

## Change and Continuity in the Representation of British Muslims Before and After 9/11: The UK Context

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***Abstract:***

9/11 is often marked out as a significant event in the current political and historical context in that it signalled a discernable shift to a new politics categorised in specific “Western” countries by the “war on terror”. Through an examination of British press representation of British Muslims over a 15 year period I show how this represents a continuation of processes that became more visible following 9/11. Starting in the period prior to 9/11, I argue that, despite an overall negativity within the British press, there was some negotiation of these spaces due to the various affiliations and allegiances of different groups who had an investment in specific constructions of “Britain” at particular moments. However, this resulted in the predominance of a “cultural clash” framework as Muslims became the focus of anxieties of living in an increasingly globalised world. Whilst these discursive debates have continued to dominate post-9/11, I examine the emergence of a security framework previously associated with world news. The aim is to provide an overview of patterns of coverage that might tell us something about the impact of various political events, most notably 9/11, on coverage. Other significant moments include the Iraq War, 2003 and the London bombings on July 7, 2007.

***Keywords:*** Britain; Islam; Media; Minorities; Muslims; Press; Representation

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**Résumé:**

Le 11 septembre est souvent identifié comme un événement important dans le contexte politique et historique contemporain, car il a signalé un tournant discernable vers de nouvelles politiques catégorisées dans certains pays spécifiques “occidental” par “la guerre contre le terrorisme”. À l’aide d’un examen de la représentation des musulmans britanniques dans la presse à la Grande-Bretagne pendant une période de 15 ans, je démontrerais comment cela représente une continuation de processus qui deviennent plus visibles depuis le 11 septembre, tout en enregistrant les changements. En commençant par la période qui précède le 11 septembre, je défendrais que malgré une négativité générale dans la presse britannique, il y avait quelques négociations de ces espaces en raison des différentes affiliations et allégeances de divers groupes qui avaient un investissement dans une construction spécifique de “la Grande-Bretagne” à des moments particuliers. Cependant, ceci a entraîné une prédominance d’un cadre conceptuel “d’affrontement culturel” pendant que les musulmans sont devenus le point de concentration des inquiétudes relié à la vie dans un monde de plus en plus mondialisé. Tandis que ces débats discursifs ont continué à dominer après le 11 septembre, j’examine l’émergence d’un cadre de sécurité préalablement associé avec les nouvelles mondiales. Le but est d’offrir un survol des tendances de couverture médiatique qui pourraient nous exposer quelque chose à propos de l’impact de différents événements politiques, notamment le 11 septembre, sur cette couverture. D’autres moments importants incluent la guerre en Iraq en 2003 et le bombardement à Londres le 7 juillet 2007.

**Mots-clés:** Grande-Bretagne; Islam; Médias; Minorités; Musulmans; Presse; Représentation

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**Introduction**

In this article, the aim is to provide an overview of patterns of coverage in the British press that might tell us something about the impact of various political events, most notably 9/11, on coverage of British Muslims. Other significant moments include the 2003 Iraq War and the London bombings on July 7, 2007 (hereafter 7/7).

As is evident in this journal issue, 9/11 is marked out as a significant event in the current political and historical context in that it signalled a discernable shift to a new politics categorised in specific “Western” countries by the “war on terror”. However, this represents a continuation of processes that became more visible following 9/11 (Poole, 2002). In other words, 9/11 has been mobilised politically, on both sides, to legitimise specific agendas, accelerating their course, and with significantly negative effects.

Critical social analysis has also situated 9/11 as possibly one of the last major “media events” in its global exposure in the face of media fragmentation. Cottle (2006: 428) recognises the “performative” role of such momentous media events in “purposefully deploying

symbolization and sentiments” in order to build solidarities. The symbolic content around this event (which established its own reality; Fiske, cited in Cottle, 2006) functioned to strengthen specific political principles that preceded it. In particular, in a post Cold-war context, neoliberal policies of globalisation, both economic and political, have resulted in the mass movement of people around the globe, what Kundnani (2007) has termed “forced migration”.

The uncertainties caused by this global upheaval have resulted in boundary making within national contexts excluding minority populations who have in turn invested in cultural religious identifications. Although simplifying various processes and excluding other sociological contributory factors these specific conditions have seen, at a local level, an “integrationist” agenda gather momentum with Muslim immigration blamed for the demise of collective identities. Global projects aimed at US hegemony and the extension of global capitalism have been further aided by the need to manage violent terrorism. 9/11 consolidated this.

Hence, in the reporting of Islam in the UK, prior to 9/11, there was already substantial evidence of the media’s role in the reproduction of political power (Poole, 2002). Debates on Muslim integration set in motion by the Rushdie Affair, 1989, continued apace whilst global “Islamic terrorism” featured heavily. This corresponds with research on the reporting of global Islam in other “Western” contexts including Canada, the U.S., and Europe (D’Haenens & Bink, 2006; Karim, 2000; 2006). Equally, we should be aware of the history of negative reporting of immigrant and ethnic minority groups in the UK’s national press rooted in Britain’s colonial past (Hall, 1997). However, the shift from a focus on race to Islamophobia (cultural racism) can be traced to the combination of processes outlined above which have found particular expressions in specific contexts. For the UK, the Rushdie Affair was the catalyst for the struggles around identity that are currently being played out across Europe. Despite the parallels with reporting elsewhere then there is also a value in mapping out the specifics of representation within a local context. In this article I am drawing on my own extensive research from a number of research projects over a 15 year period to illustrate this. The focus on *British Muslims* further attends to local political, social and cultural specificities avoiding an undifferentiated approach.

In 2002, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* featured a four year study analysing representations of British Muslims in the British press. The research included a quantitative analysis of two broadsheet newspapers with differing political orientations; *The Times* and *The Guardian* over a three year period (1994-6) and a qualitative analysis of these and two tabloids *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* from 1997.<sup>1</sup> Not only were the findings critical in demonstrating how the political strategies of contending groups play out in the public domain but, if we compare them to recent studies, they also illustrate the continuation of several dominant discourses across a significant time period (despite 9/11). Here I briefly summarise the main findings before comparing these to later studies in order to demonstrate these patterns of coverage.

### **Coverage in the British Press—Pre 9/11**

Limited frameworks and themes were associated with British Muslims but these were wider than the representations of Muslims abroad. However, Islam was a largely global representation comprising 86 percent of coverage. Over a three year period there were 6,507 articles about Islam in the two newspapers and 837 about British Muslims or Muslims in Britain.<sup>2</sup> In articles about British Muslims world events were frequently cited reinforcing ideas about a worldwide

collective and having a homogenising effect. At this point in time, *The Guardian*, a liberal newspaper that champions the rights of minority groups, was more likely to feature Muslims in Britain than the conservative press with almost twice as much coverage (504 articles to 333 in *The Times*). *The Times* had less interest in minority issues. The themes that emerged from analysing the coverage qualitatively were that:

Muslims' involvement in deviant activities threatens security in the UK, Muslims are a threat to British mainstream values and thus provoke integrative concerns, there are inherent cultural differences between Muslims and the host community which creates tensions in interpersonal relations and Muslims are increasingly making their presence felt in the public sphere.

(Poole, 2002: 84)

These themes can be illustrated further by examining the dominant topics of coverage which were politics, criminality, relationships, education and fundamentalism. Coverage of fundamentalism (a term then used by the press to describe Muslim extremists) mainly occurred in relation to the activities of Muslims in Britain (rather than British Muslims) in raising funds or supporting Islamic extremists or terrorists elsewhere (again terms used by the press). These groups were homogenised by the categorisation signalling they could all be understood in the same way. The discourse of a lax liberal immigration policy that had allowed the foreign Other to support global terrorism on British soil was evident here. "Our" tolerance is juxtaposed against the oppressive actions of the Other.

Coverage of this topic functions as an appeal to the Government to manage immigration and minority populations within, creating a climate in which repressive measures can be implemented. Whilst clearly part of an Orientalist global discourse supporting Western political strategies, this construction fits with the integrationist discourse of the other dominant topics which highlight Muslim "difference" and therefore their inability to integrate. A loss of "Britishness" (due to globalization) has been blamed on the foreigner within and led to a reassertion of ill-defined "British values" excluding Muslims who have invested in religious identity as a source of pride. This has been systematically interpreted as a threat to cohesion with forced segregation (through institutional racism and industrial decline) reformulated as separatism (Kundnani, 2007). The response amongst some groups is evident in press discourse as they seek to establish hegemony. Let us look to the coverage of education as an example.

At the time, discussion centered on the nature of Religious Education in schools and the state funding of Muslim schools. A newspaper's coverage reveals its beliefs regarding the accommodation of minorities within the UK. For the conservative press Britain was constructed as a Christian country to which Others should adapt. Their answer to the "problem" of diversity was assimilation. *The Guardian* on the other hand, with its moderate secular stance, advocated a secular pluralism which opposed religious instruction and schooling of any kind. In this, and other coverage then, *The Guardian* was often guilty of an "exclusive liberalism" which negativised Islam. As Muslims began to assert the equality politics of other minority groups (women, race, sexuality) space for positive coverage occurred. This appeared mainly in *The Guardian* but also elsewhere. Unfortunately Muslim activism has been interpreted as originating from inherent religious differences which have then been constructed as a "cultural threat" in order to assert a "Britishness" according to a particular set of values which appear to be a fusion between a moderate Christianity and balanced secularism.

What this study showed was the low visibility of Muslims in the press (in comparison to post-9/11) particularly in the tabloids. However, coverage of Islam was much greater than that of other religious traditions (outside of Christianity) which clearly relates to the historical social context. Coverage in *The Sun*, the most widely read newspaper in the UK, rarely made any significant distinction between minority groups, homogenizing them as the external Other. Interestingly, the audience research in this project, albeit small scale, also showed how monocultural non-Muslim audiences, who consumed tabloid newspapers, shared similar “cultures of ignorance” that worked to thwart stereotypical ideas about Muslims (due to the lack of differentiation between minority groups) (Poole, 2002). The audience research was fascinating in revealing the interaction between social groups, belief systems and frameworks of interpretation. For example, liberally minded participants who mixed regularly with Muslims in an everyday context, and were well-informed about issues of race and discrimination, were more likely to share the dominant discourses of the press due to an avoidance of discussing sensitive religious issues demonstrating how contact alone is not sufficient to negate negative assumptions but depends on the presence of other conditions (Allport, cited in Pettigrew, 1998). In this way the media appear to act as an important resource for public knowledge of Islam but limit the way in which Muslims are known. This aspect of the research would benefit from further investigation in a contemporary context in which Muslims are much more visible.

### **Post-9/11 Coverage**

Here I am drawing on research projects I have undertaken at key moments post-9/11 that, in their totality, allow us to say something about shifting patterns of coverage over time and the significance of changes in the political context. This has included:

1. An immediate post-9/11 examination of all articles on Islam and Muslims in Britain from September 12, 2001 to October 25, 2001 in *The Times* and *The Guardian* (Poole, 2002).
2. A more in-depth quantitative analysis of 2003 including all articles on British Muslims and Islam in *The Times* and *The Guardian* following the invasion of Iraq (Poole, 2006).<sup>3</sup>
3. A case study approach to coverage following the 7/7 bombings, incorporating coverage from the trial of British Muslim Mohammed Atif Siddique for activities relating to terrorism and the Glasgow Airport attack, 2007 (including all British national newspapers) (Featherstone, Holohan & Poole 2010).
4. A more extended project including an examination of two months of newspaper coverage (*The Times*, *The Sun*, and *The Yorkshire Evening Post*—a local paper) from 2008 which coded all *references* to Islam and Muslims in *all* articles from those months (not just articles on British Muslims as with previous studies) and an analysis of one week’s television coverage from 2009 (BBC1, BBC2, and ITV1). Quantitative and qualitative content analysis was used (Knott, Poole & Taira, Forthcoming).
5. A case study of press coverage of the deportation of Geert Wilders, the anti-Islamic Dutch MP, from Britain following an invitation to attend a screening of his film *Fitna* in the House of Lords, February 2009. This incorporated all

articles from all national newspapers in print and online and comments posted online by readers (Poole, in Knott, Poole & Taira, Forthcoming).

The differing methodologies employed in these studies, due to their specific requirements as separate projects, do raise issues for comparison which I highlight as I contrast the outcomes below.

The first most obvious difference in the findings post-9/11 is volume. In the aftermath of 9/11, between September 12, 2001 and October 25, 2001, *The Times* and *The Guardian* carried the equivalent of each paper's previous annual coverage (Poole, 2002: 5). Coverage of Muslims and Islam abroad actually decreased from 1994 to 1999 whilst coverage of Muslims at home showed a steady annual increase. However, the data from 2003 shows an explosion of coverage. It is not possible to say (due to a lack of data) whether this transpired immediately, post-9/11, and remained high through to the invasion of Iraq or whether these peaks occurred only when these significant events took place. Unfortunately, this data cannot be compared to the findings from 2008 due to the latter project's global focus and attention to references within articles rather than actual number of articles. However, we can look to other studies to compare. Moore, Mason and Lewis (2008), for example, found that there was a year on year increase in coverage of British Muslims in the British press from 2000 to 2008 with exceptional peaks in 2001 and 2006.

The second major quantitative finding was that the conservative press overtook the liberal press in their attention to Islam. I have argued previously that 9/11 and the 2003 War on Iraq allowed for the construction of Muslims in a way that is more likely to be reinforced in the conservative press. The broadsheet press continued to cover Islam more than the tabloids. For example, in the 2008 study *The Times* included 162 references to Islam and Muslims and *The Sun* only sixty two. This is partly a reflection of the greater volume of coverage of *all* news in the broadsheet press.

Here, I focus on the dominant topics of coverage and how they have been treated over the time period. If topics are selected for their news value and carried for a given time depending on considered importance we can see how Islam is being presented to the public and on what basis. The consistency of the topics associated with Islam, both British and global, found here (despite the differing methodologies of the studies) is illustrative of a "framework of interpretation" which has dominated news reporting for over a decade.

### ***"Islamic Terrorism"***

The most significant shift in the coverage of British Muslims post-9/11 was in the association with terrorism. Whilst this was clearly the prevailing image of global Islam prior to 9/11, British Muslims were not directly attributed with this label (see Richardson, 2004). Rather, it was Muslims in Britain; exiles, dissidents and asylum seekers, who were categorized as extremists. Suggestions of covert activity, such as raising funds for political groups abroad, were made as were links to the wider Muslim community but the physical threat remained at a distance. This shift occurred immediately following September 11<sup>th</sup> when coverage converged dramatically around three major topics: terrorism, counter terrorism measures and discrimination against Muslims (Poole, 2002). This has continued to be the dominant topic of coverage over time accounting for 24 percent of coverage in *The Guardian* and 30 percent of coverage in *The Times* in 2003. However, it should be noted that both these initial studies were quantitative. In subsequent projects, through in-depth qualitative analysis, I have found a process of Othering

which has sought to distance the British Muslim from the source of terrorism. Whilst terrorism in Britain clearly was and continues to be a predominant focus of news about Muslims perhaps a qualitative study might find that initial coverage post-9/11 also concentrated on *Muslims in Britain* rather than *British Muslims* when discussing terrorist activity in Britain? What *is* clear is that since 9/11 and, even more so, 7/7 “Islamic terrorism” in Britain is a central concern. For example, seventeen out of the nineteen articles on terrorism from October 2008 focused on the domestic context. The trials of and raids on suspects are a dominant feature of coverage. Using the qualitative analysis of articles from 2007-8 (research projects 3 and 4) it was evident that there were several common elements in these stories:

### *Categorisation*

Various labels are used to categorize those engaged in what is predominantly defined as “Islamic terrorism”. This might be “bombers”, “Islamic fundamentalists”, “violent Muslim fanatics”, (Kerbaj, Kennedy, Owen & Keeley, 2008: 24) or “Islamic extremists” (Hughes, 2008, October 10: 6), amongst others. In *The Sun* terrorists are all members of al-Qaeda, they do not distinguish (Flynn, 2008: 35). Once a person is labelled in this way, action against them does not have to be justified. This is not to legitimize acts of terror but to note the culturally embedded use of language and its implications for interpretation. The interchangeability of these categorizations and their use in the press makes one term easily replaceable with another so when extremist or militant is used, they are infused with ideas of terrorism.

### *Agency*

Agency in these articles is clear as in *The Times* report “Doctor on fire seen punching and kicking police” (Bird, 2008:17). In the main, the central actors are the “terrorists” whose actions are always negative against the less frequently featured heroic action of the police and public. One of the problems of coverage is that it focuses on the activity prior to a verdict; the raids and trials of suspected terrorists. For example, in the reporting of the trial of two young men accused of planning terrorist activities (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, October-November 2008) a weight of evidence is presented to suggest the “schoolboys” guilt, yet the “not guilty” verdict is covered by a single line.

### *Decontextualisation*

Rather than providing any historical or political context, the acts of terrorism are clearly linked to Islamic belief. The link between religion and violence is made frequently in coverage of the trial of the perpetrators of the 2007 Glasgow Airport attack. Here the defendants are described as, “strictly observant Muslims” who “adhered to extreme Islamic Beliefs” and yet were “intent on murder” (O’Neill & Bird, 2008: 22-23). The perpetrators’ Muslimness is emphasized, other motivations, if mentioned, are dismissed. Belief is the central explanation for behaviour.

### *The Process of Othering*

I have argued previously (Holohan & Poole, 2011) how, since 7/7 and the possibility of British citizens attacking other British citizens has arisen, a strategy has been used in press discourse to

deal with this. A process of Othering takes place by individualizing the perpetrator (and so divorcing him from the wider Muslim community and appeasing any accusations of racism) and criminalizing him (seen partly in the predominance of mug shots) but then linking him to radicals outside the UK who have “brainwashed” the individual with “extreme religious and murderous ideology” (O’Neill & Bird, 2008: 22-23). Thus the link is made to Islamic ideology, given as the driving force, but it is also Othered by being located outside the UK. This process is evident in much of the coverage analyzed in 2007-8: the trial of British Muslim Mohammed Atif Siddique, who was accused and convicted of activities relating to terrorism over the period August-October 2007, coverage of the Glasgow airport attack in June 2007, and the reporting of British convert, Nick Reilly’s attempts to blow up a bomb in a toilet, 2008. There are two significant processes here in terms of: characterization; that of the naïve individual who is susceptible to brainwashing (Reilly had Asperger’s syndrome and this is also offered as an explanation for his conversion) and technology which is marked out as central to the process of “radicalization” in terms of “internet jihad” (Fresco, 2008: 3). This was the strategy adopted by both *The Times* and *The Sun* in “Bomber brainwashed over the Internet” (Ibid). This simplifies complex processes of “radicalization” to a single linear cause: it is technology that is allowing for the “radicalization” of vulnerable British men from abroad.

The main difference in coverage of the Glasgow airport attacks, a difference emphasized in many articles, is that, in this instance, the defendants were doctors. The newspapers puzzle over the contradiction between their training to save lives with the intent to “murder”. The answer is in the lineage. In this case the defendants are Othered by fore fronting their background and birth elsewhere; for example, for *The Sun*, Dr. Bilal Abdulla is “an Iraqi born in Britain” and his “Saudi- born pal” (Hughes, 2008, October 10: 6). But ultimately, the implication is that if such good citizens can turn against their host country then so could any Muslim.

There are, of course, articles on terrorism that offer an alternative viewpoint. From the initial articles, post-9/11, that featured the increasing discrimination experienced by Muslims (particularly in *The Guardian*), to 2003 there was also a rise in articles that covered discrimination, and, more recently, criticism of counter terrorism measures such as the controversial Control Orders that place significant restrictions on terrorist suspects in 2005. However, the volume of negative coverage clearly outweighs this counter discourse illustrated by the lack of commentary around these stories demonstrating a consensus of opinion.

Whilst the recent study from Moore, Mason, and Lewis (2008) suggests that this topic peaked in 2006 and has since been overtaken by stories about religious and cultural differences, our own research has found that militancy is the most frequently referred to subject in relation to Islam in 141 out of 255 references (Knott, Poole & Taira, Forthcoming).

There are many reasons why this topic has such salience for the news media including a commercial imperative that results in sensationalist reporting and that it creates a diversion from other social problems but the repeated discursive construction creates a climate of fear and suspicion that allows for the management of people, including immigration control, but most importantly exacerbates the situation by excluding a whole group from society.

### ***Conflict/Extremism***

There is, of course, an overlap between all the topics detailed here, but the articles I have included in these two categories fall outside those that are explicitly labelled as terrorist. I have included these two topics together as those individuals or groups who are defined as extremist



are often shown to be involved in conflict. Stories about extremism and fanaticism obviously had a presence prior to 9/11 but were framed as “fundamentalism”—the lexicalization adopted by the press at the time (see previous discussion). Clearly then there is a continuation in coverage of this topic in relation to Muslims in Britain. This is demonstrated by (predominantly tabloid) press coverage of “Preachers of hate”. The term “preachers of hate” has been coined by the tabloid press to describe Muslim clerics who preach an anti-Western message. Rarely, the term is applied to someone outside Islam if they are deemed “extreme” enough. For example, it has been used to describe the leader of the extreme American Christian group, the Westboro Church, Fred Phelps. The term was not applied to Geert Wilders, the anti Islamic Dutch MP, who could be accused of “hate speech”.

A useful example is *The Sun*'s obsessive pursuit of Omar Bakri Mohammed and Abu Hamza, frequently referred to as “Evil Hook” (Hughes, 2008, October 6: 25). These stories serve two other agendas; to reinforce an anti immigrationist stance and to attack the welfare system. Omar Bakri Mohammed's speeches (described as rants) continue to be featured despite the fact he is now living in the Lebanon. All these articles refer to specific examples of hate speech and the negative acts of the individual, their associations with terror and yet demonstrate perfidiousness as in Bakri's divorce and new young wife, his pole dancer daughter and his ex-wife's fraud.

These articles also operate as a positive representation of the in group: the tolerance of the British compared to “their” intolerance “People in this country do all they can to understand the Muslim way of life” (Savage, 2008: 47) yet “they” object to the most innocuous things such as television entertainment—*The X Factor* (Wells, 2008: 1). Each recurring story confirms the pattern of behaviour. Here, the pressure is placed on various authorities to restrict these men and their activities (and to justify this) but also acts as criticism of authorities who have failed to act (Hughes, 2008, October 6: 25; Wilson, 2008, October 15: 15). The simplistic characterization constructs the clerics as bogeymen, easy to dismiss (hate and blame) without any further contextual information. There is no evidence of counter discourse.

The construction of asylum seekers as scroungers, dependent on our goodwill and with nothing to contribute, obscures the causes of immigration in which the West could be implicated. Kundnani (2007) argues that the symptoms of what the countries from which asylum seekers are fleeing have been subjected to are instead interpreted as characteristics of those countries and their people which allow governments to set limits on their rights as “global citizens”. Instead of being perceived as victims they have become scapegoats for all the anxieties and uncertainties of living in a globalised world. The discourse of “economic migrants” then legitimizes welfare “reforms” which have now been extended to other “abusive” groups (Kundnani, 2007: 88).

### *Conflict*

Prior to 9/11 this did not feature as a topic due to its conceptualization as “world conflict zones” as British Muslims were not implicated in terrorist activity abroad. It was predominantly a feature of world news about Muslims (Richardson, 2004) although many domestic stories could be described as focusing on the “conflictual”. Post-9/11 the idea that British Muslims were being “radicalized” abroad gathered pace and has led to extended coverage. The Iraq war was also a major topic of coverage in relation to British Muslims in 2003 as they were invited to comment on events and their reactions and protests were reported on. Positive articles sympathized with Muslims' perspectives and had a certain political expediency as they were used to criticize

Government policy (mainly in *The Guardian*). However, coverage tended to assume one Muslim perspective as both interested and opposed to the war. As well as having a homogenizing effect, this reporting questioning the loyalty of Muslims within was a feature of coverage in the last Gulf war (Werbner, 1994).

The 2008 study demonstrates the continuing dominance of world affairs within this topic. Coverage mainly focused on ongoing events in Iraq and Afghanistan with some coverage of conflict in India over Kashmir. The largest single story in this category from the time period was that of the death of aid worker, Gayle Williams, shot in Afghanistan by the Taliban in October 2008. Whilst I do not discuss this in detail here due to the British focus of this article it is worth noting a couple of points. The coverage further reinforces the argument that Britain and/or the British are variously constructed as Christian or secular depending on the story/context or writer involved. In *The Sun* Gayle is clearly constructed as Christian, highlighting the persecution of Christians in Muslim countries, another central feature of the reporting of Islam. This is rejected by *The Times* as part of various strategies aimed at refuting the accusation made by the Taliban that “she was spreading Christianity”. Equally, coverage demonstrates the homogenizing, essentializing tendency in reporting on Muslims outside the UK. The Taliban, as elsewhere, are constructed as irrational (but purposeful—driven by irrational ideology), cowardly murderers which is supported by clear attribution in the text; “Taliban Hit Squad kill Christian Brit” (O’Shea, 2008). Constructed as outlaws there is little need to justify action against them. The lack of complexity apparent in coverage of terrorism is amplified in external settings; for example, the fluid relationships between members of the Taliban and other Afghans.

### *Cultural Values/Differences*

This theme, which suggests that Muslims have inherently different cultural and religious values that conflict with “British values” (a construction) dominates the coverage of British Muslims and runs through a variety of popular topics such as education, relationships, legal issues, gender issues, religious practice, criminality, and political values. As we saw earlier, this was a significant theme in the reporting of British Muslims prior to 9/11 and according to recent research by Moore, Mason, and Lewis (2008), due to a decline of terrorist activity since 9/11 and 7/7, has moved back into the forefront of coverage. My research shows the strength and consistency of this discourse throughout the time period. Whilst there has been a shift in the types of stories used to express this since the late nineties there is little change in its message: Within a binary exclusive relationship “we”, the British, have been too tolerant. This has been abused by “them” as they seek to impose “their” way of life on “us”. Many of these articles therefore concentrate on the restrictive censorious “nature” of Islam in contrast to liberal Britain. Examples of this include coverage of the veil, honour killings, conversion, Muslim protest, Muslim separatism, immigration, and censorship versus freedom of speech. Since 9/11 these articles have increasingly highlighted the “persecution” of Christians and focused on the increasing “Islamification” of the UK made permissible by weak government.

This was a dominant theme in the reporting of Geert Wilders, a Dutch MP for the Party for Freedom (PVV), who has been vocal in highlighting “Islamification”. When Lord Pearson, of the UKIP party, invited him in to a screening of *Fitna*, his anti-Islamic film, in the House of Lords, Wilders was refused entry to Britain on public order grounds in February 2009. The Home Secretary deemed *Fitna*, in tandem with Wilders’ presence, as “threatening community harmony and therefore public security” and denied him entry. Aware that he would be turned

back at the airport, Wilders flew to London, thus achieving a huge publicity coup. Rather than choosing to protect a minority group from attack, media coverage focused on the juxtaposition of freedom of speech (constructed as a liberal Western value) versus censorship (here a product of Islam's prohibitionist nature). This led to a homogenization of both "us" and "them" presented as an exclusive dichotomous relationship resulting in a "clash of cultures". The government was presented as undermining "British values" by tolerating "preachers of hate" whilst banning Wilders. Appeasement and double standards were key themes.

I have obviously simplified here, due to the need to summarize the main findings of longitudinal research, thus reducing the nuances in coverage and differences between media forms and outlets to a generalized message. For example outlets such as *The Guardian*, *Channel 4*, and the *BBC* do regularly feature alternative counter discourse that runs against the dominant forms of representation. Television coverage appears to be more diverse than the press due to the wider variety of genres featuring. There are indications from the one local paper studied here, the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, that the local press has a different set of news values that leads to more inclusivity. For example, this is not only evident in coverage of community relations and interfaith activities but also reports that depict Muslims as ordinary everyday community members that are rare elsewhere. There is evidence from emerging studies of alternative media that offer distinctive narratives. Faimau's (2011) examination of the UK's Christian press shows how Muslims and Muslim groups are frequently presented as partners sharing similar values and objectives whilst the "clash of civilizations" thesis is often directly challenged. Hence coverage should not be taken for granted. Positive coverage often occurs in unexpected places. As societies diversify and Muslims gain a greater presence in the public sphere so coverage will evolve.

## **Conclusion**

Prior to 9/11 global economic and political restructuring had implications for the movement of people and the stability of national identities. In this context Muslims have been represented as an immigrant group that are not only a drain on resources but have brought alien values and practices into the UK threatening "our values". Issues that have arisen out of a complex changing political and social context are blamed on "cultural difference" and increasingly since 9/11, and the subsequent "war on terror", are linked to a security threat. 9/11, therefore, is one of those contexts that have shaped the way Muslims have been constructed in public discourse. 9/11 created a climate in which the outcomes of neoliberal restructuring of the economy could easily be displaced onto the problems of "Muslim integration". Here the policies of community cohesion and counter terrorism are confused whilst the sociological causes of separatism and the role of foreign policy in fuelling various Islamist movements are obscured. The legacy of New Labour's integrationist policy has been taken up with a vengeance by the new Conservative Government. In an alarmist speech to a Munich Security Conference, almost ten years after 9/11, the Prime Minister David Cameron blamed multiculturalism for Islamic extremism (due to minority separatism) and set out a test for "extremism" on the day that the English Defence League staged an anti-Islamic march in Luton, UK (February 5, 2011). In a context in which the welfare state is being dismantled to increasing public protest to use terrorism as a vehicle to further restrict British Muslims can only be counterproductive.

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## Notes

- 1 The UK has a national press which is not required to demonstrate neutrality. Due to the predominance of the market model, the national press tends towards conservatism excluding two left of centre newspapers. The newspapers were chosen to represent one more conservative and one left of centre publication plus two broadsheet newspapers, one middle market tabloid and one lower market tabloid (with the highest readerships).
  - 2 For the sake of this analysis “British Muslims” refers to those born/living in the UK and non British Muslims acting within the UK.
  - 3 In both 1 and 2 the newspapers chosen sought to replicate the study of 1994-7 to allow for comparison.
  - 4 The methodology of this study differed to earlier projects as it had a specific remit to replicate a previous study from 1982 on the representation of religion. The project came out of Leeds University hence the choice of local newspaper.
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**About the Author**

Elizabeth Poole is a Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at Staffordshire University, United Kingdom. She specialises in the area of ethnic representation; in particular, Muslims and the news. Dr. Poole has significant postgraduate teaching experience and published widely in the area of Muslims representation including: *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (2002, I.B.Tauris) and *Muslims and the News Media* (2006, Editor with John E. Richardson). She has just completed an AHRC project “Media Portrayals of Religion” with Professor Kim Knott (Leeds) and is currently working on “Muslims in the European Mediascape” with Siobhan Holohan (Keele) and the Institute of Strategic Dialogue.

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