**Navigating Journalistic Spaces: British Muslim Media Producers.**

Elizabeth Poole[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Abstract**

*Much has been written about changes to media production brought about by a wide range of phenomena including technological developments and processes of globalisation. These have had an impact on both professional practices and media content. These trends have taken place against a background of transnational migration increasing cultural diversity across Europe. This paper is based on the findings of a research project that aimed to explore the role of Muslims in media production in the UK in a range of media contexts. The paper shows how Muslims negotiate their identities in various media environments in order to create a space in which to construct their own narratives and the challenges they face in doing so.*

Key words: Muslim media, minority media, production, journalism practice, diasporic media

**Introduction**

In the last decade or so there has been a growth of media produced by and targeted towards Muslim audiences in the UK. This is partly driven by the growth of cultural politics in the post 9/11 era but also the explosion of media forms due to technological developments. Whilst a healthy literature on minority media already exists (see Cottle 2000) complemented by subsequent ethnographic research on diasporic communities and their media consumption (Gillespie 2002, Tsagarousianou 2007) there has been little attempt to study what we have termed ‘Muslim media’ in the UK. This label does not seek to reify this aspect of identity but is helpful in differentiating media that aims specifically to address Muslim issues. Two previous studies of Muslim media have focused on consumption (Ahmed 2006) and representation (Gilewicz 2012). More recently Muir and Smith (2011) have studied the experience of journalists with a Muslim heritage working in mainstream media. This paper details the main findings of ‘Muslims in the European Mediascape’ a project which examined the production and consumption of news about Muslims. In this article I will focus only on the producers’ findings from the UK side of the project.

**Muslims in the European Mediascape[[2]](#footnote-2)**

The project had two primary aims, to:

* Comparatively analyse patterns in the media use and production of people of Muslim and non-Muslim background in Europe (Germany and the UK).
* Identify possible relationships between perceptions, views about and attitudes to various groups in society and patterns in the use and production of media in view of further key variables which may include socio economic background, education, gender, ethnicity, religion, generation, personal and private inter-cultural relationships and age.

In meeting these aims, the project sought to:

* Explore how Muslim and non-Muslim (including minority) populations in Germany and the United Kingdom relate to media content involving diversity issues.
* Document radio, print, television and Internet media outlets targeted at, produced by and significantly consumed by audiences of Muslim background in Europe.
* Investigate diversity and equality practices within mainstream and minority/community media institutions.
* Explore the dynamics of journalistic work, particularly in relation to the coverage of issues related to diversity and inclusion.
* Explore the professional practices and experiences of Muslim journalists and their relationship to the production of various types of content in different media outlets.

**Methodology**

Editor and producer interviews took place with producers working in mainstream and minority media. The majority of these were individual semi structured interviews with some focus groups. It was necessary to shift from face to face to telephone interviews when time constraints became a limitation to professionals’ ability to take part. Specific outlets were targeted including large well know media organisations but also regional, local and wider, especially for Muslim media, blogs etc. supplemented with a snowballing technique. This resulted in 37 interviews overall with the sample of mainstream producers being slightly larger (23 compared to 14 working in Muslim media), reflecting the greater number of these organisations in the UK.

**Concept of ‘Muslim Media’**.

The term is obviously problematic but here is used as shorthand for media which is largely produced for and by Muslims and addresses ‘Muslim’ issues. That this may be a problem was picked up by the German team (with a large Turkish demographic). Whilst some outlets, such as some Asian publications, are obviously aimed at a wider audience (and many others had that intention), most of the UK participants, were comfortable with the term. Most had a positive perception ‘it was the first Muslim media product I should say that I found was confidently Muslim. And I’m unashamed to see the world through Muslim eyes. And that was very, very exciting. I’d never seen that before. So there’d be movie reviews of *Terminator 2*, but written, you know, with a kind of a sensibility of how we would see it.’ Producer

The aim was not to essentialise identity and suggest that Muslim identity is at the forefront of and central to all decision making taking place in these producers’ professional lives. However, the aim of this project was to explore when and how this does impact on reporting. It is clear that in the current political climate these producers (who were self selecting) do consider the politics of Muslim identity when reporting on specific issues.

**Muslim Media producers:** *Who are they?*

The producers we interviewed were predominantly male (only 3 were female), about 10 years into their career, and were working as generalists. Participants were mainly of an Asian background, British and Muslim. Two identified themselves as converts. Of the people who talked about their career routes all had gone to university (10 out of 14) and then taken a varied path, working across a range of media gaining experience before entering their current job. This included mainstream and specialist organisations. Whilst they all worked as generalists now, it is their experience writing on ethnic issues that has often led to openings, in particular for writing in more mainstream organisations such as *The Guardian* and *Channel 4*.

*Who do they work for?*

Many of the media outlets these producers worked for were not specifically newsgathering organisations but social/cultural creative organisations producing media for education religious/ purposes etc. for example, resources (film and photography exhibitions) for public/educational/community events. Because they tend to be smaller outlets with a mainly freelance staff the lines between Editor and producer were more blurred than in larger mainstream organisations. However, six were Editors (as well as having a role in production) and nine solely producers. Five of these producers were freelancers.

The type of organisations they working for ranged from blogs, NGOs, print media such as *Q News*, community magazines, publications aimed at a broader Asian market, publishers and freelancers working across the media.

al-Jazeera (English) was not represented in this sample because it does not define itself as an Islamic media organisation, but rather a global mainstream news and broadcaster based in the Middle-East (http://english.aljazeera.net/aboutus).

The organisations could be described as ‘progressive’ in their politics (only one used the term left-wing’) dealing with humanitarian issues, social and cultural policy, identity, race relations; ‘so we try and keep a broad issue range of what stories we cover. We do have a core interest in human rights, the Muslim world and minority communities in Europe’. Editor, Internet.

*Audience Profile*

Ranging from small (5,000 a month readers) to medium sized organisations (publications with monthly circulations of 60,000 with some supporting websites reaching 1.5million hits a month). Most, however, were on the smaller end of the scale.

All the organisations described Muslims as being their core audience but were keen to emphasise their outward facing content. Most talked of their ‘broad’, ‘wide’ and varied content that would have a wider interest. One Editor emphasised the desire not to ‘ghettoize’.

Most of these have a national focus and so were also largely aimed at the South Asian diaspora. Only one organisation described itself as being international (a publisher).

Most did not have an accurate way of measuring their audience (due to costs) but talked about mixed age ranges (as the content was already specialist) with two organisations targeting a younger market.

*Staff Profiles/ Diversity Policy*

Being small organisations, they did not appear to have formal policies on this but talked about having a ‘mixed race’ profile. This is partly due to the size of the organisations that rely on voluntary contributions and freelancers. Whilst there was a tendency towards a greater number of staff from ethnic minority groups this was due to the content of the output.

Amongst those who had worked for mainstream organisations there was a difference between those who had worked in the print media and those who had worked in broadcasting. Those who had worked in newspapers did not appear to know what their organisation’s policies on diversity and equality were (and felt it was not their remit) other than that they took it seriously. There was a sense that the organisations they worked for felt that they had the integrity to work independently (issue of trust) and Editors would only intervene if necessary. This may reflect the outlook of the organisations that employ them that actively promote diversity. Those who had worked in broadcasting felt it was much more about meeting regulations and quotas;

‘Yeah, yeah, that’s why you’ll find a lot of presenters not on the main show for example *London Tonight*, but the late bulletin or the early bulletin, a black or Asian, and why do you think that is? Because they have this kind of quota where they’ve got to tick boxes – how many Asians or black people do you vox pop, how many women, and they’re very strict’. Producer

It was also claimed that the local media were more sensitive to local demographics:

‘Whereas what I found with *London Tonight* there was much more of an awareness that we have a mixed audience in London in particular and I found their stories quite balanced and the coverage quite balanced and there are a lot of stories about ethnic minorities, not really pushed by the editor.’ Producer

**Main Findings: Muslim Media Producers**

*Representational Issues*

Mainstream media

There was complete agreement that the mainstream representation of Muslims was predominantly negative. This was the most discussed topic in the interviews despite the emphasis on production in the research.

Participants noted the increased volume, simplification, decontextualising, ‘formulaic’, ‘reactionary’ and ‘xenophobic’ coverage that focused on extremism, radicalism, barbarism, homogenisation and sensationalism.

They were particularly critical of the Conservative press, Murdoch media, some current affairs programmes such as *Newsnight* and *Dispatches* and some outspoken right wing commentators.

As the research was carried out around the time of the death of Osama Bin Laden there was much criticism of coverage of this;

 ‘And as a journalist I know that’s poor journalism. It’s shoddy….But why does it pass muster these days? ....no one asked, you know, the basic questions. Where’s the evidence for… did you actually see this happen? Have these reports been corroborated? Are there any independent observers of this thing? .... Journalism should be – cleverly, in a pithy way, with expertise – giving us the context’.

Sources

Many were against the practice by some news organizations of using extreme sources or a number of self-appointed representatives that do not represent members of the Muslim community. They argued that the consistent use of these minority sources causes a lot of frustration.

The precise causes cited however varied from a perceived lack of effective media strategies amongst moderate Muslim groups, to tabloidization and associated stereotyping

‘there are quite a few so-called Muslim community leaders, so-called representatives that are just rabble rousing attention seekers, they’re …(unclear) allowed to dominate headlines. The obvious example are people who have got zero following in the Muslim community, they have got a handful of individuals if that, that are presented as if they are mainstream voices and essentially they are no more representative of Muslim communities than the grand wizard of the Klu Klux Klan represents Christian communities.’

What is felt to be missing in the coverage? Spiritual aspects of Islam, its diversity, achievements and contributions to civilisation, attacks on Muslims, depth, detail and Muslim voices;

‘I often feel that the very interesting realities and contours of Muslim communities in Europe or in Britain on the ground are often missed’.

Generally, it was the critical awareness that these journalists had of changes in recent decades – global geopolitics, migration, that had led to social fracture and religious diversity - which was felt did not frame the debates about diversity issues in the press.

However, there was some praise in places, for *The Guardian* for example, although it was also criticised for having a ‘liberal’ agenda (exclusive liberalism), *New Statesman,* and Britain in general which was felt to be a generally positive and diverse cultural and social environment particularly in comparison to the rest of Europe.

‘Apart from a couple of awful awful institutions that tend to be the Murdoch press, *The Daily Star*, there is quite a grown up attitude toward race in Britain and diversity in Britain. Primarily because such a large part of Britain’s population is black or Asian, primarily because most people in Britain are fair minded and recognize the history of the relationships between Britain and India and Pakistan and the West Indies.’

Overall the participants felt negative media coverage had led to Muslims being suspicious/sceptical of the media hence a loss of credibility, even for the BBC.

Internal Representation (How do Muslims represent themselves?)

Almost all of the producers working in these outlets felt it was somewhat their responsibility to counter mainstream representation not so much with positive images (rejected as promotion) but with a more nuanced approach.

However, there was a general keenness to make the content more widely accessible with as many references made to providing an ‘open view’, ‘different sides of the picture’ a ‘broad range of content’ and ‘complexity’. Participants also felt a responsibility to criticise minorities but again to do so in a more nuanced way than the mainstream media. The aim appears to be to provide a critical journalism which may appeal to a wider public rather than be engage in the ‘promulgation of Islam’ whilst focusing on diversity issues given the core audience;

 ‘so a lot of the ideas that I write about are things which don’t explicitly try and offer a positive viewpoint but which try and offer a more complicated portrayal of Islam, whether that’s to do with, you know, speaking with Muslim comedians or whether that’s to do with talking about my own wedding or whether it’s to do with Muslim girls who are learning about British fashion. I try and tell stories which haven’t been heard, which kind of add something to the more perennial and familiar tropes that are present in Muslim portrayal in the media’ Producer.

Few if any of the Muslim media outlets engage in regular newsgathering. They tend to offer more feature based stories of a human interest or religious nature. This was partly due to the publication cycle which may not follow established news routines for example bi-monthly publications. Some felt it was their duty not to focus specifically on ethnic issues but to include features on universal issues such as relationships and marriage, financial matters, medical concerns, environmental issues and how these relate to their religion. Those with a greater religious focus explored facets of the religion and teaching and how these related to everyday life whilst some of the diasporic media had a strong focus on countries of origin such as Pakistan. Each outlet emphasised a contextualised approach (exploring meaning and significance of experience within a specific context).

The process of choosing stories is quite spontaneous. None of the outlets were big enough to have specialist correspondents who were sent out to cover specific stories. Rather, they are specialists in a different way following their own interests. In other words many of these outlets relied on the interests of others to send stories in or followed their own interests when coming up with ideas. It may not be possible, therefore, to follow a media agenda such as the Middle East as they did not have the resources to do this. Those with a team of writers also pursued their own interests. Some of the coverage was a reaction to mainstream media coverage (or response to). One of the producers who also worked in the mainstream media was also able to pursue his own ideas as he had the profile and networks to be able to do this. He maintained that what he was offered by the mainstream media was always ‘ethnic issues’ and the only way he could balance this out was by being proactive.

Role of new media

Whilst some highlighted the increase in coverage post 9/11 with a continuing negative narrative, some also highlighted improvements in the diversity of voices partly due to social media which had extended the coverage of and become a source for mainstream outlets. There were frequent references to social media as a source of greater diversity. However, this wasn’t only perceived as a positive development but had also led to a quantity of media sources over quality and increasing fragmentation which could undermine democracy.

‘And I do think that new media – new media as shorthand for all the other stuff that’s out there – is really challenging the way in which things are being covered. But also we’re creating – you know the analysis is old now but it doesn’t mean it’s not true – we’re creating a whole bunch of echo chambers that exist, echo chambers-silos, that exist next to each other. You know that… we’re speaking to ourselves because now given the media choice we have we can just go to the places that reflect our opinions and ideas and perspectives to begin with.’

In this regard it is becoming increasingly difficult to categorise audiences (Muslim media) in the contemporary fragmented media environment because people are getting their media content from a variety of sources and are able to mix and match across a range of local, national, international, print, broadcast and digital media.

*Journalist Backgrounds*

Journalists of a Muslim background working in the mainstream press affirmed that this was of benefit for engaging with and relating to sources. But it was also suggested that it enabled a more critical take on Muslim issues (being insulated from accusations of Islamophobia).

‘But I think that sometimes as journalists and society in general we recognise institutions or someone that sets up an organisation, but we don’t recognise individuals, we don’t recognise people, so I try to just go out of my way and try to speak to individual people, and the contacts that I had in the community.’ Producer

The majority of journalists interviewed also said that their background meant that they would be more equipped to cover stories relating to Muslims and Islam because they would have a greater understanding (and interest) of the complexities involved in the issues. In the main this was viewed positively although most were reflexive about this;

‘‘it’s important and I think journalists, whatever they are and whatever things they bring to the job, need to abide by, I mean hopefully the highest levels of professionalism and practice and investigation. But I’d be a liar if I said that my faith or my values or my principles, my ethics, my morals don’t impact on what I choose to report, how I choose to report it. In fact quite the opposite, I try not to gloss over nasty things when I find it, and because that’s the journalist in me. You know those are things I wanna expose. At the same time I’m always careful about context, so for me personally it’s always about… you can’t simply understand X without the context around it. ‘ Producer

The journalist’s class was also an issue with many stating that a non-white who was very middle class would fit in and not be able to relate to ordinary Muslims. Only one of these journalists felt background was not an issue a view more in keeping with the mainstream reporters interviewed (based on an idea of professional objectivity).

*Impact of Coverage*

There was complete agreement that media coverage has an impact on attitudes on the ground and on inter-group and community relations. This included an increase in antagonism, tension and even racial violence. This was felt to be inappropriate in sensitive times.

Q—‘Do you think that media coverage of minorities has an impact on inter-group relations and attitudes on the ground?’

A—‘Yeah, I think it does. I think it probably does in the sense that if you hear the same thing again and again and again through a multiplicity of media, and you don’t have direct experience which contradicts it, I can’t see why… you know I think it’s impossible to not accept that there must be some impact on that.’ Producer

Negative coverage leads to frustrations amongst Muslims and a feeling of exclusion (some went as far as saying that it breeds extremism).

Most journalists did say they have adapted or carefully considered the way they covered a story because of community tensions they were aware of on the ground.

Q ‘Are there times when you have not reported or been careful about the way that you have edited a particular story because concerns about potential impacts on community tensions?

A ‘Yes absolutely. The major very very sensitive thing is desecration of the Koran. As someone who spends a lot of time in Pakistan and is involved minority rights and human rights work in Pakistan I am very aware that the actions of a mob and the actions of lunatics wanting to create a response in Europe lead to the reactions and a consequential impact of activity of mobs in Kurachi and Lahore, so we tread very carefully because some of these things incendiary and have an impact on the streets’.

It was felt that by giving Muslims a voice these media can have a positive impact on integration. Muslim media provides a channel for the articulation of frustrations but these participants thought that they should also be represented in mainstream media.

**Mainstream Media Producers**

In this section I will briefly discuss some of the findings from the mainstream media producers. Almost half of these were from a minority background and so illustrate the kind of dilemmas these journalists face on a daily basis.

Out of 23 people interviewed 12 were from a minority background. Only four self-identified as Muslim. They gave their ethnicity as British Asian (two), Pakistani and Iranian.

The organisations these producers worked for tended to be larger but also more liberal based on the method of self sampling. Only one had at some point worked on a tabloid newspaper. Most came from the print media although the majority of media forms were at least represented.

Interestingly, the results from the non-Muslim minority producers concurred more with that of the Muslim producers than with that of other colleagues in the mainstream media *on this issue*.

*Staff profiles*:

As this sample included more employees from large national organisations respondents were more aware of diversity policies especially at the BBC. Despite this, other than at al-Jazeera English, most observed that newsrooms were predominantly white, male and middle-class, and felt this to be problematic. There was a suggestion of tokenism being evident in some broadcast organisations, particularly on the presenting side of the camera. As was the practice in larger newsrooms, local newsrooms would occasionally use freelance reporters to cover stories that required a particular angle or access to a particular community, but local media did not always have this resource available.

*Background*

Here, mainstream producers from minority groups contradicted the notion that any good journalist could cover any story presented by white British producers (within the norms of journalist professionalism and values of objectivity). Instead, they suggested that they were often pushed (however nicely) into covering stories about minorities or indeed pushed into minority or specialist media itself. Only one minority producer disagreed, a reporter at al-Jazeera thought background was not an issue and that that the organisation did not send ‘a Muslim looking reporter’ to do a Muslim story. Having ‘fixers’, enabling access to various communities across the world, supported this policy.

This reveals a fascinating, though not necessarily surprising, dynamic at play in the newsrooms of mainstream media. Unlike those working in minority media minority producers working in mainstream media were keen to escape the foregrounding of this identity. This is partly a result of the differing objectives of these organisations. Mainstream producers suggested it was not their job to cater for specific audiences and some questioned the notion that minority groups should be regarded differently to other audience members.

The project illustrates the tensions felt by producers of a Muslim background both in making production decisions and covering Muslim stories. For those working in the mainstream they have to struggle with the ‘burden of responsibility’ – the tension between not wanting to be pigeon holed and taking the opportunity to provide positive images to counter the negative. These are the kind of struggles they have to deal with on a daily basis.

*Representation*

Most respondents felt that their organisation’s coverage of stories related to Islam and Muslims was well-done and even-handed, with those working in the liberal broadsheet press and national broadcast media praising its coverage highly. However, all acknowledged that negative representation existed in certain sections of the media. The tabloid press was held up for particular scrutiny.

*Social Impact*

Here we can see the difference between those producers of a migratory/non-migratory background illustrated further in relation to questions about the potential impact of their news stories;

‘[...] there are an awful lot of stories which can be written so that they stir up all kinds of prejudice, but at the same time I don’t think you should write them that way. But I don’t think you should ignore them altogether simply because they might lead to bad things’ (Minority background mainstream producer).

‘I don’t think it’s the journalist’s responsibility to spend too much time worrying about the impact of their story on community relations. For instance after the Bradford riots you go up there and you have to tell the story what happened in the Bradford riots why did it blow up this way. Now by doing that you may inflame tensions further, but it’s definitely in the public interest to tell the public how on earth the situation got as bad as it did’. (Non-migratory background mainstream producer).

There was considerable criticism of what is perceived to be Muslim media by mainstream media producers based on quality, its affect on fragmentation - ‘people talking amongst themselves’, and failing to have an impact or political significance. Many producers from non-minority backgrounds had little knowledge of the existence of these media revealing the dissonance between Muslim media producers’ perception of their impact and actual impact.

**Conclusion**

* This project demonstrates the growth of media organisations and content aimed at minority audiences. The range of organisations that exist have different functions and are aimed at religious, ethnic and/or diasporic communities. However, they all seek to address what is lacking in mainstream media.
* Muslim media producers demonstrate a professional, critical and intelligent journalistic approach. Their aim is to have a positive impact countering negative media coverage and providing a more nuanced understanding of diversity issues which reflects their own acute understanding of these. These outlets are not sectarian and are keen to differentiate themselves from ‘religious’ media that might seek to propagate Islam. They should be seen as part of a wider process of diversification and personalisation of the media offering more consumer choice.
* They believe that Muslim media is increasingly a resource for mainstream media adding to the diversity of voices available. However, apart from some liberal publications, this view was challenged by the results of the interviews with non-Muslim mainstream producers who often had little knowledge of this alternative media. We could call this a ‘difference of perception’ narrative or a dissonance between the views of those working in minority and mainstream media.

On this basis we could offer some possibilities for change:

* 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 could be further regulation of the industry to instil ethical responsibility.

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**Note on the Contributor**

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2. ‘Muslims in the European Mediascape’ was a year long project funded by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue. Some of this material is taken from Holohan and Poole, 2012, Muslims in the European Mediascape UK Country Report, ISD. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)