UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

A review of the evidence relating to the representation of Muslims and Islam in the British media

Written evidence submitted to the

ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON ISLAMOPHOBIA

by

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The role and impact of the media is "contentious and debatable"[i]

74% of the British public claim that they know 'nothing or next to nothing about Islam'[ii]

64% of the British public claim that what they do know is 'acquired through the media'[iii]

Research from 2006 suggests that the press coverage relating to Muslims and Islam in British national newspapers had increased by approximately 270% over preceding decade[iv]

91% of that coverage was deemed negative[v]

84% of press coverage represented Islam and Muslims either as 'likely to cause damage or danger' or as 'operating in a time of intense difficulty or danger'[vi]

Research from 2008 once again confirmed that the press coverage of British Muslims had increased significantly since 2000, peaking in 2006, and remaining at high levels in 2007 and 2008[vii]

2008 was shown to be the first year in which the 'volume of stories about religious and cultural differences (32% of stories by 2008) overtook terrorism related stories (27% by 2008)'[viii]

Research from 2007[ix] set out that the consequences of this type of media coverage was:

- Likely to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims;
- Likely to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims, and in this way to weaken the Government's measures to reduce and prevent extremism;
- Unlikely to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of unlawful discrimination by non-Muslims against Muslims;
- Likely to be a major barrier preventing the success of the Government's community cohesion policies and programmes;
- 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.

INTRODUCTION

In focusing on the topic of 'Muslims', 'Islam' and 'the media', it is necessary to refer back to a point I made in the European Monitoring Centre on Racism & Xenophobia's (EUMC) report, *Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001*[x]. As it stated, the role and impact of the media is both "contentious and debatable"[xi]. As I went on to explain for the EUMC, understanding the role of the media is extremely difficult because rarely can the media – whether through a particular broadcast or printed article – be seen to have directly caused or be held responsible for a reported or identified act of aggression or change in attitude[xii]. However, research has shown that the media plays a fundamental role in the formulation and establishment of popular views and attitudes in society. So whilst no *direct* evidence exists to suggest that the media's role causes Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hate, the media's role cannot also be entirely dismissed either given that it has the ability to shape and influence public attitudes that *could* create, feed into and subsequently justify Islamophobic and anti-Muslim attitudes and expressions.

A decade on and the contentious and debatable nature of the media is maybe even more problematic. This is because today social media is beginning to change the form and nature of 'the media' in turn presenting many new and different challenges. In the social media sphere, we have recently seen existing boundaries being pushed, not just in what can and cannot be said, but so too by whom and to which audiences. The recent YouTube 'film', *The Innocence of Muslims* is one example of this type of phenomenon. So too is the proliferation of Facebook 'groups' where individuals are able to form alliances around a whole series of different issues, issues which are not always necessarily conducive. Similarly also is the use of Twitter where taste and decency as well as the manifestation of hate speech and other problems have recently come to the fore.

Such is the newness of many of these forms of social media that little research has been undertaken to explore its role and impact. Over the next few months, two projects undertaken here at the University of Birmingham will begin to contribute to improving knowledge and understanding about social media. Briefing papers are expected to be

published before the end of 2012 which will set out the findings from two pieces of research: the first, exploring the opposition to the proposed Dudley mosque using Facebook groups; the second, the response of British Muslim political elites to *Innocence of Muslims*.

This written evidence therefore only focuses on research undertaken into the role and impact of traditional broadcast and print media in the British context.

ISLAMOPHOBIA & THE MEDIA

It is necessary to consider what is meant by Islamophobia.

If Islamophobia is an all-encompassing term which covers such disparate things as attitudes, sentiments, discourse, rhetoric, physical and material acts including anti-Muslim hate crime as well as processes which prejudice and discriminate against Muslims, then it is extremely difficult to understand the role and influence of the media within such a broad understanding. If however - as my research has suggested - Islamophobia is best understood in terms of it being ideological in its nature, then it is easier to consider the potential role and impact of the media.

In my book, *Islamophobia*[xiii], I argue that discriminatory phenomena function on a threefold basis:

- a political programme or ideology that becomes largely interdependent with the notion and ideology of nationalism as well as providing knowledge and meaning about other both new and existing relations of power and meaning;
- a set of prejudices, opinions and attitudes that may be held by either individuals, groups, communities or society, or indeed a combination of these;

- a *set* of exclusionary practices as a result of prejudice and discrimination in employment, housing and other socio-economic spheres as well as subjection to violence as a tool of exclusion

The first is where I place the phenomenon of Islamophobia. Through the perpetuation and provision of negative meanings about Muslims and Islam, Islamophobia as an ideology creates a form of order about who we are, or perhaps more precisely who we are not, by the processes of stigmatisation, marginalisation and intolerance associated with this. More importantly, these meanings are routinely employed to 'make sense' of the need to hold such attitudes and views which can then translate into discriminatory and exclusionary practices.

In this written evidence, I will therefore be focusing on the role of the media in its capacity to shape and inform the ideological component of Islamophobia. It is worth stressing that any ideology of Islamophobia is not the sole construct of the media. Such an ideology can be reinforced through messages and meanings from the social, political and cultural spaces, from individual and collective interactions, and from ideas and understandings which are already embedded in our histories also. Such messages and meanings can be as equally gleaned through the 'real' as indeed the perceived, the misrepresented or inaccurate. For example, the factual and accurate reporting of the events of 7/7 can reinforce any ideology of Islamophobia as much as any inaccurate or inappropriate reporting[xiv]. All have the potential to contribute to the process of stigmatisation, marginalisation and intolerance.

POST-9/11

A YouGov poll from 2002 stated that 74% of the British public claim that they know 'nothing or next to nothing about Islam'. Of those that do, 64% claimed that what they do know is 'acquired through the media'[xv]. If this is the case, then it is important to consider exactly what it is that might be acquired about Islam and Muslims from the media.

The first findings are drawn from a small piece of research undertaken soon after the events of 9/11. Research showed that following 9/11, more 13 million people bought a national newspaper in Britain everyday[xvi]. In total, the *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Financial Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Star*, *Mirror* and *Sun* added an additional 2.5 million copies to their normal combined print runs, all of which sold out on a daily basis[xvii]. The disseminative audience of the British press was therefore much wider immediately following 9/11 than on what might be termed a 'normal' day prior to it.

From Brian Whitaker's research, it was shown that during the period 1 January to the 9 September 2001 inclusive, the number of articles about Muslims and Islam in the national newspapers was[xviii]:

Newspaper	No. of articles
Guardian	817
Independent	681
Times	535
Daily Telegraph	417
Daily Mail	202
Mirror	164
Daily Express	139
Sun	80
Daily Star	40

Replicating the research during the period 20 June 2001 to the 19 June 2002 - a period that included 9/11 – the number of articles rose dramatically[xix]:

Newspaper	No. of articles	% increase
Guardian	2,043	250%
Independent	1,556	228%
Times	1,486	278%
Daily Telegraph	1,176	282%
Daily Mail	650	322%
Mirror	920	561%
Daily Express	305	219%
Sun	526	658%
Daily Star	144	360%

Whilst it would be unfair to suggest that these articles were anti-Muslim, it is likely that a significant amount of the content related to matters of terrorism, threat and so on. As Elizabeth Poole's research highlighted, there was a process emerging from media coverage at the time where all Muslims were becoming homogenised: an indistinguishable and un-differentiated group where all of its members – 'Muslims' – were seen to have the same attributes, qualities, capabilities and characteristics most of which were extremely negative[xx].

INSTED REPORT 2007

Five years later, research published by INSTED[xxi] suggested that things had worsened. Based on an analysis of the representation of 'Islam' and 'Muslims' in the British press between 8 May and 14 May 2006 inclusive, the research sought to establish what the a 'normal' week looked like. It was termed a 'normal' week because there was no evidence to suggest that it would be any different from any other randomly selected week, from the point of view of the coverage of events related to Islam and Muslims. Comparing it to existing research from

1996, the findings suggested that the newsworthiness of Islam and Muslims, as measured by items in the national press alone, had increased by approximately 270%[xxii].

During that 'normal week', of the 19 national newspapers analysed on a daily basis, 12 were identified as having entirely negatively framed or associated coverage of Islam and Muslims. Across all newspapers, 91% of all coverage was deemed to be negative. Almost 50% of all of the coverage referred to Muslims and/or Islam as posing a 'threat' whilst a further 34% related to crises. A significant majority (84%) represented Islam and Muslims either as 'likely to cause damage or danger' or as 'operating in a time of intense difficulty or danger'.

The research concluded that it was likely that through such coverage, Islam and Muslims would be widely seen seen as the antithesis or Other to 'the West', having few if indeed any similar belief systems, actors, characteristics, attributes, qualities or values. It was also noted that given the high levels of prevalence and voracity of the negative coverage, that public audiences could begin to see such negative messages as 'truths'. Another potential consequence was that if Muslims were continued to be represented in such ways, then it might be difficult for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike to see how Islam and Muslims might ever be seen to be 'British' or take an equal participatory role in that which might be seen to be 'our' way of life.

A fuller picture of the data collected as part of this research is set out in Appendix 1.

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY REPORT, 2008

A final piece of research of note was undertaken at the Cardiff University and published in 2008[xxiii]. Focusing on the coverage of British Muslims in the British press, the research confirmed the findings of the INSTED report previously: that press coverage of British Muslims had increased significantly since 2000. As it added, this peaked in 2006, and

remained at high levels in 2007 and 2008[xxiv]. This was explained partly by the increase in coverage focusing on terrorism, accounting for approximately 36% of all stories[xxv].

The research noted a change however. Whilst recognising the increasing importance of stories focusing on Muslims and Islamic 'difference' – religious and cultural (22%) – and Islamic extremism (11%), it went on to note how 2008 became the first year in which the "volume of stories about religious and cultural differences (32% of stories by 2008) overtook terrorism related stories (27% by 2008)"[xxvi]. Reciprocally, it noted how coverage of attacks on or problems facing Muslims had declined as a proportion.

A quote from the report sets out the problems with this type of coverage:

> "Four of the five most common discourses used about Muslims in the British press associate Islam/Muslims with threats, problems or in opposition to dominant British values. So, for example, the idea that Islam is dangerous, backward or irrational is present in 26% of stories. By contrast, only 2% of stories contained the proposition that Muslims supported dominant moral values.
>
> Similarly, we found that the most common nouns used in relation to British Muslims were terrorist, *extremist, Islamist, suicide bomber* and *militant,* with very few positive nouns (such as 'scholar') used. The most common adjectives used were *radical, fanatical, fundamentalist, extremist* and *militant*. Indeed, references to radical Muslims outnumber references to moderate Muslims by 17 to one.
>
> One in five stories about British Muslims makes comparisons between Islam and other religions. While around half of these comparisons do not make explicit value judgments, of those that do, negative assessments of Islam outnumber positive assessments by more than four to one. Negative assessments are particularly prominent in the tabloids."[xxvii]

Whilst the report noted that the language used about British Muslims was largely reflective of the overly negative of 'problematic' contexts within which they are situated, "decontextualisation, misinformation and a preferred discourse of threat, fear and danger, while not uniformly present, were strong forces in the reporting of British Muslims in the UK national press"[xxviii].

FINAL REFLECTIONS

As the EUMC report highlighted, the role and impact of the media is therefore extremely problematic. The evidence shows an overwhelmingly negative picture, where threat, otherness, fear and danger posed or caused by Muslims and Islam underpins a considerable majority of the media's coverage. Given that 64% of the British public claimed that what they know about Muslims and Islam is acquired through the media, then it could be that such a stream of negativity goes some way to feeding, creating and justifying a form of order about who we are, or more precisely who we are not being created in the minds of the general public. All of this has the potential to then ensure stigmatisation, marginalisation and intolerance. If such messages are seen to 'make sense', then not only is it possible that this will result into discriminatory and exclusionary practices but so too does it make the divisive messages of those such as the far-right – the British National Party and English Defence League for instance – appear justified and fair. From an alternative perspective, such a process also reinforces the view that Muslims do not – and never will – 'belong' here, reinforcing dualistic and oppositional rhetoric especially of those promoting more radical ideas from within some sectors of Muslim communities.

To summarise, it is worth returning to the findings from the 2007 INSTED report where the consequences of such media coverage were set out as being:

- Likely to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims;
- Likely to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims, and in this way to weaken the Government's measures to reduce and prevent extremism;

- Unlikely to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of unlawful discrimination by non-Muslims against Muslims;

- Likely to be a major barrier preventing the success of the Government's community cohesion policies and programmes;

- 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.

The report concluded that the media reinforces the notion that "Islam is profoundly different from, and a serious threat to the West; and that, within Britain, Muslims are different from – and a threat to – 'us'"[xxix]. In other words, it almost undeniably creates a form of order about both who we are and who we are not, and so would almost certainly feed into an ideological understanding of Islamophobia.

All tables and data reproduced for my own research undertaken for contribution to the 2007 INSTED[xxx] report.

Table 1 Articles in one week referring to Islam or Muslims,
by paper, day and total

Title of paper	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	total
Financial Times	8	5	10	8	4	2	-	**37**
Independent	11	6	6	13	9	3	-	**48**
Star	1	2	1	3	2	2	-	**11**
Mirror	4	4	3	2	2	1	-	**16**
Express	5	3	1	1	2	2	-	**14**
Mail	5	9	1	4	8	4	-	**31**
Telegraph	5	8	4	9	12	5	-	**43**
Sun	2	6	2	4	1	4	-	**19**
Guardian	11	7	11	7	12	4	-	**52**
Times	4	9	7	6	9	10	-	**45**
Independent on Sunday	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	**2**
Star on Sunday	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	**2**
Sunday Mirror	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	**2**
Sunday Express	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	**4**
Mail on Sunday	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	**2**
Sunday Telegraph	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	**2**
News of the World	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	**7**
Sunday People	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
Observer	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	**7**
Sunday Times	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	**8**
Total	**56**	**59**	**46**	**57**	**61**	**37**	**36**	**352**

Table 2 Images in one week referring to Islam or Muslims,
   by paper, day and total

Title of newspaper	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
Financial Times	2	1	9	3	1	-	-	**16**
Independent	6	4	5	7	9	2	-	**33**
Star	-	1	-	1	1	2	-	**5**
Mirror	2	3	3	2	1	1	-	**12**
Express	4	3	1	1	1	1	-	**11**
Mail	4	3	1	3	3	2	-	**16**
Telegraph	1	3	4	3	9	5	-	**25**
Sun	1	3	1	2	1	3	-	**11**
Guardian	5	3	5	5	8	4	-	**30**
Times	2	5	7	2	7	7	-	**30**
Independent on Sunday	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	**1**
Star on Sunday	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	**2**
Sunday Mirror	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	**2**
Sunday Express	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	**1**
Mail on Sunday	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	**1**
Sunday Telegraph	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	**1**
News of the World	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	**5**
Sunday People	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**-**
Observer	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	**6**
Sunday Times	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	**6**
Total	**27**	**29**	**36**	**29**	**41**	**27**	**25**	**214**

Table 3   Focus of articles in each newspaper: Britain, international
   or generic

Title	Focus of article			
	Britain	International	Generic	Totals
Financial Times	5	31	1	**37**
Independent	14	32	2	**48**
Star	9	2	-	**11**
Mirror	7	9	-	**16**
Express	8	5	1	**14**
Mail	19	10	2	**31**
Telegraph	17	23	3	**43**

Sun	10	9	-	**19**
Guardian	22	28	2	**52**
Times	23	21	1	**45**
Independent on Sunday	0	2	-	**2**
Star on Sunday	2	0	-	**2**
Sunday Mirror	2	0	-	**2**
Sunday Express	3	1	-	**4**
Mail on Sunday	2	0	-	**2**
Sunday Telegraph	1	1	-	**2**
News of the World	6	1	-	**7**
Observer	3	4	-	**7**
Sunday Times	3	5	-	**8**
Total	**156**	**184**	**12**	**352**

Table 4   Focus of articles by type of newspaper

	Focus of article			
Publication type	**Britain**	**International**	**Generic**	**TOTAL**
Tabloid	68	41	3	**112**
Broadsheet	90	141	9	**240**
Totals	**158**	**182**	**12**	**352**

Table 5   Positive, neutral or negative associations of articles, by paper

Title	Association of articles (%)			Number of articles
	Negative	**Neutral**	**Positive**	
Financial Times	89	5.5	5.5	**37**
Independent	80	2	8	**48**
Star	100	-	-	**11**
Mirror	100	-	-	**16**
Express	71	21	8	**14**
Mail	97	-	3	**31**
Telegraph	91	7	2	**43**
Sun	100	-	-	**19**
Guardian	85	12	3	**52**
Times	89	7	4	**46**

Independent on Sunday	100	-	-	**2**
Star on Sunday	100	-	-	**2**
Sunday Mirror	100	-	-	**2**
Sunday Express	100	-	-	**4**
Mail on Sunday	100	-	-	**2**
Sunday Telegraph	100	-	-	**2**
News of the World	100	-	-	**7**
Observer	100	-	-	**7**
Sunday Times	100	-	-	**8**
Total	**91**	**5**	**4**	**352**

Table 6 Positive, neutral or negative associations, by type of paper

Publication type	Association of articles (%)			Number of articles
	Negative	**Neutral**	**Positive**	
Tabloid	96	3	1	**112**
Broadsheet	89	6	5	**240**
Totals	**91**	**5**	**4**	**352**

Table 7 Positive, neutral or negative associations of images (percentages)

	Association of images			
All newspapers	**Negative**	**Neutral**	**Positive**	(Number)
TOTAL	**80**	**14**	**6**	**214**

Table 8 Positive, neutral or negative associations of images, by type of paper (percentages)

	Association of images			
Publication type	**Negative**	**Neutral**	**Positive**	Total
Tabloid	88	8	4	**30**
Broadsheet	77	17	6	**70**
Totals	**80**	**14**	**6**	**100**

Table 9 News content by story

News content	Number	Percentage
Bombs on 7 July 2005	69	19.6
Iraq	49	13.9
Iran	42	11.9
Palestine	22	6.2
Afghan hijackers	20	5.7
Prince Naseem sentencing	15	4.3
Guantanemo Bay	14	4.0
Women	12	3.4
War on terror	11	3.1
Abu Qatada	10	2.8
9/11	9	2.6
Human rights	6	1.7
Islamic schools	5	1.4
Somalia	5	1.4
Afghanistan	4	1.1
Crime – UK	4	1.1
Egypt	4	1.1
Muslim world	4	1.1
Pakistan	4	1.1

Table 10 News content by broad theme

Theme	Percentage	Theme	Percentage
International threats	34.7	National threats	14.1
Crises	34.2	Islamic finance	0.1
Shariah law	0.3	Women's rights	2.2
Human rights	4.0	Society – UK	3.5
Immigration	3.2	Jihad	0.1
Islam/Muslims – generic	1.2	Islamic schools	0.4
Polygamy	0.6	Racism – PC	0.1
Environment	0.1	Halal	0.3
Sport	0.1	Islamic design	0.1
Arts – all	0.3	Sexuality – homosexuality	0.1

Holocaust denial   0.1

[i] Chris Allen & Jorgen Nielsen, *Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001* (Vienna:
[ii] YOUGOV, *Attitudes towards British Muslims*, Islam Awareness Week (4 November 2002).

[iii] YOUGOV, *Attitudes towards British Muslims*, Islam Awareness Week (4 November 2002).

[iv] INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007)
p.xvii.

[v] INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007)
p.xvii.

[vi] INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007)
p.xvii.

[vii] 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* (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2008).
[viii] 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* (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2008).
[ix] INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007)
p.xvii.

[x] Chris Allen & Jorgen Nielsen, *Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001* (Vienna: EUMC, 2002).
[xi] Ibid, 46.
[xii] Ibid, 48.
[xiii] Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).
[xiv] Ibid, 99.
[xv] YOUGOV, *Attitudes towards British Muslims*, Islam Awareness Week (4 November 2002).

[xvi] Michael Bromley & Stephen Cushion, "Media fundamentalism: the immediate response of the UK national press to September 11th", in *Journalism after September 11,* eds. Barbie Zelizer & Stuart Allan (London: Routledge, 2003), 160-77.

[xvii] ibid.

[xviii] Brian Whitaker, "Islam and the British press", in Hamid & Sharif (2002), 53-7.

[xix] ibid, 54.

[xx] Ziauddin Sardar, "The excluded minority: British Muslim identity after 11 September", in *Reclaiming Britishness,* eds. Phoebe Griffith & Mark Leonard (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2002), 51-56.

[xxi] Chris Allen, "A 'normal week'" in *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007).

[xxii] Poole, Elizabeth *Reporting Islam: media representations of British Muslims* (London: IB Tauris, 2002) 23 & 57.

[xxiii] 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* (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2008).
[xxiv] Ibid, 3.

[xxv] Ibid.

[xxvi] Ibid.

[xxvii] Ibid, 4.

[xxviii] Ibid.

[xxix] INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007) p.xvii.

[xxx] INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007).