

Using examples, evaluate contemporary media representation of Islam and Muslims in western contexts.

The media is becoming an increasingly problematic area of modern life. The growing presence of the media can be seen everywhere. With a massive rise in social media platforms and 'influencing' becoming a full time job for some it can only be seen to be growing. With this in mind we can see how media responses are responsible for shaping of individual beliefs. Depending on what kinds of media you have access to, and even which part of the UK you live in, the versions of events that you are told could be totally different to those of friends, family or colleagues. This paper will use examples from the news and television in order to evaluate contemporary media representation of Islam and Muslims in the West.

It is also important to consider that UK media and Muslim media are two separate things and it is important to distinguish between the two. UK media is the media that we see across the majority of our channels, this is media produced and shown in the UK. Muslim media is a type of media which has been produced and created by Muslims specifically. Whilst both can be found in the UK, they are likely to attract different kinds of audiences¹. The examples shown in this paper suggest that the UK media is more likely to provide a negative representation of Islam and Muslims as opposed to representations that are given through Muslim Media.

Since the year 2000 there has been a rise in how much Islam and Muslims are mentioned in the media. It is no surprise that the amount of publicity given to Islam and Muslims has risen since the 9-11 attacks. This is thought to be due to the rise in stories related to terrorism or terrorist attacks. Research by Cardiff University shows that coverage was at all time high in 2006 and remained high during 2007 and 2008. They found that the bulk of coverage at this time focused on Muslims as a threat, a problem or sometimes both². Being posed as either of those things is negative and we can see from the offset that a lot of coverage on Islam and Muslims is negative. The study did not draw upon any positives. The evaluation of the media has a role to play in the representation of Islam and Muslims. The use of the internet is growing and evolving even compared to as recently as just 10 years ago as a result people are growing more conscious of it. This can be argued to give the media more power. More people are taking notice of what the media has to say, and even if it is not the intention of the creator or the viewer it is easy to see how it can subliminally form opinions and judgements.

It is also key to be mindful of the ways events such as protests are portrayed. More than ever before, we rely on media outlets to inform of us what is happening in the world. With the varieties of these kinds of outlets developing and news now spreads more quickly as a result of the ease of access to news whenever you want it and wherever you are. This argument will focus on the news as an example of a type of media and analyse some of its representations of Islam and Muslims in the UK. The main focus of the news is to provide information. However, in order to survive and secure a greater audience it needs to capture the attention of the audience to watch. The news can be incredibly dramatic including suggestive headlines and clips of interviews in order to pull a larger audience than its competitors. This in itself is an issue when discussing Muslim and Islam in the media as it is rare to see Islam being discussed without it being related to war or terror offences. This is not to say that all news is negative towards the representation of Islam, but it is a key issue. The call for a fairer representations of Islam and Muslims in the UK media has been campaigned for by the Muslim Council of Britain³ as recently as July 2019 which emphasises the significance of the issue to

¹ Katy Sian, Ian Law and S. Sayyid, "The Media And Muslims In The UK", 2012 <<https://www.ces.uc.pt/projectos/tolerance/media/Working%20paper%205/The%20Media%20and%20Muslims%20in%20the%20UK.pdf>> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

² Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis, "Images Of Islam In The UK: The Representation Of British Muslims In The National Print News Media 2000-2008 -ORCA", *Orca.Cf.Ac.Uk*, 2009 <<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/53005/>> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

³ "Muslim Council Of Great Britain Campaigns For 'Fairer' Media Coverage", *BBC News*, 2019 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-48906841>> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

Muslims in the UK. In 2018 the Council conducted a study using more than 10,000 articles and clips from TV over three months and found that a staggering 59% of them portrayed Muslims in a negative way. Though this does suggest that over three quarters of the media sampled represented Islam and Muslims in a positive (or at least not negative) way, it is still enough to subtly reinforce stereotypes and create a negative image. Both Elizabeth Poole and John E. Richardson⁴ discuss the dangers of how Islam can be represented in the book *Muslims and the News Media* where it is noted that context and understanding of the background of the situation is key in order to see the full picture. This would hopefully lead to a much fairer representation in our news channels.

A study by the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies in the University of Leeds⁵ analysed the representation of Muslims in 68 news items over a period of 3 months echoes an earlier point that though not all representation of Muslims and Islam in the UK media is negative, there is a large proportion that fuels already formed stereotypes. When researching these negative representation you are very likely to find articles which portray an 'UK vs Islam' or an 'us vs them' story. It takes something which is incredibly British and pits it against something which is related (or not related as the case may be) to Islam. One example of this is an article by the MailOnline in 2011, the headline reading: 'Law that put poppy burning fanatics in the dock faces the axe'⁶. The first line of the article mentions Muslim extremists burning poppies on Remembrance Sunday. The rest of the article explains more about the law that was to be scrapped and provides examples of how it was used against other religions/groups. Whilst it could be argued that the aim of the article isn't to solely portray Islam and Muslims in a negative way, the first lines trigger anger and fuels stereotypes. Through the article it is difficult to see the purpose of the story as it draws on examples which leads to a negative representation. By 2020 The Sun and The Daily Mail have reputations for harsh headlines and misrepresentation whilst newspapers like The Guardian or The Independent are found to be less harsh.

Another issue to consider when discussing contemporary media representation of Islam and Muslims in western contexts is the reaction from world leaders. Boris Johnson, Prime Minister of the UK was quoted by the Daily Mail for making incredibly offensive comments about Muslim women wearing the burqa by comparing them to looking like 'bank robbers' and 'letter boxes'⁷. This is in stark contrast to the reactions given by the Prime Minister of New Zealand in light of the Christchurch attacks. She treated all victims with respect and compassion whilst also refusing to name the attacker. This was not to protect him but to ensure he did not receive the praise he would have wanted for carrying out the attacks⁸. Both articles mentioned here were posted within a year of one and other, and the way Muslims are portrayed in both couldn't be in more of a contrasts. The article by the mail gave the impression of oppressed women suffering, with the New Zealand leader distinguished that there attacks were separate to Islam which portaged the region and Muslims as having a much fairer representation. Though it can be argued that New Zealand isn't a part of 'the West' this example was used the echo the negative way in which Muslims can be projected within the United Kingdom.

⁴ Elizabeth Poole and John E Richardson, *Muslims And The News Media* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

⁵ Sian, Katy, Ian Law, and S. Sayyid, "The Media And Muslims In The UK", 2012 <<https://www.ces.uc.pt/projectos/tolerance/media/Working%20paper%205/The%20Media%20and%20Muslims%20in%20the%20UK.pdf>> [Accessed 8 January 2021]

⁶ Jack Doyle, "Law That Put Poppy Burning Fanatics In The Dock Faces The Axe", *Mail Online*, 2011 <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2048895/Law-popy-burning-fanatics-dock-faces-axe.html>> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

⁷ Kate Ferguson, "Boris Johnson Says The Burka Makes Women Look Like 'Letter Boxes'", *Mail Online*, 2018 <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6030927/Boris-Johnson-says-burka-makes-women-look-like-bank-robbers-letter-boxes.html>> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

⁸ : Ishaan Tharoor, "The World Is Praising Ardern'S Response To New Zealand Terrorist Attack", *The Independent*, 2019 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/new-zealand-shooting-jacinda-ardern-video-reaction-world-praise-a8832186.html>> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

Therefor to conclude, we can see that representations of Islam and Muslims can vary in the West,. There are many diversities even within Muslim communities and it is key to recognise these diversities. Media representation of Muslims in the West rarely expands on the complexities within these communities. It is clear to see that this is a key area for developments in studies and that more needs to be done to ensure an equal representation of Muslims in the West which educates others and celebrates diversities.

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