Media Representation of Religion: Islam

• The media is a significant social agent, with the potential to influence community perceptions.

• Media coverage of Islam-related issues has changed dramatically since the beginning of the new millennium.

• The events of September 11, 2001, thrust Islam into the global media forefront: not only did coverage of Islam drastically increase, particularly in news and entertainment media, but the way in which Islam was framed by the media changed as well.
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• The American-led ‘War on Terrorism’ led to an increase in Islamophobia (fear or hatred of Islam) across the globe.
• This increase in Islamophobia was in turn reflected in the way media outlets addressed and stereotyped Muslim populations.
• While some deliberately framed Islamic coverage positively in an attempt to counter Islamophobia, many of the portrayals of Muslims contributed to the formation of harmful Islamic media stereotypes.
The most prevalent Islamic stereotype is the radical Muslim insurgent, bent on waging jihad, or holy war, against the West.

This stereotype usually represents violence as an inseparable part of being Muslim, as well as religion as justification for violent actions.
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- There are many different and conflicting ways in which the meaning about the world can be constructed, it matters profoundly what and who gets represented, who and what regularly and routinely gets left out; and how things, people, events, relationships are represented (Miller, 2002, p.246).

- Stuart Hall (1978) says the media constitute a ‘machinery of representation’ determining.

  “... what and who gets represented and what and who routinely gets left out (and) how things, people, events, relationships get represented ... the structure of access to the media is systematically skewed towards certain social categories”
Media, Racism and Islamophobia: 
The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media 

Amir SAEED (2007) 

• This article looks at how the media in the UK represent one minority group, Muslims.
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• Islam is a trendy word referring to a trendy group of people – the Muslims. It is one of the well-used or some would radically say misused word in academia today.

• An ever-increasing body of research has argued that on the balance the images, representations and discourses relating to Islam/Muslims in mainstream Western media tend to be negative and hostile (Poole and Richardson 2006).
Paul Baker’s (Representations of Islam in British broadsheet and tabloid newspapers 1999-2005) analysis uncovers that tabloids tend to write about Muslims in a highly emotional style, often connecting them with terrorist attacks and religious fanaticism and extremism.

Tabloids, says Baker (2010), are filled with keywords including terrorists, bombers, suicide, killers, attack or hijack; in addition to some emotional reactions including tragedy, horror, or terrible.
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• For Elizabeth Poole (2002), it appears that British newspapers spread an image of Muslims as a threat to British mainstream values. Poole’s book – *Reporting Islam: Media representations of British Muslims* – exploring media representation of British Muslims and reporting of Islam acknowledges that the Orientalist discourse and constructions of the “other” continue to be manifested in a similar fashion.
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• Talking about the British media treatment of Islam and Muslim minority groups in the UK, Amir Saeed equally suggests that British Muslims are seen as a threat to the “British way of life” (2007, p. 460).

• Saeed acknowledges that Western media is overtly biased and xenophobic, and the tone of the rhetoric is often alarmist.

• Islam is regarded as an Oriental, medievally backward religion, symbolising terror; and Muslims are misrepresented as “alien other” within the context of racism, namely Islamophobia.
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West and the Rest
In Samuel Huntington’s book – Clash of Civilizations - he argues that that a new cold war is taken place based not on economics or politics but on culture.

Huntington continues that Islam with its innate propensity to violence poses the most serious threat to Western civilisation. It is clear for Huntington that Islam is and Muslims are inherently inferior.
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- Even prior to Huntington’s thesis Islam was presented as a threatening other.
- Edward Said focuses primarily on the Middle East – the territory occupied principally by Muslims. What he argues is that European domination took not only political and economic forms, but also a cultural form.
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- It involved the construction of a particular discourse, Orientalism, whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’ or ‘the other’) (Said, 1985, 19).

- Said further argues that in this context, Islam was regarded as medievally backward and Arabs were held to be inferior, a construction of the West’s sense of itself through its sense of difference from others.
Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were representing themselves as ‘white’ and ‘civilised’.

Yet, today, the Westerners are depicted as civilised, logical, rational, virtuous, sceptical, empirical and dedicated.

Orientals, on the other hand, are shown as gullible, cunning, prone to intrigue and flattery, lethargic, stupid, irrational and childlike.

The West has a natural affinity with self government, the East a natural affinity with despotism. These representations are presented as fixed and unchanging identifications for the reader of Orientalist discourse: the West is us, and the Orient them (Donald 1992, p. 75).
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• Similarly, Whittaker (2002, p.55) notes that Muslim representation in the British press can be characterised by:

  “four very persistent stereotypes that crop up time and time again in the different articles. These tells us Muslims are intolerant, misogynist. Violent or cruel. And finally strange or different”.

• The media’s role cannot be overlooked, and it has been identified as having an inherent negativity towards Muslims and Islam (Neilsen, 2002, p.47).
Islam and the Media

• Islam and Muslims are treated homogenously in Western media and depicted as the opposite of the West.

• There is a complexity of reasons why the Western media has a certain unsympathetic view on Islam; Said (1981) argues that the main reason is that the West has its ‘own’ ‘experts’ (reporters, commentators, academics/scholars, etc.) commenting on Islam; making statements about it, explaining it and so on.

• The problem he says is that ‘we’ the West, represent ‘them’ (the East), hence, ‘they’ are not representing ‘themselves’.
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• In his book – Covering Islam – Said looks at how the definitions of Islam today are predominately negative saying.

• For example, this was highlighted when a Danish newspaper published caricatures of Prophet Muhammad suggesting he was a terrorist, among other things. It could therefore be argued that these publications suggest that Islam is the root of terrorism.

• Islam comes to symbolise, in Said’s words, ‘terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians’.
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• Amir Saeed (2007) says that the media do indeed present negative images of Muslims and Islam.

• Such images are transferred to the public at large, therefore the media is guilty of reinforcing anti-Muslim racism. E.g. Post 9/11 has seen a dramatic increase in newspaper coverage about Islam and Muslims.
Islamophobia
• Islamophobia came about because of a desire, by Western powers, to prolong the ideology of white supremacy:

“Claims that Islam is totally different and other often involve stereotypes and claims about ‘us’ (non-Muslims) as well as about ‘them’ (Muslims), and the notion that ‘we’ are superior. ‘We’ are civilised, reasonable, generous, efficient, sophisticated, enlightened, non-sexist. ‘They’ are primitive, violent, irrational, scheming, disorganised, oppressive”. 
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- Saeed concludes: “A discourse has been produced that directly links British Muslims with support for terrorism, fundamentalism, ‘illegal immigration’ and an ‘Oriental’ stereotype of the East” (2007, p. 459).
Media Capital and the Representation of South Asian Muslims in the British Press:
An Ideological Analysis

Tahir ABBAS (2001)

• This paper is an attempt to explain the ideological nature of anti-Muslim discourse found in the British press.
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• ‘The commercialisation of the press, the effect of advertising, the trend to sensationalism, concentration of ownership, and the reduction of political coverage’ became the industry norm.
• Control over the production and distribution of ideas became concentrated in the hands of a small number of capitalists owning the means of production sufficient to allow entry.
• This ideological domination plays a key role in maintaining class inequalities.
• As such, large multinational conglomerates are increasingly found to control a number of daily national newspapers.
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“... the media do not simply and transparently report events which are ‘naturally’ newsworthy in themselves. ‘News’ is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories”
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• Racism is a socially learned concept and it is institutionally manifest in education, employment, media, politics, and in businesses and certain professions.

• The media employs few ethnic minority journalists, especially at higher levels. By implication, it suggests that news stories and overall journalistic criteria are inherently white English, male and middle class in make-up:

“… most elites in North America and Europe happen to be white, a dominant white view and perspective pervades in the news, with the white group systematically presented in a more favourable light”
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• Negative representation of Islam and Muslims is not a recent phenomenon; it is a variant of existing historical discourses.
• Muslims have been characterised as barbaric, ignorant, closed-minded semi-citizens, maddened terrorists or as intolerant religious zealots (Abbas, 2001).
• Association of the word ‘fundamentalism’ with Islam is a more recent phenomenon in the press.
• Islamic fundamentalists, for instance, are often associated with acts of terrorism or extreme political movements.
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- The human need for the construction of the other as a way of self-identification and self-assurance is a universal one.
- This process can lead to racism, prejudicial hatred, and violence in the most extreme cases.
- Muslims are depicted as being evil, irrational, barbaric and lecherous as a way of denying the presence of these impulses in Western society.
- At the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Akbar Ahmed says that 80% of the British population saw ‘Islam as the next major enemy after communism’.
The Construction of the Self and the ‘Other’

- The seminal work on the Western construction of the Oriental and Islamic other is Edward Said’s Orientalism.
- It was constructed through a power relationship in which the West was unconditionally dominant. Thus, the Orient is a Western construct made for Western purposes.
- Oriental culture is argued to be trapped in a state of eternal stagnation (not moving, static). Hence, Orientals and Islam are thought to be primitive and backward.
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• The main traits of the stereotype of the Orient are its irrationality, its violence, cruelty and barbarism so that it symbolises ‘terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians’.

• Edward Said claims that these historical archetypes are ingrained in the modern Western imagination and psyche.
Bias in the Media

- The language used to describe them is often violent.

- Muslim words have been appropriated into universal journalistic vocabulary and have been invested with new meaning, which is generally aggressive and extremist.

- Muslims have come to be regarded as ‘fundamentalist’ and this attitude has been described as ‘Islamophobic’.
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The Contemporary Context

• Today, Muslims across the globe are ill prepared to defend themselves from this attack.
• Technological innovations have developed rapidly in Western European economies, but as Muslims are prevalent in underdeveloped countries, they suffer too often from a lack of knowledge of the intention of the media in the West or the means to fight it.
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- Islam is the new enemy of the West now that the Cold War no longer pertains, and the states of the Middle East are persistently ‘given the rough treatment’ by the media in general in the West, and by the print press in particular. As a result:

“Muslims in the media have no voice, no platform, so they cannot object or explain. Muslim expressions of cultural identity are dismissed as fanaticism, Muslim demands for legitimate rights seen as fundamentalism. In this media game Muslims—weak and impotent, it appears—cannot win. Their frustration thus finds expression in anger and in violence”.
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- The media consciously attempt to present white English groups in terms that are more approving and Muslims as the instigators of their own problems. Muslims are categorically regarded as threats to society, as ‘fundamentalists’, as aliens.
Media Representation of Muslim Women

- Western Muslim women are often presented either as passive victims of male power imposed upon them, or as strong feminists who oppose this power by fighting it from a disadvantaged position.

- Media sometimes criticizes Islam for marginalizing women and for providing a disproportionate amount of power to men.

- Acceptance of Islam is equated with women giving up equality and women’s rights are represented as being incompatible with freedom of religion.
Media Representation of Muslim Women

• As a result of these portrayals, the most common words used to describe Muslim women by journalists and politicians are:
  

• In crime dramas such as Criminal Minds, Muslim women are almost always represented as victims of male domestic violence.