while Muslim organisations became marginalised and excluded from the media debate about their own communities (Bail, 2014).

In the UK, the British press has similarly been indicted with legitimising and mainstreaming anti-Muslim far-right narratives. In his interview, tabloid journalist Ryan recalled a time when he had to interview Tommy Robinson, a very vocal far-right spokesperson in the UK:

> I had to interview him once. The terrifying thing was that we put a call into him for a story and he came back to us in about 10 seconds. He had the lines ready, he was good, he was pleasant, he gave us everything we needed. And you think this is a kind of operator, you know, he was pretty slick.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist Ryan*)

Ryan was shocked at how well-versed and experienced this far-right figure was in dealing with the mainstream media.

Even the more liberal, left-leaning newspapers such as *The Guardian* have contributed to the mainstreaming of far-right politics, adversely obscuring their Islamophobic policies by framing far-right rhetoric as 'populist' (Brown and Mondon, 2021). The re-appropriation of key liberal tenets by far-right groups, such as democracy, feminism and freedom, further serve to blur their Islamophobic rhetoric and win public support by placing Muslims in contravention of these core liberal values (Tyrer, 2010). Others have tracked the increasingly sophisticated methods that

far-right groups have used to push anti-Muslim messages through both mainstream and social media platforms (Winter, 2019)

Chapter 3 discussed how anti-Muslim far-right figures were given mainstream media platforms due to their perceived entertainment value and in the name of journalistic balance. The British broadcaster the BBC came under scrutiny for giving open platforms to Islamist and far-right speakers in its dogged pursuit of journalistic balance and impartiality. MCB's media campaigner Miqdaad Versi, for example, complained:

> [Radical Islamist] Anjem Choudhary didn't have a platform until the BBC gave him a platform. [Far-right figure] Tommy Robinson according to the BBC themselves literally didn't have a platform until the mainstream news gave him that platform. And they abuse that platform.
>
> (*Interview with Miqdaad Versi*)

Many journalists I interviewed saw through this framing and expressed serious concerns and discomfort at the continued mainstream platforming of far-right figures, compared to other voices, including those of Muslim communities. As journalist Leila told me:

> Not everyone gets a platform all the time, not every political movement always gets a platform. But it seems like the far right are seen as this attractive thing to put under the microscope. There seems to be a kind of perverse element to that.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist and columnist Leila*)

The imbalanced power advantages held by some actors over others in terms of resources and access to the media make counter-hegemonic struggles for signification an uneven contest. The struggle over meaning is not simply acted out in some form of idealised Habermasian discursive sphere between different ideological positions. Instead, the stratification of opportunities to transform power into public influence (Habermas, 2006) through the media highlights an underlying power structure that ultimately privileges some groups over others. Furthermore, the symbolic closure of a topic around a fixed definition is much easier to achieve against those groups (like Muslims) that are already relatively powerless (Hall et al., 1978).

Digital Battlegrounds: Contesting Muslim Narratives Online

Social media has become an important arena for contestation, an arena where battles to determine the position of Muslims in British society are fought, particularly following the breaking of a high-profile news story involving Muslims. Much of these debates are instigated by far-right social media campaigns, where Muslims are at the receiving end of often vicious Islamophobic rhetoric and hatred. In the aftermath of the Woolwich attack in 2013, for example, platforms like X were

used to propagate Islamophobic sentiments (Awan, 2014). Far-right social media campaigns, such as the UK-based anti-halal consumer activist 'Boycott Halal Campaign', were used to mobilise and recruit different far-right groups by conflating Muslims with nationalism as a threat to British identity (Jafari and Saleh, 2024). Similar patterns have been found in the mobilisation of Islamophobic social media campaigns in Canada, where the #removekebab hashtag became a far-right code for the deportation, murder or genocide of Muslims (Mirrlees, 2021). More recently, anti-Muslim disinformation about the killing of three young girls in Southport led to riots targeting Muslims, mosques and hotels for refugees (Gaucher, 2024).

On the other side, X has served as a platform for contesting these discriminatory narratives about Muslims. For example, the platform was used to spread positive, inclusive narratives about Muslims and to counter disinformation and Islamophobia during the 2017 Grenfell tower fire in London (Downing and Dron, 2020). In response to the usual Islamophobic sentiments, some X users attempted to separate the extremist actions of the terrorists from ordinary Muslims and Islam following the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing (Downing, Gerwens and Dron, 2022). Poole et al., (2023a) also demonstrate how a pro-Muslim Twitter campaign in the aftermath of the Christchurch terror attack in New Zealand used the hashtag 'hellobrother' to foster transnational affective solidarity to counter Islamophobia. The mobilisation of this hashtag together with others (such as #peacefulmosques) promoted emotional solidarity, peace and community resilience while defending Muslims against far-right rhetoric (Poole et al., 2023a, Poole at al., 2023b). Yet while social media does hold significant reach to challenge Islamophobic discourse, Muslim voices are again often drowned out by organised far-right social media campaigns. This level of hashtag activism has further been criticised for failing to address neither the underlying structural basis for anti-Muslim discrimination nor the compete against the legitimising power of mainstream newspaper narratives about Muslims (Poole et al., 2023a; Titley, 2019).

Whose Voice Counts? Legitimacy in Newspaper Narratives

Even though Muslim organisations have become increasingly vocal about the issue of negative representation, organisations such as MEND and MCB are often marginalised and delegitimised in their contestation of dominant political and media narratives about Muslims. In Chapter 3, I presented how the Muslim Council (MCB) status as a representative and authoritative mouthpiece was often called into question, despite being the largest Muslim umbrella organisation in the UK. Even though Miqdaad Versi acknowledges that the MCB could not possibly represent every single Muslim opinion in the UK, his interview discussed earlier highlights how the organisation is often subject to greater scrutiny and standards when compared to other umbrella organisations for specific communities.

The standing of MCB as the main organisation in State-Muslim engagement became significantly damaged by its criticism of the Iraq war and the war on terrorism. MCB found itself labelled as apologists for terrorism (Meer, Dwyer and

Modood, 2010). In a separate incident, a press interview from the head of the MCB warning of the growing Islamophobic sentiment in Britain became subject to a backlash from the British press and was used to delegitimise the MCB as a representative voice for the wider Muslim community (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008).

Hall (1997) points to how the marking of difference through such symbolic boundaries serves the purpose of closing ranks, whereby what does not fit into an agreed definition of 'Us' are then easily be labelled as deviant and de-legitimated from participating in the struggle for meaning. This is the 'politics of signification' that Hall (1982) defines as a struggle for the power to signify events in a particular way. Invested groups compete for one meaning to take priority over others and become the consensual interpretation of 'Muslims' in Britain. This requires winning credibility and legitimacy for their own interpretations on the one hand, and on the other, to marginalise or de-legitimise alternative interpretations from other groups (Hall, 1982). As these articulations are often arbitrary themselves, they can be disconnected from a particular meaning (or cause) and re-attached to another. Examples include feminist columnists supporting Muslim women's right to wear the burka or the re-appropriation of key liberal tenets by far-right groups such as feminism or LGBTQIA rights to position Muslims in contravention of these core liberal values (Tyrer, 2013). This process of articulation enables different ideas and groups (whether communities, interest groups, think tanks or others) to align through a chain of equivalence to become a unified political and social force (Hall, 1985).

More recently, MCB is sometimes referred to in British newspapers as the 'moderate' Muslim voice. However, the relationship between the media and Muslim organisations is both precarious and ambivalent (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008). This was reflected in the Home Affairs Inquiry where many of the editors went to considerable lengths to discredit the complaints of Muslim 'interest groups'. When discussing the complaints IPSO had received about stories involving Muslims, editors rejected the complaints by claiming that they came from interest groups rather than readers or members of the public. These groups are not only made distinct from members of the public or audiences but depicted as enemies of the British press and press freedom, and consequently of the British public as well. Some of the editors claimed these groups were committed to shutting down debate on 'complex and important subjects' to do with minority groups such as Muslims (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018)*.

When asked by the Home Affairs Inquiry committee why the Editors' Code's discrimination clause did not extend to groups as well as individuals, Neil Benson the Chair of the Editors' Code committee, spoke of his concerns around co-ordinated campaigns that sent "cut-and-paste letters or emails to the Code Committee". Rather than addressing actual breaches of the editors' code, many of these complaints instead 'opened the floodgates' for any story that someone generally did not like. "The corollary of that is that we believe it would certainly have a chilling effect on freedom of expression", Benson stated, "because in that sort of climate editors would be bound to think, 'Well, I'm not going to publish this

story—I'm just not going to go there—because I know what the reaction is going to be'" (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*).

His views were echoed by various newspaper editors, including The Sun's Peter Clarkson below:

> There are also the groups that orchestrate complaints, so it is abused by interest groups. You might find, for instance, that thousands of complaints can be orchestrated on social media, all about the same story.
>
> *(Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018)*

In the context of the Home Affairs Inquiry, these arguments serve two key purposes. Firstly, they reduce the validity of the complaints as the interest groups are seen to have their own political agendas rather than true grounds for complaint. Complaints about Islamophobic newspaper coverage is also dismissed as imaginary, unauthentic and ingenuine. Just as the interest groups are a pest, the complaints themselves by association are constructed as vexatious and troublesome as newspapers become 'swamped' by false complaints.

Second, it sets up a tangible threat to ideals of press freedom and public interest. There is a strong fear that increased regulation because of these complaints will lead to the silencing of the free press and its ability to report on 'difficult topics' about Muslims. As *The Times* Ian Brunskill stated in his written evidence to the committee:

> It would be regrettable if continuing debate on these complex and important subjects were to be closed down on the basis of assertion and prejudice from vested interest groups who dislike the British press and appear to hold its readers in contempt.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

By considering how the concerns of groups that challenge negative Muslim representation are dismissed in these ways, it is possible to view the uneven nature of contestation where certain interpretations are privileged while others distorted or dismissed.

The Case of MCB and the Centre for Media Monitoring

The case of MCB highlights how when Muslim groups do achieve the necessary cultural capital to be able to engage in public debate through the media, it is rarely on their own terms. Instead, as Hall emphasises, any ideological struggle over meaning is integrally bound up with the struggle over access to the means of signification. There is a sharp contrast between those who have privileged access (or even an acknowledged right) to the world of public discourse and those who struggle to gain access at all (Hall, 1982). For Muslim communities and their representatives, there is a constant struggle for their right to put forward their interpretations of their own communities into public discourse at all. For these

groups, as Hall (1982) points out, “their own definitions [are] always more partial, fragmentary and delegitimated; and who, when they did gain access, [have] to perform within the established terms of the problematic in play” (p. 81).

Media scholars Henrik Örnebring and Michael Karlsson (2022) ask that journalists consider how they frame coverage of groups that have historically been denied equal democratic participation. Instead of dismissing these groups as ‘special interests’, this requires some recognition that they are not biased for wanting equal rights. The same applies to Muslims. Rather than dismissing their concerns about how their communities are portrayed in newspapers, journalists should engage with these groups. As Örnebring and Karlsson (2022) point out:

> The best way for journalists to assess whether the claims of such a group is legitimate is to assess whether such claims are based on truthful accounts of the world.
>
> (p. 203)

Despite his fair share of critics, Miqdaad Versi’s focus on inaccuracies and corrections has met with considerable success in raising the concerns of Muslim communities to the editors’ attentions. He received several special mentions during the Home Affairs Inquiry, including from IPSO and editors themselves. As the former IPSO chair Sir Alan Moses testified to the committee: “I think this question of continuing the discussion and debate [around Muslim representation in newspapers]—as Miqdaad Versi knows and does contact me personally, meets me personally and discusses these things—the more that happens, the better”. Similarly, *The Times’* Ian Brunskill stated:

> You mentioned Miqdaad Versi. Can I just pick up on that? What this shows, which is really useful—it is more useful than getting into a stand-off about apologies and corrections and where they go—is that it is about process. I think this process can work. The process of policing accuracy is potentially much more effective than the process of posturing and arguing about discrimination. That is my sense. That is what I think Miqdaad Versi has very sensibly woken up to doing. It is working. What he does now is to pick people up on small errors about Islam all the time.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

When Versi and MCB set up the Centre for Media Monitoring in 2018, the aim was to develop an evidence base on how Muslims and Islam is reported in the British print and broadcast media. The Centre works collaboratively with editors and journalists from the national print and broadcast media to address inaccuracies, generalisations, and misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims. Its monitoring team has secured 100s of corrections from broadsheet and tabloid newspapers by drawing on breaches of the Editors’ Code, mainly around issues of inaccuracy or misleading stories. Amongst the corrections was *The Sun*’s front page headline in 2016, claiming that “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathise with Jihadis”. Misappropriating

the results of a survey of UK Muslims, the article received more than 3,000 complaints. IPSO adjudicated that *The Sun* newspaper had "failed to take appropriate care in its presentation of the poll results, and as a result the coverage was significantly misleading" (BBC, 2016).

To date, CfMM has analysed around 200,000 online print and broadcast clips and engaged with over 1,500 managing editors, editors, producers, correspondents and journalists from print and broadcast media (Versi, 2023). Despite these successes, Versi is well aware of the limitations of this type of 'reactive' approach. "There is one side of things where you want to make sure that you respond and get things changed, but there is another element which is persuading some of the managing editors that they are getting it wrong", he stated in his interview. He has used different methods to reach newspapers, including complaints, roundtables with editors and journalists, and presenting them with empirical evidence of their newspapers coverage of Muslims. At the end, Versi admits that this might not be enough:

> It's like all of these things we are trying to do to push things in the right direction. But it shouldn't just be reactive in terms of the newspapers […] we need the structure to be looked at for change. But the reality is, and I have to be totally honest, that these things only change when influencers want them to change.
>
> (*Interview with media campaigner, Miqdaad Versi*)

Within his reference to 'influencers', it is through those 'influential' agents within the newspapers that structural change can take place – namely journalists and editors.

Inside the Newspapers: The Impact of Internal Contestation

To consider the role that journalists might play within the context of contestation, we need to revisit the structural imperatives that restrict their agency when it comes to how they report on stories involving Muslims. So far, the book has discussed these imperatives in some detail – starting with the embedded common-sense conceptions of Muslims as problematic outsiders in British society and moving on to how commercial pressures and ideological constructions of audiences and the British public work together to drive sensationalist reporting on Muslims. Journalism's own norms and practices also contribute to the favouring of certain representations of Muslims while devaluing others. Finally, organisational pressures and structural institutional biases make it difficult for journalists to exercise their agency to directly challenge how their newspapers report on Muslims.

What each of these chapters additionally uncovered was the conflictual aspect of Muslim representation in the tensions that journalists experienced. These tensions often presented in the accounts of journalists as ideological dilemmas. Social psychologist Michael Billig describes these dilemmas as "the discrepancies between

actions and words or between theory and practice, or upon the inconsistencies between expressed ends and chosen means" (Billig et al., 1988, p. 21).

Journalism scholars characterise these dilemmas as a conflict between the normative conceptions of journalism and the practice of journalism itself (Mellado, 2021). This embodies the discrepancies between what journalists think they should be doing (journalist role conception) and the news stories they produce within the media institutions they work for (journalism performance). By unravelling journalism as a social practice and as an institution (Hallin, 2016), the ensuing tensions between its ideals and practices shed light on both the reproduction of negative Muslim representations and the contradictions that journalists experience in the reporting of stories about Muslims (Haq, 2024). Taking journalistic role performance into account also extends cultural scholar Stuart Hall's media hegemony approach by making space for the autonomy and power of individual journalists to decide how to report on Muslims.

Returning to British sociologist Anthony Giddens' structuration theory as mentioned in Chapter 4, media structures become subject to change as they are constituted and reconstituted over time due to their constant interactions with agents. Any structural change in terms of Muslim representation is similarly dependent on the action or inaction taken by agents both outside these structures (such as Muslim organisations or the far right) but also from *within* news institutions. Journalists are both empowered or constrained to challenge anti-Muslim bias within their newspapers, and, in turn, the actions of their newspapers will either reinforce or reconstitute their practices. As Marsden and Savigney (2009) point out by extending Gidden's structure-agency relationship:

> This reconstitution is dialectical and ongoing, so that those reconstituted structures then provide alternate courses of action, within which agents act (or not), and then reconstitute and reshape those structures.
>
> (p. 147)

In his reference to 'influencers' earlier, Versi acknowledges that it is through those 'influential' agents within the British press that structural change can take place. In my interviews, there were several examples of how journalists themselves had been instrumental in redressing how Muslim were represented in the British press.

One of the broadsheet journalists I interviewed described how he used his considerable influence as a very senior, high-profile journalist to help spread MCB's message on terrorism:

> In the immediate aftermath of the Manchester attack, MCB did tweet that this is a criminal act, this is nothing to do with Muslims whatsoever. I retweeted that and that went to literally two million and it still gets retweeted. Here was the Muslim Council of Britain saying this has nothing to do with Islam, this is not the act of Islam, and just managing to get that message out at that particular point was far more influential I think than anything else they could have done.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist*)

Even though this journalist credits MCB for this success, his account highlights how journalists can work with Muslim organisations to bolster, rather than suppress, counter-narratives and alternative interpretations of news events. Even the editors and newspaper regulators at the Home Affairs Inquiry appeared to be open to working with Muslim groups in this way. Ian Murray of the Society of Editors, for example, spoke about his engagement with Muslim-led bodies such as the Muslim News and the Aziz Foundation. "We cannot tell editors what to do, but we can help to facilitate bringing together topics, ideas and discussions", he told the committee. A similar view was put forward by *The Sun*'s Paul Clarkson who stated:

> What we find very useful is engaging with some of these minority groups. We don't only engage with Muslim groups. Because one group obviously cannot speak for an entire community, we speak to multiple Muslim groups.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

Similarly, all of the local journalists I interviewed spoke of their attempts to engage positively with Muslim community groups to ensure fairer and more accurate reporting practices. When we were discussing one of the articles he wrote in his interview, local journalist Thomas, for example, described how the idea for the story had come from a key Muslim figure in his area with whom he had already built a long-standing relationship. "In terms of the logistics of that story, [name of source] had written something on the mosque facebook page, and I sought it out. When I found it, I phoned him up and said is it OK to use this?" he told me.

Some may argue that such small acts from within newspapers themselves cannot redress a long-standing and pervasive bias in the way that stories involving Muslims are reported. Contestation by its very nature, however, has an accumulative impact. It disrupts accepted ways of thinking, adding chink after chink in the armour of embedded structural biases.

If there was one shared experience amongst all editors in the Home Affairs Inquiry and the journalists I interviewed, it was their awareness of the problematic ways in which their newspapers reported on Muslims and that something needed to be done about it. Perhaps the most powerful example of this was presented by Gary Jones, the editor-in-chief of the *Daily and Sunday Express*, to the Home Affairs Inquiry. Jones was the only editor to openly accept the disproportionately negative portrayal of Muslims in his newspaper, as the following account reflects:

> I think that each and every editor has a responsibility for every single word that's published in their newspaper. And yes, cumulatively, some of the headlines that have appeared in the past have created an Islamophobic sentiment, which I find uncomfortable. It is my responsibility to ensure that content is accurate and that newspapers don't look at stereotypical views that may or may not be around in the general public. So, I should be held to account and be answerable.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

If journalists and editors are simply (or even unconsciously) reproducing the structural biases of their newspaper, the example of Gary Jones shows that it is possible for these biases to be overcome and enable change from the 'inside' of the structure – *if* the over-riding motivation to do so is strong enough.

Navigating Self-Reflection and Agency within Journalism

In his critique of racial liberalism, C.W. Mills (2017) advocates that by understanding how certain social structures promote racially flawed processes, it is possible that an individual as an agent can

> extricate oneself from them (insofar as that is possible) and [consider] how best to do one's part in undermining them […] one has a better chance of getting things right through a self-conscious recognition of their existence and correspondingly distancing from them.
>
> (p. 11)

Gary Jones has been editor-in-chief of the *Daily Express and Sunday Express* since March 2018, just a month before he was asked to give evidence to the inquiry. When asked by the committee whether Islamophobia was a significant problem in Britain today, he replied "Yes, I do think that there are issues with Islamophobia. How deep-rooted they are, I am not sure, but the media have certainly had issues in the past". Jones reflected on how he had taken the time to review several past front pages of his newspaper and admitted to feeling very uncomfortable looking at them, stating:

> Individually, they may not present specific issues. There have been accuracy issues on some of them and some of them are just downright offensive, and I wouldn't want to be party to any newspaper that would publish such material. I have to accept, as a newspaper editor, that people have different views to my own and that the newspaper is there to represent the broader section of views, but I think there are limits to how far you should go in an honest and fair-minded society.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

A similar tension presented across journalists interviews between their normative role in society (what journalism should be) and how their newspapers performed when it came to the representation of Muslims. These tensions led some journalists to exercise what limited agency they had to redress the biases against Muslims within their newspapers. As one tabloid journalist just starting out in his career stated:

> [For] the vast, vast, majority of people [working for tabloids] what you have to understand about them is they are all very deeply compromised students who wanted to get a job in journalism. But they have gone to a publication

> that they probably never read before ever in their lives, because they were the places that offered them jobs. So, their private views about what they think about issues like Islam, they will try as much as possible to crowbar it into the copy that they put out.
>
> (*Interview with junior tabloid journalist*)

This journalist resists the pressure to conform to a more negative, sensationalist stance towards Muslims by 'crowbarring' counter-narratives into the newspaper's copy. Other journalists described how they would seek out alternative avenues to provide more nuanced and balanced stories on Muslims. Journalist Stephen, for example, used his well-paid job at his tabloid newspaper to enable a side-line of writing more nuanced, investigative articles on cases of anti-Muslim discrimination for smaller, independent publications. "I almost use the fact that I earn a decent income from [the newspaper he works for] to write pieces like that which get me no income and often cost me quite a lot", he told me in his interview.

Other journalists felt obliged to leave the newspapers they worked for and opt for a freelance career to produce the stories they wanted. As Hasina reflected in her interview:

> I have a lot more freedom with the articles that I write and the topics because I'm pitching the ideas to the editors. It's up to them whether they want to publish those or not. I think I would be definitely more restricted working within an organisation where they have their own kind of editorial agenda, and they are working towards their own kind of messages that they want to convey or certain angles.
>
> (*Interview with freelance journalist Hasina*)

As a freelance Muslim journalist, Hasina was often approached by mainstream newspapers to write opinion pieces following key news stories relating to Muslims. This enabled her to put forward alternative interpretations to how those stories were usually reported in the press. One example she recalled was where she wrote a comment piece on her personal experiences as a Muslim woman and the Islamophobia she had experienced. "When I experienced Islamophobia myself, the abusive man was ranting on about things he saw on the TV, so that kind of stuck with me", she told me in her interview. "[…] And I do genuinely feel that representations do influence society at large, certain representations of Muslims especially when Islamophobia is very rampant".

These attempts at resistance enable some counter-narratives of news stories involving Muslims into public debate but they compete against the more privileged and powerful dominant interpretations of stories involving Muslims within the uneven nature of the media terrain (Hall et al., 1978). The traction of counter-narratives is significantly shaped by several factors. For Hall et al., the most significant criteria relate to

> whether the collectivity which generates counter-ideologies and explanations is a powerful countervailing force in society; whether it represents an

> organised majority or substantial minority; and whether or not it has a degree of legitimacy within the system or can win such a position through struggle.
> (p. 67)

Some counter-definers, such as the Muslim organisations discussed earlier, do have varying access to the media. But it is journalists and editors that hold significant legitimacy and access to act as a powerful countervailing force in society. As tabloid journalist Ryan rose in the ranks of his newspaper, for example, he was given a regular column over which he had greater autonomy to produce more nuanced, counter-interpretations of Muslim-related stories. During his interview, he shared a past occasion when some Muslim readers had approached him personally to complain about an article he had written.

> When I was at the [*tabloid newspaper*[1]] I got some correspondence from Muslim people about what the f***k are you doing writing this basically? I had a really decent dialogue saying look the stance of the paper, it's happened, there might be some spin on it […] but you know you have to understand this is how we are working. People were very reasonable about it. People were generally like I don't read the thing anyway but it's just the nerve. And yeah, I understand that.

It is perhaps not surprising that Muslim news readers are highly critical of newspapers' coverage of Islam and Muslims and worry about the divisiveness and hatred that negative representations foster in the societies they live in (Ewart, Cherney and Murphy, 2017). The intervention by his Muslim readers, however, served to cement in Ryan the potentially harmful consequences of his reporting on the communities he served.

Another journalist I interviewed used this awareness to challenge common-sense ideas about the link between Muslims and terrorism through his newspaper by drawing on hard evidence and facts:

> There's a lot of debate that you know we fear for our lives, and we are all going to get murdered tomorrow by jihadists that sloshes around. I think the most important article I wrote about terrorism in Britain during my career was based on a leaked MI5 paper. This showed that MI5 did not believe that there was any point in trying to profile Britain's Muslim communities for potential terrorists because they come from all different ways. But it also completely demolished any kind of link between religious devotion and orthodoxy and radical Islamist terrorism. Indeed, it's so often converts who had very secular lifestyles. I thought that was most important and I felt like I needed to re-publish that every six months.
> (*Anonymised interview with journalist*)

As I discuss in Chapter 6, this type of agency to both recognise the imbalances in newspaper reporting on Muslims and then take action to redress this was

particularly demonstrated in my interviews with local journalists. In my interview with Thomas for example, he shared how he would actively challenge anti-Muslim stereotypes in his reporting on terrorism attacks:

> I made a conscious decision to do those stories because I think it's important that the narrative that all Muslims are terrorists is challenged. There's no better opportunity or time to do that than in the aftermath of a terror attack because there would be people going "f*****g Mussies" on social media. I think it's important as many people as possible should see it – you know there's a spike in Islamophobia and attacks every time after a terror attack.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Thomas*)

During the interview, I also asked Thomas how he would deal with someone from a far-right organisation approaching him to cover a story from their perspective. This was something he had experienced on several occasions. The last instance was where the local newspaper where he worked as a journalist learnt of a local march being organised by a far-right group. Thomas had been contacted by the group in a bid to gain media attention for the march. "Actually, looking back at it now, it is the one thing we have debated amongst ourselves in the newsroom", he told me. "Personally, they are a nightmare to deal with, so I am reluctant to give them any platform at all, only as far as to say what they plan to do".

Thomas investigated the groups organising the march to confirm their far-right status and found that they also included supporters who had been prosecuted for anti-Muslim hate crimes. "I was able to join the dots up and present that and say look they are far right", Thomas continued. "I remember it was one of the few times that we took a collective decision to agree let's do the bare minimum about them and instead just concentrate on what they're doing and how it's going to disrupt people".

The march would be reported in his newspaper as a matter of public interest, but Thomas would approach it from a more practical angle about it being a nuisance rather than the issues they were marching for. After the reporting of the story, he received considerable abuse from the far-right group and their supporters for how he had portrayed the march. He was subject to Twitter pile-ons[2] to the point where he was receiving direct messages with death threats, simply because he had referred to the organisations as 'far right'. "They've got the right to say what they want but there are laws in this country about hate crime and hate speech, incitement to violence and incitement to racism", he told me in his interview. "They've got a big enough platform through social media; they don't need us to trumpet what they're saying as well. That's my personal view and that's one that we kind of stuck to as well".

In the digital age, journalists are expected to take on additional and often escalated emotional labour when it comes to reporting on the politics of hate (Perreault, 2022). As Perrault explains, it is natural that journalists will be emotionally invested in their newswork, and that reporting on hate evokes feelings of anger, concern, sadness and fear. As he emphasises, "[t]his emotional labour would naturally mean

that to some degree the hate journalists experience in their profession they by extension also feel as an individual" (Perrault, 2022, p. 112). Despite the death threats and social media pile-ons Thomas experienced, he felt strongly that providing the far-right organisations with a mainstream media platform would simply legitimise their Islamophobic and racist views. Thomas could have been swayed by the lure of a sensationalist, click-baiting story but instead he focused on his role as a local journalist and on what his audiences needed to know.

To understand this type of reconstructive, (self-) transformative potentialities of agency towards its structural contexts, we need to recognise the temporal nature of human experience (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). For journalists, this temporal process positions their agency as being synchronously informed by their past (through the routine or habitual aspects of their journalism practices), orientated towards the future (to imagine ways of improving their reporting on Muslims) as well as rooted in the present in their ability to evaluate and contextualise current practices. Under Emirbayer and Mische's conception of agency as a form of relational pragmatics, journalists "may switch between (and reflexively transform) their orientations toward action, thereby changing their degrees of flexible, inventive, and critical response toward structuring contexts" (p. 1013).

In this way, the acts of journalists become part of the struggle to disrupt and redefine representations. This shift from embedded structural constraints to the privileging of agency in favour of social transformation can only take place when an individual is 'hailed' into a project that corresponds with their sense of 'who they are' and the values that they represent (Hall, 1998, p. 59).

Conclusion

The chapter started with the contention that the representation of Muslims in the British press should not be viewed as fixed but recognised for its fluid and contradictory nature. At the same time, any analysis of media representations must reflect long-standing relations of power and subordination (particularly around race) that take place in wider society (Ferguson, 1998).

Building on the previous chapter, I presented the case that we must view representation through journalists' experiences of the tensions between structure and agency against a backdrop of political and cultural contestation about British Muslims. In doing so, we gain a much more nuanced, underexplored insight into both the reproduction of, and resistance to, any anti-Muslim bias within newspapers. The chapter draws on the experiences of journalists with examples of how they were able to create spaces to resist and challenge biases entrenched within the media structures they worked for. It further explores how contestation from outside the media – whether instigated by parliamentary figures (as in the Home Affairs Inquiry), media campaign groups, Muslim organisations and even news audiences – can challenge news institutions on how they report on stories involving Muslims.

Cultural politics and contestation about how Muslims are represented in the British press, and about their position in wider society, opens the doors for change. It puts pressure on newspapers to address how to report on Muslims in more accurate, fairer ways that does not disproportionately demonise or marginalise them. At the very end of the Home Affairs Inquiry session where he was presenting his evidence, the Society of Editors' Ian Murray stated:

> I would be very surprised if any of those who were here today did not go back and have serious conversations in their newsrooms and say, "That is something we ought to consider bringing in in some way." I hope I am not putting words into their mouths. I just know that, given the way the industry has changed and the conversations that have taken place over the past decade or so, that will be taken on board.
>
> *(Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018)*

That statement was nearly seven years ago, and there is still such a long way to go.

Representation is not a neutral act; it reflects and enforces power dynamics in society (Hall, 1997). Newspapers often control the means of representation, potentially limiting how marginalised groups define themselves and giving platforms instead to those who spread Islamophobic rhetoric.

Even though contestation from those outside of newspaper institutions, including Muslim organisations, media reform campaigners, audiences and even public figures such as politicians or the police, contribute to this change, these direct challenges or protests cannot on their own undermine the "well-knitted together nature of media discourse" (Gabriel, 1994, p. 17). Furthermore, as Ferguson (1988) points out:

> The contradictions thrown up by these representations are played off against each other in a kind of miniature cultural episteme where they tend to sustain ideological relations of power and subordination rather than challenge them [drawing] upon a discursive reserve which allows for all these different positions to be adopted as part of the unitary (if brittle) worldview.
>
> (pp. 259–260)

This again returns us to the question of whether dominant representations embedded within structures of power are ever truly challenged, contested, or changed? To some extent, and in line with Gidden's structuration theory, structural change must come from within the media structure itself, making journalists pivotal to its transformation. Such a transformation is only possible when journalists are aware of the biases involved in the ways Muslims are represented and actively invested in challenging these inequalities from within their newspapers. For journalists, this requires the exercising of some measure of self-directing freedom and moral independence while also taking account of the social institutions they are part of (Sjøvaag, 2013).

Notes

1 The name of the newspaper has been redacted to protect interviewee's anonymity.
2 Thompson and Cover (2022) define a pile on as "the cultural practice in which an individual is publicly shamed by internet users in numbers that range from two or three to thousands or even millions" (p.1772).

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6 Beyond Representations

Transforming Diversity in Journalism

Introduction

In 2020, 50 Black, Asian and ethnic minority journalists signed a letter asking the Society of Editors to take action for the repeated failure of UK newsrooms to improve their diversity (Tobitt, 2020).

The letter argued that a diverse editorial team brings a broader representation of perspectives, enabling the coverage of stories beyond race-related issues in more nuanced and balanced ways. It highlighted the importance of sharing the views of ethnic minority communities on a wider range of issues – where their voices have often been overlooked despite facing the same challenges as other Britons. “There is more to our communities than just ‘race matters’”, the letter complained. “Having a greater cross section of journalists from across the UK’s diverse communities will only help to enrich coverage, provide more eclectic views and deliver more insight into those that make up the Britain of today”.

Amongst the measures, the letter calls for editors to adopt positive recruitment campaigns, properly paid traineeships, equal promotion and pay for staff already in newsrooms and regular audits of diversity representation.

In this chapter, I discuss how equality ‘solutions’ to the lack of diversity in British newsrooms risk reproducing the same inequalities they claim to address. Out of all religious groups, Muslims are the most under-represented in the population of UK journalists (Thurman, Cornia and Kunert, 2015). Simply adding more Muslim journalists to the payroll, however, does not wholly mitigate anti-Muslim bias within newspapers nor guarantee fairer and more balanced reporting of stories involving Muslims. Drawing directly on interviews with Muslim journalists, I reflect on how a cultural change is required alongside diversity measures that ensure newsrooms nurture their Muslim journalists. This involves recognising that the heterogeneity of their Muslim journalists reflects the wider heterogeneity of Britain’s Muslim communities – a concept often overlooked within newspapers coverage itself.

So how can we better reimagine the culture of diverse newsrooms when it comes to Muslims? In this chapter, I explore the experiences of both journalists and editors to find where spaces for cultural change are created. The lessons learnt from the interviews with local journalists and their very different conceptualisations of

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who their audiences are and their relationships with them, presented ways to report on Muslims that include, rather than exclude, them as an integral part of their social imaginary.

The Quest for Diversity in Newsrooms

The make-up of newsrooms in the UK has always been dominated by mainly white, middle-class men (and to a lesser extent, women). Statistics from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Thurman, Cornia and Kunert, 2015) find that British Black communities make up approximately 3% of the British population yet comprise a tiny 0.2% of journalists. There are slightly better figures for British Asians who account for 2.5% of journalists and 7% of the UK population. These figures have improved since the Reuter's report was originally published in 2015 but Black and minority ethnic journalists still very rarely reach higher editorial positions within British newsrooms (Spilsbury, 2023).

Across my interviews with journalists, there was a consensus that this lack of diversity in the newsrooms directly contributed to the bias towards negative representations of Muslims in British newspapers. As Patrick observed:

> It's the way that the media works, it's the way the national press works. [My publication] is a liberal newspaper but it's just at the liberal end of these very conservative institutions that have been around a long time. It's Oxbridge [educated at Oxford or Cambridge universities] dominated and I think you get a certain mindset of people who go there.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Patrick*)

Several of the journalists saw this as problematic, although they believed the situation had improved overall more recently. Following on from his experience of working for a left-leaning broadsheet newspaper, Andrew emphasised the importance of having Muslim journalists in newsrooms and involving them at every stage of the news production process. He told me:

> I think my newspaper, and other papers to a degree as well, are in a much better place than they were 20 years ago, and that we have Muslim reporters. We made a specific effort to go out and try to find them, and try to fund training schemes, just so that people are familiar with Britain's diverse communities. What better way to be familiar than [for journalists] to come from [those communities], and be part of [newspapers], and not just relying on white Oxbridge.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Andrew*)

Andrew had added this enthusiastic call for more diversity in the newsroom at the end of our interview as he felt this important point had been missed in our prior discussion. Rather than a human resources tick-box exercise, for Andrew diversity represented valuing diverse experiences to ensure more balanced coverage.

A similarly passionate sentiment was echoed in the interview with broadsheet journalist Karen:

> I mean good grief! We've got all these stories about people 'pouring into the country' and we don't think anything at all about the fact that they are not represented in our newsrooms. I just think that if you're working alongside someone, it is going to reduce your prejudice isn't it. You're not going to hold people in the same way. You know you'd be embarrassed to say something or to write something that the chap who sits next to you at work is going to read. If you are going to be embarrassed by it because you're categorising his race, religion or whatever, then that's going to act as a breaker. It's going to make you stop and think a bit more.
>
> (*Interview with right-leaning broadsheet journalist, Karen*)

Again, Karen sees the value of having a diverse workforce as a way of challenging ingrained biases that exist within what Hall (1972) terms the "extremely narrow social band" that news providers tend to recruit from (p. 6).

How these journalists view the importance of diverse newsrooms reflects how seeds of structural change can stem from a genuine position of wanting to address inequalities and bias within newspapers. Rather than reproducing the same institutional bias towards white, Oxbridge journalists, most interviewees displayed a sincere desire towards disrupting this bias and enabling progressive change. Working with journalists of colour, including Muslims, can act as what Karen terms 'a breaker', where personal prejudices and biases are challenged (even indirectly) through everyday interactions in the newsroom.

In both these accounts, however, the responsibilities for producing unbiased media coverage about Muslims appears to be placed on Muslims themselves. They are tasked with 'educating' other journalists on how to write about their communities. Even their presence in the desk next to the journalist suddenly provides the non-Muslim journalist with the necessary tools to be able to cover accurately and sensitively all the diverse, heterogenous Muslim communities in Britain. Even though having diverse newsrooms does enable the circulation of diverse ideas about how to report on key issues, one Muslim journalist cannot represent the views of the heterogenous, 3.6 million Muslims in Britain today (Office for National Statistics, 2022). The very concept of diversity in the newsroom often leads to minorities being viewed in unitary terms as a solution to the general negative impact of racism (Gabriel, 1998), rather than an understanding that British newsrooms should reflect British communities.

The Journalism Gap: Challenges in Hiring Muslim Journalists

When asked about how the lack of diversity in newsrooms should be addressed, tabloid journalist Ryan expressed his doubt as to whether this was a truly realistic aim:

> I think it's cultural change that needs to take place. It maybe [possible] – but it would take such a long time. There was research into the gender pay gap, and

> we've kind of sprang into action over that which is, you know, phenomenal, great news. Until the equivalent research is done, and the proper publicity is given to justify the sheer lack of diversity, then it's not going to change.
>
> (*Interview with tabloid journalist Ryan*)

The figures back up Ryan's observations. Changing Newsrooms 2023, an international survey of senior industry leaders by the Reuters Institute, finds that 90% of newsroom leaders are satisfied they are doing a good job when it comes to gender diversity. In contrast, only 53% felt that their organisations were addressing issues of ethnic diversity, with 46% believing their newsroom were failing.

In his interview, Broadsheet journalist, Patrick, agreed that in practice, race diversity within the newspaper industry was much more resistant to change than gender diversity. He maintained that gender diversity was easier to redress since most people had a personal connection with women – whether this is as daughters, wives, or friends. "In terms of race and ethnicity, it is much slower and much more effort is required, much more having to get out there and target people who aren't in your radar", he told me. "So, even when people acknowledge that there is a problem, a lot of the initial reaction is just to shrug and say well you can't really reach hard to reach groups, they don't apply".

As Patrick points out, the recruitment of Black and ethnic minority journalists has been a sore sticking point for the British press industry. During the first of the Home Affairs Inquiry sessions, this point was reiterated by Professor Frost, Chair of the Ethics Council, National Union of Journalists when asked by the committee why the proportion of UK journalists who are Muslim is 0.5% compared to 5% of the national population. Frost admitted that the NUJ itself had been working hard on these issues for decades and it was still clearly unbalanced. Echoing Patrick's account above, he added:

> It is not so bad on gender; there is still more men than women but that is changing, and I think in 20 years' time it is going to be pretty much 50:50. But it is certainly white journalists who are from more privileged background and that clearly distorts the way that newspapers are operated. They do not know about the communities on which they are reporting because they simply do not have the background information. We need people from much more diverse backgrounds, whether that is class or ethnicity.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, February 2018*)

Frost admitted that even though the NUJ itself strived towards a balance of ethnicities within British journalism, getting applications from journalists in those communities was a significant problem. He was committed to investigating what the reasons were that precluded their engagement with the industry, and how to make British journalism a more attractive proposition for them.

In his approach, Frost prioritises tackling the underlying structural factors that contribute to the lack of diversity within newsrooms when it comes to Muslims. He acknowledges that the solutions for this must come from the industry itself. In contrast, rather than recognising how structural factors contributed to a failure in

attracting a diverse workforce, the editors at the Home Affairs Inquiry could be seen to place the blame squarely on Muslims themselves. In one excerpt, *The Mirror's* group editor-in-chief Lloyd Embley described the industry's problem with attracting Muslim journalists as being caused by Muslim culture:

Lloyd Embley: It is a problem for the industry to attract them. My children are a quarter Pakistani, by the way, so I have a certain element of knowledge here. It is difficult to attract particularly Muslim, Hindu and Sikh -

Panel member Sarah Jones: That's not surprising when you look at content.

Lloyd Embley: I think it is more a cultural thing. Their parents don't see journalism as the kind of career that they want their kids to go into, [it] is the truth. I can't speak for the others, but I can certainly speak for *The Mirror*. We would like more, for sure (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*).

A similar viewpoint was shared by Neil Benson, chair of the Editors' Code committee who admitted that there was very little ethnic diversity in British newsrooms. Reflecting on his experience of working in Bradford many years ago, Benson recalled trying to recruit local Muslim journalists to join the local newspaper the *Telegraph and Argus*. "We eventually appointed a young Indian woman, who was our first non-white person on the team. Her parents did their utmost to talk her out of it and then to get her to stop doing the job", he told the committee. "That is one instance. It was the reality of the situation, and that pertains today as well" (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*).

Both Embley's and Benson's accounts reflect an underlying process of 'Othering' where problems of diversity in the newsrooms are not caused by the best and valiant efforts of 'Us' but cultural issues from 'Them'. Compared to the more genuine belief in the need to instigate change from within their newspapers found in the journalists' interviews, the editors' accounts (whether they consciously believe this or not) suggest that it is not the media system that needs to change but Muslims and their culture. Clearly, even though not all Muslims have a burning desire to be journalists, the question remains why potential Muslim journalists are put off from applying for a position, particularly in right-leaning broadsheets or in tabloid newspapers across the board.

Other journalists similarly appeared puzzled at why their news organisations were unable to recruit from Muslim communities. Amanda, for example, questioned why her news organisation had not received a single application from a journalist of an ethnic minority background in response to a recent job advert:

> I'm very hopeful that there is no bias on part of my employers because clearly they are supporting and encouraging people from all backgrounds to apply. But you know we've had job roles come up and I know the applications. There's nobody from those backgrounds applying for it. I don't know if it's a problem with people wanting to apply (or) if the job's not been advertised in

> places where people might see them. I don't know what the issue is but it's something I'm really aware of.
>
> (*Interview with news agency journalist, Amanda*)

Amanda expresses her concern but, at the same time, cannot understand why this is the case despite her news organisation's best efforts. It is possible to address this puzzlement at least partially by comparing how the editors at the Home Affairs Inquiry constructed the issue of diversity in their newsrooms.

At one level, all editors expressed their desire to recruit more ethnic minority journalists to work on their newspapers and saw this as a positive practice in principle. "We would all like more people from ethnic minorities in journalism. That is only fair; that would be representative and just the right thing to do", the *Telegraph's* Ian MacGregor told the committee.

The editors further shared the various schemes and initiatives they had implemented (blind CVs, specialist recruitment agencies and apprentice schemes) to try and encourage young people from minority backgrounds to work in their newsrooms. Ultimately, they expressed disappointment that their efforts had led to little success in terms of recruitment. By exploring how the editors themselves justify this lack of success, we can see how dominant institutions reinforce the reproduction of existing biases and constrain, rather than enable, transformation and change.

Certainly, when it came to the issue of unconscious bias around Muslims within newsrooms, some of the editors adopted a rather defensive response. An example of this can be seen in the following exchange between Home Affairs Inquiry committee panel member Sarah Jones and *The Times'* Ian Brunskill:

Sarah Jones: You said you haven't got a mechanism for knowing how many Muslim stories you cover.

Ian Brunskill: We don't have a mechanism for ticking boxes and going through the paper each morning and counting the number of Muslim stories. We have, as I have tried to say, an editorial setup which involves, one would hope, constant awareness of what we are doing, which draws on what we have done before. The same people are doing this all the time.

Sarah Jones: But they are probably white, Christian journalists.

Ian Brunskill: But journalists write all the time about things that they are not, as it were.

Sarah Jones: But that is the point of unconscious bias, isn't it?

Ian Brunskill: No, it isn't. What we do is write about things that we don't know about—that we are not. We are not experts. We write about science; we are not scientists. We write about Muslims; we are not Muslims. We write all kinds of things. What you do is you find out the facts and you get them right, and you find out where to go to get the unbiased information (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*).

Brunskill's reproach suggests that unconscious bias is mitigated through stringent journalistic practices. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, these practices are often built to reproduce the very biases that Brunskill claims they negate. Indeed, journalists as individuals regulate their actions not solely based on ingrained biases but in response to social norms, organisational rules, and the opportunities available to them (Noon, 2018). Taking an agent-focused approach to tackling an institution's bias sidelines the critical role of structures in embedding racism within institutional cultures, norms and practices.

Despite the popularity of unconscious bias training as a diversity intervention in the workplace, human resource management expert Mike Noon (2018) maintains that simply becoming aware of your biases does not automatically result in real change in organisations. Even if an individual with questionable biases or even racist views is challenged or made aware of their behaviour, structural constraints can work against any meaningful pro-diversity institutional change. Unconscious bias training often side-steps structural change by focusing on individual agency rather than the critical role of structural and systemic inequalities in propagating discrimination against people of colour. As Noon points out, unconscious bias training reinforces a culture that absolves both individuals and institutions of accountability, on the basis that "racial discrimination is not a product of our conscious thought [...], so discrimination is not really our fault" (p. 202). Yet these deep-set biases are often guided by the social norms of the institution and constrained by formal and informal organisational cultures (Noon, 2018).

In contrast, when diversity becomes embedded within the very cultural fabric of the news institution, then challenging unconscious (or even conscious) biases becomes a normalised and expected way of practising journalism. Working for a London-based local newspaper, local journalist Ben described his more reflexive approach to unconscious bias and an openness to learn. "I think I've always been aware that you can get things wrong. You have bias which you won't be aware of, and just trying to stay aware of that", he stated. "The longer I've stayed in the job, the more I realise how little I really do know, how little any of us can, so it's about keeping that energy there really". Ben's self-reflexive approach to any unconscious bias he holds about Muslims comes from a more sincere positioning where he acknowledges his own limitations when it comes to his journalism practice. It is ironic perhaps, as Noon (2018) points out, that those journalists who are more amendable to unconscious bias training are often those who are already committed to accepting equal opportunity principles in their everyday lives.

Carrying the Weight: Muslims and the Challenges of Representation

More than half of UK journalists have either personally experienced or witnessed racism within British newspaper organisations (Mayhew, 2022). More subtle forms of everyday discrimination or micro-aggressions further impact on the well-being of those affected, compounded by attributional ambiguity and limited means of redress (Noon, 2018). Muslim women as journalists are subject to further micro-aggressions, such as questions about their choice to wear hijab and are the

easy targets for ridicule and hate online (Malik, 2021). A high-profile example of this is the Fatima Manji case, where *The Sun* columnist Kevin MacKenzie accused Channel 4 News of 'editorial stupidity' for allowing the hijab-wearing journalist to present the news following a terrorist attack in Nice. Manji raised a formal complaint with IPSO, where she wrote: "In this case, *The Sun* published an opinion article that abused that principle of freedom of expression. The purpose of the article appeared to be to incite hatred against Muslims in general, Muslim women in particular, and me" (Greenslade, 2016). Nevertheless, the complaint was thrown out by IPSO, dismissed under its under its current inadequate provisions (see Chapter 4).

Minority journalists working within British newspapers often become institutionalised while carrying the extra burden of responsibility for reporting on their communities. People of colour can be 'boxed' racially into telling stories about their communities, whereas white journalists get to enjoy a much wider remit (Douglas, 2022). Muslim journalists can be particularly targeted in these ways, given the current media furore around their communities. This can leave them experiencing conflicting loyalties between the personal, professional and community expectations of their journalistic work (Poole, 2019).

Most of the Muslim journalists I interviewed did feel a personal sense of responsibility regarding stories relating to Muslims. Even though they did not consider their journalistic role to be relegated to only reporting on these stories, they often attempted to redress the perceived imbalance in negative reporting. In her interview, one of the Muslim journalists told me:

> I do find a lot of coverage about Muslims and Muslim issues quite distasteful. I would like the opportunity to do more stories which are sort of more balanced when it comes to Muslims. […] I mean I don't really feel a burden. I would like to do more positive stuff if I could, if the opportunity arose. But that's not really what I'm there to do, I think. It's almost quite nice to not be pigeonholed as a Muslim reporter and sort of be treated as just a journalist in my own right.
>
> (Interview with *Muslim journalist*)

In this case, the journalist does not feel pigeon-holed into reporting only on Muslim issues and appreciates being treated the same as her peers within the newspaper. Nonetheless, she welcomes the opportunity to write more positive articles on Muslim to redress some of the imbalances that she has witnessed within newspaper coverage.

Other journalists, like online newspaper journalist Amina, were more assertive in pushing for these types of alternative narratives about Muslims within their newspapers. Often, Amina would highlight Muslim-related topics and concerns, aiming to present them in ways that normalised and humanised the community. By doing so, she hoped the newspaper would attract more Muslim readers as well as present Muslims more naturally as part of wider British society. "It might be too idealistic to think that we will get to a place where we apply that sort of nuance to all our stories, but I am hopeful that it will get better", she shared.

Similarly, Muslim journalist Hasina used her freelance platform to push for more nuanced representations of Muslims in mainstream newspaper coverage:

> You have various representations of Muslims in the media that I feel they don't quite represent us the way they should. There is so much positive work within the community, but you rarely see that within the mainstream media. This is something that I try to bring to the mainstream. I try to kind of counteract negative stereotypes that could only further fuel hatred and misconceptions about what Muslims really are and what they really believe. […] I'm not saying that everything needs to be rosy about Muslims, but I think there should be a balance.
> (*Interview with freelance journalist Hasina*)

Hasina seeks to challenge the news values of British newspapers by pitching alternative, positive stories that move away from the dominant preoccupation with negative stories about Muslims. This experience is parallelled in studies of the practices of indigenous journalists in mainstream news organisations in Australia. These journalists similarly found that their indigenous lived experience was often validated by their news organisationsas a form of expertise and knowledge (Thomas, 2024). This, in turn, led to spaces where the expression of their own news values further challenged normative understandings of their news organisations on how to report on indigenous communities. For the journalists involved, however, this was not an easy process as they were constantly battling against entrenched newsroom cultures centred on normative whiteness (Thomas, 2024).

Navigating Roles and Responsibilities for Muslim Journalists

Within the profession, there is a general belief that any journalist should be able to report on any story, and their backgrounds should not influence the way stories are reported (Poole, 2014). While the journalists I interviewed did not necessarily feel 'pigeon-holed' into reporting on Muslim-related stories, there was an expectation from some of the non-Muslim journalists that this is where their value came in. In his interview, for example, Patrick reflected on the lack of Muslim representation in his newspaper during the 7/7 terrorist attacks in 2005. He recalled the dawning realisation in the newsroom that the terrorists in this case were not foreign but British Muslims. As Patrick recalled:

> That was the first point, it was oh my God this is home grown terrorists or whatever. Oh, do we have a Muslim around and we (laughs) had someone who was on work experience in the building. And we had a white member of staff columnist who'd talked to Muslims – and that was all we had.
> *(Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Patrick)*

A very similar sentiment came up in the interview with journalist Brendan who works for a right-learning broadsheet newspaper:

> There's a couple [Muslim journalists] in the newsroom, but it's not enough especially when you come to stories like this around [terrorists attacks in]

> London Bridge and Manchester […] Because of the way that our society has seemed to have evolved, we are in ghettos aren't we? So, we're sending white reporters into Muslim areas, and they wonder why nobody talks to them. I think we have a problem that we do not represent the population that we write about.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Brendan*)

Even though both Patrick and Brendan are trying to make the point that diversity in the newsroom results in more diverse news reporting, their arguments are at odds with those journalists who do not define themselves as 'Muslim journalists' but as journalists who happen to be 'Muslim'. Given the diversity within Muslim communities, it would be incorrect to presume that one Muslim journalist can represent all Muslims. Nor that they would necessarily provide alternative representations to those that already dominate media coverage on Muslims. For instance, the underlying blame discourse that often accompanies stories about Muslims (as discussed in Chapter 2) was much more explicitly stated by some of the Muslim journalists I interviewed. One Muslim journalist working for a tabloid newspaper maintained that negative portrayals of Muslims were due to their own involvement in events such as terrorism. "If the last 10–15 years were not punctuated by these terrorist attacks, then I think the language would've die down and concerns would have gone elsewhere", he told me. According to the journalist, the dominantly negative coverage about Muslims was not solely the media targeting Muslims, but also the contexts in which Muslims placed themselves. "When there is no terrorism attack, then you look through the prism of religious sort of activities which are not terrorist but inflammatory, like poppy burning or insulting a parade of soldiers in Luton", he stated. "So, the media doesn't always choose Muslim, the context often determines it".

In a similar manner, left-leaning Muslim journalist Sarwat further drew on a direct comparison of the media experiences of Muslim and Jewish communities to appeal to Muslims to obscure their visibility from the press spotlight. Jewish communities, she noted, had become "very clever at unrecognition" and avoiding attention because their survival depended on it. Sarwat argued that while Muslims may feel they are facing an existential crisis, their actions often exacerbated the situation. She added:

> It's one thing to say we are facing an existential crisis but at the same time we are not helping ourselves […] We become exceptionalists, we never give and take. Why do you keep demanding this, this, this, this. I honestly think if we don't change, we are in real serious danger. And it's just not good enough to say it's my faith and it's my right.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Sarwat*)

In her call for 'unrecognition', Sarwat's positioning of Muslim 'demands' as unreasonable and problematic echoes the debates underlying Charles Taylors' concept of the 'politics of recognition'. Taylor (1994) highlights how the politics of recognition

has played an increasing role in the public sphere linked to modern ideas around identity – what some today term 'identity politics'. The underlying premise is that people's identity is partly shaped by recognition, meaning that the misrecognition of a particular group identity can be damaging to that group. As Taylor explains: "Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (p. 25).

In this way, disproportionately negative representations that position Muslims as the dangerous 'Other' are a form of misrecognition as they present a "distorted and reduced mode of being". In Sarwat's case, she is advocating a form of non-recognition for Muslims, where the demand for recognition is seen to directly contribute to their being represented in negative ways in British newspapers. Yet her position on the issue of Muslim representation highlights an important critique of Taylor's politics of recognition, namely its reliance on a rather essentialist conception of culture (Lyshaug, 2004). Not every Muslim journalist fits into preconceived clear and distinct boundaries of 'Muslimness', nor can one Muslim represent the views of all the nearly four million Muslims in the UK population. Sarwat's more critical experience of being a Muslim is also informed by other aspects of her intersectional identity – her gender for example, her upbringing, her class and so forth. It is her authentic experience of being, but – as with the other Muslim journalists I interviewed – there is not a single homogenous Muslim experience.

The Burden of Representation – An Obligation or an Opportunity?

In his groundbreaking book *Welcome to the Jungle*, British art historian Kobena Mercer (2013) speaks of the burden of representation as an essentialising misconception of culture as a fixed and final property of the individual racialised subject. Referring to the burden of representation placed upon Black artists, he argues that increasing the public visibility of a handful of Black artists often results in the legitimatisation of the much wider invisibility and inequality faced by the Black community. A similar experience was highlighted in my interview with online newspaper journalist Amina. "There have been occasions where a Muslim issue comes along and someone will ask me so what's your view of that or what does that mean", she told me. "I don't mind but I do think that happens to a lot of token brown or black people in a white dominated space".

The burden of representation can also be understood as an issue of structure and agency. Here, the access to cultural capital – in the case of Muslim journalists to the means of representation through the media – is seen to place the minority journalist under a set of ethical obligations to speak on the behalf of a heterogenous community (Mercer, 2013). However, as Mercer points out,

> the notion of a given, and hence naturalised, set of ethical 'obligations' immediately sets up a moral problematic in which questions of structure are displaced by a voluntaristic emphasis on individual agency. This implies a contractual model of subjectivity in which Black artists are assumed to

> have a fundamental ‘freedom of choice’ that has to be reconciled with their ‘accountability’ to the community.
>
> (p. 240)

Such an approach again places the impetus for change on individual agency rather than on systematic failures in the structural elements of the organisation (Noon, 2018). Muslim journalists may view their background as an opportunity as well as a burden (Holohan and Poole, 2011) but this role has fallen on their shoulders not from free choice. Instead, as Mercer points out, it is the direct consequence of historical structures of racism that have limited their access to the means of cultural production.

The burden further reflects a perceived reluctance of ethnic minorities to engage in critical public dialogue about their own communities. As Mercer (2013) further asserts:

> our fragile notion of community has also been shaped by that unspoken internal imperative that, as Black subjects, we should never discuss our “differences” in public: that we should always defer and delay our criticism by doing our “dirty laundry” in private.
>
> (p. 238)

The same idiom of ‘doing dirty laundry in public’ was directly referenced in two of my interviews. In her interview as a Muslim journalist, Amina expressed a sense of responsibility towards her community and her apprehension about misrepresenting them. “I worry about making them look bad, airing our dirty laundry, discussing internal community dialogue”, she stated. “Sometimes you don’t want to talk about the things that are personal to our community on a platform that you know goes out to a lot of white people”. Even though Amina believed that most readers were not racist, she would read comments left under her stories and see how it had been used by racists to fuel their Islamophobia. “So, at times, I’ve wondered, oh maybe I shouldn’t have written this”, she admitted to me in the interview.

Even as Amina worried about the consequences of her writing, another Muslim journalist was more scathing of this type of community self-censorship as the following interview exchange demonstrates:

Muslim journalist: I’m very careful about how I write. I write about sometimes quite difficult subjects, but I write them not to create a sensation. I write them because I think they are important. So recently I wrote a very long article on [men in forced marriages]. That upset a lot of people.

Interviewer: Who did it upset?

Muslim journalist: People who said you are washing our dirty linen in public. Then women got angry saying you are now distracting from the women’s problems, so feminists got angry, and everyone got angry. But I’m really pleased I did it.

(*Interview with Muslim journalist and columnist*)

This journalist's account highlights that it is possible for Muslim journalists to be critical of their own communities when needed. It again counters the assumption that simply having Muslim journalists in the newsroom will balance out coverage on Muslims – some may hold very critical or even biased views of their communities themselves.

Two of the Muslim journalists I interviewed were actually very critical of others who had questioned British press reporting on stories involving Muslims. One Muslim tabloid journalist, for example, disparaged Muslim community leaders for blaming the media for negative coverage. "Some of that criticism is warranted but the problem is the Muslim community, well elements within it, are also doing things that bring this attention onto them", he stated in his interview.

The other journalist who expressed similar views was Sarwat, who asserted:

> I don't agree with Muslims who go around always attacking any negative stories about Muslims. As a Muslim I think how do we improve if nobody is allowed to criticise us. Societies, families, communities, nations improve because the media exposes its faults, when the service is done well, and it's done fairly. There is a tendency I think amongst British Muslims, not only British Muslims but certainly British Muslims and I would say British Jews, minorities in general, that journalism is about protecting them.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist and columnist Sarwat*)

Mercer (2013) would argue that the main problem with the concept of the social responsibility to their own community stems from the assumption that a Muslim journalist is representing a supposedly homogenous and monolithic community simply based on their shared ethno-religious identity. Both Sarwat and Shabir reject this role and instead define themselves primarily as journalists who are often critical about Muslims. This shows how the burden of representation is not always straightforward. Some journalists like Amina feel strongly that they need to challenge what they believed was the imbalanced, anti-Muslim bias within newspapers overall. Others reject this felt responsibility. As Sarwat emphasised in her interview:

> My responsibility and the responsibility of journalism are broader than 'oh this is a beleaguered community'. One of the things I firmly believe is if you want to be a journalist, you cannot be loyal. You cannot be loyal to your nation, to your community, even to your family. If you feel that loyalty, then you cannot be a good journalist.
>
> *(Interview with broadsheet journalist and columnist Sarwat)*

Echoing the concept of ideological dilemmas discussed in Chapter 6, Muslim journalists can experience conflicting loyalties between their perceived cultural obligations and required professional duties, giving rise to both ethical dilemmas and conflicts of identity (Poole, 2014, p. 108). When faced with this dissonance, the Muslim journalists I interviewed resolve it either by accepting the burden of representation, or by rejecting it in favour of their journalistic identity. As not all Muslim

journalists view the issues relating to their communities in the same way, this brings into question how valid a tick-box solution of adding more Muslim journalists is for addressing the overall issue of negative Muslim representation. This important point was highlighted in my interview with Miqdaad Versi:

> Each Muslim journalist has a certain lived experience which is an important lived experience. It needs to be understood, it needs to be part of the article. But if that's the only lived experience that's represented within the media, that's not appropriate even if they are Muslim. That almost is worse.
>
> (*Interview with media campaigner, Miqdaad Versi*)

Redefining Newsroom Culture through Leadership

Muslim journalists clearly enrich British journalism by bringing their own diverse life experiences and interactions into the newsroom. The key to 'diverse' reporting, however, lies in the efforts that journalists make to really understand the issues and communities they are reporting on. Rather than the quick fix solution of recruiting more Muslim journalists (although this too is important), this requires a change in the very cultural foundations of journalism where these wider experiences become both valued and considered in all their complexity.

In isolation, the recruitment of more Muslim journalists to resolve the issue of negative Muslim representation does little to challenge the structural status quo responsible for their reproduction in the British press. This sentiment was echoed by a senior Black journalist in an interview where we discussed his perspective on the challenges of diversity in newsrooms:

> You can add Muslim voices but [what] if they're just being told by white bosses what to write all the time and whether their ideas are acceptable or not. If the white bosses are uninformed and they are only interested in what they perceive as the dominant culture of the organisation, then there won't be much change. […] I would rather have a white editor who commissions people from different backgrounds and wants to cover the country in all its glorious variety, than a Black or Muslim editor who just wants to copy what they think the organisation wants.
>
> (*Interview with anonymised journalist*)

The journalist recognises the importance of having Black and ethnic minority editors within British newspapers, but true change required efforts from the leadership to commission a diverse range of perspectives to enhance the quality of news for readers. Part of this leadership responsibility involved active engagement with under-represented groups and going the extra mile to recruit a diverse range of journalists from different backgrounds. As the journalist elaborated in his interview:

> [Newspapers] have to realise that it might take a little bit more effort to find someone who knows what's happening in Oldham or Bradford or whatever,

> but then that's worth it because that provides our readers with a better service. Otherwise, you just end up taking on people and they all get disenchanted and then they leave. And you say well we tried it, and it didn't work and then you go back to thinking exactly as you always did. So, change doesn't happen.
>
> *(Interview with anonymised journalist)*

Solutions like increasing the diversity of the workforce can only effect change if they operate within a wider culture of structural change. Social transformation requires more than a reliance on Muslim journalists to facilitate change within newspapers. Instead, it involves a cultural change in the common-sense ideas of how British journalists – of whatever religion or ethnicity – represent their minority communities. I explore the possibilities of this assertion by turning to local journalists for an alternative normative conceptualisation for reimagining diversity within British newspapers when it comes to Muslim representation.

Bridging Communities: Local Journalism and Muslim Representation

There is little direct empirical research investigating how local British newspapers report on Muslims, and how this contrasts with the national press.

The Home Affairs Inquiry data reflected how local newspapers did not appear to have as significant an issue with Muslim representation compared to the national press. As the Society of Editors' Ian Murray highlighted when commenting on the high number of complaints that national newspapers received on the grounds of discrimination:

> If it (the Inquiry) was looking at the regional press, I think it would be nowhere near that. I think it would be a much more positive view […] I imagine that in the regional press […] there are far more examples of diverse local communities and of positive news stories going on there.
>
> (*Home Affairs Inquiry data, April 2018*)

Local media, in general, gets far less scholarly attention compared to the national media (Nielsen, 2015) and comparisons in terms of ethics, journalism practices and normative values are even scarcer (Firmstone et al., 2022). Research from the Centre for Media Monitoring indicates that regional news television in the UK is more likely to include stories showing a supportive sentiment towards Muslims compared to a more confrontational and negative tone often adopted by national news broadcasters (Hanif, 2021). Regional news channels are also more likely to include stories about local initiatives by Muslim communities and instances where Muslims have been victims of Islamophobia. There are little (if any) comparable findings that focus on local newspapers and their coverage of Muslims (Haq, 2025).

The local journalists I interviewed were keen to distinguish between national and local newspapers when it came to Muslim representation. While discussing the range of inter-faith stories he had written for his paper during his interview, local journalist

Elliott observed that certain newspapers, whether right-leaning or left-leaning, had more of an agenda than local newspapers. "We wouldn't put a negative spin on the work that [Muslim] groups do. I think we probably do cover them differently", he stated. Elliott's experience at his local newspaper highlighted the significant role local and regional press play in balancing the more biased agendas of the national press.

Another journalist working for a different local newspaper, Mark, further suggested that local news stories could become distorted when reproduced in the national media:

> I think not all national journalists necessarily feel the same sense of community. I don't like tarring everyone with the same brush because that would be very unfair. But you can sometimes see a local story that you've written taking on a different life from the moment it goes national. The way it goes nationally is different, and sometimes there can be a change to the story to make it more attractive to their readership, if you like. Whereas I tend to want to make my stories attractive to my readership, but at the same time have that sense of responsibility.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Mark*)

In line with Mark's account, the key differential between the ethics of local journalism and that of national journalism often centres on the proximity of the local journalist to the communities they serve (Frost, 2006). As Frost points out, this perceived loyalty or duty to the local community and local readers can result in an often more thoughtful approach to a story, with less tendency to sensationalise.

Local newspapers also have distinctive newsroom cultures shaped by these closer relationships to their readers (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009). In my interviews, local journalists and readers are seen to be part and parcel of a single community with common values and goals. In his interview, local journalist Elliott agreed: "A lot of us live in the communities that we work in, so we do feel part of that community. We want it to be a better, more positive place for everyone". Likewise, for Catherine, being a local journalist meant she was much more connected to the audiences she worked for, particularly as she herself was part of that community her newspaper served. With that close connection came a strong sense of accountability, as she explained:

> I feel a responsibility because if I wrote something about somebody that wasn't true, or took a quote out of context and it was an unfair representation, I would have to look that person in the face. I would have to put my hand on my heart and say I know, this is why I did this. That link to your community I think is important. That's why I wanted to be a local journalist rather than a national one.
>
> *(Interview with local journalist Catherine)*

When it came to reporting on Muslim-related stories, this prioritised sense of community allowed local journalists to actively promote the concerns of those marginalised within their wider communities.

Journalism for Multicultural Communities?

In his work on the impact of multiculturalism on journalism, media scholar Mark Deuze (2005) suggests that multiculturalism has three important implications for journalism practices in terms of:

- the knowledge of journalists about different cultures and ethnicities
- the issues of representation (pluriformity or diversity)
- the perceived social responsibilities of journalists in a democratic and multicultural society (p. 453).

These factors were witnessed across all of my interviews with local journalists when it came to reporting on stories involving Muslims.

In my interview with London-based local journalist Ben, for example, he emphasised the importance of being a voice for marginalised groups within the local community:

> I can certainly speak about how I see the role of my own reporting. I think there's a term in comedy which is 'punching up', where it's about highlighting evidence based, valid concerns and giving them the platform upwards. Be that an individual or a group of individuals that have an issue which they feel at the end of their road with. [It's about] attempting to engage them in the sense of allowing them a voice and creating a debate within the community. I think it's very much staying relevant on local issues and concerns while always attempting, from my point of view, not to be punching down.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Ben*)

In line with Ben's distinction between the 'punching up' of news stories by the local press and the 'punching down' often seen in the national press, a multiculturalist approach to journalism involves a slow and subtle change in the consensual professional understanding of what serving the public means (Deuze, 2005). As Deuze highlights, this requires a shift from a "primary top-down meaning to an increasingly bottom-up application", where journalists proactively seek out engagement amongst their diverse audiences (p. 456). Such a conceptualisation of audiences contrasts starkly to those discussed in Chapter 2, where newspapers' imagined sense of audience leads to more sensationalist and negative reporting on Muslims.

Viewing audiences as localised citizens rather than consumers enabled the local journalists I interviewed to reject the homogenised representations of Muslims that dominate national press coverage. Instead, their focus on publicness came from a stance of particularity rather than universality (Martin, 2013), where their sense of social responsibility towards local readers and the local community included Muslims as an integral part of those communities.

Rather than adopting a position of professional retreatism, they were able to exercise their agential judgement regarding how local stories involving Muslims were

reported. This increased sense of autonomy meant they could positively intervene and contribute to contestation and public debate on Muslims where necessary. Local journalist Thomas, for instance, discussed a passionate article he had written about a well-known controversial, anti-Islamic public figure who had tweeted something negative about one of the local Muslim communities. As Thomas commented:

> I remember distinctly having a conversation with the news editor, thinking you know he's gone too far. This is a line in the sand. It's firstly ridiculous and secondly racist and wrong. I've got a strong sense of if you attack my neighbours, you are attacking me sort of thing, and we all need to have each other's backs. So yeah, I wanted to put the context. I wanted to explain using as many facts as I could find about the [particular Muslim] community and, you know, in a kind of neutral way. It's not [about] a duty to educate people but I thought this was an opportunity. I wanted to put it up in plain facts to counter the misinformation that would no doubt come in the comment section underneath.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Thomas*)

In Thomas' admission that he is 'not impartial', it is possible to see how the concept of professional retreatism contrasts with such a 'rhetoric of inclusivity' reminiscent of a more multiculturalist approach to journalism (Deuze, 2005, p. 456). Deuze defines this approach as one which shifts the orientation of journalists towards a multicultural society in which news becomes contextualised accordingly and where the positions of minorities are redefined.

Adopting a multiculturalist approach can problematise the norms of journalism such as objectivity and balance in favour of a more complex or multifaceted reading of events (Deuze, 2005). By defining their own interpretations of journalistic norms around their close connections with their audiences, local journalists were able to enact their agency in the process of change. Elliott, for instance, highlighted how he would consciously challenge stereotypical views of Islam and Muslims wherever possible in his work:

> I certainly do my fair bit of that because I do think there is a lot of ignorance around Islam at the moment in this country. Islam is a religion of peace, despite people using that line, you know, mockingly.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Elliott*)

Similarly, London-based local journalist Ben would also go the extra mile in his reporting to seek out community-centred stories that presented a more authentic image of his local community. For Ben, this level of community engagement was central to challenging the fragmented and misleading rhetoric about minority communities often encountered online. "For me, it's about pushing back against the atomised bullshit that we see coming back at us online", he stated in his interview. "The reason it's important to tell stories truthfully and accurately is to push back against this dehumanising narrative that is out there".

For local journalists like Ben and Elliott, serving the local public interest translates to also conscientiously countering the potentially harmful and biased rhetoric about Muslims in both the national media and across social media. Journalism scholar Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2024) similarly find that editors of local journalism start-ups based in deprived or marginalised areas frequently give voice to marginalised groups and nurture positive representations of maligned communities. Ultimately, as Wahl-Jorgensen concludes, "local journalism entrepreneurs occupy a position of epistemic authority which allows them to speak truth to power and reverse historical injustices of representation" (p. 59).

In an interview that further substantiated the perceived proximity of journalism to its local community, local journalist Mark recalled a cover story ran by his newspaper several years ago, that came under enormous criticism by the local community for its racialised bias. Although the newspaper apologised for the headline, the story had a considerable impact on the paper's relationship with its local community as Mark recollected during his interview:

> The editor apologised for the front page, it caused a lot of fractions in the community, and it was a case of people not trusting the newspaper because of that front page. My editor might say something different, but the truth is that overtime we lost that trust.
>
> *(Interview with local journalist Mark)*

Mark's interview demonstrates the more reflexive, two-way engagement that local newspapers have with their audiences in comparison to national newspapers as discussed in Chapter 2. Viewing their local publics as localised citizens rather than news consumers seeking out the latest sensationalist story on Muslims enabled the local journalists to recognise and reject the homogenised, sensationalist representations of Muslims that dominate national press coverage in favour of a more multicultural and multi-perspectival reporting of news events (Deuze, 2005).

It is not all good news on the local journalism front, however. Decades of media mistrust, coupled with an over-estimation of the willingness or ability of Muslim communities to engage with journalists, can prove to be barriers to this level of inclusivity. As Mark's interview reflects, local newspapers have also not been immune to negative or biased reporting on marginalised groups. Furthermore, hundreds of local newspaper titles have closed in over last two decades (Hutton, 2018). Local news publishers face declining revenues, unable to compete with bigger players in an increasingly digital media landscape (Cairncross, 2019). Increasing consolidation of local news titles has meant that nearly 84% of local newspapers are now owned by just six companies (Media Reform Coalition, 2021). Even though consolidation has been a lifeline for some newspapers, for others it risks extinguishing the close community connection vital for this level of inclusive and balanced civic journalism.

The Social Imaginaries of National and Local Newspapers

From the accounts of local journalists, it is possible to envisage the role of local journalism as a form of contestation or counter-public discourse. Journalists' modes

of address are very consciously presented *against* ideological accounts of national British 'publicness' discussed in Chapter 3, in ways that resist the assumed universalism of dominant media forms and norms (Martin, 2013, p. 143). By rejecting the dominant framing when it comes to Muslim representation, local journalism provides an alternative starting point for public debate about the role of Muslims in British society.

To make sense of these assertions, I present Charles Taylors' (2004) concept of social imaginaries as a framework to explore how ideas of belonging and inclusion can directly influence the everyday practices of journalists. The concept of social imaginaries refers to the shared understandings and assumptions that people within a society have about their collective lives. These understandings are built on

> the ways that people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.
>
> (Taylor, 2004, p. 23)

The social imaginary provides a framework for common practices and a sense of legitimacy in society, reflecting a collective understanding of the morals, beliefs, values and symbols that dictate how members should interact and live together. Ideas become embedded into the social imaginary through the interweaving of understandings and practices. Using Taylor's concept, we can compare how both national and local journalism practices are built upon particular social imaginaries which, in turn, reinforce or challenge how journalists report on stories involving Muslims.

In the accounts of the local journalists I interviewed, the social imaginary of their local community very much included, rather than excluded, Muslim communities. The voices of these communities were valued as part of public debate. Other voices that potentially caused them harm and risked disrupting the harmony of the wider community that Muslims were an integral part of, were challenged. This social imaginary became reflective of the practices of their society (Taylor, 2004, p. 91), both in terms of their local communities and their own journalistic identity and practices. A different 'social imaginary' built on the position of a shared cultural community, rather than from a position of seeing Muslims as the problematic Other, became the starting point for their journalism practice.

We can contrast this local social imaginary with the national social imaginary that is reflected in national newspaper coverage of Muslims. Returning to Chapter 1, we see how questions of citizenship, national identity, Britishness, multiculturalism, and liberal values dominate British newspaper coverage about Muslims. For instance, Elizabeth Poole (2012), a leading scholar in the study of Muslim media representations, highlights how patterns of representations of British Muslims often follow a dominant 'discourse of the nation' narrative around assertions of 'Britain' and 'Britishness' (p. 164). The emphasis on incompatible cultural differences and conflict in national newspaper coverage about Muslims largely serves to create symbolic boundaries around who belongs and who does not.

Muslims are homogenised as a separate imagined community to the rest of British society (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). In terms of Muslim representation, the norms of a particular social imaginary can work to exclude certain groups or ensure they exist only in conflict with the dominant group.

Returning to Hall (1998), national journalists appear to be 'hailed' into a social imaginary that excludes Muslims or positions them as the outsiders. The resulting framing of stories of Muslims becomes almost fixed in powerful ways that restrict their capacity to challenge them. The local journalists I interviewed, however, were hailed by an alternative social imaginary. Negative Muslim representations did not reflect their concept of identity as journalists nor as local citizens. Their 'social imaginary' further reflects the double-sided relationship between practices and understanding. The understanding of what 'community' means creates journalism practices centred on that understanding. In turn, these practices reinforce and strengthen the understandings inherent to the social imaginary built on a 'repertory' of collective actions (Taylor, 2004).

How can we then take the lessons learnt from the local journalists and extrapolate them to national journalism? To do this, we need to unsettle the ideological construction of 'publicness' as discussed in Chapter 2, to one that includes Muslims and Islam as "aspects of what it is to be British" (Modood, 2019, p. 23). This is only achieved through a cultural change in how journalists themselves work with the communities that they serve in ways that build trust and mutual respect.

To illustrate this, I present two specific interviews excerpts side by side – that of national journalist Brendan that I have also cited elsewhere in this book, and the second from local journalist Catherine.

> There's a couple [Muslim journalists] in the newsroom, but it's not enough especially when you come to stories like this around [terrorists attacks in] London Bridge and Manchester […] Because of the way that our society has seemed to have evolved, we are in ghettos aren't we? So, we're sending white reporters into Muslim areas, and they wonder why nobody talks to them. I think we have a problem that we do not represent the population that we write about.
>
> (*Interview with broadsheet journalist Brendan*)

> The kind of bubble that I lived in wasn't really concerned about going into (local Muslim areas). But just speaking to people there was a realisation I had that we don't serve these communities right. I made a really conscious effort to try, you know, to make contacts and represent people, and hear a range of views.
>
> (*Interview with local journalist Catherine*)

Brendan's account reflects his stance that Muslim journalists need to be sent to cover Muslim communities, as we live in 'ghettos' (by which he means, in racially segregated communities). Underlying this account is the overwhelming theme of 'difference', of 'Us' not being able to talk to 'Them' and vice versa. As a journalist,

therefore, Brendan is not able to 'represent' those communities. Catherine, however, recognises the need to break out of the 'bubble' that she was working from, and make a conscientious effort to immerse herself within these communities as part of her journalistic remit to represent the range of views of her wider community.

These types of dialogue between journalists and Muslim communities are central to redressing anti-Muslim bias in the British press. It must begin from a position of a shared identity, rather than from a position of 'difference'. Part of the issues faced by national newspapers in their reporting of Muslims relates to the long-standing lack of diversity within national newspaper organisations but also a failure to recognise Muslims as an integral part of the national social imaginary. As Patrick pointed out in his interview:

> Well, [the media] just sees Muslims as if they are not people like us. We will talk about them. We won't talk to them. We won't listen to them. Of all we know about British Muslims, of all this country knows about British Muslims, 99.9% [sic] of it is either reported or written by white people. So, the perspective on their lives is a completely outsider perspective.
>
> (*Interview with left-leaning broadsheet journalist Patrick*)

Even though Patrick's comments do apply to some extent across all national newspapers, it is worth reiterating that some are much closer to a more inclusive social imaginary than others, particularly the left-leaning broadsheets, including *The Guardian*.

To work towards this shared social imaginary, journalists must reconceptualise their audiences, and by association the wider British public, to include Muslims as an inclusive part of who 'we' are. This requires an active engagement with Muslim communities in ways that challenge common sense preconceptions and encourage civic responsibility. The voices of these communities need to be heard and included across media debate (and not only stories centring on Muslims or Islam).

Conclusion

Throughout the book, we can see how questions of structure and agency impact on the enduring reproduction of disproportionately negative representations of Muslims and on its potential redress. This framework can be applied from the emphasis of diversity solutions to the failure to recruit Muslim journalists, the burden of representation and finally the role of local journalists in reconceptualising diversity on their own local terms. Many of the failures to redress the lack of diversity in newsrooms comes from a misaligned focus on agency – often where this agency itself is restricted (and shaped) by newsroom structures and cultures. A different case for reimagining diversity comes from the local journalists I interviewed and reflects how an alignment between structure or institutional cultures and journalistic agency can lead to more proactive and inclusive ways of reporting on Muslim communities.

Rather than adopting the 'Othering' frames of national newspapers where Muslims ('Them') are placed in opposition to British society ('Us'), local journalists'

purview of Muslims as an integral part of local society shaped how they reported on stories. Here, a shared local identity informed the basis of their journalistic practice rather than a divided, national identity where Muslims were represented as outsiders. Such an approach reflects a much more inclusive way of imagining Britishness in line with Taylor's (2004) concept of social imaginaries as a way of understanding how people 'imagine' how they ought to live together as a collective.

Chapter 2 discussed how national news stories relating to Muslims are framed to carry a connotative meaning beyond the events they report on. This message is often foregrounded in line with existing common-sense ideas and myths about the nature of Muslims as the problematic 'Other' of British society and is seen to be shared by journalists and their audiences. Journalists further build upon their audiences' own sense of difference from Muslims to provide a selective, connotative version of news events (Couldry, 2015) that feeds into existing mythical, common-sense ideas about Muslims as threatening, illiberal and antagonistic.

There is an urgent need for journalists to reconsider how they view their audiences, and the wider public they serve to include Britain's Muslim communities. Taylor (2004) argues that this is possible, as a transformation in the social imaginary leads to formerly accepted practices becoming reinterpreted to a new meaning. Over time, new ideas and perspectives may emerge that challenge or complement existing beliefs within the social imaginary. As these new concepts are introduced and integrated into the collective understanding, they can lead to shifts in practices as individuals adapt to or adopt these novel ways of thinking and behaving (Vertovec, 2012).

The accounts of the local journalists I interviewed presented the case where the ideological conception of both journalism and citizenship became re-articulated to a much more inclusive representation of Muslims in British society. This demonstrates the cyclical relationship between understandings and practice at the heart of social imaginaries – where practices are not only contextualised by the understandings behind the social imaginaries but act to reinforce the social imaginary itself (Taylor, 2004). It also highlights the role that journalists can play towards the accommodation of difference in a pluralistic, multicultural society (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015).

Through an awareness of the inequalities of society and their potential role in perpetuating them, journalists can become active agents in challenging the entrenched practices within newsrooms that reproduce negative Muslim representation (Deuze, 2005). Such an approach, however, can only take place within the wider re-articulation of the concept of Britishness/Britain where "Muslims are not 'Them' but part of a plural 'Us', not mere sojourners but part of its future" (Modood, 2009, p. 207).

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Conclusion

Introduction

Representations of Muslims are not mimetic images of a reality that exists 'outside' of cultural practices. Just as representations are intrinsically linked to identities, they are also inextricably embedded in practices. Hall (1997) similarly stresses how "representations sometimes call our very identities into question. We struggle over them because they matter – and these are contests from which serious consequences can flow" (p. 10). It is for this reason that there is always so much at stake in the practice of representations, particularly when they act to exclude and discriminate against marginalised communities.

In today's world, distorted representations often supersede the everyday realities of complex, multicultural societies. They lead you to second-guess whether you *really* know your Muslim neighbours, your local Muslim doctor or teacher, the ones you see congregating at mosques and community centres, the young men supporting beards or the young women wearing hijabs. On the other side, there are many who capitalise on the fear and uncertainty that come with disproportionately negative representations of Muslims, and journalists cannot be amongst them.

In the UK, there has been an emboldening of the far-right in whipping up anti-Muslim hatred, often shadowing their prejudices as public interest concerns. The *Fear & Hope* survey 2024 report, produced by HOPE not Hate (the UK's leading campaigner against far-right extremism) makes sober reading. The report finds that British people are around three times more likely to believe that Muslims cause problems in the UK than other religious groups. Those who maintain that multiculturalism has 'failed' in Britain are twice as likely to think that it is Muslims at the heart of this failure (Deo and Malik, 2024).

Considering this socio-political environment, the aim of the book has been to understand the complexities of Muslim representations in British newspapers and how continuity and contradiction, reproduction and contestation all play a part. The starting point was to shift the empirical focus away from newspaper coverage and focus on journalist interviews and documentary analysis of the oral evidence transcripts of the Home Affairs Inquiry into hate crime focusing on Islamophobia in the media. This approach gave a much under-researched

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insight into both the enduring reproduction of negative Muslim representations and why spaces for resistance and contradiction coexist alongside these representations.

The book makes an important contribution in uncovering the 'behind the coverage' tensions and conflicts journalists face when reporting on Muslim-related stories. Each of the chapters highlights the complex nature of Muslim representations that reveals itself in the contradictions journalists face when powerfully embedded ideas about their role in a democratic, liberal society are confronted with anti-Muslim bias in the newspapers they work for.

In this concluding chapter, I begin by reflecting on the key takeaways from the research. As the book seeks normative indications of how to develop more nuanced, fairer journalism practices, I discuss how the findings can impact on the ways journalists report on Muslim-related stories. The chapter concludes by considering the wider implications of my research for redressing the anti-Muslim bias in the British press, as well as its limitations and areas for future research.

Making Sense of the Representation of Muslims through Journalists' Perspectives

After more than two decades of research into *how* Muslims are represented in British newspapers, the book asks the important question of *why* are Muslims portrayed in such disproportionately negative ways? Chapter 2 describes how deeply embedded common-sense ideas about Muslims contribute to these representations, influencing the language and framing chosen by journalists and the sources they draw upon.

A particular underlying sense of 'difference' is reserved for Muslims. They are positioned as the exceptional case in comparison to other minority groups, reinforcing their image as the problematic outsiders of British society. Even positive stories about Muslims are often framed around the exceptional Muslim who has 'proven' their value as a British citizen. Although many editors and journalists criticised the use of stereotypes and prejudicial representations of Muslims, their accounts highlight how normalised these representations have become as the consensus on Muslims both within the press industry and for its perceived audiences.

In common with the academic literature, the starting point for understanding the representation of Muslims relates to their perceived problematic positioning within liberal British society. Said (1997) argues that these types of representations have become so normalised in the 'West' that Muslims are only seen through an Othering frame.

Even though journalists might not be directly instructed to reproduce dominantly negative representations, those I interviewed struggled to reconcile the problematic and much more implicit nature of the reproduction of these representations in their work. At times, they felt under pressure from commercial and organisational demands to adhere to market-led ideas about what audiences wanted when it came

to Muslim-related stories. Increasing competition from social media and audience metrics further exacerbates this perceived demand for sensationalist and polarising content on Muslims that generates fear and anxiety amongst audiences.

A closer examination of journalists' ambivalent conceptualisations of 'audiences' reflects how this belief is largely built on an imaginary construction of the British public and what they want when it comes to Muslim-related stories. This is a particularly important finding of my research. As my interviews with local journalists reflect, an alternative re-conceptualisation of journalists' sense of what their audiences want (or need) leads to alternative ways of reporting on Muslims that position them as an inclusive part of British society, rather than as the problematic 'Other'.

The Roles and Responsibilities of Journalists

To deliberate why British newspapers might be compelled to represent Muslims in certain ways, we need to consider how journalists understand their own roles and responsibilities within democratic societies. When journalists imagine their audiences, we see a tension around whether the role of the journalist is to produce the sensationalist and exciting content that audiences are perceived to desire, or to give audiences what they *need* to enable informed, civic public debate about Muslims. This question directly cuts to the heart of the role of journalism in society, its relationship to public interest and its status as a force of democracy and the 'common good'.

Instead of viewing the relationship between newspapers and audiences as unidirectional either way, the book highlights the need to break down the complexities of this relationship. Audiences should not be seen as merely passive news consumers waiting to be entertained. Instead, there needs to be a reassessment from newsrooms about the media-audience relationship with a focus on the role of journalism in mitigating civic atrophy (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015).

The concept of public interest is further problematised in the accounts of both journalists and editors when juxtaposed with other norms such as objectivity, balance and freedom of expression. Tensions particularly arise when these journalistic norms and values appear to the detriment of civic debate, serving to justify the reproduction of negative representations of Muslims rather than providing more nuanced and contextual reporting.

In line with Stuart Hall's (1974) concept of professional retreatism, professional ideals act to distance journalists from intervening in how stories about Muslims are told, and from their potential consequences. Even though journalists recognise that an overly ritualistic application of these norms perpetuate negative representations, they also have the potential to challenge biases, and to encourage alternative voices (including those of Muslims) to enter newspaper coverage. Rather than dismissing the merits of journalistic norms and values such as freedom of expression, objectivity and balance when it comes to Muslim-related stories, a re-conceptualisation of how these ideals are used in practice is needed – one that aligns, rather than clashes, with the values of the wider public interest. Journalists need to reflexively

consider their own agential judgements when applying these norms and values to specific stories involving Muslims in ways that also avoid harm to an already marginalised community.

As Chapter 5 highlighted, ideas of autonomy are fundamental to the British press, and particularly to establishment ideas about press freedom and self-regulation. Yet journalistic autonomy is exercised from within the institutional limits of the newspaper. When it comes to how stories on Muslims were reported, this autonomy was often compromised by different structural factors, including professional practices and norms, organisational hierarchies and commercial imperatives.

The dilemmas that journalists experience reflect the push-and-pull of the structure-agency dichotomy between the structural factors that privilege the reproduction of negative representations and the agency of the journalist to intervene in how stories about Muslims are reported. Through this lens, it becomes possible to explore how a journalist's own consciousness acts as the vehicle for social change against the powerful structures that constrain their work. The experience of Gary Jones, now former editor of *The Express*, discussed in Chapter 6, is a case in point.

Although structures are powerful and contribute towards the privileging of negative Muslim representations in the British press, they cannot (always) reduce journalists to what Billig et al. (1988) describe as "an unthinking obedience, in which conformity to ritual has replaced deliberation" (p. 31). Instead, a critical deliberation or consciousness about the role that journalists play in society and the responsibilities that they have to the wider public – including Muslims – leads to the critique, disruption and re-conceptualisation of the disproportionately negative ways in which Muslims are represented in the British press.

Contestation, Disruption and Re-Conceptualisation

The representation of Muslims in the British press should not be viewed as fixed but instead recognised for its often-contradictory nature. We only really appreciate the complexities of Muslim representations by extending our analysis beyond newspaper coverage to consider the more complex, shifting social, political and cultural contexts in which news stories involving Muslims are situated. Through the lens of cultural politics, we can then position the media (newspapers in this case) as the arena where the cultural meaning of citizenship itself is being contested (Nash, 2001), or more specifically, the contestation of the citizenship and belonging of Britain's Muslim communities. The reproduction of, and contradictions to, negative Muslim representations in newspaper coverage are inextricably linked to contestation over the differing interpretations about Muslims and their place in British society.

Contestation and resistance, both external and internal to journalism, have the potential to disrupt anti-Muslim bias within newspapers and contribute to its potential redress. At the same time, any analysis of media representations cannot ignore the long-standing relations of power and subordination (particularly around race) that take place in wider society (Ferguson, 1998). As the case of the

Muslim Council for Britain discussed in Chapter 6 highlights, Muslim communities themselves struggle to get their voices represented. This struggle for media access reflects the politics of signification – epitomised in the sharp divide between those who possess the recognised authority and privilege to shape dominant public discourse and those who must battle for their voices to even be heard (Hall, 1980).

Hall's (1974) media hegemony framework of the reproduction of dominant interpretations through the media provides a compelling framework for understanding the enduring nature of negative Muslim representation. Yet even though the media itself acts as the terrain for this contestation, Hall leaves journalists in a position of subordination where their unconscious acceptance of their role to reproduce hegemonic interpretations means they do not act as agents of counter-hegemonic contestation themselves. As a former journalist myself, I struggle to reconcile this conceptualisation. Most journalists I know are very conscious and critical of the structural constraints around their work and are constantly looking at ways to address this.

The book draws on British sociologist Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984) to position the relationship between journalists and their news institutions as a dialectic between agency and structure. Under this framework, we see how different structural imperatives – from internalised common-sense ideas to commercial imperatives for selling exciting news content, as well as professional and organisational constraints – shape the practices of journalists when it comes to reporting on Muslims.

When it came to contestation from within newspapers, journalists' own critiques about how audiences (and the wider British public) were conceived, and their relationships with and responsibilities to public interest, led them to question and critique how Muslim-related stories were told. These tensions often presented as the ideological dilemmas journalists faced between the potential consequences of negative Muslim representation and their wider responsibilities within a liberal, multicultural society.

The lessons learnt from the local journalists I interviewed, and their very different conceptualisations of who their audiences were, and their relationships with them, reflected that it is possible to report in ways that include, rather than exclude, Muslims. In line with Taylor's (2004) concept of social imaginaries as a way of understanding how people 'imagine' how they ought to live together as a collective, a shared local identity informed the basis of their journalistic practice rather than a divided, national identity where Muslims were represented as outsiders. The voices of local Muslim communities were seen to be valued as part of public debate, while other voices that caused them harm and risked the civic harmony of the wider community that Muslims are a part of were challenged.

By defining their interpretations of journalism's norms and values around the close connections they shared with their local communities, local journalists defined their autonomy accordingly to apply these norms and values in the public interest of *all* members of their community (including Muslims). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that studies find local newspapers generate much higher levels of public trust compared to national tabloid newspapers (Newman et al., 2023).

By similarly unsettling both market-led and ideological conceptions of audiences and the British public, and often rigid and ritualistic ideological interpretations of norms and values, national journalists can also rearticulate the concept of who they 'serve' towards a much more inclusive representation of Muslims in British society. As a result, an alternative starting point for media debate about Muslims becomes normalised. Here, rather than an 'Othering' frame that places Muslims ('Them') in opposition to the rest of British society ('Us'), a shared national identity informs the basis of journalism practices when it comes to the reporting of Muslim-related stories.

Reflecting on the Research

This brings me to critically self-reflect on the potential limitations of my own research. In line with other research that uses interviews with journalists to study negative Muslim representation (Holohan and Poole, 2011), there is most likely some level of sampling bias in my research towards those journalists who are already critical of how the British press portrays Muslims. The sampling process was rigorous and time-consuming, taking a lot of effort to invite a wide range of journalists to participate. I targeted many journalists who had written more negative articles about Muslims, but ultimately most of those who agreed to the interview were journalists who already write more nuanced and less negative articles.

Fortunately, I was able to draw on my personal contacts within the industry to 'convince' a much wider range of journalists to take part in the study. The snowballing sampling technique also helped. In one incident, a senior journalist whom I would consider to be critical of Muslims and Islam was strong-armed by a fellow journalist to agree to talk to me. Although some may question the ethical implications of whether this represents fully informed consent, this interviewee began the interview from a highly defensive position and ended an hour later enthusiastically asking me to contact him if I wanted to interview him again.

Rather than attributing this to any particularly good interviewing skills on my part, I understand this reaction to be part of the contradictions that surround the negative representations of Muslims in the British press. On the one hand, the anti-Muslim bias of the British press industry has become so embedded that journalists come to accept it, rather than being oblivious to it. As many of them do not have direct contact or relationships with Muslims, it remains something that they feel uncomfortable with, and even guilty about – but do not necessarily care enough about to disrupt the status quo. Given the opportunity to discuss it and consider how and why this disruption leads to better journalism, this leads to some introspection about how their practices may contribute to the propagation of negative representations and the associated consequences for British Muslim communities.

To make these contradictions visible in journalists' accounts, it is necessary to uncover the often irreconcilable nature of discourse (Billig et al., 1988). This requires thinking about agency as being subject to 'ideological dilemmas' that

reflect the social oppositions and contradictions inherent in our common-sense understandings of who we are and how we act.

What Next?

Perhaps most importantly, the insights from this book have significant implications for how journalists themselves contribute to redressing how stories involving Muslims are reported. This requires the exercising of their autonomy in ways that considers the potential consequences of their work for both Muslim communities and the wider public interest. A re-consideration of journalistic norms and values helps journalists reassess whether their practices perpetuate anti-Muslim bias in newspapers or enable a more nuanced and contextual reporting of Muslim-related stories.

The most significant message from this book relates to the need to re-conceptualise how journalists view their audiences, and the wider British public. This requires dismantling the barrier of 'difference' by getting to know Muslim communities first-hand and seeing their public interest as part of the wider British public interest.

As Muslim communities have been central to contesting how they are represented in British newspapers, journalists and editors need to draw on these communities and use their expertise and resources to build relationships with Muslim communities. Michael Munnik's (2018) research into the relationships between local journalists and Muslim groups is an excellent case study of this experience. I am myself in the process of launching an online toolkit for local journalists and Muslim communities in the UK built on the lessons of the research that informed this book.

The online toolkit challenges anti-Muslim bias by targeting local journalism as a means of promoting more inclusive, fairer representation of Britain's diverse Muslim communities. It also raises the voices of Muslim communities by empowering them to influence media narratives about them. The toolkit is designed to offer an interactive and user-friendly experience for local journalists and Muslim communities across the UK. Local journalists can access tailored advice for fairer reporting on Muslim-related stories and enhance their collaboration skills with local Muslim communities. For Muslims, it provides guidance on fostering positive relationships with journalists and media skills development. The toolkit also acts as a 'one-stop-shop' bringing together existing resources and guides on reporting on Muslims or media engagement in one convenient, easily accessible site. This project promises to have a positive impact due to the significant reach of local newspapers in the UK, as around 40 million people engage with the local news media every month (Local Media Works, 2023).

We also draw insights into research and impact initiatives elsewhere in the world, including Australia. One example is the Transformative Journalism Model (TJM) developed in Australia by Ewart and O'Donnell (2018). Specifically targeting the representation of Muslims in the Australian mainstream media, the model provides support to journalists, journalism students and educators towards

developing an ethical and informed journalism around Muslims and Islam. Built on both existing international good practice recommendations and their own interview research with journalists and journalism educators, Ewart and O'Donnell move away from other models of ethical journalism, such as constructive journalism, solutions journalism and peace journalism, to develop a model around the specific challenges involved in mainstream media coverage of Muslims. In line with my own research, this involves considering the norms and conventions of journalism such as objectivity, quality, truth-telling and accuracy in their application to this coverage (Ewart and O'Donnell, 2022, pp. 212–213). While journalists are themselves seen as potential agents of socio-cultural change, the need to address the problematic aspects of negative Muslim representation in the media in terms of leadership, cultural change and resources is the TJM's ultimate goal.

Ewart and O'Donnell's model shares many parallels with the discussions and solutions presented in this book, and the authors have even developed a similar toolkit for journalists. The toolkit encourages journalists to be reflexive in considering their own practice when it comes to stories on Muslims and Islam and similarly finds that some of the best practice comes from local and community newspapers. Nevertheless, the authors themselves point out that as the model has been specifically developed for the Australian context, it is not clear how appropriate it would be in the UK, which has both a different media landscape and a very different historical, cultural and socio-political context when it comes to the relationship with its own Muslim communities. In terms of my research, ideas about identity and Britishness are central to achieving the sort of transformative change that Ewart and O'Donnell advocate, and it is difficult to see how real change is achieved without a wider consideration of how Muslims are conceived as an integral part of British society.

Clearly, what is needed overall is for some level of cultural change *within* British newspapers. To shift these changes from individual journalistic practices to the wider culture of the institutions that journalists work for, these recommendations should be incorporated into journalist training programmes, whether for existing journalists or new journalists through colleges and universities. For these recommendations to work, the starting point must come from the position of nurturing a shared identity rather than from needing to reconcile difference. As Chapter 6 reflects, solutions to increase the diversity of newsrooms often ultimately fail as they begin from a starting point of difference, placing the burden for solving anti-Muslim bias on Muslim journalists themselves or ignoring how racism and bias are structurally reproduced through institutional practices and cultures themselves. Wider measures include the nurturing of local journalism (including financially) as a critical counterpoint to national media narratives, reconfiguring existing equality and diversity programmes and journalism training programmes and building closer links between journalists and minority communities.

The media landscape when it comes to local journalism is rapidly changing and not all local newspapers work from the same model of journalism. According to the Media Reform Coalition (2021), local journalism is facing increasing consolidation with over 80% of newspapers now owned by just six companies.

The experiences of local journalists contributed such an important normative insight into how the issue of negative representations could be redressed. However, they only represented a part of my sample, and they all worked in areas with relatively large Muslim populations. This might explain their vested interest in challenging negative representations of Muslims, particularly as other researchers suggest that local journalists based in areas with very small Muslim populations tend to be less concerned about this (Holohan and Poole, 2011). Moving forward, future research could focus on a wider sample of local journalists, taking into consideration the impact of the increasing commercialisation of their industry. As it stands, these local communities are increasingly likely to get much of their exposure to Muslims from the more reductive and negative representations generated in national newspapers.

A similar point is made about the limitations of this research in terms of its focus on newspaper journalists, rather than the wider media industry, including broadcast news. The fact that newspaper journalism is facing what some call an existential crisis brought about by competition from social media and rapidly declining newspaper circulations (Wahl-Jorgenson and Hanitszch, 2019) has undoubtedly increased pressures on journalists to reproduce sensationalist and polarising media stories about Muslims. Television coverage, however, has been shown to exhibit considerably less bias and inaccuracies around Muslim representation than newspapers (Hanif, 2021).

Yet, despite talks of a national press crisis, British newspapers continue to be important players in the national media market. It is true that press circulation has been declining – by an estimated 33% in the UK in the five years before the pandemic according to Deacon, Smith and Wing (2024). But legacy news organisations have an increasingly powerful presence online and their digital reach is expanding internationally. *The Mail, Sun* and *Guardian* newspapers have been listed as the top 20 most popular news sites in the USA and legacy news content is heavily harvested and aggregated by social media platforms (Deacon, Smith and Wring, 2024). Sadly, it is local news publishers that face declining revenues as they struggle to cultivate an online presence (Cairncross, 2019).

Platform power exercised by companies such as Facebook and Google (as well as platforms such as X or YouTube) increasingly shapes our media environments and our exposure to the news (Nielsen and Ganter, 2022). As digital journalism swiftly embraces AI technology and algorithms, all the evidence so far points to how both tools amplify societal inequalities, and particularly Islamophobia, racial and ethnic biases and other forms of discrimination (Nolan, Maryam and Kleinman, 2024).

Last Words

Finally, I wanted to say something about the role of research in contributing to the transformation of societal injustices. Studies of newspaper coverage about Muslims and Islam, for example, tell us much about the disproportionate bias in the British press. From this, researchers put forward their recommendations of what needs to be changed to redress this bias. These recommendations come from the researchers themselves, albeit built on the insider knowledge of the journalists who report on these stories and face these issues in their everyday working lives.

What I did find was a significant proportion of the journalists I interviewed were themselves critical of the representation of Muslims and their participation in the research was a way to contribute to change. Others felt that being part of the research process led them to critically consider their own journalistic practices.

In their reflections of interviews with journalists reporting on the Falklands conflict, Morrison and Tumber (1988) similarly discuss how the research interactions had "opened the eyes of the journalists themselves, turning them into reflective witnesses of their occupation" (p. viii). Many journalists who expressed some nervousness at the beginning of the interviews stated how much they enjoyed the interview process and the chance to step back and consider the difficult and controversial topic of Muslim representation. I conclude with the comments of one of the journalists I spoke to at the end of his interview:

> It was good actually, sometimes it helps to talk about these things. When you meet colleagues, you don't talk about stories because you have to keep it close to your chest and so it helps to talk about this. You realise how negative a job it is. I mean I realised that a lot of this stuff is negative but what can you do (pause) well you can do something.
>
> *(Interview with anonymised journalist)*

In Morrison and Tumber's (1988) seminal publication *Journalists at War*, their investigation into the experiences of British journalists provided a pivotal insight into the tensions and struggles faced by journalists in their reporting on difficult topics. Rather than being simply about journalism practices and routines, Morrison and Tumber believed that the insights provided by the journalists reflected a wider insight into the heart of journalism as being about "how a society tells a story about itself" (xiii). By exploring the representation of Muslims in the British press through the perspectives of the journalists who produce these stories, this book has similarly aimed to investigate what journalists' accounts of how Muslims are represented in newspapers reveals about how British society tells a story about itself and its Muslim communities.

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