

The Search for Common Ground – Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media

A study for the Greater London Authority by the Insted Consultancy
(www.insted.co.uk)

(Please note: the full report can be downloaded from [the GLA website](#))

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2006 the Greater London Authority commissioned a study of media coverage of Islam and Muslims in the UK media. The study was coordinated by the Insted consultancy and took place between 1 May 2006 and 30 April 2007. It involved:

- a review of recent opinion polls
- study of recent books and articles
- a survey of the news in one week
- consideration of stories about political correctness
- interviews with Muslim journalists
- analysis of a TV documentary.

The underlying questions for investigation were:

- Do the media promote informed debate about the building and maintenance of Britain as a multicultural society? Or do they oversimplify, giving insufficient information about the background to the news and pandering to readers' and viewers' anxieties and prejudices?
- How community-sensitive is media reporting about multiculturalism and British Muslim identities? Is it likely to foster anxiety, fear or hostility within particular communities – for example, in the views that non-Muslims have of Muslims, and that Muslims have of non-Muslims?
- Does media coverage hinder or promote mutual understanding, and increase or decrease a sense of common ground, shared belonging and civic responsibility?

Findings and conclusions

The project noted examples of good practice. These included the decision by every British national paper not to re-print the caricatures about Islam created in Denmark in 2005 and widely published in early 2006 in most other European countries; the exercise of responsibility after 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005; and a range of one-off news items, features, projects and investigative articles. But in most though not all of the UK print media, and for most though not all of the time, the project found that:

1. The dominant view in the media is that there is no common ground between the West and Islam, and that conflict between them is accordingly inevitable.
2. Muslims in Britain are seen in the media as a threat to traditional British customs, values and ways of life.
3. Alternative world-views, understandings and opinions are not mentioned, or are not given a fair hearing.
4. Facts are frequently distorted, exaggerated or over-simplified.

5. The tone of language is frequently emotive, immoderate, alarmist and abusive.
6. The coverage is likely to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims.
7. The coverage is at the same time likely to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims, and in this way may weaken the Government's measures to reduce and prevent extremism
8. The coverage is unlikely to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of unlawful discrimination by non-Muslims against Muslims.
9. The coverage is likely to be a major barrier preventing the success of the Government's community cohesion policies and programmes.
10. The coverage is unlikely to contribute to informed discussion and debate amongst Muslims and non-Muslims about ways of working together to maintain and develop Britain as a multicultural, multi-faith democracy.

Principal recommendations

In the light of this report:

1. News organisations should review their coverage of issues and events involving Muslims and Islam, and should consider drawing up codes of professional conduct and style guides about use of terminology. Such codes of professional conduct should be based on their own best practice.
2. News organisations should take measures, perhaps within the framework of positive action in equalities legislation, to recruit more journalists of Muslim heritage and to draw, when appropriate, on their experience and knowledge.
3. News organisations should consider also, however, how best to give Muslim staff appropriate professional support and to prevent them being pigeon-holed as specialists in minority issues rather than concerned with the full spectrum of an organisation's output.
4. Organisations, projects and programmes concerned with race relations should see and treat anti-Muslim hostility as a form of racism, and as serious as other forms of racism.
5. The new Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) should focus explicitly on, amongst other concerns, combating anti-Muslim hostility and prejudice, both in society at large and in the media in particular.
6. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) should give a higher profile than hitherto to combating anti-Muslim hostility in the media, and in the general climate of public opinion.
7. Both Muslim and non-Muslim organisations should complain more frequently and persistently about distorted coverage of Islam and Muslims in the media.
8. Consideration should again be given to amending the Press Complaints Commission's terms of reference in order that it can consider distorted and inaccurate coverage of groups and communities as well as of individuals.
9. Organisations and institutions concerned with education should give consideration to how they can develop (a) critical media literacy and (b) religious literacy in the programmes, courses and curricula that they provide.

(The report defines religious literacy as 'skills in understanding and assessing religious statements and behaviour; discerning the difference between valuable and harmful aspects of religion and religions; appreciating religious architecture, art, literature, music and symbols

without necessarily accepting all the beliefs that they express or assume; and making reasonable accommodation between people holding different religious and non-religious world-views.)

The report chapter-by-chapter

Chapter 1: Common ground?

Do non-Muslims see Islam as a threat, both within Britain and in the world generally? Or is there a sense of common ground? Chapter 1 reviews some recent opinion polls on this question and compares and contrasts opinions in Britain with opinions in certain other countries. Amongst other things it shows there has been a decline in optimism in recent years about the possibility of common ground. However, it shows also that optimism is greater in Britain than in many other countries and that in particular there are positive attitudes in London.

The chapter also considers whether the alleged clash between Islam and the West is correctly understood as a clash between civilisations, cultures and religions or whether the key tensions are political, to do with power, territory and resources, both in the world generally and in local urban areas within Britain. It notes in this connection that in Britain as in other countries there is substantial support for the view that conflicts around resources are more significant than differences of culture or religion.. An implication is that the media should give this view a higher profile.

As a further introduction to the report's concerns, the chapter recalls a front-page story in early 2007 about a new publication from the Muslim Council of Britain. The coverage was considerably inaccurate and distorted and, judging by the tone and content of messages from readers published on the paper's website, caused much alarm, anger and abuse directed at Muslims. Several of the messages are quoted. They show that anxiety and fear relating to Islam are mixed with fears about multiculturalism and so-called political correctness, and with uncertainties and worries about British identity.

Chapter 2: A normal week?

When the words Muslim and Islam appear in the media what is the context and what are the implications? To explore this question, a study was made of how Islam and Muslims had been represented in the British press during one week. The week in question was chosen at random about a month in advance. A count was made of all articles that mentioned 'Islam', 'Muslims' or derivatives such as 'Islamic' and 'Islamist', or words and phrases that have an obvious resonance or association with Islam, for example 'Sunni' and 'Shi'a'. On the basis of these criteria, 352 articles were identified. They were categorised according to type of paper; whether they were about domestic or international affairs; whether the context was negative, positive or neutral; and whether they expressed a sense of threat or crisis. The principal findings included:

- There were substantial differences between daily newspapers with regard to how many articles mentioning Islam or Muslims they contained during the week in question. There were just over 50 articles in the *Guardian*, over 40 in *The Times*, *Financial Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Independent*; but less than 20 in the *Sun*, *Mirror*, *Express* and *Star*.
- Tabloids and broadsheets differed not only in the amount of coverage they provided but also in whether it focused on domestic affairs or international. In the case of the tabloids, close to 60 per cent of articles pertained to Britain and 40 per cent to the wider world. In the case of the broadsheets, however, the proportions were the other way round: 60 per cent were about the wider world, and 40 per cent about Britain.
- Of the 352 articles that referred to Islam and Muslims during the week in question, 91 per cent were judged to be negative in their associations, and only four per cent were judged to be positive. Five per cent were judged neutral. The principal instances of negative association were to do with terrorism in Britain, and with Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran.

- In 12 of the 19 papers studied during the week there were no positive associations.
- In the tabloids, 96 per cent of all articles were judged to be negative. This compared with 89 per cent in the broadsheets. It is relevant to bear in mind in this connection that the combined circulation of the tabloids is about three times greater than that of the broadsheets (May 2007 figures).
- It was judged that almost a half of all articles represented Islam as a threat. Of these, about a third pertained to Britain and two thirds to the wider world.
- The overall picture presented in the media during the week in question was that on the world stage Islam is profoundly different from, and a serious threat to, the West; and that within Britain Muslims are different from 'us', and a threat to 'us'.

Chapter 3: 'Britishness is being destroyed'

This chapter considers and illustrates key issues by considering four small episodes. Each episode was relatively trivial in itself. But also, each was portrayed in the media as illustrating the claim that 'common sense' is under attack from 'the PC brigade'. In two of the four instances the attack on political correctness was combined entirely explicitly with an attack on Muslims. These were to do, respectively, with the alleged banning of piggy banks by a bank and a building society in a Lancashire town and the alleged banning of Christmas by a local council in London. In a third it was implicitly to do with Muslims, though in principle was also to do with all non-Christian religions. In the fourth, the attack was primarily directed towards the police and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). However, the bullying in a school playground against which the police and the CPS had taken action had an anti-Muslim dimension and it is for this reason that it is included here.

All four, in addition, had in common that the media coverage involved serious factual inaccuracies and distortions. With regard to each there is an extract in chapter 3 from the original story as it first appeared. This is followed by consideration of how the story was commented on in leaders, op-ed pieces and readers' letters. Finally, the truth behind the story is outlined, based on interviews with, and statements by, people who were directly involved. Three of the interviews have not previously been published. The fourth was published, to the paper's credit, in the *Mail on Sunday*. The chapter draws to a close with discussion of the concept of political correctness.

Chapter 4: Being a journalist, being a Muslim

What's it like, if you are of Muslim heritage, to work as a reporter on a mainstream newspaper? How are you treated by colleagues and news editors? What kinds of assignment are you given? How do you get on with members of the public? What opportunities do you have to influence, if you wish, the policies and practices of your paper? Until a few years ago these questions could barely be investigated at all, for there were virtually no journalists of Muslim heritage to be questioned. Nowadays – fortunately – that has changed. Chapter 4 contains an account of their experiences and perceptions, told almost entirely in their own words and with a wealth of personal anecdotes and memories.

In the light of the discussions and quotations in this chapter it is clear that there are practical advantages, if media coverage of Islam and Muslims is to be improved, in employing Journalists who are themselves of Muslim backgrounds:

- When writing about issues concerning Islam or Muslims they are more likely to do so with sensitivity and fairness, and awareness of complexity.
- When interacting with members of the public who are Muslims they are more likely to establish a rapport and to win people's trust and confidence.
- They are able to advise and challenge colleagues, including senior editors, about how certain stories should and should not be covered.

- They can have an impact on the organisational culture of the paper, making it more open-minded and self-critical.

It is important, however, that senior managers in news organisations should:

- understand that there is a wide range of opinion, outlook and practice amongst journalists of Muslim backgrounds, as amongst people of Muslim backgrounds more generally. Not all practise the religion, for example, and no single individual should be treated as a representative or ambassador
- recognise that journalists of Muslim backgrounds are keen to be seen essentially as journalists who happen to be Muslims rather than Muslims who happen to be journalists
- resist pressures to limit people's career prospects by pigeon-holing and type-casting them into a narrow range of work

Chapter 5: Full and frank debate?

Chapter 5 explores the claim often made in the media that people of Muslim heritage can be divided into two broad groups – 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims', 'moderates' and 'extremists', 'Sufis' and 'Islamists'. There are many objections to this over-simplification. One is that people who use it are prone to claim further that the term 'Muslim extremist' is largely tautologous, simply two different ways of saying the same thing, and that 'moderate Muslim' is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Key issues are explored in this chapter through consideration not only of reportage in certain newspapers but also, and primarily, of a *Panorama* TV programme.

The programme was about representation of British Muslims in two separate senses – a) how they are portrayed and b) how Muslim voices and views are presented to others, particularly the Government. The latter sense of the word *representation* necessarily involves considering questions of leadership and management in umbrella organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain, and the roles and responsibilities of office-holders in such organisations. The producer of the programme called for 'a full and frank debate' about representation in the latter sense. Issues of who speaks for Muslims and who the Government should listen to are certainly of great importance and do need debating. This *Panorama* programme, however, did not facilitate or support the level of debate that is required.

Chapter 6: Histories and stories

The report draws towards its end by discussing theoretical issues. What, in any study of the representation of Muslims and Islam in the media, are the key issues to look for? The chapter makes four distinctions: a) between what it calls 'histories' and 'stories'; between the content and the form of histories and stories; b) between, in relation to content, dominant and alternative world-views; and c) in relation to form, between open and closed forms of engaging, thinking, talking and writing.

In the light of these discussions the chapter considers the nature of Islamophobia. It recalls the coining of the word in its current use around 1990, notes the objections that have been made to it and proposes a new and fuller definition.

In relation to the media, Chapter 6 suggests the word should be seen as a shorthand term for referring to coverage that:

- presents narratives about Islam and Muslims as threats at the same time as ignoring or misrepresenting alternative narratives
- does so with closed not open ways of thinking, talking and engagement
- is likely to increase insecurity and vulnerability amongst Muslims
- is likely also to provoke anxiety, fear and panic amongst non-Muslims

- is unlikely therefore to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of discrimination against Muslims
- is unlikely to contribute to an informed debate about ways of maintaining and developing Britain as a multicultural, multi-faith democracy.

Chapter 7: Responsible journalism

The final chapter suggests that a key issue is anxiety rather than phobia, and the key professional responsibility of journalists is to promote informed debate, as distinct from pandering to anxiety and to being alarmist. It recalls in this respect that all UK papers behaved responsibly in 2006 in connection with the Danish caricatures that were widely published in other European countries. It commends also the coverage immediately after 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005.

How can responsible journalism be fostered? How can responsible journalism be fostered? The chapter reviews and discusses six principal themes:

- Freedom of speech
- Dealing with anxiety
- Religious literacy
- Critical literacy
- The making of complaints
- Codes of professional practice

In the light of these discussions, the chapter makes the recommendations listed near the start of this summary.

Conclusion

In March 2007 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, declared that 'we urgently need a new approach to tackling the violent extremism that seeks to undermine our society and this approach must be based as much on winning hearts and minds as on security measures'.

She said further that there 'must put a new emphasis on local solutions' and that 'our aim must be not just to stop people committing violence but also to challenge the ideologies that drive them'. She acknowledged that successive governments, including the present one, 'have not always got this balance right'. Governments have 'put too much faith in action,' she added, 'not enough in debate'.

The purpose of the debate, she continued, would be to challenge, isolate and neutralise 'ideologies of hatred' amongst 'a tiny minority' of Muslims. She drew an analogy with far right extremism – 'the British public rejects their ugly message'.

The stress on debate as well as on action was and is welcome. The mainstream media – not just the Muslim media – will have a major role to play in it. The debate in the mainstream media will be disingenuous, however, if it assumes that hostility and suspicion towards Islam and Muslims are to be found only amongst a small minority of non-Muslims, the so-called far right.

There needs also to be substantial debate about the prejudices, anxieties, sometimes amounting to panic, amongst many non-Muslims. This will have to include consideration of how the mainstream media are by no means always responsible in the ways in which they treat the basic theme of this report, the search for common ground.

If they are to contribute constructively to the debate, the mainstream media must put their own house in order. They need to be supported, encouraged and empowered in this by their readers, viewers and users.

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