

Response – Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life

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I am a Senior Lecturer in Media, Communication and Culture at Keele University and a specialist on Muslims and the media in Britain. I have written several books in this area and more recently have been involved in a longitudinal project on the representation of religion in the media, and on media producers and diversity. Although I have written some thoughts here I have also included a bibliography, rather than repeat myself, and have attached an article which is a summary of all the work I have done. This is yet unpublished but a version of which should appear in **Cultural Values in The News. A Cross-Cultural Content Analysis of the Representation of Islam"** (edited by Stefan Mertens and Hedwig de Smaele, forthcoming, Lexington Press).

Media Representation

Media coverage of religion varies according to the media type and religion being examined. In mainstream media some religions are barely acknowledged except for Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The other main faiths tend to be exoticised and feature in some news, if the news value is high enough, and travel programmes. Most coverage in the UK is of the Abrahamic faiths and this tends to be negative in news (due to the news value of negativity). However, Christianity does get some positive coverage as it is embedded in the culture, language and traditions of the UK. Recent positive coverage includes representations of the current Pope and the type of defensive coverage that seeks to champion Britain as a Christian country. Coverage of Islam, due to the current political climate and the War on Terror, is disproportionately negative. Muslims are linked to terrorism and Islam is perceived to be backward and repressive. I have argued that a news framework has developed which ensures that stories which fit into this are featured whilst the diversity of Muslim people and Islamic practices are overlooked. Muslims are homogenised and represented through a small range of negative topics – terrorism, extremism, conflict, separatism and cultural difference/clash. A recent example is coverage of the 'Operation Trojan Horse' case where governance issues, that affect many schools, when including Muslims were linked to radicalisation and so ultimately terrorism, stigmatising whole communities including children. Few voices from those communities were heard in the media. Here most voices were from the establishment but the use of extreme sources to represent Muslims is a common practice. Only a few media organisations (BBC, Channel 4, The Guardian) seek out the voices of a range of Muslims and these are rarely members of the public.

Most coverage of Judaism in the UK positions Jews as aggressors (Israel) or victims (anti-Semitism) and there is a lot of historical coverage and commemoration of the Holocaust. (For coverage of Christianity see Knott, Poole and Taira 2013, Ch 3, for coverage of Islam and other World religions, see chapter 4).

Education is a valuable tool for countering negative media representations but currently subjects like Media Studies are being marginalised and devalued. The media is a significant source of information for people about other religious and ethnic groups, where there is little knowledge elsewhere. Current media practices are divisive, encouraging people to focus on differences and using minorities as scapegoats. The current discourse on immigration, for example, shifts attention from those who have the power to change people's lives to blaming the poor and powerless in society for its current ills. Media literacy goes some way to enlightening people about how and why this occurs. Understanding can only lead to better community relations in society. With power comes responsibility. The media's huge power in informing people about religion and religious groups put them in a position of responsibility. And yet religious correspondents have been vastly reduced in

numbers. If those reporting on religion are ignorant, how can they inform their publics in any reliable, credible way?

Improvements

I have written about this in the paper attached. This is a difficult issue that requires media reform and I would draw your attention to the work of <http://www.mediareform.org.uk>. Media Reform Coalition in this respect. Aside from this kind of structural change, the media would benefit from greater regulation to encourage an ethical journalism (implementing the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry would assist with this). A greater diversity in the staffing of these organisations would help (mainstream media organisations are still male dominated and white, Poole, 2014). But this will not help if those working within the organisations are simply white-washed as is the case in the BBC. The fragmentation of the media makes reaching people more difficult as people tend now to only consume media that confirms their views. So, although social media offers a way of trying to counter negative mainstream representation, often this will only be circulated through networks that already subscribe to particular views.

Journalist education should include ethics and training on diversity. Whilst obviously journalists cannot be taught in depth about every topic they may encounter, they can be taught the values of in depth journalism and the importance of context in explaining religious conflict, for example. There are enormous pressures on journalists, however. Many are freelance and face heavy competition to find work. Again, there are wider structural issues here around de-regulation but journalist training, media organisations and regulatory bodies should include codes of ethics on representing religion and diversity.

Social Change and Islam

The negative media representation of Muslims has clear implications for social relations in the UK and this is not healthy for a cohesive society. We will only make headway here if we are more inclusive – i.e to have a fully functioning democracy we need to include all people in it. At the moment, and partly due to negative media coverage, Muslims feel excluded and this may result in alienation and parallel societies. Our current research has found that Muslims want to be part of wider British public life but the media is an alienating factor (Poole, 2014). Legislation on racial and religious discrimination already exists. We need a greater diversity of voices in the media which requires media reform. We need to protect public service broadcasting and regulate to ensure fairness in media ownership.

‘Suggestions for change (I am quoting from article attached)

- There should be greater interaction between minority/mainstream media. This should be used a source for mainstream media to share a more nuanced history of relations between Islam and the West.
- Research (such as this) should feed into journalist education.
- There should be clear and formal policies on diversity and editorial policy. Evidence from broadcasting shows that these can have a positive benefit. Whilst informal arrangements

may work at small or progressive organisations, a more rigorous approach demonstrated by the regulation of broadcasting could have a positive impact on other organisations. Clear communication of these policies to staff is also needed.

- Employers should recognise both the value and importance of employing a wider diversity of people in their workplace.
- Editors should use their journalists as a resource for greater understanding but should not always foreground their religious or ethnic identity.
- There should be further regulation of the industry to instil ethical responsibility.'

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