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978-1-107-00882-3 - Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press

Paul Baker, Costas Gabrielatos and Tony McEneaney

Excerpt

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# 1 Introduction

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## Introduction

On 18 October 2006 the British tabloid newspaper the *Daily Star* carried the front page headline ‘BBC PUT MUSLIMS BEFORE YOU!’. The headline was accompanied by a picture of a woman in a face-covering niqab making a two-fingered gesture. Despite the fact that the 2001 census recorded 1,588,890 Muslims living in the United Kingdom, comprising 2.78 per cent of the population,<sup>1</sup> the use of the word *you* to address the reader directly appears to discursively exclude the possibility that a Muslim could buy the newspaper or even read the headline.

It is unlikely, though, that *Daily Star* editors would think that Muslims would never see the headline. Instead, the article seems to have been intended to create an ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinction. On one side is the presumably non-Muslim majority readership of the newspaper, represented as overlooked by the BBC (a British public service broadcaster that is funded principally by an annual licence fee). On the other are Muslims, implied to be the recipients of undeserving privilege. One interpretation of the accompanying picture is that the Muslim woman is making an insulting gesture towards all non-Muslims, particularly *Daily Star* readers.

This article is an explicit case of British journalism fanning the flames of conflict between the mostly white, nominally Christian (though mainly non-churchgoing) majority of people living in the United Kingdom and the minority of Muslim residents, many whom were born in the United Kingdom, although their parents or grandparents may have come from countries such as Pakistan, India or Bangladesh. While Ford (2008) reports that most British people have become more accepting of ethnic minority groups, McLaren and Johnson (2007) and Eatwell and Goodwin (2010) have noted that public concerns about topics such as immigration, law and order and Islam have become more salient since 1999. In general, attitudes towards Muslims in the United Kingdom have not been positive. For example, according to the

<sup>1</sup> From the Office for National Statistics; [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html).

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British Social Attitudes survey in 2003, 62 per cent of Britons believed that British Muslims were more loyal to Muslims abroad than to British non-Muslims (McLaren and Johnson 2007). Another survey, carried out by the Exploring Islam Foundation in 2010, found that 40 per cent of British adults (in a sample of 2,152) felt that Muslims had not had a positive impact on British society. Half the respondents linked Islam with terrorism, while only 13 per cent and 6 per cent believed that Islam was based on peace and justice, respectively. Sixty per cent said they did not know much about the religion, although, perhaps more encouragingly, a third said they would like to know more.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of writing, there is a sense that opposition to Muslims has grown in recent years in the United Kingdom. A group called the English Defence League was formed in 2009, and since then it has conducted anti-Islam demonstrations in cities and towns including Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds, Leicester, London, Newcastle, Oldham and Preston. Many of these places have relatively high numbers of Muslims, and some of these demonstrations have resulted in conflict, street violence and arrests. This growing opposition is hardly confined to the United Kingdom but seems to be part of a larger trend: attitudes towards Islam in other parts of Europe, and the United States, appear to be hardening. In 2010 a proposal to build a Muslim community centre two blocks north of the site where al-Qaeda terrorists flew two hijacked planes into the Twin Towers in New York City in 2001 resulted in protests about a 'Ground Zero mosque'. In France, the Senate approved the banning of the face-covering burqa in all public places, while other European countries including Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, the United Kingdom and Switzerland have seen discussions about similar bans. The Swiss government banned the building of new minarets (towers that are distinctive features of mosques) in 2009. Such events suggest that a sense of animosity between 'the West' and 'the Muslim world' has intensified since 11 September 2001.

This book focuses on the role that the British national press has played in representing Muslims and Islam, particularly in the years following the 9/11 attacks. We have chosen to focus on the printed media because we believe that it plays an important role in shaping opinions as well as setting agendas regarding the importance of certain topics. As an indication of the 'news value' of Muslims, between 2000 and 2009 the word *Muslim* and its plural appeared 121,125 times in the national British press (about thirty-three times a day on average), suggesting that this is a topic that the UK press feels is worthy of considerable focus.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.inspiredbymuhammad.com/campaign.php](http://www.inspiredbymuhammad.com/campaign.php).

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The media present information about world events to masses of individuals. As it is never possible to present a completely impartial, accurate and full account of an event, instead the media offer *representations* of events, through the use of language (spoken or written) and/or images (still or moving). Such representations are often restrained by space and time limitations; journalists need to prioritise particular events, as well as certain people's perspectives or opinions, over others. Additionally, summaries of events may be coloured by the political priorities of newspapers or the abilities of the journalists who are writing for them. In the United Kingdom, national newspapers function as more than mere 'mirrors' of reality. Instead, they have the role of constructing ideologically motivated versions of reality, which are aimed at persuading people that certain phenomena are good or bad, leading John Richardson (2004: 227) to describe journalism as an 'argumentative discourse genre'. Thus, British national newspapers attempt to exert (often successfully) social and political influence, though, as discussed below, newspapers must also balance this aim with reflecting the views of audiences. As Gerbner *et al.* (1986) have shown, the media have a long-term effect on audiences, small at first, but compounding over time as a result of the repetition of images and concepts. Although our main goal is to examine how language is used to represent Muslims and Islam, more specific aims involve focusing on whether there have been changes in representation over time, and whether there are differences between newspapers. We are also interested in identifying the various techniques or strategies that newspapers employ in order to legitimate or justify certain representations, particularly those that may be controversial or would otherwise result in people complaining about the newspaper.

In this chapter, we first describe the context of our own study: the British national press. We then locate our study among others that have examined the representation of Islam and Muslims in various media around the world. Following that, we outline two types of linguistic analysis, which we combined in order to conduct our research: critical discourse analysis, a process that combines close analysis of language with consideration of social context; and corpus linguistics, which uses computational tools to uncover linguistic patterns across very large amounts of text. After describing how we collected the articles to be analysed in this book, we consider the limitations of our approach, and then give an overview of the remainder of the book.

Before we can examine the ways that the British press have written about Muslims and Islam, it is useful to look at the British press in general. The following section gives a brief account of different ways of classifying British newspapers, as well as examining issues surrounding readership, influence, political bias and complaints processes.

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## 4 Introduction

**The British press**

The British press is composed of a wide range of different types of newspapers, distinguished by frequency of appearance (daily, Sunday, weekly), political stance (left-leaning, right-leaning, centrist or ‘independent’), style (broadsheet, tabloid or ‘middle-market’) and coverage (national, regional). In deciding which newspapers to focus on, we were initially constrained by availability. We used an online searchable archive (Nexis UK), which gave us access to the text (but not the images) of a wide range of newspapers. While it would have been interesting to examine regional newspapers, and to compare whether areas with higher populations of Muslims had different news coverage from others, we eventually decided to focus on news reportage at the national level, reasoning that such newspapers would be more readily available to the entire population of the United Kingdom, and thus potentially more influential. It is certainly the case that regional newspapers have a role to play in the way that the country views Islam; for example, a 2006 article on Muslim women and the veil in the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* written by the then leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw, triggered a national debate on veiling (see Chapter 8). It is the fact that this story was picked up by the national press that is of key interest to us. We have included both daily and Sunday editions of newspapers. The Sunday editions tend to be longer (sometimes as a result of supplemental magazines or sections), and often have different editors from the daily editions. Traditionally, the Sunday editions of British newspapers have been responsible for breaking or covering sexual or political scandals.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of our analysis, we have classed *The Observer* as the Sunday version of *The Guardian*, and the now defunct *News of the World* as the Sunday version of *The Sun*.<sup>4</sup> One Sunday newspaper, *The People*, has no daily equivalent. Our data set also contains a weekly newspaper called *The Business*, which converted to a magazine format in the autumn of 2006 and then closed in 2008. These two latter publications contributed only a small proportion of our data.

Readers of this book who are unfamiliar with the national British press may benefit from further information. The national British press works within a system of capitalist democracy, meaning that people choose to buy print newspapers from a range of possible options (often from local

<sup>3</sup> Examples include David Beckham’s affair with Rebecca Loos (broken by the *News of the World* in 2004), Max Mosley’s private sadomasochistic sexual acts with prostitutes (*News of the World*, 2008) and MPs’ expense claims (*Sunday Telegraph*, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> As the *News of the World* did not contain much text, we have tended simply to conflate it with *The Sun*. However, *The Observer* tends to be a longer newspaper, so we have often viewed it separately from *The Guardian*.

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shops, newsagents, supermarkets, petrol stations or kiosks at railway or bus stations).<sup>5</sup> By the beginning of the twenty-first century national newspapers also published online versions, which were mainly free to access at the time that the corpus was collected (although some newspapers have since begun to charge for access). Such online access, combined with the high status of the English language and the fact that the United Kingdom is a relatively rich and culturally influential country, means that the British press has a potential reach beyond its own shores. British newspapers compete for readers and do not receive government funding. As Sparks (1999: 45–6) points out, newspapers ‘do not exist to report the news... They exist to make money.’

To survive, a newspaper needs to be attractive to readers, enough of whom will maintain some form of ‘brand loyalty’ to that newspaper. The period under examination (1998 to 2009) saw talk of a crisis in print journalism, with sales figures suggesting that newspapers were in decline<sup>6</sup> and losing readers to other sources such as twenty-four-hour television news or online news, although Conboy (2010: 145) argues that newspapers are adapting to the paradigm shift by incorporating their products to online formats, as noted above.

Some academic research indicates that newspapers have considerable power to influence public opinion (see van Dijk 1991). For example, Lido (2006) has demonstrated that the negative portrayal of asylum seekers in the press had a direct and immediate effect on readers’ assumptions about asylum seekers. Brescoll and LaFrance (2004) examined news stories about sex differences, and found that readers tend to accept explanations about sex differences as being scientifically valid, rather than being linked to the newspaper’s political standpoint, while Dietrich *et al.* (2006) found that subjects who read a newspaper article that linked mentally ill people to violent crime subsequently had an increased likelihood of describing a mentally ill person as dangerous and violent. The power of influence possessed by the press therefore seems well established.

One significant way that newspapers can impact on society is by their perceived ability to influence the outcome of national elections. Linton (1995) and McKee (1995) have both attributed the defeat of the Labour Party in the UK general election of 1992 to *The Sun*’s pre-election anti-Labour campaign that year. Sanders, Marsh and Ward (1993) and Gavin and Sanders (2002), who concentrated on news reporting of the economy, found

<sup>5</sup> Some local newspapers are free, relying heavily on advertising, and are either delivered to homes or can be picked up from kiosks or collection points in towns or cities.

<sup>6</sup> For example, sales of all daily newspapers between 2007 and 2008 dropped – by as much as 10.3 per cent for *The Independent* or as little as 1.43 per cent for *The Sun* ([www.guardian.co.uk/media/table/2009/jan/09/abc-december-national-newspapers](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/table/2009/jan/09/abc-december-national-newspapers)).

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that there was an indirect influence exerted by press coverage on voting perceptions. However, research does not always indicate that newspapers can affect elections. For example, Norris *et al.* (1999) looked at a shift in some British newspaper coverage from the concept of ‘sleaze’ to ‘Europe’ during 1997, and conclude that this shift did not impact on the outcome of the 1997 general election.

In line with other writers on news media, including Martin Conboy, Norman Fairclough and Ron Scollon, we view the relationship between newspapers and readers or audiences as complex, with each influencing the other. Conboy (2010: 7) writes that ‘[n]ewspapers have always created readers, not news, as their primary function’, and argues that viewing the role of newspapers as mirroring society is ‘lazy-minded’ (Conboy 2010: 4). However, he also points out: ‘Newspapers over time have adapted to articulate particular variants of language for particular social groups’ (Conboy 2010: 6). Newspapers thus help to bring the concept of particular social groups into being – Anderson’s (1983) concept of ‘imagined communities’ being relevant to note here. However, readers are not passively constructed; meaning is created from interaction between a text and its readers (McIlvenny 1996), and a newspaper’s fortunes may suffer if it falls too far out of step with the social group buying it. For example, Gibson (2003) argues that the *Daily Mirror*’s anti-war stance on Iraq in 2003 was a factor in its circulation dropping to below 2 million for the first time in seventy years. Additionally, individual members of audiences possess multiple identities (based on gender, nationality, region, social class, age, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, political views, etc.), and particular identities may become extremely salient if newspapers do not take this into account. *The Sun*’s negative and inaccurate coverage of the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster (in which ninety-six people died) resulted in many people in Liverpool boycotting the paper – a boycott that has lasted to the time of writing.<sup>7</sup> Newspapers thus construct society and the identities of their readers, but if they wish to be successful they must also construct themselves in relationship to their readers.

One way of classifying newspapers relates to style and format. A distinction can be made between tabloids and broadsheets. Tabloids are generally smaller in size, have short articles, use puns in headlines, tend to focus more on national stories, particularly about celebrities, sport and entertainment, and employ a more populist and informal writing style. Broadsheets are normally larger, contain more text, have more focus on international news and political analysis, and generally use a more formal writing style. Tabloids tend to be

<sup>7</sup> *The Sun* made the unsubstantiated claim that Liverpool fans urinated on the bodies of the dead and attacked rescue workers. In September 2012, after the publication of an official report concluding that no Liverpool fans were responsible for the disaster, the then editor, Kelvin MacKenzie, apologised for the article.

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more popular with working-class readers whereas broadsheets are more commonly bought by the middle classes, which, in Britain, refers to professionals (see Figure 3.2). For the period under examination, the tabloid/broadsheet distinction becomes problematic for a number of reasons. First, some newspapers are easier to classify than others. A newspaper such as *The Sun* could be thought of as being a typical tabloid, having its title in a red nameplate (tabloids are sometimes called ‘red tops’) and printing many stories about celebrities and sport. The *Daily Mail*, on the other hand, is of a similar size to *The Sun*, but contains longer articles and has a more formal writing style than *The Sun*, as well as having its title in black ink. However, while the *Daily Mail* seems to feature more political articles, it often appears to articulate a ‘tabloid’ world view, associated with populist politics or even a politics of fear, suggestive of attempts to create moral panic (see, for example, an analysis of its construction of gay people as promiscuous and proselytisers by Baker 2005). Some people refer to the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* as ‘middle-market’ newspapers rather than tabloids.

To make matters more complicated, there are aspects of broadsheets that make them appear closer to tabloids. For example, the broadsheet newspaper *The Guardian* has a daily supplement, referred to as a ‘tabloid section’, that focuses on more populist reporting of celebrity gossip and quirky and ‘human interest’ stories. Additionally, most broadsheet newspapers have become smaller in size over time. *The Times* and *The Independent* are now the same size as tabloids (and are sometimes referred to as ‘compacts’), whereas *The Guardian* has reduced its size to what is called a ‘Berliner’ format. Thomas (2005: 154–5) argues that the popularity of tabloids has impacted on all forms of news reporting, with a move in the elite press towards populism. Distinctions between newspapers are thus made with regard to multiple factors and are gradient in nature rather than binary. As well as noting that the distinction between tabloid and broadsheet is impressionistic and personal, we also need to take into account the fact that newspapers can change style over time, or even within a particular issue.

Another way of conceiving of the differences in focus and style between newspapers is to use the terms *popular* and *quality*. As Tables 1.2 and 1.3 show, *The Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror* are the three most popular newspapers, whereas the traditional broadsheets *The Guardian* and *The Independent* are the least popular. However, the right-leaning broadsheets, or ‘qualities’, *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* are actually more popular than the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Star*. *Popular* therefore more accurately refers to ‘populist’ than number of copies sold or read. The term *quality*, on the other hand, refers to newspapers that take a more serious approach to news reporting, with a higher proportion of political or international stories and more in-depth analysis. Pricing tends to correlate with sales to an extent: in

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September 2006 the highest-selling newspaper, *The Sun*, cost 35p whereas the two lowest-selling papers, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, cost twice as much).<sup>8</sup> In this book we maintain the tabloid/broadsheet distinction, as it is the one that most British people are familiar with, although we acknowledge that the terms are broad and do not always apply.

A second important distinction is to do with political affiliation. Post-structuralists would maintain that it is impossible to write from an unbiased stance (arguing that the aim to be unbiased is in itself a ‘position’). Even a news source such as the BBC News website, which claims no political affiliation, could be said to contain biases within its reporting (from the choice of stories that it prioritises to the opinions it decides to quote or foreground in a particular article). Nonetheless, even armed with the knowledge that bias is unavoidable, visitors to the United Kingdom are sometimes surprised at how partial British newspapers appear to be. Newspapers declare allegiance to particular political parties and urge their readers to vote accordingly. For example, the 1992 election win for the Conservative Party was reported by *The Sun* on 11 April as ‘It was the Sun wot won it!’. Despite their political standpoints, newspapers are not normally blindly loyal to a particular party (and even less so to leaders of parties). Many newspapers backed Tony Blair’s ‘New’ Labour Party in 1997, including the right-leaning *Sun* and the left-leaning *Guardian*. However, in later years many newspapers became negatively disposed towards Labour, and in the 2010 election *The Guardian* backed the Liberal Democrats while *The Sun* favoured the Conservatives. The political terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ are relative, multifaceted and therefore problematic, and we use them to indicate a broad overall stance, while acknowledging that within a newspaper there may be some columnists who have been chosen precisely because they represent an antagonistic view (the Conservative Member of Parliament Anne Widdecombe was briefly employed as an ‘agony aunt’ by *The Guardian*, for instance), and that there are different ways of being ‘left’ or ‘right’. For example, someone could hold leftist economic views, and advocate that all property should be government-owned, that there should be wage equality and that the state should provide benefits for those who are less able. Yet the same person could hold rightist social views, in arguing that homosexuality and abortion are wrong, that the death sentence is an acceptable form of punishment and that immigration should be highly regulated. Consequently, we use the terms *right-leaning* and *left-leaning*, rather than *left-wing* and *right-wing*, in this book, as the latter two terms suggest that a newspaper occupies an extreme position. When

<sup>8</sup> The correlation is not perfect, though. The broadsheet newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* cost as much (70p) as *The Guardian* and *The Independent* in September 2006, but sold more newspapers than the less expensive tabloids *The Daily Express* (40p) and *The Daily Star* (35p).



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The British press

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Table 1.1 *The British national press*

	Left-leaning	Right-leaning
Tabloid	<i>Daily Mirror</i> and <i>Sunday Mirror</i>	<i>The Sun</i> and <i>News of the World</i> <i>Daily Star</i> and <i>Daily Star Sunday</i> <i>Daily Express</i> and <i>Sunday Express</i> <i>Daily Mail</i> and <i>Mail on Sunday</i> <i>The People</i>
Broadsheet	<i>The Guardian</i> and <i>The Observer</i> <i>The Independent</i> and <i>Independent on Sunday</i>	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> and <i>The Sunday Telegraph</i> <i>The Times</i> and <i>The Sunday Times</i> <i>The Business</i>

compared with newspapers across the world or throughout other periods in history, the British press does not currently occupy the most extreme political positions possible; the newspapers are not at the 'wing'. Table 1.1 shows our (admittedly impressionistic) view of where the newspapers we included in our corpus fall in terms of their style and political position.

Readers will have noticed that the majority of the tabloids are right-leaning, whereas the broadsheets appear to be more evenly spread. At a first glance, this would appear to suggest that the corpus of newspaper articles we have collected will be somewhat skewed to the right. However, it should be borne in mind that the tabloids generally contain less written text than the broadsheets; it should also be noted that, for some of the right-leaning newspapers (*The Business*, the *Daily Express*, *The Star*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph*), the archiving of data in Nexis UK was rather patchy for the years 1998 and 1999.

Along with political affiliation, it is worth taking into account where the newspapers generally stand on religion. Taira, Poole and Knott (forthcoming) carried out a profiling of newspapers based on the analysis of stories about Geert Wilders, a Dutch conservative politician who was banned from entering the United Kingdom in 2009 because of concerns over his anti-Islam views, and a visit by the Pope to the country in 2010. They placed British newspapers on a pro-/anti-religious continuum. At one end of the continuum were two pro-Christian newspapers, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express*. Next to them were the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*. At the opposite end of the continuum were more secularist newspapers, which were sometimes openly critical of religion. These included *The Independent* and *The Guardian*. In the middle of the continuum were the *Daily Star*, the *Daily Mirror* and *The Times*. It can be seen that, generally, the pro-Christian newspapers were also right-leaning, whereas the two secularist newspapers were left-leaning.

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Another factor when considering newspapers also needs to be taken into account: newspapers contain more than ‘hard news’, or stories about important current political and social events. They also feature a great deal of ‘soft news’, consisting of celebrity gossip, ‘human interest’ stories (which often have little impact on anyone except for those directly related to the story) and reviews and commentaries about books, films, music, plays, gadgets, computer games, fashions, restaurants and holiday destinations. Such articles are also found in magazines and thus could be viewed as belonging to genres of entertainment, or even advertising, rather than news. Additionally, newspapers employ columnists or commentators, to write on particular topics (often on a weekly basis). Such columnists may or may not be representative of the newspaper’s general stance, and one columnist may work for multiple newspapers. Some columnists were well known to the public for other reasons before they started writing columns (such as the British television presenters Jeremy Clarkson and Robert Kilroy-Silk), while others became well known through their journalism (such as Julie Burchill and Richard Littlejohn).

Columnists are generally granted more freedom than journalists, who engage in the ‘hard’ reporting of facts. Their columns normally aim to be entertaining, provocative or populist, and as a result are more openly opinionated than other forms of journalism. During the period we focused on, the British press was regulated by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), which describes itself on its website<sup>9</sup> as ‘an independent self-regulatory body which deals with complaints about the editorial content of newspapers and magazines (and their websites)’. The PCC contains an editors’ code of practice, which was originally written in 1991 and had almost thirty changes made to it by 2011. The PCC’s website describes the code as not constituting a legal document but, instead, setting a benchmark for ethical standards and acting as ‘the cornerstone of the system of self-regulation to which the industry has made a binding commitment’. The code (about 1,400 words in length) is divided into sixteen main sections, which cover areas such as accuracy, discrimination and privacy. The discrimination section, for example, reads:

- (i) The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual’s race, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability.
- (ii) Details of an individual’s race, colour, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story.

<sup>9</sup> See [www.pcc.org.uk/index.html](http://www.pcc.org.uk/index.html).