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# **"How a Society Tells a Story about Itself":**

Journalists' Accounts of the Enduring and Contradictory Nature of Muslim  
Representation

Nadia Haq

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of PhD in Sociology in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, September 2021.

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## Abstract

This thesis provides an important contribution to understanding how continuity and contradiction, reproduction and contestation can co-exist within the representation of Muslims in the British press. Existing research based largely on the analysis of media content reflects how Muslims are represented in disproportionately negative ways that draw on historical, often Orientalist stereotypes while portraying British Muslims as the problematic outsiders of British society. While these studies show *how* Muslims are represented, they often cannot explain *why* journalists represent Muslims in these ways, or for why tensions, differences and contradictions can also be found in press coverage. To provide this missing insight, the thesis shifts the empirical focus away from media content towards in-depth qualitative interviews with journalists to examine the enduring reproduction of negative Muslim representations and why spaces for resistance and contradiction can coexist alongside these representations.

This thesis makes three key contributions to existing scholarship on the representation of Muslims in the media. Firstly, it offers an empirical contribution by providing a much under-researched insight into the perspectives of journalists themselves about how they report on Muslim-related stories. Secondly, it presents a theoretical contribution by problematising the subordinated role that journalists play under theories of media hegemony and highlighting how their critical consciousness can contribute to the contestation of negative representations from within their media structures. Thirdly, the thesis offers a normative contribution through the often-dissonant and dilemmatic accounts of journalists. This finds that a critical re-conceptualisation of market-led and ideological conceptions of audiences and the British public, and of the often rigid and ritualistic ideological interpretations of journalistic norms and values, can shift the balance of negative representation away from its reproduction and reposition Muslim representations from a starting point of inclusivity rather than difference.

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## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: Nadia Haq    DATE: 18 September 2021

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The title of this thesis ‘How a society tells a story about itself’ is taken from Morrison and Tumber’s (1988) seminal publication ‘*Journalists at War*’. Their investigation into the experiences of British journalists covering the Falklands war provides a pivotal insight into the tensions and struggles faced by journalists in their reporting. This quote highlights Morrison and Tumber’s belief that the insights provided by the journalists told them much more about the wider society that the journalists operated in than simply about their practices and routines. By exploring the representation of Muslims in the British press through the perspectives of the journalists who produce these stories, this thesis aims to explore what journalists’ accounts about how Muslims are represented can tell us about the story that British society tells about itself and about its Muslim communities.

### Representations of Muslims in the British Press

In 2019, Sir Alan Moses, the now former chair of the UK press regulator IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation) described the issue of the representation of Muslims in the British press as “the most difficult issue” the regulator has faced for the past five years (Nilsson, 2019, para.1). His comments came before the publication of the long-awaited IPSO guidance on reporting on Muslims and Islam published in November last year (IPSO, 2020).<sup>1</sup> The scrutiny of the British press industry’s problematic coverage of Muslims and Islam, however, has proven to be a much longer, enduring challenge for the British press. Going back across the past 20 years, academic scholars across disciplines have examined how Muslims and Islam are represented in British newspapers (Poole, 2019; Ahmed and Matthes, 2017; Bleich et al., 2015; Shaw, 2012; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Morey and Yaqin, 2011; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010; Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008; Saeed, 2007; Poole and Richardson, 2006; Poole, 2002; Richardson, 2001). These studies support the claim that Muslims are presented in a disproportionately negative manner, one that builds on historical, often Orientalist stereotypes (Said, 1997) and essentialised, homogenous caricatures of Britain’s diverse Muslim communities. Most studies further point to the process of ‘Othering’ prevalent across press coverage, where Muslims are seen as the

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<sup>1</sup> In November 2020, UK press regulator issued a guidance on the reporting on Muslims and Islam according to their Editors’ Code of Practice (IPSO 2020).

‘Other’, outcast “folk devils” (Morey and Yaqin, 2011) in opposition to the British majority and its liberal values (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008).

While this emerging picture indicates the disproportionately negative ways in which Muslims are portrayed in the media overall, my thesis contends that by considering the contradictions that appear in the British press alongside the more dominant negative representations, a deeper understanding of the issue of negative Muslim representations can be achieved. In Chapter 2, I highlight how tensions, differences and contradictions to negative Muslim representations can also be found in the existing literature in the field. This suggests that contestation about Muslims as the ‘Other’ does to some extent permeate through the more negative media coverage, indicating that space can be made for alternative representations of Muslims to enter mainstream media debate. The presence of both the reproduction of negative Muslim representations and its contradiction in press coverage indicates a much more complex process at play than a one-sided effort to spread negative narratives about Muslims. My thesis therefore asks how can we make sense of this picture of continuity and contradiction, of reproduction and contestation within the representations of Muslims in the British press?

### **Research Objectives**

To consider this puzzle, I put forward three key arguments in my thesis.

Firstly, as I elaborate in Chapter 2, I contend that while existing studies of press content provide an important insight into *how* Muslims are represented, they often cannot provide a direct explanation for *why* journalists represent Muslims in these ways. It is not always possible to interpret the meanings of these representations, the intentions behind them and their wider social implications, or why press discourse on Muslims can sometimes be framed in unpredictable ways. Existing research also struggles to empirically explain why this coverage can at times appear conflicted and contradictory, even within the same article. This leaves a significant knowledge gap in the field of the study of Muslim representations in the media. To fill this gap, I put forward the case for taking an alternative methodological approach, one that focuses on in-depth, qualitative interviews with journalists as the producers of this coverage to provide a missing insight into both the reproduction of, and contradictions to, the negative Muslim representations found in British press coverage. 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 and how they contribute to the production of specific representations and meanings in media discourse (Baden, 2019).

Secondly, I assert that the presence of both the reproduction of, and contradictions to, negative Muslim representations is indicative of the wider political and social contestation around Muslims and their role in British society. As I discuss in Chapter 2, this idea can be supported by much of the literature on the representations of Muslims as reflecting what Poole (2012) describes as the construction of press coverage on Muslims as “a discourse of the nation” that demarcates the “insiders and outsiders within a polarised identity politics” (p.164). For this reason, I argue that the analysis of the negative representations of Muslims also requires the consideration of the wider cultural and political context in which this press coverage takes place.

In Chapter 3, I propose my theoretical case for considering these more contested aspects of Muslim representation through the lens of cultural politics, where it is the “cultural meaning of citizenship” itself which is being contested (Nash, 2001: 86). Under this perspective, the media is seen to act as the arena where cultural politics are thrashed out. Representations of Muslims in press coverage, including the reproduction of, and contradictions to negative representations, are therefore linked to how social plurality itself can lead to considerable contestation over the interpretation of particular societal ‘issues’. To account for the overall dominance of the reproduction of negative representation, it is also imperative to recognise how the process of representation is subject to hegemonic power relations. This understanding serves to problematise the concept of social plurality itself, as while there may be many different interpretations on offer, not all are seen as equal (Finlayson, 2007).

Bringing these two central aspects of my research together necessitates a deeper theoretical analysis of how journalists produce their content within complex cultural institutions that are themselves central to contestation. Grounded in the concept of cultural politics, I draw on the work of Stuart Hall on media hegemony to build a theoretical framework that can provide some insight into how the media can serve to reproduce dominant ideologies (including those involving Muslims) while acting as the terrain for counter-hegemonic resistance and contestation.

Hall’s conceptualisation of the media as being a particularly important site for the production, reproduction, contestation, and transformation of ideologies provides a strong framework for my own research. It offers some contextualisation for the enduring reproduction of negative

Muslim representation in the British press, but also why spaces for resistance and contradiction co-exist alongside these representations. While the media itself acts as the terrain for contestation, however, Hall leaves journalists in a position of unconscious subordination, with little agency to engage themselves in contestation or to intervene to redress the anti-Muslim bias in the media. My third argument therefore problematises Hall's concept of media hegemony by arguing that while journalists may be constrained by structural imperatives and hegemonic discourses that lead to the reproduction of negative representations, they can also exercise some conscious agency to challenge these representations in their work.

As my thesis focuses on exploring how journalists as cognisant mediators of this contested terrain understand and act in terms of Muslim representation, I supplement Hall's conceptualisation with a deeper exploration of the structure-agency dichotomy, and in particular the role of journalistic agency – a perspective significantly underdeveloped in Hall's theory. I further argue that space for this agency can be found by considering the tensions and dilemmas faced by journalists when reporting on Muslims stories, and how their own critical, often contradictory consciousness can lead them to challenge the way these stories are reported.

When asked why Herman and Chomsky (2002) did not draw on interviews with journalists in their seminal work '*Manufacturing Consent*', Herman (1999) dismisses the question by replying:

Are reporters even aware of the deeper sources of bias they may internalise? Will they not tend to rationalise their behaviour? (p.106)

In my thesis, I put forward the case that it is possible to develop a qualitative approach that uses in-depth interviews to draw out the tensions and contradictions that arise in the interviews as journalists negotiate their own agency when reporting on Muslim-related stories. At the same time, I seek to uncover the same "deeper sources of bias" that Herman describes above to explore how journalists themselves critique the structural biases within journalism that lead to negative representations. To contrast these experiences with those of the most senior of editors in the British press, I further draw on secondary data in the form of transcripts from the recent Home Affairs Inquiry into '*Hate Crime and its Violent Consequences*' (April 2018) where these editors were asked to present evidence on the prevalence of negative Muslim representation in their newspapers.

Accordingly, my thesis asks the following research questions

- i) What insights do journalists and editors present about the claim that there is negative bias against Muslims in British press coverage and its potential drivers?
- ii) How do journalists and editors understand their own roles and responsibilities in terms of Muslim representation?
- iii) What spaces for change and resistance against negative Muslim representation in can be identified from journalists' and editors' own accounts and experiences?

### **A Critical Intervention in the Representation of Muslims**

By examining the often-dissonant accounts of journalists and editors, this thesis makes an important empirical contribution into how the structure-agency dichotomy both underlies the enduring nature of negative Muslim representation and offers normative considerations for its redress. By focusing on the experiences of journalists in this way, my thesis offers a further theoretical contribution to Hall's theory of the media as the terrain of contestation, by making space for the conscious role that journalists too can play in terms of contestation and social change. My findings highlight that by drawing on their own conflicted, critical consciousness regarding the negative ways in which the British press represents Muslims, journalists can find alternative, more inclusive ways of reporting that disrupt the frame of 'Othering' to one where Muslims are seen as an integral and central part of British society. As I will argue later in my thesis, a central component of this shift involves a reconsideration of how journalists conceptualise their audiences as well as their own professional routines and conventions.

The objectives of my research are important because it is through critical intervention that the space for change becomes possible. By viewing negative Muslim representation through the lens of the critical consciousness of journalists themselves, this thesis provides a 'behind-the-content' analysis of why these representations are so enduring and what can 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 ideology, can shift the balance of negative representation away from its reproduction and towards more complex and nuanced ways of reporting on Muslim-related stories.

Hall (1974) highlights why media representations matter when he states that:

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. (p.19-20)

Representations matter because they “call our very identities to question”, and define “what is ‘normal’, who belongs and who is excluded” (Hall, 1997b: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 and the story we tell about ourselves.

### **Thesis Overview**

The thesis is organised as follows:

**Chapter 2 Reproduction and Contradiction in Representations of Muslims** provides a critical overview on the literature on Muslim representation in the media that highlights the reproduction of disproportionately negative representations of Muslims. This literature tends to focus less on the differences, tensions and contradictions that also can be found in media coverage about Muslims. While these studies provide an invaluable insight into how Muslims are represented, I contend that relying on the analysis of media content alone provides a limited, empirical understanding of why journalists frame Muslims in this way. To gain this insight, I advocate an alternative methodology that focuses on journalists’ experiences of reporting on Muslim stories.

**Chapter 3 Theorising the Space for Journalists in the Reproduction and Contestation of Muslim Representation** presents the theoretical framework I adopt to make sense of why the reproduction of negative Muslim representations and its contradictions can both be present in media coverage about Muslims. I draw on Hall’s conceptualisation of media hegemony to contextualise the representation of Muslims within cultural politics where the media acts as the terrain for political and cultural contestation. The chapter highlights how journalists are left in a position of subordination under Hall’s approach, with little agency to engage in contestation or to intervene to redress the anti-Muslim bias in the media. I explore how space for this agency can be made by considering the structure-agency dichotomy faced by journalists, and how their ‘contradictory consciousness’ in terms of the dilemmas they face can lead them to challenge the way stories about Muslims are reported.

**Chapter 4 Researching Journalists - Methodology and Research Design** provides an account of the methodological approach I develop to investigate my research questions by focusing on journalists as the subject of study rather than the media content on Muslims. As well as discussing the epistemological position that my research takes, I explain how qualitative interviews with journalists can be used to the greatest effect to draw out the tensions and dilemmas that journalists' experience in terms of Muslim representation. I also outline my use of the secondary data from the Home Affairs Inquiry. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the key ethical and reflexive dilemmas I encountered as a researcher, as a journalist, and as a Muslim within the research process.

**Chapter 5 Making Sense of the Representation of Muslims** contributes to the existing scholarship to provide depth and nuance to previous research by exploring the tensions journalists experience when reporting on Muslim-related stories. The chapter discusses how negative representations are reproduced through common sense understandings of what Muslims represent. At the same time, journalists remain highly conflicted about the prevalence of negative Muslim representation, reflecting a contradictory consciousness between their acknowledgement of its reproduction in the newspapers they worked for, and their desire to redress this anti-Muslim bias.

**Chapter 6 Problematising Audiences** explores how journalists' preconceptions about their audiences influence the way they report on stories involving Muslims. In particular, the chapter highlights how commercial pressures, including the need to compete with social media, lead to the privileging of negative representations of Muslims that generate fear and anxiety. Journalists' critical awareness of these constraints on their reporting lead them to reconsider their relationship with their audiences, and the need to report on Muslim-related stories in ways that contribute to more complex civic debate rather than sensationalist narratives.

In line with Hall's conceptualisation of the relative autonomy of the media discussed in my theoretical chapter, **Chapter 7 Reconceptualising the Journalistic Ideology** highlights how the journalistic ideology and the norms and routines that legitimise journalism's independent truth-telling role contribute to the favouring of certain representations of Muslims and the devaluing of others. Through the dilemmas and tensions that journalists experience in reconciling these norms and values with the anti-Muslim bias in the press, they recognise the

necessity of exercising their own agential judgement as to the application of these norms and values to stories involving Muslims with the principle of wider public interest in mind.

The last of my analysis chapters **Chapter 8: Structure, Agency and Social Transformation** considers how the structure-agency dichotomy within journalism can act to either challenge or reproduce negative Muslim representation. The chapter is divided into two parts. In **Part I** of the chapter, I juxtapose the tensions faced by journalists when it comes to negative Muslim representations with the push-and-pull of the structure-agency dichotomy. While contestation from those outside the media structure can challenge negative representations, I argue that journalists' own 'contradictory consciousness' can also play a critical role in instigating change from within the media. In doing so, this chapter contributes to the development of Hall's theory of media hegemony by making space for the autonomy of journalists and the role that they too can play in terms of contestation and social change. **Part II** of the chapter turns its attention to a critical normative analysis of the solutions offered by journalists and editors in my analysis to redress the anti-Muslim bias by increasing the diversity of their newsrooms. The chapter then turns to local journalism to show how an inclusive approach that includes, rather than marginalises, Muslims as part of the wider community they belong to, provides a better indication for how the issue of negative Muslim representation can be addressed.

**Chapter 10** presents my conclusion chapter, bringing together all the different elements of the thesis to summarise how it addresses the research questions posed in Chapter 1. It highlights the important contribution that this thesis makes to our understanding of both the possible contestation and transformation of negative representation in the British press as well as its enduring nature. The chapter also considers the implications and limitations of the research study, and areas for potential future research.



## **Chapter 2: Reproduction and Contradiction in Representations of Muslims**

### **Introduction**

In the past two decades, a significant body of research has been undertaken examining the representation of Muslims in the media. Studies across disciplines have analysed media coverage to explore how Muslims have become the favoured ‘folk devils’ of the British media (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). In this chapter, I put forward the case for my thesis by exploring the considerable canon of research on the representation of Muslims in the British press. Much of the research literature draws mainly on the analysis of media content to provide a generally consistent argument for the overall negative representation of Muslims and Islam. Following a critical overview of this scholarship, I contend that while studies of media coverage provide an important insight into *how* Muslims are represented, they often cannot provide empirical support that explains *why* Muslims are represented in these ways.

To gain this empirical insight, I put forward the case for taking an alternative methodological approach, one that focuses on journalists as the producers of this coverage, to provide a missing insight into both the reproduction of, and contradictions to negative Muslim representations found in British press coverage. I then discuss how taking such an approach requires the consideration of the wider cultural and political context in which this press coverage takes place, and of how media production processes themselves can push journalists to reproduce negative representations while stifling alternative discourses about Muslims. As my thesis argues, it is by unravelling the tensions and pressures that journalists themselves face when it comes to Muslim representation that it becomes possible to gain the ‘insider’ perspective missing from existing scholarship based on media content. This insight can contribute towards a greater understanding of the enduring nature of negative representations, as well as their contestation from within the British press.

### **Patterns of Representation**

Research based on the analysis of media content tends to converge on certain salient patterns in terms of the disproportionate presence of negative Muslim representation and the language, imagery and tropes associated with Muslims. Ahmed and Matthes’ (2017) meta-analysis of 345 studies on Muslim representation in the media (conducted between 2000 and 2015) points to a shared consensus of the dominant tendency of the media to negatively frame Muslims while portraying Islam as a violent religion. Large-scale analyses of British

newspaper coverage (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008; Poole, 2002) provide further evidence of this framing within the British press. Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery's (2013) extensive corpus linguistic analysis of over 200,000 British newspaper articles finds that the nouns 'Muslim', 'Islam' and 'Islamic' appeared on average 33 times a day between 1998 and 2009, with considerable peaks following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 7/7 London attacks. While this frequency expectedly peaks in the immediate coverage of such a major news event as a terrorist attack, news stories on Muslims and Islam continue to be consistently high across the years following an attack (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008).

Patterns of media coverage further reflect that across a variety of news stories beyond the terrorist attacks, Muslims are most frequently represented as a threat to the Western liberal way of life (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017), and as connected to conflict (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Shaw, 2012; Richardson, 2001). In around two-thirds of the stories studied in Moore, Mason and Lewis's (2008) in-depth content analysis of newspaper articles in the British press between 2000 and 2008, British Muslims are portrayed as a threat (relating to terrorism); a problem (in terms of incompatible differences); or generally in opposition to British values (p.3). References to 'radical' Muslims far outnumber those to 'moderate' Muslims (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008), with the latter often portrayed as the 'exceptional' Muslim case (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). The differentiation between 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims' often replaces the differentiation between 'terrorists' and 'civilians' to distinguish members of Muslim communities. This contributes to reinforcing the image of Islam as a problem that needs to be fought *within* the Muslim community by 'good Muslims' (those more tolerant and secular) against the more religious 'bad' Muslims (Mamdani, 2002: 766). I return to representations of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims later in this chapter.

Comparative studies of British press coverage of Muslims and that of other ethno-religious groups find that Muslims are systematically portrayed in a much more negative way than other groups (Bleich et al., 2015; Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008). In their analysis of nearly 12,000 newspaper headlines involving the major religions, Bleich et al. (2015) find that Islam disproportionately features in at least 40% of headlines from 2001 to 2012. Muslims are significantly more likely to be represented negatively as a 'problem' than other ethno-religious groups. Representations of Muslim women show them portrayed largely as 'victims' in need of liberation and juxtaposed with Muslim men as potential aggressors

(Dreher, 2020; Ahmed and Matthes, 2017; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnergy, 2013). More recently, there has been a shift in media discourse towards the inclusion of a more antagonistic narrative about veil-wearing Muslim women, where the burka signifies “a symbol of a stubborn refusal to accept ‘our culture or to embrace modernity’” (Khiabany and Williamson, 2008: 70).

In charting the way that the representation of Muslims and Islam changes following the events of 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks, Moore, Mason and Lewis (2008) highlight how the number of news stories concentrating on religious and cultural differences between British culture and Islam (or between ‘the West’ and ‘Islamic extremism’) overtake the number of stories reporting on terrorist events after 2008<sup>2</sup>. Press coverage also begins to focus its critique more upon Muslims as a group rather than on Islam as a religion as seen in earlier coverage (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnergy, 2013). Muslims are increasingly represented not only as a physical or security threat in terms of terrorism, but also as a cultural threat to the British way of life (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010; Saeed, 2007). More recent analyses of the representation of Muslims have focused on this shift to cultural difference in media coverage on Muslims, and on how it has enabled what Poole (2019) describes as “the construction of a narrative of cultural incompatibility” where Muslims are viewed as “the most problematic of minority groups within integrationist models of citizenship” (p.480). These studies have particularly concentrated on specific high-profile news events, such as the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy (Meer and Mouritsen, 2009); the Charlie Hebdo incident (Luengo and Ihlebæk, 2019; Jenkins and Tandoc, 2019); the Trojan Horse Affair (Poole, 2018; Cannizzaro and Gholami, 2018); the UK ban on anti-Islamic Danish MP Geert Wilders (Poole, 2012); the wearing (and banning) of the Muslim veil (Williamson, 2014; Khiabany and Williamson, 2008) and the grooming gangs scandals (Cockbain and Tufail, 2020; Cockbain, 2013) to provide a more qualitative insight into the framing of Muslims and Islam in the media around issues of citizenship, national identity, Britishness, multiculturalism, and liberal values.

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<sup>2</sup> Although as Poole (2011) argues the core ‘Othering’ message of the terrorism/security discourse has continued to maintain its “strength and consistency” (p.58), and “the association of Muslims with terrorism has concretised” (Poole, 2006: 95).

## **The Limitations of Text-Based Analysis of Press Coverage**

Studies of the analysis of media coverage have been invaluable in showing an overall empirical picture of the negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the press. In doing so, however, they have also become subject to critique on various grounds. While these studies can include elements of alternative representations, often as anomalies or exceptions to the rule, their focus on overall patterns can lead the nuances and contradictions in press coverage to be overlooked. Studies that focus on the quantitative analysis of media content can have additional methodological limitations when it comes to the coding and categorising of representations. In terms of their own corpus linguistical analysis of press coverage, Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013) present a coding dilemma around the wearing of the Muslim veil as a case in point. Opting to categorise news coverage as describing the veil as an ‘imposition’, ‘demand’, ‘choice’ or ‘right’, they struggled to reach a consensus on what a ‘fair’ representation of the Muslim veil would be. For example, should articles that portray the veil as an ‘imposition’ or ‘demand’ be coded as negative while those representing the veil as a ‘choice’ or ‘right’ be seen as positive (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013)? Furthermore, they ask at what point of quantification does a representation become categorised as negative ‘overall’? In the case of their analysis of the veil, for example, 58% of cases were seen to be more positive, while 42% were seen to be negative. Does this therefore suggest, as Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery ask, that “as the British press seems to represent the veil positively most of the time, we should say that the other 42 per cent of cases are acceptable?” (p.265).

Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery’s example provides an insight into the difficulties involved in attempts to quantify Muslim representation according to the assignment of specific, rather than fluid and complex, coding categories. Debates about the Muslim veil often present as much more nuanced and ambivalent in media coverage (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013), and this complexity becomes lost within a binary positive/negative judgement of overall coverage. For example, while Macdonald (2006) reports on the tendency of press coverage to reflect the veil as an “iconic symbol of cultural difference” (p.7), there is also some openness and diversity in its wider representations, particularly from the more liberal newspapers. A similar ambivalent and at times contradictory position in the British press on the veil is reported by Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010) in their analysis of coverage following the request of Labour MP Jack Straw to female Muslim constituents to remove their veils during consultations. A range of critical perspectives of Straw’s comments

(supporting the choice of Muslim women to wear the veil) were present across the coverage alongside the more negative representations about the veil itself. A similarly broad range of Muslim voices were represented, coming from both men and women, both in defence and in criticism of the veil. This diversity in the press coverage leads Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010) to conclude that rather than the “kinds of argumentation which might, for example, invoke conceptions of an exclusive nationhood to challenge the public manifestation of Muslim difference” (p.229), the inclusion of diverse Muslim voices reflected the heterogeneity of Muslim views on the veil in the media.

When justifying the focus of their analysis on the press’s framing of one specific event involving Muslims, Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010) explain how:

one important rationale for limiting our analysis to these items concerns the ways in which the currency of different types of press discourse is sometimes overlooked, which means that the content of newspapers can be homogenised in a manner that ignores internal variations between different sections. (p.221)

Adopting this stance enabled their research to explore the more nuanced nature of the press discourse around the Muslim veil, and how even the same newspaper can display internal variations in the way it represents Muslims. Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010: 223) highlight how the diversity of Muslim voices further indicates a more heterogenous representation, in contrast to the “fundamentalist, angry Muslim voices” reflected in earlier press coverage, such as in that relating to the Rushdie affair. For example, at least half of the press coverage by the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* included the varied perspectives of diverse Muslim figures, whether critical of Jack Straw’s comment or of the wearing of the veil. The tabloid’s further inclusion of contradictory opinions of Muslim women who were either supportive of or against the veil contrasts with the more general overview of press coverage as representing the veil as an “impediment to women’s autonomy” (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010: 224). This study also highlights how Muslim voices have become more assertive within the mainstream media, enabling them to contest and challenge representations of themselves, a point I elaborate on in the next chapter. Golnaraghi and Dye (2016) similarly find that Muslim women actively contribute 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. Like Meer, Dwyer and Modood,

their analysis deliberately focuses on a wide variety of press coverage of a specific event (the proposed Bill 94 to limit the face veil) to capture the nuances of its coverage.

Despite these alternative perspectives, however, Golnaraghi and Dye (2016) highlight that the dominant media narrative on the veil continues to be that it oppresses Muslim women. In the UK, while the representation of veiled women has become more complex as the result of Muslim public contestation, it is now not only seen as a symbol of oppression, but also as a symbol of defiance and the rejection of British values (Williamson, 2014: 68). As Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010) point out, this reflects 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” (p.229). I elaborate on the issue of Muslim contestation in the next chapter.

The discussion about media coverage of the Muslim veil highlights how the claim that Muslim representation in the media is negative is not so straightforward. Representations can often be ambivalent, dissonant, and contradictory, even within the same newspaper or across the reporting of the same story. Bleich et al.’s (2015) analysis of the ‘tone’ of British press headlines on Muslims and Islam presents a different conclusion to the majority of scholarship in the field by finding little support for the claim that Muslims are portrayed in a “systematically negative way” (p.942). Their analysis of newspaper headlines between 2001 and 2012 found them to be more positive towards Muslims than negative on average<sup>3</sup>. Aside from their contradictory findings, Bleich et al. found that they had to code a large number of headlines as ‘ambiguous’, as they could be read as *either* positive or negative or include *both* positive and negative elements. These examples serve to highlight the limitations of quantitative text-based analysis research into Muslim representations. The labelling of complex stories using a limited coding system risks a limited analysis that fails to consider the more nuanced nature of representations. In the case of Bleich et al.’s analysis, the researchers were also unable to shed any empirical light on why these types of ‘ambiguous’ headlines were so prevalent across media coverage of Muslims.

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<sup>3</sup> These findings are perhaps surprising as headlines are seen to be a major source of misleading information when it comes to stories involving Muslims (Hanif, 2018). It is also worth pointing out the dangers of using only headlines to study representations, as it is often copyeditors who write the headlines while journalists produce the content of the article. The headlines might therefore not always reflect the tone and bias of the article itself.

## **Framing across Different Newspapers**

Many of the studies that cite an overall negative bias in media coverage also highlight how the representation of Muslims in the UK press is “anything but uniform” (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013: 66). This is largely because the mainstream press itself is not monolithic, and instead reflects different political and social positions (Karim 2002). Newspapers tend to represent Muslims and Islam differently depending on their own news values, style, and audiences (Poole, 2002). For instance, research shows that tabloid newspapers are more likely to adopt discourses that link Muslims to terrorism and conflict, and to show Islam as a dangerous religion (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). Broadsheets, on the other hand, tend to focus either on a “clash of civilisations” narrative which places Muslims in opposition to Western values, or on Muslims as evidence of the failure of multiculturalism (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008: 15). Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013) find that while both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers appear to share an underlying presentation of Muslims as a homogenous population associated with conflict, this argument is presented very differently according to the newspapers’ political leanings. Right-leaning newspapers (whether tabloid or broadsheet) are generally seen to be more negative towards Muslims and Islam than left-leaning ones (Bleich et al., 2015; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Poole, 2002). This is not always the case, however, as studies have shown right-wing newspapers to report more positively on particular Muslim-related stories (for example, in the reporting of public opinion polls about Muslims) than the left-wing press (Sobolewska and Ali, 2015). Sobolewska and Ali (2015) account for these seemingly contradictory findings by suggesting that regarding certain issues, the left-wing press are more critical of Muslims due to the perceived anti-liberal traditionalism of Muslims and Islam. A similar view has been expressed by Poole (2002), who suggests that left-leaning newspapers may be more negative about Muslims than other minorities due to their strong anti-religious, pro-secular position and their stronger stance on the defence of liberal values such as freedom of expression.

It is also possible to see both consistency and contradiction in the way Muslims are framed across different types of newspapers with differing political stances. While it can be argued that media discourse does to some extent routinely and negatively racialise Muslims (Meer, Dwyer and Modood 2010), “slippages, ambivalences, and contradictions” in content can be found across newspapers, within the same newspaper and even within the same article

(Poole, 2002: 100). How then can we make sense of this picture of continuity and contradiction, reproduction and contestation within the representation of Muslims in the British press?

### **Understanding Muslim Representation through Journalists**

This chapter has indicated that the representation of Muslims and Islam in the British press should not be viewed as fixed but that its fluid and often contradictory nature should also be recognised. Studies of media content have been key to the mapping out of prevalent features of Muslim representation in large bodies of media text. It is not always possible, however, to interpret the meaning of these features, their wider social implications or why media discourse can be shaped in unpredictable ways (Hansen et al., 1988). This leaves a significant knowledge gap in the field. It appears that as summarised by Morrison and Tumber (1988) in relation to their own study of journalists reporting on the Falklands war:

whilst content analysis can be useful for determining values, it cannot go beyond its own methodology to explain how the picture was arrived at. The values say something in that they do not appear by chance; indeed they represent the workings of social relationships which go beyond even the news industry itself and into social formation. (p.x)

In his defence of the use of the discourse analytical approach over traditional content analysis of media content, Van Dijk (2000) argues that content analysis overlooks the more implicit elements of media discourse that may be hidden in more neutral, or even positive, stories relating to Muslims. Using discourse analysis, he asserts that it becomes possible to examine the sub-text behind the stories by going beyond the analysis of the text to consider the wider 'coherence' or connotations of the stories. Van Dijk (2000) elaborates how:

in news and editorials about ethnic affairs, thus, many meanings are merely implied or presupposed and not explicitly stated. Because of social norms, and for reasons of impression management, for instance, many negative things about minorities may not be stated explicitly, and thus are conveyed between the lines. (p.40)

One example of this can be seen in terms of the positive/negative stories dichotomy. While positive stories may provide an alternative narrative to the more negative Muslim coverage, an asymmetrical relationship is found between the recurring archetypes that appear in



positive and negative stories. Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013) identify the common archetypes in 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 framing of positive stories, on the other hand, 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. Under a discourse analytical perspective, however, these 'positive' representations are seen to work ideologically to reflect 'our' positive self-representation (i.e., our tolerance towards those Muslims who are more like 'Us' or who have been civilised through 'our' influence) and reinforce the negative representation of the 'Other' (those not like 'Us') (Van Dijk, 2000). Other studies have drawn on different types of discourse analysis to similarly posit how positive narratives act to strengthen and validate, rather than mitigate, negative representations of Muslims (Bowe and Makki, 2016; Morey and Yaqin, 2010; Macdonald 2006). As Hall (1997) points out in relation to positive images of Black people:

The problem with the positive/negative strategy is that adding positive images to the largely negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of the ways in which 'being Black' is represented but does not necessarily displace the negative. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them. (p.274)

This discussion suggests that discourse analysis of media texts can, as Van Dijk (2000) argues, provide some insight into the more hidden, implicit ways that discourse represents ethnic minorities and embodies 'Othering' strategies. In line with the critique of the analysis of media texts in general, however, text-based discourse analysis can also only provide a limited understanding of the social structures that embody negative representations (Philo, 2007). It cannot provide direct empirical evidence of how the news stories about Muslims came to be reported in a particular way, 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 in the press (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). By primarily focusing on seeking out systematic patterns (Gillespie et al., 2010), studies of media content further risk overlooking those spaces of resistance and contestation that journalists may themselves create to challenge the dominant negative bias against Muslims.

Philo (2007) advises moving away from a more text-based analysis towards a methodology that provides insight into news production processes, the practices of journalists and the analysis of the often “conflicting pressures” that affect news content (p.190) Speaking from his experience with the Glasgow University Media Group, Philo argues that it is not possible to analyse media representations without considering how production processes also structure these representations. In particular, he identifies several key areas that text-based analysis of media coverage often fails to evidence, including the following (p.175):

- the origins of competing discourses and how they relate to different social interests;
- the diversity of social accounts compared to what is present (and absent) in a specific text;
- the impact of external factors such as professional media practice on the manner in which the discourses are represented;
- the question of how rhetoric ‘belongs to’ or is used by different social interests.

In the next section of this chapter, I introduce my argument for both my theoretical framework and my chosen methodological approach of using qualitative interviews with journalists to provide some understanding of these factors when it comes to Muslim representations.

The discussion so far suggests that while the analysis of content can tell us much about how Muslims are represented in the British press, it tells us little about the intentions behind this coverage in terms of *why* they are represented in these ways. It also cannot empirically explain why this coverage can sometimes appear conflicted and contradictory. Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery (2013: 256) proffer that these types of contradictions reflect a “tension in journalism” when it comes to coverage of Muslims and Islam, but it is difficult to empirically capture this through the analysis of media texts alone. Yet there has been a surprisingly limited amount of research that considers journalists’ own perceptions and experiences of reporting on Muslim-related stories.

### **The Wider Political and Cultural Context**

According to Hall (1997), the notion of representation in both cultural and media studies is in danger of becoming too literal, as if there is a ‘true’ representation against which negative representations can be measured as distortions. Instead, he stresses how representations do

not have a ‘true’ meaning to start with, as they themselves are built upon the meanings that people assign to them. In line with Hall, Poole (2019) views representations as a social process, as “products of both their social environment (the political and economic context) and the way they are produced (the media context)” (p.469-470). As a result, how the media represent certain groups will always be contextual, shifting over time and across the media (Poole, 2019). Examples of these types of shifts can be found in the earlier discussion of how representations of veiled Muslim women have changed from portrayals of 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: 76). Both contrasting images coexist within the complex and ambivalent media coverage of veiled Muslim women. Similar contradictions are found in Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery’s (2013) analysis around the theme of ‘conflict’, where press coverage appears to give responsibility for the violent actions of a few Muslims to the whole Muslim community while countering this claim by arguing that the majority of Muslims are peaceful. The researchers themselves speculate as to whether the presence of a discourse that homogenises Muslims as violent, while separating those who committed the violence from the wider Muslim community, could be a ‘legitimising strategy’ to avoid being called Islamophobic. Without speaking to the journalists who produce these stories, however, the intentions behind this seemingly contradictory press discourse remain unverified.

Ahmed and Matthes (2017) highlight the need for scholarship on representation to extend beyond “frequently used paradigms and research categories” to consider the more complex, shifting social, political and religious contexts in which they appear (p.236). Similarly, to understand representations as a social process, Poole (2011) recommends the qualitative study of specific news events around Muslims, where the close qualitative scrutiny of a more localised data sample enables the analysis of how patterns of coverage change over time in relation to different political and social contexts. Smaller-scale, qualitative content-analysis studies that focus on Muslim representation in a more localised context – such as the Trojan Horse Affair, the Charlie Hebdo incident or the grooming gang scandals for example, can tell us more about how media stories reflect not only the dominant discourses on Muslims, but also the wider contestation in the public domain about the place of Muslims in British society. For example, studies focusing on the London terrorist attacks of 7/7 highlight a critical moment in the shift towards the scrutiny of the ‘Britishness’ of Muslims (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). Prior to 9/11, negative media discourses about Muslims most often refer to

foreign immigrants (Richardson, 2001). In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when media coverage is focused on terrorism and counter-terrorism measures, Poole (2006) finds that it is Muslim exiles living in Britain, rather than British Muslims, that are associated with the extremist label. While the physical threat of Islamist extremists was presented very much as a distant, external one rather than a British threat, the association of British Muslims as terrorists has become increasingly commonplace (Poole, 2006). As Morey and Yaqin (2011) elaborate as follows:

We can see the 2005 shift from a shocked dawning awareness of the existence of “lost” Muslim individuals and groups to a project of national repair and cultural retrenchment around a racialized Britishness, played out overtly in the way the press covered the London bombings. (p.66)

While the media’s focus on issues of national identity and inclusivity in relation to Muslims can be followed back to the late 1980s and events such as the Rushdie affair (Poole, 2002), the debate about the nature and parameters of Britain’s multiculturalism underlies much of the representation of Muslims in the media since the 7/7 terrorist attacks (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). The press coverage reflects a preoccupation with questions relating to the loyalty and belonging of British Muslims (Moore, Mason and McEnery, 2008), their inability to integrate into and adhere to mainstream British values (Poole, 2006), and their being in tension with the rest of Britain’s citizens (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). At the same time, a sense of conflict can be detected within these media narratives, with attempts being made towards portraying a more “pluralist version of the country” (Poole, 2002: 257).

Media reporting on the Danish cartoons’ controversy, for example, highlights two major media frames, involving the values of ‘freedom of speech’ on one hand and the need for ‘religious tolerance’ towards Britain’s Muslim communities on the other (Craft and Waisbord, 2008 cited in Jenkins and Tandoc, 2019). Studies on the press coverage of public debates on religious rights for Muslims also find that media coverage is often more positive towards Muslims, with the voices of the advocates of Muslim religious rights more strongly represented than the opponents (Carol and Koopmans, 2013; Vanparys, Jacobs and Torrekens, 2013). Vanparys, Jacobs and Torrekens (2013) further conclude that the more positive stance of media debate about the accommodation of Muslim religious rights remained unaffected in light of more violent and contentious events involving Muslims (this

included the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Madrid and London bombings, the cartoons affair and the assassination of Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam).

Considering their findings, Vanparys, Jacobs and Torrekens (2013) raise the question of how representative studies of the media coverage of a specific event are in terms of overall Muslim representation, asking:

Whether studies that use content analysis or qualitative discourse analysis should not pay more attention to the dangers of selective sampling and partisan theoretical framing. When one analyses in an in-depth way only the most ‘interesting’ interventions in the public debate, one might be tempted to focus on only the most shocking or negative ones. (p.225)

This suggests that even event-specific qualitative content analysis of media coverage can be at risk of focusing on particular themes (mostly around controversial events involving Muslims) that affirm an overall picture of negative representations, while overlooking the wider context and diversity of media coverage.

### **Orientalism and Representations**

It is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and his consequent work on media representations of Islam and Muslims that 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 a reductive media discourse on Islam and Muslims today. The media is seen to reproduce Orientalist representations of Islam as both “uniform” and “uniformly ubiquitous”, drawing on “the same time-honoured caricatures of Islam” (Said, 1997: 6). Muslims are reduced to a “handful of rules, stereotypes and generalisations” that serve to reinforce “every negative fact associated with Islam – its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities” (p.xvii). As a result, Said (1997) asserts that Orientalist ideas have entered the “cultural canon”, serving as the “*a priori* touchstone” for “anyone wishing to discuss or say something about Islam” (p.156-157). The process of ‘Othering’ is central to Said’s theory for understanding why Muslims are represented in these ways. Said (1997: 44) maintains that the reductive image of Islam is always juxtaposed with the civilised self-image of the West, characterised within a “confrontational political situation” pitting ‘Us’ (Occident/West) against ‘Them’ (Orient/Islam). Islam and Muslims are represented as “apparent aberrations from normalcy” when compared with the realities and norms of liberal society from its position of enlightened modernity (Said, 1997: 42).

Poole (2002) highlights how Orientalism remains a relevant paradigm for more contemporary understandings of representations of Muslims. Much of the more recent literature analysing British media coverage has echoed elements of Said's assertions about the frequent, recursive representations of Islam and Muslims as "dangerous, backwards or irrational" (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008: 16). Shaw's (2012) critical discourse analysis of coverage following the 7/7 London terrorist attacks across British newspapers similarly finds the depiction of Islam as a "'lunatic', 'barbaric', 'violent' and 'uncivilised' culture set in a kind of tug-of war against the 'peaceful' and 'civilised' western culture" (Shaw, 2012: 519). Orientalist tropes of Muslims have even been found in studies of sports media coverage (Malcolm, Bairner and Curry, 2010). The presence of 'Othering' has been regularly evidenced in research on the representation of Muslims in the media (Lewis, Mason and Moore, 2009; Morey and Yaqin, 2010; Poole, 2002). By homogenising Muslims as a 'monolithic' community (Poole, 2019), Muslims are represented as a separate "imagined community" to the rest of British society (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEneaney, 2013: 255). The wider role that 'Othering' plays in representations has further been studied by scholars across disciplines, including postcolonial scholars (c.f. Spivak, 1996; Bhabha, 1984) and those from the field of psychoanalytic studies to examine social representations and their repercussions (Howarth, 2011; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010). From a socio-psychological perspective, for instance, 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. Orientalist imagery within media coverage also functions in a hegemonic sense. As Poole (2002) points out, this enables the management of the 'Other', while "promot(ing) an agreed sense of national identity at the 'Other's expense in order to protect and maintain social structures and systems" (p. 251).

While acknowledging the seminal work of Edward Said on the representation of Muslims and Islam in the Western media, Aydin and Hammer (2010) voice their concern about how Orientalism and related studies focus on the passive, one-sided negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam on one side and the media as a "self-perpetuating institution with no human access or participation" on the other (p.3). To avoid reducing the critical potential of this work for normative change, Aydin and Hammer urge researchers to move away from such a "sharp and artificial distinction" (p.3) to consider the complexity of ways in which Muslims and the media are both connected and influence one another. Similarly, Modood (2020) posits that

while the analysis of ‘Othering’ is useful in the context of media representations, it becomes less useful when considering the complex debates that take place around Muslims in the West today. He gives the example of the wearing of the veil by Muslim women and debates around whether it represents a form of oppression or a personal choice. While some of these debates adopt the first position as a means of reinforcing images of the backwardness of Islam, others may originate from a more principled and reasonable position on “women’s rights, gay liberation, secularism and emancipation” whilst also representing Muslims as paradigmatic Others (Opratko, 2017: 86). In line with the earlier discussion, the first position itself may also come from members of the diverse Muslim communities who themselves do not agree with the wearing of the full-face veil in the name of Islam.

Said’s ‘Othering’ framework is clearly important for the analysis of the cultural processes involved in representations and in the construction of ‘Otherness’ (Gabriel, 1994), particularly as he seeks to highlight the position of representers themselves within Orientalist representations (Valbjørn, 2008). However, 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 Hall (1996b) emphasises, they also exist within “a cultural politics designed to challenge, resist and, where possible, to transform the dominant regimes of representation” (p.443). Orientalism appears as an all-defining discourse with little space for resistance or change. Despite his extensive analysis of literary and historical texts, Said further 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 he is complimentary about a particular scholar’s account of Islam, Said gives no indication of how such an alternative account can arise from within the given hegemonic formation (Porter, 1982: 1818, cited in Mills, 2004).

### **The Role of Hegemony**

The study of representations of Muslims from the perspective of an Orientalist framework requires an understanding of how hegemony itself works through the “systematic discipline” by which the West constructs such enduring, authoritative representations of Islam and Muslims (Said, 1978: 11). As Said (1997) elaborates:

One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away [...] what we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted together strength of Orientalist discourse, its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability [...] It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength. (p.14-15)

The concept of hegemony is central to understanding the representation of race within media discourse, and why certain narratives about Muslims are privileged over others. According to theories of media hegemony, the media serves to systematically project and reproduce definitions of situations and events that favour the “hegemony of the powerful” (Hall, 1982: 82). This framework can be seen in research on the representation of Black communities in the British press (Van Dijk, 1989, 1991), and it shares many parallels with the representation of Muslims. This reflects a media tradition of showing ethnic minority communities in general as threatening the cultural and political ideals of the nation (Solomos, 2003: 186). Van Dijk’s (1989, 1991, 2000) influential discourse analysis work on the representation of race in the British press has repeatedly shown how ethnic minorities are consistently linked with conflict. In his analysis of British press editorials about the 1985 disorders, Van Dijk (1989) describes how the disturbances are placed within a dominant interpretative framework of law and order. This represents young African-Caribbean males as inherently violent, destructive, criminal and lawless, and the wider Black community at fault for failing to integrate with the law-abiding majority. Dwyer, Shah and Sanghera (2008) find the similar framing of young Muslim men as deviant and threatening in news reporting on the urban disturbances in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in 2001. Similarly, Hall et al. (1978) highlight how Black youth and muggings became synonymous in the British press in the 1970s, leading to a widespread media narrative of criminalisation and violence in relation to Britain’s Black communities.

First published in 1978, Hall et al.’s *Policing the Crisis* provides an in-depth analysis of the relationship between media representations of race and hegemony. Hall et al.’s Gramscian conjunctural analysis shows how the British media’s framing of muggings as a moral panic led to the construction of Black youth as the ‘folk devils’ - the ‘Other’ - of British society. Taking place against the wider crisis of authority experienced by the British state in the 1970s, the Black ‘mugger’ became a ‘common sense’ symbolic representation of the need for



more authoritarian policing and state control. Hall et al. (1978: 220) argue that the media act not only to define for the public what significant events are happening but to provide powerful interpretations of how to understand the events. In the case of the muggings, these hegemonic interpretations were built around dominant consensual orientations about the events themselves and the people involved in them. By framing the coverage according to these assumptions (albeit through the newspapers' own "constructions and inflections"), the media are seen to systematically reproduce the "definitions of the powerful" by acting as "secondary definers" of the primary definitions of the state (Hall et al., 1978: 220). I return to Hall et al.'s analysis of the media in the next chapter.

*Policing the Crisis* was based mainly on an examination of daily British newspapers where researchers would 'read' the newspapers to identify the 'ideological frameworks' underlying the news stories on muggings. Hall et al. did not speak to the journalists themselves about their "behind the headlines" newsroom decision making (McLaughlin, 2008: 147). This meant that their deductions about the media's role were based only upon these readings and the reworking of existing research on news production, news values and journalism. Where any counter-narratives were found in the media's narrative on the muggings, these appear to have been largely disregarded. For example, Hall et al. (1978: 95) note that the coverage by the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* was "unique in both its ideological interpretation and the journalistic forms it adopted" because it centred around the victims of the muggings, rather than the young, Black perpetrators. This 'anomaly' presents a challenge to Hall et al.'s rather monolithic thesis about the media, as instead of taking its lead from the state, the newspaper set its own 'primary definition' of the situation it was reporting on (McLaughlin, 2008). McLaughlin suggests that the shift in tone of *The Sun* represented a wider shift in the model of British journalism towards a more public-oriented style of news reporting, one that has become even more relevant in today's "rapacious, tabloidized 24/7 multi-media environment" (p.152). Philo (2007) similarly points to *The Sun* as a source of "contradictions and variations" when it comes to representations of race, in line with its "differentiated readership" and its "complex marketing strategy which produces variations in its news coverage, editorials and features" (p.189). *The Sun* was also one of the British newspapers<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike some of their European counterparts, not a single British national newspaper re-published the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons citing grounds similar to that expressed by *The Sun* (Petley, 2006: 106). However, this does not mean that media coverage was more favourable to Muslims and Islam (c.f. Meer and Mourtisen, 2009; Berkowitz and Eko, 2007; Petley, 2006)

that refused to publish the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad produced in the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*, stating in an editorial that:

the cartoons are intended to insult Muslims, and *The Sun* can see no justification for causing deliberate offence to our much-valued Muslim readers. (*The Sun*, 3 February 2006, cited in Philo, 2007)

On the other hand, Poole's (2002) extensive study of Muslim representation in the British press finds that elements of counter-discourse were present across all the newspapers of her study, *except* for *The Sun* which was highly consistent in its negative portrayal of Muslims.

### **Hegemony, Contradiction and Dissonance**

According to Kumar (2010), there are five key hegemonic frames when it comes to Western media debate on Islam after 9/11, namely that:

- 1) Islam is a monolithic religion.
- 2) Islam is a uniquely sexist religion.
- 3) the "Muslim mind" is incapable of rationality and science.
- 4) Islam is inherently violent.
- 5) the West spreads democracy, while Islam spawns terrorism. (p.257)

While Kumar's US-based thesis appears to conform to some of the underlying conclusions of UK-based literature on Muslim representations, it serves to undermine the complexity that can be found in British press coverage. It suggests an overly fixed and essentialised picture of the relationship between the media and hegemony, and between Britain and its Muslim communities. It is by addressing the "messiness" of media discourse that it becomes possible to see how this type of hegemonic ideology is not monolithically manifested across media coverage of Muslims (Kelsey, 2019: 252). To start with, representations themselves 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). Secondly, rather than reflecting accurate or inaccurate images of reality, representations are contingent on the ideological work that goes into their creation and reproduction. In terms of representations of Muslims and Islam, Said (1997) sees this manifested as a hegemonic form of "word politics", where different "communities of interpretation" struggle to push forward their interpretations into media coverage (p.45). As I

explore in the next chapter, media representations of Muslims can therefore be seen to reflect the following:

The challenging and the answering, the opening of certain rhetorical spaces and the closing of others: all this makes up the “word politics” by which each side sets up situations, justifies actions, forecloses options, and presses alternatives on the other. (Said, 1997: lvi)

In the next chapter, I put forward my theoretical case for considering these more complex aspects of Muslim representation through the lens of cultural politics, where it is the “cultural meaning of citizenship” itself which is being contested (Nash, 2001: 86). From this perspective, the media acts as the arena where cultural politics are thrashed out.

Representations of Muslims in media coverage reflect how social plurality itself leads to considerable contestation over the interpretation of certain problems or dilemmas and exposes “the existence of multiple and varied perspectives on the affairs of the polis” (Finlayson, 2007: 550). At the same time, as representation is subject to hegemonic power relations, the concept of social plurality itself is problematised as not all interpretations are seen as equal (Finlayson, 2007).

When it comes to hegemonic struggle, Poole (2012) similarly concludes that press 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. Ultimately the media’s emphasis on incompatible cultural differences and conflict when it comes to coverage about Muslims largely serves to create symbolic boundaries to ensure social stability for the dominant majority and to maintain hegemonic power relations (Poole, 2012). I examine the media’s role in terms of hegemony and cultural politics in more depth in the next chapter.

This then 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, 1997: 269). Hall (1996b) sees cultural politics as the means for making space for resistance and the challenging and possible transformation of “dominant regimes of representation” (p.443). Hall argues that for this to happen, two important conditions need to be met. Firstly, there must be access to the means of representation (or

counter-representation) through the media. Secondly, there must be some space for positive representation that itself contests the marginality and stereotypical nature of negative representations (Hall, 1996b). Some of this counter-representation comes from the greater diversity of Muslim voices now being represented in media coverage. Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010) point to the opening of the public sphere to various expressions of Muslim ‘differences’ which is driven by an increased media assertiveness from British Muslim communities. In an active attempt to redress the negativity in press coverage about their communities, Muslim sources are seen to actively seek out engagement with journalists (Munnik, 2018a). At the same time, as I discuss in the next chapter, Muslim participation in the media discourse about them is restricted by other, highly vocal, dominant groups, including journalists themselves. As Poole (2002) points out, it is often at the point of media production that Muslim groups can “lose control of the meaning” they want represented in the media, as the media itself privileges “a dominant ideological framework based on an agenda of maintaining and protecting sacred values and institutions” (p.99).

## **Conclusions**

In summary, this chapter has argued that the representation of Muslims in the British press should not be viewed as fixed but should be recognised for its fluid and contradictory nature. At the same time, in line with a discourse analytical approach, the analysis of media representations must reflect the long-standing relations of power and subordination (particularly around race) that take place in wider society (Ferguson 1998). Ferguson elaborates how:

[t]he 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. (p.259-260)

By taking this into consideration, my research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of Muslim representation in the media through the lens of journalists. By providing an alternative methodology to the considerable literature based on the analysis of media coverage, it draws on in-depth qualitative interviews to contribute to the limited number of studies that attempt to understand Muslim representation through the journalists who write the stories. Holohan and Poole (2011), for example, use interviews with both

Muslim and non-Muslim media producers of British newspapers as one component of their wider, cross-cultural multi-methodological project '*Muslims in the European Mediascape*'.<sup>5</sup> Their study examines patterns of media production and consumption in relation to the coverage of issues concerning diversity and inclusion, including the views of both mainstream and alternative media producers on reporting about Muslims and Islam. This thesis builds on Holohan and Poole's interesting study of journalists' perspectives and practices as part of their much wider research project. Another study that examines articulations of anti-Muslim racism in the accounts of mainstream, liberal journalists in Austria is that of Opratko (2019). Using interviews with editors and journalists from national Austrian media outlets, Opratko adopts a Gramscian lens to consider how this racism has become internalised as the 'common sense' ideas of journalists, leading to the reproduction of liberal Islamophobia in their news work. The theoretical framework of my thesis (as discussed in the next chapter) shares similarities with that of Opratko, providing an interesting comparison of the experiences of British and Austrian journalists' internalisation of common sense ideas about Muslims that I elaborate on later in Chapter 5.

My thesis is further grounded in the recognition of how representations of Muslims take place within the wider context of cultural politics, where these representations are reproduced and contested. In the next chapter, I draw on the work of Stuart Hall on media hegemony to build a theoretical framework that enables the examination of these complexities when it comes to the representation of Muslims. Understanding how continuity and contradiction, reproduction and contestation can co-exist within the representation of Muslims in the British press requires this deeper examination of how the media can serve both as a mechanism for societal control and bias, and as a vehicle for contestation. It also requires a consideration of the role that journalists themselves play in the way Muslims are framed in the media, and the role they play as part of the multicultural societies they themselves are a part of.

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<sup>5</sup> The project also include a separate study of how journalists make sense of narratives concerning Muslims in Germany – see Heeren and Zick (2014).

### **Chapter 3: Theorising the Space for Journalists in the Reproduction and Contestation of Negative Muslim Representation**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter provided an overview of the literature on Muslim representation in the British press with the aim of presenting an insight into its complexities. Although most of the literature converges on the disproportionately negative representation of Muslims, the diversity of narratives and frames across the coverage also point to the presence of some plurality in viewpoints and perspectives that cannot be accounted for simply by newspapers' divergent political stances. This presence of both reproduction and contradiction in media coverage denotes a much more complex process at play than a one-sided effort to spread negative narratives about Muslims.

In this chapter, I present the theoretical case for my thesis and its contribution towards understanding the enduring reproduction of negative Muslim representation in the British press, but also why spaces for resistance and contradiction coexist alongside these representations. This framework involves understanding representation through the lens of political and cultural contestation in a conceptualisation that views journalists as conflicted agents at the heart of this contestation. Developing a theoretical framework based on Stuart Hall's cultural hegemonic analysis of the media, I argue, in line with Hall, that:

[h]ow things are represented and the “machineries” and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation - subjectivity, identity, politics - a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life. (Hall, 1996b: 444)

I start this chapter by locating the media as the terrain for the “ideological work of transformation”, where ideologies are seen as the “sites of popular struggle” and where common sense constructions are the stakes of those struggles (Hall, 2003:108). By adopting the view of the media as a site where struggles for definitions and interpretations take place between different groups in society (Eldridge, Williams and Kitzinger, 1997: 66), I contend that media coverage of Muslims reflects how social plurality itself leads to considerable contestation over certain problems or dilemmas, exposing the multiple and varied perspectives of the polis itself (Finlayson, 2007). At the same time, it is impossible to

examine Muslim representation from this theoretical perspective without also scrutinising the impact of the hegemonic “power at work” at the heart of contestation (Nash, 2001: 85).

As my thesis focuses on exploring how journalists as cognisant mediators of this contested terrain understand and act in terms of Muslim representation, it is necessary to supplement Hall’s theory with a deeper exploration of the structure-agency dichotomy, and in particular the role of journalistic agency – a perspective significantly underdeveloped in Hall’s work. In this chapter, I present the case that viewing representation through journalists’ experiences of the tensions between structure and agency, against a backdrop of political and cultural contestation about British Muslims provides an essential insight into their representation in the British press. The objectives of my research are important because, as Hall (1987) explains citing the work of Antonio Gramsci, every crisis presents a moment of reconstruction, of the opportunity to put something new in place. Similarly, through theoretically informed practice, the possibilities of the terrain of ideological struggle promise space for strategic interventions that could lead to progressive change (Hall, 1985) in terms of how British Muslims are perceived in wider British society.

### **Social and Political Contestation**

Contestation is inherent in democratic politics (Finlayson, 2007). Rather than being about a clash of opinions or misunderstandings over a particular issue or event, contestation reflects what Finlayson (2007) describes as the irreducible “plurality of public life”, which itself is always comprised of a range of contesting world-views (p.522). Contestation is also central to the study of cultural practices and how people make life meaningful, or as Hall observes in terms of how:

we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them. (Hall, 1997: 3)

We can see then that contestation is both a political and a cultural process as it relates to both our positioning (in public life) and our identities.

Taking a cultural-political stance to answer the question of Muslim representation, therefore, means viewing culture epistemologically as both “universally constitutive of social relations” and as historically always implicated in the construction of the social relations and identities

in our societies (Nash, 2001: 77). More importantly, as contestation is a central element of hegemony, the role of power cannot be underplayed. Contestation inevitably embodies intrinsic inequalities in terms of who can and cannot legitimately engage in public life and whose representations are accepted or rejected. As Nash points out, cultural politics can therefore be seen to be present in every social setting where “power is at work”, manifesting itself through the “contestation of normalised identities and social relations in which one individual or group is subordinate to another wherever they occur in the social field” (Nash, 2001: 85). In line with my last chapter, the lens of contestation also mirrors academic research that suggests how media coverage of British Muslims reflects the cultural meaning of citizenship itself being contested (Nash, 2011), with the media acting as the arena where this contestation is thrashed out.

### **Hall’s Cultural Hegemonic Approach to News Production**

Drawing upon the work of Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, Hall (1997: 40) conceptualises ideology within the hegemonic notion of the ideological struggle as “the terrain on which men move [and] acquire consciousness of their position” (Gramsci, 1971: 377). Rather than using a Marxist conceptualisation of ideology, Hall defines ideologies as representing:

[t]he mental frameworks - the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation - which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works. (Hall, 1997: 25-26)

It is through these frameworks that any particular form of power and domination can become stabilised and temporarily ‘fixed’ or enable the rising up of new counter-hegemonic conceptions of the world against the prevailing system. Multiple ideologies are represented within the “field of meanings” on offer rather than in terms of the unified one-way relationship between the dominant and the dominated (Hall, 1977: 343, cited in Makus, 1990). As different interests held by different groups in society require political and ideological construction to be given meaning (Hall, 1987), both dominant and subaltern groups must work to push forward their preferred ideological definitions in line with their group identity (Jones, 2007).

Hall’s work within British cultural studies similarly seeks to both analyse hegemonic forces of domination and to identify alternative, counter-hegemonic forces of resistance (Kellner



and Durham, 2006: xxiv). For Hall (1980, cited in Peck, 2001), Gramsci's ideas provide the antidote to the "persistent downgrading" of conscious struggle in the structuralist paradigm (p.69). By turning Gramsci into a "protostructuralist", Hall seeks to repudiate this critique of reductionism and ahistoricism that is already levelled at structuralism (Peck, 2001: 220). By situating culture and the media within the context of social production and reproduction, it should be possible to understand Muslim representation in terms of both the structural mechanisms of social control and the agency for resistance and change.

By conceptualising the media arena in line with Gramsci's characterisation of hegemony as being built upon the shifting terrain of consensus and contestation (Kellner, 1990), it becomes possible to move away from the idea of the media as a vehicle for the uni-directional propagation of dominant ideologies to explain the unbalanced news coverage of Muslims. Under this conceptualisation of hegemony, as Kellner elaborates:

different classes, sectors of capital, and social groups compete for social dominance and attempt to impose their visions, interests, and agendas on society as a whole. Hegemony is thus a shifting, complex, and open phenomenon, always subject to contestation and upheaval. (Kellner, 1990: 382)

In line with Hall's framework, Gramscian perspectives tend to view the media as being central to the production of identities and focus on the role of media representation in consensus formation that is developed through struggles between dominant and subaltern groups (Jones, 2007). This theoretical standpoint provides some integral insights into how the messages of groups with different interests in defining Muslims can be disseminated in society. By viewing the media as arenas where "symbolic contests" of meaning are conducted (Kellner, 1990: 382), it is possible to track how different groups can push their preferred interpretations into the media (Gamson et al., 1992). The media is similarly conceptualised as the dominant means of social signification in Hall's work, whereby the media message becomes a "symbolic sign vehicle" with its own "internal structuration and complexity" (Hall, 1982: 57).

In the next section, I provide a more contextual interpretation of how Hall's theorisations can help shed light on both the reproduction and the contradiction reflected in the academic literature on Muslim representation discussed in the preceding chapter. By considering the media as the terrain of contestation, what role can journalists play to either intercede to address negative representations of Muslims or to contribute to its enduring reproduction?

## **The Significance of Articulation**

The ‘success’ of a particular ideology depends on its ability to produce the semblance of (temporary) unity between different elements (Hall, 2006). As I mentioned in the previous chapter, this is achieved through the process of articulation, enabling 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). In terms of British Muslims, for example, this can be seen in the way in which different interests come together to present Muslims as at odds with the freedoms of other marginalised groups in terms of women’s rights, gay liberation, and secularism (Opratko, 2017). This results in the articulation of an overall position regarding the specific illiberalism of the Muslim community or the separation of Muslims from other minority groups to show that anti-Muslim narratives are not ‘racist’. Said similarly describes the process of articulation (although he does not use the term) as central to Muslim representation in his discussion of the Iranian crisis rendered through:

[t]elevision pictures of chanting “Islamic” mobs accompanied by commentary about ‘anti-Americanism’, the distance, unfamiliarity, and threatening quality of the spectacle limit “Islam” to those characteristics [...] [giving] rise to a feeling that something basically unattractive and negative confronts us. (Said, 1997: 48)

This kind of articulation represents what Hall (1982) refers to as the “politics of signification” as the struggle for the ideological power to signify events in a particular way (p.65). Ideology itself becomes the site of struggle between competing definitions which seek to “disarticulate a signifier from one, preferred or dominant meaning-system, and rearticulate it with another, different chain of connotations” (Hall, 1982: 76). As meaning must be produced rather than given, different kinds of meaning can become attached to the same events (Hall, 1982). This can be used to explain some of the apparent plurality of perspectives on Muslims as seen in the British media, for example in the way that key news stories such as those reporting on terrorism or burka bans are covered. For one meaning to take priority over others (to become the consensual meaning), invested groups must compete to win credibility and legitimacy for their own interpretations on one hand, and on the other, to marginalise or de-legitimise any alternative interpretations from other groups (Hall, 1982). As articulations themselves are arbitrary, they are also open to contestation and can be disconnected from a particular articulation and re-attached to another (for example, feminist columnists supporting Muslim

women's right to wear the burka). Hall (1986) himself refers to the reclamation of the term 'Black' by Britain's African-Caribbean communities as an example of the disarticulation of the (negative) meaning of a certain term being successfully rearticulated with new (positive) meaning. Rather than involving the direct exchange of 'good' or 'bad' meanings, this rearticulation is the result of the "‘relatively autonomous’ field of constitution, regulation and social struggle", with "real consequences and effects on how the whole social formation reproduces itself, ideologically" (Hall, 1986: 113). It is in this contingency, Hall (1985) emphasises, that the possibility for ideological struggle can be found. He explains how:

a particular ideological chain becomes a site of struggle, not only when people try to displace, rupture or contest it by supplanting it with some wholly new alternative set of terms, but also when they interrupt the ideological field and try to transform its meaning by changing or re-articulating its associations, for example, from the negative to the positive. (Hall, 1985: 112)

It is important to consider how the strategies of this contest influence journalists in mainstream media debates about Muslims. Muslims themselves have become much more politically visible both as individuals and as groups, leading to a greater variety of Muslim voices in media coverage. As discussed in the previous chapter, the shift in focus in the media from the narrative of "Muslim voices of fundamentalist-anger" that prevailed in the late 1980s (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010: 218) suggests that these groups have learnt better strategies for pushing forward their position through the media. Counter-hegemonic narratives on Muslims are also located in other sources, including the Christian media (Faimau, 2013). Faimau (2011), for example, presents the case of the British Catholic weekly newspaper *The Tablet's* representation of Muslims as a counter-narrative to the clash of civilisations thesis. Muslims and Christians are seen to engage in mutually beneficial and respectful relationships with shared goals for the common good. Nevertheless, it is necessary to reiterate the hierarchies of subordination and dominance that are an integral characteristic of Hall's theory. What Hall terms 'lines of tendential force' further influence the power of articulations based on the particulars of any given articulations at a given historical moment (Clarke, 2015). As existing power structures already arrange different elements and identities both laterally and hierarchically within the ideological terrain (Sikka, 2006), certain articulations have greater powers of resilience and potency over others. As I discuss later in this chapter, this makes it harder for counter-hegemonic articulations of Muslim representation to gain the necessary traction to stimulate social change (Clarke, 2015).

## **Framing and the Role of Language**

The above discussion on articulation alludes to the centrality of framing and the use of certain language and common tropes in media coverage about Muslims as discussed in my previous chapter. Baden (2019) explains how:

different frames endow the same reality with different meanings and serve different political-ideological or otherwise persuasive purposes [...] we can thus characterise framing as the purposefully selective representation of an issue, object, or situation, which serves to guide interpreters to construct specific frames that coherently organise the foregrounded information and render it meaningful.  
(Baden, 2019: 232)

At one level, language and definitions can be seen as the very weapons of the “battleground for competing groups” (Philo, 2007: 178). Philo (2007) highlights that where there is a contentious topic, there will be competing interpretations of events that reflect different ways of understanding. For this reason, the use of language and definitions in terms of Muslim representation also reflects the relationship between individual meanings and understandings and the wider conflicts and divisions within the society in which they arise (Philo, 2007: 178). The prevalence of binaries in Muslim media coverage such as good/evil or fundamental/moderate (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010), for example, is seen by Hall (1996b: 446) as attempts to constantly mark out and naturalise difference through definitions of belongingness and otherness. At the same time, these binaries are also continuously being destabilised as different representations interact and clash to become displaced and substituted with other interpretations in “an unending chain” (Hall, 1997: 10).

This type of ‘Othering’ is seen to be a central aspect of representation by both Hall and Edward Said, and conceptualising ‘Othering’ through the lens of contestation also addresses some of its criticisms mentioned in the last chapter. Representations are seen to be more about positioning than uncovering, shifting from a focus on the substance of ‘Othering’ to a more relational consideration of how Others are constructed through representations (Valbjørn, 2008). Modood (2020) further warns that the reduction of the representation of Muslims to an ‘Othering’ theoretical frame such as Said’s Orientalism diminishes Muslims to “mere projections” of dominant groups, disregarding their own subjectivity and agency to define themselves (p.39). Through a contestation perspective, Muslims are afforded the counter-space to contest exclusionary stereotypes with their own positive identities, or as

Modood (2020) states, to fight “outsider perceptions by boosting insider identifications (‘the struggle for recognition’)” (p.35). This perspective also provides some recourse to Modood’s further point about the greater complexity of representations, whereby racist discourse can admit counterexamples in line with the demarcation between a ‘good’ Muslim and a ‘bad’ Muslim. This reflects how not all Muslims will fit comfortably under the ‘Othering’ lens when some may be seen as more or less like ‘Us’. Modood observes how:

a group may be, and usually is, more than just an ‘Other’; the fact of interaction between the ‘Othering’ of Muslims and non-Othered Muslimness does not limit the possibilities of being a Muslim to the tropes of ‘Othering’. (Modood, 2020: 42).

The use of ‘Othering’ that prevails in media coverage of British Muslims can instead be conceived, like framing and language, as a useful strategy or tool in the public contest to ‘win’ the definition of the social consensus on Muslims. Islamophobia itself has often been characterised as an attempt to “fix the meaning of Muslims” by turning them into the dangerous and irrational ‘Other’ (Tyrer, 2013: 36). Tyrer further points to the re-appropriation of key liberal tenets by far-right groups, such as democracy, feminism and freedom, to further win support from other liberal groups by placing Muslims in contravention of these core liberal values. This framework also helps explain why even the most liberal of newspapers can problematise Muslims as illiberal and backwards within their human rights stance (Poole, 2012). The marking of difference through such symbolic boundaries further serves the purpose of closing ranks, whereby what does not fit into an agreed definition of ‘Us’ can then easily be labelled as deviant (Hall, 1997) and de-legitimated from participating in the struggle for meaning. Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010: 219), for example, mention how the standing of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) as the “main interlocutor in State-Muslim” engagement became significantly damaged by its criticism of the Iraq war and the war on terrorism, its voices and concerns dismissed as apologists for terrorism<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, Moore, Mason and Lewis (2008) discuss the case study on how a press interview from the head of the Muslim Council of Britain warning of the growing Islamophobic sentiment in Britain became subject to a twisted backlash from the

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<sup>6</sup> MCB’s six-year boycott of Holocaust Memorial Day (on the basis that it excludes other genocides such as those in Rwanda and Bosnia) has also been cited as another significant rupture of their relationship with the British government (Dodd, 2007).

British press and was used to ‘delegitimise’ the MCB as a representative voice for the wider Muslim community.

### **Emotion and Morality in Contestation**

As representations often involve a cultural or emotional connotation, as well as their literal meaning, it is further necessary to factor the role of emotions and morality into contestation. The role of emotionality in politics has become an increasingly significant contributor to our understandings of the relationship between media practices and mediated politics (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2019). 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 and elicited from audiences (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2019: 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. As he elaborates:

our material interests and our bodies can be called to account and differently implicated, depending on how meaning is given and taken, constructed and interpreted in different situations. But equally engaged are our fears and fantasies. the sentiments of desire and revulsion, of ambivalence and aggression. (Hall, 1997: 10)

Hall (1997) further highlights how ‘Othering’ works as part of the wider maintenance of social and symbolic order, setting up boundaries between what is normal and acceptable, and what is deviant and unacceptable. This fits in with the academic literature on moral panics and their significance to the relationship between race and the media. Moral panics represent the periodic mobilisation of collective fears and anxieties as they become amplified through the media as a means of promoting societal control (Cottle, 2006). In their seminal work *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al.’s (1978) analysis of the framing of media coverage of muggings as a ‘moral panic’ shows how the media represented muggers (mainly seen as young Black people) as ‘folk devils’ that stood against British values and signified the social and moral breakdown of the country. As discussed in the preceding chapter, similar ‘moral panic’ framing has been found in media coverage of the 7/7 London bombings, setting out a discourse of young Muslim men as deviant and threatening (Dwyer, Shah and Sanghera, 2008). In both these cases, the media is seen not only to identify what counts as a significant

event for the public but also, more crucially, to offer powerful hegemonic interpretations of how to morally make sense of these events. Bearing theoretical similarity to the concept of contestation, research on moral panics focuses on how social action and social reaction relate to each other, requiring both actors and reactors (Young, 2011: 247). As such, moral panics do not represent sporadic and irrational events, but, as Cohen (2002) highlights, involve the “condensed political struggles to control the means of cultural reproduction” (p.xxxv). For a culture to remain stable and retain its unique meaning and identity, symbolic boundaries act to keep things in their “appointed place” (Hall, 1997: 236). When something is out of place, the culture becomes unsettled and requires action to restore it back to order and consensus (Hall, 1997).

### **The Centrality of Consensus**

Consensus is at the heart of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Seen as a set of “tacit, shared agreements”, it represents the “lowest common denominator” in the common sense ideologies and beliefs that are widely shared amongst a society (Hall, 1974a: 25). It is seen to be “powerfully pre-structured” (Hall, 1974a: 26) by the dominant groups who normally define and maintain the boundaries of consensus in line with their own interests. The contingent nature of consensus, however, means that it is constantly transforming through the contestation and negotiation of both dominant and subaltern groups (Gramsci, 1971). The fragile nature of consensus is especially visible at those significant moments when hegemony comes into a crisis. Examples of this include where the ruling group is unable to pacify its subalterns or is thrown off balance by an unforeseen event (Jones, 2007), or when the ruling class is seen to have “failed” in a major political undertaking (Gramsci, 1971: 210).

Parallels in the relationship between consensus and ideology are also located in Charles Taylor’s (2004) concept of social imaginaries. Taylor’s description of social imaginaries below can be seen to echo Hall’s theoretical conceptualisation of consensus:

Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. Such understanding is both factual and normative; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how

they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice. (Taylor, 2004: 24)

Resembling Hall's theorisation of consensus as 'common sense', the concept of social imaginaries similarly provides space for the role of power in terms of how the norms of a particular social imaginary can work to exclude certain groups or ensure they can only exist in conflict with the dominant group. It also provides a consideration of the role of resistance in changing those imaginaries in line with Hall's (1997) calls for representations to be viewed as complex social 'dialogues' between groups. As these social dialogues are sustained through shared cultural codes, representations themselves can become open to change as the shared cultural codes themselves evolve. While Taylor's account has been criticised for being arguably more theoretical than substantive (Corner, 2016), it brings into discussion the importance of the concept of how a shared culture is created, drawing in ideas not only about what our culture is, but also about what it could (or should) be.

Consensus is also integral to the ideological struggle over meaning as it ensures that the terrain of contestation is a "tilted playing field" (Gamson et al., 1992: 382) that is in favour of hegemonic groups. While dominant hegemonic groups may not directly 'fix' the consciousness of subordinated groups, Hall (1997) maintains that they set the boundaries for any opposition by using consensus to frame "all competing definitions of reality within their range" (p.333). Hall's 'lines of tendential force' further influence the power of hegemonic articulations, giving them resilience and potency over others and making them harder to disarticulate and change. These ideological "logics" keep debate on the terrain to within the "limiting social realities" of how the world works, judging each element according to set boundaries of reasonableness or realism (Makus 1990:495). This enables the selective demobilisation of certain counter-hegemonic elements or identities by rendering them silent (Clarke, 2015) or by dismissing them as unreasonable or unrealistic as discussed earlier in relation to the MCB.

In terms of Muslim representation, historical conceptions of what constitutes Britishness (and what does not) can be understood in this way as an example of lines of tendential force giving power to particular articulations through historical context. In a similar way to my discussion in the previous chapter about how news stories on Muslims focus on inclusivity, separatism, and loyalty within a framework of nation, identity, and culture (Poole, 2002: 246), ideas about 'nation' and 'national identity' are seen by Hall to be regularly articulated with race



and imperial supremacy. Representations of race are underpinned by a “long history of colonisation, world market supremacy, imperial expansion and global destiny over native peoples” (Hall, 1996c: 42). Said’s (1997) work on representations discussed in the previous chapter, similarly demonstrates how media stories and images are associated with historical, Orientalist preconceptions of Muslims. Articulations built upon historical premises are difficult to disarticulate as the ideological terrain is often so powerfully structured by its previous history. As Hall (1996c) points out, this makes it much more difficult to give the notion of ‘Britain’ a more socially radical re-articulation (p.41). As a result, Muslims seeking to put forward a counter-hegemonic definition and break tendential historical connections end up battling “against the grain of historical formations” (Hall, in interview with Grossberg, 1996: 143). Despite their influence, it is important to note that even lines of tendential forces are contingent and serve only to provide the “givenness of the historical terrain” rather than to fix it forever (Hall, 1996c: 42).

To consider which specific ideologies of which specific groups might win over journalists at any given moment, it becomes imperative to again consider which groups have the most influence in terms of how our social worlds are defined, ordered, and classified (Hebdige, 1979: 14). Access to, and success in, the mainstream media requires considerable cultural capital to have any kind of significant effect on constructing or disrupting a particular public agenda (Schlesinger, 2016, cited in Slaatta, 2016). Bail’s (2014) research on how US anti-Muslim civil society organisations were able to create a gravitational pull or ‘fringe effect’ that shaped US mainstream media discourse on Islam and Muslims is a case in point. The initial success of these anti-Muslim fringe groups was largely due to their public displays of fear and anger in relation to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The groups not only achieved resonance with the media but enhanced their own mainstream credibility and legitimacy. Bail highlights how these groups were able to access financial resources that allowed them to develop lucrative and powerful networks, further strengthening their capacity to influence the media and challenge the boundaries of public consensus. 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 them (Bail, 2014).

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 (Gamson et al., 1992). 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: 419) through the media highlights an underlying power structure that ultimately privileges some groups over others. As Hall et al. (1978) point out, the symbolic closure of a topic around a fixed definition is much easier to achieve against those groups that are already relatively powerless.

Hall’s own contextualisation of the role of power at work in ideological contestation can be seen to be influenced by the later work of Michel Foucault in terms of the power of knowledge, language, and representation. Foucault (1980) maintains that the frame of reference for considering “how human beings understand themselves in our culture” should be “that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power not relations of meaning” (p.114-115). By focusing on “relations of power not relations of meaning”, Foucault (1980) is further seen to emphasise the role of knowledge (as opposed to ‘truth’) as central to the power complex. This enables certain representations to be classified as legitimate or illegitimate (or ‘true’) for the purpose of sustaining or contesting certain interests and positions. As Hall (1997) contends in relation to Foucault’s position:

Knowledge linked to power not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has real effects and, in that sense at least, “becomes true”. Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practices. (p.33)

Foucault’s position is also reflected in the work of Edward Said on Orientalism in terms of the power given to certain forms of knowledge over others to define and represent Muslims and Islam. Adopting a similarly post-constructivist view to Foucault, Said understands representations to be the “result of agreed-upon conventions, of historical processes and, above all, of willing human labour expended to give those things an identity we can recognise” (Said, 1997: 45). As with Said’s claims, however, Foucault’s characterisation of the relationship between knowledge and power briefly touched upon here can appear all-

defining and absolute. While Foucault himself was passionate about the possibilities for radical social transformation, he has been criticised for not being able to reconcile how such a transformation is possible against the totalising effects of power (Allen and Goddard, 2014).

### **Journalists and the Contested Terrain**

Hall's conceptualisation of the media as being a particularly important site for the production, reproduction, and transformation of ideologies within this terrain of struggle and contestation provides a strong framework for my own research in terms of viewing the media as the site where ideological contestation concerning British Muslims is played out. A cultural hegemonic analysis of Muslim representation requires an analysis of journalists themselves within a terrain where both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces and ideas engage in contestation to 'win' the consensus on their own interpretations (Kellner and Durham, 2006). Kellner and Durham (2006) elaborate how:

hegemony theory thus calls for a historically specific sociocultural analysis of particular contexts and forces, requiring dissection of how culture and a variety of social institutions from the media to the university facilitate broader social and political ends. [...] The approach requires social contextualisation of all ideas, representations, and cultural forms; it enjoins seeing societies as a locus of social contestation between competing groups who seek dominance and who manipulate reigning institutions and culture to promote their ends. (p.xvi)

But where then does that leave journalists as part of these social institutions in terms of the representations of British Muslims in the mainstream media?

Gramsci (1971) views the press as being the "most prominent and dynamic" site of the "material organisation aimed at maintaining, defending and developing the theoretical or ideological 'front'" (p.16). Hall further conceptualises the media as the site of the terrain of ideological struggle, where consent for a particular ideology is won or lost through the process of articulation that is encumbered by structures, practices and historical conditions that advantage dominant, hegemonic definitions of the world (Hall et al., 1978). This conceptualisation shares some parallels with theories that emphasise the propaganda role of the media (Herman and Chomsky, 2002), journalists are viewed as enablers of this hegemony through their projection of the dominant ideologies on the general public (Van Dijk, 1995).

Within Hall's theoretical framework, the media is seen to have an integral role to play in propagating this hegemonic consensus by acting as the secondary definers of the primary, dominant definitions. *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 1978) presents an opportunity to put Hall's conceptualisation of the media's role in contestation into practice. Media interpretations of muggings are regarded as often built around dominant consensual orientations about the event itself and the people involved in it. By framing news coverage within these assumptions, the media is seen to systematically reproduce the "definitions of the powerful" by acting as secondary definers of the primary definitions of the state (Hall et al., 1978: 220). Hall et al. also provide some indications of the uneven nature of the media as an ideological terrain by highlighting how certain topics and ideas are favoured by the media while others become "strategic areas of silence" (p.67). Both the state and consensus itself are seen to represent the main structural constraints, pushing and pulling journalists towards dominant narratives naturalised as common sense. Hall et al. (1978: 58) indicate this is largely because the media itself is built upon the assumption that there is a "national consensus", made up of a common store of cultural knowledge that journalists share with their audiences.

When it comes to Orientalist media representations, Said (1997) similarly echoes the argument that media organisations serve to reproduce and strengthen "a common centre, or consensus", which leads him to conclude that:

the media can do all sorts of things that are eccentric, unexpectedly original, even aberrant. But in the end, because they are corporations serving and promoting a corporate identity [...] they all have the same central consensus in mind [...] It does not dictate content and it does not mechanically reflect a certain class or economic group's interest. We must think of it as drawing invisible lines beyond which a reporter or commentator does not feel it necessary to go. (Said, 1997: 52-53)

What can be seen in both Hall's and Said's accounts above is that structure in terms of cultural hegemonic approaches does not necessarily imply direct pressure or control over the media. Instead, structure operates in much more implicit or invisible ways to push journalists towards hegemonic interpretations of the news. It is in the third chapter of *Policing the Crisis* that these more nuanced notions of the role of structure in the social production of the news are elaborated. This moves Hall's ideas away from an Althusserian (2006 [1970]) conceptualisation of the media as an 'Ideological State Apparatus' and towards an

examination of the complex role that the media itself plays in the hegemonic process. Hall et al. (1978) posit that rather than the media explicitly propagating dominant ideas, it is in the more routine structures of news production arising from a mix of professional, technical, and commercial factors that the media's orientation towards dominant definitions becomes realised. In particular, they discuss how:

hierarchical structures of command and review, informal socialisation into institutional roles, the sedimenting of dominant ideas into the "professional ideology" – all help to ensure, within the media, their continued reproduction in dominant form. (Hall et al., 1978: 62-63)

The media therefore reflects a socialisation process in which specific journalistic practices reinforce dominant assumptions about society and how it should operate, while keeping the media itself in a position of "structured subordination" (Hall et al., 1978: 59). Media scholars similarly theorise about how the professional ideology of journalism and its collection of values, strategies and formalities serve to perpetuate dominant views (Deuze, 2005). The dominant hegemonic culture is seen as embedded within the working practices of professional journalists (Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2017; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Hallin, 1984; Bennett, 1982). According to this professional ideology, journalists adopt a detached and non-interventionist stance towards the stories they report on and are bound by values such as objectivity, balance, impartiality and fairness (Hanitzsch, 2011). These professional codes and conventions are seen to reflect the most critical elements of the reality-defining practices of the media because it is here that the "ideological underpinnings" of that practice are the least visible (Bennett, 1982: 301). The underpinnings are well hidden behind common sense or consensual understandings of what journalism is and its important civic role in society. At the same time, the media gets its ideological power from this appearance as an independent, 'free' public servant, with no interests or agendas of its own. Normative ideals such as public interest, truth, and press freedom further serve to bestow a normative dignity (Hall, 1974b: 276) on journalists as a validated and authoritative source of knowledge. In this way, not only can journalistic practices implicitly reinforce dominant definitions within the ideological terrain, but they can also act as lines of tendential force themselves, serving as barriers to counter-hegemonic interpretations (Hall, 1996c: 41). What case then can be made for journalistic agency within the terrain of contestation?

## **The (Relative) Autonomy of Journalists**

Recognising the ideological function of professional practice and the role of both consensus and primary definitions lends some clarity to how journalists can operate within the 'relatively autonomous' codes of the media and yet serve to reproduce "(not without contradiction) the hegemonic signification of events" (Hall, 2006: 171-172). Hall is empathic in his emphasis that, while journalistic practice was constrained by structure, it was linked rather than fixed, neither "totally free or unconstrained, nor [...] a simple, direct reproduction" (Hall et al., 1978: 65). It is difficult, however, to find the space for journalistic agency within his conceptualisation of the media as essentially the secondary definers of dominant definitions. Instead, as Eldridge, Williams and Kitzinger (1997) point out, the assumption that the media reproduce dominant definitions does not provide any in-depth context about the agents who are involved in this process. As structure is seen to be ultimately constraining, the concept of agency disappears, leaving the impression of media coverage as "agentless acts" (Barker, cited in Eldridge, Williams and Kitzinger, 1997: 65). While other participants in the terrain of ideological struggle, such as counter-hegemonic groups, are afforded the agency to contest ideological representations, the same cannot be said for journalists. Instead, Hall (2005) significantly underplays any intention on part of the individual journalist, stating:

The broadcaster's consciousness of what he is doing – how he explains to himself his practice, how he accounts for the connection between his "free" actions and the systematic inferential inclination of what he produces – is indeed, an interesting and important question. But it does not substantially affect the theoretical issue. The ideology has "worked" in such a case because the discourse has spoken itself through him/her. Unwittingly, unconsciously, the broadcaster has served as a support for the reproduction of a dominant ideological discursive field. (p.84)

My thesis hopes to shed some light on this 'interesting and important' question of journalistic agency and the role of journalists within the terrain of ideological struggle. As structural relations of power are seen to pre-structure journalistic free choice and limit their agency, Hall et al. (1978) conclude that "it seems undeniable that the prevailing tendency in the media is towards the reproduction, amongst all their contradictions, of the definitions of power, of the dominant ideology" (p.68). Yet when the subject of contestation (such as Muslim

representation) cuts to the very heart of our identities and values, how can the role of agency be overlooked?

Howarth (2006) points to how:

knowledge is never disinterested: it is always 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)

While journalists may not see themselves as belonging to either the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic side (although of course, there will be some who will consciously choose one or the other), can it be argued that they have no interest in or position on the wider “social stakes” of media representations that make up their own political and social worlds?

One of Hall’s most widely accepted works relates to understanding the way in which audiences consume media texts. His encoding/decoding model is seminal in counteracting the ‘hypodermic-needle theory’ of mass media effects (Shaw 1979) which saw audiences as mindless, passive consumers of the media. While some audiences might accept dominant-hegemonic interpretations of news stories (in line with Hall’s preferred definitions), they can also opt for negotiated and oppositional interpretations. This reflects how media messages are historically and contextually contingent and open to contradiction (Hall, 2006). Audiences may even be aware that the interpretation put before them in media coverage is hegemonic or politically biased, and be aware of alternative interpretations, and still *choose* to align with the hegemonic interpretation (Philo, 2009). Unlike in his more complex model of audiences, Hall leaves journalists with little space for moments of negotiation and struggle (Howarth, 2011). Echoing this critique of Hall, Ross (2011) proposes that the encoding/decoding model could be adjusted to consider how journalists can encode media texts in a comparable way to how audiences decode them. Under this adjustment, journalists as encoders can adopt the same range of positions by taking up either the dominant hegemonic interpretation or a negotiable or oppositional one. In the same way, journalists may consciously opt to align with hegemonic views and reject alternative ones. This is not because they are necessarily oblivious to these views but because they already correspond to their own political, social, and cultural worlds.

This argument can be further extended in line with the previous chapter’s discussion of the influence of the newspapers’ own political stance when it comes to the hegemonic framing of

Muslim-related stories. In her analysis of media coverage of the Trojan Horse affair, for example, Poole (2018) finds that the left-leaning newspaper *The Guardian* used the case to criticise the Conservative-led government (an oppositional hegemonic encoding), whereas the right-leaning *Daily Mail* newspaper tended to frame the story as a problem with Islamist ideology rather than poor governance in line with the present hegemonic position. Conversely, in Meer, Dwyer and Modood's (2010) analysis of the reporting of Labour MP Jack Straw's perceived negative veil comments, the right-leaning newspapers used the incident to directly critique Straw himself as part of the Labour government. The right-leaning newspapers were also found to be more critical of the Labour government's "soft-touch" politically correct counter-terrorism approach following the 7/7 attacks (Shaw, 2012: 518). This type of press coverage lead to the question of whether Muslims are always the intended target of the media or, in some cases at least, end up as the "convenient scapegoats" (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013: 260) in a wider hegemonic struggle. This also highlights the scope for journalists to go against the current hegemonic position if it does not align with the political leanings of their own newspaper. But this then returns us to the question about the role of the journalist within the wider terrain of contestation regarding Muslim representation?

While Hall predicts that the media will act as secondary definers of dominant interpretations of how Muslim-related stories are signified, he also makes space for contingency in his own theory in the form of resistance by arguing as follow:

If the reproduction of the dominant ideology were free and uncontested – if nothing else 'got through' – then the study of the style, technique, forms, studio presentations etc. would be simply a study, at the micro-level, of the dominant structures. But if [...] the reproduction is of an ideology and its contradictions, then the level of significations (i.e.: style, technique, forms, content, etc.) is a crucial level of analysis, with a 'relative autonomy' of its own, since, in any instance, the outcome of an encounter in which several contestants are present cannot be fully predicted: in this area, significant battles to win a hearing for alternative points of view can, sometimes, be won [...] there are also crucial areas where the definitions and identification have to be negotiated [...] hence situations, while "structured in dominance" (i.e.: showing a systematic tendency to reproduce the hegemony of dominant definitions of the situation) are not determined by it. (Hall, 1972: 15-16)



Part of this wider contradiction between structure and agency that is inherent in Hall's work on cultural politics relates to how he himself epistemologically moved away from a structuralist approach towards a focus on "the relations between 'the social' and 'the symbolic'" (Hall, 1996: 287, cited by Peck, 2001). Peck (2001) presents the case that while structuralism sees experience as the *effect* of signification, Hall focuses on it more as a *source* of signification and, in many ways, this encapsulates where the structure-agency dichotomy can be seen in his theorisation. Hall would have been aware of the tension between agency and structure between the two approaches as "structuralism's antihumanism collided with the humanist inclinations of culturalism" (Peck, 2001: 203). Peck suggests that Hall believes that bringing together the two paradigms in their shared critical approach towards the base/superstructure relationship can enable an understanding of the "dialectic between conditions and consciousness" (Hall, 1980: 72, cited in Peck, 2001). Instead, according to Peck (2001), this convergence results in the actions of individuals becoming arbitrary and without meaning, as their significance can only be determined by the structures that precede them.

Space has been built into Hall's concept of contestation to allow for resistance and the disruption of dominant hegemonic ideas. However, as structure ultimately underlies all action, the agency to contest – even for counter-hegemonic groups – is significantly compromised. This means that while conceding that agents have 'relative autonomy', Hall also requires them to be "somehow independent of and not reducible to discourse or conditions" (Peck, 2001: 227). This contradiction leads Peck to question how change then becomes possible under Hall's concept of contestation as:

once one adopts the structuralist premise that individual elements (signs, units of discourse, etc.) have no inherent (substantial) meaning unless and until they are set into relation with each other by the structure (the formulation of the principle of formation), the idea of individuals effecting a different meaning by substituting or recombining elements is nonsensical. Because meaning is always and only inscribed by the logic of the structure, any change in the meaning of individual elements arises only through a change within the structure itself. The question then becomes how, why, and under what circumstances a structure changes. (Peck, 2001: 222)

Peck herself is adamant that, from a classic structuralist position at least, the answer is that structure never changes, but this staunch position goes against Hall's post-structuralist conceptualisation of the terrain of contestation as the means of hegemonic change. Clearly some structural change is possible, and we can see this in the way that the concept of race and racism itself has undergone significant historical and political change. Furthermore, Peck argues that to bring in the more post-structuralist concept of agential change from Hall's theorisation would involve denoting an 'outside' of the structure (something outside of language, discourse and ideology) that could then facilitate true hegemonic change (p.222).

Here, the post-structuralist concept of contingency can be brought in to show how hegemonic structures themselves are not always as unified and as fixed as structuralist accounts might hold (Peck, 2001: 222). Hall himself does bring in some elements of this post-structuralist aspect of contingency when he speaks of the conditions under which the media (and journalists) faces its own 'double-bind' when hegemonic consensus itself breaks down and a space for agency within the media is opened up. At the moments when the "rift in the moral-political consensus" in society widens, consensus no longer provides the journalist with their "built-in ideological compass" and the media itself becomes the site for the contestation of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies (Hall, 1974a: 26). The media terrain correspondingly becomes much more open, enabling a wider variety of non-elite actors and voices to enter public discourse, presenting journalists with a potentially more pluralistic way to report the news.

Political dissensus is particularly important when considering media discourse, as the connection between the media and political authority is seen to be one of the most prominent characteristics of news production (Hallin, 1984: 13). Media scholar Hallin provides some empirical elaboration of how dissensus can reshape the media landscape in his seminal debunking of the thesis of oppositional media in relation to the Vietnam war. Rather than the popular misconception that the media's defiance and opposition to government policy led to the collapse of US public support for the war, he maintains that the breakdown of elite consensus on foreign policy led to a substantial shift in critical news content of the war. Rather than being the means to perpetuate dominant ideas, elite divisions transformed the consensual media into an open forum for the voicing of political differences (Hallin, 1986). Although the media generally serves the purpose of strengthening prevailing political trends, Hallin (1984) concludes that it can only function in this way when there is elite consensus. When consensus is challenged from within elite circles, a corresponding expansion in the

bounds of political debate enables alternative voices to enter the mainstream media discourse and put forward their own interpretations to shape the public consensus on an issue. The corresponding expansion in the bounds of political debate can lead to the possibilities for journalists to produce more critical and balanced coverage.

While Hall likewise continues to frame dissensus as the condition under which the media's "hidden but pervasive symbiotic relation to power and to the dominant ideologies" (p.5) becomes most visible, others have interpreted these conditions as central to the concept of journalistic agency. Other media scholars, for example, point to the widening of media debate when elites are divided or uncertain about a particular issue (Robinson et al., 2016; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Schlesinger, 1989; Morrison and Tumber, 1988; Hallin, 1984; Gitlin, 1980). Others point to the waning of hegemonic influence over the mainstream media due to increasing digitalisation and social media (Waisborg, 2018) and the increasing commercialisation of the press industry (Davies, 2008) contributing towards the overall greater journalistic autonomy from the political sphere (Ornebring, 2009). There are also incidences where journalists can be seen to deliberately undermine the 'official line' of the state (or even their own newspaper), even if this means risking their professional careers (Philo, 2007).

Contradictions appear to be equally possible, however, when the prevailing structural constraint over journalists is more economic than political. For example, Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda model (2002) attributes the media's ideological function to the guided market system widening the media's subjugation beyond the state to the "decentralised pursuit of a set of micro-interests" (Herman, 1999: 16). Bourdieu (1998) further proposes that it is the pressures imposed on journalists by marketisation that lead to news production that propagates the elite consensus. Bourdieu's field theory has also proven popular amongst media scholars as a way of conceptualising journalism as a profession caught between conflicting forces of autonomy and heteronomy (Hanitzsch, 2011). Caught between economic "relations of competition" and political "relations of collusion", journalistic compliance is seen to result from journalists' ultimate dominance by the economic field (Bourdieu, 2001: 254).

Returning to his own problematisation of consensus at times of political dissensus, Hall does provide an insight into the conditions under which media debates become a site of conflict (Schlosberg, 2015: 27). Nevertheless, he omits to provide an account of how journalists'

themselves can exercise their agency or resistance whether at times of consensus or dissensus. This leads to a gap within his theorisation, leaving Hall unable to answer the question that he himself poses on how to account for the following:

the fact that on some specific occasions, broadcasters assert their editorial independence against clear political pressure, and at the same time account for the mutual adjustments, the reciprocity of interests and definitions, occurring from day to day between broadcasters and institutions of power? (Hall, 1974a: 20)

### **The Problem of Missing Agency**

Hall's theorisation takes away this power from journalists by arguing that they are oblivious to the way ideology prescribes their actions (and so how can they act independently?). Many media scholars in contrast would argue that journalists have become increasingly sensitised to these conditions of their work (Gillespie et al., 2010) and are often intensely resistant to being viewed as puppets of the state (Philo, 2007). Rather than unilaterally pursuing arguments of structure over agency or vice versa, McLennan (2011) argues that the "quintessential sociological task" is to formulate a synthesis of structure and agency (p.128). He points to two particular attempts at this synthesis (amongst others) – that of Pierre Bourdieu's 'habitus' and that of Anthony Giddens' 'structuration theory', both of which I will briefly review as potential, alternative conceptualisations for reconciling a more synthesised relationship between structure and agency.

Bourdieu himself is a critic of structuralism and its reduction of agents to "mere automatons" while ignoring the role of structuring processes in terms of subjectivism (Olick, 2018: 77). Central to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of agency is the idea of 'habitus' as a way of synthesising culture, structure and agency. Agency, then, is not the product of "an unstructured subjectivity" but instead the result of a structured set of dispositions (Olick, 2018: 78). In this way, while habitus itself is seen as a structural constraint (as it is the product of social structures), it is not fixed as agents are able to exercise some "creative improvisation" across the different fields and capitals (McLennan, 2011: 130). This does not, however, resolve the conundrum of agency and Bourdieu ends up suffering from the same critique as Hall of being overly structuralist and deterministic (McLennan, 2011: 130), and he is accused of bringing in "a hierarchical ordering through the back door" that privileges economic structures (Olick, 2018: 78). As Sewell (1992) likewise concludes:

Bourdieu's habitus, schemas and resources so powerfully reproduce one another that even the most cunning or improvisational actions undertaken by agents necessarily reproduce the structure. (p.15)

Giddens' structuration theory, in contrast, argues for the duality of structures, as not only do structures shape the practices of agents but the repeated actions of agents can reproduce and alter structures (Giddens and Sutton, 2017). Structures are *both* constitutive and constituted by individuals, constructed through the rules and resources of social practices as they are reproduced (Giddens, 1984: 2). Rather than seeing agency and structure as opposing concepts, the relationship is therefore one in which each presupposes the other, meaning that structures not only constrain agents but enable conscious, "knowledgeable" agents to creatively engage in structural change (Sewell, 1992: 4). While Giddens clearly makes space for agency in this way, he has been criticised for underspecifying exactly what constitutes 'structure' (Sewell, 1992) and for underplaying the role of power (central to the concept of contestation) by implying that structures can only have a "virtual existence" (Olick, 2018: 81). I return to Giddens' structure-agency synthesis later in my analysis chapters.

It appears that, in line with the earlier critique of Hall's concept of 'relative autonomy', most theorists who advocate some kind of synthesis between structure and agency tend to be accused of reductionism on one side or the other. McLennan (2011) doubts that the "perceptual oscillation" between structure and agency will ever be resolved, but the dichotomy presents an interesting lens through which to further explore Hall's theorisation of the media as the terrain of ideological contestation and the role of journalists within that terrain. McLennan himself advocates a starting position of:

conceiving social structures as having their own kind of agency as a result of their collective, but not exactly conscious, form; and to conceive of individual agents as themselves being complex structures of a certain kind, themselves composed of complex structures (brains, bodies, normative orientations, unconscious motivations). (McLennan, 2011: 132)

What does appear to be shared between all these perspectives and that of Hall's is the centrality of social practices and relations to the structure-agency synthesis. By looking at the role journalists and their social relations and practices play in contestation regarding British Muslims, it should therefore be possible to find both structure and agency, and the reproduction, and contradiction of negative Muslim representations, in their experiences.

## **Returning to the Media as the Terrain of Contestation**

In *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 1978), journalists are left scrabbling in the “worker ant” role of disseminating the dominant ideological position of a particular issue (Mclaughlin, 2008: 149). Their role is merely to signify an economic and political crisis that has already been characterised as such by the primary definers and reinforce their preferred definitions of it (Woollacott, 2005). This passive role leaves little space for understanding their role in terms of how the media operates as a field of ideological struggle. Instead, journalists themselves are seen as playing no real role, begging the question of whether journalists are truly so led by dominant interests that this negates any possibilities for journalistic independence (Altheide, 1984: 479).

It is interesting to note that a similar critique is applied to Edward Said’s work on Orientalism, where Mills (2004) argues that a politicised analysis of colonialism becomes almost impossible through Said’s approach as:

(by) making discursive structures anonymous, beyond human agency, it is almost impossible to blame any individual agent for their part in imperialism. Whilst it is clear that individuals cannot be held responsible for the larger-scale organisation of imperialism, it is also clear that individuals differed in the degrees to which they championed, acquiesced or challenged imperialism. (Mills, 2004: 122)

Other research on media hegemony counter-argues that journalists may not be so homogeneously socialised into reproducing dominant ideologies, nor unconsciously fixated on maintaining the social consensus (Altheide, 1984). Instead, journalists can act as agents of counter-hegemonic ideas themselves. While Hall’s theorisation provides space for the reconceptualisation of news production as a much more complex, cultural process than the structuralist and ideology-driven theories that precede it, it fails to consider any real role for one of the central mediators in terms of hegemonic contestation – journalists themselves.

In terms of my own thesis on Muslim representation, Woollacott (2005) advises that a more effective approach to research in this area would be one that examines the role of journalists themselves as part of the “overall pattern of signifying systems and the configuration of ideological practices” (p.107-108) that they are implicated in. This adjunct could further enrich Hall’s theory by providing a micro-level analysis of the ideological terrain of struggle that can lead to some form of theoretical conceptualisation of internal contestation (Wetherell

and Potter, 1992) in terms of how journalists act and react to issues relating to Muslim representation.

### **Ideological Dilemmas and Contradictory Consciousness**

Hall (1982) seeks to show:

[h]ow it could be true that media institutions were both, in fact, free of direct compulsion and constraint, and yet freely articulated themselves systematically around definitions of the situation which favoured the hegemony of the powerful.  
(p.82)

Although he puts forward the conditions that enable the media to become a more open terrain for contestation between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic groups, journalists themselves become marginalised, ascribed with what Woollacott (2005) describes as “a sophisticated version of the notion of false consciousness” (p.107). As racism and prejudice are often seen to be moral and emotional subjects, it could be argued that journalists themselves as members of a shared society will inevitably have some form of agential, social or political judgement on this. Hall (1997) himself emphasises how:

we do not have a straightforward, rational or instrumental relationship to meanings. They mobilize powerful feelings and emotions, of both a positive and negative kind. We feel their contradictory pull, their ambivalence. (p.10)

For this reason, it is important to supplement an investigation into journalistic agency in the terrain of contestation on Muslims with a consideration of the ‘dilemmatic’ character of discourse (Billig et al., 1988). Rather than viewing ideology as a relatively coherent and consistent influence, Billig et al. advocate rethinking human agency in terms of “ideological dilemmas” - social oppositions and contradictions involving internal and external “argumentative debates” about how to be or how to act (p. 19). These dilemmas are not simply about difficult choices but reflect the moral and ideological complexities of the social preconditions that set the stage for the dilemmas. Echoing elements of Hall’s concept of consensus, dilemmas take place against common sense notions of value, community, and social behaviour that are socially and culturally imbedded, but also conflictual, contradicting, and dissonant. This parallels Gramsci’s conceptualisation of how the ‘subject’ of common sense is “necessarily ‘fragmentary, disjointed and episodic’” and made up of “very contradictory ideological formations” (Hall, 1996c: 42).

Gramsci further highlights the ambiguity of consent and the conflict that can arise between an individual's conscious thought and the more implicit values underlying their actions (Lears, 1985: 569). As such, in Gramsci's words, each "man-in-mass" has:

two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his [sic] activity, and which in reality unites him [sic] with all his [sic] fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he [sic] has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. (Gramsci, 1971: 326-27 cited in Lears, 1985)

Gramsci (1971) sees the latter consciousness as overpowering the former as it "holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will" to such an extent that the ensuing "contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity" (p.333). To extrapolate this to journalists in relation to the representation of Muslims, it can be argued that journalists have both their own (agential) consciousness of the social world and another (structural) hegemonic consciousness that is "not (their) own but borrowed from another group" (Lears, 1985: 569), which can be overpowering. It is then possible to view their consent to media hegemony to be the subject of a consciousness that is contradictory rather than false (Kim, 2001: 6647).

Approaching the analysis from this position also provides a framework for assessing the tensions and contradictions that arise in journalists' own accounts as they negotiate their personal agency when reporting on (often contested) Muslim-related stories. By examining the often-dissonant accounts proffered by the journalists and editors, it is possible not only to identify the role that different structural factors play in terms of Muslim representation, but also the structure-agency dichotomy that underlies its enduring, but not altogether fixed, nature. By bringing together the "microlevel sociology of journalism with the macrolevel politics of hegemony", it also becomes possible to make visible journalists' own consciousness as the vehicle for social change without underplaying the role of the ideological structures that confine them (Kim, 2001: 744). As Billig et al. (1998) advocate:

By assuming that there are contrary themes, a different image of the thinker can emerge. The person is not necessarily pushed into an unthinking obedience, in which conformity to ritual has replaced deliberation. Ideology may produce such



conformity, but it can also provide the dilemmatic elements which enable deliberation to occur. (p.31)

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has discussed how Hall's conceptualisation of media hegemony can provide a strong theoretical base for understanding why the reproduction of, and contradictions to negative Muslim representation can be present in media coverage about Muslims. While the media itself acts as the terrain for contestation, journalists are left in a position of subordination, with little agency to engage in contestation or to intervene to redress the anti-Muslim bias in the media. Space for this agency can be made by considering the tensions and dilemmas faced by journalists when reporting on Muslims stories and how their own contradictory consciousness can lead them to challenge the way stories about Muslims are reported. In the next chapter, I discuss my research methodology, which draws mainly on qualitative interviews with journalists to capture the tensions and dilemmas that can help explain the presence of both reproduction and contradiction in British press coverage of Muslims.

## **Chapter 4: Researching Journalists - Methodology and Research Design**

### **Introduction**

The previous two chapters presented the conceptual and theoretical framework that guides the research methodology to be discussed in this chapter. While the review of the academic literature reflects a consensus of the reproduction of disproportionately negative representations of Muslims in the media, less attention is paid to differences, tensions, and contradictions. I have contended that these aspects of media coverage are important, as they reflect the presence of some contestation in terms of how Muslims are represented. There is, however, very little research on the role of journalists in the framing of stories on Muslims, and specifically on how and why they reproduce or contest particular frames. I have further argued that although journalists may be constrained by structural imperatives and hegemonic discourses that lead to the reproduction of negative representations, they can also exercise some agency when it comes to their reporting of stories relating to Muslims. To gain this empirical understanding of why negative representations can be both reproduced and contradicted in media coverage, my thesis contends that it is necessary to investigate what happens ‘behind the scenes’ in their production. This involves a shift in the subject of analysis from media content itself to those who produce this content, i.e., journalists themselves.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, such an approach requires a deeper theoretical analysis of how journalists produce this content within complex cultural institutions that are themselves central to our social and political worlds. Grounded in the concept of cultural politics, Hall’s theory of media hegemony takes the central role that the media plays in the reproduction of dominant ideologies (including those on Muslims), and problematises it as the terrain where counter-hegemonic resistance and contestation - and alternative interpretations of Muslims – become possible. Yet as journalists themselves remain relegated to a position of secondary subordination under Hall’s approach, it is necessary to develop a research methodology that can both understand this subordination and problematise it to consider how journalists themselves can challenge negative Muslim representation.

In this chapter, I discuss how the epistemological argument for my research should be commensurable with my understanding of news production on Muslims itself and its truth claims. I then present my chosen methodological approach of using mainly qualitative interviews, and a detailed account of how my data was collected and analysed. The chapter

then concludes with a discussion of the key ethical and reflexive dilemmas I encountered as a researcher, as a journalist and as a Muslim within the research process.

### **Epistemological Argument**

Guba and Lincoln (1994) highlight how the underlying epistemological concerns of the research problem play a very significant role in the choice of methodology. As my research process and my research topic of the representation of Muslims through the media both relate to questions of the production of knowledge, the epistemological positioning of my research is inextricably linked to my epistemological conceptualisation of news production. While journalism itself has roots in modernity and positivist ideals regarding the seeking out of the truth, 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). While some journalists may narrowly align the concept of truth with an obligation to accuracy alone, most recognise that a completely mimetic semblance of truth is not realistically obtainable (Zelizer, 2004). For this reason, Zelizer (1992) recommends that journalism should be viewed primarily from an interpretivist epistemological position, and as rhetorical rather than ‘truthful’, as “much of journalists’ interpretive authority lies not in what they know, but in how they represent their knowledge” (p.34). Journalistic judgements influence the way a story is framed, such as 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 what meanings are offered to their wider audiences (Baden, 2019).

Following Hall’s stance discussed in the previous chapter, my research further adopts a similarly post-structuralist leaning towards news production, where the power of the media is not its ability to produce truth but lies in its power of signification, that is, the “power to signify events in a particular way” (Hall, 1982: 65). For this reason, Hall recommends that:

we should perhaps learn to think of meaning less in terms of “accuracy” and “truth” and more in terms of effective exchange - a process of translation, which facilitates cultural communication while always recognising the persistence of difference and power between different “speakers” within the same cultural circuit. (Hall 1997: 11)

Rather than the concept of universal meaning, Hall’s anti-essentialist description shows meaning to be the product of cultural practices at a given time and space, influenced by prior discursive positions. Here, as Barker (2003) points out, “truth is not so much found as made”

(p.11). In terms of media coverage on Muslims, therefore, the argument put forward by cultural studies is that media texts themselves are not neutral but produced in a way that symbolically provides meaning as a signifying system (Barker, 2003: 7). Just as media texts cannot be viewed from this epistemological position as artefacts of pure truth, neither can journalists' accounts of what happens 'behind the scenes' of Muslim-related stories be straight-forwardly analysed as factual accounts of what is happening. By adopting a cultural approach to journalism that does not reduce journalists and their actions to structural factors or media output, while also considering the role of hegemonic contestation, it becomes possible to uncover the tensions between the practices, values, and attitudes at the core of the profession.

Carey (2008) argues that adopting an alignment with cultural models of media production as the starting point of research, as opposed to transmissional models that view the transmission of media messages as a means of social control (often termed the 'Hypodermic Needle model of communication'), significantly influences the path that the research takes. Although both cultural and structural factors interact significantly in understanding how the media operates, each approach has its own "distinctive, substantive methodological consequences" (Carey, 2008: 43). As one of the underlying arguments of my thesis relates to the role of contestation as a contributor towards the representation of Muslims, a cultural model is more appropriate for what Carey (1992) describes as the "charting and explaining social conflict, in uncovering the meanings embedded in social practice, (and) in laying out the dimensions and politics of social struggle" (p.58).

It is important to note, however, that the same epistemological tensions that underlie my own research can be found in the interplay between journalism and cultural studies, as highlighted by Zelizer (2004):

Journalism prides itself on a respect for the facts, truth, and reality. Yet, what happens when these god-terms for the practice of most kinds of journalism become the focus of inquiry that insists on their relativity and subjectivity? (p.100)

This further reflects how cultural studies will often end up reading journalism "against its own grain", seeking to understand journalists through their own eyes while critiquing the self-presentations they offer (Zelizer, 2004: 101). As part of Holohan and Poole's (2011) '*Muslims in the European Mediascape*' project, for example, interviews with media producers revealed that they felt they were impartial, truthful, and fair in their coverage of

Muslims. On the other hand, the researchers conclude that the way their news stories were constructed instead reflect their tendency to legitimise dominant hegemonic discourses (Holohan, 2014). In line with Hall, British cultural studies of media production in general tend to place journalism within a more subordinated position against wider hegemonic powers, with the production of knowledge in the hands of either those holding the power or those contesting it (Zelizer, 2004). As Zelizer warns, this can lead to the actions of journalists themselves becoming defined by these terms, again taking away the role of journalistic agency or judgements when faced with possible contradictions within their own professional practices and beliefs. Accessing these nuances and tensions is imperative for understanding how journalists give meaning to their work when reporting on British Muslims. I return to this later in the chapter in terms of my own data collection and analysis.

### **Critical Normative Research**

As I highlighted in my introductory chapter, representations do not exist as mimetic images of a reality that exists ‘outside’ of cultural practices. Just as they are intrinsically linked to identities, so they are inextricably linked to 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 it comes to the representation of marginalised groups with limited powers to contest them (Howarth, 2006).

In line with critical theory, research can contribute towards the transformation of the exploitative structures that the investigator may be conscious of through some previous knowledge (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Studies of media content about Muslims and Islam, for example, tell us much about the disproportionate bias in the British press. From this, researchers can put forward their recommendations of what needs to be changed to redress this bias. However, these recommendations come from the researchers themselves, and not from the insider knowledge of the journalists who report on these stories and face these issues in their everyday working lives. In line with the gap between how researchers view journalism and how journalists themselves view their profession as discussed above, it is plausible that these recommendations may not resonate with journalists themselves as

possible means of change. By exploring the representation of Muslims through how journalists themselves give meaning to their work (Deuze, 2005: 444), it becomes possible to gain an insider perspective of how change can take place from within the media structures that reproduce these representations. At the same time, due to the complex structure-agency dichotomy that underlies journalistic experiences as discussed in the previous chapter, it is necessary to adopt a critical normative standpoint to any solutions or recommendations that are proposed. I return to this idea of the research process as a process of social change in relation to the journalists I interviewed later in my chapter.

### **Methodological Argument**

Adopting the epistemological standpoint discussed above requires a data collection method that can access rich data about how journalists make sense of their worlds when it comes to the representation of Muslims. In Chapter 2, I discuss the need for an alternative methodology to contribute an ‘insider’ perspective to the picture of Muslim representation already amply provided by studies of media content. There is a significant gap overall in media research that directly considers journalistic framing practices in general when compared to studies of the framing of journalistic products (Baden, 2019: 230). In this chapter, I propose that qualitative interviews can provide an “authentic insight” (Silverman, 2015: 91) into the experiences of journalists when they write Muslim-related stories and explain why alternative methodological approaches for this field of study might not be suitable.

My literature chapter discussed the important role that the text-based analysis of media coverage has played in identifying how Muslims are represented in the British press. I also put forward a detailed consideration of how this research methodology alone often fails to provide an empirical explanation about why journalists frame stories in these ways, and of the reasons behind the contradictions that can occur within this coverage. In this chapter, I consider another potential methodology that could also have been drawn on to study the ‘real-life’ experiences of journalists and the processes of news production – ethnography.

Ethnography as a method of data collection has been popular in studies of news production environments and cultures (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009), shifting the focus from media content to the observation of the social practices of cultural production (Schlesinger, 1981). This methodological approach is unsuited to my own research questions for two practical reasons. Firstly, ethnographic research is better suited to more general investigations of newsroom

workings, rather than the coverage of a specific issue or set of issues. It would be very difficult within a busy newsroom to track journalists who are writing a specific story involving Muslims, as most journalists cover a wide range of stories in their daily work. Secondly, an ethnographic study of a particular newspaper would not give me the breadth of experience that I seek in my research. As discussed in the literature chapter, different newspapers report on Muslim-related stories in different ways, and these nuances would be lost by focusing on one, or even two, newspapers alone. Newsroom ethnography also cannot provide an insight into other forms of journalism such as the experiences of freelance journalists in comparing how they report on Muslim-related stories.

Qualitative interviews may be subject to criticism for their poor external validity and lack of generalisability as small samples are often involved. However, as the purpose of this research is to delve into journalists' narratives in relation to the construction of news discourse on Muslims, qualitative interviews offer the opportunity for the researcher to "see the world from their (subjects) perspective" (Bryman, 1984: 78). Rather than take the journalist's interviews at face value, adopting a cultural approach to journalism further provides a focus away from structural factors or media output, and towards the more introspective examination of journalists' "biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings" (May, 2001: 120). By also identifying the tensions and dilemmas journalists face when trying to account for Muslim representational practices in their work, interviews can help to uncover:

the unpronounced, illogical and dissonant sides of journalism – the contingencies and contradictions involved in the constant, often tiresome, and frequently fruitless negotiations to yoke popular and official, private and public, lay and professional, dishonest and truthful, biased and balanced impulses. (Zelizer, 2004: 111)

Moving the focus to the journalist 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: 147) on the link between the media and Muslim representation. As Marsden and Savigny advise in terms of their own theorisation of the relationship between

the media, religion and conflict, this involves not taking the side of structure over agency or vice versa, They instead focus on the contingent nature of these interactions, drawing on the structure-agency debate as follows:

The structure and agency debate provides us with a (relatively) simple mechanism through which to identify not only what is significant in analysis, but why this might be the case...(It) provides us with the vocabulary and conceptual toolkit through which to reflect upon the interaction between structures and agents. (Marsden and Savigny, 2009: 148)

### **Constructing the Sample**

Patterson and Donsbagh (1996) define a journalist as “an individual within a news organisation who makes decisions that affect news content directly” (p.456). To draw up my sample, however, it is necessary to go beyond this rather simple definition for several reasons. Firstly, like most of studies of media content<sup>7</sup> that I draw upon in Chapter 2, the focus on my research is on newspaper journalism (both print and digital). Apart from the ease of accessing newspaper data, researchers often opt to study print journalism due to its role in setting the agendas of the wider media industry, as well as its long-standing historical relationship with political and other elites (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013, Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008, Hall et al., 1978).

My main sample was made up of print newspaper journalists who worked for mainstream British newspapers, reflecting a cross section of different types of newspaper styles (broadsheet, tabloid or middle-market) with different political leanings. In recognition of the changing conditions that journalists now work under (Deuze, 2019), the sample further included journalists who solely worked for the online (rather than print) versions of the same newspapers, news agency journalists, and freelance journalists who wrote for those newspapers but were not employed by them. It was also important to include journalists as columnists<sup>8</sup> as they tend to participate more directly in public debates and potentially have greater influence in swaying public opinion (Statham, 2007). As local newspapers are often seen to reflect a more inclusive form of reporting on Muslims and Islam compared to national ones (Knott and Poole, 2013; Halliday, 1999), it was also important to include a sub-section

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<sup>7</sup> Ahmed and Matthes (2017) overview of research on Muslim representation in the media finds that half the studies focused on newspapers, with only 13% looking at television, 5.8% on the internet and just 1 study on radio coverage.

<sup>8</sup> Some of my interviewees only wrote opinion pieces whilst others produced a mix of news and columns.



of local journalists. Finally, a sub-section of Muslim journalists was recruited to see how working within a mainstream newspaper environment influenced how they viewed media representations of Muslims.

Negotiating access to a sample of time-constrained professional journalists is difficult (Holohan and Poole, 2011), particularly due to the length of time needed for a qualitative interview. While journalists may be reluctant to accept an elite status, as Mayerhöffer (2019) argues, journalists are themselves strategic elites with the abilities to exercise significant political influence and power. From a research perspective, elites are known to be less accessible, manifesting in smaller interview samples in general (Richards 1996). Journalists can also be somewhat wary of academics, particularly as those from the fields of sociology and cultural studies tend to take a more critical stance to their work (Zelizer, 2004), as mentioned earlier. Where journalists perceive their news work as the product of professional judgement, academics often cast their work as the product of institutional power (Sjøvaag, 2013). Journalists are also known to be highly defensive against insinuations of bias in their work (Patterson and Donsbagh, 1996). Right-leaning newspapers, for example, have come under particular criticism for the way they portray Muslims. In Holohan and Poole's (2011) study, they found that the journalists who responded positively to their research invitations were those with an existing interest in the issue of Muslim representation and were mostly from the more liberal media. The more conservative newspapers tended to decline the invitation, risking a potential bias in the sample.

To try and mitigate this bias, I drew up a sample matrix to ensure I was reaching out to a relatively mixed sample of journalists in terms of being male/female, tabloid/broadsheet, right-leaning/left-leaning, local/national and Muslim/non-Muslim. The sampling process involved several steps. First, I identified a pool of journalists who had written on Muslim-related topics and who fitted into the sample matrix. This involved trawling through hundreds of articles online. Once identified, the second step involved finding their email or Twitter contact details. I then approached the journalists in tranches to ensure a good distribution across my sample matrix. If I had recruited more left-leaning newspaper journalists in one tranche, I would focus on right-leaning newspaper journalists for the next, and so on. I used the articles written by the journalists to tailor each invitation according to their own work. This was a time-consuming process, but the personalised approach enhanced the authenticity of the research for the journalists I approached (and later interviewed), showing I had done

the necessary groundwork to ‘find’ them. As I explain later in this chapter, the articles were further put to use as a ‘prop’ to stimulate discussion during the interview.

Pulling together such a purposive sample was extremely laborious, but essential to achieve the stratification needed to contribute most to the understanding of the phenomena under study (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). While such a selective sampling technique can be criticised for its potential of researcher bias (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), it is essential for a study such as this one which requires its participants to have undergone a certain shared experience (as journalists reporting on Muslim-related stories) while also reflecting the heterogeneity of the press industry in the UK. At the point of data saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), I had interviewed 23 journalists from a wide range of backgrounds (see Table 1 below) between January 2018 and July 2018. I also interviewed a key media campaigner for Muslim representation who had experience of working with journalists and editors on Muslim-related stories.<sup>9</sup> Journalists from the more conservative, right-leaning newspapers were much more difficult to recruit, but overall, I felt that the efforts paid off as the final mix of journalists recruited brought with them a rich and diverse range of fascinating experiences to the research. The proportion of male to female journalists is 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).

**Table 1: Sample breakdown**

<b>Gender (Total 24)</b>		<b>Religion (Total 24)</b>		
<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Muslim</b>	<b>Non-Muslim</b>	
15	9	6	17	
<b>National Journalists (Total 13)</b>				
<b>Tabloid</b>	<b>Broadsheet</b>	<b>Right-Leaning</b>	<b>Left-Leaning</b>	
5	8	7	6	
<b>Other Journalists (Total 11)</b>				
<b>Local</b>	<b>Freelance</b>	<b>Online</b>	<b>Other</b>	
5	3	1	2	

<sup>9</sup> While I also met with a representative of British press regulator IPSO to discuss the issue of Muslim representation, they did not want the meeting’s discussion included in the data.

## **Conducting Elite Interviews**

As discussed earlier, for methodological purposes at least, journalists can be categorised as elites as they hold a privileged position in society (Richards, 1996). While some of the journalists were more junior than others, the distinction between elites and non-elites is less about job positions as it is about the ability to exert influence due to their strategic position within social structures (Harvey, 2011: 485, cited in Mikecz, 2012). Drawing on the advice from the considerable methodological literature on elite interviews can therefore help ensure that the interview goes well. Firstly, when interviewing elites, the researcher should be well-prepared, appearing professional and knowledgeable about the interviewee's background and career (Richards, 1996). In most cases, I had been able to track the career trajectory of the journalists I interviewed as part of the original research that went into their initial selection. Access to this knowledge can help give the interviewer more confidence and decrease the status imbalance with the elite interviewee (Edwards and Holland 2013, Mikecz 2012) as the researcher is already well-informed and familiar with their interviewee's background. Secondly, approaching the journalists from my position as a former journalist serves to level-up my status as an interviewer. As I was seen as someone who shared an 'insider' experience of the world of the journalists being interviewed (Fielding and Thomas, 2016), this made it easier for the journalists to talk to me openly.

Elite interviews particularly highlight the issue of researcher positionality, where the usual positions of power and privilege within the interviewer-interviewee relationship are reversed (Mikecz, 2012; Richards, 1996). Mikecz (2012) describes how elites are used to being asked their opinions and are confident in interviews, often getting into monologues rather than answering direct questions. Elite interviewees are more likely to try and dominate the interview (Mikecz, 2012; Welch et al., 2002), at times rejecting other interpretations and viewpoints (Ball, 2003). I experienced this quite forcefully in at least two interviews. Both cases were opinion columnists who had very strong opinions on the topic and enjoyed argumentation. I return to the issue of positionality later in this chapter.

To keep the elite interview on track, Richards (1996) advises using a semi-structured approach and aide memoire. Lilleker (2003) further advises keeping an open mind when conducting interviews with difficult, evasive elites, particularly when discussing potentially contentious topics. This advice was especially useful when interviewing journalists who were

dismissive of claims of negative Muslim representation in the press. In these cases, it was useful to follow Lilleker's advice to:

state that you would like to understand what their position is, that perhaps you do not accept the criticisms and would value an alternative perspective and, if you feel it appropriate give the impression that you are on their side. (p.211)

Taking this more open approach was effective in interviewing the more reticent of journalists. As a result, one defensive journalist who insisted on only providing a 15-minute interview ended up talking to me for over an hour.

### **Drawing on Secondary Data**

While the sample included journalists from a range of different seniority levels, it was not possible to recruit the most senior of newspapers editors. To supplement this gap in my interview data, I drew on secondary data from a Home Affairs parliamentary inquiry into '*Hate Crime and its Violent Consequences*' (Home Affairs Committee 2018) that took place in April 2018 (see Appendix 1 for background). The inquiry included two panel sessions of oral evidence focusing on the issue of the representation of Muslims in the British press, where the editors-in-chiefs 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 by the inquiry panel (see Table 2 below). *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. The session was filmed and a transcript of proceedings provided on the parliamentary website.

Using the transcripts of the two panel sessions that focused on Muslim representation as secondary data enabled me to include the perspectives of the most senior editors of the British newspapers that many of my interviewed journalists worked for. It is important to note, however, the conditions under which this secondary data was produced. Secondary documents are rarely neutral artefacts, and often reflect rhetorical power (May, 2011). The data from the inquiry itself took place in a rhetorical setting where politicians and editors sought to control the debate in their favour. In their own discourse analysis of the reverse scenario – of politicians being interviewed by journalists – Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak (2011) shows how interviewers can hold considerable power over those being interviewed, including controlling the time allowed to answer questions and setting the boundaries of the

discussion. In the inquiry, the politicians were able to largely control the discussion and, at times, cut the editors short if the answers did not appear to be the ones they wanted. The “rhetorical jousting” (Martin, 2013: 142) between politicians and journalists also serves to highlight the defensive responses from the editors when it came to insinuations of the anti-Muslim bias in their newspapers. Nonetheless, drawing on this secondary data source serves to corroborate evidence from the interview data (Prior, 2004) and to highlight any differences between how journalists view Muslim representation compared to the senior management of the newspapers.

**Table 2: Secondary Data Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>
Paul Clarkson	M	Managing Editor	The Sun
Lloyd Embley	M	Group Editor-in-Chief	Trinity Mirror Group
Gary Jones	M	Editor-in-Chief	Daily and Sunday Express
Peter Wright	M	Editor Emeritus	Associated Newspapers (includes Daily and Sunday Mail)
Ian Brunskill	M	Assistant Editor	The Times
Ian MacGregor	M	Editor Emeritus	Telegraph Media Group
Ted Young	M	Editor	Metro newspaper
Neil Benson	M	Chair	Editors Code Committee
Ian Murray	M	Executive Director	Society of Editors

### **The Structure of the Interview**

In line with my research questions discussed in Chapter 2, the purpose of the interviews is to explore how journalists make sense of how they (and their peers) report on stories about British Muslims. In particular, the interviews will draw out the tensions and dilemmas that they face in terms of their own roles and responsibilities as journalists in multicultural Britain. Once the issue of access is resolved, Besley and Roberts (2010) describe journalists as strong candidates for qualitative interview research, marking them as meaningful and reflective communicators with access to unique knowledge. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind how skilled journalists are at weaving narratives themselves, particularly when they want to be evasive about a difficult topic. To move past the more surface-level

explanations and penetrate journalists' more reflective understandings of Muslim representation, it is necessary to give some thought to the structure of the interview and the questions guiding it. In Opratko's (2019) study of Austrian journalists' discourses of liberal Islamophobia, he found that semi-structured interviews provided the journalists with the necessary "space" to "freely narrate and associate" (p.162) about their experiences of reporting on stories involving Muslims. Similarly, my interviews were mainly face-to-face<sup>10</sup> and semi-structured, allowing the participants the space to speak openly about their experiences while keeping the focus on the topic at hand. To facilitate this, an interview schedule was drawn up to act as a flexible guide for the interview rather than a rigid questionnaire (see interview schedule in Appendix 2). The schedule was split into four sections as follows:

### **Section 1: Opening Questions.**

The first part of the interview involved very general, open questions about the participants' personal journeys into journalism. Beginning the interview with a personal but open and non-threatening question was important to build interviewer-interviewee confidence and rapport (Healey and Rawlinson, 1993). Prompting an interviewee into telling a chronological story (Richards, 1996) can be an effective means to extract thick descriptions of their experiences. This enabled the journalists to spend the first part of the interview talking without prompts from myself, providing personal journey narratives that gave a rich insight into what journalism meant to them.

### **Section 2: Questions about Journalism as a Practice.**

The second section delves into more details about the participant's experiences of journalism as a practice. As journalists tend to self-present as independent adjudicators in the news, it became necessary to deconstruct their role in society to tap into the "existential struggles" (Alexander, 2016: 23) that they undergo when it comes to the push and pulls of agency and structure in their journalistic work. The interview was also set in this way to encourage journalists to later consider Muslim representation from their professional as well as their personal perspective, keeping the more ideological constructions of journalism and its role in society in mind.

### **Section 3: Specific Discussion about Articles.**

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<sup>10</sup> Two of the interviews were by phone due to having to be rearranged.

As discussed earlier, the articles used to source the journalists as a sample were further used as a prop or interview stimuli (Foddy, 1993) during the interview. A similar technique was used in Holohan and Poole's (2011) *Muslims in the European Mediascape* project which drew on news stories of two events relating to Muslims (David Cameron's speech on multiculturalism in February 2011 and the Arab Spring uprisings) but this was not the journalists' own work. Having pre-informed the journalists at the invitation stage that their articles would be used in the interview, this section involved a discussion of the article to get some understanding of the logistics and thoughts behind the story (for example, I asked how it had been framed, what sources were used, certain language and so on). Drawing out journalists' own framing strategies when it came to Muslim representation made it possible to connect the interviewees' earlier conceptualisations of journalism and its roles and routines directly with the observed outcome (i.e.: the news product itself) (Baden, 2019) and to identify any tensions between the two. From this joint appraisal of the article, it becomes possible to "identify (the) important meanings created and interpretive resources mobilised by journalists and point at possible deficiencies in the resulting debate" (Baden, 2019: 231).

#### **Section 4: Questions about the General Debate on the Representation of Muslims in the Media.**

The final section of the interview focused on the general issue of the representation of Muslims in the media and how the journalists felt about this debate. When it comes to elite interviews, Richards (1996) advises waiting until rapport has built up during the interview to move on to the more "contentious, critical or tricky questions" to avoid alienating your interviewee "who may become defensive and unforthcoming" (p.203). It was important that a discussion about what for some journalists was a contentious topic came at the end of the interview. At this stage, journalists were further able to reflect on their discussions in the earlier stage of the interview on the wider issue of the representation of Muslims in the media.

Once the participants had agreed to take part in the research, a project information sheet (Appendix 3) and consent form (Appendix 4) were sent to them. The signed consent form was sent back by email or handed back to the researcher at the start of the interview. Consent was also verbally re-confirmed at the start of each interview. Each interview lasted around an hour, and most took place either in a coffee shop or in the participant's office. The interviews were all recorded, with permission to use a recorder for transcription purposes agreed in the

consent form and reaffirmed at the start of the interview. At the end of the interview, I asked whether there was anything else that the journalist would like to add that had not been covered so far. I also took this opportunity to ask for names of fellow journalists that I might approach for the research study, and this snowballing technique (Mikecz 2012) proved useful on several occasions. An email was sent to all participants following the interview, thanking them for their participation, confirming any confidentiality requests, and letting them know that I would send a summary of the research findings when it became available.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of the data analysis is to draw out themes from the interviews and secondary data in a way that can provide an insight into the representation of Muslims in the British press from the perspective of the journalists' "lived world" (Kvale, 2006: 481). When it comes to analysis, an important decision is about the level at which data is to be analysed – whether at a more 'surface' or semantic level or at a more interpretative level (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While the first level of analysis focuses more on the semantic content of the data (i.e.: what a participant has directly said), the second level seeks to:

go(es) beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies - that are (already) theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data. (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84, original emphasis)

To analyse the qualitative data from the interviews and secondary data in a way that further enables an analysis of the tensions that interviewees experience, the data analysis took place across both the semantic and the interpretative levels (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

#### **Level One: Semantic Level Analysis**

The first stage of analysis involved the development of a suitable coding index to make sense of the data (Silverman, 2015). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) advice on conducting thematic analysis, all the data scripts were read through to gain a sense of direction of the overall picture and initial themes and codes. After this initial orientation, the scripts were analysed and coded systematically, and a coding index was developed. The data was then re-analysed and all data relating to specific codes grouped together under potential themes. The data under each theme was then further analysed and re-coded if necessary until a cohesive set of themes had been developed and refined (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These themes were



then placed under a wider set of overarching headings identified from previous empirical research (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

### **Level Two: Interpretative Level Analysis**

To examine the more introspective tensions and dilemmas in journalists' accounts, it was necessary to apply another, more interpretive layer of analysis to the data, as Billig et al. (1988) explain how:

to bring these implicit meanings to the surface, the analyst faces a greater interpretive or hermeneutic task, for a counter-theme needs to be interpreted within discourse which seems *prima facie* to be arguing straightforwardly for a particular point [...] the concealment is not a deliberate or even subconscious concealment but may operate within layers of meaning of language. (p.22-23)

This level of analysis, sometimes referred to as 'thematic discourse analysis', shares roots with the constructionist paradigm and overlaps with discourse analysis in its consideration of the broader "assumptions, structures and/or meanings" that provide the theoretical underpinning of the themes articulated in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 85). An additional coding index was developed based on my theoretical framework to focus on the themes of social relations of power; structure and agency; reproduction and resistance; and the tensions and dilemmas that journalists face when it comes to the representation of Muslims in the British press. For this coding index, I also drew on advice from various readings of discourse analysis (e.g., Howarth, 2000; Mills, 2004; Fairclough, 2013) and discursive psychology (e.g., Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Billig et al., 1988). Discursive psychology has proven a particularly useful tool in studies seeking to understand how journalists talk about values and processes (Reardon, 2018). This approach can also help shift the focus of the research to make the agency of the journalist an important object of the investigation, whereas discourse analysis focuses more on structure (Cruikshank, 2012: 45). The interpretative level of analysis is also imperative to capture the potential 'ideological dilemmas' discussed in Chapter 3, and the social preconditions that lead to tensions and dilemmas for journalists as they negotiate how they report on (often highly contested) stories involving Muslims.

On a more practical level, the data was managed using a qualitative data analysis software programme (NVivo 11), which made it much easier to code and retrieve the data according to the themes and to search for data systematically and quickly. There are some concerns that by

‘fragmenting’ the data into nodes, NVivo loses some of the more analytical and interpretative elements of data analysis (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). As Bazeley and Jackson point out, there can be a danger with the use of qualitative software such as NVivo of falling into a “coding trap” where researchers become distanced from their data and unable to make sense of the bigger picture of their research from the data segmentation (p.7). I found NVivo invaluable for the management of the considerable volume of qualitative data I had collected through its code and retrieve system, for grouping together disparate data under themes and for its useful labelling of the data. When it came to the actual in-depth analysis, however, I ultimately opted to print out the collated data and complete the analysis ‘by hand’.

### **Reflexivity and Ethics**

When it comes to interpretative analysis, Ang (2006) highlights that:

because interpretations always inevitably involve the construction of certain representations of reality (and not others) they can never be ‘neutral’ and merely ‘descriptive’ [...] the ‘empirical’, captured in either quantitative or qualitative form, does not yield self-evident meanings; it is only through the interpretive framework constructed by the researcher that understandings of the empirical come about. (p.184)

To some extent at least, the interpretations of the research remain contingent upon those doing the research (Ang, 2006). Just as I argue that journalists face dilemmas because they cannot distance themselves from the stories that impact on their lives as political and moral subjects, so as a researcher my own responsibilities lie not only to the research but also to the social world that I live in. Ultimately, as Ang (2006) suggests, “it is at (this) interface of ethics and scholarship that the researchers’ interpretations take on their distinctive political edge” (p.184). Considering this stance in the next section, I discuss two key issues that arose in the process of doing my research – that of anonymity and of positionality.

### **Anonymity**

From an ethical perspective, I sought full, informed written consent from all participants prior to the interview (see Appendix 4). The consent form included the clause ‘I understand the data I provide will be anonymous’ rather than one that allowed the participants themselves to choose whether or not they required anonymity. It was after careful consideration that I opted to provide anonymity to all my research participants and assign pseudonyms to protect their identities instead (Wiles et al., 2008). Taking this decision on behalf of my interviewees can

be claimed to be disempowering them, as they may have preferred to have their real identities revealed or at least make that choice themselves. As a matter of fact, two of the journalists I interviewed did comment on the anonymity clause in the consent form, stating that they did not mind me using their real names in the research. In both these cases, however, the journalists had left their respective newspapers and moved onto different careers, meaning that there would be little recourse to anything critical they said about their own newspapers.

The only exception was for media campaigner, Miqdaad Versi, as I felt that it would be impossible to keep his identity anonymous due to his high-profile campaign work in this area and the relationships that he had developed with many newspaper editors. While Miqdaad had completed the same consent form as the other participants, I later discussed this with him, and he agreed to be named on the basis that he could confirm the sections of his interview script that would be used in my thesis. This was then confirmed with him via email, giving him the chance to edit any quotations as needed (as it stands, he made very little adjustments to the interview script).

There were several reasons why I decided to opt for a more blanket approach to anonymity for the rest of the participants. Firstly, it could be argued that the journalists were put at risk by partaking in a research study on such a politically charged and hyper-present issue for the British press. As the secondary data from the Home Affairs Committee inquiry shows, their superiors clearly struggled with admitting that their newspapers had an issue when it came to Muslim representation. I wanted to ensure that the journalists felt able to talk freely without worrying about possible repercussions. This is quite a common experience in terms of elite interviews where, as Lilleker (2003) highlights, “the more controversial the research the less response you will get and fewer of those who do respond will be willing to speak entirely on the record” (p.213).

As I wanted to get open testimonies of the journalists’ experiences rather than deflections or guarded responses, I felt that anonymity would offer them the chance to speak to me without feeling they had to self-censor. As it stands, some of the journalists were extremely nervous about their identities being revealed and it was only the reassurance of anonymity that assured them to even take part in the research. Their omission would have been to the detriment of my research findings. For others, anonymity was a practical comfort as they would have otherwise needed permission to take part in the interview from their management, a process that would be long and burdensome for them.

Anonymity has become an increasingly contested concept within research ethics, with a growing critique of its value in social research on several grounds. Critics argue about the difficulties of achieving total anonymity in practice, particularly in the internet age (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2019), and of how non-anonymity can potentially empower participants as partners in the research (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009; Baez, 2002). As a former journalist myself, I understand the lengths needed to be taken to protect sources, and even with the promise of anonymity, the journalists I interviewed asked for some aspects to be kept off the record. The responsibilities to anonymity do not end with the use of pseudonyms but require careful consideration of how to discuss and present research findings in a way that ensures participants cannot be indirectly identified as much as possible (Wiles et al., 2008).

On a more practical level, I can see the potential value that being able to identify some (if not all) of the journalists could have brought to the study. Being able to identify exactly what newspapers they write for, rather than obscuring this by just referring to the newspaper's genre, might have been illuminating for some readers (at least those familiar with the British press industry). On balance, however, having a mix of real names and pseudonyms might have been confusing in the analysis write-up, particularly as most interviewees felt reassured by the promise of anonymity. For this reason, I opted to present my data using pseudonyms that I gave to my participants.

Finally, 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 this respect, they were empowered as partners in my research, whether they were named or not. 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). The journalists in my study who were nervous at the beginning of the interview stated how much they enjoyed the interview process and the chance to step back and consider the difficult and controversial topic of Muslim representation. As one Muslim journalist commented at the end of their 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.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Reflexivity is a central part of the qualitative research process (Berger, 2015; Haynes, 2012; Watt, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992). The way we carry out qualitative research and analysis is significantly informed by our “personal, political and theoretical biographies” (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 122), and so it is imperative that consideration is given to how my own position as the researcher influences my study. Edward Said cites Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* when discussing the importance of his own reflexive position to his work on Orientalism:

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. It is important therefore to make an inventory. (Gramsci 1971, cited in Said, 1979: 731)

My own reflexive ‘inventory’ recognises how my identity as a Muslim, as a journalist and as an academic influenced every stage of the research process – from conception to conclusion. It became most visible, however, during the data collection process. In qualitative research, the “image of the researcher is brought into parallel with that of the people studied” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:19). Just as I was observing the interviewees, so they were observing me, and how they perceived me was instrumental to the interview discussion. Was I perceived primarily as a Muslim, as a journalist or as an academic? As I did not directly ask my participants this question, I can only reflect on my own experience in answering. I would argue that each interviewee saw me in a different way, according to the common ground required to enable the rapport needed to facilitate frank and open discussion. I could play-up or downplay certain characteristics of my identity accordingly. For example, the Muslim journalists I interviewed clearly saw me as Muslim first. There were shared cultural anecdotes and assumptions of shared experiences, with one journalist referring to me as ‘sister’. A similar comradeship was present in interviews with other journalists of colour who viewed me through the lens of a shared experience of, and commitment to, anti-racism.

It is harder to judge how the white journalists I interviewed saw me. I primarily felt that they saw me as a journalist first, as our shared experience related to our shared identities as professional journalists. As Morrison and Tumber (1988) point out, many journalists believe

that it is impossible “to understand their occupation unless one has oneself been a journalist” (p.viii). This made it possible for me to ask the challenging questions required of critical research (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) without appearing to attack the journalists on some moral ground. Comparing my interview data to that of Opratko’s (2019) similar study of journalists as a white researcher, however, made me realise that my Muslim-status most likely did impact on the discussions with the white journalists I interviewed. Seeing how Opratko’s interviewees’ responses were much more aggressive, and potentially offensive, it becomes evident that my interviewees were, to some extent at least, careful in what they said to avoid causing offence to me as a Muslim. For example, in his study, one of the journalists tells Opratko:

perhaps a woman would think twice before she decides to marry, say, an Iranian, not because he is necessarily a bad man, but because his mindset is just completely different, and then it might well happen that she ends up locked up at home, or that she will be beaten because she wants to see her friends [...] I mean, you can play a game of water polo against crocodiles, if you feel like it. But you should know before that they are crocodiles. (Opratko, 2019: 165)

As can be seen in my analysis chapters, this type of more directly offensive response was absent in my interview data. Although Opratko’s study takes place in Austria and not in the UK, it is possible that the findings of my research may have included these elements if I had been a non-Muslim rather than a Muslim researcher.

Thinking about the interaction between interviewer and interviewee in this way is an imperative part of the qualitative reflexive process. In line with Goffman (1990 [1959]), social interactions can be seen as a performance shaped by both the environment and the audience. In the interview scenario, both sides are seen to be managing their respective presentation of self (Goffman, 1990 [1959]). I adjusted my own performative identity according to who I was interviewing, and the interviewees did the same. Positionality can also highlight the potential power relations inherent in the research relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Kuper, Lingard and Levinson, 2008). Researchers from ethnic minority backgrounds have spoken of the power reversal in the interviewer-interviewee relationship when it is a minority researcher interviewing white respondents (Phoenix, 1994). Yet this dynamic is much more fluid than simply about researching up or down (Tang, 2002). Instead, both the interviewer’s and interviewee’s observations of the other’s social, cultural

and personal differences can impact on the power dynamics of the interview (Tang, 2002). In my research, for example, the seniority of the journalist I was interviewing and whether they were well-known, could tip the scales of the power differential towards them. In the interviews with the more junior or local journalists, this tended to be reversed.

There is an irony in my position as a Muslim researcher interviewing those with the power to represent me, but this is empowering as ultimately the research has a potential to challenge this power of representation. I felt in control throughout the interviews because I had researched the topic and my interviewees extensively and planned the whole research process myself. Becker (1966) asserts that nearly all sociological research represents “morality plays” where the researcher “plays on one side or another” (p.245). If research then ‘takes sides, it becomes open to questions about whether this presents a form of distortion into the research process, leading to questions of its reliability. This position that the researcher must be objective and bias-free to enhance the validity of the research, however, is incommensurable with qualitative research that comes from a critical tradition (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2011). By examining the tensions that journalists go through when it comes to Muslim representation, I also wanted to reflect how journalists themselves are often conflicted, embroiled in the same structures that lead to the enduring nature of negative Muslim representation. Through finding ways to break this recursive pattern, I am therefore also ‘taking sides’ with the journalists themselves.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have discussed the methodological approach that I adopt to answer the research questions in Chapter 2. In particular, I have gone into some detail about the thought-processes that went into this research design in my efforts to tap into the tensions inherent in “the inside workings” of the journalists’ world (Morrison and Tumber, 1988: xiii) when it comes to Muslim representation. In the proceeding chapters, I present my analysis and findings. Across each of these chapters, the inherent conflicts and tensions in the data are evidenced, as journalists and editors attempt to reconcile competing discourses, priorities and values while making sense of the ways that Muslims are portrayed in the British press. Each chapter highlights the tensions between structure and agency as experienced by journalists, and the drive to both reproduce negative Muslim representations and to challenge them. Starting from the next chapter, my analysis demonstrates that while journalists recognise how common sense understandings of Muslims can contribute to their negative representation,

they remain highly conflicted about this and seek to redress this bias. In Chapter 6, I explore how these common sense representations are further seen to be shared by their audiences, and how journalists' own conceptualisations of these audiences contribute to how they report on stories involving Muslims. Then in Chapter 7, I examine how the codes and conventions of professional journalism can act to both reproduce and challenge the anti-Muslim bias in the British press. Finally, in Chapter 8, I unpack the structure-agency dichotomy discussed in my previous chapter in more detail, and how this can contribute towards our overall understanding of the reproduction of, and contradictions to negative Muslim representation.



## Chapter 5: Making Sense of the Representation of Muslims

### Introduction

In this chapter I present my analysis of how journalists and editors make sense of their experiences of reporting on Muslim-related stories and the wider issue of negative Muslim representation. In line with both my literature and theoretical chapters, I discuss how common sense ideas about Muslims influence the ways that journalists' report on Muslim-related stories. The chapter further contributes an understanding of how negative representations are built upon implicit, rather than explicit, common sense ideas that journalists themselves hold which position Muslims as the problematic outsider of British society. These ideas are seen across a range of journalistic experiences of reporting on Muslims: in the language and framing they use, the sources they draw upon and how they differentiate Muslims from other minority groups. Rather than reflecting direct racism, journalists' accounts reveal a deeply conflicted dilemma when it comes to negative Muslim representation that itself presents as 'Othering'. On one side, Muslims are themselves seen to be deserving and at fault for the negative representations they receive due to the events that they become implicated in. On the other, journalists struggle to reconcile the problematic nature of these negative representations in light of other key values in an egalitarian, multiculturalist society.

### The Issue of Negative Muslim Representation

The editors of the leading British newspapers were asked by the Home Affairs Inquiry committee whether they believed that Islamophobia represented "a significant problem in Britain today" (HA 2018).<sup>11</sup> All of the editors without exception responded by emphasising their acknowledgement of what they saw as the wider *societal* problem of anti-Muslim racism and the presence of Islamophobia in Britain. For example, *The Times*' assistant editor Ian Brunskill declared "Islamophobia in society – yes definitely. I think none of us would dispute that" (HA 2018). Similarly, *The Sun*'s managing editor Paul Clarkson told the committee:

I think there will always be a problem with all kinds of issues against minorities. It is just how pervasive that is. (HA 2018)

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<sup>11</sup> All secondary data taken from the Home Affairs Committee Inquiry 2019 is cited as HA 2018 throughout the analysis chapters.

The suggestion of a potential anti-Muslim bias or Islamophobia within their own newspapers, however, was one that most editors strongly rejected. The exception from the secondary data was *The Express*' newspaper editor-in-chief Gary Jones whose alternative position will be analysed in Chapter 8. In general, the rest of the editors' unwillingness to accept the possible presence of direct Islamophobia within their own newspapers could be evidenced in the strong, declarative points they made to the Committee. For example, *The Mail*'s Peter Wright strongly asserted that "there is no anti-Muslim agenda: it doesn't exist", while *The Sun*'s managing editor Paul Clarkson stressed that "Certainly in the mainstream media, I don't believe that it is an issue" (HA 2018). In particular, the concept that anti-Muslim prejudice might be a deliberate act for the British press is fiercely denied by most of the editors. *The Times*' assistant editor Ian Brunskill, for example, expressed indignation at the "rather wild allegations" of newspapers "deliberately and rather weirdly stoking Islamophobia" (HA 2018). *The Mail*'s editor emeritus Peter Wright likewise declared "I have never heard an editor say, "Right. Let's run this story because it attacks Muslims". These accounts appear to be in line with Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery's (2013) study which finds that while there are some explicitly Islamophobic representations found in press coverage, these tend to be a salient exception rather than the rule. For the editors, the idea of conscious Islamophobia within their newspapers is seen to go against the liberal values they themselves hold, as Ian Murray of the Society of Editors told the Committee:

I have been in contact with the national newspapers, national reporters and national broadcasters, and there is no conscious Islamophobia there. They would recoil from that. (HA 2018)

In contrast to most of the editors, nearly all the journalists I interviewed were more willing to accept that there could be an anti-Muslim bias within the British press. For example, tabloid journalist Martin admitted that "it would be strange to not concede that there is a demonisation towards the group". Broadsheet journalist Brendan also accepted that "there's an element of truth in it" when it came to the claim of anti-Muslim bias in the press. While some were very open about the negative ways in which newspapers represented Muslims, most journalists appeared to concur with the editors' claims that this bias was rarely due to overt and direct anti-Muslim racism or Islamophobia.

The purpose of this introductory discussion is to set my analysis against a backdrop where anti-Muslim racism or Islamophobia itself is seen by both editors and journalists as an

unfavourable attribute for British society, and therefore also for the national British press. It is something that is difficult for editors, and to a lesser extent for journalists, to acknowledge directly exists within their “liberally tolerant” newspapers (Holohan, 2014: 41). Rather than reflecting the individual racism of the journalist, Holohan (2014) suggests that negative representations display how “racialised discourses are constructed systematically through the stream of narratives that emerge from a particular perspective” (p.41). Similarly, this chapter examines how negative representations of Muslims can be influenced by the more implicit, common sense understandings that journalists themselves hold about the place of Muslims in British society.

### **Why Muslims?**

Allen (2010: 231) points to how ‘cultural racism’ is rooted in frames of exclusion and inclusion rather than direct biological racism. This cultural racism revolves around common sense ideas about who may legitimately belong to a particular national group, and the boundaries of the norms and values of that group. ‘Othering’ is central to cultural racism as it builds on the idea of difference where ‘Their’ way of life is seen to be at odds with ‘Our’ way of life (Allen, 2010). By examining intertextual references comparing Muslims to other minority groups, it is possible to find some evidence of this type of positioning in the journalists’ interviews.

Across my data, media portrayals of Muslims were directly compared to those of Black, Irish and Jewish communities. These comparisons often provided a contextual reference point from which journalists could position the perceived bias against Muslims in the British press. For instance, Patrick, who identifies himself as Black, compared 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.

Patrick 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". The key difference in terms of media portrayals is that Black communities are no longer seen to be at the receiving end of this negative coverage due to their greater acceptance in 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 because partly maybe because they are afraid? Maybe the internal politics or dynamics of a community protecting itself?

In line with Nickels et al.'s (2012) study 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 (p.27). The journalist sympathises with their shared plight and, like Patrick, 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 Patrick's account, he 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 by Poole (2002) in media representations of Muslims, where

Muslims are themselves to blame for their discrimination “through their own antiquated practices” (p.82).

In his study of Austrian journalists, Opratko (2019) argues that in hegemonic media discourse about Islam, Muslims appear as immature and non-contemporaneous subjects. In particular:

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 (Opratko, 2019: 171).

Under the Orientalist perspective discussed in the literature chapter, Said (1997) sees Muslims being compared against the West as the ‘Other’ in a crude form of a confrontational Us-versus-Them relationship. Opratko (2019) similarly concludes that media representations of Muslims reflect the “historicist racism” (p.160) at the heart of ‘Othering’, where ‘Their’ perceived backwardness is set against ‘Our’ own liberal progress. He finds that the internalisation of this common sense narrative by journalists themselves contributes to the reproduction of liberal Islamophobia in their newspapers. If journalists themselves view Muslims through the common sense starting point of ‘difference’, whether explicitly or implicitly, or even positively or negatively, this will inevitably influence how they represent them. The underlying narrative of blame that appears in the journalists’ accounts above points to a “threshold of intolerance” (Bloommaert and Verschueren, 1998, cited in Richardson, 2009: 369) reserved for certain groups. This reflects how newspapers are only expected to be tolerant of Muslims up to a certain point (Richardson, 2009) and can be evidenced in the testimony of the Mail’s editor emeritus Peter Wright 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 (*HA 2018*).

A further example of this can be seen in this account from tabloid journalist Roger:

In the same way we value Muslims and their contribution to society, like we value Jews, and we value Christians or other people. What we don't like is people who come

and blow us up. It's like Irish people, we've got a great relationship with Ireland, we love Irish pubs, we go over to Ireland on holiday and yet they had terrorists amongst them. We never sort of had the view that Irish people were bad. Now we've got it with Muslim people, they live here and have settled here. We go to their restaurants, most of them are run by Bangladeshis and we enjoy what they do, and we have them as friends. But there is a minority of them who want to cause us harm and they should be tackled.

As discussed in the literature chapter, Muslims have become assigned as the preferred 'folk devil' of the media in what Morey and Yaqin (2011) describe as the "merry-go-round of cultural approval" whereby societal (and media) disapproval of different minority groups takes place at different times "arbitrated by the 'host' community" (p.53). Similar themes of blame, deservingness and tolerance in the data can be seen in intertextual references to media coverage of Jewish communities. These references were mostly framed in critical terms around how anti-Semitic media coverage was considerably less tolerable than anti-Muslim coverage. Senior 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. If you did that to Jews, you would be finished. You'd never write again ever in this country.

Broadsheet journalist Karen likewise reflected:

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.

Why do journalists feel that anti-Muslim stories appear to be so much more tolerable than anti-Semitic ones? 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 seen to be a political threat. Although there is a recognition of the parallels from the Jewish experience in the accounts of the journalists I interviewed, there is also an indication that anti-Semitism has reached a status where its propagation through the media is

no longer acceptable, while the equal treatment of Muslims lags far behind.<sup>12</sup> Bleich et al.'s (2015) findings similarly suggest that Jewish communities are much less likely to be reported on in a negative manner, and most often portrayed as victims. Muslims, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to be represented as a 'problem'. Norton (2013) suggests that this discrepancy is due to Muslims, and no longer Jewish communities, presenting the current threat to the liberal values of Western civilisation. Meer and Modood (2009) similarly argue that much of the media's reluctance to categorise anti-Muslim prejudice in par with anti-Semitism stems from a general anxiety around Muslims. This anxiety feeds into representations of Muslims that portray them as disloyal and dangerous. As Modood (2009) highlights, Muslims generate greater anxieties about immigration and cultural diversity than any other ethnic minority group.

Said makes reference to the "strange revival" of previously discredited Orientalist ideas about Muslims at a time when

racial and religious misrepresentations of every other cultural group are no longer circulated with such impunity; 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: xi)

In line with Said's comment, journalist Patrick maintained that it had become acceptable to talk about Muslims in a way that was no longer acceptable for other groups.

I would still say that it's not like it was in the 80s. 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, Patrick's account highlights a sense of blame in that Muslims have become an acceptable target for the mainstream media due to their own choice to follow the wrong religious ideas. Echoing Said's (1978) critique of the underlying Orientalist belief that Muslims need to be, in her words, "liberated from their false consciousness", broadsheet

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to argue that negative or stereotypical depictions of Jewish communities are wholly absent from British media coverage, as recently shown in a case put forward by Kahn-Harris as part of the All Party Parliamentary Group report on Religion in the Media (2021: 31) in relation to the over-use of images of Haredi Jews in unrelated stories about the wider and diverse Jewish communities.

journalist Francesca commented on how historical, common sense ideas of Muslims were reflected across the political spectrum of newspapers:

To crudely paraphrase, what you get on the right is that sort of Christian idea that you know Muslims are the infidel and Europe's got to be defined as Christian etc. So, some very old-fashioned notions about that old, old conflict between Christianity and Islam. 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.

Said (1997) similarly points to how different political stances tend to represent Muslims in different ways – 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). Where all these stances concur, according to Said, is that “even though little enough is known about the Islamic world, there is not much to be approved of there” (p.lv).

In an interesting turn, this underlying blame discourse was found to be more explicitly stated in some of the interviews with Muslim journalists. Tabloid journalist Shabir argued that negative representations of Muslims were due to their 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. 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 [...] So the media doesn't always choose Muslim. the context often determines it.

Left-leaning columnist 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:



It's one thing to say we are facing an existential crisis but at the same time we are not helping ourselves. I said [at a recent event] listen you've got to wake up, we are the next Jews of Europe, if for no other reason wake up. When Jewish people were living through that, what did they do. They became very clever at unrecognition and kind of disappearing because their survival depended on it. I'm not suggesting that we have to do that, but there are lessons here. Instead of doing that, 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.

In her call for 'unrecognition', Sarwat positions Muslim 'demands' as unreasonable and problematic. Unlike Jewish and other minority communities, Modood (2019) highlights how 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) where:

those who see the current Muslim assertiveness as an unwanted and illegitimate child of multiculturalism have only two choices if they wish to be consistent. They can repudiate the idea of equality as identity recognition and return to the 1960s liberal idea of equality as colour/sex/religion, and so forth, blindness. 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: 124)

### **The Liberal Dilemma**

This liberal dilemma around Muslims becomes most visible in my interviews with journalists working for left-leaning newspapers. These newspapers tended to give more space to a greater diversity of Muslim voices and often provided a critical counterpoint to negative Muslim 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. As discussed in the literature chapter, studies indicate that the left-wing press may be more 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). This can be seen in an account from left-leaning broadsheet journalist Francesca about her newspaper:

I think the [left-leaning newspaper] was a very, very idealistic organisation to work with and okay, so some of those ideals it didn't live up to. But there was a tremendously clear sense of the value and importance of social democracy. 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 remembered how the newsroom culture reflected the internal conflict experienced by the newspaper's journalists when it came to Muslims:

I remember after one of the terrorist attacks, when 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.

Francesca also recalled how frequently the debate of Muslim women's choice of burka occurred at her left-leaning newspaper.

I remember that issue cropping 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.

This type of liberal dilemma comes to the forefront with stories about the wearing of the veils and headscarves by Muslim women, as left-leaning broadsheet journalist Patrick highlighted:

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, which to me is a shocking thing to say.

My literature chapter discussed how the representation of Muslim women in the media has garnered special scholarly attention (see Williamson, 2014; Khiabany and Williamson, 2008; McDonald, 2006). These studies point to representations built around the evocation of emotions often found in colonial discourses about veiled Muslim women, reflecting a contradictory mix of “fear, hostility, derision, curiosity, and fascination” (McDonald, 2006: 8). As Patrick indicated in his account above, these frames also reflect a sense of salvation in terms of the “liberal western feminists who wish to rescue” Muslim women (Morey and Yaqin 2010:153).

Parekh echoes Modood’s concept of Muslims as the ‘illegitimate child of multiculturalism’ to provide some insight into the cause of the liberal anxiety around Muslims and the defence of liberal values and practices. He elaborates how:

the fear is particularly acute among liberals and leads to a veritable panic [...] 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: 25)

It is this fear and resentment that contributes to the justification of common sense ideas of Muslims as problems for ‘Us’, making it easier to frame negative representations about them in the media without appearing illiberally racist (Barker, 1981, cited in Allen, 2010).

The analysis in this chapter so far points to a general sense of the ‘deserving’ nature of negative representations that are at least partially due to the actions of Muslims themselves. The chapter has discussed how common sense ideas of Muslims as a problematic part of liberal, British society can be seen in journalists’ accounts of the representation of Muslims in the press. Rather than reflecting a direct and overt anti-Muslim bias, these ideas lead to the justification of why Muslims are represented in more negative ways compared to other minority groups. At the same time, journalists’ accounts show negative representations about Muslims to be problematic and unacceptable in a liberal and egalitarian British society. This reflects the contradictory nature of negative Muslim representations as driven by the concurrent need to both accommodate Muslims as part of British society while also rejecting them. I explore this further in my analysis of journalists’ understandings of how stories involving Muslims are framed.

## **The Framing of Muslim-Related Stories**

Rather than being about individual author styles, 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 purpose of these discursive frameworks is to distinguish the negative image of the ‘Other’ from that of the “positive, civilised image of British society” (Mills, 2004: 107). Over time and through their repeated use and increased familiarity, these frames take on truth-values, informing the common sense ideas about Muslims. The ways journalists frame Muslims stories through discursive frameworks and language is central to understanding the reproduction of negative representation. Tabloid journalist Shabir highlighted how newspapers draw upon shared “stock phrases” to resonate with the readers.

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.

Although Shabir accepts that this type of language is problematic for certain groups including Muslims, he remains dismissive of the need for change as he sees this as an integral part of the journalistic culture. Negative stock phrases about Muslims can, however, have seriously pejorative connotations. Tabloid journalist Ryan talked about stories in the Daily Star that regularly referred to “Vile Muslims”. The Home Affairs Inquiry (2018) included a discussion about how media immigration narratives were built around terms such as ‘swarming’ or ‘swamping’. In another example, broadsheet journalist Brendan was asked about his use of the popular media term ‘jihadi bride’ to refer to Shamima Begum<sup>13</sup> in a news piece rather than denoting her by name, and he explained:

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

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<sup>13</sup> For context to this story, see [Who is Shamima Begum and how do you lose your UK citizenship? - BBC News](#)

come from. They sum up the whole story in three words basically. She is the ISIS bride or the Jihadi bride.

Shabir similarly shrugged off the repeated use of the term “battle-hardened jihadis” in his newspaper, explaining:

It is justified because we are talking about returning jihadis from Syria. So of course, these would be battle hardened and that isn't just a dramatic description. It signifies also a fear that they are battle hardened and desensitised so pose a national security threat, so it isn't just description here.

Both Brendan and Shabir struggle to find anything problematic with the use of these terms and how it might impact on the reading of the story. In both cases, they are more interested in the ‘mechanics’ of the *writing* of the story, with little thought to how the story could be read and its subsequent consequences, a theme explored in my next analysis chapter. As Hall (1997: 225) points out, this reflects the “poetics” of language, as opposed to its “politics”. It also shows how writing and the use of language are seen 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 this way, the preferred language adopted by newspapers when reporting on Muslim-related stories can tell us much about how news production processes work to reproduce negative representations. Referring to Nietzsche, Said (1975) emphasises how “texts are fundamentally facts of power, not of democratic exchange” (p.14). Despite the rather superficial stance described above, it can be argued that journalists are 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 (2018) “are we aware of the power of words and words that are chosen carefully? Absolutely”.

Retired broadsheet journalist Francesca likewise shared how journalists become “very good at manipulating words”. Local journalist Mark acknowledged his personal struggle to balance being “a good writer” with his fear of “twisting a story”:

It is a very fine line between twisting a story and making it interesting and being a good writer. That is a very, very fine line. I find sometimes I struggle and that's the truth. I think every journalist lies if they say they never struggle with that.

A particularly interesting account of this was narrated by high-profile liberal columnist James who felt that his preoccupation with writing witty content led to a compromised article:

I remember it with some shame as well. It's not just the facts, it's the facts on which I built an argument. Its normally done for a freak reason to turn something that ought to be serious into -I mean the curse of English culture is everything's a joke, nothing matters, we can just snigger from a position of superiority. You know I've then got the facts wrong as well.

James appears to be referring to a type of poetic licence that risks privileging effect over clarity or even facts themselves. However, as broadsheet journalist Francesca warned, it is much easier to fall back on stereotypes when trying to write “glib, witty” content:

It was coming 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.

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: 206). Coming from a place of both desire and fear of the ‘Other’, stereotypes further require constant reinforcement, Bhabha elaborates how:

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. (Bhabha, 1994: 66)

The journalists’ account of the framing of Muslims stories so far serves to highlight how representations are constructed from a basis of separation and differentiation (Richardson, 2004). Yet it is Muslims themselves that are seen to be at blame for this differentiation. When asked why the media might choose to frame stories on Muslims this way, Karen’s following

conflicted, introspective response reflects 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, and (sighs) And I mean going back I remember as a child you know the Arab Israeli wars. But (sighs) I don't know, I don't know. 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 don't know! I don't know how...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.

Karen's account reflects how Muslim-related stories appear within "a framing narrative [whose] parameters of which are defined by questions of belonging" (Morey and Yaqin, 2010: 147). But what underlies this debate about belonging is 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, freelance columnist Leila argued 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.

Tabloid journalist Stephen similarly reflected how these common sense views had become embedded in the minds of some of the journalists he worked with:

I have often had these conversations with colleagues in which I have questioned their journalism - 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 that's what you get, and 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.

For retired broadsheet journalist Karen, she realised the extent of this internalised bias only when she left her 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. 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.

### **The Articulation of Common Sense Representations of Muslims**

Hall sees common sense as formed through the articulation of selected, fragmented elements with dominant conceptions to produce what appears as shared understandings of the world (Clarke, 2015). These common sense frames similarly reflect Said's (1997) claim of 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" (p.xxii). The framing of stories covering 'Muslim grooming gangs' can be viewed as a case in point, with its focus on the culture and religion of Muslims as being at fault rather than the criminality of those involved. As Press Association journalist Amanda observed in 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.

Broadsheet journalist Patrick commented how instead of focusing on the criminality of the perpetrators, it was their culture and religion that was seen as the driver of their crime:

The grooming one in particular has been the worst coverage of recent years in creating a stereotype and then reinforcing that stereotype, and that stereotype moving from sort of the right wing. What does this say about the Muslim community of two million or three million people in Britain when less than one in 1000 people are actually committing these crimes, and yet it's seen as a stereotype of a whole religion and whole communities across the country.



Comparing media coverage of child sexual abuse cases where the offenders are either white or 'Asian', 'Muslim' or 'Pakistani', 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 media coverage takes on a more discursive 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: 39). This also reflects the circular nature of representations, where the signification of these events starts from the basis of "already established fact(s)" (Hall, 1982: 71) about Muslims. By establishing an equivalence between the criminal act and the religion and culture of the perpetrator, this signification then serves to reinforce these 'facts' through how these events are interpreted.

The different ways in which the media reported on news events depending on the ethnicity or religion of the perpetrator was further highlighted by my interviewed journalists with regards to terrorism stories. Broadsheet journalist 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 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.

This theme was also raised during the Home Affairs Inquiry (2018) in the response from *The Times'* assistant editor Ian Brunskill when asked about newspapers labelling of a white terrorist as a "jobless lone wolf" (HA 2018). As he told the committee:

There are differences around those things. You do have to look at those people. Some people are acting in a cause and say that they are acting in a cause and have some kind of measure of organisation around them and so on, and it becomes easier to say that that is a terrorist. I don't think this is a purely racial thing at all. There are other people who really are, I think, loners who are just doing it—you don't know what the agenda is. If you can identify, or if they have proclaimed, an agenda, you are more likely to call them a terrorist. (HA 2018)

From the above accounts, the label of ‘terrorist’ should be given to any persons who are committing such an act of violence in the name of a particular agenda or group. Yet it is clear, as some of the journalists pointed out, that terrorist events continue to be framed differently when the perpetrators are Muslim compared to when they are white. As online journalist Amina observed:

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.

Research on media reporting of mass acts of violence similarly reflects how terrorism framing is most often used when the main perpetrators are Muslim, compared to the humanising frames used when perpetrators are white, non-Muslims (ElMasry and El-Nawawy, 2020). This underlying framing could be seen in the interview with local journalist Thomas when discussing his investigative piece exposing the back story of a potential white terrorist. Thomas’ discomfort and surprise when I asked whether he had meant to position the potential terrorist in a loner-victim stance demonstrated how this type of framing can often be unconscious, even in the face of the very best of intentions. As he responded:

I don't think I portrayed him as a victim, I'd be surprised and disappointed if you think that I do. The purpose of the story was to say that he was a white supremacist, Islamophobic nutter and that needed telling. And at the same time the question needs to be asked why wasn't he charged, he must be a terrorist in the sense of if you flip it and he was a Muslim, then people would say that he's a terrorist. Yeah well, I could see he was a little pathetic loner who suddenly turns to...I'm not going to kind of not say that. I wanted to kind of tell that story to explain as far as I could how he ended up like that, I guess. If people read this and say oh what a shame, what a poor fellow, then I think they're reading it wrong.

Thomas’ account further reflects how the boundaries of common sense act implicitly beneath the consciousness of the journalist to influence how they write, even if their intentions are otherwise. In the next part of this chapter, I explore how common sense ideas can influence

Muslim representations even when the journalists' own intentions are to produce positive stories.

### **Positive Stories**

Across my data, journalists and editors all spoke of the need for more positive stories on Muslims. Local journalist Ben, for example, stressed the importance of finding “community stories showing ethnic minorities in a positive light”. Similarly, the Society of Editor’s Ian Murray highlighted the need for “the media to engage with far more positive stories from the Muslim community to balance what would be legitimate debate” (*HA 2018*). The idea that positive stories could offset or neutralise more negative representations can be further seen in Murray’s account:

There are going to be areas where it is a legitimate debate that takes place. But 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?

The need to “rebalance” Muslim media coverage in this way was also highlighted by journalist Patrick:

I would never say that we shouldn’t cover terror gangs or whatever but what is apparent is that in terms of coverage of white people you get the human side. Obviously white criminals and white dodgy politicians get flack everyday but that's counterbalanced by these sorts of human-interest stories, the miracle medical breakthroughs, the man fights off shark, the welcome to my lovely home, the homes and gardens and lifestyle features, the arts. All of those things sort of counterbalance the negative stories that would be written about in the news pages. Yet for Black and Asian people, we didn't feature in restaurant guides or in homes, in any of that kind of aspect. It is more a case that what we need is to rebalance it, so that we do not only see Muslim faces where they are in terror gangs.

In Chapter 2, I highlighted the asymmetrical relationship between positive and negative stories on Muslims, where positive representations of Muslims did not necessarily displace negative representations (Hall, 1997). Similarly, although having more positive stories is

constructed in Patrick's account as a solution to the more negative coverage on Muslims, the construction of positive stories as somehow cancelling out the negative ones is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, newspapers appear to be generally more reluctant to produce positive stories than negative ones. As *The Sun's* managing editor Paul Clarkson admitted to the Home Affairs 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 (HA 2018).

Local journalist Mark, on the other hand, contradicted this perception in his example of the popularity of a positive Ramadan-related online video story produced by his newspaper:

We had such an experience, not just for us but the people who watched it. Wow! The honest truth was the news desk did not think how it was going to do, or whether it was going to get that sort of reception and it just blew our minds. Just to get a better understanding about why people practice Ramadan.

Mark's account indicates that more positive media coverage on Muslims can attract readers and can provide a more nuanced interpretation of Muslims and Islam. As I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, it also brings into question the implied assumptions that audiences are seen to only want negative stories about Muslims.

The second difficulty with positive stories relates to their framing and how they can end up reinforcing the very same negative representations of Muslims they claim to balance out. As broadsheet journalist Karen highlighted:

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.

Karen asserts that by deliberately seeking out positive stories, journalists continue to marginalise the 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 editor emeritus Ian Macgregor referred the Home Affairs Committee to look at the "very positive articles" about "the difficulties facing Muslim people, or Muslim women, in society" (HA 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 (HA 2018). Rather than counteracting the negative images of Muslims in the press, these examples can be 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 account, journalist Amanda 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 kind of ... it's been hugely well received by everyone, 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.

Amanda's own 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. On the other hand, Poole and Williamson (2021) 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, 2021).

### **The Good Muslim/Bad Muslim**

Rather than displace negative representations, Hall (1997) highlights how positive representations can be based on the same binaries that differentiate Muslims from the rest of British society. In Gramscian terms, this reflects how "the 'prize-giving' activities of

individuals and groups, etc, must also be incorporated in the conception of the Law” so that the moderate Muslim is rewarded for ““praiseworthy and meritorious activity”, whilst those labelled fundamentalists are “punished”” (Gramsci, 1971: 247). As Meer, Dwyer and Modood (2010) point out, this is even though the terms ‘moderate’ and ‘fundamentalist’ themselves are both subjective and context specific.

Journalists and editors’ accounts of positive stories can also 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:

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. (HA 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, columnist Sarwat similarly pointed 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”. A similar theme could be seen in the interview with broadsheet columnist James:

In my own journalism coming from where I do, I listen very strongly to feminist Muslims and ex-Muslims Socialists liberals who are fighting if you like a two-front war. On the one hand they are up against white racism, the type you are describing. On the other hand, they're fighting reactionary ultra conservative and really quite threatening versions of Islam with some bravery, because however small the risk, their lives are in danger. So those are the people I most admire and so if you've got some kind of controversy, who do I listen to? Some news stories come up, I won't just say what do I think. I will phone my comrades to use old fashioned words and say well you know, come on, what do you make of all this and listen to what they say.

Rather than only viewing Muslims according to a “logic of pure alterity”, Tyrer (2010) asserts that Islamophobic representations “code” Muslims according to “degrees of difference from the universal white male” (p.102). As mentioned in Chapter 2, representations of ‘good’ Muslims in this sense 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, as seen in James' account above. Morey and Yaqin (2010) suggest that negative stereotypes and the call for positive representation are "inherently dialogical" as they both contribute towards reductive representations of Muslims (p.148). As they explain:

We are not talking about a situation where bad stereotype clashes with good stereotype, leading to a synthesis (that is, accurate, 'realistic' representation). Rather, the necessities of certain political discourses help to give the form to representation. (Morey and Yaqin, 2010: 148)

This can be further reflected in my interview with MCB's Miqdaad:

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. If you are a lazy Muslim who just sits in front of the TV, you shouldn't have to be a Sadiq Khan or Mishal Hussain or Mo Salah to be respected. 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.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry in colonial discourse can add further depth to the concept of the 'good Muslim' as a way of understanding how Muslims are both 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" (Bhabha, 1994: 91). Mimicry in media representation can therefore involve the accommodation of the Muslimness of the good Muslim who favours liberal values while rejecting the Islamic traits of the bad Muslim.

## Conclusions

This chapter has examined how negative representations of Muslims can be reproduced through journalists' own common sense understandings of what Muslims represent. This can further lead Muslim-related stories to be framed in certain ways, drawing on particular language and imagery to privilege certain interpretations of Muslims while marginalising others. Hall et al. (1978) suggest that these structured forms of communication have become almost invisible, "so taken for granted, so deeply embedded in the very communication forms which are employed" (p.67). My findings reflect some of the later conclusions from Holohan and Poole's (2011) *Muslims in the European Mediascape* project. Journalists were similarly seen to report on Muslims from within "a narrative of integration that celebrates Britishness, while at the same time pushes to the margins of society those who fail to accept this story of liberal tolerance" (Holohan, 2014: 42). This chapter also provides some support for the findings of Opratko's study of how Austrian journalists reproduce the liberal Islamophobia that they themselves have internalised.

Hall (1972) sees this consensus as providing journalists with "an outer horizon, a set of boundaries to 'what is normal, expected, understood, taken for granted'" (p.12). In other words, the journalist 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 (Hall, 1972: 12). In this way, this chapter does appear to provide some support for Hall's claim that news production will incline (rather than guarantee) journalists to reproduce certain 'common-sense' interpretations about Muslims. By viewing this process as unconscious, however, Hall's conceptualisation of the media cannot account for the underlying tensions that emerged from my analysis. Rather than being unaware of how common sense ideas of Muslims lead to their negative representation in press coverage, the journalists I interviewed were highly conscious of the issue of negative Muslim representations and how they themselves, their peers and editors, and their newspapers contribute to this bias. By recognising journalists as conscious but conflicted agents aware of the bias that is reproduced in their newspapers, it starts to become possible to account for the contradictions to negative Muslim representation that also co-exist within British press coverage. Although journalists might not be directly 'obliged' to reproduce negative representations of Muslims, when this common-sense is also seen to be favoured by the audiences they write for, it can further act as a 'warrant' for this reproduction (Hall, 1972:12). I explore this further in the next chapter by considering how the journalist-audience



relationship and the perceived commercial appeal of negative Muslim representations influence the way journalists report on Muslim-related stories in the British press.

## **Chapter 6: Problematizing Audiences**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter focused on how journalists and editors made sense of the issue of negative Muslim representation in the British press. In particular, the analysis reflected on how common sense understandings of Muslims and their perceived problematic positioning within liberal British society contributed to the reproduction of this central narrative in media content. All the journalists I interviewed were very conscious of how this central narrative dominated British press coverage, and most felt highly conflicted about how this propagated the negative representation of Muslims. In the tensions that the journalists themselves projected when talking about Muslim representation, it became possible to witness how media practices can serve to reinforce negative common sense ideas about Muslims, even when journalists themselves are critical of this practice. At the same time, this also indicates the potential role that journalists' own very conscious critique can play as a driving force for seeking out alternative ways of reporting on Muslim-related stories.

One of the key emerging themes from the previous chapter related to the centrality of the journalists' sense of what their audiences wanted in terms of stories involving Muslims. While many believed that audiences desired to read negative stories about Muslims, others challenged this viewpoint by demonstrating how positive stories could engage (and to some extent educate) audiences by presenting an alternative perspective that reflected the multidimensionality and heterogeneity of Britain's diverse Muslim communities. This conception of audiences, and what audiences want when it comes to stories involving Muslims, is particularly important as it has a significant influence on how journalists report on stories. For this reason, this chapter engages in a deeper examination of how journalists' conceptualisations of their audiences can both contribute to the reproduction of negative Muslim representation and account for contradictions within media coverage on Muslims.

In this chapter, I begin by demonstrating how market-led ideas of what audiences want to read about when it comes to Muslims can lead to the reproduction of sensationalist, and often polarising media content. Competition from social media further exacerbates this demand, leading journalists to become constrained in terms of challenging these narratives and producing counter-narratives. Tensions and contradictions arise in the accounts of journalists, particularly as most view social media as a negative influence on the values of traditional journalism and question whether these types of negative narratives are in the best interests of

their audiences and of wider British society. By unpacking these tensions regarding how journalists make sense of their relationships with, and professional commitment to, their audiences, it is possible to see how a different conceptualisation of audiences, and of the wider British public, can lead journalists towards more diverse ways of reporting on Muslims.

### **Pandering to Readers' Prejudices**

According to Hall (1974a), the media is most consistently regulated by its sense of its audience and what journalists believe this audience want to read. 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 (Lashmar, 2019; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013; Poole, 2002). My analysis indicated that many of the journalists I interviewed, and particularly those from minority or Muslim backgrounds, also strongly believed that British newspapers represented Muslims in a way that reflected the existing anti-Muslim prejudices of their readers. Muslim journalist Sadia, for example, commented:

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 they do - which is 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. For as much as I hate it, they do reflect the general country.

This perspective was similarly echoed by online journalist Amina:

I mean 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.

In these accounts, Amina and Sadia are making very serious indictments not only about readers but about wider British society and the prejudices they hold about Muslims. Yet in both cases, 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 as compelled to produce coverage that feeds the prejudices of their readers. This suggests that the desire for negative Muslim-related stories comes primarily

from audiences, rather than from journalists pushing these narratives into the minds of a passive audience, as broadsheet journalist Andrew commented:

So, it's an accumulation, it's about drip, drip, drip [...] 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, I think.

Although the newspapers in question might argue that stories on Muslims lend themselves to these prejudices as they most often involve fear-generating topics such as terrorism, Poole (2011) argues that there is also a commercial imperative that leads to the salience of these types of stories and the often sensationalist reporting that accompanies them. This in turn serves to intensify a climate of fear and suspicion of the Muslim 'Other'. Across my data, journalists commented on the commercial, 'entertainment' value associated with stories involving Muslims that served to amplify the existing fears and anxieties of audiences. As media campaigner Miqdaad observed:

I think there is definitely an element of knowing what sells [...] So, this element to me is not like the sensationalist side. 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 it or creating it. Then that's a problem.

Broadsheet journalist Brendan similarly discussed 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.

Examples of this could be seen across the interviews in terms of the framing of Muslim-related stories. When talking about terrorism stories, for example, tabloid journalist Shabir highlighted how "there is fear, and that fear needs to be accentuated. It grips the readers". Tabloid journalist Stephen discussed how media coverage of Muslims was "clearly digging in very deep into anxieties about immigration". This position was also elaborated by broadsheet journalist Patrick:

I've been in journalism for the last 30 years and there is something instinctively wrong about journalism in that that people will respond more to fears. If you stoke the fears of readers, you know, Muslim evasion of Britain, immigration, house prices to go through the roof. Those fears, it's stirring up fears, crime waves all these things are the kind of things that make people more likely to buy your newspaper.

Altheide (1997) refers to this type of reporting as the 'problem frame', where complex events are set up as a type of morality play to provide more entertaining news reporting. The problem frame further serves to reinforce the audience's existing common sense understandings of the nature of the problem through fear. In particular, the format of the problem frame 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: 654). In this way:

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. (Altheide, 1997: 665)

The increasing emphasis on the entertainment value of news has reinforced the pressures on journalists to reproduce the problem frame and its production of narratives of fear (Altheide, 1997), even when it comes to stories involving Muslims outside of terrorism. As tabloid journalist Shabir explained:

Because sometimes what happens with journalists is that they cannot find a story on an extremist group or on an extremist hate preacher. Because 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.

Broadsheet journalist Karen similarly reflected on how this type of problem framing became gratuitously applied to any topic involving Muslims:

It's all the different headlines – so there are toilets only for Muslims, swimming pools only for Muslims, Muslim only kitchen equipment [...] it's absolutely extraordinary.

In line with Said's Orientalism, the morality plays at the heart of the problem frame rely upon the audience's familiarity with common sense narratives about Muslims that can be reinforced through the media in "an attractive fear-package" (Altheide, 1997: 655). As the problem frame often shifts into a discourse of 'blame' (as discussed in my previous chapter), the selling of 'fear' becomes central to the process of 'Othering' in Muslim representation. In this way, Muslim-related stories reinforce 'Othering' in a way that is synchronously reassuring for readers (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010). As tabloid journalist Martin highlighted:

It's about pandering to your readers' prejudices, giving back to them in terms of what they already think of them [Muslims]. So, it's like a signalling to say we are on your side, you are under threat, but you know we will always stand by you.

### **The Public Idiom**

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 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" (Hall et al., 1978: 65). The transformation of a news item into the public idiom elevates the story into a valid matter for public concern. 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. 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 negative commentary on Muslims. Meer (2006: 36) describes these columnists as "print media public intellectuals (PMPIs)", who hold authoritative positions in the British press based on their abilities to set agendas for public debate and influence public opinion when it comes to Muslims. While some of these columnists can be well-respected in the industry, Meer finds their commentary often propagates negative common sense ideas about Muslims under the veneer of journalistic intellectualism. The columnists themselves may approach the issues they write about from a particular stance (for example, as a secular liberal or as a conservative nationalist), but their columns ultimately serve to reinforce exclusive accounts of belonging and Britishness to the

exclusion of Muslims (Meer, 2006). A similar critique was given by broadsheet journalist Francesca in relation to one well-regarded secular liberal columnist she worked with:

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.

Francesca spoke very highly of this columnist in terms of her diligence and commitment to her work. Yet when it came to Islam and Muslims, her columns came from a static and biased position based on her own personal views on religion and Muslims in particular.

By featuring in mainstream newspapers, the anti-Muslim views of these commentators enter public discourse using the public idiom in their claim to authoritatively speak on behalf of the readers and the wider public. This serves to stretch the boundaries of acceptable narratives about Muslims in mainstream discourse (Mondon and Winter, 2017), making space within the discursive structure of the British press for more explicit negative Muslim representations as reflective of the common sense positions of readers (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery, 2013). As broadsheet journalist Andrew similarly observed:

I mean the argument that Rod Liddle has some kind of safety valve, that he can throw out far right extremist Islamophobic views that are 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.

When it comes to opinion columns, Hall et al. further assert how:

this "taking the public voice", this form of articulating what the vast majority of the public are supposed to think, this enlisting of public legitimacy for a view which the newspaper itself is expressing, represents the media in its most active, campaigning role – the point where the media most actively and openly shape and structure public opinion. (Hall et al., 1978: 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. Most of the journalists I interviewed were highly critical of those columnists who had become notorious for their inflammatory, anti-Muslim content. Most felt that they brought the newspapers involved into disrepute and went against the very values of public interest central to journalism’s role in society. As Muslim columnist Sarwat shared about anti-Muslim columnist Rod Liddle:

I detest everything he writes. I’m not going to ever say I’m glad he’s writing it because I’m not glad he’s writing it. I think people like him have made the public space deeply uncivilised in recent years.

Speaking of the same commentator, broadsheet journalist Andrew 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 Rod Liddle and this industry of manufactured outrage. Personally, I think that he debases his newspaper as a title. I think there have been times where he does cross that line. But equally he has been vilified for it. That rapid Twitter and social media (feedback) allows that vilification to take place now in a very rapid and somewhat frightening fashion, or an overwhelming backlash can occur in a way that couldn’t before. Is that a sufficient counter, is that a sufficient sanction on him or not, you can debate that.

Press Association journalist Amanda was also highly critical of anti-Muslim columnists and this negative association they gave to the journalistic profession:

I’m thinking back to the column in The Sun, you know when Fatima Manji was wearing the hijab after the terror attack and how utterly awful that was. 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.



From the accounts above, a tension emerges in terms of how the concept of audiences relates to the responsibilities of journalists and how they report on stories. While a commentator such as Rod Liddle may claim to speak in the public's interests, other journalists view his columns as the antithesis of this, contributing instead to misinformation, hatred, and discrimination against Muslims. Other journalists also 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. Freelance columnist Leila, for example, emphasised how opinion pieces could provide more of the historical and social context that was often missing from news articles on Muslims:

I think 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. I think 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 as well 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.

A rich diversity of opinion columns was seen to challenge readers' perceptions, particularly if they presented a perspective that ran counter to their existing beliefs. As journalist Brendan discussed in relation to the range of columnists from his own broadsheet newspaper:

I think we have a really interesting diverse bunch of people who write against each other. 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. I think we have some brilliant columnists who write really challenging stuff and I think that fostering that level of debate is really important.

This view was echoed by broadsheet journalist Francesca:

I have always really liked the idea of the columnist and the sensibility that was brought to bear on a different subject every week. That was really enlightening. I always personally wanted to learn a lot from a column. My favourite columnists give me a lot of information that they've gathered but I trust them enough and their expertise. That's what I value, expertise like that.

Finally, for some of the Muslim journalists I interviewed, opinion columns provided opportunities to contribute from a Muslim perspective on news events and stories. As freelance columnist Hasina shared about her own work:

I often write blogs and columns where I have been able to express myself better [...] I draw on personal experience because I have experienced Islamophobia in the past. And I do genuinely feel that representations do influence society at large, certain representations of Muslims especially when Islamophobia is very rampant. Also, 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. I thought you know I'm not saying that everything needs to be rosy about Muslims but I think there should be a balance. That's really what I try to convey.

The analysis so far has shown how the journalist-audience relationship can have an impact on how journalists report on stories involving Muslims. If audiences are seen to want existing prejudices confirmed, or as hungry for sensationalist and fear-generating content, then it appears that journalists will be more obliged (on a commercial level at least) to reproduce negative Muslim representation. As the discussion on opinion columns shows, however, a different conceptualisation of the journalist-audience relationship, one where the journalist consciously attempts to provide more nuanced and diverse perspectives on Muslims, can contribute counter-narratives that can balance out the anti-Muslim bias in the British press. Despite the best intentions of individual journalists, however, the choice of which path to choose can become increasingly restricted by market imperatives, particularly when newspapers must compete with social media.

### **The Impact of Social Media**

The pressures on journalists to conform to the perceived prejudices of readers and to supply sensationalist and anxiety-reproducing stories on Muslims was seen across the interviews to be particularly exacerbated by digital news-sharing and competition from social media. Local journalist Thomas, for example, reflected on how the media's "online revolution" (Lecheler and Kruikemeier, 2016: 167) had impacted his own journalistic practice:

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. It's all about sharing, it's all about engaging people online.

A similar account was provided by local journalist Catherine:

I guess you're also selling something as well. 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.

As digital news and social media increasingly dominate the press industry (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2019), stories that focus on engaging provocative content are seen to draw in the attention of fickle readers (Richardson and Stanyer, 2011). This has also had a considerable amplifying impact on the negative representation of Muslims through social media and internet forums (Törnberg and Törnberg, 2016). Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) report that social media acts as an "online amplifier" that reproduces and intensifies the existing negative narratives about Muslims found in traditional media (p.134). 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). Web analytics are used to track and monitor the preferences of audiences (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015), leading to the strengthening of British newspapers' desires to align to readers' perceived prejudices. In this way, as broadsheet journalist Patrick highlights, anti-Muslim stories can be viewed as what he calls "traffic gold":

I have to accept that there's a thing about the business model. Now on every single story that we do, we are 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 I think almost inevitably there will be more of a drive towards a rating sort of game where we compete in ratings terms. And I think this would risk having the most damaging effect on modern journalism, on what we do, that we just seek this sort of traffic gold.

These accounts highlight the tensions that journalists face by the need to produce content that is commercially viable and able to attract audiences through social media. Audiences' preferences, and the ensuing popularity of certain types of stories, can now be monitored through web analytics (Duffy, Ling and Tandoc, 2018). This means that there is a constant pressure on journalists to produce content that is sensationalist and attention-grabbing. At the same time, as Tandoc and Thomas (2015) point out, this can result in a contradiction between journalism's own communitarian ideals and their submission to the market rationale, where the stories journalists produce may not be for the benefit of the 'common good'. This was particularly the case with the socially mediated sharing of fake news on Muslims, and journalists' concerns about audiences' abilities to distinguish between fact and fiction. As broadsheet journalist Patrick highlighted:

Now in the age of social media and the internet, you know it's all about clicks. If you say certain things, then more people will click on that piece. 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 you will present people with facts, and they will just say I don't believe you.

Broadsheet journalist Brendan was also highly critical of this level of "democratically dysfunctional and misinformed news sharing behaviour" amongst the public (Chadwick, Vaccari and O'Loughlin, 2018: 4257). As he commented:

My opinion is that this culture is really dangerous because it leaves people really ill-informed. I have friends and relatives who share things on Facebook that I will go 'I'm sure that's a fucking lie', and 10 minutes' research will prove that is a lie. Yet people just read a few lines and they make a judgement, they share it, look at this, have you seen this! I think people need to step back and read more; I mean people have stopped thinking.

Similarly, freelance journalist Hasina voiced her concern that readers were losing the ability to separate fact from fiction when it came to media coverage of Muslims:

In this point of time there are issues with representation and Islamophobia, there's not many diverse representations of Muslims in the media that can help with what's going on in society. And there is a link between what people view, because 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.

### **The Clash of Commercial Pressures with Journalistic Ethics**

To rationalise their critique of social media, journalists and editors attempted to draw a distinct demarcation to separate social media from 'real' journalism. Most 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 when it came to issues involving Muslims, encouraging groupthink and echo chambers. As tabloid journalist Roger observed:

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. Now there is a whole splintering of opinion groups that we see, you know different factions.

Similar critiques were reflected in the accounts of other interviewed journalists:

Some news organisations are pandering to that. [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. Other newspapers are also pandering to that populism but that is to be expected. (*Tabloid journalist Shabir*)

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. So, it's a business thing here. (*Freelance columnist Sarwat*)

In these accounts, the interviewed journalists appear resigned to the realities of journalism in the social media age, where market competition pushes newspapers towards even more "savage" and "populist" ways of reporting. At the same time, as I discussed above, the pressures faced by journalists to conform their practices to the demands of social media

audiences by adopting similarly populist styles and techniques aimed at maximising audience share ultimately lead to the reproduction of negative Muslim representation. This also makes it difficult for journalists to find spaces where counter-narratives on Muslims can be published. In turn, this presented a dilemma for journalists when it came to stories involving Muslims of how to reconcile their own journalistic ethics with the demands of the market. Freelance journalist Raj reflected on the dilemma in his own work:

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 [as a columnist]. Then as a result of that, you feel that you are justified saying what you're saying and your views harden a lot.

Existing media research appears to be in line with this analysis. Bartholomé, Lecheler and de Vresse (2015), for example, find that while journalists tend to deliberately 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. The tensions that arise between market demands and the demands of the democratic role of the media have also been highlighted in the reporting of religion and conflict. Accordingly, Marsden and Savigny (1990) find that the over-riding principles of liberal democratic capitalism can be seen to privilege news that can be 'sold' to audiences and therefore to advertisers. This prioritisation of market demands often leads to the media's existing discourse of 'Otherness' when it comes to stories involving Muslims to continue to be reproduced and unchallenged (Marsden and Savigny, 1990).

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

The chapter so far has discussed how the importance that newspapers place on their audiences, particularly in the social media age of journalism, contributes to the reproduction of negative Muslim representation. Journalists are under pressure to produce stories that generate clicks and shares, and as a result, are often pushed towards adopting framing strategies that emphasise fear and anxiety when it comes to Muslims. Most journalists agree, however, that this is not in the best interests of the British public and often results in increasing polarisation, hatred and discrimination against Muslims. When it comes to journalism in an egalitarian society that accommodates difference, Tandoc and Thomas (2015: 251) draw a line between journalists' responsibilities to give audiences what they need as opposed to what they want. While audiences should always be enabled to choose what media content to consume, they argue that journalists also have a responsibility as part of their communitarian role to provide content that conforms to journalistic standards and mitigates civic atrophy rather than encourages it (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015). Such an approach involves reconceptualising the relationship between journalists and their audiences to one where audiences view Muslims as an integral part of their own communities, rather than through the lens of difference and fear.

### **Disrupting the Public Idiom**

Rather than seeing representation in the media as a one-way transmitter, Hall (1997) states that it should be understood more as a form of dialogue that is sustained through shared cultural codes between the media and its audiences. It is through these "cultural 'maps' of the social world" that journalists define for audiences what significant events are happening and provide interpretations of how they should be understood (Hall et al., 1978: 57). The discussion in both this chapter and the preceding chapter has contended that if these cultural maps are such that Muslims are viewed as problematic and potentially dangerous 'Others', then it seems inevitable that negative Muslim representations will continue to be reproduced unchallenged. This view was echoed in my interview with freelance columnist Leila:

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.

Hall et al. (1978: 58) further maintain that our sense of belonging to British society comes from the sharing of cultural knowledge and the same “maps of meaning”. When news events are ‘mapped’ by the media, it is on the assumption that readers share the same cultural frameworks with which to make sense of stories. As I will argue later in this chapter, this does not mean all audiences will interpret Muslim-related stories in the exact same way, but that the basic consensual frameworks of difference and of what ‘We’ represent as opposed to what ‘They’ represent will always be implied. A similar position was shared by broadsheet journalist Patrick in his call to fellow journalists to find other ways of telling Muslim-related stories:

If you want to have your bigotry reinforced, then newspapers can do that. Obviously, at its core the human conscious works in various ways. We bond with people like us, and we want to protect ourselves from outside threats. 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, and they can feel more powerful.

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. This call is essentially, therefore, a question about whether the audiences that act as a guide for journalists should be viewed as consumers or as citizens, and about the role that journalists should accordingly play. Tandoc and Thomas similarly 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? (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015: 248)

To even begin to answer these questions, it is necessary to unpack how audiences are understood by journalists and how this understanding contributes to the way they report on stories involving Muslims.



## Who is the ‘Audience’?

The discussion so far has developed the idea that 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 anti-Muslim opinion columnists and stories shared through social media. These negative representations are seen to reflect the common sense ideas of audiences and the British public. 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 when asked about anti-Muslim bias in their respective papers. This can be seen in the following accounts (*HA 2018*):

If I carried some of that stuff, I would lose readers; it would not be very sensible. (*Lloyd Embley, Group Editor-in-Chief, The Mirror*)

We don’t always get it right, and I certainly think if we have got it wrong, they [the readers] will let us know about it. (*Ted Young, Editor, the Metro*)

A fuller account can be seen in the testimony of *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. (*HA 2018*)

These accounts provide an interesting contrast to the journalists’ interviews in terms of how readers’ prejudices themselves were seen to drive anti-Muslim coverage. It is possible that contextual factors may have partially contributed to this shift in perspective in editors, especially as they were under pressure when being questioned by the inquiry committee about the charge of an anti-Muslim bias in their newspapers. By framing the readers as a

mechanism for holding the newspaper to account for any discriminatory or misleading articles, the editors sought to deflect blame from questions about how they were monitoring their own newspaper content for anti-Muslim bias. Yet the notion that readers are critical rather than seeking confirmation of their existing prejudices was also reflected across the accounts of some of the more right-leaning newspaper journalists I interviewed. For example, tabloid journalist Roger stressed the following about readers:

People can make up their own minds you know. They're all quite capable of making their own minds up. To be honest, half the time you write something that they will agree with. If you don't balance it out, they will say they disagree with this.

Similarly, broadsheet journalist Brendan maintained:

I think if you pick up a paper like [ours], you are going to be a reasonably educated person. And you are going to have the capacity to disagree with what you read, or be informed by what you read, or be provoked by what you read.

Contrary to the arguments put forward at the start of this chapter, these accounts suggest that readers are seen to be more literate and nuanced in their media consumption (Gillespie et al., 2010) rather than simply seeking out entertaining, sensationalist content on Muslims. Said (1997) similarly points to the existence 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, particularly when it came to the comments sections that appeared at the bottom of Muslim-related stories. Right-leaning journalist Martin, for example, spoke critically about the readers comments below one of the stories we looked at together:

I would have hoped that I would have turned the comments off on that automatically. I mean obviously the comments are the most extreme furnace of hate that you can imagine, but interestingly that seems to be true to me as well when I was at [a local paper] which is essentially a left-wing paper. 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.

Local journalist Catherine similarly shared the backlash from readers she received on stories about Muslims or Islam:

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. 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.

In a study of online comments from British newspaper readers, Richardson and Stanyer (2011) find most of the comments posted in response to news columns on immigration, race and religious difference to be “shrill and/or reactionary”, frequently drawing upon racist assumptions and failing “even basic standards of reasonableness” (p.995). This was seen to be true across newspaper genres, and as one journalist pointed out, liberal left-leaning papers such as *The Guardian* were not immune:

When we first set up comment is free at The Guardian, there were hopes that the discussions would be informed, polite, generous, with a community of readers, all being nice to each other. But in fact, it just quickly degenerated into just abuse, and it became more and more toxic.

How then can we account for this contradictory picture of newspaper audiences as on one hand, holding prejudicial and negative views about Muslims and on the other, being critical of newspapers that display this same bias. One answer comes from Billig (1996) who highlights how the idea that the common sense of an audience is unitary fails to recognise the contingent and contrary nature of common sense itself. Rather than seeing readers as individual citizens or consumers, I contend in this final section of the chapter that it is rather a construction of an “assumed audience” (Hall et al., 1978: 57), and an imagined British public which holds negative common sense ideas about Muslims, that drives the reproduction of negative representations and their perceived appeal. In turn, I consider how a hegemonic, construction of the public common sense stands in to signify how the British public views Muslims.

### **The (Re)Construction of the Audience**

This thesis has so far 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 existing common sense ideas and myths about the nature of Muslims and is seen to

be shared by journalists and their audiences. According to some of the journalists' accounts above, it would be possible to conclude that journalists 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. However, the discussion on how readers themselves are constructed by journalists and editors in my own data in relation to Muslim representation has shown some ambivalence and contradiction and requires further consideration.

Firstly, it is noteworthy that the readers' comments on articles referred to by both Catherine and Martin above were not from negative stories but from stories attempting to show Muslims and Islam in a positive light. The negative comments received were therefore not directly reflective of the stories they appeared under. Secondly, other journalists highlighted the presence of 'push-backs' to these anti-Muslim comments from other readers. As local journalist Elliot observed in relation to a story he had written about Muslim refugees:

There were pretty nasty comments from members of the public, some of which we had to hide. There were also comments from other members of the public, you know, calling them out for their views.

This indicates how 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 anti-Muslim prejudices. The difficulties in defining audiences have long been acknowledged in media research, and there has been a call to move away from ideas of audiences as unified entities (Ang, 1995). For this reason, it is more productive to consider how a more ideological construction of audiences contributes towards negative Muslim representations.

The role of the media is not simply to inform the public about what is happening in the world but, as Martin (2013) suggests, to determine how citizens might position themselves within the communicative space that is constructed through news production. He points to how this often involves the use of rhetorical strategies by newspapers around what constitutes 'the public' and public interest. By hailing the public into the newspaper's own identity, newspapers exercise their distinctive rhetorical power. This further serves to blur the boundaries between the newspaper and the audience in their claim to speak objectively in the public's interest (Martin, 2013: 28). Yet tangible definitions of the 'public' remain just as elusive as attempts to define how newspaper audiences read and interpret Muslim-related stories. 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)

Rather than considering negative Muslim representation as a means to pander to readers' existing prejudices, the ambivalent concept of 'the public' can help us understand how the media is legitimately able to reproduce negative representations involving Muslims in the ways discussed in the previous chapter. While newspapers will inevitably view their audiences as central to how they present news stories, several of my interviewees indicated that newspapers' misconceived assumptions about the prejudices of audiences act as drivers for negative, essentialist representations of Muslims. As broadsheet journalist Karen observed:

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.

Local journalist Ben further highlighted the dangers of making the assumptions that readers were only interested in essentialist and negative stories about Muslims:

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.

In line with my earlier discussion, Ben's account points to the importance of the responsibilities of the journalist to ensure that their readers do not have a limited, essentialist view of the world 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 consider the complexities of this relationship in terms of negative Muslim representation. Under his encoding/decoding model discussed in the literature chapter, Hall (2006) shows that audiences can react in different ways to news content, including directly rejecting it. While the encoding process involves some imposition of the hegemonic perspective in the form of 'taken-for-granted', common sense ideas, news texts can be

decoded independently from the wider ideological framework within which they appear (whether they end up being accepted or rejected) (Hall, 2006). A similar conceptualisation of the journalist-audience relationship when it came to Muslim-related stories was shared by freelance columnist Leila:

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. Well, 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. 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. Although the other side is very damaging as it does influence opinion and shape public debate, I think there's another really worrying and insidious side of those tropes that have circulated for decades without being updated and are still inserted into a lot of our coverage.

Leila's conflicted narrative shows that while she recognises that journalists often reproduce negative tropes and ideas that reinforce readers' existing beliefs, she also believes that there is scope to push the boundaries of that debate and introduce new perspectives and counter-narratives on stories involving Muslims.

In his critique of Hall's seemingly polysemic starting point regarding the way news is consumed by audiences, Philo (2009) argues that this approach risks greatly underestimating the power of the media to legitimise and rationalise hegemonic interpretations as common sense. As a result, even when journalists put forward alternative, non-hegemonic counter-narratives, audiences may still actively choose to interpret them using the hegemonic perspective. This could help explain why negative comments are just as likely to appear under positive stories on Muslims as under negative stories as mentioned earlier. As audiences can also appear critical of the newspapers themselves, this would suggest that the power and influence of the media over public understandings and debate acts implicitly rather than explicitly (Philo, 2009). This more implicit internalisation by audiences of media representations as common sense could be evidenced in journalists' own understandings of how audiences consumed stories involving Muslims. As online journalist Amina observed:

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. But in the rural areas, out in the sticks somewhere, if that's the only kind of information that they're getting, then of course they're going to think that Muslim men are radicalised to become terrorists or whatever. 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.

Similarly, broadsheet journalist Karen reflected:

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 media - or press more than media - to further a different agenda. That's what makes me so uncomfortable.

Other journalists highlighted how the language used by the media became amplified in public discourse, reflecting how media coverage can influence readers' views on Muslims. As broadsheet journalist Patrick recalled from watching a YouTube video of a tirade of Islamophobic abuse from a Black woman:

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. I would like to think as a Black person that she would be thinking oh god, remember us, they used to say that about us. 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. It was quite a depressing thing because you think if a Black woman can take on these lies and distortions and stereotypes, and churn them out like that, then my God what are white people going to be like, how far is it going to white people?

For Patrick as a journalist from a mixed heritage, it was even more dismaying that someone whose community has also experienced racism first-hand would adopt the anti-Muslim language of the media.

The above accounts 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 in relation to the need to conform to readers' prejudices.

### **Conclusions**

The focus of this chapter has been to understand the influence of audiences on how journalists produce stories involving Muslims, and how this can serve to both reproduce and challenge negative Muslim representation in the British press. The analysis has highlighted how journalists are placed under pressure by market-led ideas of what audiences want to read about when it comes to Muslim-related stories. They further face a wider commercial imperative to produce sensationalist and often polarising media coverage that can compete with social media content. Despite these constraints, many of the journalists I interviewed endeavoured to make space for counter-narratives about these stories, enabling the presence of some alternative perspectives to enter mainstream media discourse. These endeavours were mainly driven by a strong critique of social media's impact on public discourse, and by the need for journalism to consider its own professional commitment to public interest.

A closer examination of journalists' ambivalent conceptualisation of 'audiences' suggests that negative representations of Muslims can become justified according to the desires and demands of an imaginary, more ideological construction of the 'public' and what it wants when it comes to Muslims. This suggests that a reconceptualisation of what the British public wants in terms of media coverage on Muslims could therefore lead to different ways of reporting, that move away from positioning Muslims as the problematic 'Other' in British society. This is an important finding, which I will examine in much more detail in Chapter 8.

Hall (1972) himself would argue that the ideological conceptualisation of the 'public' under hegemony serves as a means of winning consent or acceptance of certain interpretations of Muslims. Consensus is seen to be agreed by the public at large, rather than being something that itself has been "powerfully pre-structured" by those in power, who invoke the concept



constantly as a means to legitimise their actions (Hall, 1972: 13). The discussion in this chapter reflects how newspapers can also use the imaginary ‘public’ to justify and reproduce negative Muslim representation. While journalists are themselves placed under pressure by the commercial imperative to sell newspapers that appeal to this ‘public’, their own commitment to public interest can at times over-ride this imperative by considering what the public need, rather than what they want (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015). It is for this reason that the media-audience relationship itself also becomes a site for cultural struggle (Ang, 2006) as different ideas about Muslims compete to gain public consent.

As a central component to the ideology of journalism, the public service ideal is a driving force when it comes to journalistic practice (Deuze, 2005). 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 discussed in my theoretical chapter, it is often in the norms and routines that journalists rely upon to achieve this role that the media’s orientation towards dominant definitions can become realised (Hall et al., 1978). I examine this argument further in the next chapter by considering how the codes and conventions of journalism can stifle journalistic agency and encourage the reproduction of negative representations of Muslims in the British press. Again, rather than their unconscious acceptance of these codes and conventions, my analysis also reveals spaces for contingency where journalists’ conscious critique of their own professional practices can lead to alternative ways of reporting on stories involving Muslims.

## **Chapter 7: Reconceptualising the Journalistic Ideology**

### **Introduction**

In the previous two analysis chapters, I have reflected on how negative Muslim representations can be understood through the influence of common sense ideas in terms of how journalists write stories involving Muslims and how their audiences are seen to interpret them. These common sense ideas position Muslims from a starting point of being problematic outsiders in British society. This rationalisation is also evidenced in many of the studies on Muslim representation discussed in the literature chapter, where a process of ‘Othering’ emerges as a common theme within media content.

The last chapter also considered how the ambivalent nature of the journalist-audience relationship, and how different ideological constructions of audiences as the ‘public’, can incline journalists towards different ways of reporting on Muslim-related stories. The analysis suggested that those journalists who view audiences primarily as consumers will be more inclined to reproduce negative representations to sell audiences the sensationalist and polarising content they desire. On the other hand, those journalists who recognise audiences primarily as citizens may be more likely to seek out spaces to push forward alternative, more nuanced perspectives about Muslims that encourage complex, civic debate.

Furthermore, the previous chapter highlighted how this latter perspective was primarily driven by journalists’ perceptions about their professional, ideological commitment to public interest and the common-good. In this chapter, I take a closer examination of the journalistic ideology and how this can contribute to the ways that Muslims are represented in the British Press. The chapter highlights the tensions that exist within journalism itself between its ideological role in society and the realities of news production when it comes to Muslim-related stories. In support of Hall, the chapter considers how different values of journalism in turn – its truth-seeking role and its commitment to objectivity and balance and to freedom of expression – can serve to reproduce rather than mitigate any anti-Muslim bias within media coverage. Where my data diverges from Hall’s concept of the journalistic ideology, however, is in journalists’ own conscious critique of how these values can serve to reproduce negative Muslim representation. Tensions arise within journalists’ accounts when these procedural norms and values contradict other values central to journalism’s role in society. While my interviews demonstrate the high regard given to these values as core components of the journalistic identity, rather than fetishising the values, many of the interviewed journalists

also emphasised the importance of applying their own conscious judgements to the application of these values in their reporting. As such, this chapter does not reflect a dismissal of the internal merits of journalistic values such as freedom of speech, objectivity, and balance (Morrison and Tumber, 1988) but a further call for journalists to exercise their own agential judgements as to their applicability to stories involving Muslims (and beyond).

### **‘Truth’ and The Journalistic Ideology**

In my theoretical chapter, I discussed how journalism was viewed as a process of socialisation, where specific practices and conventions themselves served to reproduce dominant interpretations about society while keeping journalists themselves in a position of “structured subordination” (Hall et al., 1978: 59). At the heart of the journalistic ideology lies the philosophy of what Hall (1972: 11) terms “professional retreatism”. Journalists are seen to distance themselves from the stories they report upon, drawing upon professional codes and conventions to provide a non-interventionist and detached account of ‘reality’ (Hanitzsch, 2011). In particular, Hall sees ideals such as public interest, truth, and press freedom as providing a “normative dignity” (Hall, 1974b: 276) for journalists as a validated and authoritative source of knowledge rather than as reproducers of dominant ideologies. Journalists are therefore able to fulfil their important hegemonic role in society by appearing to be independent public servants with no agenda or interests of their own.

As the previous chapter has already discussed the concept of ‘public interest’, in this chapter, I start by focusing on journalism’s perceived truth-telling role. Journalism’s truth-seeking role can also be seen as inextricably bound to its commitment to public interest and the common good. Broersma (2010) explains how:

as a trustee of the public, it [journalism] professionally reports and critically investigates social reality. For the common good, it distinguishes facts from fiction, lies and biased comments. As such, this promise of truthfulness is the basis for the social code shared by journalists and their reading audience. (p.25)

It was when I asked my interviewees about their own personal journey into journalism that the concept of truth was most often articulated with ideas of public interest and journalism’s role in society. Journalists spoke about the need to “tell the truth about things” (*tabloid journalist Stephen*) and to “keep the public informed of the truth” (*freelance journalist Hasina*). This could also be seen in the reflections of broadsheet journalist Andrew about why he joined the profession:

There are those who actually want to get involved in intervening with society and use journalism not only as a way of documenting and chronicling society, but also highlighting and changing 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.

The imagery evoked towards the end of Andrew's account reflects connotations of journalism as the "inheritor of enlightenment values" (Anderson, 2019: 8), with a mission to actively seek out truth through knowledge. This perspective was also similarly reflected in my interview with columnist James:

I believe, you know as Novikov said, you can challenge my opinion and I shrug, challenge my facts and I reach for a dictionary. You've got to get your facts right and you've got to believe in truth, without inverted commas, incidentally, Nadia. I think one thing that Trump and everything has destroyed is casual postmodernism. 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 and looking at what else they write, they are not very interesting.

James' account above shows that, even as a columnist, he alludes to a purity of journalism in terms of the 'truth', directly rejecting any (very vague on my part) postmodernist suggestion of the truth as relative. His conceptualisation of journalism is intertextually linked with that of the Russian writer Novikov, who like James, was seen to have an "unbounded faith in the narrative process, believing that a narrator will always and everywhere tell the truth [...] as an instrument of enlightenment and correction" (Morris, 2000: 112).

The interview with James further articulates truth in journalism with facts and accuracy and this articulation was similarly reflected across several of the interviews in relation to how to report on stories involving Muslims. For example, broadsheet journalist Francesca discussed:

When it comes to writing news stories, you try to sort of establish facts. 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. And 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.

Earlier in this thesis, I have argued that when it comes to Muslim representations, the media defines, rather than reproduces, reality (Hall, 2006). As Hall (2006) elaborates, representations are not reflections but involve the active process of signification, of “selecting and presenting, of structuring [...] [of] making things mean” (p.118). While most journalists are aware of this aspect of news production, news coverage continues to be presented as a discourse “capable of accurately describing or mirroring social reality” (Broersma, 2010: 26). A similar perspective was echoed by columnist 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, this is what that person thinks, it's a much more honest approach. People read it and they know that's what she thinks, that's what he thinks. Whereas you can read a news article in the *Sunday Telegraph*, and they'll give you all this stuff 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. So, the problem is not with the opinion people, the problem is with the news.

Broersma (2010) 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). He argues that instead 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 can act to “transform(s) an interpretation into truth - into a reality the public can act upon” (Broersma, 2010: 21).

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that despite the embedded relationship of the concept of ‘truth’ to journalism, most journalists recognised the problematic nature of this claim. Broadsheet journalist Francesca, for example, contended that while journalists should endeavour to get as close to the truth as possible, the end story will inevitably involve some form of interpretation and most likely, embellishment:

I feel very nervous of any journalist who says they are producing the truth. I think that's a kind of naivety which is really problematic, well that's a professional delusion. They spend a lot of time trying to get as close to a truth as possible - sometimes the best of

them - trying to establish as much of the facts as they 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.

While Francesca emphasises the need for journalists to get "as close to a truth as possible" (for example, through checking sources and facts), she also reflects on how other aspects of the news production process, such as the need to make it appeal to the audience (as discussed in the last chapter) can compromise this. Other journalists similarly highlighted how truth in terms of media coverage is often interpreted according to newspapers' own editorial agendas. Tabloid journalist Roger, for example, spoke about how different newspapers would present stories about knife crime:

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 (laughs) the truth is that one is just a different political viewpoint, and you go for whatever you go for.

Roger's account points to how the 'truth' about a story is rarely completely objective, and often depends on the viewpoint of the newspaper or journalist that reports on the story. This brings into question the concept that a 'true' version of events is possible and that journalists should guard against their own biases (or judgements) tainting how a story is reported. Yet this type of detachment is ultimately impossible as how a story is reported will inevitably be influenced by the stance of the newspaper in which it appears. This also falls in line with the discussion in my literature chapter on the different ways that different newspapers frame stories involving Muslims.

For journalism's "performative discourse" to be viewed as legitimate, it must have the infrastructure around it to give it the persuasive force necessary to convince the public that a particular representation of reality is a truthful one (Broersma, 2010: 27). In other words, the media's interpretations of news events must *appear* to be mimetic reproductions of those events. Just as 'the public' can be seen as an ideological construction that legitimises certain ways of reporting on stories involving Muslims (as discussed in the previous chapter), so

journalism's truth-telling role can be seen to enable certain representations of Muslims to be seen as 'truths' when they are, in fact, interpretations. By acknowledging the limitations of news production in terms of its truth-seeking role, it becomes more difficult for journalists to legitimise negative representations under the veneer of this ideological function. Recognising journalism as a performative discourse in this way can then serve to introduce some structural ambiguity into news reporting on Muslims, that itself brings into question journalism's own procedures concerning representation (Broersma, 2010: 31). This more introspective critical examination of journalism's truth-telling role when it comes to Muslim representation can be seen in the following account from columnist Leila:

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. And 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.

Similarly, tabloid journalist Martin commented:

There is an enormous degree of elasticity on what is considered accurate. At one very extreme end, there's absolute platonic objective truth and then at the other end, which seems to be closer to where IPSO operate, it's not *technically* wrong you know. The truth is so ridiculously complicated, and there's so many different ways in which something can be true, which probably sounds terrible. But there is a wide scope of what the truth and accuracy is which seems sort of counter intuitive, but it is the case in my experience.

A direct demonstration of how what Martin refers to as IPSO's equivalence of truth with 'accuracy' can act ideologically to suppress challenges to negative Muslim representation can be evidenced in the secondary data from the Home Affairs Inquiry. Throughout the data, the editors drew on notions of editorial accuracy to explain the presence of any potential anti-Muslim bias. As accuracy is the main criteria through which the press's regulatory body IPSO can judge whether an article fails the editorial standards of the British press industry, it became a means through which editors were able to dismiss claims of the reproduction of

negative Muslim representation in their newspapers. Most of the editors contended that inaccuracies in stories about Muslims - unlike claims of negative bias or discrimination - could be 'measured' to show if a newspaper displayed an anti-Muslim bias in its coverage. For example, *The Telegraph's* editor emeritus Ian MacGregor rejected claims that his newspaper had any such 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. (HA 2018)

Similarly, *The Sun's* managing editor Peter Clarkson dismissed the number of complaints of anti-Muslim bias that his newspaper had received by measuring them against the number of complaints upheld by IPSO's accuracy criteria:

It is not the number of complaints; it is how many are upheld and actually have merit. That is where it is a completely different picture. When you actually think of the percentage of upheld complaints compared with the amount of complaints that come in, it is infinitesimally small. *The Mail* and *The Sun* are probably some of the best at IPSO. (HA 2018)

Just as this chapter has earlier discussed how the concept of 'truth-seeking' can act to legitimise certain interpretations of Muslims while blurring their interpretative nature, the associated concept of 'accuracy' in this context acts to both minimise and disempower claims about negative Muslim representation. As *The Times's* assistant editor Ian Brunskill commented:

The process of policing accuracy is potentially much more effective than the process of posturing and arguing about discrimination. You can be as critical as you like [...] but you have to get your facts right. (HA 2018)

Used in this way, accuracy can be seen to act as a form of 'professional retreatism', with its ultimate purpose being a "technique of neutralisation" (Hall, 1974a: 24) that protects, rather than challenges, the reproduction of anti-Muslim bias in the British press. The responsibilities of journalists and editors therefore appear to begin and end with their fact-checking commitments. The problematic nature of this approach was reflected in my interview with



media campaigner Miqdaad on his quest to get editors to address the anti-Muslim bias in their newspapers:

There are some who believe that actually fundamentally there is nothing wrong, but you know people make mistakes and that's what happens. They believe there is no Islamophobia in the press, and that there are just errors because everyone makes errors and therefore, we correct.

It is perhaps not surprising that this discourse emerged more strongly from the most senior of representatives of the British press rather than from the interviews with journalists themselves in the lower tiers of the profession. Hall (1997) highlights how the knowledge linked to power has the authority of being legitimised as 'the truth' but also holds the power to persuade others that it is indeed 'true' (p.33). Just as the last chapter considered how the public idiom served to enable columnists to speak legitimately and authoritatively on behalf of an imagined public, accuracy turns truth into a "technical idiom" (Hall, 1972: 11) which then legitimises news production as an accurate (and therefore truthful) account of social reality. This positioning further epitomises Hall's concept of "professional retreatism", where:

By converting issues of substance into a technical idiom, and by making himself [sic] responsible primarily for the technical competence with which the programme is executed, the producer [journalist] raises himself [sic] above the problematic content of the issues he [sic] presents. (Hall, 1972: 11)

In the accounts of the editors discussed above, the editors raise themselves above the problematic content of their newspapers when it comes to Muslim representation by claiming that their stories are 'accurate'. This serves to distance them from any consequences that these stories may have, as their responsibility lies only in making sure they are accurate. In this way, professional retreatism works in a counter-productive way to public interest, where the journalist or editor can be seen to have the legitimated 'truth-telling' power to influence how Muslims are represented yet accept no accountability for the implications of those representations. This position was epitomised in the interview of columnist James in relation to the potential consequences of negative Muslim representations in the media:

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.

As a columnist, James upholds his responsibility to write literately, passionately and accurately but it appears that his responsibility ends when he lays down his pen. This would also imply that by denying that there are any real consequences of his work, he becomes free to write whatever he likes with little accountability beyond producing well-written articles. Nevertheless, as some of the journalists' account discussed earlier imply, not all journalists were comfortable distancing themselves from the stories they wrote about Muslims in this way. I will return to this later in the thesis.

Together with the previous chapter, this chapter has discussed how ideas about journalism's relationship with both 'the public' and 'the truth' can act to legitimise negative representations about Muslims as accurate depictions. Both concepts act as a form a professional retreatism, distancing the journalist from the stories they report on but also distancing them from any potential implications and consequences of those stories. Broersma (2010) further highlights how journalists use specific ritualistic norms and routines to persuade their audiences that they "have done all they can to reveal the truth" (p.28). He explains how:

journalism does not derive its performative power from its contents (the facts), but [...] from its forms and style. News consumers tend to believe the contents that come with professional routines and conventions, justifying and masking the subjective interpretation and news selection of the individual journalist. (Broersma, 2010: 21)

In the next part of this chapter, I discuss how the norms of objectivity and balance can further contribute to the reproduction of negative Muslim representation.

### **The Role of Objectivity**

One of the key premises behind objectivity as a journalistic norm is that an unbiased and true account of reality can be obtained through the depersonalisation and rationalisation of journalistic practices (Broersma, 2010: 27). Objectivity further implies elements of impartiality through the journalist's assumed neutral position in relation to their work (Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2017).<sup>14</sup> For most of the journalists I interviewed, objectivity

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<sup>14</sup> In general, however, impartiality is more often associated with public service broadcasters (such as the BBC) rather than with newspapers (Wallace, 2013).

was seen to be central to their professional role. Freelance journalist Hasina, for example, commented:

When you're being objective, you're playing a role. 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.

Other journalists, such as local journalist Mark, saw objectivity as a protective measure against their own personal bias 'contaminating' their news work:

On being objective, I mean you must be able to sleep at night, let's put it that way. If you cannot sleep at night because of something you've written, then that's really difficult.

Likewise, Press Association journalist Amanda shared:

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.

In all three of the accounts above from Hasina, Mark and Amanda, it is possible to see how objectivity serves as a means for the journalist to psychologically separate themselves from the stories they write involving Muslims. Bearing a similarity to James's earlier conceptualisation of accuracy, this distancing acts as a form of professional retreatism, where the function of objectivity is essentially to write out the journalist from the news on which they report (Reardon, 2018). As a result, it reduces the obligations of the journalists to being accountable only for the mechanics of *how*, rather than *what*, they report (Glasser, 1984 cited in Broersma, 2010). However, this again can serve to undermine journalists' own agency in terms of their judgements on how to report stories involving Muslims.

According to Raeijmaekers and Maesele (2017), the norm of objectivity is built on the premise that by depersonalising and rationalising their practices, journalists can strive towards "the unbiased truth", leading to a "mimetic representation" of social reality (p.648). As my thesis has argued, however, news production is always socially contextual and selective, whether this is about how a story is framed or what language is used, or even what stories are told. It is from this basis that Hall (1974a) himself indicts objectivity as an "operational fiction" that is driven by selective news decisions mired in a "stock of social knowledge" and "shot through with previously sedimented social meanings" (p.23-24). Just as many of the journalists I spoke to were critical of the realities of journalism's truth-telling

role, a similar critique about objectivity was echoed across several of the interviews. Tabloid journalist Ryan, for example, reflected on the role of journalism:

I think it's to *present* news rather than to kind of deliver it. It is to package it and hand it over rather than just to give it objectively.

Left-leaning columnist Leila was even more adamant that she could never make a claim to be objective or impartial in her work:

I'm very honest about that. 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. I think for me there is a clear distinction there. But even if you're writing news, there is an ideological pinning and to claim that there isn't, is somewhat disingenuous.

While columnists are generally not likely to make the same claims of objectivity as their news reporting peers (Broersma, 2010), Leila's account highlights the problematic nature of what she terms these "disingenuous" claims in news reporting as well. Here, objectivity is seen to work to obscure to news readers that what they are consuming is one interpretation of an event (Broersma, 2010).

The premise that journalists can draw on objectivity to completely detach themselves from the stories they write was further questioned by several of the journalists I interviewed. While many recognised the importance of objectivity to avoid personal biases impacting on news coverage, they struggled to reconcile the concept of objectivity in terms of their own journalistic practice. As broadsheet journalist Sadia discussed:

I don't think you'll ever get objectivity. I mean, I don't sort of believe that it exists, but I believe that you can strive for it. I do think the reason you should strive for it is just to make yourself more credible.

A similar struggle to reconcile objectivity was shared by local journalist Catherine in relation to reporting on Muslim-related stories:

I think it's essential, you should be as objective as possible. I had 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 and 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.

As journalists, both Sadia and Catherine believe that they should strive towards objectivity as much as possible but recognise that it is not possible to completely remove their own lens from the stories they tell. Journalists cannot completely 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). As Catherine worries about her own 'unconscious bias' when reporting on Muslim-related stories, it is not always possible for journalists to separate their own moral and personal beliefs from the stories they report. Yet the 'rules' of objectivity indicate that journalists' should not allow their personal judgements to impact how a story is written in the belief that this is detrimental to journalism itself. On the other hand, however, many of the journalists I interviewed recognised that there were times when they had to follow their own judgement as to how 'objective' a particular article should be. In the following interview extract, for example, Catherine reflects on the tensions she experienced between her own personal beliefs and her attempts to follow the rules of objective journalism. During the interview, we discussed her use of the word 'vile' to describe the 'Punish a Muslim'<sup>15</sup> letters and whether she felt this was 'objective':

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. But 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 appears to contravene her professional commitment to objectivity. Do journalists then have a responsibility to make a judgement about something that is "so clearly wrong", or should they report it as objective outsiders, detached from bias but also from any consequences? Research on journalistic professionalism suggests that, rather than functioning to neutralise

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<sup>15</sup> See [Every day is "Punish a Muslim Day" for British Muslims \(newstatesman.com\)](https://www.newstatesman.com) for general context on this news story

possible bias in media discourse, norms such as objectivity can serve to propagate existing hegemonic biases while disguising their ideological nature (Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2017). As this chapter has discussed, journalists are encouraged to produce news about Muslims that appears to be an objective and ‘truthful’ account about what happened, rather than a specific political and cultural interpretation of the event. As the public judges the news as ‘truth’ through the prism of the routines and conventions they expect from professional journalism (Broersma, 2010), objectivity enables journalists to put forward authoritative representations of Muslims that can then be seen by audiences to be fair and legitimate. On one hand, objectivity acts as a “strategic ritual” (Tuchman, 1972) to legitimise the validity of negative representations through a perception of journalists as independent and rational definers of social reality (Soloski, 1997). On the other, it can act as a form of professional retreatism by reducing the agency of journalists to intervene directly in terms of how they report on Muslim-related stories and to distance them from any potential consequences of those stories.

While ‘truths’ about Islam and Muslims are seen to be relative according to who produce them (Said, 1997: lviii), journalism’s legitimatised relationship with knowledge serves to reinforce and consolidate certain ideas about Muslims as the wider common sense ideas of British society. Journalists themselves therefore have the status of being “a knowing subject” that comes from “powerful positions from which to speak” (Mills, 2004: 115). Yet a ritualistic approach to objectivity also acts to curtail journalistic agency to challenge certain narratives on Muslims, or to intervene in societal affairs through their news work. Anderson (2019) argues that journalistic “procedural mechanisms” act in this way to self-police the way journalists report on stories, in the belief that “as long as journalists get the practices and procedures right, then truth (and even justice) can take care of itself” (p.10). Across my interviews, however, there was a tension between the values of journalism in theory, and how they were to be applied in practice, particularly when reporting on an already marginalised community. While most journalists recognised that objectivity helped to prevent their own biases from unnecessarily impacting on the stories they wrote involving Muslims, others felt obliged to intervene in how those stories were told. I explore this tension further by considering how the journalistic norm of balance can serve to both reproduce, and potentially challenge, negative Muslim representation.

## **The Ritual of Balance**

Like objectivity, balance was viewed as an integral and important component of journalism across my interviews. It was also seen as the means to enable alternative interpretations of news events involving Muslims to enter mainstream media debate. Broadsheet journalist Andrew, for example, shared:

I think it's important that you give a fair and accurate, open-minded hearing or a chance for the reader at least. 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. It's about giving that chance to the readers to understand those different points of view fairly rather than forever delegitimising some voices.

Local journalist Catherine similarly discussed the importance of paying attention to balance when covering potentially contentious topics such as the burka debate:

I think the conversation needs to be had but you just have to be so careful. I think 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.

In both these accounts, the norm of balance is seen to place the burden of truth-claims onto the readers (Hartley, 1992: 148), who are tasked with deciding "what the normative implications of a particular story might be" (Anderson, 2019: 10). The journalist is therefore responsible for providing different perspectives on the same news event or issue. Balance in this respect was seen to be central to journalism's role in fostering civic debate. As local journalist Ben shared:

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 in to not putting out unbalanced, one-sided stories.

When understood in this way, the concept of balance can be seen as central to Hall's conceptualisation of the media's role in hegemonic contestation, where different groups struggle to put forward their own meanings into public debate. The application of balance within journalistic practice in this case appears to be premised on a Habermasian model of rational civic debate, where the journalist provides citizens with access to a fair, open arena for rational, public debate by providing a plurality of different perspectives (Karpinnen, 2007). However, Hall (2006) provides an important critique of this model when he warns that while there can be a variety of interpretations on offer, 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 media discourse. This is because, to repeat from my theoretical chapter, all interpretations concede to "the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions" (Hall, 2006: 169). Columnist Leila similarly criticised the unequal way that debates involving Muslims were 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 they are already perceived by the public.

Leila's account suggests that while journalists may include Muslim voices in their attempt to produce a balanced story, these voices are positioned from a point of disadvantage due to the existing ways in which they are negatively portrayed. Despite the concept of balance appearing to champion a diversity of voices, it can therefore be subject to the same criticisms faced by the Habermasian model of civic debate itself, namely the failure to consider power asymmetries and inequalities inherent in public life (Karpinnen, 2007; Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2015; Ferree et al., 2002; Young, 1996; Schudson, 1997).

Rather than viewing balance as a means of levelling the field when it comes to Muslim representation, Hall (1974a) contends that balance in journalism provides a "false symmetry" to news stories and debates by ignoring the unequal relative weights set by the power-relations of those involved (p.22). While Muslim spokespersons are invited to put forward their positions, their participation can often be limited to "within the established terms of the problematic in play" (Hall, 1982: 81). 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. Debates on Muslim-related issues, and race in general, for example, are often framed as culture wars due to their commercial appeal, rather than as issues of structural and systemic racism (Frazer-Carroll, 2020). In line with my previous chapter, this type of framing is privileged due to the popularity of debates as exciting and entertaining verbal duels between two irreconcilable sides that are unlikely to ever reach a consensus (Meyer, 2002). As freelance columnist Raj concurred:

I think when it comes to the going back and forth, there is no economic reason to end that debate in a sensible and calm manner. If people are more likely to share something which is polarising, then as an editor you are more likely to commission that kind of stuff, because you want to make money and you want to grab attention.

The misuse of the concept of balance was further highlighted in my data in reference to the media platforming of far-right figures. Returning to Bail's (2014) research on US far-right fringe groups discussed in my theoretical chapter, far-right anti-Muslim figures were seen by many of my interviewees to be given entry into mainstream debate in the name of balance, driven by the media's commercial imperative for exciting news debate. As columnist Leila observed:

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 kind of like this attractive thing to put under the microscope. There seems to be a kind of perverse element to that.

Local journalist Catherine similarly spoke of the appeal of the "shock values and levels of outrage that come with UKIP". Tabloid journalist Ryan further highlighted the appeal of anti-Muslim figure Tommy Robinson:

As far as TV news is concerned, he's box office. Everybody would tune in to watch him be taken apart or watch him, you know, do well. So, he's kind of an irresistible draw.

The British broadcaster the BBC came under particular 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, 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.

In another interview, columnist Leila made similar remarks about the BBC interview with anti-Muslim and 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. How are you going to try to hold them to account because there's very few moments where they catch them out. 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 the 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?

Leila's account returns us to the question of journalistic judgements and how the ritualistic adherence to balance (like objectivity) can serve to perpetuate negative Muslim representation rather than challenge it. Her interview also reflects the wider conflict between the ideal of balance in journalism (hearing all sides in the interest of freedom of speech) and the need to consider the potential harm of this speech on minorities. There were also cases when these platforms were used effectively to challenge far-right anti-Muslim rhetoric. MCB media campaigner Miqdaad, for example, contrasted the way BBC journalist Emily Maithis challenged the Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó on his anti-migrant views with her more passive interview with UKIP 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, so what ended up happening was he just got a platform and that's the problem. When you give someone like that a platform, you need to ensure if they say a lot of things that are incorrect, that you are able to challenge each one of them. You need to make sure that when they say something that you are not able to challenge right then, you challenge them later on and afterwards when they've gone. 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 gone, 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.

In summary, the discussion so far reflects on how the journalistic norm of balance can serve to both reproduce negative Muslim representation, or when used in a critical manner, to challenge anti-Muslim perspectives. Many of the interviewed journalists remained critical of the more ritualistic requirement to always provide two sides of an argument. This was seen to align with the presumption that there were always two equally valid and acceptable opposing positions that need to be debated, even when this was not necessarily the case. As broadsheet journalist Brendan shared:

I don't really believe in that BBC balance thing. I think you should call right, right and wrong, wrong. This is wrong and that's right and not just go on the one hand and on the other hand. I think there are things that you have to clearly call out, you know dangerous mad things.

As Brendan indicates, when it comes to debates, there are moral, societal boundaries around positions that are acceptable and unacceptable in civil society. A similar realisation came to local journalist Thomas as we discussed the role of balance as a journalistic obligation:

It's interesting actually, if we've done the story about someone who's been in court for a crime, you never say well, you need to hear their side of it and go up to them afterwards and say what have you got to say about it. The conflict would come I guess where you've got someone like a race hate group attacking a mosque for instance, we wouldn't find them and say why have you done that.

In the case of debates about race, Modood (2020) suggests that racialisation cannot be a normatively neutral topic since its very starting point is "built to be a concept that picks out something negative" (p.30). This position was echoed by media campaigner Miqdaad in relation to Muslim-related stories:

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.

Billig (1996) argues that opening up the concept of racism to different interpretations in the name of balance makes it once again subject to challenge and contestation, rather than an unacceptable part of British society. While the concept of balance purports to offer marginalised groups an opportunity to put forward their own interpretations, this type of

debate shifts the perceived status of racism as a normative concept (for example, ‘racism is wrong’) to a controversial belief (‘racism is wrong but...’) (Billig, 1996: 151). The increased “debatability of racism” as perpetuated through the media further serves to disconnect the meaning of racism from systems of power and equality (Titley, 2019).

Hall (1974a) views the ideological value of balance (like objectivity) as validating the media as independent of hegemonic powers and as a forum for open debate and a plurality of views. Instead, alternative, contesting voices are allowed to present their case, but only according to the “frames of reference” set by the media (Hall et al., 1978: 72). As the preceding discussion reflects, this explains how, when it comes to Muslims, balance can act to both express and contain conflict (Hall, 1974a). When used ritualistically, without the critical judgements of journalists themselves, both objectivity and balance can be seen to act almost as lines of tendential force when it comes to Muslim-related stories, contributing to how the media reproduces and legitimises negative representations of Muslims as socially acceptable. It is also possible to see how balance, like objectivity, further serves to distance the journalist from the Muslim-related stories they report on and their consequences. Yet again journalists themselves will always be implicated within this process, as it is their choice of whose perspective to include within the news story that determines which voices are represented and which are excluded. Across my interviews with journalists, tensions arose when these journalistic norms and values were seen to act to the detriment of civic debate, rather than to enhance it. While journalists expressed concerns as to how a more ritualistic application of these values could perpetuate negative Muslim representation, the same values had the potential to challenge these representations and to encourage alternative voices (including those of Muslims) to enter into complex debates on stories involving Muslims. This again highlights how journalistic judgements about how to apply these values can be critical for redressing the anti-Muslim bias within the British press.

### **Consequences and Conflict – Freedom of Speech**

In this last section of my chapter, I return to the question of whether journalists can ever really write themselves out of the Muslim-related stories they report on and their potential ramifications. As I mentioned earlier, journalism’s truth-seeking role is seen to be protected by its “belief in process” (Anderson, 2019: 8). It is executed through its embrace of procedural mechanisms that lead journalists to social ‘truths’ while ensuring that the legitimacy of journalism as a public institution is sustained (Anderson, 2008). Through key

journalistic ‘mechanisms’ or norms such as objectivity and balance, journalistic practice becomes validated and legitimated as a means of presenting a truthful account of social reality (Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2015; Broersma, 2010; Deuze, 2005). Tensions arise, however, when these procedural norms stand in contradiction with other important liberal values such as social equality and civic responsibility (Anderson, 2019). I explore these tensions next by looking at the dilemma faced by journalists between freedom of expression and the propagation of negative Muslim representation.

Freedom of expression has often been seen as a controversial “flashpoint” when it comes to stories involving Muslims, and it is often juxtaposed as a conflict between liberal western values and the intolerance of Islam (Wetherley, 2012: 36). When it came to news stories involving Muslims, a particularly robust stance on freedom of expression could be found in the secondary data from 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, HA 2018*). *The Express’s* editor-in-chief Gary Jones similarly argued that “the protection of freedom of expression, particularly comment, is essential to the maintenance of a free society” (*HA 2018*). Any external measures to monitor and regulate anti-Muslim bias were seen to threaten freedom of expression through self-censorship and compromise the press’s ability to report on difficult stories involving Muslim communities. As 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”. (*HA 2018*)

The majority of the editors were unwilling to compromise on freedom of expression, even when it came to the more offensive articles about Muslims. *The Mirror’s* group editor-in-chief, Lloyd Embley, for example, claimed:

Personally, though, I think there are some issues raised by the word ‘offence’. 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. (*HA 2018*)

Compared with the generally unwavering stance towards freedom of expression from editors when it came to Muslim-related stories, my interviews revealed more of a mixed response.

Some of the journalists I interviewed expressed similarly strong opinions on the issue of freedom of expression in relation to the production of news stories involving Muslims.

Tabloid journalist Roger 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.

Like Roger, some of the columnists I interviewed similarly rebuked the notion of self-censorship with regards to Muslim-related stories as they felt it constrained their ability to present a critical perspective on the stories they wrote. Broadsheet columnist James, for example, emphasised that:

The worst thing you can do is write with one eye over your shoulder. You're thinking how are people going to react to that? Will X be upset or will Y be upset?

Similarly, freelance Muslim columnist Sarwat 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?

Those journalists who saw freedom of expression as more of an absolute condition for news reporting were also clearer on what they perceived to be the boundaries of acceptable free speech when it came to stories involving Muslims. Broadsheet columnist James, for instance, reflected:

The line should be that you have freedom to publish unpopular ideas, ideas people hate, ideas that offend as long as you're not inciting violence. You see here's the thing. If you say that people have no right to offend, working that out in law I would say is next to impossible. When you say that, people then just go "oh he's saying that everything that's not incitement of violence is OK". It *does* mean that. When you stay within that line, people can't judge you, people can't criticise you.

Other journalists I interviewed held a much more conflicted perspective on the issue of freedom of expression when it came to Muslim representation. In particular, they struggled to reconcile the principle of freedom of speech with their own social responsibilities as journalists to consider the potential harm of their work on Muslim communities. Tabloid journalist Martin, for example, observed:

An untrammelled freedom of speech, absolutely unrestrained freedom of speech would be that you can say anything that you like, which obviously I definitely don't agree with. I think anything that would constitute harassment and incitement to violence, an invasion of privacy is all over the line. I obviously also think that without freedom of speech to a very large degree, then there is no such thing as a free press. I'm not somebody who particularly holds up to this sort of absolute ideal, but you should not be able to say anything you want. I don't think we should have absolutely unadulterated freedom of speech but for all extensive purposes, I think you should be able to say to an extent what you like about certain issues without fear of state intervention. I know this sounds horrible actually.

Even though Martin is trying to uphold the importance of freedom of expression for journalism, it is something he feels highly conflicted about in relation to Muslim representation. There were several similar accounts across my data that bore testimony to the conflictual nature of this debate, as journalists struggled in their bid to defend freedom of expression when it came to negative Muslim representation. Tabloid journalist Ryan, for example, contemplated the issue:

Fundamentally yeah of course, freedom of speech trumps everything. You know you should be able to say what you like, what you don't like etc. 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 do you begin to - how would you even begin to arbitrate? But having said that - it's not as simple as I'm offended by that, therefore it's wrong.

This tension was further reiterated by local journalist Elliott:

I think certainly that (sighs) (long pause) it is difficult because we have free speech in this country, free press, freedom and independent free press. 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 that some right-wing papers have done over the years.

Across newspaper genres, the interviewees' accounts highlighted the conflictual nature of this debate, where freedom of expression had to be balanced against other liberal values, such as anti-racism and social equality. While the editors at the Home Affairs Inquiry upheld freedom of expression above all other values, they also framed negative Muslim representation as an unresolvable ideological clash of values between freedom of expression (and associatively, press freedom) and social equality. This 'clash' was described by different editors in terms of being an impossible "balancing act", "a very narrow path to walk down" and "very dangerous territory" (HA 2018). As Neil Benson, chair of IPSO's editors' code committee, summarised the position to the Home Affairs committee:

We are now trying to square the circle. We are trying to say that, on one hand, we have a liberal society that allows freedom of expression, but on the other hand, we need to protect groups and individuals from that freedom of expression going too far. (HA 2018)

Gabriel (1994) maintains that this level of preoccupation with the impossibility of the freedom of expression debate serves as a distraction from the real consequences of media coverage on Muslim communities in Britain. In his recent book 'Is Free Speech Racist?', Titley (2020:24) further points to how anti-Islamic activists have been able to weaponise free speech as 'an expression of liberty' that permits Islamophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric to enter in mainstream debate in the UK. Some of the journalists I interviewed also felt that the concept was often weaponised to justify negative representations of Muslims within mainstream press discourse. Tabloid journalist Stephen, for example, observed:

We have freedom of speech so you're using it as a device for, you know, saying something filthy about the Prophet. It's obvious that it's an attack on the people who believe [in Islam], you know it's not testing freedom.

Despite her generally supportive stance towards freedom of expression, freelance columnist 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, that's the only argument really.

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. Broadsheet journalist Andrew likewise expressed his concerns about the consequences of negative representations 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.

Glasser, Awad and Kim (2009) contend that it is possible for journalism in a multicultural society to reject this perceived "dichotomy between professional interests and cultural interests" (p.73). This suggests that a multicultural approach to journalism does not necessarily have to contravene professional standards nor stifle freedom of expression or press freedom. To distinguish between reasonable criticism of Muslims and whether it is Islamophobic, Modood (2020: 31), for example, proposes a normative framework that enables journalists and others to judge the more Islamophobic aspects of discourses while enabling reasonable civic criticism and intercultural engagement. His framework involves the application of five tests to gauge whether a piece of news work is Islamophobic or a reasonable criticism of Muslims. The tests include assessing whether an article essentialises or stereotypes Muslims, a questioning of the language used and the motives behind the article, and whether it includes Muslims as part of the wider debate of the news story or whether it marginalises them. Modood's overall framework therefore represents a call to journalists (and others) to exercise some reflexive consideration of whether the way Muslims are represented in a particular article is fair. In this way, articles can be critical about the involvement of Muslims in a particular news event (for example, a terrorist attack or

grooming incident) without negatively representing Muslims in general as the ‘Others’ of British society.<sup>16</sup>

Returning to the concept of freedom of speech, several of the interviewees could be seen to similarly exercise their reflexive judgement to inform the reporting of stories involving far-right figures such as Tommy Robinson. Local journalist Ben, for example, maintained that he would not interview Robinson as “giving a platform to the leader of a potentially violent extremist far right group is a voice that I would not necessarily need to give space to.” For Ben, the need to protect an already marginalised community from hateful (and potentially violent) perspectives is seen to trump freedom of expression. Others recognised that while the line between acceptable and non-acceptable speech was often drawn at the incitement of physical violence, it was also necessary to consider the wider consequences of negative representations on the communities that had to bear them. As columnist Sarwat highlighted:

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?

As Billig (1996) points out, the value of freedom of expression is all too often allowed to “overstep the realities of all other values” (p.252). Yet as this chapter highlights, it is through the dilemmas faced by journalists into reconciling some kind of reflexive judgement between the value of freedom of expression and the need to avoid harming already marginalised communities that enables space for alternative ways of reporting on Muslims. Furthermore, it is through the critical consciousness of journalists of how journalistic norms and values overall can act to reproduce, rather than challenge, negative representations, that journalists can move away from a more ideological and ritualistic implementation of these concepts. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, such an approach does not mean rejecting the merits of important journalistic values such as objectivity and balance (Morrison and Tumber, 1988) but a call for journalists to exercise their own agential judgements as to their applicability to stories involving Muslims (and beyond). This becomes even more important when taking into consideration the integral commitments of journalism to public interest, as advised by both local journalist Ben and broadsheet journalist Patrick below:

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<sup>16</sup> An example of an opinion column piece that presented such a critical but fair analysis of the definition of Islamophobia based on Modood’s five tests can be found in my submission to the All Party Parliamentary Group report on Religion in the Media (2021: 36).

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. (*Ben, local journalist*)

I would like to think that journalism should be about showing people a better way of interacting. Showing the humanity in all of us that exists in everyone, and we don't treat some people as more valuable than others. (*Patrick, broadsheet journalist*)

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has examined how the norms of objectivity and balance, together with ideals such as freedom of expression and journalism's truth-telling role, can act ideologically to contribute towards negative Muslim representations. Through the accounts of both editors and journalists, my analysis has shown some support for Hall's claim that journalists' focus on the technical, routine aspects of news production can (to some extent) lead them to become "systematically constrained" to handle and process news within a "framework of a limited set of interpretations" (Hall, 1974a: 24). More specifically, the chapter contributes an empirical examination of how journalists' application of these norms and values can contribute to the reproduction of negative Muslim representations and the stifling of alternative interpretations of Muslim-related stories. The norms can be seen to work as a means of professional retreatism, protecting the journalists and editors (and therefore the British press in general) from the possible consequences of their news reporting. Together with the ideal of freedom of expression, the claim that journalists are detached from the stories they tell further serves to detract criticisms about the existing anti-Muslim bias in press coverage.

Hall (2006) maintains that by "bracketing their hegemonic quality", these norms legitimise journalists as acting fairly and independently of any dominant influences (p.171). My findings, however, are particularly important when considering the power that journalists have in terms of cultural politics. Rather than being detached observers of cultural politics where they "stand above conflict and judge it impartially" (Hall, 1974a: 10), journalists will always have some influence on contestation about Muslims and how they are represented to the public. Where my analysis diverges from Hall's conceptualisation of journalistic ideology is in terms of the critical consciousness that journalists display when it comes to how these

values can lead to the propagation of negative Muslim representation. In this chapter, this was particularly demonstrated in the need to balance the potentially harmful impact of media coverage on an already marginalised community with the importance of freedom of expression. With the over-riding principle of public interest in mind, many of the journalists emphasised the need to exercise their own judgements when it came to balancing these tensions.

Approaching my analysis from this position sets up the framework for my final analysis chapter. The chapter focuses on the tensions and contradictions that arise in journalists' accounts as they negotiate their own agency regarding how they report Muslim-related stories from within the structures of the media institutions they work for. In previous chapters, I have highlighted how all the journalists I interviewed and the editors in the secondary analysis recoiled against the insinuation that they were being Islamophobic, and they often adopted strong moral positioning to underscore their liberal commitment to anti-racism. At the same time, none could deny that negative Muslim representation had become a serious issue of concern for the mainstream press. All showed a considerable awareness of the problematic nature of Muslim representation, echoing much of the academic literature in their experiential accounts in terms of language, framing and choice of sources. So how can this discrepancy be explained? In the next chapter, I consider this question by analysing the relationship between structure and agency in terms of how journalists report on stories involving Muslims.

## **Chapter 8: Structure, Agency and Social Transformation**

### **Introduction**

To explain the reproduction of negative Muslim representation, Hall would argue that reproduction is “the product of a set of structural imperatives” (Hall et al., 1978: 63). Similarly, my last three analysis chapters have demonstrated how different factors contribute to the systematic reproduction of negative Muslim representation. In Chapter 5, I explored the centrality of common sense conceptions of Muslims as problematic outsiders in British society and how this contributed to the reproduction of the anti-Muslim bias in the British press. Chapter 6 discussed how commercial pressures and ideological constructions of audiences and the British public worked together to drive journalists to reproduce representations of Muslims that draw on conflict, anxiety and ‘Otherness’ to sell narratives of fear and difference. In the last chapter, I examined how the journalistic ideology and the norms and routines that legitimise journalism’s independent truth-telling role contributed to the favouring of certain representations of Muslims and the devaluing of alternative ones. In their own distinct ways, each of these chapters has contributed to a greater understanding of how structural imperatives can influence British journalists to reproduce negative representations of Muslims, without requiring any overt direction or inclination to do so.

What each of these chapters has additionally uncovered is the dilemmatic aspect of Muslim representation through the conflicts and tensions that journalists experience when producing Muslim-related stories. These tensions presented in the accounts of journalists and editors as “ideological dilemmas”, as described by Billig et al. (1988) as “the discrepancies between actions and words or between theory and practice, or upon the inconsistencies between expressed ends and chosen means” (p.21). The dilemmas were ideological as they stemmed from the inherent contradictions that existed within journalists’ own powerfully embedded common sense ideas (Billig et al. 1988) of what journalism represents, and of their own responsibilities as part of an egalitarian, democratic society. Through these dilemmas, it was also possible to see the contingent nature of the reproduction of negative Muslim representation and, in line with Hall’s concept of the media as the terrain of contestation, how spaces for resistance and challenging this reproduction could be found.

This chapter is divided into two parts. In part 1 of the chapter, I focus on these tensions, juxtaposing them against the push-and-pull of the structure-agency dichotomy. In particular, I explain why this dichotomy is central to the role that journalists’ own ‘contradictory

consciousness' can play in challenging negative Muslim representation from within the media institutions that journalists work for. In doing so, this chapter makes a significant contribution to Hall's own theory of media hegemony by making space for the autonomy of journalists and the role that they too can play in terms of contestation and social change. In the second part of the chapter, I turn my focus to a critical consideration of some of the solutions that journalists themselves proposed to address structural change in the way Muslims are portrayed in the British Press. Finally, I return to the discussion about how journalists conceptualise their audiences as one way of addressing the prevalence of negative Muslim representations in the British press.

## **Part 1: Reproduction with Contradiction**

### **The Autonomy of Journalists**

For Hall, the relative autonomy of the media does not act as a "mere cover" for hegemonic power (Hall, 1974a: 21). Instead, as I have mentioned previously, 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 (Hall, 1974a: 21). Rather than acting as agency-free disseminators of dominant, hegemonic interpretations, the journalists I interviewed demonstrated a clear consciousness of these constraints on their work. This was reflected in the tensions between their own "free actions" and the "systematic inferential inclination" of the institutions they worked for (Hall, 1982: 84) when it came to Muslim representation.

From the perspective of their everyday working lives, most journalists believed that they did hold a certain level of autonomy in their news work. Online newspaper journalist, Amina, for example, told me:

Thankfully, I have a lot of autonomy. If I can justify it or explain how it can bring value to [my publication], I'm usually allowed to go forth and do it.

Local journalist Thomas likewise described his sense of autonomy in his work:

You come up with an idea, and one of the news editors will say, will people read that? In that sense there is complete freedom. As long as you can say I think people will, and I will write it in a way that will make it engaging or make people read it. Or I think I've got a readership, that I'll be able to find people on social media. It's all about sharing, it's all about engaging people. So, yeah, we do have freedom.

Through these accounts, journalists had some autonomy over their day-to-day responsibilities as long as they operated within what Ornebring (2009) describes as “an accepted system of occupational hierarchies, standards and values” (p.569). In line with previous research, this autonomy is reflected in their freedom to choose story angles, their choice of sources and, to some extent, the narrative frames they use (Ryfe, 2009) when reporting on Muslim-related stories. Nevertheless, while Thomas asserts that he has “complete freedom”, his autonomy in terms of what he writes about and how he writes it, appears to be dictated by his sense of readership. A similar perspective was reflected by local journalist Mark:

When you talk about how much freedom I have, it’s just essentially up to my readers what they believe I should be writing. I am guided by them. The way the readers think should hopefully also guide the way the editor decides what sort of stories we should cover. When that happens then you’ve got a perfect system, where if you write what the reader believes are the things we should cover, not the way we should cover but things we should cover, and the editor believes in that, and I have no problems.

While Mark’s account returns us to the discussion in Chapter 6 of how the journalists’ sense of audience can influence their autonomy, both journalists above also make a reference to the need to justify the stance that they take to their editors. Across my interviews, the importance of occupational hierarchies within the field of journalism was emphasised, in line with media research that highlights how editors ultimately control decisions about media content (Sjøvaag, 2013; Ornebring, 2009). As broadsheet journalist Sadia observed:

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. They are meant to tell you what the line is or agree on the line.

Some of the journalists saw this as a welcome and protective aspect to their work, rather than an infringement on their autonomy. As online journalist Amina stated:

Like with me, all my work goes through my editors which is a blessing because they can be like this doesn’t make sense, or you need to explain this. Or you need to do justice to this by bringing in an expert opinion.

Similarly, local journalist Mark highlighted:

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. Once you get to a certain stage in your career, you learn to put emotion aside and write objectively, which I like to think I can do now. At the same time there will always be a news editor who will say I want this headline.

Mark's account reflects the professional retreatism discussed in the last chapter, where journalists believe they must distance themselves from the stories they report on. Soloski (1997) further points to how the journalistic ideology can serve as an effective "trans-organisational control mechanism" (p.143) in this way, enabling editors to curate the willing submission of journalists in the name of professionalism. This can also act as a way of controlling any potential conflict between editors and journalists about the reporting of certain stories (Soloski, 1997). Mark views this distancing as a positive aspect that comes with journalistic experience and so requires editorial intervention in the interim. 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 their own journalistic judgements became more of a cause for consternation for the senior journalists I interviewed. As this exchange with tabloid journalist Ryan demonstrated:

Ryan: As I've progressed, there is kind of more room for - if not autonomy, there is certainly a little more room for, I suppose, argument, you know. It's probably the best word that I can put on it. But I would underline 'kind of'?

Nadia: Why would you underline 'kind of'?

Ryan: Your input is welcome, let me put it like that, but not necessarily acted upon.

Similarly, tabloid journalist Martin described how the "correcting influence" of editors worked in practice when his editor asked him 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.



In summary, journalists' accounts suggest that while they believe they have a certain level of autonomy, this reflects a relatively subordinated autonomy as described by Hall. Whether in the case of readers or editors, journalists were willing to concede their own judgements (either willingly or unwillingly) to others. This further adds support to the previous chapter's discussion about how professional hierarchies, norms and routines can act as an efficient means for news organisations to manage journalists in a way that limit any meaningful discretionary judgements (Soloksi, 1997) when it comes to Muslim-related stories.

### **The Stance of the Newspaper**

As I mentioned in my previous chapter, the editorial stance of a particular newspaper was seen to influence how a particular story was reported, highlighting the interpretative nature of media content that purports to be objective. Across my interviews, journalists further acknowledged that they had to follow the newspaper's editorial line on Muslim-related stories, even if they might go against their own personal judgement. As tabloid journalist, Stephen shared:

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 these are quite powerful and accomplished people, and you know there's a lot of stories they won't want to write about.

As Hall et al. (1978: 63) point out, each newspaper has its own "social personality", depending on its organisation, sense of audience, language, format and so on. This "mode of address" plays an important role in terms of how an event is transformed into a news story (p.63). While the underlying facts of a story involving Muslims may be shared, each newspaper will convey a significantly different interpretation through its framing and language choices, use of sources and "selective omission" (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006: 281). The different angles that newspapers might push for in terms of Muslim representation, the type and genre of the newspaper, and how closely this aligns with the worldview of the journalist, can further impact on their autonomy (Sjøvaag, 2013).

As discussed in my literature chapter, the left-leaning broadsheets are generally seen to be more positive in their reporting on Muslims than other newspapers (Poole, 2002). The journalists I interviewed from these newspapers tended to reflect on their sense of ease with the fit between their own social values and that of their newspaper. Journalist Francesca, for example, spoke of the "happy match" between her ideals and the "tremendously clear sense

of the value and importance of social democracy” she shared with the left-leaning broadsheet newspaper she worked for. Journalist Patrick who came from a mixed-heritage similarly observed the following regarding the left-leaning newspaper he worked for:

I could never see myself working at *The Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail* or *The Sun* because they just churned out stories that treated Black people so negatively day after day. [My newspaper] at least tried to be better and a lot of the stories that were covered were a lot more sympathetic and much more aware.

While media research indicates a likely alignment between journalists’ own political beliefs and the editorial lines of the newspaper they work for when it comes to Muslim topics (Holohan, 2014), this alignment is not always possible in the competitive media job market. Across my interviews, this misalignment led to considerable dilemmas between journalists’ sense of professional responsibility and their wider social responsibility. This could be witnessed in the conflicted “argumentative debates” (Billig et al., 1988: 19) found across the journalists’ interviews about reporting on Muslim-related stories. While tabloid journalist Ryan, for example, expressed regret for his short stint at the sensationalist tabloid newspaper *Daily Star*, known for its anti-Muslim angles, he also admitted that “I needed a job basically. It was not my natural home but needs must.” Tabloid journalist Martin also shared his dilemmatic experience of working for a newspaper that clashed with his personal and political views:

I would say that if anything that’s the overarching feeling of, you know, I don’t write about the things I would necessarily hope to. I very much viewed this as on the road to bigger and better things. 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.

Some of my interviewees similarly discussed having to accept positions at newspapers that went against their personal, ethical values due to employment pressures. Freelance journalist Hasina shared how this dilemma made her feel grateful for her own freelance position:

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 do your job as well,

you have to be professional. It's that dilemma. I believe freelance gives you a little bit of freedom because if they want to run your article, they'll run it and if they don't, well then that's it really!

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-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2019). As Deuze (2019) highlights, it appears that “few, if any, reporters and editors have control over what will happen next in their careers, seeing how colleagues are losing their jobs left and right” (p.1). Tabloid journalist Ryan echoed this bleak outlook:

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.

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 whilst decreasing any likelihood of criticism or professional failure (Niven, 2005). The journalists I interviewed were likewise realistic that at times they had to compromise their personal views to fulfil their career ambitions or in recognition of the competitive market they worked in. This was the case even when reporting on a Muslim-related story in a way that made them feel uncomfortable, as tabloid journalist Ryan confided:

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.

At the same time, many of the journalists displayed considerable conflict about how this approach led to the deterioration of journalism's role in society. As freelance columnist Raj observed:

People have this long-standing tradition around mainstream media, they are institutions, they are powerful. Nevertheless, this whole edifice is crumbling because people have given up thinking about society and their mission in favour of what can get us clicks and get us money.

Tabloid journalist Ryan also complained:

I don't think there's such a thing as adult discourse anymore. That's probably a horribly patronising thing to say and I apologise. There's a real bitter undercurrent to it, there's no nuance, there is no grey area, there's no respect for other people's views. I think there's so many conversations that we're not having [...] it's left an abhorrent vacuum that has been filled with some really unsavoury characters.

As discussed in Chapter 6, while journalists tend to deliberately 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). Freelance journalist Raj reflected on how this led to the loss of the public's trust in journalism:

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.

In summary, the discussion in this chapter so far corresponds with existing media studies literature that indicates how journalists do have some autonomy over aspects of their work. This autonomy is often restricted by structural factors including those at the economic and organisational levels of news production (Sjøvaag, 2013). These structural constraints can be seen to work alongside cultural and ideological ones (discussed across the preceding chapters) to systematically favour the reproduction of negative Muslim representation. It is also interesting to note that, as discussed in my theoretical chapter, Hall's visualisation of the role of the state as the primary definers for the secondary definitions propagated by the media was not directly evidenced in my data. Instead, it was the market that appeared as the predominant social structure that restricted journalistic autonomy when it came to Muslim representation. This is not to claim, however, that political power is completely absent in terms of its influence on journalists. As Said (1997) highlights, while commercial pressures may lead media organisations to promote certain representations of Muslims over others, this

is only made possible “within a political context made active and effective by an unconscious ideology, which the media disseminate without serious reservation or oppositions” (p.49). In line with cultural politics, there has furthermore been a shift in focus from the traditional, more linear relations between the state, media and society that influenced Hall et al.’s work in *Policing the Crisis* in the 1970s (Altheide, 1984). Instead, a conceptualisation of political hegemony as contestation increasingly reflects how “all social life must be seen as potentially political” (Nash, 2001: 77).

### **Reproduction with Contradiction**

Sjøvaag’s (2013) extensive review of the academic literature on journalistic autonomy concludes that journalists have autonomy if they adhere to the structural boundaries under which they operate. As this autonomy can only be exercised from within the institutional limits of the newspaper, however, it serves more to inspire conformity rather than contestation or agency (Schudson, 2005: 218, cited in Sjøvaag, 2013). As discussed in previous chapters, the professional retreatism adopted by journalists can also be seen to have an adverse impact on journalists’ abilities to value and act upon their personal judgements (Carlson, 2018). As a result, the depersonalisation and rationalisation of journalistic practices serves to privilege certain interpretations over others in the belief that only by refraining from ideological, emotional, or value-laden judgements themselves, can journalists present accurate and truthful interpretations of reality (Anderson, 2008: 250). Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) further suggest that journalists’ resigned acceptance of these structural constraints has become part of an internalised socialisation process. Similarly, as discussed earlier in this chapter, my interviewees viewed the external forces at play (and economic ones in particular) as a natural and inevitable aspect of the realities of news production.

Returning to Hall’s conceptualisation of media hegemony, Downey, Titley and Toynbee (2014) suggest that when it comes to the media, ideology works to construct consent to inequality. It is clear, however, that this can be a form of “disaffected consent”, where journalists accept their conditions but “they don’t like it [and] they don’t agree” (Hall, 2011: 776). The centrality of contestation in Hall’s theory, however, suggests that the role of the media is not simply to reproduce the dominant ideology, but to also reproduce all the contradictions inherent within this ideology (Hall, 1972). As such:

Conflict and contradiction, therefore, as well as consensus and social order can be produced at the micro-level. Each encounter, therefore, puts the ‘structure in

dominance' to the test: and the differing definitions of the situation must struggle for dominance, win assent for their outlook against others, try to amplify definitions so as to favour the dominant perspective etc. The level of signification is, therefore, a privileged level with 'relative autonomy' but it is neither fully determined by larger structures, nor free of them. (Hall, 1972: 16)

Contradiction runs alongside reproduction due to the centrality of contestation in hegemony, where hegemony is always tested and vulnerable to change. It is because of this contestation that it becomes possible to understand the presence of both reproduction and contradictions within British press coverage on Muslims.

### **Contestation from Outside the Media**

As I discussed in my theoretical framework, under his post-structuralist conceptualisation of hegemony through contestation, Hall indicates that something 'outside' of the structure can facilitate hegemonic change (Peck, 2001). This is due to the centrality of contestation as the key to understanding the contingent nature of hegemony where:

the outcome of an encounter in which several contestants are present cannot be fully predicted: in this arena, significant battles to win a hearing for alternative points of view can, sometimes, be won [and] there are also crucial areas where the definitions and identifications have to be negotiated. (Hall, 1972: 15-16)

In my literature chapter, I discussed how Muslim organisations have become increasingly assertive in countering the negative representations in British press coverage. Local Muslim community groups and leaders, for instance, will seek out and build positive relationships with local journalists (Munnik, 2018b). On a national level, Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain and MEND (Muslim Engagement and Development) actively campaigned to change the way Muslims were represented in the mainstream media<sup>17</sup>. Amongst my interviewees was Miqdaad Versi, MCB's media spokesperson and executive director of MCB's newly set up Centre for Media Monitoring. Miqdaad worked with the British press industry to instigate change on how they reported on Muslim-related stories. In

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<sup>17</sup> Other campaigns that operate 'outside' of the media structure that have also had some success in terms of negative representations of Muslims and other marginalised groups. Based on a moral economy model, 'Stop Funding Hate', for example, uses social media to dissuade advertisers from appearing alongside articles that further marginalise vulnerable groups (<https://stopfundinghate.info/>). 'Hacked off' has addressed negative Muslim representation in its long-standing campaign against British press abuses (<https://hackinginquiry.org/>).

particular, he used IPSO's own complaints procedure to painstakingly report inaccuracies in media coverage on Muslims and Islam. Due to the efficacy of his diligence, he had built productive relationships with newspaper editors. As Miqdaad recollected:

This all started when I heard there's something called the press regulator, let me send a complaint to them and see what happens. 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.

Modood (2020) points to the centrality of this type of assertive Muslim agency to the rearticulation of negative representations and "misrecognitions" (p.36). Through the sustained efforts of Miqdaad and others, newspapers had become obliged to place the issue of Muslim representation high on their agendas. As Neil Benson, chair of the Editors' Code Committee, told the Home Affairs Inquiry:

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. This isn't something that is taken at all lightly. I think it is higher on the agenda now than it has ever been. (*HA 2018*)

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

I hope, genuinely, that you have seen here...that newsrooms are no longer cavalier. They cannot afford to be cavalier, and they do think these things through. Do they get it right every time? No, but it is not a cavalier, "Print and be damned." It is not that attitude at all. (*HA 2018*)

This discussion shows how contestation can lead to the potential for change and how, as Billig et al. (1988) state, the "probings of a minority [can have] the effect of disrupting the epistemological status of the majority's assumptions", dislocating negative Muslim representations from their "privileged status of being unquestioned common sense" (p.250).

Although the extent to which these editors reflected a genuine commitment to structural media change is debatable, it is possible to see how contestation can at least open the scope for alternative interpretations of the situation (Hall, 1982).

In line with the uneven nature of the media terrain described by Hall, my analysis demonstrated that while Muslim organisations had become increasingly vocal about the issue of negative representation, organisations such as the MCB were often marginalised and delegitimised in their contestation. According to their website, the Muslim Council (MCB) is the largest Muslim umbrella organisation with a membership of over 500 mosques, schools, charitable associations, and professional networks since setting up in 1997<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, MCB's Miqdaad shared how its status as a representative organisation was often called into question:

You know we are a representative organisation [but] we don't represent everyone [...] What's really interesting is they 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. Then why is the same question not asked for any other organisations when they are out there, but it's always asked of us. [Organisations] are accountable fully. But in reality, some are held to a much higher standard. The expectations are much higher [for us] and that's something that we need to recognise.

Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery's (2013) analysis illustrates the representation of Muslim leaders, particularly in the right-leaning tabloids, as being "hostile, easily angered and undeserving of the title of leader" (p.256). Moore, Mason and Lewis (2008) further highlight that while MCB is sometimes used in the media as the 'moderate' Muslim voice, the relationship between the media and Muslim organisations can be seen as both precarious and ambivalent. Holohan and Poole (2011) similarly find that while journalists do draw on Muslim organisations as sources, they question the representativeness of these sources. This was reflected in the Home Affairs Inquiry where most of the editors went to considerable lengths to discredit Muslim 'interest groups' as legitimate spokespersons for the wider Muslim community. In one instance, *The Sun*'s Peter Clarkson directly dismissed Muslim organisations in his declaration that "we don't only engage with Muslim groups. Because one

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<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that MCB is seen to occupy a precarious position regarding its 'representativeness' – having faced mixed support from both government and from Muslim communities themselves (Jones et al., 2014).



group obviously cannot speak for an entire community” (HA 2018). When talking about the complaints IPSO had received about negative Muslim representation, editors rejected the complaints by claiming that they came from organisations rather than readers themselves. For instance, *The Sun*’s Peter Clarkson further asserted:

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. (HA 2018)

Similarly, *The Times*’ Ian Brunksill stated:

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. (HA 2018)

By considering how the concerns of organisations that contest negative Muslim representation are dismissed, it is possible to view the uneven nature of contestation where certain interpretations are privileged whilst others distorted or excluded (Howarth, 2011). Furthermore, the case of MCB highlights how when Muslim groups do achieve the necessary cultural capital to participate in national debate through the media, it is rarely on their own terms. Instead, as Hall emphasises, the ideological struggle over meaning is integrally bound up with the struggle over access to the means of signification in terms of:

the difference between those accredited witnesses and spokesmen who had a privileged access, as of right, to the world of public discourse and whose statements carried the representativeness and authority which permitted them to establish the primary framework or terms of an argument; as contrasted with those who had to struggle to gain access to the world of public discourse at all; whose definitions were always more partial, fragmentary and delegitimated; and who, when they did gain access, had to perform within the established terms of the problematic in play. (Hall, 1982: 81)

While Miqdaad’s focus on inaccuracies and corrections has been successful in raising the issue of negative Muslim representation to the editors’ attentions, he himself acknowledged the limitations of his more ‘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 [...] I think they get it wrong in many ways and obviously sometimes it's through complaints you can make them aware of it, sometimes it's through roundtables and discussion, sometimes it's through documents and evidence that you show them. 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.

### **Space for Structural Change**

Returning to Giddens' structuration theory as mentioned in Chapter 3, structures can become subject to change and are "constituted and reconstituted" over time due to their constant interactions with agents (Marsden and Savigny, 2009: 147). Any structural change in terms of Muslim representation can similarly be seen as also being influenced on the action or inaction taken by the agents *within* these structures. Agents can act to either continue to reproduce negative representations (whether this is a result of structural constraints or their own agency to consciously and willingly reproduce these representations) or can act to challenge them. As Marsden and Savigney (2009) argue by further drawing on Giddens' theory:

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)

In his reference to "influencers", Miqdaad acknowledges that it is through those 'influential' agents within the media that structural change can take place. An example of this can be seen in the following account from one of the broadsheet journalists I interviewed, who used his 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.

While Andrew credits MCB for this success, his account highlights how journalists can work with Muslim organisations to push out, rather than suppress, alternative interpretations of the news. Another example of how negative representations could be challenged from within the media structures can be seen in the testimony of 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. (HA 2018)

As discussed in my theoretical chapter, Hall sees ideology as working implicitly beneath the consciousness of the journalists themselves. As a result, they become resigned to a position of subordination that denies them the agency to challenge the structures defining their actions. At the same time, Hall also acknowledges that, as part of the process of hegemony, these structures are open to reinterpretation and deconstruction due to contestation. As those inside the structure will be determined by it, however, it is only those outside of, and free from, the structure that can "pierce the generative 'foundations' of a discourse" (Peck, 2001: 218). What then does this mean for the possibilities of redressing negative Muslim representation? From Hall's stance, challenging representation involves the re-articulation of the meaning of its individual elements and the exposure of its contingency (Peck, 2001). Relying on the 'outside' of structure for this, however, is seen by Peck to be a contradiction in Hall's theory as representations themselves are inscribed and embedded by the logic of structure. This suggests then that they can only be changed from within the structure itself (Peck, 2001). As the example of Gary Jones implies, it is possible for the subordinated consciousness of journalists to be overcome and enable change from the 'inside' of the structure. To further understand how this becomes possible, it is necessary to revisit Gramsci's notion of contradictory consciousness as discussed in Chapter 3.

## **Return to Contradictory Consciousness and the Structure-Agency Dichotomy**

In Chapter 3, I introduced Gramsci's (1971) notion of 'contradictory consciousness' as a way of understanding the agency-structure dichotomy and the ambiguity of consent and conflict present in journalists' accounts of Muslim representation. Gramsci saw the contradictory consciousness as composed of two theoretical consciousnesses. I proposed in my theoretical chapter that journalists similarly could be seen to have both their own (agential) consciousness of the social world and another (structural) hegemonic consciousness that is "not (their) own but borrowed from another group" (Lears, 1985: 569). From this, I argued that rather than view journalists as subordinated when it came to reproducing Muslim representations, it is possible to view their consent to media hegemony as the result of a consciousness that is contradictory rather than false (Kim, 2001: 6647). As the latter consciousness would often overpower the former, Gramsci (1971) maintained that the contradictory consciousness led to a condition of "moral and political passivity" that curbed any agency-led possibility for structural change (p.327). This can be reflected in my own analysis, for example, in how journalists use professional retreatism to separate themselves from Muslim-related stories to reconcile any potential dilemmas they might face in the way they are reported.

However, Gramsci's contradictory consciousness can also provide an explanation for the possibilities of internal structural change as it highlights the important role that morality, emotion and affect play in motivating human agency (Kim, 2001). While Gramsci sees consent as a contradictory mix of "approbation and apathy, resistance and resignation", it is the contradictory nature of consciousness that makes space for the possibilities for "antagonistic cultural expressions" (Lears, 1985: 570-571). It is also here that the space for journalists themselves to challenge and contest negative Muslim representation becomes possible.

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 to understand how to:

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)

In Gary Jones' account to the Home Affairs Inquiry, he displays how his 'contradictory consciousness' led him to reassess his newspaper's stance on Muslim representation:

I have gone through a lot of former *Express* front pages, and I felt very uncomfortable looking at them. 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. (*HA 2018*)

Throughout my data, the experience of the contradictory consciousness was reflected by the journalists I interviewed on the issue of Muslim representation. Through these accounts, it was possible to see how journalists used the limited agency they had to challenge the perceived negative bias against Muslims in the British press. Tabloid journalist Martin stated:

The vast, vast, majority of people [working for tabloids] what you have to understand about them is they are all very deeply compromised [university] students who wanted to get a job in journalism. But they can't afford London rent and 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 I think to try to crowbar it into the copy that they put out.

Despite pressures on journalists to take a more negative, sensationalist stance towards Muslims, Martin resists by 'crowbarring' different 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, because I might research a great scandal.

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

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.

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.

Although these attempts at resistance do encourage alternative interpretations of news stories involving Muslims into public debate, they remain in the minority compared to the significant circulation-power of the dominant interpretations of the mainstream press. Hall et al. (1978) similarly argue that while alternative comment pieces are essential for pushing out counter-definitions and interpretations into public debate, they compete against the more privileged and powerful dominant interpretations within the uneven nature of the media terrain.

Furthermore, the traction of alternative representations largely depends on:

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. (Hall et al., 1978: 67)

While it can be argued that some 'counter-definers', such as the Muslim organisations discussed in Chapter 5, have varying access to the media, journalists and editors themselves do have the 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. One of the broadsheet journalists I interviewed similarly discussed how he was able to use his senior position at the newspaper to challenge common sense ideas about the link between Muslims and terrorism:

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 also, completely demolishing 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 the most important and I felt like I needed to re-publish that every six months.

Likewise, local journalist Thomas actively challenged 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 "fucking 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 after every time there is a terror attack. So, yeah, I thought it was important to do that.

## **Part I Conclusions**

The acts of journalists clearly can serve as part of the struggle to disrupt and redefine representations as part of Hall's constantly shifting process of hegemony. As mentioned in my theoretical chapter, Gramsci similarly recognised the 'subject' of common sense to be contradictory. To enable the shift in the contradictory consciousness that privileges agency in favour of social transformation requires understanding how an individual can only partake in a project of change when they are "hailed" into an ideology that corresponds with their sense of "who they are" and the values that they represent (Hall, 1998: 59). I examine this further in the next part of this chapter by critically analysing how solutions to the issue of negative Muslim representation can serve to either reproduce existing structural constraints or to transform them.

## **Part II: Change within the Media**

### **Introduction**

This chapter so far has discussed how contestation and resistance, both external and internal to journalism, can have the potential to challenge the issue of negative Muslim representation and contribute to its potential reformation. By seeing journalists as part of the same social and political contestation, it becomes possible to consider how they too can influence change when it comes to Muslim representation. This involves exercising some measure of self-directing freedom and moral independence while also taking account of the social institutions they are part of (Sjøvaag, 2013). For social transformation to take place, both Hall and Gramsci would maintain that the contradictory nature of the ideological elements that enable negative anti-Muslim bias within the British press would need to be exposed and challenged. In Gramsci's words:

What matters is the criticism to which such an ideological complex is subjected by the first representatives of the new historical phase. This criticism makes possible a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideology used to possess. (Gramsci, 1971: 195, cited in Hall, 1996b: 434)

With this in mind, in the next section of this chapter I present two very different conceptualisations from within my data of how the issue of anti-Muslim bias within the British press could be addressed. While both scenarios reflect attempts by journalists to put the 'structure in dominance' to the test when it comes to Muslim representation, they demonstrate how some 'solutions' reproduce the very structures that they purport to resist while others hold the potential for true transformation. Through this discussion, this chapter contributes a critical normative insight into how the anti-Muslim bias within the British Press can be addressed.

### **Diversity in the Newsroom**

Despite the issue of negative Muslim representation being on the media's agenda for at least the last two decades, mainstream news organisations continue to reflect a lack of diversity in personnel (Poole, 2019). Academic research into the ethnic make-up of newsrooms reflects that it is dominated by mainly white, middle-class men (and to a lesser extent, women) (Holohan and Poole, 2011; Poole, 2002; Cottle, 1999). Almost all the journalists I



interviewed similarly highlighted the lack of diversity in the newsrooms as being a cause for biased Muslim representation. As journalist 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 dominated and I think you get a certain mindset of people who go there.

In line with similar studies (e.g., Holohan and Poole, 2011), my interviewees viewed the lack of diversity in their newsrooms to be problematic, placing it as a priority for change.

Broadsheet journalist Andrew, for example, stated:

How important is it that we have Muslim journalists in the newsroom and that we have this at every stage in the process. 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 to come from them and be part of them and not just relying on white Oxbridge.

Andrew's passionate call for more diversity in the newsroom was added 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 similar sentiment was echoed by 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.

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).

The purpose for providing quite a data-heavy account of how journalists themselves view the importance of a diverse newsroom is to demonstrate how the seeds of structural change can stem from a genuine position of wanting to address inequalities and bias within press coverage. 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. In these accounts, however, the responsibilities for producing unbiased media coverage on Muslims is placed on Muslims themselves. They are tasked with ‘educating’ other journalists 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. It is further possible to see how the issue of ‘racism’ leads minorities to be viewed in unitary terms as a solution to the general negative impact of racism (Gabriel, 1988), rather than an understanding that British newsrooms should reflect British communities. A closer consideration of interviewees’ suggestions about how this diversity could be achieved further highlights how structural factors can restrict change and ensure the reproduction of existing structures.

When asked about how the issue of the lack of diversity in newsrooms should be addressed, tabloid journalist Ryan expressed his doubt as to whether this could be achieved:

I think it’s cultural change that needs to take place. It maybe (pause) - but it would take such a long time. There was the 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.

Broadsheet journalist, Patrick similarly acknowledged how in practice, race diversity within the newspaper industry was much more resistant to change than gender diversity:

Gender was an easier change because everyone has a daughter or wife or a female that they meet at a dinner party or in their circle of friends [...] In terms of race and ethnicity, it was much slower and much more effort was required, much more having to get out there and target people who aren’t in your radar. So, it was like even when

people acknowledge that there was a problem, a lot of the initial reaction is just to shrug and say well you can't really reach hard to reach group, they don't apply.

Other interviewees appeared puzzled at why their news organisations were unable to recruit from minority communities. Press Association journalist 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 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, I don't know 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.

Amanda expresses her concern but, at the same time, cannot understand why this is the case despite her news organisations 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, each editor expressed their desire to recruit more ethnic minority journalists to work on their newspapers and saw this as a positive practice in principle. As these respective examples from the representatives of *The Mail* and *The Telegraph* newspapers show:

I think we would like more journalists from all minority groups.” (Peter Wright, Editor Emeritus, *Daily Mail*, HA 2018)

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 (Ian MacGregor, Editor Emeritus, *The Telegraph*, HA 2018).

All the editors 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, however, they expressed disappointment that their efforts had led to little success in terms of recruitment. It is by examining their respective explanations for this lack of success that it becomes possible to explore how dominant institutions can reinforce reproduction and constrain, rather than enable, contradiction and change.

Rather than considering the structural factors that contributed to their failure at attracting a diverse workforce, the editors could be seen to place the blame firmly on Muslims themselves. In one example, *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, is the truth. I can't speak for the others, but I can certainly speak for *The Mirror*. We would like more, for sure. (HA 2018)

A similar perspective was put forward by Neil Benson, the chair of the Editors Code Committee:

I think we have got very little ethnic diversity in newsrooms [...] There are other issues, which I know from my time working in Bradford many years ago. We tried to get some representatives from the Muslim population in Bradford to join 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. That is one instance. It was the reality of the situation, and that pertains today as well. (HA 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 beliefs in the need to instigate change from within their newspapers in the journalists' interviews, in the editors' accounts (whether they consciously believe this or not) it is not the media system that needs to change but Muslims and their culture.

### **The Experiences of Muslim Journalists**

The discussion so far indicates how the proposed solutions for greater diversity in the newsrooms as a way of redressing any anti-Muslim bias serves instead to reinforce certain

ideas of the problematic and homogenised nature of Muslim communities and their culture. Research on minority journalists working within mainstream news organisations indicates that they can often become institutionalised while carrying the extra burden of responsibility for reporting on their communities (Poole, 2019). In line with Billig et al.'s (1988) ideological dilemmas, this can result in an experience of "conflicting loyalties" when it comes to the personal, professional and community expectations of their journalistic work (Poole, 2019: 473). Muir et al. (2011) further highlight the "distinctive stresses, difficulties and dilemmas" that Muslim journalists face within mainstream news organisations (p.221). Most of the Muslim journalists I interviewed did feel a personal sense of responsibility regarding stories relating to Muslims. While 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. As broadsheet journalist Sadia discussed:

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. Do I feel a burden? 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.

Muslim journalist Amina also spoke about how she actively tried to write positive stories about Muslims for her online newspaper:

They are just Muslim issues - no not issues - Muslim topics, and just talking about them in a way that sort of like normalises them a little bit if you know what I mean. I think doing that sort of stuff makes it more humanised and normalised. It brings Muslims into the fabric of sort of what we do. I think 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.

Freelance journalist Hasina likewise felt able to contribute more nuanced representations of Muslims within her published work in the mainstream press:

When you're having various different representations of Muslims in the media that, you know, 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.

In line with my earlier discussion, research into Muslim journalists within mainstream newsrooms suggests that most journalists in general believe 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 Muslim journalists I interviewed did not feel ‘pigeon-holed’ into reporting on Muslim-related stories as indicated in other studies (Poole 2014), there was an expectation from some of the non-Muslim journalists that this is where their value came in. In one interview, broadsheet journalist Patrick recollected how there were no Muslims in his newsroom at the time of the 7/7 terrorist attacks:

I remember being at the newsroom after the 7/7 attacks in 2005. I remember it was like is there a Muslim in the building? We needed someone when it was clear that the perpetrators were actually British Muslims, rather than up to that point everyone had thought of terrorists as being Afghan or whatever. 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 who was in the building. And we had a white member of staff columnist who’d talked to Muslims and that was all we had.

In another example, broadsheet journalist Brendan stated:

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.

Although both Patrick and Brendan are trying to make the point that diversity in the newsroom results in more diverse news reporting, their arguments appear at odds with those journalists who do not define themselves as ‘Muslim journalists’ but as journalists who happen to be ‘Muslim’. Furthermore, given the diversity within the 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.

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 (p.237). Referring to the burden of representation placed upon Black artists, he argues that increasing the public visibility of a handful of Black artists itself results in the legitimatisation of the much wider invisibility and inequality faced by the Black community. This burden of representation can further be seen as a problematic 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. (Mercer, 2013: 240)

Such an approach places the impetus for change on individual agency rather than on systematic failures in the structural elements of the organisation (Noon 2018). While Muslim journalists may view their background as an opportunity as well as a burden (Holohan and Poole, 2011), this suggests that the role has fallen on their shoulders not from free choice but “as a consequence of structures of racism that have historically marginalised their access to the means of cultural production” (Mercer, 2013: 240). This burden also reflects a perceived reluctance of ethnic minorities to engage in critical public dialogue about their own communities. Mercer (2013) further asserts that:

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 idiom of ‘doing dirty laundry in public’ was also directly cited in my interviews with Muslim journalists. As online journalist Amina observed:

I would love to say that we are not defined by our identity but unfortunately, and fortunately as well, we are. We just have a responsibility towards our community firstly so a lot of the times I worry about misrepresenting my community, making them look

bad, airing our dirty laundry, discussing internal community dialogue. 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. I would say that the majority of my readers are obviously not like racist. But sometimes I'll read the comments on some of my stories, and it has been adopted by racists and it fuels their Islamophobia. So, at times I've wondered oh maybe I shouldn't have written this.

While Amina worried about the consequences of her writing, opinion columnist Sarwat was more scathing of this type of community self-censorship:

Sarwat: 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 the number of men from Asian and Somali communities, and they're not just Muslims, who are forced into marriages. That upset a lot of people.

Nadia: Who did it upset?

Sarwat: 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.

Sarwat's account suggests that it is possible for Muslim journalists to be critical of their own communities when writing in the mainstream press. It further counters the assumption that Muslim journalists will necessarily balance out negative Muslim representations. Tabloid journalist Shabir demonstrated this in the following account:

The problem of course is, you know, as a Muslim journalist, as someone who talks to so many Muslim leaders, they are constantly blaming the media for the negative coverage. Some of that criticism is warranted but the problem is of course it's the Muslim community, well elements within it, are also doing things that bring this attention onto them.

Columnist Sarwat was similarly critical about Muslim communities when I asked her a wider question about the role of journalism in society:

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.

Mercer (2013) argues that the main problem with the concept of the social responsibility of the Black artist to their own community stems from the assumption that the artist is representing a “supposedly homogenous and monolithic community” simply based on their shared race (p.248). Yet both Sarwat and Shabir rejected this role, defining themselves primarily as journalists who can also be critical about Muslims. As Sarwat told me directly:

My responsibility and the responsibility of journalism are broader than “oh this is a beleaguered community”. When the Satanic Verses happened, I wouldn't have written some of the stuff I now write about Muslims. At that time Muslims were utterly powerless and voiceless, but not now [...] 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.

Echoing Billig et al.'s concept of ideological dilemmas, Poole (2014) asserts that Muslim journalists can experience conflicting loyalties between their “perceived cultural obligations and required professional duties” (p.108), giving rise to both ethical dilemmas and conflicts of identity. 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 solution of adding more Muslim journalists is for addressing the overall issue of negative Muslim representation. As media campaigner Miqdaad highlighted:

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.

While Muslim journalists enrich British journalism by bringing their own diverse life experiences, the key to ‘diverse’ reporting lies in the efforts that journalists make to really understand the topics and communities they are reporting on. Rather than the quick fix

solution of recruiting more Muslim journalists, this requires a change in the very cultural foundations of journalism where these wider experiences become both valued and considered in all their complexity. As with the earlier analysis of the issue of diversity in the newsroom, it becomes possible to understand how 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. As this narrative from journalist Patrick who came from a mixed-heritage similarly reflected:

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 always say if it's a choice of a white editor or a Muslim editor or whatever, I would rather have the person who's going to do the most diverse commissioning, and the one who most wants to represent the country. 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, and will do the "masters" work, or do the boss' work or whatever. But I do think that if any white person wants to be informed about what's going on in the world, then they have to have contacts with people from different backgrounds. They 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.

Patrick's lengthy, passionate tirade above highlights how 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 the media organisation. Instead, it involves a cultural change in the common sense ideas of how British journalists – of whatever religion or ethnicity – represent their own minority communities. I explore the possibilities of this assertion by turning to local journalists for the second normative conceptualisation of how anti-Muslim bias within the British press can be addressed.

## **Muslim Representation in Local Journalism**

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. (*HA 2018*)

The local journalists I interviewed were also keen to emphasise the distinction 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, local journalist Elliott observed:

I would think certain newspapers do definitely have more of an agenda whether they are right leaning or left leaning. We wouldn't put a negative spin on the work that these groups do. I think we probably do cover them differently. The local and regional press have a very important role to play in perhaps countering the more biased agendas of the national press. I think that is certainly in our case.

Local journalist Mark similarly 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 national 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.

Frost (2006) argues that the key differential between the ethics of local journalism and that of national journalism relates to the proximity of the local journalist to the communities they serve. In line with both Elliott and Mark's accounts, this perceived 'loyalty' or 'duty' to the local community and local readers can be seen as:

placing a different emphasis on first the approach to the source and the story, and then the way the story is used when published. There is often a more thoughtful approach with a lesser attempt to sensationalise. (Frost, 2006: 278-9)

Local newspapers tend to have “distinctive newsroom cultures” that are shaped by these closer relationships to their readers (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2009: 28). In these newsroom cultures, journalists and readers are seen to be part and parcel of a single community with common values and goals. As local journalist Elliott concurred:

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.

A similar perspective was provided by Catherine:

For me, I think being a local journalist, you are also much more connected to the community that you’re working for because you are in it every day and you see the same people. I feel a responsibility because if I wrote something about somebody that wasn’t true, or slightly took a quote out of context and it was an unfair representation, I would have to look that person in the face and 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.

When it came to reporting on Muslim-related stories, this prioritised sense of community was particularly important. As London-based local journalist Ben emphasised:

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.

In his discussion of the impact of multiculturalism on journalism, Deuze (2005: 453) suggests that multiculturalism has three important implications for journalistic practice 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)

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" represents (Deuze, 2005: 456). This implies a shift from a "primary top-down meaning to an increasingly bottom-up application", where journalists actively seek out engagement amongst their diverse audiences (Deuze, 2005: 456). This conceptualisation of audiences contrasts starkly to my analysis discussed in Chapter 6, where the media's imagined 'sense of audience' was seen to lead 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, as the focus on publicness comes from a stance of particularity rather than universality (Martin, 2013: 144). Their sense of social responsibility towards local readers and the local community includes Muslims as an integral part of those communities. Rather than adopting a position of professional retreatism, they felt able to exercise their agential judgement regarding how stories involving Muslims were reported. This increased sense of autonomy further meant they were able to 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:

There you go, I'm not impartial. I remember distinctly having a conversation with the news editor. I remember 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 and I wanted to put it up in plain facts to counter the misinformation that would no doubt come in the comment section underneath.

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: 456). Deuze (2005) 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 to journalism can problematise the norms of journalism such as objectivity and balance so that they become interpreted in practice in favour of a "more complex or multi-perspectival reading of events" (Deuze, 2005: 456). It is by defining their own interpretations of journalistic norms around their close connections with their audiences, that enables local journalists to also enact their agency in the process of change (Deuze, 2005). Local journalist 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.

London-based local journalist Ben likewise saw his active engagement as central to his role as a journalist:

The reason I attempt to go the extra mile in my reporting and try to do more community focused stories is to attempt to get a more, I guess it's a devalued word, but a more truthful picture of where the community is and the real lives of the people within it. For me, it's about pushing back against the atomised bullshit that we do see coming back at us online. The reason it's important to tell stories truthfully and accurately is to push back against this dehumanising narrative that is out there.

From these accounts, it is possible to envisage the role of local journalism as a form of "counter-public" discourse, where journalists' modes of address are very consciously presented *against* ideological accounts of 'publicness' discussed in Chapter 6, in a way that resists "the assumed universalism of dominant media forms and norms" (Martin, 2013: 143). By rejecting the dominant framing when it comes to Muslim representation, local journalism can provide an alternative starting point for public debate about the role of Muslims in British society. Rather than adopting frames of 'Othering', where Muslims ('Them') are placed in opposition to British society ('Us'), local journalism's purview of Muslims as an integral part

of local society shape the way that they report on stories involving Muslims. Here, a shared local identity informs the basis of their journalistic practice rather than a divided, national identity where Muslims are represented as outsiders. Such an approach reflects a much “more inclusive way of imagining Britishness” (Morey and Yaqin, 2010: 153), one that reflects the type of multicultural citizenship advocated by Modood (2003, cited in Morey and Yaqin, 2010) that is “characterized by respect for difference and based on universalist values where citizenship takes into account multiple group identities, sustained through dialogue and plural forms of representation” (Morey and Yaqin, 2010: 153).

In my theoretical chapter, I introduced Charles Taylor’s concept of social imaginaries as a way of understanding how “ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings” (Taylor, 2004: 23). As Taylor (2000) elaborates:

Modern society invents or imagines a new collective agency that it requires: the “people”, sometimes also called [...] the “nation”. This collective agency must have a certain kind of unity if it is to function as it is supposed to. (Taylor, 2000: 373)

In terms of Britishness, this unity can either act to represent Muslims as an integral part of the social imaginary, or to ensure they can only exist within it as the ‘Other’. From the accounts of the local journalists I spoke to, the social imaginary of their local community very much included, rather than excluded, their Muslim communities. The voices of these communities were valued as part of public debate, while 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: 91), both in terms of their local communities and their own journalistic identity.

Gramsci highlights that the basis for all culture lies in the “spontaneous philosophy absorbed and shaped by each individual” (Lears, 1985: 593). Returning to Hall (1998), when it comes to Muslim representation, national journalists can be seen to be ‘hailed’ by the dominant ideology that restricts their agency and leads to the reproduction of negative Muslim representation. The local journalists in my study, on the other hand, were hailed by an alternative social imaginary. Negative Muslim representation 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, as Taylor elaborates:

If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice which largely carries the understanding. At any given time, we can speak of the “repertory” of collective actions at the disposal of a given group of society. These are the common actions which they know how to undertake [...] The discriminations we have to make to carry these off, knowing whom to speak to and when and how, carry an implicit “map” of social space, of what kinds of people we can associate with in what ways in what circumstances. (Taylor, 2002: 107)

How can we then take the lessons learnt from the local journalists in my study and extrapolate them to national journalism? As this chapter has indicated, this requires the unsettling of the ideological construction of ‘publicness’ as discussed in my analysis in Chapter 6, to one that includes Muslims and Islam as “aspects of what it is to be British” (Modood, 2019: 23). This can only be achieved through a cultural change within journalism in terms of how journalists themselves work with the communities that they report on in a way that builds on trust and mutual respect. To illustrate this, I present two specific interviews excerpts – that of national journalist Brendan that I have also cited earlier in this chapter, 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. (*Brendan, broadsheet journalist*)

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. (*Catherine, local journalist*)

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, on the other hand, recognised 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.

For cultural transformation to take place, Gramsci maintains that an active and genuine dialogue between intellectuals and non-intellectuals is imperative (Crehan, 2011). Similarly, this dialogue between journalists (those ‘intellectuals’ with the power and legitimacy to redefine negative representations from within the media structure) and Muslim communities (those ‘non-intellectuals’ who strive to contest representations from outside the structure) is central to redressing the anti-Muslim bias in the British press. This dialogue, however, must begin from a position of a shared identity, rather than from a position of ‘difference’, as highlighted by broadsheet journalist Patrick:

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.

## **Chapter Conclusions**

In summary, this chapter has discussed the role that journalistic agency can play in the way negative Muslim representations are either reproduced or contradicted in the British press. While it appears that many structural factors can contribute towards the anti-Muslim bias within the British press, the dilemmas that journalists faced led them to consider how to make spaces for counter-representations and the more nuanced and considered reporting of Muslim-related stories.

By considering the tensions inherent in journalism’s structure–agency dichotomy, this chapter has contributed towards understanding how the dominant tendency towards negative Muslim representation in the British press can be addressed. In line with Hall’s claim that the media has only ‘relative autonomy’, my thesis demonstrates how structural constraints whether commercial and organisational pressures, or cultural and ideological understandings, can limit the autonomy of journalists when it comes to the reporting of Muslim-related stories. As the result of these constraints, journalists also experience considerable tensions between different clashing values regarding what the role of journalism is (and should be) in a democratic, egalitarian society. These ideological dilemmas are central to the process of

social transformation as they act to put the “structure in dominance” itself “to the test” (Hall, 1972: 16).

While contestation from those outside of the media system, including Muslim organisations, contributes to this change, these direct challenges or protests cannot on their own undermine what Gabriel (1994) refers to as the “well-knitted together nature of media discourse” (p.17). To some extent, and in line with Giddens structuration theory mentioned in my theoretical chapter, as structure and agency implicate each other, structural change must also come from within the media structure itself, making journalists pivotal to its transformation. Although Hall makes space for both agency and resistance through the concept of contestation, he does not include journalists as agents within this contestation. Yet it is in his theory that the possibilities of their role in social transformation can be found. This is because they themselves are critical to the successful contestation of hegemony, where negative representations of Muslims can become re-articulated to a different interpretation.

With reference to Giddens, it is also necessary to recognise the complexity of the structure-agency dichotomy when it comes to the media and how both agency and structure can be both constraining and enabling of social change. While agency in this chapter is seen to reflect the agency of journalists to instigate social change around negative Muslim representations, for some journalists their agency is exercised in reproducing, rather than challenging, these representations in line with their own identity, morality and beliefs (Ryfe, 2009). Similarly, for editors, the exercising of agency could involve prioritising commercial and economic imperatives and accordingly constraining the agency of the journalists who work under them. In these cases, there is an alignment between agency and a structure which enables, rather than constrains, journalistic agency while also reproducing negative representations. Giddens (1984) further highlights how the ability to act as an agent within a social structure depends on the rules and resources of the structure itself. My analysis has discussed for example how journalists higher up in the media hierarchy often have access to more resources as well as greater authority and autonomy and are often better positioned to challenge existing practices. Yet to get to that position of greater autonomy, junior journalists must adhere to the existing rules and conventions of their media institutions, contributing to the recursive nature of negative representations.

Media institutions in the structural sense are durable but not fixed. They are also entangled in the socio-political environments in which they operate. While structures can constrain and

confine journalistic agency, it is also possible to see how certain media structures enabled journalistic autonomy to redress negative representations in the case of the local newspapers. From a Gramscian perspective, agency can therefore be located within a particular structural context, where rather than viewing agency as voluntarist acts, it becomes recognised as ‘the realisation of structurally grounded potentialities and possibilities’ (Joseph, 2008:144).

In this chapter, 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 highlights the role that journalists can play towards the accommodation of difference in a pluralistic, multicultural society (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015). Rather than adopting an approach of professional retreatism, by being more aware 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). These actions both enabled and were enabled by the changing structures of their newspapers themselves.

Such an approach, however, can only take place under particular conditions (Joseph, 2008), where the wider re-articulation of the concept of Britishness/Britain sees “Muslims are not ‘Them’ but part of a plural ‘Us’, not mere sojourners but part of its future” (Modood, 2009:207). To achieve this, journalists themselves must be prepared to reconceptualise the way they view their audiences, and the wider British public, to one which sees Muslims as an inclusive part of who we are. This requires an active engagement with Muslim communities in a way that challenges common sense preconceptions and encourages social responsibility. In doing so, journalists can work towards Gramsci’s own call for an “integral journalism”, one which “seeks not only to satisfy all the needs (of a given category) of its public, but also to create and develop these needs, to arouse its public and progressively enlarge it” (Gramsci, 1971: 408).

## **Chapter 9: Conclusion Chapter**

### **Introduction**

Overall, my thesis has sought to understand how continuity and contradiction, reproduction and contestation can co-exist within the representations of Muslims in the British press. The starting point of my thesis was to shift the empirical focus away from media content itself towards journalists to get a better understanding of the enduring reproduction of negative Muslim representations, and why spaces for resistance and contradiction coexist alongside these representations. By drawing instead on qualitative interviews with journalists, together with testimonies from editors through secondary data, this thesis has contributed a much under-researched insight into how journalists themselves make sense of the issue of negative Muslim representation. In particular, the data from my research fills the gap in the study of the representation of Muslims in the media by highlighting the ‘behind the media content’ tensions and conflicts journalists face when reporting on Muslim-related stories. Each of my analysis chapters uncovered the dilemmatic nature of Muslim representations that reveals itself in the contradictions journalists face when powerfully embedded ideas about their own ideological role in an egalitarian, liberal society are confronted with the anti-Muslim bias in the press industry they work for. Through these tensions, it becomes possible to uncover the contingent nature of the reproduction of negative Muslim representation, and how spaces for challenging these representations can be found.

In this concluding chapter, I begin by considering my key findings against the arguments and research questions I put forward in Chapter 1. As my thesis also seeks normative indications of how the issue of negative Muslim representation can be addressed, I discuss how my findings can impact the ways in which 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**

The first research question examines the insights that journalists present about the claim of negative bias against Muslims in the British press and its potential drivers. My analysis reflects how deeply embedded common sense ideas about Muslims contribute to the way they are represented in press coverage, influencing the language and framing used by journalists and the sources they choose. A particular underlying sense of ‘difference’ is applied to

Muslims; they are seen as the exceptional case in comparison to other minority groups, reinforcing the image of Muslims as the problematic outsiders of British society. This is particularly emphasised when exploring the construction of ‘positive stories’ about Muslims and how they are often framed in terms of the exceptional Muslim who has ‘proven’ their value as a British citizen by adapting to the liberal way of life. While many of the journalists speak about these common sense representations in a critical manner, their accounts highlight how normalised these representations have become as the consensus on Muslims both within the press industry and for its perceived audiences.

While journalists are not directly instructed to reproduce negative representations, most struggle to reconcile the problematic and much more implicit nature of the reproduction of these representations in their work. Journalists feel particularly under pressure from commercial and organisational demands to adhere to market-led ideas about what audiences want when it comes to Muslim-related stories. Increasing competition from social media further exacerbates this perceived demand for sensationalist and polarising content on Muslims that generates fear and anxiety amongst audiences. Yet a closer examination of journalists’ ambivalent conceptualisations of ‘audiences’ indicates that 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 for my thesis as it signifies how an alternative re-conceptualisation of journalists’ sense of what their audiences want (or need) can lead 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**

These findings also have significant implications for my second research question regarding how journalists understand their own roles and responsibilities when it comes to negative Muslim representations. When journalists are conceptualising their audiences, there is a tension around whether the role of the journalist is to produce the sensationalist and exciting content about Muslims that audiences *want*, or to provide audiences with 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 and its relationship to public interest and its status as a force of democracy and the ‘common good’.

The concept of public interest is further problematised in the accounts of journalists and editors when juxtaposed with other norms and values of journalism such as objectivity,

balance, and freedom of expression. Tensions particularly arise when these journalistic norms and values are seen to act 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 Hall's concept of professional retreatism, journalistic norms and values can act to distance journalists from intervening in the way stories about Muslims are told and from their potential consequences. While journalists recognise how a more ritualistic application of these values can perpetuate negative representations, the same values also have the potential to challenge these representations and to encourage alternative voices (including those of Muslims) to enter press coverage. This suggests that, rather than dismissing the merits of journalistic values such as freedom of expression, objectivity, and balance when it comes to Muslim-related stories, a re-conceptualisation of the way these norms and values are applied that aligns, rather than clashes, with the values of the wider public interest is needed. This involves journalists drawing on 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.

### **Contestation, Disruption and Re-Conceptualisation**

These key findings about the tensions around how journalists see their audiences and how they understand their own roles and responsibilities against the wider value of public interest are central to answering my third research question about the spaces for change and resistance against negative Muslim representation. Both these findings appear in my data as the ideological dilemmas journalists face between the potential consequences of negative Muslim representation and their wider responsibilities within a liberal, multicultural society. Journalists' own critiques about how audiences (and the wider British public) are conceived, and their relationships with and responsibilities to public interest, lead them to critique and unsettle the construction of 'publicness' in terms of its influence on how Muslim-related stories are told.

The lessons learnt from the local journalists I interviewed, and their very different conceptualisations of who their audiences are and their relationships with them, reflect how it is possible to report on Muslim-related stories in ways that include, rather than exclude, Muslims as an integral part of their social imaginary. The voices of local Muslim communities are seen to be valued as part of public debate, while other voices that can cause them harm and risk the civic harmony of the wider community that Muslims are a part of are

challenged. While local journalists keep the principle of public interest to the forefront in terms of how they report on Muslim-related stories, they also consider the possible harmful consequences of their reporting on local Muslim communities. By defining their own interpretations of journalistic norms and values around the close connections they share with their local communities, local journalists are able to use their own judgements accordingly to apply these norms and values in the public interest of *all* members of their community (including Muslims). This suggests that by similarly unsettling both market-led and ideological conceptions of audiences and the British public, and the 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 can become normalised, where 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 journalistic practice when it comes to the reporting of Muslim-related stories.

The dilemmas that journalists experience further reflect the push-and-pull of the structure-agency dichotomy that exists 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. As I contend in Chapter 3 of my thesis, by bringing together the microlevel study of journalists with macrolevel ideas about hegemony (Kim, 2001) it becomes possible to analyse how a journalists’ own consciousness can act as the vehicle for social change while also taking into account the power of the structures to constrain their work. While structures are powerful and contribute towards the privileging of negative Muslim representations in the British press, they cannot reduce journalists to what Billig et al. (1988) describe in Chapter 3 as “an unthinking obedience, in which conformity to ritual has replaced deliberation” (p.31). Instead, this critical deliberation or consciousness about the role that journalists play in society and the responsibilities that they have to the wider public – including Muslims – can lead to the critique, disruption, and re-conceptualisation of the way in which Muslims are represented in the British press.

Stuart Hall’s conceptualisation of the reproduction of dominant interpretations in the media provides a compelling theoretical base for understanding the enduring nature of negative Muslim representation. As an activist himself, Hall is also committed to the concept of contestation. By recognising the contingent nature of hegemony, he seeks to make space for contestation by viewing the media as the terrain of ideological struggles for meaning between

hegemonic and counter-hegemonic groups. While 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, as 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. My own empirical investigations extend Hall's theory by problematising the subordinated role that journalists play under theories of media hegemony and highlighting how their critical consciousness can contribute to the contestation of negative representations from within their media structures. Rather than see journalists as 'unwittingly' and 'unconsciously' (Hall, 2005:84) serving to reproduce negative Muslim representations, most of the journalists I interviewed were both highly conscious and critical of their conceived role within this reproduction. It was this conscious critique, and the tensions that arose from it, that revealed spaces for contingency where alternative ways of reporting on stories involving Muslims could be conceived. This shift in viewing journalists from being unconscious and subordinated reproducers of hegemonic ideology to agents acting to consciously change or transform the media structures they work for is central to redressing negative representation of Muslims.

This brings me to one of the limitations of my research that I discuss in Chapter 4 in relation to my sampling strategy. In line with other research that also uses interviews with journalist to study negative Muslim representation (Holohan and Poole, 2011), it is possible there is some sampling bias in my research towards those journalists who (like myself) are already critical of how the British press portrays Muslims. Although I spent a lot of time and effort inviting a wide range of journalists to participate, including those who have written more negative articles about Muslims, it was much easier to recruit journalists from liberal, left-leaning newspapers who tended to write more nuanced and less negative articles. Fortunately, I had some personal contacts within the industry that I drew upon to 'convince' a much wider range of journalists to take part in the study. The snowballing technique also helped, and in one incident, a senior journalist whom I would consider to be highly critical of Muslims and Islam was strong-armed by a fellow journalist I was interviewing 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 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 are uncomfortable with, and even guilty about, but do not necessarily care enough about to disrupt the status quo. When given the opportunity to discuss it and consider how and why this disruption can lead to better journalism, this can also lead to some introspection about how their own practices can contribute to the propagation of negative Muslim representation and the associated consequences for British Muslim communities.

As I highlighted in Chapter 3, to make these contradictions visible, it is necessary to uncover the 'dilemmatic' nature of discourse (Billig et al., 1988). This involves 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. Approaching my analysis from this position provides me with the necessary tools for assessing the tensions and contradictions that arise in the accounts of journalists and editors as they negotiate their own choices when it comes to the reporting of Muslim-related stories. It is by analysing the often-dissonant attempts to make sense of negative Muslim representation that the conflicted nature of this issue is highlighted. This also aligns with Gramsci's notion of the 'contradictory consciousness' that journalists and editors experience in terms of the anti-Muslim bias in British press coverage. On one side, journalists are a central part of a media structure that reproduces these representations. On the other, journalists feel compelled to critique this structure and seek out ways to redress any anti-Muslim bias. This can lead 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 media content alone.

## **Implications and Areas for Future Research**

In summary, my thesis makes three significant contributions to the study of negative Muslim representation. Firstly, it makes an important empirical contribution by providing a much under-researched insight into the experiences of journalists themselves when it comes to reporting on Muslims. Secondly, my thesis offers a theoretical contribution in problematising Hall's conceptualisation of the subordinated role of journalists as it highlights how journalists can exercise their critical consciousness to contest the reproduction of negative Muslim representations from within the media structures they work for. The thesis offers a third, normative contribution by indicating how the anti-Muslim bias within the British press can be addressed through a re-conceptualisation of both the practices of journalism and how journalists understand their audiences. The dilemmas and tensions that journalists and editors face when it comes to negative representations are not easily visible in the analysis of media content about Muslims. However, these dilemmas, tensions and contradictions are central to the process of transforming how Muslims are represented in the British press, as it is through this dilemmatic struggle that the possibilities for change become realised, enabling a reformation of how our society tells a story about itself.

The findings of this thesis have significant implications for the ways in which journalists report on Muslim-related stories. It highlights how journalists themselves can contribute to reforming how stories involving Muslims are reported by exercising their critical consciousness in a way that considers the potential consequences of their work for both Muslim communities and the wider public interest. This involves a re-consideration of how journalistic practices, norms and values can serve to either perpetuate the anti-Muslim bias in the British press or enable the more nuanced and contextual reporting of Muslim-related stories. My thesis further stresses the need to reconceptualise how journalists view their audiences, and the wider British public, to develop a social imaginary that positions Muslims as an integral part of British society rather than as problematic 'Others'. This requires dismantling of 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 organisations have been central to the contestation of the ways in which Muslims are represented in the media, journalists and editors need to draw on these organisations and use their expertise and resources to build relationships with Muslim communities.

To shift these changes from individual journalistic practices to the wider culture of the media institutions that journalists work for, it is necessary to incorporate these recommendations into journalist training programmes, whether for new journalists through colleges and universities or for existing journalists based at newspaper organisations. For these recommendations to work, the starting point needs to come from a shared identity rather than from a position of needing to reconcile difference. As Chapter 8 reflects, solutions to increase the diversity of the newsroom often ultimately fail as they begin from a starting point of difference, placing the burden for solving the anti-Muslim bias on Muslim journalists themselves.

An existing example of how the solutions discussed in this thesis can be operationalised is found in the Transformative Journalism Model (TJM) recently 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 more of 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, 2022:212-3). 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 (2018) model shares many parallels with the discussions and solutions of my own thesis. It 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 can be achieved without a wider consideration of how Muslims are conceived as an integral part of British society, rather than as outsiders.

There is also much scope for future research into this area of study. 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 this could be seen as a limitation of my research as they also all worked in areas with relatively large Muslim populations. This could in turn be seen to contribute to explaining 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 Muslim-related issues (Holohan and Poole, 2011). It is also important to note how the media landscape when it comes to local journalism is rapidly changing and that not all local newspapers work from the same model of journalism. According to the Media Reform Coalition (2014), local journalism is facing increasing commercialisation with over 80% of newspapers now owned by just six companies. My thesis considers the experiences of the local journalists I interviewed as integral to highlighting the possibilities for change across all newspapers when it comes to negative Muslim representations. It does not seek to make the claim that these findings can be generalised to local journalism across the board. Moving forward, future research could focus on how a wider sample of local journalists report on Muslim-related stories, taking into consideration the impact of the increasing commercialisation of their industry.

A similar point can be made about the limitations of this thesis in terms of its focus on newspaper journalists, rather than the wider media industry including television, radio and online news websites. 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 Hanitzsch, 2019) has undoubtedly increased pressures on journalists to reproduce sensationalist and polarising media stories about Muslims. Television coverage, on the other hand, has been shown to exhibit considerably less bias and inaccuracies around Muslim representation than press coverage (Hanif, 2018). It would be interesting to compare the experiences of journalists working in different forms of media with the findings of this thesis. Finally, while I only interviewed one representative of a Muslim organisation due to his expertise in this area, this added an enormous insight and perspective to my research. This also points to the scope for further research that examines

good practice examples where Muslim organisations and national journalists have worked together to redress negative representations and the lessons that can be taken from this.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Munnik (2018) for similar research on the relationships between local journalists and Muslim groups.

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## **APPENDIX 1: BACKGROUND TO SECONDARY DATA SOURCE**

**Home Affairs Committee Oral evidence: Hate Crime and its Violent Consequences – 24 April 2018.**

**Members of Parliament present:** Yvette Cooper (Chair); Stephen Doughty; Kirstene Hair; Sarah Jones; Tim Loughton; Stuart C. McDonald; Douglas Ross; Naz Shah; John Woodcock.

**Questions:** 580–823

**Witnesses I:** Paul Clarkson, Managing Editor, The Sun, Lloyd Embley, Group Editor-in-Chief, Trinity Mirror, Gary Jones, Editor-in-Chief, Daily and Sunday Express, and Peter Wright, Editor Emeritus, Associated Newspapers.

**Witnesses II:** Ian Brunskill, Assistant Editor, The Times, Ian MacGregor, Editor Emeritus, Telegraph Media Group, and President, Society of Editors, and Ted Young, Editor, Metro.

**Witnesses III:** Neil Benson, Chair, Editors Code Committee, and Ian Murray, Executive Director, Society of Editors.

**Data link:**

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/hate-crime-and-its-violent-consequences/oral/81930.pdf>



## **APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

### **Interview Schedule**

#### **Part 1: Opening Questions**

- Tell me about your personal journey into journalism.
- Why/how did you come into journalism?
- What drew you to write for the (name of publication)

#### **Part 2: Questions about journalism as a practice**

- What role does journalism play in society/What does it mean to be a journalist today?
- How much freedom do you have in your work?
- What are the constraining factors (if any?)
- What makes an event a news story?
- Who would you say is your audience? How do you tailor your work for your audience?
- Do you offer a wide range of views/balance/adhere to the demands of your readers?
- How important is objectivity/impartiality in your work?
- What would you say is the end goal of journalistic work?
- What would you say were the obligations of a journalist in a democratic society and how would this affect your work?

#### **Part 3: Specific Discussion about Work**

*These are suggested questions, but this part of each interview would be tailored to the specific news piece/articles.*

##### **a) Specific Questions**

- Tailored to each specific articles.

##### **b) General Questions**

- Why did you think this particular story newsworthy?
- What is the story here?
- Why did you choose this word/phrasing?
- Why did you include this spokesperson?
- What message are you trying to put across here?
- How do you choose your sources for your articles?
- How do you believe your readers would interpret this story?
- Do you believe your news articles are partisan in any way?
- Are there any views you would not include?
- Do you believe this article shows a balanced view of the story? What do you understand by 'balance' and how important is 'balance' in your news reporting?
- What factors influenced how you reported on this story (eg: finding sources, lobbying, editor told them)?

#### **Part 4: Specific Questions about reporting on Muslims**

- According to research, the British press tends to report negatively on Muslims overall – what are your views on this?
- Have you seen any shift in the way that Muslims are reported on?
- Do you think that certain news frames are more popular when it comes to stories about Muslims?
- How interested do you think your readership is in stories relating to Muslims?
- What level of freedom are you given to express your own individual position when commentating on issues relating to Muslims? How do you feel about that?
- What limits your autonomy when writing on stories on Muslims?
- What are some of the pressures you are under in relation to news stories on Muslims?
- Are there any other difficulties that arise when reporting on these stories?
- What needs to be done (if anything at all)?
- What are your views on media regulation (IPSO) in these cases?

**Is there anything you would like to add?**

## **APPENDIX 3: PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET**



**Sociology, Politics and International Studies**

Nadia Haq  
School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS)  
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### **Research Project: Rethinking Media Discourse on Muslims**

#### **About the research**

This research project focuses on how journalists report on Muslims and Islam. The research is based on qualitative interviews with journalists across mainstream print and online news publications.

The Principal Investigator of this research is Nadia Haq, a doctoral researcher based at the University of Bristol and the research forms part of her doctoral research which is governed by the University's research ethics and data protection protocols. The research is supervised by Professor Tariq Modood and Dr Therese O'Toole.

Ethical approval for this research has been granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies (SPAIS) at the University of Bristol.

#### **Interview Format**

Interviews will normally take around an hour and will include a discussion with the journalist of some of their published articles. With the consent of the participants, interviews are recorded to allow for greater accuracy and quality of analysis. Recordings will be anonymised and transcribed, which will then be securely digitally stored. No one other than the Principal Investigator will have access to the materials. Transcripts or recordings are never given to anyone else. Participants have the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process.

#### **Data usage and storage**

Research data will not be shared with people or organisations outside the university. Personal data held for research will not be used for any other purpose. Encrypted storage media or hard drive will be used for storing any sensitive or personal data. All sensitive and personal data stored or processed off campus will be encrypted. Security arrangements are put in place to prevent theft of data. Specifically, access to electronic and physical data will be restricted

and password protection procedures will be used to protect electronic data. Paper files containing personal data will be stored securely, for example in locked filing cabinets or in rooms that are locked when unoccupied. The data will be deleted once it is no longer required for the use for which it was gathered.

### **Outputs and dissemination**

Findings and dissemination are intended to be useful to academics. The dissemination activities will include conference presentations, workshops, blog posts and journal articles.

The principal investigator will also be happy to discuss the findings with you.

If you have any queries about any aspect of the research, please do not hesitate to contact Nadia Haq at [nadia.haq@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:nadia.haq@bristol.ac.uk).

## APPENDIX 4: CONSENT FORM

Nadia Haq  
School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies  
11 Priors Road, Bristol BS8 1TY  
Email: [nadia.haq@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:nadia.haq@bristol.ac.uk)  
Tel: [REDACTED]



### CONSENT FORM

**Research Project: Rethinking Media Discourse on Muslims:**

**YES      NO**

**PLEASE CONFIRM THE FOLLOWING TO THE BEST OF YOUR KNOWLEDGE:**

- I am 18 years of age or older  YES    NO
- I have read and understood the project information sheet supplied.  YES    NO
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.  YES    NO
- I agree to take part in the project: this will include being interviewed and audio recorded.  YES    NO
- I understand the data I provide will be anonymous.  YES    NO
- I understand that my personal contact details will not be revealed to people outside the project.  YES    NO
- I understand that the University of Bristol will use the data I provide for no purpose other than in relation to this research and associated publications.  YES    NO
- I have received enough information about the study to make an informed decision about my participation.  YES    NO
- I understand that my taking part in this project is voluntary: I am free to withdraw from the study and free to withdraw my data at any time and without giving reason for withdrawal.  YES    NO

I hereby fully and freely consent to my participation in this study.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name in BLOCK Letters: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name in BLOCK Letters: \_\_\_\_\_